

CHAPTER III

One of the professors at Alton College was a Mrs. Miller, an old-fashioned schoolmistress who did not believe in Miss Wilson's system of government by moral force, and carried it out under protest. Though not ill-natured, she was narrow-minded enough to be in some degree contemptible, and was consequently prone to suspect others of despising her. She suspected Agatha in particular, and treated her with disdainful curtness in such intercourse as they had--it was fortunately little. Agatha was not hurt by this, for Mrs. Miller was an unsympathetic woman, who made no friends among the girls, and satisfied her affectionate impulses by petting a large cat named Gracchus, but generally called Bacchus by an endearing modification of the harsh initial consonant.

One evening Mrs. Miller, seated with Miss Wilson in the study, correcting examination papers, heard in the distance a cry like that of a cat in distress. She ran to the door and listened. Presently there arose a prolonged wail, slurring up through two octaves, and subsiding again. It was a true feline screech, impossible to localize; but it was interrupted by a sob, a snarl, a fierce spitting, and a scuffling, coming unmistakably from a room on the floor beneath, in which, at that hour, the older girls assembled for study.

"My poor Gracchy!" exclaimed Mrs. Miller, running downstairs as fast as she could. She found the room unusually quiet. Every girl was deep in study except Miss Carpenter, who, pretending to pick up a fallen book, was purple with suppressed laughter and the congestion caused by stooping.

"Where is Miss Ward?" demanded Mrs. Miller.

"Miss Ward has gone for some astronomical diagrams in which we are interested," said Agatha, looking up gravely. Just then Miss Ward, diagrams in hand, entered.

"Has that cat been in here?" she said, not seeing Mrs. Miller, and speaking in a tone expressive of antipathy to Gracchus.

Agatha started and drew up her ankles, as if fearful of having them bitten. Then, looking apprehensively under the desk, she replied, "There is no cat here, Miss Ward."

"There is one somewhere; I heard it," said Miss Ward carelessly, unrolling her diagrams, which she began to explain without further parley. Mrs. Miller, anxious for her pet, hastened to seek it elsewhere. In the hall she met one of the housemaids.

"Susan," she said, "have you seen Gracchus?"

"He's asleep on the hearthrug in your room, ma'am. But I heard him crying down here a moment ago. I feel sure that another cat has got in, and that they are fighting."

Susan smiled compassionately. "Lor' bless you, ma'am," she said, "that was Miss Wylie. It's a sort of play-acting that she goes through. There is the bee on the window-pane, and the soldier up the chimley, and the cat under the dresser. She does them all like life."

"The soldier in the chimney!" repeated Mrs. Miller, shocked.

"Yes, ma'am. Like as it were a follower that had hid there when he heard the mistress coming."

Mrs. Miller's face set determinedly. She returned to the study and related what had just occurred, adding some sarcastic comments on the efficacy of moral force in maintaining collegiate discipline. Miss Wilson looked grave; considered for some time; and at last said: "I must think over this. Would you mind leaving it in my

hands for the present?"

Mrs. Miller said that she did not care in whose hands it remained provided her own were washed of it, and resumed her work at the papers. Miss Wilson then, wishing to be alone, went into the empty classroom at the other side of the landing. She took the Fault Book from its shelf and sat down before it. Its record closed with the announcement, in Agatha's handwriting:

"Miss Wilson has called me impertinent, and has written to my uncle that I have refused to obey the rules. I was not impertinent; and I never refused to obey the rules. So much for Moral Force!"

Miss Wilson rose vigorously, exclaiming: "I will soon let her know whether--" She checked herself, and looked round hastily, superstitiously fancying that Agatha might have stolen into the room unobserved. Reassured that she was alone, she examined her conscience as to whether she had done wrong in calling Agatha impertinent, justifying herself by the reflection that Agatha had, in fact, been impertinent. Yet she recollected that she had refused to admit this plea on a recent occasion when Jane Carpenter had advanced it in extenuation of having called a fellow-student a liar. Had she then been unjust to Jane, or inconsiderate to Agatha?

Her casuistry was interrupted by some one softly whistling a theme from the overture to Masaniello, popular at the college in the form of an arrangement for six pianofortes and twelve hands. There was only one student unladylike and musical enough to whistle; and Miss Wilson was ashamed to find herself growing nervous at the prospect of an encounter with Agatha, who entered whistling sweetly, but with a lugubrious countenance. When she saw in whose presence she stood, she begged pardon politely, and was about to withdraw, when Miss Wilson, summoning all her Judgment and tact, and hoping that they would--contrary to their custom in emergencies--respond to the summons, said:

"Agatha, come here. I want to speak to you."

