GALLON TOM

JIMMY QUIXOTE: A NOVEL

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Содержание

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Dedication

My Dear Malcolm Watson,

In the early days of a friendship that has happily lasted for some years, you were witness of, and kindly helper in, some of those struggles which must always be the lot of the young beginner in literature. They were good days, and I look back at them with more of laughter than of tears. And because you will recognise in these pages certain autobiographical notes of that time, and may care to smile with me at them, I feel that this book most properly belongs to you.

Your friend always,
TOM GALLON.

London, 1906.

BOOK I

CHAPTER I
OLD PAUL'S BABIES

"Old Paul" struggled back out of the big, roaring, bustling world one day in late July, and was rather glad to leave it behind him. Old Paul had been jostled and hurried and flurried and stared at in London; had drifted aimlessly into the wrong departments in shops, and had nearly bought the wrong things, and had more than once lost his way. For, indeed, it was a far cry to the days when Old Paul had known London well, and it had known him. And when it is remembered that he was clad in somewhat shabby country clothing, and that he went into the biggest shops, and with a total disregard for money bought the most extraordinary things, and insisted on carrying the greater number away with him, there is small wonder that he was stared at. Now, at the end of a hot and bustling day, he got out at the little local station at Daisley Cross, drew a deep breath of fresher, purer air, and smiled to think that he was near home.

A sympathetic porter, who had known him for some years, helped him to adjust the little cascade of parcels that tumbled out with Old Paul on to the platform; remarked that he was "main glad" to see Old Paul again – quite as though that gentleman had been absent for a few years, instead of merely for the length of a summer day. In the simplest fashion Old Paul borrowed some string from the porter, and contrived an ingenious arrangement of slings about his broad shoulders wherewith to support certain refractory parcels; and, finally, something after the manner of a very hot and perspiring summer Father Christmas, started off for home.

The summer twilight was all about him as he breasted the hill at the end of the village, and came out on to the long sweep of road that led down into the valley; and so faced a prospect that had been homely and familiar to him for some years – and faced it with simple gratitude. On such a day as this, Old Paul always went back to that London he had known so many years before with misgivings, and always returned from it with an uplifting of his heart; and yet Old Paul turned to-night a face towards the twilight that was young and unlined. True, it may have been lined with unaccustomed wrinkles of perplexity in London that day; but all those lines were smoothed away now as he went on through the gathering dusk, tramping steadily, with the step of a man used to country roads and broad uplands. As he walked he pushed back the soft hat he wore, displaying a rather high forehead, and light brown hair growing a little thin; and he smiled to himself as at some problem that was exercising his mind – yet not exercising it in any troublesome way.

"I hope there's nothing I've forgotten," he muttered, glancing about him at the parcels which formed a sort of bulwark round his tall figure. "If I hadn't lost the paper when that very agreeable young woman was advising me about the length of Moira's frock, I should feel more certain in my own mind. I tried hard to remember most things – and I don't want another journey. The curtains for the study are hardly dark enough; but then the man said they were a pleasing pattern. And, after all, I was most careful to tell him what they were wanted for. Well, we must hope for the best."

Twenty yards further on he stopped, and took off his hat, and dashed it quite unexpectedly and yet with no real violence to the ground. "Jimmy's boots!" he cried, and had turned and made off towards the station again before he realised that there was no possibility of getting to London again that night. Then, as he turned in the road and dusted his hat, a pleased smile gradually stole over his face; he tapped one of the parcels that hung from his arm.

"Of course – how very foolish of me!" he whispered. "But I'll own it gave me a turn for the moment; I could scarcely have faced Jimmy without his boots. How perfectly absurd! I stopped the cab and went back at the very last moment. Heigho! what a day it's been!"

So much of a day had it been out of the ordinary course of a quiet life, that Old Paul surreptitiously touched certain of the parcels as he strode along, and evidently mentally counted them more than once; shook his head doubtfully at the recollection of the lost list. Nevertheless, by the time he came to a low gate in an old wall the last doubt seemed to have cleared from his mind, and he went in with a smile on his face. Dark though it was by this time, he took his way unerringly by a path through what appeared to be a rambling old garden, and came to a rambling old house; lifted the simple latch of a door, and went into a little square hall; and was at home.

The scraping of a chair was heard instantly near at hand, and another door opened, and an old woman appeared, looking out at him. He nodded and smiled at her cordially, yet with something of the abashed demeanour of a schoolboy who has returned home later than he should have done; there was an apologetic air about him as he slid the strings from his shoulders, and lowered the many parcels to the floor.

"I'm a little late, Patience," he said; "but that was the fault of the train. I don't think you'll find, Patience, that anything has been forgotten," he went on, evidently still mentally calculating the parcels. "I've been most careful. And the babies?"

"All of them up, if you please, and not so much as a show of bed about 'em," exclaimed the old woman, with a little resentful toss of her head. "I don't know what the world's comin' to," she went on, while she stooped over the parcels, and prodded one or two of them with a sharp forefinger. "Wasn't allowed in my young days – nor yours either, Master Paul."

"Ah – I'm glad they're up," said Old Paul, with a smile. "I've been looking forward to seeing them all the way home – counting the miles, as you might say. I can talk to them while I have my supper. I'm hungry, Patience – with a great and mighty hunger."

"Supper's nearly spoilt," she snapped. "I'm not sure that you deserve that I should have gone out of my way to make anything special – and then see it spoiling itself on my very hands. And why you're standin' about there, when by this time you might have been half through it, beats me," she added.

"I'll come at once, Patience – if you'll tell the babies," he said. "We can count the parcels afterwards."

He was moving across to a further door, when it was opened, and a man advanced towards him. A man much older than himself, clad in rusty black, and with a curious peevish, forlorn cast of countenance. A man with nervous trembling hands that fluttered over each other and about his lips, and even over his straggling hair. A man who came forward expectantly, with eyes only for the many parcels.

"My tobacco, Paul – you haven't forgotten my tobacco?" he asked, in a strange subdued voice.

"No; that was one of the things I made sure of first of all," replied Old Paul, in his cordial voice. "I'm sorry to be late, Anthony," he added apologetically, as he dropped on one knee and began searching among the parcels. "Now, did I make them put it up with the stockings – or did I – "

But Patience had a word to say. She stooped suddenly, and swept the parcels out of his hands; pointed with peremptory finger to the further door. "Tobacco can wait – though he *has* been growling about it all day – supper can't," she exclaimed. "And as to the selfishness of some folk – the least said about it the better."

Old Paul was moving towards the door of the dining-room; he stopped to look back, and to shake a protesting head at the woman. "Not selfishness, Patience," he said. "I wouldn't call it selfishness exactly. A woman doesn't always understand what tobacco means to a man. I think you'll find it with the stockings, Anthony," he added.

He passed into the room from which the other man had come, and saw set out there his supper. The old woman was hard upon his heels; she fluttered about him nervously and anxiously, even while

she still scolded at the thought of the spoilt meal. She thrust his chair forward, and watched him while he sat down leisurely and removed the cover from the dish; heaved a little quick sigh of satisfaction in response to his boyish sniff of delight. Indeed, as she stood near, after seeing that he had all he wanted, she made a little quick movement of the hands – almost a movement of motherly benediction – behind him. Then, as she was turning away, he laid down his knife and fork, and looked at her accusingly.

"The babies, Patience," he said. "We've forgotten the babies!"

"They'll need no telling," said the old woman; and, indeed, at that moment they swarmed into the room.

Perhaps in the manner of their coming, and in the style of their reception, might best be shown the dispositions of the three children who came to greet Old Paul. The first was a thin dark-eyed girl of some eight or nine years of age, and with hair that was almost black; she came in with a rush and with hair flying, eager to be first to greet the man; and so was caught in a moment in the embrace of his arm, with her cheek close against his, in silent contentment.

The second was a handsome boy of twelve or thirteen; he came more slowly, but none the less with a smile of greeting for the man, and with a hand outstretched to grasp Old Paul's disengaged hand; he leant shyly against the table, and swung the big hand backwards and forwards in his own while he looked at the man.

"It's been a beastly long day without you, Old Paul," was his greeting.

The third child came in sedately enough. She was very fair and somewhat fragile-looking, with wide open blue eyes and a very perfect child-like mouth. There was a daintiness about her that seemed to be in the very air through which she moved. She came to the other side of the table, and looked across at the man, and smiled.

"Old Paul's brought simply heaps of parcels," she said.

Old Paul laughed as he looked round at them. "Simply heaps and heaps of parcels," he said, giving the girl beside him a sudden squeeze. "I think you'll like your frock, Moira; two inches longer this time, my dear, according to measurements. It was such fun," he went on gleefully, glancing at the door, and lowering his voice. "I lost the list! I don't think I've forgotten anything, but if I have we shall hear of it – shan't we?"

He was like a big over-grown boy when he looked round upon them with that mischievous smile; they seemed thoroughly to understand the danger which threatened him, and to be ready enough to share it. He lowered his voice still more as he went on speaking, heedless of the supper that was cooling before him.

"But, dears, I had the greatest idea!" he whispered. "I found a shop where they sold shawls – the sort of shawls that Patience loves; they're difficult to get nowadays. And I bought one – of the most beautiful colours ever you saw. Someone'll be making love to Patience when they see her in it; it's a dream of a shawl. So that, you see, if I've forgotten anything, I've only got to give her that, and – "

The door opened quickly, and the autocrat of the household came in, in the shape of Patience. Immediately Old Paul began to eat at a great rate, behaving quite badly, so far as table manners were concerned, in his anxiety to show that he was demolishing the supper; but he spared time between bites for a wink at the boy and at the dark-haired girl beside him. Of the younger, fairer child he seemed a little afraid, as though not quite understanding her. Patience, with a grunt, turned and left the room, colliding as she did so with the old man, who was coming in at the moment. He came in holding out a packet, and his face was a face of grief.

"You've got the medium, Paul – and I always smoke the full-flavoured," he whimpered. "And I've broken it now, so that they won't take it back. You might have remembered, Paul; it's little enough I ask of you, in all conscience."

"Tobacco's tobacco – and one sort's as good as another," flashed out the boy; but Old Paul laid a hand on his arm, and shook his head at him.

"You knew I'd run short, Paul," went on the complaining voice, "and I was so looking forward to it. All day long I've sucked an empty pipe and watched the clock; I couldn't work as usual, on account of missing it." He picked at the tobacco in the broken package, and shook his head despondingly.

"I'm sorry, Anthony – more sorry than I can say," said Old Paul humbly. "Now, if a pipe of mine would soothe you – or do you any good – "

"Much too strong for me," complained the old man. "I suppose I shall have to put up with this for a bit; but it's hard – it's very hard." He grumbled his way out of the room, still looking disdainfully at the big packet of tobacco he held.

Old Paul looked round at the children. "It was the list, dears," he said penitently. "I remember now he did say the full-flavoured, and I put it down; it only shows how careful anybody ought to be – doesn't it?"

He was almost dejected as he went on with his supper, while the children watched him; presently he found voice to ask a question. "What have you been doing all day?"

"Moira and I have been in the woods; we took sandwiches, and tried to think that you'd be coming any minute," said the boy.

"Yes – and Jimmy made me afraid, because he said anything might happen to you in London – and that you might never come back," said the girl of the dark eyes, watching the man wistfully.

"That was only in fun," retorted the boy.

"Never frighten people only in fun," said Old Paul gravely, as he put out a hand to the child as though to comfort her. "And Alice" – he looked across at the child on the other side of the table – "what has Alice been doing?"

There was a curious, subtle difference in his fashion of addressing the younger girl; it was not a want of cordiality, but rather as though he feared to offend her – desired, indeed, to win her good graces. She answered him demurely; her smile was as sweet and as gentle as her voice; but the words were not child-like at all.

"I thought it would be best for me to call and see the Baffalls," she replied.

Old Paul nodded, with a covert glance at the faces of the boy and girl on either side of him. "The little lady!" he murmured in admiration.

"They were very glad to see me, Old Paul," went on the child, "and Mr. Baffall saw me home afterwards." And be it noted that she spoke with no sense of priggishness or superiority, but rather with the air of one to whom the more formal events of life inevitably appealed.

Old Paul rose to his feet; he kept an arm about the slim body of the dark-eyed girl Moira. "Let's see the parcels," he said, with a gay laugh. "Oh – the shops I went into – and the stairs I climbed – and the lifts that rattled me up and down – and the people who wouldn't understand what I wanted!"

He swept them all out into the hall, there to find themselves confronted not only with the parcels, but with Patience, with a stern eye upon the clock.

"Time for bed!" she exclaimed, and the man stopped guiltily, with the children holding to him. In a hesitating nervous fashion, still with that guilty schoolboy aspect, he pleaded for them.

"Special occasion, Patience, you know – and though I wouldn't for the world gainsay anything you cared to suggest – still, if you didn't mind – "

"Ten minutes," said Patience quickly, and disappeared into her own quarters. Thereafter the thing resolved itself into a mere riot of Old Paul and the children and brown paper and string; and new wonders displayed every moment.

For Old Paul had brought home a medley. This had been one of his few excursions to London, carefully prepared for, and long looked forward to; a day on which he procured things for his household that should last for months to come. So much a business did Old Paul make of it, that here was everything that had been suggested alike to Patience and to his own thoughtful eye for the needs of his people. Boots and stockings, according to sizes; linens and woollens, presently to be prepared

by Patience; stout country suits for the boy and frocks for the girls. Even caps and hats had not been forgotten, while, in addition, even curtains and household necessaries had been brought.

