CHAPTER XIII

"FRENCHIES"

ONE bright morning, Maggie and Cassin were crossing the fields towards the Cove. They were carrying a present of cream and eggs for Gracie Thomas. These little civilities passed constantly between the two families. There had been a heavy dew in the night, and the stubble-fields sparkled in the sunshine. Here and there, on a bent stalk, lay a scarlet poppy which had bloomed untimely, after the reaping. Maggie plucked several, and tucked them into her shiny belt of imitation leather.

"They be proper flowers," she said, "red poppies."

"They are pretty," Cassin agreed, "but they have no scent. Flowers, to my mind, don't seem right unless they are sweet."

"I don't hold much by that. You can't keep sniffin' of 'em, anyway. And, somehow, them that smells best is mostly scrubby little things."

Cassin's eyes sought a piece of honeysuckle she held. It had fought out a difficult existence on an exposed wall. Its trumpets were twisted, discoloured, few in number, but its scent was strong and pure.

"Flowers without scent are to me as though they were dumb," she said, softly.

"Lor! how you do go on!" Maggie pounced on a stray ear of barley, and thrust it between her white teeth.

Cassin was silent. She could never get very far with Maggie in conversation. Just a few plain facts, then came a wall as solid as a Cornish hedge.

She raised the unsightly piece of honeysuckle and sniffed it gratefully. Andrew Thomas, she thought, he would have understood.

Their way was down a steep pasture now. A stream crossed it, slantwise, and spread into a small rush-scattered marsh. Clusters of pink ragged robin seemed to hover

over it; in it nestled big water forget-me-nots that reflected the colour of the sky.

Though the sun was already high, the pasture was so dewy that, where they moved, the cattle left dark lines on the silvered surface.

"See there!" cried Maggie, suddenly.

Cassin had been all intent on the flowers at her feet; but now she lifted her head, just in time to see a boat that was rounding the Cowloe rocks, a boat larger than any the Cove possessed; her sails, too, were not orange or brown, but white; they caught the glory of the sun as she moved through the water, gracefully.

From their place on the hillside, the girls could hear the hiss of the water against her bows, and the sharp flapping of her sails.

"What is it?" Cassin asked.

"Frenchies," said Maggie. "They're a queer lot. You'll see."

"What do they come for?"

"To buy the lobsters, of course. They comes on and off all the summer, only not big ones like this. These be come to settle up for the end. There'll be some fun now." She led the way at a brisk trot down the hill.

"How fun?" panted Cassin, behind her.

"We don't reckon to know anything—but—us does!" Maggie laughed. "I know I'll get a bottle or two of scent, and a bit o' lace, or a silk handkercher."

"But how?"

"The men do take 'em, silly, in part payment for the fish, 'stead of money."

"That seems fair enough."

"So it is, too," said Maggie. But she laughed again.

Having left their present at the thatched cottage, the girls hastened on to the slips.

A small boat, full of Frenchmen, was just entering the harbour. It was propelled by one of their number, who stood in the stern swaying to the motion of his long scull. They were picturesque figures, with faded blue blouses, loose trousers adorned with huge patches, big sabots, flat caps, gold ear-rings, and broad brown faces. They grinned a cheerful greeting to the clustering fishermen,

but a brief "good-day" was the limit, apparently, of their command of the English tongue.

"How do you manage to talk to them?" Cassin asked of Andrew, who chanced to be at her side.

"One of their chaps, he is a Jersey man, and he speaks English, same as we. He's on board now. These fellows is only come on shore for bread."

The "Frenchies" made fast their boat, and clumped away up the slips towards the village shop.

The whole Cove seemed abuzz with talk and laughter. There was a general air as of children enjoying a holiday. Some of the men were launching their punts, some were rowing out towards the "Frenchmen," some were already returning.

These were lustily greeted by the query, "Any coals, George?—Billie?—or Thomas?" as the case might be. A question that was never answered, but roused invariably a round of hearty laughter.

Cassin could not see coals in any of the boats.

Andrew had by now joined the two men, who with himself made up the crew of the *Seashell*, and was pulling out to sea, the inevitable cigarette between his lips.

Maggie had joined the men near the water's edge, and was giving and taking jests in her usual free-and-easy fashion.

Cassin was quite content to look in silence on the busy scene. Some of the boats had lines of vivid blue and green, one was all red; the colours were reflected brokenly in the clear water as the boats danced up and down; gulls swooped overhead; oars splashed; men laughed and shouted; one lost his footing on the weed-coated slips and slithered down to the water's edge. Happy as a child, he joined in the laughter of his companions. Nero stood at the far point of the weedy landing stage, barking after his master.

All the while the water rippled and shone; shadows were dark and distinct on the worn stones; the breeze flapped at Cassin's skirts as though they were sails, and she herself a boat, impatient to weigh anchor and be gone.

"Good morning, Miss Morris," said a voice in her ear.

Lorry Grainger stood there, lifting his cap.

"Lively times," he said.

"It's all so new to me," she answered, turning again to seaward.

"Would you like to go on board the French boat? I daresay I could borrow a punt."

Now Cassin would have liked to go, immensely, had it been Andrew who had offered it; but, for some reason she neither questioned nor understood, she promptly refused Lorry's invitation.

However, he seemed quite contented to linger at her side; and, under the charm of his lively conversation, the slight distrust, or intuitive shrinking that Cassin always felt on meeting him, melted away, and she was talking and laughing with him gaily.

The two figures standing together, a little apart from the constantly shifting crowd on the slips, caught Andrew's eyes as he turned his eyes towards the shore. He pulled to land stolidly, taking little heed of the laughter and boyish horse-play of his companions. As soon as the punt touched the rocks, he leapt ashore.

"Hullo, Andrew!" cried Lorry, "got any coals?"

The young fisherman turned on him almost fiercely.

"I don't deal in coals," he said, shortly.

"Sulky beast!" muttered Lorry to himself.

Cassin heard him and blushed furiously. She was sure Mr. Grainger meant no harm. How could Andrew so forget his manners? He had moved away, too, without the little special smile it had become their habit to exchange with one another. Perhaps the joke about the coals was not a nice one, and that was why Andrew was vexed. In spite of her own Cornish blood, and of the several months she had now lived amongst them, Cassin still stood, as it were, on the outer fringe of these people. She was conscious at times that she did not altogether understand their speech or ways.

Her attention was now caught by the sound of the "Frenchies'" sabots. They were coming down the slips with round Cornish loaves tucked under their arms, and a great display of big white teeth. In their midst was a tall, grey-flannelled figure, that of Philip Knight.

He was talking with them fluently enough, and, though his French probably differed from theirs as much as does the Yorkshire dialect from that of Seven Dials, they

managed to understand one another. He had given them some tins of soups from his camping stores. They pressed some tobacco upon him in return.

"Hullo, Grainger," he said, with a slight lifting of his slouch hat in Cassin's direction, "I'm going on board. Will you come?"

"I hardly know," said Lorry. He looked at Cassin and hesitated.

"I'll wish you good-morning, Mr. Grainger," she said, and moved away with dignity.

"Who's the fair lady?" asked Philip Knight, as he and Lorry sat side by side in an outward-bound punt.

