

science by assuring Noah that henceforth his cat was more than welcome to a young pheasant whenever it had a mind to one. A little strangeness on the part of the returned wanderer seemed natural in Mr. Sage's opinion. That he had apparently developed one or two new habits was also reasonable in a cat with as much new experience of the world. And meantime the wedding preparations were pushed on.

At the end of the week Ted Oldreive came home from Vitiſer for Sunday; and he expressed joy at the sight of 'Corban,' once more the glory of his old haunts.

But the young man's face changed when Noah and the cat had departed in company, and a look of frank alarm made Milly tremble before danger.

"Why, what's amiss, sweetheart?" she asked, nervously. "All danger be past now, an' the creature's settled down as homely an' pleasant as need be."

"Matter enough," said Ted; "'tis a ewe cat!"

"A ewe cat! Oh, Ted, doan't say that!"

"'Tis so; an' God send her doan't have chets 'fore we'm married, else Postbridge won't hold your dear faither — nor Dartymoor neither."

"A PICKAXE, AND A SPADE,
A SPADE"

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CHAPTER I

NEARLY two hundred years ago, when Miser Merle departed from life, his little corner of earth took heart and breathed again. Not that he had raised any very mighty mound of gold to stand between himself and the sunshine, but, according to his power, he had followed the traditional road of those similarly cursed, and though the circumstances of his life, as innkeeper of a small hostelry at Two Bridges by Dart on the Devon moors, made any huge accumulation impossible, none the less he was a right miser in grain, and died without a tear to balance his two thousand pounds of money. Some heartily cursed him on his unknown way; not one pretended to mourn his passing.

His wife was long dead — starved with cold on a winter night, so certain gossips loved to tell; his son the miser had driven out of England, and subsequent rumours of the young man's death troubled him not at all.

So it came about that, when the "Ring o' Bells" was masterless, an obscure maiden, who had dwelt there since Mrs. Merle's demise, found herself possessor of all the money, for Miser Merle left no will. Minnie Merle was his orphaned niece, and when the old man's unhappy partner shuffled off, he be-thought him of this girl. As a relation, lacking friends or position, she would come without wages. So, from the position of domestic servant in a Plymouth tradesman's family at three pounds a year, Minnie was exalted to be the handmaid of Miser Merle without remuneration of any kind.

"A man's own flesh and blood," he said, when first she came, "will understand, but I don't want to poison your regard for me with money, or reduce you to the level of a hireling. You are my niece; you and Nicholas Merle, in the North Country, are all the kindred left to me now that my wife has been taken."

So Minnie settled at the "Ring o' Bells," and, being young and healthy, survived conditions that had thrust her aunt untimely into the grave. The old man never trusted his niece again after a day upon which he caught her helping two hungry tramps to bread and cheese, because Minnie's idea of a pennyworth was far more liberal than Mr. Merle's; but she stayed at the inn, encouraged to the dreary necessity by local friends, who hinted to her, behind

her uncle's back, that such self-denial must in the long run find itself rewarded.

Then the Miser, who would not put on a pair of new boots while an old pair hung together, went through a long day wet-footed, and so received his death-blow. His last conscious utterance was a frantic petition to the medical man from Plymouth, when that worthy told him how all hope was vain.

"Then you did ought to take half fees," he gasped. "As an honest man, so you did; an' God's my witness that, if you don't, I'll never give you no peace after I'm took!"

But the physician had a material soul, feared nothing, and held out for his bond after the patient's departure. Minnie Merle, now a young woman of three-and-twenty, reigned at the "Ring o' Bells," and, with sense scarcely to have been expected from one of such youth and peculiar experience, she did wisely as maiden hostess of the little tavern. Albeit not lavish, she gave better value for money than Mr. Merle had given; the inn grew in popularity with the moor-men; and romance of an exciting nature hung about the place, because many husbands were in the air for Minnie, and as yet she had given no sign that the happy man was chosen. To discuss the subject with the woman herself was not possible for men, but Tibby Trout, an ancient gammer who cooked at the "Ring o' Bells," enjoyed the complete

confidence of her mistress, and all that Minnie desired to publish she merely murmured into Tibby's ear. The intelligencer had seventy years of experience behind her, and was considered even more artful than old.

Tibby enjoyed to serve in the bar, as a change from the kitchen; and at such times, when her mistress was not by, she would discourse, mete praise and blame, waken hope here, here chasten a mind grown too confident.

"Be it true, Aaron French, as you told a chap to Moreton that you knawed how the cat would jump?" she asked, on a night when the bar was full.

