

THE PERRY FOREST LINE



The old Wyre Forest station

by

Mary Munslow Jones

Edited by Dr C J Betts



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Edited by Dr C J Betts FBNA, CBiol.

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INTRODUCTION

Mary Munslow Jones, author of *The Lookers-Out of Worcestershire* published by The Worcestershire Naturalists' Club in 1980, was the Club's *Transactions* editor before I took over that role from her in 1988. Mary died in 2016 at the grand age of 100 and her obituary, written by her daughter Helen, can be found in the Club's *Transactions* Volume 6, Part 1, pages 63–65 with her photograph reproduced below:



I kept in touch with Mary and in 1999 she wrote me the following letter, enclosing a manuscript:

29 Balfours
SIDMOUTH
Devon EX10 9EG

27th January 1999

Dear Chris,

It was something of a coincidence that when you 'phoned me to tell me of the good news of a new site for Campanula patula, sadly diminishing in its very limited range (it has never been recorded in the SW peninsula, nor indeed in most of the British Isles) that I should have just then been looking through some Worcestershire papers which had been long stored away. Among them was the enclosed, now over thirty years old! I really have misgivings about asking a mature man of science to take possession of this story¹, intended when begun for my daughter, then doing history "O" Level, as a sort of light relief from the Reform Bill and other 19th century events. However, by the time I had finished it, she was about to go to university and too old for the story. I realise now that I had really written it for myself, since I have long been interested in the nineteenth century, and I could not help reflecting after Beeching how short the Steam Age had really been.

The sixties of this century were really a time of change, and for those of us troubled about pesticides in the food chain, the destruction of old pastures and orchards, and the general disregard of governments for the natural

¹ Mary added a hand-written marginal note here "Scarcely your usual kind of reading".

world, the foundation of the Worcestershire Trust for Nature Conservation, as it then was, seemed something positive we could do to help in our own county.

I don't need to tell you how much your parents did to build it on to secure foundations in those early years, before it could employ any paid staff. A duplicated newsletter kept the growing membership in touch, and I typed the envelopes. One lovely June afternoon in, I think, 1967 or even 1968, I was driven over by a friend, also a worker for the Trust, to have tea with your mother at Goodmoor Grange. We had tea outdoors, and it was really quite idyllic, with the pied flycatchers feeding young in a nearby nestbox, and the living Forest all around us, busy with bird and insect life among the green boughs. Your mother showed us the drawing room² which had been created by an Italian designer in the last century, and took us to see the track of the branch line, which had come back into possession of your family after barely a hundred years of existence.³

It was that golden afternoon which stirred my imagination and made me embark on the story, really for my own pleasure, for I knew it was not the kind of tale likely to appeal to modern publishers and the very different outlook which was emerging with youth culture, "pop" music etc. I knew nothing about the early history of your family, so the family, the opening of the branch line etc., are purely fictional. The Forest too is an amalgam of various tracts of woodland I have known, and is not really the Wyre Forest, but with some quite different features. I knew a large tract of woodland in Wiltshire with a church in the middle of it, but this had been built in Victorian times by the then Earl of Pembroke for a cluster of cottages occupied by woodmen and estate workers. The herbalist was based on one I had met gathering herbs in wartime in the Purbeck Hills. The inspiration, however, was Goodmoor Grange and what must have been virtually its own little railway station.

It seems startling to think that over thirty years have passed since that afternoon. There was another occasion too when I remember Dr. Hickin leading Trust members on a walk through the Forest, and Mrs. Hickin asked me to bring up the rear with her to prevent anyone getting lost, and then again we finished up at the Grange with your mother's hospitable care. I was sad to learn that there are problems with the building and its timbers, as so often happens, unfortunately, with houses of that era.

I feel sure you must have a family archive, and if you think that this story, as a perhaps interesting curiosity, worthy to be included with it, then I should be pleased. My own children, although born in Worcestershire, seem settled in Edinburgh and Wiltshire respectively, so when I am gone they may not know what to do with it. I could have had it taken out of its folder and retyped on a modern computer printer, but I felt it best for the MS, corrections and all, to be sent to you as it was when I did it in the late sixties. Please don't be concerned about the postage, life has been kind to me, and I do so appreciate what you have done for Worcestershire Naturalists' Club in taking its Transactions to a standard of which we can feel really proud.

With best wishes, Sincerely yours,



I was, of course, both flattered and moved to receive this letter and its enclosure, and I replied to Mary a little later in the spring, when I had had a chance to read the enclosed manuscript as follows:

Dear Mary

This is a short note to thank you for sending me your ms of the "Perry Forest Line". You are quite correct in observing that it is very different from my usual science reading – but nonetheless pleasurable for that: it is a refreshing change. Your written style and characters evoke what is now a forgotten world. Time runs so rapidly

² In fact it was the library my mother showed Mary that was created by the Italian designer, which is at the centre of the Grange, the drawing room being at the front.

³ The station was just up the path over which my bedroom at Goodmoor Grange looked. I remember the steam trains in the late 1950s, soon replaced by diesel, on which we used to go to Bewdley, and then the closing of the line by Beeching when my father re-acquired the station house and land.

through our fingers – I had not realised (or at least not stopped to consider) just what a dramatic transformation in society there has been in my lifetime. And in yours it must be even more amazing.

Although not in your literary league and rather dry, I hope you will accept the enclosed for your reference library. It is something I produced to help people in conservation to know when they were dealing with a legally protected species. It is good to know there are so many, although I should like to see the law strengthened in some cases.⁴

PS. You are right about my having a family archive and I am delighted to have your ms for it.

Now, in 2022, as I am in my 76th year and have stepped back a little from running a professional practice as a Chartered Biologist and Ecologist, I feel the time has come to make this charming tale of Mary's more widely available. I have therefore transcribed Mary's manuscript and added a few natural history illustrations. I hope you find the story as delightful as I did.

CJB (editor)

Credits for illustrations

Adder drawing: Leone Annabella Betts

Pearl-bordered fritillary: my own photo

Wood vetch: created from public domain image (Sturm 1796)

Buff arches: my own photo

Wild rose hips: my own photo

Marbled white: public domain images from my library (Morris 1864)

Branch over pool: my own photo

Buckbean: my photo of foliage with flower illustrated by Sturm (1796)

Wood warbler: public domain image (Naumann 1905)

Oak woodchip basket: my own photo

Silver smelter: picture from my archive of the old Betts works.

The Grange: photo from a file of my Great Aunt who lived there, as I did as a boy.

Goldenrod and devil's-bit scabious: created from public domain images in my library.

Fly agarics: painting by Leone Annabella Betts.

Editor.

The railway line, forest and characters depicted in this story exist only in the writer's imagination. They were inspired by branch railway lines, natural features, and areas of woodland known in earlier years.

Mary Munslow Jones

⁴ This was a checklist and database of the 650 or so legally protected British species I had produced.

THE PERRY FOREST LINE

by

Mary Munslow Jones

“Mr. Buck, the Engineer, is now engaged in the neighbourhood of Ludlow, surveying the country for the most eligible line for a Rail-road between that town and the Severn.”
Berrow’s Worcester Journal, 1825.

“The First Steam Age, when you could go from anywhere to anywhere by train, when guards were six feet tall and wore red carnations, stationmasters wore top hats, porters had big turnip silver watches, railwaymen were serious, respected, moustachioed, semi-priestly, totally reliable public servants...”
Paul Jennings

*..As through the wild green hills of Wyre
The train ran, changing sky and shire,
And far behind, a fading crest,
Low in the forsaken west,
Sank the high-reared head of Clee,
My hand lay empty on my knee.*
A.E. Housman

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PART ONE – THE OPENING OF THE BRANCH RAILWAY

Chapter 1 – Before Breakfast

It is thrilling to wake up very early on a fine June morning, when the dawn chorus is resounding through the Forest. In contrast to all the life astir in every glade and thicket, the human inhabitants of Whitslade Grange lay sound asleep – all save one.

It was just after three in the morning when Sophia opened her eyes and was immediately wide awake. She sat up and looked across the shadowy bedroom to the other bed. The bed curtains were looped back, and the curled-up hump of the sleeping Adelaide was just visible in the half-light before dawn.

“It’s come at last,” thought Sophia. “Wednesday, June the Eighth, year of Our Lord, One Thousand, Eight Hundred and Sixty-eight the Opening Day of the Perry Forest Branch Railway! How I hated it at first, when the navvies started cutting down the trees to clear the way for the line. Thank Heaven they did not have to go through our beloved Hayley Dingle. I suppose it will be rather fun to have our own little station – Perry Forest Station. There’s not the least doubt that it will be better for Papa not to have to ride or drive to the works every day in all weathers. I’m glad he was so good about getting Joe the job as stationmaster’s assistant. Stationmaster sounds a very grand name for Enoch Bates – he’ll really have to be ticket-collector and everything else. Joe will have to do the portering and help all round, but I’m sure he’ll get on. He says he means to be stationmaster of Paddington one day – and last week he was only our boot-boy! Now he’ll be looking quite grand in his Great Western uniform when the first train comes in from Kirminster Junction. There we shall be, all lined up and cheering! Everybody dressed in their best. I feel so excited. I want all the fun of Opening Day, yet another part of me wants to be alone and quiet in the Forest, before any humans are stirring. It may never be quite the same again, with a railway running through. I’m glad I managed to wake up for the dawn chorus, just as I planned. I shall be able to wander about for a couple of hours and more, and still slip back into bed before the servants get up at six.”

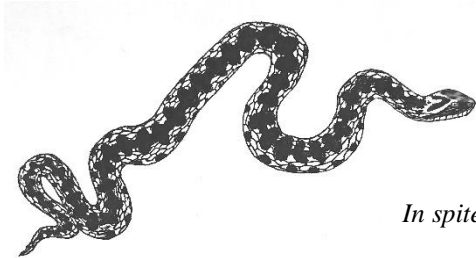
She crept out of bed, and padded over to the window. The casement was open, for the weather was settled and warm. Birdsong pulsed through the air from thousands of invisible small throats in the Forest around the Grange. She peeped out. It was still quite dark in the stable yard below the sloping tiled roof under the dormer window. The room faced east, and the sky was beginning to take on a faint apricot flush above the dark woodland rising beyond the garden. Then, in homely contrast to the wild mystery of the Forest dawn, she heard the stamp and rattle of the two carriage horses in their loose boxes in the stables below.

She crouched on the window sill until the bird chorus began to slacken. The sky grew lighter and small puffs of cirrus cloud sailed across like fleets of bright boats. She turned hesitantly, wondering if she should wake her sister.

“Addy,” she said softly, but Adelaide remained serenely asleep.

“I had better go alone,” she decided. “Then I can creep out and back more quietly. If I get caught, then I bear the blame alone, but I don’t intend to be seen. This is going to be a special day, and I don’t want to spoil a minute of it.”

She began to dress. Not in the starched and lace-trimmed petticoats which hung in the clothes-closet with the new bonnets and muslin dresses, all ready for the two sisters to wear at the Opening Ceremony, but in her everyday chemise and drawers, over which she tugged an old poplin dress now rather too small for her, and without even a single petticoat, an omission which would have highly shocked Pardoe, their old nurse, who now acted as Mama's personal maid. Even worse, she left off her stockings, for she knew the grass would be very wet. In spite of slight qualms about treading on an adder, she intended to go barefoot through the dew, carrying her boots until she reached the dry, stony track over Ash Ridge, so that when she left her boots in the boot-room afterwards, they would not be too incriminatingly soaked. Had Joe still been boot-boy, it would not have mattered, for he had been her ally, and would have hidden them from Pardoe's sharp eyes, but since he had been elevated to his new job with the Great Western, another of the Lissamore brood – his twelve-year-old brother Fred – had been brought over from Smokehills to fill his place. Although amiable and respectful, it was obvious that he had not the swiftness of mind and engaging personality of Joe.



In spite of slight qualms about treading on an adder.

She decided not to waste time on washing, for pouring water from the big flowered jug into the china washbasin might wake Addy. She tied back her straight brown hair with an old ribbon, and covered it with a limp sunbonnet. No critical humans would see her in the Forest, only such friends as bank voles basking in the early sunshine, an owl settling down in his hollow tree, or perhaps a roebuck surprised browsing on the young leaves of the ash grove on the Ridge.

Softly, stealthily, she turned the knob of the bedroom door. Outside were two pairs of polished boots. Both pairs were originally alike, but Sophia's were now easily recognisable, for they were far more scuffed, despite zealous polishing by Fred the boot-boy, and they bore mute witness to her scramblings and climbings in hollows, banks and trees.

At just twelve years old she was half a head taller than her sister Adelaide, who was eighteen months older. Their brother John was seventeen, and a boarder at the new Malvern College. The three Letts children in outward appearance and traits of personality showed an interesting mixture of their family inheritance. From their father they were descended from an energetic strain who had been smiths to the great Priory which had once held most of the Forest lands. Later the Letts had owned a furnace mill on the banks of the Jack Brook, and had smelted iron with charcoal, before the advent of Darby in Coalbrookdale. Then their grandfather, a very able man, had begun smelting precious metals in the nearby town of Kirminster, and had raised them to the ranks of local gentry, building himself a country home in the Forest parish of his forebears. Their mother and their cousin Cleone were the sole descendants of a landed family once great in the region, but which had been brought to financial ruin by Sir Chad Corbett, a spendthrift knight in the time of the Regency, and grandfather of Cleone. When her parents had both died in an influenza epidemic, the orphaned girl had thankfully accepted a home with her

uncle and aunt. They had sent her to an excellent school at Stratford-upon-Avon, and now, at her own suggestion, she taught her young cousins.

It had been a happy arrangement, and she had not let her relationship stand in the way of teaching them well. In the autumn, however, they were to go away to the same school at Stratford.

Sophia picked up her boots, and glided along the landing. Outside Cousin Cleone's bedroom door she stopped short with a beating heart, thinking she heard a sound within. Much as she loved Cleone, she did not want her to know about this escapade. Cleone, after all, was grown-up, and in a position of authority as their governess. She would be obliged to disapprove and send her back to bed. Sophia listened apprehensively, but all seemed silent, so she began to descend the stairs.

It was an old staircase, with many a creaking tread, but Sophia was practised in the swift and silent descent of this venerable piece of joinery; she simply swung herself on to the sturdy bannister and slid down. It would be noisy to pull back the bolt of the front door, so she went round to the conservatory door. The first rays of the sun were slanting into the high glass roof. There was a warm, exotic smell from the ferns and flowering plants. She crossed to the outer double doors, turned the key, and stepped out into a different world – a cool, sparkling world of freshness.

Swiftly she crossed the lawn in the direction of the carriage drive. At right angles to the drive lay a new path of yellow gravel, skirted the trees, and ended out of sight of the Grange, at a white wicket gate set in a wooden pale fence. This was their private path to the station, and the gate gave access to the platform. Invisible beyond the shrubbery were the new station buildings – ticket office, waiting rooms, goods office, and stationmaster's neat little dwelling, where Joe had now taken up lodgings with Mrs. Bates, the stationmaster's wife.

Sophia did not go in the direction of the station, but skirted the drive and took a narrow path into the shrubbery, through a door in the garden wall, and out into the Forest. The dew was clammy to her bare feet on the grassy path. She trotted along noiselessly, sharp eyes alert, and before long saw the fiery tail of a redstart flitting through the branches of an oak. She had seen a redstart a few days before near the same spot, and thought that a pair might be nesting in one of the Three Brothers. This was a trio of oaks of great age and in varying stages of decay which stood at the intersection of two ancient trackways. They had a fine assortment of holes in their branches and trunks. Once, according to Forest tradition, they had been a meeting place of outlaws who frequented the area, but in the peaceful nineteenth century the old trees, which had escaped the axe in their prime, now harboured nothing more fearsome than woodpeckers, nuthatches, and other hole-nesting birds.

A redstart's nest was something which John had particularly told Sophia to look out for this season, as he lacked its egg in his collection. He had an extensive collection, housed in a fine cabinet presented to him a few years before, and Sophia had found for him many of the rarer eggs. She had been proud of her prowess in discovering nests, and had often received the commendation of the members of the Erdingham Scientific and Natural History Society when they met in summer at the Grange. Even her father, kindest of men, seemed to think that the hen birds "would not miss one egg" and it was considered quite the thing for any gentleman interested in natural history to have a collection of birds' eggs, and a glass case or two of stuffed

birds, the rarer the better. Only Henry Taverner, son of their family lawyer at Kirminster, who knew the Forest better than anyone, and was a popular visitor to the Grange, took a different view.

“I collect nothing,” he had said at Easter. “I am content to watch without disturbance, and to “pass quietly on.”

He had been standing by the drawing-room fire on a rainy afternoon in April, when a walk had been abandoned. He had smiled across the room as he spoke, to where Sophia, Adelaide, and Cousin Cleone were sitting at a table, busy on a sketch map of the Forest, showing the route of the new branch railway and its stations. Sophia had then resolved that for the future she would not be so eager to show off the treasures of the Forest to collecting visitors.

On this particular morning, however, she could not resist climbing up into the branches of Middle Brother, in an endeavour to find the redstart’s nest for her private pleasure. She had got about twenty feet up, when she suddenly disturbed the hen bird flying from a hole close to the forked branch to which she was clinging. Off went the bird in a bright flash, and the creaking of the branch made Sophia scramble down rather hastily, feeling that perhaps if she had crashed with a piece of rotten wood, it would have been a kind of retribution.

“Don’t desert your nest,” she muttered when she got safely to the ground. “Come back soon, for I won’t tell a soul, nor steal a single egg!”

She put on her boots, and started up the steep path which led over Ash Ridge and skirted the western rim of Hayley Dingle. Her objective was the five-arched viaduct by which the railway line had been taken across the Jack Brook. Mr. Letts had declared it to be one of the most elegant small viaducts on any railway, and he considered that it had beautified rather than spoiled our “dear Jack Brook”.

Sophia’s bold plan was not merely to enjoy the beauty of the Forest before anyone else was astir on Opening Day, but also to cross the railway viaduct on foot, for the first and last time before the trains began to run. Their father had been one of the leading figures in the original company formed to build the line, which had later been taken over by the Great Western Railway Company. It had been agreed that the formal ceremony of declaring the branch railway open should take place at Perry Forest Station, instead of at the start of the first journey from Kirminster Junction. A special train was to be run for the occasion, which would stop only at Perry Forest Station, and then proceed to the terminus of the line at Brindley, where there was to be a grand luncheon at the Crown Hotel for the gentlemen of the party. The ladies, after refreshment in the first-class waiting room, were to return on the “special” in reverse.

After the line had started construction, Sophia had not been allowed to roam freely in the woodlands as she had done before. It was some time since she had been on Ash Ridge, once a favourite place for family walks. She took the path which wound between the old ash trees; their grey trunks and twisted roots stretched out above the stony ground like the claws of prehistoric animals and made the grove a strange place in the early light. She turned aside to a remembered spot to see if the butterfly orchids were in bloom, and was pleased to find these pale, spurred beauties still flowering in their grassy hollow. Then she descended towards the cutting, and followed the line – now firmly fenced in with stout posts and wire – until she reached the viaduct. Five spans of latticed ironwork leapt across the steep banks of the Jack

Brook, ready to take the snorting engines and their trains of carriages and trucks across the stream “for evermore”.

She climbed the fence, and stepped on to the sleepers between the rails. Then she bounded along until she reached the middle of the viaduct. Crouching by the ironwork parapet, she peered down at the Jack Brook flowing peacefully below. The banks had been gashed and scarred by the railway work, but already nature was beginning to spread healing greenery over the bruised area. As she watched the brook rippling over its stony bed some twenty feet below, she saw the flash of a kingfisher, heading upstream. Then her eye fell on the familiar dusky brown and white of a dipper on a stone in midstream. So they had not been driven away for ever!

The sun, now well and truly risen reminded her that she must get back to the Grange and up to her room before the servants got up at six o'clock. She thought it must now be about half-past four, but she did not possess a watch. The most direct way would be along the railway track to Perry Forest Station, so she tucked up her skirt and began to walk swiftly along the sleepers.

Half an hour later she approached the platform of the little station, which was hung with flags and bunting. She kept a wary eye open, but calculated that Enoch Bates would not be on duty yet. There was someone on the platform, however, and after a few seconds of panic lest she should have been noticed, she realised with relief that the figure was Joe, in his new porter's uniform of green corduroy, who seemed to be kneeling down and busily engaged in some activity near the end of the “Up” platform.

She crept up quietly. His back was towards her, so she could approach unobserved; as she got nearer she could see what occupied him.

On the gently sloping bank behind the platform he had prepared a bed of fine soil, which he had bordered with pieces of limestone from the cutting at the end of Ash Ridge, and had used pieces of light-coloured stone to spell out the name “Perry Forest” on the bank. Around this he was planting clumps of flowering pansies. In the corners of the oblong he had placed pieces of rock with fossils exposed.

“Oh Joe!” burst out Sophia, surveying his absorbed artistry. “I do think that's a clever notion of yours!”

Joe swung round, his face comically registering such complete astonishment and consternation that Sophia burst out laughing, then fell silent when she saw the quite unfamiliar seriousness of his expression. Without a word he came forward to the edge of the platform, where two or three blue bricks had been built projecting out to form a foothold, enabling railwaymen to climb up from the track. Still in silence he held out his hand. Sophia grasped it, and scrambled on to the platform. Feeling suddenly embarrassed, she hastily tugged her skirt so that its kirtled-up folds were released round her ankles.

“Have you just come along the line?” asked Joe in an icy voice.

“Yes,” said Sophia. “I – I wanted to see the viaduct, and cross over it just once, before the trains begin to run. I thought it would be a good way to start Opening Day.”

Joe looked at her. He suddenly seemed taller and older than the merry boot-boy she had known. He had a grave official look, and she felt abashed.

“Miss Sophia! Don’t you know that it’s an Offence to Trespass on the Line? Haven’t you seen the notices?” He waved an arm across to a notice board at the end of the platform.

“But the first train doesn’t come from Kirminster until ten o’clock...” she began feebly. Joe cut her short, she was not just then Miss Sophia, the object of his humble admiration, but A Person Found Trespassing on the Line.

“There might have been an early goods, or an engine test, or something you know nothing about! You were taking a great risk, going on the viaduct like that. Think how terrible it would have been for everybody if you had been killed on the line. I’ll not report it, but will you promise never to walk on the line again?”

“Yes, Joe,” murmured Sophia, quite deflated, with tears pricking her eyelids. “I’d better go back to the Grange now. Nobody knows I stole out. Can you tell me the time?”

“It’s nigh on half-past five. You’ll be able to get back to your room before Ellen or Rose or Missus Pardoe are about, if you’re quick, but you’d better watch out for Mr. Jordern when you pass the stable yard.” Then suddenly lapsing from the representative of the Great Western Railway Company into something of his normal boyish eagerness, he asked “Do you like the way I’ve done the station name on the bank?”

“Oh yes! It’s most striking. And the fossils look very well round the edge. Those curly ones are ammonites, aren’t they? And that very fine fossil over there – the one with a stem and petals, almost like a tulip. What’s that?”

“That’s a sea-lily. A crinoid, the Rector calls it. He tells me about the fossils I’ve found when they made the cutting. You know he’s been helping me with my reading and arithmetic, as I had to leave school when I was ten. He’s been very good to me, and says I’m getting along fast. Did you know, Miss Sophia, that these fossils prove there was a warm, shallow sea over this part of the country millions of years ago, with lagoons, and coral reefs, and tropical fish?”

“Did the Rector tell you that? What about Adam and Eve, and the world being made in six days?”

“Well, the Rector says that God’s day isn’t the same as our day. One of his days may be millions of years, so he says the Bible and geology can both be true.”

“I don’t suppose he says that to my Aunt Harriet!”

“Missus Topsham’s going to take our Louisa into service with her. She’s the one next to Fred, and she’ll be twelve in July.”

“How do you think she’ll like it with Aunt Harriet?”

“Well, our Louisa’s a bit raw, you’ll understand, and Missus Topsham’s a very particular lady, but Ellen says it’s a wonderful place for training any young lass, and her two other maids have been with her for years and years. They never go short of good “vittles”. ‘Twill build Louisa

up, for she's a bit scrawny. She'll not mind the strictness too much, I reckon, for she knows it'll stand her in good stead to get a nice place later on. She's keen to get on, same as me."

Sophia shuddered a little, thinking of the hardship of life at Smokehills, which made the prospect of service with Aunt Harriet, plus good victuals, a rosy one.

Sophia had never been to Smokehills, that strange industrial region, which lay some twenty miles to the eastward, across the River Lench, between Kirminster and Erdingham. From conversations with Joe she had built up a lurid picture of its huddles of mean houses dotted between rough tracks and murky canals where shaggy horses pulled the coal barges from lock to lock. On dark winter nights at the Grange, one could see the faint glow on the skyline from Smokehills' innumerable small foundries and forges.

Joe's father had been a nail-maker, with his own small forge in an outhouse beside his cottage on the banks of "the cut", as Joe always called a canal. He had died of pneumonia, leaving a widow and six surviving young children. Joe's mother had carried on with the nail-making, working hard and long to earn a meagre living.

The Rector's brother-in-law, a gaunt, saintly priest, and a great contrast to the genial, absent-minded Rector, occasionally visited his sister at Perry St. Lawrence to recuperate from his work in a Mission Hall at Smokehills. It was he who had interested Mrs. Letts in the Lissamore family, with the result that Joe had come to the Grange as boot-boy four years ago. Now, at sixteen, he was a very different being from the almost illiterate, underfed lad who had known what it was to dive into the canal in winter to retrieve lumps of coal which fell from the barges, so that his mother could keep the fire going in her forge.