The latter took out his cigarette case.

"She—oh, she's staying at one of the farms."

"Not a native?"

"Not exactly."

"You sly dog!" Philip brought his hand down with a thump on the other's knee.

Though Lorry fully appreciated the compliment so forcibly conveyed, somehow he did not feel such a gay dog as he could have wished.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE NET-LOFT

It was about a week after the coming of the French boat, in the slack time of the year when crabbing was over and the "herring" not yet arrived. The sea was too big for trammels or for whiffing. Usually, at this dead season, the men might be seen lounging against the particular wall or building that, for the time being, allowed them the maximum of sunshine and the minimum of wind.

To-day they were gathered in an eager knot in the middle of the road. The wind swept round the corners whipping up a handful of dust, a piece of crumpled paper or a scatter of tiny stones. The men took no heed save to thrust their hands more deeply into their trouser pockets or to ram on a cap more firmly.

In the middle of the group was Andrew Thomas. He was holding a newspaper. The wind fluttered the pages, already creased and limp with much handling.

Andrew was taller than most of the men, and his face, set and stern, overtopped theirs, which were wondering, angry, incredulous, puzzled, a few even amused.

Lorry Grainger, sauntering along, looking as usual for some interest in the passing hour, drew near the excited group. At first he could hear nothing but a continually repeated—"Iss—Iss—Iss."

(The Cornish equivalent for "yes," which expresses, however, a great deal more than a mere affirmative.)

"Iss? *Iss.* Iss!"

"Read 'un out, m'son," said one of the older men, pushing his short, sturdy figure with a jerking, sidelong motion through the throng. The hiss of the repeated affirmative was momentarily silenced. Andrew was evidently reading aloud; but the incessant roar and thunder of the sea was so great that Lorry caught only a word here and there.

"What is it?" he asked of the cox'n of the Lifeboat.

"A London paper, that is, sir. It came through the post to me last night. It was addressed right enough—Captain Pender—The Cove—St. Cleer. That's me, though I don't know, no more than you, yourself, who's sent it. Whoever it was, he's took a bit of blue pencil"—he illustrated with a blunt-ended finger and a broad palm—"an' put two big crosses alongside that bit as young Andrew Thomas is reading out, now."

"But what is it all about?"

"All about we, sir."

Grainger laughed.

"Newspaper notoriety," he suggested. The good cox'n looked huffed.

"You may call it fine names, but us calls it"—he groped in his mind for a word sufficiently expressive—"us calls it devil's work," he said hotly. "Us don't hold to be noways better'n we neighbours, but us doesn't want all we private concerns putten into print. I tell you what it is. He's just taken a rake, that chap"—he nodded towards the paper as though the fluttering thing possessed human intelligence—"that's what he done, and raked up the mud of years—old tales that is best forgotten—and some of 'em not true either—though the true ones is worst of the lot—and, to top all, what does he do but bring out as we'm cheating the Revenue—smuggling he calls it. Smuggling? Coastguard don't leave us much chance of smuggling these times—Things he says! Like enough the officer'll be down on we—hold an inquiry or something." He spat out emphatically. "Knows all about we, he does; must have been creeping in and out among us, like—" A sense of defamed virtue was depriving the good man of the power of speech. He pulled his peaked cap fiercely over his ruddy face, spread his legs, and put his thumbs aggressively through the scarlet braces that so picturesquely completed his toilet on the outside of his dark blue jersey.

To Grainger's mind there seemed something accusatory in his complete and dogged silence.

"I hope you don't think that I—" he began, tentatively.

In a moment the other had laid a warm hand on his shoulder.

"Nay, m'son, you're not one of that sort. Nor, I don't suppose"—with a kindly assurance—"you could do a bit of writing like that—writing fit to be in print, that is. No"—with another nod in the direction of the newspaper—"that chap's all right for the work. You can tell that. It isn't the first time he's been in print. But that don't make it no better for we——"

A sudden heated buzz now arose amongst the men. Andrew had evidently left off reading and every one seemed to be talking at once. One or two were pressing round threateningly, almost as though, by his reading of the accursed thing, Andrew had in some fashion taken part in this work of iniquity.

Others were occupied in explaining matters to presumably duller intelligences. But mostly, their mouths hard and set, their eyes bright, the men were making the best of a rather limited vocabulary to express their feelings. Some very ugly words could now and again be heard.

The cox'n laughed out suddenly.

"I wouldn't like to be he," he said, with an expressive wave of the hand towards the newspaper, "not if our boys finds out who done it."

With that he went away to attend to his duties.

Lorry stood on the outskirts of the crowd, which every moment increased in size and excitement.

Once or twice he fancied a scowling look was cast in his direction. When this happened, his heart seemed to leap up into his throat and hammer there uncomfortably.

By some curious change, the men he had known hitherto as careless, lethargic in some moods, in others playful as boys, children almost, were now suddenly grown to manhood, an angry manhood; it might even be a dangerous one.

Supposing they thought——!

He would have liked to have moved away, but a certain attraction held him to the spot; indeed, it drew him closer. For, presently, he had pushed his way into the group and stood shoulder to shoulder with the rest. And now he could hear Andrew's voice above the noise of the sea, the trampling and shuffling of the men's feet,

the voices of such as were carrying on arguments or explanations, the affirmatives which still broke out in a hiss at intervals, and the crying of the sea-birds overhead.

"There's not much in it," Andrew was saying; "it don't matter to we what a parcel of English newspapers has to say of us. We're here—just same as we was before—no better and no worse than we was before—for all they says of we."

"A lot sight better," called out a voice, foolishly. It was hushed down and Andrew went on:

"It's just this way"—he held up the paper—"this here was written by somebody as know'd things. It isn't no use us saying this is all a pack of lies. We knows it isn't."

"Aye, aye! you're right here," said several voices. They were quieter, more attentive, now.

Andrew held his shoulders more squarely. He felt he was carrying his audience with him:

"We Cornish," he said, "like to keep to ourselves. We has our own ways and our own customs; they may not be wise ways"—there was a growl of dissent—"but they be *our* ways."

The young voice sounded clear and strong. There was a momentary silence; then Andrew concluded impressively:

"And we don't want no foreigners meddling with them ways."

Applause broke out, long and loud. Every man was with the speaker heart and soul. Andrew was not looking at the eager faces round him, but away out to sea.

"We got"—he went on, almost softly, and yet his voice was plain to all—"we got to find out him as wrote this——"

"Iss—Iss!" The faces were expectant now.

"That's all." Andrew finished abruptly. But he looked them one after the other, straight in the eyes.

Whatever the men understood by that silent message, it woke something primitive, a heritage each had received from wild-blooded forbears, something that slept in their bosoms, but never had died.

In answer to the appeal in Andrew's eyes a roar went

up, a brutish, primitive sound that made Lorry Grainger's heart quake and his knees tremble under him.

These men whom he had looked down upon as children, what were they in reality? Horrid possibilities rushed through his brain. Some of them, the older ones, were scarcely removed by a generation from the wild fierce days of which such blood-curdling tales were told.

Lorry felt sick. With scant ceremony he pushed his way out of the crowd; and was glad to find himself on the cliff path with no sound in his ears but the hoarse voice of the sea and the shrill cries of the gulls overhead. That roar of the men—it was hardly human!

