Strawberry Roan

A. G. Street

Title: Strawberry Roan
Date of first publication: 1932
Author: Arthur George Street (1892-1966)
Date first posted: Oct. 5, 2020
Date last updated: Oct. 5, 2020
Faded Page eBook #20201012

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

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Farmer's Glory

STRAWBERRY ROAN

by
A. G. STREET

LONDON
FABER & FABER LIMITED
24 RUSSELL SQUARE

FIRST PUBLISHED IN MCMXXXII
BY FABER AND FABER LIMITED
24 RUSSELL SQUARE LONDON W.C.1
SECOND IMPRESSION OCTOBER MCMXXXII
THIRD IMPRESSION OCTOBER MCMXXXII
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
LATIMER TREND AND CO PLYMOUTH

In gratitude
TO MY WIFE
Who never doubted clouds would break

Author's Note

Although their opinions are not necessarily those of the author, all the characters in this book are entirely the product of his imagination.

Strawberry Roan

Chapter 1

One Sunday evening in the year 1928, John Dibben walked back from chapel much more quickly than usual. His two small daughters, Kate aged eleven and Emily aged nine, generally referred to by their parents as "Katenemily", were forced to trot by their father's side in order to keep up with him, and his wife was beginning to puff at the unaccustomed speed.

As a general rule their return from chapel was more in the nature of a leisurely stroll, with frequent halts for intimate conversation with other village worthies; a dallying which was usually finished by Mrs. Dibben's, "Now father, do 'ee come on. Katenemily do want their supper."

But this evening there were no stops of any kind. Mr. Dibben strode along as if for a wager, with only a hurried wave of the hand, and a curt "Good evening" to his cronies. The Wesleyan chapel was a little distance from the heart of the village of Coombe Wallop, being nearly a mile from the Dibbens' home, and, as it was a warm, sultry, September evening, the pace set by her lord and master soon proved too much for Mrs. Dibben.

She was what is known as comfortable in build, she was garbed in decorous Sunday black, and she had on a pair of new, black, button boots. New boots are usually a trial to most folk, and about halfway home these caused Mrs. Dibben to burst out with, "Fer mercy's sake, John, goo a bit stiddier, do. What's yer 'urry? My corn be fair tuggin'."

"Sorry, me dear," said Mr. Dibben, slowing down a trifle, "I werden thinkin', and I do want to get 'ome. I do want to go up along atter supper, fore do get dark."

"Lor, 'ow you do worrit about that place. You were up there afore tea."

Presently they arrived outside the village shop, of which the fascia board bore the inscription, "JOHN DIBBEN", with the word "BAKER" in front of the "JOHN", and the words "& GROCER" after the "DIBBEN". Mr. Dibben took a large key from his pocket and opened the shop door to the accompaniment of the "ping" of the shop bell.

This was one of Mrs. Dibben's greatest griefs. Though they were very comfortable, doing well, and she was considered a lucky woman by most of her contemporaries, the front entrance to her home was through the shop. And Mrs. Dibben wanted a private front door. She had wanted it for years. On weekdays the "ping" of the shop bell was music to her ears, but on Sundays it was distinctly out of tune. Sometimes the minister came to her home after the morning service, and she hated to have him come through the shop.

This was another grievance against "that place", which seemed to fill all John's waking thoughts. If he had not taken "that place", she would have had her front door last year. "Matter o' ten poun," Jesse Sturmey, the builder, had said, "and make 'ee a tidy li'l front porch an' all." And John had almost decided to have it done, and then he had taken "that place", which had swallowed up all the available ten pounds, and more besides. She heaved a regretful sigh at the thought of her disappointment, passed hurriedly through the shop, discarded the new boots for more comfortable footwear, and began to lay the supper.

There was no mystery attached to "that place", to which Mr. Dibben was going after supper. It was merely a small farm of about one hundred and forty acres, which he had rented from the Squire since the previous Michaelmas. Although Mr. Dibben was a baker and grocer, and a successful one at that, the taking of this farm marked the realization of his life's dream; for he came of farming stock, and had toiled early and late at his business, in order, in some measure, to get back to the soil from whence he sprang.

He was not ashamed of being a baker and grocer, he was proud of it, and the past year's working had proved to him that, by comparison with the shop, the farm was far from being a business proposition. But while the shop might make money, the farm satisfied Mr. Dibben's inmost soul. He loved every inch of it—the slow, certain growth and maturing of his crops, the horses, the cows, the pigs, and above all the pleasing thrill of possessing the right to do this or that at will with a piece of England's land.

But why should he want to go to his farm after supper on a Sunday evening? He was a staunch Wesleyan. Didn't he know that on the Sabbath he should do no manner of work? Of course he did, but he was not to be caught out by means of the Scriptures, because he was well aware of the bit about the man who had an ox or an ass, which had fallen into a ditch and required human assistance. Granted, Mr. Dibben did not expect to find any tragedy of this nature, when he arrived at his farm, but in the words of his

old stockman and general factotum, Silas Ridout, “Wold Dolly wur about due”. And “Wold Dolly” was Mr. Dibben’s best cow.

In his heart of hearts Mr. Dibben was far more interested in wheat growing than in dairying, but like the majority of farmers in the district he had decided that the cow was undoubtedly “the lady who paid the rent”.

He wanted to grow wheat because of the joy he got from seeing a field of it at harvest time, which marked the fruition of three years of constant planning and toil. But every time he thought about it, he was forced to admit that while it was a pleasing thing to do, it was not only too long a business, but also a certain way of losing money.

Even before he had taken the farm he had often thought about wheat growing, and had tried to find an argument which would justify growing it, but he had never succeeded. Life was too short, he thought. Why, the soil required two years of preparation in the shape of repeated crops of sheep feed, which had to be folded off by sheep to enrich the land before the wheat could be sown. Then there followed some ten months of almost continuous difficulties and dangers, before the crop could be harvested.

Rooks dug up the seed as soon as it was planted, and then, when the thin spears of almond-green made their appearance above the ground, usually in November, clouds of hungry starlings fed upon them. The plants, which survived these pests and also the winter’s rigours, were damaged by rabbits and hares in the spring. The remainder came into ear about the first week in June, but unless this occurred in calm warm weather, the ears were only half filled. From then until harvest wheat needed sunshine, then sunshine, and yet more sunshine, which Mr. Dibben knew could not be depended upon in his district.

Everything, he thought, seemed to be against wheat growing. A July thunderstorm might lay the smiling field of yesterday as flat as a pancake, thereby reducing the yield by one third and increasing the harvesting expenses by at least one half. And the harvest placed the wheatgrower utterly helpless in the hands of the weather in dealing with his crop.

Mr. Dibben’s final objection to growing wheat was, of course, its unremunerative price. He was a Liberal and a Free Trader, and had been a great admirer of that great Liberal statesman, Mr. Lloyd George; but since he had taken a farm his faith in that gentleman had been badly shaken. There should have been a fair price for wheat, he thought. The present state of things was wrong, and somehow there seemed to be some justice in the contention of the neighbouring farmers that Mr. Lloyd George had let them

down badly over the Corn Production Act. He hated to think such a heresy, but he could not help it.

Still, if he could not grow wheat under the existing conditions, there were other things which he could do, so like most of his neighbours, he had turned to the gentle, placid cow for comfort and support. Wheat growing was too long about, but cows were the quickest thing in farming. You could buy a cow one day, and sell milk from her the next—a small profit, possibly, but that unique thing in agriculture, a quick return.

Being a shopkeeper, Mr. Dibben, quite early in his farming career, had discovered this pleasing quality in milking cows as compared to the other branches of farming, and "Wold Dolly" was the apple of his farming eye—hence his hurried supper that Sunday evening.

It was a pity to hurry over supper on any Sunday evening at the Dibbens'. Supper on the Sabbath consisted almost invariably of cold roast beef and pickles. The whole family liked pickles, and from a long and varied consumption they had acquired a pretty taste in these foodstuffs. Mr. Dibben usually stuck to onions, with an occasional pickled walnut by way of a change. Mrs. Dibben was far too genteel to eat onions, and inclined more to the fancy brands of pickles, more particularly to the Indian Mango, which had a thrilling picture of an eastern snake-charmer on the label on the bottle. Pickles, being considered an unsuitable article of diet for children, were only permitted to Katenemily on Sunday nights as a treat, and the children preferred the rich, brown, liquid Piccalilli.

"Eat your own goods, and then you can tell a customer what's what," was one of Mr. Dibben's maxims, and, in the matter of pickles, undoubtedly the Dibbens knew what was what.

But there was no lingering over these delights for Mr. Dibben that Sunday evening. He consumed his supper in hurried silence. Then he rose from the table, took out his cuff links—he had supped without his coat—and began to roll up his shirt sleeves well above the elbow.

"Whatever be at, father? You bain't going to work to-night, surely?"

Mr. Dibben grunted, reached for an old mackintosh on the wall, and put it on over his rolled shirt sleeves. Old Silas Ridout was a good dairyman, and doubtless all would be well with Wold Dolly, but in these matters you never knew, and it was as well to be prepared for a job of work if necessary. Of course, this was far too delicate a subject to explain to his wife, as she was a woman, and Mr. Dibben thought it in rather bad taste that she should

draw attention to his unusual procedure that evening. It never occurred to him, that as Mrs. Dibben had produced Katenemily, she was probably well aware of what troubles might have to be surmounted in connection with Wold Dolly's coming parturition. So he ignored his wife's question, put on his hat, took up a walking stick, and with a gruff "Shan't be gone long, but don't 'ee sit up," he was gone through the shop, and out of the door into the street to the ever-annoying ping of the bell.

Down the village street he walked, past the Green Dragon, and turned up a lane towards his farm. There were one or two villagers standing about at the corner by the inn, and his unusual garb provoked this remark from one of them after he had passed by. "Wot be Farmer Dibben at to-night then, in 'is mackintosh? Tidn' gwaine to rain, surely?"

This came from a youth who worked at a wheelwright's in the next village, and who, therefore, was not quite in touch with the doings of Coombe Wallop; but another and more enlightened villager elucidated the mystery. "I seed Wold Zilas drawen up along yer a bit back. I low they got a cow bad, er one calvin', er zummat on."

Along the lane Mr. Dibben plodded, and as he passed under the railway arch, the farming countryside opened out before him. He noted that Farmer Wright had nearly finished ploughing his Long Acre field of wheat stubble, in preparation for sowing winter oats, and Mr. Dibben made a mental note to happen up against his neighbour in the near future to find out whether it would be possible to borrow a corn drill to sow his own small field with the same crop.

Farther on he stepped out of the lane through a gap and walked up the field alongside the hedge. It was not perhaps such good walking, and definitely was not suitable for his Sunday boots, which he had forgotten to change, but it enabled him to make a critical examination of Farmer Wright's mangolds, and also to discover with satisfaction once again, that his own mangolds, which lay a bit farther on, were greatly superior to his neighbour's. He had done this almost every time he had walked either up or down the lane during the last month, but it had never failed to give him joy. For there was no doubt about it, his crop was definitely the better one.

This point satisfactorily settled once again, he looked ahead to the pasture in which his five dry or in-calf cows should have been grazing. He could count but four, three reds and a white. Then Wold Dolly, who was roan in colour, must be at it somewhere. He quickened his pace until he reached the pasture gate, which he opened and closed securely, for like all

countrymen, although he was in a hurry, he never thought of getting over a gate. He looked anxiously round the field, and presently spied Wold Dolly in the far corner under the hedge.

But it was all right, for he could see Silas over there too, and as he drew nearer he could see the calf also. He heaved a sigh of relief, and slackened his pace. It would never do by hurrying to let Silas know how anxious he had been. It must appear as if he were out for a stroll, and just happened along, and for this reason he was sorry that he had on the old mackintosh instead of his Sunday jacket. It looked too obvious.

Now that his mind was relieved by knowing that the calving had apparently taken place satisfactorily, he wondered whether it was a heifer or a bull calf that had been born, as a heifer calf would be worth a matter of two pounds or so more money. In commercial dairying as in nearly all walks of life, the male is at a discount.

"Old gel managed it all right then, Silas?"

"Ay, I knawed she wur a trifle oneasy afore tea, an' I lowed as 'ow she'd 'appen it fore night. She dropped un bout twenty minnits gone, as I wur comin' droo the gate. She've a bin droo thease caper a few times afore, an' didn' want no 'elp."

Now although most cows were called old something-or-other as soon as they produced their second calf, which was usually at about four years old, Wold Dolly was in truth a venerable old lady. She had borne eight single calves and one twin before this latest arrival, and on account of her age she would not have been purchased by Mr. Dibben at the outgoing tenant's sale last year, but for Silas saying, "Wot ever you do, you buy Wold Dolly. I ain't never knawed she sick, neet sorry, and she's a wonnerful milker."

Mr. Dibben and Silas gazed at Wold Dolly and her calf for several minutes in silent satisfaction. Like most country folk they had developed this silent concentration of pure thought to a fine pitch of perfection. They gazed, and gazed, and gazed. Wold Dolly did likewise. No townsman was present to spoil this beautiful satisfying silence with empty chatter. Mr. Dibben, Silas, and Wold Dolly were in perfect sympathy, and enjoyed this ideal, hushed contemplation of each other to the full. They gazed, and gazed, and gazed.

The calf struggled shakily to its feet, Wold Dolly licked it methodically in maternal content, and Mr. Dibben and Silas continued to gaze.

"What is it, Silas, heifer or bull?"

This was a very satisfactory Sunday evening for Mr. Dibben, for Silas reported, on examination, that Wold Dolly had been blessed with a daughter, and moreover that the daughter was of the right colour, a roan. The silent study of mother and daughter continued for a few moments longer, and then Silas said: "Well, I 'low they'll be all right yer till marnin'. I'll git she in atter breakfast termorrer, an' milk her out."

"Ay, Silas. That'll be the way of it. Well, we best be getting 'ome."

Master and man plodded silently over the pasture through the gathering dark, the gate creaked, then closed with a dull click, and talking of farming problems, they went plod, plod, plod, down the lane towards the village.

It was almost dark when they separated at the Green Dragon, into which Silas went for a final pint, while Mr. Dibben walked up the village street towards his home, wondering why a good reliable man like Silas must have a pint in the Green Dragon at five minutes to ten on a Sunday night. For Mr. Dibben had been a staunch teetotaller all his life, and the delights of a village inn's tap-room were unknown to him. If Silas had been a ne'er-do-well, he could have understood this desire for beer, as it would have been in keeping with the rest of his character. In Mr. Dibben's mind there were only two classes of people in connection with this question of strong drink—decent useful folk, the total abstainers, and the no-goods, those who drank—or in other words the sheep and the goats. Silas upset Mr. Dibben's classification as he belonged to neither party, which puzzled his master greatly.

Silas was also puzzled at his master's attitude to this matter. He was greeted in the tap-room with, "What cheer, Zilas! Bin doin' a bit o' awvertime? Where's thee boss? Idn' 'er comin' in to stand thee a pint?"

"Naw," said Silas, drinking deeply at his mug, " 'Ee idn. 'Ee's gone 'ome. Vunny lil veller, zno. 'Ee do mean well, but 'ee cain't zim to understand as I'd zooner 'ee come in an' stood I a pint o' zix-penny than paid I fer a hower's awvertime which 'ee'll do come Vriday, zno, an' that'll cost un aightpence."

"Ah, but if 'ee did that you, 'ee'd a to 'ave one isself, an' that ud cost un another tanner, zno, zo 'ee do zave fowerpence by 'is way o' doin' it," replied a villager.

"Tidn' the money," said Silas. " 'Tis zummat as 'ee don't unnerstand, neet I. I don't want 'is money fer the awvertime; 'ee ain't a bad veller to work vor. I don't want nothin' fer seein' to a cow atter 'owers. An' 'ee jist

natchally don't want to come in yer an' drink no beer. 'Tis zummat's we can't 'elp, but tidn' money, neet beer. There's more to it nor that."

"Time, gentlemen," said the landlord of the inn, breaking in on Silas's philosophy, and with sundry good-nights, the company dispersed to their various cottages.

Meantime Mr. Dibben had reached his home, the shop bell had pinged for the last time that Sunday, and shortly afterwards Mr. Dibben was in bed with his spouse, who, on hearing that all was well with Wold Dolly, muttered sleepily, "Lor', 'ow you do worrit about 'that place'."

Chapter 2

Breakfast was timed for 7 a.m. in the Dibben household, as the shop opened at eight, but on the morrow long before that time Mr. Dibben had been up and doing. He scamped some of his bakehouse duties that morning, but his baker, a gawky youth of twenty, had been with him for several years and was now well able to carry on; so Mr. Dibben slipped off on his bicycle soon after six o'clock, and pedalled slowly and sedately up to his farm. Mrs. Dibben heard him depart, and heaved yet another sigh of annoyance at "that place", as she got out of bed and began to dress.

Mr. Dibben knew that there was no real need to go to the farm that morning. Every possible contingency had been thoroughly discussed with Silas the previous evening, but with a farm you never knew. This was true, and so, like most farmers, whenever he had a spare moment, he would go for a walk over his farm, and rarely, if ever, was this walk unproductive.

Besides, in his case, the attractions of the farm in the early morning as compared with the bakehouse, were greatly in favour of the former, for it was September. In mid-winter, the bakehouse would have been an easy winner to most folk, but on a fine September morning the farm would have won, hands down, in any company.

All was well at the farm that morning. Mr. Dibben found Silas and his grandson, a lad of fifteen, busy milking the twelve cows, and his other employee, Tom Hunt, in the stable harnessing the horses. He outlined the day's procedure to Tom, visited the pasture to find the dry cows and Wold Dolly and daughter all serene, and then cycled steadily home.

The bulk of Mr. Dibben's milk was purchased by the local milk factory, and picked up at the farm by lorry each morning, but an increasing portion of his herd's output was being delivered retail in the village. This was a new departure for Coombe Wallop. Hitherto, its inhabitants had fetched their milk from the different farms in the village, but the modern desire for ease and attention had wormed its way into the hearts of the majority of Wallop's dwellers, and who so able to satisfy that desire as Mr. Dibben, a man well skilled in the delivery of that other essential foodstuff—bread.

Besides, the fetching of milk from the farm by the customers had not been entirely satisfactory. The lorry came for the bulk of the milk at 9 a.m., and Silas would have it all measured up in readiness by eight-thirty at latest.

Moreover, he would have written on each churn label, so many gallons in so many churns, and made a duplicate entry in the milk book which hung on a nail in the dairy—a laborious task, which took far more out of the old man than the actual milking. Then, seven mornings out of ten, some lazy village wife or child would come for a pint of milk, thus upsetting all his accounts and calculations.

A Mrs. Green was the worst offender in this way, especially on Sunday mornings. In Silas's opinion she was a shiftless body, but no bullying nor rudeness on the old man's part made any improvement in her unpunctual habits. One Sunday, when she had arrived for her milk, long after the day's output was measured up all ready for the lorry, Silas had bullyragged her for a few minutes, and had finished up with, "An' wot 'ave 'ee bin at all marnin'? Lyin' in bed, I 'low."

"No, Mr. Ridout," she answered pertly, thinking to embarrass the old man, "I've bin a readin' of the Bible."

But Silas put this manner of employing the early hours of Sunday morning at its true valuation. "Pity you adn' 'ad zummat better to do," was his retort, as he handed her the milk.

"I cain't do wi' volk like she," he reported to Mr. Dibben afterwards. "Whoi, tud be less worrit to take the drattit milk to 'em, but I 'low they'd want fer us to drink it fer 'em as well."

And from this remark came the birth of Mr. Dibben's retail milk round in Coombe Wallop.

So on this Monday morning, Silas arrived punctually at the shop in the milk float, and picked up Katenemily, who helped him with the morning delivery. This was another grievance against "that place" in the eyes of their mother, for the children greatly preferred this pleasant task with Silas to household duties performed under the eagle eye of Mrs. Dibben.

Winchbury was the nearest market town to Coombe Wallop, being only a matter of four miles distant. Its chief claims to fame were its cathedral and its weekly market, which was held on Thursdays. It was a charming old city, but on market days it was generally a confused muddle of farming stock and modern road traffic. It could have been a pleasant and interesting spot for tourists on Thursdays but for the market, and most certainly it could have been an excellent market for farmers and dealers without the tourists, but the two combined rendered it almost impossible for everybody and for every purpose.

Some ten days or so after its birth, Mr. Dibben arranged to take Wold Dolly's calf into Winchbury market, and also to take Katenemily with him, as a final treat before they went back to school after the summer holidays.

On this particular day he had arranged to drive in with the older bread van for two reasons. One was that Silas required the milk float in the performance of his farm duties, and the other that Mr. Dibben had various stores to deliver on the way and more to bring back from the wholesale grocers in Winchbury, all of which needed a covered vehicle in case of rain.

From this it will be seen that Mr. Dibben had not as yet gone in for motor transport. He was, in actual fact, in the mid-way stage of deciding to do so. Many motor salesmen had argued with him about the matter. Most of them had referred to his horse bread vans as antiquated and expensive things, and had pointed out the unlimited advantages of the swifter modern vehicle. This was a mistake on their part, for Mr. Dibben loved his horses, and also knew that at a push in haymaking the van horses were invaluable, especially in the evenings.

But recently he had been visited by a motor salesman of tact and discernment, who had said definitely that so long as Mr. Dibben could run his business satisfactorily with two horses, he should on no account purchase a motor van. Doubtless as the business got bigger, the necessity would arise, etc. This man had builded better than he knew. Mr. Dibben would have bought a van from him long before this, but for his wife's veto.

Mrs. Dibben had put her foot down firmly. There was to be no more money fooled away until she had her front door, and Mr. Dibben had reconciled himself to the fact that there would be no motor van until this demand of his wife's was satisfied.

His objection to having the front door constructed was not solely on the grounds of expense. He recognized that his wife had loyally earned quite half his worldly wealth, and that it rightfully belonged to her. He would have given her ten pounds quite cheerfully, if she had asked for it, but to pay out that sum for a useless thing like a front door seemed absurd. After all, when it was done, what good would it be? Still, he supposed that it would have to be managed somehow in the near future.

Now there were all sorts of regulations in force concerning the transit of animals by road, and one of these was to the effect that no vehicle used for the carriage of human foodstuffs, should also carry livestock. On this journey to Winchbury Mr. Dibben intended to deliver his bread and groceries to various houses en route. How then, could a righteous man such

as he contemplate carrying a live calf in the bread van? But in rural districts there was always a certain amount of give and take in these matters. While it was manifestly absurd to send in two vehicles, still there was a modicum of justice in the regulation, for as all rural folk knew, calves were not the cleanest of freight. However, after due consultation with Silas, Mr. Dibben arrived at a way out of the difficulty, which enabled him to haul the mixed load in the van, and also to satisfy his Nonconformist conscience.

The van was loaded with bread and groceries, and then Mr. Dibben and Katenemily drove it up to the farm. Here the calf was placed in the back of the vehicle, and tied securely by means of a rope around its neck. And for this journey in the bread van Silas had arrayed the hinder portion of the animal in a garment made of sacking, which corresponded, save in appearance, with the napkin used for the comfort and well-being of the human baby of the same age.

It has been mentioned that Mr. Dibben loved his horses, but of late years the increasing mechanical road traffic had robbed his road journeys of much of their former joy. Still, he set out that morning for Winchbury feeling that the world was indeed a very pleasant place. Katenemily sat beside him on the van seat, chattering gaily, and taking turns to hold the reins when their father got down to deliver some goods. The van seat was only an eight-inch piece of board, worn smooth and shiny through constant rubbing by Mr. Dibben's posterior, and as Katenemily's legs were not long enough to reach the bed of the vehicle, they almost fell over backwards every time the horse started after one of these business calls.

However, all went well until they arrived at the outskirts of Winchbury, where they met a circus, complete with brass band, on its parade through the town. Their horse did not approve of this addition to the usual market traffic. He tossed his head, quickened his pace, and *chasséed* gaily towards the curb in a vain endeavour to get as far away from the big drum as possible.

Mr. Dibben hauled at the reins to keep the horse from mounting the pavement, and whacked him firmly with a stick. Away he pranced down the street until he saw the camels, at which sight he stopped dead.

Katenemily had been so interested in the procession that they had forgotten the insecure nature of their perch. Accordingly, this sudden stop precipitated them, faces foremost, on to the horse's rump, thus exposing plump black-stockinged legs, and a bird's-eye view of serviceable underwear to their harassed parent.

Their father grabbed at their clothing, hauled them back on to the seat beside him, and brought his stick down on the horse once again. They started with a jerk, and there was a loud crash in the rear, as the calf fell through the back doors of the van and hung suspended by its neck.

Mr. Dibben pulled up the horse with a jerk, and out popped Katenemily again. He hauled them back, and gazed around for assistance. Fortunately a policeman came to his aid, and still more fortunately this Good Samaritan proved to be a Wallop man. He ignored any suggestion of broken regulations, heaved the choking calf back into the van, and shut the doors.

A few yards further on the horse made the acquaintance of an elephant for the first time in its life, and stopped suddenly once more. Out went Katenemily, to be hauled back as before, and down came the stick again, which produced another jerky start, sending the calf out again in another attempt at suicide.

Mr. Dibben pulled up the horse, and replaced his offspring on the seat almost automatically. The band continued to play. The calf gave a dying gurgle. The elephant slowly teetered by. The bobby rescued the calf once again, and shut the van doors. Away went the horse, and Katenemily fell off the seat once more, but backwards this time.

It was too much for Mr. Dibben. Being a good Wesleyan, he could not swear to relieve his feelings. Perhaps he prayed; the situation certainly warranted such a course. But he was taking no more chances. He got the policeman to mind the horse. Then he got down, took off his coat, which he wrapped around the horse's head, thus blindfolding that sensitive animal completely, and, thanking the bobby for his help, he walked solemnly through Winchbury's main street in his shirt sleeves, leading the blinded horse until the market square was reached, and the circus band but a faint murmur in the distance.

One by one the vehicles laden with livestock slowly entered the market, and about one hour after taking his place in the line—such were the conditions of Winchbury's market—Mr. Dibben was able to leave the calf tied securely under a long, low shed in company with about a hundred other bovine babies.

He put up his horse and van at the Blue Lion, where they were met by his father, and after due salutations this gentleman took charge of Katenemily, while their father went about his business. To everyone he met in his travels he mentioned that Number 123 in Smith's Auction was a roan heifer calf from a wonderful milker.

Grandpa Dibben took Katenemily on a tour of the market before they went to his home for dinner. His early childhood had been spent on a farm, which his mother had been compelled to give up when her husband had died. There had been no alternative, for when all the debts had been settled there remained only a few hundreds for the widow. Mr. Dibben, senior, had been the eldest of her children, and these financial straits had caused him to be apprenticed to a baker and grocer at an early age. He had prospered in life, and had been his son's predecessor in the shop at Coombe Wallop, but he still remembered his boyhood on the farm, and Winchbury's weekly market was an unending source of pleasure to him in his retirement.

Grandpa Dibben was not one of those who resent the fact that getting old means retiring from the cut and thrust of business life. He had retired gracefully and contentedly at seventy, well content that his son should reign in his stead at Coombe Wallop, and he was an ideal companion for Katenemily that morning. Let their father get on with the business of the day, they were just three children, with all Winchbury market to explore at their leisure.

First they visited a coffee stall, for Grandpa knew that his small companions must have contented tummies if they were to enjoy the market's delights to the full. Here two large, steaming mugs of cocoa, and two huge currant buns were consumed rapidly by Katenemily, then Grandpa lighted his pipe, and away they went.

They began by visiting the calf shed to say a final good-bye to Wold Dolly's daughter. This done, a black man, who was making some herbal toffee at a nearby stall, entertained them. His black hands, manipulating a huge lump of greyish-white stuff while it was in a plastic condition, fascinated the children. There was a big, silvery, shining hook at one end of the stall, and his final exhibition was to place the confection on this hook, pull it out about a yard long, reloop it on the hook, and repeat the procedure until the cure-all was set hard, when he chopped it up into small pieces, and wrapped them up for sale.

For it undoubtedly was a cure-all. The black man said so. He said so very loud and clear, and once he shouted it in Emily's ear, causing her to shrink back hastily, and to clasp Grandpa's hand even more tightly than before. Coughs, colds, shortness of breath, lack of vigour, obesity, loss of weight, everything, this wonderful sweetmeat was a perfect cure for all; so Grandpa bought three-pennyworth for the children to take home to their mother.

Next a cheapjack claimed their attention. He was selling watches, knives, saws, hammers, and similar goods. “We’ll bide a bit,” said Grandpa. “Perhaps he’s got some scissors, and Grannie wants some, I know.”

The man began with watches, but nobody seemed to want them. Next he tried saws. “Now, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, holding up a saw, “winter’s coming on, and wot’s better than a log fire? Who’ll give me five shillings for ’im?”

No answer.

“Don’t use’ em, I s’pose. Didn’t the gale blow any trees down in these parts? Come on! Gimme a start.”

No answer.

“ ’Ere,” seizing another saw, “tell ’ee wot I’ll do. Five bob the pair. Cold days you can use one with each hand. Anybody ’ave ’em?”

Still no response from the crowd. The salesman mourned over the saws, he painted pitiful pictures of mother sitting over a cold hearth for lack of fuel, and he grieved openly at the evident lack of any desire in his audience for that healthy exercise of sawing logs. With tears in his eyes he reduced the price of the saws to four shillings the pair, at which figure he got rid of three pairs to Katenemily’s great satisfaction, as they were beginning to feel quite sorry for him.

The demand for saws being satisfied, the salesman turned his attention to scissors, and the children became very interested. “ ’Aving got the gentlemen a sawing logs for the ’ome,” he said, “wot about the ladies? Wot is ’ome without a mother? Ah, wot, indeed? Why, nothin’. Ah, ’ere we are, scissors. One large pair ’ere for cutting out Johnnie’s pants, makin’ one. One smaller pair ’ere for ’ome barberin’, makin’ two, and one pair o’ nail scissors ’ere, makin’ three. ’Ow much shall we say? Five bob! Anybody ’ave ’em?”

No answer.

“Four bob? Three bob? Blime, ’alf a dollar the three? Anybody ’ave ’em?”

No answer.

“Don’t use ’em, I s’pose. Buys all ready-made Mallaby Deeleys. Damme, don’t ’ee ever cut down father’s trousers fer Johnnie’s pants nowadays? ’Ere, a dainty pair o’ embroidery scissors fer dainty fingers, makin’ four. Four pair fer ’alf a dollar? Anybody ’ave ’em?”

Katenemily were wriggling with excitement. “Here,” said Grandpa, producing a half-crown, and pocketing the scissors.

They watched the cheapjack for a few more minutes, then wandered the whole length of a row of stalls, where Grandpa bought the children pokes of sweets and bead necklaces, and made his final purchase from a fish salesman, who was selling his goods in much the same manner as the cheapjack had sold the scissors. Grandpa bought an enormous cod for two shillings, which price, the salesman said, should cause him never to forget to pray each night, not only for the poor fishermen but also for the speaker.

Laden with their spoils they went to Grandpa’s home, where Katenemily were feasted royally and made much of by their Grannie, until such time as their father called with the van to take them home.

Chapter 3

Mr. Walter Morley was the tenant of Fernditch Farm, the largest farm in the parish of Pollard Royal. There had been Morleys at Fernditch for more than a hundred years, and their tradition of being good farmers was quite safe in the capable hands of its present tenant. Even Mr. Morley's men, while they often grumbled at his "worritting", admitted that the farm "wur done well".

On it there were a herd of forty milking cows, a flock of four hundred pedigree Hampshire Down ewes, thirteen cart-horses, two nags and the children's pony. To tend these animals and to grow the annual two hundred acres of corn, about twenty regular hands were employed throughout the year, with many extra at haymaking and harvest. From this it will be seen that someone had to do some "worritting" on Fernditch Farm, if all were to prosper.