Sophia thought of Joe's early hardships as she said her good-bye to him, and freely forgave him for scolding her. He opened the wicket gate for her to enter the Grange grounds, and they shook hands solemnly, smiled, and parted friends.

Hastening through the Wellingtonias, she forsook the new path, and crept round by the shrubbery to the conservatory door. Unobserved by gardener, groom or indoor servant, she managed to creep up to the bedroom, where Addy was still peacefully asleep. Feeling suddenly quite worn out, she slipped off her clothes, and was soon fast asleep in her bed. Nearly two hours later, Adelaide had to shake her awake at half-past seven.



Chapter 2 – The Opening Ceremony

They were quite a party for breakfast at eight o'clock. The Rector and his wife walked over to join them at the meal, by special invitation of Mrs. Letts.

“Once we have the Rector safely here, then there will be no risk of his quite forgetting the Opening Ceremony, and picking up his butterfly net and escaping into the Forest, as on any other fine weekday in June!”

It was well-known in the parish that Mrs. Claines was apt to have to remind her husband of regular occurrences like Sunday, and less frequent ones such baptisms, burials, churchings and the solemnisation of holy matrimony. Nevertheless, he suited the Forest dwellers very well. If he sometimes passed them like a sleepwalker, they thought tolerantly “Rector’s mind be on his insecses today”, knowing that when it came to a helping hand in time of trouble, he would suddenly become practical and succouring.

When the Rectory pair entered the dining-room, there was a delightful surprise, for Henry Taverner was with them.

He was warmly welcomed. by-everyone. He looked paler and more serious than in his undergraduate days, which was not surprising, for he had had a weary time of it since he came down from Oxford the previous summer. His mother had died after a distressing illness, and his father had become so low-spirited and unwell afterwards, that he had been quite unable to carry on with his professional work. Work had become so much in arrears that long-standing and friendly clients like Mr. Letts were seriously inconvenienced.

Henry had given up his plans to read for the Bar, and instead of departing for a pleasant life in London, with lively young men of his own age, he had gone into his father’s chambers in Kirminster, and worked hard and late with the aged chief clerk to put things in order. He had been doubtful if he could even spare a day to share their celebrations, but at the last minute he had walked the ten miles from Kirminster to his godparents at the Rectory, where there was always a room kept ready for him.

“It was good to be walking by moonlight along the Forest paths again,” he said. “I suppose I shall be obliged to take the first train back tomorrow. Quick and convenient, of course, but I love to stretch my legs and breathe the fresh air.”

“We were afraid you would not come,” said Mr. Letts. “This means, I hope, that your father is better?”

“Much improved, thank you sir,” replied Henry. “I think he is convinced now that Dalley and I can manage, and Dr. Ward advises him to rest completely for the whole of the summer. The doctor thinks that a change of air to the seaside would do him good. I hope I can persuade him to spend a few weeks at Margate.”

“Dr. Ward thinks very highly of the Margate air. He has recommended it to me,” said Mrs. Letts.

“How I wish we could go to the sea,” put in Sophia, trying to take her mind off the dish of grilled bacon and kidneys, from which delicious odours came to her famished senses. The elders were handing it round in such a leisurely fashion! “I wouldn’t wish to live anywhere else in the world but Perry Forest, but I wish we were not such a long way from the sea. I would love to try sea-bathing, and learn to swim!”

Her father smiled at her. “I hope it will be possible for us all to take a rail trip to the seaside for a week or two in September, but we are extremely busy setting up the new smelter at the works at the moment. By the way, Henry, you will be coming with us to Brindley on the special first train, of course. How about the luncheon at the Crown?”

“I have excused myself from that, sir. As I am not directly connected with the line, I thought I could return with the ladies, and perhaps we might take an afternoon walk in the Forest.”

The faces of all the females at the breakfast-table registered satisfaction at this proposal. Escorted by Henry, it would be far pleasanter after a brief stay in Brindley, to return home and stroll in the Forest, than to endure the fate of Mr. Letts and the other gentlemen, and eat a long ceremonial luncheon with the Mayor in the stuffy dining-room at the Crown Hotel, Brindley. In the cool of the evening there was to be a dinner party at the Grange, to round off the celebrations.

There was a great deal of lively talk at the breakfast table about the branch line. Papa said that the Great Western’s changeover from broad-gauge track to the narrow gauge of the other railway companies was now almost completed, and he had great hopes of increasing prosperity for the railways, after the difficult years of the early sixties. “It’s Full Steam Ahead, now”, he said. Henry began to lose some of his gravity, and became animated, so that the cheerful meal seemed all too short when the crunch of wheels on the carriage sweep outside brought from Sophia the words “Aunt Harriet!”

Adelaide, who was sitting where she had a view out to the front door, whispered to her sister she’s wearing purple.”

Neither of the girls ever remembered seeing their aunt in anything but the durable mourning she had worn for the past five years since the death of her husband, that dimly-remembered silent old gentleman whom they had called Uncle Topsham, his Christian name being something of an uncertainty, never bandied about by his wife or anyone else.

“If everyone has finished,” said Mrs. Letts, glancing around the table, “We will all go out and welcome Aunt Harriet.” Her glance rested on her husband for a moment. If everyone, including the staff, was to be on the platform to welcome the first train, then a great many things had to be attended to in the next hour.

They trooped out into the hall, and on to the sunny front steps, Henry and Cousin Cleone bringing up the rear. Since Henry was not related to the lady in purple, and Cleone was a niece on Mrs. Letts’s side of the family, they felt absolved from pressing themselves forward. As for the Rector and Mrs. Claines, although they greeted her with their unflinching courtesy, they did not have to be kissed and inspected, like the two girls, so they might well be able to smile. Sophia was particularly averse to the smell of eucalyptus oil. Aunt Harriet always put it on her handkerchief, as a specific against various infections when faced with a gathering of sundry people.

“Well, brother,” she said, briskly alighting from her old-fashioned yellow-wheeled chariot, assisted by her taciturn groom, Moses. “So your Branch Railway is to be opened at last. I pray it will not send folk bankrupt, as so many of these railway ventures have.”

“Not my railway, Harriet,” smiled Mr. Letts, as he stooped to kiss his only sister. “It’s the Great Western’s now, you know.”

“Hm, and they were in a pretty pickle a year or two back,” retorted Aunt Harriet.

“That is all past now. Things are going very well, and they will soon be paying a dividend. Every town will have its station, and every village be within a few miles of one.”

“Then folk will always be on the gad, and get to be more idle than they are already. As for convenience, Pies Hill Station is above two miles from my house. If I had a station on my doorstep like you, I might have been able to save myself the expense of keeping a carriage, and dispense with my groom.”

Moses had turned round the carriage, and was passing the steps on his way to the stables at the back, when his mistress expressed this fervent wish to do away with his services, which he must have heard, but he did not betray as much in a muscle of his impassive face. He had been employed at the Grange in the time of Sophia’s grandfather, and had accompanied Aunt Harriet to Holly Villa when she had married Mr. Topsham. She was no more likely to dismiss him than to become a Dissenter, or emigrate to America, and Moses knew this perfectly well. There were but three men on earth to whose opinion she deferred: her brother, her family lawyer, and Moses.

“Would you care for some refreshment, Harriet?” enquired Mr. Letts. “I expect you breakfasted very early. Nothing? Well, there’s plenty of time before we need assemble to go to the station, so I want you to come across and see the progress in the new wing. The workmen are having a holiday today, like everyone else. The two Doolittle sons, Jacob and Joe – Aaron’s sons you know – are making a capital job of the new staircase, from the oak Father put aside to season in his lifetime. They are first-rate joiners. Come along and see.”

He gave his arm to his sister, and the Rector and Mrs. Claines followed. It was not yet possible to enter the new wing from inside the Grange – the wall was to be breached later to minimise dust. Mrs. Letts and Cleone went indoors again to attend to household arrangements, whilst the two girls were sent to the hothouses to fetch flowers from Mr. Pumphret, the head gardener. To their great delight, Henry came with them.

Promptly to time, forty minutes later, a bright procession wended its way from the front door of the Grange along the new path to the station entrance. Mr. and Mrs., Letts led the way. The sun, now high and brilliant in a clear sky, glinted on his top hat and her fringed blue silk parasol. The family, guests and staff followed, the very last being Moses and John Jordern, the Grange coachman, both with their black billycocks pulled down hard over unsmiling faces, as if they felt their presence was an act of disloyalty to “th’osses”. In fact, they had pleaded the need to attend to the horses as an excuse for not joining the excursion to Brindley on the special train with the other Grange servants, which Mr. Letts had so kindly arranged. They were merely going to stand on the platform to watch the monster steam in, and then return to the stables, with instructions from Cook to keep an eye on the kitchen range during her four hours of

absence. She had banked it up well with slack, but if the fire went out, she might not be able to get the oven up in time to roast the leg of spring lamb for the dinner party.

“Look at all the people coming down the lane from Perry St. Lawrence,” said Adelaide, nudging her sister as they reached the gate. Everyone from the village seemed to have turned out from the month-old latest addition to the Fewtrell family, in its mother’s arms, to old Mrs. Clee, hobbling along with her ashplant as a third leg. “How magnificent the gangers look!” exclaimed Cleone. “What a patch of colour they make, with their fancy waistcoats and red neckerchiefs, and those white corduroy trousers!”

“Mr. Allard is very proud of his men,” said Mr. Letts. “He has kept the same gangs together through many contracts, and claims they are the best set of navvies in the land, and the least given to drunkenness and disturbances. I must say, this line has gone very well. He is a very able contractor.” As he spoke he noticed Mr. & Mrs. Allard on the platform, and raising his hat to the lady, went across to ask them to join his group.

“Have you noticed that family in mourning standing at the end there, beyond the navvies,” murmured Mrs. Letts to Cleone. “They are the unfortunate family of that poor man who was killed in April when the rock fell in the cutting. The widow and her family were living in lodgings in Kirminster, and to save them from destitution, we have offered them, rent free, the Old Furnace Cottage which has stood empty since Bundy died. They have no furniture, since they have lived in lodgings and moved from place to place on the contracts, but Bundy’s married daughter had not moved his things from the cottage after he died. She did not want them herself, as her husband is quite a prosperous farmer. We have given her a few pounds for the furniture, to enable the family to move in. I must send them down a basket of provisions. Aaron Doolittle has promised them some basket-making to help them support themselves. He is hoping his trade will increase now that we have the railway. The eldest girl looks old enough to start a place of service.”

Sophia gazed with interest at the widow and her family, whose black clothes contrasted so strikingly with the holiday brilliance of the navvies. There were two small boys, and two girls – the elder girl being about her own age. Her dark hair, falling in glossy curls about her shoulders, and her pink and white complexion, were just what Sophia longed to possess herself, instead of her own nondescript colouring. This orphan beauty captured her romantic imagination, and she was generously inventing a more happy future for her, when a roar from the waiting crowd made her start and attend to the present.

The signal had fallen, and everyone’s eyes were strained on the line, which was visible from the platform as a long curve disappearing into the trees. There were moments of breathless silence, then a distant steady chugging, a whistle of steam, an outburst of cheering, and the engine drawing six coaches came pounding into sight, slowing to a halt at the platform.

Sophia felt quite confused with the excitement, heat and noise. She clutched her sister’s hand and felt she was about to experience what Cook had so often graphically described as “a swoond” . Then the scene steadied, important-looking gentlemen alighted from the first carriages, and were shaking hands with Papa. John suddenly appeared, presumably from the train, kissed his mother, and started hurriedly describing how he had risen at five, caught the first train from Great Malvern to Erdingham, and just managed to get to Kirminster in time to take the place reserved for him on the “special”. It was, he assured them, being drawn by the latest in engines, built at Wolverhampton, and put on the line for this occasion only.

“They won’t leave an engine like this on a mere branch line,” he declared, reeling off technicalities about engines and rolling stock.

Out of the waiting room came a man with a tray of glasses and bottles of champagne. There were some doubts as to whether the girls were old enough to be allowed champagne, but Mr. Letts said that on this historic occasion they might have half a glass each.

Suddenly there appeared an odd-looking little man with a camera on a tripod and a large black cloth, who bustled about and took command of everything, because he was a photographer. He waved his arms, moved all the important people about, whilst the crowd gaped from behind the barrier. The notables were arranged in a group, with the engine in the background, and the driver and fireman aloft like inscrutable gods on Mount Olympus. The photographer draped his black cloth over the camera and dived under it. Everyone assumed expressions suitable for posterity, but unfortunately at that critical moment a wandering butterfly flitted over the group and alighted on the sunny wall of the booking-office. Squinting sideways, Sophia observed that it was one of the fritillary butterflies. It must have had some uncommon markings, however, for suddenly the Rector doffed his shovel hat, broke from the group in one bound and trapped the butterfly with astonishing dexterity. With what almost amounted to sleight-of-hand, he transferred it to a collecting bottle which he whipped out from some capacious pocket of his frock-coat.

There were titters from those at the barrier who witnessed this exploit, and Aaron Doolittle, pressed against the wall, with a large pocket-handkerchief spread between his perspiring head and his Sunday hat, called out “Well done, your Reverence!”

The photographer emerged from his black cloth, and said with pained emphasis, “If the reverend gentleman has quite finished, perhaps we may proceed with the photograph?”

The Rector, blushing deeply, resumed his place Everybody again put on their set expressions.

The Great Western Director took out his watch and said pointedly, “We have just seven and a half minutes before the train must proceed.”

The photographer dived again, and after a few more tense moments, emerged from the black cloth, bowed, and said “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.”

Then came another great bustle, in which the “boarding party” were arranged in the reserved compartments. Mr. and Mrs. Letts and John went with the Allards and the Director in the first compartment; the next two were occupied by other people of note, and Joe ushered the Rector and Mrs. Claines, Henry, Cousin Cleone and the two girls into a plush-upholstered “first-class”, where the six of them settled thankfully, whilst doors were slammed, the guard’s flag waved, and the “special” moved triumphantly out, with a loud blast of steam, cheers, flag-waving, and envious glances from the lesser mortals left behind.

“By Jove, Rector, that was a good catch of yours,” said Henry, turning to the Rector when the train was well away from the station. “Has it some unusual markings?”

“Wulstan dear, how could you?” murmured Mrs. Claines, “Holding everything up, and making that photographer so cross!”

The poor Rector looked very guilty. “A pearl-bordered fritillary with very unusual aberrations. I shall mount it to-night. Most opportunely seen, for I am in correspondence with Buckland on the very subject.”



A pearl-bordered fritillary ... I shall mount it to-night.

“Tonight we are to dine at the Grange,” said Mrs. Claines, trying to look at her husband severely.

“What station comes next?” asked Henry. “You girls know the layout. Seven stations in all on the branch line, are there not?”

“Six stations and one halt,” they replied in unison, looked at each other, and began to chant:

“Kirminster Junction
Pies Hill Road
Warmstry
Perry Forest
Yeld Wood Halt
Belling Sollars
Brindley”

“It’s First Stop Brindley for us today on this special train,” added Sophia. “We shall just race through the Halt and Belling Sollars.”

“I wonder if my old friend Sally Matcham the herbalist will walk the two miles from her cottage to Yeld Wood Halt to see the first train go through,” said Henry. “She likes seclusion, and may not approve of the railway.”

“Two miles is not very near. Enough to protect her solitude, I should think. She has always given me hospitality when I have gone over to St. Alfric’s-in-the-Wood to conduct a service. She is a very interesting and intelligent character, with a great knowledge of herbs. People swear by her remedies for miles around – if they do no good, they can scarcely do harm, although the medical profession frowns on them. She is sensible, and often gives the cottagers good advice on hygiene and other matters that helps to dislodge some of their superstitions. I am glad, by the way, that the parish of St. Alfric’s is to get a new incumbent at last. Isn’t he a friend of yours, Henry?”

“Yes, indeed, we are close friends. We were at Merton together. He’s eccentric, and well-to-do – which is why he was able to accept such a poor living. He intends be a recluse and study the history of the Marcher Earls. I am going to call on him when he is settled in. It will be easy enough to take a train to Yeld Wood Halt, and walk from there. Would you girls, and Cleone,

of course, like to come with me if Mrs. Letts consents? I hope to be able to take another day off in about a fortnight.”

“Oh, yes please, we would love to go to St. Alfric’s-in-the-Wood! We have never been there, and have always wanted to see it.”

“Right. When the date is certain I will write and ask Mrs. Letts. I hope this splendid weather holds.”

He looked out of the window at the sun-dappled woods flashing past, and the six occupants of the compartment, in the ease of old acquaintance, fell into contented silence until the end of their journey and the entry into the crowded and flag-bedecked Brindley Station.



Chapter 3 – An Afternoon Walk

The feminine portion of the railway contingent, escorted by Henry, arrived back at the Grange just before three o'clock. They had been given light refreshment at Brindley station, so none of them wanted luncheon. Mrs. Letts thankfully departed for an afternoon rest.

“I declare, Madam, you look properly done up!” said Pardoe, relieving her mistress of her hat and parasol, and following her upstairs. Cook, retiring to the kitchen to coax her slumbering volcano of a range into action, was in very fair shape after the twin assaults of steam travel and a heatwave. She felt she would be able to produce her finest ice-pudding for the dinner party, after a sustaining thimbleful of some very old elderberry wine, which she kept in the larder for her especial revival. After despatching Mr. Pumphret and one of his men to bring a block of ice from the ice-house, she stood before the mottled looking-glass by the kitchen window, and tried on the new Sunday hat she had purchased in Brindley. It was trimmed with a great bunch of artificial cherries, cornflowers and daisies, which might well put Mother Nature herself to shame, and which would light up in no uncertain fashion the dim religious light of St. Lawrence’s church at Evensong on Sundays.

Despite her several preoccupations, however, she did not forget the basket of provisions which Mrs. Letts had asked her to put up or the bereaved family at Old Furnace Cottage.

Cousin Cleone, the two girls and Henry decided that they would be glad to stretch their legs in a walk. Although the afternoon was so warm, it would be shady enough on the paths through Lord’s Coppice. So they set off, Henry carrying the basket.

Sophia could not help contrasting in her mind, as they strolled along, the torpor of the Forest with the activity she had seen among its wild inhabitants during her dawn walk. The birds seemed to be having an afternoon nap as the little party wound its way through the green gloom of the hazel coverts, past the bank where the wood-vetch straggled, with its far-reaching tendrils and sprays of delicate blossom.



... the wood-vetch straggled, with its far-reaching tendrils and sprays of delicate blossom.

“Wood Wisteria,” said Adelaide, catching a long bine of it, and winding it round her neck in a garland. “That’s what Mrs. Doolittle calls the wood-vetch. She says that when she was a girl, they used to wear wreaths of it on Midsummer Day. The Rector of those days stopped the Midsummer revels. Mrs. Doolittle says perhaps it was just as well, for Midsummer revel often led to Michaelmas rueing. Rueing with a “g” you know – not ruin.”

“Adelaide!” said Cleone. Adelaide, although not a chatterbox, sometimes came out with surprising repetitions of village matrons’ Tales of the Forest. She was a great favourite with them, and often sat on a cobby-stool by one or another wide log-burning hearth, with a little horn tumbler of cowslip or damson wine, listening to the rather racy anecdotes of old times, and looking, as various crones were wont to declare, like one of the blessed angels in the church windows. Whilst she paid these visits, Sophia would go along to the pond on the common at the end of the village street, for she preferred looking for caddis cases or newts, to hearing the recollections of this or that old goody.

Henry, leading the way, glanced back with a grin at Adelaide’s latest historical anecdotes. As he did so, there came precipitately round the bend of the path, a small boy carrying a pitcher. The stout provision basket and the earthenware pitcher collided; the pitcher lost the encounter, and fell shattered to the ground, leaving a pungent smell of rough cider on the still air.

“Heyday!” cried Henry, “Here’s a go! I’m sorry, young fellow. What’s your name?”

The boy gaped at the pitcher fragments, and then at the party of gentlefolk before him, gulped, and suddenly ran off in the direction in which he had come, going like a frightened hare, and disappearing round the bushes in seconds.

“Well!” exclaimed Henry, kicking the jagged sherds off the path into the undergrowth. “That was a queer business. I’d have given him a shilling for the damage, although it was not really my fault – he came round the corner in such a headlong way. But who is he? I thought I knew all the Perry St. Lawrence youngsters by sight.”

“I think he must be one of the newcomers, the Bruen family that we are about to visit,” said Cleone. “Why he should have run away from us like that I can’t imagine. Perhaps we shall see him again when we get to the cottage, and be able to reassure him, if he was so scared.”

They continued their winding way. Walking dreamily along in the dappled light, Sophia thought she could hear a distant sound of human singing; it seemed as if a deep-toned voice was singing a rousing chorus.

“Listen! Can you hear singing?” she asked Adelaide. They halted. “I can’t hear it now. It seems to have stopped.”

“I didn’t hear it at all,” said Adelaide.

They caught up the others, who were deep in conversation, so the real or imagined singing did not seem worth mentioning. Sophia, who had particularly acute hearing, was often teased (rather unfairly, she felt) about hearing faraway noises that nobody else could detect.

In due course the path joined a lane, over which went the new railway arch. They passed under it, pausing to make an echo, and admire the skilled workmanship of the dark blue brickwork, built cleverly on the skew.

Just beyond the railway arch stood the isolated dwelling known as Old Furnace Cottage, from the remains of a mediaeval iron furnace on the nearby brook. As they approached the cottage, someone pulled aside the piece of tattered curtain which shrouded one of the two small downstairs windows, peered out, and quickly dropped it again.

“We are observed,” murmured Henry. “Master Pitcher has heralded our approach, no doubt.” They passed through the gateless posts of an old garden fence, and up a rough brick path to the cottage door. Henry knocked. They stood in silence for a while, although there were sounds and muffled voices within, and then the door opened a few inches, and the face of the widow appeared, flushed with either heat or emotion, still in her black dress, but wearing a print apron, a corner of which she was applying to an eye.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Bruen,” said Cleone, “I hope you are settling in comfortably. Mrs. Letts of the Grange asked me to bring along this basket of provisions for you.”

“The Saints be praised! What a wonderful kind lady she is, to be sure, succouring a poor widder woman. We’ve bin spending the morning at the railway, as no doubt ye saw. Not that we’d any heart for rejoicings, but Mr. Allard wished me to be there out o’ respect for me poor dead husband. Now me da’ter and meself is just scrubbing the place and setting it to rights.”

She did not ask them in, but held out one hand for the basket, without opening the door any wider. A small boy peered round her apron; he appeared to be the one already encountered.

“I’m afraid your boy and I bumped into each other on the path through the wood,” said Henry. “Unfortunately, his pitcher knocked against the basket and was broken. Perhaps you would be kind enough to accept this as a recompense.” He brought out half-a-crown from his pocket.

Mrs. Bruen promptly dropped her apron from her eye, and accepted the half-crown with one hand and the basket with the other, in an ample gesture which also dismissed the peering child. “It was just taking the jug he was to the farm yonder, to get a wee drop of milk. It’s kindness itself y’are, sir!”

Cleone made a few more polite enquiries, and was answered with the same effusive gratitude. The sun blazed down on them as they stood on the brick path, so Cleone wound up the uneasy conversation by asking Mrs. Bruen to let them know at the Grange if there was anything she needed. The party then retreated to the lane, and the door was slowly closed.

“I expect they feel rather strange here after being used to town lodgings,” said Cleone, as they retraced their way up the lane. She had smelt tobacco as she stood at the cottage door. She knew of cottage women who puffed at clay pipes, but she had also heard a suppressed cough within. It would, after all, be quite natural if some of the gangers had called in after the opening ceremony, to see how their dead workmate’s family were faring, before they moved on to some new contract.

Sophia gazed quizzically at her cousin as they walked towards the archway, as if endeavouring to read her thoughts.

“Why was Mrs. Bruen so anxious to have us think that her son was going to Attwood’s Farm for milk?” she enquired. “He wouldn’t have been going through Lord’s Coppice in that case. I think he was on his way to the Huntsman’s Arms, and then ran back home again when he broke the pitcher. It smelt of cider, even though it was empty.”

“It doesn’t really concern us where he was going,” said Cleone, as if she wished to drop the subject. Henry perceived that a change of interest might be desirable, and taking out his pocket watch announced that – according to his reckoning – the train from Brindley bringing back the party from the ceremonial luncheon would pass over the archway in approximately five minutes. “So if you wish to experience the sensation of your father and brother hurtling over your heads, let us take up our places. At least it will be in the shade!”

The sun was certainly beating down on them in that shadeless part of the lane, so they pressed forward and quickly reached the archway. In a few minutes they began to hear the throb of the approaching engine. It passed above them with a deafening roar, so that they clung to Henry’s arms almost in panic; after all, the bridge was new, and railway bridges had been known to collapse (but surely never those designed by Mr. Allard!), and in this novel and pleasurable state of apprehension, they clung together whilst the train thundered overhead, rattled on its way and then the noise grew fainter, until they heard the whistle as it approached Perry Forest Station.

“So,” said Henry, as he shepherded his little flock into Lord’s Coppice again, “Perry Forest is now well and truly into the nineteenth century, and cannot be regarded as a backwater again ... dear old backwater, how much I have loved your antique ways. Never mind, now I shall be able to see you all more often.”

