

LADY HAMMERGALLOW'S VIEW.

XXVIII.

In Siddermorton Park is Siddermorton House, where old Lady Hammergallow lives, chiefly upon Burgundy and the little scandals of the village, a dear old lady with a rosy neck, a ruddled countenance and spasmodic gusts of odd temper, whose three remedies for all human trouble among her dependents are, a bottle of gin, a pair of charity blankets, or a new crown piece. The House is a mile-and-a-half out of Siddermorton. Almost all the village is hers, saving a fringe to the south which belongs to Sir John Gotch, and she rules it with an autocratic rule, refreshing in these days of divided government. She orders and forbids marriages, drives objectionable people out of the village by the simple expedient of raising their rent, dismisses labourers, obliges heretics to go to church, and made Susan Dangett, who wanted to call her little girl 'Euphemia,' have the infant christened 'Mary-Anne.' She is a sturdy Broad Protestant and disapproves of the Vicar's going bald like a tonsure. She is on the Village Council, which obsequiously trudges up the hill and over the moor to her, and (as she is a trifle deaf) speaks all its speeches into her speaking trumpet instead of a rostrum. She takes no interest now in politics, but until last year she was an active enemy of "that Gladstone." She has parlour maids instead of footmen to do her waiting, because of Hockley, the American stockbroker, and his four Titans in plush.

She exercises what is almost a fascination upon the village. If in the bar-parlour of the Cat and Cornucopia you swear by God no one would be shocked, but if you swore by Lady Hammergallow they would probably be shocked enough to turn you out of the room. When she drives through Siddermorton she always calls upon Bessy Flump, the post-mistress, to hear all that has happened, and then upon Miss Finch, the dressmaker, to check back Bessy Flump. Sometimes she calls upon the Vicar, sometimes upon Mrs Mendham whom she snubs, and even sometimes on Crump. Her sparkling pair of greys almost ran over the Angel as he was walking down to the village.

"So that's the genius!" said Lady Hammergallow, and turned and looked at him through the gilt glasses on a stick that she always carried in her shrivelled and shaky hand. "Lunatic indeed! The poor creature has rather a pretty face. I'm sorry I've missed him."

But she went on to the vicarage nevertheless, and demanded news of it all. The conflicting accounts of Miss Flump, Miss Finch, Mrs Mendham, Crump, and Mrs Jehoram had puzzled her immensely. The Vicar, hard pressed, did all he could to say into her speaking trumpet what had really happened. He toned down the wings and the saffron robe. But he felt the case was hopeless. He spoke of his protégé as "Mr" Angel. He addressed pathetic asides to the kingfisher. The old lady noticed his confusion. Her queer old head went jerking backwards and forwards, now the speaking trumpet in his face when he had nothing to say, then the

shrunken eyes peering at him, oblivious of the explanation that was coming from his lips. A great many Ohs! and Ahs! She caught some fragments certainly.

"You have asked him to stop with you--indefinitely?" said Lady Hammergeallow with a Great Idea taking shape rapidly in her mind.

"I did--perhaps inadvertently--make such--"

"And you don't know where he comes from?"

"Not at all."

"Nor who his father is, I suppose?" said Lady Hammergeallow mysteriously.

"No," said the Vicar.

"Now!" said Lady Hammergeallow archly, and keeping her glasses to her eye, she suddenly dug at his ribs with her trumpet.

"My dear Lady Hammergeallow!"

"I thought so. Don't think I would blame you, Mr Hilyer." She gave a corrupt laugh that she delighted in. "The world is the world, and men are men. And the poor boy's a cripple, eh? A kind of judgment. In mourning, I noticed. It reminds me of the Scarlet Letter. The mother's

dead, I suppose. It's just as well. Really--I'm not a narrow woman--I respect you for having him. Really I do."

"But, Lady Hammergeallow!"

"Don't spoil everything by denying it. It is so very, very plain, to a woman of the world. That Mrs Mendham! She amuses me with her suspicions. Such odd ideas! In a Curate's wife. But I hope it didn't happen when you were in orders."

"Lady Hammergeallow, I protest. Upon my word."

"Mr Hilyer, I protest. I know. Not anything you can say will alter my opinion one jot. Don't try. I never suspected you were nearly such an interesting man."

"But this suspicion is unendurable!"

"We will help him together, Mr Hilyer. You may rely upon me. It is most romantic." She beamed benevolence.

"But, Lady Hammergeallow, I must speak!"

She gripped her ear-trumpet resolutely, and held it before her and shook her head.

"He has quite a genius for music, Vicar, so I hear?"

"I can assure you most solemnly--"

"I thought so. And being a cripple--"

"You are under a most cruel--"

"I thought that if his gift is really what that Jehoram woman says."

"An unjustifiable suspicion that ever a man--"

("I don't think much of her judgment, of course.")

"Consider my position. Have I gained no character?"

"It might be possible to do something for him as a performer."

"Have I--(Bother! It's no good!)"

"And so, dear Vicar, I propose to give him an opportunity of showing us what he can do. I have been thinking it all over as I drove here. On Tuesday next, I will invite just a few people of taste, and he shall bring his violin. Eigh? And if that goes well, I will see if I can get some introductions and really push him."

"But Lady, Lady Hammergallow."

"Not another word!" said Lady Hammergallow, still resolutely holding her speaking trumpet before her and clutching her eyeglasses. "I really must not leave those horses. Cutler is so annoyed if I keep them too long. He finds waiting tedious, poor man, unless there is a public-house near." She made for the door.

"Damn!" said the Vicar, under his breath. He had never used the word since he had taken orders. It shows you how an Angel's visit may disorganize a man.

He stood under the verandah watching the carriage drive away. The world seemed coming to pieces about him. Had he lived a virtuous celibate life for thirty odd years in vain? The things of which these people thought him capable! He stood and stared at the green cornfield opposite, and down at the straggling village. It seemed real enough. And yet for the first time in his life there was a queer doubt of its reality. He rubbed his chin, then turned and went slowly upstairs to his dressing-room, and sat for a long time staring at a garment of some yellow texture. "Know his father!" he said. "And he is immortal, and was fluttering about his heaven when my ancestors were marsupials.... I wish he was there now."

He got up and began to feel the robe.

"I wonder how they get such things," said the Vicar. Then he went and

stared out of the window. "I suppose everything is wonderful, even the rising and setting of the sun. I suppose there is no adamant ground for any belief. But one gets into a regular way of taking things. This disturbs it. I seem to be waking up to the Invisible. It is the strangest of uncertainties. I have not felt so stirred and unsettled since my adolescence."