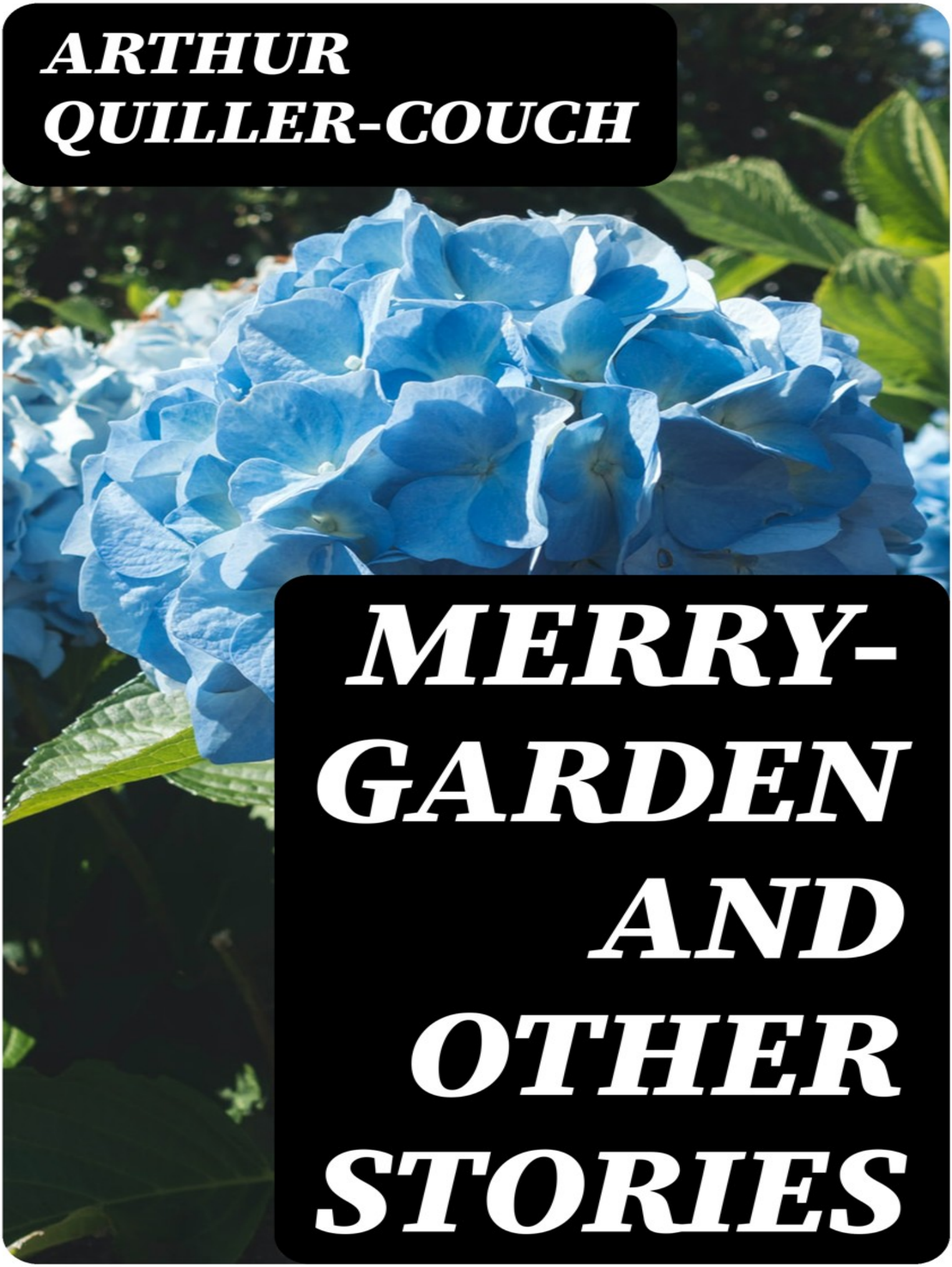
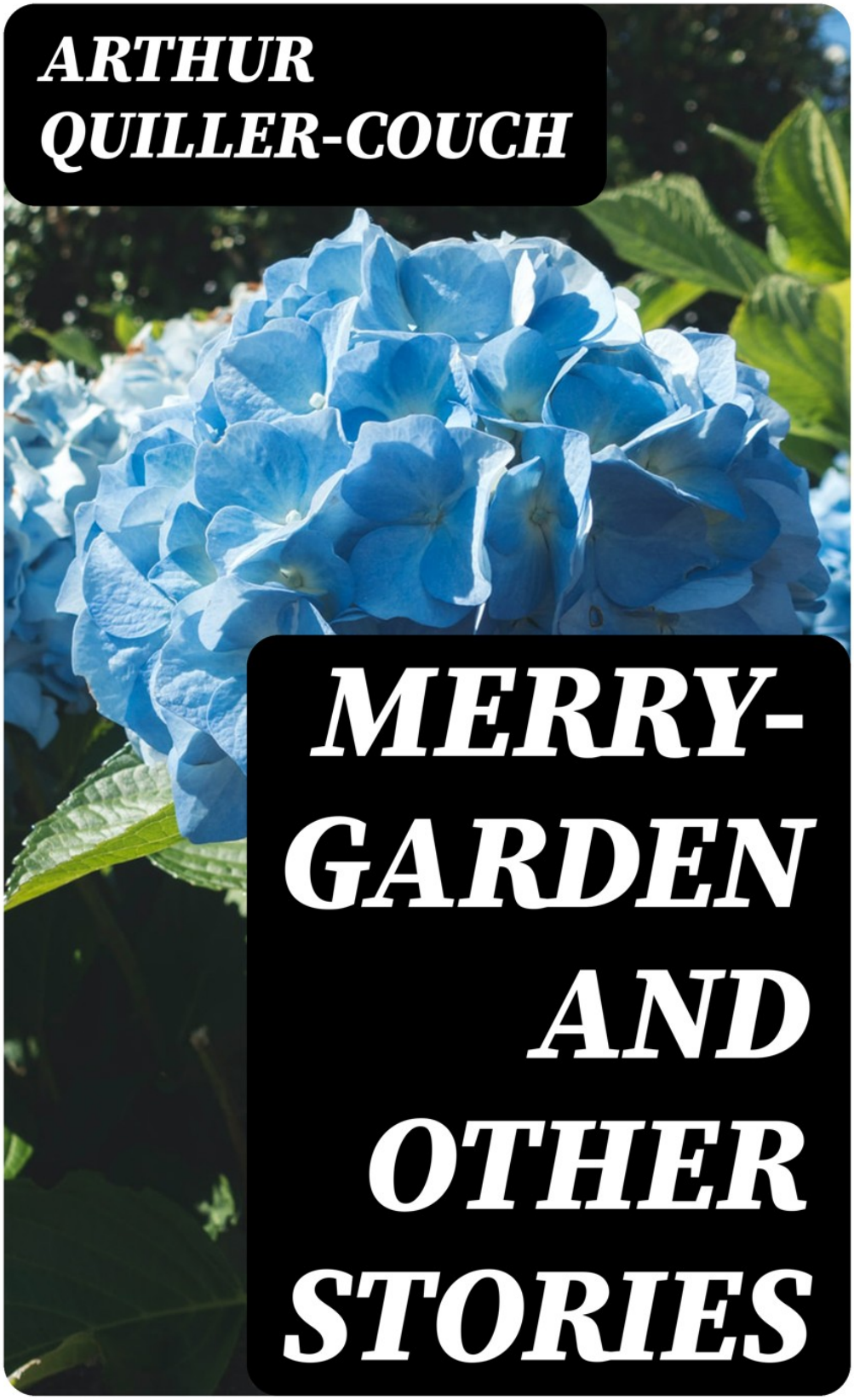
ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH



