

CHAPTER XXIV

GLASSON IN CHASE

“ Prospero: ‘ Hey, Mountain, hey !’

Ariel: ‘ Silver, there it goes, Silver !’ ”

The Tempest.

LIKE most men of fifty or thereabouts, and like every man who finds himself at that age a bachelor rector of a remote country parish, Parson Chichester had collected a number of small habits or superstitions—call them which you will: they are the moss a sensible stone gathers when it has ceased rolling. He smoked a pipe in the house or when he walked abroad, but a Manila cheroot (he belonged to the age of cheroots) when he rode or drove; and he never rode on a Sunday, but either walked or used a dog-cart. Also by habit—or again, if you please, superstition—he preached one sermon, not necessarily a new one, every week.

To-day he had broken through this last custom, but observed the others. After an abbreviated Morning Service he lit a cheroot, climbed into his dog-cart, and drove off towards Meriton at a brisk pace, being due to perform his errand there and report himself at Meriton by three in the afternoon. For luncheon he carried a box of sandwiches and a flask of whisky and water. His horse—a tall, free-stepping bay, by name Archdeacon—was, properly speaking, a hunter, and the Parson, in driving as in riding him, just rattled him along, letting him feel the rein, but seldom or never using it to interfere with his pace.

The entrance gates at Meriton are ancient and extremely handsome, wrought of the old iron of East

Sussex, and fashioned, somewhere in the mid-eighteenth century, after an elaborate Florentine pattern—tradition says, by smiths imported from Italy. The pillars are of weather-stained marble, and four in number, the two major ones surrounded by antlered stags, the two minor by cressets of carved flame, symbolising the human soul, and the whole illustrating the singular motto of the Chandlers, "*As the hart desireth.*" On either side of the gates is a lodge in the Ionic style, with a pillared portico, and the lodges are shadowed by two immense cedars, the marvel of the country-side.

But to-day the lodges stood empty, with closed doors and drawn blinds—the doors weather-stained, the blinds dingy with dust. Weeds overgrew the bases of the pillars, and grass had encroached upon all but a narrow ribbon scored by wheel-ruts along the noble drive. Parson Chichester pulled up, and was about to dismount and open the gates for himself, when he caught sight of a stranger coming afoot down the drive; and the stranger, at the same moment catching sight of the dog-cart, waved a hand and mended his pace to do this small service.

"Much obliged to you," nodded Parson Chichester pleasantly, after a sharp and curious scrutiny. For the stranger was a parson too by his dress—a tall, elderly man with grey side-whiskers, and a hard, square mouth like the slit of a letter-box. The clergy are always curious about one another by a sort of freemasonry, and Parson Chichester knew every beneficed clergyman in the diocese and most of the unbeneficed. But who could this be? And what might be his business at Meriton, of all places?

The stranger acknowledged his thanks with a slight wave of the hand.

"A fine day. I am happy to have been of service."

It was curious. Each paused for a second or so as if on the point of asking a question; each waited for the other to speak; then, as nothing came of it, each bowed again, and thus awkwardly they parted.

Parson Chichester drove on with a pucker between

the eyebrows and a humorous twitch in the corners of his mouth. So when two pedestrians, strangers, meet and politely attempt to draw aside but with misdirected *chassés* that leave them still confronting one another, they disengage at length and go their ways between irritation and amusement.

Meriton, one of "the stately homes of England," is a structure in the Palladian style, injudiciously built on the foundations of an older house dating from the fifteenth century, when sites were chosen for the sake of a handy supply of water, and with little regard to view or even to sunshine. It occupies a cup of the hills, is backed by a dark amphitheatre of evergreen trees, and looks across a narrow valley. The farther slope rises abruptly, and has been converted into a park, so to speak, against its will. The stream that flows down the valley bottom has likewise been arrested by art and forced to form a lake with a swannery; but neither lake nor swannery is entirely convincing. It was not, however, its architect's fault that to Parson Chichester the place looked much more stately than homelike, since every window in its really noble façade was shuttered and sightless.

