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THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL

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Part the First: RISE

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CHAPTER I

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Applecroft

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Half-way along the one straggling street of Savilestowe a narrow lane suddenly opened out between the cottages and turned abruptly towards the uplands which rose on the northern edge of the village. Its first course lay between high grey walls, overhung with ivy and snapdragon. When it emerged from their cool shadowings the church came in view on one hand and the school on the other, each set on its own green knoll and standing high above the meadows. Once past these it became narrower and more tortuous; the banks on either side rose steeply, and were crowned by ancient oaks and elms. In the proper season of the year these banks were thick with celandine and anemone, and the scent of hedge violets rose from the moss among the spreading roots of the trees. Here the ruts of the lane were deep, as if no man had any particular business to repair them. The lane was, in fact, a mere occupation road, and led to nothing but an out-of-the-way farmstead, which stood, isolated and forlorn, half a mile from the village. It bore a picturesque name—Applecroft—and an artist, straying by chance up the lane and coming suddenly upon it would have rejoiced in its queer gables, its twisted chimneys, in the beeches and chestnuts that towered above it, and in the old-world garden and orchard which flanked one side of its brick walls, mellowed by time to the colour of claret. But had such a pilgrim looked closer he would have seen that

here were all the marks of ill-fortune and coming ruin—evident, at any rate, to practical eyes in the neglected gates and fences, in the empty fold, in the hingeless, tumble-down doors, in the lack of that stitch in time which by anticipation would have prevented nine more. He would have seen, in short, that this was one of those places, of which there are so many in rural England, whereat a feckless man, short of money, was vainly endeavouring to do what no man can do without brains and capital.

Nevertheless—so powerfully will Nature assert her own wealth in the face of human poverty—the place looked bright and attractive enough on a certain morning, when, it then being May, the trees around it were in the first glory of their leafage, and the orchard was red and white with blossom of apple and plum and cherry. There was a scent of sweetbriar and mignonette around the broken wicket gate which admitted to the garden, and in the garden itself, ill-kept and neglected, a hundred flowers and weeds, growing together unchecked, made patches of vivid colour against the prevalent green. There were other patches of colour, of a different sort, about the place, too. Beyond the garden, and a little to the right of the house, a level sward, open to the full light of the sun, made an excellent drying ground for the family washing, and here, busily hanging out various garments on lines of cord, stretched between rough posts, were two young women, the daughters of William Farnish, the shiftless farmer, whose hold on his house and land was daily becoming increasingly feeble. If any shrewd observer able to render himself invisible had looked all round Applecroft—inside house and hedge, through granary and stable—he would have gone away saying with emphasis, that he had seen nothing worth having there, save the two girls whose print gowns fluttered about their shapely limbs as they raised their bare arms and full bosoms to the cords on which they were pegging out the wet linen.

Farnish's wife had been dead some years, and since her death his two daughters had not only done all the work of the house, but much of what their father managed to carry out on his hundred acres of land. They bore strange names—selected by Farnish and his wife, after much searching and reflection, from the pages of the family Bible. The elder was named Jecholiah; the younger Jerusha. As time had gone on Jecholiah had become Jeckie; Jerusha had been shortened to Rushie. Everybody in the parish and the neighbourhood knew Jeckie and Rushie Farnish. They had always been inseparable, these sisters, yet it needed little particular observation to see that there was a difference of character and temperament between them. Jeckie, at twenty-five, was a tall, handsome, finely-developed young woman, generous in proportion, with a flashing, determined eye, and a mouth and chin which denoted purpose and obstinacy; she was the sort of woman that could love like fire, but whom it would be dangerous to cross in love. Already many of the young men of the district, catching one flash of her hawk-like eyes, had felt themselves warned, and it had been a matter of astonishment to some discerning folk when it became known that she was going to marry Albert Grice, the only son of old George Grice, the village grocer, a somewhat colourless, tame young man whose vices were non-existent and his virtues commonplace, and who had nothing to recommend him but a good-humoured, weak amiability and a rather good-looking, boyish face. Some said that Jeckie was thinking of Old Grice's money-bags, but the vicar's wife, who studied psychology in purely amateur fashion, said that Jeckie Farnish had taken up Albert Grice in precisely the same spirit which makes a child love a legless and faceless doll, and an old maid a miserable mongrel—just in response to the mothering instinct; whether Jeckie loved him, they said, nobody would ever know, for Jeckie, with her proud, scornful lips and eyes full of sombre passion, was not the sort to tell her heart's secrets to anybody. Not so, however,