Aaron, a sand-coloured and a sanguine man, grew hot and laughed.

"Why," he said, "a chap may put wan an' wan together without any harm."

"No harm except to hisself. The wan an' wan you'm putting together in your foolish head — well, her may have named your name thoughtful-like now an' again, but not these many days now. In fact, you'd best to say nought about her to anybody, for you'm awnly like to look a fule come presently if you do. That man at your elbow might explain if he would."

Aaron French turned upon the labourer whom Tibby indicated, and sudden anger shook his high-pitched voice into a squeak.

"This be your work, then, Elias Bassett," he said, furiously. "You to dare! You — the most penniless chap 'pon Dartymoor!"

The young man addressed regarded Aaron without emotion. Elias stood a head taller than his rival, was ten years younger, and very much poorer; but he had a handsome face, a sturdy body, and a stout right arm.

"You'm a silly poult," he said contemptuously. "As if a sandy-headed little monkey like you would take any maiden onless he wanted her money. An' Mistress Merle have got two pounds for every one of yours. As for me, I doan't care a cuss for the stuff, and wish to God 'twas all drowned in Dart. All men know that I kept company with her afore her uncle died, never knowin' as she was gwaine to have his ill-got money; an' I wish her never had got it; for then her might have looked at me very like. But when it comed out her was up to her neck in gold, so to say, I knowed it must stand between us, and that a gamekeeper weren't no husband for her."

"You seed yourself as others seed you — an' that's a very rare thing," said another man.

"All the same, you're a zany for your pains," declared the old woman, who had learned what she desired to learn. "You kept company with missus — you say so. Then 'twas her place, not yours, to

say what was to be done after she was lifted up in the land. I doan't mean for a moment that she'd look at a velveteen coat, so you needn't fox yourself as you've got any chance at all with her — yet her did, careless-like, name your name to me among other chaps as didn't 'pear to have learnt any manners in their bearin' toward women."

A strong pulse stirred Elias Bassett's slow nature and made him stare at the withered old woman.

"No call to glaze like a gert bull wi' your eyes so round as pennies," she said. "An' what's more, you needn't take no comfort from what I've told 'e. I reckon her ban't for no Dartmoor market. Wi' her mort o' money an' dearth o' years, her can very well wait awhile wi'out jumping at the first clodpole among 'e as offers."

At this moment a strange man came among them and the subject was dropped for that time, before the interesting spectacle of a face unfamiliar to all present.

The new arrival carried himself as one superior to his company. He was booted and spurred, held in one hand a pair of holsters, in the other a riding-whip. He gave no general salute to those present, neither did he order refreshment, but casting one quick glance about him, addressed himself to Gammer Trout and asked to see the mistress of the inn.

Nicholas Merle was a big, clean-shorn man, with bright eyes, quick movements, and the assertive manner of one accustomed to have his way. There was no contempt in his attitude to the folk assembled, but he took it for granted that he exceeded them in importance, even as his interests rose above their own; and not one among them questioned the assumption.

"Acquaint Mistress Merle that I am come — her cousin Nicholas from Yorkshire."

Tibby curtseyed and went to do his bidding, while the new arrival out-stared each man present in turn, then went to the peat fire and kicked it.

"Give 'e gude day," said Elias Bassett, in a friendly tone. "I daresay now this here lonesome auld Moor do seem but a wisht, pixy-ridden place to a gen'leman like you be."

"It is very well, my good fellow — a little contracted, that is all. The wolds are more spacious, but a gentleman might make a living here if others would but let him. Does anybody with a fat purse ride this way?"

Elias and his companions stared, and the lower jaw of Mr. French fell until he appeared imbecile. Yet the stranger's cynical hint brought up his listeners a little more on to a level with him. Their virtue owed it to itself to stand as high as his confessed or pretended rascality.

"That sort of talk leads to a hemp collar, mister," murmured Bassett; but Merle shook his head.

"Mere talk leads nowhere," he answered. "It is the fashion of you clowns to take a jest in earnest. But have no fear. I am not come among you with any such purpose as the road. To-day I have ridden from Exeter and, since leaving Moretonhampstead, saw nought but carrion crows and a fox or two. This place tempts no man to dishonesty. I can see upon your faces that you scarce know the meaning of the word."

Gammer Tibby returned, and Merle, nodding in a friendly way to all present, followed her through the bar to the private chambers behind it. Then, hardly had the horseman clanked from sight, when Ostler Joe Mudge appeared with his mouth full of news.