They strolled back in the resumed quiet of the woods, and in due course reached the entrance to the Grange carriage drive. Henry excused himself from coming in, as he felt he ought to take tea with the Rector and Mrs. Claines. So he went on his way, and the others watched him as he strode up the lane in his easy, purposeful way. Sophia willed that he should turn and look back at them when he reached the bend that would take him out of sight. Perhaps the others were wishing the same, and three converging thought-waves reached for he did turn, at the corner, raised his hat with a gallant flourish, and disappeared.

The girls went up the Grange drive, feeling suddenly rather tired and conscious of their feet.

“Pumphret said the first cucumber might be thick enough to cut today,” said Sophia.

“Cucumber sandwiches and China tea,” said Adelaide, hopefully.

“And there is Rose, taking out the table for tea on the lawn,” said Cleone. They all hurried forward.



Chapter 4 – Rough Encounter after the Dinner Party

After tea, Cleone and Adelaide went off to arrange the flowers for the dinner party. Cleone would be dining downstairs, of course, but as the party being given chiefly to entertain the Great Western directors and their wives, and the local Member of Parliament, there was, as John put it “No room for the family small fry”, who were to have schoolroom supper. This included John himself, who was quite content to be regarded as a schoolboy on this occasion. He did not want to waste his only evening at home in June, when the trout were rising in the Jack Brook, so he disappeared to go fishing for the evening. Sophia would dearly have liked to accompany him, to see the hatch of mayfly.

“I don’t want you thundering along the banks, you will disturb the fish,” said John, and seeing she was about to protest that she never thundered along, he added, “To a fish, all human footsteps sound like thunder.”

So she decided to go along to her father’s study, for a quiet read before going upstairs. She settled herself in a favourite nook in the bay window, behind the red velvet curtains. Although the book was interesting, she was more tired than she realised after her dawn uprising. She dozed off, and awoke with a start to the sound of voices within the room.

Her father and Aunt Harriet must have entered without perceiving her, and were talking on the other side of the curtain. This was decidedly awkward; they may have been there for a minute or two. If she suddenly emerged from behind the curtain, she would seem like an eavesdropper. Had her father been alone, she would have come out and explained that she had dropped off to sleep, and he would have laughed, and recommended an early night after all the day’s excitement. Aunt Harriet, however, was apt to disapprove of Sophia “always having her nose in a book, when her sewing is so poor”. Sophia hesitated, and the more she hesitated, the more it became difficult for her to emerge. She could not tell whether they had sat down on the sofa. Perhaps they would depart in a few moments. She did not want to listen to their conversation, which seemed to be about Mr. Taverner, but when she heard Henry mentioned, she could not help attending.

“I can’t help admiring the way he has exerted himself to get the legal work in order in his father’s office,” Mr. Letts was saying.

“He has begun to dine out again lately,” came Aunt Harriet’s voice. “He has dined several times with the Willcocks’s. I happen to know, because my cook’s sister is parlourmaid at Park House. His going to them first after the mourning period for his mother was ended seems to be a pointer.”

“A pointer?” enquired her brother.

“A pointer to the way the wind is blowing. No doubt the Willcocks’s, who have made their money in trade, would regard him favourably. The Taverners are a most respectable professional family of long-standing, but they are not well-off, and there have been heavy expenses to meet, with illness and Henry’s education. Rhoda will have twenty thousand pounds, I understand. With a fortune like that, Henry could become the next Liberal candidate. Spicer says he will not stand at the next election.”

“Matchmaking, like most forms of speculation, is a risky procedure,” replied Mr. Letts. “I do not think Henry would ever marry without sincere attachment. I must confess I believe love to be the only proper basis for marriage. I married for love myself, and have never regretted it!”

“Ah, but our father left you with a flourishing business, and a comfortable property, so you could afford to please yourself,” retorted Mrs. Topsham.

Mr. Letts made no reply to this thrust.

“Well,” resumed his sister, “I suppose I must go up to my room and dress for dinner.”

“And I must go round to the stables,” said Mr. Letts. “I want to see what arrangements Jordern has made for the visiting horses. There will be five carriages, but I think we can fit them all in. We shall be sitting down twenty to dinner, which is just about as many as the dining-room will hold comfortably.”

To her infinite relief, Sophia heard the study door close. So they had gone without noticing her! As soon as she judged that Aunt Harriet had reached her bedroom, she slipped out of the study and up to the schoolroom, where she found Addy alone.

“Addy, I’ve just heard such horrible news. I was on the window-seat in the study, reading, and I must have dozed off a bit, for suddenly Papa and Aunt Harriet were in there, talking. They hadn’t seen me behind the curtain. If Papa had come in alone, or with someone else, I would have come out, but you know how Aunt Harriet cross-questions one. I stayed where I was, and tried not to listen. They weren’t talking about anything private, but do you know what Aunt Harriet said? She thinks Henry has a fancy for Rhoda Willcocks, and that it would be a good match for him. That stuck-up milliner’s dummy!”

“She’s considered very beautiful. I’ve heard Pardoe say that Rhoda is called “The Belle of Kirminster” ...”

“I wonder if he’ll take her in to dinner tonight. If we had been going down to the drawing-room afterwards, we could have noticed if he paid her special attention, but as it’s really a business party, and it will be rather a crush to get them all in, Mama thought we’d better not go down. If Henry thinks that Rhoda can sing, he must be in love with her, but I suppose she will be asked to perform.”

Just then Ellen entered, with their cold supper on a tray, and this put a halt to their discussion. Mrs. Letts and Cleone came in to say good-night, and were duly admired in their evening dresses. When they had gone downstairs, Adelaide proposed a game of backgammon, their latest enthusiasm. So they fetched the beautiful board of yew-wood, inlaid with holly, which had been made for their grandfather, and settled down to a game.

As the schoolroom was in the back wing of the house, and overlooked the stableyard like their bedroom, all they heard of the arrival of the guests was the sound of carriages being brought round. Just before eight, Sophia slipped along the passage to the staircase landing, curled up unobtrusively on the floor, peeped through the bannisters, and without being noticed was able to watch the procession into the dining-room.

“Rhoda did go in to dinner on Henry’s arm,” she reported back to Adelaide. “She is wearing

a lovely dress in smoky-mauve watered silk, with three rows of pearls. I must admit she looked very striking, with her dark hair piled right up. Henry was smiling and saying something which pleased her, I'm sure, for she looked almost animated."

"What is to be, will be," said Adelaide, shaking the dice vigorously."

"You sound exactly like Cook reading the tea leaves!"

"If we don't get on with this game, John will be back for his supper, and then we shall never finish it."

In the event, it was long after nine, and the summer dusk had fallen, before John came into the schoolroom, in a high good humour. "I had three brace of good trout," he said exultantly, as he took the cover off his cold ham and tongue. "Cook has promised me a brace of them grilled tomorrow morning for my breakfast, before I set off by the first train. How I wish I could stay a few more days whilst the fish are rising so well."

"Can't you?"

"Of course not, silly! I have to be back by mid-day at latest. I was very lucky to get permission at all, when it's not half-term exeat. It was only because old Corpus has shares in the Great Western, and hopes this new line is going to make a fat profit, bringing limestone from the Kerwardine Quarries to Smokehills. You don't imagine that the money would have been put up just to take old Granny Hemslow and her butter to Brindley market once a week, do you? By the way, did you hear the commotion downstairs just now? No, I suppose you wouldn't, up here at the back."

"Commotion?"

"I'll tell you about it in a minute," replied John, with wicked glee, "but I must have my supper first, I'm ravenous. Your idol, Henry, has been in a fight, and is just now having his bleeding lip bathed and plastered by Pardoe!"

They implored him to continue, but he would not until he had finished eating. How they hated him as he daintily plied his knife and fork, and the moments tick-tocked by in the old bracket clock. They would have liked to rush downstairs and find out the truth for themselves, but did not dare in case it was some stupid hoax on the part of John.

At length he wiped his mouth, flung aside his table napkin, and leaned back in his chair.

"As darkness was falling on the evening of the of June" he intoned, like someone making a statement before a bench of magistrates, "I was returning from the Jack Brook with my rod and fishing basket, and had reached the bend in the path as it approaches our garden wall, where there is a thicket which we call Nightingale Copse, when I heard a scream. I rushed round the corner, where I saw – for it was still light enough to see quite well – three ladies in the path, and a yard or two away two men struggling together. As I approached, the taller of the two, a gentleman in evening dress, gave the other a right hook which landed the other on the ground. The gentleman, which I could then see was Mr. Henry Taverner, waited until the other, a ruffianly looking fellow, had picked himself up. The said ruffian seemed to be injured, but

suddenly he dived off along the path in my direction. As I was holding my rod and basket, I could not intercept him before he had dodged round me and disappeared into the trees.”

“Oh, stop talking like that! What had happened?”

“It seems,” continued John in his normal voice, “that after dinner, some of the guests were in the conservatory with the doors open, as it is such a warm night, listening to the nightingales. Colonel Crombie, the old boy who has retired from the Indian Army, said he wished he could hear one at closer quarters, and perhaps see the “little brown bird”. Henry said there were always several nesting in our copse outside the garden wall, so Henry and Rhoda Willcocks, Caroline Harland, Cleone, and Colonel and Mrs. Crombie decided to stroll across to the garden door into the Forest, and walk along by the thicket to hear the nightingales at close quarters, and perhaps have a glimpse of one – although that’s not easy. When they were half way through the kitchen garden, Mrs. Crombie found she had dropped her reticule, and she and the Colonel apparently went back to look for it, saying they would catch the others up. Henry and the others went on, and they were standing in the path by the copse, listening to the birds, when Henry caught sight of this fellow, who had a sack on his back and was liming twigs, to catch song birds, including nightingales. They sell them in cages in Erdingham market-hall, and subject them to great cruelty. Henry challenged this fellow, telling him he was on private property, and would have the law on him for damage and trespass. The fellow dropped his sack, and gave Henry an upper cut, which Henry was repaying with interest when I came on the scene. Cleone was supporting the other two graces – Caroline was doing the screaming, and Rhoda was apparently about to do a swoon. Henry said he thought he had given the fellow something which would make him think twice before coming into our grounds again, and that it was of no use trying to catch him, when there was so much cover. Then Colonel Crombie, having heard the screams, came rushing up – he had sent his wife back to the house for help. He took charge of Caroline, whilst Henry gave his support to Rhoda. Cleone and I brought up the rear, as she remained calm and collected. We met the Pater and all the male guests setting forth to the rescue from the conservatory. After a great deal of excitement and explanation, everybody went back to the drawing-room, except the Pater, who led the hero off to his dressing-room, to have his swollen lip attended to, and a few bloodstains sponged off his shirt-front. I took my catch of trout to the kitchen, and of course I had to tell the whole story to Cook and the rest of them . I needed my supper after all that!”

“Did the bird-limer leave his sack behind?”

“Yes. He had three nightingales in it. I wiped the bird-lime carefully from their claws with a soft handkerchief, and released them. They flew off, seemingly quite unharmed.”

“And what about Henry?”

“Oh, don’t fret yourselves, his looks are only temporarily impaired. However, when I was coming upstairs from the kitchen, I met Mrs. Claines coming down, wearing her cloak, and she said that the Rector, Henry and herself were walking home, as it is such a fine night and only a short distance. Henry has to go back to Kirminster first thing tomorrow. I don’t suppose he wanted to go back to the drawing-room, and face all the twittering. The Pater has sent Pumphret, Jordern and the new under-gardener off with cudgels to go round the outside of the garden wall, and see if there is anybody about. It doesn’t really get dark these nights.. I expect the fellow is far away by now, and I don’t suppose he’ll come back again in a hurry, for Henry’s quite able to take care of himself in a bout of fisticuffs!”

“And we heard nothing of all this!” exclaimed Sophia in an aggrieved tone. She had lost the backgammon game as well; the day was not ending as she would have wished. “Henry might have come in to say goodbye to us before he went. He is going back to Kirminster by the early train tomorrow, and we shall not see him again before he goes.”

“It’s embarrassing for a fellow to have to play the hero,” replied John sagely. “He didn’t want to tell the story of his fight to all and sundry.”

“We are not all and sundry,” said Sophia coldly, rescuing a large moth fluttering around the candle which Adelaide had lit in the Georgian silver candlestick, banished to the schoolroom since Mr. Letts had introduced to the ground-floor rooms new patent oil lamps, made in Erdingham, and guaranteed not to smoke or smell.

“A Buff Arches, the first I’ve seen this year,” she murmured to herself, as she released it through the open window and closed the casement.



A Buff Arches, the first I’ve seen this year.

Down below in the stableyard there were voices, the clattering of hoofs, and wavering lights of carriage lamps.

“The guests are departing. Opening Day is over,” she said, and reflected that it was more than eighteen hours since she had seen the light of dawn flooding over the Forest.



PART TWO – THE LONG HOT SUMMER

Chapter 5 – The Arrival of Signor Parelli

After the excitement of the opening day on the branch line, it was inevitable that the succeeding days should seem a little flat to the inhabitants of Whitslade Grange. Gradually they ceased to start at the sound of an approaching train; even John Jordern began to accept them, and ceased to mutter among the fetlocks of his charges about the railroads having ruined coaching inns and brought ostlers to the workhouse. The private carriage at least was still a necessity to the gentry, and his own job had not been made redundant by the iron horse. Perhaps he was secretly glad that his master no longer had to ride or drive to the works, and that Russet and Mortimer would not have to turn out of their snug loose boxes on cold or wet mornings in the winters to come.

It was certainly pleasant for the family that Mr. Letts was able to breakfast with them on weekdays, and leave by the 8.35 train, instead of departing soon after seven, after a solitary breakfast. Another advantage was that the mail train brought the post very much earlier. The village postmistress at Perry St. Lawrence was now able to send Dick Hinton, the postman, over to the Grange with their private locked pouch, in time for Mr. Letts to open it personally and distribute the mail before prayers.

One morning in early July, as they sat down to breakfast, Mr. Letts handed a letter he had just scanned to his wife, with a pleased smile.

“This is from Signor Parelli, my dear, he has finished the gallery at Hareslea House for Sir William, and is quite agreeable to start on our drawing-room next week, if that is convenient. You shall have a drawing-room not inferior to that in your old family home at Sayle. He will design the ceiling, supervise the plaster designs, and personally carry out the trompe l’oeil paintings in the alcoves. When I saw Sir William at the Erdingham board meeting last week, he assured me that Signor Parelli is regarded as one of the best men in the country for interior decoration.

“I hope the new wing will not prove more expensive than you planned,” murmured Mrs. Letts, looking slightly apprehensive, and glancing momentarily at Cleone.

Mrs. Letts and Cleone were daughter and grand-daughter respectively of that historic spendthrift, Sir Chad Corbett, who had left the ancient family’s estates so deeply mortgaged that when he died, Cleone’s parents had known nothing but financial anxiety in their dozen years of marriage. They had both died in an influenza epidemic, leaving Cleone – their only child – eleven years old. Mr. & Mrs. Letts had immediately taken full charge of their niece. As for the ancestral home at Sayle, it had long since passed into the hands of strangers, so perhaps the remembrance of its eighteenth century splendours was tinged with too much unhappiness to be remembered with nostalgia.

“You must not worry about that, my love,” said Mr. Letts, with the confidence of a man who is not one of a line of decaying and incompetent squires, but a mid-century business man of the Steam Age, expanding his works and quite justified in beautifying his dwelling. “We may as well make what is to be the principal room of our house into something which our descendants

can be proud of. If you agree, I will write to Signor Parelli and ask him if he can travel up here next week-end.”

“Will he have his meals with us?” enquired Sophia.

“Of course,” replied Mr. Letts, consulting his gold half-hunter watch, and rising from the table. “Sir William assured me that the Signor has thoroughly gentlemanly manners, and they found him an agreeable guest as well as a first-rate designer.”

Sophia felt that she was in a minority of one in disliking the idea of this unexpected addition to their family circle, if only for a few weeks. Although she had not wanted a railway through the Forest, now that it was an accomplished fact she hoped it would be the means of taking them on interesting summer expeditions.

There was no hope of going to the seaside whilst the Italian was with them, and perhaps other short trips, such as a day on the Kerwardine Hills, would now be deferred or put off altogether. She liked her home as it was, and saw no reason why it should be made grander. The Doolittle brothers, that industrious pair, had transformed the “hole in the wall” which linked the new wing to the entrance hall into an attractive wide archway, and it was now possible to go up the new staircase to the rooms above.

“Mama says I can have one of the new bedrooms if I wish,” said Adelaide, as the girls looked around together, amid the scent of oak shavings. “I said I would rather stay with you in our dear old room overlooking the stableyard. When we go away to school in October, we shall have to share a dormitory with other girls.”

They both looked a little solemn at the thought of those unknown creatures who, before the year ended, would have become a familiar part of their daily lives. They were cheered by the recollection that Cleone had been very happy at this self-same school, and they were eager to enlarge their horizons, which is the natural and proper desire of youth.

Signor Parelli, however, was a much more immediate object of interest in their lives, and when Sophia was presented to him by Mrs. Letts as they assembled for dinner on the following Saturday evening, she had to admit that he seemed agreeable enough. He was younger than she had expected, with expressive dark eyes and a gesture here and there as he conversed with the attentive family.

“I think he is very pleasant,” declared Adelaide when the girls had retired to bed.

“He is not so bad. Papa obviously approves of him, because of the business-like way the drawing-room work was discussed and decisions taken on his first evening. However, he is an indoor man, and I know his paintings will be idealised landscapes of eternal summer. Neither pictures nor photographs ever satisfy me. I like the real outdoors best, in all kinds of weather. If I could paint – and you know I’m hopeless at it – I would want to show our Forest in all weathers. I would show Aaron with an old sack round his shoulders, tramping along a muddy track in winter, with a livid sunset reflected in the watery ruts, and bare swaying trees. I would show the spring light through the oak leaves, and a grassy glade in summer, and the autumn wild harvest of nuts and berries. As far as I’m concerned a carved oak mantelpiece by the Doolittles and those funny old prints of the furnace mills as they used to be would have been decoration enough.”



*I would want to show ... the autumn wild
harvest ...*

“There is a touch of Aunt Harriet about you,” reflected Adelaide, “I don’t think she will approve of an Italian drawing-room. It’s just as well she’s gone off to Margate with the Misses Twinberrow to take the air for a few weeks. Rather surprising that she should have gone gallivanting just when the blackcurrants are ripening, leaving her maids to make jam without her supervision. I suppose that when old Mr. Taverner decided to go there to convalesce, Miss Fanny Twinberrow thought it would do her good too.”

“They’re not staying at the same boarding house as Mr. Taverner, but they’re sure to meet sometimes. Great Heavens! Wouldn’t it be dreadful if Aunt Harriet and Mr. Taverner made a match of it! She would be Henry’s stepmother! I’m sure he wouldn’t like that. They’ve always been a bit cool with each other. Aunt Harriet pooh-poohed once, I remember, when Papa said Henry was considered brilliant at Oxford, and muttered about the expense it has been to his father.”

“Mr. Taverner isn’t likely to marry again! Everybody knows that when Mrs. Taverner died in February he became ill because he was so upset. Oh! I’m sleepy! Good-night!”

“Good night.”

They both fell asleep within seconds. Sophia dreamed that Aunt Harriet married Signor Parelli in a Roman pillared temple, whilst Mr. Taverner made blackcurrant jam on the beach at Margate.



Chapter 6 – Lizzie Bruen

The heatwave continued unbroken.

“Quite a Florentine summer,” remarked Mr. Letts to Signor Parelli, at the beginning of another warm day.

Signor Parelli was a native of that noble city, and his ardent “Si, signor,” showed his appreciation of the implied compliment that he had brought with him to the isles of steam and mist, not merely his artistic skills, but also the kind of summer to which he was accustomed.

There was no doubt that the polite little man was getting on famously with everyone. That morning Sophia wanted a companion for a walk in the Forest. Lessons had been suspended for the duration of the Signor’s stay, as he was delighted to have Cleone’s assistance in the background landscapes for his alcove paintings.

When Sophia peeped into the new drawing-room, she beheld Cleone, looking delightful in an artist’s smock, perched on a stepladder, and Parelli indicating with the point of an agile pencil what she was to undertake that morning. Mama and Adelaide were immersed in embroidery – chair seats to the Signor’s design. Sophia could be of no help there!

The joiner brothers, far from being hostile to their foreign overseer, were making moulds for the plasterer from Parelli sketches, as absorbed and contented as any craftsmen could be. Even Cook was deep in an Italian recipe, and was short in her answers when Sophia looked into the kitchen.

Sophia felt neglected, and went out into the garden. She wandered in a desultory way along the path to the station, thinking that perhaps if Enoch Bates was not about, she might be able to have a few minutes’ chat with Joe. Before she reached the white wicket gate, she could see that Joe was busy; he was helping a besom-maker unload a consignment of brooms from a waggon drawn up in the lane by the little siding, whilst Enoch Bates stood by, entering the tally on a form. There was no hope of any diversion there.

It was a day to gaze upon cool, flowing water. Sophia decided to go down to Hayley Dingle on her own, so she retraced her steps through the Grange grounds, and entered the woodland path through the door in the garden wall. It was about eleven o’clock, and the birds were already dropping into their noontide hush. The insect world was revelling in the hot weather, and the abundance of butterflies that year was being remarked upon even by the usually unobservant. As she passed through a sunny clearing, Sophia saw dozens of the beautiful chequered butterfly called the marbled white fluttering gregariously over patches of sheep’s fescue grass, and paused to admire them. In the rides she spotted hairstreaks and fritillaries, and even caught a glimpse of the male purple emperor, high among the boughs of a particular oak tree which the Rector had told her was favoured by this species. It would have been pleasant to meet him that day, and accompany him on a butterflying expedition, but even that stalwart friend was in desertion. He had exchanged livings for a month with a friend on the Devon coast, and was no doubt bounding up and down the sea coombes after specimens which favoured the open grassy cliffs.



Sophia saw dozens of the beautiful chequered butterfly called the marbled white

That morning a letter had come from John at Malvern College, saying that they were breaking up for the holidays next week, and that a friend had invited him down to Cornwall for several weeks. He looked forward to “a capital time, sailing, fishing and riding.” Lucky John! It really seemed rather unfair, the way in which the whole world was indifferent to Sophia’s existence on that glorious summer morning.

She drifted on, determined to take off her boots and stockings and dabble her feet in the water when she reached the Jack Brook. There was a delightful spot halfway along the dingle, where the brook curved in a meander, and formed almost a small island of short, flowery turf above sandstone ledges, opposite a low cliff, where a small basin had been formed in the sandstone by a spring, which trickled thence through ferns into the brook.

As she wandered along in the warm stillness, she was aroused from her daydreaming by the distant sound of voices – young voices enjoying themselves, with cries, squeals and shrieks. Sophia halted to listen. The village children on their regular wooding forays to gather dry sticks for fire-lighting, seldom came into the dingle. Although Mr. Letts, not being a shooting or game-preserving gentleman, never denied access to any part of his woodland to the villagers, yet Hayley Dingle was rather out of the way for them. Could it be that a picnic party had found their way there from Perry Forest Station? The branch line had brought a trickle of people possessing that rare commodity, weekday leisure, as excursionists to the Forest, but not a great many, since there were no Sunday trains. Those who did alight at the station usually wandered down the lane to sketch or stare at the picturesque village, and explored the adjacent common with its pool, so that the Grange woodlands had retained their seclusion.

Sophia was very curious to know who these youthful revellers might be, and hurried forward down the steep, winding path. The sounds of splashing mingled with the laughter and voices. Someone was paddling! She reached the edge of the trees, and gazed down with astonishment. Four children of varying ages were bathing in the brook, splashing each other, plunging, shouting, and enjoying themselves with carefree abandon. On the bank their clothes lay in scattered heaps. They were, of course, naked. Although bathing costumes might be considered necessary for total immersion in the sea at Brighton or Ventnor, they were certainly unheard of on the Jack Brook.

The waters of the brook, flowing mainly over sandstone ledges, were noted for their coldness. No previous summer in Sophia’s memory had been as warm as the present one, and although the village children sometimes paddled in summer at a spot where the brook skirted the common, she had never before set eyes on anyone bathing in it.

As she watched their antics, she noticed that the largest of the children was actually swimming in the pool below the spring basin, where the water was several feet deep. Presently this swimmer came across to the shallows on the near bank, and stood up. Sophia recognised her

as Lizzie Bruen, the eldest of the orphan brood at Old Furnace Cottage; the others must be her two brothers and little sister.

Lizzie looked like a regular water nymph as she stood there, with her damp dark hair curling around her shoulders. Although Sophia understood that this Lizzie was a year older than herself, she was certainly much further developed into a womanly figure than Sophia. Somewhat embarrassed, yet not wishing to creep away unseen, Sophia walked forward into the open. One of the boys caught sight of her, and shouted something. Lizzie plunged back into the pool, whilst the others remained in the shallows.

“Hello!” said Sophia in a friendly voice, as she stood on the bank.

Lizzie looked at her warily for a moment, and then smiled over her shoulder as she swam across the pool. She put up her white arm and caught a branch overhanging the opposite bank and floated in the current, her limbs gleaming in the sun-dappled water.

Sophia felt that her own clothes were hot, constricting and ridiculous. She was deeply envious of this careless naiad.

Suddenly Lizzie let go the branch, swam the few strokes that took her across the pool, waded across the shallows to the bank, snatched up a piece of calico and a garment, disappeared behind a bush, and in a few moments reappeared, wearing her shift and rubbing her hair with the rag.

“You can stay in the water!” she called imperiously to the other children, and they went on splashing about. Lizzie looked at Sophia, then sat down on the sunny bank, calmly continuing to dry her hair. Fascinated, Sophia sat down beside her.

“How did you learn to swim?”