Perhaps "prosper" is the wrong word, for there had been little or no profit made by the farm for several years, but everything was still done well, for Mr. Morley had a tidy bit of money and could well afford to carry on through a period of depression.

The only person who did not suffer from Mr. Motley's "worritting" propensity was the one who received the greatest quantity of it. This remarkable being was one Bill Gurd, who was Mr. Motley's foreman and right-hand man—a veritable farming Admirable Crichton.

Everybody on the farm, except Mrs. Morley and her husband, hated Bill. He had what might be termed the "all-seeing eye". No dereliction of duty on anyone's part escaped his eagle vision. He reckoned that men were of minor importance as compared with the job in hand, and he expected of all a performance equal in both quality and speed to his own—a standard almost unattainable to most of the labourers.

Mr. Morley, Junior, a cheerful youth of twelve named James, cherished for Bill a venomous hatred tinged with respect. Miss Nancy Morley, eighteen, and in Bill's opinion a bit above herself since she came home from boarding school, considered him to be a rude, uncouth person, and she was continually reproving her parents, especially her mother, for the liberties of conduct and speech which they permitted Bill in his dealings with them.

But it was all to no purpose. Bill had worked for Mr. Morley ever since he had left school, and he was well aware of his value to all at Fernditch. In appearance he was a short active peasant of about fifty. He had square-cut grizzled whiskers, which gave one the impression of a rather surly rough-haired terrier, who might bite at any moment. He accompanied his master on all his farming expeditions, both for pleasure and profit, and no matter what sudden problem had to be tackled, Mr. Morley's first remark was always, "Where's Bill? Tell him I want him." Singly, neither Mr. Morley nor Bill was a simple proposition for anyone: together they were well nigh invincible in agricultural matters.

Most large farms in the district had one man of Bill's type among the staff. These experts were generally not so gentle, nor so lovable, as the older type of farm labourer—their varied duties were against a placid temperament. For instance, the dairyman, the carter, and the shepherd tended the animals under their care, day after day, and week after week, with little variation in their duties throughout the year; but a man like Bill Gurd was all over the place—a farming Jack-of-all-trades.

Whatever Mr. Morley, or as the men called him, the Guvnor, did, he relied on Bill to carry out the necessary detail work. Supposing the Guvnor bought a wildish bull at a farm sale some miles away; Bill fetched it home. When Mr. Morley went by cheap excursion to the dairy show, Bill went with him. Sometimes the latest purchase in nag horses would not pass motors; after a week in Bill's charge he would pass anything only too willingly. When Mr. Morley was laid up for a week or so with influenza, Bill had taken charge without any visible effort, and under his control—a trying period for the staff—Fernditch Farm had run quite as well and at a slightly increased speed. During a cold snap in the winter, if the water pipes in the farmhouse roof froze up, Mrs. Morley sent for Bill. When a few dozen snared rabbits were required for Christmas boxes, a word to Bill was all that was necessary. Once when the threshing-machine got stuck in the mud and the carters could not get the horses to shift it, to their everlasting disgust, those same horses pulled it out for Bill. He had taught Miss Nancy to ride her first pony and her first bicycle. He instructed Master Jimmy in ferreting lore and other rural sports, and, when necessary, he dealt with anyone in the neighbourhood without fear or favour, no matter what their station.

Once an old labourer at Fernditch named Frank Chalke had a bedridden wife, and as they had no children living with them, the domestic problem in the cottage became very difficult. Bill discovered this, and also that owing to

it the man was getting little or no rest at night. Forthwith he sought the Guvnor.

"Zummat got to be done down there," he said fiercely, after he had explained the position. "You pays to the nursin' fund, don't 'ee? Thee see the Rector, and get un to let 'is Missus send the nurse in each mornin' to put the old lady comfortable."

Mr. Morley sought out the Reverend Charles Guthrie, and demanded nursing assistance for his man's wife, offering to pay extra for a little special attention. The Rector agreed, and Mr. Morley reported to Bill that the necessary help would be forthcoming.

Bill grunted, but made it his business to meet the Rector in his travels. "Pretty vine shepherd ov a flock, you be," he said to that amiable cleric. "Sleep most o' the time, I 'low. 'Tis a good job as 'ow we do look atter sheep bettern thee do atter 'umings. Wold Frank Chalke 'ave done 'is duty all 'is life. 'Sposin' you does yourn."

The result of this was that the parish nurse received urgent instructions to attend to the case, which she found to be a pitiable one. The day after her first visit, she met Bill, and suggested that it was a case for the Workhouse Hospital.

"Look at yer," said Bill. "That bain't gwaine to 'appen. Tell 'ee fer why. T'ud break wold Frank up if they wur parted. The Guvnor 'ave offered to pay a bit, I got a shillin' er two if 'tis necessary, and wold Frank got a bit o' money put by. 'Ee do want 'is missus made comfortable, and wunt mind payin' fer it. 'Ee do stand by 'is weddin' obligation—fer better, fer wuss."

"But she would be much more comfortable in the hospital," replied the nurse.

"Comfortable!" sneered Bill. "Wot do a single 'ooman like thee know about comfort? Frank's over seventy, an' so's 'is wife. They bin together now fer nigh on fifty years, an' 'ouldn' be comfortable, if one wur in Bucknam Palace an' tother in the Duke's castle."

"Well, anyway," said the nurse, "Mrs. Guthrie said that——"

"Don't thee goo 'atchin' up no plots wi' old mother Guthrie, cause t'wunt 'appen. Frank 'ave allus done 'is duty cordin' to 'is station: I do try to do mine; you be the parish nurse, I bain't; you try to do yourn fer a bit, an' bide quiet about 'ospitals."

The nurse reported to Mrs. Guthrie that Bill Gurd was a rude, insolent man, but there was no more talk of hospitals, and Mrs. Chalke ended her days contentedly in the cottage with her husband.

To Mr. Morley's credit, he not only appreciated Bill's worth, but showed it by paying him a wage which caused the Farm Wages Board Inspector to raise his eyebrows, when he examined the Fernditch wages book. "What hours does this man Gurd work each week?" this harassed official once asked Mr. Morley.

"Goodness only knows," was the reply. "He does his job."

"I grant you that 50*s.* weekly plus cottage more than covers practically every possibility, but you are taking a grave risk. Apparently some weeks he may do sixty hours for it, and some only forty-eight. You never reckon out his overtime, so that he could claim to be paid the fifty shillings for the forty-eight hours and compel you to pay overtime for all the extra hours. Aren't you placing yourself in his hands should you ever come to disagreement?"

"Maybe I am, but I'm content to do so. Bill knows me, and I know Bill."

The Inspector shook his head, and left it at that.

Undoubtedly Bill knew Mr. Morley even better than Mr. Morley knew him. He was well aware that the Guvnor went on the rampage during haymaking, harvest, and at all times of stress, but from long association he knew how to deal with his master.

Market-day mornings were usually days when Mr. Morley was a difficult being. On these mornings, as a rule, he rose early, and went out without any breakfast at about six-thirty. After dealing with the ordinary routine jobs, he would go to the sheepfold perhaps to pick out the fat lambs, which were to go to market that day. At this job he would get so busy and interested, that he would forget that his fast had not yet been broken. Suddenly, say at about nine o'clock, it would dawn on him that he had arranged to meet someone in Winchbury market at ten. He would then leave whatever he was doing, and ride furiously home on his cob. Outside the farmhouse he would bellow raucously for Bill to take his horse. This accomplished, he would proceed to behave in his home like a spoilt child.

"Grub!" he would yell, as he strode in the back door. "Grub, quick!"

Then at the breakfast table he would perform the marvellous simultaneous feat of eating his meal, looking at his letters, taking off his

dirty boots and gaiters, and yelling copious and varied instructions to all the household.

"Put out my best breeches, Mam, and see there's some hot water; I've got to shave."

"Nancy, get my market book and cheque-book."

"Jim, tell Bill to see the car's full up, tell him to start her up, and bring her round to the front door."

"Mary," this to the maid, "bring some more milk. Look alive, this tea's too hot to drink."

Breakfast over, he would storm upstairs in his stockinged feet, and change his breeches, yelling more orders as he did so. Then along to the bathroom for a hurried shave, which would frequently be interrupted by the appearance of his lathered countenance at the open window, from which point of vantage he would yell more orders to anyone in sight. Generally he cut himself severely on these occasions, which would bring forth yells for cotton-wool, as he raged along to his bedroom to wrestle with his collar and tie. Then, after much puffing and blaspheming, he would descend to the ground floor with his coat and waistcoat over one arm, and proceed to yell madly for his boots and gaiters.

He was a stoutish man with a thick bull neck, and as he used to bend down to fasten his boots and gaiters, shouting more orders the while, his neck would become very red, his braces would creak, and his breeches looked so tight around his posterior that an explosion at some point or other appeared inevitable.

The finish of this weekly market-day performance was usually a hurried grabbing of pocketbook, cheque-book, and other papers, a hasty good-bye, the slamming of the car door, the grind of the self-starter, the gnashing of long-suffering gears, and the disappearance of the car down the drive, followed by Mrs. Morley's plaintive remark, "Thank God, he's gone. I hope he comes back safe."

Usually one item in Mr. Morley's list of market jobs would be in his wife's handwriting. It read, "Have a dinner." This was necessary, for as a general rule Mr. Morley was so engrossed in the turmoil of his market business that a detail like a dinner would be forgotten, and on his return to Fernditch about four o'clock, his household would hear his cry of "Grub! Grub!" almost before his car had stopped.

However, on the Wednesday evening before the market day upon which Mr. Dibben had journeyed to Winchbury with his calf, Mr. Morley informed his household that he had a somewhat light day in front of him on the morrow, whereupon Mrs. Morley said that she would journey to Winchbury with him. Not altogether trusting her husband's word as to his lack of business cares, she also told Bill of her intention to go to market, and said that she wished to start rationally and peacefully about ten-thirty.

"Don't 'ee worritt, Mum. I'll see as all be ready fer un, and I'll ha' the car washed and polished fer 'ee."

Bill did more. He warned the shepherd to see that the Guvnor went home in good time for breakfast, after which meal he laid before Mr. Morley a list of the farm's more immediate needs.

It was Mr. Morley's intention that season to wean a dozen heifer calves, and after he had discussed his market business in detail with Bill, he inquired how many calves they had weaned already.

"Eleven," replied Bill, "and we got two good cows comin' in in about a fortnight, old Dumplin' an' old Plum. One ov 'em 'll likely 'ave an 'eifer calf, and that'll make our tally."

"Let's see," said Mr. Morley, "we've managed to pick up all roans up to now, haven't we? Both those cows are reds. I like to have all the calves as near one age as possible. If I see a good roan heifer calf cheap in market, I might buy it."

"Well, that's all, Bill," his employer went on. "You'll set the threshing tackle to those two wheat ricks at the buildings to-day, and put the fear of the Lord into young Sturgis. He's half asleep driving the presser. Some of yesterday's work's as crooked as a dog's hind leg."

Bill departed to his manifold duties, and Mr. Morley, after only a comparatively mild bustle in getting dressed ready for market, set out with his wife for Winchbury.

Chapter 4

To Mrs. Morley's satisfaction there was nothing on the back seat of their five-seater Morris-Oxford that morning. This was unusual. Nothing she could say or do would stop her husband from desecrating a nice motor car with some evidence of his calling on the most unsuitable occasions. Sometimes it was a market sack of corn, once it had been an odorous bag of sheep skins; and coming back from market there would usually be barbed wire, hayforks, ploughshares, or some other monstrosity.

After the purchase of each new car she had made repeated protests against this procedure, but within a fortnight Mr. Morley was back into his customary habits.

"What is the good of having a nice car," thought Mrs. Morley, "if you spoilt it in this fashion?"

But every time her husband could haul some farming need in the car he did so, for it salved his conscience by providing an excuse that the car paid its way as a farm implement. Mrs. Morley was not a proud woman, but on the rare occasions when she rode in the car, she liked to do so as a lady in a private car—not in a carrier's van.

But all was well that morning. The sun was shining, the car ran perfectly, and Mr. Morley was in a good humour.

"What's bringing you to market, Missus?" he asked, after he had noisily achieved his top gear, and settled back into his seat. "More clothes, the pictures, or Bridge?"

"No business of yours, Walter. You run the farm, and leave the household to me. If I play Bridge or go to the pictures, you'll play billiards or some other foolery."

"True, me dear," replied Mr. Morley. "Well, I shall put the car up at the County, so you can have your parcels sent there. When and where shall I pick you up?"

"Oh, at about four o'clock outside the Regal. If you aren't there, I'll come along to the County."

When they reached the outskirts of Winchbury, the market traffic, in addition to the ordinary flow through the town, made their progress very

slow with repeated full stops. Winchbury's market was in the centre of the town, some distance from the station, and although the farmers of the district had been agitating for an up-to-date market, situated on the outskirts and giving easy access to the railway, nothing had been done as yet.

Mr. Morley was one of the chief supporters of this new market idea, and his wife consequently knew the arguments by heart, both for and against. Still, every time she and her husband drove to market, she listened dutifully to his heated denunciation of Winchbury's corporation.

The chief public objection of Winchbury's leading citizens to a new market was that it would cost money, which might or might not bring in an adequate return to the city treasury. But Mr. Morley knew that the real objection lay in the fear in each trader's heart that the new market might be two inches farther away from his place of business than the old one.

Mr. Morley's personal objections to the present state of affairs were many. The economic one was that owing to the increasing maelstrom of road traffic which flowed unceasingly through Winchbury he could neither get his stock into nor away from the existing market without endless loss of time, considerable expense, and much annoyance.

He was a large, fat man, and he had started to drive a motor car in middle age. He could never achieve, when driving, the insolent, lounging, nonchalance of the modern, slim youth. His increasing girth made him appear to be sitting on the car rather than in it, and rendered the business of changing gear a matter of puffing exertion.

The repeated stops made necessary by the traffic that morning caused him to say awful things about Winchbury's rulers. "Just because old Squires thinks he'll sell a pint less beer in his bally pub if the market's shifted, we've got to put up with this sort of thing."

"This sort of thing" was when he got jammed between two large buses, a carrier's van, several private cars, and a flock of sheep. Eventually his car was stopped in the middle of the flock—a throbbing island in a sea of wool and baas. The sheep flowed round it in varying eddies, leaving a flotsam of locks of wool on mudguards and footboards. When he could get going again, Mr. Morley let in his clutch with a bang, and the car started with a series of disgraceful hiccups.

And so it went on—cattle, buses, pigs, sheep, lorries, carts, cars, and in Mr. Morley's own words, "Dam' fool women pushin' prams with a blasted dog wi' 'em."

The circus parade, which had so inconvenienced Mr. Dibben that morning, was the last straw. During its passing Mr. Morley in a loud voice consigned it, and Winchbury, and everybody in the town to the nether regions.

Mrs. Morley suffered in silence. She shuddered a little every time her husband changed gear; she shrank into the car towards him when they passed cattle, and away from him when frantically he sought the central gear lever. "Yes, dear," she said, and "No, dear," and "Hush, dear," as the occasion demanded, and made her customary resolution never again on a market day to go to Winchbury with her husband.

Her trials ceased when Mr. Morley, rather red in the face and neck, triumphantly piloted the car into the hotel yard, and she was free to go about her business in peace.

Mr. Morley descended from the car, a trifle out of breath but still master of his fate. He took his stick from the back seat, promised faithfully once again to pick up his wife outside the Picture Theatre at four o'clock, wished her good-bye, and strode out of the hotel yard, thirsting for the fray.

First he visited the sheep market, and watched numerous lots being sold by auction, including his own twenty-five fat Hampshire Down tegs. This done, a brother farmer and friend, named James Marsh, suggested lunch.

"Come and have a look at the calves a minute, Jim. I can do with a good roan heifer calf."

Wold Dolly's calf had been very miserable ever since she had left her birthplace, and more so since Mr. Dibben had left her tied up in Messrs. Smith and Sons' calf shed. For one thing she was getting hungry, and for another there was not any too much room. She was hemmed in by calves on either side, and she disliked her immediate neighbours. When she lay down, first one of these, a white calf, trod on her, and then the other, a hideous black, would get his leg over her neck rope and kick spasmodically. Her fashionable colour had attracted many prospective buyers, who had slapped and prodded her to make her stand up, and who each had encompassed the small of her back with a large hand and squeezed it firmly. Why, she did not know. In all probability the squeezers did not know either, but it was the recognized thing to do.

Mr. Morley and his friend ambled gently along the line of calves, performing the same operation on several which took their fancy. Presently James Marsh spotted Wold Dolly's calf. "That's the one for you, Walter," he

said after the usual examination. “Ain’t that a sweet pretty calf? Reg’lar strawberry roan.”

Mr. Morley agreed; like most farmers he could not resist the appeal of this colour in cattle. “ ’Tis a pretty calf, Jim. Wonder who bred her? Hi! Bill!” This last was to one of the auctioneer’s men near by. “Who brought in Number 123?”

“Come from Dibben, out to Coombe Wallop, sir.”

“Dibben?” queried Mr. Morley. “Oh, I know. Li’l feller with a baker’s shop. Took Bigg’s farm last year. Let’s see, he bought one or two goodish cows when he went in. Wonder if he’s anywhere about?”

“Yes, sir,” said Bill, pointing. “There he is, over by the pigs.”

“Thanks, Bill.”

Mr. Morley wandered casually over to the pig auction, and inquired of Mr. Dibben whether Number 123’s mother was a lady of good, sound, milking qualities, whereupon Mr. Dibben became almost lyrical in his description of Wold Dolly’s beauty of form and character.

“Ah well,” said Mr. Morley, “don’t run her up for the sake o’ pushin’ me. I can do with her at a fair price but I don’t stand for squeezing. When d’ye reckon she’ll be sold?”

Mr. Dibben guessed in about two hours’ time, so Mr. Morley and his friend adjourned for lunch, and on their way out of the market they met the auctioneer, who was going to sell the calves.

“Morning, Dick,” said Mr. Morley. “Look here, I can do with Number 123 up to four quid. If I don’t get back before she’s sold, just see to it for me.”

The auctioneer made a note in his book, and the two friends went off to the County Hotel for lunch.

They lunched at a long table at one end of the dining-room, which accommodated about a dozen of the leading farmers of the district. During lunch this company settled the affairs of the world in general, and their own district in particular; designed several new markets for Winchbury; and went over the old arguments again and again about the price of milk for the ensuing year. It was late on in September then, and next year’s prices for this commodity had not yet been settled, and they had to be decided before October. There was unanimous agreement that for various causes the price should be higher than that of the current year, but each speaker knew in his

inmost heart, that next year's price was bound to be a lower one. They talked largely about loyalty, and about holding up their milk, and about standing firm, knowing full well that any firmness in this direction would be a minus quantity with at least sixty per cent of milk producers by September the twenty-eighth.

Lunch finished, Mr. Morley, in company with Marsh and one or two other cronies, set out for the Corn Exchange. On the way they looked in at an auction yard, where cows and calves were being sold. Here they studied the trade, and continued the discussion of milk prices, which proved such an interesting subject to Mr. Morley, that the strawberry roan calf in the market was completely forgotten.

Afterwards keen business in the Corn Exchange claimed their attention. Here Mr. Morley bought some feeding stuffs for immediate delivery, refusing to buy forward on the ground that corn prices were falling and that cake therefore would be bound to follow suit. In spite of this prospect he purchased some seed wheat from a seedsman. He also inspected various sacks of grain exposed for sale by brother farmers, argued fiercely with some about milk prices, and loudly damned the Government to others.

All these things took time. Mr. Morley did not buy anything until he had chaffered with every merchant in the market, save one or two, who in his opinion had done him on some previous occasion. These he ignored, and would ignore until his death—or theirs. First he met a Mr. Jones.

"Anything you're wanting in my line to-day, Mr. Morley? Cake? Manures? Cotton Cake's down five shillings. Do you a six-ton lot to your station at six pounds five."

"H'm," replied Mr. Morley. "What about dairy cubes?"

After much reference to the wonderful analysis of his special brand of cubes, Mr. Jones quoted him at nine pounds per ton, delivered to his nearest station.

"I'll think about it," said Mr. Morley, and drifted away until he met another man in the same way of business, from whom he got a quotation at the same figure, but delivered by lorry to his farm. Then he went to another dealer, and so on. Having finally decided that nine pounds delivered home was the general price for dairy cubes that day, he went to the salesman he liked best as a man, and bid him eight pounds fifteen shillings. This proved successful, as the fact that Mr. Morley was a sound man financially, and

usually paid up quickly, made his business worth having; and he found that the same procedure was efficacious in the matter of the seed wheat.

But the general atmosphere of the Corn Exchange was one of gloom, as compared with some years ago when farming was a paying game. By two-thirty Jim Marsh had had enough of it. He sought out Mr. Morley, and asked him if he had finished his business.

"Yes," replied Mr. Morley.

"Well, then, let's get out o' this. It's like a dam' funeral. There's nobody here as we can do, and if we bide here much longer someone'll likely do us."

Mr. Morley agreed, and having found two other kindred spirits, the four left the market, and set out for the County Hotel to play volunteer snooker pool.

While all this had been happening Mr. Dibben's calf had been sold. Mr. Dibben had been greatly disappointed that he could not see Mr. Morley anywhere in the ring of buyers round the auctioneer's box. He did not mean to run up the price of his calf unduly, but if he could have watched Mr. Morley during the sale he could have put in a judicious bid or two, just to make sure that his animal was not absolutely given away. Four pounds would be a fair price, he thought, anything over that a good price, and anything under seventy-five shillings a bad one. But he could not see Mr. Morley. He wasn't there. There were only the usual calf buyers, who were, of course, in league with each other.

In due course Number 123 was hustled along towards the ring, and pushed into the middle of it by a boy, who shouted, "Number 123, sir." Mr. Dibben had told the auctioneer all about the calf's wonderful mother, but he did not expatiate on this half enough in Mr. Dibben's opinion, and only said: "Now then, gentlemen. Number 123, from Mr. Dibben. Comes from a good milker, I'm told. Pretty colour too. Ought to be weaned. Who starts me at a fiver?"

"Ah, sixty's bid, thank you. Sixty-one, two, five, all over the place."

Rapidly the price mounted to seventy-three shillings, from which point it crept onwards very slowly. At seventy-nine shillings the calf was knocked down to Mr. Morley of Fernditch. While this was satisfactory Mr. Dibben reckoned that Mr. Morley was an artful dog not to have shown up himself, and his respect for that astute gentleman was still further increased. Still,

seventy-nine shillings wasn't bad, so he went off to pick up Katenemily, feeling well content with his day's work.

Meantime, Mr. Morley was not having a very successful afternoon at snooker. He was not in form with the cue that day, his luck was atrocious, and by three-thirty he was five shillings and sixpence down. However, he paid up cheerfully, and on his way to the hotel yard to get his car he passed his friend the auctioneer, who informed him that he was now the owner of calf Number 123 at the price of seventy-nine shillings.

"Good Lord!" said Mr. Morley to himself. "I forgot all about the dam' thing. What'll I do? The carrier'll be gone, I know."

"Ted," he said aloud to the ostler, as he paid for the garaging of the car. "Got an old bag anywhere about?"

Mr. Morley was usually generous in the matter of Christmas boxes, so Ted found him a piece of sacking.

"That'll do fine," said Mr. Morley. "Good-day, Ted," and he drove out of the yard to the market.

He got his delivery ticket from the auctioneer's box near the calf shed, and, with the help of the man in charge, shrouded Number 123's hindquarters in the sacking. Together they heaved the calf into the back of the car, and after thanking the man Mr. Morley piloted his car carefully out of the market into the main street.

Then, and not till then, he remembered that his wife was in Winchbury, and that he'd promised to pick her up outside the Regal Theatre.

"My God!" he said to himself. "I dam' near went straight off home. What about that calf though? Missus won't stand for that. Wish I'd never seen the blame thing."

But the calf lay quietly in the bottom of the car, apparently asleep. He pulled up, covered the animal with a rug, and then drove on to the theatre, where he arrived just as his wife came out on to the pavement with a friend. Mr. Morley swept off his hat with a flourish and opened the car door. Wishing good-bye to her friend the unsuspecting Mrs. Morley got in, and they set out for home.

Mr. Morley was charming to his wife as they drove through Winchbury. He inquired about her day's doings, asked whether it had been a good film, and was amiability itself. So pleasant was he that his wife became suspicious, as such courteous behaviour was unusual after the storm and

stress of market day. She glanced round at the back seat, but there was nothing on it save her husband's stick and her own parcels. Still, she wondered.

As they left Winchbury behind them the calf woke up, and began to try to struggle to its feet out of the covering rug. Mr. Morley sensed this, so he talked hard to his wife, and wore the look of a spaniel puppy, who knows that he has transgressed but doesn't think his sin has been discovered.

Presently there was a loud flump in the back of the car, and Mrs. Morley turned her head to see the calf struggling to its feet, while round it, like an invalid's shawl, was the best travelling rug.

She was furious. Of all things, a calf! Mr. Morley tried to explain, but it was no good; his wife was really angry, and she would listen to no excuses.

"The idea! A calf! You could have got someone to take it home for half-a-crown."

"But, my dear, we'll be home in ten minutes. It doesn't matter."

"It does matter. Anything will do for your wife apparently. You can spend money on billiards, but won't pay a shilling or two to take your wife home decently. What did you lose at billiards to-day?"

Mr. Morley thought of the five shillings and sixpence lost at snooker, and was silent. Perhaps it was a bit thick, but still, the calf was doing no harm. What a little thing to make such a fuss about!

His wife continued to make a fuss. She sat forward on the seat to get as far away from the calf as possible, for the animal had staggered to its feet, and now stood gazing at her, as it swayed drunkenly from side to side with the motion of the car. She drummed her hands on her knees in exasperation, and threw agonized glances over her shoulder at the calf.

Suddenly the rights of the other road traffic caused Mr. Morley to swerve the car, and to bring his large foot down onto the brake. The effect of this was to throw the calf's head and shoulders over the back of Mrs. Morley's seat, and in so doing, its long wet tongue caressed her neck and cheek.

Unfortunately Mr. Morley chuckled. Probably it would have seemed funny to most folk, but in the circumstances he should have had more sense. After all, he was indubitably the cause of all the trouble.

"That settles it, Walter," said his wife, as she wiped her face, "I'll never go to market with you again. You'll have to get a Baby Austin Saloon now

for Nancy and me. That'll teach you, perhaps. I'm going to get out and walk home now. I won't ride with you another minute. Stop!"

Mr. Morley drove steadily on.

"Stop, Walter. Do you hear me? Stop! I'll walk home."

Mr. Morley drove steadily on. Granted the Missus was in a temper, and granted she had some excuse. Still, he wasn't going to let her get out. It wasn't so much that he minded her walking home the remaining half mile or so; but one of his friends would be sure to come along and pick her up, and he'd never hear the last of it. He was sorry that he had laughed when the calf licked her neck, but, hang it, it was funny. But buying another car for her and Nancy wouldn't be at all funny. Women, of course, could never see the funny side of anything. Still, he'd better smooth her down a bit.

"Don't be silly, Missus," he said. "We'll be home in a minute or two. I'm sorry and all that, but, dash it, the calf ain't doin' any harm. Look, she's laid down again now."

As they drove through their village street Mr. Morley spied the Rector and Mrs. Guthrie walking towards them. "Ah," he said, "I want a word with the Rector."

"Don't you dare," hissed his wife.

One glance at her face, and Mr. Morley knew that he daren't. This was serious; his wife wasn't just fussing. Twenty-five years of married life had taught him to respect that look and tone of voice.

Of course it was serious. Mr. Morley, being a mere man, was much too thick to understand the reason for his wife's agitation at the sight of the Rector and his lady, but the reason would have been patent to any lady of their acquaintance. The Rector had a son of about twenty-three, named Frank, and Mrs. Morley had a daughter of about eighteen, named Nancy. Frank Guthrie was tall and good-looking, and in Mrs. Motley's opinion just that little bit different from a farmer's son. Nancy was fair, undeniably pretty, and in Mrs. Morley's opinion just that little bit different from the average farmer's daughter. Whatever Frank may or may not have been, Mrs. Morley was right in her opinion of her daughter, for she was Nancy's mother, and who should know these subtle things about a girl better than her mother? No more need be said. Was Mrs. Morley going to be caught by the Rector and his wife in the act of hauling calves from Winchbury market? No, a thousand times, no!

"Don't you dare," she hissed.

Then Fate took a hand. Some seven or eight cows belonging to a smallholder came suddenly out of a side lane, and forced Mr. Morley to pull in to the left-hand pavement, and to come to a halt by the side of Mr. and Mrs. Guthrie.

Both the gentlemen raised their hats, both the ladies bowed, and in the midst of these salutations the calf woke up, began to struggle to its feet, and emitted a loud hoarse, "Mawrr". The Rector jumped as though he had heard the Last Trump; Mrs. Guthrie smiled with amused condescension; Mrs. Morley wished that the earth would open and swallow up everybody, calf included; and Mr. Morley, to his everlasting shame, chuckled aloud once more.

However, the road was now clear, so with, "Good-day, Rector. Can't stop. The baby wants her tea," he let in his clutch, and a few moments later pulled up at the door of his home.

Mrs. Morley descended in awful dignity. "Perhaps," she said icily, "when you've finished with your animals, you'll get my parcels brought in."

"An' that's that," muttered Mr. Morley to himself, as the front door closed with a bang. He drove round to the garage, and proceeded to shout loudly for Bill Gurd.

Bill arrived, and took charge of the calf, admiring its pretty colour and general appearance. "Anythin' less than fower guineas, an' her's cheap," he opined.

"I wonder!" said Mr. Morley to himself, as Bill disappeared with the calf. "What about that blamed Austin?"

The atmosphere of his home that evening was very strained and uncomfortable. Mrs. Morley scarcely spoke at all, and never to her husband. When they went up to bed he hoped that after a good night's sleep, she would have cooled down. But although *he* slept like a top that night, his wife did not, for every ten minutes or so throughout that whole long night there floated up from the buildings the hoarse, disconsolate "Mawrr" of a hungry, unhappy calf.

Chapter 5

Next morning at about four-thirty Fernditch Farm commenced another day. The first man on the scene was the old dairyman, an ancient named Frederick Simmons. He walked through the yards, opened the gate leading to the pasture beyond, and plodded away up the field in a dense mist, calling, "Cup, cup, come along," repeatedly.

Presently the dull shapes of cows loomed through the mist, as they meandered purposefully through the gate leading to the buildings.

Wold Dolly's calf was rather hoarse by this time but she achieved yet one more raucous "Mawrr" as the herd entered the cow yard. This sent them all off in repeated moos and bellows, causing Mrs. Morley to wake from a troubled sleep, and to wonder once again why she had been so foolish as to marry a farmer.

While the dairyman was rounding up the stragglers of the herd, Bill Gurd and two more milkers arrived. Bill fetched the two nag horses from a nearby pasture into their stable, while the other men proceeded to let the cows into the long cowhouse. Presently Bill joined them. There was considerable noise for a few minutes—the clanking of the cow chains, the "Git awver oot" of the men who were tying the cattle up in their respective stalls, and the crisp remarks of Bill Gurd to one or two of the more refractory beasts, from which anyone within a hundred yards of the buildings could have gathered that while Gipsy was merely a bitch, and Duchess a swine, Bluebell would get warmed smartish if she didn't behave.

At last they were all tied up, and soon the only sound was the soothing noise of the milk streaming from the teats into the pails, punctuated every so often by the new calf's hungry "Mawrr".

At six-thirty Bill left the cowhouse to put the saddle on the Guvnor's cob. Mr. Morley left the farmhouse about the same time, went to the carthorse stable to give out the orders for the plough teams to the head carter, and then passed through the cowhouse, pausing near the dairyman to say, "Morning, Fred. Everything all right?"

Receiving a satisfactory answer he went out to his waiting cob, and just as he greeted Bill with the customary "Morning, Bill," his passenger of the previous afternoon gave tongue once more.