There was, too, a softer side to the purchases of the day. There was a cricket bat and a new fishing rod for Jimmy; books and toys and dolls for the girls. And, lastly, that shawl of many colours for Patience. He spread it out, with anxious glances at them in hope of their admiration.

"If you'd given her that," said Jimmy, with conviction, "she'd have made it twenty minutes at least!"

"I'm glad you like it," said Old Paul, with a sigh of relief. "There's a great deal of it for the money, and it is certainly bright; more than that, it smooths things with Patience. Not that I would have you think," he went on hurriedly, "that I have anything to say against Patience; but we have to be careful not to hurt her feelings."

At that very moment the woman marched in; she simply stood still in the hall, and looked at the clock. Old Paul stood up, with the shawl held behind him and trailing on the ground, and approached her meekly.

"Oh, Patience, it occurred to me to-day that there might be something – "

"Time's up!" snapped Patience, taking no notice of him.

"Something you would like from – from London. So I took the liberty of bringing you – " He held out the thing sheepishly, without daring to look at her.

She took it, and looked it over with the keen eye of one who knew the value of every thread in it; opened her hard mouth as though to make some caustic remark; and then broke down. Old Paul seemed to understand, and under the pretence of adjusting it about her shoulders, contrived to touch her cheek softly with one hand, and to whisper something in her ear. She forgot about the children and the clock, and hurried away, pulling the shawl about her as she went, as though the gaudy thing might embrace her with a touch of love.

She remembered her duties strongly enough presently, and came back with added bitterness to make up for that temporary weakness, and swept the children off to bed. Old Paul stood at the foot of the stairs, and called out messages to them as they went; then turned with a smile and a sigh into his own room, and started to light a pipe. He stretched his long figure in a chair, and sighed, and leaned back, and seemed to be dreaming about the day.

And then, after a little time, sat up in the attitude of one listening. He laid down the pipe, and kept his eyes fixed upon the door of the room; noted with a little exultant nod that the door was softly opening, and that someone was coming in. It was the dark-eyed girl Moira.

She had thrown a little dressing-gown over her nightdress; the little white, slim feet were bare. Once having peeped into the room, and seen that Old Paul was alone, she crept forward swiftly, and was in his arms in a moment. For this was their sacred hour; this the time when she innocently cheated old Patience, and crept from her bed to come to the man who was all her world. And they were quite silent over it for a minute or two; sufficient for them that the quiet world held only themselves – this child and the man who loved her.

"My little maid!" he whispered at last. "So you've been in the woods all day – with Jimmy?"

She stirred in his arms, and seemed to nod her head. "But this is better than all the woods," she whispered. "This is the time you belong to me – and only to me."

"Hungry, jealous little maid!" he whispered again. "I'm afraid that big heart of yours aches sometimes for no cause. What will love do to you in the big world, Moira?"

"I don't understand," she whispered, looking at him in perplexity.

"Well that you shouldn't, little maid," was his reply; and he kissed her quickly as he spoke.

He watched her presently as she glided – a white shadow among grey ones – upstairs to her room, and came back to his chair and his pipe with a thoughtful frown upon his face. And in the smoke from his pipe seemed to trace out, in a shadowy fashion, something of who he was, and what he was, and how he came to be Old Paul of that big house at Daisley Cross.

Some years before Old Paul came to be known to the inhabitants of Daisley Cross, a certain Mr. Paul Nannock had been known fairly well in London. He was a tall, shy young man, with a painful habit of blushing, and an utter disbelief in himself and his own powers. Finding that the possession of considerable property smoothed the road of life for him, and rendered it unnecessary that he should put forth those powers, Mr. Paul Nannock drifted easily, and had rather a good time in a mild way. People spoke of him with a shrug and a laugh; perhaps the chief thing said about him was that very negative one – that there was no harm in him. Perhaps it might have been better expressed by saying that Paul Nannock had never grown up; that he looked out at the world with the wide trusting eyes of a child, fully expecting to warm his hands at the comfortable fire of life, without any fear of getting burnt in the process.

Then, in an unlucky day, Paul discovered that he had a heart; found it beating uncomfortably, and causing him considerable trouble. The dark eyes of a woman had looked into the innocent blue eyes of Paul Nannock; and from that time, as you will not need to be told, the world was a different place – never to be the happy-go-lucky place it had been before. Paul Nannock was in love.

To do the man justice, he had never for a moment believed that there was any hope for him; that this beautiful and gracious girl could stoop from her height to touch him had appeared altogether out of the question. There was only in Paul's mind a deep feeling of gratitude to the kindly fate that had brought her into his life, and had taught him this wondrous lesson of love; he was never to forget that, and it was at all times to be a blessed memory to him. Henceforth all women were to be hallowed in his sight because of her; the world to be a finer place even than he had conceived it.

And then, in a curious way – a blundering, haphazard way that belonged to the man – he had blurted out the truth to her; and had walked that night straight into heaven! For – wonder of wonders never to be accounted for – she had told him that she loved him; and let it be said here that at that time she did love him, and that there was never any thought in her mind of his money or his position or anything else. He was different from other men; the very earnestness and simplicity of him won her. For three marvellous months he walked with the gods in high places, and entered fully into the highest inheritance possible to man.

And then came the end of it. Paul had proved to be unexciting, in the sense that he was so easily found out; all his virtues were to be seen and known and loved at a glance; and there was no more of him to explore. As the heart of a woman craves for mystery, so here was no mystery to be unfolded; and she grew tired. Another man of richer promise in that respect came suddenly into her life and swept her away; and Paul Nannock walked the grey world alone.

So great and single-hearted had been his love and his purpose, that for the time the thing wrecked him; he wanted to be quit of London – that great place which reminded him always of her – and to get away somewhere to find peace. That brought him to Daisley Cross; and there he took an old rambling house known as Daisley Place; and for years lived there as a hermit. The people of the village grew to be familiar with the sight of the tall, gaunt man, striding silently through the woods and fields, and living all alone, save for that one old servant in the old house. Then one day Daisley Cross woke, and rubbed its eyes, and asked what had happened. For Paul Nannock had been seen walking through the woods with a child – an elfin-like black-eyed thing, the people said – perched high upon his shoulder.

It was her child. The man of possibilities had married her and deserted her; and at the time of her death, when she looked with clearer eyes back on the world she was leaving, she thought of her child, and she thought of the man she had loved and trusted. She sent for him; and, there being but one thing for Paul to do in such a case, he went to her straight; and he came away, when he had closed her eyes for the last time, bringing with him that small, frail replica of herself, to be his for ever after, and to be cherished for her sake. And that was the child Moira.

So far as the other "babies" were concerned, they may be said to have been supplementary, and quite accidental. Whether it came about that the big heart of Old Paul warmed with the advent of the

child, or whether, as a laughing neighbour once expressed it, "baby collecting became a hobby with him," it is impossible to say; but certainly the other children dropped into Daisley Place as it were in the most casual fashion, and remained there. Jimmy had been discovered by the merest accident; had been brought to the very door, as it seemed, solely that Paul might befriend him.

Jimmy's parents had been mere acquaintances of Paul Nannock, and they had gone to the other side of the world on the business of life, leaving the boy at school, and leaving funds for him in the hands of a guardian; and it had happened that at the school they had given Paul's name as a reference. The ship in which the young parents sailed foundered, and was lost with all hands; and the time came when the schoolmaster wrote to Paul, having failed to get any satisfactory statement from the guardian, inquiring what he should do. Paul took up the matter at once, carrying it through on behalf of the child with his usual energy, only to discover that the guardian had used every penny that had been left in his hands for his own purposes. Pressed hard by Paul on account of the boy, the man disappeared, and was, discovered in a mean hovel in Liverpool with a bullet in his brain. And the heart of Paul expanding over the lonely child, Jimmy had come into that curious house at Daisley Cross.

So far as Alice was concerned, her coming had about it a sense of comedy. Whether or not some whisper of Paul's eccentricities had by that time got abroad, it is impossible to say; certain it is that the mother of that prim little maid – known only quite casually in London to Paul – flung a telegram at him one day, and followed it within a few hours, accompanied by the child; expressed the keenest delight and admiration of the place; asserted that Alice was pining for the society of children of something near her own age, and hinted at the possibility of some arrangement being made – much as though Paul kept a species of *crèche*, or boarding establishment.

Finally, on the plea that urgent business called her to Paris for a day or two, and that she could not possibly take the child, and that there were no friends to whom she could be consigned, the lady actually left the girl there; she was to return in four days exactly. At the end of four days she telegraphed that she would be there in a week; wrote on the sixth day; and again, a week later, with profuse apologies and thanks, and the expressed hope that Alice was being a good girl; and was never after heard of. Certainly Paul was not rigorous in his inquiries, and the child expressed no regret at the absence of her natural guardian; and there the matter ended. So to-night, as Old Paul sat there smoking his pipe, he seemed to see through the years that had grown softly about them all the changes that had come in himself, and the greater changes in his babies; and was well content. Something of that old hunger in his heart had been satisfied; something of the old hopes and dreams that once had blossomed about a woman blossomed now about these children; and that was as it should be. But most of all, they blossomed about Moira – for the sake, not only of the child, but of his dead love.

CHAPTER II
AND OLD PAUL'S FRIENDS

If any man in this commonplace, humdrum world of ours elects to live on other than humdrum and commonplace lines, the unexpected must perforce happen to him; for the unexpected is a very will-o'-the-wisp, darting hither and thither, and finding but few people ready to take it seriously. Therefore it was in the very nature of things that the unexpected, which had given to Old Paul three babies that never should have belonged to him, should give him someone else also. And that someone else was a certain Anthony Ditchburn.

We have already met him in a matter of tobacco; and we have seen that he was apparently something of a fixture in that queer house. He had become a fixture there in a curious way – in as curious a way as any of those which had brought the other inhabitants of the house into the care of Paul Nannock.

Vague hints had been dropped from time to time by Anthony Ditchburn as to his antecedents; vague suggestions of a university which had not treated him too well, and which had scoffed at certain scientific departures of his; there was here a talk of the shaking of dust from his feet, and a going out into the world. That he was cultured was beyond question; that he knew books better than he knew men was also beyond question; and that he had an absolute disregard for anything and everything in the world save his own comfort was the most pregnant fact of all. And he had come to Daisley Place in this wise.

There had come a night, some years before, of heavy rain – a night when, to use a local phrase, "it wasn't fit for a dog to be out in." And on that night, while Old Paul sat musing over his fire, there had come a knock at the outer door – a surprising thing enough, in that out-of-the-way place and at that hour. Old Paul, a little startled, had gone to the door and had opened it, there to be confronted with Anthony Ditchburn, whose name he did not know, and whom he had never seen in his life before. The man being wet through, however, there seemed no great harm in his coming into the place and drying himself; and, in the process of the drying, his tongue being loosened with certain generous liquids, he displayed something of his culture; to the delight of Old Paul, with whom cultured people were rare in those days. They had talked far into the night, until it became the obvious thing for Old Paul to offer his guest a bed; and the offer had been graciously accepted. In the morning the necessary offer of breakfast was accepted in like fashion, and then Ditchburn stayed to lunch. To cut the mere chronicle of beds and meals short, let it be said at once that from that time he remained; for Old Paul had not the courage to turn him out, and felt that a hint on such a matter would have been a thing of gross discourtesy. Nor did he inquire anything beyond the name of his guest.

From time to time a certain great work on which Anthony Ditchburn was supposed to be engaged was referred to; once, indeed, Paul was allowed to enter the room that had been assigned to the elder man, and to see a great mass of notes and memoranda; he had gazed at it with his hands on his hips, and his head on one side, and had felt rather proud that such a man should have condescended to come under his roof. Thereafter, when Anthony Ditchburn deplored the fact that certain books which were absolutely necessary to the completion of the great work could not be obtained, for lack of the necessary money, Old Paul suggested a simple matter of banking, with himself as the banker; and Anthony Ditchburn condescended to accept the suggestion, and declared that the monumental work should be dedicated to his benefactor.

Anthony Ditchburn had no money, and apparently no friends other than Paul. Occasionally it became necessary that his wardrobe should be replenished, and this was done at Paul's expense. Tobacco was the man's only luxury, outside what could be procured in the house itself; and tobacco was supplied by his host. For the rest, he was a peevish, self-opinionated old man, and a rank impostor.

But Paul believed in him, and had a vague idea that he had caught a genius who added lustre to the house.

Anthony Ditchburn had come in out of the storm before the advent of the first of the babies; and the coming of Moira had upset him very completely. The man had been so comfortable; it had been a house of slippers and dressing-gowns – a place of pipes and easy chairs and dreams – the latter always intangible; and the presence of a girl, to whom this queer host of his appeared devoted, threatened disaster. It was a memorable night when Moira had been put to bed by Patience (with Old Paul hovering about on the landing outside the door of the room, asking if he could do anything, or cook anything), and when, coming down, he had encountered the resentful old man. For Paul had a feeling that all the world rejoiced and sang with him that night, because of the advent of this dark-eyed baby.

Paul had been in a joyous mood; had caught Anthony Ditchburn by the shoulders, and had pushed him into the room, and laughingly suggested a toasting of the baby. Anthony had not objected to the toasting, but he strongly objected to the baby.

"She's mine!" Old Paul had whispered exultantly. "There isn't a soul can claim her, Anthony; she's going to grow up with me, and by God!" – the joyous voice was lowered to seriousness – "she shall have a better childhood and a sweeter womanhood than her mother ever knew."

