

CHAPTER VI

The year wore on, and the long winter evenings set in. The studious young ladies at Alton College, elbows on desk and hands over ears, shuddered chillily in fur tippets whilst they loaded their memories with the statements of writers on moral science, or, like men who swim upon corks, reasoned out mathematical problems upon postulates. Whence it sometimes happened that the more reasonable a student was in mathematics, the more unreasonable she was in the affairs of real life, concerning which few trustworthy postulates have yet been ascertained.

Agatha, not studious, and apt to shiver in winter, began to break Rule No. 17 with increasing frequency. Rule No. 17 forbade the students to enter the kitchen, or in any way to disturb the servants in the discharge of their duties. Agatha broke it because she was fond of making toffee, of eating it, of a good fire, of doing any forbidden thing, and of the admiration with which the servants listened to her ventriloquial and musical feats. Gertrude accompanied her because she too liked toffee, and because she plumed herself on her condescension to her inferiors. Jane went because her two friends went, and the spirit of adventure, the force of example, and the love of toffee often brought more volunteers to these expeditions than Agatha thought it safe to enlist. One evening Miss Wilson, going downstairs alone to her private wine cellar, was arrested near the kitchen by sounds of revelry, and, stopping to listen, overheard the castanet dance (which reminded her of the emphasis with which Agatha had snapped her fingers at Mrs. Miller), the bee on the window pane, "Robin Adair" (encored by the servants), and an imitation of herself in the act of appealing to Jane Carpenter's better nature to induce her to study for the Cambridge Local. She waited until the cold and her fear of being discovered spying forced her to creep upstairs, ashamed of having enjoyed a silly entertainment, and of conniving at a breach of the rules rather than face a fresh quarrel with Agatha.

There was one particular in which matters between Agatha and the college discipline did not go on exactly as before. Although she had formerly supplied a disproportionately large number of the confessions in the fault book, the entry which had nearly led to her expulsion was the last she ever made in it. Not that her conduct was better--it was rather the reverse. Miss Wilson never mentioned the matter, the fault book being sacred from all allusion on her part. But she saw that though Agatha would not confess her own sins, she still assisted others to unburden their consciences. The witticisms with which Jane unsuspectingly enlivened the pages of the Recording Angel were conclusive on this point.

Smilash had now adopted a profession. In the last days of autumn he had whitewashed the chalet, painted the doors, windows, and veranda, repaired the roof and interior, and improved the place so much that the landlord had warned him that the rent would be raised at the expiration of his twelvemonth's tenancy, remarking that a tenant could not reasonably expect to have a pretty, rain-tight dwelling-house for the same money as a hardly habitable ruin. Smilash had immediately promised to dilapidate it to its former state at the end of the year. He had put up a board at the gate with an inscription copied from some printed cards which he presented to persons who happened to converse with him.

JEFFERSON SMILASH

PAINTER, DECORATOR, GLAZIER, PLUMBER & GARDENER. Pianofortes tuned. Domestic engineering in all its Branches. Families waited upon at table or otherwise.

CHAMOUNIX VILLA, LYVERN. (N.B. Advice Gratis. No Reasonable offer refused.)

The business thus announced, comprehensive as it was, did not flourish. When asked by the curious for testimony to his competence and respectability, he recklessly referred them to Fairholme, to Josephs, and in particular to Miss Wilson, who, he said, had known him from his earliest childhood. Fairholme, glad of an opportunity to show that he was no mealy mouthed parson, declared, when applied to, that Smilash was the greatest rogue in the country. Josephs, partly from benevolence, and partly from a vague fear that Smilash

