

Henty George Alfred

**A Search For A Secret: A
Novel. Volume 3**



George Henty

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Henty G. A. George Alfred

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CHAPTER I

GREAT CHANGES

Now that I have finished the account of the last of the series of unsuccessful attempts which were made to find the will, I must hurry over the subsequent events of my life in a much briefer and more concise way. It is now nearly six years since Robert Gregory died, and I must content myself with a mere sketch of what has taken place in that time; for this my history has already spun out to a most unreasonable length, many times surpassing the limits I proposed to myself when I first sat down with the intention of writing it. But my pen has run on and on, as I recalled all the past events of my life; and I feel every day, when I see the mass of manuscript which has accumulated in my drawer – for my desk has long since been too small to contain its growing bulk – that the chances that any one will ever take the trouble to read it through, are growing fainter and fainter every day.

However, should it be so, my task has served its purpose. It has, by chaining my attention to the period of which I have been writing, saved me from many an hour of sorrowful thought, and has served as a break to the monotony of many a weary day. It has, too, often served as an excuse for me to seclude myself in my own room, when my spirits have felt unequal to take part in the constant flow of tittle-tattle and harmless gossip, which form the staple of the conversation of those with whom my life is now cast, and is likely, I hope, to remain to the end.

After I came back from our three months' trip on the continent, with my health greatly restored, my spirits rose proportionately; and as I had nothing to throw me back again into my old state, with the exception of the shock I received at the news of Angela Harmer's death, I really began to look at things in a more hopeful way, and to think that the eight years – no, the seven years and a half – I was getting very particular as to dates – which were to elapse before Percy started on his return from India, were not such a hopelessly long time to look forward to after all.

By the way, I did not mention in its proper place that he started with his regiment for India while we were on the continent. Poor Percy! he was terribly disappointed and grieved that he could not see me before he sailed. But we were in Italy at the time he received his order, and as he had very short notice, it was quite out of the question that he could come for the purpose.

I, too, was very sorry that it so happened, and had we been in England I certainly should have made no objection to our meeting; and yet the interview would have been so painful to us both, that although I was very sorry I did not see him, I was yet sure that it was for the best that we should not meet. My letters from him, except during the voyage, came regularly every three months, and it did not seem nearly so hard hearing at these long intervals – now that he was so very far off – as it had done while he was within a day's journey of me. I knew how hard Percy must have felt it before by own feelings; for I, who had made the rule, fretted and complained to myself against it. It seemed so cruel, when by merely sitting down and writing to him, I could have given myself so much pleasure as well as conferred it upon him – so hard, when the postman came of a day with letters for others, that none should come from him, who if I only gave him leave, would have written such long loving letters to me every day. I knew that I had determined for the best, but still it had been a very great trial for me. But now it was quite different; letters from India could only come once a month or so, and therefore, as I have said, three months did not seem so very unnatural.

When the letters did come, they were quite volumes; for I had put no limit to length, and Percy used to write a little nearly every day, so that in the three months it swelled to quite a bulky packet.

They were delightful letters; such long accounts of his Indian life, and of everything which could interest me in it. Such bright, happy pictures of our future life out there, and such welcome reiterations of his love for me. How often I read them through and through, until I knew them by heart! They are all in my desk now, faded and torn from constant reading. I take them out sometimes and read little bits – I never can get very far with them – and then have a long, sad cry over my dead hopes and faded dreams; but I end at last by cheering up and thanking God, that at least in my present tranquil life, if I have had great troubles, I have some very happy moments to look back upon, which nothing can ever change or alter, or efface from my memory.

All this time Ada corresponded with me regularly; not very frequently, indeed, but often enough to show me that she thought very often of me, and loved me as of old. She wrote more like a sister than before, and always talked of my marriage with Percy as of a settled event which was certain to occur on his return from India, to which she said that she, like I, was counting the months and years. I judged from the tone of her letters that she did not care so much for gaiety as she had done, and that the constant whirl of dissipation in which she lived during the London season had greatly lost its charm for her. At last one of her letters came, which she said at the beginning, she was sure would give me pleasure, and indeed it did; for it told me that Lord Holmeskirk, who had proposed to me during the season I had spent in London, had for the last two seasons transferred his attentions to her, and that he had now proposed and she had accepted him, to the great satisfaction of her mother. I was indeed delighted at the news, for I liked the young nobleman very much – he was so perfectly natural and unaffected.

It was, of course, a very good match for her; and what was, I thought, of far more importance, I could see by the way she wrote that she really was very fond of him for his own sake. In one of her after letters to me, she laughed and said that it was terribly galling to her pride to have to take up with my rejected one; but that, as this was the only possible objection she could find to marrying him, she could not allow it to counterbalance all the advantages of her so doing.

When the time for her marriage drew near, she wrote to say how much she regretted that she could not ask me to be her bridesmaid, and how much pleasure it would have given her could she have done so; but that, of course, in the present state of relationship between Lady Desborough and myself, it was out of the question.

However, I saw the report of the wedding in the *Morning Post*, with a full account of how the bride looked, and of the bridesmaids' dresses; and Ada sent me a large piece of her wedding-cake, and wrote to me from Switzerland where she had gone with her husband, giving me a detailed account of the whole ceremony, and of how happy she was. She wound up by saying that Lord Holmeskirk had requested her to send his compliments, but that she had pointed out to him that compliments to a future sister-in-law were simply ridiculous, and so he had sent his love.

She corresponded with me much oftener after she was married than she had done before; indeed, I noticed that she wrote regularly once a month, and as I answered as regularly, I have no doubt that my letters to her were sent out to Percy, as being the next best thing to having letters direct from me; and very often she sent me his letters to herself, so that I heard pretty regularly how Percy was, and what he was doing.

Ada seemed very happy in her new character as Viscountess Holmeskirk. The first winter after she was married, she sent me a very pressing invitation to go up and spend a few weeks with her: but as I pointed out to her in my reply, it would be unpleasant to all parties, for Lady Desborough could not come to her house the whole time I was there; at any rate that if she did, I certainly could not meet her: so that it was really better I should not come, as I could not possibly feel at ease, and, in any case, I should not have cared for entering into the gaieties of London life.

Ada wrote back to say that although she was very much disappointed that she should not see me, still, there was so much truth in what I said, that she could not urge me farther; she said, however,

that the same objection did not apply to Polly, and that she should be very glad if she could come up, and be introduced into society under her care.

