The Squire’s Story

By Elizabeth Gaskell

In the year 1769, the little town of Barford was thrown into a state of great excitement by the intelligence that a gentleman (and ‘quite the gentleman,’ said the landlord of the George Inn) had been looking at Mr Clavering’s old house. This house was neither in the town nor in the country. It stood on the outskirts of Barford, on the road-side leading to Derby. The last occupant had been a Mr Clavering—a Northumberland gentleman of good family—who had come to live in Barford while he was but a younger son; but when some elder branches of the family died, he had returned to take possession of the family estate. The house of which I speak was called the White House, from its being covered with a greyish kind of stucco. It had a good garden to the back, and Mr Clavering had built capital stables, with what were then considered the latest improvements. The point of good stabling was expected to let the house, as it was in a hunting county; otherwise it had few recommendations. There were many bedrooms; some entered through others, even to the number of five, leading one beyond the other; several sitting-rooms of the small and poky kind, wainscotted round with wood, and then painted a heavy slate colour; one good dining-room, and a drawing-room over it, both looking into the garden, with pleasant bow-windows.

Such was the accommodation offered by the White House. It did not seem to be very tempting to strangers, though the good people of Barford rather piqued themselves on it as the largest house in the town, and as a house in which ‘townspeople’ and ‘county people’ had often met at Mr Clavering’s friendly dinners. To appreciate this circumstance of pleasant recollection, you should have lived some years in a little country town, surrounded by gentlemen’s seats. You would then understand how a bow or a courtesy from a member of a county family elevates the individuals who receive it almost as much, in their own eyes, as the pair of blue garters fringed with silver, did Mr Bickerstaff’s ward. They trip lightly on air for a whole day afterwards. Now Mr Clavering was gone, where could town and county mingle?

I mention these things that you may have an idea of the desirability of the letting of the White House in the Barfordites’ imagination; and to make the mixture thick and slab, you must add for yourselves the bustle, the mystery and the importance which every little event either causes or assumes in a small town; and then, perhaps, it will be no wonder to you that twenty ragged little urchins accompanied the ‘gentleman’ aforesaid to the door of the White House; and that, although he was above an hour inspecting it, under the auspices of Mr Jones, the agent’s clerk, thirty more had joined themselves on to the wondering crowd before his exit, and awaited such crumbs of intelligence as they could gather before they were threatened or whipped out of hearing distance. Presently, out came the ‘gentleman’ and the lawyer’s clerk. The latter was speaking as he followed the former over the threshold. The gentleman was tall, well-dressed, handsome; but there was a sinister cold look in his quick-glancing, light blue eye, which a keen observer might not have liked. There were no keen observers among the boys, and ill-conditioned gaping girls. But they stood too near; inconveniently close; and the gentleman, lifting up his right hand, in which he carried a short riding-whip, dealt one or two sharp blows to the nearest, with a look of savage enjoyment on his face as they moved away whimpering and crying. An instant after, his expression of countenance had changed.

‘Here!’ said he, drawing out a handful of money, partly silver, partly copper, and throwing it into the midst of them. ‘Scramble for it! fight it out, my lads! come this afternoon, at three, to the George, and I’ll throw you out some more.’ So the boys hurrahed for him as he walked off with the agent’s clerk. He chuckled to himself, as over a pleasant thought. ‘I’ll have some fun with those lads,’ he said; ‘I’ll teach ’em to come prowling and prying about me. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll make the money so hot in the fire-shovel that it shall burn their fingers. You come and see the faces and the howling. I shall be very glad if you will dine with me at two; and by that time I may have made up my mind respecting the house.’

Mr Jones, the agent’s clerk, agreed to come to the George at two, but, somehow, he had a distaste for his entertainer. Mr Jones would not like to have said, even to himself, that a man with a purse full of money, who kept many horses, and spoke familiarly of noblemen—above all, who thought of taking the White House—could be anything but a gentleman; but still the uneasy wonder as to who this Mr Robinson Higgins could be, filled the clerk’s mind long after Mr Higgins, Mr Higgins’s servants and Mr Higgins’s stud had taken possession of the White House.