Agatha closed her lips, drew in a long breath through her nostrils, and marched to within a few feet of Miss Wilson, where she halted with her hands clasped before her.

"Sit down."

Agatha sat down with a single movement, like a doll.

"I don't understand that, Agatha," said Miss Wilson, pointing to the entry in the Recording Angel. "What does it mean?"

"I am unfairly treated," said Agatha, with signs of agitation.

"In what way?"

"In every way. I am expected to be something more than mortal. Everyone else is encouraged to complain, and to be weak and silly. But I must have no feeling. I must be always in the right. Everyone else may be home-sick, or huffed, or in low spirits. I must have no nerves, and must keep others laughing all day long. Everyone else may sulk when a word of reproach is addressed to them, and may make the professors afraid to find fault with them. I have to bear with the insults of teachers who have less self-control than I, a girl of seventeen! and must coax them out of the difficulties they make for themselves by their own ill temper."

"But, Agatha--"

"Oh, I know I am talking nonsense, Miss Wilson; but can you expect me to be always sensible--to be

infallible?"

"Yes, Agatha; I do not think it is too much to expect you to be always sensible; and--"

"Then you have neither sense nor sympathy yourself," said Agatha.

There was an awful pause. Neither could have told how long it lasted. Then Agatha, feeling that she must do or say something desperate, or else fly, made a distracted gesture and ran out of the room.

She rejoined her companions in the great hall of the mansion, where they were assembled after study for "recreation," a noisy process which always set in spontaneously when the professors withdrew. She usually sat with her two favorite associates on a high window seat near the hearth. That place was now occupied by a little girl with flaxen hair, whom Agatha, regardless of moral force, lifted by the shoulders and deposited on the floor. Then she sat down and said:

"Oh, such a piece of news!"

Miss Carpenter opened her eyes eagerly. Gertrude Lindsay affected indifference.

"Someone is going to be expelled," said Agatha.

"Expelled! Who?"

"You will know soon enough, Jane," replied Agatha, suddenly grave. "It is someone who made an impudent entry in the Recording Angel."

Fear stole upon Jane, and she became very red. "Agatha," she said, "it was you who told me what to write. You know you did, and you can't deny it."

"I can't deny it, can't I? I am ready to swear that I never dictated a word to you in my life."

"Gertrude knows you did," exclaimed Jane, appalled, and almost in tears.

"There," said Agatha, petting her as if she were a vast baby. "It shall not be expelled, so it shan't. Have you seen the Recording Angel lately, either of you?"

"Not since our last entry," said Gertrude.

"Chips," said Agatha, calling to the flaxen-haired child, "go upstairs to No. 6, and, if Miss Wilson isn't there, fetch me the Recording Angel."

The little girl grumbled inarticulately and did not stir.

"Chips," resumed Agatha, "did you ever wish that you had never been born?"

"Why don't you go yourself?" said the child pettishly, but evidently alarmed.

"Because," continued Agatha, ignoring the question, "you shall wish yourself dead and buried under the blackest flag in the coal cellar if you don't bring me the book before I count sixteen. One--two--"

"Go at once and do as you are told, you disagreeable little thing," said Gertrude sharply. "How dare you be so disobliging?"

"--nine--ten--eleven--" pursued Agatha.

The child quailed, went out, and presently returned, hugging the Recording Angel in her arms.

"You are a good little darling--when your better qualities are brought out by a judicious application of moral force," said Agatha, good-humoredly. "Remind me to save the raisins out of my pudding for you to-morrow. Now, Jane, you shall see the entry for which the best-hearted girl in the college is to be expelled. Voila!"

The two girls read and were awestruck; Jane opening her mouth and gasping, Gertrude closing hers and looking very serious.

"Do you mean to say that you had the dreadful cheek to let the Lady Abbess see that?" said Jane.

"Pooh! she would have forgiven that. You should have heard what I said to her! She fainted three times."

"That's a story," said Gertrude gravely.

"I beg your pardon," said Agatha, swiftly grasping Gertrude's knee.