MERRY-GARDEN AND OTHER STORIES

ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH



MERRY-GARDEN AND OTHER STORIES

Arthur Quiller-Couch

Merry-Garden and Other Stories

EAN 8596547135142

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

MERRY-GARDEN.

Table of Contents

I.

PROLOGUE.

Table of Contents

Beside a winding creek of the Lynher River, and not far from the Cornish borough of Saltash, you may find a roofless building so closely backed with cherry-orchards that the trees seem by their slow pressure to be thrusting the mud-walls down to the river's brink, there to topple and fall into the tide. The old trees, though sheeted with white blossom in the spring, bear little fruit, and that of so poor a flavour as to be scarcely worth picking. They have, in fact, almost reverted to savagery, even as the cottage itself is crumbling back to the earth out of which it was built. On the slope above the cherry-orchards, if you moor your boat at the tumble-down quay and climb by half-obliterated pathways, you will come to a hedge of brambles, and to a broken gate with a well beside it; and beyond the gate to an orchard of apple-trees, planted in times when, regularly as Christmas Eve came round, Aunt Barbree Furnace, her maid Susannah, and the boy Nandy, would mount by this same path with a bowl of cider, and anoint the stems one by one, reciting—

Here's to thee, good apple-tree—
Pockets full, hats full, great bushel-bags full!
Amen, an' vire off the gun!