The White House was re-stuccoed (this time of a pale yellow colour), and put into thorough repair by the accommodating and delighted landlord, while his tenant seemed inclined to spend any amount of money on internal decorations, which were showy and effective in their character, enough to make the White House a nine days’ wonder to the good people of Barford. The slate-coloured paints became pink, and were picked out with gold; the old-fashioned banisters were replaced by newly gilt ones; but, above all, the stables were a sight to be seen. Since the days of the Roman Emperor, never was there such provision made for the care, the comfort and the health of horses. But every one said it was no wonder, when they were led through Barford, covered up to their eyes, but curving their arched and delicate necks, and prancing with short, high steps, in repressed eagerness. Only one groom came with them; yet they required the care of three men. Mr Higgins, however, preferred engaging two lads out of Barford; and Barford highly approved of his preference. Not only was it kind and thoughtful to give employment to the lounging lads themselves, but they were receiving such a training in Mr Higgins’s stables as might fit them for Doncaster or Newrnarket. The district of Derbyshire in which Barford was situated was too close to Leicestershire not to support a hunt and a pack of hounds. The master of the hounds was a certain Sir Harry Manley, who was *aut* a huntsman *aut nullus*. He measured a man by the ‘length of his fork’, not by the expression of his countenance, or the shape of his head. But, as Sir Harry was wont to observe, there was such a thing as too long a fork, so his approbation was withheld until he had seen a man on horseback; and if his seat there was square and easy, his hand light, and his courage good, Sir Harry hailed him as a brother.

Mr Higgins attended the first meet of the season, not as a subscriber but as an amateur. The Barford huntsmen piqued themselves on their bold riding; and their knowledge of the country came by nature; yet this new strange man, whom nobody knew, was in at the death, sitting on his horse, both well breathed and calm, without a hair turned on the sleek skin of the latter, supremely addressing the old huntsman as he hacked off the tail of the fox; and he, the old man, who was testy even under Sir Harry’s slightest rebuke, and flew out on any other member of the hunt that dared to utter a word against his sixty years’ experience as stable-boy, groom, poacher and what not—he, old Isaac Wormeley, was meekly listening to the wisdom of this stranger, only now and then giving one of his quick, up-turning, cunning glances, not unlike the sharp, o’er-canny looks of the poor deceased Reynard, round whom the hounds were howling, unadmonished by the short whip which was now tucked into Wormeley’s well-worn pocket. When Sir Harry rode into the copse—full of dead brushwood and wet tangled grass—and was

followed by the members of the hunt, as one by one they cantered past, Mr Higgins took off his cap and bowed—half deferentially, half insolently—with a lurking smile in the corner of his eye at the discomfited looks of one or two of the laggards. ‘A famous run, sir,’ said Sir Harry. ‘The first time you have hunted in our country, but I hope we shall see you often.’

‘I hope to become a member of the hunt, sir,’ said Mr Higgins.

‘Most happy—proud, I am sure, to receive so daring a rider among us. You took the Cropper-gate, I fancy, while some of our friends here’—scowling at one or two cowards by way of finishing his speech. ‘Allow me to introduce myself—master of the hounds.’ He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket for the card on which his name was formally inscribed. ‘Some of our friends here are kind enough to come home with me to dinner; might I ask for the honour?’

‘My name is Higgins,’ replied the stranger, bowing low. ‘I am only lately come to occupy the White House at Barford, and I have not as yet presented my letters of introduction.’

‘Hang it!’ replied Sir Harry; ‘a man with a seat like yours, and that good brush in your hand, might ride up to any door in the county (I’m a Leicestershire man!), and be a welcome guest. Mr Higgins, I shall be proud to become better acquainted with you over my dinner-table.’

Mr Higgins knew pretty well how to improve the acquaintance thus begun. He could sing a good song, tell a good story and was well up in practical jokes; with plenty of that keen, worldly sense, which seems like an instinct in some men, and which in this case taught him on whom he might play off such jokes, with impunity from their resentment, and with a security of applause from the more boisterous, vehement or prosperous. At the end of twelve months Mr Robinson Higgins was, out-and-out, the most popular member of the Barford hunt; had beaten all the others by a couple of lengths, as his first patron, Sir Harry, observed one evening, when they were just leaving the dinner-table of an old hunting squire in the neighbourhood.

‘Because you know,’ said Squire Hearn, holding Sir Harry by the button—‘I mean, you see, this young spark is looking sweet upon Catherine; and she’s a good girl, and will have ten thousand pounds down, the day she’s married, by her mother’s will; and, excuse me, Sir Harry, but I should not like my girl to throw herself away.’

