

CHAPTER III

ANTHONY MAYBRIDGE arrived at Cross Ways, and amongst the various items of his luggage he was only concerned for his gun-case. Mrs. Dacombe greeted the youth with old-time courtesy, and her husband soon perceived that the newcomer would be a pupil in little more than name. Anthony, indeed, made an energetic start, and for the space of a full week resolutely dogged the farmer's footsteps; but his enterprise sprang from a whim rather than a fixed enthusiasm. On the spur of the moment, before various alternatives, he had decided upon farming; but the impulse toward that life waned, and in a month the lad found Richard Dacombe's society much more congenial than that of his taciturn parent. Good store of snipe and plover were now upon the Moor, and they drew young Maybridge more surely than the business of manuring hay lands or getting in the mangel-wurzel crop. With Dick, indeed, he struck into close fellowship, founded on the basis of the gun; and with Jane Stanberry he also became more friendly than anybody but herself was aware. Socially, Maybridge stood separated from his host by the accident of success alone.

Dacombe and Anthony's father were old acquaintances, and the latter, a prosperous nurseryman at Tavistock, sometimes fell in with his friend when the hounds met at the powder-mills.

The boy found Jane sympathetic, and being possessed of a warm heart but little sense, he soon revealed to her the true cause of his present life and temporary banishment from home.

"If you can believe it," he said, when she met him returning from a day with the snipe in the bogs, — "if you can believe it, I shall be surprised. I always thought a man ought to look up to women as the soul of truth and all that. I was engaged — secretly; and there was another chap I hardly knew by sight even; and that girl was playing with me — like you play with a hooked fish; the only difference being she didn't want to land me. In fact, I was the bait, if you understand such a blackguard thing, and she fished with me and caught the other chap. I could mention names, but what's the use?"

"How horrid!" said Jane. "I'm sure I'd very much rather not know who 'twas."

"Well, anyway, the other chap took the bait. And the moment she got him she threw me over. *After we were engaged*, mind you! And the rum thing is, looking at it from a mere worldly point of view, that I shall be worth tons more money than that chap ever will be."

"She didn't really care about you, then?"

"I suppose not, though I would have taken my dying oath she did. And after the frightful blow of being chucked, I tried to hide the effect, but couldn't, owing to going right off my feed — especially breakfasts. My mother spotted that, and taxed me with being ill — a thing I never have been in my life. So I had to confess to her what a frightful trial I'd been through, and she told the governor."

"I'm sure they must have been very sad about it, for your sake."

"Not half as much as you would have thought; though many chaps have been utterly smashed up body and soul and gone into a consumption of the lungs for less. But it came as a bit of a shock to my people, because, you see, I'd never mentioned it, and — well, the girl was in a tobacconist's shop, and my governor hates tobacco; which made it worse, though very unfair it should. Anyway, it shows what girls are."

"And shows what fathers are, seemingly."

"Yes; though how my governor, whose grandfather himself went out working in other people's gardens, could object to a girl who had pluck enough to earn her own living, I don't know. I had a furious row about it, until he pointed out that, as she had chucked me, it was not much good quarrelling with him about her. Which was true. Nobody

but you has really understood what a knock-down thing it was. I'm an atheist now — simply owing to that woman; I don't believe in a single thing. I said all girls were the same till I met you. Still, I feel as bitter as a lemon when I think much about it. But you're different, I can see that."

"You'll feel happier come presently."

"I am happier already — in a way, because I find all women are not like that. You and Mrs. Dacombe have done me a lot of good, especially you."

"Sure I be gay and proud to think so," said Jane.

"To promise and then change! Why, it's contrary to human nature, I should think," declared the ingenuous Anthony. But Jane Stanberry did not reply; she had reached a point in her own experience of life that indicated the possibility of such a circumstance.