with her sister Rushie, a soft, pretty, lovable, kissable, cuddlesome slip of a girl, who was all for love, and would have been run after by every lad in the village and half the shop-boys in the neighbouring market town, if it had not been that Jeckie's mothering and grandmothering eye had always been on her. Rushie represented one thing in femininity; her sister typified its very opposite. Rushie was of the tribe of Venus, but Jeckie of the daughters of Minerva.

Something of the circumstances and character of this family might have been gathered from the quality of the garments which the sisters were industriously hanging out to dry in the sun and wind. Most of them were their own, and in the bulk there was nothing of the frill and lace of the fine lady, but rather plain linen and calico. An expert housewife, fingering whatever there was, would have said that each separate article had been worn to thinness. Thus, too, were the sheets and pillow-cases and towels; and of such coarse stuff as belonged to Farnish himself—all represented the underwear and appointments of poor folk. But while there was patching and darning in plenty, there were no rags. If her father allowed a gate to fall off its posts rather than hunt up an old hinge and a few nails, Jeckie took good care that her needle and thread came out on the first sign of a rent; it was harder to replace than to repair, in her experience. And now, as she put the last peg in the last scrap of damp linen, it was with the proud consciousness that if the whole show was poverty-stricken it was at least whole and clean.

"That's the lot, Rushie!" she said, turning to her sister as she picked up the empty linen basket. "A good drying wind, too. We'll be able to get to mangling and ironing by tea-time."

Rushie, who had no such love of labour as her sister, made no answer. She followed Jeckie across the drying-ground and into the house; it was indicative of her nature that she

immediately dropped into the nearest chair. The washing had been going on since a very early hour in the morning, broken only by a hastily-snatched breakfast; on the table in the one living-room the dirty cups and plates still lay spread about in confusion. And Jeckie, who had eyes all round her head, glanced at them, and at the old clock in the corner, and at her sister, sitting down, all at once.

"Nay, child!" she exclaimed. "It's over soon for that game! Eleven already, and naught done for dinner. Get those pots washed up, Rushie, and then see to the potatoes. Father'll none be so long before he's home; and there'll be Doadie Bartle and him for their dinners at twelve o'clock. Come on, now!"

"I'm tired," said Rushie, as she slowly rose, and began to clear up the untidy table. "We've never done in this house!"

"So'm I," retorted Jeckie. "But what's that to do with it when there's things to be done? Hurry up now, while I look after those fowls; they've never been seen to this morning."

She caught up a sieve as she spoke, filled it with waste stuff from a tub in the scullery, and, going out through the back of the house, walked into the fold behind, calling as she went to the cocks and hens which were endeavouring to find something for themselves amongst its boulders. None knew better than Jeckie the importance and value of that feathered brood. For three years she had kept things going with her poultry and eggs, and with the milk and butter which she got from the four cows that formed Farnish's chief property. The money that she made in this fashion had found the family in food and clothing, and gone some way towards paying the rent. And as she stood there throwing handfuls of food to the fowls, scurring and snatching about her feet, she had a curious sense that outside them and the cows feeding in the adjacent meadow there was literally

nothing about the whole farmstead but poverty. The fold was destitute of manure; half a stack of straw stood desolate in the adjoining stack-garth; there was no hay in the loft nor corn in the granary; whatever produce he raised Farnish was always obliged to sell at once. The few pigs which he possessed were at that moment rooting in the lane for something to swell out their lank sides; his one horse was standing disconsolate by the trough near the well, mournfully regarding its emptiness. And Jeckie, as she threw away the last contents of her sieve and went over to the pump, had a vision of what other possibilities there were on the farm—certain acres of wheat and barley, of potatoes and turnips, the welfare of which, to be sure, depended upon the weather. She had a pretty keen idea of what they would bring in that coming autumn in the way of money; she had an equally good one of what Farnish would have to do with it.

