

A PAIR OF HANDS

SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

"IT HAPPENED WHEN I lived down in Cornwall. Tresillack was the name of the house, which stood quite alone at the head of a coombe, within sound of the sea but without sight of it; for though the coombe led down to a wide open beach, it wound and twisted on its way, and its overlapping sides closed the view from the house, which was advertised as 'secluded'. I was very poor in those days, but I was young enough to be romantic and wise enough to like independence, and the word 'secluded' took my fancy.

"The misfortune was that it had taken the fancy of several previous tenants. You know, I dare say, the kind of person who rents a secluded house in the country? 'Shady' is the word, is it not? Well, the previous tenants of Tresillack had been shady with a vengeance.

"I knew nothing of this when I first made application to the landlord, who lived in a farm at the foot of the coombe, on a cliff overlooking the beach.

"To him I presented myself fearlessly as a spinster of decent family and small but assured income, intending a rural life of seemliness and economy. He met my advances politely, but with an air of suspicion. I began by disliking him for it; afterward I set it down as an unpleasant feature in the local character. I was doubly mistaken. Farmer Hosking was slow-witted, but as honest a man as ever stood

up against hard times; and a more open and hospitable race than the people on that coast I never wish to meet. It was the caution of a child who had burnt his fingers, not once but many times. Had I known what I afterward learned of Farmer Hosking's tribulations as landlord of a 'secluded country residence,' I should have faltered as I undertook to prove the bright exception in a long line of painful experiences. He had bought the Tresillack estate twenty years before because the land adjoined his own, but the house was a nuisance and had been so from the beginning.

"Well, miss," he said, "you're welcome to look over it; a pretty enough place, inside and out. There's no trouble about keys, because I've put in a housekeeper, a widow-woman, and she'll show you 'round. With your leave I'll step up the coombe so far with you and put you in your way." As I thanked him, he paused and rubbed his chin. "There's one thing I must tell you, though. Whoever takes the house must take Mrs. Carkeek along with it."

"Mrs. Carkeek?" I echoed dolefully. "Is that the housekeeper?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, miss," he added, my face telling him no doubt what sort of woman I expected Mrs. Carkeek to be; "but I had to make it a rule after — after some things had happened. And I dare say you won't find her so bad. Mary Carkeek's a sensible, comfortable woman, and knows the place. She was in service there to Squire Kendall when he sold up and went: her first place it was."

"I may as well see the house, anyhow," said I dejectedly. So we started to walk up the coombe. The path, which ran beside a little chattering stream, was narrow for the most part, and Farmer Hosking, with an apology, strode on ahead to beat aside the brambles. But whenever its width allowed us to walk side by side, I caught him from time to time stealing a shy, inquisitive glance under his rough eyebrows. It was clear that he could not sum me up to his satisfaction.

"I don't know what foolish fancy prompted it, but

about halfway up the coombe, I stopped short and asked:

“There are no ghosts, I suppose?”

“It struck me, a moment after I had uttered it, as a supremely silly question; but he took it quite seriously. ‘No: I never heard tell of any ghosts.’ He laid a queer sort of stress on the word. ‘There’s always been trouble with servants, and maids’ tongues will be runnin’. But Mary Carkeek lives up there alone, and she seems comfortable enough.’

“We walked on. By and by, he pointed with his stick. ‘It don’t look like a place for ghosts, now, do it?’

“Certainly it did not. Above an untrimmed orchard rose a terrace of turf scattered with thorn bushes, and above this a terrace of stone, upon which stood the prettiest cottage I had ever seen. It was long and low and thatched; a deep veranda ran from end to end. Clematis, banksia roses, and honeysuckle climbed the posts of this veranda and clustered along its roof, beneath the lattices of the bedroom windows. The house was small enough to be called a cottage, and rare enough in features and in situation to

confer distinction on any tenant. It suggested what in those days we should have called 'elegant' living. And I could have clapped my hands for joy.

"My spirits mounted still higher when Mrs. Carkeek opened the door. A healthy, middle-aged woman with a thoughtful, but contented, face, and a smile, she was comfortable; and while we walked through the rooms together (for Mr. Hosking waited outside), I 'took to' Mrs. Carkeek. Her speech was direct and practical; the rooms, in spite of their faded furniture, were bright and exquisitely clean; and somehow the very atmosphere of the house gave me a sense of feeling at home and cared for; yes, of being loved. Don't laugh, my dears; for when I've done you may not think this fancy altogether foolish.

"I stepped out onto the veranda, and Farmer Hosking pocketed the pruning-knife which he had been using on a bush of jasmine.

"This is better than anything I had dreamed of,' said I.

"Well, miss, that's not a wise way of beginning a bargain, if you'll excuse me.'