“For God’s sake, Bill, tell Fred to get some grub into that blaring calf. Been on all night,” said Mr. Morley, as he clattered out of the yard on his way up to the sheepfold.

Bill explained the urgency of the case to the dairyman on their way home to breakfast, and that worthy promised to “zee to ut vust thing atter grub”.

On his return to the buildings the dairyman set one of his helpers to clean out the cowhouse, and the other to feed the eleven calves, which had already learnt the gentle art of drinking. Then he proceeded to attend to the new arrival.

First he put some milk into a bucket and warmed it by immersing the bucket in the dairy copper. Then having got it to the required temperature, which he ascertained by dipping his hand into the milk, he carried the bucket to the loose-box, where Wold Dolly’s calf had spent an unhappy night.

This young lady was not pleased to see him. She was hungry and miserable. She wanted her mother, not this funny old man with a pail. She backed away from him, as he entered, to the farthest corner of the box.

“Coom on then, my pretty. Coom along. I ’low thee bist hungry,” said the dairyman, advancing towards her.

The calf dodged round him.

“Coom on, zilly. I bain’t gwaine to ’urt thee. Ah well, I shall ’a to ketch thee, I ’low. Thee’t ’a more zense in a day er two.”

He hustled the frightened animal into a corner, and tried to force its head into the bucket. The calf objected, and in jerking her head to free it from the old man’s arm, splashed the warm milk all over her face.

The dairyman released her head, but still kept her a prisoner in the corner of the box. She blinked at him, shook her milky head, and then her tongue came out of her mouth and darted like a snake into each nostril in turn. This was milk, she thought, as the flavour of the splashings tickled her palate. It brought back delicious memories of that warm fluid she had been in the habit of sucking from her mother’s ample udder.

The old man surveyed her licking procedure with approval. “Bain’t zo bad then, young un, be it? Coom on, p’raps thee’t trust I a bit now.”

He got her head into the bucket again with much less difficulty, for the smell of the warm milk attracted her, and with infinite, tender patience he

coaxed her to suck his milky fingers, and sometimes to dip her muzzle into the milk.

"She ain't gwaine to be much trouble," he reported to Bill Gurd later in the day. "Cunnin' young madam, that be. I'll 'a she awver wi' tother-me in a few days."

The old man's prophecy was correct. Each succeeding night there were fewer and fewer hungry "Mawrrs" to disturb Mrs. Morley's rest, and by the end of a week the latest arrival was over in the calf shed with the others, drinking like an old hand.

Life at Fernditch proceeded that winter according to schedule without any untoward happening. Mr. Morley made his peace with his wife, and promised that, when times were better, a small car should be purchased for the exclusive use of his wife and daughter. A safe promise this, he thought, for, as everyone knew, farming times never did get better.

The winter wheat was got in by the end of November; last season's wheat stubble was ploughed up in December in preparation for the spring corn; the water meadow ditches were cleaned out; preparations for the lambing of the flock in January were got well in hand; the milk went to London daily; and Wold Dolly's calf throve amazingly.

Over this kingdom Mr. Morley reigned in cheerful content, varied by occasional days of vicious irritability. Behind him, his Prime Minister, Bill Gurd, spurred everyone to increased activity when the Guvnor was cheerful, and took the delinquent's part, when Mr. Morley was on the rampage. Alone of all the farm's inhabitants, he dared to argue with the Guvnor.

"I've 'a telled the dairyman as 'ow 'ee kin 'ave thic rick o' vield hay up in the Long Acre," he said one day to his master. " 'Tis nice and 'andy fer un to git at, and 'ee do want a bit o' good hay fer they Fall calvers. Shepherd be main put out awver it, zo I telled un as I'd name it to 'ee."

At first Mr. Morley said that it was impossible. The sheep must have all the field hay, and the dairyman must manage with the pasture rick in the yard. "You know we never reckon for the cows to have any field hay, Bill. That won't do."

"Wun't it?" said Bill. "Course you knows best an' all that, but thic rick in yard ain't much better nor straw fer milk. You kin mind we spoiled 'ee last summer. You don't want to take all shep says as gospel. Shepherds be allus 'ungry. 'Ee'd feed I to 'is flock, if zo be as they'd eat I. I tell 'ee we got plenty fer the sheep wi'out thic rick."

"I'd sooner not, Bill. If we once start that game, dairyman'll want it every year."

"Well, wot if 'ee do? You be allus thinkin' about they sheep. Wot about thic milk cheque now? I be thinkin' o' 'ee. 'Ee'll be right 'andy, I 'low. You let I tell Fred as 'ee kin 'ave a bit o' thic rick. They calves do want a pick at zummat zweet. I'll zee as tain't wasted."

The upshot of this conversation was that, as in most things, Bill got his own way, and left Mr. Morley to make his peace with the shepherd.

Apart from the farm Bill had only one interest. He loved a bargain, and whenever opportunity occurred, he went in for private dealing on his own account. Not, of course, in livestock, as he had no accommodation for them, but he would buy almost anything else. Bicycles, furniture, perambulators, wheelbarrows, anything which, in his opinion, could be resold at a profit.

In December Mr. Morley was invited to go for a day's shooting. It so happened that this engagement fell on a market day, so he arranged that Bill should go to market in his stead, and carry out the one or two commissions which had to be executed in Winchbury that day.

By this time the calves had been practically weaned off milk on to calf meal, and in addition to his other errands Bill was instructed to bring back five hundredweight of this foodstuff in the milk float. Mr. Morley was well aware of Bill's private trading, so as he set off in his car he said to him, "You don't need to hurry back from market, Bill. So long as you're back in time for the float to take the milk to the station 'll do. Give you time to find a bargain or two in market somewhere."

Bill drove into Winchbury as instructed, and took with him two calves about ten days old. When he had got them safely tied up in the auctioneer's shed, he proceeded to get his load of meal, and then to put his horse up at the Blue Lion. Having done several other small commissions, he went back to the market to see what he could find.

There seemed to be nothing much in his line that day amongst the varied assortment of dead stock in Smith's auction, and the only possibility was a wooden tea chest filled with books of all kinds. Bill decided to risk a half-crown on these as a speculation.

When the auctioneer came to this lot he could not get a bid of any kind. "Come on, gentlemen," he said, "start me somewhere. We must get on."

Someone facetiously bid a shilling, which after a few moments the auctioneer took, and just as he was going to knock the lot down, Bill Gurd

bid eighteenpence.

There was a general chuckle, as Bill's dealing propensities were well known. "Some scholard, you be, Bill," remarked one wag, and "Knock 'em down, Guvnor. Bill here, 'ee's studyin' fer an exam," cried another.

In a moment or two the auctioneer and crowd passed on, leaving Bill the owner of the box of books for eighteenpence. "An' I bain't gwaine to lose no sleep awver that," said he to himself, as he wandered over to the calf sale to see how his passengers were selling.

About an hour afterwards he was back, examining his purchase, when a Mr. Wheeler, who kept a book and antique shop in Winchbury, came up to him.

"Ah, my man," he said to Bill. "I understand that you have purchased these books."

"Well, wot about it then?" said Bill.

"Unfortunately I could not get here when they were sold, but I can do with them. How much do you want for them?"

"I dunno much about books, mister, but you kin 'ave 'em fer ten shillin', cash," said Bill.

"But Mr. Smith told me that you only paid eighteenpence for them," expostulated Mr. Wheeler.

"You gie Mr. Bloody Smith my compliments, an' tell 'im as 'ow 'ee an't got no right to blab 'is client's bizniss broadcast. Wot I gied fer 'em's no odds to nobody. I wants two ov 'em fer meself, an' ten bob fer tother-me. Take 'em er lave 'em."

"Which two do you want to keep?" asked Mr. Wheeler.

"I wants thic Bible. 'Tis bad luck to trade in they; an' I wants this un too. 'Ee's writ by a bloke called Shakespeare. I've a yerd 'ee well spoke ov."

"Well, I'll give you five shillings for them. Come along. Books aren't in your line."

"No, but they be in yourn. That's wot do count now. Be you gwaine to take 'em at 'alf a quid er not, cause else I be gwaine to take they whoam? I kin do wi' they."

"Look here, I'll make it six shillings. They're no good to you."

"Bain't 'em? 'Ow dost thee know? There's a matter o' fifty books in thic box. Damme, ten bob's cheap. 'Tis only a bob fer vive. Wot about it then?"

"Oh, all right," said Mr. Wheeler, producing a ten shilling note. "Have it your own way, but you must deliver them over to my shop for that."

"Right," said Bill, pocketing the note, "but if I does that, thee dussent 'ave the box."

Mr. Wheeler groaned in despair, and left it at that. Bill borrowed one of the auctioneer's barrows, delivered the books, and then took the empty box to the egg market, where he sold it to an egg buyer for a shilling. "An' a very tidy deal all roun'," he said to himself as he drove back to Fernditch and his manifold duties.

Of the two books he brought home Bill kept but one. He presented the Bible to his old mother, and kept the Shakespeare for his own reading. He must have read it to some purpose that winter, for later on towards the end of January, he put his knowledge of that poet's work to good account.

The Rector met him one morning, and asked him if he could get anyone to do the hedge at the bottom of the Rectory garden.

"Why don't 'ee zee George Avery, zur? 'Ee do usually do yer jobs," said Bill.

"I've asked him," replied the Rector, "but he says that he doesn't see his way."

"All right," grunted Bill. "I'll zee wot I kin do."

That night Bill visited the village pub, and after standing George Avery a pint of beer, he got out of him what a Wiltshire man calls "the true innards" of the situation. It appeared that if the Rector employed anyone by the week, he paid up on Saturdays as was customary, but a contract job like doing a hedge was a case of sending in a bill, which possibly might not be settled for perhaps three months.

"Like that, is it?" said Bill to himself, as he walked home that night. "Course old George couldn' never wait fer 'is money. Allus lived 'and to mouth. Well, I reckon as I kin fix it."

A day or two afterwards Bill met young Jack Lever, who had been hurdle making all the winter in the big wood at the top of Fernditch Farm.

"Got a job fer thee, Jack, when thee canst git away from 'ood fer a few days. Old Cholly," for such was the irreverent way in which most of the

villagers referred to the Rector, “want’s ’is ’edge done proper. ’Er’s reel bad. ’Er an’t felt iron fer nigh on fourteen year. Thee’t jist the chap fer to do un.”

“Ay, ’er do want doin’, but not fer I, Bill,” replied Jack.

“Why not? Thee canst do ’ee well. Bin chinnin’ it awver wi’ George Avery, I ’low, and thee’t afraid thee’t ’ave to wait fer thee aypence.”

“That’s about the zize ov it, Bill.”

“Well, look at yer,” said Bill. “Thee do the ’edge, make a vust class job ov un, and I’ll zee as thee gits thee money on the dot.”

“An’ I be dealin’ wi’ thee, not wi’ Old Cholly, Bill?”

“Damme, ah!”

“Right you be, then,” agreed Jack.

In due course Jack proceeded with the job, and when it was finished he sought out Bill.

“Many hours ’ast put in?” asked Bill.

“Thirty-nine.”

“Well, ’ow much an hour?”

“Ginilly reckons about ninepence.”

“Gawd,” said Bill. “ ’Ave a pride in thee craft. Thee’s done a good job. Sposin’ we calls it forty hours at a bob. You wur standin’ in water on the meadow zide ov un the main o’ the time.”

“Wull ’er stand fer it?” asked Jack.

“Damme, thee’t dealin’ wi’ I not wi’ old Cholly. Ull two quid satisfy thee?”

“Not arf.”

“Well, there thee at then,” said Bill, drawing the money from his pocket. “Now thee’t finished wi’ it.”

Jack went away well pleased, and that night Bill sat down to make out his bill for the Rector. “I’ve a zeed to it fer un, an’ I’ve feenanced the bizniss,” he said to himself. “I maun ’ave a bit fer me time an’ trouble.” After some cogitation he produced the following bill, which he delivered at the Rectory next day.

The Rev. Charles Guthrie

to

William Gurd

Plashing and layering 9 rod of hedge, with stakes and binders all complete at 5*s.* a rod. 45*s.* in all.

A few days afterwards as Bill was passing the Rectory, he met the Rector.

"Ah, Gurd," said Mr. Guthrie. "I've received your bill for getting my hedge done."

"Well, wot about it then?" said Bill.

"It's a lot more than I expected," said the Rector. "Are you sure that you've reckoned it correctly?"

"Wot do 'ee take me fer?" asked Bill. "I bain't no scholard, but I've a put down the price of a good job. If you 'as vust class workmanship, you maun expect to pay accordin'. You mid be a good judge o' sermons, Rector, but I do know wot's wot about doin' an 'edge an' you don't."

"True," said the Rector, "I don't know, so I must get some advice before I settle with you."

Bill sensed the true state of affairs at once. 'Tis now er never, he thought. If I doan't draw to-day, I'll 'a to wait. Aloud he said: "Look at yer, Rector, I've a treated 'ee fair. You couldn't git thic 'edge done wi'out I. I bain't one o' they as runs about the village sayin' as you don't pay up. I does wot you asks an' charges 'ee accordin'. Wot about it, then?"

This beat the Rector completely. The tithes had not come in very promptly that season, and one or two of his investments had passed their dividends. He was well aware that he had one or two long outstanding accounts still unpaid in the village. The best way would be to pay up at once, and put this aggressive yokel in his place.

"Come with me, Gurd," he said, "and I'll pay you now. You're a bit of a Jew, so I would prefer not to be in your debt for any length of time."

"Jew, be I?" said Bill, stung to the quick. "Wot be you? You be keen enough after yer pound o' flesh, when 'tis a matter o' tithes, bain't 'ee? I an't asked 'ee fer more than me pound neet less, which is accordin' to the poets, as you do well know."

“Good heavens,” said the astonished Rector, and as he was writing out the cheque he kept murmuring, “A little knowledge, a little knowledge.”

Bill did not know what the clergyman meant by these mutterings, but he pocketed the cheque, signed a receipt, and went away well pleased with himself.

Chapter 6

The twelve weanlings lived that winter and spring in a long, low shed, which was open along the side facing south. This open side had been walled up with sheep hurdles—double hurdles wattled with straw in between them along the bottom half of the opening, and above these single hurdles only. Since they had left their respective mothers, this long, dim room had been the calves' only dwelling.

The floor of this abode had been planned on crudely scientific principles. The base was Mother Earth, next came a layer of green hazel faggots, which had been covered with a thick coating of dry wheat straw. More straw was added daily as required, with the result that, as time went on, the shed became lower and lower as the floor covering thickened.

In addition to milk and calf-meal, the weanlings acquired a palate for other food stuffs of a more solid character. They learned to nibble a little sweet hay, and to eat some linseed cake, which was ground fine by their foster-father, the old dairyman. Their life consisted chiefly of eating and sleeping. They never went outside their home for the first six months. It was bedroom, dining-room, schoolroom—everything.

Few people took much interest in them. Mr. Morley knew vaguely that he had picked up a dozen calves that season. He inquired from the dairyman every weekly pay-day as to their well-being, and if occasion took him by their dwelling, he would look in on them for a moment with a knowledgeable eye; but beyond that he did nothing. The flock and the spring corn sowing occupied his attention. Twelve calves were much too small a detail on Fernditch Farm to warrant the concern of the Guvnor.

The ubiquitous Bill Gurd however usually found time to peep at the calves each day, and the old dairyman worried over them like a mother. He loved them. Nobody else was allowed to do anything for them. Not that he neglected the major part of his job, the milk yield of the dairy herd. That, of course, had to be attended to every day, but there was little or no romance in that; it was just a factory-like occupation, the same, day after day.

The calves were different. They were his children. When first taken from their mothers they had been so frightened and helpless. They had been afraid of this gentle, old man, upon whom they depended. He had taught them all they knew; first to suck his milky fingers, then to dip their noses into a

bucket and drink, and finally to drink boldly, side by side at a trough, with their tails wiggling in ecstasy.

When once they had decided that the food he brought them was nice, they longed for his coming. Hunger was not the only reason for this longing. The old man's visits were the only break in their monotonous existence, excepting when the wintry sun shone through the top hurdles, making curious patterns and shadows on the whitewashed walls of their home. As they grew older they became rough and boisterous, and sometimes would almost knock the dairyman down in their eagerness to get at their food. But he did not mind. They were growing. They were "doing". What else mattered? This growth was solely due to his care. Each day as he admired their condition while they were feeding, he felt inclined to say, "Alone I did it. This little job is mine, and it is well done." He did not actually say this, but vaguely he was aware that the pride of achievement still beat in his ancient breast. He worried not a whit about hours or wages. *His* calves, not Mr. Morley's calves, were doing fine.

One day in the first week of May he stood looking over the half-door at his charges, when Bill Gurd joined him.

"A pretty bunch o' calves, dairyman. Thee's done they proud. Blowed if the last un, thic strawberry there, ain't ketched tother-me, an' passed 'em."

"Ay, she'm a lusty young varmint. I wur a tellin' the Guvnor tother day, that 'tis a main vew zeasons zince we 'ad sich a level lot."

"Thee shut up about 'em to the Guvnor, er you knows 'ow tull be. Predenly, when there's a bite o' grass about everywhere, zomeone ull tempt un wi' a good bid, an' then thee't lose 'em. 'Ee'll trot out 'is nimble ninepence agen. Thee bide quiet, an' we'll turn they out next market day, when 'ee's in Winchbury."

"Wur be gwaine to put 'em?"

"In thic little groun' awver Arch. 'Tis out o' zight o' the road, zo no one gwaine by wunt zee 'em, an' they'll be out ov 'is usual roun'. If we kin keep they 'id till we do start 'aymakin', we'll be all right. Once he'm maggotin' wi' the hay, he wunt bother wi' nowt else."

Next market day Mr. Morley went off about ten o'clock as usual. When he was safely out of the way Bill Gurd tapped at the back door of the farmhouse, and asked to see Mrs. Morley. "We be gwaine to turn out the calves, Mum," he informed her. "I do know 'ow you do like to zee 'em frisk, zo I 'lowed you'd like fer to know."

“Oh, thank you, Bill. I’ll tell Miss Nancy, and we’ll watch from the dining-room.”

The dining-room windows looked out onto the calf shed and yard adjoining, and in a few minutes both Mrs. Morley and her daughter were nearly helpless with laughter.

The dairyman and Bill opened the door of the shed, and stood to one side. One or two calves peeped out, and stood hesitating in the doorway. “Dunno wot’s good for ’em, Fred,” said Bill. “Come on, we’ll ’a to drave ’em out.”

Never were prisoners so reluctant to leave their prison. They had to be pushed out into the sunlit yard. When this was done Bill and the dairyman pulled the lower half-door shut, and stood leaning on it to watch the pantomime.

For some months the calves had lived in one room some twelve yards long by five yards wide. Consequently they hardly realized that their legs were intended as a means of locomotion, and the bright sunlight of the yard made them blink after their dim winter quarters. They stood in a huddled bunch just outside the door, wondering what was going to happen next.

Nothing happened, so that bold spirit, the strawberry roan, took heart of grace, and stole gingerly a pace or two away from her companions. A queer light, this, she thought, but it was rather pleasant. There was more room too, and the ceiling of this strange new world seemed very far away. Nice to have more room though. That bright light in the ceiling shed a lovely warmth on her roan back. She felt fine. She would run a few steps, and perhaps kick a little with her strong legs.

She did so, and felt strangely elated. This sort of thing was what those lovely legs of hers were made for. She would do it again. She did. It was splendid. Everything was wonderful. What a lovely place this bright new world was.

The combined effect of sun and freedom went to her head like wine, and she set off round the yard in a wild dance of glee, an example soon copied by her companions. In a moment or two the yard was filled with crazy, drunken calves leaping in an abandoned frenzy of delight.

Everything they did surprised them. At the end of a short, quick run they would leap into the air, and come down on four straddled, wobbly legs, with an expression of utter bewilderment on their faces. They snorted, they

danced, they bucked, they galumphed, and literally chortled in their joy. A frabjous time, indeed.

It was a pity that Bill Gurd and the dairyman were not conversant with the works of Lewis Carroll, for then they could have shouted, "Calloo, Callay," to cheer on the dancers, but all the old man said was, "I low they be reel 'appy, zno," and his companion, thinking that enough of a working day had been wasted in watching their antics, said, "Lave 'em be till atter dinner. They'll 'a found the use o' thur legs be then, I low. We'll run 'em up awver Arch afore milkin'."

The reason why Bill wanted to get the calves out of Mr. Morley's way was that although each year a bunch of calves was weaned at Fernditch, never yet had they been kept long enough to come into the home dairy. The demand for livestock was naturally at its keenest in May and June, when there was a plenteous supply of natural food. Later on in the summer, when grass was scarcer, calves, more often than not, were cheaper than in May, although they were some three months older. In May there was the prospect of the summer's cheap keep, but in August the outlook was very different, for winter keep cost money.

Mr. Morley was well aware of this fact, and one of his dictums was that "A nimble ninepence was better than a dead shilling". He could never resist a good price for livestock, and each year he sold his weanling calves in May, much to his men's disgust.

Unknown to Bill and to the dairyman he had worked out the "cost and come to" of this particular bunch of calves with his son during the Easter holidays. To his heir's great annoyance he had chosen a fine evening for the calculation, when Master James would have much preferred to have been out after young rabbits with a ·22 rifle. But when Mr. Morley wanted to work out the "cost and come to" of any farm product, he always made his son sit by his side, in order to learn this most important branch of the farming art.

Accordingly, father and son had carefully hunted out all the bills for calf-meal, made a detailed estimate of the milk, hay, and linseed cake consumed by the calves, debited them with a fair sum for attendance and rent, and to this total added the initial cost per calf of four pounds.

The result of this calculation was that Mr. Morley was firmly convinced that this particular lot of calves was ten pounds per head in his debt. This sum, he explained to his son, was in some measure only theoretical. For instance, if the calves had not been weaned that winter, the expenses of the

farm for labour and rent would not have been lessened in any way. Still, from an accounting point of view, the calves had cost ten pounds each, and Mr. Morley decided that should anyone be optimistic enough about the future to bid him anything over twelve pounds per head for them, he would sell, and he wound up this rather one-sided debate with yet another reference to the "nimble ninepence".

The largest cattle-dealer in the district, Robert Tucker by name, had a farm some four miles west of Fernditch. He was very different from the old-time dealer, being an entirely modern product. He had been to a good school, had married a local farmer's daughter, and was in his early thirties. He played a good game of tennis, and a cheerful if rather buccaneerish game of Bridge. On a tennis court or in his club most folks would have put him down as a doctor or a solicitor.

But he was a good cattle-dealer. As in most walks of life good business is dependent on friendship and integrity, so in cattle dealing, and Bob Tucker had acquired a reputation in his district that was worth much fine gold to him. Farmers said to one another, "Bob's all right. You can trust the devil."

His turnover in a year was enormous. At Bristol market he was a familiar figure, and on occasion he journeyed as far afield as Ireland to buy cattle. In effect, he was a shining example of the "nimble ninepence", for, with farmers who paid up promptly, he would handle cattle for a very small profit per head.

That season Bob had an inquiry from a customer for a bunch of homebred heifer calves, with the proviso that they must be all roans, and he had been unable to find a suitable lot. He knew that Mr. Morley was in the habit of weaning a good coloury bunch, but although he had driven slowly in his car along the road through Fernditch several times during the past fortnight, he had been unable to spot any calves at pasture. A townsman would have thought that the obvious thing to do would have been to ask Mr. Morley outright whether he had any weanlings for sale, but Bob knew that course to be the wrong one. In rural circles a more oblique method was advisable. If he could only see the calves somewhere, he would know how to get about the business.

A week or two later Bob was driving home from Winchbury one morning about ten o'clock. Once again he took the road through Fernditch, and on his way he overtook the old dairyman, who was carrying a bag on his shoulder.

“He’s got some cake in that bag,” Bob thought. “Wonder where he’s off to?” He pulled up and offered the old man a lift.

At first the dairyman refused. “I bain’t gwaine fur, zur, an’ I’d as lief walk, thankin’ you all the same.”

“Rubbish, dairyman! A third class ride’s better than a first class walk. Come along.”

Reluctantly the old man got into the car beside him, and sat down with the bag on his knees.

“What’s on, dairyman?” asked Bob, pointing to the bag as they started off. “Cakin’ some cattle outside? I should have thought there was plenty of grass for you this season.”

The old man hated to lie, but the safety of his calves was at stake, so he suggested that he was just giving a mouthful of cake to two or three down-calving cows. He did not do this very convincingly, and as his companion could see through a small hole in the bag that he was carrying linseed cake, kibbled small, he did not believe this lame explanation.

In a few moments he set the old man down at the top of a short lane leading to a level crossing, and then drove on over the railway arch.

About a hundred yards further on he stopped and got out of the car. “Morley don’t often give linseed cake to calvers,” he muttered to himself, “and that was kibbled a lot too fine for cows. I’ll just see what he’s at. They’ve got two little grounds over the line.”

He got over the fence, and walked out into the field opposite, until he could see the small pastures belonging to Fernditch Farm. Presently he spotted the bunch of calves all making towards the gate as if on business bent. “Just what I thought,” he said to himself. “A bunch of weaners. Mostly roans too, as far as I can see. Just my handwriting. I’ll bet old Bill Gurd put ’em up here, so as they’d be out of sight. Well, we’ll see.”

On his return home he found that fate was playing into his hands, for his wife informed him that Mrs. Morley had rung up to invite them to tennis on the following evening.

Next day, after one or two strenuous sets, Bob retired to the house with Mr. Morley and Jim Marsh for a drink, and carefully led the conversation round to farming matters, mentioning that he wanted a good bunch of weanlings.

“I’ve got a bunch turned out,” said his host. “Like to have a look at ’em, Bob?”

“Well, what about the tennis? You don’t want to bother with calves this evening.”

“Oh, that’s all right. We can run up in the car in a couple of minutes. They’re not far from the road. Come on, I want to have a look at ’em myself. I haven’t seen ’em lately. Best go out the back way.” In spite of Bill Gurd’s precautions Mr. Morley knew where the calves were.

Unknown to the company on the lawn, they slipped out, and in a few minutes their car pulled up near the level crossing. In immaculate flannels the three experts went into the pasture, rounded up the calves into a bunch, and stood looking at them critically.

“That’s as pretty a bunch o’ weaners as ever I see,” remarked James Marsh, “an’ ain’t they doin’, Bob?”

“They certainly don’t shame their pasture, Jim. Goodish ground this, Mr. Walter?”

“Yes, ’tis. This one and the next are the only grass I’ve got as’ll fat a bullock. What about it, Bob? These any good to you?”

“If you want to sell ’em, I can do with ’em, but you’ll want a fancy price to part with these. I shan’t be any good to you; I’ve got to sell ’em again.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t exactly want to sell ’em, but I’ll sell anything at a price.”

James Marsh wandered away from his companions to the other side of the calves, so as to be out of earshot. If they were going to talk business, he knew his manners too well not to leave them to it.

In a few minutes Mr. Morley hailed him. Bob had bid him twelve pounds per head, and he wanted advice. “Bob’s hard-hearted to-night, Jim. Come and tell him so. He expects me to sell ’em for twelve pounds.”

“You two are quite capable of doin’ each other without my help,” remarked Jim, as he rejoined them. “Blowed if I’d sell ’em at any money, Walter. Dammit, all the hard work’s done. They’ll plim like biscuits this summer, and won’t cost you anything.”

“That’s what I tell him,” said Mr. Morley. “ ’Sides, look at their colours. You got to pay for colours like that, Bob. They’re all roans. Why that

strawberry roan there's worth all the money I'm asking for the lot. Ain't she a picture?"

"That's all true enough," said Bob, "but I ain't a picture dealer, an' I want something for handling 'em.

"Well, I'll part at a good price, but I ain't going to fool 'em away, Bob."

"And what might that be, Mr. Walter?"

"Fourteen quid apiece. You'll be able to make fifteen of 'em, Bob."

"Will I? What would you say if any friend of yours bought weaners at fifteen pounds this season?"

"That he wanted his head seen to," chuckled Mr. Morley. "But I haven't got your silvery tongue, Bob. You can persuade folk to do these silly things."

"Can I? Well, if either of you can tell me where to place these calves at fourteen five, I'll take 'em at fourteen, but I haven't met anyone fool enough yet."

And so the argument went on for several minutes, until when they left the field to drive home, Bob had raised his bid by ten shillings, and Mr. Morley had lowered his price by a similar amount.

On the road home Mr. Morley said to Bob, who was seated beside him: "One word, Bob. I'll take thirteen, even if 'tis unlucky. Please yourself. If you don't want 'em, there's no harm done. We must get back to tennis."

"All right, Mr. Walter. I'll take 'em. I'll send for 'em one day this week if that suits you."

"That's settled then," said Mr. Morley, as they pulled up at the farmhouse. "Now then, let's see if Nancy and I can beat you and your missus. Come along."

It is interesting to record that on the morrow Mr. Morley reported the sale of the calves to Bill Gurd in a very shamefaced manner. That worthy received the news with the remark, "Bout what I thought, when I zeed 'ee goo up along last night wi' Bob Tucker. Anybody'd think as 'ow you wur 'ard up fur a shillin' er two." And Bill stumped away in great annoyance to report the sad news to the old dairyman, who accepted it with sorrow and resignation, mumbling to himself: "Spose the Guvnor do know 'is own bizniss best, but they wur a preety lot. Well, we maun zee wot we kin do

next year." He realized that fundamental thing about farming—there is always a next year.

Chapter 7

A day or two afterwards the strawberry roan calf and her companions went to their new home. They did not visit Bob Tucker's farm at all, but journeyed by road to their new owner's farm some ten miles distant. Bob had sold them for a gross profit of fifteen shillings per head delivered.

He rang up Mr. Morley one morning and arranged to take them away on the morrow, asking if Mr. Morley could spare a man to help them over the level crossing.

This was accomplished successfully at 7 a.m., as it was hot weather, and the cattle would travel better in the cool of the morning. Having seen them safely into the drove leading to the downs, and arranged to pick up his drovers at their destination, Bob returned to his car. He presented Bill Gurd with two half-crowns, one for himself and one for the dairyman, and then drove home.

The head drover was a sour, taciturn peasant of sixty, and his companion a half-witted youth of seventeen called Silly Willy. Deficient youth went in front of the calves, and crabbed age, accompanied by a nondescript collie, plodded at the rear. Their road, an old Ox Drove, led them to the top of the Wiltshire downs, along whose ridge they travelled for the major part of the journey.

It was a gorgeous May morning, and both men sensed vaguely that the world was indeed a pleasant place just then. Silly Willy shambled along, singing and shouting. "Bye bye Blackbird" had been added recently to his repertoire by the gramophone at the village inn, and he sang it repeatedly. Its cataleptic rhythm gave him great joy, and the fact that he was walking on green turf, through golden gorse bushes, from which darted real blackbirds and countless other songsters, never dawned on him.

The drover at the rear of the herd did not sing at all. Why should he? When he'd finished this job there would be another arranged for him to do, and when that was done, yet another. So it would go on, he supposed, until one day he'd die, and then there would be no more weary journeys to do. For there was little joy in droving, no continuity and no constructive purpose. It was like being an errand boy all one's life.

He wished that the fool in front would shut up. There was enough trouble in the world, surely, without adding to it by singing. So, beyond

cursing his dog whenever she strayed from his heel, he said nothing, but just plodded on and on at the heels of the calves, with his worn gaiters going "squeak, squeak" as they rubbed against the back of his heavy boots at each step.

But though he was oblivious of the beauties of nature's pageant through which he was passing, he noted keenly all the material farming things, as he plodded along. So-and-so's sheep were doing well; on another farm they were drilling turnips; and what a lot of thistles in this piece of barley. Of course, they used double ploughs here. Ah, they were no good. Didn't cut half the ground. Serve 'em right.

