THEIR APPOINTED PLACES

by

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(A novel containing Isle of Wight dialect)

CHAPTER 1

It was 1890. At the top of St. Catherine's Down on the southern end of the Isle of Wight one man broke the serenity of a July afternoon; the sound of his spade causing rabbits nibbling among the gorse to scamper homewards and an air-borne kestrel to divide its attention between the digger and its next meal. Seven hundred and seventy feet below stretched the English Channel with a becalmed French brig, bound from Bordeaux to Denmark with a cargo of wine and preserved fruit, the sole focal point on the placid opalescence.

In need of a breather, Rupert Blake stepped back and surveyed the three-feet wide trench he had cut from the edge of the tumulus to its centre – a trench that had taken five laborious hours. Hired labour, he knew, would have done the work in half the time, but employing people untrained in archaeology too often resulted in irreparable damage to buried artefacts.

In contrast to his father, Sir Gerald, a Doone-proportioned man, Rupert stood only just above average height. He was however, a muscular man and his rolled-up shirt sleeves revealed strong forearms and wrists that had been capable of lofting a cricket ball over the school pavilion.

The face to which he applied a cambric handkerchief, although not remarkably handsome, suggested by curve of brow, finely drawn nose, and determined mouth, its owner's patrician forebears. Its normal expression indicated a pleasant disposition.

A movement to his right caught his eye. The girl's approach over the moss-like turf had been inaudible, the sudden apparition of her grey bonnet and dress mildly startling.

"Good gracious! I thought you were a ghost from the pharos!".
"Pharos". She was momentarily puzzled. "Oh, dost mean thet wol' tower? Us calls'un Pepper Pot,"

The girl indicated the fourteenth-century octagonal tower capped with a pyramidal roof which stood some fifty feet behind her, its time-proof stone a reminder of Walter de Godeton's penance for unlawfully taking one hundred and seventy-four tuns of white wine when the *St. Mary's* of Bayonne disintegrated on Atherfield Ledge.

Rupert smiled. "A good name for it."

By now partly recognising the girl's face, the most well-favoured he had seen since coming to Chale, Rupert, prepared to chat, rested on his spade.

"Have I not seen you at the Rectory?"

"Las' Chris'mas ye did. I be kitchen-maid - Lucy Read." It was an honest statement of fact. The look which accompanied it, neither bold nor subservient, produced an immediate rapport.

"I'm Rupert Blake." He studied her face, his critical eye surprised to discover a refinement at variance with the coarse sensuality that so frequently marred any good looks possessed by the lower orders. When his prolonged scrutiny evoked a smile, he could think of no other face capable of producing one equally captivating.

"Where have you been hiding this time?" he asked.

"I bin mortal poorly wi' measles. Had to stay home."

"I see. And now you are convalescent, you like to walk a little."

She had, she told him, been to see her cousin in the neighbouring village of Niton.

"Have you really? That's quite a step for someone who has been ill."

Lucy shook her head. "Walken' beant no trouble. I cud'uv tuk th' lower road to short me way, but I prevur to be up yer."

"Do you like high places?"

"Iss. Higher th' better. I veel I cud vly out over Channel. Wudden' ye like to goo up in one o' they balloons?"

Rupert blenched and, although there was no reason why he should do it, confessed to suffering from acrophobia, explaining that had the place where they stood been close to a sheer drop he would have been unable to approach it – an admission that later was to be his undoing.

For Lucy, who at ten had climbed after seagulls' eggs and competed with her brother in attempts to reach almost inaccessible nests, Rupert's fear of heights was difficult to understand.

She changed the subject. "What be diggen' vor? Buried treasure?"

"Well, there's always the possibility; but actually I hoped to find a cinerary urn."

Another head shake. "I doan' know what that be."

"I'm sorry. You wouldn't, of course. It's simply an earthenware pot in which people interred the ashes of their dead after burning the bodies."

Then, with no thought of the immense social gap between them, he enlarged on Bronze Age sepulture and under the spell of his subject told her of the island's prehistoric communities, their way of life, and their ability to fashion from clay, flint, and reeds the utensils, weapons, and habitations that enabled them to maintain it.

A query from Lucy regarding his reference to celts and eoliths preceded her return to the question of buried treasure.

"I don't start with that in mind," he said, "but the fact that one never knows what will be uncovered adds to the fascination of what one is doing. Take Schliemann's good fortune, for instance."

Lucy frowned. "Schliemann..?

For the second time Rupert apologised and said the discoveries made at Mycenae some twelve years ago by Heinrich Schliemann were so well known he thought she might have read about them.

"Us doan'read much – apart vrom local paper which I gets with others at Rectory to light the vires.

It was at that moment Rupert had a brainwave. How nice it would be to meet this girl on equal terms, to hear her speak correctly, to discuss with her the subjects he loved.

"Books mean so much to me, I simply can't imagine life without them."

"Back hoam we hay th' Bible an' *The Pilgrim's Progress* – they be all."

Rupert seized the opportunity. "I must lend you some books."

"Oh no, zur! Twudden be vitten'."

Her instant and emphatic rejection of his offer surprised him. "Why not. You like reading, don't you?"

She did. At school she often had been called upon to read aloud.

"Well then. To begin with you shall have John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*. It will open up new worlds for you."

Another negative shake. "Missus wudden' like et. Her's ter' bul pertic'lar."

"What her guests do with their books is not Mrs Ryall's concern."

"What her servants do es."

Very patiently Rupert informed her his hostess need never know, and Lucy, drawn by the magnetism of a personable young gentleman who spoke beautifully and had so much of interest to impart, agreed to borrow whatever he suggested

"Good," he said, taking a long look at the most appealing eyes he had ever encountered – a look confirmatory that teaching Lucy Read would be a pleasure not to be missed. Whatever the expedient, he knew their acquaintanceship must be developed. "You'd better have it a volume at a time."

"Then I must' do zumthen' vor'ee in return."

He gave her a speculative glance, wondering what she had in mind. Surely he'd not misjudged her?

"That's not necessary."

"Lemme help ye wi' what you'm doen'."

"Would you really?" He gave her a doubtful glance. "You'll get in a dreadful mess."

"Tes not me best dress." Her gesture lifted the hem high enough to disclose a stout pair of leather shoes."

His attention for the first time drawn to what his companion was wearing, Rupert saw that the serviceable grey cotton of the dress which buttoned from waist to chin, although spotlessly clean, showed signs of age. Along the bottom hem a narrow frill of the same material as the dress was beginning to fray, and a little higher a three-inch tear had been mended so carefully that it was almost invisible. Subconsciously he compared the quality of it with that of his cream poplin sports shirt and heather-mixture knickerbockers.

"All right. Take that sieve and as I remove the earth with this trowel I want you to riddle it for potsherds – that is pieces of pottery or anything else of interest. I've finished the heavy work for the time being."

And so for the next two hours the pair worked as a team, with Rupert gingerly excavating the floor of his trench while Lucy sifted the spoil.

After working for half-an-hour she removed her bonnet, allowing the light to play on intensely dark brown hair that was pulled back from a centre parting to conceal its length in a bun – a style that fully revealed what, had it not been for a hint of fullness in the cheeks and chin, would have been classical beauty.

From time to time, carried by air currents too light to fill the sails of the becalmed brig, the scent of lavender which impregnated all the clothing kept in Lucy's chest of drawers made Rupert doubly conscious of her proximity: nor was she unaware of more than a nuance of citronella which the warmth of the day extracted from the pomade he used on his snuff-brown curls,

At five o'clock Rupert put down his trowel. "I think that's enough for today."

"A ter'bul lot uv work vor dree titty bits o' broke pottery."

He smiled ruefully. "We may fare better tomorrow. But I'm afraid someone has been here before me."

"Wud ye laike I to zift vor'ee agen tomorrow?"

His reaction was spontaneously enthusiastic. "I would indeed. And I shall being the book for you."

Lucy rose from her knees, brushed some earth from her home-made dress, and adjusted its white collar.

"I best hike off hoam, zur." She picked up her bonnet and put it on. "Me volks'll wonder where I be."

"You must tell them it was my fault if any anxiety has been caused," He held out his hand. "Thank you for helping me."

Lucy shook hand. "You'm welcome." Then, dropping a curtsy, she began to run down the steep declivity to the village below.

Having watcher her until she disappeared behind some trees, Rupert collected his tools and took them into the ancient pharos where they would be safe until he needed them.

Emerging from the poky chamber at the base of the tower, he paused to enjoy a view of an undulating and wandering coastline that merged from the burnt sienna of Atherfield sandstone into the chalk cliffs of Freshwater Bay. It was then the possible consequences of his scheme to educate a kitchen-maid entered his head and caused him to think of discarding it. What had come over him? And what would the girl think? Was it not possible she might get ideas above her station – some preposterously romantic ideas that he might be falling in love with her? And would he not be letting down the side by associating with a girl of her class? Such things simply were not done.

At this point the absurdity of his thoughts struck him. Why get perturbed? He was committed only to lending a book. What harm could come of that? None, if that was where the matter stopped. But did he intend things to go no further? Inherent honesty compelled him to admit he hoped they would Ruskin was to be the thin edge of the wedge. The few hours spent in Lucy's company had convinced him she was no ordinary young woman, worthy of no other fate than to become the wife of some clodhopping yokel and the mother of a brood of poverty-stricken children. It would be a shameful waste of good material – a waste it was up to him to prevent. At the same time he knew that to argue on these lines was to deceive himself into believing he had not been captivated by an ingenious girl whose friendly and natural behaviour was, to say the least of it, extraordinarily attractive, and whose dark hair and nearly classic profile were a delight to behold.

Admitting the attempt at self-deception, he shrugged. One thing was certain. He was no womaniser, and even if he could not clearly define his basic motive, he was quite happy that it was not dishonourable. At Oxford, when some of the men had taunted him regarding what to them was his failure to prove his manhood, he had never seriously considered it necessary to jeopardise his principles to win their approval. Lucy Read was to be introduced to good literature, and something must be done to modify her appalling vowel sounds and rasping sibilants. Those were the steps immediately to be taken. Beyond them at present he was not prepared to look.

Once more he examined the potsherds; then wrapping them in a cloth, he placed them in the knapsack which had contained his midday meal and, donning the jacket and deer-stalker cap complementary to his knickerbockers, he took the route previously used by Lucy and made a bee-line for a lane at the bottom of which, doldrum still, the gilded weather-cock of the Reverend Hector Ryall's church showed above some intervening elms.

CHAPTER 2

Cliff Cottage, the home to which Lucy Read returned (a single-storied, tar-coated, wooden building, comprising three rooms and a lean-to scullery) was situated on a thirty-foot wide ledge twenty feet above the beach and halfway down the somewhat precipitous face of a friable sandstone cliff. Its back garden, which Mrs Read kept planted with vegetables, tapered to a point that coincided with one end of the ledge. At the front where there was no attempt at cultivation, a number of rough posts were set in the sandy soil to provide drying accommodation for fishing-nets which hung in great swags above the ever-flourishing marram-grass and a collection of lobster-pots, shrimp-nets, and oars.

Starkly black against the modulated greys and umbers of the pebbled beach a heavy rowing-boat lay above the high-tide mark, and equally black against the unruffled water of Chale Bay, Ezra Read's fishing-smack, the *Rose of Chale,* rode at anchor some twenty yards offshore.

Near the porch, his eighteen stones compressing a rope fender, George Read sat holding a lobster-pot between his knees while he bound some broken wickerwork with copper wire. A ragged blue jersey, patched trousers, and long tousled hair made an unprepossessing combination that was offset by the strength of character suggested by a boldly modelled face which might well have served as a pattern for a mahogany

figurehead. Square-jawed, obstinate, too lacking in imagination to know fear, and endowed with great physical strength, Lucy's brother was not a man to be trifled with.

He looked up as his sister came down the cliff path. "You'm late."

"Iss, I know I bin busy." She picked her way among the festooned nets towards the front door, out of which the smell of fried fish and an oil stove greeted her nostrils when she was still several yards from it.

"Cum on, my gurl. I kep' tay back, waiten' vor 'ee.! Martha Read, grim-looking, grey haired, with traces of the handsome woman who had given birth to George and Lucy not yet completely eradicated by worry and overwork, stood in the aperture between the kitchen and the lean-to scullery.

"Zorry, Mother."

"Whatever kep' ye owt till this ower? An' jist luk at thee hands! A body'ud think ye bin maken' mud-pies."

"Tes nuthen."

"Goodness me, you dress be vilthy. Ded'ee hay a vall?"

"No." Eager and happy, Lucy wished to recount her recent activities so as to achieve the maximum effect.

"How cum ye to git in that state – jis' gwyne to Nit'n an'back."

Ezra Read spoke from his Windsor-chair for which there was barely sufficient space between the cold black-leaded kitchener and a table already laid for tea. He, too, was a massive man whose face and full black beard and knitted woollen cap suggested with something piratical the good looks he had reproduced in his son.

Lucy hesitated. Confronted by her father, environed by the things she had known all her life, the cheap heavily-framed oleograph of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, the pipe-rack, the pair of bellows, the grotesque china dogs on the mantelpiece, the flattened rag mats, she felt that what had taken place that afternoon could not be told without embarrassment. She, Lucy Read, Mrs Ryall's kitchen-maid, a fisherman's daughter, had stepped out of her place – had spent a considerable time conversing as though on equal terms with one of her superiors. The fact there had been no intended presumption on her part did not free her from blame. She blushed to think she had, even, for an instant, thought that a gentleman such as Rupert Blake could be interested in her. The notion was stupid. Unless he was expecting her to be an easy conquest!. Over-whelmed with shame, she wished whole-heartedly explanations were not necessary. Her story, she decided, would be an edited version. What on the top of St. Catherine's Down had seemed quite reasonable, in the familiar milieu of Cliff Cottage appeared in an entirely different light.

"I bin helpen' Measter Blake, Vather."

"Measter Blake? Who's he?" Ezra was instantly suspicious.

"A guest at Rect'ry." To cover her confusion Lucy untied her bonnet ribbons and twisted them round her finger.

Her father aimed his pipe-stem at her. "Rect'ry wudden' on yor road."

"Twuz by th' Pepper Pot. A's diggen' vor relics uv olden times."

Ezra nodded. "Aye, I zid a young veller gwyne up thet way wi' a load o' tools."

"I doan' see how ye cum to work vor'n. Ded'n ax 'ee to?"

This was not easy. "No, a ded'n, I offered."

"Niver knawed ye push yourself vorward avore."

"I cum on en zudden like an' ztartled en. Then us ztarted to natter an' a told I what a wuz doen'"

“Theer wuz no call vor’ee to offer to help.” Ezra’s tone was cold with disapproval.

“I thought ‘twud be interesten’. An’ zo ‘twaz. I be gwyne at et agen t’morrer.”

The sizzling in the lean-to ceased. Mrs Read appeared with a dish of fried plaice. She set it on the table.

“Y’ mun mind what you’m about, my gurl. Missus Ryall woan’t hay her guests getten’ harled up wi’ th’ zarvents. Ye doan’ wants vind theeself out uv a situation.. ”

Ezra placed his pipe in the rack. “I doan’ like th’ zound uv et. When a young gent starts taken’ up wi’ th’ likes uv our Lucy, a’s usually a’ter zummit.”

Lucy blushed again – partly from anger. “No, Vather! A’s not that zart.”

“Doan’ ye be too zure.” He wagged a calloused finger. “Y’ know what bevell yor vriend Jenny o’re to Zquire Mort’n’s. They young zparks vrom collidge be all th’ zame – gi’ em half a chance, an’ they’ll hay thee britches down avore ya knaws what they’m about.”

“Ezra!” Martha was shocked. “Mind what you’m zayen’.”

Ezra moved his chair to be ready to start eating. “The gel’s eighteen, Martha. ‘Tes time her heard things jo an’blunt wi’owt being zmock-veased abought em.”

With difficulty Lucy restrained an angry retort. With a woman’s lack of logic she ignored the fact that only a few minutes previously some doubt regarding Rupert Blake’s integrity had crossed her own mind.

“I ken tek keer o’ mezelf. Vather.”

He grunted. “Many a maid’s thought thet to her cost.”

“What ‘bout Joe Wheeler?” Martha paused on her return to the scullery. “A woan’ want no truck wi’ a nanny light o’ love.”

Lucy bridled. “Tes not zettled atween me an’ Joe.”

“Time twuz then/ A woan’ wait vor ever.”

“Nother thing” Ezra, having bitten into a thick slice of bread, spoke with his mouth full, “Us doan’ want no ztrangers pokeassen ‘bout yur – ‘speshully now wi’ another bit o’ bus’ness bein’ planned.”

In spite of her anger and embarrassment, Lucy experienced internal sensations created by anxiety. Those ‘bits o’ bus’ness’, secret missions that took them to France, meant danger for her father and brother and worry for her mother. Since the first time she knew of their existence she had hated them.

“Doan vret. Measter Blake be too tuk up wi’ his arch’ology or whatever ‘tes to zpare a thought vor what ye med be doen’.”

Ezra waggled an admonitory crust in her direction. “Thet’s ez mebbe. I’d zooner ye had nuthin’ to do wi’en.”

Having made a pot of tea, Martha took her place at the table. In accordance with her usual custom she had put on a clean apron. “Iss, a wurd dropped be chance, ef en got to th’ wrong ears, cud put yer vather an’ Jarge in ter’bul trouble.”

“I beant thet stooped.” Lucy assured her.

Summoned by the sound of crockery, George came in and managed to insert his bulk between table and horsehair sofa. The latter, when Lucy slept at home, became George’s bed. At mealtimes he used it as a chair. Above it hung the royal portraits.

Martha said: “Trust Jarge Read to know when grub’s on table.”

“Menden’ lobster-pots be hungry work, Mother. I was veelen’ leer.”

“A’ter that gurt dinner I giv’ee? Thee’ll ate we owt uv house an’ home.”

George helped himself to a couple of plaice and some bread. “Twuz onny a znack.”

“I’ll go an’ wash.” While George’s noisy manoeuvres were being performed, Lucy had been ignored.

“What’s up wi’ she – ztanden’ theer all mumchance/” her brother asked.

Ezra wiped the back of his hand across the tobacco-stained aperture in his black beard. “Us bin hayen’ a vew wurds. Zims her med be gitten’ vriendly wi’ one o’ the’ gentry.”

George grinned. “I thowt her lukked middlen’ pleased wi’ herself.”

“Tes axen’ to be put in vam’ly way.”

Realising the futility of further discussion, Lucy had been on the point of leaving the room to pump some water for washing. She turned.

“Be that all ye think uv me, Vather?” Her quiet voice did not conceal the hurt she had suffered.

Ezra stirred his tea. His love for his daughter, never overt but of considerable depth, made him reluctant to cause more distress. He could not, however, allow parental authority to be flouted.

“Ez I zed avore, us doan’ want no nosey parkers abowt. Th’ zlightest hint an’ th’ gaugers’ll be down on we like a ton o’ bricks.” That some of its former harshness had gone from his tone did not pass unnoticed.

“Trouble vor ye, be trouble vor me. I know when to keep mum.”

But Mrs Read had the last word. “Aye, I dare zay y’ do; but there ztill be Passon an’ Missus Hryall to consider. If her hears thee an’ young Blake bin meeten’, ye med ez wull zay goodbye to ten poun’ a year an’ a good job.”

CHAPTER 3

That night, for the first time in her life, Lucy was troubled by insomnia. What should she do? While recognising the folly of another meeting with Rupert Blake, in her inmost heart there was an eagerness to be with him again that she could not deny. Time after time the easy courtesy with which he had treated her ran through her thoughts. Practically every word he had spoken in that modulated voice of his was imprinted in her memory. Here, something tells her, was the opportunity that would not be repeated. If he had not been interested in her, he surely would not have offered to lend her his books. And she had promised to help him again. What would he think of her if she failed to keep her promise?

But could she go against her parents’ wishes? Commonsense told her there was a lot of truth in what her father had said. The fate of Jenny Jacobs was a good example of what could happen. Jenny, who never had been on the flighty side, was now an unmarried mother, shunned by her neighbours. Were all men the same? Was she, after a more devious approach, to be seduced? No. Rupert Blake was different. Not once, even by as much as a look, had he accorded her anything but the respect he would have given to a woman of his own class. By treating her like a lady, he had made her feel like one.

At one time her thoughts strayed into forbidden territory. She visualised a curly snuff-brown head on her pillow and a figure an inch or so above medium height lying beside her. Almost instinctively her hands sought the firm contours of her breasts. Then, suddenly aware of what she was doing, without daring to analyse her thoughts, she eliminated the fantasy as decisively as she would have closed the shutter of the dark-lantern her father sometimes used.

Long after the light from the sunset’s afterglow had faded so that she no longer could read *I am the Resurrection and the Life* on the framed wool-worked sampler which faced her when she was in bed, she turned restlessly from side to side beneath her patchwork bedspread.

At midnight, remembering her prayers had been left unsaid, she got out of bed and knelt to say them. Should she ask for guidance, or was the matter too trivial? In Lucy's case, although she always uttered the same words, praying had not become a meaningless habit. Fearing that what she really wanted might be breaking the Fifth Commandment, she made no addition.

When in the early hours she fell asleep, no decision had been taken.

In the morning bad weather had set in, causing a complete transformation from the perfection of the previous day. Driven from the south-west by half a gale, low lying clouds over the Channel brought continuous rain. Seen from Lucy's window, yesterday's nacre was sullen foam-flecked lead.

Under these conditions archaeology was out of the question. Her decision, for twenty-four hours at least, could be postponed. This thought, however, brought little comfort, Lucy's chief reaction being a feeling of being let down, for she had more or less made up her mind that if she did not help as promised she would go up and explain why she could not.