His departure was not unmarked.

"He been in and out like," said one.

"He'm pleasant-spoken enough."

"Pleasant-spoke is often the worst."

"He not writ' it. He too big a coward."

"He was a coward, the man who wrote this," said Andrew, "but Grainger's not the one. He's another sort of a fish, altogether."

"You knowing the name of 'un?"

"That's going too fast," said Andrew.

"You knows he."

"Tell us his name."

"Dirty devil, he got to reckon wi' we."

Once again they crowded round. Once again there rose a brutish sound; this time it was like the growl of a beast whose fangs are already hot in the prey.

"Come along into the net-loft," said Andrew.

The loft where the pilchard nets were stored in the off season was not infrequently used for more or less formal meetings in connection with fishery and other semi-public affairs.

Andrew led the way. Most of the younger men followed him; but several who were married and the greater part of the old men dropped out of the crowd with an air intended to suggest a sudden memory of neglected and important affairs. Caution was beginning to overpower the anger of righteousness.

The deliberations within the net-loft lasted some time. When the men came out their angry aspect had quite changed. There was a look of pleasurable interest in their

faces; some were whistling; several stopped in the shelter of the doorway to light a cigarette. The meeting had evidently been of too grave an import to admit of smoking.

Andrew came out last.

"Now, see you," he said to one or two of the younger lads, "us doesn't act without clear proof. We gives he justice."

"Aye! same as him has given we."

"Justice, mind," repeated Andrew, as he walked away.

"Us don't care a damn for justice," broke out a little man, with a laughing innocent face, "us wants our bit of fun."

CHAPTER XV

OLD BILLIE ENJOYS HIMSELF

It was the evening of the next day. Philip Knight, according to his usual custom, had dropped into the tap-room of The Success. The tap-room was, in reality, the kitchen of the old thatched and whitewashed cottage which, beyond the memory of man, had been the Inn of the Cove.

Summer and winter a fire blazed on the old-fashioned open hearth. When filled with jerseyed fishermen, the air thick with the smoke of their strong tobacco and the reek of their far from potent beer, the atmosphere of the room was a little difficult of breathing. Specially so did Philip Knight find it after the pure salt air of his camping-place. Yet he came here night after night. To study the people. So he had confided to Lorry Grainger in a certain twilight hour.

The men were quite willing that the stranger should stand drinks and pass round his tobacco, which they took on principle, though they considered it but poor stuff compared with their own strong twist. And if he could make anything out of their confused and broken talk, their constant use of nicknames, their utter disregard of the gender of pronouns, their reference to places which none but a Cornishman could pronounce—well! he was quite welcome!

Things on this particular evening followed at first a normal course. The men dropped in, one after another, until the room seemed quite full; and after that, just as usual, a few more squeezed in, somehow. The stranger stood drinks round—(the fat landlord's receipts must have been going up by leaps and bounds). The air as usual was thick with tobacco smoke, and time-honoured comments were made on the weather and the fishing past and to be.

To any one who had given the matter consideration, one

thing might have appeared odd, not to say ominous. No allusion was made to the all-absorbing topic of the marked newspaper.

Andrew was not present. He was a Rechabite and the kitchen of The Success knew him not. In his absence some of the younger lads kept up a by-play of winks and nudges as though they had some joke amongst themselves. But beyond the spilling of a mug of beer, and a violent choking fit which obliged one ruddy-faced youth to quit the premises hurriedly, nothing untoward happened.

As the evening wore on, however, the aspect of things became less normal. One after another the men got up and, with a muttered something about a look at the weather, lurched out.

Presently Philip Knight found himself alone with old Billie Thomas. Making some remark about the fire giving out a rare heat for the time of the year, the latter contrived to push back his chair until he sat between the stranger and the door. Then he glanced up at the clock.

A good hour's work, according to solemn compact made between himself and his son, Andrew, lay before him.

"I did ought to master it, so well as any man," he said to himself, as he took his pipe from his mouth and prepared for enjoyment.

"You belongs to wonder where all the boys be gone," he said with a backward movement of his head towards the door.

"I own the thought did cross my mind that it was unusual for them to leave before closing time."

"That's because you doesn't know us and our ways," —old Billie certainly knew how to enjoy himself. "This be sweetheartin' night, so it be."

The stranger bent forward rather eagerly.

"Sweethearting night?" This was going to be interesting.

"Aye! that it be." The old man laughed softly and rubbed his hands down his shins. "There's many a sweetheartin' night I've helped forward, myself."

"An old custom, I suppose?"

"I believe you. Old as the cliffs, theirselves. You seed them boys steal away—well, well—us was young, too, once."

"But what do they do?"

The old man rubbed his hand across his wicked old mouth.

"That be tellin's," he chortled.

The stranger sat back with crossed legs, plainly waiting for more.

Old Billie was quite equal to the occasion.

"You know little hollow 'tween Kelynack and Clodgy Point?"

The stranger did not know it, but he nodded assent rather than lose this tit-bit of local tradition.

"Well—so soon as moon rises over Clodgy Point—her be nigh on full to night—all the young wummun as isn't tokened, them steps down from Kelynack, and all the boys they comes t'other way round Clodgy Point—that be no great ways from where your tent be fixed, as you do know——"

Oh! old Billie was enjoying himself rarely.

"Well, so they comes and just as their shadders do fall together, man and wummun, so there they be—as us do say, sweethearts for the year——"

"By Jove, that would be worth seeing!" Knight rose quickly from his chair. "Phil you are in luck for once," he told himself.

But old Billie laid a restraining hand—it was old, but it was strong—on the other's arm.

"Thank the Lord, I be here," he said with due solemnity. "And you just so innocent as a babe and not knowing. You mustn't go *there!*"

The old man was so realistic in the character of one who has narrowly warded off a threatened misfortune, that Philip Knight unresistingly dropped again into his seat.

"Why mustn't I?" he asked.

The kitchen was very quiet. The Cove, outside, seemed to be deserted; the voice of the sea sounded only as a faint undertone; the clock ticked loudly.

Having paused long enough for effect, old Billie, gesticulating solemnly with his pipe, said slowly:

"A stranger there on sweetheartin' night! Aye! I do call to mind one such a many years ago. I never seed him afore, and I never seed him since, nor I don't want

to. There he were, just in the full of the moon; and the girls a-crying out at seeing of he; and we boys—us did carry on what we didn't care——"

"And what happened?"

"That was the fever year, that's what happened. A many of them as was so gay as gay, afore another year come round they was a sweetheartin' in another world. That's what happened."

For a few minutes the two men smoked in silence. Then the stranger glanced up at the clock.

Old Billie was instantly alert.

"There's a deal of old customs as I can tell, so you do care to hear," he said.

Philip settled down with renewed interest.

"Did you ever hear tell of Treagle, now?" asked the old man.

"Tregeagle, that calls from Genvah Sands?"

"Aye! Treagle, us calls him."

The stranger was evidently familiar with local traditions. Something stronger was needed to hold him. Old Billie was equal to the occasion and gaily continued on his bold course.

"Aye! every one do know tales like them, that they belongs to put in books. But us as is bred and born and coffined here, us knows things a deal more tasty than them."