And so the calvacade plodded along the Ox Drove on this glorious sunny day in late May. May in southern England and a fine day! The birds appreciated it if the men did not. They talked of nothing else all that morning. On the roof of some field buildings Mr. Sparrow in his black waistcoat sat ruffling his chest, and saying again and again to demure Mrs. Sparrow in her dove-coloured blouse that it was a fine day, and she probably answered as a good wife should, "Yes dear, but supposing you leave the weather to take care of itself for a while, and fetch me some pieces of straw for our nest."

A thrush perched on a scrubby chalk oak tree was singing a beautiful tenor solo, which translated into words meant, "Summer's coming, summer's coming. I am so glad. I am so glad." In fact they were all in complete agreement about it, sparrow, chaffinch, thrush, blackbird, lark, yellow-hammer, linnet, blue tit, and all the feathered choir.

From the Ox Drove it was possible to view the valley beneath, and beyond it the arable fields, which sloped up to the opposite ridge of downs —a picture of serene beauty, painted by a generous hand, with green as its predominating colour. Green of all shades. The vivid, lush green carpet of the water meadows, with pollard willows dotted here and there like furniture —couches and chairs, covered with the green chintz of the willow's first leaves, some silvery green, some amber green, and others reddish green. On the far hillside were the different greens of the arable crops; the dark green of clover, the sea-green of wheat, the bluish-green of spring oats, the delicate green of young barley, and countless other shades; while through the whole picture ran the river, like a wandering bright silver thread.

After they had been journeying for some two hours the head drover yelled to Silly Willy to stop the cattle. They had come to a dew pond, and while the calves drank and rested, the two men ate their lunch. They

resumed their journey after some twenty minutes, and at about half-past eleven turned out of the Ox Drove down a rutty chalk road leading through Springhead Farm, at that time rented by a young farmer named Christopher Lowe.

It was a typical South Country farm of some six hundred acres, which ran from the Ox Drove at the top of the downs to the Ripple Valley below. The source of the river Ripple was actually on the farm, hence the name, Springhead.

From a green pocket in the hillside the spring bubbled out, crystal clear. It formed itself into a little rivulet some four feet wide, which babbled gaily by the roadside through the village of Springbourne, becoming ever wider and wider until it was large enough to warrant the name of river.

Every villager who lived on one side of the road in Springbourne had to cross a little foot-bridge from the village street to the door of his cottage. The cottages were damp, and rheumatism was prevalent amongst their occupants. Tourists and casual visitors thought Springbourne a most picturesque and charming village, but of course, they did not have to live there, year in, year out.

To the head drover's great disgust neither Mr. Lowe nor his wife was at home when the calves arrived. This probably meant a loss of a half-crown tip unless he could meet Mr. Lowe in the near future, and remind him that he had delivered the calves. That was nothing like as satisfactory as drawing it on arrival. Still, there was no help for it. Mr. Lowe's dairyman, Arthur Weeks, received the calves, and with his help they turned them into a small pasture nearby, through which the miniature river twisted and turned.

The calves drank their fill, made a cursory inspection of their new pasture, and in a few moments lay down. They had just finished the longest journey of their young lives, and were tired. So were the drovers. They returned to the farm buildings, sat down under the yard wall, and finished the remainder of the food they had brought with them.

It was rather bad luck that there was nobody at home, thought the head drover, else there'd have been a glass of beer going at the farmhouse besides the missing half-crown. Still, he was used to bad luck, so when his meal was finished, he lay back against the wall, tilted his hat over his eyes, and went to sleep. Silly Willy did likewise, save that he took his hat off, and lay supine upon his back, with his large, loose mouth wide open.

Arthur Weeks had departed to his dinner, and apart from the two sleeping men, Springhead Farm was deserted. The sun shone, the flies buzzed around Silly Willy's mouth, an inquisitive fowl picked up the crumbs the men had dropped, and but for an occasional cock-crow, silence reigned.

At one o'clock Bob Tucker's motor recalled the sleepers to the trials of this mortal life. Bob had picked up Arthur Weeks on his way back from dinner, and before returning home with his men, he inspected the calves to see that there were none lame, parting with yet another half-crown to Weeks as a guarantee of good faith.

Christopher Lowe and his wife, Molly, had motored to Bournemouth that day. They frequently did this sort of thing. That was the trouble at Springhead. If it wasn't dancing at Bournemouth, it was golf at Broadstone, tennis at Brockenhurst, a point-to-point meeting somewhere else—always some pleasure or other away from the farm.

They were an attractive couple. Everybody liked them. They had no real vices. They did not drink or gamble to excess, and they were in love with each other. But they both liked pleasure, and Springhead Farm was to them only a means of making the wherewithal to get away from it.

Of course, the first few years after the war had spoiled them. Chris's parents had died in 1917, and he had come out of the army in 1918 at twenty-four years old to find himself possessed of the live and dead stock of Springhead Farm as his share of his father's estate. His three sisters had inherited the remainder, some six thousand pounds, divided equally between them. Two of his sisters were married, and lived in London and Manchester respectively, and the third, Janet, was the head mistress of a large school for girls in Brighton.

Janet had spent the Christmas holidays of 1918 at the farm with Chris in order to get him settled in. She had arranged for a groom-gardener and his wife to live in the farmhouse and look after her brother.

"But I don't need this big house, Janet," Chris had said, when he heard of this arrangement. "Why not let it, and get rooms in the village for me?"

"Because, my economically-minded brother, I know what a fathead you're going to be for a while. You've had four years of unnatural, nightmarish existence, and you're bound to cut loose. If you live here, you'll have to come home to sleep, and then you'll at least wake up on your farm."

"I like that," expostulated Chris. "Why, you talk, Janet, as though I shall go straight to the dogs."

“It’ll be only the mercy of Providence if you don’t, Chris. I’m not blaming you. You haven’t got a fair chance. All you young farmers will be spoilt in the next few years. Farmers are making money too easily just now. Few of you youngsters will be able to stand it—mentally or morally, I mean. And when the crash comes, as come it will in a few years time, you won’t know how to meet it.”

“But I like farming, Janet. I want to make this place go. It’s been let go back, since father was so ill and helpless.”

“Quite, my son. I believe you, but you’ll soon find that you’ll get drawn into a daily round of pleasure that will be more important than making the farm go. Look here, I’m off to-morrow. What’s your programme for next week? Just think.”

Chris thought for a moment or two, and remained silent.

“Startles you a bit, doesn’t it?” said his sister. “Give me a cigarette, Chris.”

Chris did so. Queer old bird, Janet, he thought.

“Yeomanry ball, tennis club dance, market day, shooting on Wednesday, and a week-end’s golf at Broadstone,” continued Janet, checking off the various items on her fingers between puffs at her cigarette. “Doesn’t leave a lot of time or energy for this concentrated farming push, does it, Chris?”

“Yes, but Janet, it’s the Christmas season. Every week won’t be like that.”

“H’m, not quite, perhaps, but most of them will be somewhat on those lines. You know, the last year under Dad’s will this place made a thousand pounds profit with just Meeks running it. You aren’t old enough, and you haven’t had enough experience to deal with an income like that, Chris. Besides, you’re far too good-looking. Before you know where you are, you’ll want to get married. You’ll need this house then.”

Her brother snorted his derision at the idea of getting married.

“You wait, Chris. You don’t realize the field of experiences that’s open to you now. Please God you’ll be lucky enough to get a wife with some sense. But you probably won’t. You’ll choose some damsel with a beautiful body, thin ankles, and a good forehand drive at tennis. At least, I should in your place.”

“You seem to know a lot about things, Janet.”

“Bless you, yes. I’m forty-two, and a crabbed old spinster. All my girls think I’m a kind of female wrath of God, and that I was never young and silly. But I know something about what you’re up against now, Chris. I’ve had my moments.”

She glowered into the fire for a few minutes, tossed her cigarette into the embers and rose to her feet.

“Come on, Chris. Bed. You’re driving me to the station first thing after breakfast, Cheer up. Perhaps you’ll only succeed in making an average fool of yourself after all, and there’ll be some excuse for you.”

Things had turned out much as Janet had predicted. Chris had attended to the farm well in the beginning, but when the first enthusiasm had cooled off, rural sports and pleasures began to take more and more of his time and energy. After all, when a fellow had got his handicap down from eighteen to ten in about nine months, what might he not accomplish if he practised hard? A scratch figure could not be so very far away. Then there was shooting. All his neighbours shot, and it would seem rather odd not to join in. Hunting? Granted it wasn’t a very swell pack, but it was good fun, and, dash it, a fellow had to have a horse to ride about the farm, so why not put in one day a week anyway?

Besides he was fit. One was only young once. Time enough to sober down when he was forty. And anyway, the farm was paying, and paying better than before he took it on. He must have made at least fifteen hundred the first year. No one could say that he wasn’t doing the place all right.

Up to a point this was true. There were a flock of four hundred Hampshire Down ewes, a thirty-cow dairy, and about twenty head of young stock on the farm when he took over, and prices of all farm produce continued to rise. Besides he could and did work hard, when it was essential.

He found these periods of farming activity extraordinarily pleasurable. After a fortnight in the lambing pen, or a month at harvest, he felt curiously happy and satisfied, and made countless resolutions to restrict his pleasures away from the farm to one day a week. But invariably these promises were broken. He had the telephone installed, and neighbours were continuously ringing him up and asking him to shoot, to play golf or tennis, or to join in other amusements according to the season.

And all these societies and clubs held dances in the winter, so girls began to come into the picture. Chris liked girls. He liked playing tennis with them, he liked dancing with them, and he liked looking at them. They were

attractive somehow, he thought. Not that he flirted much, at least, not seriously. He kissed one or two girls, but more for fun than anything else. Marriage tied a fellow up so; besides, you might make a frightful mistake. And he didn't want to mess about. He'd seen one or two men come a frightful mucker at that, while he was in the army.

There was a curious streak of purity in his make-up somewhere. He did not want to think of marriage for years yet, but a shadowy someone, who would transform everything for him some day, lurked in the background of his consciousness. All things came to those who waited, didn't they? Well, for this he was content to wait. Meantime, life was very sweet, and he'd enjoy it to the full.

And so his days were filled. Lovely days of pleasure and satisfying days of work, all mixed up in a delicious medley that was glorious. The feel of a good horse between his knees; the solid joy of something attempted something done, when he drove a tractor and binder round and round a good field of corn, until it was all laid low in tidy sheaves; tense moments of expectation when the partridges were coming straight at him, down wind; the peculiar, profound joy of helping and tending young lambs only a few moments old; the zest of tennis, the satisfaction of a full wooden club shot or a deftly played approach; the piquant tingling excitement when you struck at a rising fish; and countless other blissful things.

Another gratifying thing behind all these delights was the fact that he was sole master of Springhead Farm. He entertained his men friends in proper season to dinner, with bridge to follow. In return for hospitality received from his neighbour's wives he gave one large tennis party in the summer, and joined with several other bachelors in giving a dance in the winter. His men liked him, and he liked them. He owed no man anything. He was absolute monarch of his small kingdom, and only the weather could say him nay.

Naturally such an eligible bachelor caused some speculation amongst the ladies of the district, but for the first twelve months of his return, Chris took no especial notice of any girl. He was good friends with them all, but from anything more intimate he shied away like a colt. Life was too good for that sort of complication, he thought. Much too good. Why spoil it?

And then, during his second winter home, he met Molly Richards at the Golf Club's dance in December.

Chapter 8

Molly Richards was not a rural product. She was the only child of a Brighton solicitor, and some twelve months before her advent into Winchbury society, her seemingly secure, settled life had collapsed without warning like a pack of cards. Money troubles too bad to face had caused her father to decide that his old service revolver was the best solution to them, and the shame and worry of it all had proved too much for Molly's mother, who died a few weeks afterwards.

Accomplishments which graced the position of Miss Molly Richards, daughter of a prosperous solicitor, seemed very inadequate to earn a living for the same girl, now that this secure background had vanished so suddenly. Her only relation, a rather vinegary aunt, said firmly that Molly must go as a companion to some lady or other, preferably to one with a Christian home. Her niece did not seem to be attracted to this idea at all, either with or without the Christian home. In fact, she would have preferred one with the opposite qualities in this respect, on the grounds that if she had to become a sort of glorified servant in order to earn her living, she might just as well do it in interesting surroundings.

However, she decided that she would rather go as companion to Mrs. Grundy herself than stay a moment longer than was necessary in her aunt's house, where she was treated, from daylight to dark and after, either to lamentations on her father's wickedness, pitying scorn of her mother's weakness, or caustic remarks on her own poor qualifications as a wage earner. So she agreed to the plan of going out as a companion. Her aunt had already written to a lady in Cheltenham to arrange an interview, when the postman brought a letter for Molly from one of her old schoolfellows which suggested a much more attractive solution of her difficulties.

This girl, Patricia Somerville, was a dancing mistress in Winchbury. To give her her proper title, she was the principal and proprietress of the Somerville School of Dancing. In effect, she was more. She was principal, mistress, typist, publicity agent—everything. She was the daughter of a Winchbury doctor, and, after some hectic years in the V.A.D. during the War, she had returned to Winchbury to find that her home life was too dull to be borne.

To relieve this monotony, she went to London, where she took a course of instruction at one of the leading dancing academies. In due course she

obtained the necessary qualifications, but then discovered that suitable employment in this direction was hard to find. To keep her hand in—or rather her feet—until a fitting position was offered her, she had begun to teach dancing to a few small children in Winchbury, and the demand for her services had exceeded her wildest expectations.

From a modest beginning of two classes weekly, given in a hired room in Winchbury with a bibulous, down-at-heel pianist as accompanist, she had blossomed out into a school of dancing, of which the citizens of Winchbury and the surrounding district were justly proud. She took a lease of a suitable hall, fitted with dressing-rooms and other necessary accommodation, engaged a more presentable pianist, and a dancing mistress to help cope with her daily increasing number of pupils.

Farming was paying well, and consequently not only farmers but everybody in the district had money to spend. In a short while, to send one's children to the Somerville School of Dancing was recognized amongst the agricultural fraternity as the hallmark not only of prosperity but of culture. What farmer's wife could fail to glow with a proper pride when her offspring displayed their prowess in the terpsichorean art at the school's annual display in Winchbury's small theatre! In addition to the children, the young men and maidens of the neighbourhood sought to improve their skill in this direction. Of course, the farming fathers did not look on this new departure in the social life of the district with much favour in the beginning. Like all folk who get their living from the soil they were suspicious of any innovation, but their womenfolk soon conquered these early prejudices. They pointed out that doctors said definitely that dancing was a very beneficial exercise for young, growing children; they insinuated into their husbands' minds that their little Mary or Nelly would be mixing with such nice children, which would be so useful to them in after life; they remarked also with fervour that their husbands were not exactly parsimonious just then, when it came to a question of their own personal amusement.

These arguments, by constant repetition, soon wore down even the most surly father's opposition to such an idiotic and immoral waste of money, and for the sake of peace and quietness the farmers reached for their cheque-books, and made out cheques for several guineas to Miss Patricia Somerville. This young lady, who had started more or less as a joke, realized that she was on to a good thing and that it was no longer a joke but a serious proposition. She put her tongue in her cheek, increased her charges a trifle, and bunged more and more French into her advertisements.

Her annual exhibitions soon became events of much social importance in Winchbury, and the programmes fairly bristled with Gallic terms. As a break in the dancing programme on these occasions Pat engaged a professional artiste to sing two or three groups of songs. She spared no expense in this feature, which impressed her patrons greatly. The singer thinking that, as he or she was going to entertain a rural audience, country folk songs would be most suitable, was very surprised at the type of song chosen by Miss Somerville. But Pat knew her public intimately, and always chose a goodly proportion of high-brow songs, one or two of which were always sung in a foreign language.

These proved a great draw. Thick-necked, rubicund, prosperous farmers attended the evening performances in bulging-fronted evening dress, and applauded vigorously. Nobody should say that they did not appreciate songs sung in French or German. If old Bill So-and-so could clap "Plaisir d'amour" by Martini, old Tom This-or-that went one better after hearing "Es blinkt der Tau" by Rubinstein, and farmers are rarely half-hearted over anything. German "Kultur" being satisfactorily squashed, rural England was coming into its own in this respect, and woe betide anyone who dared to scoff!

Pat's letter to Molly contained a short resumé of these early activities, and then came an invitation to Molly to join the school as yet another mistress, particularly with regard to the elementary side of ballet dancing.

> "You see, my dear, they've got hold of the idea that ballet is the thing for little kiddies to learn, and they mustn't be disappointed. I've only got ballroom and rhythmical certificates and I've got too much to do to swot it up, and pass the necessary exams for ballet, but you passed the first two at school. You've done it all before, and things are a bit putrid for you just now—sympathy and all that, my dear—so why not come along? I suppose you do remember some of your ballet work? You're eight years younger than me. I'm thirty. Good Lord, you must be twenty-two. I say, it'll be rather a joke, you'll knock these young farmers endways. Seriously, some of them aren't bad; you might do worse. Anyway, it'll be great to have you with me. Oh! as to salary. You can pig in with me here, I've got a flat with a spare bedroom. You'll get your grub, and all that, and I'll give you fifty pounds the first year, and after that, we'll see. I know it's about what you'd pay a good cook, but I'm a hard-hearted Hannah, when it comes to money. Do say you'll come. I'll get a book on

ballet, so that you can mug up the French terms again. French is my long suit down here.

"Yours
"Pat.

"P.S.—'Tisn't a bad wheeze, you know. All your frocks and pretties will come in handy. You'll have a job to find an old lady who'll let you wear 'em as companion."

This cunning postscript decided Molly. She wrote to Pat, and accepted, and then communicated her decision to her aunt. That good lady pooh-poohed the very idea of such an immoral occupation for her niece. Finding this of no avail, she forbade Molly to entertain it. Molly said firmly that it was all settled, and that she was going. Finally, her aunt stormed and raved, whereupon Molly informed her that as she was free, white, and over twenty-one, nobody could stop her doing as she liked. A day or two of venomous recriminations followed, until another letter from Pat clinched the matter, and two days afterwards Molly wished her aunt good-bye, metaphorically shook the dust of Brighton from her dainty feet, and fled to Winchbury.

She wondered about a lot of things in connection with her new life during the journey down to Winchbury from London. Most of these wonderings were not concerning her coming work as a teacher of dancing, but rather as to whether Miss Molly Richards was going to have a good time or not. She loved dancing, and felt that she would have little difficulty in teaching young children the rudiments of ballet. The old French terms for the various movements repeatedly crossed her mind—*Plié*, *Fouetté*, *Port de Bras*, *Entres Chats*, *Battements*, and the rest. But to leave Brighton and bury herself in a rural market town like Winchbury seemed pretty awful. The children would be all right—children usually were—and Pat was a good sort, but to consort with young farmers!!!

Her ideas of farmers were vague. She imagined hobbledehoys with hobnailed boots, large clumsy hands, and red, vacant faces. She pushed out her own dainty feet, and studied them with satisfaction. Fancy dancing with uncouth young farmers, and getting her toes trodden to bits! And they'd be certain to get hot, and then their collars would wilt. Ugh! Perhaps they wouldn't wear collars! According to Pat's ideas, she was to consider them as possible husbands. Help!! No, not if she remained a spinster all her life. Still, anything was preferable to going as companion to some sour old lady. Winchbury was a fairly large town. Perhaps there would be a few presentable men in it.

The carriage was fairly full and, unknown to herself, one of the despised farmers of the Winchbury district was studying Molly from behind the shelter of the *Tatler* with interest and appreciation. Molly was a jolly pretty girl, Christopher Lowe decided as a result of this inspection. He admired everything about her that he could see, and what intrigued him most was an occasional glimpse of chestnut hair which showed beneath her black felt hat. He came to the conclusion that he would very much like to see her with her hat off, and when a young man decides that so quickly he is interested indeed.

Molly had summed up Christopher with half an eye, as soon as he entered the carriage. In her eyes he was just right in every detail. Overcoat, shoes, suit, tie, the whole go of him was correct. She contrasted him with the young farmer of her imagination, and mourned that her lot was not to be cast in a different sphere, where attractive, lean men of this type were plentiful. He was so right, and looked so prosperous, that she marvelled that he should be travelling third class. She never dreamed that he was a tenant farmer, and she did not know that farmers all the world over, never spend a shilling when ninepence will serve their purpose, however extravagant they may be when they want something.

When the train pulled up at Winchbury, all Molly's travelling companions prepared to get out. Christopher was sitting in a corner seat on the platform side, and Molly noticed that he opened the door, and began to help the stout lady opposite him with her luggage. Consequently she was very slow to gather her own possessions together and, as she reached up for her suitcase, a brown hand gripped it, swung it down to the seat, and the suggestion was made pleasantly that if she would get out he would hand the suitcase down to her.

She did so, thanked him, and with a sigh of regret watched his tall figure striding up the platform towards the exit. Then she looked round for Pat, who had promised to meet her, but could not see her anywhere. "Late as usual," she said to herself, remembering Pat's schoolday failing. She wandered down the train to the luggage van, and had just got a porter to put her trunk and baggage on to a pair of trucks, when Pat greeted her breathlessly.

"Sorry I'm late, Molly, but I've been listening to a fond mother talking about her offspring's dancing. Thought she'd never finish. Lord, but I'm glad to see you. I'm up to my eyes. Come on, tell that porter to bring your traps along. I've got the chariot outside."

The chariot proved to be a dilapidated Morris two-seater, and as they were stowing Molly's luggage into the dickey, she caught a glimpse of her travelling companion setting off in a gleaming A.C. sports model. After a short but rather dashing display of driving by Pat, which included at least two miraculous escapes from sudden death, Molly found herself helping to lug her trunks up interminable flights of stairs, and eventually having tea in Pat's cosy sitting-room.

Immediately after tea there was a class from five until six, which Molly attended in order to be introduced to various pupils and their mothers, and to watch Pat's genial style of conducting a class, as a means of getting some idea of the general procedure.

Then they returned to the flat, where getting and eating a scratch supper, heart to heart conversation, and the unpacking of Molly's trunks took up the remainder of the evening. Pat greatly admired Molly's frocks.

"They're extra, Molly. You'll fairly startle the neighbourhood. You'll knock the young men, and nark the maidens. What a lark! You know, you're almost a beauty, my dear. Let's see now, the Golf Club's dance is in about a fortnight's time. We'll go, and you'd better wear that silver tissue frock, stockings to match, and silver kid shoes. You'll burst on 'em like a bomb."

Then, noticing that the younger girl's eyes were filled with tears, Pat realized that probably the silver frock brought back memories of happy times at her Brighton home before the crash, so she took Molly's arm, and said, "Cheer up, kid. 'Twon't be too bad. You're tired and miserable. Bed's the place for you. It's a box of a place, I know, but the bed's comfy, and breakfast'll be lavish. I'll give you a call about nine. Good-night."

Pat was right. Molly was tired out, and the bed was comfortable, so she was soon in dreamland, a place peopled by handsome strangers, who taught chestnut-haired girls to dance, to music played by an orchestra of bucolic farmers in breeches and leggings.

Youth forgets easily, quickly, and fairly completely, and in a few days Molly had settled down to her new life quite happily. Pat seemed to know everybody, and introduced her to a crowd of quite presentable young men. When Molly discovered that most of her new acquaintances were farmers, she expressed her amazement, and Pat proceeded to enlighten her ignorance as to the proper standing of the farmer of south-west England during that short, prosperous period immediately following the War.

"You've got antiquated notions about farmers, Molly. Most of the farms round here are large. You need about ten thousand pounds capital to stock one. Even before the War farmers were doing well, and now a good many of 'em are simply rolling. A lot of the boys I've introduced you to have been to public schools, and a few of 'em to college. You want to revise your ideas of Farmer Giles. He's the whole works down here."

Molly revised them at every opportunity, but she never set eyes on her travelling companion during her first weeks at Winchbury. Chris was having one of his spasmodic bursts of work at home. Somehow or other the wheat sowing had got behind-hand, and during that first fortnight in December he stayed at Springhead and toiled. Consequently, although he was a great friend of Pat's, he did not meet Molly, but occasionally he wondered whether the filly with the chestnut hair, who had got out of the train at Winchbury that day, had stayed in the district, for he still wanted to see her with her hat off.

Wheat sowing was finished at last, and he decided to go to the Golf Club's dance. He dressed that evening in a contented frame of mind. A bout of work always left him with a sort of moral glow of well-being. He felt fine. He sang tunelessly but gaily in his bath. Mrs. Gray, his groom-gardener's wife, who lived with her husband in the farmhouse, and kept house for Chris, smiled grimly when she heard him. "Going to a dance, was he?" she muttered to herself in strong disapproval. No good would come of that, she thought. She was an ardent Nonconformist, and in her eyes all modern girls were immoral hussies. For that's what this dancing would lead to. Some girl or other, and then she'd be certain to have to leave the farmhouse and go back to a poky cottage.

She said as much to her husband, who was sitting by the kitchen range reading the local paper. That good man grinned cheerfully at his wife's annoyance. "Why shouldn' er zing, if zo be as he do veel like it?" he asked. "We be only young once. An' a proper vigger of a man he be, too. They gals ull vair vight ver un, I 'low. When 'ee do want to git married, 'ee will. Thee cassent stop it, neet nobody else. 'Ush! Yer 'ee comes."

Chris, resplendent in tails and white waistcoat, entered the kitchen. "I can't find my dancing shoes anywhere, Mrs. Gray. Do you know where they are?" Mrs. Gray produced them proudly. She had spent at least a half an hour on them with a shammy that evening, for Chris was the apple of her eye, in spite of his immoral pleasures. He thanked her, informed her that he would not be back till late, that they were on no account to wait up, and wished them good-night. In a few minutes they heard his car going down the

drive, and Mrs. Gray, for her husband's benefit, did some more mourning out loud at her employer's love of late nights. "Why can't er bide at 'ome, 'stead o' night 'awkin'?"

"Cause 'ee'm still a huntin', missus," replied her husband. "When 'ee've a found a 'ooman fur a wife, 'ee'll look to 'is bed fur vun, 'stead o' trapesin' about the country atter it."

It was a beautiful moonlit night, and as Chris drove to Winchbury, he felt extraordinarily pleased with himself. Gosh! It was good to have a farm, and a car, and to feel fit. He reckoned he would go some at this dance. Nothing like sticking at home working for a spell to make a fellow appreciate a bit of pleasure. Everything had gone well that day. His farm work was nicely in hand, the bath water had been really hot, his white tie had got tied miraculously into a perfect bow first shot, and the car was running like a Rolls.

He parked it in the market place, covered the radiator with a rug and a horse blanket, and entered the Town Hall. After a few moments joking in the cloakroom with some friends, he straightened his tie, grabbed a programme from the pile on the table, and sallied out into the large open space at the foot of the old staircase, which had been transformed by the energetic ladies committee of the Golf Club into an attractive lounge.

This was thronged with the young men and maidens of Winchbury and the surrounding district. Irreverent young farmers referred to it on these occasions as the "heifer market". The old aldermen of days gone by, whose portraits hung on the walls, seemed to gaze down on the barbaric modern scene in scorn and pity. Barbaric it certainly was. It might have been an Eastern slave market, save that there was no auctioneer and no actual selling of young women to the highest bidder. But the young women were there in all their glory, on offer so to speak, displayed as in a market.

Chris had arrived a trifle late, so he dived into this sale ring to fill his programme, hoping that all the bargains had not been snapped up. He passed from one group to another, booking dances with several girls, and, remembering past kindnesses and hospitality, with several mothers also. Presently he met Pat Somerville, who, after booking a dance with him, introduced him to Molly. Chris took one glance at her chestnut head, and decided that this dance was going to be the best of the season. He was greatly disappointed to find that Molly's programme was practically full, and that he had to content himself with number seventeen only. When this was booked, before he could get another word with her, the band struck up,

and she was whisked away by her partner for the first dance. Well, it was his own fault for coming late, he thought, but before starting to dance himself, he scrawled two hieroglyphics against two other dances, so as to keep them free to study this new importation.

Molly was having a great time. She was being sought after by the men, and her frock was undoubtedly far and away superior to and more expensive than any other in the room; so she felt quite kindly disposed to all the women. She discovered that most of her partners could dance quite decently, but she regretted that Chris had arrived so late, for as he passed her during the dancing, she gathered the impression that he would be an even better partner than the others.

Chris used the two dances, which he had kept free, to watch Molly closely. By Jove! She could move. She seemed to dance for sheer love of the rhythmic movement. And she was alive, every bit of her. He liked the way her head was set on her slim neck; he admired the slender sweep of her youthful figure; and he adored her hair. Gosh! Her waist was like the stem of a flower. The whole go of her reminded him of a young chestnut filly he had once seen in somebody's paddock. There was the same half-frightened, challenging, exploring look. Thoroughbred, that was it. A thoroughbred chestnut filly. And Chris lounged by the door and watched her with envious eyes.

Number seventeen came along at last, and Molly's early impression that Chris was a good dancer was confirmed. A dancing mistress is rather apt to be the leading spirit of the partnership, even when she is dancing for pleasure, and although Molly had been teaching for but two weeks only, she had to some extent already developed this not very pleasing habit. Most of her partners had been only too pleased to dance with her without making any attempt to assert their male superiority and leadership, but Chris was different. He was the unquestioned leader. He danced with her definitely and expertly, he made her feel that she was in the hands of some power which she could not and, strangely enough, did not wish to control, and, crowning excellence of all, he made no attempt to talk. Why should he? Why should anyone talk while they are dancing? Her chestnut head came up to his chin, she moved like a racehorse, and she seemed to know each change in his step before it happened. Why talk?

He had been looking forward to that dance all the evening, and he enjoyed it to the full. As so often happens towards the end of a dance, numbers seventeen and eighteen were played by the band as one dance. Then came "The King", and soon afterwards Chris picked Molly up at the

door of the Town Hall, and drove her home to the flat. He debated in his mind whilst fetching his car, whether he should kiss her on the road home, but somehow he felt that Molly was a bit different. More precious. He knew, of course, that he'd kiss her someday, but to try to do it on so short an acquaintance savoured of cheapness. He decided to wait awhile.

Molly, while she was putting on her cloak, argued out the same problem in her mind. She supposed that Chris would want to kiss her, and wondered whether she would let him or not. She decided that it would be rather attractive and exciting, but that it would be best to keep him in his place. At any rate *this* time. Of course, some day. . . . But it was with a thrilling feeling of pleasant expectancy that she snuggled into the car by his side.

And then the evening just fizzled out. Chris drove her straight home, for which she thanked him. He gravely wished her good-night and, with some remark about having to be at work in about two hours time, he drove away, leaving Molly to toil up the stairs to her bedroom, thinking that at least he might have *tried* to kiss her.

Chapter 9

During the round of festivities and dances that Christmas, Chris obtained Molly as his partner and companion at every opportunity. The ladies of the district, especially the mothers of marriageable daughters, were annoyed. Here was a strange girl coming into Winchbury, and bidding fair to snap up the matrimonial prize of the district, without seemingly making any particular effort herself at all.

Christopher Lowe, who up to date had shown no marked preference for any particular damsel, appeared to have fallen for this unknown dancing mistress completely. It wasn't right. After all, who was she? A friend of Pat Somerville's. Ah, yes, but of course, although Pat was a doctor's daughter, she had spent some years in the V.A.D. during the War, and who knew what might have happened? Not for nothing had the ladies of the neighbourhood perused the post-war literature placed at their disposal by Messrs. Boots and Smith.

They communicated to their respective husbands their doubts about Miss Molly Richards's birth and breeding, and also as to her suitability for the position of mistress of Springhead Farm. These good men sensed the true reason for their wives' attitude to so pretty a girl as Molly, and they were for the most part rather pleased that their better halves were being beaten, not only at their own game, but also on their own course. Their remarks on the subject to their wives in the privacy of their own homes, whilst they were crude and possibly a trifle coarse, were very much to the point.