Though Sir Harry had a long ride before him, and but the early and short light of a new moon to take it in, his kind heart was so much touched by Squire Hearn’s trembling, tearful anxiety, that he stopped and turned back into the dining-room to say, with more asseverations than I care to give,—‘My good squire, I may say, I know that man pretty well by this time; and a better fellow never existed. If I had twenty daughters he should have the pick of them.’

Squire Hearn never thought of asking the grounds for his old friend’s opinion of Mr Higgins; it had been given with too much earnestness for any doubts to cross the old man’s mind as to the possibility of its not being well founded. Mr Hearn was not a doubter, or a thinker, or suspicious by nature; it was simply his love for Catherine, his only child, that prompted his anxiety in this case; and, after what Sir Harry had said, the old man could totter with an easy mind, though not with very steady legs, into the drawing-room, where his bonny, blushing daughter Catherine and Mr Higgins stood close together on the hearth-rug; he whispering, she listening with downcast eyes. She looked so happy, so like her dead mother had looked when the squire was a young man, that all his thought was how to please her most. His son and heir was about to be married, and bring his wife to live with the squire; Barford and the White House were not distant an hour’s ride; and, even as these thoughts passed through his mind, he asked Mr Higgins if he could not stay all night—the young moon was already set—the roads would be dark—and Catherine looked up with a pretty anxiety, which, however, had not much doubt in it, for the answer.

With every encouragement of this kind from the old squire, it took everybody rather by surprise when, one morning, it was discovered that Miss Catherine Hearn was missing; and when, according to the usual fashion in such cases, a note was found, saying that she had eloped with ‘the man of her heart’, and gone to Gretna Green,” no one could imagine why she could not quietly have stopped at home, and been married in the parish church. She had always been a romantic, sentimental girl; very pretty and very affectionate, and very much spoiled, and very much wanting in common sense. Her indulgent father was deeply hurt at this want of confidence in his never-varying affection; but when his son came, hot with indignation from the baronet’s (his future father-in-law’s house, where every form of law and of ceremony was to accompany his own impending marriage), Squire Hearn pleaded the cause of the young couple with imploring cogency, and protested that it was a piece of spirit in his daughter, which he admired and was proud of. However, it ended with Mr Nathaniel Hearn’s declaring that he and his wife would have nothing to do with his sister and her husband. ‘Wait will you’ve seen him, Nat!’ said the old squire, trembling with his distressful anticipations of family discord. ‘He’s an excuse for any girl. Only ask Sir Harry’s opinion of him.’ ‘Confound Sir Harry! So that a man sits his horse well, Sir Harry cares nothing about anything else. Who is this man—this fellow? Where does he come from? What are his means? Who are his family?’

‘He comes from the south—Surrey or Somersetshire, I forget which; and he pays his way well and liberally. There’s not a tradesmen in Barford but says he cares no more for money than for water; he spends like a prince, Nat. I don’t know who his family are; but he seals with a coat of arms, which may tell you if you want to know; and he goes regularly to collect his rents from his estates in the south. Oh, Nat! if you would but be friendly, I should be as well pleased with Kitty’s marriage as any father in the county.’

Mr Nathaniel Hearn gloomed, and muttered an oath or two to himself. The poor old father was reaping the consequences of his weak indulgence to his two children. Mr and Mrs Nathaniel Hearn kept apart from Catherine and her husband; and Squire Hearn durst never ask them to Levison Hall, though it was his own house. Indeed, he stole away as if he were a culprit whenever he went to visit the White House; and if he passed a night there, he was fain to equivocate when he returned home the next day; an equivocation which was well interpreted by the surly, proud Nathaniel. But the younger Mr and Mrs Hearn were the only people who did not visit at the White House. Mr and Mrs Higgins were decidedly more popular than their brother and sister-in-law. She made a very pretty, sweet-tempered hostess, and her education had not been such as to make her intolerant of any want of refinement in the associates who gathered round her husband. She had gentle smiles for townspeople as well as county people; and unconsciously played an admirable second in her husband’s project of making himself universally popular.