The horse, a fairly decent animal, drank greedily when Jeckie had pumped water into the trough, and as soon as he had taken his fill of this cheap commodity she opened the gate of the fold and let him out into the lane to pick up whatever he could get—that was an equally cheap way of feeding stock. Then, always with an eye to snatching up the potentialities of profit, she began to go round the farm buildings, looking for eggs. Hens, as all hen-wives know, are aggravating creatures, and will lay their eggs in any nook or corner. Jeckie knew where eggs were to be found—in beds of nettles, or under the stick-cast in the orchard, or behind the worn-out implements in the barn. Twice a day she or Rushie searched the precincts of Applecroft high and low rather than lose one of the precious things which went to make up so many dozen for market every Saturday, and when they had finished their labours it was always with the uneasy feeling that some perverse Black Spanish or Cochin China had successfully hidden away what would have brought in

at any rate a few pence. But a few pence meant much. Though there were always eggs by the score in the wicker baskets in Jeckie's dairy, none were ever eaten by the family nor used for cooking purposes. That, indeed, would have been equivalent to eating money. Eggs meant other things—beef, bread, rent.

Jeckie's search after the morning's eggs took her up into the old pigeon-cote of the farm—an octagon building on the roof of the granary—wherein there had been no pigeons for a long time. Approached by a narrow, much-worn stone stairway, set between the walls of barn and granary, this cobwebbed and musty place was honeycombed from the broken floor to the dilapidated roof by nests of pigeon-holes. There were scores upon scores of them, and Jeckie never knew in which she might not find an egg. Consequently, in order to make an exhaustive search, it was necessary to climb all round the place, examining every row and every separate chamber. In doing this she had to pass the broken window, long destitute of the thick glass which had once been there. Looking through it, she saw her father coming up the lane from the village. At this, leaving her search to be resumed later, she went down to the fold again, carefully carrying her eggs before her in her bunched-up apron; for Jeckie knew that Farnish had been into Sicaster, the neighbouring market-town, that morning on a question that had to do with money, and whenever money was concerned her instincts were immediately aroused.

Farnish was riding into the fold as she regained it, and he got off his pony as she went towards him, and silently removing its saddle and bridle, turned it loose in the lane, to keep the horse company and find its dinner for itself. Carrying its furniture, he advanced in the direction of his daughter—a tall, lank, shambling man, with a wisp of yellowish-grey whisker on either side of a thin, weak face—

and shook his head as he turned into the stable, where Jeckie silently followed him. He flung saddle and bridle into an empty manger, seated himself on a corn-bin, and, swinging his long legs, shook his head again.

"Well?" demanded Jeckie.

Farnish, for a long time, had found it difficult to encounter his elder daughter's steady and questioning gaze, and he did not meet it now. His eyes wandered restlessly about the stable, as if wondering out of which particular hole the next rat would look, and he made no show of speech.

"You may as well out with it," said Jeckie. "What is it, now?"

There was an emphasis on the last word that made Farnish look at his daughter for a brief second; he looked away just as quickly, and began to drum his fingers on his bony knees.

"Aye, well, mi lass!" he answered, in a low tone. "As ye say—now! Ye may as well hear now as later. It's just like this here. Things is about at an end! That's the long and that's the short, as the saying goes."

"You'll have to be plainer than that," retorted Jeckie. "What is it? Money, of course! But—who's wanting it?"

Farnish made as if he swallowed something with an effort, and he kept his eyes steadily averted.

"I didn't make ye acquainted wi' it at the time," he said, after a brief silence. "But ye see, Jeckie, my lass, at t'last back-end I had to borrow money fro' one o' them money-lendin' fellers at Clothford—them 'at advertises, like, i' t'newspapers. I were forced to it!—couldn't ha' gone on, nohow, wi'out it at t'time. And so, course, why, its owin'!"

"How much?" demanded Jeckie.

"It were a matter o' two hundred 'at I borrowed," replied Farnish. "But—there's a bit o' interest, of course. It's that there interest——"

"What are they going to do?" asked Jeckie. Her whole instinct was to get at the worst—to come to grips. "Let's be knowing!" she said impatiently. "What's the use of keeping it back?"