—Whereupon Nandy, always after a caution to be extry-careful, would shut his eyes, pull the trigger of his blunderbuss, and wake all the echoes of the creek in an uproar which, as Susannah never failed to remark, was fit to frighten every war-ship down in Hamoaze. The trees, grey with lichen, sprawl as they have fallen under the weight of past crops. They go on blossoming, year after year; even those that lie almost horizontally remember their due season and burst into blowth, pouring (as it were) in rosy-white cascades down the slope and through the rank grasses. But as often as not the tenant neglects to gather the fruit. Nor is it worth his while to grub up the old roots; for you cannot plant a new orchard where an old one has decayed. One of these days (he tells me) he means to do something with the wisht old place: meanwhile I doubt if he sets foot in it once a year.

For me, I find it worth visiting at least twice a year: in spring when the Poet's Narcissus flowers in great clumps under the north hedge, and the columbines grow breast-high—pink, blue, and blood-red; and again in autumn, for the sake of an apple which we call the gillyflower—small and shy, but of incomparable flavour—and for a gentle melancholy which haunts the spot like—yes, like a human face, and with faint companionable smiles and murmurs of dead-and-gone laughter.

The tenant was right: it was a wisht old place, and the more wisht because it lies so near to a world that has

forgotten it. Above, if you row past the bend of the creek, you will come upon trim villas with well-kept gardens; below, and beyond the entrance to the creek, you look down a broad river to the Hamoaze, crowded with torpedo-boats, powder-hulks, training-ships, and great vessels of war. Around and behind Merry-Garden—for that is its name—stretches a parish given up to the cultivation of fruit and flowers; and across the creek another parish 'clothed'—I quote the local historian—'in flowers like a bride'; and both parishes learned their prosperity from Merry-Garden the now deserted. In mazzard time ('mazzards' are sweet black cherries) the sound of young laughter floats across Merry-Garden; but the girls and boys who make the laughter seldom, wander that way. No longer to its quay come boats with holiday-parties from the Fleet and the Garrison at Plymouth, as they came by scores a hundred years ago.

In those days Merry-Garden was a cherry-garden. The cottage was faced with a verandah overlooking the tide. In the wide stone chimney-place, where now, standing knee-deep in nettles, you may look up and see blue sky beyond the starlings' nests, as many as twenty milk-pans have stood together over the fire, that the visitors might have clotted cream to eat with their strawberries and raspberries. In the orchards, from under masses of traveller's joy, you may pull away rotten pieces of timber that once made arbours and summer-houses.

The present tenant will sub-let you the whole of Merry-Garden, if you wish, for two pounds ten shillings per annum. He is an old man, with an amazing memory and about as much sentiment as my boot. From him I learned the

following story: and, with your leave, I will repeat it in his words.

I.

Table of Contents

Aunt Barbree Furnace was a widow woman, and held Merry-Garden upon a tenancy of a kind you don't often come across nowadays—and good riddance to it!—though common enough when I was a boy. The whole lease was but for three pounds a year for the term of three lives—her husband, William John Furnace; her husband's younger sister Tryphena, that had married a man called Jewell and buried him within six months; and Tryphena's only child Ferdinando, otherwise known as Nandy. When the lease was drawn, all three lives seemed good enough for another fifty years. The Furnaces came of a long-lived stock, and William John with any ordinary care might hope to reach eighty. His sister had been specially put into the lease on the strength of her constitution; and six months of married life had given her a distaste for it, which made things all the safer. As for Nandy, there's always a risk, of course, with very young lives, 'specially with boys: but if he did happen to pull through, 'twas like as not he might lengthen out the lease for another thirty years.