To pass the time, she would have liked to do some housework or cooking. Her mother would not hear of it. And when she asked if there was any mending to be done, Mrs Read's dignity was ruffled by the suggestion that any of her duties might have been left unattended.

Never before had Lucy's home been so claustrophobic and depressing. The shabby furniture, the buff-coloured woodwork multi-layered in paint, and the all- pervading smell of stale tobacco smoke, fish and paraffin oil – all combined to stress the contrast between the living standards at Cliff Cottage and those which obtained at the Rectory.

Discontent, a hitherto unknown characteristic in her make-up, conduced to self-pity. What could she expect from life that would be any better than this? Nothing. Marriage to Joe Wheeler might bring a tied cottage if they were lucky. It most certainly would result in nothing but poverty, yet, two days ago, marriage to a farm labourer who earned ten shillings a week had seemed a viable proposition. Joe, a simple uneducated giant like her brother, was a temperate man with whose happy-go-lucky disposition she had been acquainted since childhood. The woman he married would not be beaten, nor would she have to cope with a drunkard. Bur how dull life would be! Having left school at ten and not touched a book since, Joe's knowledge was restricted to the natural history of the locality in which he lived – of which he knew a great deal. For Lucy Read, who recently had learnt of Mycenean treasures, the eating habits of a vole or the siting of a green woodpecker's nest now held little significance.

Her father and brother had left early to walk to Niton, her mother was busy, so there was no one with whom she could play a few games of dominoes or draughts.

Completely at a loose end, she took their family bible, a weighty volume with metal clasps, from the fireside cupboard, carried it into her bedroom where, placing it on the bed, she opened it with the reverence all her family customarily assigned holy writ, and examined its coloured illustrations. Reversing the order for a second look, she passed the picture depicting Isaiah by Hezekiah's sickbed, the pair of them gazing at the backward moving shadow on a floor-level sundial, and commenced to turn the thick wad of pages which separated that plate from one of David routing the Philistines. *The Song of Solomon* checked her.

On account of its layout being different from the presentation of the poems taught her at school, added to the fact that the lines were not rhymed, it did not occur to her that she was reading poetry.

'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love it better than wine.'

A new sensation, delightfully disturbing, electrified her being in a manner which, unsophisticated though she was, she identified as something wholly unconnected with spiritual matters.

'A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me: he shall be all night betwixt my breasts.'

Lucy sighed.

'My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of En-gedi.'

Fascinated by the amatory phrases she read on, occasionally drawing an excited breath when shocked by the poet's imagery. But, absorbed by its beauty, it was not until she had reached the end that she was

conscious of a feeling akin to guiltiness; vaguely aware such pleasures as that which she had derived from the passionate verses might be sinful.

The reality of God and the certainty of an after-life in Heaven above the sky were, to Lucy Read, unquestionable. Her conception of Hell, though not as positive, was on traditional lines. When she had moments of doubt regarding everlasting torment, she did not express them in front of her parents.

Mildly troubled, she shut the bible, fastened the covers, and returned it to the much-painted cupboard.

"I'll tell'ee what ye ken do – write a letter to me zister Harriet vor me. Thee ken ax a'ter you Uncle Fred. A beant bin right since a cum home vrom Majuba – though 'twaz nigh on ten year ago." Anticipating no refusal, Mrs Read laid writing materials on the kitchen table.

Glad at having something to do, Lucy settled down to the slow and taxing job of composing a long letter – a letter which time and again was interrupted by recurring mental similies from the *Song of Solomon* which likened joints of thighs to jewels, a navel to a round goblet, and bellies to bright ivory overlaid with sapphires. Could this be temptation? She endeavoured to exclude them.

She was still writing at dinner-time when Ezra and George with water streaming from their oilskins came in. Both, as usual, were ravenous.

The following day was a fine one. The wind had dropped and veered to the north-west, tempering the heat and making an ascent to the Pepper Pot one that could be made in comfort.

At ten o'clock Rupert Blake extracted his equipment from the pharos and, after throwing aside his cap and jacket, began to extend his original trench into one that cut diametrically across the barrow. Although not a big man, his passable skill at games gave him sufficient rugby and cricket to keep him very fit, and being in good condition he enjoyed using the spade. Not once did it enter his head that what he was doing was no task for a gentleman.

An hour later, taking a short rest, he glanced at the book wrapped in brown paper which lay near his jacket. He had brought the first volume of *Modern Painters* in the second edition published by George Allen two years previously. For the hundredth time he wondered if Lucy would come to collect it. He did not expect to see her until the afternoon, but could not resist an impulse occasionally to look down towards the village to see if she were coming.

She arrived at half-past one, wearing in place of the grey dress he had seen some forty hours before one of olive green. From its faded condition Rupert judged it to be as old as the grey. The bonnet concealing her hair was unchanged.

He greeted her warmly, adding he had now reached the stage when her help again would be appreciated.

"Gi me a vew minutes to ketch me breath. 'Tes a middlen climb vrom the village when you'm in a hurry." The rapidity with which her breasts rose and fell was not due entirely to the steepness of the summit.

"Of course. How inconsiderate of me." He indicated his jacket. "Use that for a cushion. The turf is still damp."

Lucy smiled and shook her head. "I be alright, zur. Gi' I th' riddle. As zoon as thee'uv dug a pile uv earth I zhull be ready to see what's to be vound."

For a while after the work had been started nothing more sas said. With the utmost care Rupert trowelled earth into small heaps for Lucy to riddle. Her half-formed resolution to say she would not be able to help him had disappeared. Her mother's final words as she left home, by no means forgotten, had lost their potency.

"I zhan't try to ztop ye vrom gwyne, but mind what you'm doen' or thee'll regret et – mark my wurds."

Why should she regret it? She had no intention of doing wrong. Then again, what were her motives? To that question she could find no sensible answer. And Joe? Where in the pattern of her life did he fit? To this she knew the answer – nowhere.

After a prolonged silence Rupert mentioned the book. Ruskin's defence of J.M.W. Turner's work had exploded a bombshell, he explained, the effect of which was to rid the art world of a lot of learned rubbish and out-of-date formulae.

Lucy coloured, her voice scarcely more than a whisper. "I be zorry, but I think et would be best if I ded'n borry en."

"You don't want to read it?" Rupert was hurt. The book was a treasured possession. – one normally he would not lend.

" "Ted'n that, zur. It's…" She stopped, unable to explain.

"It's what, Lucy?" Sensitive to her confusion, he spoke kindly.

"Tes me volks. They think I zhudden' trouble ye."

"What nonsense! You're not troubling me. I want you to read it – and a lot of others."

"They doan' unnerztand."

He leant forward and patted her head. "Leave it to me. I'll call upon them and reassure them."

"Oh no! Please." Dismay gave a sharpness to her tone which warned him he must tread warily. Something more than she had revealed lay behind her words.

"Very well. I'll not go if you don't wish it." The indifference he intended to convey carried a hint of coldness. These people really were the limit. A fellow went out of his way to do them a good turn and what was the result? Unnecessary obstacles. For two pins…

Lucy's eyes filled with tears. "Tes not me. I wudden' hay ye think I be ungratevul."

Contrition at the sight of tears restored former warmth to his voice. "Don't distress yourself. I'm quite sure of that. I can take J.R. back to the Rectory, and we'll say no more about him. A pity. He would have given you so much pleasure."

This, Lucy realised by instinct rather than by conscious reasoning, was a vital moment – a moment that could change her whole future. Lead where it would, she could not reject his offer. She blotted her eyes on her sleeve and gave Rupert the frank look that had intrigued him at their first meeting.

"I wull read th' book, zur, ef y' please."

"Sensible girl." The words slipped out and he cursed himself for a patronising ass. Lucy appeared not to notice.

With harmony restored, they worked throughout the afternoon; but as the hours passed it was evident someone had forestalled them. Only four fragments of pottery and what might have been a broken arrow-head were brought to light.

Rupert threw down his trowel. "It's useless to continue, Lucy. There's nothing here."

Lucy emptied the sieve and rose to her feet. "'Tes a zhame yor time zhud be waasted.."

"Not entirely wasted. Two days in the open air, lovely scenery, plenty of exercise – and pleasant company. What more could one ask for?"

Stooping to make a bundle of his equipment, he did not notice the effect of his words.

"By the way," he continued, "when do you return to work?"

"On Monday, zur."

"In two days' time, eh? Are you looking forward to it?"

Lucy's reply was non-committal. 'Tes zummit that;s got to be done." What, she thought, was there to look forward to in blacking grates, polishing fire-irons, scrubbing floors, and carrying scuttles of coal? – jobs to which Rupert Blake would never have spared a minute's thought.

Rupert handed her the book. "I shall keep in touch."

For a second or so Lucy did not answer, then she said "do'ee think 'twud be wise?"

Rupert shouldered his bundle. "Wise or not, I'm quite sure it is what I want to do." His free hand rose to the peak of his deer-stalker cap, and as Lucy curtseyed he left her.

Over the mainland bleached cumulose banks, the rear-guard of yesterday's depression, were piled against a cobalt sky. The Channel, lapis-lazuli blue, sparkled in the sunlight. It would have been a perfect day upon which to admit the awakening of love.

CHAPTER 4

"Theer ye be, Monarch. You'm zettled vor th' day." Amos Read picked up the galvanised bucket the horse had emptied and patted the animal's neck. Monarch whickered and lifted its head as far as a rope terminating in a wooden block would allow.

In normal circumstances, feeding and watering the horse was Fred Mursell's job. But Fred was on one of his periodic drunken sprees which usually lasted three or four days. In any other man Amos, a teetotaller, would not have tolerated such behaviour; but Mursell was an exceptionally good carter – a man who treated horses far better than many men treated their wives.

The stable, below ground-level on one side, was gloomy, its small windows dirty and thick with cobwebs. Such light as penetrated, however, revealed pegs loaded with well-kept harness and horse brasses lovingly cared for.

Amos, Ezra Read's elder brother, was fifty. Physically the brothers were much alike – both good-looking despite being somewhat low in the forehead: both big and bearded. Of the two, Amos wore a shorter beard, and where Ezra's was jet black his was grizzled. With their bodily attributes, resemblance ended. For his brother's unlawful activities Amos had great abhorrence. Law-abiding and God-fearing, a regular chapel-goer, his religious opinions narrowly confined by the tenets of Wesleyism, his interpretation of the Commandments gave no latitude. On Sunday domestic duties were reduced to necessities, and all other work forbidden. In the Read household a loose button remained hanging, a torn garment unmended until Monday.

In four decades Amos had done much better for himself than, considering his unpropitious start, might have been expected. On leaving school at the age of twelve he had possessed enough foresight to realise that, with the Island's seaside villages beginning to grow into towns, a profitable future might lie in the building industry. He had, therefore, gone to Ventnor to serve a seven-year apprenticeship was a bricklayer.

A journeyman at nineteen, he went to Portsmouth where seemingly interminable terraces provided employment but demanded a quota of five hundred bricks a day, and necessitated his competing with more experienced men who jeered if he failed to keep pace with them.

Back on the Island, an unpleasant job nobody else wanted which he contracted to do for the Ryde Corporation enabled him to save the minimum required to start his own business – a minimum that soon proved insufficient to permit him to continue without mortgaging the bulk of future profits. So, after thiry years as a master builder (with some two hundred houses to his credit and six men on his pay-roll) Amos Read still operated, as he would have expressed it, 'on tick'. But the house near the Cowes salterns with 'A.Read, Builder and Contractor' painted on its fanlight was one to which people were recommended for good workmanship and fair dealing. Some people however, employed him only once, for Amos took pride in being 'Jo and blunt', and with touchy customers outspokenness did not always pay.

"Hullo, Father. Shall I feed the fowls?" The boy who spoke from the doorway was dressed in a white sailor blouse with blue and white collar and cuffs. Blue serge trousers reached below his knees. Black stockings covered his legs. He was not a typical Read. At nearly fourteen he was small for his age, and his face had none of the strong features that characterised his father's. It was a weak-chinned face with

something about the hazel eyes, a potential lack of integrity, that not infrequently gave Amos disquieting moments. A 'voxy luk' would have been his description for it had Harry not been his son. His vocabulary, even if he had recognised it as such, would not comprehend 'an embryonic hypocrisy'. It was an expression he tried not to see, for Harry was to be his right-hand man, educated to save architects' fees and to take over the book-keeping now done by his mother. To this end the boy had been sent, not without stringent economies on the part of his parents, to Mr Parkin's Grammar School.

"Aye, ye med ez wull. 'Twull zave me a job."

Harry went to a wooden bin near the chute through which chaff came down from the hay-loft and with a metal scoop measured some maize into a sieve.

"Bin gitten' on alright wi' yor book-larnen'?"

Harry blushed. "Fine." He mumbled.

"Zpeak up, lad. No call to be mumchance." His voice was gruff but not unkind.

"Just fine, Father."

"Thet's better. What y' bin doen'?"

Harry hesitated. "Oh, Latin, algebra, French – all sorts."

Amos chuckled. "Lat'n, an' French, eh? Thee'll hay a headpiece on 'ee like a Vhiladelvia lawyer avore you'm vinished. Not that they'm gwyne to be much use in our line. Though ye med want 'em to be upsides wi' they solicitors an' the' like."

"I know the declensions."

Amos removed his hard hat and rubbed his bald patch. "Doan' knaw nuthen' 'bout they."

The contrast between Harry's speech and that of his father was remarkable. Life away from his birthplace had done nothing to alter the rural dialect Amos had learnt from his parents, while Harry, apart from a very occasional lapse into rustic idiom, had grown up to use the vernacular of his schoolfellows and teachers. |The process had not been an unqualified success. Distorted vowel sounds and an unmistakable local accent of which he was unaware would be with him for life.

Further interrogation was interrupted by the arrival of Agnes to warn her father that his tea was ready.

Agnes was seventeen, a year younger than her sister, Daisy. Unlike Harry, Agnes had inherited her father's looks, but with his strong profile modified to feminine contours. A less round and more oval face would have presented a striking resemblance to one currently captivating London Society – that of the American heiress and future Vicereine of India, Mary Leiter – the likeness being emphasised by a love-knot that fastened a plentiful supply of light brown hair. Her disposition, docile to the point of apathy, gave Agnes the identical expression, sweetly soulful, that in some of her photographs disguised the American's latest hauteur of coolness towards social inferiors.

Amos looked at his daughter with approval. Her serviceable dun-coloured dress with its pleated bodice, lace collar, and puffed sleeves, hung gracefully – her tallish frame extracted all its simple lines could give.

"Nuthin' to wurret about theer," Agnes was a good maid. 'Twuz a pity zame cud not be zed uv Daisy."

Harry, glad to be free of questions, slipped away to where at the start of an orchard the fowl-houses were overlooked, on the one hand by back windows in an austere terrace, on the other by the windows of a rope-walk.

Arm in arm, father and daughter left the builder's yard and entered their home – a modest flat-fronted, six–roomed, house which double gates to the yard separated from the neighbouring dwellings.

CHAPTER 5

In the village of Chale, as in most rural communities, the last thing people wanted, or were expected, to do, was to mind their own business. In consequence of this the most trivial and mundane activities were observed with interest and in due course became common knowledge. To act in secret was almost impossible. A watcher, seen or unseen, saw and reported. Take, for instance, the case of a certain farmer and a grass widow whose husband was at sea. When the farmer left his isolated cottage to visit the lady, his route took him across deserted fields and into a copse where his paramour's home was completely hidden. Having for six months followed this procedure twice weekly without encountering a soul, he imagined nobody knew. It was not until he eventually received from the cuckoldised husband the hiding of his life that he realised his mistake.

It was little short of a miracle, therefore, that, although the labours of the young man from the Rectory had been noticed and commented upon, Lucy's part in the work had passed unremarked.

After circulating in the village for a week, the news of Rupert's strenuous efforts was brought by the sexton's wife to the ears of Mrs Ryall. Mrs Dawson expressed surprise that a guest at the Rectory should have to dig 'Like a common worken'man'.

Agitated by the information, Mrs Ryall went straight to her spouse. The Rector was in his study – a room heavy with theological tomes, early Victorian furniture, and gilt-framed portraits, one of them of the Rector himself which, in 1885, had been painted by a Royal Academician and exhibited at Burlington House. The portrait was a good likeness, and in the face that stood above the dark folds of his crimson-lined gown one could see the eager benevolent pomposity which was the sitter's salient characteristic. Side whiskers sweeping towards a corner-drooping mouth added dignified severity to a picture that Hector Ryall, at first, had viewed with pride – pride that turned to chagrin when he chanced upon Henry Holiday's man with a telescope and tuning-fork in *The Hunting of the Snark.* The unmistakable similarity between the character in the illustration and his own representation in oils was something he tried to forget. Unfortunately, to enter the study was to be reminded of it.

The entrance of his imperious wife rocked the Chinese folding screen decorated with golden storks.

"I can't think why you want this ridiculous screen, Hector. There are no draughts at this time of year."

The Rector repressed a sigh and lightly pencilled 'dochmiac' in the margin of his text to remind him where Euripides had changed his metre.

"I thought it much cooler today, Edith."

This was true. The temperature of the previous day had dropped five or six degrees – a variation that gave Mrs Ryall an opportunity to wear her tight narrow-waisted brick-red coat with its rows of brown fur down the front. It gave her, too, a chance to bring out a black Regency-style steeple-crowned hat which sported a red and brown feather. Both hat and coat were eminently fashionable.

Living in a small village remote from Town was, in Edith Ryall's opinion, no excuse for being unfashionable. She had, therefore, been one of the first ladies in the district to discard the bustle.

She raised her lorgnette to her Roman nose – an unnecessary gesture at that moment, but one that lent an air of authority.

"Cool, but not draughty."

"Very well, my dear. I shall not argue with you. You have something important to tell me?" He rotated his swivel-chair to face her.

"It is about Rupert. I have learnt from Mrs Dawson that he was seen digging, in her words like a common working man. I gather he had removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves – his shirt sleeves!"

"We did know he'd been excavating."

"Excavating, yes. I had no idea that entailed behaving in the manner described by Mrs Dawson – a manner that has made his actions the subject of village gossip." Mrs Ryall looked at her husband as though he personally were responsible for Rupert's discreditable actions.

"Come, come, my dear. We could not expect him on a warm day to dig with his jacket on." The Rector, relieved that he was not a target for censure, exuded pompous benevolence.

"Dig! I should not expect him to dig." Her brown and red feather shook indignantly.

"Did you not see his equipment when he set out?"

"I did not. And had I done so I would have assumed it was his intention to engage a labourer."

The Rector examined his pencil and tapped pursed lips with it. "I've no doubt he had a valid reason for not doing so."

"I fail to see what reason could excuse such conduct, " Mrs Ryall argued.

"Nor I at present. One can only assume it was done *pro re nata*." His command of Latin gave him a feeling of superiority that was reflected in his expression of self-satisfaction.

"The all I can say is, for those circumstances to arise at this particular time was singularly unfortunate."

"Why do you say that, Edith?" He had not expected her to translate so easily.

"Have you forgotten Annette?"

Annette Howell lived in the village of Brighstone, four and three-quarter miles away, where her father, a retired civil servant, had built a substantial villa within half a mile of the sea.

"When is she coming?" Gravity replaced conceit.

"In August, I think. She will stay a fortnight – possibly until Rupert goes to Dorset to spend the remainder of his vacation with his father."

"Are you not worrying unduly?" His glance strayed in the direction of his portrait. He frowned and directed it at his wife. One day he would ask what she thought of the painting – if she thought it a truthful one. She had never said whether she liked or disliked it.

"One cannot be too careful in such matters. We know how punctilious her father is."

"Of course, of course." His mind went back to Euripides. He wished Edith would leave him in peace.

"You will have to do something, Hector." Behind her lorgnette unsympathetic grey eyes seemed to detect his mind had wandered. Her voice had an edge. "I suggest you speak to Rupert about it – as soon as possible."

"Really, Edith. I am not sure that it is for the me…"

She ignored his protest. "It must be done with tact. I am sure he will not resent good advice coming from someone old enough to be his father. We simply cannot allow thoughtless behaviour on his part to mar a relationship which should, given time, develop into a love match."

"A match you intend to foster."

"If I did not, I should not be doing my duty. They are admirably suited to one another."

Thinking only of Annette's beauty and her father's money, Hector Ryall agreed. That the girl was shallow and empty-headed was beside the point. That she was a snobling would not have occurred to him. If it had, he would not have considered it reprehensible.

He swivelled towards his desk. "I will speak to him the moment he comes in."

"Thank you." She gave the screen a disapproving look and exited with the dignity of a grand-duchess.

As the Rector returned to Hecuba's misfortunes, a whiff of his wife's eau-de-Cologne made his nose twitch.

CHAPTER 6

A perfect evening had followed a fine day. It was two weeks after the Rector's discreetly worded little homily had been listened to with well-mannered attention. Under a cloudless sky the quiescence was virtually unbroken – only bird-rustlings in the hedges, the lowing of cattle, and the remote sound of a dog, giving evidence that Rupert and Lucy were not alone in sentience.

They had met every other day, Rupert holding the opinion that at less frequent intervals his tuition, in the limited time at his disposal, would not be effective.

At first Lucy had demurred. Rupert, convinced of a vocation, would not be put off. The clandestine nature of their meetings both regretted, for to act furtively was foreign to their characters. In Lucy a feeling of guilt refused to be ignored.

"Us'll go this way vor a change."

The narrow lane, rough underfoot, led shorewards. Behind them the church was backed by the impressive swell of St. Catherine's Down – the Pepper Pot a helmet-spike on its sharply defined parabola.

Rupert shook his head indulgently. "Us, Lucy?"

"'We' I shud'uv zed."

"That's better." The almost classic regularity of her profile fascinated him. More than once his lack of attention to where he placed his feet made him stumble in potholes.