Polly at first made some objections, but I overruled them as I knew what a treat it would be for her, and she accordingly went up in February, and stayed for six weeks with Ada. She came back delighted with her visit, and looking upon London as a species of fairy-land. Lord Holmeskirk and Ada, she said, had been so extremely kind to her, and treated her quite like a sister: she had been as gay as I had during my stay at Lady Desborough's, and had been out almost every evening of her visit in London. She said that, no doubt owing to her stay there, Lady Desborough had been very seldom to Ada's, and then only during the day. On these occasions she had, under some pretence or other, generally absented herself from the room; still, she had occasionally remained, as she did not wish to seem afraid of meeting her, for, as Polly said, certainly she had nothing to feel ashamed of, whatever her ladyship might have. Ada had, of course, introduced her, Lady Desborough had bowed with extreme frigidity, and Polly flattered herself that she was at least as distant and cool as her ladyship. This visit served Polly and me as a topic of conversation for a long time, and, as she had met very many of the people that I had done, it gave us a great subject in common, whereas previously my London experience had been of little interest to her, owing to her knowing nothing either of the place or people.

And so my life passed away very quietly. I had become quite strong again now; and month passed after month, and year after year since Percy had gone – so that two and a half out of the eight years were gone – and there were only five and a half more to be looked forward to. Percy's letters were unaltered in tone, and loving and fond as ever, and so I began to be quite cheerful and happy again, and to believe that there was great happiness in store for me yet.

My only little fear was that when Percy came back he would find me looking dreadfully old. I was more than eighteen when the eight years' agreement was made, and I should be nearly twenty-seven when he returned, and twenty-seven then seemed to me to be quite old; and I used very often to wonder whether I should be much changed, and frequently looked at my face in a glass very carefully, to see if I could detect any sign of alteration in it; but the glass at present told me no disagreeable tidings, for my cheeks had filled out again and the colour had come back into them, and I looked once more bright and hopeful.

Polly and I were able to take long walks together, and were a happy, laughing couple of girls again. And so another year went by, quiet and uneventful, varied only by our Christmas gaieties and the festivities of the cricket week. Polly enjoyed these immensely; I, too, liked them; but certainly principally for her sake – at any rate they were a change.

All this time Harry had continued at his employment as an engineer, with but indifferent success. I do not mean that he was not keeping himself; but it was not much more. The market, he said, was overstocked. All the great jobs were taken up by great men, who found the money, and got the plans through Parliament. These men, of course, employed their own staff and pupils, and an outsider had a very poor chance of getting a footing. If the great engineer to whom Harry had been articled had lived a few years longer, so that he could have put him into some post where he would have had an opportunity of making himself a name, it would have been quite different. As it was, he had to be content with the supervision of comparatively small works, and when these were completed, had to look out for something else.

Another thing which prevented him getting on, was that, in some respects, Harry was a very diffident man. He had no idea of pushing himself, or of blowing his own trumpet; but was content to work hard, and let other people take the credit. However, he did not fret about it; he had enough to live upon, and as he did not stand out for high salaries he was never long out of work.

He had twice spent a month or two with us down at Canterbury, in his intervals between leaving one place and going to another. These were delightful times, and we made the happiest quartet

possible. I used to ask Harry sometimes, on these occasions, whether there was any chance of his bringing home a new sister some day; but he would only laugh in his loud way, and say, —

"Never, Agnes, never!" It was, he said, much too expensive a luxury for him to think of; indeed, he should have no time to enjoy one if he had her; he was out all day at his work, and had plans and drawings to make of an evening. Besides, he smoked all day, and nearly all night, and what would a wife say to that? His work, too, lay chiefly in out-of-the-way places, where his only companions were rough, unpolished men, who did very well for him, but who would by no means accord with a wife's idea of good society.

And after all these and various other objections, he would wind up with, —

"No, no, Agnes; I am very well as I am, and I by no means think a wife would better my condition."

Evidently, Harry was at present quite heart whole. About this time he got an engagement upon a series of extensive works in the neighbourhood of London, where he was likely to be engaged for a very long time. Indeed, the engineer who was carrying them out, and who had known Harry when he was serving his time in town, told him that he could promise him regular work for some years.

And now there came a time when our happy life at Canterbury was to come to an end, and the dear old house which we loved so much, and where we had lived so many years, was to pass into other hands. Our father, our dear, kind father, was found one morning dead in his bed. He died of disease of the heart, of the presence of which, it appeared afterwards, he had been conscious for many years.

I pass over that terrible time without a word.

Harry came down at once and managed everything. Polly was heart-broken; and this time it was I who was the stronger, and who was able, in my turn, to console and support her.

At last, when all was over, when a week had passed, we drew our chairs round the fire after dinner, as was our old custom, to discuss the future; and yet how different from the old times, with that dreadful gap among us, — that empty chair which was never to be filled again. It was some time before any of us could speak; but at last Harry began talking on indifferent subjects, and we all gradually joined in. Still, we only did so at intervals; for we felt that we must presently come to that point from which we all shrank — the future. We had not come to any understanding with each other that we were to discuss our future arrangements at this particular time; but I think we all felt instinctively, as we drew our chairs round the fire, that the question could not be put off any longer, and that this was the time at which it must be faced. At last, Harry, who was, as usual, puffing away at his pipe, began it by saying as cheerfully as he could, —

"And now, girls, we must talk business. In the first place, I have had a long chat this morning with Mr. Fairlow, our lawyer. He tells me that, as I had expected, there is not very much besides the life-insurance. The practice has hardly done more than paid for the carriage and horses for the last three years. Mr. Petersfield and I are executors. The will was made nearly four years ago, just after you girls missed finding the will in the secret room at Harmer Place. Papa asked me at the time if I agreed to its provisions, and I said that of course I did, for it was just as I should have wished it to be. The amount of insurance, £4,000, is divided among you girls; I am left everything else."

"But what is there else?" I asked dubiously, after a short silence.

"Oh, lots of things," Harry said, cheerfully. "The furniture and the horses and carriage to begin with, the book debts, and all sorts of other things. Besides, had there been nothing at all, it would not have made the least difference to me, for as I can earn enough to live upon, what do I want with more?"

We afterwards learnt that at the time the will was made, there was a house worth upwards of a thousand pounds, which had also been left to Harry; but that this had, at Harry's own suggestion, been sold a short time afterwards, as at that time papa did not expect to live many months. He had told Harry this, and was naturally desirous of going on living in the same style he had been accustomed to; and as the professional income had, as I have said, been very small, this thousand pounds had

been very nearly expended in the three years for the housekeeping expenses, and for the payments of the premiums upon the insurance.

"And now, girls, that you know exactly what you have, what do you think of doing?"

"How much a year will £4,000 bring in, Harry?"

"Well, it depends upon what you put it into. I daresay Mr. Petersfield could put it out for you on mortgage, on good security, at four and a half or five per cent."

"And how much would that be a year?"

"£180 to £200."

"And how could we best live upon that, Harry?"