"Nothing," cried Gertrude, flinching hysterically. "Don't, Agatha."

"How many times did Miss Wilson faint?"

"Three times. I will scream, Agatha; I will indeed."

"Three times, as you say. And I wonder that a girl brought up as you have been, by moral force, should be capable of repeating such a falsehood. But we had an awful row, really and truly. She lost her temper. Fortunately, I never lose mine."

"Well, I'm browed!" exclaimed Jane incredulously. "I like that."

"For a girl of county family, you are inexcusably vulgar, Jane. I don't know what I said; but she will never forgive me for profaning her pet book. I shall be expelled as certainly as I am sitting here."

"And do you mean to say that you are going away?" said Jane, faltering as she began to realize the consequences.

"I do. And what is to become of you when I am not here to get you out of your scrapes, or of Gertrude without me to check her inveterate snobbishness, is more than I can foresee."

"I am not snobbish," said Gertrude, "although I do not choose to make friends with everyone. But I never objected to you, Agatha."

"No; I should like to catch you at it. Hallo, Jane!" (who had suddenly burst into tears): "what's the matter? I trust you are not permitting yourself to take the liberty of crying for me."

"Indeed," sobbed Jane indignantly, "I know that I am a f--fool for my pains. You have no heart."

"You certainly are a f--fool, as you aptly express it," said Agatha, passing her arm round Jane, and disregarding an angry attempt to shake it off; "but if I had any heart it would be touched by this proof of your attachment."

"I never said you had no heart," protested Jane; "but I hate when you speak like a book."

"You hate when I speak like a book, do you? My dear, silly old Jane! I shall miss you greatly."

"Yes, I dare say," said Jane, with tearful sarcasm. "At least my snoring will never keep you awake again."

"You don't snore, Jane. We have been in a conspiracy to make you believe that you do, that's all. Isn't it good of me to tell you?"

Jane was overcome by this revelation. After a long pause, she said with deep conviction, "I always knew that I didn't. Oh, the way you kept it up! I solemnly declare that from this time forth I will believe nobody."

"Well, and what do you think of it all?" said Agatha, transferring her attention to Gertrude, who was very grave.

"I think--I am now speaking seriously, Agatha--I think you are in the wrong."

"Why do you think that, pray?" demanded Agatha, a little roused.

"You must be, or Miss Wilson would not be angry with you. Of course, according to your own account, you are always in the right, and everyone else is always wrong; but you shouldn't have written that in the book. You know I speak as your friend."

"And pray what does your wretched little soul know of my motives and feelings?"

"It is easy enough to understand you," retorted Gertrude, nettled. "Self-conceit is not so uncommon that one need be at a loss to recognize it. And mind, Agatha Wylie," she continued, as if goaded by some unbearable reminiscence, "if you are really going, I don't care whether we part friends or not. I have not forgotten the day when you called me a spiteful cat."

"I have repented," said Agatha, unmoved. "One day I sat down and watched Bacchus seated on the hearthrug, with his moony eyes looking into space so thoughtfully and patiently that I apologized for comparing you to him. If I were to call him a spiteful cat he would only not believe me."

"Because he is a cat," said Jane, with the giggle which was seldom far behind her tears.

"No; but because he is not spiteful. Gertrude keeps a recording angel inside her little head, and it is so full of other people's faults, written in large hand and read through a magnifying glass, that there is no room to enter her own."

"You are very poetic," said Gertrude; "but I understand what you mean, and shall not forget it."

"You ungrateful wretch," exclaimed Agatha, turning upon her so suddenly and imperiously that she involuntarily shrank aside: "how often, when you have tried to be insolent and false with me, have I not driven away your bad angel--by tickling you? Had you a friend in the college, except half-a-dozen toadies, until I came? And now, because I have sometimes, for your own good, shown you your faults, you bear malice against me, and say that you don't care whether we part friends or not!"

"I didn't say so."

"Oh, Gertrude, you know you did," said Jane.

"You seem to think that I have no conscience," said Gertrude querulously.

"I wish you hadn't," said Agatha. "Look at me! I have no conscience, and see how much pleasanter I am!"

"You care for no one but yourself," said Gertrude. "You never think that other people have feelings too. No one ever considers me."

"Oh, I like to hear you talk," cried Jane ironically. "You are considered a great deal more than is good for you; and the more you are considered the more you want to be considered."