But there is some one to make ill-natured remarks, and draw ill-natured conclusions from very simple premises, in every place; and in Barford this bird of ill-omen was a Miss Pratt. She did not hunt—so Mr Higgins’s admirable riding did not call out her admiration. She did not drink—so the well-selected wines, so lavishly dispensed among his guests, could never mollify Miss Pratt. She could not bear comic songs, or buffo stories—so, in that way, her approbation was impregnable. And these three secrets of popularity constituted Mr Higgins’s great charm. Miss Pratt sat and watched. Her face looked immovably grave at the end of any of Mr Higgins’s best stories; but there was a keen, needle-like glance of her unwinking little eyes, which Mr Higgins felt rather than saw, and which made him shiver,even on a hot day, when it fell upon him. Miss Pratt was a Dissenter, and, to propitiate this female Mordecai, Mr Higgins asked the Dissenting

minister whose services she attended, to dinner; kept himself and his company in good order; gave a handsome donation to the poor of the chapel. All in vain—Miss Pratt stirred not a muscle more of her face towards graciousness; and Mr Higgins was conscious that, in spite of all his open efforts to captivate Mr Davis, there was a secret influence on the other side, throwing in doubts and suspicions, and evil interpretations of all he said or did. Miss Pratt, the little, plain old maid, living on eighty pounds a year, was the thorn in the popular Mr Higgins's side, although she had never spoken one uncivil word to him; indeed, on the contrary, had treated him with a stiff and elaborate civility.

The thorn—the grief to Mrs Higgins was this. They had no children! Oh! how she would stand and envy the careless, busy motion of half-a-dozen children; and then, when observed, move on with a deep, deep sigh of yearning regret. But it was as well.

It was noticed that Mr Higgins was remarkably careful of his health. He ate, drank, took exercise, rested, by some secret rules of his own; occasionally bursting into an excess, it is true, but only on rare occasions—such as when he returned from visiting his estates in the south, and collecting his rents. That unusual exertion and fatigue—for there were no stage-coaches within forty miles of Barford, and he, like most country gentlemen of that day, would have preferred riding if there had been—seemed to require some strange excess to compensate for it; and rumours went through the town, that he shut himself up, and drank enormously for some days after his return. But no one was admitted to these orgies.

One day—they remembered it well afterwards—the hounds met not far from the town; and the fox was found in a part of the wild heath, which was beginning to be enclosed by a few of the more wealthy townspeople, who were desirous of building themselves houses rather more in the country than those they had hitherto lived in. Among these, the principal was a Mr Dudgeon, the attorney of Barford, and the agent for all the county families about. The firm of Dudgeon had managed the leases, the marriage settlements and the wills, of the neighbourhood for generations. Mr Dudgeon's father had the responsibility of collecting the land-owners' rents just as the present Mr Dudgeon had at the time of which I speak; and as his son and his son's son have done since. Their business was an hereditary estate to them; and with something of the old feudal feeling, was mixed a kind of proud humility at their position towards the squires whose family secrets they had mastered, and the mysteries of whose fortunes and estates were better known to the Messrs Dudgeon than to themselves.

MrJohn Dudgeon had built himself a house on Wildbury Heath—a mere cottage, as he called it; but though only two storeys high, it spread out far and wide, and work-people from Derby had been sent for on purpose to make the inside as complete as possible. The gardens, too, were exquisite in arrangement, if not very extensive; and not a flower was grown in them, but of the rarest species. It must have been somewhat of a mortification to the owner of this dainty place when, on the day of which I speak, the fox after a long race, during which he had described a circle of many miles, took refuge in the garden; but Mr Dudgeon put a good face on the matter when a gentleman hunter, with the careless insolence of the squires of those days and that place, rode across the velvet lawn, and tapping at the window of the dining-room with his whip-handle, asked permission—no! that is not it—rather, informed Mr Dudgeon of their intention—to enter his garden in a body, and have the fox unearthed. Mr Dudgeon compelled himself to smile assent, with the grace of a masculine Griselda; and then he hastily gave orders to have all that the house afforded of provision set out for luncheon, guessing rightly enough that a six hours' run would give even homely fare an acceptable welcome. He bore without wincing the entrance of the dirty boots into his exquisitely clean rooms; he only felt grateful for the care with which Mr

Higgins strode about, laboriously and noiselessly moving on the tip of his toes, as he reconnoitred the rooms with a curious eye.

'I'm going to build a house myself Dudgeon; and, upon my word, I don't think I could take a better model than yours.'

'Oh! my poor cottage would be too small to afford any hints for such a house as you would wish to build, Mr Higgins,' replied Mr Dudgeon, gently rubbing his hands nevertheless at the compliment.