"Well, you might take a nice little place for £30 or £35 a year, put furniture into it, keep one servant, and manage very comfortably upon it; or, should you prefer it – which I should think you would not – you could live in a boarding-house very well, the two of you, for – say £140 a year, which would leave you about £50 a year for clothes and other expenses."

"No, no, Harry," we both said, "we would much rather live alone; not here, for the present, at any rate, although we might some day come back, but somewhere near London."

"Then," Harry said, "there is one more proposition, and that is – I am likely to remain in London for some time; my income is £200 a year. Now if you like, we will take a little cottage, and live together. You shall keep house for me, and I will take care of you, and if I move, you can either move with me, or set up for yourselves, just as you like."

"Oh, yes, yes, Harry," we both exclaimed, delightedly. "That will be nice, that will be charming," and we kissed the dear old fellow again and again, in greater glee than I should have thought it possible that anything could have made us feel; and so pleased were we at the thought of it, that it was some time before we could settle down to discuss the question quietly.

"And now, girls, that we may consider that settled, what part of London do you think you should like to live in?"

"You don't mean in London itself, Harry, do you?" I asked, rather frightened at the thought of all the smoke and noise.

"No, no," Harry said; "we should find some difficulty in getting the sort of house we want there. We must get out of the smoke, on one side or other of it. The question is, where?"

For some time neither of us offered any suggestion, for we knew very little indeed about the suburbs of London. At last I said, "I think Harry I should like to be somewhere near the river, if that would suit you as well as any other side of London. When we were at Grendon House, we used to go up the river to Kew in a steamer, once or twice every summer, on the Miss Pilgrims' birthdays, and grand occasions of that sort, and I remember I used to think to myself, that if I were to live in London, I should like it to be near the river."

"Just the very thing I should have proposed, if you had no decided preference for any other part," Harry said. "I have lately joined the 'Metropolitan Rowing Club,' which was started about a year since. It is held at Putney, and Putney would suit me very well for business, for I can get up by train in twenty minutes, as early of a morning as I like. Yes, that will do capitally for us all."

So to Putney it was unanimously settled we should go.

"And now, girls, when will you leave here?"

"The sooner the better, Harry," Polly said, eagerly; and I agreed with her, for I really dreaded being by our two selves in that rambling old house, where every room, every piece of furniture, every act of our daily life would bring back some association of him who was gone.

"How long can you stay, Harry?"

"Not beyond Saturday, Agnes – five more days. Pellat has written to me saying that, although of course under the circumstances he does not wish to hurry me, still that I am greatly wanted; and I answered him to-day saying that I could not possibly get away before, but that I would be at work on Monday morning."

"Do you mean to sell the furniture, or move it, Harry?"

"Sell it, my dear; it will be of no use to us: it is all very old, and would hardly pay for the carriage. Of course those things which have any particular association we will take with us."

"Do you think there would be any possibility of our going up with you on Saturday, Harry?" Polly asked, anxiously. "I should not mind how hard I worked, if we could but do it; don't you think we could?"

"Well, Polly, I don't know that there is any absolute reason against it, if you work very hard, and get everything packed up; of course I will help you. To-morrow morning I am going to speak to Dr. Hooper. He has written to me saying that he should be glad to take the lease of the house of me. There are only three more years to run. I answered him that I would let him know to-morrow; but of course I could give no decided answer till I knew what your plans would be."

"I suppose if we can get ready to go up with you, Harry, we could go into lodgings at Putney, till we find a house to suit us?"

"Certainly, Polly, that will be what we must do."

"I can tell you of some lodgings," I said. "I have the address upstairs."

I accordingly went up at once to the drawer where I kept all my old pocket-books. I found the one for the year when we had been at Ramsgate, and there in pencil, as I had written it down when the old bathing-woman told me of it, was her daughter's address at Putney. I went down with it triumphantly, and found them wondering where I could have got the address of lodgings at Putney. However, I explained the matter to them, and although, as Harry said, she might have moved long since, we agreed at any rate to try there first, as it was much pleasanter to have some fixed place to go to, than to drive about vaguely looking for lodgings.

The next morning we girls set to work at our packing, and at luncheon Harry came in with the welcome news, that he had arranged everything most satisfactorily with Dr. Hooper.

Dr. Hooper was at present living in a furnished house, and he had gladly agreed to take all our furniture at a valuation, and also the carriage and horses, and to continue old Andrew as coachman – at any rate, for the present; and Harry, on his part, agreed to ask very little for the lease of the house, which we held on favourable terms for three years longer. This was a very good arrangement, as it saved us all further trouble; and it was more pleasant to think of the old house remaining as it had been during our time, which we could not have done had the furniture been put up and sold by auction. I have no doubt that it suited Dr. Hooper equally well, as it was a very large, roomy house, at a moderate rent, and the good-will, although not worth much, was still an advantage to any medical man taking the house.

That afternoon we went through the house, and decided on the few articles we should like to keep. The next day a valuer came in, and on Friday morning Dr. Hooper gave Harry a cheque for £500, which was, with the exception of £70 or £80, which some of the richer of papa's patients owed him, all that Harry ever received as his share of the property.

That four days we were dreadfully busy – what with packing, and seeing all our friends who came in to say good-bye; but on Saturday we had finished, bade farewell to Canterbury, and started by the one o'clock train for London.

CHAPTER II

A QUIET TIME

It was dusk when we got to Putney. We had left all our heavy baggage, to be sent up after us when we should have got into a house, and had brought up only what we should require for the present. We got into one of the rickety-looking flies standing at the station, and told the man to drive us to No. 12, Charlemagne Villas. We were soon there, and in the uncertain light we could see that it was a little detached house standing in a garden, and cut off from its neighbours and the road by a wall.

The driver got down and rang at the bell, and the gate, or rather the door in the wall, was opened by a small servant-girl.

"Does Mrs. Thompson live here?"

"Yes, ma'am; will you walk in?"

Very pleased to find that the object of our search still lived there, Polly and I got out of the fly and went in; while Harry, who said he hated this sort of thing, stopped outside to look after the boxes.

We were shown into a pretty little drawing-room, where the servant drew down the blind and lighted the gas, and in a minute or two a brisk little woman came in and said —

"My name is Thompson, ma'am; did you wish to see me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Thompson: some four years ago I was at Ramsgate, and when there I struck up a great acquaintance with your mother. She gave me your address, and I said that if ever I came to London I would come to you. Do you still let lodgings, and are they vacant?"

"I do, ma'am," Mrs. Thompson said, "and shall be only too glad to let them to any one whom mother recommended them to. If you had come two months later I might have been full, but my season does not begin till April, so we are quite empty at present."

