

Owing to the wise precaution of his host, or rather to the help of Providence, Tunstall was enabled to remain in concealment until the excitement following upon his disappearance had subsided. Arrangements had meanwhile been made to convey him to the east coast, where a good Catholic skipper, who had already smuggled several priests out of the country, was prepared to lend his vessel again for a similar purpose.

Never did the park and gardens of Chislehampton Hall, which was situated about ten miles from the City of Oxford, as well as the venerable mansion itself, show to more perfect advantage than when seen in the soft light of a cloudless autumn day. Standing as the house did on an eminence, the broad walk which ran in front of it commanded views of all the surrounding country, charming glimpses of woodland scenery being discernible between the trees in the park; while the distant Thames, gleaming like a band of silver, lent life and variety to the scene. From the house a succession of terraces, adorned with brilliant autumn flowers, led to the well-kept lawn below. The summer had been exceptionally warm and fine; so that, although September had already begun, the rose garden, which was one of the chief beauties of the grounds, could still boast many splendid blossoms.

Among the roses, a fairer flower than any of them, moved Margaret, Lady Amhurst, the mistress of the wide demesne. Tall and graceful, the charms of her face equalled those of her figure. Her soft brown eyes were exactly the same color as her glossy and abundant hair; while her well-cut features and delicate complexion completed the harmonious whole. In fact, no one who beheld her, whatever his individual taste might be, could deny that she was a truly beautiful woman. Her face was indeed her fortune; for she had six sisters, and her parents, being the reverse of wealthy, were only too glad to marry her, when she was scarcely more than eighteen, to Sir Percival Amhurst, a wealthy and childless widower, more than forty years of age. He was a justice of the peace, and held in high esteem at court on account of the zeal he displayed in putting down the ancient Faith. As a matter of fact, his wife had to conform; but Margaret's parents saw no obstacle in this, their sole aim in life being to secure brilliant matches for their pretty, penniless daughters.

Nor were Margaret's scruples difficult to overcome, though she had been brought up a Catholic. Her husband regarded her as a fresh ornament to the home of which he was justly proud, and admired her as he admired the peacocks that sunned themselves upon the terraces, and the gold and silver fish that darted hither and thither in the pond that was not far from the centre of the lawn. He might now be seen advancing toward the rose garden, a stately and commanding figure, stern of aspect, and evidently made rather to be feared than loved. Yet his greeting to his wife was kind and genial:

'Well, Maggie, you are busy among your roses as usual, I see. Can you spare one for your husband, or do you want all to make the rooms look gay? Do not be late,' he continued, glancing toward the mansion, from a side door of which an old servant had just issued. 'You are apt to find your patients a little too engrossing, I think. You know how much I dislike your absence when the dinner bell rings.'

Much to Margaret's satisfaction, all further remonstrance was cut short; for the elderly domestic, who had formerly been her nurse, had now come close up. Dropping a respectful curtsy, and glancing timidly toward Sir Percival, she said:

'I beg your pardon if I am interrupting you, my lady. But it is the hour when your ladyship visits the poor-sick people in the village, and you bade me come and remind you of it.'

'Quite right, Sally,' said her mistress. 'Good-bye for the present,' she added, turning to her husband and holding out to him the finest rose she could find in the basket which hung on her arm. He gallantly accepted it, and offered to carry the basket back to the house for her.

So mistress and maid set forth together on their errand of charity, as it was their habit to do twice in every week. Margaret had no children to occupy her time and thoughts; and in the days in which her lot was cast, evil as they undoubtedly were in many respects, idleness was not so prevalent as it unhappily is in our own. Those who were exempt from the necessity of earning their bread were not content to fritter away their days and years in the mad pursuit of so-called pleasure. Margaret had deft and skilful fingers; she had, moreover, inherited from her mother an aptitude in binding up wounds and applying bandages, and had acquired a considerable knowledge of the medicinal uses of many plants and herbs.

A special heirloom in her family was the recipe for a certain unguent famous for its healing powers. Not her own dependents alone, but sufferers from a distance, often sought and proved its efficacy. She had fitted up in one of the cottages a room which she called her dispensary. Here she saw and treated all who were not too weak to leave their homes.

On the day in question, the room was more than usually full when she entered it and took her seat at a table in the centre of the apartment, amid the respectful greetings of a motley and somewhat grotesque-looking assembly. Meanwhile Sally the nurse was arranging, within her mistress's reach, the contents of the capacious basket she had carried.

In a gracious and affable manner, Lady Margaret began her labors.

'How is the burn on your arm getting on, my little man?' she inquired, as she lifted a boy of three years on to her lap.

'And, please, your ladyship,' put in an older sister, who had charge of the sufferer, 'Jack's arm is not so well to-day. He is a naughty boy; mother says he does not deserve to get well, for he pulled all his bandages off in the night.'

'Poor little Jackanapes!' said Lady Margaret, as she proceeded to renew the dressing on the injured arm, in spite of the tears that fell from Jack's eyes as the process went on.

Next in order came an old man who had cut his arm with a billhook in a somewhat critical place, and who was nervously afraid lest lockjaw might supervene. Then the mother of a large family had a piteous tale to tell, about having been bitten by a dog which she declared to be mad, but which Lady Margaret knew to be perfectly healthy, although she had great difficulty in convincing the terrified peasant of the fact.

After this manner the morning slipped rapidly by. The greater part of the patients had gone their various ways, and Sally was repacking her basket, as the hour of departure had come, when a knock at the cottage door announced a fresh applicant. The knock was so gentle as not to be audible until it had been repeated several times; and when Sally, at her mistress's bidding, at length opened the door, the stranger who stepped in was so evidently not one of the countryfolk that those who yet lingered there fell back and made way for him to advance to the table where Lady Margaret was still seated.

Margaret's practised ear had already heard the light, gentle step of the newcomer, and recognised its contrast with the ponderous tread of the villagers. The first glance showed her that he was different indeed from the rest of her patients. Her quick eye noted his small, pale, delicate features, well-set ears, and slender fingers. His dress, however, would not have distinguished him from the common herd, and was by no means calculated to set off his personal advantages.

Glancing around him with an air so modest and diffident as to savor of timidity, he approached the table and said to Margaret:

'I fear, madam, that I am somewhat late. I am a stranger to these parts, and have lost my way in seeking you out. But I have heard wondrous reports of your charity and of the marvels your unguent can work. I am a peddler, and my hand has been grievously hurt, as you see, with rough-handling the rope that secures my pack. It gives me no little pain, both by night and day.'

Suiting the action to the words, he unwrapped his right hand from the linen in which it was swathed, and laid bare an extensive and festering sore.

Margaret felt irresistibly drawn toward him, and determined to do her very utmost to help him. His melodious voice completed the favorable impression his person had made.

'You may go now, all of you,' she said, addressing those peasants who yet lingered near.

Then, turning to the fresh arrival, she addressed him in her blindest tones, requesting him to come and sit beside her that she might examine his hurt, while Sally prepared all that was necessary for dressing the wound.

The operation ended, he departed, after gratefully thanking Lady Margaret. She gave him a small box of the ointment, instructing him how to use it, and graciously granting him the permission he asked—to come on her 'dispensary days,' as she called them, until his hand should be healed.

For about a fortnight the peddler made his appearance quite regularly. Margaret became more and more interested in him, partly because of his pleasing manners and gentle patience, partly also, it must be confessed—for she was a true daughter of Eve—because there was something mysterious about him, in spite of his prosaic name of Jones and his threadbare garments. She could not resist a certain feeling of pique.