He took out his pipe, pressed down the baccy, then bent forward towards the fire.

"Things there is, I be a'most feart to tell and you'd be feart to hear."

He looked so genuinely impressed, and he was so unromantically dirty, and his tangled beard hid so well that feature which at times betrays even the most cunning; that, without the least suspicion that he was being hoaxed, Philip Knight listened to all the yarns the old man brought out, congratulating himself the while that he had "spotted" old Billie and so successfully drawn him out.

So successfully, indeed, had he drawn him out that old Billie, growing bolder and bolder, let his imagination, which was that of a child, have such play that at last he almost believed his own creations of omens, superstitions, murders, appearances, spirit voices—a jumble of grue-

some fare, such as mortal man surely never before offered to a guest.

So much did he warm to his subject, that his regret was quite as genuine as Philip Knight's when the landlord entered the kitchen and, with a glance at the tall clock, whose hand was on the stroke of ten, said : "Closing time, gentlemen, if you please."

The air outside felt strong and clean. The sea-voice filled the hollows of the night. The stars were so vivid that almost they outshone the risen moon.

With a cheerful good-night and hearty thanks for so entertaining an evening, the stranger set off towards his camp on the cliff.

The old man stood on the moonlit road. His shadow, stretching out after the other's retreating figure, seemed to shake with suppressed laughter.

"You do well to thank I," said old Billie, when he was sufficiently recovered to find his voice, and pointing with his stump of a pipe. "You go and put all that I'se been telling in that there Lunnun newspaper o' yourn. It be all so true as what you writ before—and a deal more entertaining. Lord! Lord! Larf! I did think I'd a-busted summut inside wi' keeping on it in——! Well—I must get along home and tell on it to my little wummun. It will set her going, proper, see if he won't!"

CHAPTER XVI

CORNISH WAY

As Philip Knight took his way along the steep cliff path he was revolving in his mind a smart little article on Cornish superstition.

"Who would have thought in these days of universal education any one would have been left capable of believing such things," he mused. Yet so potent had been old Billie's spell, that Philip, himself, almost believed a part, at any rate, of all he had heard.

"Certain it is, strange things do happen at times," so he ruminated, "coincidences—call them what you will."

"Hullo!"

He stopped suddenly. A dark figure was standing on the crest of the hill in front of him. It was quite motionless, enlarged against the diffused light of the moon.

"Hullo!" Philip said again.

The figure turned.

"Hullo!" came in answer, but faintly.

"You, Grainger!" Knight laughed in a relieved fashion, he scarcely realised what for a moment he had thought the other to be. "You, Grainger! Isn't it time good little boys were in by-bye? I'm ready to turn in myself or I'd ask you to come along to the camp."

"Oh! yes!—no—thank you," Lorry stammered.

"Been drinking," Philip said to himself.

The face of the other looked whiter than even the moonlight warranted. He turned to go, then seemed to hesitate. Truth to tell, he was putting a strong compulsion on himself; for he badly wanted to flee.

"I'll just step along as far as Carn Morvah," he said.

"All right," the other nodded.

Grainger came in silence. Philip noticed that he did not walk as though he were the worse for liquor and he charitably concluded that the young man might be in personal trouble of some kind. If so, it was of no use

hurrying the chap. If he wanted to tell anything he would bring it out of himself, later on.

Philip began to whistle.

Lorry gazed at him stealthily. There was an awed, almost shocked, look on his face.

"Here we are," sang out Philip, cheerily.

Then he stopped, looked to right and left. The moonlight flooded everything, making all as distinct although more massed than by day.

Philip looked puzzled.

"I'm hanged if I haven't mistaken the place," he said, "yet I've hit it, first go, darker nights than this."

Lorry tried to say: "This is the place," but the words stuck in his throat.

So he was silent.

"It *is* the place," stated the other firmly. "Where in Hell's name is my tent?"

Lorry knew only too well; but he could say nothing, for the hammering of his heart in his throat.

"It's gone! The whole bally lot," said Philip Knight slowly, as though, even yet, he could not believe his eyes. Yet they in no way played him false. Save for a ham-bone and an empty tomato tin, which gleamed in the moonlight, the place that had held his cosy little camp stretched emptily.

"I don't understand it," he said. Yet in his heart he was beginning to understand.

"Hullo!" he went on, "what is this?"

A piece of paper was fixed into a crevice of the rock by means of a splinter of wood.

He felt for and lit a match. It flickered and went out.

"Damn," said Philip. He struck another match, and, holding it close to the paper, saw what was evidently intended as a message, or explanation, written in a small neat hand.

Your tent and things is at the bottom of the sea. If you write any more newspapers about we—us will put you along of they.

That was all.

Philip laughed.

"Very sporting of them, I must say," he remarked coolly.

He rolled the paper into a crumpled ball and tossed it over the cliff-edge. A little upward draught caught it and brought it back to his feet. He set his heel upon it. And quite suddenly he began to curse old Billie. By all his gods he cursed him, and by a good many other things also that were not, by any means, gods.

It would have warmed that old reprobate's heart to have heard oaths so rich and flavoury poured so freely on his wicked old head.

Having exhausted his powers of invective, Philip turned on Grainger.

"I won't ask you how much *you* know of all this," he said with a sneer.

"Nothing. I swear it." There was little of the gay dog about Lorry now.

"Rather curious that you were on the spot. Curious coincidence, shall we say? that you should be witness of the grand finale."

He turned away.

"Go and tell your friends," he said, "that I don't care a tinker's curse. There!"

"They are no friends of mine," Lorry's undeveloped manliness stirred, "on the contrary, having had an inkling that something was up, I came to warn you."

Knight laughed bitterly.

"Having come to pray, you remained to curse? In other words, if you did not help, you never raised a hand to prevent all this."

"I came too late."

"I don't doubt it. Careful little boys always do arrive too late to get into danger."

"If that's how you take it, I'm off."

"Look here, Grainger, it's all right. I was only rotting."

Lorry hesitated. It seemed a little mean to leave the other to his stripped loneliness. Lorry stayed. Perhaps Knight was grateful, at all events he spoke in less angry fashion.

"Did you actually catch them at work?"

"As I came up the hill I saw a lot of dark figures all over the place and——"

"You preferred discretion to valour?"

"Where would have been the use?" protested Lorry. "Just as I came near, there was a big splash. I own I was frightened."

"You were, were you?" drily.

"I thought for a moment it might be—you."

Philip laughed.

"I don't think they'd go as far as that," he said. He thrust his hands into his pockets and looked about him.

"They've made a pretty clean sweep," he remarked. "There was a book or two I would rather they had spared and a bit of a writing-case I had off a chap in the Boer War. Well, it's all in the game, I suppose."

Lorry did not know what to say, so he said nothing.

Philip kicked the empty tomato tin carefully to the edge of the cliff, there he sent it flying. He stooped—and the ham-bone followed the tin.

Meanwhile he was thinking.

"You don't happen to know any of them? The leaders, or anything?"

"I don't," answered Lorry, with a jerk.

"No. I suppose it is better that you shouldn't."

Lorry said nothing. He was feeling more uncomfortable every minute.