A bargain was soon made with her, and Mrs. Thompson went to the top of the stairs and called "Mother," and, to my great surprise, the old bathing-woman herself came up. She knew me at once.

"Miss Ashleigh!" she exclaimed. "Oh, miss, I am so glad to see you. Do you know it is only ten days ago, when I saw your loss in the paper, that I said to Jane: 'Now, Jane, I should not be surprised if Miss Ashleigh comes up to town; every one does seem to come up here some time or other in their lives — perhaps this is her time.' And I said, miss, that I should take the liberty of writing to you in a few days, in case you might be coming up. I remembered I had given you Jane's address, but I thought you would have lost that long since. It is very kind of you to have thought of what an old woman said so long ago."

"Not kind at all," I said, "I was very glad to think that there was a place I seemed to know something of, and as I wrote the address down in my pocket-book at the time, I had no trouble in finding it. Have you given up your old occupation?"

"No, miss, but it is not the season now, and only one of us waits on through the winter, and as I begin to find the water then too cold for my old limbs, I have given it up these last two winters, and come here and stop with Jane and her husband."

Our landlady now took us upstairs. Our room was a nice large one, over the drawing room. Harry's was behind ours, smaller, but quite large enough for him, and both were beautifully clean and nice.

While tea was getting ready, we unpacked as much as we could, and in half an hour, when Harry's voice was heard shouting at the foot of the stairs that tea was ready, we were quite astonished to find how much we had done, and how nearly we had finished our unpacking and putting away. The room below looked so comfortable that we could not help exclaiming with surprise and pleasure when we went in. A bright fire blazed in the grate, various gauze covers which had been placed over the chimney glass and picture frames, had been taken off. A white table-cloth was laid on the table, with

a very pretty tea service upon it. Harry had made the tea, and the bright copper kettle was standing on the fire. I don't know when I enjoyed a meal so much – it seemed so homelike and comfortable that we were all quite in spirits, and certainly all very hungry; and we agreed that it was most fortunate that I had kept the old bathing-woman's address.

We were very comfortable at Mrs. Thompson's; indeed, we could not have been more so in our own house, and we almost debated whether we should not stay as we were. Still, after all, there is nothing like being in a house of one's own; and it would give Polly and me something to do to see after the housekeeping. Besides, Harry said that he wanted a place where he could have men in of an evening to have a glass of grog and smoke a pipe with him; for, although he did not mind smoking when alone with us, he said he did not wish the room where his sisters were to look like the bar parlour in a public-house.

On the Monday after we got there, Harry went up to work. Sometimes he went to an office at the West End, and on these days we breakfasted at half-past seven, which was rather a hardship; still it would cease to be one in another month, when the mornings got lighter and the weather warmer; and it could not be helped, as Harry had to catch the ten minutes past eight train, so as to be at his office by nine. Sometimes he had to go out surveying, and on these mornings he had to start very early – soon after six. When he did this, we did not get up to breakfast with him, but he had some bread and butter taken up to his room overnight, and he made a cup of coffee in a patent machine over a spirit-lamp.

After we had been in Putney about a week, and began to know the place a little, Harry asked us to look about for a house. We were not long in finding one, for Polly and I had observed a pretty little place to let within a hundred yards of us, which we both agreed would suit exactly; and now, having Harry's permission to look for a house, we at once went there.

We found that it was just what we wanted; indeed, that it could not have been more so if it had been specially built for the purpose. It was one of a row of six little semi-detached villas – at least they were called villas – but I think the word cottages would have been more appropriate. They stood back from the road, with pretty flower gardens in front, and a good large piece of ground behind for vegetables. A row of lime-trees grew in the gardens close to the road, the branches of which were trained towards each other, so that they formed a green wall in summer, and it was only through the arch cut over each gate that the houses could then be seen at all by passers-by. It was just the right size, and was altogether a charming little place, and the rent was £35 a year.

Harry stopped at home the next morning an hour behind his usual time, to go in with us to see it. He was as much pleased with it as we were, and at once decided upon taking it. It was a few days before he could spare time to give a day with us in town to buy the furniture; but in just a month from the date of our arrival in Putney we were snugly installed in our new home, which was called No. 1, Daisy Villas, Charlemagne Road; and comfortable as we had been at Mrs. Thompson's, we all agreed it was far pleasanter being in a house of our own. Harry had furnished the drawing-room very nicely, and bought a piano as a joint present for Polly and myself.

We had promised old Andrew that directly we were in a house of our own we would have up his youngest daughter Susan, who had been with us for a year before we left Canterbury, as our servant; and, accordingly, when we had taken the cottage, and the furniture came in, we sent for Susan, who arrived in due course, and was installed as our maid-of-all-work; and an excellent servant she turned out.

On the opposite side of the road to us was a large field, which had as yet escaped the builder's hands, and which was in autumn and winter used as a playground for the children of the neighbourhood, and in spring and summer was shut up, and kept for hay. Before we left, however, a builder had begun to erect a line of villas opposite to us, but for the first two years there was nothing to interfere with our view; and even afterwards it did not matter so much, for, as I have said, in summer our lime-trees formed such a leafy screen that we could not see beyond our bright little flower garden.

We liked Putney very much. Polly and I were capital walkers, and there were such pretty walks to be taken round it – up the hill, and across the common to Wimbledon, or on nearly to Kingston, or across Putney heath, through Barnes, to Mortlake and Kew, or – best of all – through the green lanes to Richmond Park, with its groups of splendid trees, its brown fern brakes, and fallow-deer; and sometimes, when it was fine and the water was high, along the towing-path to Hammersmith, to watch the barges drifting lazily on the quiet water, and the steamboats, full of holiday-makers to Kew, cleaving their swift way through it.

I certainly got to like Putney, with its quaint High Street, its noble river, and its pretty walks, very very much – not in the same way that I loved Canterbury. Canterbury, with its quiet, sleepy ways, is far better suited to me as I am now; but as I was then, I thought Putney a delightful place to live in. It was, too, such a convenient distance from town, and once a week Polly and I used to walk across the bridge, get into an omnibus, and go as far as the Circus, and then get out and walk up Regent Street and Oxford Street, and look at the shops.

It was not always that we had shopping to do, although we generally managed to want something, as a sort of excuse for going; but we both enjoyed it much, it was all so new to us; for we had never been in London at all, except at the time when we were at school – and then, of course, we never went up into London itself, and when we were staying respectively with Lady Desborough and Ada, when we were very much too grand to go out shopping on foot. So that the shops, and the gay carriages, and the bustle and confusion were all quite new, and very pleasant to us.

Sometimes of an evening, when Harry got back in good time, he would take us up to the theatre, at which he occasionally had a box given him by a friend in the "Metropolitan." Being in deep mourning, we could not go into any other part of the house; nor, indeed, did we go at all for the first six months of our stay in London.