She turned to face him, the frankness of her unfaltering glance as innocent as a child's. The roundness in her cheeks, spoiling the classicism added to her feminine appeal.

"I zhale niver learn to zpeak proper."

"There's no reason why you shouldn't," he replied. "You're young and intelligent. You have a good ear. It's simply a matter of application – of thinking before you speak."

"Me tongue's quicker'n me brain."

"It'll come with practice." He hoped she would not be discouraged. The lessons were the sole excuse for their meeting. The magnitude of what he had undertaken did not escape him. It was a challenge.

'"Tes zummat us – er, I mean we, niver thinks abowt."

"I fully understand. That is why I have to keep on correcting what you say – to make you conscious of the words you are using."

"Thee'll need a 'tarnel lot o' patience," she said doubtfully.

"You also. I shall not give up as long as you are willing to continue."

"Our time vor lessons be too zhart."

How true! Five or six hours a week did not give him much time to rectify the speech patterns of a lifetime.

"We must make the most of them. Later on I shall lend you a text-book of English grammar. Incidentally, how are you getting on with Ruskin?"

She coloured slightly. "I vind ut zlow work. Zum o' ut I doan'unnerztand – all they – er – those voreign names an' long wurds."

"Never mind those. Just try to enjoy the beauty of what he has written." No one, he thought, could fail to appreciate the colour in Ruskin's prose. The author's arguments and his classical allusions might be over Lucy's head, but the extent of his verbal palette was there to be relished by anyone.

"Tes not easy to enjoy zummat when th' veelen's theer thet what you'm doen' be agen yer vam'ly's wishes."

"Why against their wishes? Don't they want an educated daughter?" He was not unacquainted with the ignorance and prejudices of the lower classes but this attitude of the Read family to something advantageous puzzled him.

"Tes not thet, zur. Tes zummat I ken't tell 'ee."

Aware of her embarrassment, he did not press the matter. "I think it is time you called me Rupert," he said.

An offer of marriage would not have taken her more aback. "Twudden' be right."

The firmness of her reply warned him his approach had been premature.

"Are we not friends?" he asked quietly.

Once again there was one of her hesitations. "Kitchen an drawen'-room be diff'rent worlds. I be onny a servant."

Rupert repressed an impulse to shake her. Had he not made it perfectly clear that social barriers between them were to be forgotten?

He said. "A kitchen-maid that does not aspire to be anything better, deserves to remain one. Is that what you want, Lucy?"

Another pause before answering. "I beant zure. 'Tes not clear why thee zhud bother wi' me."

Suddenly he realised it no longer was crystal clear to him – that it never had been.

"I thought I explained that. I hate to see good material wasted. Some people are born to black-lead kitchen ranges and scour saucepans. You are not one of them."

"There med be middlen' vew chances uv doen' enythen' else."

Rupert touched her arm. "We'll make opportunities, Lucy. Here or elsewhere, we'll make them. If you are prepared to persevere, believe me, you'll never regret it."

The lane bottle-necked and then forked into two footpaths. To their left the green-streaked burnt sienna and ochre cliffs rose precipitately some four hundred feet above the wrack-strewn pebbles. Over a stile to the right the path cut across fields above Lucy's home and went in a westerly direction along the top of some lower cliffs.

Lucy made for the stile. She had one foot on its step when Rupert said: "Stay a moment. I've not been this way. Where does it lead?"

"By taken' that path us'll – we'll reach th' var end uv village."

"No, not that way, please!" His voice betrayed his anxiety.

"I wuz gwyne to zhow'ee where Jarge an' me used to climb a'ter seagulls' eggs. We wor both dabsters vor climben'"

"I'm sorry. I can't go there." The shame he felt at being unable to conquer his weakness produced a strained inflexion that made Lucy give him a searching look.

"Tes safe enough."

"Not for me. The path is too near the edge. Do you not remember what I told you when first we met? It's extremely embarrassing this dread of heights. It amounts to obsessional fear. They make me feel physically ill."

"Vancy thet." She told him how once she had to be rescued by coastguards when two hundred feet up.

"The thought of it makes me shudder." He said.

"Zounds middlem' rum to me. Ztill, I a' pose ye ken't help et."

"I only wish I could." He asked where the left fork would take them, and learnt it went down to the beach where they could be seen from Lucy's home.

"Tell'ee what," suggested Lucy. "Ef we goo over stile an' keep to th' inland zide o' th' vield, we ken still make our way t'other zide uv village."

"Excellent." Holding his boater in one hand he vaulted the stile and extended his other hand to Lucy. Her grey dress, temporarily snagged on a bramble, exposed coarse stockings covering shapely calves. Rupert averted his eyes.

In a thicket a short distance farther inland Joe Wheeler caught the sound of voices, one of which he recognised. Snapping a fallen branch and adding it to a pile of kindling at his feet, he then proceeded to climb an oak which would enable him to see over an intervening hedge. The branch creaked under his weight. He grasped a stronger bough, swung his legs to encircle it, and drew himself up into a sitting position. For a man of his size he was remarkably agile.

Rupert and Lucy were getting closer – the former unmistakable in cream flannels and vertically striped red and green blazer. He was questioning his pupil on a previous lesson involving the conjugation of present indicative verbs which he hoped would abolish her misuse of pronouns. Lucy, having a retentive memory, was giving correct answers.

"I love, thou lovest, he or she loves." They were far enough away from the eavesdropper to tantalise his ears with one or two words in every half dozen.

Love talk! Joe's bucolic mind made an excusable error. His honest face darkened. He clenched his fists, cushioning earth-rimmed nails against calloused palms. Although not by nature an aggressive man, the sight of the girl for whose sake he had rejected not a few brazen invitations walking with 'thet whipper-snapper uv an overner' aroused in his phlegmatic being a jealous militancy that demanded action.

A more quick-tempered man might have been stirred to make an immediate confrontation. Joe thought of so doing and changed his mind. "Twuz not Lucy;s doen'," he reasoned, and not wishing to distress her he decided to postpone what had to be done until the culprit could be caught by himself. The affair, according to Joe's deliberations, could be settled in only one way. Either he or his rival must prove himself the better man. He flexed an arm. Well-developed biceps tightened his shirt-sleeve. He had no misgivings regarding the better man's identity.

The couple, deep in syntactic exercises, passed the thicket without a glance in the direction of Joe's observation post. Shading his eyes against the setting sun, he watched them go from sight. The fact that Rupert made no attempt to put his arm round Lucy's waist he regarded as a 'rum do.'

He dropped to the ground, filled a sack with the wood he had collected, and directed his steps towards the White Mouse public house which stood apposite the new school and within a stone's throw of the church. He was still glowering when he left the sack near the door and entered the smoke-wreathed bar.

"Evenen' Joe'" George Read lowered his pewter mug.

Joe nodded, called for a pint of ale, and sat down beside George on a long wooden bench. At a rough deal table several villagers were playing dominoes and cribbage.

"What's up?" queried George. "You'm lukken put owt."

Joe took a long swig. "Iss. Not wi'owt cause neether." He told what he had witnessed.

"What be gwyne to do?" He watched a smoke-ring float away from the chokingly strong shag that filled his clay pipe.

"Do? What ken a veller do but hay et owt wi'en? I war'nt I'll larn he a lesson, you."

"Aye." George nodded approvingly. "That orter zettle en. But mind what you'm doen'. Gurt veller like thee oud kill en."

Joe emptied his tankard. "Doan vret. I shan't kill en. I hay me doubts ef a wull show hackle. Ef a do, I'll jis' alter that purdy veace vor en." He slapped the knee of his corduroy trousers as if to indicate that an open-handed blow would suffice to accomplish the proposed disfigurement.

CHAPTER 7

The next morning Joe absented himself from his work and loitered near the Rectory. At ten o'clock Rupert, again dressed in knickerbockers and carrying a walking-stick, came out into the road, walked briskly through the village, wheeled left by the church, and ascended the hill at the top of which he would be able to get on the down and climb to the pharos

The year was at its best. A walk along the ridge of the down from the Pepper Pot to a monumental column erected to commemorate a visit of the Czar Alexander in 1814 would give the right amount of pre-luncheon exercise combined with an opportunity to enjoy lovely panoramic views of which Rupert never tired.

Joe, at a discreet distance, followed him to the top.

"Hey! You!".

Rupert halted. He knew Joe by sight. Lucy had told him of his wish to marry her. He raised his stick in greeting.

"Good-morning to you."

Joe came up and towered above him. "Wha' d'y think yor game es?"

"A lot depends on your definition of 'game'." The other's belligerency the cause of which he could guess, left him unperturbed.

Joe frowned in an effort to comprehend. "I doan' want no smirt answers."

Rupert allowed a ghost of a smile to appear. "An uncivil question deserves no answer."

"I beant got no gift o' th' gab. I doan' mince me wurds." Joe's voice had risen.

The smile lingered. "Splendid. I admire frankness."

"Gi' oi a straight answer then. What's yor game wi'Lucy Read?"

The smile disappeared. His tone sharpened. "You might tell me what business that is of yours." He leaned back on his stick.

"I be Joe Wheeler. Lucy's my gurl, zee?" He thrust his face forward to bring it close to Rupert's.

"If that were true, I think she would have told me. Do you claim to be engaged?" He had a mental snapshot of the pair standing before the altar, with his host conducting the marriage ceremony. Lucy and this oaf!

"Wull, noa – not 'zackly/ Us hay an understanden' like."

A one-sided understanding perhaps?"

"Doan' knaw nuthen' 'bout that." Rupert's curtness made him feel a little uncomfortable. This was the kind of authoritative voice automatically to be obeyed. He blustered. "Thee'st better leave she alone, thet's all."

"And if I don't."

Joe raised a menacing fist. "I zhull make 'ee, zee?"

"I'd advise you not to try." Relaxed and unflinching, Rupert still rested on his stick. He did not think it necessary to disclose that, although he did not care for boxing, after he had been rather badly knocked about during a bullying session in his college dormitory, his father had insisted on his having some professional tuition.

Joe snorted. "You'm onny a whipper-snapper. I cud lick two uv'ee wi' one hand."

"Look, Joe. I've no wish to quarrel with you." The curtness had gone. Rupert's voice was quite friendly. "Be a good chap and clear off before you get yourself into trouble."

Joe scowled. "I'll goo when I be good an' ready. I'll knock zum sense into 'ee vust." In spite of his hectoring manner, he did not feel as confident as his words implied. That he could trounce his rival he never for a second doubted. It was Rupert's nonchalance, so different from what he had anticipated, that disturbed him.

Rupert's tongue made a noise expressive of regret. "It's such a splendid morning. I do wish you would return to your muck-spreading or whatever it is you should be doing."

Joe was needled. "Wull'ee leave the' maid be?"

When the request comes from her. Certainly not to satisfy you."

"Right." Joe took off his well-worn leather waistcoat and spat on his hands. "Thee've axed vor et. I'll larn'ee not to meddle wi' maids hereabowts. Put up thee vests."

Rupert sighed. "Very well. If you insist." He removed his jacket and deer-stalker, drove his stick into the ground, and used it as a clothes-hanger.

From the initial squaring up it was a matter of brains versus brawn, of trained skill outwitting brute strength. A prodigious 'haymaker' swept over Rupert's head and his counter-offensive, aimed at the solar plexus, landed on Joe's sternum. It was like hitting a brick wall.

Head down and throwing wild punches with both arms, Joe charged, hit nothing, and charged again.

Rupert. Never in the same place for two seconds on end, weaved and ducked, and when an opening was presented landed some stinging blows on his opponent's head.

"Ztan' still, wull'ee, an' vight like a man." taunted Joe.

Rupert grinned. "And have my head knocked off. Not likely."

"I beant used to vighten' dancen'-mayasters."

A left-hook, following a feint that lowered his guard, brought a trickle of blood from Joe's lips.

"You talk too much." said Rupert.

Overhead a formation of birds flew in from the Needles, swooped and
soared skywards. An adder, awakened by trampled bracken, stole away to safety.

Ten minutes passed. The contestants, beginning to pant, drew apart. At that moment Rupert felt his foot slip. The springy turf had polished the soles of his shoes to such an extent that they could have been worn as dancing-pumps. He groaned inwardly. His survival depended on swift movement and accurate timing. To stumble would be disastrous. He looked at Joe's boots. Hobnailed. They would never slip.

A moment's respite and they were at it again. Twice Rupert slid and recovered. Then, side-stepping to avoid a punch so obviously signalled that normally he would have taken advantage of it, he found himself skidding, not away from Joe but towards him. Completely off balance, with his head in advance of his body, he was
at his adversary's mercy.

The knock-out blow never came. Joe lowered his hands and stepped back.

"Vair's vair," he grunted.

"Thanks, Joe." Rupert took off his shoes and threw them aside.

The fight was resumed, but to a changed pattern, for the brief interval had given Joe Wheeler's sluggish brain time to grasp that, being outclassed as a boxer, his only chance of winning lay in using his superior weight and strength. With this in mind, he tried to wrestle.

Warned by the first attempt at a 'hold'. Rupert knew what to expect. It was imperative he should not be trapped. From a seventeen-stone bear-hug he would be lucky to escape without broken ribs. Both men were tiring.

Once again the bigger man attacked with open arms. It was once too often, for Rupert's fist jabbed him below the breast-bone. He gasped and doubled up, jaw exposed waiting for the uppercut that came like the upthrust of a piston-rod, and put him on his back.

Rupert rubbed his wrist. It had been a jarring blow, delivered with every ounce of his eleven stones behind it. He hoped Joe had had enough.

The unconscious man stirred and tried to sit up. He was not able to do it. He moaned, fell back, and remained still for a few more seconds. His second effort brought him unsteadily to his feet.

Rupert, sitting tailor-wise a few yards away, watched him warily.

Joe felt his jaw and wiped the blood from his face with a white-spotted red handkerchief. He looked bewildered. Then, muttering something about 'vighten' dancen'-mayasters', he picked up his waistcoat and shambled off.

The victor sat with mixed feelings. The elation of victory was short-lived. It was replaced by something akin to pity. He regretted the violence. Joe Wheeler was a good fellow, but, like so many of his kind, motivated by primitive instincts, Poor Joe!

The ethics of combating violence with violence occupied his thoughts for twenty minutes, at the end of which he re-clothed himself and set out for the Hoy Monument. He wondered if Joe would be fit to do a day's work. He himself had a tendency to tremble.

CHAPTER 8

Across the road, behind a five-foot stone wall, the lofty holm oaks and elms of an extensive park hid from sight the residence of the Lord of the Manor of Northwood – a Georgian mansion Amos Read had never seen.

Returning from a cottage in the vicinity, for the repair of which he had been asked to give an estimate, he began to speculate on the amount of wealth people like the Ward family would possess. It was said they owned practically the whole of the parish of Northwood, that their other properties extended from Parkhurst Forest to Freshwater, and that, some seventy-four years earlier, the church which broke the continuity of their wall had been rebuilt at their expense.

Opposite the church, flanked by superior-looking dwellings, was Mr Parkin's Grammar School, from which the principal's exit coincided with Amos Read's arrival at its door.

Amos touched the brim of his hard hat. "Good-day t'ye, Mr Parkin."

Parkin, a red-complexioned man with a drooping white moustache and a far-carrying voice, beamed "Ah, Mr Read! I'm so pleased to meet you. I was going to write you a letter. Now it will not be necessary."

"Nuthen' amiss, I hope?" Amos adopted a characteristic stance – legs apart, shoulders back, chin high.

"As a matter of fact I feared there might be, I have been wondering why your son has been absent for the past month. It seemed rather strange you did not communicate with me."

Amos glared. "Harry not bin to zchule? What zart o' cock-an'-bull yarn's this? Az var ez I know, th' nipper's bin ev'ry day."

The other bridled. "I assure you, Mr Read, he has not. I cannot recall the precise date of his last attendance. It must have been at least four weeks ago."

"Vower weeks! An' this es th' vust I hear uv et?" When consorting with an educated man he never was at his best – a sense of inadequacy tending to make him aggressive. The fact that the school-master was inclined to self-importance – a 'pussikey veller' – did not help matters.

Parkin raised a placatory hand. "My dear sir. How was I to know he was not being kept away for some perfectly legitimate reason? The boy might have been ill, or one of your family might have succumbed to an infectious ailment."

The reasonableness of the argument was undeniable. "Aye, I z'pose you'm right," he admitted grudgingly.

"Am I to understand he has been playing truant?"

"Ken't zee no other explanation." He was bitterly disappointed. He and Sarah had denied themselves a number of little luxuries to cover Mr Parkin's fees.

"Why should he? Was he not happy with me?"

Amos shook his head. "Dunno no more'n you. Onny las' week a telled as how a wuz doen' wi' they 'clensions an' th' laike."

Mr Parkin was in a dilemma. He did not want to lose a pupil; on the other hand he thought the boy's father ought to know the truth.

"To be quite honest with you, Mr Read, I was rather disappointed with Harry's progress. He is no dullard, but I had the impression that after a promising start he began to lose interest – that he was not even trying."

"Then theer's no point in wasten' my money an' yor time."

"I would not say that." Mr Parkin made a final attempt to retain a pupil. "The boy has brains."

Amos glowered. "Mebbe zo, mebbe not. When th' young vool drows away th' chance o' a lifetime, I begin to wonder. Vrom now on a goes back to Nash'nul zchule where a wuz avore. But vust a'il hay me to reckon wi."

Parkin expressed polite sorrow, and with a curt "Good-day to y'" from Amos the men parted. At the back of his mind the builder still harboured a suspicion that he had been talked out of giving the other a 'zetten' down'.

CHAPTER 9

"Do you like me new hat?" Daisy Read peered between the black marble clock modelled on the Parthenon and a bronze-painted plaster fisherman to indulge in self-admiration in a gilt-framed overmantel.

"It's smart." Secretly Agnes thought it a bit 'fast'.

Mrs Read turned from a mahogany desk under which an iron safe occupied most of the knee-hole. "Ken't say I keer vor thet wol' veather."

It was Daisy's weekly half-day's holiday and the three women were in Sarah's living-room which served also as office and strong-room.

Daisy pouted. "Oh, Mother! It wouldn't be anything without it."

"I doan' want ye tuk vor a ztreet-walker."

"I like to be fashionable." Daisy tucked in a strand of sandy hair.

Igoring the hint of rebelliousness in her daughter's reply, Sarah Read shrugged and again faced the ledger from which she was making out accounts. Thirtover little mommet. Med ez wull zave breath ez argue.

"Her ladyship's got one almost identical." Daisy bared her teeth. Two incisors had started to decay. This was something she preferred not to think about, hoping the cavity was not noticeable when she spoke. Hastily bringing her lips together, she whirled round, caught her reflection in the glass that covered a large steel-engraving of Prince Albert, and paused to primp – an expression of fatuity and conceit marring features that otherwise were not uncomely.

Her navy-blue costume, made by her mother, comprised a short tight-waisted jacket with leg o' mutton sleeves, wide turned-down collar and revers, and a full bell-shaped skirt, of which the centre panel was edged with braid and ornamented with pointed straps and buttons. The rose-pink frilly-fronted shirt blouse with a satin bow at the throat revealed by the open jacket was Agnes's handiwork.

"Are you goin' to see the magic-lantern this evenin'?" Agnes, sensitive to friction, wanted to change the subject.

"Bert did say somethin' about goin', or we might go to Poole's. What's the subject?" Poole's Panorama, a popular place of entertainment, was conveniently close to the Cowes-East Cowes ferry, on which Daisy had to return to reach her employer's house.

"Travels in the Holy Land. It should be interestin'." Illustrated lectures were given at the back of the Wesleyan Chapel, in a long room normally used for the Sunday School.

"What time will it finish? I mus' catch the quarter-to-nine ferry to be in at nine."

"It starts at seven," said Agnes. "You might have to leave before the end."

"I was told off las' week for bein' late. I better be on time tonight."

"Oh, yes, Daisy. You musin't get into trouble." Agnes was vicariously anxious.

Mrs Read faced them again. "Thee'd best watch yourself, me gurl, or ye'll be owt uv a place." Daisy's 'place' was that of under housemaid in Lord Waignmorton's fifteen-roomed villa – a house handily situated within a few hundred yards of Osborne House where its owner as a member of the Queen's Household.

For twelve pounds a year, plus an allowance for tea and sugar, Daisy rose at six a.m., cleaned and black-leaded grates, laid fires, scrubbed floors, dusted, swept, polished furniture, emptied slops, opened and made beds, and in her spare time did any other jobs her superiors thought they could impose upon her.

"I'd not let that worry me."

Sarah Read, a small prematurely wizen-faced woman of forty-eight, put down her pen. "Hed'n better let yor vather hear'ee zay that."

"Here he comes." Agnes had seen him pass the lace-curtained window behind the desk.

"I'm, goin'." Daisy, always eager to gallivant, pulled on her gloves.

"Doan' be late for tay." Sarah had no inkling of the upset that would occur before the meal was taken.

"Shan't be more'n an hour." She hurried through the kitchen and met her father at the back door. One glance at the face warned her of his mood. When her demure "Hullo, Father" was unanswered and he strode by as if she were not there, she knew someone was 'for it'.

"Harry not home?" Surprised by the suppressed anger in his voice, both Agnes and her mother looked at him with startled faces.

"Ain't zid en."

"'Bowt time a wuz." With widespread fingers he leant on the table. He had not removed his hat.

"Ye luk in a pelt, Amos." She felt her stomach respond to his anger.

Not wi'owt cause."

"What's wrong?" She could think of nothing Harry had done to annoy his father.

"Young varmint's bin michen'"

Sarah dropped her pen, making a blot on a bill-head. "Oh, no!"

"I was passen' th' zchule uz Parkin cum owt. A wanted to know why th' boy was bein' kep' home."

"But why shud'n miche?"