"You don't know what you're doing," Anthony had snapped. "Boys are bad enough – but a girl! They grow up; they put on airs with their frocks – and silly ways as their skirts grow longer. I know 'em! – and there's trouble brewing for you if you keep the child here. Rank sentiment and moonshine; she'll grow up to laugh at you, and to go out into the world for the first lad that holds up a finger to her. Send her packing in the morning; if you must look after her, find a good, hard boarding school."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Paul had replied with unexpected harshness. "This baby is more to me than anyone else could be, Anthony Ditchburn; with her tiny fingers she writes for me the book of life as I have known it; lisps out to me with her baby-lips all that life has spelled for me; tells over again, with the sweet eyes of her, a story I have tried to forget, and yet have been glad to remember. The child stays."

"Then it'll be damned uncomfortable!" Ditchburn had exclaimed in a heat.

"If it rests between you and the child, Anthony Ditchburn," Old Paul had said gravely, "there are other places where you can find opportunity for work and for thought." Which showed Anthony Ditchburn that it would be well to be silent.

But if these were his feelings on the arrival of Moira, what must have been his thoughts when Jimmy came into the house – and when Alice followed. The man for a time regarded himself as being in a state of siege; dared not move about the house, lest he might stumble upon some objectionable child. At meal times he grunted and ate in silence, while the merry talk went on at the other end of the table; he smoked many pipes, and determined that in the monumental work he would contrive to introduce a chapter dealing with a Rational Upbringing of Children; a chapter which should throw a new light upon a very much misunderstood subject.

Old Paul was a lover of peace; he would have been glad to bring Anthony Ditchburn to a better understanding of the children – to have welded together those warring elements. Knowing Ditchburn for a man of learning, it had occurred to him, as time went on, that the old man might do something towards the education of Moira and the others. Not that it occurred for a moment to the generous mind of Paul that in that way Anthony Ditchburn might work off a great debt; he would have blushed at the thought. But to Anthony himself the suggestion savoured of that, and he resented it hotly.

"You are evidently unaware, my dear Nannock," he said, "of the position I once occupied in the world, before I decided, for that world's service, to write my present treatise. Shall I, who have touched the highest in matters of learning, descend to teach babies the alphabet and the rule of three? Shall I, who have been regarded with veneration by men whose names (through their arts of self-advertisement) are known to the world, stoop to teach boys and girls their tables?"

"It occurred to me that you might care to help me in the matter," Paul had suggested humbly. "Of course, I can guess how great your attainments must have been, before you consented to come down here and to bury yourself; but the children want teaching something."

"Very well, then, I will sacrifice myself," Anthony Ditchburn had declared. "I am aware that I am in your hands; it is not for me to be proud in these days; I must bend the knee, I suppose, in return for the food I eat and the bed in which I sleep. It is but another instance of what culture and learning must pass through in this stony world. Not another word, I beg" – this as Old Paul would indignantly have protested – "I will see the children after my third pipe to-morrow morning."

But the experiment was not a success. It was declared afterwards that Anthony Ditchburn, in the intervals of falling asleep and much smoking of pipes, quoted Horace to the silent wondering babies, and even read a scrap or two from the monumental work; but he taught them nothing. Jimmy drew pictures for their delight on some of the tutor's sacred margins; and they whispered together, what time Anthony Ditchburn slumbered; but Old Paul saw that another arrangement must be made.

The further experiment involved the rector. Old Paul only knew him casually, chiefly because the Rev. Temple Purdue, having been much exercised in his mind over the strange household of Daisley Place, had called, with the view to a better understanding of all the circumstances; and had gone away utterly bewildered, and with no understanding at all. But he, too, was a man of learning, and in a small way, a man of family, for he had a son. It occurred to Old Paul that it might be possible to induce the rector to give lessons to those babies who, from the educational standpoint, were beginning to be troublesome. Therefore he called upon the Rev. Temple Purdue, and broached the matter.

The rector was a small, mild, spectacled man of a frightened aspect; he had been left a widower some two or three years before, and it was his painful duty to pass the modest headstone erected to the memory of the late Mrs. Temple Purdue twice on Sundays, and occasionally on other evenings. In sleepy Daisley Cross he was certainly very much out of his element; may be said, indeed, to have fluttered about among his sturdy, slow flock, like a small timid hen in charge of rather large and heavy ducks. But he was a conscientious little man, with a large leaven of unworked geniality in him.

He had held up hands of protest at the mention of the large sum which Old Paul was prepared to pay for the education of the children; had compromised gratefully on something a little more than half; and had told himself that undreamt-of luxuries, in the shape of books and other matters, were to be his for the future. And the children – shy at first – had gone across to the rectory each morning, and had been well and carefully grounded.

That arrangement of necessity involved the son of the Rev. Temple Purdue – Charlie. Up to that time, Charlie Purdue had been a lonely, restless, mischievous boy of about the same age as Jimmy – roaming the neighbourhood, something to its scandal, and listening impatiently to mild and nervous lectures in the evening times from his father. Now, suddenly, new interests came into his days; these children he had only seen from a distance were intimately concerned with him in the first dreary journeys into the mysterious land of Knowledge.

It came to be an ordinary thing during successive summers (and be it noted that to a young child the world is always summer, and chill winter but a thing of a week or two, to be happily forgotten), for Charlie Purdue to spend a great deal of his time with Old Paul's babies; in effect, he made a fourth, and spent many hours with them in the house, and in rambling about the countryside. He knew more about that countryside than they did, and was learned in the ways of birds and beasts and fishes; he opened up new worlds to them. His was a happy-go-lucky, mischief-loving nature; and they followed him after a time, awe-struck and admiring.

Had Old Paul but known, heads were nodded over him across many a country tea-table, shoulders were shrugged and eyebrows raised, and he formed for a time the chief topic of conversation. The mere sight of him, strolling through a country lane with his hat on the back of his head and his short pipe in his mouth, and with the three children clinging to him, or playing about him, was extraordinary enough; that he should keep up that great house, solely, as it seemed, for their

benefit, and should keep himself and them apart from his neighbours, was stranger still. One or two daring spirits took upon themselves to call upon him; but in few instances did Old Paul suggest, by his manner of speech or his smile, that he would be glad to see the visitors again.

In the case of the Baffalls, Paul opened his heart at once. He had heard of them and of their coming, as, indeed, had all Daisley Cross. It had not been easy to lose sight of the Baffalls when once they loomed upon the place. For they came in force; huge furniture vans lumbered along the roads, and taxed the strength of the bridges; servants in flies, superciliously eyeing the country, arrived to put things in order; and finally, after a delay, the Baffalls themselves. A brand-new carriage met them at the little station, and they drove shyly through the village to their newly-furnished house, and held each other's hands as they went, and looked nervously about them. For they only knew London (wherein their money had been made); and the country to which they were retiring was new and strange and awful. Mrs. Baffall would never have come to the country but that she had heard it was the thing to do; and Mr. Baffall would never have come but for Mrs. Baffall.

Then, of course, they came to hear about Old Paul and the babies; and instantly Mrs. Baffall was excited. It had been the tragedy of her life that she had had no children; she had lain awake at nights, many and many a time in her hard-working life, and had held a dream child to her breast that ached for the touch of little lips. And here was a bachelor with three of them!

She had believed that another thing to do when you retired was to call upon people; and the first man on whom to call should be this extraordinary creature and his babies. She did not know that she should have waited decorously until people called upon her; she simply dressed Baffall in his best, and put him into the large brand-new carriage, and took him to call upon Old Paul. And Old Paul, a little amazed and frightened, went to find them in the big sitting-room that had books and toys and other delightful lumber scattered about it; and found Mr. Baffall smoothing a silk hat round and round upon his knee, and Mrs. Baffall examining a battered doll she had picked up from the sofa, and smiling at it. They laboriously shook hands with Old Paul (Mrs. Baffall at first nervously presented the legs of the doll to him instead of her own fingers), and hoped he was well.

After that conversation flagged. Old Paul made a remark or two about the weather, and inwardly wondered where Mrs. Baffall had bought her bonnet; Mr. Baffall responded as to the weather, and looked at the carpet. And then suddenly Mrs. Baffall broke the ice by asking in a fluttering whisper, and with pleading eyes turned to the young man, if she might see the children. And the hunger in those eyes was so strong that it went straight to the heart of Paul; so that from that moment he loved the common old woman with a mighty love.

The children were sent for; and meanwhile Paul, who had apologised for the delay by suggesting that they would "want some finding," examined his visitors. He saw that Mrs. Baffall had once been plump and pretty; she was plump enough now, but only a suggestion of the prettiness remained. It was obvious that, while she was grateful to Fortune that had enabled her and Mr. Baffall to rest from their labours before the greatest rest of all fell upon them, she yet did not quite know what to do, now that the necessity for labour had gone past. She glanced about the room furtively, as though seeking suggestions as to decorations; she was evidently making mental notes of alterations she could effect in her own establishment. More than that, glancing at Paul's easy tweed-clad figure, she decided that Baffall must have that kind of dress instanter, and must discard the black clothes and the silk hat; but she felt that Baffall would look well in a somewhat more marked pattern. Baffall, for his part, presented the appearance of a hard-grained, well-knit old man, with a firm mouth unobscured by a moustache, and with a mere fringe of grey beard on his chin; he spoke slowly and deliberately.

"You see, sir," he began, running a stunted forefinger round and round on the top of his silk hat, and regarding the process thoughtfully, "Mother is fair set on the babies. Turns round in the street to look at 'em; keeps pictures of 'em cut out and pasted in books. In fact, sir" – the man raised his head, and his grey eyes twinkled for a moment – "it's my belief that she keeps a big doll somewheres secret."

"Go along, father!" exclaimed Mrs. Baffall, blushing.

"Never mind, mother." Mr. Baffall stretched out a rough hand, and laid it on the plump gloved hand of the woman beside him. "It's only my fun. Though I give you warning, sir," he went on solemnly, "that you'd better watch these babies of yours; or one of these fine days Mrs. B. will be off with one of 'em."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that," replied Paul, kindly. "I think I'd trust Mrs. Baffall with any of them."

At that moment the children came into the room. Moira went straight to Paul, and slipped her hand into his, and looked inquiringly from him to the visitors. Jimmy, after a moment's hesitation, walked across to Mr. Baffall, and held out his hand. Mr. Baffall rose to his feet, and bent his body, and slowly and ceremoniously shook the hand of the boy.

"I hope you're well, sir, and that you like the country," he said, stiffly.

The only one of the trio absolutely at home under these circumstances was Alice – true daughter of that vivacious widow who had been, before all things, a woman of the world. She went straight to Mrs. Baffall, and graciously submitted to being kissed, smiled delightfully, and answered all that was said to her perfectly. Moira alone remained close to Paul; his arm had encircled her where he sat.

"And this," said Old Paul, "this is my little maid, Moira. Moira was the first of the babies to find her way to me; she gave me the idea about – about the others," he added, waving a hand vaguely towards the two other children.

Mr. Baffall glanced at his wife. "We might have thought of taking a little child like that," he said, in a low voice.

But Mrs. Baffall shook her head. "We couldn't have got the right sort – not situated as we were, with the business. And I should have wanted something I could look up to, as well as be fond of, in a way of speaking."

The Baffalls presently took their awkward leave, after a visit which was to be but the first of many, and drove away solemnly in the carriage. As might have been expected, Old Paul sank into insignificance, at least, in the mind of Mrs. Baffall, in comparison with the children; to her the children were everything. Indeed, she hovered about the house scandalously, coming in on all sorts of excuses at all times of the day. More than once she was actually found waiting outside the rectory, at the time the three of them came from their lessons; and walked home with them humbly enough, and proud that people should look at her, holding a hand of one of them.

She carried them off one day to her own place, and gave them tea in a big gaudily-furnished room, where they sat stiffly on chairs and looked at her and Mr. Baffall. Urged by Mrs. Baffall, the man cudgelled his brains to remember a game he had once played in childhood; essayed to introduce it for their delight. But at the very moment that he was down on his knees in the middle of the room repeating some doggerel with his eyes shut, the thing slipped his memory, and he knelt there, looking foolish, with the children gravely watching him. After they had been sent home, he sat for a long time saying the half-forgotten thing over to himself, and Mrs. Baffall, very silent, watching him.

"It ain't no good, Daniel; they didn't understand us, and we don't understand them," she said at last, slowly. "I never got the trick of it, having none of my own; and it's too late to learn it now. But I think if one of 'em ever came up to me – spontaneous – and put their arms round my neck – well, I think I should dance, Daniel!" And the tears were in the old woman's eyes as she spoke, although she laughed and brushed them away.

Incidentally the Baffalls were responsible for Honora Jackman, and for her introduction to Paul Nannock. Honora Jackman had casually, and somewhat scornfully, made the acquaintance of the Baffalls in London; but the Baffalls in the country, remote from trade, were people to be cultivated. So that it came about that they received one day a gushing telegram (with reply prepaid), demanding to know if she might come and "rusticate." And the Baffalls had looked at each other in some dismay, even while they had felt vaguely flattered. For Honora had been a person of consequence in their limited circle in London.

"Mother, what's 'rusticate'?" asked Mr. Baffall, feebly.

"It's a general term," Mrs. Baffall responded; "means picking flowers, and walking about, and – and looking at the trees and things, I believe. It's what we're doing now, father."

"Well, it's easy enough," said Mr. Baffall. "Tell her to come down at once, and mention the best train."

Honora Jackman descended upon the Baffalls with a series of little shrieks of delight; which was Honora's way. She was a lady with a high, clear voice and a high, clear colour; perfectly self-possessed; one of those people who assure you volubly and loudly that they are having "a fine old time." She was always busy over doing nothing; always in splendid health; and never in any one place for more than a week or two at a time. Possessed of very small means, Honora had seen the years slipping away beneath her well-shod, quick feet, and the "fine old time" had come down to be a mere matter of hunting up friends, and doing anything that should keep her away from a small and poky set of rooms in an obscure street in London. She had reached that stage when the hunt for friends had developed into a somewhat stern chase.