After we had been in our new home about a fortnight, I wrote to tell Ada where we were. I had not done so before, because I did not wish her to come down to see us till we were quite straight, and had everything very nice: it was a little bit of pride, perhaps, but so it was. I had received a letter from her a week after dear papa's death, condoling with us, and asking Polly and me to go and stay with her for a while, when we felt equal to it, until our future plans were settled; and I had written back, thanking her, and telling her I would let her know when things were arranged. After that, I had not sent my usual monthly letter to her, but, as I had written myself to Percy, that did not matter. The day before I wrote, I had received a letter from her, which was forwarded from Canterbury, asking what had become of me, and this I now answered by giving our present address, and saying how pleased we should be to see her.

By this time it was the end of April; the season happened to be an early one, and our garden was gay with spring flowers, with which we had stocked it from a nursery close by, and the lime-trees in front were just putting out their delicate green leaves.

On the very day after I had written to Ada, an open carriage with a splendid pair of horses stopped in front of our house, and a tall powdered footman got down, opened the gate and came down the little walk, with a rather mystified air, as if wondering what his mistress could possibly want at No. 1, Daisy Villas.

He knocked a prolonged and thundering knock at the door, such as had probably never before been sounded upon it, and which was evidently intended to impress us all with a sense of the extreme importance and urgency of our visitor, and I heard him inquire of Susan, when she opened the door, in a tone of the most dignified condescension, "If Miss Ashleigh were at home?" Finding that she was, he returned, opened the carriage door and let down the steps, and Ada got out and came up to the door, and in another minute she was in my arms.

It was some time before we were composed enough to talk at all. It was so long since we had met – nearly five years now – at the time when Percy came down with her to Canterbury, when I became engaged to him. How much had happened since then! how many changes! it seemed an age

to look back upon, and a very sad age too. Ada was naturally the first to recover herself, and as soon as she saw that I could listen to her, she began to scold me for being six weeks so near London without writing to let her know, and said that she had felt so indignant, when she first received my letter, that she had a great mind not to come down at all. I excused myself as well as I could, and told her frankly that I had been influenced by three reasons – the first, that from the time when we came up we had been so occupied in seeing about the furniture of our new house, that we had been busy from morning till night; the second, that owing to the same cause, both we and the house had been in such a state of confusion that we were not fit to receive visitors, and that I preferred her seeing the place when it was clean and tidy; and lastly, that I really had hardly felt equal to seeing her, and having so many sad memories called up. Ada still scolded me a little, and then, finding that I had now recovered myself, said: —

"There, Agnes, I will forgive you; and now let me look fairly at you: turn to the light. Really, I do not think you look a year older."

"Nonsense, Ada, I know I am looking older; I do not care for myself, but I only hope Percy will not think me looking dreadfully old when he comes back."

"If he does, Agnes, I will have nothing to say to him. Let me see, he has been gone now nearly four years, – four more, darling! it seems a long time to wait, but still it is something that half has gone, and what a happiness it is that his regiment was not out in that dreadful Crimea. And now, how am I looking, Agnes?"

"A little changed, Ada. You see I speak the truth. You were, like myself, nearly eighteen then; you are twenty-three now. Older, and a little more matronly-looking, for you were a girl then; you are a woman now, but certainly not less beautiful; indeed, I think more so, for your face has a calmer and brighter expression than it had."

I was not flattering her, for as I looked at her I thought I had never seen such a lovely woman in my life. Ada laughed and coloured a little, and declared I was an old goose; and then I said: —

"And now for a very important question, Ada; how is baby?"

"Very well, Agnes; he is six months old now, getting quite a big, troublesome boy. Ah, here is Polly!"

For Polly, always thoughtful, had remained out of the room, to let Ada and me have our first meeting, after so long a separation, together alone. It was only a year since they had met, and I was pleased to see by her manner how fond Ada was of her; as in the event of my going to India with Percy, her friendship would be very valuable to Polly.

"And is that your carriage, Ada?" I asked.

"Dear me, no," Ada said, "my equipage is a simple brougham. But I was in at the Square this morning with Holmeskirk, and I said I was coming down to see you; so the countess – who has a very high opinion of you, my dear, and who constantly inquires after you, especially as she knows, of course, how you stand with Percy – insisted on my taking her carriage and leaving her card. She sent her love, and she hopes that you and Polly will call upon her when you come over to see me; and I can assure you, Agnes, the dear old lady meant it. And now what day will you come? I will send my brougham down any day you like to name, that is if you will let me first see what days I am disengaged."

Ada thereupon took out her tablets, and found she was engaged for every day except Friday.

"Now, Agnes, I want you and Polly to come early to lunch. Then we will have the countess's carriage – she is a great invalid now, and she likes my using her carriage, – and we will have a drive in the park, and then a long cosy talk till dinner, at seven. And I want your brother to come to dinner, and then the brougham shall bring you back. Holmeskirk would have called himself; but your letter said that your brother always went out early, so he knew he had no chance of finding him in; but he asked me to leave his card."

After a little consultation with Polly, I accepted the invitation as far as the going up to dinner was concerned, but solely on condition that we came up in our own way. Ada inquired what was our own way, and I said that we should send up a box by the Parcels' Delivery with the things we required for dinner, and that we ourselves should come up by an omnibus to Sloane Street; that we would walk from there to her ladyship's, and that we should have a fly to fetch us at night. And so it was agreed; and Ada sat and talked for more than an hour, and then got up to go. We went down the garden with her, and she stopped at the gate to kiss us again before she got in; to, I have no doubt, the intense astonishment of the powdered footman, who was holding the carriage-door open, and who must have suffered the more that his position prevented him expressing his feelings, except by assuming an expression of even more stony impassiveness than before; for I have no doubt that before he saw this mark of affection and familiarity, he had the impression that Viscountess Holmeskirk had come down to pay a visit to some old nurse or domestic whom she had known in childhood.

When Harry came home, I told him of the engagement we had made for him, and he pished and grumbled, and said at first that he would not go; but, as I pointed out, there was no possible excuse for his not doing so, and indeed that it would be of no use, for Ada had particularly begged me, should Harry say he was engaged for that day, to write at once and let her know, and she would change the day for one in the following week. So Harry had to give in, and on the day of our engagement arranged to dress in town, and come straight down, for he was busy just then, and could not get away till six o'clock. Polly and I got to Ada's house, which was in Wilton Crescent, at one o'clock. Lord Holmeskirk was at home, and renewed his acquaintance with me with the frank heartiness which was natural to him.