The great entrance porchway lay at the back of the house, in the gloom of a dripping cliff. Here the Parson climbed down and tugged at an iron bell-handle. The bell sounded far within the house, and was answered pretty promptly by the butler, a grizzled, ruddy-faced man, who (it was understood) had followed Sir Miles out of the Service, and carried confirmation of this in the wrinkles about his eyes—those peculiar, unmistakable wrinkles which are only acquired by keeping look-out in many a gale of wind.

"Ah? Good morning, Matters!" said Parson Chichester. "Sorry to disturb you, but I've driven over to ask for Sir Miles's address."

"Certainly, sir. That's curious too," added Mr. Matters half to himself. "His address . . . yes, to be sure, sir, I'll write it down for you. But you must let me get you something in the way of luncheon after your

drive. Sir Miles would be annoyed if you went away without—though, the house being closed, you'll pardon deficiencies. As for the horse, sir——”

“I hope I know how to stable him,” struck in the Parson. “But I won't stay—thank you all the same. I've eaten my sandwiches on the road, and couldn't make a second meal if you paid me. What's curious, by the way?”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“I am quoting you. ‘Curious,’ you said.”

“Ah, to be sure, sir. Well, less than half an hour ago there was a stranger here—a clergyman too—putting the very same question.”

“I met him at the lodge gates. Oldish man, grey whiskers, mouth like a trap.”

“That's him, sir.”

“It's a coincidence, certainly. The more remarkable, I guess, because Meriton nowadays is not much infested with parsons. Wonder who he was, and what he wanted?”

“He would not give his name, sir. He wanted the address.”

“You gave it to him?”

“I did not, sir.”

“Was he annoyed?”

“He was, sir; very much annoyed. He said words to himself, which unless I'm mistaken——”

Matters paused.

Parson Chichester laughed.

“If you had refused *me*, you'd have heard 'em quite distinctly.”

“Yes, sir. The address is Grand Hotel, Monte Carlo. I heard from Sir Miles only yesterday. You understand, sir that as a rule he does not choose for everyone to know his movements.”

“I do, and am obliged by your confidence. I want it for Miss Sarly Breward; and, if this reassures you, I shall give it to her and to no one else.”

“I thank you, sir. It was unnecessary. But I may

tell you, sir, that Sir Miles has a very high opinion of Miss Sally, as I happen to know."

"We all have, Matters. . . . Well, I have what I came for, and will be driving back to Culvercoombe with it. So good day, and thank you!"

"I thank you, sir."

Mr. Matters bowed.

Parson Chichester turned Archdeacon, and put him at his best trotting speed—by a single hint from the reins, no whip needed. This time he had to descend and open the lodge gates for himself. A mile and a half beyond them the road crossed one of the many high brows of the moor, and here on the rise he discerned a black-habited figure trudging along the road ahead.

He recognised the stranger at once, and reined up as he overtook him.

"Good day again, sir! Can I offer you a lift?"

"I thank you," said the stranger. "I am bound for a place called Culvercoombe."

"Why, and so am I! So you must give me the pleasure."

"You are exceedingly kind."

He clambered up, not very skilfully, and the dog-cart bowled on again.

For a while the two kept silence. Then Parson Chichester made an opening—

"You don't belong to these parts?" he asked.

"No. . . . Pardon my curiosity, but are you a friend of Miss Breward's?"

"I believe she would allow me to say 'yes.' By the way, hereabouts we call her Miss Sally. Everyone does—even the butler at Meriton, with whom I was speaking just now."

"Indeed! . . . I am wondering if you would presently add to your kindness by giving me an introduction to her? Trust me," he went on, staring down the road ahead and answering Parson Chichester's quick glance, without seeming to perceive it, you will incur no re-

sponsibility. I am not a mendicant priest, and only ask her to favour me with an address, which I believe she can easily give."

"An address?"

The stranger's somewhat grim mouth relaxed a little at the corners.

"The English language," he said, "is full of distracting homonyms. I am not asking her for a sermon, but to be directed where a certain gentleman resides—at present, I have reason to believe, abroad—where, for instance, a letter will reach him."

"Sir Miles Chandon?"

"Precisely. You have hit it. . . . But, to be sure, you were talking just now with his butler. A worthy fellow, I dare say, though suspicious of strangers."

Parson Chichester felt pretty much of a fool, and the more, annoyed because unable to detect anything offensive in the tone of the rebuke—if, indeed, a rebuke had been implied.