might at any moment take an action against him for defamation of character, said he had no doubt that he was a very cheap workman, and that it would be a charity to give him some little job to encourage him. Miss Wilson confirmed Fairholme's account; and the church organist, who had tuned all the pianofortes in the neighborhood once a year for nearly a quarter of a century, denounced the newcomer as Jack of all trades and master of none. Hereupon the radicals of Lyvern, a small and disreputable party, began to assert that there was no harm in the man, and that the parsons and Miss Wilson, who lived in a fine house and did nothing but take in the daughters of rich swells as boarders, might employ their leisure better than in taking the bread out of a poor work man's mouth. But as none of this faction needed the services of a domestic engineer, he was none the richer for their support, and the only patron he obtained was a housemaid who was leaving her situation at a country house in the vicinity, and wanted her box repaired, the lid having fallen off. Smilash demanded half-a-crown for the job, but on her demurring, immediately apologized and came down to a shilling. For this sum he repainted the box, traced her initials on it, and affixed new hinges, a Bramah lock, and brass handles, at a cost to himself of ten shillings and several hours' labor. The housemaid found fault with the color of the paint, made him take off the handles, which, she said, reminded her of a coffin, complained that a lock with such a small key couldn't be strong enough for a large box, but admitted that it was all her own fault for not employing a proper man. It got about that he had made a poor job of the box; and as he, when taxed with this, emphatically confirmed it, he got no other commission; and his signboard served thenceforth only for the amusement of pedestrian tourists and of shepherd boys with a taste for stone throwing.

One night a great storm blew over Lyvern, and those young ladies at Alton College who were afraid of lightning, said their prayers with some earnestness. At half-past twelve the rain, wind, and thunder made such a din that Agatha and Gertrude wrapped themselves in shawls, stole downstairs to the window on the landing outside Miss Wilson's study, and stood watching the flashes give vivid glimpses of the landscape, and discussing in whispers whether it was dangerous to stand near a window, and whether brass stair-rods could attract lightning. Agatha, as serious and friendly with a single companion as she was mischievous and satirical before a larger audience, enjoyed the scene quietly. The lightning did not terrify her, for she knew little of the value of life, and fancied much concerning the heroism of being indifferent to it. The tremors which the more startling flashes caused her, only made her more conscious of her own courage and its contrast with the uneasiness of Gertrude, who at last, shrinking from a forked zigzag of blue flame, said:

"Let us go back to bed, Agatha. I feel sure that we are not safe here."

"Quite as safe as in bed, where we cannot see anything. How the house shakes! I believe the rain will batter in the windows before--"

"Hush," whispered Gertrude, catching her arm in terror. "What was that?"

"What?"

"I am sure I heard the bell--the gate bell. Oh, do let us go back to bed."

"Nonsense! Who would be out on such a night as this? Perhaps the wind rang it."

They waited for a few moments; Gertrude trembling, and Agatha feeling, as she listened in the darkness, a sensation familiar to persons who are afraid of ghosts. Presently a veiled clangor mingled with the wind. A few sharp and urgent snatches of it came unmistakably from the bell at the gate of the college grounds. It was a loud bell, used to summon a servant from the college to open the gates; for though there was a porter's lodge, it was uninhabited.

"Who on earth can it be?" said Agatha. "Can't they find the wicket, the idiots?"

"Oh, I hope not! Do come upstairs, Agatha."

"No, I won't. Go you, if you like." But Gertrude was afraid to go alone. "I think I had better waken Miss Wilson, and tell her," continued Agatha. "It seems awful to shut anybody out on such a night as this."

"But we don't know who it is."

"Well, I suppose you are not afraid of them, in any case," said Agatha, knowing the contrary, but recognizing the convenience of shaming Gertrude into silence.

They listened again. The storm was now very boisterous, and they could not hear the bell. Suddenly there was a loud knocking at the house door. Gertrude screamed, and her cry was echoed from the rooms above, where several girls had heard the knocking also, and had been driven by it into the state of mind which accompanies the climax of a nightmare. Then a candle flickered on the stairs, and Miss Wilson's voice, reassuringly firm, was heard.

"Who is that?"

"It is I, Miss Wilson, and Gertrude. We have been watching the storm, and there is some one knocking at the--" A tremendous battery with the knocker, followed by a sound, confused by the gale, as of a man shouting, interrupted her.

"They had better not open the door," said Miss Wilson, in some alarm. "You are very imprudent, Agatha, to stand here. You will catch your death of--Dear me! What can be the matter? She hurried down, followed by Agatha, Gertrude, and some of the braver students, to the hall, where they found a few shivering servants watching the housekeeper, who was at the keyhole of the house door, querulously asking who was there. She was evidently not heard by those without, for the knocking recommenced whilst she was speaking, and she recoiled as if she had received a blow on the mouth. Miss Wilson then rattled the chain to attract attention, and demanded again who was there.