“Easy!” she replied, with a sidelong glance through her long lashes. “I just used to keep myself up with a piece of driftwood when we lived by the strand.”

“Strand?”

“That’s what we used to call the seashore in Ireland.”

“So you used to live by the sea! How lovely. I’ve never been to the sea yet, but I hope to go later this year. When did you come over to England?”

“Two years ago.” The assurance and prettiness of this girl at close quarters quite dazzled Sophia. Lizzie was utterly unlike the village girls, nor was she at all like the girls she had met among her own circle, limited as it was to the daughters of local gentry. They began to chat, and very soon Lizzie was telling Sophia about her travels – in the steamship from Dublin to Holyhead; train journeys to places where her father had worked as a ganger; lodgings in London and Erdingham. She had been to music halls, and enjoyed various “good times”, but whether she had ever been to school Sophia did not like to enquire. Lizzie’s education in the school of life had obviously been so much more extensive than her own, that it seemed impertinent to enquire whether she had learned to read, write and do arithmetic.

Rustic young lady though Sophia felt by contrast, she nevertheless reflected as they talked that the various plans she had heard discussed by her parents to help this bereaved family to earn a

living now that they were settled in Old Furnace Cottage hardly seemed appropriate. It was difficult to imagine Lizzie as a kitchen maid.

“Do you like my bracelet?” enquired Lizzie, twisting a filigree circlet on her wrist.

“Yes, it’s very pretty,” replied Sophia.

“It’s real silver,” replied Lizzie complacently. “It was given me by a friend. Have you any jewels?”

“No... Well, I’ve rather a nice brooch that belonged to my grandmother, my father’s mother. Both my grandmothers are dead and Mama gave me the brooch on my last birthday when I was twelve.”

“I shall be fourteen soon. What’s the brooch like?”

“It’s an amethyst, in a gold setting Quite a large stone, and a lovely colour.”

Just then one of the boys came dashing out of the water, and came across to his sister. The others followed him, and they stood bare and dripping in the blazing sunshine.

“Whar’s tatties?” he demanded. It was the boy who had broken the pitcher and received a half-crown compensation from Henry on the afternoon of Opening Day.

Lizzie jerked her thumb in the direction of an old rush basket, and the boy dragged it forward. It was full of small new potatoes, boiled in their skins.

The children started to eat them ravenously, dipping them in salt in a screw of paper. Lizzie watched them with distaste.

“D’you like one?” she asked Sophia suddenly.

Sophia did not like to refuse, so she took one of the tiny cold potatoes, peeled it, popped it into her mouth and said it was delicious.

“The woman down at the farm where A get milk gave ‘em to us. They’m pig taters, really, that size. They ain’t worth scraping, but the young ‘uns like ‘em.”

“I always think tiny new potatoes are the nicest, especially boiled in their skins.”

“I hate taters. Had too many in Ireland. I like black pudding, and faggots and peas. When we lodged in Erdingham you could get all those sorts of things piping hot from a shop only a few doors away. Here you can’t get anything ready cooked, and Ma hates cooking, and so do I. All we’ve got today is bread and cheese and taters, and buttermilk from the farm.”

Sophia felt she would like to stay by the brook all day and share that food with them, but she suddenly realised that it must be about mid-day, and jumped up.

“I shall have to go home now, I’m afraid. It must be nearly time for luncheon. I’ve enjoyed talking to you very much.”

“Shall you come here again tomorrow? Our Ma’s going on the train to Kirminster tomorrow, and leaving me to look after the others, so we might as well come here.”

“I’ll try to walk this away again, if I can. I shall have to hurry now, so good-bye until tomorrow, if I can manage to come down.”

“Wear your brooch, to show me” called Lizzie, as Sophia ran up the path.

Sophia did not reply to this. She did not like to say that she was only allowed to wear the brooch with her best dress on Sundays and special occasions. She waved farewell to Lizzie, who still reclined on the bank, and disappeared among the trees. As she hastened along the ride she resolved that she would meet Lizzie again next morning, and wear her brooch, even if it meant concealing it under the collar of her dress, to avoid Pardoe’s questioning.

(“Why are you wearing your brooch on your print dress, Miss Sophy, when you know you should keep it for your best muslin?”) Pardoe still treated her as if she were in the nursery. Feelings of rebellion welled up in her as she contrasted the carefree freedom of Lizzie with the restrictions of her own life. She felt a sudden hatred of the artificialities that position and wealth seemed to impose on people.

“How flushed you are, Sophia dear,” said Mrs. Letts gently, as Sophia took her seat at table, only a few moments late. There had not been time to wash her hands; she had rubbed them on her drawers and hoped the fact that they were sunburnt would conceal that they were not particularly clean.

“I suppose you have been rushing about in search of butterflies all morning?” continued her Mama, but in a very amiable tone.

“I have just walked down to the dingle and back,” replied Sophia. She wriggled, realising that she was getting remarkably secretive, concealing activities and thoughts even from Adelaide, with whom she had hitherto shared all happenings.

Nobody seemed disposed to question her any further about the way in which she had spent her morning; they were all too busy practising Italian with Signor Parelli, or discussing with him – for he spoke English quite well although with a pronounced accent – the artistic glories of Florence.

Sophia, eating in silence Cook’s Milanese soufflé, had to admit that it was delicious, but so were tiny new potatoes eaten outdoors by a sparkling brook. As for charming landscapes, she believed that Lizzie disporting herself by the spring was as beautiful as classical figures against a landscape of Fiesole.



Chapter 7 – The Bathe

To Sophia's chagrin next morning, the carriage was ordered round, and the girls were told to get ready to accompany Mrs. Letts on a morning call to the Harlands, who lived at the Manor House in Perry St. James, the next village. This precluded all possibility of her being able to go down to the dingle in the morning, for the visit entailed a three mile drive in each direction.

"I think those Harland girls are insipid," she said to Adelaide, as they drove home along the Old Coach Road after paying the call.

"Why, you used to like Lavinia!" replied Adelaide.

"I used to think her a good partner at croquet in the days when I liked croquet, but I find it tedious now. Oh! It is so sultry! How I long to plunge into cool, cool water. I wish we could bathe."

"Bathe! How can we do that? We are nearly a hundred miles from the sea!"

"We have a brook."

"Who ever heard of anyone bathing in the Jack Brook! Perhaps we could have a paddle, like we used to when we were little, when next we go down to Hayley Dingle for a picnic, but Cleone is too busy with the painting to do that. Signor Parelli can only spare another week here."

Mrs. Letts had been sitting opposite the girls with her eyes closed, as the carriage bowled along the leafy road, where the grass verges were white with dust. She opened her eyes, glanced through the window, and murmured "It is so oppressive today. I think there is thunder in the air."

"Thunder!" exclaimed Sophia. "Why, there is not a cloud in the sky!"

"Not at the moment, perhaps, but surely this furnace-like heat will end in a storm."

"I hope not," said Sophia, and they all lapsed into silence again. Sophia opposed the very idea of a thunderstorm with all her inward thoughts – it was the last thing she wanted that afternoon, for she hoped after luncheon to be able to slip away unremarked and keep her assignation with Lizzie. She thought that, unless indeed a storm gathered, the Bruens would spend the whole day by the brook. She felt a burning wish to encounter Lizzie again; the novelty and fascination of this diverting creature made other company seem tedious. Yet she did not wish to talk of this new friendship to a anyone, least of all to Adelaide.

Cleone and Signor Parelli joined them for luncheon. Despite the heat they were making good progress with the wall paintings in the two alcoves, and they hoped to complete that part of the drawing-room during the afternoon.

Mrs. Letts, who had not seemed very well of late, although she strove to carry on as usual, gave way to Adelaide's urging, and went up to her room to lie down for the afternoon. Adelaide and

Pardoe were going to finish the new brocatelle curtains for the drawing-room, so Adelaide headed for the sewing-room, which faced north and was mercifully cool, without making any enquiries which Sophia might have found awkward to answer. Just as yesterday, Sophia found herself free to do as she pleased, but this time instead of feeling neglected and aggrieved, she flitted purposefully through the shrubbery to the door in the garden wall. She was still wearing her best muslin dress and the amethyst brooch, which had been donned for the morning call. Normally she would have changed before going into the Forest, but she sensed that Lizzie's obvious love of finery would make a Sophia adorned more interesting than the same young lady in an old print dress. Thus did Sophia's former opinions on the stupidity of preoccupation with dress fall instantly before the effortless power of this new acquaintance.

She ran along the green ride, where everything was motionless in the still heat. The languor of Nature contrasted with her own eagerness. She could not hear the shouts and splashings before, as she approached the top or the dingle, and she feared that she might be disappointed. As the path wound clear of the trees, she saw with delight that the family were indeed there – Lizzie and the youngest child on the bank at the edge of the pool, and the two boys climbing around on the sandstone cliff, where the spring emerged.

“Coo-ee!” she called, and ran down the path to the grassy peninsula formed by the brook's wide meander.

They all turned and watched her approach, staring, silent, not moving.

“Oh! I am so hot!” she exclaimed as she reached the brookside, pushing aside the clammy locks from her perspiring forehead.

Lizzie, reclining by the water's edge, gazed up at her. Her glance took in Sophia from head to foot.

“So you wore your brooch.”

“We paid a call at Perry St. James this morning, so I was able to keep on my best dress when I came down here, although I should have changed.”

“I wear what I please,” said Lizzie, with a toss of her dark curls.

“And nothing, when it pleases you,” thought Sophia, but did not dare say it aloud. Lizzie continued to stare appraisingly at the brooch and Sophia's dress.

“Very nice, but not so smart as the pink dress I had last summer when we were in Erdingham. Ma made me have a black dress after Pa died, but black doesn't suit me, and I'm not going to wear it any more.

“Why don't you take your things off and have a dip? Nobody comes down here.” She yawned.

Sophia felt that she could at least take off her boots and stockings. The cool water felt delicious when she put her toes in. The rest of the Bruen family played around the spring, and took no heed of her, so that she began to feel more confident than when they had stared at her arrival.

Lizzie began to swim around the pool, and Sophia envied the effortless skill which she would

so like to acquire herself. She came across to the bank again, close to where Sophia sat dabbling her feet.

“Oh! It’s dull in this stupid forest, right away from everything!” she exclaimed.

“Dull!” replied Sophia, rising immediately to the defence of her native haunts. “How can you say that when you’re enjoying a lovely swim!”

“That’s well enough, although the sea’s better, but I do think Ma might have taken me with her to Kirminster, instead of leaving me to look after the others all day. Are you sweet on anybody?”

“Sweet?” repeated Sophia, taken aback by this abrupt change of subject. Oh ... um ... I don’t know.”

She felt she could not tell Lizzie of the hero-worship which she and Adelaide felt for Henry Taverner. It would be disloyal, somehow, to talk of family and friends in this intimate way to a comparative stranger. Perhaps a flicker of caution disturbed the flame of yesterday’s admiration.

“I’m not really sweet on anybody just now,” continued Lizzie, contemplating her bare arms with satisfaction. “I don’t go brown like a gypsy, I’m glad to say. My skin stays white, even in summertime.” However, she moved along the bank slightly, so that she was in the shade of the alders.

“The lads in this place are proper yokels,” she went on. “There was a fellow who called at our place last Sunday, when we were having a bit of a party, Ma wanting to thank friends from the line-layers who had been kind to us. They’re starting a new railway job on the other side of Erdingham.”

Sophia said nothing, but remembered the walk on the afternoon of Opening Day, when they had called at the cottage with a basket of provisions, but had not been asked in.

“This young chap who called,” proceeded Lizzie, “Is a red-haired fellow who works at the station, Joe by name. I’ve seen him a few times going past our place. When he called at the door, Ma said she reckoned I must have been making eyes at him, but I said – catch me making eyes at a red-haired porter! There’s better fish to fry than that!”

Sophia, already uncomfortably hot, felt her face glowing with annoyance at this contemptuous allusion to Joe. Perhaps Lizzie was unaware that until recently Joe had been in service at the Grange. To hide her discomfiture, she stepped off the bank into the shallows of the brook, and So began to paddle around.

“You’ll mess up your dress,” said Lizzie, watching her. “You’d best take it off.”

“Well, I can take off my dress, and paddle in my petticoat,” said Sophia. So the muslin dress, with the amethyst brooch attached, was slipped off, folded up carefully, and placed under a bush near the bank.

Gathering up her petticoats, Sophia waded knee-deep along the edge of the deep pool, into which Lizzie had plunged again. Around the bend of the brook, on the other side of the alder

clump, there was another pool, smaller and shallower, where one of the trees leaned over, so that one could hold on to a horizontal branch conveniently low above the deeper water.



... one could hold on to a horizontal branch conveniently low above the deeper water

“I’m sure I could soon learn to swim if I held on there,” thought Sophia. Suddenly determined, she clambered out of the brook, and soon her petticoats, shift and drawers had joined her dress and boots under the bush.

She ran quickly back to the second pool, and waded in, holding the supporting bough . All her feelings of oppression flowed away with the silken water. She held on to the bough with one hand and tried to get her feet off the bottom, but it was not as easy as she had imagined. She thought that Lizzie would come round the alders to give her some instruction, now that she had literally taken the plunge, but she did not appear. Sophia did not want to be seen by the other children, so she remained where she was, holding on to the bough, splashing and kicking with absorbed delight.

The minutes passed; she did not notice that the sun had become veiled by the rapid gathering of storm clouds. Nor did she notice a fork of lightning streak across the dingle, so enclosed was the little pool by the steep bank on one side and the trees on the other. Then a great clap of thunder crashed, as it seemed, right above her. Startled, she clambered over the sandstone ledges into the shallows, and round to the open grassy place opposite the spring basin. There was no sign of the Bruens. They must have gone to dress and shelter without calling her.

Surprised at this, she ran across to the bushes under which she had placed her clothes. There was another lightning flash, followed by a peal of thunder even louder than the first.

“Lizzie, where are you?” shrieked Sophia, crouching wet and shivering in the shelter of the bushes, and looking around for her clothes and boots. They were not where she had placed them. Lizzie and the Bruen children were nowhere to be seen.



Chapter 8 – The Thunderstorm

Great drops began to fall on Sophia. As she was already damp and bare they could not add much to her discomfort, but the apparent desertion of the place by the Bruen family really alarmed the poor shivering girl. Between one clap of thunder and the next she had time to hope that they might merely have taken her clothes to a drier spot nearby, but when there was no answer to her calling, and her cries were overwhelmed in the next tremendous peal, she began to sob in the realisation of her plight.

Then the next forked flash across the valley made the sheer instinct of survival come uppermost, so that she managed to control her wild agitation and creep into the centre of the clump of bushes. In the middle there was a big old holly, under which the ground remained quite dry, although prickly with fallen withered holly leaves. Here she crouched, whilst the deluge descended with a loud drumming on the leaves. Sophia, was not unduly frightened of thunderstorms when experienced in more normal circumstances. She had seen riven trees in the Forest, and her father had taught her that lightning usually struck a solitary tree, or one much taller than those surrounding it. In this low clump at the bottom of the dingle she felt she was unlikely to be struck, although the storm seemed right overhead and only a few seconds occurred between each flash and the following peal.

The turmoil above was hardly worse than that within her mind. Why had the Bruens deserted her, and apparently made off with her clothes? What was she to do when the storm abated? How could she return to the Grange in her present state; she would never live down the shame of it, yet it had all begun as innocent fun. Could this ever be explained to her parents? Her tears overflowed again, until checked by a crash of thunder so tremendous that the very ground on which she crouched in such prickly discomfort seemed to shake, and once again she had to struggle to control herself from collapsing into absolute despair.

Gradually the storm passed over. The peals grew further away and fewer; the mad hiss and patter of the torrential rain began to quieten. Sophia clung to the trunk of the holly, for its dense, sheltering crown seemed her only support in this dire trouble. Crouching thus, she wished she could pass into oblivion.

After the barrage of noise, a silence began to settle on the dingle. Unable to think what to do, Sophia remained in a kind of stupor, conscious of the silence.

Then a bird started up. Almost automatically Sophia noted that it was a blackcap.



Sophia noted that it was a blackcap

Listening, in spite of herself, to this delicate song, she was suddenly alarmed into deepest attention by another whistling, more distant, but approaching. This was human whistling, and, moreover, the tune had a special significance. It was “A Keeper Did a Shooting Go”, one of a collection of folk songs which Mr. Letts had given to Sophia on her birthday. Although she was dilatory at practising, she was not without some talent on the piano. This easy tune she had played so repetitiously that her family had begged her to try another. Before he had left their household, Joe had also begun to whistle it when cleaning boots. Surely it might be Joe whistling as he went along one of the footpaths?

Perhaps there might be salvation here, but how was she to let him know of her predicament and still retain her self-respect? Sophia, although she might be adventurous and called a tomboy, yet had her pride and modesty, and she did not wish to fall from the pedestal on which she knew Joe had placed her. However, she felt her situation to be desperate, and she must have help.

She waited until the whistler had got nearer, and she was certain that it was Joe, and then called out very clearly and emphatically “Joe! Stand still where you are! Listen to me!”

Peering from her hiding place, she saw him halt in his tracks, and look around, mystified. “Miss Sophia! Where are you?”

“Don’t move Joe, please! Stand where you are and listen to me. I’m in terrible trouble. You mustn’t come any nearer. You’ll understand why in a minute.”

The astounded Joe stood where he was, whilst from her scratchy bower Sophia poured forth her troubles, in a voice which frequently threatened to be choked with sobs. Nevertheless, the quick-witted lad grasped what had happened. After some rapid questions and answers.

Red in the face and distressed, he took off his uniform jacket - that treasured new jacket of green corduroy.

“You’ll catch your death!” he exclaimed, approaching the bushes with his face averted and holding out the jacket.

“Here, put this on whilst I think. I can’t see you in there, so don’t be upset, Miss Sophia. Those Bruens, they’re a bad lot, and would to God they’d never come here. Your Papa meant well, but it was a mistake, and I know it.”

Sophia gingerly thrust her arm through the bushes and drew the jacket into her retreat. She was thankful to struggle into the warmth of it, for the air had cooled considerably after the storm, and she was very chilled.

The jacket, which had been on the large side for Joe, although he was growing rapidly, completely enveloped her body and came nearly to her knees. Clutching it round her she cautiously poked out her head and called to Joe, who had chivalrously retreated to the banks of the stream, and stood gazing at the swollen current as if it contained an answer to the dilemma in which he had unexpectedly become involved.

“Thank you for the jacket, Joe. I feel much better now, but what am I to do? I just can’t understand why the Bruens should have gone off with my clothes like that. I can’t believe they

would have dared – with my amethyst brooch and best dress as well! Do you think that they merely ran off because they could see the storm approaching, and that somebody else found my things before I came out of the pool?”

“I don’t think so. Nobody from the village would have taken them, and excursionists from the station don’t come down here – in any case no strangers got off any of the trains today. I’ve only just come off duty, and as it was nice and fresh after the storm, I thought I’d go fossil-hunting. The Rector’s coming back next week from Devon, and I wanted to have some new finds to show him, so I was taking a short cut through the dingle and across the brook to the old quarry.”

“And now I’ve spoilt your walk, and you don’t get much time off! I’m sorry, Joe ... and you’re in your shirtsleeves ... Oh dear!”

The tears started to trickle down again.

“Now don’t take on, Miss Sophia! I’m more than glad I happened to come this way. Now what am I to do? Do you want me to go up to the Grange and let Miss Cleone or Miss Adelaide know what has happened?”

“Oh, good heavens, no! Mama would have to be told, and she went to bed after luncheon as she was not feeling well. Mercy! How can it be explained? What time is it?”

Joe consulted the pocket watch which Mrs. Letts had given him as a parting gift when he left her service.

“Ten minutes to four.”

“It’s not so late as I thought,” said Sophia brushing away her tears with the sleeve of Joe’s jacket.

“There’s n handkerchief in the left pocket,” said Joe, parenthetically, and in a low voice.

Sophia continued “We are not having a proper afternoon tea this afternoon, as Mama is resting and the others are busy getting the new drawing-room finished. Papa has gone to Erdingham for the day, and is not expected back until the last train., Cousin Cleone, Addy and I am to have a cold supper at half-past six, so I shall not be missed until then. Joe, I implore you! Could you not go to the Old Furnace Cottage and demand my things back from the Bruens? Lizzie said you had been visiting there”. Her voice trailed off into hesitation, and she looked doubtfully at Joe. She did not like to repeat Lizzie’s actual words about Joe being sweet n on that treacherous creature, it was too painful.

Joe coloured up again, but this time it was with anger, not embarrassment.

“I did call there one Sunday, it’s true. I had nothing else to do, and sometimes I feel a bit in the way in Mrs. Bates’s house., So I walked along to the Bruens, wanting to be friendly like and to see if there was anything I could do for them. I found a couple of men there who had driven over in a trap from Kirminster, friends of theirs. They were all sitting out on the grass plat under the apple tree at the back, drinking cider. There’s nothing wrong in that, on a warm afternoon, even on a Sunday, but as soon as I got there Lizzie handed me a pitcher and asked

me if I'd go to the Huntsman's Arms and get them some beer. I refused, and she went over to the others and started saying something very sneering about me being a "carrotly pledger". I cleared off then. I can't help the colour of my hair, and I haven't signed the pledge, although I don't much care .. for liquor – I've seen too much of what it can do for folks in Smokehills!"

"Your hair is not carrotly, Joe! It's a very nice colour – a sort of fiery chestnut, like a redstart's tail. But now I suppose you hardly like the idea of confronting the Bruens. Oh, what am I to do?"

"I'll go. I'll rum along there now, and threaten to report them to the village constable if they don't give back your things at once. I'll be as quick as ever I can, but I don't suppose I can be back in much under half-an-hour, so you must keep my jacket on and get right in by the holly trunk again, out of sight. Not that I think anybody else'll come along. I'll be off now, Miss Sophy, so go back in and try not to worry."

He ran lightly off back up the path, and before he was hidden by the trees, she could see his figure in striped flannel shirtsleeves, striking off along a path to the right, which was the nearest way to the lane leading to Old Furnace Cottage.

She crept back into the middle of the clump, and leaned against the holly trunk again, the jacket giving her both warmth and comfort. Without it, she reflected, Joe would feel even more at a disadvantage in tackling the cool insolence of Lizzie. How could she ever have been deceived by her? Yet she was so pretty, and anyone at first would believe that she had a nature to match her looks. She fell into a miserable reverie, and was so exhausted that she must have slipped into a kind of doze, for it did not seem long before she heard Joe's voice outside the clump, low but urgent.

"Miss Sophy, are you there?"

"Yes, Joe." She rose to her feet and peered through the bushes. Joe carried a bundle under his arm. "Oh, thank Heaven! You've got them. And my brooch?"

Joe nodded. "I was in luck. You see, although I felt sure the Bruens must have gone off with them, yet I had no proof, so Lizzie could deny it, and I couldn't be sure if she was lying or not. I knew Mrs. B. had gone to Kirminster for the clay, for I sold her the ticket myself, so I knew she wasn't coming back until the 6.45, so at least she wouldn't be at the cottage to make things more difficult. Well, just as I got there, I found the youngest one sitting on the bank in the lane by the garden gate, eating little green apples and snivelling. I asked her what was the matter, and she said Lizzie had been cross with her because she was hungry and had asked for some bread and jam. My Lady Lizzie wouldn't get her any, it seems, because she was busy "dressing-up and looking in the bit of looking-glass on the dresser" and had shut her out of the cottage. I gave the little 'un a ha'penny I had in my trousers' pocket, and asked her what her sister was dressing up in. "The lady's things from down by the water" says this little piece, grabbing the ha'penny and running off. I went straight to the cottage door, and after a good deal of knocking, Lizzie puts her head out of the window and asks what I might be wanting. Of course, she denied everything at first, but I had the evidence, so I just threatened her with the police. I gave her two minutes to hand me out the clothes, including the brooch, and in less than no time she flung them through the window, with some expressions I wouldn't care to repent. So here they are, and you'd best get into them quick, Miss Sophy, and be away back to the Grange before they wonder what's become of you!"

Grateful beyond words, Sophia received the precious bundle, and crept back into her retreat. In a few minutes she emerged as her normal but somewhat crumpled self. She silently handed Joe his jacket. He resumed it, and then adopting a very matter-of-fact tone, feeling that this would help her in her still rather tremulous state, he said that he hoped to be back on duty at the station at six o'clock, and if she would walk quickly back with him he would leave her at the door in the Grange Garden wall.

It was not many minutes later that Sophia entered the conservatory door, and made her way up the old staircase to change her dress, wash and tidy herself before supper. She met no-one on the way, except Rose the parlourmaid.

“You were never out in the Forest in that storm, were you, Miss Sophia?” she exclaimed. “Whilst it was on Miss Cleone rang for me in the new drawing-room, and asked where you were, and I said you were in the schoolroom. I never dreamt you’d gone out when it looked so threatening. You must have been frightened to death when the storm broke!”

“I was quite all right. I sheltered under a thick holly tree. My muslin has got a bit crumpled and dirty, that’s all.”

“You’d best go and change at once, and let me have it. Mrs. Cull is coming up this evening from the village to do the clear starching, and she’ll wash it through. It’s a mercy you came to no harm. I said to Cook I thought a thunderbolt had fallen after one crash. You shouldn’t really have gone out, but you’re none the worse, and there’s raspberry pudding for your supper!”