"As if," declaimed Agatha theatrically, "increase of appetite did grow by what it fed on. Shakespeare!"

"Bother Shakespeare," said Jane, impetuously, "--old fool that expects credit for saying things that everybody knows! But if you complain of not being considered, Gertrude, how would you like to be me, whom everybody sets down as a fool? But I am not such a fool as--"

"As you look," interposed Agatha. "I have told you so scores of times, Jane; and I am glad that you have adopted my opinion at last. Which would you rather be, a greater fool than y--"

"Oh, shut up," said Jane, impatiently; "you have asked me that twice this week already."

The three were silent for some seconds after this: Agatha meditating, Gertrude moody, Jane vacant and restless. At last Agatha said:

"And are you two also smarting under a sense of the inconsiderateness and selfishness of the rest of the world--both misunderstood--everything expected from you, and no allowances made for you?"

"I don't know what you mean by both of us," said Gertrude coldly.

"Neither do I," said Jane angrily. "That is just the way people treat me. You may laugh, Agatha; and she may turn up her nose as much as she likes; you know it's true. But the idea of Gertrude wanting to make out that she isn't considered is nothing but sentimentality, and vanity, and nonsense."

"You are exceedingly rude, Miss Carpenter," said Gertrude.

"My manners are as good as yours, and perhaps better," retorted Jane. "My family is as good, anyhow."

"Children, children," said Agatha, admonitorily, "do not forget that you are sworn friends."

"We didn't swear," said Jane. "We were to have been three sworn friends, and Gertrude and I were willing, but you wouldn't swear, and so the bargain was cried off."

"Just so," said Agatha; "and the result is that I spend all my time in keeping peace between you. And now, to go back to our subject, may I ask whether it has ever occurred to you that no one ever considers me?"

"I suppose you think that very funny. You take good care to make yourself considered," sneered Jane.

"You cannot say that I do not consider you," said Gertrude reproachfully.

"Not when I tickle you, dear."

"I consider you, and I am not ticklesome," said Jane tenderly.

"Indeed! Let me try," said Agatha, slipping her arm about Jane's ample waist, and eliciting a piercing combination of laugh and scream from her.

"Sh--sh," whispered Gertrude quickly. "Don't you see the Lady Abbess?"

Miss Wilson had just entered the room. Agatha, without appearing to be aware of her presence, stealthily withdrew her arm, and said aloud:

"How can you make such a noise, Jane? You will disturb the whole house."

Jane reddened with indignation, but had to remain silent, for the eyes of the principal were upon her. Miss Wilson had her bonnet on. She announced that she was going to walk to Lyvern, the nearest village. Did any of the sixth form young ladies wish to accompany her?

Agatha jumped from her seat at once, and Jane smothered a laugh.

"Miss Wilson said the sixth form, Miss Wylie," said Miss Ward, who had entered also. "You are not in the sixth form."

"No," said Agatha sweetly, "but I want to go, if I may."

Miss Wilson looked round. The sixth form consisted of four studious young ladies, whose goal in life for the present was an examination by one of the Universities, or, as the college phrase was, "the Cambridge Local." None of them responded.

"Fifth form, then," said Miss Wilson.

Jane, Gertrude, and four others rose and stood with Agatha.

"Very well," said Miss Wilson. "Do not be long dressing."

They left the room quietly, and dashed at the staircase the moment they were out of sight. Agatha, though void of emulation for the Cambridge Local, always competed with ardor for the honor of being first up or down stairs.

They soon returned, clad for walking, and left the college in procession, two by two, Jane and Agatha leading, Gertrude and Miss Wilson coming last. The road to Lyvern lay through acres of pasture land, formerly arable, now abandoned to cattle, which made more money for the landlord than the men whom they had displaced. Miss Wilson's young ladies, being instructed in economics, knew that this proved that the land was being used to produce what was most wanted from it; and if all the advantage went to the landlord, that was but natural, as he was the chief gentleman in the neighborhood. Still the arrangement had its disagreeable side; for it involved a great many cows, which made them afraid to cross the fields; a great many tramps, who made them afraid to walk the roads; and a scarcity of gentlemen subjects for the maiden art of fascination.