She landed at Daisley Cross with her battered trunks, and looked about her good-humouredly through a single eyeglass. She decided at once that she would be bored to death; she drew a mental picture of Mr. Baffall falling asleep after dinner, and of Mrs. Baffall knitting, or doing embroidery, and striving vainly to find subjects for conversation. She wondered if they kept anything she could ride. But she was all smiles and hearty good humour when presently the old couple drove up in the carriage to meet her; she exclaimed delightedly about the picturesqueness of the place, and vowed they should never get rid of her; shrieked with delight when a small urchin chased a hen across the road, and borrowed a penny from Mr. Baffall to throw to him.

She made rather a brilliant figure after dinner that night in the subdued light of the shaded lamps, what time she lazily smoked a cigarette, and drew Mr. and Mrs. Baffall out concerning the neighbours. And then, for the first time, she heard about Old Paul Nannock. She leaned across the table, with her white elbows on it, deeply interested, asking questions with a perplexed frown.

"A rich old bachelor – adopting babies?" she asked, in her high voice.

"Oh, dear no – not a bit old," replied Mrs. Baffall, laughing. "Quite young, as a matter of fact – and certainly good looking. At least, I think he's got nice eyes."

"Gracious!" Honora Jackman puffed out a cloud of smoke very suddenly, and leaned forward again over the table. "What's the matter with the man? Has he been crossed in love – or what is it?"

"Well, you see," said Baffall solemnly, "we haven't cared to ask him, Miss. He's a nice fellow; and he seems fond of the children, and that's all there is to it. I'm told he's got plenty of money."

"And certainly there isn't what you'd call any stint," corroborated Mrs. Baffall.

"I never heard of such a thing," exclaimed Honora, appealing to the very furniture and the pictures in her astonishment. "A rich young man – collecting babies as though they were postage stamps – and living all alone with 'em in the country. Do you know him well?"

"Oh, yes; the children often come here," replied Mrs. Baffall.

"And he doesn't?" said Honora, drily. Then, suddenly changing her tone, she added beseechingly, "I say, you positively must take me to see him; I revel in children, and I should simply love to meet a man like that. I'm sure he's a dear."

The Baffalls looked at each other a little doubtfully; perhaps into the mind of each came the thought that Honora Jackman might scarcely fit in well with Old Paul or Old Paul's ways. However, something had to be said, and Mr. Baffall was the one weakly to capitulate.

"I'm sure he'd be pleased," he said. "Mother and I'll take you over – whenever you like."

"How perfectly heavenly of you!" exclaimed Honora. "I'm simply dying to know him."

Honora Jackman took her loud-voiced way upstairs that night, and sat for some time thoughtfully twisting her rings round and round on her fingers. She had dreams – absolutely mercenary, let it be said – of a certain tall, blue-eyed man, who had much money, and was encumbered

by children he had been foolish enough to adopt. Honora gave a short, quick laugh when she thought of them.

"Idiot!" she exclaimed scornfully. "After all, there may be something to be got out of this dead-and-alive hole; you never can tell. I expect he's a bit raw; but that won't matter. And as for the children" – Honora laughed again, as she rose and yawned and stretched her white arms above her head – "well, we can easily dispose of that sort of nonsense."

CHAPTER III
"JIMMY QUIXOTE"

Exactly at what date Jimmy fell in love with Honora Jackman it would be difficult to say; it was a subtle affair growing out of circumstances; it would have been impossible even for Jimmy to have written a diary of it. For be it known that Jimmy was some thirteen years of age, with certain large ideas of his own regarding the world in general and ladies in particular; and Honora had burst upon him, and had captured him in quite an innocent and pretty fashion.

With the thought of a larger capture in her mind, Honora had wavered in her going from the hospitable house of the Baffalls, and had ended by not going at all. She had discovered that one of the horses fitted her "adorably"; and she had pretty well ridden him to death after that discovery. Then she had contrived to stir the Baffalls into giving a dinner party, to which the Rev. Temple Purdue was invited, and came, mildly apologetic for his very presence; and to which Old Paul, greatly against his own wish, also came. Then for the first time Honora looked upon him and found him exceedingly good. She had visions of years stretching before her, during which she wound him gaily round her little finger; and had, so far as herself was concerned, that "fine old time" to which reference has been made.

On that occasion Honora did not smoke; more than that, she subdued that high and somewhat grating laugh of hers. There was a new shyness upon her, and she inquired sympathetically and kindly about the children. She turned her rather good eyes upon Paul, and let them sparkle at him while she asked for full particulars; nodded brightly and sympathetically over the account of the coming of each child; threw in a word or two here and there, which showed Paul that she understood very perfectly his own intimate feelings concerning them; and stated that she was dying to meet them. Only in the drawing-room afterwards, amid gusts of stifled laughter, did she tell the perplexed Mrs. Baffall what she thought of Paul Nannock and of the children; only then did she suggest something of a programme that had been mapped out in her mind.

"He wants waking up – he wants stirring, and showing what the world is!" she exclaimed. "Fancy a man with that money pottering about country lanes with other people's children clinging to his skirts. Skirts is the right word; the man isn't a proper man at all. He's wasted here; I should like to do something with him."

Mrs. Baffall flutteringly thought it possible that Honora might do something with the man not altogether to the taste of his friends, but she said nothing. She only noted the change in Honora Jackman when the tall young man presently came into the drawing-room – that change to sweetness and gentleness that seemed a little foreign to the woman's nature. When presently Paul, with a glance at the clock, stated that he must be getting home, Honora rather lost sight of the part she was playing, and expressed her contemptuous resentment.

"You don't mean to tell me that you've got to tuck up the babies?" she demanded, with a little shrill laugh. "Upon my word, Mr. Nannock, you are positively interesting; one seems to see you hovering over them with candles, and listening to their breathing."

"I'm afraid you don't quite understand," Paul said, a little stiffly.

"Indeed, I understand perfectly," she replied, with that softened manner and with that bright light in her eyes. "And to-morrow I'm coming round to see them, if I may."

"I should like you to see them," said Paul; and went away with the feeling that the woman had a heart in her, after all, and was only flippant by accident.

She appeared at the house quite early the next morning, striding in with that appearance of gay good-nature and boundless health that best became her. And long before Paul had appeared to greet her, she had in some miraculous fashion discovered the children, and had made their acquaintance,

and learnt something of their lives, and of their pet haunts and hobbies. Jimmy had quite naturally taken the lead as guide and deputy host, and Jimmy had therewith lost his heart.

At first the loss had not been serious; he merely sighed a little after she had gone, and remembered with gratitude how naturally and easily she had spoken with him, and how frankly she had laughed with him, instead of at him. He remembered, in particular, certain adroit questions she had asked him in regard to himself, and how, when he had admitted that except for Old Paul he was quite alone in the world, she had made a demure, wry grimace, and had whispered that she, too, was alone in the world; which was distinctly a bond between them. He remembered that after Old Paul had quite unnecessarily put in an appearance, Miss Jackman had walked with a hand on his (Jimmy's) shoulder; and it had been, "Jimmy says this," or, "Jimmy thinks the other," until the boy's head had swum a little, and the light hand on his shoulder had seemed to press it with a caress. Then, too, she had suggested, with that charming laugh of hers, to Old Paul that she was alone in the world; had made rather a point of it, in fact. When, after inspecting everything, and expressing shrill delight at everyone, she was taking her leave, she had said, with a little whimsical shrug of the shoulders, that she really didn't know what was going to become of her unless she settled down soon. "I suppose I'm not like other people," she said, toying with her eyeglass, and laughing a little confusedly. "You see, Mr. Nannock, I'm a nomad; I've simply got a stuffy place in London, and so many trunks, and I" – she threw out one arm gracefully and laughed again – "I simply wander. Various people are kind enough to put me up – like those dear, sweet Baffalls, and then I go off again somewhere else. Nice in the summer, but a bit rough for a woman in the winter."

"I'm sorry," said Paul, for no particular reason.

"Though I don't know why I should bore you about myself," she added more brightly. "Mr. Nannock" – she held out her hand to him and laughed frankly – "you're one of the people it is good to meet. You've refreshed me – helped me; I shall face the world more bravely, remembering this place – and remembering you."

"We – we shall hope to see you again," said Paul, though he did not quite mean it at the time. "Kind of you to have called – most kind of you."

Honora Jackman knew the people with whom she had to deal, and knew perfectly well that she could stay in the place as long as she liked. To do her credit, she managed the thing rather well. She began by declaring on the third or fourth day that she must trespass no longer on the hospitality of the Baffalls; and on Mrs. Baffall murmuring that they were only too glad to have her there, while glancing at Mr. Baffall, and so eliciting a growling murmur from him, had impetuously rushed round the table to kiss Mrs. Baffall, and had declared, somewhat to the consternation of the worthy couple, that she would "make it another week."

At the end of the week she was discovered by Mrs. Baffall, among a confusion of trunks and clothing, diffidently attempting to begin the task of packing; the eyes she raised to the kindly old woman were suffused with tears. Never had she felt it so difficult to tear herself away from any place; never had she felt before, in this strange fashion, the loss of that mother who had died when Honora most needed her. She made a desperate business of drying her eyes, and of going on with the packing; she wondered, a little incoherently, what was going to become of her. So that it ended in Mrs. Baffall, with unwonted firmness, insisting on the trunks being put aside and on Honora Jackman, after protests and tears and embraces, consenting to stay a little longer. She was a beast, and it was a shame, and the Baffalls were angels – a couple of people in a beastly hard world who had hearts in 'em, and were not ashamed to acknowledge it. And oh – if dear mother had only lived!

Old Paul proved inaccessible more than once, and Honora, biting her lip to save an exclamation of impatience, had to put up with the children. It occurred to her that through the children she might best attack that stronghold to which she desired to win; and, to the future heart-breaking of Jimmy, she chose that susceptible boy as the first line of defence to be demolished; though, had she but known

it, she had better have attempted to secure the allegiance of Moira. Jimmy, nothing loth, fell an easy victim, and dimly wondered how such a glorious creature could have stooped to him.

At first it was a mere matter of showing her the nearest way to the village, and Jimmy strode along willingly enough and proud of his new responsibilities. Truth to tell, it had been the design of Honora to capture all the children, and so incidentally to reach to Paul himself; but Moira stood in the way. When Honora Jackman had swung up to the house with a cheery call and a light laugh, she had been met by the dark-eyed girl; the child held out a hand calmly, and put up a cold cheek for the proffered kiss. But she could not go out; there were things she had to do for Old Paul.

"Why do you call him 'Old Paul'?" asked Honora.

The child looked at her in surprise. "We all call him that," she replied. "You see, he's not an ordinary relation – not a father, nor an uncle – nor anything of that kind; and we've got to call him something. We talked it over a long time ago with him, and we came to the conclusion" – Moira stepped delicately over her words at this point – "came to the conclusion that it would not be quite respectful to call him 'Paul' so we called him 'Old Paul'; and no one can have a word to say against that – can they? You see," the child concluded simply, "it's really because you don't know Old Paul that you don't understand."

"Gracious!" Honora ejaculated under her breath; but she smiled at Moira with apparent understanding.

Jimmy coming out at that moment flung himself joyfully into the breach, but he had a suspicion that the child regarded him coldly as he walked away with Miss Jackman. He must really explain to Moira afterwards that there were things in life she could not possibly hope yet to understand – affairs of the heart, vague but beautiful. Meanwhile, Honora Jackman, inwardly fuming, was smiling upon him and extracting information. Jimmy, with his cap upon the back of his head and his hands in his pockets, supplied answers cheerfully.

So it came about that Honora learnt more than she had learnt already from the Baffalls; understood how this large-hearted man had stood in his loneliness, as it were, with wide-opened arms ready to welcome these children who drifted in from the world he had gladly left behind; understood, with no real sense of the beauty and generosity of it, how all and sundry who came had been welcomed, for the simple and perfect reason that they were children. That point never appealed to the woman; she saw only a foolish man, easily imposed upon by a tale of distress.

"So that I suppose you all have different names?" she suggested. "I mean, of course, names other than Jimmy – and Moira – and the other child."

"My name is James Larrance," said Jimmy, "and Alice's mother (she went away and quite forgot to come back, you know) was Mrs. Vickery. Only Moira has got the real name," he added.

"The real name?" She turned and looked at him sharply. "What's the real name?"

"Nannock," replied Jimmy. "That's Old Paul's name, you know; and he gave it to Moira because I believe he couldn't bear that other one – the name that really belonged to her. He got Moira from someone he was awfully fond of."

Honora began to see daylight; began to sniff suspiciously at a possible but impossible love story – an awkward jumbled thing, buried away in the years that Old Paul was trying to forget. She became interested in spite of herself, but she saw that she must use this boy to further her ends. She dropped that light hand again upon his shoulder as they walked, and spoke confidentially, playing upon his heartstrings as upon a new and untried instrument, easily stirred.

"Jimmy, I'm quite sure that you and I are going to be great friends," she said. "Of course, you understand, Jimmy, that I have very few friends – not people that I really like – people I can talk to."