"They can sell me up," answered Farnish in a low tone. "They can sell aught there is. I signed papers, d'ye see, mi lass. I had to. There were no two ways about it."

Jeckie made no answer. She saw the whole of Applecroft and its hundred acres as in a vision. Sold up! There was, indeed, she thought, with bitter and ironic contempt, a lot to sell! Household furniture, live stock, dead stock, growing crops—was the whole lot worth two hundred pounds? Perhaps; but, then there would be nothing left. Now, out of the cows and the poultry a living could be scratched together, but….

"I been into Sicaster to see Mr. Burstlewick, th' bank manager," continued Farnish. "I telled him all t'tale. He said he were very sorry, and he couldn't do naught. Naught at all! So, you see, my lass, that's where it is. An' it's a rare pity," he concluded, with a burst of sentimental self-condolence, "for it's a good year for weather, and I reckon 'at what we have on our land'll be worth three or four hundred pound this back-end. And all for t'want of a hundred pounds, Jeckie, mi lass!"

"What do you mean by a hundred pound?" exclaimed Jeckie. "You said two!"

"Aye, but ye don't understand, mi lass," answered Farnish. "If I could give 'em half on it d'ye see, and sign a paper to pay t'other half when harvest's been and gone—what?"

"Would that satisfy 'em?" asked Jeckie suspiciously.

"So they telled me, t'last time I saw 'em," replied Farnish in apparent sincerity. "'Give us half on it, Mr. Farnish,' they said, 'and t'other half and t'interest can run on.' So they said; but it's three weeks since, is that."

Jeckie meditated for a moment; then she suddenly turned, left the stable, and, crossing the empty fold, got rid of her eggs. She went into the kitchen; took something from its place in the delf-ledge, and, with another admonition to Rushie to see to the dinner, walked out into the garden, and set off down the lane outside. Farnish, from the fold, saw her going, and as her print gown vanished he turned into the house with a sigh of mingled relief and anticipation. But as he came in sight of the delf-ledge the sigh changed to a groan. Jeckie, he saw, had carried away the key of the beer barrel, and whereas he might have had a quart in her certain absence he would now get nothing but a mere glass on her problematical return.

CHAPTER II

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The Tight Lip

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Ever since her mother's death, ten years before the events of that morning, Jeckie, as responsible manager of household affairs, had cultivated an instinct which had been born in her—the instinct, if a thing had to be done to do it there and then. As soon as Farnish unburdened himself of his difficulty, his daughter's quick brain began to revolve schemes of salvation. There was nothing new in her father's situation; she had helped him out of similar ones more than once. More than once, too, she had borrowed money for him—money to pay an extra-pressing bill; money to make up the rent; money to satisfy the taxes or rates—and she had always taken good care to see that what she had borrowed was punctually repaid when harvest came round—a time of the year when Farnish usually had something to sell. Accordingly, what she had just heard in the stable did not particularly alarm her; she took her father's story in all good faith, and believed that if he could stave off the Clothford money-lender with a hundred pounds on account all would go on in the old way until autumn, when money would be coming in. And her sole idea in setting off to the village was to borrow the necessary sum. Once borrowed, she would see to it that it was at once forwarded to the importunate creditor; she would see to it, too, that it was repaid to whomever it was that she got it from. As to that last particular, she was canvassing certain possibilities as she

walked quickly down the lane. There was Mr. Stubley, the biggest farmer in the place, who was also understeward for the estate. She had more than once borrowed twenty or thirty pounds from him, and he had always had it back. Then there was Mr. Merritt, almost as well-to-do as Mr. Stubley. The same reflections applied to him, and he was a good natured man. And there was old George Grice, Albert's father, who was as warm a man as any tradesman of the neighbourhood. One or other of these three would surely lend her a hundred pounds; she was, indeed, so certain of it that she felt no doubt on the matter, and her only regret at the moment was that her visit to the village might make her a little late for her dinner—no unimportant matter to her, a healthy young woman of good appetite, who had breakfasted scantily at six o'clock. Jeckie took a short cut across the churchyard and down the church lane, and came out upon the village street a little above the cross roads. There, talking to the landlord of the "Coach-and-Four," who stood in his open doorway holding a tray and a glass, she saw Mr. Stubley a comfortable man, who spent all his mornings on a fat old pony, ambling about his land. Stubley saw her coming along the street, and, with a nod to the landlord, touched the pony with his ash-plant switch and steered him in her direction. Jeckie, who had a spice of the sanguine in her temperament, took this as a good omen; she had an idea that in five more minutes she would be with this prosperous elderly farmer in his cozy parlour, close by, watching him laboriously writing out a cheque. And she smiled almost gaily as the pony and its burden came to the side of the road along which she walked.