The sky was cloudy. Agatha, reckless of dusty stockings, waded through the heaps of fallen leaves with the delight of a child paddling in the sea; Gertrude picked her steps carefully, and the rest tramped along, chatting subduedly, occasionally making some scientific or philosophical remark in a louder tone, in order that Miss Wilson might overhear and give them due credit. Save a herdsman, who seemed to have caught something of the nature and expression of the beasts he tended, they met no one until they approached the village, where, on the brow of an acclivity, masculine humanity appeared in the shape of two curates: one tall, thin, close-shaven, with a book under his arm, and his neck craned forward; the other middle-sized, robust, upright, and aggressive, with short black whiskers, and an air of protest against such notions as that a clergyman may

not marry, hunt, play cricket, or share the sports of honest laymen. The shaven one was Mr. Josephs, his companion Mr. Fairholme. Obvious scriptural perversions of this brace of names had been introduced by Agatha.

"Here come Pharaoh and Joseph," she said to Jane. "Joseph will blush when you look at him. Pharaoh won't blush until he passes Gertrude, so we shall lose that."

"Josephs, indeed!" said Jane scornfully.

"He loves you, Jane. Thin persons like a fine armful of a woman. Pharaoh, who is a cad, likes blue blood on the same principle of the attraction of opposites. That is why he is captivated by Gertrude's aristocratic air."

"If he only knew how she despises him!"

"He is too vain to suspect it. Besides, Gertrude despises everyone, even us. Or, rather, she doesn't despise anyone in particular, but is contemptuous by nature, just as you are stout."

"Me! I had rather be stout than stuck-up. Ought we to bow?"

"I will, certainly. I want to make Pharaoh blush, if I can."

The two parsons had been simulating an interest in the cloudy firmament as an excuse for not looking at the girls until close at hand. Jane sent an eyeflash at Josephs with a skill which proved her favorite assertion that she was not so stupid as people thought. He blushed and took off his soft, low-crowned felt hat. Fairholme saluted very solemnly, for Agatha bowed to him with marked seriousness. But when his gravity and his stiff silk hat were at their highest point she darted a mocking smile at him, and he too blushed, all the deeper because he was enraged with himself for doing so.

"Did you ever see such a pair of fools?" whispered Jane, giggling.

"They cannot help their sex. They say women are fools, and so they are; but thank Heaven they are not quite so bad as men! I should like to look back and see Pharaoh passing Gertrude; but if he saw me he would think I was admiring him; and he is conceited enough already without that."

The two curates became redder and redder as they passed the column of young ladies. Miss Lindsay would not look to their side of the road, and Miss Wilson's nod and smile were not quite sincere. She never spoke to curates, and kept up no more intercourse with the vicar than she could not avoid. He suspected her of being an infidel, though neither he nor any other mortal in Lyvern had ever heard a word from her on the subject of her religious opinions. But he knew that "moral science" was taught secularly at the college; and he felt that where morals were made a department of science the demand for religion must fall off proportionately.

"What a life to lead and what a place to live in!" exclaimed Agatha. "We meet two creatures, more like suits of black than men; and that is an incident --a startling incident--in our existence!"

"I think they're awful fun," said Jane, "except that Josephs has such large ears."

The girls now came to a place where the road dipped through a plantation of sombre sycamore and horsechestnut trees. As they passed down into it, a little wind sprang up, the fallen leaves stirred, and the branches heaved a long, rustling sigh.

"I hate this bit of road," said Jane, hurrying on. "It's just the sort of place that people get robbed and murdered in."

"It is not such a bad place to shelter in if we get caught in the rain, as I expect we shall before we get back," said Agatha, feeling the fitful breeze strike ominously on her cheek. "A nice pickle I shall be in with these light shoes on! I wish I had put on my strong boots. If it rains much I will go into the old chalet."

"Miss Wilson won't let you. It's trespassing."

"What matter! Nobody lives in it, and the gate is off its hinges. I only want to stand under the veranda--not to break into the wretched place. Besides, the landlord knows Miss Wilson; he won't mind. There's a drop."

Miss Carpenter looked up, and immediately received a heavy raindrop in her eye.

"Oh!" she cried. "It's pouring. We shall be drenched."

Agatha stopped, and the column broke into a group about her.

"Miss Wilson," she said, "it is going to rain in torrents, and Jane and I have only our shoes on."

Miss Wilson paused to consider the situation. Someone suggested that if they hurried on they might reach Lyvern before the rain came down.

"More than a mile," said Agatha scornfully, "and the rain coming down already!"

Someone else suggested returning to the college.