Jimmy gulped, and began dimly to call to mind all the romances of which he had heard or which he had read. Almost he wished that something wonderful might happen – some danger that should threaten her; it seemed then that he would have known perfectly what to do. Strong boy though he was, he was almost on the verge of tears at his own helplessness – at the thought that she must go away,

and leave him as she had found him but a few days since. For this was not love in the ordinary sense; this was but that fine chivalry that lies deep in the hearts of all of us, and can be wakened at a whisper or at the touch of a hand; only in some of us it grows and springs to full life earlier than in others. Jimmy did not understand what the very word woman meant; only he stretched out warm impulsive young hands into the future, and craved to do that which the best of men had done before him and had laid down their lives for. The woman did not matter; the fact that she was a woman sufficed.

Even when she began to reveal a little of her purpose he did not understand; he was glad only to help her. Still keeping that hand upon his shoulder as they walked towards the village, she began delicately to ask him about the lives they led – he and the others and Old Paul – and how they spent their days. And by the guileless Jimmy was let suddenly into the secret heart of it all.

The betrayal was disgraceful; but, then, Honora knew the ways of youth, and she meant to gain her point. She fished delicately, with slow, easy questions for bait, until Jimmy had led her – in words, at least – into the very heart of that paradise which Old Paul had made for himself and the children, in certain deep woods unexplored by others. Honora had a vision of the man hidden away there, surrounded by the children, and reading and talking to them on sunny afternoons. There, apparently, he was to be taken off his guard; there discovered in his most intimate moments, and taken unawares. Honora laid her plans, and determined heartlessly enough to use the boy to further them. Jimmy was to meet her on the morrow; the infatuated boy was actually to bring this loud-voiced hearty woman into the holy of holies, and to spring her suddenly upon his friends.

Only when Jimmy had parted from her, and was taking his way back to the house, did he realise what he had promised, and what it involved. He remembered how first he had been taken – walking on tip-toe and breathing carefully – deep down into that place of trees and ferns and birds and rustling things; remembered with what pride he had assisted to bring Moira and Alice into it afterwards. The place had been Old Paul's discovery; you had to plunge through masses of undergrowth and drop down a bank to get to it, and no one in the world had ever found it before! Alice had been properly frightened, and had torn her frock; Moira had gone into it with her eyes wide open, and her lips parted a little in sheer delight. And to-morrow Honora Jackman was to scramble into it, and to take them all by surprise.

Jimmy thought deeply about the prospect. In the first place, it might be well to break it to the others; to explain that the lady was really very nice, and that he adored her, and to try and recollect a few of the things she had said when speaking about their retreat. On the other hand (a wiser and more subtle thought, this), it might be well to meet Miss Jackman, and take her by another route to another place, and so get over the difficulty in that way. But Jimmy had not yet learnt to be absolutely dishonest; he faced the thought resolutely that to-morrow he must redeem his promise, and must thrust the lady, willy-nilly, into the paradise.

This new Judas had revealed the very time when Paul might be discovered with his young people; Jimmy woke with the thought of that in the morning, and carried that leaden thought all day; or, at least, until the time when he was to meet Honora Jackman. He had made an excuse for deserting the party; had slipped away at the last moment, and now hung about, flushed and irresolute, but strangely happy, to wait for the lady with the eyeglass. And presently saw her swinging along towards him, and already noting him with a smile. Jimmy discovered, too, that another miracle was to happen at the very moment of meeting; for she dropped an arm about his shoulders, and stooped and brushed his lips with her own.

"You're the best friend I have in the world," she whispered, truthfully enough.

The intoxicated Jimmy stumbled on through the wood with the woman behind him. His lips were wet with her kiss, and had it been anyone else who had done this thing, he would have rubbed the lips hard to get rid of the taint of it. But now he dared not even lick them. Honora Jackman sang softly as she walked, and Jimmy, with that wondrous being behind spelling indefinite happiness, faced resolutely the dreadful moment when he must meet those he had betrayed. He wished desperately

that she might have been content with any other place in the wood in which to sit and talk with him; why she should choose this particular spot, and be so anxious about it, had not yet dawned upon the mind of Jimmy. So, with fear knocking at his heart, he came to the top of the bank and parted the bushes and looked down.

"Hullo!" he called feebly.

There was a shriek of delight, changing instantly to a dead silence as the head of Honora appeared beside his own, looking down at them. Old Paul was upon his hands and knees working out an elaborate design with fir cones; he looked up at the apparition and straightened himself, and got ceremoniously to his feet, treading out the design as he moved. Honora, nothing daunted, looked down and nodded cheerfully, and surveyed the paradise out of her bright eyes through a brighter eyeglass.

"How perfectly heavenly!" she exclaimed. "Will you help me down?"

Now Old Paul was something of a coward; moreover, he had lived so long that hermit life away from women that he had nothing wherewith to meet the situation. Jimmy had jumped down, and was industriously kicking away at the ground beneath his feet, without caring very much to look at anyone, and Paul glanced round at the girls. Most of all he looked at Moira, and he read the shameful answer he was to give clearly in her eyes. After that he faced Honora Jackman with some sternness, though with a little laughter in his eyes.

"I'm afraid you must go back," he said. "You see, this is private property, in a manner of speaking; it's our enchanted garden – and all that sort of thing. I'm afraid you must go back."

"I don't think I can find my way," she retorted; and then lowering her voice, added rallying to the innocent face uplifted to her own below the bank, "I declare you're the biggest baby of the lot!"

"Very likely; but I'd rather you went back; Jimmy will take you," he said.

Jimmy, after a moment of amazed silence, scrambled up the bank, cast a glance of withering scorn back at Old Paul, and then disappeared with Honora into the wood. In less than five minutes he was back again, and he came like a young fury, bursting through the bushes, and flinging himself breathless before Paul, who had resumed work with the fir cones.

"You're a beast!" the boy shouted, almost crying. "She's much nicer than you think – and she's a lady – and she was crying when I left her. You're a brute, Old Paul!"

That statement was to an extent true, but the tears in the eyes of Honora Jackman had been those of sheer rage and mortification. Moreover, Jimmy's outburst may be accounted for by the fact that she had utterly ignored him at the moment of parting, except to request him viciously to "run away and play." For Honora was seriously annoyed.

"Oho! sits the wind in that quarter?" said Old Paul, sitting back on his heels, and regarding the boy with a quizzical smile. "Poor old Jimmy! I'll wager a week's pocket money with you, Jimmy, that you love her. Come, now – out with it!"

Jimmy stammered and stuttered, and looked about at the trees. "I do – and I don't mind who knows it," he said at last, hotly.

"Brave boy! good boy! You're growing up finely, Jimmy, and it's just what I might have expected of you. But even in your love, Jimmy, you mustn't betray your friends," he added gravely. "She's a nice lady, though a trifle old for you, Jimmy; but you're growing every day. I'll even forgive you for calling me names, though that wasn't quite fair. Did you see her safely out of the wood, Jimmy?"

But Jimmy, with a sudden suspicious sound in his throat, had turned and bolted up the bank. And in a moment Paul's smile faded, and he took the bank at a leap, and went after the boy. He found him lying prone on the ground, with his face hidden on his arms, sobbing as though his heart would break. He flung himself in a moment beside him, and put his head down close to Jimmy's.

"Jimmy – old Jimmy – I didn't mean – "

Jimmy raised his face cautiously, looked about him to be sure that no eyes save those of Paul could note his swollen eyelids and his quivering lips. "I know you didn't," he gulped. "But you don't

understand me; you don't know how wonderful she is. You haven't thought that she hasn't got a friend in the world – 'cept me; she told me that," he added proudly.

"Did she now!" Old Paul sat up and looked at the boy. "She's more wonderful than I thought, Jimmy. And I suppose you'd do anything for her – die for her?"

"I would!" exclaimed the boy earnestly. "If I thought she was in trouble – or anybody was going to do anything that would hurt her – I'd – "

"I know – I know, Jimmy," replied Paul, with a grave nod. "And it's a brave feeling – isn't it, boy? Makes you tingle all over, especially at the tips of the fingers. Makes you carry your head up, and draw your breath quickly – eh?"

"Why – how do you know, Old Paul?" asked the boy, staring at him.

"Oh – just guessed it," said Paul, with a little laugh. "Come on, Jimmy Quixote, let's join the ladies."

"What's 'Quixote'?" asked Jimmy, getting slowly to his feet.

"Oh, he was a gentleman who went out to fight for ladies – and he tilted at windmills and things," said Paul. "But he was rather a good sort, Jimmy; and I think I like you the better for this afternoon. You don't mind my calling you 'Jimmy Quixote,' do you?"

"Not if he was that sort of man," replied Jimmy.

For a long time after that – long, indeed, after Honora Jackman had left the Baffalls in peace and gone again upon her journeyings – Old Paul would sometimes, in moments of confidence, tenderly call Jimmy by that curious name, so that between them it rather stuck to him. It was, moreover, a reminder of something that must not be known by others – a sweet and beautiful confidence – the first of that kind between them.

But Honora Jackman was not of the kind to be ignored, nor did she mean to give up the pursuit so easily. The children were a nuisance, but she remembered that they were not always in evidence; there was a time when the tiresome creatures were safely shut away with the Rev. Temple Purdue, and when Old Paul had, in a manner of speaking, lost his bodyguard. It would be hard if Honora did not contrive to get hold of the man at that time, and her confidence in herself told her that she could soon bring the man to her feet if once she had got him out of his usual surroundings. He was a good creature, and he was rich, and he was simply wasting his life. Apart from all else, too, Honora's pride was piqued at the thought of his apparent inaccessibility; she would challenge him, and that, too, before the children. To do her justice, she felt that ordinary honesty demanded that she should not attack Paul behind their backs.

The opportunity arrived easily enough. On the following morning, behold Honora at the gate leading to the grounds, standing tall and slim and straight as the children came out on their way to the rectory; behold Old Paul standing sheepishly in the gateway, and giving her "Good morning!" Jimmy flushed hotly, and gave her his hand; Alice did likewise; Moira shyly drew back and bowed. Honora Jackman gaily nodded to Paul, and proffered her blunt request.

"I lost my way again in the woods this morning, Mr. Nannock," she said. "You will really have to show me the way through them – and I'll promise not to go near your sacred haunts," she added, with a glance at Jimmy.

"I – I should be delighted," said the recreant Paul in a low voice.

"I can't manage it this morning; I've got some shopping to do in the village for Mrs. Baffall," said Honora. "Shall we say – to-morrow?"

"To-morrow," echoed Paul, with a nod.

The three children walked in silence to the rectory; it was a dismal day for everyone. And that night, for the second time, Old Paul sat in his room smoking, and listening for a little light footfall on the stairs – a footfall that never came.

CHAPTER IV
THE ELOPING PERSONS

That was a night against which a black mark had afterwards to be set in the memory of Paul Nannock. It had seemed such a simple thing, and so inevitable – that promise to which he had been forced, and which would have meant, with anyone else, a mere matter of an idle stroll and a little easy talk. But with this man the children stood first; and ever in the front rank of them stood Moira, child of the woman he had loved. The absurdity of regarding the little expedition with Honora Jackman seriously occurred to him more than once, and yet he shrank from it; and the fact that the sensitive child who was so near to his heart had stamped it with her disapproval meant much to Paul. It was a desertion on his part, and she had answered it by a desertion of her own. Paul sat up later than usual, in the hope that she might after all come creeping down to his room; but she never appeared.

He stole upstairs at last, miserably enough, and listened at the door of her room. All was silent, and he told himself that she had forgotten, and had fallen asleep. Had he known that she lay in her bed, wide-awake, fighting out jealously the bitter problem in her mind, it would have been a matter of his hurrying in in the darkness, and taking her in his arms, and promising I know not what. But he did not know that, and he went upstairs to his own room.

In a new bravery induced by the darkness he determined that on the morrow he would invent an excuse, and would get out of the engagement with Honora; in a more sober and reflective moment he knew that he would do no such thing; the affair must be gone through with, and he must contrive in some fashion to make his peace with Moira afterwards.

The relations between the child and the man were so curious and so subtle, that no real explanation of anything that troubled them could ever be made between them. Their sympathy one with the other was so great, that it had long ago become a mutual business of give-and-take; the sensitive little creature had come to learn long since that no words were necessary, and that the mere taking of her into Old Paul's arms in silence meant much, and atoned for much, and explained everything. Gentle as she was, she resented bitterly and fiercely any interference with the man; he was all her world, and she must stand first with him, or her world crumbled into dust. And Paul had long ago come to understand that, and to understand that he must be watchful. The thought of it troubled him now; the impossibility of explaining to Moira that this was a mere act of politeness to Honora Jackman struck him with a sense of comical dismay.

He slept badly, and rose early; he was glad to get out into the air and into his garden before anyone was stirring; there was every promise of a perfect long summer day before him. Well, he would be done with Honora Jackman in a matter of an hour or so; the rest of the day was his own. Yet how he longed even to be rid of the responsibility of that hour or so!

He went back into the house and into his room, and set about preparing for himself a cup of coffee. He very often did that in the early morning, before anyone was about. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was not quite six. He was bending over the little spirit stove, when he suddenly drew himself upright and listened; for there was a sound of little feet upon the stair.

The sound drew nearer, while he listened a little guiltily. Then the door was pushed open, and Moira came in; and for a moment the man and the child looked deep into each other's souls.

"Hullo, Moira!" said Paul at last. "You're up early."

She did not reply; she walked across to him, and put up her face for a kiss. He did not dare even to whisper a question as to the previous night; he was casting about in his mind for the best thing to say under these tragic circumstances. The pride of the child forbade that she should even breathe the name of her rival; so that each waited and wondered what was best to be said. Had the simple Paul but known, however, Moira had already made up her mind what to do with him; had been thinking it out during the night.