"Now, mi lass!" said Mr. Stubley, looking her closely over out of his sharp eyes. "What're you doing down town this time o' day? Going to Grice's, I reckon? I were wanting a word or two wi' you," he went on, before Jeckie could get in a word of her own. "A word or two i' private, you understand. You're

aware, of course, mi lass," he continued, bending down from his saddle. "You're aware 'at t'rent day's none so far off? What?"

A sudden sense of fear sent the warm flush out of Jeckie's cheeks, and left her pale. Her dark eyes grew darker as she looked at the man who was regarding her so steadily and inquiringly.

"What about the rent-day Mr. Stubley?" she asked. "What do you mean?"

"I had a line from t'steward this morning," answered Stubley. "He just mentioned a matter—'at he hoped Farnish 'ud be ready with the rent; and t'last half-year's an' all. What?"

The hot blood came back to Jeckie's cheeks in a fierce wave. She felt, somehow, as if some man's hand had smitten her, right and left.

"The last half-year's rent!" she repeated. "Do—do you mean that father didn't pay it?"

Stubley looked at her for an instant with speculation in his shrewd eyes. Then he nodded his head. There was a world of meaning in the nod.

"Paid nowt!" he answered. "Nowt at all. Not a penny piece, mi lass."

Jeckie's hands fell limply to her sides.

"I didn't know," she answered, helplessly. "He—he never told me. I'd no idea of it; Mr. Stubley."

"Dare say not, mi lass," said the farmer. "It 'ud be better for Farnish if he'd to tell a young woman like you more nor what he does, seemin'ly. But, now—is he going to be ready this time?"

Jeckie made no answer. She stood looking up and down the street, seeing all manner of things, real and unreal. And suddenly a look of sullen anger came into her eyes and round her red lips.

"How can I tell?" she said. "He—as you say—he doesn't tell me!"

Stubley bent still lower, and, from sheer force of habit, glanced right and left before he spoke.

"Aye, well, Jeckie, mi lass!" he said in low tones. "Then I'll tell you summat. Look to yourself—you an' yon sister o' yours! There's queer talk about Farnish. I've heard it, time and again, at market and where else. He'll none last so long, my lass—can't! It's my opinion there'll be no rent for t'steward; nowt but excuses and begging off, and such like; he's hard up, is your father! It 'ud be a deal better for him to give up, Jeckie; he'll never carry on! Now, you're a sensible young woman; what say you?"

There was a strong, almost mulish sense of obstinacy in the Farnish blood, and it was particularly developed in Farnish's elder daughter. Jeckie stood for a moment staring across the road. She looked as if she were gazing at the sign of the "Coach-and-Four," which had recently been done up and embellished with a new frame. In reality she saw neither it nor the ancient hostelry behind it. What she did see was a vision of her own!

"I don't know, Mr. Stubley," she answered suddenly. "My father's like all little farmers—no capital and always short o' ready money. But there's money to come in; come harvest and winter! And I know that if I'd that farm on my hands, I'd make it pay. I could make it pay now if I'd all my own way with it. But——"

Then, just as suddenly as she had spoken, she moved off, and went rapidly down the street in the direction of Grice's shop. The conversation with Stubley had given a new turn to her thoughts. What was the use of borrowing a hundred pounds to stave off a money-lender, when the last half-year's rent was owing and another half-year's nearly due? No; she would see if she could not do better than that! Now was the moment; she would try to take things clean into her own hands. Farnish, she knew, was afraid of her—afraid of her superior common sense, her grasp of things, her almost masculine powers of contrivance and management. She could put him on one side as easily as a child can push aside the reeds on the river bank, and then she could have her own way, and pull things round, and… she paused at that point, remembering that all this could only be done with money.