At any rate Mr. and Mrs. Furnace took the risk with a cheerful mind. The woman came from Saltash, where she and her mother had driven a thriving trade in cockles and

other shellfish, particularly with the Royal Marines; and being a busy spirit and childless, she hit on the notion of turning her old trade to account. Her husband, William John, had tilled Merry-Garden and stocked it with fruits and sallets with no eye but to the sale of them in Saltash market. But the house was handy for pleasure-takers by water, and by and by the board she put up— *Mrs. Barbree Furnace. Cockles and Cream in Season. Water Boiled and Tea if You Wish*—attracted the picnickers by scores; and the picnickers began to ask for fruit with their teas, till William John, at his wife's advice, planted half an acre of strawberries, and laid out another half-acre in currant and raspberry bushes. By this time, too, the cherry-trees were beginning to yield. So by little and little, feeling sure of their lease, they extended the business. William John, one winter, put up a brand-new chimney, and bought three cows which he pastured up along in the meadow behind the woods; and next spring the pair hung out a fresh board and painted on it—*Furnace's Merry-Garden Tea-House. Patronised by the Naval and Military. Teas, with Fruit and Cream, Sixpence per head*: and another board which they hoisted in the mazzard-season, saying—*Sixpence at the Gate, and eat so Much as you Mind to. All are Welcome*. With all this, Aunt Barbree (as she came to be called) didn't neglect the cockles, which were her native trade. In busy times she could afford to hire over one of the Saltash fish-women—the Johnses or the Glanvilles; you'll have heard of them, maybe?—to lend her a hand: but in anything like a slack season she'd be down at low water, with her petticoat trussed over her knees, raking cockles with her own hands. Yes, yes, a powerful, a remarkable

woman! and a pity it was (I've heard my mother say) to see such a healthy, strong couple prospering in all they touched, and hauling in money hand-over-fist, with neither chick nor child to leave it to.

Prosper they did, at any rate; and terrible popular the place became with the Fleet and the Army, till by the year eighteen-nought-five—the same in which Admiral Nelson fought the Battle of Trafalgar—there wasn't an officer in either service that had ever found himself at Plymouth, but could tell something of Merry-Garden and its teas, with their cockles and cream and strawberries in June and mazzards in July month. By this time the Furnaces had built a new landing-quay—the same to which your boat is moored at this moment—and rigged up arbours and come-sit-by-me's in every corner of the garden and under every plum-tree and laylock-bush: for William John was extending his season by degrees, and had gone so far as to set up a board in May-time by Admiral's Hard, down at Devonport, and on it '*Officers of the United Services will Kindly take Notice that the Lay locks in Merry-Garden are in Bloom. Cockles Warranted, and Cream from best Channel Island Cows. Patronised also by the Nobility and Gentry of Plymouth, Plymouth Dock, Saltash, and East Cornwall*.'

You may wonder that the Furnaces' success didn't encourage others to set up in opposition? But a cherry-garden isn't grown in a day. Mrs. Furnace had dropped into it (so to speak) when the trees that William John had planted were already on the way to yield good profit. Also she was a woman who knew how to keep a pleasure-garden decent,

however near it might lie to a great town and a naval port. Simple woman though she seemed, she understood scandal.

But in the midst of life we are in death. One day, at the height of his prosperity, William John drove over to Menheniot Churchtown (where his sister Tryphena resided with her boy Nandy and kept a general shop) to fetch them over to Merry-Garden for a visit. Aunt Barbree loved children, you understand: besides which, Tryphena's husband had left her poor, and 'twas the first week in August after a good season, and the mazzards wanted eating if they weren't to perish for want of it.... So William John, who by this time was rich enough to set up a tax-cart, but inexperienced to manage it, drove over to Menheniot and fetched his sister and the boy: and on the way home the horse bolted and scattered the lot, with the result that William John was flung against a milestone and sister Tryphena across a hedge. The pair succumbed to their injuries: but the boy Nandy (aged fourteen) was picked up with no worse than a stunning, and a bump at the back of his head which hardened so that he was ever afterwards able to crack nuts with it, and even Brazil nuts, by hammering with his skull against a door or any other suitable object. Of course, when they picked him up he hadn't a notion he possessed any such gift.

Well here, as you might say, was a pretty kettle of fish for Aunt Barbree. Here not only was a loving husband killed, and a sister-in-law, but at one stroke two out of the three healthy lives on which the whole lease of Merry-Garden depended. She mourned William John for his own sake, because, as husbands go, she had reason to regret him; and

Tryphena Jewell, for a poor relation, had never been pushing. Tryphena's fault rather had been that she gave herself airs. Having no money to speak of, she stood up against Aunt Barbree's riches by flaunting herself as a mother: "though," as Aunt Barbree would complain to her husband, "I can't see what she finds uncommon in the child, unless 'tis the number of his pimples: and I've a mind, the next time, to recommend Wessel's Antiscorbutic Drops. The boy looks unhealthy: and, come to think of it, with his life in the lease, 'tis only due to ourselves to advise the woman." She only said this to ease her feelings: but the truth was (and William John knew it) she yearned for a child of her own, even to the extent sometimes of wanting to adopt one.