"Et beats me," Amos replied. "I gi' en a chance hun'erds o' youngsters 'ud jump at, an' a kerries on this vashion."

"Et's too bad."

Amos dug into the pockets of his flap-fronted trousers and brought out a coin. He handed it to Agnes whose cheeks had lost their colour and whose right hand clenched the left.

"Yur, take this an' go to th' carner shop an' buy one o' Missus Baxter's canes – a good strong one."

Agnes hesitated, her eyes pleading. "Must I, Father?"

He made an impatient gesture. "Do ez you'm bid – an' doan' vorget th' change."

She took the coin, paused as though about to say something, changed her mind and, rising from the sofa, left the room.

Sarah abandoned her writing. "Thee'll gi' Harry a chance to explain?"

What excuse ken theer be?" Vower weeks, an' a's not showed up at zchule once.".

"I doan' like to think ov'n gitten' a hiden'." She ventured.

"Ye wudden'. You'm, too soft, 'ooman. Th' boy mus' be larnt a lesson a'll not vorget in a month o' Sundays."

"Theer's other ways," she said quietly.

"This be mine. Me vather used to gi' me zight o' stirrup ile wi' his buckle-ztrap athert me backside – an' I be none th'wus'vor et."

Sarah was not convinced. "Ye niver laid hands on en avore."

He took off his hat. "Mebbe I zhud 'a done once or twice. A's allus hided behind yor petticoat. A wont this time, I'll war'nt."

She went over to him and touched his arm. "I knaw how ye veel – th'disappointment an' ev'rythen'."

He moved away, refusing to let her compassion soften him. “I zet me heart on en bein’ top zcholar – an’ now this.”

“Doan’ make en hate’ee, Amos.”

“Wud en uv let me down ef a’d eny love vor me?”

She dacked an incipient tear. “I ken’t think what cum o’re en.”

He gripped her shoulder. “When th’ nipper cums in, thee’et better clear off up orchard or zumwhere. Tek Agnes wi’ee. Her’s ez tender-hearted ez thee bist – more ef enythen’.”

Wont ‘ee hay zecond thoughts?”

“No.” He was as implacable as any of the Old Testament prophets in whom he so devoutly believed. “’Tes plain’nuff in th’ Good Book. He thet spareth hes rod hateth his zon.”

“I’ll go now, Zend Agnes a’ter me when her cums back.” She hoped to repress her tears until she was alone.

Twenty minutes passed. With the cane hidden behind his chair, Amos sat by the empty fireplace and waited. Apart from the unobtrusive ticking of the clock, there was no sound.

“Oh, where is everyone, Father?” Harry burst in with his usual exuberance. He threw his bulging satchel on the sofa.

“Up orchard.”

“I’ll go and see.”

“Not so vast. Ztop an’ tell me how ye got on today.” Amos spoke quietly, but with a grim undertone which made his son uneasy.

“Fine, Father – jus’ fine.”

“Gitten’ on alright wi’ yor Lat’n?”

Harry’s evasive glance darted from wall to wall. “Latin? Er..oh, yes. We did it this afternoon.” He wished he knew what was in the wind. Why was there no tea on the table? His agile brain sought an answer.

“Tell me ‘bout et.”

“You wouldn’t understand, Father. It’s declensions and things.” What was the reason for these questions?

“Niver mind thet. Jis’ tell me what ye larnt.” He had difficulty in controlling his anger.

“Er…let me think. Oh, yes, nouns of the third declension.” Harry’s heart was beginning to pound. Surely his father hadn’t found out?

“Zo ye done thet today,eh?”

“That’s right. Miles, miles, militem, militia…”

“Liar!”The violence of the shouted word made Harry gasp and stagger.
Ye stand there tellen’ bareveaced lies, when ye know thes’st not bin near th’ zchule vor weeks – when ye knaw thee’st bin jackassen’ about on th’ seafront or zumwhere.”

“I…”

“Cum yur.”

Harry went to his father. Amos gripped his shoulder.

“I z’pose thee thought thee’d make a vool o’ me, ye ungrateful little toad.”

Harry squirmed. “No, Father. I didn’t, honest, I didn’t.”

“Then whatzart uv game ded’st et think ye were playen’?”

Harry hung his head and did not reply.

“Cum on! Answer me!”

“I don’t know what to say.” His voice was almost inaudible.

“No clever excuse? Not they’d make a scuddick o’ diff’rence. Thee bist gitten’ a tannen’.”

Harry tried to pull away from his father’s grip. “No! Please, Father! I’m sorry!”

“Too late to be zorry.” Amos reached for the cane, and told the boy to drop his trousers. Then, taking him to the sofa, he made him bend over the head.

Eight times the cane rose and fell. Eight times Harry screamed. Each stroke, however, had been progressively severe and, he began to realise, what had started purely and simply as a punishment was tending to give him pleasure – a sensation to be felt by a bully, not by a respectable, chapel-going, master-builder whose only wish was justly to chastise an erring son. To Amos Read the more recherché quirks of the mind were a closed book.

He stood back. “Theer, p’raps thet’ll make a man uv’ee.” He recalled with satisfaction a story of a naval flogging that had reformed a ‘hang-gallus’ rascal and transformed him into a first-class seaman.

Harry’s tearful howling continued and he made no attempt to move.

“Cum on. Be a man. Ye doan’ wan’ upzet yor mother,” said Amos gruffly. The look he gave Harry was not without pity.

Gulping and snuffling in renewed paroxysms, Harry, pulling up his trousers with one hand, went from the room and slowly climbed the stairs to his bedroom.

CHAPTER 10

Agnes tapped lightly on the door of her brother’s bedroom and opened it. “Are you awake, Harry?”

“Go away.” His voice was muffled, for he was lying prone.

“I came to see if you were alright.”

“How can I be alright?” he said surlily. “ I can only lay on my belly.”

Agnes approached the bed, over which a framed text proclaimed ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’ in twig-lettering entwined with flowers.

“I’m sorry.”

“Clear of, will you. I don’t want to speak to anyone.”

“What made you do such a wicked thing?”

“I dunno.” His face remained buried in the pillow. “Now go away and leave me alone.”

Agnes picked up his discarded clothing and folded it. “I’m jus’ goin’, Harry. Can I get you some ointment or anythin’?”

"No."

She pulled the quilt up to his shoulder and tucked it in. "I should like to do somethin' to make you comfortable."

"You can keep your help," he snarled. "You're his favourite, ain't you? Always were. Agnes always came straight home from school. Agnes never tore her clothes. Agnes never played with boys."

His sister ignored his jibes. "You really were wicked not to go to school. We all know how much Father wanted you to get on."

"That's what made me play truant."

"You'll be the loser."

"P'raps I shall. But it upset him, didn't it? And I'm glad – glad."

Unwilling to accept that her brother was as perverse as his words indicated, Agnes persisted. "Why, Harry? Why?"

"Because we always have to do what he wants. Nobody else has a say in anythin' not even Mother."

"I think you're being silly. All children have to do what their parents want. It's only right they should."

"Why is it right?"

"Parents know best." This was the doctrine by which she had lived.

Harry moved as though about to sit up, yelped as the weals on his buttocks took his weight, and subsided into his former position.

"Jus' wait a bit."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I'll pay him out for this. I'll never forget it – never."

Her eyes filled with tears. "How can you say such things?" She was torn between compassion and loyalty to her father. "Father is good and kind. I think you were horrid to make him angry, so there. I won't listen to you any more."

"Nobody asked you to."

"Oh, Harry!"

Harry sneered. "I s'pose he's down there reading his bible?"

"You know he never misses his daily chapter." Her father's bible, kept on the desk beside the ledger, was read every evening.

"He don't understand a quarter of it. He's ignorant – ignorant as a pig."

This was too much. Agnes moved to the door. "I'm goin' to bed."

Harry did not reply. Agnes, who liked to live in harmony with everyone and expected others to feel the same way, went with a heavy heart to her own room.

CHAPTER 11

Another tutorial was coming to an end. The start of the path to Cliff Cottage was visible from where Rupert and Lucy were standing. It was eight-thirty.

"By the way," said Rupert," I must warn you that later on the regularity of our meetings may be interrupted. Another guest is coming to the rectory. You may have seen her. It is Miss Annette Howell from Brighstone."

"Iss. Her's bin to Rect'ry avore. Her's purdy." A pinprick of misgiving was too potent for her not firmly established grammar.

"Lucy!"

"I knew 'twuz wrong," she admitted.

Rupert continued. "It is quite probable that entertainments may be arranged in which I shall be expected to participate."

"I zee."

"If this should happen on one of our evenings, it would not be easy for me, without appearing ill-mannered, to refuse."

"You mun do what's right."

Always sensitive to her reactions, he detected a nuance of foreboding. Would he ever understand these people, who seemed always ready to read in simple statements a significance they did not contain? Were they so unsure of themselves?

"It will not be for a month or so. A nuisance really. You have so much ground to cover."

Lucy brightened perceptibly. Miss Howell's shadow faded.

"Whatever happens," Rupert went on, "I shall not neglect you. You've made a remarkably good beginning. When I go back to Oxford I shall expect you to do written work. I shall let you have the necessary text-books and test papers. It will mean a lot of hard work, but it will not be beyond you."

"I shall do my best." The sibilant was silk-smooth, the pronoun given its full value. Rupert, knowing his efforts over the past weeks had not been futile, beamed.

They parted, two happy people, neither of whom was yet quite ready to accept that their happiness came from their being in love.

In the kitchen of Cliff Cottage inadequate illumination from an oil lamp with a naked glass chimney blended the general shabbiness to give an illusion of cosy domesticity. The garish colours of the Victoria and Albert prints were subdued, the mantelpiece-based china dogs less fantastic.

George, his hands clasped behind his head, was lying on the sofa. Mrs Read was darning a pair of socks.

Lucy looked at the clock. Twenty to nine. Mrs Ryall's curfew hour, officially nine o'clock but with a ten minute tolerance provided it was not abused, gave her half an hour.

"No need to ax what thee'st bin up to. I ken tell be yor veace." Martha Read;s greeting was unfriendly."

"Onny tryen' to better mezelf, Mother." The abrasive sibilant was again in evidence.

"To what purpose, I'd like to know?"

"I doan' know yit."

Mrs Read cut her darning wool and pulled the wooden mushroom from the sock. "Nor nobody else, ef ye ax me."

"Bin znoodlen' on cliffs more like. Plenny o'vuzzy gorse there to hid'ee vrom zight." George's raillery was accompanied by a leer.

Lucy flushed. “Us niver goes thet way.”

“Most carten’ couples do.”

“We beant carten,” Lucy, extremely slow to anger and able to take without offence her brother’s heavy-handed humour, was dangerously near to losing her temper.

Martha intervened. “Zhud ‘a thought cliff path wud ‘a bin a nice walk vor’ee.”

“Tes too near th’ edge, Measter Blake can’t abide et.”

“Nuthen’ to be aveared uv there,” said George.

“Tes th’ height. You wudden underztand. Can’t zay I do meself. ‘Tes zummat they call acrophobia.”

George grinned. “Her’s larnen’ zum crackjaw wurds, Mother, ef nuthen ‘ else.”

His mother cemented the end of her wool by drawing it through a lump of beeswax. “A veller yor Uncle Amos hed worken’ vor en cudden’ nivver go up a ladder. Med be zummat zim’lar. A’s head used to git zwivetty.”

“Tes an ailment,” Lucy explained. “That’s all I know.”

“Bad vor en, I mus’ zay.” Mrs Read never held back her sympathy when any form of illness was brought to her notice.

George asked: “Did a tell’ee’bout th’ zet-to wi’ Joe?”

Lucy;s heart quickened. “What zet-to?”

“Th’ one they had z’marnen.”

Martha looked at her son incredulously. “They niver cum to blows?”

With calculated slowness George filled his pipe and tamped the tobacco “Not half they dedn’. Wol’ Joe had wust uv et, too. A’s got a ter’bul cut lip an’swulled up jaw.”

Lucy gripped the back of a chair.

Her mother asked: “How’d et cum about?”

George took an appreciative puff. “’Pears Joe volleyed young Blake up to Pepper Pot, telled en our Lucy was his gurl, an’ warned en to leave she alone.”

“Joe Wheeler zhud hold his tongue.” Lucy released the chair to wipe an angry tear.

“Z’pose a thought ‘twuz vor th’ best,” rationalised the elder woman.

George chuckled. “I louz wol’ Joe had th’ zurprise uv his life. A never counted on Blake zhowen’ hackle.”

“A massy a did’n kill en wi’ they gurt vests uv hisn.”

“T’other wuz too light on his veet vor’n. Like a dancen-mayaster ‘carden’ to Joe . Made en zim pumble-vooted. Knowed how to use his dooks, too. Winded Joe vust, an’ then vloored en.”

“Zerves en right,” snapped Lucy. “Gurt vool!”

Martha looked grave. “I allus zed ‘twud bring trouble – mixen’ wi’ gentry.”

“There no reason why it zhud, Mother – ef volks ud mind their own avairs.”

“Wull, ye knaw how yor vather an’ me veel – an’ Garge.” Mrs Read sighed. Such tantrums vrom th’ maid who, up to a month or zo ago, hed bin zo sweet-tempered an’ docile!

“None uv ‘ee’s got eny time vor education.”

George examined his pipe. The reeking shag tickled Lucy’s throat, made her eyes smart. “I beant zo sure this edication ain’t a zprat to ketch a mack’rel.”

Lucy glared at him. “Measter Blake is a gentleman.”

“A’s onny a human like th’ rest o’ we. ‘Twull be too late when ye vind a wuzburd on th’ way.”

“I woan’ listen to zuch talk, Garge.”

Martha selected another sock and, finding a large hole at its toe, said “Drat” without emphasis and then, “Doan’ be too voreright, young ‘ ooman. There be good zense in what yor brother zays.”

“’Tes not me gitten’ in th’ vam’ly-way a’s aveared uv. ‘Tes th’ nex’ bit o’ business a’s wurreted abowt.”

The brittle clay of George’s pipe-stem snapped under involuntary pressure from clumsy fingers. “Us cant be too keerful, an’ doan’ ye vorget et. Eny question axed, ye doan’ know nuthen’, zee?”

An eloquent look gave him his answer. Then, bidding them a strained goodnight, she opened the door.

“God bless ‘ee.” Martha’s habitual benediction followed her as she went out.

CHAPTER 12

“Wretched man!” Agnes, seated at the desk, was poring over the accounts ledger. Giles Easthorpe, a tight-fisted client, always expected to have his property repaired for next to nothing. This time, having averred he was charged twice for the same job, he had refused to pay. A check by Mrs Read had disclosed the error. Agnes was double-checking.

A week had elapsed since Harry’s chastisement. He had returned to the council school, and life had resumed its normal course.

“Where’s Ma?” Daisy, pert and restless, came in.

“Either in the carpenter’s shop getting’ firewood, or in the orchard pickin’ up windfalls. I want to finish checking this account before she comes in again.

“Would you like me to go and detain her for a while?”

“I wish you would, Daisy. She means well, but when she tries to help I lose the place and have to start again.”

“Don’t you get fed up?” Daisy caught her reflection in the overmantel, approved of what she saw, and fussed with her hat.

“Oh, no! I’m quite happy.”

“I saw Donald Price on the ferry. He wanted me to ask you if you would meet him this evenin’. He’ll wait by the Police Station until seven.”

Agnes blushed. “He’ll wait in vain.”

Daisy perched herself on the head of the sofa. “Why? Donald’s a steady chap..”

“Yes, he’s alright. I simply don’t want to encourage him.”

“The chances you throw away! There’s Billy and Edwin, and now Don – all after you. You’ll be an ol’ maid if you’re not careful.”

"I shan't mind. Agnes did not respond lightly to her sister's banter. "I'll be able to take care of Mother an' Father."

Daisy shot out her legs and lifted her skirt to examine he shoes. "What sort of life's that goin' to be?"

"I think I might prefer it to getting married."

"Don't you want to fall in love?"

Agnes considered the question. "Perhaps. I can't say what will happen later on. I s'pose everyone wants to be loved – but not all in the same way."

"Agnes." About to broach an exciting and virtually taboo topic, Daisy lowered her voice and bent forward. "Don't you ever feel you'd like to…well…you know?"

"Sleep with a man?" She wished Daisy would not speak of these disconcerting things. Her counter-question was free of all prurience.

Daisy giggled. "You could put it like that."

"I'm not sure I'd ever care enough for anyone really to want to want to go to bed with him. At any rate, it's not somethin' I'd look forward to."

Daisy raised her skirt still higher. "Funny, ain't it?"

"What is?"

"How different you an' me are. I can hardly wait."

"Daisy!" Agnes expressed shock and concern. "Do be careful! Don't for goodness' sake do anythin' silly."

Her sister inspected the pink ribbon threaded in the insertion at the hem of her petticoat. "If it was a question of keepin' or losin' Bert," she said, "I'd probably do anythin'."

CHAPTER 13

"It is not possible, Mrs Dawson. You must be mistaken." Edith Ryall, hauteur personified, brandished her lorgnette, defying her informant to confirm the calumny.

Mrs Dawson snorted. "Indeed I beant. I med be zixty-one, but I still hay a good pair uv eyes."

The two women were near the window of the general stores where Mrs Ryall had been to settle her monthly account. In the churchyard across the road Mr Dawson was using a reaping-hook on long grass.

Mrs Dawson, a born busybody, wiry and thin-lipped, continued: "Dree times I zid 'em. Measter Blake wearen' thet red an' green coat uv hisn one o' th' times. A body'd niver make no mistake o're that."

"But are you sure it was Lucy Read with him on each occasion?"

"Zarten sure. I zid 'em o're to Beckfield Cross, down to Walpole, an' once at Blackgang."

"Could they not have met by chance?" offered Mrs Ryall, knowing full well they had not.

"Wull, I z'pose they oud'uv. Ded'n luk like et to me."

"I am sure Mr Blake had a very sound reason- if what you have told me is correct." Once more the lorgnette came into action.

"Ef it beant, my name's not Emily Dawson."

Inside his shop Bernard Collins, eager for news, edged towards the door.

Mrs Ryall dropped her voice. "I think it would be advisable to keep this between ourselves. That the matter will be satisfactorily explained, I've not the slightest doubt."

"I zhan't say a word." A belated promise. Half the population of Chale already knew.

In an agitated frame of mind Edith Ryall returned to the Rectory, too preoccupied to do more than half acknowledge the respectful salute given by the landlord of the White Mouse as he drove his pony-trap into his yard.

"It will not do, Hector," she said after interrupting another of her husband's engagements with Euripides and recounting Mrs Dawson's story.

"Of course not, my dear. But can we be sure it is true?" He hoped it was not. He detested crises.

"I should like to think not, but I fear it is. These things always are."

The Rector joined the fingertips of both hands. "Like you, I think this calls for an investigation. I would, however, without hesitation vouch for Rupert's probity."

His wife pursed her lips. "Lucy Read is an attractive young woman."

He unjoined his fingers, leaving the thumbs touching. "Hardly comparable with Annette Howells."

"Certainly not."

"With Annette's visit in the offing, a contretemps of this nature, whatever lies behind it, is deplorable – most deplorable."

Looking away from his wife, his eyes encountered his portrait. That, too, was deplorable. He regretted having paid fifty pounds for it.

"Especially as Sir Gerald has indicated that a match between Annette and his son would meet with his approval." Engrossed by this problem, she had not seen the flicker of distaste.

"A delicate situation, Edith."

"Indicative of the times. When I was a girl it simply would not have occurred. Now, with radical ideas spreading to all classes of society, anything can happen."

"People like that mountebank Shaw are responsible." He grasped an ebony ruler and shook it vigorously.

"He and that appalling Fabian Society."

"Clever people, my dear, with doctrines that cannot fail to appeal to the working classes. Let us not deceive ourselves on that score."

Mrs Ryall frowned. "The lower orders need little prompting to take liberties."

"I view the growth of Socialism with profound disquiet." The ruler was held like a lecturer's pointer. "Only last week the Bishop told me that editor fellow, Keir Hardie, intends to stand for Parliament."

Had the Bishop told him the Devil himself was to be a candidate at the next election, Hector Ryall would not have been more perturbed. He surveyed the study, comforted by the integrity of its solid bookcase, desk and bureau, and by the watercolours and faded sepia of college-group photographs that filled so large an area of the striped wallpaper. How real a menace to his way of life were Hardie and people of his kidney?

"So few people can see the danger," Mrs Ryall continued. "Do you recall the difficulty I had in persuading the Carter-Wickhams not to convert an attic at the manor into a servants' bathroom? A bathroom for servants! I suppose the next thing to be given them would be a carriage and pair!"

"Give them an inch and they take an ell." The Rector was in sententious agreement.

"When one hears of the impertinence tolerated at Osborne, one wonders where it will end. They say that Scottish gillie is most outspoken – positively rude at times, even to the Queen." Indignation at the enormity of such behaviour brought a flush to her cheeks.

"I imagine John Brown to be exceptionally privileged. Her Majesty would permit no other person to speak as he does."

"What do you suggest we do?" Edith Ryall, dismissing Court favouritism, returned to the subject originally under discussion.

"The matter requires thought."

"The girl will have to be given notice." Her tone forestalled any leniency on his part.

"There has been no previous cause for complaint?" The question was superfluous. If there had been, he would have heard about it.

"None. Her conduct has been exemplary. Cook has spoken highly of her willingness and industry."

"We should not antagonise Mrs Sprake." His ruler became a rolling-pin.

"Something must be done." No temperamental cook would dictate terms while she was mistress.

"It might be wiser if I were to have a chat with Rupert first – to discover why he should wish to consort with a kitchen-maid."

"I shall find it difficult to overlook Lucy's conduct." Her lorgnette, searching for a sign of weakness, came into operation.