Young Maybridge was pleasant to see, and, as cynical chance would have it, his gifts, both physical and mental, were of a sort to shine conspicuous from the only contrast at hand. Dick Dacombe had a face of true Celtic cast, that might have been handsome, but was spoiled by an expression generally surly and always mean. His character became more distrustful and aggressive as he grew older, and the suspicious nature of him looked specially ill before Anthony's frankness and simplicity. The latter was fair, with open, Saxon type of counte-

nance. His good temper overcame all Richard's jealousy from the first, but the keeper envied Anthony's extra inch and a half of height and greater weight of shoulder, though he himself was the closer knit of the two.

For a period of weeks all went well between the young men, and their increasing intimacy argued ill for Anthony's progress toward practical knowledge in agriculture. This Jonathan Dacombe understood, but held it no concern of his. It happened that the farmer came home one day just in time to see his son and his pupil departing from Cross Ways together. An expression of contempt touched with slight amusement lighted his grey face, and he turned to Jane Stanberry, who stood at the door.

"Like the seed 'pon stony ground," he said. "Comed up wi' a fine blade an' full o' nature, then withered away, 'cause there wasn't no good holding stuff behind. A farmer! However, there's no call he should be. He'm here to learn to forget, not to farm."

"He is forgetting so fast as he can," declared the girl. "He's got nought to say nowadays 'bout the wickedness of women and such-like; an' he went to church wi' mother an' me 'essterday to Postbridge, an' singed the psalms an' hymns wi' a fine appetite, I'm sure. His voice be so deep as a cow when he uplifts it."

"I reckon he'm getting over his trouble too quick for my liking," answered Mr. Dacombe. "My bird will be off some fine mornin' when shooting be over and theer's nought more for him to kill."

Meantime, while Jane spoke with admiration of Anthony's good qualities, and Mrs. Dacombe heard her indignantly, young Maybridge himself was similarly angering another member of the Dacombe family. Now he stood with Dick upon the lofty crown of Higher White Tor, and watched a flock of golden plover newly come to their winter quarters from some northern home. They flew and cried at a great height above the marshes, wheeled and warped in the clear blue of a December sky; and when simultaneously they turned, there was a flash as of a hundred little stars, where the sunlight touched the plumage of their breasts and underwings. But they were bound for a region beyond the range of the sportsmen who watched them; soon, indeed, the birds dwindled into dots, that made a great > upon the sky; and as they flew, they constantly renewed that figure.

"Pity," said Anthony. "Off to the middle of the Moor. Haven't got a shot at a golden plover yet. Miss Jane's favourite bird, too, so she says."

"No call for you to trouble about that. If she eats all I've shot for her, she'll do very well."

"You're a lucky devil, Dick."

"That's as may be."

"Always the way with chaps like you, who never had anything to do but ask and get 'yes' for an answer. You don't know when you're well off in these parts."

Richard laughed without much merriment.

"There's so good fish in the sea as ever come out of it," he said. "I'd not break my heart for any girl."

"A chap in love to say such a cold-blooded thing!"

"We're not all froth and splutter, like you."

"Nor yet ice, like you, I should hope. You're engaged to the prettiest girl I've ever seen in my life, and the best; and you take it as if it was your right instead of your frightfully good luck. It's only because you don't know the world that you are so infernally complacent about her, Richard. If you knew all that I do —"

The other sneered in a tone of levity. "A wonderful lady's man you — by all accounts! But don't think I'm afeared of you. Might have been jealous afore you comed — not since."

Anthony grew red as the dead asphodel foliage under his feet in the bogs.

"That's as much as to say I'm a fool."

"Why so? It's as much as to say you're honest — that's all."

"That wasn't what you meant when you spoke.

You were laughing because you know you are sharper than I am. You may be, but you're not sharp enough to know your luck. You've told me pretty plainly what I am; now I'll tell you what you are — a good shot and a good sportsman all round, but no other good that I can see. You think a jolly sight too much of yourself to make a good husband, anyway. If Jane realised —"

"Mind your awn business!" thundered out the other, "and keep her name off your tongue henceforward. D'you think I doan't know her a million times better than you do? D'you think us wants lessons from you after all these years, you —"

"I can make you angry, then, though I am a born fool?"

"Yes, you can; an' you damn soon will if you'm not more careful of your speech. I doan't want to take law in my own hands an' give you a thrashing; but that'll I do if you touch this matter again. Who are you, to tell me my duty to my maiden?"