Chapter 9 – The Fête Champêtre

Sophia changed her clothes, and handed over the crumpled garments to Rose to take down to the wash-house. When she went down to supper, the fact that her mother was still unwell and could not come down, deflected attention from the subdued Sophia. Everyone agreed that it had been a dreadful storm; a big oak had been struck in Kyre Plantation; the village pond had overflowed with storm water; Mr. Letts, arriving late, said a signal-box at the Junction had been damaged; Jordern had reported that the horses in the paddock had been “nigh demented” with fright. Yet the question that Sophia had dreaded – her whereabouts during the storm – was not even asked; everyone assumed that she had been somewhere indoors. A rambling, enlarged house is not without its advantages.

In the morning it was evident that Sophia had a severe feverish chill. She had spent a restless night, and soon after seven in the morning a messenger was sent to Dr. Ward, requesting him to ride over to see the two invalids. This he did with alacrity; felt pulses, looked portentous, and promised to send over medicines. Meanwhile, both were to remain in bed.

Pardoe, of course, devoted herself to her mistress, and Cleone undertook to nurse Sophia. Perhaps she felt she had been neglecting her charges whilst acting as the Signor’s painting assistant, so she was very attentive to her patient, sponging her with cold water, giving her cooling drinks and doing all she could to make her comfortable. After five days the fever subsided, but Sophia’s languor and lack of interest in everything persisted. She did not even care to be read to, and was reluctant to eat.

On the sixth day of her illness, Adelaide came into the sick room with some surprising news.

She had been walking that afternoon to the village, and was at the junction of the lane which led past the Huntsman’s Arms towards the railway arch, when she had stopped to allow a pony and trap to pass. A stranger was driving it, and perched beside him were Mrs. Bruen and Lizzie, with the rest of the children and a pile of belongings in the back.

As they drove past with a great flourish, Lizzie, to Adelaide’s intense astonishment, had glanced back, stuck out her tongue, and made a rude gesture.

Pondering on this phenomenon, Adelaide had continued on her way to the Post Office. There she had learnt from the postmistress that Mrs. Bruen had married whilst on a visit to Kirminster only a few days before, and that the new husband had called to collect bride, family and belongings, to take them to Erdingham, where he was landlord of a public house.

“And good riddance to the lot of them, too, Miss Adelaide, with all due respect to your father, whose intentions towards the family were of the kindest, I’m sure, but unfortunately misplaced in this instance.” Thus Miss Arlett summed up Perry St. Lawrence opinion.

Sophia lay in her bed, apparently taking little notice as Adelaide recounted this surprising news to Cleone, but in reality she was overwhelmed with thankfulness, and when Adelaide and Cleone went along to the schoolroom to fetch a little table so that they could all have tea together, Sophia’s tears ran so freely that they made the pillow damp, and she had to snuggle down and pretend to be having a nap in case they should notice her red eyes.

After only six weeks in the cottage, the family which she now detested had departed for ever. Of Joe's loyalty and discretion she had no doubt, and the whole painful episode, continually mulled over in her feverish brain, would – so returning common sense told her – be best put out of mind.

From that afternoon she began quickly to regain strength, and a few days after both Mrs. Letts and Sophia were sufficiently recovered to come down to tea in the glory of the completed new drawing-room. Signor Parelli took his last meal with them, before being escorted by Mr. Letts (who had come home specially from the works at mid-day), Cleone and Adelaide to the station, to catch the 4.50 to Kirminster Junction. From thence he was going to Erdingham, where he had been commissioned by the town council to do a frieze for their new art gallery.

“The manner in which he kissed our hands in farewell – Cleone's and mine, of course, not Papa's – was an object lesson in courtly manners to all on the platform,” declared Adelaide on her return. “His thanks to Cleone for her assistance were really fervent. It must have been a pleasant change for her from trying to drum French verbs into us.”

“Talking about a pleasant change,” said Mrs. Letts, “I have just received a letter from Henry by the afternoon post. Listen to what he says:

I am delighted to learn that both you and Sophia are recovering fast. This being so, I have a proposal to make. Thursday of next week, the 5th of August, is St. Oswald's Day, according to the almanack hanging in my office. Since my second name is the same is that of the worthy Saxon king and martyr, let us celebrate it as my name day with a fête champêtre, as the French would. I now have the legal work sufficiently in hand to take another day off. I propose to come down to the Rectory next Tuesday evening, and to call for you next day at nine o'clock sharp. We will catch the 9.15 Brindley train, get off at Yeld Wood Halt, and walk to St. Alfric's-in-the-Wood, where we are to have a picnic feast by kind invitation of my friend Kenward, now installed at the parsonage. We shall be able to call on the renowned Sally Matcham, who lives nearby, and drink “yarb tea” with her. We can return by a different footpath which passes the ruined hermitage, in time to catch the last train home from the Halt (I trust!). Does this appeal to you?”

Of course it appealed to the younger element most emphatically. After some discussion it was decided that it should be a young people's expedition, and that Henry should escort Cleone, Adelaide and Sophia to meet his friend, and the Rector and Mrs. Claines readily agreed to spend the day at the Grange, to keep Mrs. Letts company – “Whilst poor Papa goes to work as usual,” said Mr. Letts.

“Dearest Papa, couldn't you take a day off and come with us?” pleaded Sophia, twining her arm round his neck as he sat contemplating the Signor's alcove paintings.

“No, my love, I have to pay for all this,” he replied, with a wave of his hand. “But truly, I am very busy at present, and you will be quite safe in the care of Henry. We must meet his friend later – we must invite him over.”

St. Oswald's Day dawned fine and clear, and after breakfast Henry promptly appeared, arrayed in straw boater, old college blazer and light trousers, and escorted them to the station. They made an attractive little group as they waited for the train and chatted to Joe.

“How that young fellow has developed since first he came from Smokehills!” said Henry, after Joe had closed the carriage door on them, and they steamed away. “The Rector tells me that Mr. Letts is now going to offer Old Furnace Cottage to Joe’s mother and family, since it is not needed for any local people. Joe is apparently very keen to get his mother away from Smokehills, as she has not been very well lately, and is no longer fit for the laborious work of nail-making. Mrs. Claines feels sure she would settle here successfully, unlike the Bruen family. Of course since their hasty departure, the Rector has been hearing many tales of Mrs. Bruen’s iniquity from the villagers – debts and drinking-parties, and the “frowardness” of that pretty elder girl. They must have made quite an enjoyable stir in the place whilst they lasted. However, I’m sure that the Lissamores will not fall into the category of the undeserving poor–given but the chance of the cottage they will soon stand on their own feet.”

“Ah yes!” exclaimed Cleone, “A chance to stand on one’s own feet – that is so much better than charity!”

“This is an age when so much is being achieved, but there is a great need for law reform, to help poor people to be better able to get a just reward for their labours. I used to dream of success at the Bar, and then a seat in Parliament to fight for such reforms, but those were Oxford pipe dreams, I fear. One must do one’s duty in the way Fate presents it.” He laughed suddenly, but without bitterness, and began to declaim:

“If I live to be old, for I find I go down,
Let this be my fate in a country town;
May I have a warm house with a stone at the gate,
And a cleanly young girl to rub my bald pate.
May I govern my passion with an absolute sway,
And grow wiser and better as my strength wears away,
Without gout or stone, by a gentle decay.”

They all laughed. Anything less gouty and decrepit than Henry, sitting there in the gently swaying train, reciting in his beguiling voice, was impossible to imagine.

“Did you make that verse up?” asked Sophia.

“No. It was a fellow named Pope. Not the great Alexander Pope, but one Walter, who lived about the same time. Heavens! Here we are at Yeld Wood Halt already!”

There was just a little wooden platform and a shelter, for the Halt was not manned. The train clanked to a stop. Henry opened the door, and assisted his bevy to alight, under the interested gaze of a large sow, two rough ponies, a milch cow and a smallholder, who lined the fence of an adjacent field.

“Yeld Wood Halt:” shouted the guard in a disapproving tone, being obliged to cry his own wares in this outlandish spot without a porter to announce it. Nobody else alighted or got on, and he waved his green flag and jumped back on the moving train. When it had steamed out of sight, they crossed the line at the place appointed by a notice (the Halt did not aspire to a footbridge), and took a footpath which led them across a couple of small fields, and then into Yeld Wood, a remote part of the Forest, which only Henry of the party had visited before.

Before the advent of the railway, only a rough track had linked this part of the Forest with the eastern and northern parts. A wandering lane skirted it on the southern edge, which led eventually to Brindley, but Yeld Wood had always seemed the Ultima Thule of the Forest.

The girls looked round with eager interest as they entered the wood, for it was unlike the rest of the Forest in that it had never been clear-felled or coppiced. No charcoal-burners or besom-makers inhabited it; nor did it support bark-strippers or makers of baskets. It was not jealously reserved for the lordly pheasant, as in a northern area of the Forest belonging to a great sporting landowner. Great oaks, some of them hollow, were dotted about in open grassy glades. Although many of them were too ancient to have timber value, they still bore good crops of acorns, which the few smallholders gathered for their pigs in autumn, but in general there was a brooding sense of the past in Yeld Wood, and a feeling that figures in hunting green might be seen slipping through the trees.

They strolled along quietly, now in sunshine, now in shade, stilled from idle chatter as one might be in a great cathedral, until Henry suddenly said “Look! There is St. Alfric’s-in-the-Wood!”

They stood and gazed.

Cleone said softly “I think I never before saw a building which seemed so completely part of its natural surroundings. How I wish I could paint it – but who could convey the magic of the place on this perfect summer day?!”

The little church and its attached priest’s dwelling were timber-framed, with walls of wattle-and-daub, on a base of weathered red sandstone. There was a small, slightly crooked steeple, covered with silvery oak shingles. A magnificent yew stood among the leaning headstones, and a ruined stone archway wreathed with ivy stood apart from the present church.

“Many more people lived in this parish in olden times,” explained Henry. “At the time of the Black Death, people fleeing from the plague settled here, as the well-water was supposed to have special healing powers bestowed by St. Alfric in the seventh century. The present church was built in the 16th century – the solitary arch is all that remains of an earlier one. The Christian history of the spot wanders back through a dozen centuries. There are now only about eighty people in the whole scattered parish!”

“Yet your friend from London has chosen to live here!” exclaimed Cleone.

“The seclusion will not worry him! Nor the fact that the living is worth less than a hundred pounds a year. His father is a rich London merchant, and fortunately there are two older sons already in the business, so Edmund is able to indulge his antiquarian bent – they can afford a scholar in the family. He intends to write a history of the Marcher Earls, the Wigmores and the Mortimers, to whom you are distantly connected on the Corbett side. At the moment he is deeply enamoured of a certain Lady Eleanor, who unfortunately died betimes at twenty, and has a delightful effigy in the church.”

“But why did he become ordained? Could he not have been an antiquarian, pure and simple?”

“Oh, antiquarians are rarely simple and never pure! They must gain access to old records, parish registers, court rolls and the like, and as a settled parish priest he will make friends in the

diocese, visit the cathedral library, and be invited to study their archives by local landowners and the like. Nonetheless I think he will make a good incumbent, and will serve his little band of parishioners faithfully. He will carry out urgent repairs to the church at his own expense, but he will not be like some of the ardent restorers going the rounds at present, ripping out fine old treasures and putting up monstrosities!”

“I hope he will not mind meeting three live females!”

“Oh no, I assure you, he will be most hospitable. Every now and then he likes to surface from the past, and entertain the living. Our close friendship has survived Oxford days, and will be a durable thing, I fancy. Ah, here he is, coming to greet us! He must have been on the look-out.”

A tall young man approached them with a welcoming smile. He warmly clasped Henry’s hand in greeting, and was then introduced to the others. They liked his plain, unaffected manners, and the girls felt that the picnic would not be marred by any feeling of formal unease in the presence of their host.

Their walk had given them a good appetite, and they were glad to see a round table spread with a snowy cloth, standing under a big pear tree outside the parsonage front door, which opened straight out on to the grass, with no drive or gravel sweep before it. The tiny house had diamond-paned windows of greenish glass, and was attached, with a lower roof, to the western end of the church.

A nice old servant, with a decided Cockney accent, waited on them. Cleone asked her if she minded living in this out-of-the-way spot, but she said she did not mind where she was so long as she was busy. She had been with “Master Edmund’s” family since he was a small child. Looking after him, and, acting as an unofficial verger for the church, gave her plenty to do.

“Although we’ve not had a burial here yet,” she said, with grim humour. “I can turn my hand to most things, but grave-digging is something I might find a bit beyond me!”

“Lottie has made a friend here, at any rate,” said Edmund, as he handed round a bowl of delicious salad. “Every afternoon, she pops on her bonnet, and goes over for a chat with Sally Matcham, our local herb doctor. I believe you know her, Henry. She supplies Lottie with fresh eggs and lettuce, and milk and butter from her cow. I’m sure that Lottie is longing for me to fall ill, so that she can discuss my symptoms with Sally, and cure me triumphantly with one of her nostrums. That would make a capital report to my mother. Lottie has been charged by my mother to report regularly on my welfare, since I rarely write myself – there is nothing to write about.”

“Are your parents likely to come down to visit you?”

“Great Heavens, no! I shall drop in on them at Hampstead occasionally, when I am visiting the British Museum. I think my mother would be as likely to follow in the footsteps of Dr. Livingstone as to venture up here, in this outlandish West Midlands forest. But, Henry, it suits my trade of digging out the past very well to be a recluse here – how much longer are you going to plod along as a country lawyer, instead of reading for the Bar, as you planned?”

“Circumstances alter cases. My father is still in Margate, which seems to be doing him good. With the expense of sending me to Oxford, and then my mother’s long illness, he found himself

in some straits. I have managed to get things more or less in order again in his legal practice, but I cannot think of deserting him at present, when he is not well. We were a close-knit family, and now, only he and I remain.”

He looked sad for a moment, and they remembered that he had lost his young sister from diphtheria a few years before as well as his mother last February. He quickly came out of his abstraction and urged Sophia to finish up the blackcurrant tart, which she was quite willing to do. After they had finished feasting, Edmund showed them round his tiny parsonage, with oak-panelled rooms the size of good cupboards, and they inspected the church, where he pointed out its many interesting details. Then they strolled over to visit Sally.

A flock of geese noisily heralded their approach. It looked a snug place under its thatch, with a garden full of bright flowers, vegetables and fruit bushes, growing in that luxuriant, controlled confusion which marks the skilful cottager, who likes flowers, but must rely on the plot to supply most of the victuals.

There was a simple, friendly dignity in the tall woman in the sunbonnet who came out to welcome them. They wandered round the garden and orchard. All along the south side of the cottage there were bunches of herbs hung up to dry in the sun.

“Do you only use herbs from your garden?” asked Cleone.

“Oh no! I range the Forest far and wide in search of what I need, but I always take only a few here and there, and leave the plants to seed and spread. These days there are so many of these gentlemen botanists from the towns, and folk who gather for the apothecaries, that some of the less common sorts will vanish altogether unless we are more sparing in the gathering.”

“Quite right, Sally,” said Henry. “Do you know, when I was a boy, there were great patches of that charming flower, the buckbean, growing in a marshy place by the River Lench, on the very edge of Kirminster town. People gathered it so much that now it is quite disappeared. Indeed, I do not know of it anywhere now.”

“If you will promise to keep it secret,” said Sally with a smile, “I will show you a good patch of it by the brook at the bottom of my field. I dry some of the root every year, for it is a very valuable remedy.”

So she showed them the buckbean, which still had one or two of its pretty fringed pink-and-white flowers lingering, and then she revealed another of her wilding treasures, the white helleborine.



So she showed them the buckbean, which still had one or two of its pretty fringed pink-and-white flowers

The afternoon passed very quickly, and soon it was time to set off again for the railway halt by another route. Edmund insisted on accompanying them, although it would mean a five-mile walk for him, there and back – but what is five, ten or even fifteen miles to a young man in the country, when in agreeable company? He certainly seemed that afternoon not to have the slightest aversion to the company of live young ladies, who could not yet be regarded as of any historical interest. Indeed, he gave an arm each to Adelaide and Sophia, and as they went along he told them all manner of interesting things about the Forest, which they had never heard before. It pleased their love and loyalty to their native place to find that, although some regarded it as a dull place behind the times, he found it full of fascination and mental stimulus.

Cleone and Henry followed behind, and the two young men tossed information and humour back and forth until everyone was in the best of spirits, so that the girls felt they could have walked the dozen miles home without fatigue, on such a glowing evening.

“What a splendid day!” exclaimed Adelaide, as she stood at the carriage window and waved good-bye to Edmund.

“A hearty vote of thanks to St. Oswald!” murmured Henry.

The others carried unanimously as they settled themselves each in a corner seat of the empty compartment. As for the young parson, walking back alone and entering his little church, where the evening sun lit up fair Eleanor’s effigy, although he paused in renewed admiration of the lively skill of the sculptor, of long ago, his mind dwelt on a living, golden-haired maiden.



Chapter 10 – Summer Shadows

“Addy, are you awake?” called out Sophia, around seven o’clock next morning.

“Yes,” replied Adelaide. “I’ve been awake ages, thinking about our outing yesterday. Wasn’t it fun, Soso?”

“The greatest fun in the world,” replied Sophia.

She endorsed Adelaide’s opinion all the more fervently, because, like all imaginative people, she was apt to anticipate forthcoming events, whether for pleasure or pain, rather too vividly. In her new mood of modified rapture after the Bruen episode, she had approached the Fête Champêtre with caution: there would perhaps be a thunderstorm; St. Alfric’s-in-the-Wood might prove a less romantic place than it sounded; Henry’s friend might be a dry-as-dust pedant; Sally, the famed herbalist, was perhaps an artful character who traded upon credulity. In the event, everything had far exceeded her expectations, and the day would always be one of the highlights of youthful memory.

“Sally and Lottie were great dears,” continued Adelaide. “Quite different – one a complete Cockney sparrow, and the other a retiring bird like a wood warbler, but both interesting characters. As for Mr. Kenward – Edmund – I think Henry tried to frighten us a little about him beforehand! He was the reverse of a death’s head at the feast, even if he does prefer ladies dead and gone for his researches!”



a retiring bird like a wood warbler

“He is a very plain young man,” Said Sophia, but it is possible to be pleasing without being handsome. His manner was so natural and frank – no trace of anything parsonical. Not that the Rector has that, either, but some parsons have. Clergymen always seem to be either very interesting – or just the reverse.”

“I did not think he was so very plain,” said Adelaide with decision, jumping out of bed and making for the washstand. “He had very fine eyes which lit up his face when he spoke, and he makes history quite fascinating!”

There followed a little scuffle as to who should use the washbasin first, but in the end Adelaide allowed her sister to have precedence, so that she should not be late, for their parents would want to hear more about the outing than there had been opportunity for on their return last evening.

It was not destined, however, that there should be any discussion of that cheerful kind at the breakfast table. As the two girls were descending the stairs, Cleone met them and told them that their mother had been taken ill again in the night. She had been in great pain. Dr. Ward had been sent for and was with her now.

“Please do tell us what is the matter with Mama,” implored Adelaide, clutching Cleone’s arm. “We are old enough to be told. Is it something likely ... likely ... to be very serious?” her whisper ended with a sob.

“No, dear, I do not think it is as grave as that, but it is recurring, and gives her great pain and weakness. It is a case of the kidney-stone, apparently,” replied Cleone quietly. “The medicine Dr. Ward prescribed gave her relief at first, but now the symptoms have come back worse than before. However, Jordern has ridden over to Kirminster to get a new prescription made up by the apothecary. Dr. Ward has given her some laudanum, so I hope she will be able to sleep for a while now, as she is so worn out. Uncle John is already down; he is going to the works as usual, as Dr. Ward says the illness is not at present dangerous, and Pardoe and I can nurse her. Perhaps it is just as well that John is to remain in Cornwall for another fortnight. Aunt Lydia does not wish her illness to be mentioned in letters to him. She does not wish to make him anxious.”

They went into the dining-room, where Rose the parlourmaid approached Cleone with the postbag.

“The Master has gone upstairs again, Miss Cleone. Dr. Ward is staying to breakfast, and the Master says would you mind unlocking the bag and handing out the mail for him?”

Cleone took the leathern pouch, and proceeded to sort out the letters. There were a couple for the staff, some business letters for Mr. Letts, a letter from John in Cornwall, one in Aunt Harriet’s handwriting with the Margate postmark, and last – but not least – a letter with an elegant seal, addressed in flowing handwriting to Cleone, with an Erdingham postmark.

“So she is corresponding with Signor Parelli!” thought Sophia, recognising the handwriting before Cleone (hastily, as Sophia thought) put the letter into her pocket. Before she could think any more about it, however, Mr. Letts entered the room with Dr. Ward, and there were anxious enquiries about Mama.

Dr. Ward answered these in his usual “brimstone and treacle manner” as Adelaide described it. They all sat down and commenced breakfast, which was rather a silent meal. As soon as it had finished, Dr. Ward begged to be excused, as he had another call to make some distance away. His horse was brought round and he rode away.

When he had gone, Mr. Letts glanced at his mail. He put aside the business letters, the one from John he handed to Rose with instructions to take it to Pardoe, so that Mrs. Letts should have it as soon as she awoke. Then he proceeded to open the letter from his sister.

Sophia was scarcely agog to hear what Aunt Harriet thought of Margate, but she did happen to glance in her father’s direction as he opened the letter and started to read it. She saw his countenance change in the most extraordinary way. If ever a man could be said to be dumbfounded, it was Mr. Letts at that moment. He made a strangled exclamation, looked at the place where his wife usually sat, then glanced round rather helplessly until his gaze fixed on Cleone.

“What is it, Uncle? Have you had bad news?”

“Not bad news precisely, but news which has surprised me very much. My sister ... your Aunt Harriet ... has married! She and Taverner have been married ... very quietly ... in Margate! Whatever is Henry going to say to this?! His mother not dead these six months, and he has been keeping things going because his father was ill with grief! Harriet says in this letter that Taverner was writing at the same time to Foregate House to tell Henry the news, but of course he is here, at the Rectory. He will not have heard this news, and he is calling here in a few minutes. He is to travel up with me on the 8.35!”

Cleone went quite pale. No doubt she was thinking, as was Mr. Letts, of the great shock Henry was about to receive. If only Mrs. Letts had not been ill that morning! They all felt the need of her presence and advice.

“I did not expect this, when Harriet went off with the Twinberrows,” murmured Mr. Letts, as if musing aloud. “I knew they would call on Taverner at Margate as an old friend. But for Harriet to marry him, so soon and so suddenly! What am I to say to Henry?”

“Do you wish me to break it to him, Uncle?”

“No, my dear, no! I must do it, as my wife cannot. Great Heavens! I hear his voice in the hall. We shall have to go across for the train, it is later than I thought!”

He dashed out into the hall. Rose must have been ready with his top hat and umbrella, for Henry simply put his head in at the dining-room door and bade them a cheerful farewell. Then the two gentlemen could be seen striding along the station path until the Wellingtonias hid them from view.

Cleone and the two girls sat at the breakfast table in absolute silence, listening. They heard the whistle of the approaching train, the distant shout of Joe’s voice: “Perry Forest Sta—a—tion! Perry Forest Sta—a—tion!” Just as on any other weekday morning they heard the faint sounds of carriage doors slamming, the whistle of the guard, and the rumble of the departing train.

They looked at each other. Each had a mental picture of a first-class carriage, with Mr. Letts and Henry seated opposite each other. In the mind’s ear, each could hear Mr. Letts beginning...

“I have had n letter this morning, Henry ... from Margate ...”

Cleone jumped up with none of her usual grace, knocking a knife from the tablecloth as she did so.

“I shall have a number of things to see to this morning, girls,” she said hastily. “Pardoe will tell us when Aunt Lydia awakes, and then you shall go in and see her. Meanwhile I think you had better take a note over to the Rectory. I’m sure Uncle John will wish me to let Mrs. Claines and the Rector know – they are his godparents, and so close to him.”

She went straight to the study, and wrote a short note, whilst the girls fetched their hats. When they returned, she handed Adelaide the note, and they set off for the Rectory.

“So what we were predicting in fun, when Aunt Harriet first went off to Margate, has actually come to pass,” said Adelaide, as they walked up the drive to the lane. “I hope you are not prophesying any more weddings!”

“Well, I can think of a couple.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think that Henry will have all the more reason to marry Rhoda now. One can’t imagine him wanting to go on living at Foregate House, with Aunt Harriet as his stepmother!”

“Where do you think they will live – at Holly Villa or Foregate House?”

“I think Foregate House is a gloomy old place, with all the ground floor being used as offices, but it is nice at the back with the garden going right down to the river, and the old mulberry tree.

’But you said a couple of prophecies. What other match have you in mind?”

“Cleone had a letter this morning from Signor Parelli. Yesterday I noticed that she talked a lot about him to Henry, and said how much she had learned about painting during his stay. Painting means a lot to her – more than just a ladylike hobby as it is with most girls. They were always talking Italian together.”

“I expect the letter was about the drawing-room – something to do with varnishing or gilding.”

“In that case it is more likely he would have written direct to Papa or Mama. Last night after we got back from St. Alfric’s, and we were having coffee in the drawing-room, I noticed Cleone sitting gazing with an absolutely rapt expression at one of the alcove paintings. The Rector brought her a cup of coffee and she was so oblivious that he was standing by her with it, that he laughed and offered her a penny for her thoughts. She went as pink as a China rose and took the coffee, looking more confused than I’ve ever seen her before.”

“Here we are, talking nonsense, when poor Mama is ill, and everything at sixes and sevens,” answered Adelaide, quickening her pace.

They soon reached the Rectory, and the parlourmaid was about to show them into the drawing-room, saying that Mrs. Claines was over at the village school, and she would send a message across, when the Rector emerged from his study.

