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.