"Don't be so damn spiteful, missus," Jim Marsh said, when the subject of Christopher Lowe's insane infatuation for Molly Richards was brought up. "Why shouldn' Chris do as he likes? He don't need to marry a bit of cash. He can please himself. By gum, I don't blame him. She's as pretty as a picture. Clean bred too. Look at her ankles. Nothing hairy about the heel there. She'd win a prize in first class company."

"So that's why you would go to the Cricket Club's dance," flashed his wife, whose ankles had never been her strong point. "Admiring a young girl's ankles at your time of life. I suppose, unless I'd had a bit of money, you wouldn't have married me. I was never up to dancing mistress standard."

"Oh God!" groaned Jim to himself. "Now I've done it."

Undoubtedly he had done it. No amount of explanation on the point that he only meant Molly was pretty above the average of the girls in the district, and on those grounds would naturally attract the bachelor who could afford to choose the best, was of any avail. His wife treated him during the next few days as though he were a middle-aged lecher of the worst type, and it was only after a trip to Bournemouth, during which Jim was a most attentive and generous husband, that the good lady forgave him.

Mr. Morley was a much worse offender. Of course, he should have known better, but then he never did. He opened the subject himself one day, and remarked that Molly and Chris made the smartest team he'd ever seen.

His wife's rather acid, "Indeed!" should have warned him that he was on dangerous ground, but he went on, unheeding.

"She is pretty, you know, missus, and she's put together right. There ain't a blemish nowhere. She stands out among the other girls like a roan heifer 'mongst a lot o' reds. She's tall with it, too. Just about Chris's fightin' weight. If they do make a match of it, they'll breed some fine children. She'll throw a good colt, I'll warrant."

"Handsome is as handsome does," snapped Mrs. Morley. "Chris'll want a mistress for Springhead Farmhouse, besides a girl with good looks. Look at her frocks. They cost a pretty penny. I wonder what she'll be like in an apron."

"Bless you," chuckled her husband. "You women are all alike. Young Chris ain't interested in frocks nor aprons, but in what's inside 'em. And so were I at his time o' life. Can't you mind, missus?"

"No, I can't," said Mrs. Morley, "and I don't intend to, either. You men are all alike, when it comes to a pretty face. Fools, all the lot of you. There's some excuse for Chris at his age, but you're old enough to have more sense."

Sensible or not, Chris made no secret of Molly's attraction for him. He fell in love with her honestly, frankly, and physically. The mental and spiritual side of it he took for granted or left to chance. Springhead Farm dropped back into second place that spring. Chris attended to the essential things, but even to these in a hurried and somewhat resentful manner. Instead of loving his farm, he was in love with this lovely, laughing girl, and any time spent away from her seemed wasted. Farming! A farm was all very well. A man could farm when he was old, but he could enjoy the society of a girl like Molly only in the heyday of his young manhood.

Mrs. Morley and other housewives might cast doubts on Molly's capabilities as a future mistress of Springhead Farm, but this side of the question never entered Chris's head. Why should it? Springhead was paying well. He did not need a sort of glorified, unpaid maid servant as his future wife. He wanted a mate, and he wanted Molly. He never stopped to analyse why. He wanted her, that was enough, so he spent nearly every evening away from home in her company.

During the spring most of these evenings were spent in dancing, or in visiting theatres at Southampton or Bournemouth, which, of course, meant that Chris's return to Springhead was usually in the small hours of the morning. These late nights caused Mrs. Gray great concern.

"No good'll come of it, you mark my words," she said again and again to her husband. " 'Tis they motycars wot'll 'ave to answer for it. Bournemouth on Wednesday, Southampton on Thursday, and now I wonder where 'ee's gone. This yer 'owlin' about night atter night bain't Christian."

"They cars 'ave done one good thing, missus," said her husband. " 'Ee do allus come 'ome sober. You got to wi' one o' they. Cain't you mind years ago, when twer all 'osses, 'ow volk used to booze. Owd Farmer Chalcraft now, 'ee used to come 'ome vair pot-valiant, most nights, an' 'is 'oss allus fetched un back safe. You maun gi'e cars credit fer that, I 'low."

"May be," replied the good lady, "but there's worse things nor the drink fer a young man. When twer 'osses everybody knowed where a young man went to in evenings, an' 'ee be'aved accordin'. 'Ee couldn' do nowt else. Now, wi' they motors, nobody don't know where 'ee do get to, an' men's nature bein' wot 'tis——" and she shook her head gloomily.

But none of the awful things imagined in the puritan mind of Mrs. Gray took place between Molly and Chris. Had he kissed her on the night of their first dance together, who knows what might have followed? But as he had not done so, Molly had been a trifle piqued, and she had kept him at arm's length on the occasion of their next meeting. Chris retaliated by feigning a complete indifference to Molly's physical charms, and although he showed a marked preference for her company on every occasion, he never once attempted to overstep the big-brotherly attitude. Night after night, or rather early morning after early morning, he drove her home from some jaunt or other, gravely wished her a decorous good-night when he set her down at the door of the flat, and saved all his rapturous, desiring thoughts for the solitary drive home from Winchbury to Springhead.

Consequently, Molly became more and more annoyed with him, and more and more in love with him, each time such tame good-nights ended their pleasant expeditions. Very definitely, she was in love with Chris soon after her arrival in Winchbury. Every time she danced with him she experienced the same delightfully helpless feeling, as she had during their first dance together, and to her annoyance she felt no desire to conquer this insane helplessness. And yet, with all that, Chris treated her with such deference. There was none of the, "You're a dancing mistress, and you ought to be jolly grateful to me for taking you out," which seemed to be the attitude of most of her acquaintances amongst the young farmers of the district. Even when just giving her a cup of tea in a restaurant, Chris managed to convey to her that it was a privilege to be allowed to do so.

And he was attractive, physically. Like all girls, Molly preferred men, especially young men, to be lean—a certain latitude of thickening was permissible in older men—and Chris was tall, lean, and good-looking. He wore his clothes well. Most men's clothes, Molly thought, either hung on them in folds owing to their weedy physique, or else gave the impression that they were not quite large enough. They expressed a sort of almost bursting effect, especially around the collar, which was decidedly unattractive. But Chris always looked tight, no matter what he wore, and in evening togs or riding kit, he was a figure to make any woman's heart miss a beat.

In addition, as material things had to be taken into account in this matter of a young man's attractions, Chris must be rather well off. He had his car, he hunted, he shot, he danced, he played tennis, in fact he seemed to have money to do anything that he or she fancied.

By the time Easter came along Miss Patricia Somerville woke up to the fact that Molly was returning to the flat at about 2 a.m. on four nights a week at least, and that Chris was invariably her attendant cavalier. Thinking of her own escapades in years gone by, and realizing that Molly was, after all, in her care, she waited up one evening until she returned.

"Had a good time, kid?" she asked, as Molly kicked off her shoes, and sat on the rug before the fire toasting her toes.

Molly nodded dreamily. Why, oh why hadn't Chris kissed her, or at least shown that he wanted to, she thought? Pat's crisp tones broke through these musings.

"I say, Molly. I suppose I'm in *loco parentis* to you, what? These jaunts with Chris Lowe now, night after night. I suppose you know enough to come

in out of the wet?"

Molly's face flamed, but she gazed steadily into the fire, and said nothing.

"Come on, kid. Out with it, I feel sort of responsible."

"My dear Pat, it's a dry, dry climate. Up to date not even a shower."

"Do you mean that he's never——?"

"No, he's never, never, if that relieves your motherly conscience, Pat. He's never kissed me yet. I suppose I'm repulsive, or else he's a monk."

"Do you love him, Molly?"

Molly nodded her chestnut head vigorously. "At least, I think I do. What is love, Pat? I mean, how do you know? I want him to want me, and I just long to get his head in my lap, and ruffle his hair."

Pat laughed. "You've described it rather well, Molly. There's not much doubt about you. What about Chris? Surely you know?"

"I don't, Pat. That's just it, I don't, I don't. He seems to have made a vow to be a brother to me or something. After we've spent an evening together, he shakes my hand, wishes me good-night, and thanks me, *me* of all people, for the pleasure I've given him. And that's all. And he's done all the giving, and I've given nothing. And oh, Pat, I'd like to. I'd like to give him heaps of things, but he might at least try to take something."

Pat thought of her own past life, in which there was one man only, who had shown her the same deference, and he was buried in a military cemetery in France. But there'd been too many of the other sort, she thought. This kid did not realize her good fortune. "You lucky little fool, Molly," she said aloud. "You don't know how lucky you are. All things come to those who wait, and in these days a man who values a girl highly enough to refrain from trying to take things is worth waiting for. I've met both sorts and I know. And I don't think you'll have to wait much longer either, so for heaven's sake don't rush things. Come on, now that my maternal anxieties are allayed, we'll go to bed."

Pat was quite right; Molly did not have to wait much longer. Midnight on Whit-Monday evening found her and Chris leaving the Grand Hotel, Bournemouth, after a very pleasant dinner and dance. "Let's see the sea, Chris, it's moonlight," she said, as their car entered the Square preparatory to turning up the steep hill to the Winchbury road. Obedient as ever Chris swung the car in the opposite direction, and in contented silence they purred

slowly along the Undercliff Drive. They were drugged with the pleasant intimacy of their recent dancing, the murmur of the sea soothed them, and half-hypnotized by the moon shining on the water, they drifted along through the soft-scented night in dreamy, happy content.

Boscombe reached, Chris turned the car, and drove slowly back along the drive to Bournemouth. “Nice man,” thought Molly, “he knew I wanted to go back along the front again, and he did it without my asking. But my, he is silent to-night.” They swung up from the sea, through the silent Square to the Winchbury road, then Chris put his foot down, Molly snuggled down into her seat, and the car fled smoothly through the night.

Chris was silent. He was worried. He wanted to tell Molly that he loved her and wanted to marry her, but he couldn’t get started. It seemed an awful thing to tell a girl outright that you wanted her in that way. He had almost got it out during the run along the Undercliff Drive, and then he had remembered that if she turned him down, he would have some thirty odd miles to drive her home, which would be awkward for both of them. Better to risk it when they were much nearer home, he thought. So when the car topped the last rise of the downs, and they could see Winchbury beneath them, bathed in silvery moonlight, Chris took his courage in both hands, and pulled up.

“Molly,” he said. “Have you enjoyed going out with me this summer?”

“You know I have,” replied Molly. “You’re a fair chauffeur, a good dancer, an entertaining companion, and not too big a fool, Chris. In these days, what more can a girl expect?”

“Don’t rot, Molly. This is serious. I can’t keep quiet any longer. Little lady, little lady, I’m crazy about you. Love me a little, Molly, for I love you with all my heart.”

He gathered her into his arms, and sought her lips. She gave them to him frankly and eagerly. This then was love. To be crushed against a tobacco-scented, tweed-coated shoulder. To feel one’s body almost melting into a man’s arms. Whatever it was, it was divine. Chris kissed her throat, her eyes, the lobe of her ear, and then his lips found her cool, sweet mouth once more. On that warm, soft, sweet-scented June night time for those two young things stood still.

When they eventually returned to earth, Chris told Molly many things. He had discovered that she loved him, and his courage increased rapidly. He told her again that he loved her, that she had the prettiest hair, the daintiest

feet, and, greatly daring, the loveliest legs in all the south-west. After a few moments it became a sort of Song of Solomon with I love you as its theme, and all sorts of exciting, delicious things as accidentals.

This pæan of praise and thanksgiving finished, another ecstatic interlude took place, after which Chris drove triumphantly home to Winchbury. After repeated good-nights, he sped back to Springhead, marvelling at the splendour of the world in general, and his own lot in particular; while a starry-eyed, dewy-lipped Molly mounted the stairs to the flat, where Pat, after one discerning glance, broke out into the triumphal pum pum pum of the wedding march.

Their engagement was the usual nine days' wonder, and then the question of the date of their marriage came up for discussion. There seemed nothing to wait for. Both Chris and Molly were extraordinarily alone in the world. Molly's vinegary aunt inspected Chris, and his intellectual sister Janet inspected Molly, with the result that both inspectors agreed that it might have been a lot worse, and probably would have been a lot worse, but for the merciful dispensation of providence, which appeared to have watched over the two young fools concerned—for which it behoved everybody to be truly thankful.

Even Mrs. Gray was pleased about it. For one thing, there would be less "owlin' about" at night when Chris was married, and for another Molly had expressed the wish that Mr. and Mrs. Gray should continue in their respective jobs, an exhibition of extraordinary sound sense for a young modern girl, in Mrs. Gray's opinion.

So they arranged to get married at the end of September, after the harvest; and that was the first intimation to Molly that she was not only marrying Chris but also his farm. She resented the implication that getting married to her was an unimportant detail to be carried out only after the really important thing, the harvest, had been accomplished. Still, she couldn't very well be ready herself much before that date, and in the excitement of all the preparations this notion that she took second place to the farm was forgotten.

They were married in Winchbury church, and all the farming community came to the wedding, while Chris's sister Janet and Molly's still vinegary aunt also attended. Janet viewed the whole business with somewhat grim amusement. Her prophecy about her brother's future was coming true almost to the letter. She hoped that it would not prove quite so accurate in days to come, and, to relieve her troubled mind, she spent most of the day sparring

amiably with Mr. Morley, who, as usual, was in great form. In many ways they were kindred spirits.

Molly's aunt had said firmly that some responsible gentleman must give the bride away, so Mr. Morley had stepped into the breach. Resplendent in a rather tight-fitting morning coat, with a carnation in his buttonhole, he performed this duty nobly; and in the vestry afterwards he earned the envy of his cronies and the displeasure of his wife, by kissing the bride as though he liked it, which undoubtedly he did. More fame he garnered afterwards, as it was due to his rather heavy-handed blandishments that Molly's aunt condescended to taste the champagne, after which, according to Mr. Morley, she became almost human.

But the whole district combined to wish them well. Even the ladies, now that Chris was married, admitted that they made a handsome pair, and after many toasts they drove away together in the two-seater through a haze of confetti.

Chapter 10

Like all farming communities Chris's neighbours expected that Molly and he would return from their honeymoon to settle down to the serious business of life. It was the generally accepted thing to do. No matter how frivolous and gay you might have been before marriage, afterwards you became careworn and serious, especially a wife. A certain latitude in outdoor sport was permitted the young married farmer, but his wife must consider that babies and housekeeping made up the whole of her interests. At least, this had been the prevailing custom in farming circles from time immemorial, and although, just recently, there had been slight deviations from this narrow path of dull rectitude in one or two cases, generally speaking the farmers' wives divided their lives quite distinctly into two totally different periods: one before marriage, a rapturous affair of fun and frolic, and the other after marriage, just plain hard work.

Molly, of course, possessed no antiquated notions like these. If she had managed to have a good time before her wedding, she was going to have a much better one now. Everything was suddenly so much easier of attainment. All her pre-marriage pleasures could now be indulged in more easily, more extensively, and more expensively, while many new delights were possible. She returned from her honeymoon to Springhead fully determined to enjoy life to the full.

And Chris aided and abetted her. To give this lovely, new, exciting playmate everything that lay in his power gave him the greatest joy he had ever experienced. To see her face light up when he proposed some jaunt or other, or brought her some little present was wonderful, while the thought that she was all his never failed to thrill him. Quite literally he lived up to his marriage vows; he had wedded his love with a ring, he worshipped her with his body whenever possible, and he was eager and willing to endow her with all his worldly goods.

That first winter he taught her to ride, and she took to it like a duck to water. For one thing it was a dashing thing to do, and for another it meant a new outfit of exciting clothes. It also meant a horse of her own, which, Chris said, must be a chestnut of the exact shade of her hair. To find this animal their car nosed its way into numerous villages in three counties before the search succeeded, and when they did succeed Chris was guilty of making the weakest deal of his life.

But what could he do? As the horse dealer said afterwards to his cronies in the smoking-room of his favourite pub: “We leads out thic chestnut I bought when Squire Bennett selled off ’is ’unters, ’an she gi’ed one look at un, an’ says, ’Oh, Chris!’ Then she goes up to ’im, whips off ’er ’at, an’ lays ’er ’ead agen ’is neck. ’Twer a perfect match. An’ she stands there lookin’ at ’er ’usband wi’ girt round eyes. God! I’d a’ gi’ed ’er forty ’osses, if so be as she’d belonged to I.”

“I ’low you charged un a bit, Tom?” remarked one of his hearers.

“Matter o’ ten poun’ extry, that’s all,” said the dealer. “Course I could a ’ad more. ’Ee’d a paid anythin’, but she wur that pretty, I adn’t the ’eart. ’Sides, twer too easy.” And after pulling deeply at his mug, the good man sighed, and spent the next few moments ruminating on his inexplicable generosity to his customers.

This riding of Molly’s proved expensive in many ways. In addition to her horse, a saddle, bridle, and riding kit were required. Then, when she was proficient enough to go hunting with Chris, it was found that Gray, the groom-gardener, could not manage both departments of his calling unaided. This meant that a lad had to be engaged to help him, and in addition to this, a maid to help Mrs. Gray, whose household duties were also increasing rapidly.

But whilst all this cost money, Chris did not grudge it. For one thing he had it to spend, and for another the sight of his wife astride her horse was ample return. A pretty woman on a good horse takes some beating, he thought, and when that pretty woman is your own wife, well——! He loved the proud way in which Molly sat her horse. That straight upright back, those lovely legs in breeches and top-boots, that queenly head of chestnut hair and that fearless, challenging chin—his, all his. Other men at the meets might gaze, admire, and possibly envy, but Molly was his, not only by day, but during the sweet, sensuous night also. So when they arrived at the meet and Molly’s back was, if possible, more upright than ever, Chris slouched in his saddle, enjoying her triumphs in silent content.

The local pack was not a very swell one, but it gave them good fun that winter. The memory of one glorious run would always linger. A misty morning, the burst of music somewhere the other side of the cover they were drawing, one moment being amongst twenty other riders, and then Molly and he alone in the fog a moment after. “It’s right-handed, Molly. Come on, follow me.” Then just a momentary glimpse of the huntsman’s red coat disappearing left-handed through the swirling mist. A hasty pull up, with

Molly's chestnut cannoning into him from behind. "Sorry, Mollykins. I'm wrong. Ford's gone back t'other way, round the cover. Come on, stick close or you'll get lost."

Round the wood they bustle, and the sun breaking through the mist shows them the huntsman scrambling swiftly up the far slope of the downs. Into the gully they spatter, and up the hill after him, the man on the bay a little ahead of the girl on the chestnut. He knows that the chestnut will follow his horse whatever happens, so he sits down happily to cut out the work, every now and then casting a glimpse behind him to see that Molly is all right. "Good for you, Mollykins," he mutters to himself, each time these glances show him that his wife is sticking to it. "Something funny about her head though." Another glance. "Her hat's gone, that's what 'tis."

The crest of the rise gives them a sight of the pack streaming up yet another slope, and away they pound after them. Up and down, up and down, there's little jumping in a Down country, but you cannot catch a fox unless you have a horse which will take you down and up those interminable Down shoulders at least three times.

Six miles of this, just the three of them, for they have caught up the huntsman now, the remainder of the field being nowhere in sight, and then there's a check at a large piece of gorse, some five or six acres in extent. Chris pulls up, and looks round to find that he has been followed by a chestnut-haired amazon, whose tresses are streaming in the breeze. "My hair, Chris!" These were Molly's pre-shingle days. "What can I do?"

"Do! Come on. Whoops! He's away again."

And away he is, but he's getting tired, and some few miles farther on he is killed in the open on the top of the downs, a twelve-mile run, enjoyed by but three of the whole hunt. Presently the others ride up, bemoaning their misfortune in getting away wrong-handed in the mist, and in due course the brush is tucked into Molly's bridle.

Enough being as good as a feast Molly and Chris jogged off home after this exciting morning, and after lunch Molly scrambled down on the hearthrug to make up the fire, while Chris went outside to give some orders to the dairyman. When he returned about an hour later, he found a slim, flushed boy in breeches sound asleep on the hearthrug. Molly was so tired that she hardly woke up when he carried her upstairs, undressed her, and tucked her up in bed, where she slept until it was time to dress for dinner.

The pleasure Molly found in this new pastime definitely ruled out any idea of babies, so, in spite of the disapproval of most of the older married people in the neighbourhood, Molly and Chris lived their lives in fully as irresponsible and care free a manner as did the single folk, enjoying in addition the intimate joys of their wedded estate. This way of going on was considered almost indecent by some of their older neighbours. It was as though Molly and Chris were performing the impossible feat of eating their cake and having it as well. But they paid no heed to friendly warnings. Life was good. They were young and fit, they had plenty of money, and they were in love with each other. So a winter of fox-hunting, golf, and dancing was followed by a summer of tennis, otter-hunting, and holidays away from home.

The men of the district missed Chris at shooting parties and other solely masculine amusements, which he now joined in but rarely. The first time he went shooting after his marriage, Jim Marsh inquired sarcastically whether he had "slipped his halter?" Chris grinned; he did not mind chaff. "He ain't halter broke, he's sugar broke," said Mr. Morley. "That's the way of it, eh Chris?" Again Chris just grinned cheerfully. Let 'em chaff, he thought. He was happy enough.

This conversation took place in Mr. Morley's dining-room one cold December morning about nine-thirty. Chris, Bob Tucker and Jim Marsh were having what their host called an "eye-straightener", before going out with him for a day's ferreting. Mr. Morley's mixture for this purpose was two thirds cold milk and one third whisky. "An' you'll want it this morning," he said to his guests. "They'll bolt like blue blazes, or I'm a Dutchman. Come on, Frank Hard'll be waiting."

Glasses were emptied hastily, and they went outside. Here Mr. Morley gave final instructions to Bill Gurd as to whereabouts the party would be at lunch time, also copious orders for farm work, which would have taken an ordinary man at least two days to accomplish. "Well, you'll get round that by noon, Bill. Then you can bring the lunch up to the Pit Folly. You better bring somebody with you to take back the float, and then you can bide with us. There'll likely be some diggin' to do after lunch. Rabbits always bolt best before twelve o'clock."

"Bill's a rare feller for diggin'," Mr. Morley explained to his friends, as they left the farm and walked up the lane.

Three keepers awaited their coming at a gateway about a quarter of a mile away from the farm buildings—Frank Hard, the keeper of the Fernditch

beat, and his two underlings, Ted Bridge, a husky, beery individual, and a lean ferret-faced youth named Sam Cousins, who literally and metaphorically sat at the feet of these two Gamaliels of the keepering profession.

The two experts viewed the approach of the guns with grunts of satisfaction. “Wun’t be much diggin’ fur thee, Ted, to-day, if we can git ’em to bolt,” said Frank.

“Naw!” said Ted, spitting noisily. “Thic lot’ll ketch ’em forrad, thank God. Still, tain’t often Morley do ’ave anybody as cain’t. ’Ee don’t like to zee ’em ’it behin’.”

“No, ’ee don’t,” said Frank, “an’ neet do nobody else wi’ zense. ’Sides ’ee ain’t got no real visitors s’marnin’, so they wun’t wait fur each other. That’s wot do spoil fertin’.”

“Ay!” chuckled Ted, “but ’ee gits ’em zum-times. Can ’ee mind when ’ee ’ad thic cousin down from Lunnon, dree year back? Old Morley, ’ee started off by bein’ main perlite. ’Ee waited on each rabbit fur the fool to shoot, but twerdin no good. Gawd! ’Ee wur spiteful atter a bit. Thic feller did loose off ’is gun every time, jist as they wur gwaine down an ’ole, an’ course, ’it ’em behin’ every time. I ’ad to dig all day, thic day.”

The keepers were quite justified in their remarks. They knew that ferreting was no game for the amateur. Bolting rabbits rarely gave time enough for the courtesy of waiting for one’s guests to have the first chance. Usually there was one moment, and one moment only, while a rabbit was going from one hole to another, when it could be killed neatly, and any hesitation was sure to cause trouble. Unless a rabbit could be hit forward it was best not to shoot at all, as if it was wounded in the hindquarters it would be almost sure to crawl on its front legs to the innermost recesses of the burrow. Apart from the unnecessary suffering thus caused, the loose ferrets would most probably lay up with the wounded animal, and have to be dug out laboriously. This last was the reason why Ted, the digger of the party, was glad that only accredited ferreting shots were coming that day.

After the customary greetings the party set off across the field to a small clump of trees. Two loose ferrets were put into the burrow, and the guns and the keepers stood well down wind. This burrow produced seven rabbits, which bolted well, as Mr. Morley had predicted. One loose ferret was then picked up, but the other remained underground, so the main party moved off to fresh ground, leaving Ted Bridge behind to clear up the mess—to find the

loose ferret with a line ferret, and to hang up the seven dead rabbits in a bush ready for the cart to pick up.

The guns then split up into two parties, as there were two parallel banks to ferret, about two hundred yards apart. Chris, Bob Tucker and the under-keeper took the lower one, and Mr. Morley with Jim Marsh and Frank Hard went on up to the other. A match was arranged as to which party would get the bigger bag by lunch time, the stakes being half-a-crown a corner, with an extra shilling per head for any rabbit which got away from one bank and was killed by the other bank's team.

Although this appears to have been a fair bet, all ferreters of experience will know that, as usual, Mr. Morley had the advantage. Granted, the lower bank gave every appearance of harbouring more rabbits than the upper one, but as rabbits always prefer to run uphill rather than down, it was almost certain that some would escape to the upper bank. To Mr. Morley's great joy the younger generation let three rabbits escape in this fashion, and each of them scuttered across the down to the upper ridge to be tumbled head over heels by Mr. Morley in workmanlike style.

Some of the younger men might be able to beat him at driven partridges or at rocketing pheasants, but at snapshooting at rabbits, either when they darted from hole to hole or flitted between tree trunks, he was practically unbeatable in his own district.

He shot instinctively, and so did his companions. Any rabbit, which dared to stay above ground for even so short a run as three yards, was committing almost certain suicide. The unconscious ease and speed with which their guns went to their shoulders was comparable to the expert draw of the gunmen of the Wild West. Mr. Morley might be talking to the keeper —not that he talked much at these times—he might be lighting his pipe, he might be turning round to see how the other party were getting on, no matter what might have distracted his attention for the moment, woe betide any rabbit which dared to take advantage of it. Mr. Morley's weather eye was always on the burrow; or possibly he possessed a weather ear, for even when his back was turned he seemed to know that a rabbit was bolting even before it showed above ground. Up went his gun, and over went the rabbit. How he contrived to hit them—it seemed almost without trying—Mr. Morley did not know. He had been doing it since boyhood, and his gun was a part of himself. Hallo! There goes a rabbit! Bang! Got him! That's all there was to it.

And all his companions that day were practically as good as he was at the game. The three rabbits which had escaped from Chris and Bob had bolted far ahead along the bank out of shot, and had then made a break for what they fondly imagined was the safety of the upper bank. The finish of the two banks resulted in Chris and Bob winning the half-crowns on total score—seventeen to fifteen—but as they lost three shillings on the three escaped rabbits, Mr. Morley and Jim Marsh drew sixpence each with great glee.

Next they joined forces, as the Pit Folly contained a large burrow, which required at least three guns to police it satisfactorily. Three of them stood in the bottom of a large tree-covered pit, and Mr. Morley stood so that he could command the rim in case any rabbits bolted on the top. It was pretty shooting for the lower guns. The bolting rabbits ran along small twisty, terraced runs around the bowl of the pit, and when shot they rolled some twenty yards to the bottom.

After some seven or eight rabbits had been killed, nothing further happened. No more rabbits bolted, and neither of the loose ferrets showed up, but the guns waited quietly, in case. The loose ferrets had evidently driven several rabbits up into a corner underground, and they might or might not bolt at any moment.

Still nothing happened, and when Bill Gurd arrived with the lunch it was decided to have it in the pit, so that the burrow could be watched during the meal. Ted Bridge had now joined them. Lunch meant beer, and Ted was never very far away when any of that genializing fluid was available.

He took on the duty of watching the side of the pit in case anything bolted, while the others ate their lunch. Of course, this task did not prevent him from eating his own lunch. He drank one horn of beer at a gulp just to get in working trim for his double-barrelled occupation, and then he took up his post as sentry. He sat on a fallen tree with another horn of beer placed safely on the log within arm's reach. He had found a soft spot in the log, and had forced the bottom two inches of the horn into the rotten wood. "Reg'lar socket fur un," he observed. Across his knees lay Mr. Morley's gun, loaded and at full cock. A huge hunk of bread and cheese was in his hands, together with a large raw Spanish onion, and a teaspoonful of salt was emptied on to his left coat sleeve, well below the elbow.

He munched steadily, cutting up his food with a huge pocket-knife, which, after performing several grisly operations on the dead rabbits, he had cleaned by thrusting it many times into the earth. To the uninitiated he would

have appeared to be interested in two things only—one, his lunch, and the other, the general racy conversation of the party. But his weather eye was on the burrow.

Suddenly a rabbit bolted, and Ted exploded, literally in all directions. Onion, salt, bread and cheese, and pocket-knife went broadcast; but before the rabbit had travelled many yards it was dead, and rolling down the side of the pit, while Ted, after reloading his gun, groped in the leaves for his scattered lunch, inquiring gruffly, "Where be me onion?"

There was a general laugh at this, and Mr. Morley congratulated Ted on killing the rabbit. "You know, Ted, if you didn't drink so much beer, you'd be a real good shot."

"Beer don't 'urt I," said Ted with a grin, finishing his horn, and holding it out to be refilled, "an' it don't 'urt nobody. That's wot I telled a town feller in pub last August Monday."

"How was that, Ted?" asked Mr. Morley, scenting a story.

"Oh, 'ee wur one o' they 'ikers. 'Ee 'ad on liddle short knicks like footballers' knicks, on'y theasem wur kharki. Lil bit of a chap, 'ee wur. 'Ee comed in, orders zum gingerpop, an' zits down next to I.

" 'Gaffer,' 'ee says, lookin' at me pint, 'you didn' ought to drink no beer. 'Tis bad fur 'ee.' "

" 'Oh,' I says, avin' a good swig, 'be it? Well, look at yer, I bin drinkin' beer all me life, an' I be vifty-zeven, an' wot's wrong wi' I?' "

" 'You do look well enough,' 'ee says, 'but you'd be a lot better wi'out it. I an't never drunk no beer ner no alcoholic liquor all me life.' "

"I looks 'im up an' down. 'Ee wur a pale li'l feller. Nobbut a scrimmick ov a chap. 'Be better wi'out it, should I?' I says. 'Well, me feyther, 'ee drunk beer reglar all 'is fife, an' 'ee died when 'ee wur a 'underd an' two. When 'ee died, we kep' un a matter o' ten days, 'twer 'ottish weather too, an' when we screwed un down, dang me if 'ee didn't look a dam' zight better than thee dust now.' "

"Ho! Ho! Ho! I tell 'ee, that vair done un. 'Ee drunk up 'is gingerpop, an' 'opped it. Thellook's a rabbit!"

Ted sprang to his feet again, and catching a glimpse of a brown ghost flitting between two trees, he rolled it over and over with his first barrel, just to prove once more that beer was a help and not a hindrance to his shooting skill.

After lunch, the four guns and two keepers went on ahead, leaving Bill Gurd and Ted to hunt for the loose ferrets in the pit. Bill had brought his own gun, a very ancient single barrel, which he referred to as his musket. Every now and again throughout the afternoon its booming report was heard by the advance party, and when this happened, Mr. Morley would remark, "Hello! Bill's got one." He never said "I wonder if Bill got him." He knew that Bill rarely wasted cartridges. Once, to his own great disgust, he let a rabbit bolt back towards the pit, but a few moments later he knew that Bill had performed the needful.

The ferreting came to an end about four o'clock, the bag being sixty-three, a total which satisfied everybody concerned. The beer left over from lunch was then finished up, Ted consuming the major portion, and after half-crowns had been presented to the keepers, Mr. Morley and his guests walked back to Fernditch for tea.

Naturally Mr. Morley reckoned to get some good fighting bridge after tea that evening, as he had a suitable four, but here Chris let the party down. He apologized for doing so, but said that he had arranged to take his wife to the pictures, and that she was calling for him at six-thirty.