"Let us in," was returned in a hollow shout through the keyhole. "There is a dying woman and three children here. Open the door."

Miss Wilson lost her presence of mind. To gain time, she replied, "I--I can't hear you. What do you say?"

"Damnation!" said the voice, speaking this time to some one outside. "They can't hear." And the knocking recommenced with increased urgency. Agatha, excited, caught Miss Wilson's dressing gown, and repeated to her what the voice had said. Miss Wilson had heard distinctly enough, and she felt, without knowing clearly why, that the door must be opened, but she was almost over-mastered by a vague dread of what was to follow. She began to undo the chain, and Agatha helped with the bolts. Two of the servants exclaimed that they were all about to be murdered in their beds, and ran away. A few of the students seemed inclined to follow their example. At last the door, loosed, was blown wide open, flinging Miss Wilson and Agatha back, and admitting a whirlwind that tore round the hall, snatched at the women's draperies, and blew out the lights. Agatha, by a hash of lightning, saw for an instant two men straining at the door like sailors at a capstan. Then she knew by the cessation of the whirlwind that they had shut it. Matches were struck, the candles relighted, and the newcomers clearly perceived.

Smilash, bareheaded, without a coat, his corduroy vest and trousers heavy with rain; a rough-looking, middle-aged man, poorly dressed like a shepherd, wet as Smilash, with the expression, piteous, patient, and desperate, of one hard driven by ill-fortune, and at the end of his resources; two little children, a boy and a girl, almost naked, cowering under an old sack that had served them as an umbrella; and, lying on the settee where the two men had laid it, a heap of wretched wearing apparel, sacking, and rotten matting, with Smilash's coat and sou'wester, the whole covering a bundle which presently proved to be an exhausted woman with a tiny infant at her breast. Smilash's expression, as he looked at her, was ferocious.

"Sorry fur to trouble you, lady," said the man, after glancing anxiously at Smilash, as if he had expected him to act as spokesman; "but my roof and the side of my house has gone in the storm, and my missus has been having another little one, and I am sorry to ill-convenience you, Miss; but--but--"

"Inconvenience!" exclaimed Smilash. "It is the lady's privilege to relieve you--her highest privilege!"

The little boy here began to cry from mere misery, and the woman roused herself to say, "For shame, Tom! before the lady," and then collapsed, too weak to care for what might happen next in the world. Smilash looked impatiently at Miss Wilson, who hesitated, and said to him:

"What do you expect me to do?"

"To help us," he replied. Then, with an explosion of nervous energy, he added: "Do what your heart tells you to do. Give your bed and your clothes to the woman, and let your girls pitch their books to the devil for a few days and make something for these poor little creatures to wear. The poor have worked hard enough to clothe THEM. Let them take their turn now and clothe the poor."

"No, no. Steady, master," said the man, stepping forward to propitiate Miss Wilson, and evidently much oppressed by a sense of unwelcomeness. "It ain't any fault of the lady's. Might I make so bold as to ask you to put this woman of mine anywhere that may be convenient until morning. Any sort of a place will do; she's accustomed to rough it. Just to have a roof over her until I find a room in the village where we can shake down." Here, led by his own words to contemplate the future, he looked desolately round the cornice of the hall, as if it were a shelf on which somebody might have left a suitable lodging for him.

Miss Wilson turned her back decisively and contemptuously on Smilash. She had recovered herself. "I will keep your wife here," she said to the man. "Every care shall be taken of her. The children can stay too."

"Three cheers for moral science!" cried Smilash, ecstatically breaking into the outrageous dialect he had forgotten in his wrath. "Wot was my words to you, neighbor, when I said we should bring your missus to the college, and you said, ironical-like, 'Aye, and bloomin' glad they'll be to see us there.' Did I not say to you that the lady had a noble 'art, and would show it when put to the test by sech a calamity as this?"