Well, this terrible accident not only widowed the poor soul, but brought all her little jealousies, as you might say, home to roost. She couldn't abide Nandy, and Nandy had reached an age when boys aren't at their best. But adopt him she had to; and, what tried her worse, she was forced to look after his health with more than a mother's care. For, outside of a stockingful of guineas, all her capital was sunk in Merry-Garden, and all Merry-Garden hung now on the boy's life.

The worst trial of all was that, somehow or other, Nandy got to know his value and the reason of it, and from that day he gave Aunt Barbree no peace. He wouldn't go to school; study gave him a headache. His mother had taught him to read and write, but under Aunt Barbree's roof he learned no more than he was minded to, and among the things he taught himself was a tolerable imitation of a hacking cough. With this and the help of a hollow tooth he could spit blood

whenever he wanted a shilling. He played this game for about six months, until the poor woman—who was losing flesh with lying awake at night and wondering what would happen to her when cast out in the cold world—fixed up her courage to know the worst, and carried him off to a Plymouth doctor. The doctor advised her to take the boy home and give him the strap.

Aunt Barbree applied this treatment for a time, but dropped it in the end. The boy was growing too tall for it. The visit to the doctor, however, worked like a miracle in one way.

"Auntie," said the penitent one day, "I'm feeling a different boy altogether, this last week or two."

"I reckoned you would," said Aunt Barbree.

"My appetite's improving. Have you noticed my appetite?"

"Heaven is my witness!" said Aunt Barbree. The cherry season was beginning. She had consulted with a friend of hers in Saltash, the wife of a confectioner. It seems that apprentices in the confectionery trade are allowed to eat pastry and lollypops without let or hindrance, until they take a surfeit and are cured for ever after. Aunt Barbree was beginning to wonder why the cure worked so slow in the case of fresh fruit. "Heaven is my witness, I *have!*" said Aunt Barbree.

"There's a complete change coming over my constitution," said Nandy, pensive-like. "I feel it hardening every day: and as for my skull, why— talk about Brazil nuts! —I believe I could crack cherry-stones with it."

"I beg you won't try," pleaded Aunt Barbree, for this trick of Nandy's always gave her the shivers.

"A head like mine was meant for something worthier than civil life. I've been turnin' it over—"

"Turnin' *what* over?"

"Things in general," said Nandy; "and the upshot is, I've a great mind to 'list for a sojer."

"The good Lord forbid!" cried Aunt Barbree.

"The Frenchies might shoot me, to be sure," Nandy allowed. "That's one way of looking at it. But King George would take the risk o' that, and give me a shilling down for it."

"O Nandy, Nandy—here's a shillin' for 'ee, if that's what you want! But be a good boy, and don't talk so irreligious!"

Well, sir, the lad knew he had the whip-hand of the poor woman, and the taller he grew the more the lazy good-for-nothing used it. Enlistment was his trump card, and he went to the length of buying a drill-book and practising the motions in odd corners of the garden, but always so that his aunt should catch him at it. If she was slow in catching him, the young villain would draw attention by calling out words from the manual in a hollow voice, mixed up with desperate ones of his own composing— "*At the word of command the rear rank steps back one pace, the whole facing to the left, the left files then taking a side step to the left and a pace to the rear. Ready, p'sent! Ha, what do I see afore me? Is't the hated foeman?*"—and so on, and so on. Aunt Barbree, with tears in her eyes, would purse out sums varying from sixpence to half a crown, coaxing him to dismiss such murderous thoughts from his mind; and thereupon he'd take

another turn and mope, saying that it ill became a lad of his inches, let alone his tremenjous spirit, to idle out his days while others were dying for their country; to oblige his aunt he would stand it as long as he could, but nobody need be surprised if he ended by drowning himself, And this frightened Aunt Barbree almost worse than did his talk of enlisting, and drove her one day, when Nandy had just turned seventeen, to take a walk up the valley to consult Dr. Clatworthy.

II.