"More than two miles," said Agatha. "We should be drowned."

"There is nothing for it but to wait here under the trees," said Miss Wilson.

"The branches are very bare," said Gertrude anxiously. "If it should come down heavily they will drip worse than the rain itself."

"Much worse," said Agatha. "I think we had better get under the veranda of the old chalet. It is not half a minute's walk from here."

"But we have no right--" Here the sky darkened threateningly. Miss Wilson checked herself and said, "I suppose it is still empty."

"Of course," replied Agatha, impatient to be moving. "It is almost a ruin."

"Then let us go there, by all means," said Miss Wilson, not disposed to stand on trifles at the risk of a bad cold.

They hurried on, and came presently to a green hill by the wayside. On the slope was a dilapidated Swiss cottage, surrounded by a veranda on slender wooden pillars, about which clung a few tendrils of withered creeper, their stray ends still swinging from the recent wind, now momentarily hushed as if listening for the coming of the rain. Access from the roadway was by a rough wooden gate in the hedge. To the surprise of Agatha, who had last seen this gate off its hinges and only attached to the post by a rusty chain and padlock, it was now rehung and fastened by a new hasp. The weather admitting of no delay to consider these repairs, she opened the gate and hastened up the slope, followed by the troop of girls. Their ascent ended with a rush, for the rain suddenly came down in torrents.

When they were safe under the veranda, panting, laughing, grumbling, or congratulating themselves on having

been so close to a place of shelter, Miss Wilson observed, with some uneasiness, a spade--new, like the hasp of the gate--sticking upright in a patch of ground that someone had evidently been digging lately. She was about to comment on this sign of habitation, when the door of the chalet was flung open, and Jane screamed as a man darted out to the spade, which he was about to carry in out of the wet, when he perceived the company under the veranda, and stood still in amazement. He was a young laborer with a reddish-brown beard of a week's growth. He wore corduroy trousers and a linen-sleeved corduroy vest; both, like the hasp and spade, new. A coarse blue shirt, with a vulgar red-and-orange neckerchief, also new, completed his dress; and, to shield himself from the rain, he held up a silk umbrella with a silver-mounted ebony handle, which he seemed unlikely to have come by honestly. Miss Wilson felt like a boy caught robbing an orchard, but she put a bold face on the matter and said:

"Will you allow us to take shelter here until the rain is over?"

"For certain, your ladyship," he replied, respectfully applying the spade handle to his hair, which was combed down to his eyebrows. "Your ladyship does me proud to take refuge from the onclemency of the yallovments beneath my 'umble roofree." His accent was barbarous; and he, like a low comedian, seemed to relish its vulgarity. As he spoke he came in among them for shelter, and propped his spade against the wall of the chalet, kicking the soil from his hobnailed blucher boots, which were new.

"I came out, honored lady," he resumed, much at his ease, "to house my spade, whereby I earn my living. What the pen is to the poet, such is the spade to the working man." He took the kerchief from his neck, wiped his temples as if the sweat of honest toil were there, and calmly tied it on again.

"If you'll 'scuse a remark from a common man," he observed, "your ladyship has a fine family of daughters."

"They are not my daughters," said Miss Wilson, rather shortly.

"Sisters, mebbe?"

"No."

"I thought they mout be, acause I have a sister myself. Not that I would make bold for to dror comparisons, even in my own mind, for she's only a common woman--as common a one as ever you see. But few women rise above the common. Last Sunday, in yon village church, I heard the minister read out that one man in a thousand had he found, 'but one woman in all these,' he says, 'have I not found,' and I thinks to myself, 'Right you are!' But I warrant he never met your ladyship."

A laugh, thinly disguised as a cough, escaped from Miss Carpenter.

"Young lady a-ketchin' cold, I'm afeerd," he said, with respectful solicitude.

"Do you think the rain will last long?" said Agatha politely.

The man examined the sky with a weather-wise air for some moments. Then he turned to Agatha, and replied humbly: "The Lord only knows, Miss. It is not for a common man like me to say."

