"It is ridiculous," she said to herself. "It is a shame!—and General Waller ought to know—although I'm not going to tell him."

There happened an unexpected, and for some a rather embarrassing, occurrence. The General's house in the old Square had been got ready and aired for him by his sister, Bert's mother, but the carriage that received him, instead of taking him there, whirled him off to a little country-seat he had recently acquired some three miles off. The explanation of the flight came later in the day from Bert.

"The old boy," said he, "couldn't stand the idea—don't you know—of staying in the Square. He was afraid all Billington would be coming to stare at his windows—and I daresay he was right—so he said to the mater, 'No, no, Jane; very kind of you to get the house ready, but I'll go to the otherplace'; and he went, although there was nothing ready for him."

Gertie was pining to meet General Waller—for she was profoundly interested in her own conception of him—but Bert Wigginton made no offer to introduce her to the General's notice in any way; and she was not the girl to ask him. Day after day passed, and at length the day was at hand when the General was to be publicly received and feted, and Gertie Miniver took a desperate resolution to see and speak with the General before the business of the day should begin. Why? Well, she was, as I've said, profoundly interested in the General, and she told herself she ought to know the General before she should answer "yes" or "no" to Bert Wigginton's importunities.

She had got to know from Bert that his uncle was an early riser—a really early riser; five o'clock was his hour, and he was commonly out by six for a ride or a walk. So Gertie Miniver, on the evening before the great day, went to a livery stable, and ordered a horse to be ready for her at half-past five the next morning; in that way she would be prepared to meet the General either riding or walking.

She was a good horsewoman, and by six o'clock in the morning she was riding slowly in the sunshine along a grass-grown lane that skirted the General's country place. She suddenly drew up on hearing a voice not far off—a man's voice saying clearly: "Mr Chairman and gentlemen—no, no; Mr Mayor, Aldermen, councillors, gentlemen and ladies—no, no! Won't do at all!" She peeped and peered over the high hedge, and there came pacing quickly into view—who, but the General himself? There could be no doubt of that. He was a tallish man, well-set-up, burnt to the colour of an old brick, as lean as a greyhound, and somewhat grizzled. He stood still and made another oratorical effort, speaking in a strong, clear voice, as if he were addressing a regiment, and jerking his hand and wagging his head at an imaginary audience: "Mr Mayor and—and Gentlemen,—er—I rise—to my feet—my feet—. No, no, no, no! D—the thing! I wish to goodness I had never engaged to meet the crowd! I shall certainly break down! I shall make a mess of it!"

He was in a little secluded space, surrounded by shrubbery, and Gertie Miniver smiled to herself at his nervous quandary. It was manifest what he was about; he was preparing, or trying, his address in acknowledgment of the gift of the golden casket that was to be made to him that day, and he was making a mess of it. He sat down on a bench in the full morning sunshine, and pulled a sheet of foolscap from his pocket, from which he began, apparently, to study his speech.

He read attentively for a little while, and then his gaze began to wander. He stretched out his legs, leaned well back upon the bench, and yawned — a wide yawn, which showed a mouthful of good teeth.

"I'm dooced sleepy! Bad night, I s'pose! Got this confounded thing on my mind!"

He resumed with a resolute frown his study of the foolscap. In the quiet the birds that had been silenced by his resonant oratory broke out afresh with their morning songs. A robin-red-breast, as bold as a British soldier, stood forth on a twig opposite to the General, cocked a bright eye at him, and trilled forth a fine flow of confident notes. The General raised his head from his foolscap.

"Yes, you little beggar," said he, "you think you could do it—don't you! Well, I wish I had your nerve, and your flow of speech. But you're not before an audience, you know."

The robin trilled forth again, and the General laughed, let his foolscap slip to the ground, folded his arms, sank his head on his chest — and gave way to sleep.

Gertie Miniver looked at him a little while, and considered, with her hand pensively at her chin. Then she resolved what she would do. She slipped from her seat on the horse's back, led him swiftly away up the lane for some twenty yards, tied him to a tree, and ran back to the spot whence she had viewed General Waller. She had noted a thinness in the hedge, a step or two off, which could easily be made into a gap. Through this she crept, and stepped softly to the General's seat. From the grass she picked up the foolscap, and retired behind the bench on which he slept to read it.

Her suspicion was right, it was the speech destined for the great occasion that day. She smiled over it; a bright idea came and shone before her. She seated herself on the grass, and with a pencil which she found in her pocket, she wrote a nice little speech of her own, beginning, "Mr Mayor, and fellow-townsmen, although this is a most interesting occasion for me, it is also a most trying one." She wrote on and on, while she smiled to herself, and produced a complete little speech on the empty half-sheet of foolscap. Without thinking of the noise she might make, she tore with a wrench the two half-sheets apart. They separated with a harsh sound that alarmed her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in a suppressed voice; and before she could say or do anything else, the General had wakened, turned on the bench, and looked at her!

"Hallo!" he said, after a quiet and amazed pause of recovery from his slumber. "What are you doing with that paper?"