Table of Contents

Dr. Clatworthy was a man in many respects uncommon. To begin with, he had plenty of money; and next, he was as full of crazes as of learning. One of these crazes was astronomy, and another was mud-baths, and another was open windows and long walks in the open air, and another was skin-diseases and nervous disorders, and another was the Lost Tribes, and another was Woman's Education; with the Second Advent and Vegetable Diet to fill up the spaces. Some of these he had picked up at Oxford, and others in his travels abroad, especially in Moravia: but the sum total was that you'd call him a crank. Coming by chance into Cornwall, he had taken an uncommon fancy to our climate and its 'humidity'—that was the word. There was nothing like it (he said) for the skin—leastways, if taken along with mud-baths. He had bought half a dozen acres of land at the head of the

creek, a mile above Merry-Garden, and built a whacking great house upon it, full of bathrooms and adorned upon the outside with statues in baked earth to represent Trigonometry and the other heathen gods. He had given the contract to an up-country builder, and brought the material (which was mainly brick and Bath-stone) from the Lord knows where; but it was delivered up the creek by barges. There were days, in the year before William John's death, when these barges used to sail up past Merry-Garden at high springs in procession without end. But now the house had been standing furnished for three good years, with fruit-gardens planted on the slopes below it, and basins full of gold-fish: and there Dr. Clatworthy lived with half a score of male patients as mad as himself. For, though rich, he didn't spend his money in enjoyment only, but charged his guests six guineas a week, while he taught 'em the secret of perfect health.

Well, you may laugh at the man, but I've heard my mother (who remembers him) say that, with all his faults, he had the complexion of a baby. She would describe him as an unmarried man, of the age of fifty,—he had a prejudice against marrying under fifty,—dressed in nankeen for all weathers, with no other protection than a whalebone umbrella, and likewise remarkable for a fine Roman nose. 'Twas this Clatworthy, by the way, that a discharged gardener advised to go down to Merry-Garden and make a second fortune by picking cherries, "for," said he, "having such a nose as yours you can hook on to a bough with it and pick with both hands." I don't myself believe that he came to visit Merry-Garden on any such recommendation; but visit

it he did, and often, while his own trees were growing; and there his noble deportment and his lordly way with money made an impression on Aunt Barbree, who had already heard talk of his capabilities.

So—as I was saying—one day, being near upon driven to her wits' end, Aunt Barbree marched the boy up to Hi-jeen Villa (as the new great house was called), and begged for Dr. Clatworthy's advice; "for I do believe," she wound up, "the boy is sinking into a very low state of despondency."

"And so should I be despondent," said the doctor, eyeing Nandy, "if I had that number of pimples and didn't know a sure way to cure them."

"Fresh fruit don't seem to do no good," said Aunt Barbree, "though I've heard it confidently recommended."

The doctor made Nandy take off his shirt. "Why," said he, enthusiastic-like, "the boy's a perfect treasure!"

"You think so?" said Aunt Barbree, a bit dubious, not quite catching his drift.

"A case, ma'am, like this wouldn't yield to fresh fruit, not in ten years. It's throwing away your time. Mud is the cure, ma'am—mud-bathing and constant doses of sulphur-water, varied with a plenty of exercise to open the pores of the skin."

"Sulphur-water?" Aunt Barbree had used it now and then upon her fruit-trees, to keep away mildew. She doubted Nandy's taking kindly to it. "He's easier led, sir, than driven," she said.

"My good woman," said the doctor, "you leave him to me. I'll take up this case for nothing but the honour and glory of it. He shall board and lodge here and live like a

fighting-cock, and not a penny-piece to pay. As for curing him—if it'll give you any confidence, look at my complexion, ma'am. What d'ye think of it?"

"Handsome, sure 'nough," said Aunt Barbree.

"Satin, ma'am—complete satin!" said the doctor. "And I'm like that all over."

"Well to be sure, if Nandy don't object—" said Aunt Barbree, hurried-like.

Nandy thought that to live for a while in a fine house and be fed like a fighting-cock would be a pleasant change; and so the bargain was struck.

Poor lad, he repented it before the first week was out. He couldn't abide the mud-baths, which he took in the garden, planted up to the chin in a ring with a dozen old gentlemen, stuck out there like cabbages, and with Clatworthy planted in the middle and haranguing by the hour, sometimes on politics and Napoleon Bonaparte, sometimes on education, but oftenest on his system and the good they ought to be deriving from it. Moreover, though they fed him well enough, according to promise, the sulphur-water acted on his stomach in a way that prevented any lasting satisfaction with his vittles. In short, before the week was out he wanted to run away home; and only one thing hindered him—that he'd fallen in love.