Paul was sipping his coffee, and furtively glancing at the child, when he saw that she was about to speak. She was leaning against him, and his arm encircled her; almost he could feel her thin young body quiver with the eagerness of the question, although she spoke quietly enough.

"Old Paul – what do you do when you love anybody?"

"Do?" Paul set down his cup, and twisted the child about, the better to look into her eyes. "Oh, you just – just love 'em," he replied feebly.

"Oh!" The child lowered her eyes, and seemed to be pondering deeply. Finally she spoke, tracing a vein on the back of the man's hand with one finger as she said the words, and looking down at that finger. "Patience says that sometimes, when you're in that state, you elope."

"Patience seems to know a lot about it," said Paul. "Look here, old lady – what are you driving at? We're quite alone, you know – and I'll never breathe a word about it."

"Patience says that sometimes there's somebody in the way – 'somebody who stands between,' was what she said; and in that case you steal out quietly, and you rush away, and you never get caught. At least, that is, in the best eloping cases," she added, thoughtfully.

"And you only do that when somebody stands between?" whispered Paul. "Somebody, for instance, who is a little bit in the way?"

She did not look up at him; she only nodded quickly. As he looked at her, he saw a bright drop fall on his hand, but he was too wise to say anything; he went on in an unaltered tone:

"Someone, for instance, who would take – shall we say *me*, for argument? – away for a time; that is, of course, if they could. But, dear" – he drew her a little closer to him – "I don't really want to go."

"But of course there are things you must do, unless somebody else is brave enough to help you," she whispered. "That's why it seemed to me on such a day, that we might, if we were very quiet about it, elope!" She raised her eyes for the first time, and the eyes were laughing. "It isn't a serious business, Old Paul; and we could be back in time for supper."

"It *is* a serious business," he replied. "It's a desperate business. We might be pursued by that – that other person."

"There's not a moment to be lost, Old Paul," she cried, slipping out of his embrace, and dancing light-footed and light-hearted round the room. "Come at once!"

"Eloping persons generally have a carriage, and they drive at top speed," suggested Old Paul. "We must do the thing properly, you know."

"There is the Ancient One," replied Moira instantly.

"To be sure; I never thought of the Ancient One," he replied.

Now the Ancient One was an aged and somewhat dejected donkey, who had been bought out of sheer charity by Old Paul under distressing circumstances. Originally the Ancient One had been attached to a cart owned by a gipsy; and Paul had come upon the gipsy belabouring the animal unmercifully upon a country-road. Moira had been with him; she remembered to this hour all that had happened on that wonderful and exciting occasion.

Old Paul had first of all taken off his coat, and folded it neatly, and laid it on the bank; and then a moment later he and the gipsy were "all arms and legs," as Moira expressed it afterwards, "about the road."

It had ended in the gipsy being discovered, as they say in the plays, seated with a swollen face on the opposite bank, and bewailing his hard lot; while Old Paul stood over him, and asked what he wanted for the Ancient One. (They christened him the Ancient One afterwards, because Paul said that donkeys never died, and that this one ought to have died years before.)

Paul had paid certain bright sovereigns for the Ancient One, and had led him home in triumph, with Moira poised upon his back. After that an old chaise had been discovered, hidden away in the stable of an inn; and that had been a mere matter of seventeen shillings; and this was the equipage in which these eloping persons were to start.

But first, of course, there were preparations. You cannot elope without careful consideration; and it was more than possible that they might be hungry before the day was out and they crept home to supper. Going hand in hand and on tip-toe guiltily, they stole from the larder bread and cheese and a bottle of milk; moreover, Paul made an uncouth sandwich or two in a desperate hurry. When all this had been tied up in a cloth, they went out of the house in search of the Ancient One and the chaise.

By all the rules of the great game it was necessary, as Old Paul carefully explained in a whisper, that he should be waiting in the carriage in a lane, until the lady could escape and join him. Therefore, the better to keep up that fiction, Moira hid in the bushes until three shrill whistles sounded from outside the garden; then she crept out to meet her lover; and Old Paul (the dog must have been through this before, to understand it so well!) received her, hat in hand – a difficult process, because he had to hold the Ancient One with the other hand, and the Ancient One was kicking; but Moira, radiantly happy, got into the chaise, and sat bright-eyed and demure; then Old Paul climbed in beside her, and after a preliminary tussle with the Ancient One, started him on his journey.

Properly speaking, the Ancient One should have gone at top speed, with dust flying and the chaise rocking perilously. But there was no top speed about that animal; instead, he crawled along in a zig-zag fashion, just as tempting grass lured him at either side of the road; while Old Paul sat, leaning forward, with the reins hanging loose in his hands, the while he talked to Moira. For they were going out into the big world, these two, if only for a day; and it was a wonderful place to each innocent pair of eyes, unexplored and beautiful. Somewhere or other, when the Ancient One should have condescended to drag them to the spot, they were to have breakfast, and to discuss the plans for the day.

In that, again, Old Paul showed his absolute genius; you might have imagined that he would have stopped in some secluded spot, and have opened that precious cloth which contained the provisions he had so artfully prepared; but not a bit of it; he had other ideas than that for such an occasion. Presently, if you please, the Ancient One was turned unresisting into an old stable yard attached to an equally old inn; there to dream in a little while of the Elysian Fields, amid a generous bounty of hay. By that time a wondering landlady had conducted Old Paul and the child to a room upstairs, where in the mere twinkling of an eye a cloth was spread upon the table, and a round-faced, open-eyed young female had bounced in and out with knives and forks and cups and plates. For by that time the Ancient One had been examined, and the very chaise appraised; and the story was abroad of this wonderful young man who had come suddenly as it were into the deserted place, and had mysteriously ordered breakfast.

The landlady herself waited upon them; hovered about them, indeed, with hands upraised, and with stifled exclamations of wonder and delight. It was difficult to get rid of her; she came in on the mere pretext of picking up a crumb from the floor; there was no delicacy about her. When, however, it had at last dawned upon her that her presence was an outrage, the two settled down to their meal; and the dark eyes looked into the blue ones contentedly and happily; and the blue ones smiled back; for even Moira knew that this was the proper thing to do on an elopement.

They grew quite confidential over that meal – more confidential, in fact, than they had ever been. It was as though they had been lifted out of their ordinary world, and set down in an enchanted one somewhere else; the ordinary conditions of life had slipped past them; and could be lightly forgotten. Old Paul told her something of the days when he had been a boy, something of his life in a time that seemed now far off, lying back in the shadows. And Moira learned, to her surprise, that in that time Patience had been with him, and had even then, as it seemed to his remembrance, been quite old.

"I was a little chap, and I remember that we were all very poor, Moira," he said across the table. "But always Patience was there; she looked after my mother a lot, when my mother seemed only to be a young girl. Then heaps and heaps of riches came to me, too late for the young girl who was my mother, but still I had Patience with me; which accounts, you see," he added whimsically, "for her

being there now, and understanding me so well. If sometimes you think she's hard and stern, dear, you've only got to remember that I've given her a lot of trouble in my time, and made her anxious about me. I've taken a deal of watching, Moira."

"You have, Old Paul," she retorted, with a remembrance of her rescue of him that day. "You might have been quite destroyed if we hadn't looked after you carefully," she added, with her elbows on the table and her chin propped in her palms.

"Do you know," he said, looking across at her gratefully, "although I wouldn't mention it to a soul, I shall never know quite how to thank you for to-day. This elopement of ours has quite put matters straight; I should never have thought of it myself at all."

"Patience says that it takes a woman to manage things," retorted Moira wisely.

They found the Ancient One less inclined to move than ever after his feasting; indeed, Moira declared that it was a little difficult to fit him in between the shafts. But they got him started, and went away on another unknown expedition, with the whole inn to watch them, including the landlady and the bouncing female who had brought in the knives and forks and plates. At the last moment the Ancient One decided that he would return to the hay, and it became necessary for Old Paul to lead him out into the high road, and for the landlady and the bouncing one to push the chaise behind; while Moira, in a high state of dignity, sat in the chaise, and strove hard not to laugh. For Old Paul saying pretty things to the donkey while he led him was certainly funny.

Paul had been thoughtful in regard to the home-coming, and the landlady had received secret orders, so that by the time the long bright day was ending, and the shadows were lengthening across the roads and fields, they came, in some unaccountable fashion, by a circuitous route back to the inn again; there to find the landlady, apparently moved to astonishment at their re-appearance, and yet with a sumptuous meal on the way. Moira was handed over to the care of the motherly woman and the bouncing maid, while Paul smoked a pipe, and lounged in a deep window seat, and looked out over the darkening fields. And presently the child came down, radiant and hungry, with her attendant slaves hovering about her. The man and the child ate their meal in the dusk of the room, with only their eyes for lights – the one for the other.

"It's been the most wonderful elopement possible," said Moira, with a deep sigh of contentment. "I'm sure that even the Ancient One will remember it to his dying day – that is, if he ever dies at all."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world," said Paul.

A little jealous feeling crept in, even in the midst of Moira's happiness; she stole round the table, and got an arm about his neck, and whispered:

"Have you thought about her at all, Old Paul?"

"Once – but not seriously," he whispered. "But I don't like you to say that, dear," he added.

"That's because you don't understand," she breathed, with her lips against his cheek. "I should have died if I had thought of you in the woods with her; I could not have borne it. Promise me, Old Paul – promise me truly?"

"What, little maid?" he whispered.

"Promise me that never in all your life will you elope with anybody but me. Let me know that no one else will be taken away by you like this. Let this be my own – my very own elopement."

And Old Paul most solemnly promised.

They drove home under a kindly moon and stars; and by that time Moira was nearly asleep. Jogging along through the country lanes, Old Paul as he held the reins and kept an arm about the child, dreamed dreams. Dreamed, perhaps, that this might have been the woman who had died; that in such a fashion he might have travelled through an impossible world of moonshine and of starshine with her, and been impossibly happy. Almost he came to think that by the love of the child he had won back to the love of the mother; that the disaster that had touched his life was a thing to be forgotten – something long since atoned for, alike in death and by the gift of this baby. The love his young

manhood had known for the mother seemed to be swallowed up in this purer, finer love for the child; he came back, at the end of his perfect day, secure in that love at least.

By the time the sleepy Ancient One stopped at the gate in the wall Moira was awake again; she suffered herself to be lifted from the chaise, and so to face the commonplace world again. She stood, swaying a little with sleep, in the warm dusk; she became dimly conscious that someone was surveying her through a bright eyeglass. That was the crowning moment of her triumph, and she did not need to say anything in explanation.

"I was taking a stroll," sounded the high voice of Honora Jackman. "Where have you been hiding all day, you two?"

Old Paul felt the warm fingers of the child tighten about his hand; he knew what answer he must give. "Well, as a matter of fact," he replied blandly, "Moira and I have been away all day – on a little excursion." The fingers tightened still more, and he plunged desperately into the full truth. "We – we eloped together early this morning; and it has been a wonderful day."

That was enough; impelled by the stern hand of Moira he was swept past Honora Jackman, and was drawn towards the house, leading the Ancient One. It was the hour of Moira's triumph, and she would not have abated one jot of it. The shrill little laugh the woman gave was the final beautiful note of it.

Only Anthony Ditchburn seemed to have suffered. He came querulously to Paul that night – looking in with a scared face, and with glances over his shoulder, as though in fear of pursuit.

"Why did you go away, Nannock?" he demanded. "She's a horrible woman; she came early, and said something about woods; seemed to have a sort of suspicion that I was hiding you. Came again several times during the day, and asked about you; was positively rude at times. And I in the midst of an important chapter! You needn't laugh," he added piteously; "it has quite unnerved me. She's dangerous."

But Old Paul leaned back in his chair, and laughed until he cried.

CHAPTER V
JIMMY'S AFFECTIONS

It does not need to be recorded here that after that first fierce outburst the image of Honora Jackman faded from the mind of Jimmy, and became but as a vague dream of the past. True, for a time he hugged to himself the impossible thought of her; remembered with a pang the day of her departure. For even the Baffalls were to see the last of her, and Jimmy was to be privileged to be inconsolable for some twenty-four hours.

She did not depart without something of a sensation. She felt she owed it to her reputation, and to her superior knowledge of the world, that she should let this man know that she understood his feelings – understood, in particular, that he was afraid of her. Bitterly though she resented the fashion in which he had set her aside, there was consolation in the thought that he had had to set, as she believed, the frail child between herself and him; she would remind him of that at least before she went. Mrs. Baffall being easily managed on such a matter, it came about that Mrs. Baffall put in an appearance at Daisley Place, and sought an interview with Old Paul.

"She's going away," said Mrs. Baffall; it did not seem necessary to mention any name.

"You'll miss her," replied Old Paul politely.

Mrs. Baffall glanced about her as though fearing listeners; then she smoothed her gloved hands down over her silk dress, bending herself a little to do so, and spoke in a confidential whisper:

"We shall – and we shan't, Mr. Nannock, in a manner of speaking," she said. "Between you and me and what I may call the gate-post, Baffall and me won't be sorry. She's nice, and she's got style, but it's a bit too much of a style for us. Bare shoulders at dinner make me feel chilly – and her voice seems to go through and through the house."

"I think I understand," said Paul, nodding. "But you want me to do something?"

"I thought if you could stand the shoulders for one evening – you being more used to 'em like, Mr. Nannock – it'd be a charity. She said this morning" – Mrs. Baffall made an extraordinary grimace, as though controlling a desire to laugh – "said this very morning that she was dying to see you and the children together – in your own place. Seems quite set on it."

Paul walked across to the window and looked out; turned there, and looked at the old woman. There was an unspoken question in his eyes, and she answered it promptly.