"I'd rather like"—Philip went on quietly—"to wire to Town for another tent and pitch it on the same place."

"I wouldn't," said Lorry earnestly.

"I know *you* wouldn't. Nevertheless it is on the cards that *I* shall."

In the end he didn't. Probably the meditations of the night brought wisdom. He slept at The First and Last and left by the 'bus next morning. He was soon forgotten in the Cove.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE THATCHED COTTAGE

Old Billie Thomas and his apple-faced wife sat on either side of the fire and laughed and laughed. The tale of the evening at The Success had already been told several times, and had lost nothing in the telling. Old Billie pointed out the funniest parts with the stump of his pipe which had long gone out, and his wife caught them up, and made them her own, as was her invariable habit, prefacing them with her customary "I was saying." A third person, had such been privileged to be present, would certainly have concluded that Gracie Thomas had held her part in the hoaxing of the stranger.

To these two, still in paroxysms of chortling joy, entered their son, Andrew. Tall and alert, he seemed at once to dominate the situation. The light of battle shone in his eye.

"Well," he said, "we've settled he, proper."

Old Billie nodded his head.

"I did keep 'un till shutting-up time. Lord bless 'ee! I could have kep' him till it was time to open again. So I could!"

"That he could," chuckled Gracie. "I'm saying father could have kept he till time to open again, so he could."

"It didn't take we long," put in Andrew, sitting down leisurely. There was a quiet joy about him, such as is the aftermath of some good or great action.

"The tales I did tell to he," ruminated old Billie.

"The tales he did tell," echoed his wife.

"We've settled him proper," went on Andrew. Each was following his own train of thought.

"Eh?" questioned the old man, reluctantly bringing his mind away from that which was to him the main portion of the evening's doings, "you did settle un——!"

"Aye! It didn't take we so long as putting down a

string of pots—not near so long. We laid hold of tent first—he come up easy, he did—a good bit o' canvas, too——"

"You did ought to have saved that, it would a' come in useful," interposed his mother.

"That would have been stealing," returned her son, not without virtuous indignation.

"To be sure, that would have been stealing," echoed, in reproving tones, his mother.

Andrew went on.

"So we has he over cliff sharp enough, strings, and pegs, and all. And after him we heaves the old stove. Golly! but he made a splash. I did think once, we'd fetch out the coastguard."

"Did he come?" asked his mother eagerly. She always readily pursued side issues.

"Like enough he was fast asleep," answered Andrew, with a half-smile. His eyes were still bright and joyous. "Then we cleared up rest—books, chairs, cushions, all the lot. It was soon done. There was hardly a shy apiece," he finished regretfully.

"All done and every boy to his heels, I'll be bound, afore ever I let him go," chuckled old Billie.

"Aye! never a sight did he get of any of we. Though I did think, once, he'd been and given you the slip."

"Nay, nay!" objected the old man.

"There was some one slinking about among the rocks. It was only this Grainger, though."

"This Grainger?" questioned his mother. "Then he'll have seen summut. I wouldn't be frightened * if he did go and tell the police."

"Not he. And if he did, they can't do nothing, not unless they summon the whole Cove. No!" Andrew stretched out his legs, comfortably. "I'm nohows feart of they."

Mention of the police, however, had momentarily sobered old Billie. He shifted his battered hat and ran his hand over his tousled hair.

"You don't think, now, as this Grainger would have seen anybody so plain as to put a name to 'un?" he asked.

* Surprised.

"No," with a contented air. Andrew brought out a cigarette. "No! we'd be nothing but moving figures to he. They farm people can't see by night same as us."

As it happened this statement, probably correct from a general point of view, was in this instance wide of the mark.

Lorry Grainger had a shrewd suspicion as to the identity of more than one of the men, and could, besides, with a clear conscience, have taken his oath that it was Andrew Thomas and no other that was leading and directing them. But Lorry, if not quite the devil of a dog he fancied himself, was not without something of a sportsmanlike turn of mind.

So he kept his own counsel.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WAY OF A MAID WITH A MAN

It was a still warm evening such as comes occasionally in autumn when the wind, tired of its fury, has sunk into silence, and the clouds wearied with their race across the heavens, slumber low on the eastern horizon: when the air, itself, soft and caressing, recalls the amorous languor of early spring.

Two figures were walking in a winding lane. They walked close together. The thick stone "hedges" on either side were covered with heather and bracken, little tufts stood up darkly against the evening sky. The young moon hung, boat-shaped, ahead of them. Lorry had slipped his arm round Maggie's plump waist, she would have upbraided him, indeed, had he not done so. It suited her hot-blooded temperament to feel it there. She was really in love with Lorry. But then Maggie, for the time being, would have been in love with any man who had his arm round her waist. Readily, however, as she responded to love-making, she never let her inclinations outrun her clear-headedness. She meant, if possible, to marry a gentleman. At one time it had seemed to her that Lorry Grainger was to be that gentleman. Then Cassin had come. Unaccountably, as it appeared to Maggie, Lorry had cooled off. She, grown desperate, had taken possession of her cousin's horseshoe.

Inspired by its possession, Maggie had laid more successful siege to the young man's heart. Or it might be that, rebuffed by Cassin's coolness, Lorry's affections had rebounded in favour of the more demonstrative girl. Certain it is that, of late, something of the old intimacy had revived between the two. On many a fine night Maggie would rise and slip out. Aunt Susie would look after her with anxious eyes, and Granma would shake her head over her knitting; yet neither thought of interfering. This slipping out in the dusk of the evening was

an old-established Cornish custom, and old customs die hard.

So, unrebuked and unforbidden, Lorry and Maggie walked down the flowery way together. He, for all he was such a "devil" in his own estimation, without any baser intention than the gratifying of his boyish vanity.

She—well—Maggie, at that time, did in no way understand the desires of her own heart, they were so many and so varied, pulling her this way and that. Yet, foremost amongst them was the desire for a life of ease, escape from the necessity of work. And this, Maggie, in her ignorance, believed would be attained, once and for all, were she to marry a gentleman.

So she made love to Lorry.

"I do like you," she purred, "you are *that* strong——"

There is no woman so ignorant that she has not mastered the first rule of flattery, which lies in praising that very virtue the flattered lacks and would fain possess.

"You are *that* strong; you wouldn't need to be feart of any one."

"I won't go so far as to say that." Lorry's vanity plumed itself, and he could afford to be modest.

"*You* wouldn't have let they chaps throw *your* things into sea, like that writing fellow."

"He wasn't there when they did it."

Lorry deigned to be generous.

"Like as not, he kep' away on purpose. I never do hold much with they long lean chaps."

Maggie's conscience failed altogether to remind her that she had not neglected to cast would-be fascinating glances at the stranger. Glances he had most carefully failed to see

One of the rules of Philip Knight in his journalistic wanderings (it was a pity the others were not as full of wisdom) was to keep out of reach of the women. This Maggie did not know, and, in consequence, she called the stranger in her own mind "a gurt stupid chap, just so cold as a flatfish."

As to Lorry, he was not cold at all. She had only to glance up at him with her great dark eyes to feel an answering pressure in that arm about her waist.

"You does like me a bit—doesn't you, now?" she pleaded.

"Silly little thing."