“Ah, my dears!” he exclaimed, coming forward with a welcoming smile. “How good to see you. You had a capital day yesterday at St. Alfric’s, I understand. Have you come over to help me search for a Purple Emperor?”

“We have brought a note,” said Adelaide, handing it to him. He opened and read Cleone’s short note.

“Well, I’ll be d...d!” he exclaimed. “I’m sorry – that was wrong of me, very wrong. But this news has certainly taken me by surprise, as no doubt it did your father.” He stared through the open door, lost in thought. “It may not be a bad thing, in the end,” he said after a few moments “but the manner of its performance, and the absence of any notice of intent is going to be a decided shock for Henry. They seem to have acted on the maxim of Lady Macbeth in a rather different context:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well

It were done quickly.

You girls will not object, I am sure, since it makes Henry a relation by marriage, a kind of honorary cousin. However, I think I must go over to Kirminster and have a talk with him. What time is the next train?"

"Ten forty," they said in unison.

"Right!" said the Rector, laying aside his butterfly net. "I have to change into attire more suitable for visiting that metropolis of thirty thousand souls. My dears, will you pop over to the school and fetch Mrs. Claines?"

In twenty minutes, Mrs. Claines had exchanged a peaceful morning listening to the little ones learning their Catechism, to hurrying along the lane to the station with her consort and the girls.

She was very concerned to learn about Mrs. Letts' renewed illness.

"We thought she was not feeling well yesterday, " she said, "but she would not admit it. She was so glad that the day was fine for your fête champêtre, and when you returned in the evening, she insisted we stayed for that impromptu supper party – the perfect end to a most perfect day, as Henry put it when we walked back to the Rectory at midnight. Now I don't know how he is going to react to his father's sudden metamorphosis from a stricken and ailing widower into a happy bridegroom! Henry had to take on the burden of everything."

"Early responsibility matures a young fellow," replied the Rector. "All the same, it was not right to spring a big change of circumstances upon him like this."

They reached the station, and after seeing them off, the girls lingered for a few minutes to talk to Joe, whose powers of sympathetic understanding they had known in his boot-boy days.

He was very concerned about Mrs. Letts. "Although she couldn't have been feeling well, Mrs. Letts sent for me yesterday to tell me that my mother can move into Old Furnace Cottage as soon as it can be managed. The rent is to be only a shilling a week, and it has been repaired and put into good order. The Railway has given me permission to have two days off next week, to bring my folk over from Smokehills, with our bits of furniture. It will be a new life for my mother."

He had already heard of Mrs. Topsham's wedding, for his sister Lizzie was now a maid at Holly Villa, and the news had reached there several days before it had been revealed to the Grange.

"Henry, it seems, although the person. most concerned, was the last to hear the news," said Adelaide, as they went back to the Grange.

"Well, I'm glad he did not know yesterday," replied Sophia, "Or he would not have been in such carefree spirits – do you remember how we all laughed on the way back to the Halt?"



Chapter 11 – Sally Matcham’s Cure

The next few days passed for Sophia in a kind of dull haze. She endeavoured to expiate past sins by being as helpful as possible to Cleone, who was nominally in charge of the household, although the well-trained servants scarcely needed supervision. Sophia missed her Mama’s tranquil presence about the house exceedingly; when she had been laid up before, Sophia also had been tossing in bed in her feverish chill, so she had not then fully felt her mother’s indisposition.

Cleone wished the girls to continue their lessons, so that they should not be less advanced than other pupils when they began school in October at Stratford. They went to the schoolroom each morning, although it was August, and worked hard for three hours before luncheon.

The Rector and Mrs. Claines called each day to enquire about Mrs. Letts, and the Rector coached Sophia in Latin. They did not say much about their hurried visit to Kirminster, except that Henry had taken the news rather badly, but they hoped he would become reconciled to the idea in time. He did not come down to the Forest, again and after a few days a note from him arrived for Mrs. Letts, saying that he was grieved to hear of her illness, and hoped that she would soon be better. He added very briefly, in a postscript, that he was that day going to London, and did not know when he would be back, as he had decided to begin his studies for the Bar. There was not a word about his father’s marriage, and he had not waited for their return from Margate before he departed.

“He is very upset, obviously,” said Mrs. Letts from her pillow, as her husband read Henry’s note to her, for she was too weak to deal with her own correspondence.

There was also a letter from the Taverners, saying that they planned to take up residence at Holly Villa during the next week; they did not mention Henry, and Mr. Letts went off to catch his morning train feeling depressed about his wife’s health, and vexed with the senior Taverners – not so much for the marriage, but with the manner of it.

Cleone seemed very abstracted. Even allowing for the fact that she was worried about her aunt, her absent-mindedness was noticeable. During Mrs. Letts’ illness, her uncle had asked her to continue opening the letter-pouch and distributing the mail, as she was downstairs first.

“If she has any further letters from Signor Parelli,” murmured Sophia to Adelaide as they went in to household prayers, “Nobody will know. This arrangement will suit her admirably.”

Adelaide looked uncomfortable. She was too honourable to tell her sister that on entering the dining-room a few minutes before, she had seen Cleone rather surreptitiously slipping a letter from the pouch into her dress pocket, extracting it from the pile hastily, before sorting the rest out. Adelaide felt that it was childish and ill-bred to ask questions about other people’s letters. If they wished to communicate the contents they would do so, but it was bad manners to be inquisitive. She certainly did not care to think that there might be a secret correspondence between Signor Parelli and Cleone, but Cleone was entitled to her privacy. Adelaide was not going to say anything to add fuel to Sophia’s speculations on the subject.

Her discretion, however, was of no avail. When lessons were over for the morning, Sophia hoped to be able to sit with her Mama, but she met Pardoe on the landing, finger to lips, and

she whispered that Madam had fallen into a doze after another bad night, so must on no account be disturbed. Sophia went down sadly into the kitchen garden, hoping that Mr. Pumphret might spare her a ripe peach. She was lucky, and took her velvety solace to the girls' old "den" – the mossy plinth of a broken garden statue, hidden by an overgrown bush of the China Rose, and warmed by the south wall. As she sat thus concealed, nibbling her peach, she caught a glimpse of Cleone passing along the lavender walk which led to the yew arbour. She was walking slowly, and perusing what looked like an unfolded letter.

She disappeared into the arbour, and in other circumstances Sophia would have run along and joined her cousin, but she sat nursing her troubled suspicions. She was genuinely worried that her attractive and clever cousin, whom she so much admired, should appear to be carrying on a clandestine love affair by correspondence – and at a time when they were all so worried about Mama's illness! Adelaide was no comfort in the matter, for she refused to discuss it, saying that it was none of their business, and that Cleone would never do anything underhand. "You cannot say anything to Cleone, or speak to Papa, Soso," she said quite angrily as they washed their hands for luncheon. "You are not a child now, and must learn that you cannot come out with every notion passing through your head."

Sophia sighed as she went downstairs and paused at the big landing window which looked out over miles of sunny woodland. It was just over a week since that happy day at St. Alfric's-in-the-Wood, and now all was changed and melancholy. It was a silent meal, all three of them abstracted, and afterwards Cleone said she was going into the village to the post office. Adelaide went upstairs, and Sophia wandered disconsolately into the hall, where she encountered Rose with a message from Pardoe requesting that she should go and sit with her mother for a while. Sophia raced up the new staircase and into the spacious bedroom in the new wing that her parents now occupied. She opened the door quietly and tiptoed in. Her mother lay awake in the great bed, and Pardoe departed to have her mid-day meal.

Sophia was able to spend the best part of the afternoon tending her mother, for Mrs. Letts had insisted that Pardoe should take a rest.

"When is Dr. Ward coming to see you again?" asked Sophia, as she gave her mother the medicine which she had to take every three hours.

Mrs. Letts shuddered as she swallowed. "He has gone to London for a few days to a meeting of the British Medical Association. Papa is thinking of writing to ask him to bring down Sir Isaac Fuller for a second opinion."

A second opinion. This phrase troubled Sophia's mind as she received a loving kiss from her Mama on Pardoe's return, with praise for her nursing care and the injunction to go out and get some fresh air. As she went along to her bedroom to get her bonnet, she thought of the long months – so very recent! – when Henry's mother had lain ill. No wonder he had been upset by the secret marriage at Margate, and had gone off to London. Perhaps he would never be on the old footing with the Grange family again, although his new stepmother was their aunt.

As soon as she entered the bedroom, she spotted a note on the pincushion, addressed to her. She snatched it up and unfolded it.

Dearest Soso,

I have decided to go by myself to Sally Matcham's, to get a herbal draught for Mama. I resolved on my plan this morning, but did not tell you, as there is bound to be disapproval at my going alone like this, and I did not want you to be in trouble as well. When we were at Sally Matcham's before, she mentioned that she had cured a number of people of this complaint with a special mixture based on the buckbean and other herbs. Dr. Ward is away for a few days, so Mama could try it without his disapproval! I am going to Yeld Wood Halt on the 1.45, and I shall have time to walk to Sally's place and back to catch the same train home that we did a week ago. I'm sure I shall be quite safe, but if you could avoid saying anything about this without actually fibbing until I am home to make my own explanations it would perhaps be better. I don't want Mama to be worried.

Yours in haste, Addy.

“Jumping Jehoshaphat!”, exclaimed Sophia aloud when she had read this, and sinking onto her bed with astonishment. Several conflicting emotions surged through her – admiration for her sister's bold initiative, a certain jealousy that Adelaide should have done this on her own, and the desire to help her by keeping her by keeping her absence a secret until she returned.

As she sat there with the note in her hand, she heard footsteps on the landing. She dropped the note and pushed it with her foot under the bed-valance. The door opened and Cleone stood there, twirling out the flounces on her closed parasol. She looked dispirited.

“I'm getting weary of this hot weather,” she said. “I wish it would turn cooler. The lane is white with dust.”

To Sophia's great relief she did not ask where Adelaide was, but said she was going in to sit with her aunt when she had taken off her hat. As soon as she had vanished, Sophia retrieved the note and put it in a drawer. Supposing Adelaide had not returned by half-past six, she would have to produce the note, with explanations. Until then she hoped to keep out of the way of everyone who might ask awkward questions. Fortunately, her father's usual train from Kirminster was due to arrive just after the Brindley train; they passed on the double track at Perry Wood Station. The Brindley train waited for the one from Kirminster, so Adelaide should arrive first and be able to make her own explanations to Papa. There were two hours to go, and Sophia wondered how she was to occupy them. She decided not to leave her room, in case she met Cleone again, or Pardoe. She tried to settle to a book, and succeeded up to a point, for it was a thrilling new tale of the Navy's attempts to stop illegal slave-trafficking up the Congo called “*The Congo Rovers*”, it told of the gunboat patrols of a certain young lieutenant who got wounded and separated from his crew during a jungle landing. He was nursed back to health under a palm-leaf hut by the dusky and devoted young daughter of a local tribal chief. Even this, however, failed to absorb Sophia completely, as it would normally have done, and she slipped out every half-hour or so to consult the schoolroom clock. At length it was nearly half-past six, and she felt she would be justified in going over to the station, ostensibly to meet her father – not something she usually did – but really to see Adelaide alight from the up train.

To her disappointment, Joe was not at the station. It was his off-duty time, and Enoch Bates was bustling around.

She gave him a penny for a platform ticket, for he was punctilious about such things.

“Come to meet your sister, have you” he enquired. “I was surprised when she took a day return to Yeld Wood Halt, all on her own, but she seemed to know what she was doing, did the young lady. It’s not my place to ask questions when people are no longer half fares, and may be said to have reached years of discretion.”

“Thank you,” said Sophia, turning away as she took the platform ticket. She was not going to satisfy the curiosity of Enoch Bates.

She went over the little iron footbridge to the up platform, where Aaron Doolittle and one of his men were unloading crates of woodchip baskets from a wagon in the lane and bringing them on to the platform. They were destined for the orchard region in the south of the county, where the apple harvest was beginning.



woodchip basket

(This is an actual Wyre Forest oak chip basket made by Mr Doolittle for my grandmother. Ed.)

“Hey, Miss Sophy!” exclaimed Aaron, when he caught sight of her, raising his battered old-fashioned hat in a courteous salute. “How is Mrs. Letts today?”

“No better, I’m afraid, Aaron.”

“’Tis sad I am to hear it. Dr. Ward’s treatment don’t seem to be doing much good. Now he’s a handy enough gentleman at bone-setting, but if me or Mrs. Doolittle or my young chaps was to have anything wrong innardly, we’d consult Mistress Matcham, the herbalist over Yeld Wood way. She’s a wonderful name for curing things of that nature.”

Sophia was so pleased at hearing this further testimonial to the skill of Sally Matcham, that she decided to confide in Aaron, and tell him why she was on the platform. Papa had a high regard for the Doolittles. The Letts and Doolittle families had lived in the Forest for many generations – one family specialising iron and the other in wood, but now in the last three generations the Letts had let the undergrowth creep over their ancient furnace mill on the brook, and had risen to the ranks of the gentry, as smelters of precious metals in Kirminster for the Erdingham Mint, and the goldsmiths and silversmiths of that busy town. The Doolittles had stuck to wood and remained master tradesmen who did not aspire to gentility, but between the families there was still the warmth of old association.

Aaron shook his head when Sophia told him of Adelaide’s lone expedition.

“Young maidens shouldn’t go traipsing about on railways by themselves, and I don’t doubt but she’ll get a scolding. ’Tis in a good cause, and if she brings back one of Sally’s draughts I’d advise Mr. Letts to let his lady give it a trial.”

Just then the train from Brindley came steaming in, and clanked to a halt, and at one of the carriage doors Adelaide was looking out. Aaron stepped across and opened the door for her, and assisted her to alight. She looked as fresh as a daisy, and was clutching a straw basket which contained a corked stoneware bottle.

Aaron had to move away to help with the loading of the crates of baskets, and the two girls climbed the steps of the footbridge.

“Are you going to wait until Papa’s train comes in?” asked Sophia. “Perhaps it would be better if we met him and you told him where you have been on the way back to the house.”

So they stood on the down platform and Adelaide related her adventure.

“After I left the Halt. I took the same path that we followed with Henry a week ago – and how long ago that seemed! When I was halfway through the wood, I came to that mossy pile of stones that we saw before – you remember, Henry said it was the site of a hermitage. Who should be on top of the stones, measuring them with a yardstick, but Mr. Kenward ... Edmund. When he saw me he looked as astounded as if I were Lady Eleanor’s effigy which had walked out of the church, but when I explained my errand, he was kindness itself. He escorted me to Sally’s cottage, and stayed with me all the time I was there. Sally was very friendly and kind, gave us some tea, and freshly prepared the draught for Mama, which I have here in this bottle, and she has given me certain instructions on treatment as well. Edmund insisted on walking with me back to the Halt, and put me in a “Ladies Only “ carriage when the train arrived, and so, here I am, safe and sound, and Oh, I do so hope Mama will agree to give Sally’s treatment a trial!”

“I have just been talking to Aaron, and the Doolittles swear by Sally’s draughts as well. Aaron has promised to come over and have a word with Papa when his train comes in, so perhaps you won’t get much of a scolding for going alone without saying anything. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I found your note – you, of all people, when I am the one who is supposed to be impetuous!”

Adelaide smiled. She seemed quite exhilarated by her unorthodox errand, but when a few minutes later her father emerged from the train from Kirminster, she looked a little apprehensive. Mr. Letts was surprised to see them on the platform, and his first anxiety was that his wife might be worse, but immediately reassured on this point, he moved with them along the platform towards their gate. Aaron had come over the bridge when the other train had departed, and now came forward to speak to Mr. Letts.

Mr. Letts listened as the tale of Adelaide’s odyssey was unfolded. He looked serious when he heard how she had gone off alone, without saying anything to Cleone.

“You were very wrong to do that, Adelaide, and might have caused much anxiety.”

At the end of the account, and after Aaron had put in a word or two, a slight twinkle appeared in their father’s eyes, and the girls felt that by the time they reached the Grange such displeasure as Adelaide might have incurred by her solitary adventuring would have evaporated.



PART THREE –HARVEST MOON

Chapter 12 – Fresh Suspicions and Reactions

When Mrs. Letts heard the story of Adelaide's expedition, she marvelled at this uncharacteristic boldness on her elder daughter's part, which she immediately perceived was due to concerned devotion. She tasted the herbal draught, and found it quite agreeable, for she was not one of those patients who believe that a remedy is found to work better if it is unpleasant. She decided there and then to give Sally Matcham's regime a trial, even if it meant incurring the displeasure of the absent Dr. Ward and the ancient medico in the dog-cart who was acting as his locum.

Sally had sent certain instructions:

"You are on no account to drink any more water from our well," declared Adelaide. "Sally advises that we send at once to Kirminster for bottled Malvern water for you to drink. It should be obtainable there, she says. She uses distilled rainwater for her own draughts, because she says most of the wells in the Forest have a high mineral content. You are to have two tablespoonsful of the draught every three hours. She also recommends that you drink three glasses of champagne each day. Naturally she can hardly recommend that to her poor patients – for them she prescribes dandelion wine. For the next twenty-four hours you are to have no solid food, but after that you can take junket and other invalid dishes you may fancy."

Mrs. Letts did not expect miracles, but perhaps the interesting circumstances which brought her the treatment, the absence of anything disagreeable to a fastidious taste in the herbal nostrum, and her natural disposition to hope, may all have contributed to her turn for the better. Within twenty-four hours the pain had eased and she felt more comfortable. After four days she had obviously improved, and began to enjoy the various invalid dishes which Cook sent up, although remaining on the regime of herbal draught, Malvern water and champagne, as far as liquids were concerned. Within a fortnight she was getting up, eating nourishing foods, and generally rejoicing the heart of her family. The pain had quite gone; she believed Sally's remedy had dissolved the stone.

Of course, when Dr. Ward returned from London and learned of this shocking resort to a herbalist, he was greatly displeased. "In a leading local family too, whose head is supposedly noted for his modern and scientific outlook. One would not have expected such credulity." He begged to be excused from future attendance on the family.

"A pity," said Mr. Letts tranquilly, "but well worth it to have you well again. Let no one in this family dare to break a collar bone or sprain an ankle in future, for we shall have to send to Kirminster for a doctor. It is just as well we have a railway."

Then came the day on which the son and heir returned from his holiday in Cornwall, and Mrs. Letts' pleasure at this reunion stimulated her return to health still further.

One warm, sunny afternoon in early September, they all foregathered on the sheltered terrace on the south side of the new wing for a tea party which included the Rector and Mrs. Claines.

Aunt Harriet, and their new Uncle Philip, now installed at Holly Villa, were driven over for the afternoon by Moses. The arrival of the newlyweds passed off without embarrassment, rather to the surprise of the younger element, but the social tact of Mrs. Letts was perfectly equal to such an occasion. Yet how could Sophia and Adelaide help thinking of the absent Henry, as they handed round Cook's superlative fancy cakes? He was not even mentioned at the gathering, but they felt that his continued breach with his father must hang like a question-mark above the chatter about Margate and Cornwall.

As the railway lay to the north of the Grange, they failed to notice on the south terrace the distant sound of the arrival of the 4.10 from Brindley, but presently the parlourmaid came through the French window, followed by a young gentleman in clerical garb. Adelaide was the first to notice him.

"Papa," she whispered, "Here comes Mr. Kenward!"

Mr. Letts rose instantly, and extended his hand in a cordial welcome.

"Here is a surprise for you, my dear," he said, leading Edmund over to Mrs. Letts. "When you said you felt strong enough for this little tea-party, I wrote to Mr. Kenward and asked if he could join us. I knew you wanted to thank him personally for looking after Adelaide that afternoon. I also wrote to Miss Sally Matcham, and told her of the success of her cure, and how indebted we all felt. I asked her if she would come over to see us too, for I know how much you wish to thank her, but she replied that she rarely leaves her home. She would prefer us to call and see her, when you are stronger."

"Sally has never been on a train," said Edmund with a smile, "I doubt if she will ever sample the branch line. We cannot hear the trains at St. Alfric's, even in the stillest weather, and she is pleased about that, for she likes to be solitary – and so do I."

He was soon comfortably ensconced in a wicker chair, talking to Mrs. Letts, and accepting cakes from Adelaide. John conversed with his aunt (with whom he had always been a favourite) and his new uncle, about seaside matters, as befitted returned travellers. The Rector discussed some parish business with Mr. Letts, whilst Mrs. Claines, Cleone and Sophia did justice to the petit fours and chatted – at least Mrs. Claines and Sophia did, but Cleone soon lapsed into a pensive silence.

"You are a little pale, my dear," said Mrs. Claines, placing an affectionate hand on Cleone's arm. "Have you perhaps been overdoing it, with Mrs. Letts' illness, and this prolonged warm weather?"

"No, I am perfectly well, thank you. As for overdoing it, Pardoe and the other servants know their work so well, that my charge of the household was really rather nominal."

"Well, you have the charge of this rascalion Sophia here, and her accomplice Adelaide! That must be fatiguing enough. Never mind, they will soon be packed off to school, to be finished according to the latest and most enlightened plan, and then you will have perfect peace."

Cleone sighed. "Peace! There is certainly peace here in the Forest, yet sometimes I wish to expand my horizons."

“You could be a lady missionary,” put in Sophia. “I have heard of a lady missionary who went to the East Indies. There are wonderful butterflies in the tropical jungles!”



*There are wonderful butterflies in
the tropical jungles*
(These are along the Amazon. Ed.)

Cleone smiled a little, as if that were not quite what she meant, and Mrs. Claines said good-humouredly “What my husband has to answer for, when the Church and butterfly-collecting are so inextricably associated in this tender mind!”

“However,” she continued, accepting a second cup of tea, “Without going as far as the Orient, I do think that a change of scene sometimes is a good thing. Wasn’t Mr. Letts planning to take you all to the seaside this autumn?”

“It cannot be managed, now, I’m afraid. The girls depart to Stratford in just over a fortnight, and Uncle John is so busy at the works, that he has decided to defer the trip until next summer. Aunt Lydia will not go away without him.”

She did not add that she believed her uncle did not wish to incur further expense that year, but she knew that the extension to the Grange and alterations to the works at Kirminster had made big demands that year on his available capital, so that he had decided to economise for the time being.

Mr. Letts came over to his wife’s chair, and said he thought that the sun was westering enough to make it desirable for them to adjourn indoors, if they had all finished tea. So the elders retreated through the French window, John went off to seek the Doolittle brothers, who had promised to take him rabbiting that evening, and Sophia plucked the sleeve of Adelaide when she was about to follow the others, and muttered “Come along to the kitchen garden, I want to talk to you.”

“What do you want to talk about?” asked Adelaide, when they reached their old nook behind the rose bush, where the sun’s warmth still exuded from the bricks of the south wall. “Don’t forget that Edmund has to return on the 6.40, and we had better go over to the station with Papa to see him off.”

“You mean, you hope Papa will suggest it,” replied Sophia pointedly. “They are going to examine some old books on local history in the study, so you will not be missed by the antiquarian for the next half-hour.”

“I like local history,” said Adelaide stoutly. “Oh Heavens! I nearly sat on a big spider on this plinth!”

“Don’t tell me you are getting young-ladyish, Addy, pretending you are afraid of spiders? Why, we used to have a pet one who lived under the broken carving. Don’t you remember Tonkins with his handsome striped body?”

“I wasn’t afraid. I simply didn’t want to crush a useful, hard-working, fly-catching spider, that’s all. Now what is it you want to talk about that’s so vastly important and secret?”

“I wanted to ask you if anything had been said about Henry. There seems to be a conspiracy of silence about him.”

“There was no conspiracy of silence as far as Mama and Edmund were concerned. They did not discuss Henry in front of the Taverners, of course, but when Aunt H. and Uncle P. went over with John to see that lump of serpentine rock which he has brought back from the Lizard, Mama asked Edmund if he had news of Henry. It appears that he is living at Hampstead, at that lodge in the grounds of the Kenwards’ house, which is set aside for Edmund’s use. Edmund has lent it to Henry for as long as he likes, and it seems that Mr. and Mrs. Kenward are very attached to Henry, and are pleased to have him occupy the lodge. He is studying for the Bar, and eating his dinners at the Middle Temple, which is part of the process. He still refuses, however, to make any overtures of reconciliation towards his father. He wrote to Edmund that he considers the sudden and secret marriage, after so short an interval, was an insult to his mother’s memory. Rumour hath it, according to Pardoe, that long ago when our grandmama was alive, young Philip Taverner used to be a frequent visitor to this house, when Papa was a tiny child. Aunt Harriet was then in her teens, and was supposed to like the said Philip very much. Then Grandmama died when our Papa was only five, and Aunt Harriet devoted herself to bringing up her little brother and looking after Grandpapa, her father. A new vicar came to All Saints at Kirminster, who had a very beautiful daughter. Philip Taverner fell in love with her and married her, and she became the mother of Henry.”

“Well, it seems like a kind of poetic justice that Aunt H. should marry her old sweetheart at last, although Henry cannot be expected to see it like that. Yet it may turn out to be a good thing for him in the end, for it has freed him from the musty old office at Kirminster. Aunt H. is quite well off, so Mr. Taverner – Uncle Philip – it is so difficult to start calling him that - will not have to worry about carrying on being a lawyer.”

“And what about Henry and Rhoda Willcocks?”