"Folk in these parts see few strange faces," he said lamely.

"It was the kinder of you to offer me a lift. I had heard, by the way, that Sir Miles's butler did not come from these parts, but was a much-travelled man."

"That is so."

Mr. Chichester felt that he was getting very markedly the worst of this conversation, and decided to let it drop. But just as he had arrived at this decision the stranger faced around and asked—

"Perhaps *you* know Sir Miles's present address?"

At this point-blank question Mr. Chichester's face grew very red indeed. He had brought it on himself. Denial was useless.

"Perhaps I do," he answered. "But you were going to ask Miss Sally for it, and we will leave it to her."

"Quite right," the stranger assented. "Here is my own card, though it will convey nothing to you."

But it conveyed a great deal. Parson Chichester

reached across with his disengaged right hand, took the card and read—

*The Reverend Purdie J. Glasson, LL.D.,
Holy Innocents' Orphanage,
Bursfield.*

The words danced before his eyes. Imagine some unskilled player pitted against an expert at cards, awake at one moment to his weakness, and the next overwhelmingly aware that his opponent, by an incredible blunder, is delivered into his hands. The elation of it fairly frightened Mr. Chichester, and he so far forgot himself as to take up his whip and administer a sharp flick on Archdeacon's shoulder—an outrage which the good horse, after an instant of amazement, resented by a creditable attempt to bolt. This was probably the best that could have happened. It gave the Parson a job he understood, and for five minutes effectually prevented his speaking.

They had almost reached the entrance gate of Culvercombe before he reduced the affronted horse to a trot, and Doctor Glasson, who had been clutching the rail of the dog-cart in acutest physical terror, had no nerve as yet to resume the conversation. A lodge-keeper ran out and opened the gate (service under Miss Sally was always alert), and they rolled smoothly down the well-gravelled drive through an avenue of yellowish sycamores.

A couple of aged mastiff bitches—mothers in their time, and now great-grandmothers, of a noble race—lay sunning themselves before the house-porch. They recognised the parson's dog-cart and heaved themselves up, wagging their tails to welcome a respected, if rare, visitor, but growled at sight of his companion. Their names were Tryphena and Tryphosa.

Parson Chichester alighted and rang the bell, after handing the reins to Doctor Glasson with an apology.

"I'll get the groom sent round in a moment," he explained, and to the butler who opened the door, "Miss Sally is expecting me, eh, Butts?"

"In the yellow drawing-room, y'r worship."

The Parson was a magistrate, and, for no known reason, Butts always addressed him as such.

"Very well, I'll find my way to her. Send someone around to take the dog-cart, and as soon as he comes, take this gentleman inside until your mistress rings. Understand?"

"I understand, y'r worship."

"Then be as brisk as you can, for the horse is fresh to-day."

"He 'as aperiently been workin' hissself into a lather, y'r worship," said Butts. "Which I 'ave noticed, sir, your 'abit—or, as I may say, your custom—of bringin' 'im in cool."

But Parson Chichester had left him, and was making his way across the hall to the yellow drawing-room, which he entered with little ceremony. Miss Sally rose to receive him. She had been sitting in its oriel window with a small table before her, and on the table a Bible. This was her rule on a Sunday afternoon, and every Sunday after luncheon she donned a pair of spectacles. Butts, who knew her habits to a hair, brought the spectacles once a week and laid the book open at his favourite passages. For aught it mattered, he might have opened it upside-down.

"You're pretty punctual," said Miss Sally. "Before your time, if anything."

"Yes; the horse bolted, or tried to," Mr. Chichester explained. "Guess whom I've brought with me."

"Not Miles Chandon?"

"No; he's at Monte Carlo. His address, the Grand Hotel. Guess again."

"Don't be foolish and waste time. The children may be arriving at any minute."

"You must keep 'em out of the way, then."

"Why?"

"Because I've brought him."

"'Him'? You'll excuse me——"

"Glasson."

"Glasson?" Her eyes opened wide. "You've brought Glasson? Well, I must say you're clever."

"On the contrary, I've been infernally stupid. I met him coming down the drive from Meriton. He had been pumping Matters for Sir Miles's present address—which he didn't get. What's his game, do you think?"

"Blackmail."