Maggie was quite as tall and a good deal broader than the young man. But he liked to think of her as little.

"Silly little thing. You know I do."

"I likes to hear you tell me."

Lorry smiled. All this was very enjoyable.

"What will you give me if I tell you I do?"

Maggie's lips were readily yielded.

"Say it," she insisted, a few minutes later.

"I do like ——"

"'Like' isn't hot enough, not for me!"

"Then—I—do love—you, Maggie."

It is quite likely that just then, with his arm round her waist, and the glowing moon ahead, Lorry really did think he was speaking the truth.

For answer Maggie gave her lips again.

There was silence for a while, a full, honeyed silence, into which fell the far-off murmur of the sea; whilst the scent of late-blooming honeysuckle and dew-drenched stubble stole sweetly on their senses.

Had Maggie known it, in such moments of silence she was nearest to the gaining of her desire. Her warm presence appealed to Lorry, he was flattered by her unstinted admiration for himself, but there were times when her slipshod speech jarred on his nerves, when he even contrasted her, sadly to her disadvantage, with the girls of his home life. But so long as she was silent, Lorry, hugging her tightly, stealing a kiss now and again from her hot lips, or caressing her downy cheeks, was quite content.

He, however, aimed at nothing but the pleasure of the moment. She, whilst taking hold of that pleasure greedily, wanted a good deal more. At the same time she was shrewd enough not to risk losing the present by grasping too eagerly at the future.

"I wish it was all like this," she said, rather vaguely, as she leant her head amorously upon her shoulder.

"All what?" he asked, tenderly.

One was naturally tender with a soft, rounded creature like this.

"All the rest, I means."

"All the rest of life?"

"So I suppose. I mean as how it was all sweetheartin' same as now."

"You would tire of so much sugar."

"It takes a lot to make me sick."

"But one must do something else with one's life."

"I wants to know why?" Maggie lifted her head from his shoulder and confronted him with the question.

Lorry hesitated. To state the plain truth he, himself, did not know why.

"Some one must do the work of the world," he said, after a pause. He flattered himself he had put the matter rather neatly.

Maggie returned her head to its resting-place.

"Let the rest do the work," she said, "and leave the love-making to we."

She gave a low contented laugh.

"We'll do it proper, too," she added.

Further caresses seemed suitable, even necessary, at this point.

Presently Maggie began again. Her voice had grown suddenly tearful:

"I know you're a gentleman."

No doubt about that, of course, in Lorry's mind.

"I know how it'll be. You won't stay here always."

Well, who could expect it?

"You'll go away and forget all about me."

Maggie finished with a little sob. It was all very real to her at the moment.

"Silly little thing. I shall never forget."

He knew quite well, even at the time, that he would.

"That won't be no good to me, so long as you're far away," she protested.

"Well, I'm not going yet, anyhow."

He tried to be reassuring. After all, a chap likes to be missed.

"It isn't you it'll matter to"—Maggie was getting really sorry for herself—"you'll find another girl somewhere else." Stranger things might certainly happen.

"But there's me. I shan't never love no one else, not now."

Very sweet of the dear little girl to think so, but of course she would, right enough.

Meanwhile, the only diplomatic answer seemed a further instalment of kisses.

Matters had reached this point, silent but engrossing, when a small sturdy figure popped out of a side lane straight upon the couple.

"It be only my Aunt Susie," said Maggie. She saw no necessity for any alteration in their mutual position.

But Lorry hastily disentangled his arm, and placed the width of the lane between them.

Aunt Susie, for it was she, returning from an evening gossip with a neighbour, and secretly affrighted at being in the darkness alone—joined the couple with a cheerful heart.

Lorry rose to the occasion. Possibly to his mind the "sweetheartin'," to use the girl's expression, had gone far enough. At all events, he seemed quite ready to meet Aunt Susie's advances with corresponding cheerfulness.

Maggie strode along in dogged silence.

"He might have ars't me this very night if her hadn't come blundering down on we," she told herself angrily.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MISSING HORSESHOE

CASSIN put her head into the kitchen from the stair-case door.

"Maggie, what *do* you think—my horseshoe is gone."

Maggie made no reply for a moment. She was hunting in her grandmother's work-box for a reel of black cotton. She found it, bit off a length, and replaced the reel in the box before she turned round and said:

"What is gone?"

"My horseshoe."

"It's in your trunk, isn't it?"

"No, that is just what I'm telling you." Cassin was visibly distressed.

"Nonsense, it must be there."

Maggie was fumbling now in the cupboard. She made a good deal of noise.

"You haven't seen it, I suppose?" her cousin asked, humbly. Her grey eyes were filling with tears.

"How should I have seen it?" Maggie always, if possible, avoided a downright lie. "Like as not it has just missed your hand."

"I've had everything out."

"Well, you can't do no more."

That was exactly what Cassin felt herself. The thought was not comforting.

"Could it have got anywhere amongst *your* things?" she suggested, as a forlorn hope.

Maggie turned a flushed face.

"Now don't you go tumbling of my things over, mind! Likely I'd have your dirty old horseshoe among them!"

"Would you mind looking yourself?"

Maggie must have hardened her heart or she could not have resisted Cassin's face full of sorrow and with the dewy eyes of a hurt child.

Maggie's heart was hard, for she answered shortly:

"I may some time. Can't you see I'm busy now?"

A thing so far from evident in her indefinite fumbling movements that even Cassin's tear-dimmed eyes might have seen through the petty device.

"I wouldn't lose it for anything," she murmured, half to herself.

"I 'spect, as I said afore, it has just missed your hand. Easy enough with all that paper. You go and look through them things of yours again."

Though she felt in her heart the task was hopeless, Cassin obediently went.

"If she had chanced and gone rummaging in that drawer!" said Maggie to herself. "She dursn't! Not she! I'll have to slip up and put it somewheres. And Lorry coming round so nice, too!"

Maggie thought as she spoke in disconnected sentences.

Meanwhile, sounds proceeding from the room above told plainly that her cousin had not yet abandoned the vain quest.

Maggie's heart must have been hard, indeed, to have felt no stirrings of pity for the disconsolate seeker.

With the black cotton she had secured from her grandmother's work-box, she drew together a gaping hole above the heel of one of her ribbed woollen stockings; then she began to play unconcernedly with the cat which was sunning itself amongst the geraniums in the window.

There was silence now overhead. Next came steps down the uncarpeted stairs, and once more the door opened.

"It's gone," said Cassin, heavily; "I can't think how or where."

"Look here," Maggie had a sudden inspiration, "you go and ask Aunt Susie. Her's across at the barns. Like enough you left it about, and she's put it somewhere. She's always tidying—Aunt Susie."

At the renewal, however faint, of hope, Cassin revived a little. It was just possible she had left the horseshoe out of her trunk, though she felt almost certain she had never seen it since the day when the pipe was broken and

great-grandmother Morris's china saucer was smashed. Nevertheless, she went to seek Aunt Susie at the barns.

Maggie continued her careless play with the cat until she heard the swing of the garden gate. Then, with unusual briskness, she ran upstairs and tugged out the bottom drawer.

The horseshoe was still in its hiding-place.