“Oh, I expect they are waiting until he has been called to the Bar before announcing the engagement. It would make it look better in *The Morning Post* and *The Kirminster Messenger*. “Rhoda Honoria Willcocks, only daughter of Frederick Willcocks Esquire, of Park House, Kirminster, to Henry Oswald Taverner, barrister-at-law.” There will be a grand wedding, and Rhoda will have a gown from Paris. Mr. Willcocks will build them a palatial villa on the outskirts of Kirminster, all gables and turrets and evergreen shrubbery. That dozing old Whig M.P. who came to our dinner party will resign before the next election, and Henry will be put forward as candidate. Of course he will be returned, and Mr. Willcocks will talk: about “my son-in-law, the Member for Kirminster”. Henry will cease to come here, and we shall never again have him at our New Year’s Eve party, roasting chestnuts with us on the hearth, and telling us ghost stories. It’s all very sad.”

They sat bathed in the declining sun, thinking that some of Sophia’s melancholy predictions might well have come to pass by the time they returned from school for the Christmas holidays.

Sophia stood up to go, and then crouched down again with a conspiratorial “Ssh:”

“What is it?” whispered Adelaide.

Sophia did not reply, but shook her head for silence. After a minute or so she said softly, “It was Cleone, passing on her way to the old summerhouse. She did not notice us here. Don’t you remember how I told you that she goes there to read letters she receives from Signor Parelli, and to write replies? You were cross with me that day, so I dropped the subject, but I have seen her go there several times since. I have not deliberately watched her, but I have caught sight of her when I have been in the kitchen garden for peaches and greengages. Nobody uses the old arbour anymore, so she is safe from disturbance there. What can she see in that little man, with his hows, and his “Si, si, si,” like the coletits in the larches!”

“He is not as absurd as you make out. He and Cleone have a great deal in common in art and painting. He seems to be doing quite well in this country!”

Sophia shook her head vehemently. “I am not prejudiced against him because he is a foreigner. It’s not that, it’s simply that they do not seem to me to be a proper pair, in spite of Cleone’s artistic leanings. And why should she feel this secrecy necessary?”

“Perhaps she is corresponding with him in order to know him better and make up her mind. She may not have wished to discuss it at present with Mama, because of her illness. We must give her the benefit of the doubt. After all, she is twenty-three!”

Adelaide rose, and glided off in the opposite direction from the path to the old summerhouse. After a moment or two, Sophia meekly followed her sister.

There was the first faint touch of autumn in the sunset air as they walked from the door in the walled garden towards the house.

“Look,” said Sophia, pointing to the western sky, “There is the new moon. That will be the harvest moon. Each evening it will grow until it rises like a great orange ball.”

The barn owl swooped noiselessly across from the trees, with a glimmer of white wings. The smell of woodsmoke came from the Grange chimneys. The two sisters slipped through the conservatory door into the hall, just in time to join in the farewells to the visitors. Adelaide, however, managed to accompany her Papa to the station to see the antiquarian off, and although their conversation on the platform may have been mainly on the 18th century volume of local history that Papa had lent him, yet their final handshakes at the carriage door, one might have ventured to predict that the book would be duly returned in person, and not through the post.



Chapter 13 – The Elopement

Towards the end of September, the Harlands of Perry St. James' Manor were to have a dinner party and ball to celebrate their silver wedding. They were old friends of Mr. and Mrs. Letts; indeed, Mrs. Letts had been their bridesmaid when she was lovely young Lydia Corbett, and it was at their wedding that she had first met John Letts of Whitslade Grange. The Harlands rejoiced when they knew that Mrs. Letts was now well enough to attend their celebration, which was to be on the night of the full moon – the Harvest Moon – to make travelling easier.

Mrs. Harland came over to settle the delicate matter of which of the Letts family were to receive invitations.

“We have to limit it to thirty couple, for our ballroom will not take more if there is to be proper room for dancing. I'm sure you will agree, Lydia dear, that it is quite necessary for everyone's enjoyment to have equal numbers of ladies and gentlemen. This means that Adelaide and Sophia will have to be excluded. It is not because they are still in the schoolroom, for of course we do not insist that girls shall be “out” as they do in London society. I hope you will not mind if the invitations are for you and John, and Cleone and young John.”

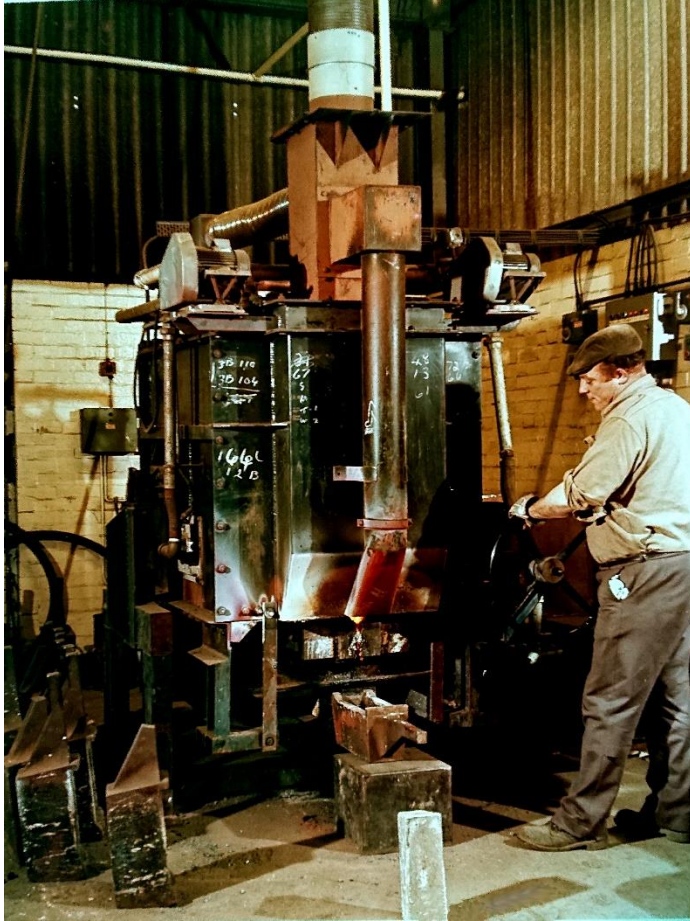
Before Mrs. Letts could assure her friend that this would indeed be quite agreeable, Cleone interposed.

“Dear Aunt, I must beg to be excused! I have already promised Lucy Crofts, my old school friend who has come to live in Kirminster, that I would spend the day of the 19th with her, and stay overnight. I can hardly go back on the arrangement now!”

After some confabulation it was decided, to everyone's satisfaction, that Adelaide should take Cleone's place. She was a natural dancer, and was thrilled at the idea of her first ball, after Sophia had earnestly assured everyone that she did not mind in the least. She would be perfectly content to remain at the Grange in the care of Pardoe and the rest of the servants, for the Grange guests were to remain with the Harlands overnight, to save Mrs. Letts the fatigue of the drive home in the small hours. Sophia was very glad to be left out, for she was not at all enamoured of the idea of attending a ball. She knew she would be quite the youngest girl there; she had the gravest doubts about her ability to dance correctly, and suspected that she would feel extremely awkward among the older, more self-assured young ladies, and dreaded the supercilious glances of finished productions such as Rhoda Willcocks. Mrs. Harland, therefore, departed in the happy knowledge that nobody would be offended, and her thirty couple left in their nice balance.

The fortnight before the celebration passed very quickly and pleasantly. With Mrs. Letts recovered, and John at home, the days had not hours enough for all they wished to do. Mr. Letts was very occupied at the works, and frequently John went up with him on the morning train to assist in the business. He was going straight into the business next year, when he left school, for he did not wish to go to university, and perhaps Mr. Letts was a little relieved at his preference to start work, for he had had heavy outlays that year, and his capital was rather tied up in the works.

One day all the family, including Mrs. Letts, went to the works to see the new silver smelter in action. Afterwards they drove from the works to Holly Villa to have luncheon with Aunt Harriet. Mr. Taverner now travelled to Foregate House each day to carry on his legal practice, but he was looking for a suitable partner, and then intended to go into retirement.



... the new silver smelter in action.

It really was like this. Ed.

“We hope to visit Switzerland, on one of Mr. Cook’s Tours,” said Aunt Harriet. “We are told they are very well conducted.”

Adelaide and Sophia exchanged glances. Aunt Harriet was certainly getting adventurous since this second marriage. If only Henry could be reconciled to his father, how pleasant it would be for everyone. Mrs. Letts would have liked to broach the subject, but Mr. Letts had counselled her to wait.

They both felt that the Taverners should make the first overtures to Henry by asking him to come down from London to discuss his plans to read for the Bar. Alas, like most elders who know in their hearts that they have acted unwisely in relation to their young, the Taverners were reluctant to climb down.

There was a thunderstorm that evening when they had returned home. Sophia took refuge in the schoolroom, lit a candle although it was still broad daylight, drew the curtains at the window, and tried to absorb herself in a book.

Unfortunately, she was interrupted by the entry of John, who wanted her assistance in the harness-room in connection with a small geological exhibition which he was mounting for the impending visit of the Erdingham Scientific Society.

“I’m not going outside,” said Sophia, firmly. “There’s thunder about – and lightning!”

“Why, what a silly goose you have become, Sophy!” exclaimed her brother. “You used not to mind thunderstorms at all. It’s only a matter of crossing the stable-yard, and yet you refuse to budge. I call it very uncooperative,” and he stalked off.

Another spell of fine weather followed, and the day of the Harlands’ party dawned fine and clear. Cleone was to depart for Kirminster by the ten-forty. The dressmaker had come to the Grange that morning to make some adjustments to the evening dresses of Mrs. Letts and Adelaide. They were in Mrs. Letts’ bedroom, immobilised by pins, when Cleone came in to say good-bye. Sophia was sitting on the floor by the cheval looking-glass, watching the proceedings with the detached pleasure of one who has not to be pinned, twirled and adjusted herself.

“How nice you look, Cleone,” said Mrs. Letts, looking approvingly at her niece, who was dressed in a very becoming new blue travelling costume. “I do hope you will enjoy your little visit. Give my compliments to your friend, whom I recollect when she was a pupil with you at Miss Broome’s. Be sure you take a first-class ticket and ask Joe to put you in a Ladies Only compartment. Have you told Fred to take your bag across to the station?”

“Yes thank you, Aunt Lydia,” said Cleone, kissing them all. She paused at the bedroom door, and Sophia was surprised to notice that her cousin’s eyes seemed misty as if with tears, but she turned immediately and went out, closing the door behind her.

“It was a pity she could not come to the Harlands’ ball,” said Mrs. Letts, who had her back to the door and could not therefore have seen Cleone’s sudden emotion. “We so seldom have the opportunity of dancing. I loved it so when I was young, and even now I look forward to a quadrille and a few waltzes. However, Sophy, I understand just how you feel. You shall have dancing lessons at Stratford, and that will give you confidence. When you are seventeen I’m sure you will be as eager for a ball as anyone!”

“I’m going to spend the evening writing the labels for John’s exhibition,” said Sophia. “He has promised me half-a-sovereign if I make a really first-class job of it.”

Although she was an indifferent embroidress, Sophia was considered to write the best hand in the family, and to excel at lettering. With the prospect of a piece of gold for her endeavours, she set to work very seriously that evening after the carriage had departed with the revellers just after six.

“My word, Miss Sophy,” puffed Cook, personally climbing the back staircase to the schoolroom with a tasty cold supper on a tray, “Mistress of all you survey, that’s what you are tonight!”

“Where’s Pardoe, Cooky?” risked Sophia, making room on the table for this welcome feast.

“She’s brought her needlework down to the kitchen to keep Ellen and me company this evening, as I’ve no dinner to cook, and we’ll be having a good old gossip, I warrant you! It’s Rose’s afternoon off, and she’s gone into the village to see her Ma. The mistress also kindly said that young Fred could go along to Old Furnace Cottage and see his family, so they’ll both be back about eight. Are you sure you’re not lonely, Miss Sophy, up here on your own?”

“Not in the least, Cooky. I’ve a great deal to do. “Tell Pardoe she need not bother to come up. I shall finish these cards, have my supper, and go to bed about nine.”

“I’ll tell her,” said Cook, smiling at her favourite, and off she went, her stays and the floorboards creaking in unison.

The longcase clock on the landing struck seven. A rosy light from the setting sun filled the quiet schoolroom, and outside the blackbirds were settling to roost in their usual noisy fashion. Sophia decided to leave her supper until she had finished the cards. The various fossils were in cardboard boxes, with John’s rough notes.

“Encrinite – a joint or fragment of one of the fossil sea-lilies,” she read. Now that strikes a bell. Oh yes! Joe said there was a fine section of a sea lily in one of the stones he used to make the words “Perry Forest Station” on the bank beyond the waiting-room. The pansies he planted have spread so that one can hardly see the stones now. I wonder if he would lend the best fossils for John’s exhibition? Perhaps he would be pleased to have them properly displayed and labelled in the exhibition, with his name on. I’ll go over to the station and ask him.

She brushed her hair and put on her hat and jacket. It was only a few hundred yards to the station, but Sophia was getting more particular about her appearance, and she wished to look well in the eyes of Joe.

She was glad that she had gone out, for as she walked along the station path, she saw the full harvest moon rising in all its splendour in a clear sky above the line of trees to the east.

Joe was lighting the oil lamps on the platform as she went through the gate, and there was a mingled smell of colza oil and autumn leaves. She went along to the bank where the Perry Forest Station name was proclaimed in stones, to see if she could see the fossils, whilst she waited for Joe to finish his task. In a few minutes he joined her, and she explained why she had come. He was very pleased with the idea of adding his fossils to John’s exhibition.

“I was thinking I ought to remove them from here before winter comes,” he said, rummaging among the pansies. “I intend to tidy up this bank, and I can replace the fossils with plain stones. I’ll sort out the best and wash the soil off them this evening. Then I’ll bring them over to you tomorrow morning. How will that do?”

“Thank you very much, Joe. It’s very good of you to lend them, and I know John will be pleased.”

There was a train due from Kirminster in twenty minutes. Enoch Bates was having his evening meal over in the stationmaster’s house, and Joe was not busy, so they were able to continue their chat. Joe told her that his mother and the three youngest children were very contentedly settled at Old Furnace Cottage, and he was much happier now that he was able to live at home instead of lodging with the Bates. His mother and the children were getting “plumped up

nicely” with better food and country air. His mother had learned to make chip-baskets, which brought in a few shillings, and with this and his railway pay of six shillings a week, they were managing nicely. He had dug the vegetable garden and had planted plenty of winter greens, and was rebuilding the pigsty.

“So you are quite settled, Joe?”

“Well, mother is, Miss Sophy, and I hope it will be our family home for the rest of her days, but in a year or two I shall have to move to a bigger station, if I’m to get on. I want to be assistant stationmaster at a junction by the time I’m twenty-one.”

The signal bell rang, and Joe moved across to the wicket gate to the Grange grounds, and opened it for Sophia. She knew that this was a hint that he thought it was time for her to depart before the train arrived. She was now well aware that there was a nice distinction between Joe as her loyal friend and Joe as the employed representative of the Great Western Railway, so she exchanged a friendly “Goodnight” with him, and took the moonlit path back to the Grange.

She had only gone a few yards, when she felt a strong desire to see the train come in. She did not like to go back to the platform, but she could stand by the fence which divided the Grange shrubberies from the western end. So she slipped through the evergreens to the palings, and waited.

Soon there came the familiar whistle, and the engine with five coaches, and guard’s van at the rear, came steaming round the curve from the east and slowed to a halt. Only a couple of countrywomen with baskets alighted, and went over the footbridge. At the rear of the train there was a good deal of bustle and clatter as various packages were humped in or out of the luggage van, and she could hear the voices of Enoch Bates and the guard. Right opposite where she was standing there was the coach containing the first-class compartments. They were only dimly lit, but the moonlight shone full into the carriage windows. Only the second compartment seemed to be occupied, and she could see the outline of a man’s top hat, sitting beside a lady. They sat on the far side, and did not turn their heads to glance out at the station, but something in the shape of the lady’s hat and the poise of her head and shoulders rivetted Sophia’s attention. She peered from her viewpoint behind the palings at this moonlit figure with a sudden, overwhelming conviction. “It’s Cleone ... I’m sure it is ... her hat ... the way she holds her head!”

The top-hatted figure beside the lady was not so well illuminated and she could not tell who it was, but a sudden, tremendous suspicion filled her throbbing mind as she stared. It must be Signor Parelli! He was eloping with Cleone – to Brindley! Brindley certainly seemed on the face of it an unlikely place to choose for an elopement, but they must have some reason to select it as the destination of their flight, for they had obviously no intention of alighting at Perry Forest. Could they be intending to marry at Brindley the following day and then come to the Grange with a fait accompli, hoping to be accepted? These thoughts rushed through Sophia’s brain and she began to run back through the shrubbery in the direction of the gate. It took her only seconds to reach the platform. At the far end, under the lamp, the men were still busy at the goods van. She tore in the opposite direction towards the hissing engine, reached the carriage door containing the two first-class passengers, and desperately wrenched it open.

“Cleone!” she gasped.

They turned in her direction. Her keen eyes had not been in error, it was indeed Cleone, and she gave a startled cry. The gentleman in the top hat also gave an exclamation, and rose to his feet. It was not Signor Parelli. It was Henry.

“I – I thought you were Signor Parelli!” she cried, swallowing hard, and raising her voice almost to a screech above the hissing of the steam.

“Signor Parelli!” returned Henry, in a voice of absolute astonishment.

There was a banging of doors. The train was about to depart. Joe came hurrying along the platform to close any open carriage doors. When he got near enough to perceive Sophia standing at the open door, he hurried forward, and then saw Cleone and Henry. He did not speak, but just stood rooted to the spot.

Henry turned to Cleone. “I think we have no alternative now but to alight,” he said in a low voice. She rose as if sleep-walking, and he assisted her on to the platform.

“There is some hand luggage on the rack, Joe. Kindly get it out for us,” said Henry coolly. “Perhaps you will bring it over to the Grange when you finish duty. Here are our tickets.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll bring it over later.” There was a florin’s silver glint as the bits of pasteboard changed hands. If Joe could see from the colour of the tickets that they were for a destination further along the line, he made no comment.

Henry gave his arm to Cleone, and they went towards the wicket gate, leaving the hapless Sophia to follow.

Joe slammed the carriage door, the guard blew his whistle, and the train slowly steamed out.



Chapter 14 – A Pause for Enlightenment

Sophia was literally trembling with agitation as she followed the lovers along the gravel path. Despite the turmoil of her unanswered questions, the observant part of her mind – which seemed to operate independently of her emotions – made her see in the pair walking before her a quaint resemblance to an old woodcarving in the church, on which she had gazed through many a sermon. It depicted Adam and Eve departing under trees from the Garden of Eden, as seen from the rear by God and the fourteenth century carver. Cleone and Henry, as they walked arm in arm through the moon-dappled trees, seemed like this elemental human pair, despite their conventional 19th century attire.

Were they angry with her intervention, based as it was on a complete misconception? Her mind was buzzing so much that she walked off the path a little, and stumbled over a tree root.

She only fell lightly, and picked herself up again immediately. The others turned, and she hastily assured them that she was not in the least hurt.

An old garden bench stood at this spot.

“Let’s sit here, whilst we have some much-needed explanations,” said Henry decisively. “It’s a mild night.”

He sat down between them, still keeping his arm around Cleone’s waist.

“Now, Sophia,” he said, gently, but in a firm tone, “I think you are alone at the Grange tonight, except for the servants – the family are at the Harlands’ ball, are they not? Why were you on the station?”

“I went over to see Joe about some fossils for John’s exhibition. I was going back to the Grange when I suddenly thought I would stand by the fence above the embankment and watch the train come in. Your carriage was halted just opposite where I stood, and the moonlight is so bright that I could see a lady inside whom I felt sure was Cleone, so I just dashed round on to the platform and opened the carriage door.”

“But what did you mean about Signor Parelli?”

“I – I thought Cleone had been corresponding with him. I didn’t really mean to spy on her, but once I saw her receive a letter in his handwriting. Then ... then, well, I used to see her in the summerhouse, reading letters and writing them. I’m terribly sorry. I’m afraid I’ve made a dreadful mistake. I thought from something I once heard that you were going to marry Rhoda Willcocks. I never once thought of you and Cleone being in love – you were always so matter of fact with one another!”

“There seems to have been a tangle of misapprehensions,” said Henry gravely. “I have been in love with Cleone for a long time, but I was not in a financial position to marry, nor did I think that she cared for me. She gave me no sign of her feelings, because she is proud and independent. We did not come to an understanding until that day when we had our expedition to St. Alfric’s-in-the-Wood. Do you remember how you left the two of us ostensibly resting in the little church, and went back with Edmund and Adelaide for a drink of Sally’s elderflower

tea, before we started on the walk back to the Halt? We had barely twenty minutes alone together, but it was enough to demolish past misunderstandings. We decided to keep our engagement secret until my father returned from Margate, so that I could discuss the future with him before I went to Mr. Letts to ask his approval. Then the very next morning I had the shock of hearing of my father's re-marriage. I went off to London, and I was the secret lover with whom Cleone has been corresponding – not Parelli!"

"I did receive a letter from him once – a simple matter of a reply to a query which Aunt Lydia wished me to make about the future cleaning of the gilded mouldings!" put in Cleone.

"As for Rhoda Willcocks," said Henry drily, "she has never been anything to me, nor I to her. I had to dine with her father several times in the way of business, when I was acting for my father, that is all."

"Please forgive me," said Sophia humbly. "I'm afraid I got things badly mixed up. But were you really eloping? Why did you get off the train?"

We could hardly have gone on, leaving you there alone," replied Henry even more drily. "Cleone would not have had a moment's peace, wondering what you were doing on the station at that time of night, when the rest of the family were away."

At this Cleone burst into tears. "We were wrong to attempt this," she sobbed. "I cannot forgive myself for deceiving Aunt and Uncle. I had to meet you as I promised in my letter, but ever since we met on Kirminster station I have had horrible misgivings about our plan. I know we are of age and can please ourselves in the eyes of the law, but our secret marriage would have hurt the feelings of so many dear to us. I wanted to save Uncle the expense of a fashionable wedding, and I knew he would feel obliged to help us financially at a time when the business is making big demands on his resources. We should have been prepared to wait ... but a long engagement, with you in London, and I here in the Forest, was more than I felt I could bear. I have acted very wrongly!

"No, dearest, do not reproach yourself! I must bear the blame for the pleading and planning. Now Fate seems to have stepped in, with Sophia as her handmaiden. Perhaps it is just as well. You see, Sophia, were on our way to Edmund Kenward's. We have a particular wish to be married in the little church where we first pledged ourselves to each other. I have obtained a special licence," and he patted the breast pocket of his frock coat.

"A special licence!" exclaimed Sophia. "I thought that only the Archbishop of Canterbury granted a special licence!"

"True! However, I have one, and after we had been quietly married by Edmund at St. Alfric's, we were going to come over tomorrow to the Grange, with the deed accomplished without expense or fuss. We were going to dispense with the usual wedding tour, and go straight back to London so that I can continue my studies for the Bar. As a result of my father's re-marriage I receive a small inheritance from my mother's trust, which will enable us to live carefully for a year or two, until I am earning. The prospects are good in company law in this industrial age. Do not fail me, Cleone! With you at my side I can succeed. Have faith in me!"

"You know I have faith, and we will marry, but what shall we do now?"

“I must make a clean breast of our plans to Mr. & Mrs. Letts. I think you will have to go back to the Grange now with Sophia. It will be easy enough to make some excuse to the servants to cover your return this evening. I will go along to the “Huntsman’s Arms” and hire a horse. I must go over to Edmund’s because he is expecting us tonight. I will come back here early tomorrow morning, by which time your aunt and uncle will have returned home. Then I shall have to play my own advocate in earnest! I hope we may still be married tomorrow!”



I think you will have to go back to the Grange now

This is the Grange as it would have been at the time this story was set and may have inspired Mary Munslow Jones’ writing. The station is a little way up a path to the left of the picture. Ed.

Cleone gave him a wan smile.

“I think we had better part here, dearest,” he continued. It would be embarrassing for you if the servants saw me. I will slip across into the lane. Goodbye, Sophia, and don’t worry. You did nothing wrong in visiting the station to ask Joe for his fossils, so don’t reproach yourself for what subsequently happened.”

Feeling relieved, Sophia stammered a farewell to Henry, and slipped away towards the house, realising that the lovers wished to take a private leave of each other. She did not meet any of the servants as she made her way back to the schoolroom, for they were having supper in the kitchen. After a few moments Cleone joined her.

“I will just go and bathe my eyes,” she said tremulously. She went off to her bedroom, and Sophia felt that this evening their roles seemed to have been reversed, and she felt quite maternal towards her cousin and erstwhile governess. When Cleone returned she seemed more composed, and Sophia persuaded her to share the supper which Cook had brought up. When the clock on the wall was striking nine, there came a tap at the door, and in came Ellen to fetch the tray. She was too well trained to show surprise at the sight of Cleone, who merely remarked that she had changed her plans and returned from Kirminster by the evening train.

“We shall not require anything more tonight, Ellen. Tell Pardoe she need not trouble to come up. Miss Sophia and I will not come down again, so perhaps you will lock up at ten o’clock.”

“Very good, Miss Cleone,” said Ellen, and departed.

“What will aunt and uncle think of me?” murmured Cleone, pushing her hair from her forehead and looking as if she were about to break down again.

Sophia jumped up from the table and went round to her cousin and put her arms around her. “Don’t distress yourself, Cleone darling! Everything is going to be all right. I think you and Henry are just right for each other, and I can’t understand why I was so blind and made such a ridiculous mistake about poor Signor Parelli!”