Noon was just striking from the church clock as Jeckie came up to the front of Grice's shop. She never looked at this establishment without remembering how it had grown within her own recollection. When she was a child of five, and had gone down the street to spend a Saturday penny on sweets, Grice's shop had been housed in one of the rooms of the old timber-fronted house from which the new stores now projected in shameless disregard of the antiquities surrounding them. Nothing, indeed, could be in greater contrast than Grice's shop and Grice's house. The house had stood where it was since the time of Queen Anne; the shop, built out from one corner of it, bore the date 1897, and on its sign—a blue ground with gilt lettering—appeared the significant announcement: "Diamond Jubilee Stores. George Grice & Son." There were fine things about the house, within and without: old furniture in old rooms, and trim hedges and gay flowers on the smooth, velvety lawns; a mere glance at the high, sloping roof was sufficient to make one think of Old England in its days of calm and

leisure; but around the shop door and in the shop itself there were the sights and sounds of buying and selling; boxes and packing-cases from Chicago and San Francisco; the scent of spices and of soap; it always seemed to Jeckie, who had highly susceptible nostrils, that Albert Grice, however much he spruced and scented himself on Sundays, was never free of the curious mingling odours associated with a grocer's apron.

Albert was in the shop when she marched in, busied in taking down an order from Mrs. Aislabie, the curate's wife, who, seated in a chair at the counter, was meditatively examining a price list and wondering how to make thirty shillings go as far as forty. He glanced smilingly but without surprise at Jeckie, and inclined his head and the pen behind his large right ear towards a certain door at the back of the shop. Jeckie knew precisely what he meant—which was that his father had just gone to dinner. They had a custom there at Grice's—the old man went to dinner at twelve; Albert at one; there was thus always one of them in the shop to look after things in general and the assistant and two shop lads in particular. And Albert, who knew that since Jeckie was there in her morning gown and without headgear it must be because she wanted to see his father, added a word or two to his signal.

"Only just gone in," he said. "Go forward."

Jeckie went down the shop to the door, tapped at the glass of the upper panel, pushed aside a heavy curtain that hung behind, and entered upon old Grice as he sat down to his dinner. He was a biggish, round-faced, bald-headed man, bearded, save for his upper lip, which was very large and very tight—folk who knew George Grice well, and went to him seeking favours, watched that tight lip, and knew from it whether he was going to accede or not. He was a prosperous-looking man, too; plump and well-fed; and there

was a fine round of cold beef and a bowl of smoking potatoes before him, to say nothing of a freshly-cut salad, a big piece of prime Cheddar and a tankard of foaming ale. The buxom servant-lass who attended to the wants of the widowed father and the bachelor son, was just going out of the room by one door as Jeckie entered by the other. She glanced wonderingly at the visitor, but George Grice, picking up the carving knife and fork, showed no surprise. He had long since graduated in the school of life, and well knew the signs when man or woman came wanting something.

"Hallo!" he said in sharp, businesslike tones. "Queer time o' day to come visiting, mi lass! What's in the wind, now?"

Jeckie, uninvited, sat down in one of the two easy chairs which flanked the hearth, and went straight to her subject.

"Mr. Grice!" she said, having ascertained by a glance that the door leading to the kitchen was safely closed. "I came down to see you. Now, look here, Mr. Grice; you know me, and you know I'm going to marry your Albert."

"Humph!" muttered Grice, busied in carving thin slices of beef for himself. "Aye, and what then?"

"And you know I shall make him a rare good wife, too," continued Jeckie. "The best wife he could find anywhere in these parts!"

"When I were a lad," remarked Grice, with the ghost of a thin smile about his top lip, "we used to write a certain saying in the copybook—'Self-praise is no recommendation.' I'm not so certain of it myself, though. Some folks knows the value of their own goods better than anybody."

"I know the value of mine!" asserted Jeckie solemnly. "You couldn't find a better wife for Albert than I shall make him if

you went all through Yorkshire with a small-tooth comb! And you know it, Mr. Grice!"

"Well, mi lass," said Grice, "and what then?"