Hector Ryall coughed nervously. A gentle rebuke and a show of authority was called for. Edith was apt to forget his was a spiritual office.

"As her rector, it is incumbent upon me to temper chastening with charity."

"The girl should not have forgotten her station."

"Let us reserve judgment, my dear, until I have spoken to Rupert."

"Very well." She was still nettled. "But I think, Hector, there should be no delay."

There was none, for at that moment Rupert crossed the front yard. Edith Ryall, elegant in a narrow-waisted royal-blue taffeta dress with puffed sleeves and flaring hemline, retired to another part of the house, leaving her husband to catch their guest as he came in.

A tactful preamble regarding village gossip brought the Rector to Rupert's association with one of his servants.

Rupert explained.

The Rector smiled indulgently. "Quite frankly, my boy, I find the idea extremely quixotic."

Rupert, sitting as much at ease as was possible on one of the study's straight-backed chairs, wished this discussion had not come upon him before he had had time to consider how to deal with it.

"I don't agree, sir," he said. "I see nothing quixotic in trying to educate an intelligent girl."

"Lucy Read is no longer a girl." The Rector was still smiling.

"She is young enough to have a receptive brain – a brain open to new ideas."

"Undoubtedly. But have you given the matter sufficient thought? To you, no doubt, the pros are obvious, but what of the cons?" Having had no opposition when he had spoken to Rupert regarding the digging, he expected respectful acquiescence this time.

"What can be said against improving good material?"

"Nothing – if that were the only facet." The proviso was uttered with profound solemnity.

"There can be no other that really matters."

"Come, come, young man." His magisterial benevolence was identical to what the artist had captured in his portrait. "Such naivete is unworthy of you."

"I don't follow, sir." He did, but growing irritation with the snobbish principles he felt sure were responsible for the other's argument strengthened his resolve that his host should be made to speak without equivocation.

"Let me put it this way. Lucy Read is eighteen, and a very personable eighteen at that."

"Agreed."

"Would you not also agree that it would be unreasonable to expect any man of twenty-one, confronted by such a lovely young woman, to be absolutely certain his motives were entirely altruistic?" A smugness engendered by conscious pride in what he considered to be his command of the Socratic method enhanced his resemblance to Henry Holiday's illustration.

"I assure you…"

The Rector raised a pacifying palm. "Don't misunderstand me, Rupert. Not for a moment would I doubt your integrity."

"Then I'm afraid I can't see where this is leading," Rupert said frostily.

"The world is censorious, my boy. You, a gentleman, are seen associating with a servant-girl. You, Lucy Read, and myself, know the purity of your intentions. What of other people? What will they think?"

"They may think what they please." The frost had turned to ice.

The elder man, unsure of the extent of his mentorial authority *in loco parentis,*
Suppressed a sharp retort and said: "Is that quite fair to Miss Read – or to Miss Howell?"

Miss Howell? How was she concerned? Surely they did not think friendship in that quarter would develop into anything closer?

"I'm sure Annette would understand."

"I would not be too sanguine on that score. Young ladies can be most unsympathetic when it suits them."

Rupert shrugged. "I'm not particularly worried about Annette's opinion."

Momentarily nonplussed, Hector Ryall switched his argument. "There is another aspect – one concerning which my wife and I, and, no doubt, your father, have strong feelings."

At last, thought Rupert. "Which is?"

"Status. Certain things simply are not done." The sentiment was one in which he genuinely believed. He thought in Rupert's case it would be unanswerable.

"A few of us at Oxford are beginning to think differently." Rupert's reply carried equal conviction.

The Rector looked grave. Here was further evidence of the way things were going. "Not only at Oxford, I fear. An insidious radicalism is now spreading throughout the country."

"We think changes are overdue."

Hector Ryall sat back, grasping with both hands the lapels of his coat. He might have been about to address a public meeting. "Think again, my boy. I adjure you to think again. Break with tradition and you undermine society." Tradition. The room was steeped in it. The solid furniture, the photographs of men taught to govern, the theological works, weighty and unquestionable – all were representative of an established order of which much was good, but in which some things (the intolerance of change and the adherence to a system that recognised the rights of only a privileged few) were in need of drastic reform.

Rupert looked at the Rector's portrait, and for the first time glimpsed what the painter, despite a standardised technique, had included in his portrayal – that modicum of insight of which the sitter was now so disturbingly conscious.

"I doubt if my efforts on Lucy's behalf will have recolutionary consequences."

Suspecting a red herring, the Rector ignored it. "The girl went to school?"

"In the village."

"Then she has received an education appropriate to the class into which she was born?" His fingers tapped the blotting-pad and hovered above it.

Rupert leaned forward. "But not consonant with her ability, sir."

"Educate her above her station, and you will make her dissatisfied with it." The poised fingers struck the pad with an emphatic smack.

"Dissatisfied and eager for something better – to which, in my opinion, she is entitled. Why should a girl remain a kitchen-maid when she has the potentiality to become, shall we say, a governess?"

The Rector pushed back his chair and stood. Persuasion had failed. The time had come for him to unsheathe the weapon he had hoped to keep in its scabbard.

"I'm sorry, Rupert, that we have to disagree. Your obdurate attitude will, I fear, compel Mrs Ryall and me to take a step we were hoping to avoid."

"You wish me to leave the Rectory?" Rupert, too, had risen.

"Most certainly not. But your – er – pupil, of course, will have to be dismissed."

"Oh, no!" His involuntary exclamation was almost boyish.

Magnanimous in victory, Hector Ryall laid his hand on Rupert's shoulder. "Perhaps you would care to think it over, and let me know your decision before the end of the week. I am sure that after due consideration you will see the wisdom of what I have been saying. Encourage intimacy, and you forfeit respect."

Rupert smiled ruefully. "So, according to St. Luke, thought the Pharisees."

This was received with a tolerant pat. "When you have reached my age, Rupert, you will have learnt the necessity of reconciling what is ethically right with what is sociologically possible."

Rupert moved towards the door. "I sincerely hope not, sir." He said firmly. To remain respectful cost him quite an effort.

CHAPTER 14

The bedroom occupied by Lord Waignmorton's guest, the Sixth Baron Roxomilly, always received Daisy Read's special attention – its massive mahogany furniture getting an extra application of beeswax and every square inch of its carpet a sprinkling of tea-leaves, for the Baron, thirty years of age and a bachelor, was prodigal with his smiles and not too high and mighty to drop a kind word to the lowest servant. Once, meeting Daisy who was carrying a slop-pail in one hand and her brushes and dust-pan in the other, he had stopped to open a door for her.

On her knees, with only her legs and buttocks showing outside the turned-up valance as she swept beneath a tester-covered bed, Daisy did not hear the Baron come in, and until he slapped her was unaware of his presence. A glimpse of highly-polished riding-boots revealed his identity. His hand lingered.

Had the Baron's morning gone as arranged, he would have been absent for two or three hours. His mount suddenly going lame had curtailed his excursions.

Daisy scrambled backwards, hitting the back of her head against the bed.

"Oh!" She remained kneeling, rubbing her head, and looking up at him.

He helped her to rise. "Have you hurt yourself?"

Daisy was flustered. "Give me head a nasty bump." She tried to straighten her lace cap.

"Perhaps this will make it better." He drew her to him, bent, and kissed her on the lips. His black moustache tickled her.

"Oh, sir!" Was this really happening or was she dreaming?

His riding-habit was of superb quality and its cut displayed his breadth of shoulder. His face, plump-cheeked with good living but still handsome, was close enough for her to see the faint tell-tale purple lines of over-indulgence. In his green-brown eyes there was something that made her tremble. A more experienced woman would have recognised it as a danger signal.

Without relinquishing his hold, he guided her to an easy-chair, sat down, and took her on his knee.

In keeping with her general lack of knowledge, Daisy's notion of the ways of men with inexperienced women was not comprehensive. The bare details of what took place in conjugal beds had been explained by her mother: she knew also that some predatory males liked to anticipate the marriage ceremony. She did not know that certain types of fondling could produce sexual excitement of such vehemence that a woman, unless she was very strong-minded, lost the will to resist. And Daisy was not strong-minded.

Baron Roxomilly, who had seduced many women far more sophisticated than Daisy Read, was an expert. After preliminary work upon her breasts, he lifted her skirt and petticoats. Daisy giggled and wriggled, but his exploratory hand went unimpeded to its objective. Ten minutes later he carried her to the bed.

CHAPTER 15

The mild day was closing with a magnificent sunset. Innumerable pink and grey fan-shaped cloudlets, increasing in size as they radiated from horizon to zenith, were themselves sections of a vast fan of gradatory colour. Seen from the summit of St. Catherine's Down, midway between the Pepper Pot and the Hoy Monument where Lucy and Rupert had stopped to admire it, the spectacle was one they would long remember.

Throughout the day, since the argument with his host, Rupert had given a lot of thought to the problem of what to do for the best. Lucy, not yet ready for anything else, must not lose her job. He was not prepared to terminate the tuition he was giving her. And, he had to confess, if there had been no lessons, he would have invented some excuse for continuing their relationship.

Lucy, noticing his subdued manner, wondered if the impending arrival of Miss Howell could be the cause of it.

"'Tes wondervul," she said, gazung at the sky. "Pity 'twon't last."

"And a great pity I have to spoil such a beautiful evening with such bad news." The time for breaking it to her could be no longer postponed.

"Bad news?" Although she had half expected it, she was disturbed.

"The inevitable has happened, Lucy, This morning. A man-to-man talk in the Rector's study. The case for the prosecution wrapped in pastoral benevolence – and finally an ultimatum."

She caught her breath. “Ye mean they know ‘bout we–us?”

He looked away from her, fearing the effect of what he had to say.”

“Either I agree never to meet you again, or you lose your job.” He forced himself to face her. Her face registered dismay. There was no anger.

“I told’ee vust day Missus Ryall wudden’ ztand vor et.”

“I resent being dictated to.”

“When you’m in service, ye learn to zwalley a lot o’ resentment.”

So this was how it was going to end! She should, she told herself, have known it could not last.

“I should be sorry to be the cause of your receiving notice.”

“Vather’d be ter’bul vexed.” She wondered if he would be angry enough to use his belt. It would not be the first time.

“On the other hand I hate, for the sake of an outdated code of conduct, to abandon a project I consider worth while.”

“’Twud not be easy to git another place. Gentle-volks want references.” She guessed, rightly, that he would not fully appreciate the seriousness of being dischargedwithout them.

“I wish you were ready for the sort of place I have in mind for you.” The ease with which, when surprised or moved by emotion, she slipped back into her habitual mode of speech made it perfectly obvious she was far from ready.

“’Tes gwyne to be a long job.”

“You’re making progress.” Her dispiritedness worried him.

“Zumtimes I think “twud be better ef I stopped tryen’, Ye can’t make a zilk purse out uv a zow’s ear.”

Rupert watched the pink fade from the sky, leaving a canopy of broken grey. Ought he to accept her admission of defeat? Was she so easily beaten? He thought not. Hoped not.

“I shall feel terribly let down if you give up now.”

“’Twud zave’ee a passel of trouble.” Lucy persisted in an argument she knew to be contrary to her wishes.

“I should like to prove it can be done.”

Her brown eyes met his with that frankness he had seen in no other woman. Anythin’ ken be done in time. They train elephants to zit on stols.”

He laughed. “Not a very apt analogy, Lucy.”

“I med vinish up as misplaced as they be.” A good-humoured smile banished her former seriousness.

Lovable! Acknowledging for the first time Lucy’s appeal as a woman, he subdued a desire to take her in his arms. Not yet. To act precipitately would be unwise. What were her feelings for him? At no time had she given the slightest indication. Although she no longer called him ‘sir’ her demeanour remained that of a respectful servant. Not once had she used his Christian name.

“ Lucy…

“Yes?”

"Do you intend to marry Joe Wheeler?"

The question took her by surprise. She blushed and gazed at the patchwork landscape. At length she said: "We've walked out a time or two."

"That doesn't answer the question." His anxiety for the right answer affected his voice.

"Z'pose I med ez well. Joe'ud allus kill a couple uv pigs a year. I shudden' go hungry."

"I should think not." Rupert's patent lack of understanding was a reaction to be expected from someone for whom regular and more than ample meals were simply part of the routine of everyday existence. That families of eight or ten children had sometimes to subsist on a diet of bread soaked in hot water and sprinkled with salt and pepper would never have occurred to him. That Lucy might not have been so well developed if her father's bits o' bus'ness in France had been less remunerative, also was unknown to him.

"Are you in love with him?"

A pause. One wrong word and her day-dreams would be ended. It might be better for all concerned to tell a lie and have done with day-dreams.

"Joe's middlen' fond of me. We've knawed each other zince we were zo high. A used to gi' me pickey-back rides."

"But you don't love him." His elation was only just concealed.

Another pause,

"No."

He touched her arm. "You won't act hastily, will you?"

"Joe knows a's got to wait."

"For ever, I hope." His emphasis gained a searching look. Was lovelight there? He could not be sure.

"Ye doan' like Joe?"

He waved an indifferent hand. "I neither like nor dislike him. I dare say he's sound enough."

"Me volks be all vor me an' him maken' a match of it."

He took her hand, and the sensation Lucy had experienced when reading *The Song of Solomon* recurred.

"I want you to promise to wait."

"Why?"

This time it was Rupert who coloured. Her direct look demanded reciprocal honesty. He wavered – made irresolute by an ambivalence that urged him to declare his love and yet at the same time showed him the folly of so doing.

With raised chin and slightly parted lips, Lucy waited for his reply. He could not resist. Taking her in his arms, he kissed her, crushing her yielding mouth against his own.

Lucy broke the spell. Awakening from a moment of bliss, she recalled the warning given by her father. 'They young zparks vrom collidge be all th'zaame – gi' em half a chance, an' they'll hay thee britches down avore ye knaws what they'm abowt. She recoiled mentally. The magic of the moment was lost. Gently but firmly she pushed Rupert from her. He released her immediately.

"That is why," he said shakily. Lucy, confused but not unaware that passion had stirred within her, trembled – shaken by her first real encounter with temptation.

"Us'ud best be gitten' back," she said, adjusting her disarranged bonnet.

He took her hand and kissed it. “I would never harm you, Lucy. Please believe that.”

“I b’lieve ye wudden, Rupert,” she said quietly.

Having complicated their problem, they now had to decide what they were to do in the immediate future. Neither could bear the thought of discontinuing their meetings. Lucy reiterated her fear of dismissal.

“I should approach my father” Rupert assured her. “He would do something for you. Of that I’m certain. But you will not be dismissed. We simply have to be more discreet.”

“We’m bound to be zeen.”

“Which leaves us no alternative but to meet at night. Would it be possible for you to leave your room undetected?”

“Onny by th’ window. Missus Zprake be zuch a light sleeper. A creaken’ vloorboard in th’ passage ‘ud wake her in a jiffy.”

“How would you reach the ground?”

“’Twud be easy. That wol’ chestnut do have a branch athert me window.”

“Do you really think you could?” He sounded doubtful.

Compared with climbing for seagulls’ eggs, Lucy explained, to descend via the chestnut tree would be child’s play.

“I shall use the stairs’” said Rupert. “An excuse for being downstairs should not be difficult to find; but I don’t think the necessity will present itself.”

Both were young enough to derive pleasurable excitement from their conspiracy. A trysting-place at the far side of a five-acre glebe which adjoined the Rectory was agreed upon.

“But ye have to gi’ rector an answer.” Lucy remembered.”

“I shall tell a lie.”

Oh dear!” A Commandment wilfully broken was no light matter.

“It goes against the grain to do it, but the circumstances demand it.”

Had he been gifted with prevision, he would have known the untruth would be uttered to no purpose.

CHAPTER 16

“I’m so frightened, Agnes.” Daisy picked a leaf from the tree which provided shade for a seat that once had been a pew in the Methodist Chapel. Eight weeks had passed since her defloration. The sisters were in the orchard. From the rope-walk which bounded one side came a continuous jingling of running machinery - musical and not disturbing.

“Everythin’ will be alright.” Agnes looked over the fence against which they were sitting. None of the neighbours was in her back garden. Those behind open windows in the long terrace were out of earshot.

“It won’t. I’m sure it won’t. Father’ll turn me out in the street.”

Agnes cuddled her. “No, Daisy, he’d never do that. He will be furious, of course, at first.”

Daisy scattered the torn leaf and plucked another. “I’ll never be able to face him.”

“What did Mother say? Does she want him to know?”

Daisy examined the leaf. "Not yet. She's goin' to write to Aunt Harriet in London to ask if I can go an' stay with her. She did think of askin' Aunt Martha, but she's got no room, an' Father don't approve of Uncle Ezra, anyway."

Agnes nodded. A new sound, superimposed on the jingling, announced the passing of the rope-making machine. In the past both girls had been lifted window-high to watch it go by.

"Father'll want to know why you're goin'."

"Ma's goin' to tell him I'm run down and anemic, an' that I need a change of air."

A wasp flew near. Agnes waved it away. "That sounds a good idea. I don't like deceit, but in this case…" The wasp returned and cut the sentence.

Daisy crushed another leaf and threw it at the wasp. "I've still got to come back."

"By that time Father will have heard all about it, an' Mother will have had time to talk him round."

"Oh, why did I let it happen?" Daisy was near to tears.

"I did warn you, Daisy." It was a statement rather than a rebuke.

"I got carried away. He was so strong – so handsome."

Agnes looked puzzled. "Is Bert prepared to marry you?"

"Bert?" For an instant she had forgotten the misplaced sense of loyalty and fear of greater condemnation that had prevented her from disclosing who would be the father of her child. "Oh, Bert's quite willin', but he's got no money. He can't save out of what he gets at the shop."

Agnes said: "I dare say somethin' can be worked out later on. I've got about twenty pounds you could have."

For the first time that afternoon Daisy brightened. "We might not be able to pay it back for donkeys' years.

A careless gesture dismissed the objection. "If I know Father, he'll see you have enough to live on."

"Do you eally think he would?"

"It would be against his principles not to. You ought to have known that, Daisy – how good he is."

That evening Daisy and Albert Harrison walked to the Recreation Ground, a quiet place on the outskirts of the town where only a few couples occupied wooden benches interspersed among chestnuts, sycamores, and plane trees that surrounded a cricket pitch. No match was in progress, and the thatch-roofed pavilion was shuttered and deserted. Across the road rooks, circling the elms in Northwood Park, were black against a cloudless sky and noisy in their home-coming.

"Let's sit here." Daisy indicated a bench remote from the road and the other couples.

"Pity there ain't a match." Albert's face was thin, and his pointed red-tipped nose pinched. Leanness characterised the whole of his undernourished body, for, until he had been able to add to the family budget the pittance he earned at Solomon and Blanford's haberdashery, the Harrisons not infrequently went hungry – the foundryman's wages taken home by Albert's father, even when combined with the few shillings his mother acquired by taking in washing, being insufficient to clothe and feed two adults and four children, Reddish hair and eyebrows emphasized his habitual pallor.

"You an' your ol' cricket!" Daisy gave him a playful shove, "I don't understand the game. Can't see why they have to keep on wastin' time by changin' places."

Albert, whose only cricket had been played with a piece of wood and a rubber ball against a wicket drawn in chalk on a brick wall, explained the rules. Daisy, having other things on her mind, heard but did not learn.

She had to get married, and it looked as if Bert Harrison would have to do. She liked but did not love him. In her mind's eye she compared him with the man who had taken her virginity. Typically the hero of the cheap novelettes which were the only books she ever read, the Baron's physique alone was enough to make her disparage her companion. How strong he had been when he carried her to the bed? For a while recollection of the subsequent ecstatic moments deepened her reverie. Returning to the present, she appraised Bert's insignificance – tried to imagine what he might do in bed. Rita, the kitchen-maid, had told her some little men were very energetic.

"There, do you think you'll be able to follow what happens?" His discourse on overs, no balls, and field placing was finished.

"Yes, I think so." Then, almost involuntarily she added, "Bert, let's get married soon."

Even before he spoke, the consternation in his eyes told her he would refuse. "You know we can't, Daisy."

"You do love me, don't you?"

"I want to mary you – when we can afford it."

Should she leave it at that. Anxiety compelled her to force the issue. "I may not be prepared to wait that long."

"We agreed that's what we mus' do." His grey eyes, quick to chill, were unfriendly.

"I've changed me mind."

"I've seen enough of what it is to be poor. I don't suppose you know what it's like to go to bed with an empty belly – to have no decent clothes to wear. I've had to wear boots given by charity. It was that or go barefoot. I've had to go to the soup-kitchen when that's all there was for dinner. I don't want my youngsters to live like that."

This was a new Albert. His usual soft-spoken address (his counter-jumper's voice, Daisy had called it) was more decisive. Although not clever, Daisy had the perception to realise that to argue or to try to persuade would be futile. She rose and took his arm.

"I s'pose you're right," she said miserably. "No good tyin' a millstone roun' our necks."

CHAPTER 17

Annette Howell, colourful in heliotrope tussore under a bottle-green travelling coat, arrived in her father's brougham. A saucy hat from Paris perched on light amber curls that had the sheen of twenty-four carat gold, made Mrs Ryall long for a quarter of an hour with it in front of her mirror.

"My dear!" she exclaimed. "You look more beautiful than ever!"

Annette's eyes sparkled. Confirmation of what her reflection told her twenty times a day was never unwelcome. That her father called her a vain little minx did nothing to check her vanity. Beauty merited adoration. Annette's invariably received it.

When Miss Howell, relieved of her hat and coat, followed Mrs Ryall into the sitting-room, her critical eye noted that red plush was still its predominant feature. This material, its thick pile retaining imprints of numerous knick-knacks so that each article had its appointed place, covered two of the three tables, the top of an upright piano, and formed a draught-excluding curtain for the door.

