

"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

time, at any rate. She wished it. But now — now you threaten me as if you were a murderer, I shan't move, not an inch. And if there's any blackguardly attempt on your part to do me an injury, I'll break your neck, Dacombe; so now you're warned. Anyway, you have shown that I was right, for any girl would be a madwoman to marry such a lunatic."

"Talk on, now, if you've got the wind to do it," answered Richard, "but the last word will be mine."

CHAPTER VI

A BLACK malignity dominated the beaten man after his reverse; and, inasmuch as Jane Stanberry, now at the cross ways of her life, fell from honour and played a base part out of fear, her lover continued to believe that his enemy alone was responsible for Jane's weakness. He blamed the girl, but his love did not diminish, and he still supposed that Anthony Maybridge once removed, she would return to him with eyes that again saw clearly. He attributed his conqueror's conduct to a tremendous strength of purpose, whereas mere feebleness and an amorous nature were responsible for it. The woman was at least as guilty as the man; and now an added blame belonged to her, for while Anthony henceforth openly declared himself the rival of Richard, she held the balance a little longer between them — chiefly from fear of Mrs. Dacombe. Her decision was made, yet very carefully she concealed it, and Richard continued in error.

From his mistaken conclusion, and smarting still with venom bred of the wounds Anthony had inflicted, the keeper proceeded to a criminal deed.

Such active hatred as he now felt stuck at nothing, and within a fortnight of his reverse came the evil inspiration that he waited for.

A veiled antagonism reigned between the men after their battle; then matters seemed to sink into customary course. Richard absented himself from home more than usual; Anthony abandoned shooting, and took to hunting instead.

Once more it happened that the warrener saw a light burning in No. 4 Case House by night, and, passing by, heard Maybridge within, whistling to pass the time until Jane's arrival. Richard slunk by awhile, and presently, like a ghost, Jane flitted past him. A flash of light fell upon the waste as she opened the door; then all grew dark again. Still the wronged lover remained within earshot, and accident killed his sudden gust of passion against the girl, for he heard a sob and listened to a weak, vain protest from her against the double part she was constrained to play. She accused Anthony of drawing her to him against all honour and right feeling; whereupon the listener departed, not desirous to hear more, and confirmed in his belief.

He visited the old Case House in the middle of the next day, and ground his teeth at sight of a rough carving—two hearts with familiar initials beneath them. Then he examined the concealed

blasting powder, and surveyed its position with respect to the main walls of the building. Satisfied of this, he proceeded into the air, took a heavy clasp knife, dug down a foot beneath the grass and turf and removed two bricks from the foundation of the Case House. Within them was a thin layer of concrete; the matchboarding followed; and then came the gunpowder. Calculating the exact spot of his excavation, Richard entered the hut and pursued his work from inside, after carefully moving the powder beyond reach of any spark that might be struck from his attack on the concrete. With light, numerous blows he gained his end, and soon had a clean hole running from beneath the magazine to the ground outside. This he filled with gunpowder, replaced the mass of the explosive above it, returned the bricks to their original positions, and covered up the space outside with turf and dry fern.

A scrap of touchwood and a match would do all the rest.

Richard Dacombe completed his preparations just in time, for as he moved away to the Moor, he saw his brother Davey in the valley. Thereupon Dick hid behind a rock to surprise the youngster unpleasantly should his goal be the Case House. But Davey had either seen his brother, or knew that he was not far distant. At least, he showed

himself too wary to run any risk, and pursued an innocent matter of climbing a pine tree for a wood-pigeon's nest. Nor did he come down again until Richard had gone upon his way to the warren.

CHAPTER VII

EVENTS by no means conspired to shake the keeper's evil determination. Lulled to fancied security and a belief that his indifference indicated a change of mind toward her, Jane continued her attention to Dick; and he abstained from upbraiding her, for he took this display to be love, and felt more than ever assured that, Maybridge once out of the way, the girl would waken as from a dream to the reality of his regard and worship. Her conduct, indeed, obscured his own affection, but he came of a class that takes life and its tender relations callously. The only ardent and worthy emotion that had ever made his heart throb quicker was this girl. His love was still alive, nor could anger kill it while he continued blind to the truth that she no longer cared for him.