This was the way it happened. Dr. Clatworthy, having notions of his own upon matrimony, and money to carry them out, had picked out a pretty child and adopted her, and set her to school with a Miss St. Maur of Saltash, to be trained up in his principles, till of an age to make him 'a perfect helpmeet,' as he called it.

The poor child—she was called Jessica Venning to begin with, but the doctor had rechristened her Sophia—was grown by this time into a young lady of seventeen, pretty and graceful. She could play upon the harp and paint in water-colours, and her needlework was a picture, but not half so pretty a picture as her face. She came from Devonshire, from the edge of the moors behind Newton Abbot, where the folks have complexions all cream-and-roses. She'd a figure like a wand for grace, and an eye half-melting, half-roguish. People might call Clatworthy a crank, or whatever word answered to it in those days: but he had made no mistake in choosing the material to make him a bride—or only this, that the poor girl couldn't bear the look or the thought of him. Well, the time was drawing on when Clatworthy, according to his plans, was to marry her, and to prepare her for it he had taken to writing her a letter every day, full of duty and mental improvement. Part of Nandy's business was to walk over with these letters to Saltash. The doctor explained to him that it would open the pores of his skin, and he must wait for an answer. And so it came about that Nandy saw Miss Sophia, and fell over head and ears in love with her.

But towards the end of the second week he felt that he could stand life at Hi-jeen Villa no longer—no, not even for the sake of seeing Miss Sophia daily.

"It's no use, miss," he told her very dolefully, as he delivered Friday's letter; "I've a-got to run for it, and I'm going to run for it to-morrow." He heaved a great sigh.

"But how foolish of you, Nandy!" said Miss Sophia, glancing up from the letter. "When you know it's doing you

so much good!"

"Good?" said Nandy, savage-like. "How would *you* like it? There now— I'm sorry, Miss Sophia. I forgot—and now I've made you cry!"

"I—I sh—shan't like it at all," quavered Miss Sophia, blinking away her tears. "And—and it's not at all the same thing."

"No," agreed Nandy; "no, o' course not: you ha'n't got no pimples. Oh, Miss Sophia," he went on, speaking very earnest, "would you really like me better if I weren't so speckity?"

"Ever so much better, Nandy. You can't think what an improvement it would be."

"'Tis only skin-deep," said Nandy. "At the bottom of my heart, miss, I'd die for you.... But I can't stand it no longer. To-morrow I've made up my mind to run home to Merry-Garden: and there, if it gives you any pleasure, I can go on taking mud-baths on my own account."

"Merry-Garden?" said Miss Sophia. "Why, that's where Dr. Clatworthy wants us to take tea with him to-morrow! He writes that he is inviting Miss St Maur to bring all the girls in the top class, and he will meet us there. ... See, here's the letter enclosed."

"That settles it," said Nandy.

He walked home that afternoon with two letters—a hypocritical little note from Sophia, a high polite one from Miss St. Maur. Miss St. Maur accepted, on behalf of her senior young ladies, Dr. Clatworthy's truly delightful invitation to take tea with him on the morrow. She herself—she regretted to say—would be detained until late in the

afternoon by some troublesome tradesmen who were fixing new window-sashes in the schoolroom. She could not trust them to do the work correctly except under her supervision, and to defer it would entail a week's delay, the schoolroom being vacant only on Saturday afternoons. The young ladies should arrive, however, punctually at 3.30 p.m., in charge of Miss de la Porcheraie, her excellent French instructress: she herself would follow at 5 o'clock or thereabouts, and meanwhile she would leave her charges, in perfect confidence, to Dr. Clatworthy's polished hospitality.... Those were the words. My mother—who was fond of telling the story—had 'em by heart.

>br>

III.

Table of Contents

Nandy kept his word.

Breakfast next morning was no sooner over than he made a bolt across the pleasure-grounds, crept through the hedge at the bottom, and went singing down the woods towards Merry-Garden, with his heart half-lovesick and half-gleeful, and with two thick sandwiches of bread-and-butter in his pocket to provide against accidents. But he didn't feel altogether easy at the thought of facing Aunt Barbree: and by and by, drawing near to the house and catching sight of his aunt's sun-bonnet up among the raspberry-canes, he decided (as they say) to play for safety. So, creeping down to the front door, he slipped under it a letter which he had spent a solid hour last night in composing; and made his