When Molly arrived Mr. Morley chaffed her on having her husband so well trained, but told her that he reckoned she was worth all of it and more. He went outside to see them off, put two couple of rabbits in the back of their car, and wished them good-night.

"Pictures!" he snorted, as he was returning indoors to play three-handed nap with his remaining guests. "But there, he'll grow out of it, I suppose, in God's good time. Most all of us do."

But Chris did not grow out of it. Molly was all-satisfying, life was perfect in every way, and this happy state of things looked like lasting indefinitely.

However, he soon discovered that it cost a lot of money. The first two years or so of their married life went very well indeed. Farming was still paying handsomely, and although Chris's personal expenses had increased by leaps and bounds as compared with his bachelor days, the farm could well carry them. But something went seriously amiss with farming in 1922. The whole business seemed to have sprung a leak. In the winter of that year Chris found himself short of money for the first time in his life. He gave up paying his bills punctually, thus foregoing the large discount for ready money customary with most farming accounts. But these delayed settlements proved only a temporary relief. The bills seemed to accumulate

faster and faster. Money got tighter and tighter. Something would have to be done, he thought. You couldn't keep meeting people in the market with the knowledge that you owed them money, and were unable to pay. Damn it, some of them had a sort of questioning look in their eyes already.

Still, there were always ups and downs in every business. Doubtless next year would be better. But the next year was worse, and the accumulation of bills on his file had grown alarmingly big. They'd have to economize, he thought. No, dash it, you could not let your wife down. Couldn't let her think that you couldn't give her the things which other men gave their wives. To suggest to her that they could not afford to do this or that would be to admit to her that you were a poor sort of fish—a second-rater. And his wife was first rate, there was no question about that. Times would soon get better. Dash it, he owned all the stock and farming goods. There was no need to reduce their expenditure, he decided. Anyway, if he did so, neighbours would wonder why, and they'd talk. So, without telling Molly anything of the true position, he interviewed his bank manager, arranged an overdraft so that he could clear up his outstanding bills, and carried on as before.

Their being so obviously in love with each other annoyed the other farmers of the district, even the ones who had argued with their wives in favour of Molly's suitability for mistress of Springhead Farm. Chris, they considered, was letting them down. Even after four years of married life, he still considered his wife before his farm, which his neighbours thought not only silly, but bad farming practice. Besides, it rather showed up their own conduct.

In contrast, their wives, who had been so incensed at Molly's capture of such an eligible bachelor, pointed to Chris's conduct as a model of what a husband's should be. Even Mr. Morley, who was very fond of both Molly and Chris, felt hurt at his wife's attitude.

"Young Chris Lowe's headin' for a fall, if he don't look out," he remarked to his wife, one evening when they were alone together. " 'Tis time he broke his wife in. He'd give her the top brick off the chimney if she asked for it. If he've arranged to take her anywhere, he does it, no matter if something turns up on the farm, which he ought to bide at home and see to. 'Twon't do, missus."

"But it's rather nice in these days to see a young couple so much in love, Walter," said Mrs. Morley.

“Oh ah! Lovin’ your wife’s all very well, but you mustn’t neglect your business for it. ’Sides, ’tisn’t only the business. It don’t do for a woman to think that her man’ll do any dam’ silly thing to please her. Molly’s as pretty a little filly as ever I see, but all this yer gaddin’ about all over the countryside’s no good to either of ’em. Costs money, too. The farm won’t stand it; there ain’t no guaranteed price for corn now. Farmers should wake up to that, and bide on their farms. I can’t think what young Chris is thinkin’ of. He used to farm better than most of the young men.”

Mrs. Morley remained silent, while her husband noisily threw some logs on the fire.

“Why don’t ’em have some kids?” he continued wrathfully. “A colt’ll steady a flighty mare, an’ a baby’ll do the same for a lively girl. Give her something to think about besides her own fun. Chris ought to have sense enough to know that. Dammit, they don’t grow up at all, they’m like two kids.”

Mrs. Morley put down her knitting and gazed into the fire. She thought of her girlhood, of her courtship when Mr. Morley was a slim, dashing, young farmer, and of her marriage. Then of her busy, full life afterwards. She felt that she had never come first; it had always been the farm—she had come second. She remembered the first few weeks of her married life. Even their honeymoon had been arranged to suit the farm—just a bare ten days between haymaking and harvest. It should have been a fortnight, but the weather had been exceptionally hot and sunny, ripening the corn a few days earlier than had been expected, and they had been recalled by telegram. And she had returned to Fernditch Farm to discover that her lover husband had suddenly become first a farmer, and only secondly a lover.

In her own home she had been accustomed to a mid-day dinner at one o’clock, but her husband wanted his at twelve sharp, as the farm men stopped for dinner between twelve and one. It had taken her some days to get used to this new arrangement, and Walter had been cross, and even brutal when his meal was late. He would come in about five minutes past twelve, and storm into the kitchen if dinner wasn’t ready. On carrying days in the harvest, he used to rage and swear, and once he had walked out of the house without a meal, leaving her to weep her heart out in the kitchen; and a lovely dinner with three vegetables, which was ready about quarter to one, was wasted, as she had been too miserable to eat anything herself. That was the breaking-in process, she thought, which Molly was missing. She sighed as she recalled these memories, and aloud she said dreamily into the fire: “It must be lovely to be loved like that.”

Mr. Morley was hurt and shocked. That a sensible woman like his wife should applaud Chris's daft way of treating a wife! He supposed that she got these fool notions from the pictures. Couldn't she see where it would lead? To the bankruptcy court most likely. Besides, hadn't he been a good husband? Hadn't he loved his wife? He'd worked and supported her. They'd got on, and she'd had every comfort. What the hell did a woman want, anyway? He said as much to Mrs. Morley.

"I know, Walter. You're quite right, and all that. You're a dear good man, and I love you. You've done everything for me that you should, and I'm grateful. We're well off, we've two good children, and we're happy, but you don't understand. The farm has always come first, and I suppose rightly so, but a woman doesn't always want what's right from her man. She likes to think that he'll do something silly, something wrong perhaps, to please her. She likes to think that she comes first with him in everything. I know it's selfish and silly, and that Chris is foolish, but I do envy Molly sometimes. To come first, it must be wonderful."

This was beyond Mr. Morley. What the devil were women coming to? He'd always played the game. He'd worked and worried for his wife. It wasn't fair, this attitude.

Then he noticed a tear trickling down his wife's cheek. Dammit! This was taking an unfair advantage. A woman wanted to come first, did she? Well, hadn't he always put his wife first? No, perhaps he had been a bit short with her once or twice. Still, when a man had a large farm to see to, he couldn't be everlasting fiddle-faddling about. Oh, hell! Now she was crying in earnest. He'd better do something. Couldn't just sit here and look a fool.

He got up, threw some more logs on the fire, and crossed the room to his desk. There he played with some papers, rustling them busily. He filled and lit his pipe. The silence continued. Damn it, he couldn't stand this. He'd go out for a breath of fresh air. Still, that would be funking it. His wife was miserable. Perhaps he'd better worry over her instead of about Molly and Chris. Still, he felt that the whole thing was unfair, and that he was being unjustly treated. He crossed over to her chair.

"Sorry, missus. I have been a bit short sometimes I know, but I'm sorry. You're right about it, and I'm right as well, I expect, but don't 'ee take on." He kissed her clumsily, told her that he had something to see to over in the farm buildings, patted her shoulder, and left the room with a sigh of relief.

Mrs. Morley sat quietly for a few moments after her husband had gone. Then she wiped her eyes, mentally called herself a silly old fool, but

reckoned that it had been worth it, and resumed her knitting. From long experience she knew that a farm required all a man's thoughts and energies to force it to pay a profit, and that her husband was probably right in his estimate of Chris's foolishness. Still——

Her husband, still hot and bothered, went out side, and looked across at the farm buildings and yards. He could see a light moving about. Ah! That 'ud be Bill Gurd seeing to something or other. He'd go across and have a word with him. By God! 'T'ud be a treat to talk to someone sane, and Bill, with all his faults, was that. He went over, and in an interesting technical discussion with his foreman during a lantern light inspection of the housed cattle, he forgot Molly and Chris, and became absorbed in the never boring problems of his own farming.

Chapter 11

In spite of all these criticisms of her neighbours Molly made a most charming mistress of Springhead Farmhouse. Early on she had made Mrs. Gray her adoring slave, and, in anything connected with her house, she took the greatest interest. The trouble was that she took none at all in the farm. She held the view that the farm was Chris's job, and that any interference on her part would look as if her husband was not capable of running his own business. She considered that a man ran a business to get a living and support his wife, but that it should be kept entirely apart from his home life.

She regarded the farm as a nuisance, when its demands on Chris interfered with her plans, and she did not realize that a farmer's land and his home are component parts of his business, and cannot be separated night or day. Even though Mr. Morley and the neighbours considered that Chris neglected his farm to satisfy his wife's whims, there were occasions when she found that she had to take second place.

When this happened she regretted that Chris had not got a business, where he would go to his office at a certain time each day, and come back at a certain time, with definite, unalterable periods for leisure and holidays. It was true that she could generally persuade Chris to do as she wished, but, every now and again, she came up against the brick wall of the farm's needs.

These became more and more important as time went on. The harder up Chris got, the more difficult he became. The weather and the livestock seemed to conspire against her, she thought. She realized that during haymaking or harvest tennis was off; but if she arranged a large tennis party for the first Wednesday in July, say, when haymaking should have been finished, the weather would be wet in June, and there would still be hay to carry in July. Most of her guests would be townspeople from Winchbury, and they would turn up to find that their host unfortunately was absent through haymaking. It was maddening. Fancy being the slave of some rotten old hay! Other men were masters of their various businesses. They had an adequate staff, and could get away when they wished apparently. Why couldn't a farmer do the same?

It was just the same in the winter. They would have some friends in for dinner and cards, and there would sure to be a horse or cow ill during the evening. The maid would come in, in the middle of dinner most likely, and say, "If you please, sir, the dairyman would like to see you at the back door."

And Chris would apologize gravely to his guests, and vanish perhaps for hours. Then he would come in, filthy, smelling of the stable or cowshed, and have to waste more time in changing again.

Of course, when their guests were of the farming fraternity these sudden absences didn't matter. The men would vanish with Chris, and their respective wives seemed quite glad to see them go and would settle down to friendly gossip. Even in the middle of a rubber of Bridge, when the news of some sick animal arrived, the men would lay down their cards, and troop out with Chris, all looking as serious as doctors. They seemed quite keen to go, too. Apparently, anything to do with a farm was more attractive than the entertainment she provided. And when they returned they would sit and talk technically about all sorts of ghastly things. If it was necessary for farmers personally to do these horrid, menial things for their livestock, they might at least discuss them in their offices. Very certainly, a drawing-room was not a fitting place for it.

She told Chris one evening after dinner, when they were ensconced in a big arm-chair together, that farmers farmed all day, thought and talked about their farms all the evening, and dreamed about them all night. "They haven't a mind above a horse or a cow, Chris. Can't they forget their farms for a moment?"

"That's the right way to farm, dear," replied Chris. "It's a whole time job, and so are you. That's why I'm a bad farmer. I try to serve two mistresses."

"I like your style, Chris. I'm your lawful wedded wife. With this ring," she waggled her left hand at him, "you me wedded."

"True, darling, but finish the rest of the quotation, or haven't I carried out the rest of it? With my body——"

"I thee worship. Oh, Chris. I love you so. I love every bit of you, my long, lean man."

"And I love you, Mollykins, Oh, so much. More and more as time goes on. You're just lovely. The more I have you the more I want you. I'm like a drug taker. It gets worse."

"Not very complimentary, darling, but I know. It's the same with me. And we're old married folks now. It's how many years? 1920 to 1926. Six years. We ought to be getting fed up with each other by now. I say, mustn't it be awful for married people who don't get joy in each other like we do?"

“Horrible, darling. Doesn’t bear thinking about. You know, we’re so happy, that I’m frightened. I feel something’ll happen. It’s too perfect to last.”

“Rubbish, why shouldn’t it? You’re getting to be an old croaker. Come on to bed, darling,” and as she got up out of his arms, Molly whispered in his ear, “I’ll take your fears away.”

But later that night, when she was lying peacefully asleep with her head on his shoulder, happily tired, Chris lay awake, worrying and wondering. His thoughts were with the last part of the quotation from the marriage service, which they had not discussed. “With all his worldly goods——” Farming was getting worse and worse, and his worldly goods were getting less and less. Supposing the time came when he could not give this lovely woman the material things of life in sufficient quantity. Would their love be enough then? God! He couldn’t let her down. Still, perhaps times would get better. No need yet to tell her that they would have to go more carefully. He’d have to stick at home more though, and work. That would automatically stop them spending money. Yes, that would be the best plan. And in the midst of these musings he fell asleep, his black head close to her chestnut one.

But the very next day he broke his resolution to stick at home on the farm, and went off pleasuring with Molly.

It was May, and during the morning he had noticed a track along the side of a new hayfield, which was being made by people who preferred to trespass rather than walk on the farm road, which was very rough and stony. This careless treading down of his grass annoyed him, and he had decided that it must be stopped. Just as they were finishing lunch, Molly asked him if he could drive her in to Winchbury on a shopping expedition.

“I can,” he said, “but I don’t want to. I’m busy.”

“Then might I ask my lord and master the precise form of villainy he intends to perpetrate this afternoon?” asked Molly brightly.

“You may,” retorted Chris in similar vein. “I’m joining the Flying Squad. Instead of committing crime, as you so lightly suggest, I intend to stop other people committing it. I’m going up to the seventeen acre to make people walk on the road instead of on my grass. I shall be prosecuting about a dozen people next week for trespassing. Why the——?”

“Ush, dearie, ’ush. Spare me, and save it for the trespassers. You know, I thought you seemed a bit stuffy this morning. Too much asparagus last

night. I say, give the trespassers a miss and drive me in. You can have half an hour in Woolworth's all to your little self, while I buy a hat."

"Sorry, Mollykins. It can't be done. It's Saturday, and there's sure to be a lot of people going up that road to the wood this afternoon."

"Ah, come on, Chris. What does it matter anyway? You won't do any good—they'll go just the same. And look here, are you quite sure of your ground over this trespass business?"

"Sure of my ground? What the dickens! I pay the rent for it, I've bought the seeds, and sown them, I've——"

"Yes, dear, I know, and you worry over it too, granted, but you miss the national idea. The land belongs to the people; you're only there on sufferance. You're hopelessly out of date. Besides I've heard somewhere that the law of trespass is a bit queer. In pursuit of conies or something. Sounds like women at a fur coat sale. You'll only get into trouble. You'd much better come with me."

They wrangled pleasantly about it for a while longer, but the upshot was that Chris drove Molly into Winchbury, where they discovered that there was a good show on at a Southampton theatre. Shopping finished, they drove on down there and returned soon after midnight. It did not really matter very much to postpone his trespasser-catching for one day. It was only a little thing, but once again the farm came second.

1927 proved to be a still more disastrous year for British farmers. Instead of times getting better they were definitely worse. In addition to yet another fall in the price of practically every farming product, the weather was atrocious. It rained the whole of the summer. Acres and acres of hay were cut and never gathered at all; the swaths lay as they fell from the mower, untouched for weeks (mute evidence of man's helplessness in the face of nature), until they gradually faded into the rank, unhealthy green of the aftermath.

The almost complete absence of sun resulted in the ears of corn being only half-filled. The wet, dismal haymaking dragged on into harvest, and still it rained. Corn was cut in between the showers, and stood mournfully in stook for weeks. It never got dry enough to rick. The incessant wet caused it to sprout in the stooks, which became suddenly in a night as though they were covered with snow, as the white shoots from the sprouting grain burst from the ears. Then, in a day or so they turned green, as the grain grew, and

matted the sheaves together. The older labourers said to each other: " 'Tis nigh as bad as seventy-nine wur."

In October the weather cheered up for a spell, and permitted this already spoiled harvest to be gathered in. But the quality was poor, the yield was low, the expenses of harvesting had been enormous owing to the weather, and prices fell steadily. Livestock was little better. Milk prices were a trifle lower than in the previous year, and cattle and sheep had not thriven owing to the continuous wet. As Chris's shepherd put it, "What can 'ee expect. They sheep an't 'ad a dry back all summer."

Now when Chris had been a bachelor, whose farm made a profit of fifteen hundred a year, while he had only spent about eight hundred, he'd had a right royal time. During the first two years or so of his married life his farm profits and his personal expenditure had been about equal. Subsequently the profits had gone down, while his annual living expenses had remained stationary, the difference varying from three to five hundred pounds a year—hence the necessary overdraft at the bank.

This mode of living meant that he had been going financially downhill, slowly but surely, buoying himself up with the hope that times would get better. A year like 1927 brought him up against hard times with a vengeance. His personal expenditure was possibly a trifle less—even the prices of pleasures had fallen a little—but the year's working on the farm showed a trading loss of at least seven hundred pounds. Money could not be described as "being tight"; there simply wasn't any. The overdraft had reached the limit, and he hated to think of the pile of bills on his file.

He had got into the habit of paying January's accounts at the end of February. Artificial manures had been purchased in the spring on a six months credit basis, and so had implements and other necessaries, with the result that the harvest had been mortgaged before it was gathered, and this year its financial return did not justify the mortgaging.

In spite of all the articles in the newspapers, which stated that farmers spent far too much time at fairs and markets, Chris discovered that why he did not go to market so often as formerly, was because he did not like to meet people to whom he owed money. This was awful. He thought of his father's reputation in the district for integrity. By God! He was trading on that, was he? Something would have to be done. But what?

Many farmers had in recent years given up keeping their regular Hampshire Down breeding flocks, because they did not pay. The argument against them being that they required so much labour, which had increased

in cost compared with prewar days much more than had the price of wool and mutton. Chris dug into the profit and loss accounts of his own flock during the past few years, and the results frightened him. Pay? Why they were losing hundreds a year. While this was, in a great measure, true enough, the flock hardly got a fair chance in these calculations; Chris had to get some ready money somehow.

He inquired of various neighbours about the advisability of selling the flock. James Marsh had sold his own flock some two years previously, and he advised Chris to do the same, and to increase his cattle. Mr. Morley told Chris that while his flock did not pay, he was too old to change his ways. His father had kept the flock, and he should continue to do so, whatever happened, as he could afford the luxury, and could not imagine farming without the cares and pleasures of a breeding flock. Still, he would advise Chris to sell out; but if he did so, he must increase some other department of his farming, preferably his milking herd.

So in 1928 Chris sold his flock, and the resultant influx of money into his account somewhat restored his self-respect. He wiped off his overdraft, paid all his outstanding bills, and decided to go carefully in the future.

But he did not increase his dairy herd. He used the money from the sale of his flock to put his back troubles right, but his plan of campaign for his future farming without a breeding flock was only a half-hearted one. Dairying was such an infernal nuisance. Weeks, the dairyman, managed the present herd all right with the help of his wife and family, but any increase would mean more milkers, and oh, endless trouble. Still, with the flock gone, something had to be done. He let the under-shepherd go, and two other men also, but he couldn't get rid of his old shepherd. It would break the old fellow's heart. He'd keep a small fatting flock for the old man to look after, and instead of growing only half corn on the arable land, he'd grow two-thirds corn, more hay, and just enough sheep keep for the small fatting flock, which could be enlarged or diminished according to the season.

Of course he would lose the manurial value of the regular flock, but that could be put right by using artificial manures. If this system did not prosper, he would have to go in for more cows, but this depression couldn't go on much longer. Surely prices had touched bottom. They could not go any lower. Farming always went in cycles. Well, an upward trend was overdue. Times must get better.

So, while Chris told Molly that they must go a trifle less extravagantly, he did not tell her the true state of affairs, which meant that, while they effected some minor economies, they made no great difference in their way of living.

Who knows what might have happened if he had told his wife the truth? Molly was in love with him, and while a woman may be thoughtless, pleasure-loving, and extravagant by nature, she will cheerfully suffer anything where her affections are engaged. The blame for their still far too high personal expenditure must lie at Chris's door. Apart from Mr. Morley's dictum that "a man should be master in his own house", it was unfair to Molly that Chris funked telling her the true state of affairs.

But he did not tell her, and life was still a very pleasant thing for them both. The departure of the breeding flock with all its attendant cares and worries made Chris's farming still more easy to manage. Three men had been dispensed with, so that his labour bill was down by some five pounds weekly, which was one definite cash saving at least. Still, the gross production of the farm was going to be less now the flock had gone, Chris thought. He couldn't very well ignore that obvious fact. What about this dairying now? Milk prices had, of course, fallen steadily since the war, but the fall had been proportionately much less than in the case of other farming products. He supposed that he would have to go in more for milk production.

Like many farmers, Chris did not relish this prospect. Producing milk seemed more like running a business than a farm. The milking had to be done twice daily, and trains had to be caught, weekdays and Sundays. You couldn't dodge it anyhow. Might as well be behind a shop counter. To increase his herd materially he would have to make considerable alterations to his existing buildings, and more grass land would be needed, with its necessary fencing and water supply in addition. Expensive business this, and then there would be the extra cows to purchase. No good rushing things, he thought. Better to go carefully. He decided to lay down some more land to pasture, and to buy some young stock, so as to work up gradually into a larger herd.

Yes, that would be the best way to get about it, he thought. Buy good class young stock. If farming got better, and this increased dairying proved unnecessary, good coloury roan heifers would always sell, and if times didn't get better, they would grow into first class cows to increase his herd. So, in the spring of 1929 he decided to start operations by buying a bunch of

good roan weanling heifers, and he instructed his friend, Bob Tucker, to look out for a good lot.

These, as has been told, arrived that May morning when he was driving to Bournemouth with Molly, and he was informed of their arrival by Mrs. Gray on their return late that night. It was too dark to inspect them then, so Chris decided to do so first thing in the morning.

Chapter 12

Chris got up bright and early next day. As he was dressing he wondered where the new arrivals had been put to spend their first night at Springhead. Most likely in the little pasture on the other side of the tennis court, he thought. He looked out of his bedroom window to find that the early morning mist was so thick that he could barely see the shrubbery at the far side of the lawn. “My word! Going to be a blazer to-day by the look of things,” he said to himself.

He finished dressing, and then, before he left the room, he bent over the bed, and looked at his still sleeping wife. “Lovely little devil,” he thought as he kissed her hair, and tucked the bedclothes carefully around her, for in the abandon of sleep, many of her feminine charms had become uncovered.

As he went downstairs the grandfather clock on the landing struck six. He wished Mrs. Gray good-morning, pulled on a pair of gum boots, and went over to the dairy. There, Meeks, the head dairyman, told him that the bunch of calves were in the home pasture, as he had imagined, so after finding out that all was well with the milking herd, and discussing the coming day’s horse work with the head carter, he walked down the road and through the pasture gate in search of his new purchases.

It was worth getting up for, he thought. This early morning business was hard to beat. There seemed to be a freshness, a coolth, a misty scented peace, which satisfied one’s soul, and fortified against the heat to come. Yes, it was the peace of the early morning, which was so refreshing. As he walked across the pasture, through lush green grass wet as a river with the dew that age-old miracle, sunrise, took place. First, a faint, rosy tinge through the mist towards the east: then, a gorgeous red ball of fire, still veiled in wreaths of mist, rising over the unseen horizon. He stood still and watched. No sun rays for a few moments, for, although the sun was by that time well up over the horizon, it was still subdued by the misty mantle of the early morning. Then, suddenly, the first ray broke through, and in a few moments the mist was a thing of the past, King Sol rode triumphant through the heavens, and another hot day began.

Gorgeous, Chris thought, and then turned to look over the pasture. He could see the calves in a bunch in the highest and driest corner of the field. Only one of them was grazing, the others had not yet moved from their night

bedding place. He walked across to them, and proceeded to stir them to their feet.

They got up slowly, with many snorts and stretches, and then started in to the serious business of an animal's life, feeding. They knew that another hot day was in store, and that early morning and late evening were the best grazing periods of the day in hot sunny weather.

Chris wandered round each one, carefully appraising its points and condition. Yes, he decided, they were a good lot. Level, and good colours all of them, especially that strawberry roan. By gum! You didn't often see a prettier beast than that. A picture, she was. Yes, old Bob Tucker had certainly done him proud. Stiffish price though, thirteen fifteen. Still, Bob had admitted that in his letter, but had said that they were a tip-top lot. Well, they were. Yes, they'd do all right. Make some grand heifers at three years old.

He filled his pipe, and looked at his watch. Seven o'clock. He went back to the farm buildings, and crossed through the yards to the nag stables, where Gray had his horse saddled ready for him. He mounted, and clattered through the steading, and on up the farm road to the sheepfold. He was expecting the shearing gang in a day or two to shear some fatting tegs, and wanted to see the shepherd about the necessary arrangements.

This done, he rode further up the hill to a field above the Ox Drove, where the carters were busy dressing down the fallows in preparation for the sowing of swedes and kale. Soon after eight he was riding slowly down the hill towards the farm, filled with contentment at the satisfaction of having got up early, and of having made the round of every department of his farm before breakfast.

From this vantage point he obtained a beautiful bird's-eye view of the farmhouse and buildings, with the valley beyond. There was the dairy herd in the big water meadow, roans and reds against the green. He could see the calves in the home pasture, strung out busily feeding. Peeps of the grey stone walls of his home were showing between the gaps in the trees around the steading, and far across the valley on the other slope up from the river to the downs was the glorious patchwork of the differently cropped fields belonging to his neighbour.

Gosh! Who would choose to live in a town? Times might be a bit difficult, he might be hard up, but still, a farmer's life had many compensations. Molly and he were happy and fit, and life was still good in

spite of bad times. He clattered into the yard, gaily whistling “A Farmer’s Boy”.

Chris made one mistake in thinking that Molly and he were fit, and also in his unthinking assumption that they always would be fit; healthy people never realize that there is no freehold grip on health. As a matter of fact Molly was not fit, and the first hint of this Chris discovered at breakfast that morning. He noticed that she ate scarcely anything, and that she looked white and ill.

“What’s up, Mollykins? You look a bit under the weather,” he said.

“Nothing much, Chris. We’ve been playing a lot of tennis lately, and I’m a bit tired, that’s all. I’ll be all right in a day or two.”

But Molly wasn’t all right in a day or two. She continued to eat scarcely anything, and she showed no inclination for games. The farmer in Chris woke up to the fact that one animal among the farm’s livestock was not doing.

“Come on, Mollykins. Something’s up. What’s wrong? Made the great mistake at last, have we?”

“No, Chris. ’Tisn’t that. It’s, well, it’s a pain in my tummy. No, not exactly a pain—a—what’s the word—a niggle. I expect I’ve sprained myself at tennis. We’ve played nearly every day this May, the weather’s been so glorious. Beastly nuisance, but I’ll have to chuck it for a bit.”

Despite her protests Chris rang up the doctor. “Something’s wrong with you that I don’t understand, dear, so we’ll get the expert.”

To Molly’s remark that he was a silly old chump and that it would be a needless waste of money, he retorted that he would do the same for a horse or a cow, and that if he couldn’t do it for his wife, farming must be indeed in a bad way.

The doctor’s diagnosis was much the same as Molly’s. He could not find anything definitely the matter, but said that obviously she had been overdoing things, and must therefore go steadily for a while, what time nature would put things right. When fine weather meant almost continuous tennis, he said, young people did not realize that the machinery of the human body could be overworked. Rest was the only remedy.

Consequently, they decided to drop out of tennis and dancing temporarily, until Molly had recovered her strength. Haymaking was coming on, which would automatically prevent them from getting away together,

and if Molly took things quietly, while the hay was being harvested, they would be able to go junketing again between haymaking and the corn harvest.

Apart from the fact that all was not well with his wife, Chris enjoyed that month's haymaking. He had a fair crop of hay, which he made in first class condition, as the weather was ideal. Instead of working to get things done in order to get away from Springhead, he went to bed each night, physically tired but mentally content, and looking forward to the morrow as a further opportunity to do some necessary, satisfying job on his farm, a mental condition which should always be the mainspring of a farmer's life.

But when the haymaking was finished Molly still did not want to play tennis. Apparently the niggling pain was still there, and according to Chris, she did not eat enough to keep a flea alive. The weather continued hot, much too hot to eat, Molly said, so Chris took her away to the sea for a fortnight. "That niggle of yours thrives too well at Springhead, Molly," he said. "We'll get away to the sea, and see if we can drown the blighter." So to Totland Bay, Isle of Wight, they went, and lazed in glorious idleness on the sands.

This change did Molly a lot of good. She returned home, brown as a berry, and seemingly quite fit. Chris was overjoyed that she was better, and that she did not mention the annoying little niggle. "Told you we'd drown the little devil, Mollykins. 'Fraid we shan't get much tennis though. The hot weather's ripened the corn a heap since we've been away. I shall have to start straight in to harvest."

Molly was glad that the harvest prevented the question arising of her playing tennis again. She would have hated to tell Chris that she did not want to play, as it would have worried him that she was still not quite fit, and he would have probably called in the doctor again. There was nothing wrong with her really, just that she did not feel bursting with energy exactly, and that the niggle had not been drowned at Totland, but was still a faint reminder at the back of her consciousness that all was not quite well with her, morning, noon, or night.

The hot weather continued. It seemed as though it could not rain, and Chris got his harvest together, cheaply, quickly, and in tip-top order. There was a further slight fall in the prices of both grain and milk in October, but the latter product was still much higher in price compared with prewar figures than was grain, so Chris decided to carry on with his plan for gradually working up to a larger dairy herd. Accordingly he weaned twelve calves in October to follow on the ones he had purchased from Bob Tucker.

The older lot had done well that summer at Springhead. When they were taken out of the pastures in early November, and put in a strawyard at the hill buildings, Meeks, the dairyman, described them as being "fat as quails". "I 'opes I lives to see they come in wi' their calves in two years' time. If they don't make the bestest heifers in any dairy down the valley, then dog bite me."

Their winter quarters were certainly more spacious than those of the previous year, but they were very circumscribed compared with the lovely green pastures in which they had spent the summer. From November until the next May they were to stay in a small yard, and eat straw and mangolds. Straw was placed in the yard *ad libitum*, and what they did not eat they trod into dung. A monotonous existence, and a placid one; no worries, plenty of wholesome food, and a comfortable bed. Surely a good many human beings might have envied their lot.

In spite of the splendid way they had "done" that summer, Chris hated this lot of cattle. Every time he visited the yard to inspect them, and to note their progress, he associated their arrival at Springhead with Molly's illness. Not that she was ill exactly, but there it was, she wasn't well. She wasn't the Molly of the days before these infernal calves had arrived. The spring seemed to have gone out of her. She was always tired, always wanting to go to bed. It was no good messing about, he'd have the doctor again.

The doctor came, and his report was much the same as before. "Nothing definitely wrong, that I can find, Mr. Lowe, but she is run down. She has probably been overtaxing her strength for some time, and now nature has called a halt. Women are up and down people. I'll give her a tonic, which will help her, but rest and time will be the best remedies. See that she takes things easily."

So they took things easily. Molly seemed quite content to do so, and so was Chris. Now that his wife could not join in his sport and pleasure, his joy in these things was gone, and he gave them up without regret. If Molly was content to stay at home, the farm provided endless interest for him. They had always gone about together, and for him to go off on the spree alone seemed pointless somehow.

Molly, too, seemed to need him more than ever now. Appeared to depend on his company, and to hate it when he was compelled to be away anywhere all day attending a fair or market. Their physical pleasure in each other became less and less, and Molly was so apologetic about this, that it

hurt like the devil. “Chris darling, I’m so sorry, but I’m so tired. Do you mind so very much?”

Good God! What did she think he was? A ravening beast? She was his wife, and he was content to wait her pleasure and inclination. There could be no joy in that sort of thing unless both were eager and willing.