After lunch Ada took us up to the nursery to see baby, and after we had sufficiently admired him – and he was really a fine little fellow – we put on our things and went for a drive with her in the park in the Countess of Rochester's carriage. On our return we went in with Ada to call on the countess herself, who lived in Belgrave Square, and who was very kind in her manner and remarks. She was evidently very fond of Ada, and not a little proud of her beautiful daughter-in-law; and I could see that Ada, on her part, was very attached to the kind old lady, whom she treated with a deference which I had certainly never seen her exhibit for her own imperious mother.

After we got back to Ada's we took off our things, and sat down for a long, cozy chat about the past. I found she was very happy in her married life, and that her husband was all she could possibly wish him. I certainly thought that her happiness had improved her; for, although quite as cheerful as of old, she had a quiet dignity which very much became her. She said that she hoped, when we were able to enter into gaiety again, that we would let her take us with her into society.

For myself I declined at once, and I am glad that Polly did the same. I told her we moved in a sphere as far removed from the one in which she did, as the sun was from the earth, and that I was sure it was a great mistake, as my own example might prove, to go out of it. "It is pleasant for a time, Ada," I said, "but it is a bitter fruit; no good can come of it. When Percy comes home, if we are married, and if Polly is still single, it will be a different thing; but at present Daisy Villa has nothing in common, except our affection, with Wilton Crescent and Belgrave Square. We shall be very glad to come over sometimes to see you quietly, and for you to drive over to see us when you can spare time from your gaieties, but beyond that, as long as I am Miss Ashleigh, nothing." Ada tried hard to shake my resolution, but in vain, and Polly was equally firm with myself.

Harry came to dinner, and Ada made him feel perfectly at home. Certainly prosperity had not spoiled her; she was just as frank and as friendly as when she had been staying with us as a girl at Canterbury; she introduced him to Lord Holmeskirk with a laughing remark, that Harry had at one time very nearly prevented her from ever occupying the position she now so unworthily filled, by making the most desperate love to her when she was only sixteen years old. Lord Holmeskirk laughed, and said, that in that case he was very greatly Harry's debtor in that he had not succeeded in his attempt upon Ada's affections.

Harry and Lord Holmeskirk were soon on very friendly terms. They suited each other well. They had moved certainly in very different circles, and had seen very different sides of life; but they were of the same happy disposition; both in their way singularly straightforward men, and both gifted with the same honest determination to see only the best side of things.

Our little dinner-party went off very pleasantly; and I felt quite relieved to find that when we were helped, the servants left the room; and Ada then told us that she had suffered so much as a girl from the stony presence behind her mother's chair, that she had always determined, if she were at the head of a house of her own, never to have a servant in the room one moment longer than necessary.

After dessert was over, Ada and we went up to the nursery, leaving the gentlemen over their wine, and I believe they would have sat and talked there all night if Ada had not at last sent them message after message to say that tea was ready upstairs. Soon after they came up our fly arrived, and we went home very much pleased with our evening.

After that Harry never raised any objection to going to dine at Wilton Crescent, which we afterwards did every month or so when Ada was in town. Polly and I used to lunch with her once a fortnight, and the coronetted carriage was very often down at Daisy Villa, where it never ceased to be an object of wonder and admiration to the small children of the neighbourhood, and I have no doubt gave us great standing and dignity in the eyes of the inhabitants of the other five villas. I really believe we never ceased to be subjects for wonder and speculation to the countess's powdered footman, who knowing that Lord Holmeskirk had married the daughter of the fashionable Lady Desborough, could never form any hypothesis perfectly satisfactory to himself as to how she could possibly come to be familiar with people living in such a small, and exceedingly unfashionable domicile as No. 1, Daisy Villas, Charlemagne Road, Putney.

CHAPTER III

A STRANGE PROFESSION

A very touching picture Sophy Gregory presented as she sat in the little parlour at work, a week after Dr. Ashleigh's visit; in her mourning dress, and with the tiny fatherless child in her lap. She was very pale, and looked years older than she was. Sophy had gone through a heavy trial. She had loved her husband very truly; not indeed with the same admiring affection she had felt for him when they met in the plantations of Harmer Place – that dream had been dispelled rudely enough long ago, – but she had loved him as a true woman, knowing his faults, and bearing with them, taking them indeed as a special and deserved punishment upon herself for her fault in marrying him as she had done; but yet loving him the more, in that she saw how hard he tried, in spite of his faults, to make her happy. For this she had thanked God, and had prayed very earnestly that some day it might be granted to her, that through her influence over him, and his love for her, he might yet turn out nearly such a man as, in her early days of love, she had fancied him to be. But now all those pictures which she had been so fondly painting of their life in a distant land, had suddenly faded away; those bright pictures which had been ever before her eyes, as she sat at her work through the day, or of an evening, with Robert sitting moodily drinking beside her; fair, happy pictures of their future life, in a rude hut in some lonely clearing, far away from the nearest neighbours; she, engaged in her household work, listening to the ring of Robert's axe, till the hour should come for him to return from his labour, tired, but cheery and bright, to spend the evening with her happily without that dreadful bottle; contented with her fond welcome, sitting by the log fire-side, perhaps with his children climbing on his knee, or standing by while he told them stories, or taught them their first simple lessons, while she sat by busy at her work watching them fondly. At the thought of these, or some such fancies, Sophy's face had brightened often, and, trusting in the future, she had almost forgotten the present, and once again admired as well as loved her husband, not for what he was, but for what he would some day become. But now all these pictures were gone, blotted out in a moment by the rude hand of death, – and of such a death! If he had died as most men die, tranquilly and peacefully, with his last words breathed in her ears, his last look fixed upon herself, Sophy thought she could have borne it with resignation; but to die such a death as this, to be shot down in his strength, to go out full of health and spirits, and never to return; and for her only to be told that he lay in an obscure grave in a distant town! this she could hardly bear; and as she looked with a blank hopeless look into the fire, she thought that were it not for the unconscious babe on her knees, she would gladly – oh, how gladly! – go where there is no more weeping and tears. But for the child's sake she must live and work; for that child who, if he had his rights, would be heir to wealth and fortune – to that very home where his father had been shot down like a common robber, by the woman who had defrauded him of his rights. Sophy did not know all the history of that night's work, only what Dr. Ashleigh had told her; that Robert had gone with the intention of alarming Miss Harmer into divulging where the will was hidden. Angela Harmer's death she regarded as an unfortunate effect of the fright, which could not have been foreseen; of the violence used towards her she was of course ignorant.