'Not at all! not at all! Let me see. You have dining-room, drawing-room,—' he hesitated, and Mr Dudgeon filled up the blank as he expected.

'Four sitting-rooms and the bed-rooms. But allow me to show you over the house. I confess I took some pains in arranging it, and, though far smaller than what you would require, it may, nevertheless, afford you some hints.'

So they left the eating gentlemen with their mouths and their plates quite full, and the scent of the fox overpowering that of the hasty rashers of ham; and they carefully inspected all the ground-floor rooms. Then Mr Dudgeon said,—'If you are not tired, Mr Higgins—it is rather my hobby, so you must pull me up if you are—we will go upstairs, and I will show you my sanctum.'

Mr Dudgeon's sanctum was the centre room, over the porch, which formed a balcony, and which was carefully filled with choice flowers in pots. Inside, there were all kinds of elegant contrivances for hiding the real strength of all the boxes and chests required by the particular nature ofMr Dudgeon's business; for although his office was in Barford, he kept (as he informed Mr Higgins) what was the most valuable here, as being safer than an office which was locked up and left every night. But, as Mr Higgins reminded him with a sly poke in the side, when next they met, his own house was not over secure. A fortnight after the gentlemen of the Barford hunt lunched there, Mr Dudgeon's strong box,—in his sanctum upstairs, with the mysterious spring-bolt to the window invented by himself, and the secret of which was only known to the inventor and a few of his most intimate friends, to whom he had proudly shown it;—this strong-box, containing the collected Christmas rents of half-a-dozen landlords, (there was then no bank nearer than Derby,) was rifled; and the secretly rich Mr Dudgeon had to stop his agent in his purchases of paintings by Hemish artists, because the money was required to make good the missing rents.

The Dogberries and Verges of those days were quite incapable of obtaining any clue to the robber or robbers; and though one or two vagrants were taken up and brought before Mr Dunover and Mr Higgins, the magistrates who usually attended in the court-room at Barford, there was no evidence brought against them, and after a couple of nights' durance in the lock-ups they were set at liberty. But it became a standing joke with Mr Higgins to ask Mr Dudgeon, from time to time, whether he could recommend him a place of safety for his valuables; or, if he had made any more inventions lately for securing houses from robbers.

About two years after this time—about seven years after Mr Higgins had been married—one Tuesday evening, Mr Davis was sitting reading the news in the coffee-room of the George Inn. He belonged to a club of gentlemen who met there occasionally to play at whist, to read what few newspapers and magazines were published in those days, to chat about the market at Derby, and prices all over the country. This Tuesday night it was a black frost, and few people were in the room. Mr Davis was anxious to finish an article in the *Gentleman's Magazine:* indeed, he was making extracts from it, intending to answer it, and yet unable with his small income to purchase a copy. So he stayed late; it was past nine, and at ten o'clock the room was closed. But

while he wrote, Mr Higgins came in. He was pale and haggard with cold. Mr Davis, who had had for some time sole possession of the fire, moved politely on one side, and handed to the new comer the sole London newspaper which the room afforded. Mr Higgins accepted it, and made some remark on the intense coldness of the weather; but Mr Davis was too full of his article, and intended reply, to fall into conversation readily. Mr Higgins hitched his chair nearer to the fire, and put his feet on the fender, giving an audible shudder. He put the newspaper on one end of the table near him, and sat gazing into the red embers of the fire, crouching down over them as if his very marrow were chilled. At length he said,—

'There is no account of the murder at Bath in that paper?' Mr Davis, who had finished taking his notes, and was preparing to go, stopped short, and asked,—

'Has there been a murder at Bath? No! I have not seen anything of it—who was murdered?'

'Oh! it was a shocking, terrible murder!' said Mr Higgins, not raising his look from the fire, but gazing on with his eyes dilated till the whites were seen all round them. 'A terrible, terrible murder! I wonder what will become of the murderer? I can fancy the red glowing centre of that fire—look and see how infinitely distant it seems, and how the distance magnifies it into something awful and unquenchable.'

'My dear sir, you are feverish; how you shake and shiver!' said Mr Davis, thinking, privately, that his companion had symptoms of fever, and that he was wandering in his mind.

'Oh, no!' said Mr Higgins. 'I am not feverish. It is the night which is so cold.' And for a time he talked with Mr Davis about the article in the *Gentleman's Magazine,* for he was rather a reader himself, and could take more interest in Mr Davis's pursuits than most of the people at Barford. At length it drew near to ten, and Mr Davis rose up to go home to his lodgings.