But the other women of the district had found out all about Molly’s illness, damn them. Ghouls they were, the older ones. They revelled in discussing the ghastly horrors of illness. Each one appeared to have some female relation in the nursing profession, from whom they had learnt all sorts of hideous details. Operations were their long suit and, it seemed to Chris, their favourite topic also. Snatches of their whispered conversation came to him at times. “And, my dear, she told me that when they operated on her sister for appendicitis, they found that——”

The younger women were worse. Both married and single, yes and even some who had barely left school, they all seemed to know that he wasn’t living the normal life of a young married man. They’d meet him with sympathetic inquiries as to Molly’s health on their lips, and a question and an invitation in their eyes.

At first he thought that he was imagining things, and called himself all kinds of a fool, but giving a lift home from Winchbury one evening to one young lady of the district proved to him that this invitation he thought he saw in women’s eyes was no imagination but a beastly reality. Damn it! It wasn’t an invitation merely, it was a demand.

He got hot when he thought of that drive. The trouble was that the women were right. He was unsatisfied that way. Although he had got away on that occasion, scathless, only he himself knew how near he had been to making a fool of himself. And even if he hadn’t made a fool of himself, there was no doubt but that he’d made an enemy of that girl. Women were either ghouls or dirty little she-cats, he decided, and he made up his mind to steer clear of them in future.

But Molly, his wife, was neither, thank heaven. She was delicious, sweet, and lovely, and she was his, all his. It was true she was ill, but this was only a temporary thing. She would get well soon, and then life would be all glorious once more. She was, as the doctor said, an up and down person. Just when they had made up their minds to seek another opinion, she would have an “up” period for a week or so, and the getting of further medical advice would be postponed.

Their usual doctor called regularly to see her, and reiterated his dictum of rest and time. “What does he do, Molly?” asked Chris one day. “He comes to see you, spends a dickens of a time with you, but I can’t get much out of him when he comes downstairs. I believe he just gossips to you and Mrs. Gray.”

“He does talk rather a lot, Chris, but I like him. He’s a nice man, and awfully shy. Mamma Gray looks on him with suspicion. In her eyes all men need watching. Wild horses wouldn’t drag her out of my room when he’s there, so you needn’t be suspicious, me lord.”

“Rot, Molly. I mean, what does he reckon he’s trying to find out?”

“I don’t know, Chris. He looks wise and serious when he comes in. Then he listens to my chest with those funny things, you know, a what d’you call ’um, a stethoscope. Then he taps my tummy all over. Quite hard sometimes. Funny, I never thought to let any other man tap my tummy but you, Chris. Then he says ‘Hum’ and ‘Hah’, looks wise, smiles at me and Mrs. Gray, and starts talking about the weather. Never mind, Chris. It pleases him, and hurts nobody. I’ll be better in the spring, and then he can go and tap somebody else’s tummy.”

Molly was tall above the average, and her usual weight, even though her figure had always satisfied the modern, slim requirements, had been eight and a half stone. Chris had noticed that she had looked slightly thinner for some time, but a few days before Christmas during one of her “down” periods, this thinness seemed to be very marked. He chaffed her into going over to the barn to weigh herself one afternoon. “Livestock never stands still, Mollykins. What is it old shepherd says? ‘They do either do, er else they do goo back. Nothin’ don’t bide put.’ You’ve lost weight. Let’s find out how much.”

He got the shock of his life when he found that she was only a bare seven stone. This was serious. Chris was scared. Molly laughed, and told him that probably the scales were wrong, whereupon he put her in the car, and drove to Winchbury. There they visited three shops, which had weighing machines, and these all told the same tale as the barn scales.

Hot foot, he took Molly to the doctor. First, he interviewed that good man alone, and he was so scared that he was bluntly rude to him. He pointed out that this enormous loss in weight meant that something serious was wrong with his wife, no matter what the doctor thought. Even his own farming knowledge proved that. It was no good saying that she was run down, had been doing too much, or damn silly things like that any longer.

They'd been messing about far too long already. If the doctor could not find out where the trouble lay, would he tell Chris where to go for further advice?

The doctor, good man, being well used to the fact that a patient's relations are almost invariably more trouble than the patient, and that in their anxiety when their loved ones are ill, their manners go by the board, proceeded to deal with the situation according to the best medical standards. The layman will never know whether doctors have to pass an examination in their youth as to their capabilities for soothing a patient's anxious relations. Possibly they have in their safes some precious certificates testifying to their qualifications in this most difficult branch of the profession, which their children are allowed to look at on wet Sundays as a treat.

"Mr. Lowe," he said. "You are anxious about your wife, and so am I. As you know I've been attending her regularly this winter. I've treated it as a watching brief. Only too often more harm is done by hurrying into operations than by watching for a period of time before deciding that the risk of an operation is warranted. Some people, I know, operate in search of trouble. Most of us, however, have found out by experience that it is better to take time in trying to diagnose the trouble before operating."

"But, doctor, is there anything wrong with my wife to need an operation?"

"I don't know for certain, Mr. Lowe. I've been coming to the conclusion that there is some abnormality in Mrs. Lowe's stomach, and after Christmas, I should like to have an X-ray examination, and then we shall know more about it."

"But if anything's wrong, why wait? Why not X-ray to-morrow?"

"Because, Mr. Lowe, everybody is away for Christmas. Dr. Dare, the radiologist, is in Switzerland, and Dr. Vivian," naming a surgeon famous throughout the south-west, who practised in Winchbury, "is away on holiday too. I should like him to be present, when the examination takes place."

This staggered Chris. His wife was really ill then, seriously ill. Dr. Vivian's name, although he was loved by everybody, was always associated with surgery, operations, clever, ghastly, horrible things. That sort of thing to happen to Molly! Chris felt suddenly sick.

The doctor recognized the signs. "Now then, Mr. Lowe, pull yourself together. Don't run away with the idea that your wife isn't going to get better. And don't scare her. It is probably only some simple little thing,

which we can soon put right. We don't know yet that an operation is necessary. There's no need to cross that bridge until we come to it."

Chris got a grip of himself, and after the doctor had seen Molly, they drove back steadily to Springhead.

During that evening Molly wormed out of Chris all that the doctor had told him. At first she was terrified at the bare idea that something serious might be wrong with her, that she might have to have an operation, and most of all, that she might die.

"Chris, Chris, I'm frightened. I don't want to die, Chris. What happens when you die? Do you know, Chris? I'm terrified."

Chris not only did not know what happened after death, but he had never thought about it at all. Other people died, and you went to their funerals. Fellows went out in France like shot rabbits; one moment they were, and the next moment they weren't. They were just snuffed out. He supposed that perhaps there was some sort of a future after death. Still, it was a risky thing for an ordinary chap like himself to talk about. Yet here was his wife sobbing with fright in his arms. He must do something. Afraid to die. Good Lord, she wasn't going to die! Even if the worst came to the worst, and an operation proved necessary, the chances were in her favour. Ah, that was the line to take. Molly'd always take a chance.

So he carefully weighed up the chances for her on a mathematical basis. Out of every thousand people, so many had this illness, and so many that illness, and so many were fortunate enough to have nothing wrong with them. Of those who had something wrong with their tummies, a large proportion got well without an operation, and most of those who had to have operations got better. Molly, therefore, had a five hundred to one chance, if not more. Why, life in full health wasn't much better odds than that. Look at the people who were run over every day. You might easily fall downstairs and break your neck. Besides, Molly, at her age, had a much better chance of getting well than an older person. The idea that she was going to die, and leave him, was too ridiculous to think about.

But the more he tried to cheer her up, the more despondent Molly became. X-ray, operations, being ill, doctors, nurses—she was scared of all of them. She had always been so fit, and so proud of her lovely body. She couldn't go through with it. She couldn't let them cut her about. She shuddered at the very thought, and wept anew.

Then she noticed Chris's face, and discovered that he was suffering as well. Poor old boy, she thought. And he'd been so patient, so understanding with her, during the past six months. He deserved a better wife, somebody some good, not a helpless, whining drag. At least, he deserved a wife, and he had been deprived of one for, oh, ever so long. Miraculously she suddenly cheered up, and dried her eyes.

At supper, she was quite gay, and managed to eat a respectable meal. "I feel better, Chris. This fright has scared me well, I think. I'll show these beastly doctors."

They went to bed soon after supper, and there Molly deliberately made love to her husband, and gave him what he had longed for, unsatisfied, for many months.

But this sudden cheering up and return to her old ways was but a flash in the pan, for next morning she fainted when she got out of bed, and, loathing himself for a beast, Chris rang up the doctor.

Chapter 13

From that moment Chris's life was a nightmare for some two months. He became a mere puppet in the hands of doctors, specialists, nurses, well-meaning friends, and the whole paraphernalia of serious illness. Added to this were the never-ending needs of his farm, and the ever-increasing fear that his Molly was slipping away from him into an unknown country of mystery and dread.

Apparently her physical weakness was such that before even an X-ray examination could take place she must be nursed carefully into a stronger condition. This meant that a trained nurse came to Springhead, and Chris had to pacify Mrs. Gray at this (in her opinion) insult to her capabilities. In addition, both Mrs. Gray and the maid resented waiting on the nurse and obeying her orders for Molly's requirements, and their grievances they took to Chris. Apart from Gray, the groom-gardener, who did not count, as his wife had said firmly that "he must walk a chalk line till this yer drattit 'ussy be out of the 'ouse", Chris was one lone, forlorn male in a houseful of warring women.

However, the nursing had the desired effect, and some weeks later Molly was strong enough to be taken to Winchbury for the X-ray examination, which definitely showed that an operation was necessary. The doctors and the surgeon talked to Chris about all sorts of incomprehensible things, of kinks, of ulcers, of growths, and other hideousnesses. Apparently an operation was the only hope, and Molly, a thin, pitiful, shrunken Molly, went into the nursing home early in February.

On the day fixed for the operation, which was timed for 3 p.m., Chris said good-bye to Molly at 2-45, and drove home to Springhead, feeling that the bottom had dropped out of his world. The surgeon had promised to ring him up immediately it was over, say about five o'clock. Chris put the car away, went indoors, told Mrs. Gray that he was not to be disturbed until he rang, and sat down in the study feeling extraordinarily alone.

He filled his pipe, lit it, and looked out of the window. It had started to rain. Blow! he thought, that'll stop the horses dressing down the fallows in preparation for the spring sowing. Still, what did that matter, what did anything on the farm matter, now? His Molly was in danger. They would be busy with her now. Cutting into her lovely body, of which she was so proud, and with which he had had such joy and happiness. He conjured up all he

had ever read or heard about operations—people in masks, rubber gloves, ether; ah, thank God for that blessing!

He looked at the clock. Three-thirty. An hour and a half to go before he'd know. God! He daren't think; he must *do* something. But what? Farming? No, he must stay here, near the telephone. He glanced at the instrument standing on his desk. An impersonal, inanimate thing, like a candlestick. What would be the message he would receive from it in ninety minutes time? His pipe had gone out. He relit it, and puffed vigorously. Three thirty-five. Eighty-five minutes to go.

He picked up the newspaper. Some politician's speech on the state of British agriculture caught his eye. He glanced through it. Farming must be made to pay. Not likely, when the majority of voters were buyers of food. Still, what did it matter? If Molly went under they could wreck all the farms in the country for all he cared. Molly! So frightened she'd been, and he was powerless to help her. Couldn't even be with her to share her troubles. He was here at Springhead, and she was in the hands of those impersonal ghouls in the operating theatre. To them, she'd just be an interesting case. Ah, thank God for ether!

Three forty-five. Just one hour since he had wished her good-bye, and she'd clung to him, terrified. Such a pitiful little bag of bones! All her lovely roundnesses gone. Almost like the pictures of the Russian famine children. Still, if only they would put right whatever was wrong, he did not mind what time, care, and expense would be needed to nurse her back to his lovely, laughing, chestnut-headed mate.

Three-fifty. God! Would the time never go? There was a tap at the window. He looked up to see his retriever bitch, Flora, with her front paws upon the sill. Nice old girl, he thought. You'll be company, and you won't talk. He opened the window, and the dog jumped in, wriggling with joy. He shut the window, sat down in an arm-chair, and Flora put her head on his knees. He pulled her ears, and talked to her. Another woman who loved him, he thought, and another woman he loved. Flora thought the world of him. You could see the calm serenity and faith in her eyes. She trusted him. So did Molly.

Was he worthy of that trust? He'd made a pretty muck of most things. Lost a dickens of a lot of money in the last few years. Money? Mustn't go on losing it. He'd have to make some now. All this business would cost money, and then Molly would have to have every comfort and luxury, when she came out of the home. Supposing he failed her? Supposing he couldn't

give her what would be necessary? His desk was littered with that morning's letters; some of them, the halfpenny stamp ones, not opened, bills probably. The clock on the mantelpiece struck four.

God! He must do something. He supposed that people prayed at times like these. He couldn't. He'd sort of given religion and all that the go-by for years. Been too busy and happy to bother about it. Couldn't very well start praying just because you wanted something—ignore your God, if there was a God, while things went well, and then, when you were in a hole, go whining to him! No, he might be a fool, a failure, a poor sort of fish generally, but he couldn't do a dirty trick like that.

Five minutes past four! His glance caught the littered desk once more. He had neglected his business writing since Molly had been ill, some two months now. He would straighten up his desk, and try to make some estimate of his financial position. However bad it was, it would be best to know where he stood. That was the worst of this operation. He did not know how things were going. To know anything would be better than this awful uncertainty. Yes, he'd sort out his bills and papers. It would help to pass the time at any rate.

He sat at his desk, and dug into his farming affairs. They were worse than he had imagined. Bills had accumulated since Christmas. His overdraft had grown alarmingly large. There seemed to be dozens of letters from business firms drawing his attention to the fact that their accounts were long overdue. He set down on a sheet of paper all his outstanding liabilities, added them up, and the total staggered him. What were his assets? He made a rough list of them. Seemed a very small lot, he thought. Ah, of course, the breeding flock had gone, and so had the money received from their sale. His tenant right and tillage valuation was lower too on that account, and also because he had been growing more than his right proportion of corn.

He struck a rough balance sheet to discover that he was barely solvent. Barely solvent, and he had a sick wife depending on him, in need of him, in need of a man for a husband, who could give her every luxury and comfort. And he was nearly bankrupt. He was a failure, a fool, the sort of man the neighbours would speak pityingly about, when he was forced to sell out. To sell out, to leave Springhead, to get a job! To go as a bailiff somewhere at three pounds a week. And Molly was fighting for her life in the nursing home, and her husband had failed her. God! She'd better die, and never know it.

The clock struck the half-hour. Four-thirty. Only half an hour to go. Digging into the accounts had done one good thing; it had helped to pass the time. It had done another; it had shown him what sort of a man he was. He supposed that it was best to know, to realize how low you had sunk, and then possibly you might creep up a step. He ran through his figures again. Well, he wasn't quite bust yet, he'd give up every pleasure and luxury, sack some men, and stay at Springhead and work. Molly wouldn't be able to play games and things for a long time. If they lived quietly on the farm, maybe he could pull the thing round.

Four forty-five. Surely he would soon hear something. He lit a cigarette. Brrr went the telephone. "Hello!" "That Mr. Lowe?" "Yes!" "Atkins and Co. speaking. Your drill repairs are finished. Can you fetch the drill away to-morrow, as we are short of room?" "Yes, good-bye."

He crashed up the receiver. "Blast all drills!" he muttered. He threw his cigarette into the fire, and looked at the clock. Four-fifty. When would he hear any news? He filled and lit his pipe, got up, turned Flora over on to her back, and tickled her, and then walked to the window, and looked out at the rain.

Brrr, went the telephone again. He crossed the room, and grabbed the receiver. "Hello!" "That Mr. Lowe?" "Yes, speaking." "Great Western Railway speaking. There's a truck of cake arrived for you from Bristol. We thought you would like to know at once." "Yes, thank you. I'll fetch it to-morrow. Good-bye." He hung up the receiver, and sat down at the desk.

"I can't go on," he said aloud. "I can't. Molly! Molly!" He buried his face in his hands. Flora, sensing that something was wrong with her master, got up from the hearthrug, and sat by his side with one paw on his knee, and the clock struck five.

In a minute or two the telephone rang once more. Wearily, he took up the receiver to find this time that it was the surgeon. "That you, Mr. Lowe? Well, we've found out the trouble, and we've put it right. It is just a question now whether your wife is strong enough to pull through."

Chris thanked him, and asked if he should come in to see his wife.

"No, Mr. Lowe. She won't be round from the ether for some time yet. You cannot do anything for her. We will do everything that is humanly possible. I shall be at the home all night, and I'll ring you again at ten o'clock, when we shall know better how we stand."

Chris asked the chances of Molly's recovery.

“I can’t say, Mr. Lowe. She is very weak, but women have extraordinary powers of recuperation. She has a chance, but I cannot disguise from you that it is a slight one. Everything that can be done to help her will be done. I am sorry that I can give you no better news, but that is the position. I will ring you at ten.”

Chris thanked the doctor, rang off, and sat thinking. He did not know whether to be glad or sorry. Apparently, although Molly was through the actual operation, her recovery was still very uncertain. That was the worst of it, the uncertainty. To know definitely one way or the other would be a relief. He felt guilty, when this thought crossed his mind. One way, there could only, must only be one way; he daren’t think about the other.

He felt flat and tired, oh so tired. He looked at the clock. Half past five. He’d had no tea. Well, he wasn’t hungry, but he would have some tea. Besides, Mrs. Gray would want to know about Molly. He got up to ring for her.

As he did so, a car swished up the drive, and stopped outside the window of the study. Oh curse! He didn’t want to see anybody. Who was it? Old Walter Morley. Ah well, he’d have him in to tea. Perhaps it would be better to talk to someone. Walter wasn’t too bad. He liked old Walter. Somebody to talk to, that was the thing. Well, old Walter would always talk.

He went out into the hall, where he met Mrs. Gray. He told her that Molly was through the operation safely, ordered tea for two, and went out to greet his visitor.

“Chris lad, what’s the news?” asked Mr. Morley.

Chris told him, and asked him to come in to tea.

“No, Chris. You don’t want anybody bothering I reckon. You’ve got enough worries. The missus wanted to know about Molly, and so did I, so I just ran over to find out.”

“Come on in, Walter, and have some tea. I haven’t had mine yet, and you can drink another cup. Come on, I want you to. I’m sort of alone.”

With many creaks and heavings, Mr. Morley hoisted himself out of his car. “This young feller’ve had about all he can stand,” he said to himself. “Dunno how I shall fit as a comforter, but he don’t want to be left alone, so here goes.”

He followed Chris indoors, and asked if he could use the telephone a moment to ring up his wife. Chris ushered him into the study, pointed to the

telephone on the desk, and said that he would be back in a minute or two. Mr. Morley was an enthusiastic Freemason, and had intended to attend his lodge that evening, as he held an important office, but one look at Chris's face had decided him that his Masonic duty lay outside his lodge for the moment. He rang up the secretary to make his excuses, and then rang up his wife and told her that he was bringing Chris back to supper.

This last decision was made after he had caught a glimpse of the paper lying on Chris's desk, with the headings, assets and liabilities. One glance at some of the figures and Mr. Morley whistled with astonishment. "Silly young fool. Damme, I didn' think 'twas as bad as that, although I'd heard a whisper or two. He don't want to bide studyin' that sort o' thing to-night, while he's worrying about Molly. Lord knows he've had a gut full o' trouble lately, wi'out that." He finished his telephoning, and settled down in an arm-chair on the other side of the hearth from the desk, just as Chris returned, followed by Mrs. Gray with the tea things.

At tea, and after tea, Mr. Morley talked hard. Like all men, he inevitably talked shop, in this case, farming. He spoke of crops, of stock, of milk yields, prices, prospects, and of farming politics and local gossip.

"You young chaps don't know anything about depressions," he said. "I've lived through two of 'em, and please God, I'll see this one out. 'Tis just stickin' power as is wanted. Go carefully, bide at home and work, and spend nothin' till times do come round."

Chris agreed, but muttered something about how much longer was this particular depression going to last.

"God knows. 'Tis a bad one, the worst I've known. Chris, you ain't quite such a damn fool as some. This illness of Molly's now, on top o' bad times'll be awkward. Can a friend sort of ease things? I know all about lend a friend money, make an enemy, but you got rather more than you can carry, just now. A few hundreds now, say five hundred. You can have it, and nobody'll know save you and I. I won't even tell the missus." And he looked at Chris as though he were afraid that he had insulted him.

"Walter, I can't let you do it. It's awful good of you to offer, and I'm grateful, but you must know I can't. Quite honestly, 'twouldn't be safe. Most likely you wouldn't get it back."

"An' I shouldn' lose a hell of a lot o' sleep, if I didn'. I'm damn near sixty. I shan't have so many more years to go. I got plenty. Can't I do a bit o' good wi' a little of it for once, 'fore I do go, wi'out reckonin' to get

something out of it? Look here, if so be as you find out that a bit o' cash'll put things right, there 'tis. Just when you like. You get Molly back here, an' settle down to work, and if you change your mind, just say so, and you can have five hundred, and no questions, documents, or anything. Damme, I knew your father years ago. He was always a good friend to me. Can't I be one to his son?"

"You are, Walter, you always have been, but I can't let you befriend me in that way."

"Ah well, you bear it in mind. I'm there, if I'm wanted, see; remember that. Now then, lad, get your car, and come back to Fernditch with me. The missus is expecting you."

In spite of all Chris's protests that he was no fit company for anybody, Mr. Morley had his way. He rang up the nursing home to say that any message for Chris was to be sent to Fernditch, told Mrs. Gray privately, when she came in to clear away the tea things and Chris was out of the room for a moment, not to expect her master back that night, and to tell her husband that the farm would probably have to run without him on the morrow. He hustled Chris out of the house, saw him set off on the Fernditch road in his car, got into his own, noisily achieved his top gear, and followed. Mr. Morley was in his element when he was running things.

At Fernditch he contrived to run things with such success that Chris spent an almost normal evening with friends, which was a welcome relief from the unreal existence of the last week or two.

Soon after ten o'clock the telephone rang. "That'll be your call, lad. The phone's in the office. Get to it."

Chris went to the telephone. Molly had recovered consciousness, the surgeon told him, but she was still very weak. Chris asked whether her chances had improved, and was told that they had done so definitely since five o'clock. Much depended on the outcome of the night. The best thing Chris could do would be to get to bed and try to sleep. The surgeon promised to ring him early next morning, when he hoped to have still better news.

Chris returned to the sitting-room, and told Mr. and Mrs. Morley what the doctor had said. Mr. Morley mixed two whiskies, one a very stiff dose, which he handed to Chris. "Drink that, Chris, and get on to bed. Your room's all ready for you."

Chris said that he must get home, but Mr. Morley would not hear of it. "You ain't goin' back to Springhead this night, Chris. You do what you're told for once. The missus been airin' your bed ever since I rang her up from your place."

Mr. Morley got his way as usual. He hustled Chris off to bed, fixed him up with a pair of voluminous pyjamas, and came downstairs to his wife, breathing heavily.

"That boy've had about all he can stand, missus, and so've I. I'm as tired as a dog." He looked at his glass. "Yes, I reckon I'll have one more spot, and then we'll toddle off upstairs. Please God the lass'll get right or else slip away easy an' quick. He won't stand much more."

Next morning at breakfast came a message from the nursing home that Molly was dangerously weak, and that Chris had better come at once to see her. Mr. Morley drove him to Winchbury, and waited outside the nursing home, smoking hard.

One look at Chris's face, when he came out about three quarters of an hour afterwards, told him that Molly was dead. Chris blundered into the car. Mr. Morley said nothing, but drove furiously out of the town to the top of the downs, where he stopped, and got out. "I can't help you, Chris. I don't know how, but you know I'm sorry. I'm going to smoke a pipe, and have a look at Marsh's sheep, while you go through with it. I came up here 'cause hills are sort of comfortin' somehow."

He left Chris for some twenty minutes, and returned to find a much older man in his car than the Chris of a day or two ago. Then he drove slowly back to Fernditch, took practically the whole of the funeral arrangements into his own hands, and not until the whole mournful business was over did he let Chris return to Springhead to sleep.

When Chris did return home, Mr. Morley said to his wife: "Well, we can't do any more. He've got to find his own way now, but I'm afraid 'tis goin' to be a bad job."

Mr. Morley's fears were realized. Chris stayed at home on his farm and farmed hard for two reasons. One was to tire himself so that he would sleep, and the other was to occupy his mind fully all day to prevent himself from thinking. He daren't think, either about Molly, or about his financial affairs. What was the good of farming, of anything, now? Molly was gone, and the farm was going. It was gone too far to pull round anyway. What was the good of flogging a dead horse?

He kept away from all his friends, and sat alone in his study in the evenings with his dog. Whisky was the only thing which brought any relief. First just a stiff one before going to bed. Then perhaps two during the evening, then three, and so it went on. Mr. Morley called one evening and found Chris almost fuddled. He said nothing about it then, but drove over to Springhead again the next morning and spoke his mind.

"If you must be a bloody fool, Chris, there's no sense in being quite such a bloody fool. Drink's the last word. Come on, what's the trouble? Out with it."

Chris told him that it was none of his business, and that he was quite capable of managing his own affairs.

"That's just what you ain't. Damme, you ain't capable o' judgin' the real value of a glass of whisky. If you're goin' on like this, 'tis a good job Molly died. A quitter'ud a been no good to her."

Chris was silent. Funny, no one had ever called him a quitter before.

"Come on, Chris. Folks are born, and folks die, but the world goes on. Nothin' stands still, an' you're driftin' back fast. A farm needs all a sober man's energies to keep it goin' these days. If you sit at home avoidin' your friends, an' soakin' whisky, Springhead'll go to hell in a very short time."

Chris laughed. "It's practically gone there already, Walter."

"Well, let's pull it back. What about that five hundred? Dammit, you can have a thousand, if you'll only quit this whisky policy."

Chris rummaged in his desk, found the piece of paper on which was written his rough balance sheet, and handed it to Mr. Morley. "You don't want to invest money in a business in that state, Walter, do you?"

Mr. Morley studied the figures. They were bad, devilish bad, he thought. Still, with a bit of cheap capital a man with one idea, the saving of the farm, with rigid tenacity of purpose might save it. But Chris had no purpose now Molly was dead. He'd never do it.

"Well," sneered Chris. "Those figures alter your ideas, don't they?"

"No!" snapped Mr. Morley. "They don't alter 'em, but you do. You ain't man enough."

"Very true, I'm not. I've known that for some time. Walter, I'm no good. I'm a rotter, a failure. You can't help a rotten thing. I'd like to clear out, and

get some job away from this district. I'm no good at all. What must I do, Walter? I'll take your advice, but I won't take your money."

Mr. Morley thought for a moment. "There's two things, Chris. If you'll chuck this drinkin', an' buckle to, I'll put a thousand pounds into Springhead. If you won't do that, give up the place, sell out next Fall, and get out an honest man. If you go on as you're going, some of your creditors'll be let in. You can get out next Fall, square everybody, and you'll have a hundred or two left over."

"That's what I'd like to do, Walter, get out next Michaelmas, but I'm on a yearly tenancy, and I can't get out till next Michaelmas twelvemonth. Very certainly, I can't let you lend me any money. Don't think I'm not grateful, but I can't, that's all there is to it."

They discussed the problem from all angles, and after extracting a promise from Chris to leave the drink alone, Mr. Morley left with full powers to see the agent of the estate as to the possibilities of Chris giving up the farm at the coming Michaelmas, and also to think about a possible job for him if this could be managed.

"It's the only thing to do," he said to himself, as he drove away. "His father'ud turn in his grave, if he knew, but that young fathead has got to get away to a new district, and be worked, hard. Ah well, I must see what I can do about it. Can't have him drinkin' to a dirty finish, for that's what'll happen, if somebody don't take charge." And puzzling over these new problems, he drove back home to Fernditch. Chris's affairs were now his worry, and he was content that this should be so. He liked running things.

Chapter 14

Mr. Morley was a busy man, but he found time during the next day or so to have a conversation with Mr. James, the agent of the estate of which Springhead Farm was a portion. His ostensible reason for calling on this gentleman was to solicit the aid of his employer, Lord Dampney, in the matter of the candidates for pensions from the Agricultural Benevolent Society. Mr. Morley was the society's district representative, and he wanted to get as many votes as possible for two local deserving cases.

This business being concluded satisfactorily, the two talked generally of agricultural matters. It was necessarily a guarded conversation. Mr. Morley, on his part, could not give away the fact that Chris Lowe was in a hole, and must quit his farm the following Michaelmas if he were to be able to get out an honest man. When it came down to brass tacks, he was going to pull the string that the reason for Chris wanting to give up the farm was that, owing to the death of his wife, he wished to get away to a new district, where he would avoid the almost daily reminder of his loss. Also, to let the agent know that Chris wanted to break his agreement. To give up on so short a notice as six months, would be to place that gentleman in a position to dictate terms, and nobody dictated anything to Mr. Morley except his wife.

As they talked, the agent wondered what was the real reason for Mr. Morley's call. The votes for the Benevolent Society were obviously only an excuse. "He isn't one of my tenants, and he doesn't exactly love me, but he wants something," he said to himself. "He's a wily old bird, I'd better watch out."

Inevitably the conversation drifted to agricultural politics, and soon Mr. Morley fired the first gun in the campaign. He stated flatly that all farm rents would of course have to come down; at which the agent smiled, and suggested that the wish was father to the thought. He then inquired why Mr. Morley should want to discuss such a question with him, as they were not connected in any way over farm rents.

Mr. Morley implied (he was an adept at such tactics) that there was a movement on foot amongst the farmers of the district to ask for an all round reduction in rents, a request which he considered to be fully justified by the recent large fall in the prices of all agricultural produce.

To this fly the agent rose at once. All the farms under his control, he said, were rented fairly, according to their particular advantages and disadvantages. He was, he hoped, a reasonable man. If any tenant considered that his particular farm was too highly rented, he, the agent, was always willing to discuss the matter reasonably and fairly. But any co-operation of the tenants in the nature of a rent strike or collective giving in of notices to quit, he would refuse to discuss. “Let them try it,” he said. “They would probably regret it.”

Mr. Morley said that while no drastic action such as the agent had suggested was mooted, undoubtedly there was a brief for a general reduction. No landlord, he said, would relish having to farm his farms himself, and the day was gone by when new tenants were anxious to get farms. Mr. James must surely realize that side of the question.

Mr. James smiled, and then proceeded to enlighten Mr. Morley as to the true position with regard to the demand for farms. He pointed out that the widespread agricultural depression had, up to date, affected the Winchbury district very little.

“We are not primarily arable, like the Eastern counties,” he said. “We’ve a fair proportion of ploughland, but our sheep, and our dairying, and our pigs are holding their own. I get repeated inquiries as to whether there are any farms to let on this estate even now.”

Mr. Morley grinned sarcastically. “Well,” he said, “it won’t be long before landlords in this district’ll be able to tell these brave inquirers that they’ve dozens to offer ’em, unless rents come down. It’s quite in order for you to tell me about these inquiries for farms. I should do the same in your position, but you’ve got to face facts.”

“Which are?” asked Mr. James.

“That prices have come down with a bump, and rents must follow suit. You can’t get away from that. Well, I mustn’t take up any more of your time. I’m much obliged for your promise to use his Lordship’s votes on behalf of our local candidates.”

Mr. Morley got up to go, but the agent motioned him to wait. Mr. Morley was an influential farmer in the district, he thought, even if he was not one of their tenants. Be a good plan to show him that I have got a genuine application for a farm.

Aloud he said: “Wait a moment, Mr. Morley. I should like to prove to you that I’m not altogether romancing, when I tell you that I have inquiries

for farms."

He pushed a bell, and asked the clerk who answered the summons, to bring him a certain letter. When it arrived he handed it to Mr. Morley. It was a letter from a Major Sykes, asking whether there was any likelihood of a farm to let on Lord Dampney's estate in the near future. Mr. Morley read it, and handed it back.