"He took no advantage, however, and we struck the bargain as we returned down the coombe to his farm. I had meant to engage a maid of my own, but now it occurred to me that I might do very well with Mrs. Carkeek. Within the week, I had moved into my new home.

"I can hardly describe to you the happiness of my first month at Tresillack, because if I take the reasons which I had for being happy, one by one, there remains over something which I cannot account for. I was young, healthy; I felt myself independent and adventurous; the season was high summer, the weather glorious, the garden in all the pomp of June, yet sufficiently unkempt to keep me busy, give me a sharp appetite for meals, and send me to bed in that drowsy stupor which comes of the odors of earth. I spent the most of my time out-of-doors, winding up the day's work with a walk down the cool valley, along the beach, and back.

"I soon found that all housework could be safely left to

Mrs. Carkeek. She did not talk much; indeed, her only fault (a rare one in housekeepers) was that she talked too little, and even when I addressed her seemed at times unable to give me her attention. It was as though her mind strayed off to some small job she had forgotten, and her eyes wore a listening look, as though she waited for the neglected task to speak and remind her. But, as a matter of fact, she forgot nothing. Indeed, my dears, I was never so well attended to in my life.

"Well, that is what I'm coming to. That is just it. The woman not only had the rooms swept and dusted and my meals prepared to the moment.

"In a hundred odd little ways, this orderliness, these preparations, seemed to read my desires. Did I wish the roses renewed in a bowl upon the dining-table, sure enough at the next meal they would be replaced by fresh ones. And how on earth had she guessed the very roses, the very shapes and colors I had lightly wished for? Every day, and from morning to night, I happened on others, each slight, but all bearing witness to a ministering intelligence as subtle as it was untiring.

"I am a light sleeper, with an uncomfortable knack of waking with the sun and roaming early. No matter how early I rose at Tresillack, Mrs. Carkeek seemed to have preceded me. Finally I had to conclude that she arose and dusted and tidied as soon as she judged me safely a-bed. For once, finding the living room (where I had been sitting late) 'redded up' at four in the morning, and no trace of a plate of raspberries which I had carried thither after dinner

and left overnight, I determined to test her and walked through to the kitchen, calling her by name.

"I found the kitchen as clean as a pin, and the fire laid, but no trace of Mrs. Carkeek. I walked upstairs and knocked at her door. At the second knock, a sleepy voice cried out, and presently the good woman stood before me in her nightgown, looking (I thought) very badly scared.

"'No,' I said, 'it's not a burglar. But I've found out what I wanted, that you do your morning's work overnight. And now go back to your bed like a good soul, while I take a run down to the beach.'

"She stood blinking in the dawn. Her face was still white.

"'O, miss,' she gasped, 'I was so sure you must have seen something!'

"'And so I have,' I answered, 'but it was neither burglars nor ghosts.'

"'Thank God!' I heard her say as she turned her back to me in her gray bedroom – which faced the north. And I took this for a carelessly pious expression and ran downstairs thinking no more of it.

"A few days later, I began to understand.

"The plan of Tresillack house (I must explain) was simplicity itself. To the left of the hall as you entered was the dining room; to the right the living room. The foot of the stairs faced the front door, and beside it, passing a glazed inner door, you found two others right and left, the left opening on the kitchen, the right on a passage which ran under the stairs to a neat pantry with the usual shelves and linen chest, and under the window a porcelain basin and brass faucet. On the first morning of my tenancy, I had visited this pantry and turned the faucet, but no water ran. I supposed this to be accidental. Mrs. Carkeek had to wash up, and no doubt Mrs. Carkeek would complain of any failure in the water supply.

"But the day after, I had picked a basketful of roses and carried them into the pantry as a handy place to arrange them. I chose a china bowl and went to fill it at the faucet. Again the water would not run.

"I called Mrs. Carkeek. 'What is wrong with this faucet?' I asked. 'The rest of the house is well enough supplied.'

" 'I don't know, miss. I never use it.'

" 'But there must be a reason; and you must find it a great nuisance washing the plates and glasses in the kitchen. Come around to the back with me, and we'll have a look at the cisterns.'

" 'The cisterns'll be all right, miss. I assure you I don't find it a trouble.'

"But I was not to be put off. The back of the house stood but ten feet from a wall which was really but a stone face built against the cliff. Above the cliff rose the vegetable garden, and from its lower path, we looked over the wall's parapet upon the cisterns. There were two – a very large one, supplying the kitchen and the bathroom above the kitchen; and a small one, fed by the other, obviously leading by a pipe which I could trace, to the pantry. Now the big cistern stood almost full, and yet the small one, though on a lower level, was empty.