"That crossed my mind too. He seems a deep one, and I don't like his looks."

"You are sure it is Glasson?"

Parson Chichester produced the card, badly crumpled, from his riding-glove. Miss Sally pushed her Sunday spectacles higher on her brows and examined it with her clear eyes.

"This," she said, "is going to be a treat. The man cannot possibly have guessed that the children are in this neighbourhood. You haven't enlightened him, I hope?"

"Certainly not," Mr. Chichester answered indignantly.

"Well, you said a moment since that you'd been infernally stupid, and I don't yet know what form it took."

"I let him know what I'd discovered—that he had been pumping Matters for Sir Miles's address."

"There is no harm in that. He can have the address from me as soon as he likes."

"But surely you see through his game? He has tracked out the boy's parentage, and he's out after blackmail."

"To be sure he is; and, what's more, he's going to have a run for his money. What on earth is the matter outside?"

For a noise of furious barking had broken out suddenly, and, as she spoke, there mingled with it a sound very like a human scream.

Miss Sally hurried out to the hall; the parson close at her heels. They had scarcely crossed the threshold when Doctor Glasson staggered by them like a maniac, with Tryphosa hanging on to his clerical skirts and

Tryphena in full cry behind. Butts brought up the rear of the chase, vainly shouting to call them off.

"Down, Tryphosa!" Miss Sally ran in, planted a well-directed kick on the mastiff's ribs, caught her by the scruff of the neck and banged her ears. "Back, you brutes!"

Catching a dog-whip down from the rack, she lashed and drove them yelping; while Glasson flung himself on a couch and lay panting, with a sickly yellow face and a hand pressed to his heart.

"Oh, ma'am, your lady dogs!"

"'Bitches' in the country, Doctor Glasson. I must apologise for them. Butts, bring some brandy and water to the drawing-room. . . . Not bitten, I hope? If the skin's broken we had better cauterise."

Miss Sally confessed afterwards that she would have enjoyed operating on the man with a red-hot poker: "and I'd have used the biggest poker in the house." But Doctor Glasson arose, felt himself, and announced that it was unnecessary.

"Mr. Chichester tells me you wish for Sir Miles Chandon's address. He was, until a couple of days ago, at the Grand Hotel, Monte Carlo, and I have no doubt is there yet."

Doctor Glasson's face fell somewhat.

"I thank you," he murmured. "It is a long distance."

"A letter will reach him in less than two days."

"Yes," said Glasson, and said no more.

"But a letter addressed to him at Meriton would, of course, be forwarded. So I conclude you wish to see him personally. Are you—pardon the question—a friend of his?"

"Not a personal friend, ma'am. I came to see him on a matter of business."

"From Bursfield," said Miss Sally, with a glance at the card.

It was a superstition with Glasson to tell the truth about trifles.

"From Plymouth, to be exact, ma'am. I have been indulging in a—er—brief holiday."

"Ah," thought Miss Sally to herself, "researching, no doubt!"

Aloud she said—

"Well, I am sorry, sir; but Monte Carlo's the address, and that's all I can do for you except to offer you some refreshment, and—yes, let me see—you are returning to-night?"

"As speedily as possible, ma'am."

"Sunday trains are awkward. There is one at Fair Anchor at 4.35, and after that no other until the 7.12, which picks up the evening mail at Taunton. You are on foot, I understand, and will certainly not catch the first unless you let my man drive you over."

Doctor Glasson was evidently anxious to get away at the earliest moment. He protested, with many thanks, that he was trespassing on her kindness.

"Not a bit," said Miss Sally; "and you shall be as comfortable as we can make you in the barouche. Mr. Chichester, would you mind stepping out and ringing them up at the stables, while Butts is bringing the brandy?"

The Parson guessed that she was sending him with a purpose; and he was right, for he had scarcely left the room when, on an excuse, she followed him.

"Tossell and the children are about due. This man must not see them, of course. As you leave the stables you go up on the Inistow road and head 'em off—keep 'em out of sight until the barouche is past the cross-roads and on the way to Fair Anchor."

He nodded, and having left his order with the coachman, climbed by a footpath to a rise of the moor whence he commanded a view of the cross-roads on his right, and on his left of the road running northward like a pale ribbon across the brown heather. Neither vehicle nor horseman was in sight. Nor, though he waited more than half an hour, did any appear coming from the direction of Inistow.