'No, Davis, don't go. I want you here. We will have a bottle of port together, and that will put Saunders into good humour. I want to tell you about this murder,' he continued, dropping his voice, and speaking hoarse and low. 'She was an old woman, and he killed her, sitting reading her Bible by her own fireside!' He looked at Mr Davis with a strange, searching gaze, as if trying to find some sympathy in the horror which the idea presented to him.

'Whom do you mean, my dear sir? What is this murder you are so full of? No one has been murdered here.'

'No, you fool! I tell you it was in Bath!' said Mr Higgins, with sudden passion; and then calming himself to most velvet-smoothness of manner, he laid his hand on Mr Davis's knee, there, as they sat by the fire, and gently detaining him, began the narration of the crime he was so full of; but his voice and manner were constrained to a stony quietude: he never looked in Mr Davis's face; once or twice, as Mr Davis remembered afterwards, his grip tightened like a compressing vice.

'She lived in a small house in a quiet, old-fashioned street, she and her maid. People said she was a good old woman; but, for all that, she hoarded and hoarded, and never gave to the poor. Mr Davis, it is wicked not to give to the poor—wicked—wicked, is it not? I always give to the poor, for once I read in the Bible that "Charity covereth a multitude of sins." The wicked old woman never gave, but hoarded her money, and saved and saved. Some one heard of it; I say she threw a temptation in his way, and God will punish her for it. And this man—or it might be a woman, who knows?—and this person—heard also that she went to church in the mornings and her maid in the afternoons; and so, while the maid was at church, and the street and the house quite still, and the darkness of a winter afternoon coming on, she was nodding over her Bible—and that, mark you! is a sin, and one that God will avenge sooner or later,—and a step came, in the dusk, up the stair, and that person I told you of stood in the room. At first, he—no! At first, it

is supposed—for, you understand, all this is mere guess-work—it is supposed that he asked her civilly enough to give him her money, or to tell him where it was; but the old miser defied him, and would not ask for mercy and give up her keys, even when he threatened her, but looked him in the face as if he had been a baby.—Oh, God! Mr Davis, I once dreamt, when I was a little, innocent boy, that I should commit a crime like this, and I wakened up crying; and my mother comforted me—that is the reason I tremble so now—that and the cold, for it is very, very cold!'

'But did he murder the old lady?' asked Mr Davis, 'I beg your pardon, sir, but I am interested by your story.'

'Yes; he cut her throat; and there she lies yet, in her quiet little parlour, with her face upturned and all ghastly white, in the middle of a pool of blood. Mr Davis, this wine is no better than water; I must have some brandy!'

Mr Davis was horror-struck by the story, which seemed to have fascinated him as much as it had done his companion.

'Have they got any clue to the murderer?' said he. Mr Higgins drank down half a tumbler of raw brandy before he answered.

'No! no clue whatever. They will never be able to discover him; and I should not wonder, Mr Davis—I should not wonder if he repented after all, and did bitter penance for his crime; and if so—will there be mercy for him at the last day?'

'God knows!' said Mr Davis, with solemnity. 'It is an awful story,' continued he, rousing himself; 'I hardly like to leave this warm, light room and go out into the darkness after hearing it. But it must be done'—buttoning on his great coat—'I can only say, I hope and trust they will find out the murderer and hang him. If you'll take my advice, Mr Higgins, you'll have your bed warmed, and drink a treacle posset just the last thing; and, if you'll allow me, I'll send you my answer to Phiologus before it goes up to old Urban.'

The next morning, Mr Davis went to call on Miss Pratt, who was not very well, and, by way of being agreeable and entertaining, he related to her all he had heard the night before about the murder at Bath; and really he made a very pretty connected story out of it, and interested Miss Pratt very much in the fate of the old lady—partly because of a similarity in their situations; for she also privately hoarded money, and had but one servant, and stopped at home alone on Sunday afternoons to allow her servant to go to church.

'And when did all this happen?' she asked.

'I don't know if Mr Higgins named the day; and yet I think it must have been on this very last Sunday.'

'And to-day is Wednesday. Ill news travels fast.'

'Yes, Mr Higgins thought it might have been in the London newspaper.'

'That it could never be. Where did Mr Higgins learn all about it?'