"Lord bless the man – she won't eat you!" she exclaimed, in a more natural fashion than that in which she usually spoke. "And if it'll do her any good, by all means let her. I'm sure you'll excuse me speaking in such a fashion to you, sir; but I think she's got about a hundred and fifty a year to live on – and not many friends, as you count friends in this world. And she ain't a bad sort, take her all round – and she's a woman."

Paul came away from the window and stood close to the old woman, who had risen to meet him; in that moment they clasped hands and looked into each other's eyes. "Come, all of you – and you shall fix the date," said Paul.

She withdrew her hand and laughed a little confusedly; settled the strings of her bonnet with some faint touch of coquetry. "Make it to-morrow, Mr. Nannock," she said.

In order not to reveal the innocent plot Paul sent a formal invitation that day by the hand of Jimmy. Jimmy had a wild hope that he might see his divinity, for, of course, at that time her image had not faded by any means – that was only to come later. But the lady did not put in an appearance; instead, Mrs. Baffall entertained him in the showy drawing-room, inquiring politely as to the health of everybody, and giving him minute particulars concerning various uninteresting matters with which he could not possibly be concerned. But Jimmy learnt, to his fluttering delight, that *she* was coming to dinner on the morrow; it might be that he would get a glimpse of her.

He was to get more than a glimpse. Old Paul gravely informed him, on his return to the house, that he was to dine with the company on the morrow; and Jimmy, blushing furiously, blurted out his thanks and fled from the room. For reasons of state Paul decided that the girls had better not appear; perhaps he feared Moira a little. In his own mind he set this experienced woman of the world against the child, and carefully made allowances for feelings with which another would not have credited her. In fact, all things considered, Paul felt he would be glad when the dinner party should be over, and Honora Jackman well away upon her travels again.

Honora came softly, and with something of timidity. To judge from her manner, and from the fashion in which her hand lingered in his for a moment at her coming, this might have been really an affair of hearts between them; some impossible romance, in which self-sacrifice had been demanded and sadly given. Mrs. Baffall quite felt that the unfortunate woman was departing into a grey world, charged with sad and secret memories. So well, indeed, did Honora carry out that part of the business that Paul himself had an uncomfortable feeling that he had treated her rather badly, and that she was behaving with a generosity that called for the highest commendation. In manner he was quite apologetic.

She had evidently determined that she would stamp this night into the memory of Paul Nannock; would go away, in fact, leaving the sweetest savour behind her. The boisterousness was gone; there was almost a new timidity about her. When she came into that sitting-room that was littered with books and toys, and came up frankly to him with a hand outstretched, she was careful to keep her disengaged white arm round the neck of the radiant Jimmy; insisted afterwards on having Jimmy beside her at table. And there talked in a quiet voice, and with a little low ripple of laughter, about what she was to do and what prosaic things were to happen to her.

"It's just been simply lovely down here with you all," she said. "I'll own I came to scoff; I've remained to do the other thing. If you knew anything about me, you dear simple folk, you'd know that for a time I've lost sight and touch of the hard world in which I live. Funny – isn't it? Yet it's true; even Jimmy here has taught me a lot. I shall remember your woods and your fields, and I shall think of you often and often. Gracious! – I'm growing sentimental."

She was to be a revelation to them that night. Presently she sat down at the piano in the dusk of the room (Paul remembered it afterwards, and could smell again, when he remembered, the soft warm summer night outside the open windows) and sang to them. She began with a haunting Irish song – an old thing, with a hint of mournfulness and longing and fatality in it – passed rapidly into a happy-go-lucky burlesque affair that set them chuckling, and caused Mrs. Baffall to roll about in her chair and to cram her handkerchief into her mouth. The voice was not particularly good, but it had a pleasant quality of sincerity and naturalness, and she made the most of it. And then suddenly she came out with the complete object of her visit revealed.

"Mr. Nannock," she said, with a faint flush mounting in her cheek, "you won't let me go away without seeing the – the children?"

"I'll be – delighted," he said, looking at her helplessly, and inwardly praying with extreme fervour that Moira might be asleep. "Perhaps, Mrs. Baffall – "

But Mrs. Baffall shook her head. "I'm very comfortable, thank you," she replied, "and I can see the children any time. Miss Jackman won't get another chance."

So Paul, feeling somewhat ridiculous, went out of the room, and lighted a candle in the hall, and prepared to set out on his expedition. Honora Jackman, evidently amused, stood with her skirts gathered in one hand ready to mount the stairs, watching him; noted with a secret delight the perplexed frown on the face bending above the candle. He came at last to the foot of the stairs, and smiled at her over the candle, and indicated the way.

"Is it very far up?" she asked.

"Only the first floor," he replied, and she tripped on in front of him, while he followed demurely with the candle.

The girls had two tiny beds in a big wilderness of a room – a room that had been specially fitted, under Paul's direction, for their comfort. There was a huge cupboard that held toys and dolls; there were deep chairs and couches; there was a big fireplace, covered still with a high curved fire-guard – reminiscent of the days when they had been very young indeed. Old Paul, holding the candle, opened the door, and motioned to Honora Jackman to go in. Honora stepped in delicately, and Paul followed with the light.

The first bed held Alice. She lay there with her fair curls fallen about her face, and with a smile upon the half-parted lips. Honora smiled as she bent over her. "She looks like a small angel," she whispered.

In the next bed, as they tip-toed over to it, was Moira; and Moira, be it noted, was not asleep. She had lain fretting and fuming at the thought of the woman downstairs; she had heard the footsteps on the stairs, and had known, indignantly enough, that the woman was coming up. Instantly she had closed her eyes and feigned sleep. It was, of course, a very wrong thing to do, and there is no possible excuse that can be urged; but the child felt that here, at this moment, she was to see even deeper into the heart of Old Paul, and to understand what that real intimate heart meant for her.

Old Paul bent over her, and softly put back a long strand of dark hair from her face. Honora Jackman had taken the candle, and was shading the light carefully, so that it happened that Moira's flush of sudden pleasure at his touch was unseen. Honora was looking not at the child, but at him, and her eyes were laughing.

"Why are you so afraid of me, Mr. Nannock?" she whispered, squeezing the warm top of the candle between a finger and thumb, and looking thoughtfully at the light.

"I – I don't think I am," he breathed in reply.

"Oh, yes, you are," she retorted. "So much afraid of me that you had once to set this baby between me and – shall we say – possible danger?" She gave a little quick laugh in her throat, and flashed a glance at him.

"Oh – that was a whim – of hers and mine," he said steadily, still keeping his voice to the lowest. "Besides, if you come to that, I think she stands first – in all things."

"Oh, I quite know that," she whispered. "But I wonder sometimes, as every woman wonders where a man who interests her is concerned – I wonder what you think of me."

"Nothing but the best, I assure you."

"That counts for nothing – and means nothing," she whispered sharply. "Lord, what fools we women are," she went on, in quite another tone. "I wonder what you'd think of me if I told you what was in my mind?"

"Is it necessary?" he whispered gravely.

"I think so," she said. "I came down here and heard about you, and set you down for a fool – a gaby. I thought all this business of the children was a pose – something to make you talked about; I know now that it isn't. And I like you for it – love you a little for it."

"Shall we go downstairs?" he asked.

"Not yet; there's something else to be said – and I may as well say it beside this child, who holds your heart in those slim fingers of hers, as anywhere else – better perhaps. I don't suppose you'll see me again – at any time; why should you?" She laughed that queer little laugh in her throat, and kept her bright eyes on the light of the candle. "So I'll say now that I would have sold my immortal soul to-night to have had you stand beside me as you've stood beside this baby – and touched my hair once like that – and looked at me with that softened look in your eyes. That's all. Now we can go down."

They moved towards the door; there he stopped and turned towards her. "I think you might kiss the child," he said, with a nod back towards the bed. "I should like to remember that you did that."

"Thank you," she whispered, and stole back to the bed.

Moira had heard, and in some dim fashion had partly understood – was perhaps a little ashamed of her own triumph; therefore, it happened that when Honora Jackman bent over her, she reached

up an arm in apparent half slumber and encircled Honora's neck. When the woman had settled the bed-clothes about the child she turned away quickly, and came back to where Paul stood, and handed him the candle. And she was smiling quite gaily.

Outside the room they met Mrs. Baffall; the good woman had felt that after all she might as well come up and look after her guest. "So you've seen them?" she whispered. "Aren't they sweet?"

"Oh – they're all right – for children," replied Honora, with a laugh. "And they always look better asleep, you know."

She ran downstairs, leaving the others to follow at their leisure. Mrs. Baffall turned an anxious face to Paul, and spoke excusingly of her.

"You mustn't think she's hard," she said. "I'm afraid it's her life – the people she's met, you know. There's some tenderness in her."

"I believe there is," replied Paul.

Honora Jackman was to leave the place the next day, so that this was a species of farewell. Paul presently insisted that a glass of wine should be drunk in her honour before they parted; and even Jimmy – blinking hard to keep his eyes open – was allowed a minute fraction of a glass wherewith to honour the toast. And by that time Honora Jackman, with nothing of that past tenderness and humility upon her, insisted upon clinking glasses with the boy, and drank to him specially, so that he blushed to the very ears.

"Jimmy – I drink to you," she said, and her eyes were very soft. "I shan't forget you, Jimmy – and I'm going to ask Mr. Nannock to let you come to the station to see me off in the morning – and only you."

The boy looked anxiously at Paul, and Paul nodded with a smile. Very soon after that they heard her voice calling back to them as they stood at the gate, and as she walked away with the Baffalls. The voice was high and strident and loud as ever.

"She's a good woman, Jimmy," said Paul, as he closed and locked the gate.

"She's wonderful!" said the boy, with a little catch in his voice.

He was down at the station hours before the train could possibly start; he watched the clock anxiously; wished, as time went on, that she also might on this last occasion have found it in her heart to come early, and to talk to him before she went. He felt he could have braved the grins of the one porter and the station-master in that event.

He had exhausted every nook and corner of the station, and had even wandered disconsolately outside in the road to watch for the coming carriage; but five minutes before the coming of the train there was still no sign of her. Then, when his heart was beginning to beat with the hope that after all she had decided not to go, the carriage came in sight, with the coachman flogging his horses. There was a minute and a half before the train was to come, but Honora Jackman got out of the carriage as serenely as ever, and began to give directions about her luggage. Jimmy, getting near to her, ventured to touch her hand; she looked round at him and said, quite in a tone of surprise: "Hullo, Jimmy! where did you come from?" just as though she had not expected him, or had not remembered that he was to meet her. Jimmy's one chance of a tender moment with her came when the anxious station-master, after fuming and fretting and grinding his teeth, had seen her into the train; and the one porter, red in the face from unaccustomed exertion, had got her luggage by superhuman efforts into the van. Then she dropped coppers to the porter, and held out a hand to Jimmy as the whistle sounded.

"I got up late, Jimmy; I didn't think I'd start at all, as a matter of fact. Good-bye; there hasn't been time for a word – has there?"

She might have leaned out of the window at the last; the boy waited until the very tail end of the train was disappearing under the bridge and round the curve. But by that time Honora Jackman was deep in a paper, and had forgotten his very existence.

Jimmy trudged home, kicking up more dust than was really necessary on the road, and having his cap drawn down over his eyes. Subsequently he confessed to Old Paul that girls were beasts, and

that for his part he had quite made up his mind never to marry. There were lots of things a fellow could do in the world; Jimmy seemed to suggest a sort of sardonic attitude, in which he stood with folded arms and a cynical expression, looking on at people making fools of themselves over women, and secretly pitying them. The change came at the end of a week, what time a letter arrived for "Master James Larrance"; the writing was big and sprawling, and quite a lot of Jimmy's unaccustomed name had been lost under the stamp and postmark.

But it was from her; there was the signature at the end – "Honora Jackman" – with the "man" cramped up in a corner – pushed out of the way, as it were, by the first syllable. And above that wondrous name the words, "yours ever lovingly."

Jimmy passed the thing off casually enough – quite as though he were in the habit of receiving letters from ladies signed in that fashion every day of the week, and was a little bored by them. Moira wanted to know why he didn't read it, for, of course, the inconsiderate postman had delivered the tender missive to the very breakfast table, and Jimmy had opened it in sheer wonder before he knew who the writer was.

Old Paul might have been expected to have a better grasp of the situation; but Old Paul chuckled, and advised Jimmy not to answer it; you couldn't be too careful in this world. And Jimmy burnt his mouth with his tea, and wondered why they must all find it necessary to look at him, and why the very envelope seemed to spread itself half over the table, and to be the biggest thing there. He had to wait until the meal was ended, and they had taken their time about going, before he dared pick up the sacred thing and read it.

She was well; there was comfort in that. If anything, she was a little too happy for one writing as far away as Yorkshire; but no other man was mentioned, and she had been thinking a lot about Jimmy. It appeared that Jimmy had been "beautifully kind" to her. Jimmy blushed, and glanced at the door, and read that phrase again – and yet again.

She seemed anxious to know about Old Paul; referred to him in the letter under that title, but told Jimmy he was not to mention it. She thought how nice it must be for them all to live with Old Paul, and didn't they absolutely adore him? Quite an unnecessary part of the letter was taken up with references to Old Paul; Jimmy decided it would be wiser not to tell the man about it. For the rest, she was having "a ripping time," and the people were delightful; they were described enthusiastically as "dears." Jimmy would have been better satisfied if he had known whether the "dears" were male or female.