At the end of that time, however, he saw the barouche roll past the cross-roads towards Fair Anchor. The coast was clear. So, wondering a little at the farmer's delay, he wended his way back to Culvercoombe. To his amazement, in the hall he ran against Butts carrying a portmanteau, and at the same moment Miss Sally issued from the yellow drawing-room with a Bradshaw in her hand.

"Where are the children?" she asked.

"Nowhere in sight."

"That's odd. Tossell's punctual in everything as a rule—rent included. Well, I must leave you to keep an eye on them. . . . Do you know anything about Bursfield? The best hotel there, for instance? I see there are two advertised here, The Imperial—everything's Imperial nowadays—with a night-porter and a lift—I detest lifts—never use 'em—and the Grand Central, family and commercial, electric light. I abominate commercials, but they know how to feed. Why the deuce can't these people advertise something worth knowing? Electric light—who wants to eat overdone steaks by electricity?"

"But, my dear lady, why this sudden curiosity about Bursfield and its hotels?"

"Because, my dear man, I'm going there, to-night; by the 7.12. Butts has just carried my portmanteau upstairs."

"Your portmanteau?"

"Yes; I don't believe in trunks and dress boxes—my things will bear folding, and Humphreys"—meaning her maid—"is already folding 'em. Man, don't stare. I'm going to have the time of my life at Bursfield in Glasson's absence. You saw Glasson depart? Well, he didn't tell; but you may pack me in another portmanteau if he's not posting off to Monte Carlo."

"Well?"

"Well, he won't find Miles Chandon there. Because why? Because I've written out this telegram, which I'll trouble you to send as soon as the post office opens

to-morrow. Nuisance there's no telegraphing in the country on Sundays. I thought of getting a porter to dispatch it for me at Taunton; but it wouldn't reach Monte Carlo until some unearthly hour, and we've plenty of time. Miles Chandon will get it to-morrow, probably just as Glasson is beginning to get on terms with the Channel crossing. He's the very subject for sea-sickness, the brute! . . . And the two will probably pass one another at some time in the middle of the night, while I'm sleeping like a top after a happy day at Bursfield."

"You count on Chandon's coming?"

"Here's the telegram—'*Return Meriton Wednesday at latest. Important. Sally Breward.*'"

"Will that fetch him?"

"Of course it will. Miles Chandon owes me something, as I think I told you, and is a gentleman, moreover."

"Oh, very well, I'll send it; and I have only one other question. What precisely is your business at Bursfield?"

Miss Sally grinned.

"Hay-making," she answered, "while the sun shines—that is to say, in Glasson's absence. I propose to make a considerable deal of hay. Something will depend on Mr. Hucks; but from the child's account of him, I build great hopes on Mr. Hucks. . . . There's one thing more. I've sent the barouche to the station. If I drive my own cart over to Fair Anchor, there's nobody but Butts to bring it back, and you know Butts's driving. If I take the brown, the brown'll bolt with him, and if I take the chestnut filly he'll let her down. So I must commandeer you and Archdeacon."

Accordingly Parson Chichester drove Miss Sally over to the station, and bestowed her comfortably in the 7.12 up train. She was in the highest spirits. Having dispatched her and watched the train out of sight, the parson lit his lamps, climbed into his dog-cart again, and headed Archdeacon back for home.

He had struck the Inistow road, when his ear caught the beat of hoofs approaching at a gallop through the darkness. He quartered and cried hullo! as the rider drew close. On the moors it was unusual to meet a rider at night; nobody rode so hard unless for a doctor, and no doctor dwelt in this direction.

"Hullo, friend!"

"Hullo!"

The rider reined up, and by the light of his lamps Parson Chichester recognised the young giant Roger.

"What's your errand, my friend?"

"To Culvercoombe. The children——"

"Miss Sally has left by the night train. I drove her over to Fair Anchor myself. What of the children? We were expecting them all the afternoon."

"They are gone—lost! Last night, as we reckon, they took the boat and made a bolt for it. All this day we've been searching, and an hour ago word comes from the coast-guard that the boat has driven ashore, empty, on Clatworthy beach."