"As to what you'll do or won't do," answered Maybridge, growing very rosy again, "there's two sides to that. I'd have asked you to box weeks ago, only I'm taller and heavier, and I thought you would think it unsportsmanlike. But now — when you please. As for Miss Jane, I shall speak to her, and see her, and go to church with her just as often

as she'll let me, without asking leave from you or anybody. So now you know."

Anthony swung off over the Moor, and Richard, pursuing the way to his hut on the shoulder of the tor, let the other depart unanswered. This sudden and unexpected breach rather pleased the keeper. He had always held Anthony to be a fool, and the fact seemed now proved beyond further dispute. It was not until he had lived through the loneliness of a long day and night upon the warren that the young man viewed his situation differently. Then three harpies — wrath, resentment and a natural jealousy — sprang full-fledged into being, and drove him home before them.

As for Maybridge, smarting under a sense of insult and a worse sense that he deserved it, the young man strove to excuse himself to his conscience. He assured himself many times that Richard Dacombe was unworthy of Jane Stanberry in every possible respect. And there came a day when he told her that he thought so.

CHAPTER IV

MARY DACCOMBE was wont to reserve the problems of the working day until nightfall; and her husband solved them as best he could during those brief minutes that intervened between the extinction of the candle and his first snore. An honest but unsentimental man, love for his offspring had never particularly marked his mind. He was contented that his sons should quarrel, and that Dick should thrash Davey when he felt so disposed, for it saved him the trouble. He held that each did the other good, and he had neither pity nor particular regard to spare for either.

This cheerless fact now appeared, for on a night soon after Christmas, Mrs. Dacombe approached her husband upon a matter of sentiment, and won colder comfort from him than she expected. He gave her an obvious opportunity to approach the subject, otherwise it is doubtful whether she would have had the courage to do so. That day, to the farmer's astonishment and gratification, Anthony Maybridge had come back from a brief Christmas vacation. The holiday extended over a fortnight, and Dacombe fully believed that he had seen the

last of his pupil; but Anthony returned, declared a renewed interest in matters agricultural, and gave the farmer to understand that he should continue to reside at Cross Ways for the present.

Now Jonathan laughed as he stretched himself on his bed; he laughed, and wondered what had brought young Maybridge again to the Moor. Whereupon his wife read him the riddle.

"Not you, nor yet the work, nor yet the shooting," she said. "'Tis right as you should know, however, for trouble's brewing, if I can see, an' 'tis our awn son will smart for it."

"Us have all got to smart off an' on, though how that moon-calf of a boy be going to hurt Dick or Davey, I can't tell."

"Not Davey, though 'twas him as found it out, I reckon. Davey be venomous against his brother — always was, worse luck. Dick rubs it into the bwoy, and his brother hurts him with bitter mouth-speech when he can. 'Tis this way: that young gen'leman be getting a deal too fond of Jane Stanberry by the looks of it. That's what he's comed back for, I reckon. Davey spat it out essterday when Dick clouted his head. Her wasn't theer, so the boy up an' said as Dick's temper would weary the Dowl, an' that Jane was looking away from him to a better. Lucky I was by, else Dick would have done the li'l un a mischief. He growed thunder-black, yet

I could see by his wrath be knowed the tale were more than Davey's spite."

"Them two takes after your family, mother, an' no mistake. Yet I hope they won't turn gaol-birds, or else weak in their intellects."

The woman felt the tears in her weary eyes. She wiped them away, and turned in bed.

"They'm as God made 'em, master; please Him they'll be better friends come Davey grows up. But what must us do?"

"Do? Nought."

"Surely you've got your son's good at heart? Think what 'tis for Dick to see that wicked girl coolin', coolin', by inches. Gall for him, poor dear."

But the man only laughed sleepily. "Strongest wins in this world. If Richard ban't stout enough to keep his woman by his own arts, us can't help him."

"You might send this young chap 'bout his business."