Was not Robert, she asked herself, right in what he did? Was he not in his own house, seeking his own for her sake and the child's. Should all this go for ever unpunished? Should this woman who had robbed her and her child, who had now slain her husband, who had, as Dr. Ashleigh had told her, destroyed his daughter's happiness, and brought her to the verge of the grave; should she prosper and triumph? No, a thousand times no; and day after day Sophy's determination became more and more deeply rooted, her purpose more strongly confirmed. Should it cost her her life as it had done Robert's, she would yet find the will. But how? And she brooded over the thought till her brain seemed on fire; she fell into reveries from which nothing except the crying of her child could rouse her; her

eyes began to have a dreamy, far-off look, and had there not been anything to rouse and occupy her, it is probable that her reason would have given way entirely under the strain of this fixed idea upon her mind. Upon this day, however, there was a knock at the door, and a little talking in the passage, and then Mrs. Billow, who had been as kind as a mother to Sophy during this period, came into the room.

"Mr. Fielding wishes to speak to you, my dear; he has been here three or four times to ask after you, and I do think you had better see him."

Sophy looked up at her as she spoke, but it was evident that she did not hear what was said to her; her thoughts were too far away to be called back all at once.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Billow," she said presently, with an effort, "what are you saying?" Mrs. Billow repeated her message.

"Do see him, my dear," she went on as Sophy shook her head, "It will do you good; you are fretting yourself to death. Indeed, indeed, my dear, you are, and it is very wrong of you; what is to become of your little baby if you get ill, as I am sure you will, if you sit here think, think, all day, without speaking a word to any one? Do see him, now there's a deary, it will do you good, indeed it will."

Sophy paused a little, and then said in a weary tone, "Very well, Mrs. Billow, if it will please you, I will see him."

Mr. Fielding was shown in. He was a rough man, and, to a certain extent, an unprincipled one; but he had been a gentleman once, and could be one still when he chose, and his heart was, after all, not far from its right place.

"Mrs. Gregory," he said, as he came in, "I will not pain you by offering you my condolences, or by telling you how I feel for you in your affliction. Please to consider all that as said, and to take this visit as one simply of business. When I called the day before yesterday, I took the liberty of asking your landlady what you were thinking of doing. She told me that from what you said she believed that you intended teaching again. Now will you excuse me if I say, that although, under other circumstances, such a plan might have its advantages, yet that I think, that with a young baby, whom you would be obliged to leave without you the whole day, it would be attended by great inconveniences. Besides, there is no occasion why you should do so. My proposition is, that you should continue to do as you have hitherto done. I can leave the papers, letters, and such information as you require, here of a day, without coming in to disturb you. If I were to see you, say once a week at present, while it is the slack time, it would, I should think, be sufficient. By the time the busy season comes on, you will, I hope, be so far recovered as to be able to see me for half an hour or so every day. Of course, the remuneration will be the same as it has been up to this time. I do not think you could earn more at your teaching, and you will be able to have baby with you all day. There is another thing I should wish to say. It was through – through my late partner's capital and assistance, that we managed to do as well as we did, and it has laid the foundation for a first-rate business this year. There is at present £150 only in the bank, half of which is your property. Should you choose to let that remain in the business, I will give you, as I think would be fair, an interest in it – say one-fifth of the profits at the end of the year."

"But I have no right to that, have I, Mr. Fielding? For I know that I heard Robert say that any man would be ready to put £1,000 into the business for a third of the profits."

"That is right enough, Mrs. Gregory, and I do not disguise from you that the fifth of the business is worth a great deal more than £75, even for a sleeping partner; but that is not the question: it is not for the money, but for your interest and partnership, as it were, that I think it fair that you should still have a share in it."

"But I have no absolute right to any share, Mr. Fielding?"

"Well, not actually a right, Mrs. Gregory. You see we never drew up any deed of partnership when we began; but it was, of course, an understood thing that if anything should happen to either of us that his representatives should have some sort of interest or pull out of the affair."

"And about the writing, Mr. Fielding? Are you sure that my work is worth what you pay me?"

"Quite sure," he said, in a far less hesitating and undecided way than he had before spoken in. "I can assure you that I could not get any one on whom I could rely to do the work for less money, and that I should be very sorry for any one else to know all my affairs as you do."

"Then in that case I accept with many thanks," Sophy said, gratefully; "and I feel that you are acting with great kindness, for the £75 is no equivalent for my share of the profits. You have, indeed, taken a great weight off my mind, for I have been very troubled, wondering what I should do with baby while I was out."

"That is settled, then," Mr. Fielding said, cheerfully, as if greatly relieved that the matter had been so arranged. "I will send you the papers and letters to-morrow, when the post comes in. I can assure you it will be quite a relief to me; for although work is slack now, I have got into such a muddle that I hardly know which letters I have answered and which I have not. I have all this week's lot here." And he took a large bundle of letters from his pocket. "I believe I have answered all the others, but I have not touched one of these. I will leave them with you to clear up. And now, good bye. I will call again this day week."

And so Sophy, very joyful that she should be always with her baby, again set to at her old work of making out lists, and answering correspondents, and sending out the names of winning horses; and busied in these pursuits, and in the nursing and fondling of baby, her thoughts ceased to dwell on her project for the recovery of the will, and her eyes recovered their former expression. Not that she had given up her idea, but she had postponed it for a fitting season; the only step she took towards it being to write to her foster-mother, the woman who had brought her up, to ask her to send an account of Miss Harmer's state of health every three months, and to let her know at once if she should be taken ill.

As time went on, the first faint gleams of consciousness came into baby's eyes, and then it came to know her, and to hold out its arms, and struggle and cry to come to her, and Sophy began to feel that life might have some happiness for her yet, for she had something to love and work for, something which loved her in return.

And so a year passed, and now the little child was able just to toddle across the room, to Sophy's delight and terror, and to call her "mammy," and to utter other sounds, perfectly unintelligible to any one, but which she persisted was talking; and Sophy was able to toss him and play with him almost as gleefully as she would have done years before. She looked far younger than she had done eighteen months back, for she had now no care on her mind. Sometimes, indeed, of an evening, when her work was all done, and the child in bed, she would sit by the hour musing over her plans for the recovery of the will; but her eyes had not the fixed, strange look they used to wear when thinking it over; for then she had thought of it as a duty, as a something which she had to do; but now that it was for her darling's sake, it was a pleasure; and her eyes would lighten as she thought over what she would do when she had succeeded, and she and her boy were rich.

She was comfortably off now; for the firm was doing well, and James Fielding was a member of Tattersall's and began to stand high in the ring. His drawings had risen from five pounds to ten pounds a week. He told Sophy so, and said that he considered this five pounds had been payment for his work, in the same way that her two pounds was of hers, but this additional five pounds he looked upon as a weekly division of profits, and consequently she was entitled to another one pound a week also. So she had now three pounds a week and was very comfortable. At the end of the season he showed her his banker's book, and there was nearly £2,000 standing to his credit; and he said that next year, having so good a capital, he should be able to bet more heavily, and had no question that he should do much better.