A fortnight after his visit to the Case House, Dick descended by night from his den upon the high moor, and the dim flicker of a flame he had long desired to see strung his nerves to steel. For fulfilment of his plan it was necessary that he should come pat on the interval between the arrival of Anthony Maybridge at this tryst and Jane's subse-

quent approach. Twice he had been too late; to-night he arrived in time, and his opportunity waited for him. Maybridge was alone. The light burnt in silence. Then came a solitary footfall on the hollow floor above the gunpowder.

Dacombe had calculated every action that would combine to complete and perfect the deed now before him. Nor had he disdained to consider the result. No witness could rise up against him; his enemy would be blown out of physical existence, and his own subsequent declaration that some tons of blasting powder remained forgotten in the old magazine must serve to explain the rest. A spark from Anthony's pipe would be a satisfactory solution.

The man set about his murder swiftly and stealthily. He had already driven a heavy staple into the door of the Case House, and now, without a sound, he fastened his victim firmly in, using some lengths of brass rabbit wire for the purpose. Then he crept down below the level of the building, scratched away the turf and fern and moved the loosened bricks. He felt the powder dry under his hand, brought a large lump of rotten wood from his breast pocket, where he had long carried it, and struck a match. Soon the touchwood glowed, and he set it down, leapt from his work and hastened away along the path by which Jane must presently ap-

proach. Thus he designed to intercept her progress, and, upon some pretence or excuse, draw her from the zone of danger. As to that last point, however, he was doubtful. The amount of the powder he could not accurately tell, and the extent of the explosion remained to be seen. Richard calculated that three minutes, if not a longer period, must elapse before fire would gnaw up the dead wood and reach the powder; and now, as he moved hastily away, the seconds lengthened into minutes, and the minutes most horribly dragged. An infinite abyss of time widened out between the deed and its effect. He lived his life again; and still he peered through the darkness with his eyes, and strained upon the silence with his ears, that he might not let Jane Stanberry pass him and go ignorantly to destruction.

He was a quarter of a mile from the Case House, when it seemed as though the heavens were opened and Doomsday suddenly loosed upon the world. An awful and withering explosion swept the glen like a storm. First there leapt aloft a pillar of pale fire, that rose and spread as the eruption of a volcano spreads. The terrific glare painted long miles of the Moor, and, like the hand of lightning, revealed the shaggy crowns of the tors on many a distant hill; while, long before its livid sheaf of flame had sunk, came such a crash and bellow of

sound as might burst from the upheaval of a world in earthquake. Upon this appalling detonation a wave of air swept in sudden tempest. Richard was blown off his feet and dashed to the ground; and as he fell, the hills echoed back the explosion in crashing reverberations that rolled out of the darkness, rose and fell, and rose again, until, after a hundred repetitions flung hither and thither over the peaks of the land, they sank through a growling diminuendo into silence. And the silence was terrific by contrast with the awful clamour it succeeded, even as the darkness was intense that followed upon such an unwonted and far-flung glare of light.

Richard Dacombe got upon his feet, and the tinkle of broken glass was in his ears, with the murmur of affrighted voices; for the concussion had shattered nearly every pane at Cross Ways, and mightily alarmed the dwellers there.

When he reached home the young keeper found his parents already out-of-doors, with the whole household assembled about them.

Mary Dacombe praised God at sight of her son uninjured.

"'Tis the end of the world, by the sound of it," she said. "Where be Davey to?"

His father questioned Richard, and the man declared his ignorance of all particulars.

"An explosion at the old powder-mills, or else a bolt from heaven," he answered. "I must have passed by the very place, I reckon, not five minutes before the upstore."

"A thunder-planet, for sartain," declared an ancient soul, whose few teeth chattered between his words. "I can call home when a com-com-comet was reigning fifty years an' more ago, an' 'twas just such open weather as us have had o' late."

Mr. Dacombe felt anxious for his stock in certain byres and cow-houses that lay to the west of the powder-mills. But first he held up a lantern and counted the company.