"Wheer be the gen'leman to? Not here? Then I can speak. Aw jimmery, what a hoss — if 'tis a hoss! Never seed the like in all my years! Come an' catch sight for yourselves, sawls, for you'll never believe me. Eyes like a human, an' a body all so bright as brimstone, to the last hair in the tail of un!"

While the loafers inspected a big horse of unusual colour, Nicholas Merle introduced himself to his cousin. They had never met before, and a deep interest and instant friendship wakened in Minnie's breast for the only relation she possessed in the

world. He was a tall, resolute man of thirty-five, with strange oaths and fatherly manner. He declared that chance alone brought him so far south, and that being at Exeter he had determined with himself to see his relations.

"Not until I reached Moreton did I hear of our uncle's death; then I should have come no farther, but I knew of your existence, and thought I would at least get a memory of you. And a very pleasant memory it will be, Cousin, for you're the queen of the Dartmoors, I hear, and so you should be. I never want to see a prettier maid."

But these statements, despite the speaker's convincing utterance and bluff manner of discourse, were by no means true. Nicholas Merle, chancing upon a journal nearly a year old, had read therein of his miser uncle's passing; and he knew that only one life stood between him and the dead man's fortune. So he forsook his usual haunts, to the satisfaction of better men, and galloped westward to look into the matter for himself.

CHAPTER II

WITHIN less than a week of the young man's arrival at the "Ring o' Bells," Minnie was heartily grieved that she had commissioned Mrs. Trout to hint a hope in Elias Bassett's ear. She and the gamekeeper had indeed been close friends before her uncle's death, and it troubled her that after the change in her fortunes Elias avoided the old intimacy and feared to be with her alone. Yet she admired him still, and more than ever, contrasted him with those who hummed about her like hungry wasps, since her prosperity. Now, however, to her secret shame, Minnie Merle began to see that she had dropped the handkerchief too soon. Upon the very day — within the actual hour — that Bassett received his polite hint, a greater than Bassett burst upon the vision of Minnie, and soon she hung on her cousin's words, quite dazzled by the dashing manners of him, reduced to daily blushes by his gallant address and courtly fashion of love-making.

These things, however, Elias did not perceive; nor did the newcomer dazzle him. When the coach from Exeter to Plymouth left a box for Mr. Merle, and he blossomed forth next Sunday in russet and

plum-colour, Bassett called him a popin-jay; and the keeper killed Minnie's old friendship at a breath by telling her in round terms, with the forceful periods of that time, that her cousin was either less than he proclaimed himself, or more.

"Not a plain-dealer, an' you'll live to know it. Ban't natural to bring chapter an' verse to everything a man speaks, same as he does. No honest man wants a cloud of witnesses to his least act or word. He goes in fear for all his noise."

"His way may not be ours, Mr. Bassett, but we're a good deal behind the times, and it does not become you or any other man to call my cousin in question. He is very superior and genteel, I'm sure, and as for honesty, I never met a more honest man."

"Ess fay, an' you have; an' you'll find it out after you'm married to un, if not afore," said Elias, bluntly.

Minnie flamed and frowned angrily upon the speaker.

"That's a very rude speech, and I never expected to hear you say such a thing."

"Wish to God I could say different. I'd tell a lot more against your cousin if I didn't love you wi' all my heart an' soul; but, being so set upon you, I can't speak with a free mind, so I'll speak nought. Doan't 'e be vexed wi' me, my dear woman. You know right well as I'd go 'pon my naked knees from

here to Lunnion town to do your pleasure. Awnly I ban't blind, an' I see how this dashing chap's bold front have cowed us all round about. Love of you would keep a man true an' honest if 'twas in the nature of un so to be, an' I doan't say but Nicholas Merle be right at root; but I mislike un, 'cause I'm very jealous for you, Minnie Merle, an' I pray you'll take your time an' not jump into his arms fust moment he axes you to marry him, as he surely means to do come presently."

The girl grew a little soothed before this soft answer.

"I'm sure you mean very well, Elias Bassett, an' I'll remember what you say, for it's a foolish softness toward me that makes you say it. We'm auld friends ever since I came to Two Bridges, an' I doan't think no worse of you for speaking your mind. But you'm quite out o' bias. Such a dashing man as my cousin do carry himself civil an' polite to all, because he can't help it. 'Tis his smooth custom. He wouldn't think of me as a wife. Why should he — a maiden so rough of speech an' manner? An' li'l enough to look at, I'm sure, to an eye as have often been filled by town-bred girls. Doan't 'e fret, theer's a gude man. He'm awnly biding along wi' us because he likes the strong air an' the Devonshire cream an' honey. He'll be off as he came — all of a sudden some fine day, no doubt."