'I don't know; I did not ask. I think he only came home yesterday: he had been south to collect his rents, somebody said.'

Miss Pratt grunted. She used to vent her dislike and suspicions of Mr Higgins in a grunt whenever his name was mentioned.

'Well, I shan't see you for some days. Godfrey Merton asked me to go and stay with him and his sister; and I think it will do me good. Besides,' added she, 'these winter evenings—and these murderers at large in the country—I don't quite like living with only Peggy to call to in case of need.'

Miss Pratt went to stay with her cousin, Mr Merton. He was an active magistrate, and enjoyed his reputation as such. One day he came in, having just received his letters.

‘Bad account of the morals of your little town here,Jessy!’ said he, touching one of his letters. ‘You’ve either a murderer among you, or some friend of a murderer. Here’s a poor old lady at Bath had her throat cut last Sunday week; and I’ve a letter from the Home Office, asking to lend them “my very efficient aid”, as they are pleased to call it, towards finding out the culprit. It seems he must have been thirsty, and of a comfortable jolly turn; for before going to his horrid work he tapped a barrel of ginger wine the old lady had set by to work; and he wrapped the spigot round with a piece of a letter taken out of his pocket, as may be supposed: and this piece of a letter was found afterwards; there are only these letters on the outside, *“ns, Esq., -arford, -egworth”,* which some one has ingeniously made out to mean Barford, near Kegworth. On the other side, there is some allusion to a racehorse, I conjecture, though the name is singular enough—“Church-and-King-and-down-with-the-Rump”.’

Miss Pratt caught at this name immediately. It had hurt her feelings as a Dissenter only a few months ago, and she remembered it well.

‘Mr Nat Hearn has, or had (as I am speaking in the witness-box, as it were, I must take care of my tenses), a horse with that ridiculous name.’

‘Mr Nat Hearn,’ repeated Mr Merton, making a note of the intelligence; then he recurred to his letter from the Home Office again.

‘There is also a piece of a small key, broken in the futile attempt to open a desk—well, well. Nothing more of consequence. The letter is what we must rely upon.’

‘Mr Davis said that Mr Higgins told him—’ Miss Pratt began.

‘Higgins!’ exclaimed Mr Merton, *‘ns.* Is it Higgins, the blustering fellow that ran away with Nat Hearn’s sister?’

‘Yes!’ said Miss Pratt. ‘But though he has never been a favourite of mine—*‘ns,’* repeated Mr Merton. ‘It is too horrible to think of; a member of the hunt—kind old Squire Hearn’s son-in-law! Who else have you in Barford with names that end in *ns?’*

‘There’s Jackson, and Higginson, and Blenkinsop, and Davis and Jones. Cousin! one thing strikes me—how did Mr Higgins know all about it to tell Mr Davis on Tuesday what had happened on Sunday afternoon?’

There is no need to add much more. Those curious in lives of the highwaymen may find the name of Higgins as conspicuous among those annals as that of Claude Duval. Kate Hearn’s husband collected his rents on the highway, like many another ‘gentleman’ of the day; but, having been unlucky in one or two of his adventures, and hearing exaggerated accounts of the hoarded wealth of the old lady at Bath, he was led on from robbery to murder, and was hung for his crime at Derby, in 1775.

He had not been an unkind husband; and his poor wife took lodgings in Derby to be near him in his last moments—his awful last moments. Her old father went with her everywhere, but into her husband’s cell; and wrung her heart by constantly accusing himself of having promoted her marriage with a man of whom he knew so little. He abdicated his squireship in favour of his son Nathaniel. Nat was prosperous, and the helpless silly father could be of no use to him; but to his widowed daughter, the foolish, fond old man was all in all—her knight, her protector, her companion, her most faithful loving companion. Only, he ever declined assuming the office of her counsellor; shaking his head sadly, and saying,

‘Ah! Kate, Kate! if I had had more wisdom to have advised thee better, thou need’st not have been an exile here in Brussels, shrinking from the sight of every English person as if they knew thy story.’

I saw the White House not a month ago; it was to let, perhaps for the twentieth time since Mr Higgins occupied it; but still the tradition goes in Barford that, once upon a time, a highwayman lived there, and amassed untold treasures; and that the ill-gotten wealth yet remains walled up in some unknown concealed chamber; but in what part of the house no one knows.

Will any of you become tenants, and try to find out this mysterious closet? I can furnish the exact address to any applicant who wishes for it.