"Be us all here?" he asked.

"Davey's out somewheers," answered his wife; "ess, an' Jane Stanberry be —" She broke off, and looked at the farmer.

"Down-long, I s'pose," he said carelessly; then he turned to Richard. "Us can't blink these meetings between 'em, Dick. Best man wins where a maid's the prize; or which she thinks be the best. Awnly God send her ban't in the powder-mills to-night."

"'Tis most certain she be," answered Mary Dacombe. "Her didn't know as the young man — Mr. Maybridge — was called off sudden to Moreton to serve 'pon a committee for the Hunt Dinner next month. A chap rode out, and he saddled his

mare hisself and galloped off wi' him directly after he'd ate his meat."

"Jane didn't know?" asked Richard.

"No, she went out counting to find him, I'm afraid."

"An' he'm at Moreton?"

The man asked in a voice so strange that none failed to note it, even in this dark moment of fear and turmoil.

"Her went to wait for him usual place, no doubt," said Jonathan Dacombe. "Us had better come an' look around for her, an' Davey too — not to name the things in the long byre by the wood."

A hideous cry suddenly cut Jonathan short, for a storm had swept the sinner's brain upon these words. He saw what he had done, and the shock upset the balance of his mind.

"Come!" he cried; "I've killed her, I've ended her days in a scatter of blood and flesh! Nought to show for the butivul round body of her now. But her shall have Christian burial, if 'tis awnly a hair of her head left to put in the churchyard; an' I'll mourn for her on my knees, afore they string me up!"

"God's goodness! what gabble be this?" asked his father.

"And Maybridge still alive, wi' no smell of fire about him. I'll — I'll —"

He broke off and gazed round him wildly.

"Upon the Moreton road as he comes home-along!" he said. Then the wretch turned to hurry away. At the first step, however, he stopped and stood as still as a statue, for he had heard what was hidden from the ears of the rest. Then they too caught the sound of footsteps and a murmuring in the night. Richard remained without moving, and his eyes glared into the dark, and his jaw had fallen. Then, taking shape and coming slowly into the radius of lantern light, there moved a woman and a boy.

Jane Stanberry approached, holding Davey by the hand; and at sight of her Richard Dacombe screamed out his shattered senses, and fled as one possessed of an evil spirit. In vain they made search for him by night and day, and it was not until more than eight-and-forty hours had passed that they found him wandering in the great central loneliness insane. There they ministered to him, and brought him home; and time so dealt with him that he sank into a harmless and haunted idiotcy — a horror for his father, a knife in his mother's heart.

Now it happened that Richard's brother, upon the keeper's departure from the Case House on a day already noted, had descended from his pine tree, made close investigation of the elder's deed, and guessed that such preparations were directed

against one man. From that day until the time of the catastrophe, David kept silent watch upon all occasions when Jane and Anthony Maybridge met there. Hidden within a dry drain some ten yards distant, he had played sentinel until the night of Richard's revenge. Then he had crept from his cover the moment the other's back was turned, reached the smouldering touchwood, and with amazing courage extinguished it. Afterward, releasing the girl as quickly as possible, and bidding her run for her life to the shelter of a grinding mill two hundred yards distant, he had once more set the rotten wood on fire and hastened after Jane.

She, mystified and indignant, was also conscious that the boy must be obeyed, and so fled as he ordered her. Yet both would have perished but for their protection behind the stout ruin of the grinding mill. And now, the fear of death upon their faces, they hurried trembling home, and Nemesis came with them.

* * * * *

To-day a black-bearded man, with brown eyes and a mouth always open, shambles about the blasted heart of the old powder-mill. He babbles to himself with many a frown and pregnant nod and look askance; sometimes he watches the trout in the river; sometimes he plucks feverishly at the blossoms of the broom and spearwort and other

yellow flowers. These he stamps underfoot as one stamps fire. Davey is his brother's keeper, and shall be seen always at hand. At his word Richard Dacombe obeys like a dog — shrinks with fear if the boy is angry, fawns and laughs when the boy is kind.