Backed by floral-patterned wall-paper were a couple of plaster wall-plaques (oval-shaped and framed in red velvet with classical lovers in high-relief) and a number of gilt-framed oil paintings, some of rural scenes and some of intriguing continental vistas glimpsed through mysterious archways or between conglomerations of medieval buildings.

On the uncovered table-cum-needlework box, a good piece of marquetry, stood a maidenhair fern. A glass-domed ormolu clock centred between a pair of wine-red vases with pendent cut-glass prisms and various small ornaments dominated the mantelpiece and reproduced its back view in a gilt-framed mirror.

Rupert set down his book and rose from a tapestried chair.

"Annette," he said as they shook hands. "How nice to see you again."

I've been longing to come." She gave his fingers rather more pressure than etiquette demanded, then, sitting near the brass fender and warming her hands, she said: "You must tell me all the interesting things you have been doing."

Edith Ryall smiled approvingly and left them.

Rupert's Easter vacation that year had been spent with the Howells. On the first day, he had come under Annette's spell. Now, at the Rectory, as he sat a hearthrug's length from her, the same magic was at work. Vivacity emanated from her. Her well-modulated voice and perfect enunciation delighted the ear, and, if one could not fail to detect some affectation, it was no more than was to be expected from a young woman with her background and education. For the moment Lucy was forgotten.

"How interesting." Annette had listened to his account of the abortive dig. "You really must show me the place where you were excavating."

He thought of Lucy, and for some unaccountable reason felt reluctant to take Annette to the spot where his intimacy with the fisherman's daughter had begun.

"It's rather a climb." He demurred.

"I shall race you to the top."

Every remark was accompanied by an expressive gesture of her carefully tended hands – each movement as fascinating as that of a ballet dancer. Ready laughter animated a face of rather doll-like prettiness which, even in repose, was more than sufficiently attractive to discount a *soupçon* of potential petulance about the mouth that otherwise might have brought into question its owner's amiability. The amber ringlets responded to her spirited head movements.

"My parents would like to have you for a few days at Brighstone before you return to the mainland. I was instructed to invite you. Will you come?"

The idea was alluring. He knew he must refuse. "I'm terribly sorry, Annette. I don't think I shall be able to."

"Oh." Annette pouted. "How disappointing." She examined the ends of a beige lace jabot that ornamented the heliotrope dress. "You would like to come?"

"Most certainly." His heightened colour did not pass unnoticed.

The return of Mrs Ryall did nothing to relieve Rupert's embarrassment, for, seeing no reason why this invitation should not be accepted, she at once tried to remove any obstacles.

Rupert wavered. It was a tempting proposition. Momentarily captivated by Annette's personality and cultured speech, he found himself comparing her vivaciousness with Lucy's quiet bearing, her diction with Lucy's vocal inelegancies. Once again the magnitude of the task he had undertaken struck him. Serious doubt concerning his display of affection assailed him. It was not only a question of speech. The girl's way of life, her outlook, would have to be changed. Lucy herself had quoted the 'silk purse from a sow' ear' proverb. Perhaps he should have listened – accepted her resignation. There was loyalty to one's caste to consider. It jolted him that he had executed a *volte-face* and was now siding with the Rector's dictum.

Simultaneously with these thoughts came remembrance of Lucy's steadfast gaze and of her almost classic beauty – beauty that would endure until death, beauty that would be in evidence long after Annette's more superficial loveliness had disappeared. Recollection of the passion she had aroused also intruded. He was committed.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I have such a backlog of reading to cope with. I'm afraid I've been too negligent. My father will be most disappointed if I fail to get a good degree."

After that, the conversation dealt with his reading for Greats, the ladies, while exhibiting a polite interest in the subjects involved, managed to conceal their annoyance at his refusal of the Howell's invitation. Annette, confident of her power to persuade, did not accept his answer as final. When next they were alone she would do her best to make him change his mind.

CHAPTER 18

Business at the White Mouse was unusually slack. Apart from the thatcher, Henry Morris, who was arguing with the landlord over the alleged rat-catching prowess of someone's whippet, George Read and Joe Wheeler were the only customers.

George lowered his tankard and smacked his lips. "Drink up, Joe, an' hay another to wash en down."

Joe gave the remainder of his pint a contemplative look. "Reckons I be about level, Jarge. Doan' wan'git half-zlued"

His companion shrugged. "What's th' odds? Ye got no wife waiten' to zet about 'ee at home."

Joe scowled. "I onny wish theer wuz."

George cocked an eyebrow. "Our Lucy/"

A ponderous nod. "Zoot I to a tee."

"Doan' make much headway there, do'ee?"

"No." Joe banged the table with his fist. "Not likely to wi' young Blake hangen' aroun'."

"Gi' ee a middlen' wol' larrepen', dedn' a?" The question, unnecessary inasmuch as he had been the first to learn of it from Joe on the day the fight occurred, was not without motive.

"No half larks."

"Larnt to use his vests vrom an ex-champion a tol' Lucy."

Joe took a swig at his tankard. "Wish I'd knawed that avore I went a'ter en." He rubbed his jaw as though the recollection made it tender.

George dropped his voice and learnt forward conspiratorially. "What zay to gitten' a bit uv yor own back?"

Joe scratched his head. "I'm game, but I doan' zee how et ken be done."

"Nor did I until I rec'lected zummat our Lucy let out." He picked up his empty tankard. "This yur be thusty work. Gi' us yor mug."

"Make et a half vor me then – otherwise I'll be out o' bed – two-dree times."

While George was at the bar where he was called upon to arbitrate in the whippet controversy Joe's sluggish brain began to work. By getting his own back on Blake, wouldn't he be upsetting Lucy? The usual bovine impassivity of his expression changed to a frown. He was still cogitating when his beer was put in front of him.

"I bin thinken', Jarge. Ef us lays a vinger on Blakem yor zister's gwyne to be upset. I tell 'ee jo an'blunt I doan' wan' upset she."

"Our Lucy's gwyne to be put owt zooner or later. Med ez wull git et o're an' be done wi'. Gitten' harled up wi' one o' th' gentry wuz wrong vrom th' start. Her's boun' to cum to grief."

To digest this piece of logic took several minutes and a mouthful of beer. “Us’d hay to take en be zurprise.”

“Doan’ vret. I beant axen’ vor a broke jaw.”

Joe closed one eye. “Yor old man ‘ud be glad to be shet uv en.”

George’s voice sank even lower. “Nex’ bit o’ bus’ness es a big’n. Us doan’ wan’ no unnecessary risks.”

Joe glanced at the landlord and Henry Morris, saw they were still wrangling, and murmered. ”How do us know us ken zcare en off?”

“Tis easy. Vrom what Lucy zed et zims a can’t abide heights.”

Joe looked blank. “I doan’ zee what thet’s got to do wi’ et.”

“Y’ wull when I tell’ee. A ken’t abide heights, you; zo what do us do?” There had been times in the past when the torpidity of his fellow giant’s brain had irritated him. Experience had taught him to be patient.

Jo ruminatively filled his pipe. “Us takes en down on cliff.”

“Right.” A glimmer of animation showed on Joe’s mahogany figurehead. “Us takes en down on cliff, an’ unless a zwears to hay nuthen to do wi’ Lucy us dretens to lower en o’re edge.”

“How zhall us git en down on cliff?”

Us carries en – in a taty-zack. A titty veller like he beant gwyne a be no trouble to heft.”

A cloud of Joe’s tobacco smoke indicated mental activity. “Thet’s all very vine, you: but where do us carry en vrom? Us can’t kert en droo village.”

“I thought o’ thet. Us zends a note be yor young brother, who tells en et’s vrom me zister. A cums to th’ spot us telled en in th’ note, an’ then us nabs en – zharpish like.”

A look of admiration crossed Joe’s face. “Jarge always did hay a headpiece on en”, he thought.

“When’s et to be/”

“Nex’ Zunday when a cums owt o’ church.”

Joe’s face clouded. “Doan’ knaw ez I likes Zunday work.”

“’Tes best day vor et. Nobody to zee what we’m doan’. An’ us knaws where to vind en.”

“I s’pose you’m right.” He did not sound convinced, but thought “Best not quiddle.”

CHAPTER 19

The clock in St. Andrew’s tower struck eleven. The village slept. In a bedroom at the rectory a flood of moonlight spread across an unused bed, struck high-lights from the china ewer, basin, and soap-dish on the white-painted washstand, and glinted on Lucy’s hair as she sat, wrapped in a dark-grey mantle, on a cane-bottomed chair. It was the sound for which she had been waiting, and opening the casement still wider she put he legs over the window-sill and with her feet felt for the chestnut branch some eighteen inches below.

The branch was a stout one, giving a good foothold. She grasped another convenient bough and within seconds was sufficiently near the ground to drop into deep shadow. Everything was still.

A door set in a six-foot high stone wall which separated the Rectory garden from the five-acre glebe broke the silence with the harsh noise of rusty hinges, Lucy left it ajar and hurried across the field. Here there was no cover until she reached a hedge-crowned bank which was the rendezvous she and Rupert had selected. Silhouetted against a cloudless sky, she would be visible at the distance of half a mile or more should

anyone be abroad to see. Although practically certain that nobody would be out of doors at that hour, she nevertheless could not restrain herself from running.

Rupert was not there. Breathless, she sat down to wait, her sombre-hued form lost in the shadow of an oak. Two hundred yards away every detail of the rectory's south-western façade was sharply defined. Behind it, the slopes of St. Catherine's Down, bathed in light, carried the eye upwards to the Pepper Pot.

Not a hundred yards from where Lucy sat, Joe Wheeler unpegged the net into which a rabbit had bolted, pocketed his ferret, and holding the catch by its hind legs began his homeward journey along the bank which ran between the scene of his dinner-catching and the road to Chale Green. Joe was on one side of the hedge, Lucy on the other.

At the sound of his approach, Lucy stood up.

"I be over here, Rupert. What made'ee go that zide?"

Joe halted and peered through the hedge. It was too thick for him to see anything but a vague shape.

"'Tain't yor Rupert. 'Tes me."

"Joe! What bist doen' here?"

"I med ax th' zame uv you, Lucy?"

Lucy thought rapidly. Lying would be useless. Joe must know the truth. Her aim must be to get rid of him before Rupert appeared. If Rupert did come too soon, would he think that she and Joe…? She gasped with dismay.

"I'm, gwyne to meet zumone."

Joe grunted. "You doan' hay to tell me who 'tes."

"No, I z'pose not." She could picture him standing there – an awkward giant, his slow-moving brain lumbering towards a wrong conclusion. This was soon confirmed.

"I be mortal disappointed in 'ee, Lucy. I thowt better uv'ee."

"'Tain't like that." Anxiety altered her normal voice, enfeebling her denial.

I beant that pudden'-headed. A maid doan' zneak out prid near midnight to meet her lover unless her's up to no good. I z'pose yor vine young gent put'er up to et?"

Joe's contempt for Rupert and the injustice of his accusation angered her, and at the same time made her hot with shame.

"If thet be way yor mind works, Joe Wheeler, I'll hay nuthen' more to say to 'ee, Hike off home an' leave me be."

"Iss, I'll be on me way," said Joe bitterly. "I doan' wan' no truck wi' a nanny light o' love."

In spite of her anger and eagerness for his departure, Lucy felt compelled to correct the misconception. Her voice changed.

"I beant no trollop, Joe. I'd like'ee to b'lieve that vor wol' times zake."

Joe shuffled his feet. His affection fo Lucy made him want to believe her. "Why don'ee git back to bed then? That veller's no good to 'ee. When a goes back where a cum vrom, ye'll be zorry ye ever clapped eyes on en. I knaw I beant got much to offer, but I'd make a zober hard-wurken' husband, Lucy – that I promise'ee." A lomg speech for Joe.

His sincerity and her sympathy for him left her near to tears. "I'm truly zorry, Joe, but thee'll ha' to vind zumone else."

"Tell I one thing," persisted Joe. "Hev en axed'ee to marry en?"

The question, combined with the realisation that although she had been kissed marriage had not been mentioned, took her by surprise. "No."

"An' a `niver wull – mark my wurds." This was said with an assurance that made her wonder how he could be so certain. She was still thinking about it when she found he had gone. She sighed with relief.

Five minutes later Rupert hurried towards her. He had, he said apologetically, dropped off to sleep.

When Lucy re-entered her bedroom, it was half-past one.

CHAPTER 20

Evensong was over. The knot of villagers gossiping in the Sunday twilight had untied itself and the churchyard and village street were deserted. Halfway between the church and their home the Rector and his wife strolled on the crown of the dusty road, he from top-hat to toe in black, she in veridian green trimmed with russet braid. On either side blackberry laden hedges rose from a profusion of nettles and hog-weed, amid which toadflax, harebell, and nettle-leaved bellflower still contributed sporadic variations of yellow and blue.

"Your sermon was most impressive, Hector."

Suspecting irony, the Rector gave his wife a sidewise glance.

"Colonel Duncan congratulated me," he said guardedly.

"One would not expect the Colonel to detect that it owed more to Dean Stanley's essays than to your own inspiration."

With his free arm he made a deprecating gesture. "I have long since reached the stage, Edith, when one realises that to write original sermons for villagers is a waste of time."

"Time more profitably spent with Euripides?"

"Shall we say more satisfactorily?"

"I must say I, myself, found the Dean's comments on the origin of the eucharistic sacrifice extremely interesting – particularly what he had to say concerning the selection of the most universal elements from those of what was in fact the Jewish paschal meal."

The Rector nodded concurrence. "You should read the whole book, my dear. I like especially the worthy author's reference to the Pope as 'a perfect museum of ecclesiastical curiosities."

"I think there are certain points Rupert wishes to discuss with you." Euphory too easily gained, she felt, should not be permitted to last.

"I trust he will not tax my scholarship and Dean Stanley's text beyond their limitations." The dryness of this reply left his wife in some doubt concerning his subtlety. She changed the subject.

"Incidentally, did you get his decision regarding Lucy Read?"

"I did indeed." His pompous self-satisfaction conveyed that he personally was responsible for the result.

"Their association will cease?" Her question was superfluous. The Rector's tone anticipated his answer.

"The boy assured me no future action of his would justify Lucy's dismissal."

"Splendid!" She squeezed his arm. "I'm so glad he was not obstinate. The girl is such a a remarkably good worker. I did not want to lose her."

"Her parents attend evensong quite regularly these days. They were with Lucy again this evening." Spoken confidentially, this obviously was intended to imply more than it actually said.

"Has that special significance?"

"I'm not sure, Edith." He removed his hat and looked intently at its interior, giving the impression that he expected some conjuring trick to produce the answer. "Their attendance, of course, could be governed by their spiritual needs; but for some reason I am inclined to doubt if it is. Ezra Read, as you know, is neither the most devout nor the most consistent member of my congregation." He replaced his hat.-

"Some might consider suspicion to be unworthy of your cloth."

He chuckled. "I have not lived in this community for a decade without learning a great deal about its members. If George and his father are not away from home for a few days in the near future, I shall be greatly surprised. These displays of piety have happened before."

By the time they had arrived at the Rectory, where they expected to find Rupert who, with Annette, had preceded them from the church.

Annette, alone among the red plush, was idly turning the pages of a postcard album. Rupert, she said, had gone out.

"And left you alone? How ungallant of him!" Mrs Ryall did her best to hide her annoyance. Her return had been deliberately protracted.

"He said it was important he should go without delay. I think it was in consequence of his having received a note."

"A note!" Instant assumption concerning the provenance of the note resulted in an almost indecorous vehemence.

"A boy met us at the gate – a boy of twelve or so called Norman. Poorly dressed but quite clean."

"Norman Wheeler?"

"No other name was mentioned. He thrust the paper into Rupert's hand and then ran off as fast as his legs could carry him. That was rather foolish of him actually, for he would have been given a few coppers had he waited."

"We know the lad." The Rector had followed his wife into the sitting-room. "He and an elder brother, Joseph, live with a widowed mother, I cannot conceive why any communication from that quarter should be of much importance."

"Quite unaccountable," said Mrs Ryall. She recalled having heard rumours of an understanding between Lucy and Joseph. She had, in fact, seen them together.

"How intriguing," said Annette. "But I've no doubt there will be a perfectly simple explanation. Nothing exciting ever happens in these parts."

"Are you not forgetting shipwrecks, my dear?" The Rector beamed. "Only last April a crew was saved by the Brighstone lifeboat after a slate-carrying vessel had struck the Atherfield ledge."

Annette made a moue. "I never saw it. I always imagine that sort of thing to be too dreary for words."

Hector Ryall beamed indulgently. "If you were to witness those brave fellows effecting a rescue, you would, I am sure, find it a stimulating spectacle – most stimulating."

Edith Ryall was not prepared to let this pass. "Would there not be the possibility of there being sights unsuitable for a lady's eyes?"

"A possibility, I suppose."

"I am not unduly squeamish," said Annette – an unorthodoxy her hostess attributed to a Continental education.

CHAPTER 21

In the fading light Rupert hurried past the church and wheeled seawards. Five minutes to eight, and the note had said eight o'clock. He took it from his pocket. It was succinct and written by an untutored hand.

"Please come to the wall near my home at eight. L."

He knew the wall. A few feet of round-topped brickwork was all that remained of a house which, fifty years earlier, had fallen to the beach in a landslide. Behind it, holly and rhododendrons proliferated.

Having never seen Lucy's handwriting, he could not be sure she had written the note. If she had not sent it, who had? And why? In church and outside it after the service he had carefully refrained from looking at her. Had she tried to signal to him. He thought not. He racked his brain to find a reason for what obviously was an urgent summons. He wondered also what the girl he had left at the Rectory was thinking.

At any other time he would have paused by the churchyard to absorb the beauty of pinnacles seen against the afterglow. Tonight as he passed, he scarcely noticed them.

Within the next five minutes he was within a stone's throw of Lucy's house. The lane was deserted, steeped in the tranquillity of a Sabbath evening. The bricks of the low wall upon which he sat still retained a comforting warmth. A sound behind the wall made him look over his shoulder.

Too late. Before he grasped what was happening, arms encircled his body and pulled him backward, lifting him bodily over the wall, and, while Joe pinioned his arms, George drew a potato sack over his head and lashed it with spun yarn. For the first few seconds, before the binding prevented it, Rupert with rapid twisting and bending almost loosened the hold.

"Heng on to en, Joe." George was trying to tie the thrashing legs.

"I got en. But a's middlen' ztrong."

"Us'll zoon settle en." The cord cut into Rupert's ankles as George gave it a final tug before tying the knots.

"What is this? Some kind of practical joke?" In Rupert's voice, muffled by the sack, anger was not unmingled with alarm.

"Thee'll zee predney," said Joe.

"Set me free at once! This horseplay has gone far enough!."

George chuckled. "Not yit et ain't."

"Set me free, I say!." It was an order backed by consciousness of the superiority of his social position.

"Nar bit o' good yor gitten' riled," said Joe. "Ye can't do nuthen'."

"Just wait until I'm free. You'll regret this outrage."

"Ye won't do nuthen' then," George replied, allowing insolence to match Rupert's hauteur.

"I shall do a great deal." His soft hat was over his eyes. The Hessian was earthy. Something, an earwig or a spider, ran across his face.

"Us won't zet'ee vree unless us gits a promise to behave." That was George again. Lucy's brother.

"Don't be a fool, man. You can't keep me tied up all night?"

Joe said: “I doan’ zee why us zhudden’”

“Thee’ll agree to enythin’ avore long,” added George.

“I doubt it.”

“Where are we going?” In spite of his anger, Rupert had been trying to fathom what lay behind the attack.”

“Not var,” George told him. “Jist o’re th’ vields to cliff path.”

“The cliff path?” He could not conceal his apprehension.

“New ground vor’ee.”

“I never go that way.”

“Us thowt et time ye ded. Too late vor’ee to zee th’ zunset, but there’ll be plen’y uv light to zhow’ee what us wants to.”

“Shall I put’n o’re me shoulder, Jarge?”

“Us’ll tek turns. A’s a tidy nitch.”

“No need,” said Joe. “I ken manage en.”

Rupert felt himself lifted as though he were a child, and held above the knees whilst his upper body hung behind Joe’s back. The thought of being taken to the edge of the cliff triggered his obsession. Perspiration moistened his palms.

They crossed the lane, surmounted a stile, and cut diagonally across pasture land for half a mile, heading towards the sea.

“Var’ nuff, Joe?”

“Aye. Recken ‘tes.”

The path, a narrow ribbon amidst gorse bushes, ran within four feet of the edge. The sea was two hundred feet below. Rupert, lowered gently to the ground, could smell it.

George produced his clasp-knife. “I’ll our a peep-hole vor’n.”

The sack was slashed and Rupert’s hat, squashed during the struggle, pushed up to clear his line of vision. He fought rising panic.

“Move me back. I shall roll over!”

George pocketed his knife. “You’m gwyne a zight nearer avore us be vinished wi’ee. Heights doan’ zoot’ee I heard.”

Joe proceeded to unwind a coil of rope from his waist and to attach one end to a nearby oak. The other end he made fast to Rupert’s torso.

“What now?” The captive controlled his voice with difficulty.

“You’m gwyne o’re cliff,” said Joe.

“No! You can’t do that!” This time his fear was unmistakable,

“Jist a liddle way. There’s a ledge thurdy-voot down.” George inspected the knots.

“Unless ye zhow a bit o’ gumpshun,” added Joe, grinning.

Rupert struggled for self-control. He felt sick. “This is beyond a joke. I shall report the pair of you to the police.”

Joe was amused. “Report Lucy’s brother? Not thee.”

“What do you want of me?”

“Us wants yor wurd thee’ll hay no more truck wi’ me zister.”

“I won’t give it.”