"Why should you bring my hasty words up again' me now, master, when the lady has been so kind?" said the man with emotion. "I am humbly grateful to you, Miss; and so is Bess. We are sensible of the ill-convenience we--"

Miss Wilson, who had been conferring with the housekeeper, cut his speech short by ordering him to carry his wife to bed, which he did with the assistance of Smilash, now jubilant. Whilst they were away, one of the servants, bidden to bring some blankets to the woman's room, refused, saying that she was not going to wait on that sort of people. Miss Wilson gave her warning almost fiercely to quit the college next day. This excepted, no ill-will was shown to the refugees. The young ladies were then requested to return to bed.

Meanwhile the man, having laid his wife in a chamber palatial in comparison with that which the storm had blown about her ears, was congratulating her on her luck, and threatening the children with the most violent chastisement if they failed to behave themselves with strict propriety whilst they remained in that house. Before leaving them he kissed his wife; and she, reviving, asked him to look at the baby. He did so, and pensively apostrophized it with a shocking epithet in anticipation of the time when its appetite must be satisfied from the provision shop instead of from its mother's breast. She laughed and cried shame on him; and so they parted cheerfully. When he returned to the hall with Smilash they found two mugs of beer waiting for them. The girls had retired, and only Miss Wilson and the housekeeper remained.

"Here's your health, mum," said the man, before drinking; "and may you find such another as yourself to help

you when you're in trouble, which Lord send may never come!"

"Is your house quite destroyed?" said Miss Wilson. "Where will you spend the night?"

"Don't you think of me, mum. Master Smilash here will kindly put me up 'til morning."

"His health!" said Smilash, touching the mug with his lips.

"The roof and south wall is browed right away," continued the man, after pausing for a moment to puzzle over Smilash's meaning. "I doubt if there's a stone of it standing by this."

"But Sir John will build it for you again. You are one of his herds, are you not?"

"I am, Miss. But not he; he'll be glad it's down. He don't like people livin' on the land. I have told him time and again that the place was ready to fall; but he said I couldn't expect him to lay out money on a house that he got no rent for. You see, Miss, I didn't pay any rent. I took low wages; and the bit of a hut was a sort of set-off again' what I was paid short of the other men. I couldn't afford to have it repaired, though I did what I could to patch and prop it. And now most like I shall be blamed for letting it be blew down, and shall have to live in half a room in the town and pay two or three shillin's a week, besides walkin' three miles to and from my work every day. A gentleman like Sir John don't hardly know what the value of a penny is to us laborin' folk, nor how cruel hard his estate rules and the like comes on us."

"Sir John's health!" said Smilash, touching the mug as before. The man drank a mouthful humbly, and Smilash continued, "Here's to the glorious landed gentry of old England: bless 'em!"

"Master Smilash is only jokin'," said the man apologetically. "It's his way."

"You should not bring a family into the world if you are so poor," said Miss Wilson severely. "Can you not see that you impoverish yourself by doing so--to put the matter on no higher grounds."

"Reverend Mr. Malthus's health!" remarked Smilash, repeating his pantomime.

"Some say it's the children, and some say it's the drink, Miss," said the man submissively. "But from what I see, family or no family, drunk or sober, the poor gets poorer and the rich richer every day."

"Ain't it disgustin' to hear a man so ignorant of the improvement in the condition of his class?" said Smilash, appealing to Miss Wilson.

"If you intend to take this man home with you," she said, turning sharply on him, "you had better do it at once."

"I take it kind on your part that you ask me to do anythink, after your up and telling Mr. Wickens that I am the last person in Lyvern you would trust with a job."

"So you are--the very last. Why don't you drink your beer?"

"Not in scorn of your brewing, lady; but because, bein' a common man, water is good enough for me."

"I wish you good-night, Miss," said the man; "and thank you kindly for Bess and the children."

"Good-night," she replied, stepping aside to avoid any salutation from Smilash. But he went up to her and said in a low voice, and with the Trefusis manner and accent:

"Good-night, Miss Wilson. If you should ever be in want of the services of a dog, a man, or a domestic engineer, remind Smilash of Bess and the children, and he will act for you in any of those capacities."

They opened the door cautiously, and found that the wind, conquered by the rain, had abated. Miss Wilson's candle, though it flickered in the draught, was not extinguished this time; and she was presently left with the housekeeper, bolting and chaining the door, and listening to the crunching of feet on the gravel outside dying away through the steady pattering of the rain.