"And it really have brought me luck, the beauty!" Maggie said, as she slipped it into the front of her blouse, preparatory to securing for it a fresh hiding-place.

She looked doubtfully about the room. There was no time to lose as Cassin might return at any moment. She almost pushed it under her mattress, and only reflected just in time, that the shoe might give away the secret by a sudden fall upon the floor during the night.

She was still hesitating when she heard voices outside. Aunt Susie and Cassin were coming back together. In stealthy haste Maggie pushed up the register of the fireplace (it was of the small bedroom variety that never had been, and never was likely to be, used) thrust the horseshoe behind, and closed it again.

"It is on my side of the room," she muttered; "anyhow, 'tis mine so long as I chose to keep it."

Her natural strain of superstition had been greatly strengthened by the apparent improvement of her love affair since the emblem of luck had been in her possession.

An instant later Aunt Susie and Cassin entered the room.

"I'm just having a hunt round for that there horseshoe," asserted Maggie, glibly.

"That's right," answered Aunt Susie, approvingly; "Cassin's that put about at losing of it. And I know what girls is, mixing their things all up together. You take all yours out of them boxes and drawers, Maggie, then you can give them a bottom tidying at the same time."

The meek way in which her usually rebellious niece set about obeying this peremptory order, would have

struck any mind less simple than Aunt Susie's as being suspicious.

Together the two girls entered on the task. And soon Cassin's sense of loss grew less insistent as she became interested in the odd jumblement of possessions her cousin brought forth and heaped upon the floor and beds.

As for Maggie, after the first quarter of an hour, she never gave the horseshoe or its hiding-place a thought.

CHAPTER XX

PICKLED ONIONS

ALTHOUGH Aunt Susie had taken the meeting in the lane quietly—indeed, owing to her own fear of darkness, thankfully—she was far from easy about the matter in her mind.

There was nothing in boys and girls walking together, even late at night. They always had and always would, and no great harm did come of it. Unless one took into consideration the fact that now and again there was a young wife, with a babe at her breast, who scarcely more than a twelvemonth since was playing outside the village school.

Once married, girls aged quickly, and it was no uncommon sight to see mother and daughter looking much of an age, with contemporary infants in their arms.

But there it was. Cornish custom, no less!

What troubled good Aunt Susie was the fact that Maggie's companion was neither Cornish nor of the class that would be likely to mend by marrying any misfortune in which the time-honoured custom should result.

For a day or two Aunt Susie went about her work with unaccustomed solemnity, lines of thought on her wooden brow. Then she made up her mind to speak and grew light-hearted again, waiting her opportunity.

It came one afternoon, when the uncles were away at market and Granma (glorious in a velvet mantle trimmed with bugles, and a nodding black feather in a bonnet that made a parody of her dear old face) had gone to S. Levans to the attend the funeral of a some-time schoolfellow.

Aunt Susie had intended to speak to Maggie alone.

But there. It would do no harm to Cassin to listen, too!

The three were busy pickling onions. A range of wide-mouthed bottles stood warming on the hob. The floor was littered with papery, pinkish-brown skins. The air was filled with the pungent odour, mingled with the fainter scent of hot vinegar.

The crisp sound of knives paring the onions was broken suddenly by the voice of Aunt Susie. She had been intending all along to take the chance of speaking wha was in her mind, but had hesitated as to how to begin.

"They're a bit like life—onions," she said. "It's rough outside, and when you gets closer it brings the tears to your eyes."

She lifted a fresh one from the basket and paused, knife in hand.

"It isn't no good what others tells us neither. We must all take and see for ourselves." Her knife cut crisply through the bottom of the succulent corm. "Else," she said, impressively, "things wouldn't go on happening again and again, same as they does."

The girls, each busy with her labour and her own thoughts, paid little heed to the words. Aunt Susie was a good little body enough, but from their point of view already old and therefore out of things. Things, that is, that mattered.

Aunt Susie did not look upon herself as old. What unmarried woman does? To her mind there was still plenty of time ahead in which she might change her state of single blessedness should she be so disposed. It was not that Aunt Susie was old, but that, to her mind, the girls were so very young; and Aunt Susie did not like to think their eyes, bright black and melting grey, should be blinded as hers had been with tears.

So she went on, her fingers again busy at their work.

"Now, I don't mind giving you two a bit of advice."

Maggie and Cassin went on steadily paring onions. Their thoughts were doubtless elsewhere.

"And I'm going to tell you a bit of a story. A true story 'tis, too."

A story!

The girls were all attention.

Aunt Susie took this favourable moment to unload herself of her advice.

"Don't you have no dealings with gentlemen."

Cassin coloured slightly, and Maggie used her knife with such vigour that her onion fell in two.

"'Tis spoiled," said Aunt Susie; "you do need to take things more gentle, m' dear."

She peeled two more herself, in silence, then she said:

Just such a girl as you I was when it all began. Just such a gentleman he was, as it might be this Grainger, learning farming, too. A deal finer he was, though, tall and strong. His eyes was blue, and his hair curled so sweet above his brow." Aunt Susie's knife had lost its steadiness. "It was at the Harvest Home we met; we used to have last load and feastings and doings in them days—I do believe I did fall straight in love with he, and I don't wonder. But I do wonder at him. For I never have been much to look at. But there it was. It's a dreadful thing—this love! We got walking out together and sweet-heartin'. For all he was so big and grand, he did stoop to me. I can't rightly call to mind whether he did so far as to ask I to marry; but I do know when he went away I held myself as promised, and I would not so much as look at any of the boys. From time to time he would send me a present. Not sixpenny-halfpenny things, neither, it wasn't; but a real sable muff of a present, every time, tails and all! He did write beautiful letters, too! You might think as I'd be as happy as happy—but no! I wasn't. For never could I forget I was only a 'poor girl' and he a gentleman. And all along my mind misgave me as to how it would end."

Aunt Susie bent her head lower over her pungent task. The tears started to her eyes.

"How did it end?" asked Maggie. She had been listening open-mouthed.

"We never was married." Aunt Susie's mouth twitched a little as she spoke.

"Did he die?" asked Cassin, softly.

"No, m' dear. He didn't die. He's alive yet, for all I know otherwise. It ended just so as I might have known it would end, if I hadn't been blind with love. Him and me!

"Well, I hadn't had a present for a long bit, and his letters did drop off; only, now and then, came a picture card. I have got them all upstairs still. I did ought to have known by then—I had other chances, too—but I was hot-headed same as rest. And I had to pay in tears."

"Did he never come again?"

"Yes, m' dear, he come once again. I was watering

the plants in the window—as it might be those very plants —Gran'ma was turning out her room, and all the rest was out—it being fine. My ! I do seem to smell they geraniums now. And it did shine, the sun, that day ; brighter, I do think, than ever it has shined since. All of a sudden I heard his step. I would have known it anywhere. My heart went bang, bang ; and I sat—flop—in this very chair.

"And then it was his voice.

"'May we come in ?'

"But I didn't, somehow, take the note I should have done of the 'we.'

"'Come in,' I says.

"In he came, and a lady with him. Even then, I didn't see through it ; but set her a chair, thinking she was his sister or something. She was beautifully dressed, and some might call her beautiful, too. Her face was too proud for me. And he sits over there, dangling his hat on the handle of his stick. It was a straw hat with a black band, that I do know.