That letter – the only one he ever received from her – was a thing of wonder for a day or two; and then somehow, after many readings, the wonder vanished. Sentences that had seemed almost inspired at a first or even a second reading touched the commonplace when submitted to a twentieth; at the last perusal – in a matter of a week – they appeared almost silly. There came a degraded morning when Jimmy actually burnt the letter, and went out into the world again to find new interests. Which was, of course, as it should be.

In the time that lay before him Jimmy's affections were at the most brushed lightly from time to time; they were never violently stirred. The affair of Honora Jackman had done that much for him at least, that it had brought him out into sane and ordinary life again, and had not harmed him. In whatever direction his heart might turn in his boyhood, he would not even have that experience behind him; because he had in a very short space of time absolutely forgotten all about it, and had relegated Honora Jackman to the back of his mind, so that he remembered her only as a tall young woman with an eyeglass, who was perhaps almost too elderly to be absolutely interesting.

It is the way of man (and, incidentally, perhaps, of boy) to desire that which another desires first; things are seldom valuable until another has pointed out that value to us, by coveting whatever the special object may be. And so it came about that when Jimmy once again touched emotional matters, it was owing to a question of rivalry and of jealousy. It happened in this wise.

A year or two had gone on in a dull, pleasant, easy fashion, with nothing changed or changing, as it seemed, in the quiet world of Daisley Cross. Old Paul did not look a day older, and time was only to be counted by a mere matter of actual figures, which did not concern the children, and by the fact that they had progressed considerably in their work under the guidance of the Rev. Temple Purdue. Old Paul could have told a tale of lengthening frocks for the girls, and of increased expenditure concerning Jimmy's clothes also; but he only smiled, and shook his head, and said nothing. If the truth be told, he was a little worried at the thought that the "babies" should be so obviously growing up.

Charlie Purdue had in a sense grown up with them – grown up, in fact, a little more than they had. He was tall and fair; the recklessness of his manner had increased with his years, and gave him an appearance of being older than he was. That, too, had passed unnoticed, save perhaps by the Rev. Temple Purdue, who had been compelled to strengthen his lectures a little to the boy, and who had worried a little more about the future. For the rest, Charlie had studied with them, and roamed the country with them, and had been almost as free of Old Paul's house as those who rightly belonged to it. And then one day had come the revelation to Jimmy that seemed to make him understand, in one swift moment, how much he had grown up, and how much things had changed for them all.

It happened in a mere matter of a frolic. They had come out of the rectory one summer morning (for all their recollections seemed connected with summer at that time), and it had been a merry rush for the gate at the end of the garden. Jimmy, dreaming of something else, had not heard the invitation; the rush had developed into a keen race between Charlie and Moira. Alice laughingly gave up half way, and turned back to Jimmy. Jimmy, looking at the pair, saw exactly what occurred.

Moira had no chance against Charlie at the end; he rapidly overtook her. Racing along by her side for a moment, he deftly caught her round the waist, and bent his face towards hers laughingly. She struggled, laughing in her turn, but he kissed her, and they finished the race side by side, and so drew up, blushing and laughing confusedly at the gate.

Charlie left them there, and the three walked on towards home. More than once Moira glanced at Jimmy timidly; once she tried to laugh, but gave it up. Jimmy's brow was storm-clouded; he walked on with his hands in his pockets, staring straight before him. When for a moment he glanced at Moira, as she tripped on ahead with the younger girl, the thought came to him of how greatly she had changed. She was tall and straight and slim; she carried her head high, and her dark hair fell about her shoulders in profusion. And then he remembered that Charlie Purdue had seized her roughly, and had kissed her. She had not seemed to struggle as much as she should have done.

As they turned in at the gate of Old Paul's house, Moira lingered for a moment and slipped a hand into his. He did not respond; he did not even look at her.

"You're out of friends with me," she whispered. There was no reply. "It wasn't my fault; I didn't like him to."

"He kissed you," whispered Jimmy, with suppressed wrath. "You could have got away if you'd liked."

"He was too quick," she pleaded, with a burning face. "Indeed, Jimmy dear, I didn't want him to."

"That's all right," said Jimmy magnanimously.

But he thought about it for a long time, and the more he thought about it the more his heart ached, and the more he hated Charlie Purdue. He re-enacted the little scene over again – brooded over it, and had his jealousy stirred every time he happened upon Moira. And at last went out into the woods, to fight this new battle with himself, and to get the thing out of his mind.

Poor Moira, fully recognising the heinousness of her offence by this time, followed him, in the hope to make peace; but he did not see her. He went on and on, until he came to a quiet spot in the wood, and there he flung himself down, and snatched up handfuls of grass, and tossed them about savagely, and moped. She was on the very point of creeping up to him and flinging herself down beside him, and making friends with him in the old fashion, when she heard a cheery whistle near

at hand, and saw that Jimmy was lying propped on his elbows watching. She drew back among the trees – afraid, and yet fascinated. For this was the eternal problem of which as yet she knew nothing, but which was to have its beginnings there at that very moment.

Charlie Purdue came on, all unsuspecting, gave a whoop of delight when he saw Jimmy; stopped dead when Jimmy did not respond nor even raise his eyes to him. Charlie sank down on his knees within a yard of the other boy, and leaned forward, and gazed at Jimmy quizzically.

"Hullo!" he said. "What's gone wrong?"

Jimmy got up leisurely; to an onlooker it might have seemed almost that he stretched and showed his muscles, much as a young animal might have done on the eve of an encounter. Charlie rose at the same time, and so they stood together – unobserved, as they thought, in the heart of the wood, looking into each other's eyes.

"You've got to fight me," said Jimmy. "I suppose you know what that means?"

"Oh, yes, I know," replied Charlie, with a faint laugh. "But what for?"

Jimmy suddenly determined to do the thing in the grand manner; this should be no mere squabble over the favours of a girl. He remembered suddenly and unexpectedly that former great passion of his for Honora Jackman; it inspired him now. "You've got to fight me," he said, "because you've insulted a lady. I saw you insult her."

"Rot!" exclaimed the more prosaic Charlie. "She didn't mind; she was laughing."

"She did mind; she didn't like it at all," exclaimed Jimmy fiercely; more fiercely, because he wanted to believe that himself. "Come on!"

He began to strip off his coat; Charlie, following his example more slowly, added a galling statement which served only to rouse the other boy to a frenzy.

"You'd better be careful, you know; I'm a lot bigger than you are. And I didn't start this."

Jimmy started it then and there; he set his teeth and made a blind rush for his adversary, hitting where he could. Moira, hidden by the trees, watched eagerly, and caught her breath in a sort of sob as Jimmy, rebounding from the other, went flat upon his back. But the next moment he was up, and was dancing about the bigger boy like a small madman.

The feeling that he was in a sense an avenger – alike for the girl and for his own outraged feelings – gave Jimmy a strength he would not otherwise have had in colder blood. It came to Charlie's turn to go down, and then to sit up, with a mild sort of amazement on his good-humoured face, the while he rubbed the back of his head. Then, taking things more seriously, he got to his feet, and set to work in earnest, only to find himself beaten by the nimbler Jimmy. And it finished with the pair of them rolling over and over, grappling fiercely, while Jimmy pummelled the other boy wherever he could get in a blow.

"Say – say you're sorry!" he gasped, still hitting away with might and main. "Say – say you're a beast!"

"I'm not," jerked out the other, "and I'm – not sorry. Let go my hair!"

"Say – say you're sorry – or I'll kill you!" panted Jimmy, still hitting wildly.

"Oh – oh – all right – I'm sorry. She isn't worth this," gasped the other. "Get off!"

"She *is* worth it – and you know it," cried Jimmy, setting to work again harder than ever. "Say it!"

And Charlie finally said it, as an easy way to end the business. Then they drew off from each other, the better to ascertain the damage. Charlie had a beautiful colour beginning to rise on one side of his forehead, and he mopped at his nose doubtfully, and seemed a little astonished at the state of his handkerchief. Jimmy had a fast darkening eye and a suspicious puffiness about the mouth.

"What are you going to say about it?" asked Jimmy. "I mean – you won't speak about her?"

"I suppose not," replied Charlie. "It doesn't matter much what we say; we had a row, and had it out."

"Very well," replied the other stiffly.

Moira flew home by another route – got to Old Paul before Jimmy could possibly arrive at the house. Breathlessly she blurted out something of the story, and it would appear from her narrative that Jimmy had been in the right, but that it must not be talked about. "Old Paul," she whispered, shaking him to a better understanding, "you know what I mean?"

"Oh, yes, I understand," he said, with comically raised eyebrows. He went away to find the others, muttering as he went something which sounded to Moira's ears like "Oh, wise little woman!".

So that it happened that when Jimmy, with some bravado and some hesitation, met them all at the table, and braced himself to meet their outcries and their exclamations, he found that he had nothing to meet. True, they looked at him covertly, and Alice seemed to be a little frightened, but that was all. Yet when Moira found a chance to slip her hand into his under the table, he hurriedly disengaged his fingers, and did not look at her. For so much at least his new conquering manhood demanded.

CHAPTER VI
MRS. BAFFALL'S DREAM

Old Paul had done an unprecedented thing. Utterly regardless of the fact that his usual journey to London was but just completed and the multitudinous stores laid in, he had gone to London again; and that not because he had forgotten anything.

He had apparently made up his mind with much suddenness about it; had gone off early in the morning, before anyone was stirring. Patience had been told late the previous night that he was going, and that he should return on the same day; but all her questioning only elicited from him the vague suggestion that it was a matter of business. And as London and Old Paul had been sharply divided, so far as business and all other matters were concerned, for several years past, Patience felt vaguely disquieted.

Paul came back by the last train, and he walked queerly out of the station and through the village – walked in a purposeless fashion, as though not quite knowing which way to turn. Even when he came out on to the road that led over the hill towards his house he walked with lagging feet, as though he would delay his home-coming for as long a time as possible. And frightened Patience almost out of her wits by going in at the back of the house, and coming upon her in her own little sanctum adjoining the kitchen.

"Lord save us – what's come to the man?" exclaimed Patience, starting up from her chair, and looking at him across the light of the lamp. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Hush!" he said, in a strange voice. "I'm tired – and I didn't want to see anyone to-night, Patience – not even the children. Send them to bed; I'll see them in the morning."

The woman gave him a swift look over the lamp; then turned quickly, and went from the room, closing the door behind her. Paul tossed his hat into a corner, and sat down, and idly turned the wick of the lamp up and down once or twice; once he laughed softly, as at some grim jest that had just occurred to him. But by the time Patience had come anxiously into the room, and was staring into his face, with her hands clasped at her lean breast, the man was himself again, and could afford to smile at her.

"Why – how frightened you look!" he said gently. "What's the matter?"

"Master Paul – Master Paul – something has gone wrong. You've bad news?"

"No – not bad news," he replied, without looking at her. "Nothing to worry about at any rate – especially to-night. Get me some supper, Patience – and something to drink."

She hurried away, and rapidly got a meal for him. When she came back with the tray he was seated near the table, engaged on that old occupation of turning the wick of the lamp up and down. He looked round at her, in the attitude of one listening.

"What was that on the stairs?" he whispered. "I thought I heard someone moving. Have they all gone to bed?"

"Yes, Master Paul – all gone to bed."

"Thank you, Patience; I could not have seen them to-night. And Mr. Ditchburn?"

"Oh I sent him packing the first of all," replied the woman, with a sharp laugh. She began to adjust the tray, and to set out the things as temptingly as possible; eager as she was to know what had happened, her woman's tact taught her that it was something about which he would not speak then. There was a strange awkward tenderness about her voice and her movements as she waited upon him; the faded old eyes had a light in them that had never shone for anyone but him. "Eat it, dearie; it'll do you good," she whispered.

Nor would she leave him until a little later, utterly worn out, he toiled upstairs to his room. And even then, in the security of her own room, she listened for a long time, with her ear against the door,

while the man paced up and down – up and down – in his own room near at hand. But at last even that sound ceased, and Old Paul was apparently at rest.

The night must have soothed him in some fashion; he woke calm and refreshed. True, some of his gaiety was gone; he had a way of suddenly relapsing into silence for no given reason, and then waking himself from those silences with a start and a forced laugh. And a week after that visit to London he suddenly went again; and this time was absent for the whole of that day and the night, and the whole of the next day.

As he alighted at the little station of Daisley Cross, and took his way down towards the house, with the darkening fields and woods on either side of him, he moved like a man who has come into a strange world; for now he viewed this world with other eyes than those with which he had looked upon it before. As he walked, he strove to remember what he had to face, and what had been said to him that day. It was difficult to remember, because it was jumbled in his mind with something that had to be done, and done quickly. For there was so little time – dear God! – there was such a little time left!

That was the burden of the merciless song that had been ringing in his ears all day – a song the faint coming sound of which had been suggested to him a week before. He had only heard the thing faintly then – a mere whisper of it; now it was ringing in his ears, and beating on his very brain. As he walked, tears, not wholly of self-pity, flooded into his eyes; he had not deserved this – had not expected it. It wasn't fair nor just; other men who had lived wilder lives than himself would go on living wilder lives yet, until they grew to be old, with a long life to look back upon; and his was to close in so short a time; he was still young – and yet young enough to die. It wasn't fair – there must be some way —

He grew calmer presently; some of the old sober strength of the man, that had been shattered for the time, returned to him. The peace of the night stole into his veins; he looked about him at the darkening world, and up at the stars, and thought how small and poor a thing he was, compared with all the worlds that took their calm and solemn ways about him. He was but a unit in a great scheme of things; and on this very earth he trod to-night other men in bygone years had trod their ways, of joy or pain, weariness or hope; and so had gone down into the dust, as he must go. It did not seem so bad, out here under the stars; it almost seemed as though the man walked alone with his God, and understood.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.