"An' fling away two pound a week? No, fay! Girls is easier picked up than two pound a week. Let Dick do what's in him. He ban't 'feard of that slack-twisted, yellow-haired chap, be he? Let him show the maiden which is the better man, an' not come bleating to his mother, like a hungry lamb to a ewe."

"He never comed hisself."

"Well, what's to hinder him from using his fistes? Nought brings a man down in a girl's eyes like a good hiding. Let 'em settle it same way as the tom-cats do."

"I do b'lieve your heart be made o' moor stone."

"Good job if 'twas. Ban't no use being built o' putty, nor yet o' pity, 'pon Dartymoor. Now shut your clack, an' let me go to sleep."

The woman sighed, and closed her eyes.

"I'll tell Dick what you say. Good night, master."

CHAPTER V

ANTHONY MAYBRIDGE had in truth discovered that everything depends upon the point of view. What was a deed past understanding in one woman, appeared to him quite defensible for another. He had grown into a very steady admiration of Jane Stanberry, and he told himself that her attachment to the warrener was a serious error. This he firmly believed, apart from the other question of his personal regard for Jane. He discussed the matter with a grand impartiality, and felt confident that her future must be ruined if shared with such a surly and cross-grained churl as Richard Dacombe.

Presently he expressed the same fear to Jane herself, and she was much astonished to find no great indignation flame up in her mind before such a proposition. She confessed the thought had occurred to her, and asked Anthony how it could have struck him also. Whereupon he declared that his suspicion was awakened solely from disinterested regard for her welfare and future happiness. In brief, a situation stale enough developed, with that brisk growth to be observed in all similar complications when they are exhibited by primitive natures.

Such seeds grow in virgin and uncultured hearts with a rapidity not manifest where the subjects are sophisticated and bound about with the etiquette of their order.

Jane Stanberry observed the radical differences between these men; she found Dick's cloudy spirit and gloomy nature grow daily darker by contrast with the generous and sanguine temperament of Anthony. Indeed, Richard did grow more morose, as was to be expected, while he watched such a play develop and apparently stood powerless as any other spectator to change the plot of it.

But at last his sense of wrong pricked passion, and he stirred himself. Most firmly he believed all fault lay with Maybridge alone, and he attributed to that youth a guile and subtlety quite beyond his real powers of mind. Dick accused his rival of having seduced the love of Jane against her inner will — a thing obviously not possible; and upon that judgement he prepared to act.

For her part, the girl let conscience sting until the stab grew dull and failed to disturb her comfort. Each exhibition of ferocity from Richard lessened her uneasiness, and justified her in her own eyes. She plotted to meet the other man in secret; yet still she played a double part, and outwardly pretended that Dick was all in all to her.

So stood things when Mary Dacombe spoke to

her son; and his father's advice seemed good to the man, and chimed very harmoniously with personal desire, for he had reached a point where he itched to bruise and batter his adversary. Chance helped him in his ambition, and a discovery fired him to instant force of arms.

Returning home from the Moor upon a night when it was supposed that he meant to stop in his hut on the warren, Richard came through the ruins, and was astonished to see a light glimmering from the silent desolation. It had grown late on a cold, moonlit night in late January, and nothing could have been more unexpected than the presence of any human being in the old powder-mills at such a time. Supposing that he had surprised his brother Davey, Dick crept silently to the spot, and presently discovered that the brightness gleamed in two bars set at a right angle, and flashed from behind the door of a ruin. The place was windowless, but the ill-fitting entrance revealed a flame within. Richard recognised the building as Case House No. 4, and at once associated the intruder with his brother. Even as he did so, his heart beat faster at the thought of danger — not to Davey, but himself. Creeping closer, however, voices reached him, and he discovered that Anthony Maybridge and Jane Stanberry were there together.

Tingling with passion, he had some ado to keep

from kicking in the door and bursting upon them; but he desisted, and with an effort crept away to reflect. Almost immediately upon his departure he heard them following, so he turned and met them not far from the little bridge.

"A fine night for a walk wi' another man's girl," he said, suddenly appearing out of darkness and standing in the way of the guilty pair. "You thought I was out of hearing, no doubt, as you've thought often enough of late, I'll swear, when I was closer than you reckoned. For two pins I'd blow your fool's head off your shoulders."