He held out his hand, and she was compelled to rise and give him the sundered halves of the foolscap. Then a gleam of recognition came upon his face.

"Surely," said he, "we have met before?"

"Yes," she answered, in a flutter; "three years ago, at dinner. My name is Miniver."

"Of course, said he, rising; "I remember. And mine is Waller."

"I know," she said.

"What have you been doing with my foolscap?" He smiled. "Writing on it. Hallo!" he exclaimed again, as he caught the significance of what she had written. He read rapidly through it, and then he looked at her. "You are very clever," said he.

"It is very rude of me," said she, "to interfere."

"It is very kind," he replied.

"I thought," said she, "that I would do it, and get away before you awoke, and you would think a fairy, perhaps, had done it."

"A fairy has done it," said he, gallantly, "and I am very glad I awoke before you disappeared."

"Do you think," she asked, with a genuine flutter of shyness, "that it will do?—do better?"

"Much better! It is the proper thing!"

"Do you think so, really?"

"Now, I tell you what, Miss Miniver," he said, gaily. "You're an actress. Ah, yes; I remember all about you. It would be a great kindness if you would show me how to deliver it. But—forgive my naming so common and trivial a thing—it is my time for breakfast. Will you come and breakfast with me—I am all alone—and then we can get at this in good earnest?"

"There is not really much to get at," answered Gertie, "but I'll breakfast with you gladly."

Gertie's horse was found, and General Waller led it along the lane to his house, while he walked by her side. She insisted, a little nervously, on giving her views at once on how the speech should be delivered.

"Not," said she, "as a creature in a Punch and Judy show might deliver it, but like a soldier; standing firm, speaking clearly with you hand—if you like—stuck in the bosom of your coat, like Napoleon."

In the house they sat down to breakfast, and were silently waited on by the General's soldier servant. They enjoyed themselves immensely; and they were talking and laughing, forgetful of everything but themselves, when who should come in but—Bert Wigginton and his mother! They declared at once that they had come to breakfast, but Mrs Wigginton stood in rigid surprise at the company her brother was in.

"Who is this creature you have picked up?" her look plainly said. "This improper woman who comes in and breakfasts alone with you? Alone!"

"Jane, my dear," said the General, rising, "let me introduce you to an old acquaintance of mine—Miss Miniver—the lady that I intend to make my wife."

Miss Miniver was speechless with astonishment; Mrs Wigginton gasped with amazement, and had to sit down; while Bert was smitten silent and sulky.

General Waller pressed them to draw in to the table, since they had come to breakfast.

"John," said he, "will soon make some fresh tea."

But Mrs Wigginton was on her dignity, and her son silently supported her.

"I wouldn't think," said she, "of breaking in upon your little tete-a-tete, Herbert."

That she said with intended bitterness and sarcasm, but her brother only smiled and said, "Well, as you please, Jane. I suppose I shall see you again in an hour or two."

"Oh, yes, I daresay you will see us," said Mrs Wigginton.

When mother and son had departed, there was a pause of embarrassment between General Waller and Gertie. But he took her hand in a firm clasp.

"I hope," said he, "that you have forgiven me for the liberty I have taken in the declaration I have made to my sister."

"Yes," said Gertie, "I forgive you. You said it, I know, to protect my reputation. But what is to be done next? Announce, I suppose, that your intended marriage is broken off?"

"Announce?" he exclaimed. "The next announcement will be, I hope, that I am married. Do you doubt that I meant what I said? I do intend to make you my wife." And he smiled in a masterful way.

Gertie truly had doubted. Now she was in a flutter of wonder and blushes; but she kept her courage and defiance.

"I should like to be asked first," said she. "No woman likes to be taken for granted."

"Please will you marry me?" he asked earnestly, with an engaging smile.

"I'll think about it," she answered, smiling in return, and trying to release her hand.

"Promise me first," said he, refusing to let go her hand, "and think about it afterwards."

"But—but," she urged, "I can't tell yet whether I really like you or not."

"You can't really tell that," said he, "until you are married. Promise me."

"Well, yes, then, I will," she answered, "although I feel I am being hurried off my feet."

"That's right," said he, and promptly kissed her where she stood.

The day passed with great eclat. The General's little speech of thanks for the address and the golden casket was generally pronounced "just the thing"; and at the ball that night he danced with Gertie (after he had danced with the Mayoress), and then introduced her to some friends as his intended bride].

But by that time Gertie had had a final interview with Bert Wigginton. He reproached her with being underhand, and mean, and deceitful.

"You have no right to talk to me like that," she said. "I don't know that I owe you anything—any consideration even. Yes, I have liked you; and you have worried me to become engaged to you, but you never gave any sign of doing anything to make marriage possible."

"But why," he demanded, "did you never tell me that you knew my uncle?"

"I didn't know that I knew him," she answered, "until I saw him at the station the day he arrived."

"Knew him before by another name, I suppose?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered: Bert might believe so if he liked. She added, "I knew no more than you did what he was going to say this morning when you and your mother found us at breakfast. But I'm glad—really glad—that I shall be the wife of a man who has done things, and not of a boy who hasn't learnt to do anything."