"I want you to do something for me," answered Jeckie. She pulled the chair nearer to the table, and went on talking while the grocer steadily ate and drank. "I'll be plain with you, Mr. Grice. There's nobody knows I've come here, nor why. But it's this—I've come to the conclusion that it's no use my father going on any longer. He isn't fit; he's no good. I've found things out. He's been borrowing money from some, or one, o' them money-lenders at Clothford. He owes half a year's rent, and there's another nearly due. There's others wanting money. I think you want a bit, yourself. Well, it's all got to stop. I'm going to stop it! And as I'm going to be your daughter-in-law, I want you to help me!"

Grice, carefully selecting the ripest of some conservatory-grown tomatoes from the bowl in front of him, stuck a fork into it, and began to peel it with a small silver knife which he picked up from beside his plate. His tight lip pursed itself while he was engaged; it was not until he had put the peeled tomato on his plate, and added the heart of a lettuce to it, that he looked at his caller.

"What d'ye want, mi lass?" he asked.

"I want you to lend me—me!—five or six hundred pounds, just now," replied Jeckie readily. "Me, mind, Mr. Grice—not him. Me!"

"What for?" demanded Grice, stolidly and with no sign of surprise. "What for, now?"

"I'll tell you," answered Jeckie, gaining in courage. "I want to pay off every penny he owes. Then I'll be master! I shall have him under my thumb, and I'll make him do. I'll see to

every penny that comes in and goes out; and you mark my words, Mr. Grice, I can make that farm pay! If you'll lend me what I want I'll pay you back in three years, and it'll be then a good going concern. I know what I'm saying."

"In less nor three years you and my son Albert'll be wed," remarked Grice.

"I can keep an eye on it, and on my father and Rushie when we are wed," retorted Jeckie.

"And there's another thing," said Grice. "When I gave my consent to your weddin' my son, it were an agreed thing between me an' Farnish, a bargain, that you should have five hundred pound from him as a portion. Where's that?"

Jeckie gave him a swift meaning look.

"I might have yet, if I took hold o' things," she answered. "But it 'ud be me 'at would find it, Mr. Grice. My father—Lord bless you—he'd never find five hundred pence! But—trust me!"

Grice carved himself some more cold beef, and as he seemed to be considering her proposal, Jeckie resumed her arguments.

"There'll be a good bit of money to come in this back-end," she said. "And if we'd more cows, as I'd have, we should do better. And pigs—I'd go in for pigs. Let me only clear off what debt he's got into, and——"

Grice suddenly laughed quietly, and, seizing his tankard, looked knowingly at her as he lifted it to his lips.

"The question is, mi lass," he said, "the question is—how deep has he got? You don't know that, you know!"

"Most of it, at any rate," said Jeckie. "I'll lay four or five hundred 'ud clear it all off, Mr. Grice."

"Five hundred pound," observed Grice, "is a big, a very big sum o' money. It were a long time," he added reflectively, "before I could truly say that I were worth it!"

"You're worth a lot more now, anyway," remarked Jeckie. "And you'll be doing a good deed if you help me. After all, I want to set things going right; they're my own flesh and blood up yonder. Now, come, Mr. Grice!"

Grice pushed away the remains of the more solid portion of his dinner, and thoroughly dug into the prime old cheese. After eating a little and nibbling at a radish he turned to his visitor.

"I'll not say 'at I will, and I'll not say 'at I willn't," he announced. "It's a matter to be considered about. But I'll say this here—I'll take a ride up Applecroft way this afternoon, and just see how things stands, like. And then——"

He waved Jeckie towards the door, and she, knowing his moods and temperament, took the hint, and with no more than a word of thanks, hastened to leave him. In the shop Albert was still busily engaged with Mrs. Aislabie, who found it hard to determine on Irish roll or Wiltshire. With him Jeckie exchanged no more than a glance. She felt a sense of relief when she got out into the street; and when, five minutes later, she was crossing the churchyard she muttered to herself certain words which showed that her conversation with Stubley was still in her mind.

"Yes, that's the only way—to clear him out altogether, and let me take hold! I'll put things to rights if only George Grice'll find the money!"

At that moment George Grice, having finished his dinner, was taking out of a cupboard certain of his account books. Before he did anything for anybody, he wanted to know precisely how much was owing to him at Applecroft.