Jane shrank back, and Maybridge stammered and stuttered.

"That's not the way to talk," he said.

"Talk! God's truth, I ban't here to talk — I leave that for you. What be you doing wi' my maid these many days? Tell me that!"

"I will. I'm glad of this. I've felt an awful brute lately; but you'll make me feel better in a minute. I've been telling Jane that she's making a big mistake to marry you. It's my honest opinion, and I ought to have told you."

"Honest! Wonder the word doan't choke you, you gert, hulking, lazy clown! Behind a man's back to do it! Thief that you be."

"Not at all. I've never hidden from Jane —"

"Shut your mouth, you hookem-snivey fox, or

I'll hammer your white teeth down your throat! Stand up to me, now this instant moment, an' us'll see who's the best man. 'Tis time this here woman knowed, an' I'll show her the straw you'm made of, for all your size."

He flung down his gun and his coat, then turned up his sleeves and waited.

"We can't fight before a girl — impossible," said Anthony.

"Doan't she want us to? Ban't she hungry to see us do it? Ban't she a female, like the rest of 'em? Come on, or I'll beat you like a dog."

"What's the good of making an exhibition of yourself, Richard? I was 'runner-up' in the amateur heavy-weights two years running. I can smother you, but I don't want to."

"Doan't blow so loud afore you see what 'tis to fight a chap in the right," cried Richard, with passion.

So we shift our standpoint at the beck of chance, and call virtue to our aid when accidentally enrolled under her banner. He stood where he had lied to his little brother and trampled Davey's fish into the ground and laughed at the child's rage.

"You'd better go," said Maybridge to Jane. "I'm awfully sorry about this, but —"

He was cut short, for the other rushed in and struck him a heavy blow on the side of the face. Anthony shook his head and snorted.

"If you will have it, you shall," he said; "but I'm sorry, because you're right and I'm in the wrong — more or less."

Jane fled at the first blow, and the battle began. Maybridge quickly proved the looseness of his great limbs was combined with other gifts proper to a boxer. He smarted doubly; from the other's insults and from the sense that they were deserved. He had ill-used Richard, and his dislike for him, once loosened, was proportionately bitter.

Stung thus, the young man let his strength and skill have vent. He took and gave some punishment, but he was a disciplined fighter, and very easily kept out the heavy rushes of the keeper. Then, at the first opportunity which Richard offered, Maybridge knocked him squarely off his legs with a tremendous blow over the heart. He rose slowly, but the edge of his strength was gone. His anger nearly blinded him before this reverse, while Anthony, on the other hand, had fought himself into a good humour. Presently at close quarters he hit rather low, and Dick cursed him.

"Fight fair, you devil!" he gasped.

"Fair enough," puffed the other. "Well up on your small ribs — you'll see the mark in the morning."

By mutual consent they rested presently; then the battle was renewed, and, knowing himself

beaten at every point of the game, Richard Dacombe let his temper loose and fell to fighting like a dog rather than a man. Now it was the other's turn to cry caution; but the keeper had no ears — he only lusted to do injury. Once Maybridge might have knocked him out of time, but he desisted; then, angered by a brutal kick on the calf of the leg, he got inside Dick's arms, clenched, gripped the smaller man like a bear, and with a cross buttock hurled him heavily backward. They had fought to the river's bank, and now, luckily for the loser's neck, he fell into the water. He struggled to his feet, and stood a moment where moonlight played upon the foaming stream. Then he crawled to the bank, and had scarcely strength to climb it. There he lay panting for some time. Anthony brought him his coat, and offered to give him an arm home; but Dick declined, and getting on to his feet with difficulty, walked along beside his conqueror.

"This is the beginning," he said — "not the end. If you don't leave Cross Ways before the week's out, you never will — not alive."

"Don't talk rot like that. I thought you were a good sportsman anyway, but I see you're not; and that's the worst you can say against any man. I was going — God's my judge that I'm telling you the truth — I was going away to-morrow — for a