Silence ensued, during which Agatha, furtively scrutinizing the tenant of the chalet, noticed that his face and neck were cleaner and less sunburnt than those of the ordinary toilers of Lyvern. His hands were hidden by large gardening gloves stained with coal dust. Lyvern laborers, as a rule, had little objection to soil their hands; they never wore gloves. Still, she thought, there was no reason why an eccentric workman, insufferably talkative, and capable of an allusion to the pen of the poet, should not indulge himself with cheap gloves. But then the silk, silvermounted umbrella--

"The young lady's hi," he said suddenly, holding out the umbrella, "is fixed on this here. I am well aware that it is not for the lowest of the low to carry a gentleman's broly, and I ask your ladyship's pardon for the liberty. I come by it accidental-like, and should be glad of a reasonable offer from any gentleman in want of a honest article."

As he spoke two gentlemen, much in want of the article, as their clinging wet coats showed, ran through the gateway and made for the chalet. Fairholme arrived first, exclaiming: "Fearful shower!" and briskly turned his back to the ladies in order to stand at the edge of the veranda and shake the water out of his hat. Josephs came next, shrinking from the damp contact of his own garments. He cringed to Miss Wilson, and hoped that she had escaped a wetting.

"So far I have," she replied. "The question is, how are we to get home?"

"Oh, it's only a shower," said Josephs, looking up cheerfully at the unbroken curtain of cloud. "It will clear up presently."

"It ain't for a common man to set up his opinion again' a gentleman wot have profesh'nal knowledge of the heavens, as one may say," said the man, "but I would 'umbly offer to bet my umbrellar to his wideawake that it don't cease raining this side of seven o'clock."

"That man lives here," whispered Miss Wilson, "and I suppose he wants to get rid of us."

"H'm!" said Fairholme. Then, turning to the strange laborer with the air of a person not to be trifled with, he raised his voice, and said: "You live here, do you, my man?"

"I do, sir, by your good leave, if I may make so bold."

"What's your name?"

"Jeff Smilash, sir, at your service."

"Where do you come from?"

"Brixtonbury, sir."

"Brixtonbury! Where's that?"

"Well, sir, I don't rightly know. If a gentleman like you, knowing jography and such, can't tell, how can I?"

"You ought to know where you were born, man. Haven't you got common sense?"

"Where could such a one as me get common sense, sir? Besides, I was only a foundling. Mebbe I warn's born at all."

"Did I see you at church last Sunday?"

"No, sir. I only come o' Wensday."

"Well, let me see you there next Sunday," said Fairholme shortly, turning away from him.

Miss Wilson looked at the weather, at Josephs, who was conversing with Jane, and finally at Smilash, who knuckled his forehead without waiting to be addressed.

"Have you a boy whom you can send to Lyvern to get us a conveyance--a carriage? I will give him a shilling for his trouble."

"A shilling!" said Smilash joyfully. "Your ladyship is a noble lady. Two four-wheeled cabs. There's eight on you."

"There is only one cab in Lyvern," said Miss Wilson. "Take this card to Mr. Marsh, the jotmaster, and tell him the predicament we are in. He will send vehicles."

Smilash took the card and read it at a glance. He then went into the chalet. Reappearing presently in a sou'wester and oilskins, he ran off through the rain and vaulted over the gate with ridiculous elegance. No sooner had he vanished than, as often happens to remarkable men, he became the subject of conversation.

"A decent workman," said Josephs. "A well-mannered man, considering his class."

"A born fool, though," said Fairholme.

"Or a rogue," said Agatha, emphasizing the suggestion by a glitter of her eyes and teeth, whilst her schoolfellows, rather disapproving of her freedom, stood stiffly dumb. "He told Miss Wilson that he had a sister, and that he had been to church last Sunday, and he has just told you that he is a foundling, and that he only came last Wednesday. His accent is put on, and he can read, and I don't believe he is a workman at all. Perhaps he is a burglar, come down to steal the college plate."

"Agatha," said Miss Wilson gravely, "you must be very careful how you say things of that kind."

"But it is so obvious. His explanation about the umbrella was made up to disarm suspicion. He handled it and leaned on it in a way that showed how much more familiar it was to him than that new spade he was so anxious about. And all his clothes are new."

"True," said Fairholme, "but there is not much in all that. Workmen nowadays ape gentlemen in everything. However, I will keep an eye on him."

"Oh, thank you so much," said Agatha. Fairholme, suspecting mockery, frowned, and Miss Wilson looked severely at the mocker. Little more was said, except as to the chances--manifestly small--of the rain ceasing, until the tops of a cab, a decayed mourning coach, and three dripping hats were seen over the hedge. Smilash sat on the box of the coach, beside the driver. When it stopped, he alighted, re-entered the chalet without speaking, came out with the umbrella, spread it above Miss Wilson's head, and said:

"Now, if your ladyship will come with me, I will see you dry into the stray, and then I'll bring your honored nieces one by one."