" 'It's as plain as daylight,' said I. 'The pipe between the two is choked.' And I clambered onto the parapet.

" 'I wouldn't, miss. The pantry faucet is only cold water, and no use to me. From the kitchen boiler I get it hot, you see.'

" 'But I want the pantry water for my flowers.' I bent over and groped. 'I thought as much!' said I, as I wrenched out a thick plug of cork, and immediately the water began to flow. I turned triumphantly on Mrs. Carkeek, who had grown suddenly red in the face. Her eyes were fixed on the cork in my hand. To keep it more firmly wedged in its place, somebody had wrapped it round with a rag of calico print; and discolored though the rag was, I seemed to recall the pattern (a lilac sprig). Then, as our eyes met, it occurred to me that only two mornings before Mrs. Carkeek had worn a print dress of that same sprigged pattern.

"I had the presence of mind to hide this very small discovery, and presently Mrs. Carkeek regained her composure. But I felt disappointed in her. She had

deliberately acted a fib before me; and why? Merely because she preferred the kitchen to the pantry faucet. It was childish. 'But servants are all the same,' I told myself. 'I must take Mrs. Carkeek as she is; and, after all, she is a treasure.'

"On the second night after this, I was lying in bed and reading myself sleepy over a novel, when a small sound disturbed me. I listened. The sound was clearly that of water trickling. A shower (I told myself) had filled the water-pipes which drained the roof. Somehow I could not locate the sound. I rose and drew up the shade.

"To my astonishment, no rain was falling; no rain had fallen. There was no wind, no cloud; only a still moon high over the eastern slope of the coombe, the distant splash of waves, and the fragrance of many roses. I went back to bed and listened again. Yes, the trickling sound continued, quite distinct in the silence of the house, not to be confused for a moment with the dull murmur of the beach. After a while, it began to grate on my nerves. I caught up my candle, flung my bathrobe about me, and stole softly downstairs.

"Then it was simple. I traced the sound to the pantry. 'Mrs. Carkeek has left the faucet running,' said I: and, sure I found it so — a thin trickle steadily running to waste in the porcelain basin. I turned off the knob, went contentedly back to my bed, and slept —

"— for some hours. I opened my eyes in darkness and at once knew what had awakened me. The faucet was running again. Now, it had shut easily in my hand, but not so easily that I could believe it had slipped open again of its own accord. 'This is Mrs. Carkeek's doing,' said I; and I am afraid I added 'Drat Mrs. Carkeek!'

"Well, there was no help for it: so I struck a match, looked at my watch, saw that the hour was just three o'clock, and I descended the stairs again. At the pantry door I paused. I was not afraid — not one little bit. In fact, the notion that anything might be wrong had never crossed my mind. But I

remember thinking, with my hand on the door, that if Mrs. Carkeek were in the pantry, I might happen to give her a severe fright.

"I pushed the door open briskly. Mrs. Carkeek was not there. But something was there, by the porcelain basin. My heart seemed to stand still – so still! And in the stillness I remember setting down the brass candlestick on a tall chest of drawers beside me.

"Over the porcelain basin and beneath the water trickling from the faucet, I saw two hands.

"That was all – two small hands, a child's hands. I cannot tell how they ended.

"No; they were not cut off. I saw them quite distinctly; just a pair of small hands and the wrists, and after that – nothing. They were moving briskly – washing themselves clean. I saw the water trickle and splash over them – not through them – but just as it would on real hands. They were the hands of a little girl, too. Oh, yes, I was sure of that at once. Boys and girls wash their hands differently. I can't just tell you what the difference is, but it's unmistakable.

"I saw all this before my candle slipped and fell with a

crash. I had set it down without looking – for my eyes were fixed on the basin – and had balanced it on the edge of the chest of drawers. After the crash, in the darkness there, with the water running, I suffered some bad moments.

“Oddly enough, the thought uppermost with me was that I must shut off that faucet before escaping. I had to. And after a while, I picked up all my courage, and with a little sob thrust out my hand and did it. Then I fled.

“The dawn was close upon me: and as soon as the sky reddened, I took my bath, dressed, and went downstairs. And there at the pantry door I found Mrs. Carkeek, also dressed, with my candlestick in her hand.

“‘Ah,’ said I, ‘you picked it up.’

“Our eyes met. Clearly Mrs. Carkeek wished me to begin, and I determined at once to have it out with her.

“‘And you knew all about it. That’s what accounts for your plugging up the cistern.’

“‘You saw . . . ?’ she began.

“‘Yes, yes. And you must tell me all about it – never mind how bad. Is – is it – murder?’

“‘Law bless you, miss, whatever put such horrors in your head?’

“‘She was washing her hands.’