“I wudden’ be too bresh ef I wuz in yor vix,” advised Joe. Us be deadly zet on gitten’ et vrom’ee.”

“I’ll give up meeting Lucy when she requests it – not before.”

George frowned. “Hour or two on thet there ledge an’ mebbe ye’ll change yor toon. Thurdy-voot down, an’ a hunner an’ seventy odd below en.”

“Tes middlen’ zteep.” Joe stood on the extreme edge and looked down. Rupert turned his head. Even to see another there affected his nerves.

“I couldn’t stand it. I should fall,”

“Not wi’ this rope on’ee.” George added another knot.

“I couldn’t stand it, I tell you!” With panic getting the upper hand, he found himself shouting.

“Wull ’ee gi’ yor wurd?”

“Damn you, no!”

George shrugged. “Heft en, Joe.”

Joe’s sinewy arms lifted Rupert and seated him with his legs dangling. George took in the slack.

Rupert closed his eyes, his lips moving in silent prayer for the strength to resist.

Joe said: “Shall I ketch hold uv rope while thee lowers en?”

“Vair ‘nuff. Tek th’strain, Joe.”

George’s calloused fingers dug into Rupert’s ribs and raised him from the turf. “O’re ye goes. Hang on, Joe.”

A disturbed seagull planed across the vertiginous cliff face, The nightmare situation had to end. The overwhelming terror known only to those who suffer from acrophobia dominated his being. He must get away from the precipice. Nothing else mattered. With something akin to a sob Rupert admitted defeat,

“Stop! I’ll do what you say.”

“Ye won’t zee, speak, or write to me zister?”

“On my word.”

“What’s think, Joe?”

“Gen’leman’s wurd be good. ‘nuff vor me.”

Pulled inland, the ordeal of his life over, Rupert fainted.

Joe untied the rope and dragged off the sack. “Lumme, Jarge. What’s us do now?”

"Leave'n be." The reply was characteristically heartless. Men of his breed, to whom life offered little compassion, made no concession to weakness.

As George and Joe parted to go their separate ways, Joe more than once looked back to where Rupert lay amid the gorse.

When Rupert recovered consciousness, his assailants were out of sight. He sat up and retrieved his hat which he automatically restored to its right shape. Listless with humiliation, he used his handkerchief to brush his suit. Anger flooded his being – anger born of frustration., Two louts had out-witted him and he could do nothing about it. He had renounced the girl he loved, and she would never know why. He buried his face in his hands and sat, oblivious of the passage of time, until the moon bridged the Channel. Then, disconsolate, he went to the Rectory and without a word to anyone ran up the stairs to his room.

CHAPTER 22

The next day Mrs Ryall made abortive attempts to discover what had taken place the previous evening. Rupert was uncommunicative, but his manner told her something of the utmost importance had affected him. His monosyllabic replies bordered on discourtesy, and when he and Annette went for a walk, even her vivacity proved ineffective against his obvious preoccupation.

That evening, in the overcrowded and opulent sitting-room, the conversation turned to opera.

Annette made an extravagant gesture. Her primrose evening gown, a plain-fronted skirt with fluted pleats at the back and narrow frills at the hem, was exquisitely fashioned. The bodice, cut with a square décolletage, had fan-shaped puffed sleeves and was trimmed with russet velvet stripes. A velvet sash of the same colour encircled her waist. A single yellow artificial rose decorated her hair.

"I should die if I were unable to go at least once a month," she said.

Hector remarked that they were rather cut off from that sort of thing on the Isle of Wight.

"We notice it particularly, having lived in Town." added Mrs Ryall. She, too, looked extremely elegant in an elaborate creation of fawn silk and biscuit-hued lace. Her skirt, stiffened and bell-shaped, was draped with an overskirt with lace-fringed edges, this forming a basque at the waist. A high-collared cape, also edged with lace, flared over bouffant leg o' mutton sleeves to which it was caught by a couple of bows.

"Last year Papa had four sofa-stalls at St. James' Hall for the Richter concerts. Nine of them, you know."

Edith Ryall concealed her envy with a smile. "How lovely!"

"I simply adored Sarasate. His playing of Bazzini's *Witches' Dance* was the most exciting thing I have ever heard."

Left on the outskirts of a conversation which in his present frame of mind was of no interest, Rupert lost its thread in recapitulating his first major experience of uncontrollable fear.

"Rupert!" Mrs Ryall recalled him to the present.

"Oh, I do beg your pardon. I was miles away."

"Annette asked if you thought it wise to have Madame Norman-Neruda and Sarasate on the same programme."

He gathered his wits. They must not think him a complete moron.

"I see no objection. Contrasting styles and all that sort of thing."

"I prefer Joachim. Such bravura." This from the Rector.

"Papa would not agree with you." said Annette.

"Well, Rupert, what do you think?" Determined to play the good hostess, Mrs Ryall again drew him into the discussion.

"I fear I'm not competent to judge."

"Surely you have an opinion?"

Her persistence irritated him. To blazes with Joachim and Sarasate! Why could they not leave him out of their silly chatter. Again he pulled himself together, inherent good manners controlling his impatience.

"I like Sarasate's purity of tone."

Edith Ryall beamed. "How nice you two young people have so much in common."

Annette said: "They are having a concert at the Ryde Assembly Rooms tomorrow evening. Sullivan's music. I simply adore Sullivan!"

Mrs Ryall asked Rupert if he were going.

"I'd not even thought about it."

"Why not take Annette? You may have the carriage, you know."

"I…" He could find no excuse for refusing.

His hostess continued. "Colonel and Mrs Duncan are coming to dinner. We shall not need it."

"That would be lovely!" Annette looked at Rupert expectantly.

"I'm sure you would prefer music to interminable dissertations concerning other people's mistakes against the Zulus," Hector Ryall interpolated.

Rupert knew he was beaten. "If you put it like that, yes."

"That is settled then." Mrs Ryall thought she had achieved something.

"I'll instruct Perkins to have the carriage ready at six o'clock."

Once again Rupert lapsed into a brown study, during which Annette was asked to sing. The girl's fingers danced over the keys of the upright piano and before long, despite his preoccupation, Rupert's foot was keeping time with a competent rendering of Adele's *Laughing Song* from *Die Fledermaus* which Annette had learnt during a recent visit to Vienna. Annette had been well-trained, and if her performance fell short of professional standards, she had sufficient command of technique to disguise the fact. A combination of the singer's personality and the music of Johann Strauss was irresistible. Rupert clapped with great enthusiasm and requested an encore.

Annette glanced enquiringly at Mrs Ryall.

"Please do, my dear. It was charming."

Charming enough temporarily to banish thoughts of an unaccomplished kitchen-maid who had never touched the keys of a piano, and whose vocal repertoire was restricted to hymns Ancient and Modern and a few old songs within the range of anyone capable of carrying a tune. Charming enough to overcome the self-reproaches of a man who had failed to live up to his manhood.

CHAPTER 23.

Lucy shivered and massaged her hands. After sunset the temperature influenced by a westerly breeze, had fallen ten degrees. It was ten-thirty. An owl hooted and winged its way beyond the oak against which she tried to protect herself from the wind. Getting colder every minute, she hoped Rupert would not be late.

"Beant zhowed up, have'n?" Joe Wheeler's voice startled her; his silent approach giving evidence of the big man's ability to move without noise.

"Nuthen' to do wi' thee ef he's not." The unsteadiness of her voice annoyed her.

"Wull, ye need'n wait no longer. I reckons a's ztill t'other zide uv th' Island."

"Bin zpyen' again, Joe?"

"No, I beant. But I zid Rector's kerridge drive off wi' Blake inside – an' a purdy 'ooman to keep en comp'ny. Jist a'ter zix that wor."

Lucy's heart missed a beat. An automatic gesture took one hand to her breast, "I kno wed he was goin'" In her agitation her speech was a mixture of old and new.

Joe came through the hedge and rested one hand on the oak. "Not thee ded'n, or ye'd not be waiten' yur vor nuthen' – nigh shrammed wi' cold."

Lucy turned her back. "I wish you'd not cum poken' into my bus'ness."

"Tes mine too. I still got plans vor th' pair on us."

"Vorget 'em, Joe." Rupert's lessons forgotten, she returned to the speech of her childhood,

"Not likely."

"I'll niver be more'n a vriend to'ee – nor thet ef 'ee keeps pesteren' me."

"I louz ye will – a'ter Blake zlings his hook."

For a moment Lucy said nothing. With rising panic she could not account for she wracked her brain for something that would shatter his monumental assurance. She could think of nothing suitably devastating.

"I doan' want to keep'ee on a string." She might, she felt, as well have spoken to a brick wall.

"Once a's gone, that'll be a vinisher. Drop'ee like a hot taty – zee if a don'."

"Zo thee think." Desperately she tried to regain command of the situation.

"I doan' think. I know."

Again she felt the weight of Joe;'s assurance. What could have made him so positive.

"Twull make no diff'ence if 'ee do."

"Us had an understanden', Lucy." He moved as if to touch her, changed his mind, and let his hand drop to his side.

"Thet's all o're, Joe – an' doan' try to downarg me." As she spoke, she realised the finality of her decision. Even if Rupert deserted her, she would never marry Joe Wheeler.

"Beant vinished vor me."

She resisted an impulse to thump his chest with both fists. "I don' love'ee."

"Blake'll niver wed'ee."

The sickening possibility that he would not, filled her eyes with tears.

"I ken ztay single."

"Wol' maids is to be pitied."

Lucy recovered her spirit. “Not half ez much ez mis’rable wives.”

Joe wagged a dictatorial finger. “Ye’ll zing a diff’rent toon when thee’rt left all vorlorn.”

“There’ll be plenny to occupy me mind. I zhull read – ztudy.”

Thinking he chuckled, she tried to see his face. It was too dark beneath the branches for the details of his features to be discernible.

“Thee head’s vull o’ high-valuten’ notions at predn’t. Us’ll see how long they last when you’m dezerted be yor vine friend.”

“I’ll niver vorget ‘im – niver!” Lucy was vehement.

“No call to git in zich a vaeg. Time’ll tell. I ken wait.” With these words he disappeared through the hedge, and the night swallowed him.

Left alone, Lucy pondered on his changed demeanour. The certainty with which he had spoken of her being left in the lurch worried her. With Rupert’s non-arrival, worry grew to alarm.

CHAPTER 24

In the kitchen at Cliff Cottage, Ezra Read was waiting for his tea. The atmosphere, thickened by fumes from the oil stove and Martha’s frying-pan, and clouded with shag-tobacco smoke, was at its fuggiest. The entry of George, tousle-headed and sea-booted, added the smell of tar.

“Lucy bin in?” he asked.

“In there.” Ezra jerked his thumb towards the bedroom.

“Her zimmed despurd quiet when her cum in.” Martha, preceded by a spitting frying-pan, came in from the scullery.

“I lous her wull be vor th’time bein.” George seemed amused.

Martha set the pan on the kitchen-range and bustled out to bring in pre-warmed plates. “I thought her med be zickenen’ agen.”

George took the plates from her dish-towel and put them on the table. “Her’s lovezick, that’s all.”

Ezra knocked out his pipe and placed it in the rack.

“I warned she time an’ agen ‘bout meeten’ that young veller.”

“Her won’t meet’n, agen.” He inserted his bulk between sofa and table, looked at his tarry hands, and rubbed them on his trousers.

Martha pushed a strand of grey hair from her flushed face. “Who’s gwyne to ztop her?”

Ezra said: “Her’s ter’bul voreright when her’s zet her mind.”

Don’ vret.” George helped himself to three ‘doorsteps’ of bread, “Me an’ Joe put a zpoke in his wheel.”

“You an’ Joe Wheeler?” Martha paused in the act of transferring a dab from pan to plate. George nodded.

“How’d that cum abowt?” Ezra nudged his wife, reminding her of his empty plate.

“Us ketched en unawares like. Made’n promise not to hay no more dealens wi’ our Lucy.”

“A wuzen hurted?” She took the smallest fish and sat down.

George emptied a bulging cheek. “Onny vrightened. Us put’n o’re cliff near Whale Chine. Prid near squinnyen’ a wuz when us histed’n up agen. Then a vainted.”

At that moment the door leading to the bedroom swung back and Lucy, more angry that ever before in her life, stormed into the room, and slapped her brother’s face

“Ye gurt buffle-headed brute! Ignorant jackass!” She raised her hand to strike again.

“Yur, steady on!” Vice-grip fingers closed on her wrist.

“Let go uv me wrist!” She struck with her free hand which, in turn, was gripped and held, bringing Lucy into collision with the table.

“I beant hayen’ me chops zlapped agen.”

There was a clatter of crockery as his sister struggled to free her arms.

“Leave her be, Jarge.” Ezra steadied the table. “An’ ye keep thee hands to theezelf, young ‘ooman.”

Trembling with rage, her chest rising and falling, Lucy stepped back. So that was why Joe Wheeler was so confident!

“I cud knock his ztoopid head off.”

Ezra thumped the table. “Zit down an’ cool off, or else git back into th’ bedroom.”

“What right has our Jarge got to meddle wi’ my vriends?” For once Lucy was not intimidated by her father;s anger.

George said: “Twas vor thee own good, m’gurl.”

Lucy glared at him. “We’ve had all that avore.”

“Ef ye listened to me, theer’d uv bin no call vor et to happen.” Her father’s voice was lower and less threatening.

“They med uv killed’n.”

George dismissed the idea with a wave of his knife. “Doan’ talk zo maamouthed. Us onny zcared’n.”

“’Twud tek more’n thee two to do thet.”

Nearly piped hes eye, whether or no.”

She stamped her foot. “Twuz th’ height, y’gurt vool. You wudden’ understand. No zense, no veelin’.”

“Did th’ trick, whatever ‘twuz. No vuther danger to our bit of bus’ness vrom that quarter.”

“That wuz all thee keered about.” Lucy gripped the edge of the table. “Well, I hope th; nex’ trip vails!”

“Lucy!” Martha was horrified. “Ye beant in arnest?”

“I mean every word uv it. Bad luck to it, I say. Zo there!” With her sleeve she wiped away incipient tears.

Ezra started to rise. “Shet yor mouth, an’ git out o’ my zight! Git out avore ye veel th’ weight o’ my hand!”

“Zteady, Vather.” Martha put out a restraining hand. Ezra sat down, glowering.

White-faced and shaken by her father’s violence, Lucy automatically obeyed him. Alone in her room, she gave way to convulsive crying.

The smell of fried fish which permeated the whole of the cottage told her the row had not affected her healthy appetite. Later, however, when her mother looked in to tell her the men had gone into the garden and a meal was being kept warm for her, she refused it, put on her bonnet, and, hungry and despondent, drained of emotion, she left for the Rectory.

CHAPTER 25

Hector Ryall and his wife were tete-a-tete. Their guests had gone.

"All's well that ends well." The Rector announced with satisfaction.

Edith Ryall paused in her letter-writing. "Yes, I think we handled the matter very well."

"A diplomatic *tour de force*, my dear."

"I must confess to having been rather worried when Rupert seemed reluctant to accept Annette's invitation. Once he had done so, I knew all was well." She examined the nib, frowned, and drew it across her pen-wiper. "This ink is quite muddy/"

"Do you think anything will come of it?"

"A blot if one is not careful."

Her husband smiled benignly. The occasion when Edith displayed a sense of humour were rare. "I was referring to an alliance."

"I sincerely hope so. Another fortnight together at Annette's home will give propinquity a chance to play its part." Her eyes wandered to the oval wall plaques. Finding no further inspiration in the classical figures decorously posed in alto-relief, she resumed her writing.

"Lucy Read still looks rather mopy." He had waited for the letter to be finished before speaking.

"She'll get over it." This in her 'no-nonsense' tone.

"Especially with Rupert out of the way."

"Not seeing him again should help to bring her to her senses. I am thankful the matter is settled. It was most disturbing."

He toyed with the twenty-two caret chain that secured the gold half-hunter in his waistcoat pocket. "It was gratifying to find the boy so amenable to reason – especially after a little initial obstinacy."

"These young people! One simply does not know what next to expect from them." The decisive way in which she pressed the sealed envelope against the blotter was indicative of her opinion that they required a very firm hand.

CHAPTER 26

It was on Harry's fourteenth birthday that the letter from his cousin came from London. This was unusual. Normally Charlie sent an unenclosed postcard.

He and Agnes were about to have breakfast when the postman's knock summoned Agnes to the front door to bring in two small parcels, half a dozen cards, and one letter, all addressed to Master Harry Read,

Harry opened the parcels. Aunt Harriet had sent him *Memoirs of Bob, the Spotted_Terrier, Written by Himself*, a slim quarto-sized book illustrated with a number of pen and ink sketches by Harrison Weir. Harry glanced at the vapidly angelic child depicted in an inset on the flowered cover, flicked through the pages, made a moue of disapproval, and tossed it aside. The second package contained a small musical box which, according to a label inside the lid, played *I Loved You Better Than You Knew* and *I Love the Moon*. This, a present from Maude, Aunt Harriet's teenaged daughter, met with mild approval.

Having read the letter, Harry slipped it into his pocket.

"Aren't you goin' to let us see it?" Agnes was surprised. Family letters invariably went from hand to hand.

"No," said Harry. "It's secret."

"Oh, is it?" She did not like the expression, compounded of slyness and gloating, which accompanied her brother's remark. In deference to its being his birthday, she let the matter drop.

Since the day of the thrashing, Harry's behaviour had been beyond reproach. His eagerness to go to Sunday School, and his willingness to attend morning and evening services in the Wesleyan Chapel, and his interest in the Band of Hope, pleased his father. And when Harry, without prompting, produced some simple architectural plans, Amos was convinced his treatment had been effective in setting the boy on the right path, and he had renewed hope that he would in due course make a man of him.

The charade to deceive Amos, in which Daisy posed as a victim of anaemia, had been played, and for the past three weeks she had been living with her Aunt Harriet who ran a modest boarding-house in Paddington.

"Kittle's bilen', an' ye brefkus is nearly ready." Sarah Read,` with her frying-pan on one gas-ring and a kettle on another, called from the scullery.

"All right, Mother. I'll make fresh tea." Agnes took up the tea-pot already used for her parents' breakfast, and went to the back garden to empty it.

Harry drew Charlie's letter from his pocket, looked at the envelope, and smirked. Later, tomorrow perhaps, when the time was ripe he would tell.

In the meantime, Sarah was cracking two eggs on the edge of her pan, and deciding what to prepare for Harry's tea – a meal to which he would bring a couple of his friends. A blanc-mange, stewed apples and custard and some rock-cakes – that ought to be all right. And there was that tin of fancy biscuits she had kept from last Christmas.

It was not until three days later that the opportunity for Harry to reveal his knowledge presented itself. He was in the carpenters' shop sharpening pencils with a wood-chisel when Agnes came up to ask him to chop some kindling.

"What, more firewood?" he said grouchily. "What does Mother do.
Eat it?"

Agnes put an empty trug on the bench. "She gave Mrs Baker half of the last lot."

"She'd give away her head."

"That's true." She turned and walked towards the stairs.

"Any news of Daisy?" Coming unexpectedly, the question caught her unaware. It was the first time Harry had shown interest in his sister's illness.

"Mother had a letter two days ago. She's not right yet."

"Won't be for some time, will she?" His tone was sardonic, his expression similar to what it had been when he read his cousin's letter. It was a loaded question.

"Anaemia takes a long time." She toyed with some wood shavings.

He winked. "Funny sort of anaemia."

"Funny?"

He examined the pencil, deliberately keeping her in suspense.

"Charlie had been to see Aunt Harriet. He told me about Daisy – the truth, Agnes, not a pack of lies."

"So now you know." His smugness angered her, but she knew no good would come of quarrelling with him.

Once again she started to leave.

Harry held the chisel at eye-level, examining the blade. "What does Father think of it?"

Agnes hesitated, uncertain as to whether truth or falsehood was called for. "He don't know."

Satisfied he had not damaged its cutting edge, Harry replaced the tool in the wall-rack. "There'll be ructions when he does."

Oh, yes. There'd no doubt be ructions. Agnes was thankful she would not have the job of telling her father. A loyal daughter, docile to the point of apathy, she never analysed her filial affection for both parents. Had she done so, she would have been compelled to admit that her love for Amos Read was not unmixed with fear.

"To start with," she replied.

"I'd not care to be in Daisy's shoes." The idea seemed to please him.

"She'll be forgiven. Mother's goin' to speak to him when the time comes."

"If and when he's a grandfather."

Agnes moved closer and touched his arm. "You'll keep this to yourself, Harry?"

The earnest pleading she could not exclude when asking gave him a sense of power. Harry Read, already tainted by the self-conceit he was to carry to the grave, inhibited by current mores, and dominated by his father, intended to make the most of it. His smile was enigmatic. "These things leak out, Agnes. We can't always stop them."

CHAPTER 27

If Ezra Read had been asked if his fishing-smack stood a chance of taking him and his son safely to Chale Bay, he would have replied with an unequivocal negative. Never in his life had he been at sea in such a storm as that which now vented its frenzy in the English Channel, and despite her efforts to resist drove the *Rose of Chale* before it.

On the previous day, unforeseen difficulties which nearly cost the two men their freedom had delayed the start of their return from St. Malo, and now, with their last hope wrenched away with the remnants of the headsail, and torn mainsail they were heading for Atherfield Ledge, above which disintegrated waves were being thrown to a height of thirty feet, Atherfield Ledge, where only two years ago the wreck of *Sirenia*, a full-rigged ship of 1588 ton, had claimed the lives of three lifeboatmen and several of her crew.

"Us'll never hold she agen this lot." George exerted every ounce of his strength to fight the tiller, To make himself heard above the turmoil of the wind and waves, he had to shout at the top of his voice.