All through that winter although business was very slack, and there was no occasion for his so doing, James Fielding used to come over three times a week to see her. And indeed all along his kindness had been very great, sending her little presents of game and poultry, and bringing baskets of choice fruit from Covent Garden.

It was not for a year after Robert Gregory's death that Sophy thought anything of all this. James Fielding had been very kind to her, and she had learned to think of him as a true friend; but absorbed as she was in her child, and with her spare thoughts so fixed on that other purpose of hers, she had never thought more on the subject. At length one day, something he said, some tone of his voice came upon her like a revelation. She started, looked hurriedly and anxiously at him and saw that it was indeed so. With an exclamation almost of pain she rose —

"James Fielding," she said, "don't say it to me. Never think of it again. Do not take away the last friend I have in the world from me. You are the only one I have to rely upon, do not make it impossible for me ever to receive a kindness from you again. I shall never marry again; do not, do not speak of it."

"I know, Sophy, I am not worthy of you," James Fielding began slowly, and then — as with an imploring gesture, she tried to silence him — "Let me speak, Sophy, I will never allude to it again."

"No, no, no," Sophy cried, passionately; "I will not hear you! If you once tell me you love me, you can never be to me what you have been before. I cannot be your wife; pray, pray, do not ask me."

"And can it never be, Sophy? Not in a long, long time?"

"Never, James, never! Think of me as a dear friend, as a sister. Shake hands, James. You will be my friend as you have been before, will you not? And the friend of my child?"

"I will, Sophy," he said, sorrowfully but earnestly. "I will, so help me God!"

It was a great blow to him; for he had come to love his late partner's pale young widow very truly, with her grave, sedate face when at business, and her pretty winning ways when he had come in sometimes and found her romping with her baby.

However, he saw at once that it was not to be, and very sorrowfully determined that at all events she should not find any change in his manner or way, and that she should be able to look on him as a brother. Had he thought that time could have made any change in his favour he would have been content to wait and hope; but he saw that there was none, and as he said to himself on his way home, "a man may back a horse when the odds are a hundred to one against it, and land his money in the end, but no one but a fool would put money on a scratched horse."

From that time Sophy never saw by his manner that she was anything more than a dear friend to him; and although for a little while she was timid and reserved with him, yet this in time wore off, and they fell back into their old relations, and things went on as before.

Next to James Fielding, Sophy's greatest friends were Mr. Harley and his wife who lived opposite. They had known her before Robert's death, and had about that time been very kind to her, and were really much attached to her and her boy. He played first violin at the Victoria, and his wife took the singing chambermaid at the same theatre. She was considered very clever in her line, and could have obtained an engagement at one of the houses across the water, but she preferred remaining at the same theatre with her husband. He was a man about thirty; she was twenty-six. They had been married five years, and it was their great grief that they had no children. They took very much to Sophy and her boy, who was christened James, after Mr. Fielding, his godfather; for Sophy could not at that time have borne that her child should be named after his father.

And so three years more went on. Little James was now four years old, and was growing up a very fine little fellow, and Sophy, who almost adored him, began to tell herself that it was time that she should leave him and devote herself for a while to that purpose which, if successful, would make him a rich man.

One day, nearly four years after her husband's death, James Fielding called upon her. After talking for some time on indifferent matters, he said —

"My dear Sophy, three years ago I asked you a question, and you said it could not be."

Sophy looked up for a moment with a little frightened start, but seeing by his steady face that he was not as she feared going to repeat that question, she listened quietly as he went on.

"Had your answer been other than it was — had you given me the least hope, I should have been contented to have waited any time; but I saw that what you said was final, and that it was not to be. I

therefore gave up all hope and have looked upon you ever since as you asked me to do – as a sister; and now I am come to tell you that I am going to be married."

"I am very glad to hear it, James," Sophy said, cordially; "more glad than I can tell."

"I was sure you would be, Sophy. She is a cousin of mine down in Leicestershire. She was a child when I left home, at my poor father's death, and came up to London, twelve years ago; now she is twenty-five. The winter before last, as you know, I went down to see the old place and the old folk. Two of my uncles were living there, and they were glad enough to see me. I don't say that they altogether approved of my profession; still, it is a sporting county. One of my uncles is a lawyer, the other a doctor, and both ride to the hounds, and they consequently did not think my being a betting man quite such a dreadful thing as some people might have done. At any rate they received me kindly, and I had rather a strong flirtation with my cousin. Last winter we came pretty well to an understanding, and now we have arranged that I shall go down to spend Christmas with them, and shall carry her away with me a day or two afterwards. And now, Sophy, I am going to talk business. These last few years we have been doing better and better, and we have now as nearly as may be £25,000 in the bank. Now, some of this I want to take out, as I have arranged to settle £8,000 on my wife, and I therefore propose that you should draw your share out. It is now £5,000, which will be enough to make you comfortable with your child, and place you beyond all necessity for work. It is better for us both, for, careful as I am, I might, by a run of ill luck, have it all swept away, yours and mine, and by this arrangement we shall be safe."

"I had already made up my mind, James, to tell you that I wished our partnership to be dissolved. To begin with, you now bet in such a large way, that I am sure this commission business is only an annoyance to you, and that you only continue it because it affords me work. However, I have kept a private account for the last three years, and I found that there was a good balance of profit after paying me my four pounds a week, so I did not hesitate in keeping on. However, I am now desirous of giving it up. For these four years I have been putting off the execution of a purpose I have had in my mind, and I must delay no longer. I do not tell you what it is, James, true friend as you are, for you might try and dissuade me from it, and that would only trouble me, without diverting me from my purpose. As for the £5,000, I cannot take such a sum as that; that is the result of your work, and not of the £75, which was what I put in. Still, as you say that you did benefit by Robert's work that year, and as that year laid the foundation of your fortune, I will consent to take £2,000, and I do that only for the sake of my child. Will you let it be so?"

James Fielding did not let it be so without a great struggle; but nothing could persuade Sophy to take more than the £2,000. At last, when he found that nothing could change her determination, he gave in, and agreed that it should be as she wished. He then began to ask her about her future plans.

"I cannot tell you, James, so do not ask me. My design, whatever it is, may take a year in execution – it may take two years. I may be gone before you come back."

"Gone!" James Fielding said, in astonishment; "but where on earth are you going?"

"I cannot tell you, James, so it is not of the slightest use asking."

"But what on earth are you going to do, Sophy?"

"I can tell you nothing now, James, so pray do not ask. I will send you my address when I am gone, and you can write to me; and if anything should happen to me, James, will you promise to be a father to my boy?"

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