“‘Ah, so she does, poor dear! But – murder! And dear little Miss Margaret, that wouldn’t hurt a fly!’

“‘Miss Margaret?’

“‘Eh, she died at seven. Squire Kendall’s only daughter; and that’s over twenty years ago. I was her nurse, miss, and I know – diphtheria it was; she took it down in the village.’

“‘But how do you know it is Margaret?’

“‘Those hands – why, how could I mistake, that used to be her nurse?’

“‘But why does she wash them?’

“‘Well, miss, being always a dainty child – and the housework, you see –’

“I took a long breath. ‘Do you mean to tell me that all

this cleaning and dusting –' I broke off. 'Is it she who has been taking this care of me?'

"Mrs. Carkeek met my look steadily.

" 'Who else, miss?'

" 'Poor little soul!'

" 'Well, now' – Mrs. Carkeek rubbed my candlestick with the edge of her apron – 'I'm so glad you take it like this. For there isn't really nothing to be afraid of – is there?' She eyed me wistfully. 'It's my belief she loves you, miss. But only to think what a time she must have had with the others!'

" 'Were they bad?'

" 'They was awful. Didn't Farmer Hosking tell you? They carried on fearful – one after another, and each one worse than the last.'

" 'What was the matter with them? Drink?'

" 'Drink, miss, with some of 'em. There was the Major – he used to go mad with it and run about the coombe in his nightshirt. Oh, scandalous! And his wife drank, too – that is, if she ever was his wife. Just think of that tender child washing up after their nasty doings!'

" 'But that wasn't the worst, miss – not by a long way. There was a pair here with two children, a boy and gel, the eldest scarce six. Poor mites!'

" 'They beat those children, miss – your blood would boil! And starved, and tortured 'em, it's my belief. You could hear their screams, I've been told, away back in the high-road, and that's the best part of half a mile.'

" 'Sometimes they was locked up without food for days together. But it's my belief that little Miss Margaret managed to feed them somehow. Oh, I can see her creeping to the door and comforting!'

" 'But perhaps she never showed herself when these awful people were here, but took to flight until they left.'

" 'You didn't never know her, miss. How brave she was! She'd have stood up to lions. She've been here all the while: and only to think what her innocent eyes and ears

must have took in! There was another couple –' Mrs Carkeek sunk her voice.

" 'Oh, hush!' said I, 'if I'm to have any peace of mind in this house!'

" 'But you won't go, miss? She loves you, I know she do. And think what you might be leaving her to – what sort of tenant might come next. For she can't go. She've been here ever since her father sold the place. He died soon after. You mustn't go!'

"Now I had resolved to go, but all of a sudden I felt how mean this resolution was.

" 'After all,' said I, 'there's nothing to be afraid of.'

" 'That's it, miss; nothing at all. I don't even believe it's so very uncommon. Why, I've heard my mother tell of farmhouses where the rooms were swept every night as regular as clockwork, and the floors sanded, and the pots and pans scoured, and all while the maids slept. They put it down to the piskies; but we know better, miss, and now we've got the secret between us we can lie easy in our beds, and if we hear anything, say, "God bless the child!" and go to sleep.'

"I spent three years at Tresillack, and all that while Mrs. Carkeek lived with me and shared the secret. Few women, I

dare to say, were ever so completely wrapped around with love as we were during those three years.

"It ran through my waking life like a song: it smoothed my pillow, touched and made my table comely, in summer lifted the heads of the flowers as I passed, and in winter watched the fire with me and kept it bright.

"'Why did I ever leave Tresillack?' Because one day, at the end of five years, Farmer Hosking brought me word that he had sold the house. There was no avoiding it, at any rate; the purchaser being a Colonel Kendall, a brother of the old Squire.

"'A married man?' I asked.

"'Yes, miss; with a family of eight. As pretty children as ever you see, and the mother a good lady. It's the old home to Colonel Kendall.'

"'I see. And that is why you feel bound to sell.'

"'It's a good price, too, that he offers. You mustn't think but I'm sorry enough —'

"'To turn me out? I thank you, Mr. Hosking; but you are doing the right thing.'

"'She — Margaret — will be happy,' I said; 'with her cousins, you know.'

"'Oh, yes, miss, she will be happy, sure enough,' Mrs. Carkeek agreed.

"So when the time came I packed up my boxes and tried to be cheerful. But on the last morning, when they stood in the hall, I sent Mrs. Carkeek upstairs upon some poor excuse and stepped alone into the pantry.

"'Margaret!' I whispered.

"There was no answer at all. I had scarcely dared to hope for one. Yet I tried again, and, shutting my eyes this time, stretched out both hands and whispered:

"'Margaret!'

"And I will swear to my dying day that two little hands stole and rested — for a moment only — in mine."