"Keep'n hard over, Jarge. Thet's all us ken do." Ezra stopped baling and moved aft to add his weight to the struggle.

"Wi' th'vores'le gone, us doan' stand a chance."

Ezra peered landwards under the edge of his streaming sou'wester. The Isle of Wight, a smudged mass of dismal greys and browns, its high ground blanketed with racing clouds, suddenly revealed when the smack was tossed on a wave crest, as quickly disappeared when the vessel slid into a trough.

"How var to th' ledge, Jarge?"

"Can't tell wi' they gurt waves. "Bowt half a mile, I reckon. Us'll be drove on en, that's vor zarten." He looked at his father's face. Black-bearded, framed in his sou-wester, it told him nothing. The apparent absence of fear bolstered his own courage.

"Curt pity us got harled up in S'Malo," said Ezra. "If us'd left accarden' to plan, us'd a bin back avore th' blow started."

George said ominously: "Doan' vorget us wuz ill-wished."

Ezra's eyebrows came together. "Bah! I doan' zet no store be that. Th' maid meant no harm."

Suddenly the sound of splintering wood alerted them to a new peril. A stay, rotten with age, had parted. The mast under unequal tension had broken six feet below the truck.

"Look owt!"

The falling fragment hit the bulwark only a few inches from Ezra's side and, dragging its rigging, went into the sea, bringing the port gunwale into danger.

"Gawd Almighty! That was close!" said Ezra.

"Can ye cut'n vree, Dad?"

"I dunno, you. I can try." Although hampered by the stiffness of his oilskin, he managed at last to take a clasp-knife from an inner pocket and sever the ropes.

"What'll us do when her strikes? Zwim vor it?" asked George.

"In this lot? Us'd be drowned avore gitten' vifty yards."

"Med ez wull be drownded ez battered on they there rocks." George squinted at the Ledge towards which, minute by minute, the *Rose of Chale* was getting closer.

Ezra said: "'Tes a massy 'tes daylight. Coastguard wull a zin we be this time."

"Think they'll be able to zend out lifeboat?"

"They'll try, Jarge. Ye may be zure o' thet. Ef Moses Munt war still alive, there be no doubt about it." But Moses Munt had gone overboard when trying to save the *Sirenia's* crew. Rufus Button, he thought, would do his best, but in this storm..? In his opinion he and his son were as good as dead.

George indicated the kegs lashed and stowed in the bottom of the boat, "How 'bought th' stuff, Dad? Bist gwyne to dump it?"

"Too late. Jim Biddle's wol' zpy-glass wull a bin on we vor th' past hour."

"Ten kegs o' brandy," said George. "Gaugers'll kick up a middlen' dido if um gits their vingers on they."

"Aye, that they wull. We'm in trouble, lad, whatever happens."

"I'd ez lief go to a watery grave ez to Parkhurst."

There was an appalling crash which flung both men into a confused heap. Water rushed into the punctured hull and at the same time a great volume of water swamped it from above. George Read's preference, it seemed, was to be respected.

CHAPTER 28

Amos Read was preparing his supper – a routine procedure that commenced each evening at seven-thirty, and preceded his Bible-reading. It consisted of chopping up a raw onion – his recipe for good health.

At the other side of the table, with the picture of the Prince Consort behind him, Harry was drawing a lean-to conservatory. His mother and sister were out. A week had passed since his conversation with Agnes – seven days, during which he had inwardly gloated over his knowledge of Daisy's pregnancy.

He looked up from his work. With patience which his wife averred she could not equal Amos chopped, regrouped the particles in the centre of the plate, and subdivided them. Tap, tap, tap. Time after time the knife touched china. Amos, his day's work done, was at peace with the world. Being tone-deaf, his attempt at whistling came out in a tuneless sibilance. His complacence gave Harry a malicious urge to destroy it.

How should he broach the topic? Inherent cunning coupled with fear warned him to be careful. He did not want another beating. Several opening remarks were considered and discarded. At last he had it.

"Will Daisy be able to go back to work when she comes home?"

Amos stopped chopping. "Doan zee no reason why her zhudden'."

Harry used his set-square to draw the end elevation of the roof. "I was wondering about the baby," he said innocently.

What?" The violence of his father's reaction made Harry wish he had not spoken.

"Someone will have to look after it," he mumbled, white-faced.

"You'm talken' in riddles – zummat I ken't abide. Let's hay et straight out."

Harry trembled. "Daisy's having a baby, Father. I thought you knew."

Amos put down his knife. Harry moved on his chair – wished he could leave the room.

"Zo the stoopid wench be hayen' a baby!" He picked up his knife and absent-minded;y resumed his cutting.

"That's the reason she went to London." He felt relieved the expected explosion of temper had not taken place.

"Zims like thee knaws all abowt et."

"News travels, Father. I had it from Cousin Charlie."

Amos sighed. "Aye, news travels an'reaches th' wrong ears, I'd a gi' a hun'erd poun', boy rather than hay this reach mine."

Two hours later, after Agnes and Harry had gone to bed, Sarah was defending herself against her husband's smouldering anger.

"I bin gwyne to tell'ee, Amos. I jis' cudden' bring meself to do et."

"Why not?" Under his rather low forehead his eyes glared resentfully.

"Vor one thing, I didn' wan' upset'ee." She gave glance for glance.

"D'ye think it didn' upset me to git et vrom Harry? Th' mealy-mouthed article p'tended a thought I knowed what wuz happ'nen'. Tuk a deal uv swalleyen', I can tell'ee.

"I zhud 'uv told 'ee, Amos." Her tone was apologetic. They never quarrelled. As a dutiful wife, Sarah respected the authority of her spouse. Master of the house, he was not to be contradicted. At times, employing diplomacy, she advised him against a particular course, and generally her counsel was taken, for he acknowledged she had a 'ter'bul good headpiece'"

"I be disappointed in th' pair uv 'ee – thee an' Agnes. I can't abide un'erhand work. An' there wuz no call vor it."

Sarah bit her lip. She had wanted to deal with this problem in her own way – to confess Daisy's sin at an opportune moment. The possibility that Amos might be unforgiving was one she had not considered.

"I'm zorry. I was doen' it vor th'best.

“I doan’ hold wi’ tellen’ lies,” he growled. His unrelenting sternness disturbed her.

“Some be white ones,” she offered.

“Not vor me. A lie’s a lie. Granite-hard, the words condemned her conduct.

That brought tears. She fumbled for a handkerschief in the placket hole of her skirt, failed to find one, and used the corner of her black apron.

“Even when no harm’t done?”

“Harm have bin done.” Then with a sudden change of manner. “But there, ‘tes no use squinnyen’, an’ no use harpen’ on what can’t be undone. Us’ll zay no more ‘bout it.”

She left her chair, placed her hands on his shoulders, and kissed his cheek. Amos patted her hip and she sat down again.

“What’ll us do’bout Daisy?” she enquired, her eyes no longer troubled.

“Us’ll zee.” He brought his lips together and wagged his head.

“Won’t be too hard, will ’ee?”

“Doan’ vret, ‘ooman. Her beant th’ vust maid to git into trouble.”

“Nor won’t be th’ last.” She started to collect the crockery.

Amos said: “Dos’t think young Bert’ll marry she?”

Sarah reached for his cup and saucer. “I dunno. A’s got no money.”

“I’d best go an’ talk to’n.”

The thought that Bert might not be the culprit entered Sarah’s head. She did not put it into words.

“Zhall I come wi’ee?”

“No need vor both on us to yoppul to’n. I’ll zee en gits vair doos.”

Sarah knew when not to press the point. “Med az well zee en at th’ zhop. ‘Tween one an’ two’s a good time – avore people git about, an’ when Measter Blanvord’s hayen’ his dinner.”

Mrs Read’s prediction proved to be correct. The double-fronted haberdashery in the High Street was without a customer, and its proprietor (Solomon had long since retired) had gone for his midday meal.

Left in charge, Albert Harrison behind the counter was replacing packages of woollen vests on a top shelf.

“Hullo, young man.” Amos Read, burly and bluff, spread his hands on the worn counter.

“Good afternoon, Mr Read.” Albert reached floor-level and stowed the step-ladder where it would be out of his way. “What can I show you?”

Amos noted with approval his business-like manner. “Nuthen’.”

“Oh.” Albert, nonplussed by the other’s abruptness and unexpected reply, tried to gather his wits.

“Well,” Amos said at length. “What thee got to zay vor theezelf.”

“What about, Mr Read?” He guessed the visit concerned Daisy, but could not account for it.

“That maid o’ mine. What else.”

“I…I thought she was still in London.” Then, anticipating bad news. “Not worse, is she?”

"Not's I know uv," Amos growled, not liking what he thought was evasion. "You 'knows az well az me her's in th' vam'ly way."

So that was it! So much for what she had told him about having anaemia and going away under doctor's orders. But who was the man? Albert knew he was innocent. Kissing and cuddling was all he had done – all she would let him do. He supposed some blasted nob had got round her. They were all the same – womanisers, randy as goats. A thought struck him. Had Daisy told her father he was to blame? Did she expect him to stand by her?

"Do 'ee, or don't ye?" Amos, a formidable interrogator, thrust himself as far as possible over the counter.

"Yes, I do." Almost in spite of himself he lied.

"Bis gwyne to wed she?"

Albert faced him. Having committed himself, he could speak frankly. "I'd like to, Mr Read. "I'd like to very much. But I can't afford it."

Amos straightened and stood back. "What's your wages?"

"Eighteen shillings a week."

"Be any good wi' viggeren'?"

"Pretty fair. I do the books for Mr Blanford."

Amos nodded. "Luk yur. I'll tell 'ee what I'll do. Cum an' work vor me, an' I'll pay ye twen'y-vive shillens. Missus ken do wi' zome help. I wanted me nipper to tek o're, but a doan'zhow no interest – not a scuddick."

Albert's brain, sharpened by poverty, was quick to see the golden opportunity he was being offered. Get in the old man's good books, and who could tell where it would end? He might even become a manager when Mr Read retired.

"Wull? What y'think?"

Albert, although life had taught him to treat apparent good fortune with caution, could see no snag. "Thank you, Mr Read. I'd like to work for you."

Amos extended his hand. "Play jonick wi' me," "Ye won't regret it."

CHAPTER 29

On Brighstone beach the crash of breakers, the hissing of receding waves sluicing through loose pebbles, and, over all, the roaring of the wind, combined to form an overwhelming symphony of sound. The gale, eight hours old, showed no sign of abating.

Regardless of the weather, small groups, supernumeraries in a drama that threatened to become a tragedy, concentrated their attention on the often invisible *Rose of Chale*, which, wedged between adjacent rocks, was taking a pounding that even workmanship and materials of the finest wuality could not be expected to withstand for more than a few hours.

Too far away to be recognised across the devil's cauldron that separated Atherfield Ledge from the Island shore, Ezra Read and his son occasionally waved. It would not do to give the impression they were beyond human aid.

The Howells, with Rupert as guest at their luxurious villa, were finishing breakfast when the report of the gun used to summon the crew of the Brighstone lifeboat was heard. Ten minutes later he and Annett made their way to the beach.

"Oh, Rupert. Isn't it exciting" Do you really think they will launch the lifeboat?"

They were sheltering to leeward of a rock. Both were wearing long ulsters. Rupert's deer-stalker was pulled low over his forehead: Annette's straw boater was held by a gauze scarf tied under her chin.

"I imagine so. Here come the horses."

He pointed to the lane by which they had come. A carter with a string of eight horses collected from Marsh Green Farm was emerging from it.

Annette, having said she did not know they used horses, learnt they were employed to haul the lifeboat from the boathouse and to position ready for launching the carriage upon which it was drawn.

Treating it as entertainment, Annette said: "It really is terribly thrilling. I would not have missed it for the world."

Rupert gave her a sharp glance. "Men's lives are at stake, Annette."

"But only fishermen."

Only fishermen? Had he heard correctly?

"Would they not be important to you?" He could not believe her to be as callous as her remark implied.

"Oh, of course I want to see the poor creatures saved, But one feels so remote from that sort of person."

He turned away, fully realising what he had known all the time – that he and Annette were incompatible. At that moment his face would have betrayed him.

"Sometimes it is a privilege not to be," he said quietly. "Remote, I mean."

He was given a playful slap. "You must not be tiresome, Rupert. I don't like it'"

Yet again his good manners took command. "I'm sorry, Annette. Don't let my maundering spoil your pleasure."

She took his arm and gave it an affectionat squeeze. "Do tell me what happens next."

"When the horses have taken the boat to the water's edge, they are detached. The crew climb aboard…" He stopped. Across his line of vision two women had stepped down from the pony-trap driven by the landlord of the *White Mouse*. Martha and Lucy Read – and Lucy was looking straight at him. How she must despise him. Almost involuntarily his right hand moved to the peak of his hat. Too late. She was no longer facing him.

"Yes. Go on." Annette jogged his arm.

"Eh? Oh, I'm sorry. I was wool-gathering." He collected his thoughts and continued his explanation. "The crew climb aboard , and at a signal from the coxswain everyone available pulls on the launching ropes to start the boat moving down the slipway."

By this time the cart-horses, their hooves slipping on the rounded pebbles, had brought the boat from the shed, and were halfway across the beach. Their progress was slow, and as they approached the water it became slower, for, drenched by spray and terrified by the incessant thunder of the waves, the animals were reluctant to get within launching distance. The carter, already soaked to the skin, forced the leading pair until they and he were breast high in the sea.

Rupert said: "Will you excuse me. I'd better go and lend a hand."

Annette pouted. "Must you?"

"In this weather they'll need all the help they can get."

Having ascertained that Lucy was going to assist on the port side, Rupert joined the men and women assembled to pull on the starboard rope.

"Do they know whose boat it is?" He enquired of the man next to him.

"Iss. 'Tes Ezra Read's *Rose of Chale*." Ned Sprake had left his thatching to come to the beach.

"Lucy Read's father?"

"Aye."

"He's crazy to be out in tnis storm."

Ned winked. "I reckons a wuz out already. Cetched in Channel a'ter a visit to th' Frenchies."

"I suppose that's his son with him?"

"That's Ezra's Jarge, zure's vate."

The memory of his last encounter with George Read came flooding back. For an instant he experienced something akin to malicious pleasure. Perhaps George now knew the meaning of fear? Then he thought of Lucy. George was her brother – and he was not alone in the boat.

"Have they a chance?"

Ned weighed the question. "Hay me doubts. I've zid every launchen' ver past vorty year, an' I beant niver zid um do et in a zea like this'n. If th' boat gits nigh 'em, how be they gwyne to git aboard?"

The harsh sound of iron shoes striking the pebbled beach, mingled with the general commotion and died away as the horses retreated to an adjacent field.

"Git ready!" Rufus Button surveyed his eight oarsmen and raised his arm. "Let'n go!" His arm swept downwards.

Like two tug o' war teams the villagers lay backwards, straining on the ropes. Rounded stones made a poor foothold, and Rupert had difficulty in retaining a purchase.

"All together now. Heave! The lifeboat started to slide, gathered momentum on the slipway, plunged into a cascade of water in a flurry of spray, went out with the undertow, and was immediately inclined at sixty degrees. Eight oars sliced into the wave. The boat, cork-tossed, moved from the land.

An hour passed. Grim-faced, the watchers saw Rufus Button approach the smack, get within hailing distance, only to be compelled to sheer off into deeper water. Once he closed the gap to five yards, but wind and tide were too much for him, and again he rowed away.

The second hour passed. By this time others were sheltering where Rupert and Annette stood.

"A's turnen' back." said Mary Bull. In Brighstone her confectionery was unattended

Ned Sprake said: "I zed they wudden' reach 'n."

"Niver knawed Rufus do thet avore."

"They can't just leave men to perish!" Rupert was indignant.

"Rufus Button'd niver turn tail wi'out good reason."

Mary shaded her eyes. "Reckons I ken zee why a's done it. Two beant rowen'."

When the lifeboat came in, the former procedure was reversed until it lay once again in its cradle. Two of the crew climbed out. Two more helped to lift a fifth man into their arms. It was Tom Hollis, a veteran of sixty-five.

"What's up, Rufus?" The crowd stood with upturned faces – avid for news.

"Old Tom's exhausted. Jacob's sprained his wrist."

“What’s to do now?” someone asked.

“I’ll hay ‘nuther go if I ken git a vull crew,” Rufus told him.

“Tes suicide in this weather.” Mary Bull put into words what many were thinking.

The coxswain looked from face to face. “Any volunteers?”

“Take me, Skipper?”

Those near the speaker were astonished. ‘Zoaker’ Barnes was a good-for-nothing. At forty he was drinking himself to death. It was said his family paid him to stop away from them.

“If youm zober.”

“If I were, I wouldn’t go.”

Rufus gave a glimmer of a smile. “Let’s hay thee, then – an’quick about it.”

‘Zoaker’ took one of the vacant places. “Had many a nip of brandy with old Ezra. Can’t let the old villain go before his time.”

Rufus Button’s eyes searched the crowd. “How ‘bout thee, Bill?”

“No vear. I got a missus an’ eight kids.”`

Rupert stepped forward. “I’ll go.”

Can thee row, zur”? Rufus wondered if the ‘young gent’ knew what he was undertaking.

“I did a little rowing at college.”

“Come aboard.”

“No Rupert! You’re not to!” Annette clung to his arm.

Gently but firmly he removed her restraining hand. “I know those people, Annette.”

“Know them!”

He took off his Ulster and handed it to her. He did not wait to see her throw it down.

Lucy Read, her emotions in keeping with the elements, watched the lifeboat take the water for the second time

“’Twuz all my vault, Mother. I ill-wished ‘em. An’ now Rupert’s gone.” Her voice broke.

“They beant dead yit.” Martha’s anxiety was not apparent.

“Lives throwed away.”

“Us mus’ trust in God’s mussy.”

Ned Sprake joined them. “A licker to me how they’ll git ‘em vrom one boat to t’other.”

Martha said: Rufus be a dabster. When a zays ‘jump’, they jumps ver their lives.”

“More’s one’s broken a leg that way.” Mary Bull was not noted for tact.

“Aye, an’ more’n one’s bin scrunched atween th’ boats.” Ned added his quota of gloom.

“I ill-wished ‘em,” repeated Lucy.

“Hold thee chitter, m’gurl.” Martha was angry. “What’s bin zed in anger beant no concern o’ they.”

Dominated by the elder woman, they watched in silence while the lifeboat switch-backed towards the still intact *Rose of Chale*.*

“Wind’s zhifted roun’ a pwint or two,“ said Ned. “Wi’ th’ turn o’ tide that shud help ‘em.”

Prophetic words. This time Rufus with consummate skill manoeuvred to within jumping distance, and, despite a rise and fall of eight feet, Ezra escaped with nothing worse than a sprained ankle and a black eye. His son was uninjured

Wet through and weak with fatigue, Rupert descended from the boat.

“Rupert!” Lucy ran towards him and with an impulsive movement grasped his hand. Her rough hand touching the broken blisters on his palm made him wince.

He avoided her eyes. “I have to hurry to get a hot bath and to change out of these things. I can’t stop now.

“I know why ye can’t – the real reason.” The words poured out.

Looking at her, he saw the lovelight she could not, would not, conceal. “I gave my word, Lucy.”

She made an impatient gesture. “Which is more important – broke words, or a broke heart?”

His fingers tightened on hers. “Oh, Lucy…!”

“Hullo. Holden’ hands, eh?” Neither had noticed that George Read, instead of following his father to where Martha stood, had come in their direction. In spite of the ordeal he had undergone, he still looked strong and formidable.

Lucy faced him. “Jarge! For pity’s sake! He helped to save your life.”

“What’s to be zed, mus’ be zed. Him an’me’s got a score to zettle.”

“Jarge! Please!” She left Rupert and placed both hands against her brother’s massive chest.

“Out o’ me way.” He lifted her aside as though she were a child. Rupert marvelled that such stamina could remain unweakened.

Confronting Rupert somewhat sheepishly, he offered his hand. “There’s me hand. Take it or leave it.”

Rupert hesitated. “Which means..?

“Virgit t’other night, I be zorry et happened.”

Their hands met, Rupert barely keeping back a yelp of pain as the other’s handshake brought fresh torture.

Ezra called: “Come on, Jarge. What be hangen’ about vor? I got th’ zhivers.”

When they were alone, Lucy said, “You best git along, too, Rupert, or ye’ll ketch your death o’ cold.”

“I’ve something to say first. Let us get out of this wind.”

“By the rock where ye ztood wi’ yor lady vriend ?”

“Good grief! I’d forgotten Annette! Anyway, she’s not there now. Probably gone home in a fit of pique to tell her papa what a boor I am.”

He saw his Ulster, retrieved it from the place where Annette had dropped it, and put it on.

Lucy said: “Doan’t ‘ee mind.”

“Not in the least. She means nothing in my life.”

“Her’s very purdy’” In her highly emotional state, she could not be expected to concentrate on the Queen’s English. Rupert understood and forgave.

“Look, Lucy. Next week the Michaelmas term begins, and I go back to Oxford. I doubt if I shall see you between now and December. I’m reading for my finals.”

“That’s onny a few months.”

He put his arm around her shoulders. “You’ll keep on studying?”

“If thee want me to.”

He gave her a squeeze. “It’s not absolutely necessary, of course. There’ll be plenty of time for that when we’re married.”

Lucy gasped. “Married! Ye can’t marry me – a smuggler’s daughter!”

“I can and will. I’d marry you if the Pirate King himself were your father.” He laughed. “Who knows, I might decide to join the business.”

Excited and happy, he gave no thought to problems which the future would hold – loss of friends, ostracism, and (until he finally acknowledged Lucy’s worth) Sir Gerald Blake’s displeasure. As only the young can, both of them ignored tomorrow – at one with Virgil in credulously backing the omnipotence of love.