But Bassett shook his head, and, indeed, facts presently proved that he was right, the girl mistaken. Nicholas made no haste to depart from the Moor. He took mighty rides over it upon his brimstone-coloured horse; he endeavoured to win the friendship of all men, and nearly succeeded, for he was generous and a good sportsman — sure credentials to the regard of the folk. Only Bassett and another here and there maintained a stubborn and doglike mistrust. Nor were the sceptics free of reasons for their attitude. Elias was laughed at as a man ousted from hope by a better-equipped rival, and the fact that his undue bitterness was naturally set to the account of defeated love, chastened his tongue; but in truth Mr. Bassett's regard for Minnie had little to do with his emotion. He was an honest man, and not prejudiced overmuch against young Merle by their relations. Nevertheless he had a lodged loathing against him, read craft into his apparent candour, secret policy into his open-handedness, simulation into his great affection of being fellow-well-met with all. A lad of no imagination, Bassett none the less went heavily in this matter, and was oppressed with the sense of evil at hand. A dull premonition, to which he lent himself reluctantly, spread events in their sequence before him ere they fell out.

Then accident presented him with a solid fact,

and that fact, as is the nature of such things, opened the door to many problems. But some weeks before the day that his acquired knowledge set young Bassett's brains upon the whirl, there had happened the foreseen, and Minnie was engaged to be married to her cousin. Liquor ran free on the evening of the great news, and few were those who left the "Ring o' Bells" in silence and sobriety. Elias at least was not among them, for, faced with the engagement, he abandoned his antagonism in a sort of despair, told himself that it was idle to fight fate, single-handed, and so drank Minnie's health far into the night and went home to his mother's cottage as drunk as any man need desire or deplore to be.

The time was then late summer, and the wedding was fixed to take place at Widecombe in November. This matter determined, life pursued its level way, and Nicholas Merle, who appeared to have no business or affairs that called him elsewhere, dwelt on at the "Ring o' Bells," enjoyed the best that the inn could furnish him, and spent his time between courting his cousin, in a manner much to her taste, and riding far afield over the land. Sometimes she accompanied him on her Dartmoor pony, sometimes he went alone.

There came a day in the bar when Gammer Trout was able to furnish the company with a morsel of news.

"Master Merle got a packet by the mail esster-day," she said. "Fust as ever he've had since he comed; an' not to his taste neither. 'Twill call him off, for he set his teeth and frowned when he read it, an' said as he must be gone in a week an' wouldn't be back much afore the wedding."

"Who might the packet have come from?" enquired Aaron French; but Tibby could not tell. She believed in her future master and gave the man a short answer.

"That's his business. Us all have our troubles."

"I be the last to speak anything but praise of the gen'leman," declared Aaron. "Yet he is a man of mystery, an' his goings an' comings work upon no rule that a plain head can figure out to itself."

"Done a purpose," declared Joe Mudge; "nought goes home to a maiden's heart like mystery. 'Tis meat an' drink to a fansical female. A fellow do bulk large in the innocent eyes of women folk if they think he've got a hidden side to un — a side as nought but the moon do know."

They returned to the subject of the packet; and then it fell out that, within half an hour of that time, the great fact already alluded to faced Elias Bassett, and an accident thrust the fortunes of a man and a woman into his hands.

As he left the "Ring o' Bells" a little later, his

mind upon the packet, Nicholas Merle himself set out on horseback, and galloped away in a direction that the keeper pursued more slowly on foot. And as he viewed the receding figure, a speck of white suddenly fluttered into the air behind it and fell upon the moor-path. Ignorant of his loss, the rider went forward, and Bassett, convinced that he had seen the identical object of recent discussion, marched along his way. His purpose, arrived at hastily, was to pick up the letter, conceal it, and give it to Minnie with the frank advice that she would do well to read it; but in the event he did no such thing, for as he stooped to gather up the paper, a thud of hoofs came to his ear and he saw that Nicholas Merle had discovered his loss and was returning to make it good if possible.

He dropped the writing unseen, a flash of wisdom leading to that course; but he did not do so until two words had chanced to fall upon his eyes — two words of such tremendous significance that they quite dazed the mind of Elias.

"Dear husband —"

He read that much, then moved quickly away from the letter and pretended to be picking and eating blackberries a hundred yards distant, as Merle rode past him with his eyes straining to right and left of the way. The rider banished his care and cracked a jest with Bassett; then, looking back-

ward, without appearing to do so, Elias saw Merle dismount and clutch up his letter. A moment later he resumed his ride, and went whistling along upon his great, bright horse.