"Eh ! m' dears, his hair was in those little curls, just as I remembered it.

"Sudden he says : 'Susie, this is my wife.'

"I made their teas for them. I wasn't going to let the like of *her* see as I cared. And, in course, it was only proper and fit. And I do pray God the tears he made me shed may never bring no sorrow to hisself.

"For I did love him true."

By now Aunt Susie's tears were running down her face and falling on her work.

"You look to your own sort, girls, and never to gentlemen," she said.

The girls went on peeling their onions and neither spoke a word.

CHAPTER XXI

THIS LOVE

"LISTEN to me," cries Age. "Take advantage of my experience."

Youth cares not a jot for secondhand experience.

"I had pretty wings, prettier than those of yours, and the flame scorches so."

Youth does not believe in the bygone beauty of Age's wings. And as to the flame, Youth has not felt it as yet.

So Age goes on preaching unheeded, whilst Youth flutters on its way.

Pouff!

Youth can fly no longer, but creeps maimed and weary; and soon, in turn, raises the warning voice to other unheeding Youth.

It had cost Aunt Susie some heart-burning to stir to life the ashes of her bygone sorrow. But Aunt Susie, in her brisk, cheerful way, considered herself but little. Maggie, robust, healthy, happy-go-lucky, was dear to her kindly little aunt, and she would have borne a good deal to save her from sorrow.

Perhaps, then, it was well that the warm-hearted little spinster could not read Maggie's thoughts, as she sat in silence after the ending of the tale.

"Aunt Susie was a fule," so the girl thought to herself, "she did ought to have managed so as to get him tokened afore he left."

For all she was young, and in so many ways profoundly ignorant, in others, Maggie was horribly wise.

So she took her aunt's tale as a warning—not against dealings with gentlemen, but rather against "being too easy-going like to make he fast when you have the chanst of it."

Little as poor Aunt Susie could have foreseen the fact, her interference was likely enough to hurry on the catastrophe she had sacrificed herself to avert.

Up to now, with only a vague thought or two of the future, Maggie had been quite satisfied if her "sweetheartin'" was going on amorously enough for the enjoyment of the present. Now, she was setting her wits to work to make sure of the future. Maggie's intelligence, if narrow, was by no means feeble; and, in certain ways, as has been said, she was terribly wise.

Lorry Grainger, though actually older as years go, was in many respects much younger than she. He had been brought up strictly in a feminine household. As he grew towards manhood he had mildly rebelled, and had plunged into what he called dissipation. He had been seen supping at a fashionable restaurant with a girl who worked for his mother's dressmaker: a girl who—on secret investigation, carried out by the curate's wife and two austere spinsters—was found to be of anything but irreproachable character.

There was, of course, a scene. This, in spite of a certain discomfort aroused by his mother's tears, Lorry thoroughly enjoyed. He was such a Don Juan of a fellow, you see!

Next came sentence of banishment.

"Dear Lawrence has never been very strong. The doctors recommend the Cornish climate. He is learning farming down there. Quite the simple life."

The usual flimsy curtain of pretence through which, Mrs. Grainger was only too well aware, her lynx-eyed friends saw plainly.

So Lorry came to Trezelah and began to look round for amusement. Amusement, in the ordinary sense of the word, there was none. But of course there were girls.

Maggie was not the only one who was ready to wander in country lanes and exchange kisses with a gentleman. So Lorry bought himself smart ties and striking waistcoat and deemed himself a gay Lothario.

Curiously enough, he remained innocent at heart. Perhaps this was partly due to the fact that, with these warm-blooded Cornish lassies, he found himself not pursuer, but pursued. These buxom girls, wit h their well-developed forms, rosy cheeks and laughing eyes, were no slim nymphs to flee their god's embraces. Boldly did they pursue, and he, god-like, smiled now upon one and now upon another, whilst serving as his own High Priest in the temple of Vanity.

The short sturdy fishermen and the heavy-limbed farmers held the "foreigner" of little account. Still, they agreed that there was not "much harm," in him. Some even liked him in a half-hearted, slightly ashamed, fashion. That there was no enmity between him and them was, however, mostly attributable to the feminine skill, which managed not to alienate rustic lovers whilst toying with this butterfly thing which could, at the very best, be the prize only of one.

There may have been others equally determined, but Maggie had certainly made up her mind to be that one. At the same time she, too, kept her reserve rustic in the person of Andrew Thomas. The curious thing was—which, nevertheless, shows how some really acute-minded people can be blind where their own charms and those of others are concerned—the curious thing was that Maggie had not, in the beginning, thought of Cassin as a possible rival. Accustomed, since first she began to consider such things—which, in truth, was at a scandalously early age—to the knowledge that local admiration was always accorded to size and flesh, and a certain line of conduct, euphoniously described as "lively," it was natural that she should fail to see any allurement in her cousin's thin, girlish figure, quiet manner, and air of modest reserve.

She teased Cassin sometimes about the men.

"You did ought to cheek them some. They likes a bit of mischief in a girl. You're getting a bit of colour, and when you've done with them mourning things—there ain't no reason why you should wear your blacks week days, now—and you fills out in the bosom, and begins to lark a bit—there's no reason why the boys shouldn't be after you, same as me."

Which kindly intended remarks having injured Cassin's sense of modesty, she replied, proudly:

"I'm not wishing any boys to be—as you call it—after me."

This Maggie flatly refused to believe.

It was not often, however, she gave her cousin's affairs a thought. She was far too occupied with her own. Give her time, and she could—I am afraid in her own mind Maggie used the expression—she could "nobble" Lorry

Grainger. She was quite aware that the course of love ran more easily when it ran slowly. She had no objection to lasting out the pleasures of the chase, which were, indeed, too sweet to be hurried. On the other hand, there was always the chance that Lorry might have to go home, or (Maggie was too honest in her own fashion to burk the point) that he might become ensnared in the charms of some other girl. There was Patty Marshall, to Carleen, she'd give the eyes out of her head to get him—and dress! —she'd something new every fourth Sunday—and there was no telling where the money came from, them so poor and all.

No! Maggie decided it would never do for her to shilly-shally about till somebody else had twisted a promise out of him.

On the whole, the result of Aunt Susie's intervention was that Maggie made up her mind to lose no time in bringing matters to a conclusion. She looked thoughtful at times as she went about her work; and, more than once, when she had the house to herself, she paid a hurried visit to the little fire-place in her bedroom to make sure that the horseshoe was still there, and so, in some mysterious way, "on her side."

Meanwhile, as Maggie, with solid determination, pursued the well-clothed substantial thing she called love, for Cassin, too, the word had become embodied, though hardly as yet had it taken on flesh; rather was it a faint, diaphanous dream.

Maggie pursued her love with dogged feet and grasping hands that meant to have and hold. Cassin, with shy eyes beheld a vision, faint as yet but tremulous with glory a vision that was drawing nearer, making earth more beautiful as it came. Something so pure, so perfect, that hardly might it be thought of in the strong light of day. Something that hovered in her dreams, or knelt beside her as childlike, she added the petition to her virginal prayers: "Bless —."

Even to herself she named no name.