Cleone could not help smiling at this. “Your imagination is a trifle apt to run away with you, Sophy dear. But I must admit I have been inclined to be proud and reserved, because my family, the Corbetts, were brought so low by the behaviour of my grandfather. After the early deaths of my parents I do not know what would have become of me but for the kindness of Uncle John. I have always wished to avoid putting him to further expense on my behalf, but a girl is not like a man, she cannot strike out in the world for herself.”

“But you do wish to marry Henry don’t you?”

“Of course! Far, far more than anything else in the world! But before he asked me to be his wife, I did not know what the future held for me when you had gone to school. I knew there was always a good and affectionate home for me here, but I felt I must do something to support myself. I wondered if I should try to get a post as a governess elsewhere, but most of all I should have liked to become a professional artist. That is difficult enough for a man, and perhaps impossible for a penniless girl. However, that is all past history now.”

“A stifled yawn from Sophia made Cleone add “But you are worn out, my poor darling! Why don’t you go to bed?”

“I wish I didn’t get tired about ten. Just think, the Harlands’ ball will now be starting up, and Adelaide will be twirling around merrily! I suppose Henry will have reached Edmund’s by this time?”

“I expect so. It would not take him more than an hour’s riding by the bridleways – he is so familiar with the Forest. I do not think he would have any difficulty in hiring a mount at the Huntsman’s Arms, as they know him well.”

Sophia abandoned the struggle to stay up and keep Cleone company. She suspected that her cousin would keep a midnight vigil and perhaps enjoy a sleepless night. She lit her bedroom candle and they bade each other a loving good-night. Half asleep, Sophia wandered along the silent corridor to her room, where the smooth, uninhabited bed of Adelaide made her feel lonely for a moment, and then gleeful at the thought of the confidences that would be exchanged between them before another twenty-four hours had passed.

She will much to tell about the ball, but I shall have even more to reveal about my Quiet Evening at Home! she reflected blissfully. And the odd thing is, she mused, that a few weeks ago the thought of Henry getting married was something I couldn’t bear to contemplate! Of course I love Cleone and dislike Rhoda Willcocks, which makes things different. Now he will be one of us still – part of the family, but he and Cleone are going out into the wide world – they won’t be part of the Forest life any more. Yet I don’t feel upset, or heartbroken. I felt dreadful when they got out of the train and we walked back to the house, but I really think that Cleone was already repenting about eloping like that, even if she did want to save Papa expense, I believe I was meant to stand and look at the train ... With this delightful feeling of being a special agent of divine providence, sent to use her superior powers of observation at Perry Forest Station by moonlight, for the ultimate good of the parties concerned, she fell into profound slumber.



Chapter 15 – Henry Pleads his Cause

“Well, I declare!” exclaimed Cook, lifting the silver cover from the breakfast dish which Rose had just brought back from the dining-room. “They’ve not touched these rashers and done to a turn in the Dutch oven! What can be the matter with them this morning?”

“I think there’s something in the wind,” said Rose mysteriously. “Miss Sophy’s that quiet, and Miss Cleone looks heavy-eyed as if she hadn’t slept a wink! Why did she suddenly turn up last night after saying she was spending the night with her friend in Kirminster? It’s most strange, unless she had a quarrel with this said friend. Yet Miss Cleone’s not the type to squabble, and if the friend had been taken ill or anything of that sort, she’d have been the first to stay and help. Even Pardoe, confidential lady’s maid though she may be, doesn’t know anything. However, there’s one bit of news I can tell you. Last night, when young Fred was coming back from his Ma’s cottage, who should he see on horseback, turning off from the lane into the bridleway just beyond the railway arch, but young Mr. Taverner! It was bright moonlight, and Fred was certain it was him, but he didn’t say “Good-night” or anything as he passed, although Mr. Henry’s always one to have a friendly greeting for folk, as you know. Yet he’s supposed to be in London, studying for the Bar. Went off there in a huff, he did, on account of his Pa and Mrs. Topsham., as was. getting married secretly in Margate, only six months after the first Mrs. Taverner died.”

“Well, Mr. Henry didn’t call at this house yesterday,” declared Ellen. “I can vouch for that. Nor is he staying at the Rectory, for as you know they are at Smokehills for a fortnight, and the two maids have gone home for a holiday.”

“Then I don’t see how it could have been him,” decided Cook., “Jack Jordern went off with the carriage at six this morning, to bring our folks back from the Manor, and he’ll be peckish when he gets home. I reckon I’ll warm these rashers up for him. Maybe he’ll have heard some news of what’s afoot, for there’s something up, I feel it in my bones. I’d best be melting some gelatine leaves to make fruit jellies. Whenever I have this feeling that something’s about to happen, I always makes some jellies, for they need twenty-four hours to set properly, and you’ve got to be prepared for anything.”

“Not A funeral, I hope,” shuddered Ellen. “Last night as I lay in bed I heard the Night Whistlers. Six times I heard them – that long, low whistle, and then I buried my head under the clothes, for they say that to hear them seven times is terrible bad luck. The master says it’s only the birds that travel over in the night at this time of year from the north, on their way to warmer climes for winter, but my old gran at Belling Sollars used to say it was spirits passing over!”

Before the Night Whistlers could be properly discussed, Pardoe came into the kitchen. “I think you’d best light a fire in the morning room, Ellen,” she ordered. “Although it’s still warm in the afternoons, there was a bit of a nip in the air this morning, and the mistress may be chilly after her early ride.”

Ellen went to what had been the drawing room before the new wing had been built, and was now the morning room, and lit a fire. She had just got it going nicely, and was dusting the room, when she heard the sound of horses coming up the drive. She peeped through the window and saw the Grange carriage pulling into the gravel sweep before the front door. And following

it two gentlemen on horseback. The first of course she recognised as Mr. Henry Taverner, and the other she thought was the young parson from St. Alfric's-in-the-Wood, whom she had briefly seen in the summer.

She hastily gathered up her feather duster, mop, dustpan and brush, and retreated into the hall, where she encountered Adelaide and John hurrying through the open front door.

“Good morning, Ellen,” they both greeted her.

“Good morning, Miss Addy and Master John. Did you enjoy the ball?”

“Oh yes, Ellen! I danced every dance!” exclaimed Adelaide. “Where is my sister?”
“She’s up in the schoolroom, miss” replied Ellen.

“And has Miss Cleone arrived back yet?”

“Yes, Miss Addy.” Ellen did not reveal that Cleone had, in fact, returned the evening before.

“Mama, and Papa will be coming indoors in a moment. They are just speaking to Mr. Taverner and Mr. Kenward, who arrived at the same time as we did. I think they will be going straight into the morning room, or to Papa’s study.”

“There’s a fire in the morning room, Miss Addy.”

“I think we had better go straight up to the schoolroom, Addy,” said John in a rather sotto voce way, and they both hurried round the corner to the old staircase, “making themselves scarce” as Ellen described it to Rose afterwards.

They found Cleone and Sophia in their schoolroom refuge, ostensibly sketching and writing, but in reality waiting and listening. There were greetings, and enquiries about the Harlands’ party, which John described as “not a bad turnout” and Adelaide as “just heavenly”. Nevertheless, this topic, which might ordinarily have been well discussed, was quickly abandoned, for it was obvious that there was “something in the wind” as Rose had put it. Scenting this, and fearing there was something emotional in the offing, John took up the cards which Sophia had prepared for him, and said hastily, “I just want to arrange these in the games room”, and made his exit.

Adelaide gazed at her sister and cousin with eyes that begged for enlightenment.

“It’s very odd,” she said, “but just as our carriage turned into the drive, Edmund and Henry suddenly appeared on horseback, as if they had been waiting in the lane for us. They followed us up to the front door. Mama and Papa were delighted to see Henry, of course, especially as they had no idea he had come down from London. When we alighted from the carriage, Henry came forward and asked if he could speak to them on very important business. He looked dreadfully serious, and they have gone into the morning room together.”

“Did Mr. Kenward go in with them?”

“No. He said he would hold their horses until Jordern had taken the carriage round to the stable yard. He smiled and said “Good Morning” to me in a friendly way, but I could see that he was troubled. What can be the matter?”

“I think I will go to my room!” exclaimed Cleone, rather wildly, and rushed out of the schoolroom. Adelaide’s enlightenment proceeded rapidly after that, and her astonishment was just as great as her sister could have hoped.

“We think they became engaged that day when we went to St. Alfric’s!” breathed Adelaide. “Yet we suspected nothing! And you thought that she was writing to Signor Parelli! You must own now, Soso, that as a soothsayer and fortune teller you are quite hopeless!”

“I shall never try to foretell events again. You must admit, though, that I was rather clever to spot her in the train. It is just as well that I did, for to elope like that would have upset everyone. People in love are rather lunatic, I suppose, just as Shakespeare wrote. Now, even if they do succeed in having the quiet wedding at St. Alfric’s that they have set their hearts on, we may still be able to go!”

They continued to talk in muted tones, rather as if they were in church, wondering all the while how the momentous interview downstairs was proceeding. There was a tap at the door, and Rose ushered in Edmund, saying “Here are the young ladies, sir!”

How glad they were to see him. He sat down on the schoolroom table, and talked to them as comfortably as if he had been a brother – with the added satisfaction that he was not.

He had just come from the morning room, and was happy to tell them that Cleone had been sent for to join her lover there, and that both were now freely forgiven and congratulated by Mr. and Mrs. Letts. The only stipulation was that Henry should that very day ride over to Holly Villa, and acquaint his father with his plans, and become reconciled with him and his new stepmother.

“So there cannot be a wedding today, then?” asked Sophia.

“Oh no! Although they still earnestly wish the quietest wedding possible and still wish that it should take place at St. Alfric’s. I do not see how it can possibly take place before Thursday, at the earliest. They will go to London immediately afterwards, for Henry does not wish to interrupt his Bar studies. They will live for the time being at my little Hampstead lodge, which is quite snug, I assure you, and my parents will be delighted to have them there. I am going by the next train to Kirminster Junction, and then on to Smokehills, to tell the Rector and Mrs. Claines the news. I fancy they will want to come back straightaway, to see them married. In fact, I hope the Rector will perform the ceremony, then I could be best man.”

After some quick refreshment, the two young men went off to the station to catch the 10.35 up train. Mr. Letts and John went on the same train, to spend a few hours at the works, and then to visit the Taverners.

The ladies of the Grange spent the rest of the day in a somewhat unsettled manner. In the afternoon, Mrs. Letts suggested that the girls should take Cleone for a walk “to bring some roses back into her cheeks”, for she realised that her niece had been under strain.

Now that all the explanations had been made, and forgiveness granted, Mrs. Letts quietly rejoiced in the match. From a financial point of view, it would certainly have been wiser for them to have waited, for they had only the five hundred pounds which Henry had now inherited. She felt, however, that in an age of expansion, a clever and hard-working young man was bound to succeed, and that Henry would advance better and more speedily with Cleone at his aide, than languishing in a long engagement. She foresaw that when the girls were at school she would miss her niece very much, but she was the last person to oppose the prospect of happiness in marriage which she herself enjoyed.

That evening, when everyone had returned from their journeyings, the final plans were made over the dinner table – for as Miss Edgeworth says “amidst the most interesting scenes dinner comes to the table as usual”, and all must go on, weddings or no.

The weather showed no signs of breaking, and on this contingency everything hinged, for the trackway to St. Alfric’s-in-the-Wood was still dry and firm where it skirted the Great Marsh. This afforded a short cut for horse-drawn vehicles, making the distance only seven miles. To take the train and have the two miles to walk through Yeld Wood would not be at all convenient for a wedding party. It was therefore arranged that on the Friday morning, the Grange carriage should take the bride, accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Letts and Mrs. Claines. The carriage was to be preceded by the phaeton, driven by John, with the two girls as passengers in addition to the Rector, who knew the way and would act as guide. Meanwhile, the two young men were to go back to Edmund’s parsonage the next day by train.

Mr. and Mrs. Taverner senior had of course been invited to the wedding, but they felt it would be impossible for them to do the journey from Holly Villa to St. Alfric’s – a distance of fifteen miles each way. So they promised instead to drive over to the Grange for the family wedding breakfast which was to take place there before the happy couple departed on the 4.40 p.m. for Kirminster Junction and thence on the express to London.

Cleone stuck to her resolution to keep everything very simple. She was to be married in her blue travelling dress, but she did ask her cousins to act as bridesmaids, wearing the muslin dresses they had had new for the Opening Ceremony. After the thunderstorm episode, Sophia’s dress had been expertly laundered by Mrs. Cull, who came in from the village to do the Grange washing, and to the general eye it look just as pristine as Adelaide’s counterpart. Sophia had a deep and secret dislike of the dress now, but of course she kept her distaste for it strictly to herself, for not even to Adelaide had she told the story of that disastrous afternoon, and she felt certain Joe would keep faith with her, and never tell a soul. “I may tell Addy someday,” she thought, on one of the rare occasions now when she took the recollection out of her memory and dusted it. The painfulness of her misplaced enchantment with Lizzie had gradually become outweighed by gratitude for the resourceful and gallant conduct of Joe.

Although it was getting towards the end of September, the girls were able to find enough wild flowers to make themselves a posy each, and a small bouquet for Cleone. The wild goldenrod and the blue devil’s-bit scabious were late-blooming flowers of the Forest, so they gathered these for blue-and-gold bunches.

As soon as she heard the news, Cook stayed up until midnight, baking a wedding-cake. The quietness of the wedding plans disappointed all the servants, for they would have preferred a more fashionable affair at the village church, but they owned it was just like the couple to want

to be married “in that little old place in the woods”, and sent Jordern off to Brindley to buy a wedding present from the staff, which turned out to be a very nice tea-service of Coalport china.



The wild goldenrod and the blue devil's-bit scabious were late-blooming flowers of the Forest



Chapter 16 – A Forest Wedding

There was no need to call anyone at the Grange on the wedding morning; everyone was up betimes.

Sunrise was about six-thirty and there was a touch of ground frost on the grass. After an early breakfast, the carriage and phaeton were brought round. The girls wore cloaks over their dresses, and a rug was tucked around them after they had climbed into the open vehicle. John was in the driving seat, looking very dashing in his new ulster, flourishing his whip and pleased at the chance to show off his driving skill to Jordern in the following carriage.

All the servants came out on to the front steps to wish the bride good luck as she stepped into the carriage.

“She looks as pretty as a picture,” murmured Cook, wiping her eyes, “but all the same, I wish she’d worn white. I will say, though, Mrs. Pardoe, that you trimmed her hat to a real masterpiece! The sheen o’ that swathe o’ dove-coloured velvet!”

“I did my best,” said Pardoe, “but fancy having bookays of common flowers from the Forest – tag-end things like goldenrod and that blue flower they call devil’s bit. Mr. Pumphret is quite affronted, when there’s carnations in the hot-house. A very eggsentric wedding altogether, he calls it. Still, that’s the way they both wanted it, it seems. Although Miss Cleone is but a niece, she’s always been treated like a daughter of the house, and I’m sure they wouldn’t have grudged her a proper wedding!”

“Never mind,” replied Cook, bustling back into the house as the carriage disappeared round the corner. “Mr. Pumphret can arrange his carnations on the wedding-breakfast table, and I must get back to the kitchen to turn out my game-in-aspic. They’ll be sitting down fourteen, as the Harlands are coming over as well as Mr. and Mrs. Taverner senior, as we shall have to call them in future. Mistress says the staff are to have a little celebration this evening. The gardeners and their wives are to come in, and Mr. and Mrs. Jordern. We shall be able to make up three tables at whist afterwards, so we may look forward to a pleasant evening!”

The reflections of the members of the wedding as they drove through the woods, where shreds of silvery mist were being chased away by sunbeams, were as varied as the personalities of the thinkers. The bride, in spite of the simplicity of her attire – or perhaps because of it – looked as lovely as Cook had declared. She felt overwhelmingly glad that the troubled weeks of her secret engagement were over, and that the misunderstandings between Henry and his father, which had placed her in such an awkward position, had given way to reconciliation. She looked forward to life in London, and to sharing Henry’s endeavours to succeed in his career, yet how could she help but feel a pang at the thought of leaving the Forest, when it looked so beguiling on this autumn morning?

Families of children were out nutting, their bags over their shoulders, calling to each other as they hauled down the hazel clusters with crooked sticks. Millions of dew-spangled spiders’ webs glittered on brake and briar. The spotted fly agaric toadstools stood in scarlet clusters at the foot of the silver trunks of the birches whose crowns of tired green were beginning to turn to brief gold. Noisy flocks of birds were stripping the rowans, and under a group of wild pear trees an old man was raking together the tiny, hard pears into heaps, to let them blet for perry.



The spotted fly agaric toadstools stood in scarlet clusters

Tears came into her eyes as she beheld these familiar tokens of the fall of the year, and Mrs. Letts leaned forward and clasped her niece's hand in a gesture of understanding, whilst her Uncle John and Mrs. Claines glanced at her with tender and slightly anxious affection.

The Rector, perched up beside John in the phaeton, as the guide across the causeway beside the Great Marsh. was equally solemn. Not that he had any doubts about the bridal pair, whom he considered ideally suited, but his mind was troubled about conditions in the Smokehills parish of his brother-in-law, where he had just cut short his visit.

"I would rather be a brock in his sett, than live in those warrens of back-to-back houses," he muttered reflectively to no-one in particular as they trotted along. "This past hot summer which has been so pleasant here, has caused a bad outbreak of typhoid there. This is called the century of progress, with all the wonders that the steam engine has brought in its train – if you will forgive the pun – but I cannot believe that the worker in factory and foundry is better off than his peasant forebears!"

"My father pays his workers fair wages, and sees to it that they are properly housed" said John defensively.

"Yes, yes, my boy. If all employers were like your father, then indeed we could regard the Industrial Revolution as an unqualified blessing, but we could do with half a dozen Lord Shaftesburys to fight the conditions that some of our fellow men, women and children have to toil in!"

John was about to put in a further defence of progress, when. Sophia broke in. "Hark!" she cried. "I can hear bells!"

John gave a mocking groan at this latest example of his sister's alleged superior powers of hearing, but the Rector checked him and bade the others to strain their ears as well. John brought Russet to a halt, and they had to own that they could hear distant bells.

"Perhaps they are ringing a wedding peal at St. Alfric's," suggested John, who had never been there.

“There are no bells at St. Alfric’s,” answered the Rector, “save an ancient handbell with a broken clapper, which young Kenward has pronounced to be Saxon, and perhaps the very bell which St. Alfric himself used to summon the faithful to his original wooden church. However, that has been sent to the British Museum for dating, as it may well be the oldest bell in the country. No, what we can hear is a set of horse bells, and if I am not mistaken it is from Aaron’s team drawing a timber waggon. If we should meet it half way across the causeway, then Heaven help us! The track is only wide enough for a single vehicle, and even after this drought the ground is marshy there because of springs. There will be no wedding today if we encounter the waggon once it has entered the half-mile beside the marsh. He could not turn, and we should have to unharness and go back. There is not a moment to lose, John! The girls and I must alight, and we will warn Jordern what is happening when he comes up. Drive forward and try to meet Aaron before he reaches the causeway. There is an open glade where he can pull off the track, if you can meet him in time:”

The Rector jumped down, and the girls threw aside their rug and followed him. John whipped up Russet, and rattled off along the ride.

The Rector signalled to Jordern to stop when the carriage came up, and explained to the astonished occupants what was amiss. There was an apprehensive wait of some twenty minutes, and then the phaeton came into sight again, with John waving his whip aloft triumphantly, so that they knew he had succeeded in waylaying the timber waggon before it entered the stretch beside the Great Marsh.

“All’s well!” he exclaimed, and helped them up into the phaeton again.

“It was a near thing,” he continued, as the convoy proceeded once more. “Aaron had not heard we were coming this way. He has been loading a big oak felled in Yeld Wood. He was quite flabbergasted to think he might have stopped the wedding! Now he is going to pull into the glade and unharness for a couple of hours, so that we can have the way clear for our return as well. He says he is going to leave the team with his workmen, and come along to see the wedding – so there will be one St. Lawrence villager there at any rate!”

They were soon traversing the narrow causeway skirting the Great Marsh which the Rector said had been made long ago by timber hauliers. Sophia was rather disappointed with the marsh, which she had never seen before, and which proved to be not so very great after all – merely a few open acres of yellowing sedges and horsetails. They did, however, see a snipe rise, and a water-rail lurking in the reeds by a little pool.

Soon the track entered Yeld Wood at its eastern end, and in a wide glade they passed the timber waggon. The team of six Shire horses had been unharnessed, and the gentle great animals were quietly cropping the grass, whilst two of Doolittle’s teamsters were sitting comfortably with their backs to an oak, eating hunks of bread and cheese from red-spotted handkerchiefs with their clasp knives. They stood up, took off their straw hats, and cheered as the convoy passed. About a mile further on they came upon Aaron himself, footing it with all speed towards St. Alfric’s.

John reined in. “Sorry we can’t give you a lift, Aaron,” he called. “We are full up, as you can see.”

“I’ll be there in time to see ‘em spliced, Mister John,” replied Aaron, mopping his brow. “The ladies ‘ll be setting themselves to rights a bit after the journey, no doubt, so you’ll not be going over to the church from the parsonage house until eleven. That gives me a good half hour, and it’s only another couple of miles. My, won’t the missus and my young chaps be surprised when I tell ‘em tonight. But I’ll not move the waggon until ye’ve passed on your return journey, so have no fear! On account of this being an onusual kind o’wedding, wi’out any banns being called in parish church, we’d no idea over in St. Larrence’s that the deed was being done today at St. Alfric’s, or I’d have left this bit of haulage for another day!”

“Never mind, Aaron, it turned out all right, and thanks for waiting for us. I hope it won’t hold you up too long. We shall be returning at noon, or thereabouts.”

They rattled off again, and there were no more diversions until they reached the parsonage house, where the bridegroom waited eagerly with his best man.

Sally Matcham was in the little church, of course, in her beat bonnet and shawl. She and Lottie, with Aaron – who came puffing up just as the small bridal procession was entering the church – formed the rest of the congregation, apart from a red admiral butterfly, which, wandering in through the open door, alighted on the bride’s bouquet of wild flowers. It was ignored by the Rector.

And so Cleone had the quiet wedding she desired, but late in the afternoon, when the happy pair were escorted from the Grange across to the station, the strains of the Perry Forest Silver Prize Band struck up a triumphal march when they went through the wicket gate on to the platform.

After the marriage service, Aaron had decided to call it a day as far as timber hauling was concerned, and had got back to Perry St. Lawrence with surprising speed after borrowing Sally’s old pony.

Whilst the wedding breakfast was in progress at the Grange, he had got together the members of the band, most of whom worked in his sawmill or timber-yard. Mrs. Doolittle had spread the news via the postmistress, and the result was a gathering on the station almost comparable to the Opening Ceremony. Enoch Bates was quite flustered at this unexpected influx, especially as they surged on to the platform disregarding his request for platform tickets.

Amid the cheers and congratulations, the 4.40 train for Kirminster Junction steamed in. Engine driver, fireman, and the few passengers already in the train, all gazed with astonishment at the band and the crowded platform. Joe rose to the occasion with his customary sangfroid, and quickly had the bridal couple and their luggage installed in a first-class carriage. The farewells were made, with assurances that they would come down from London for a brief visit as soon as Henry’s Bar studies would allow.

“In less than a fortnight, we too shall be leaving for Stratford-on-Avon and two years at boarding school,” said Sophia to Adelaide, after the train had departed and the Grange contingent was returning to the house.

“What a lot has happened this summer,” replied her sister. “I used to think that only the seasons changed here. It is less than four months since the branch line opened, and we seem to be flying off in all directions, like thistledown!”

“Perhaps even Joe won’t be on the platform to welcome us when we come home at Christmas,” said Sophia rather sadly, “He’s applying for a vacancy as booking-clerk at Brindley. It’s just as the porter shouts at Kirminster Junction – “All Change! All Change!”.”

“Never mind,” replied Adelaide. “We ought to be glad that Papa believes that girls should be educated as well as boys. We don’t want just to vegetate, so we’ll make the most of our next two years. If you want to go plant-hunting in the Far East, you will need to be properly educated.”

They heard the sound of a distant whistle. It was the train crossing the viaduct over the Jack Brook.

“Hurrah for All Change!” whispered Sophia bravely; Adelaide smiled and clasped her sister’s hand. Together they hurried along the path to re-join the rest of the party.

THE END

The Family Relationships

<p>Uncle Topsham = Harriet Letts = Mr Taverner senior (widower and Henry's father)</p>	<p>John Letts = Lydia Corbett</p>			<p>Brother Lydia Corbett and son of Sir Chad Corbett = Cleone's mother (both Cleone's parents died in 'flu epidemic when Cleone was 11, so John Letts looked after orphan Cleone)</p>
	<p>John Letts (17 in 1868)</p>	<p>Adelaide Letts 13½ in 1868)</p>	<p>Sophie Letts (12 in 1868)</p>	<p>Cleone Corbett = Henry Taverner (stepson of Aunt Harriet)</p>

Back Cover



The Grange location for Mary's story

The Perry Forest Line was written by the late Mary Munslow Jones, long-time member of the Worcestershire Naturalists' Club, former editor of the Club's *Transactions* and author of *The Lookers-Out of Worcestershire*, a memoir of the Worcestershire Naturalist Edwin Lees.

This charming story, which Mary wrote in the late 1960s, is fictional but was inspired by Mary's visits to Wyre Forest, lives of a local family, their house, the "Grange", the old railway line and the forest.