"I shall come last," said Miss Wilson, irritated by his assumption that the party was a family one. "Gertrude, you had better go first."

"Allow me," said Fairholme, stepping forward, and attempting to take the umbrella.

"Thank you, I shall not trouble you," she said frostily, and tripped away over the oozing field with Smilash, who held the umbrella over her with ostentatious solicitude. In the same manner he led the rest to the vehicles, in which they packed themselves with some difficulty. Agatha, who came last but one, gave him threepence.

"You have a noble 'art and an expressive hi, Miss," he said, apparently much moved. "Blessings on both! Blessings on both!"

He went back for Jane, who slipped on the wet grass and fell. He had to put forth his strength as he helped her to rise. "Hope you ain't sopped up much of the rainfall, Miss," he said. "You are a fine young lady for your age. Nigh on twelve stone, I should think."

She reddened and hurried to the cab, where Agatha was. But it was full; and Jane, much against her will, had to get into the coach, considerably diminishing the space left for Miss Wilson, to whom Smilash had returned.

"Now, dear lady," he said, "take care you don't slip. Come along."

Miss Wilson, ignoring the invitation, took a shilling from her purse.

"No, lady," said Smilash with a virtuous air. "I am an honest man and have never seen the inside of a jail except four times, and only twice for stealing. Your youngest daughter--her with the expressive hi--have paid me far beyond what is proper."

"I have told you that these young ladies are not my daughters," said Miss Wilson sharply. "Why do you not listen to what is said to you?"

"Don't be too hard on a common man, lady," said Smilash submissively. "The young lady have just given me three 'arf-crowns."

"Three half-crowns!" exclaimed Miss Wilson, angered at such extravagance.

"Bless her innocence, she don't know what is proper to give to a low sort like me! But I will not rob the young lady. 'Arf-a-crown is no more nor is fair for the job, and arf-a-crown will I keep, if agreeable to your noble ladyship. But I give you back the five bob in trust for her. Have you ever noticed her expressive hi?"

"Nonsense, sir. You had better keep the money now that you have got it."

"Wot! Sell for five bob the high opinion your ladyship has of me! No, dear lady; not likely. My father's very last words to me was--"

"You said just now that you were a foundling," said Fairholme. "What are we to believe? Eh?"

"So I were, sir; but by mother's side alone. Her ladyship will please to take back the money, for keep it I will not. I am of the lower orders, and therefore not a man of my word; but when I do stick to it, I stick like wax."

"Take it," said Fairholme to Miss Wilson. "Take it, of course. Seven and sixpence is a ridiculous sum to give him for what he has done. It would only set him drinking."

"His reverence says true, lady. The one 'arfcrown will keep me comfortably tight until Sunday morning; and more I do not desire."

"Just a little less of your tongue, my man," said Fairholme, taking the two coins from him and handing them to Miss Wilson, who bade the clergymen good afternoon, and went to the coach under the umbrella.

"If your ladyship should want a handy man to do an odd job up at the college I hope you will remember me," Smilash said as they went down the slope.

"Oh, you know who I am, do you?" said Miss Wilson drily.

"All the country knows you, Miss, and worships you. I have few equals as a coiner, and if you should require

a medal struck to give away for good behavior or the like, I think I could strike one to your satisfaction. And if your ladyship should want a trifle of smuggled lace--"

"You had better be careful or you will get into trouble, I think," said Miss Wilson sternly. "Tell him to drive on."

The vehicles started, and Smilash took the liberty of waving his hat after them. Then he returned to the chalet, left the umbrella within, came out again, locked the door, put the key in his pocket, and walked off through the rain across the hill without taking the least notice of the astonished parsons.

In the meantime Miss Wilson, unable to contain her annoyance at Agatha's extravagance, spoke of it to the girls who shared the coach with her. But Jane declared that Agatha only possessed threepence in the world, and therefore could not possibly have given the man thirty times that sum. When they reached the college, Agatha, confronted with Miss Wilson, opened her eyes in wonder, and exclaimed, laughing: "I only gave him threepence. He has sent me a present of four and ninepence!"