"Surprises you a bit, doesn't it?" asked the agent.

"Yes and no," replied Mr. Morley. "He isn't a genuine tenant farmer. From his letter, he's got plenty of money, and wants to settle in this district for some reason or other now he's out of the army."

"I grant you that, but the fact remains that he wants a farm, and is willing to pay for it. As a matter of fact he was in his Lordship's regiment, and that's the reason he wants to farm in this district. I've got instructions to give him the offer of the first vacant farm. He was in here the other day, and I had to tell him that I could give him no hope of any vacancy. Much as his Lordship wants to find him a farm, we can't very well give any of our old tenants notice. Bad landlords as we are, we haven't quite come to that sort of thing yet. Besides, he wants one next Michaelmas, which I told him was impossible."

"Well, you tell your tenants that they can get out next Michaelmas without penalty for short notice, and you'll have at least half a dozen farms to offer him. They'll jump at the chance to get out of such a hopeless job."

"I should be quite prepared to do that, but it wouldn't do any good. All our tenants know when they're well off."

"Well, if you'll put it in writing that a farm can be given up next Michaelmas without penalty on a six months notice, I reckon I can find you one."

"Whose?"

"I can't give away other folk's business unless they're safeguarded. If you want a farm for Major Sykes, put it in writing, and I'll tell you. If not, we know where we stand."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Morley. My word has never been doubted on this estate in my dealings with the tenants."

"That I well know," said Mr. Morley. "Your word's good enough for me at any time about anything. If I were doin' business for myself, I should

want nothing better, but I'm not. I can't take any responsibility without what I suggested in writing."

Mr. James, mollified by this generous answer, scribbled a letter stating that any tenant of a farm of over three hundred acres, who wished to give up next Michaelmas, could do so without penalty under the terms of his agreement, if he gave notice by March 25th, and would agree, if necessary, to do the incoming tenant's tillages according to instructions. "I've put in a minimum of three hundred acres," he said, as he handed the letter to Mr. Morley, "as that is the smallest acreage Major Sykes wants. Now, who is it?"

Mr. Morley read the letter, and stowed it away in his wallet. "Young Chris Lowe," he said. "He was wrapped up in his wife, and can't get over her death. He told me he'd like to get out next Michaelmas. Personally, I hope he stays on. Time's a wonderful healer, and he's a young man."

"H'm," said Mr. James. "Sad job, that. Pretty girl, wasn't she? Looked well on a horse. But why didn't he come and see me himself about it?"

"For two reasons. One because he didn't think there was a cat's chance of getting out without penalty, until next Michaelmas twelvemonth, in the present state of farming, and no more did I. Second because he won't meet anybody since the funeral. He's all to pieces. Never seen a man take it so hard."

"Well, Springhead will suit Major Sykes, and it will suit his Lordship for Lowe to quit at Michaelmas. When shall I know?"

"One way or the other before the twenty-fifth. Let's see, it's the tenth to-day. I've done what he asked me. I'll give him your letter, but he'll have to make the decision himself. I can't do that for him. I meddle enough in other folk's business without that."

"Well, you meddle to some purpose," laughed Mr. James, as Mr. Morley took his leave, and set out for home.

"The next thing's to get Chris a job," he said to himself, as he was driving back to Fernditch. Quite honestly, Mr. Morley wished that Chris would let him put some money into Springhead, so that he could stay on, and work hard at pulling the place round, but he realized that Chris would not let him do this. "Then what'll the fool do next Michaelmas? Dammit, he's young, there's no kids, he ought to be able to keep himself. But he won't, unless he's fixed up with a job to go to next fall. He'll mess about, and probably start drinkin' again. Ah well, I'll have to try and find a job for him, before I tell him as he can get out next Michaelmas. I've found the road

out, and now I'll have to find somewhere for him to go, else he'll be out o' the fryin' pan into the fire."

He put his car away, had his dinner, and set out to make that day's final round of his own farm. He visited every scene of farming activity. First he went to the sheepfold. He had a good breed of lambs that season, and he was never tired of looking at them, and discussing plots and plans for their well-being with his head shepherd. From there he walked over to the far hillside, where his horse teams were busy sowing spring barley. All this was going according to plan, so after a word or two with the head carter about the morrow's work, he visited his day labourers, who were making thatch ready for covering in the hay and corn ricks, which, God willing, would be made during the following six months.

Mr. Morley was a staunch believer in the proverb that "the master's foot is the best dung". When the lengthening days of early spring brought an hour's daylight after tea, he welcomed it as yet another chance to make an inspection of the farm he loved. He prided himself that he was master of every detail of his business. He never realized that he agreed with the only sound doctrine for those who own land, farm land, or work on the land, which is that the land is the mistress of all, and demands faithful service from everybody. He thought that he ran his farm, whereas, in reality, his farm ran him, morning, noon, and night. But he was content with his lot, and while he would have scouted the idea that he was a mere servant of his land, he realized dimly that his occupation was a soul-satisfying one.

During the whole of the afternoon in the midst of his own business cares, he worried over the problem of how to find Christopher Lowe some worth-while job in life after he had quitted Springhead. But he could find no decent solution. He finished up his walk that afternoon by a careful inspection of his dairy herd, and an intricate technical conversation with Bill Gurd about the coming work, before he went in to his tea.

Later on in the evening he told Mrs. Morley of his problem. He had discovered during his married life, that, as a general rule, when he was unable to find a solution to any difficulty, his wife would suggest a simple and most admirable way out. He did not consider that she arrived at these undoubtedly brilliant solutions by the process of thinking things out carefully and reasonably, as he did, but that they were flukes. Still, he was forced to admit to himself that his good lady had produced a good many flukes during their association together, which had proved of great material advantage to him.

On this occasion Mrs. Morley, without apparently a moment's consideration, said: "What about Alice Buckley? We don't see so much of her now, since she broke it off with Frank Parsons, but she always used to be in trouble with her bailiff."

Mr. Morley was astounded. His wife had done it again. Why in the world hadn't he thought of Alice? "Damme, missus, you've hit it. Now, why the devil didn't I think o' that? Chris is just the chap for her. He's a fool to himself, but he can farm, an' he's as straight as a line. Most all the bailiffs Alice have had were as crooked as a dog's hind leg. Look here, we'll drive over to see her to-morrow afternoon."

Now that Mr. Morley could see a way out of his difficulty, he was not the man to let the grass grow under his feet before he got busy. His wife, realizing that her big baby was happy now that he had yet another bit of business to run, agreed to accompany him, so next day they drove some thirty miles west of Fernditch to Miss Alice Buckley's farm in Somerset.

This lady was the owner of about a thousand acres of good farming country, together with a charming old-world manor house. It might almost be described as a small estate, and the natives in the district always tacked on the name of the estate to that of its owner, whenever they spoke of her. It was always Miss Buckley of Rookeries, never merely Miss Buckley. They felt somehow that it was immoral for a single woman to own and farm an estate on her own. "Rattlin' around in thic girt 'ouse all by 'er lonesome. Ought to 'a bin wed years ago, when there mid a bin a son to 'a carried on the place. What's gwaine to 'appen to it when she do die, if so be as she don't git married?" said the old wiseacres in the tap-room of the village pub, when the subject of Rookeries was brought up.

"Ah but zno you, p'raps she an't bin able to vind no man to suit she. She'm a pernickety body," another would reply.

"A man to suit 'er," scoffed the ancients. " 'Tidn' she as do matter. What be best fur the place be the main thing. The land do come afore a woman's whimsies, surely."

Unknown to these critics, Miss Alice Buckley had realized that the needs of her estate were more important than her own personal feelings in this matter of getting married or remaining single. Her fiancé had been killed in the War, and her parents had died some five years ago. She was an only child, she loved every inch of her land and every stone in her house; she was fairly well to do, and after her parents' death, she had decided that the cares

and interests of farming her own land well would fill her life to the exclusion of old romantic memories.

For the first year or two things had gone well. The necessity of making a living out of her farming did not arise, for all farming was then prosperous enough to carry and cover up the mistakes and dishonesty of her bailiffs. But while she might not need to make much money from her farming—while even to lose a little each year did not matter so long as her beloved Rookeries was well done—to lose a thousand pounds a year was a serious matter. Increasingly bad times, and a succession of more or less dishonest and inefficient bailiffs, had decided her that something must be done. Her thirtieth birthday had come and gone. Romance was, therefore, ruled out, so she had made up her mind to look out for a husband who, for the sake of the place, must be well skilled in farming lore.

In this quest Mr. Morley had aided and abetted her. They were distantly related to each other, which brought to Mr. Morley the dignity of the title of uncle, and since her parents' death Alice had got into the habit of bringing most of her farming troubles to him for advice.

"You'd best get wed, Alice," he had said to her one day, some two years previously, when she had been telling him about the iniquities of her last bailiff. "There ain't one honest bailiff in twenty, and then he's usually a fool. 'Tis made so damned easy for 'em to be crooked. Don't matter whether they're buyin' or sellin' for you, some trader or other's always willing to grease their palms. They don't need to ask for it, neither. 'Tis flung at 'em."

"Well, find me a suitable husband, Uncle Walter," laughed Alice. "Somebody who can farm, and someone, you know, not too awful. I'd want a little consideration, but I'm at the end of my tether, and I'd do almost anything for Rookeries."

Although this was said in a joking way, Mr. Morley considered it seriously, and decided that it was the best thing that could happen, not only for the place, but also for Miss Alice Buckley. "She can laugh about getting a husband," he said to himself, "but that's just what she wants. 'Tis no job for a single woman to run a place like Rookeries. She've sort of missed the bus over gettin' married years ago, owin' to the war, and now she don't know what she does want. Well, we'll see."

As usual, he had started to run things. Alice came up to Fernditch to stay for a holiday, during which Mr. Morley trotted out a selection of possible husbands from the surrounding district. Repeated holidays at Fernditch followed, and, to Mr. Morley's great astonishment, his efforts in the rôle of

Cupid were successful with, in his opinion, his least likely candidate, Frank Parsons, to whom, in due course, Alice became engaged.

Frank was a bachelor of forty, and was popularly accepted as a slow, heavy, dull-witted, good farmer. He rented Woodend Farm, some three hundred acres in the middle of Friar's Wood, in which his landlord reared and shot many thousands of pheasants each year. Why the farm was named Woodend nobody knew—Woodmiddle would have been a much more appropriate title. Frank had altered his farming methods but little in the last twenty years, but as his wants were few, and all he did each day was to farm, the depression in agriculture did not cause him great concern. He loved his farm, he lived solely for it, and when a man does that, bad times can never beat him. But why men of his type should be content with such a small return for such arduous toil has never yet been solved.

While he was the least dashing of all the farmers Alice met during her holidays at Fernditch, there was a simple, straightforward dignity about him which commanded her respect, and the manner in which he loved and tended his land attracted her greatly. Mr. Morley did not realize that a mere woman could love the land as Alice loved Rookeries. In her case it was more than love, it was worship, an obsession almost. Frank Parsons was a man possessed of the same love and respect for the land, she decided, and he was the right man to transport from the Winchbury district to her beloved Rookeries, where, on those broad acres, he would have infinitely more scope to farm well, than on his little rented farm of Woodend.

Moreover, he was tall, strong, and clean living. If she must marry some man for the sake of the place, no one could say that Frank was objectionable in any way. And if, she thought, there were babies—if there should be a son to grow up at Rookeries with the idea that in the fullness of time this land would be his to watch and ward—well, she could put up with that side of it with Frank.

So she deliberately set about getting him to fall in love with her, and she found him an easy victim. Frank knew nothing about girls or women. Prior to the War he had worked at Woodend under his father's rule, and had been too tired at the end of each day to do more than eat his supper, and go to bed. After his father's death he had taken on the management of the farm for his mother, and had worked even harder. The War period brought still harder work, and at the end of it his mother had died, leaving him sole master of Woodend, in whose service he spent practically the whole of his waking hours.

Women had never entered into his life at all. The only occasions when he went off his farm were when he attended a market or farm sale, or paid rare visits to one or two farming friends. His road to market ran for three miles through the wood, and then down through Fernditch Farm. Woodend was too isolated, and too far from a station to make milk selling a reasonable business proposition, so Frank's cattle farming was mainly confined to the calving down of three-year-old heifers with their first calves, which he sold in the Winchbury auction sales on market days.

On his journeys to Winchbury with his sale cattle, he usually met Mr. Morley on his early morning rounds of Fernditch, and this astute gentleman used to make it his business on these meetings to obtain first-hand information as to the particular heifers' milking capabilities, straight from the owner's mouth. Most farmers who sold heifers and calves in Winchbury market had them hauled from their farms to market by motor lorry, because of the difficulty of walking the cattle in, owing to the ever-increasing road traffic. They argued with Frank that this method of transport was cheaper and better than the old-fashioned way of driving them in by road. Frank used to listen carefully to these up-to-date men, and admit that they were undoubtedly right, but he continued to do the job in the old-fashioned way.

Motor transport, while it was better in many ways, meant that he would have to pay out a few shillings in cash; his way meant that he did the job himself, and paid out nothing. He did not run a car, because he did not want one. When he had cattle to sell, he was obliged to leave his farm, and journey to Winchbury. If both he and the cattle went in by mechanical transport there would be two journeys to pay for, which would be absurd. Granted, after one of these long, slow journeys from Woodend to Winchbury and back during the winter, he would arrive home tired, and perhaps wet through, but if by so doing he had saved his farm the charge of a few shillings he was well content. The farm's well-being mattered, his did not. The only drawback to his methods was that he had to leave the farm in the early morning before it was light, and he would arrive home long after dark, which meant that for one whole day he would not see his beloved Woodend at all.

In the hands of Alice Buckley, a woman with a purpose, such a man was helpless, and in a few months, to his great amazement and delight, he found that he was engaged to be married to her. His amazement was due to the fact that he could never remember quite how it had happened. Alice's chief difficulty had been to get him to propose. She alone knew whether he proposed to her, or she to him; very certainly, Frank did not know, and Alice

told the details to nobody. His delight was unbounded. To realize that this woman had said that she would marry him, to think of her as mistress of his farmhouse at Woodend, to fondle her clumsily, to think that in the future he would be as other men of his age, a married man, all these things gave him great joy. The possibility of a son to follow in his footsteps at Woodend, a lad who would grow up there, and learn to love the place in proper fashion as his father did, was a wonderful thought, and Frank marvelled at his good fortune.

When he drove over to Rookeries for the first time with Mr. and Mrs. Morley, he was greatly impressed with the size of the house, and the style in which Alice lived. In company with Mr. Morley he inspected the farm, and agreed that while it was good land, it was not being managed properly. And back at Woodend that night he marvelled to himself that a woman with such possessions should be willing to marry a tenant farmer such as he. Woodend farmhouse, comfortable though it was, could not compare with Rookeries, he thought, and, a day or two later, in conversation with Mr. Morley, he said as much.

"Good Lord!" said that gentleman to himself. "He thinks Alice is going to live at Woodend, when they'm married, and she've got engaged to him just to get a good farmer for Rookeries. An' he's fool enough to stand his ground, I shouldn't wonder. I'd better warn her."

He did so, and Alice pooh-poohed the very idea that Frank might refuse to leave Woodend. "Three hundred acres rented," she said, "when he can own a thousand. No true farmer would think twice about it, and Frank's a good farmer and loves farming."

However she went cautiously in the matter for some months, but when, in due course, the date of their marriage came up for discussion, the question of their two holdings came under review. "You'd better give notice to leave Woodend, Frank. You can't run two farms thirty miles apart, and Rookeries is large enough by itself."

The idea of leaving Woodend had never entered Frank's head, when he had thought about their married life. His wife would, of course, live at Woodend on her husband's farm. Much as he disliked cars, and the modern idea of rushing about all over the place, he would buy one, and keep an eye on the Rookeries bailiff, unless Alice would agree to sell the whole estate, house and all, which, in his opinion, would be the sensible course to take.

They argued about it for weeks, but could arrive at no solution which would be satisfactory to both parties. Alice pointed out that the larger size of

Rookeries as compared with Woodend would give Frank more scope to indulge in his passion for farming. It would provide not only a better financial position for him, but also the higher social standing of an owner as against a mere renter of land. She offered to make over the estate to him on their marriage, if only he would agree to look at the thing sensibly, and give notice to quit Woodend. She told him of her love for Rookeries, of her memories of her happy childhood there, and that she would feel a traitor to the place, if she let it, sold it, or left it for any reason.

Frank cared for none of the material advantages which the ownership of Rookeries might give him. He had sufficient money for his farm's needs, and far more salted carefully away in War Loan than anyone, save his bank manager, imagined, while he was that almost unique person, a man satisfied with his own social standing, and who preferred it to any other either above or below his present position. He told Alice that all her sentimental reasons for wanting to live at Rookeries, could, on his part, be applied to Woodend, and that a man wanted to feel that he provided a home for his wife. Woodend was his farm. There he was master. At Rookeries he would feel not only an interloper but dependent. He had never been dependent on anyone before, and he did not propose to start his married life by making himself so.

They were the exact opposite to Molly and Christopher Lowe, whose love for each other had been far more important than Springhead Farm. Both Alice and Frank thought far more of their land than of love. Each wanted a son to succeed to their land; Alice an heir for Rookeries, and Frank a son to look after his beloved Woodend. But neither told the other of this secret desire. In their case the land was the important thing, love took second place. At their age the fine, careless rapture of young love was absent. They were marrying, the woman for the sake of Rookeries, and the man for Woodend Farm, but there seemed no way to marry Rookeries to Woodend.

Finally Frank had to make the decision. Alice refused to marry him unless he promised to give up Woodend, and live with her at Rookeries. He wrestled with this problem alone for several days, and then decided to seek advice. Had Mr. Morley not been related to Alice, Frank would have gone to that fount of wisdom, but in this case, he had to fall back on James Marsh.

This rural oracle listened to his statement, and then inquired whether Frank wanted his advice as to his best course financially, or from the point of view of his future happiness and comfort. Frank suggested that he wanted advice on both points.

“Well, if you quit Woodend, get married, and live at Rookeries, there’s no answer to it that you’ll be a hell of a lot better off. Most men ’ud jump at the chance. But money ain’t everything, and most women’s too dam’ mean, when they’ve give anything away to a man, to forget it. They will keep remindin’ the man about it. Besides, you’ll ’a started your married life by knucklin’ under to a woman’s fancy, an’ you’ll be like a toad under a harrow ever afterwards. Women are like that. Give in to ’em once, an’ they’ll have ’ee down for ever. You can buy good money too dear.”

Jim spoke from experience. Although Mrs. Marsh was just the opposite to a harrow in appearance, the fact that she had had a tidy bit of money when they married had kept Jim under her massive thumb ever since.

Frank digested this sage advice, but it did not give him much help. His difficulty was that he wanted Woodend, and he wanted Alice, in that order of precedence, and apparently he could not so have both of them. Finally, he journeyed down into Dorset to visit an aged uncle, who, after hearing the facts of the case, outlined the true position to his nephew so clearly that Frank was able to make up his mind almost immediately.

“There’s heaps o’ women in the world, Frank, but there’s only one Woodend Farm. Thee stick to the farm. Land’s safe, but women be kittle cattle. If she really wants ’ee, she’ll come a runnin’, an’ if she don’t, thee’t be well shot of her.”

That settled it. On the journey home in his trap, Frank repeated his uncle’s dictum to himself many times. There were heaps of women in the world, but there was only one Woodend Farm. He had never bothered with women before, and he could do without them now. And supposing he couldn’t. Well, there were heaps of women in the world. Of course there were. No doubt about that.

As he drove on to Woodend that evening, and saw his well tilled fields and thriving stock, he felt content. This was secure. He drove into the farmyard, and looked at his house. It would be nice to have a wife there to run it. Still—women—well—what about them? There were heaps of women in the world, but only one Woodend. The truth of this seemed wonderful. “Uncle’s right,” he said aloud, slapping his fat thigh a resounding crack in satisfaction at making up his mind about this difficult problem, “there’s heaps o’ women in the world, but there’s only one Woodend, and I’ve got it”.

So ended his dream of a mistress for his home, and Alice’s of a competent farmer for Rookeries, for Alice did not “come a runnin’ ”. They

parted in friendly fashion, and settled down to do their best for their respective farms, Alice by the help of indifferent bailiffs, and Frank by constant personal toil, attention, and love.

Chapter 15

Miss Alice Buckley made Mr. and Mrs. Morley very welcome, when they arrived at Rookeries. For one thing she was glad to renew a valued friendship which she had allowed to lapse since the breaking of her engagement with Frank Parsons, and for another, she was overjoyed to hear that Christopher Lowe was a possible candidate for the position of bailiff at Rookeries. As usual, she was in trouble with her present farm manager, and she jumped at the idea of getting a good farmer and an honest man in his place.

Mr. Morley explained to her the whole position at Springhead, and pointed out that it was possible, though not probable, that Chris would stay on in his farm, but that if he decided to give up, Mr. Morley would tell him of the Rookeries job, and let Alice have his decision within a month. He finished up his recommendation of Chris for the post with the words, "an' although he've been a dam' fool to himself, he can farm, an' he's as straight as my two gun barrels". A further recommendation was that Alice had met Chris several times on her visits to Fernditch, and she had always liked him; and when a woman is an employer a personal liking is a large factor in her choice of servants.

As they were discussing the matter, it occurred to Mr. Morley's fertile brain that the obvious solution for everybody concerned would be for Chris, when time had healed the raw wound of Molly's death, to marry Alice. "Best thing for both of 'em," he muttered to himself. "He'll do Rookeries well, and he's much more Alice's clip than Frank ever knew how to be. With luck, that ought to happen."

But, of course, he couldn't leave a thing like that to luck, unaided. He must put his oar in, which he did just as he let in his clutch to drive away.

"Now mind, Alice. I'll feel sort of responsible if Chris takes this job. Keep him busy farming. There's oceans to do here, before the place'll be anything like ship-shape. No woman business mind, or you'll spoil him. You let him alone. Good-bye." And in went his clutch with a bang to the accompaniment of a horrified, "Walter!" from his wife, and what she described as vulgar chuckles from himself.

Mrs. Morley was furious with him. "Why will you spoil everything you do, Walter, just for the sake of coarse joking. Alice will be furious, and now,

even if she employs Chris, she will be prejudiced. If you wanted her to marry Chris, you've said just the thing to prevent it."

"Rubbish, missus. I've a planted the right seed in good soil. I ain't a bettin' man, but I'd wager we'll live to see the harvest all right, if Chris goes to Rookeries. Alice'll maggot wi' that notion every time she sees him."

He was tremendously pleased with his simile. "The right seed in good soil," he repeated aloud with satisfaction. "An' that'll blossom, sure as shootin'. You see if I ain't right. The right seed. . . . Hey! Someone else been doin' it too. Look at that piece o' barley. That's put in proper. Drilled straight in a fine tilth. Haven't it come up nice and suent? By gum! It does a feller good to see a bit o' decent farmin'. Half the men farmin' round here ain't fit to hold land."

And mourning over the modern deterioration in farming methods, Mr. Morley drove triumphantly home, well satisfied with his day's work.

Next day, he drove over to Springhead, repeated the gist of his conversation with the agent, whose letter he showed Chris, and then offered again to finance Springhead, if Chris would stay on. Not one word did he mention concerning the suitable job at Rookeries. Oh no! Chris must make the decision to give up Springhead, unbiassed by the knowledge that there was a possible farming life open to him as bailiff to Miss Alice Buckley.

Once again, Chris refused to let his friend lend him any money. "No, Walter, it can't be done. As you said the other day, I can get out next Michaelmas an honest man, but if I let you put any money into Springhead, I'll be a rogue. I'm ever so grateful to you for getting it fixed so that I can quit next Fall, and for all your many kindnesses, but that's settled. I'll write to Mr. James at once, and then I'll have to see about getting a job. You don't want a rotten bad foreman, I suppose; one who wasn't able to keep his own farm?"

"No!" said Mr. Morley, "I don't. But don't you be so bitter about things. You're young yet. Life ain't over for you, not by a long chalk. I'm sorry in a way that you won't let me help you to stay on, but you're doin' the right thing, and I've found just the job for you. A man's size job, that'll keep you busy, and one you'll be satisfied to do."

Now that Chris had taken the decision to quit, Mr. Morley proceeded to run things. He gave Chris the particulars of the position as bailiff to Miss Alice Buckley, drove him to Rookeries, helped him to fix up the details, and gave both Alice and Chris heaps of good advice. More than this, he made it

his business to meet the agent, and advise that it would be to the mutual advantage of both Major Sykes and Chris, if the latter were to do all the tillages for the incoming tenant.

In this last he was right. Now that Chris had decided to quit, he had sufficient pride in his farming to work hard that summer, so that Springhead should be clean and in good fettle by the coming Fall. Had the incoming tenant brought his own men and horses to do his tillages, Chris would have had little to do between Lady Day and Michaelmas, which would have been not only unprofitable, but very bad for him in many ways.

Mr. Morley was tremendously pleased that he had, as he put it, "worked the oracle" over this matter of the incoming tenant's tillages, and he egged Chris on to do everything well, so that no one would be able to point the finger of scorn at him or at Springhead when he gave up.

The manner in which Chris responded pleased his mentor greatly. "Work!" he said to himself one day, as he was driving away, after a satisfactory joint inspection of Springhead with Chris, "Work! When a man's got a grief or a weakness, you can't beat it. If he's hard at it, he's too interested in his job to think of the one, and too busy to give way to the other. Still, if the silly young fool had stuck to his farm years ago, like he has this season, there 'ud be no question of his having to leave it. But there, we'm all wise after the event."

Chris's handling of Springhead that summer not only pleased Mr. Morley, but also Major Sykes. He inquired of the agent as to why a good young farmer like Chris should be forced to give up. Mr. James suggested that bad times generally, and possibly the lack of sufficient capital to weather them, were the main reasons, but offered to introduce Major Sykes to Mr. Morley, if he wanted further particulars. He managed this one market day in Winchbury, and Mr. Motley's reply to the same question gave the true reason not only for Chris's present unfortunate position, but for countless other farmers, both old and young, being in similar straits.

"Woke up to things about four years too late, that's all. He's a good farmer, and as straight as a line, but those few good years after the war ruined him, like it did a good many more, who ought to ha' known better. They thought 'twas goin' on for ever. Some o' we older folks can remember the nineties, an' we knew we were livin' in a fool's paradise, an' planned accordin'. Chris have learned his lesson about four years too late, but he'll do your job fine, Major. You'm gettin' the cash value o' the mistakes he've made and paid for."

Whatever the reason for his hard work that summer, Chris was satisfied with his labours. Springhead looked well. The weather had been a helping rather than a hindering influence. He had secured a good crop of hay in first class order, and he managed to thresh his harvest direct from the field in good, dry, saleable condition. Major Sykes's root crops were, as Mr. Morley put it, "as clean as a pink". The livestock had done well, and Chris looked fit, while the whisky bogey seemed to be a thing of the past.

His sister Janet had come down post haste when she heard from her brother in the spring that he had given in his notice to quit Springhead. She had begged to be allowed to finance him, so that he would be able to stay on. "Chris, I haven't come down to say, 'I told you so'. It's no good crying over spilt milk. Let me help to clean up the mess."

But Chris had refused on the same grounds that he had turned down Mr. Morley's generous offer, and when Janet came down to see him again just after harvest, she was forced to admit that the right decision had been made. Not only was Chris fit and well, but he was more sure of himself. The decision was taken, and for him the worst was over. He looked older, there was a fleck of grey on his temples, but if he did not look happy, he looked content.

He was content. The fear, the awful fear of going wrong, of being bankrupt, and of disgrace, was gone. He had gone through his figures many times with Mr. Morley, and there was no doubt that he would get out of his farm in a few weeks, an honest man, with a few hundreds over.

Still, when on the evening before the sale of his farming stock he went round Springhead, visiting every field and every animal during his walk, he was filled with regrets. To give up a farm, he thought, was very different from giving up a shop or a works. A farm was more than a business, it was a man's life in itself.

He stood above the Ox Drove, and gazed down over the broad acres of the farm that he loved and that he had lost through his own foolishness. Such a friendly, smiling landscape, sloping gently but surely for almost a mile and a half down to the green of the Ripple Valley.

In the home pasture he could see the squalid, gaunt, unsightly rows and rows of implements, which had been hauled out in readiness for to-morrow's sale. To expose this conglomeration of unshapely things to the light of day seemed horrible, indecent. A curious, unlovely mixture of ancient and modern, he thought. From the latest power-drive binder back to a wooden flail, which had been unearthed from the dim hiding place of the barn

rafters. Old implements, almost out of date now, which he could remember being purchased by his father, when he was a schoolboy. They had been received with suspicion by the older labourers of that date, when they had arrived in all their glory of red and blue paint.

His father! Ah, thank God he wasn't alive to witness his son's failure. Neither was Molly. He felt almost glad that she wasn't alive. Queer that. No, it wasn't, for Molly was safe, and all his memories of her were lovely. All his possessions save his memories of the years he'd had with Molly must be sold to pay his debts. But those beautiful years with his wife were his. They couldn't be sold, and no one could take them away from him. He would be able to keep them, whatever happened. The memory of several years of rapturous happiness with a lovely loving woman, the most valuable thing that any man can own. He'd loved Molly, and he'd loved his father. It was best that the two people he'd loved so much should never know of the Springhead sale. Crowds of other people did know, of course, and they'd come to-morrow to gape and to stare, and some perhaps to buy. Well, he could face them, and go through with it. He would have to, for the thing was out of his power to stop now. By to-morrow night this time the whole sorry business would be over, and Molly and his father would never know.

He wandered on down the hill towards his home, noting with a detached satisfaction that his fields were clean, and that the farm gave every appearance of being well done. He wondered whether he would have a good sale or a poor one. Arable implements wouldn't make much, he thought, as there was less and less ploughland each year. But his haymaking implements ought to sell, and so ought his livestock. He decided to go and inspect his cattle, his for but a few hours longer.

As he walked around the farm buildings on his way to the pastures, his eye caught the auctioneer's bills advertising his sale, which were pasted on the wall of the cart house.

That hurt, badly. No farmer can see those bills pasted on his buildings without regret, even when he is leaving his farm in affluence, and Chris was leaving it in poverty almost. To him, the bills were the public admission of his failure. Ten years ago he would have ridiculed the idea that such a thing could happen to Springhead in his lifetime. Still, it had happened to a good many farmers during the last few years, he thought. Things moved so rapidly nowadays. The old stability of the rural countryside was gone. Life, farming life, wasn't the safe, secure, leisurely thing of prewar days. Old-established farming names were dropping out all over the district.

He passed through the main gates of the steading to discover that the bills on the gateposts were decorated with a diagonal strip of paper, bearing the words, "SALE TO-MORROW", which had been pasted on them by one of the auctioneer's men early that morning. Yet another indignity, he thought. No, not indignity, rather one more public evidence of his shame—SALE TO-MORROW.

SPRINGHEAD, WILTS.

About 8 miles from Winchbury

The whole of the Live and Dead

FARMING STOCK

Comprising the Valuable Non-Pedigree Herd of

35 GRAND YOUNG DAIRY COWS
12 GOOD ROAN STIRK HEIFERS
12 YEARLING DITTO
ROAN STOCK BULL
10 ACTIVE YOUNG CART HORSES
A BAY HUNTER GELDING (Up to weight)
A CHESTNUT HUNTER (Carries a lady)
THE MILK COB, 11 STORE PIGS, POULTRY, Etc.

and the Excellent

IMPLEMENTS

including an INTERNATIONAL TRACTOR, a NEARLY NEW POWER DRIVE BINDER, THRESHING MACHINE by MARSHALL and other tackle incidental to the cultivation of the FARM, which

Messrs. SMITH & SONS

have received instructions from MR. C. LOWE, who is quitting, to SELL BY AUCTION, on the premises, on

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23rd, 1931

Sale to commence at 10-30 o'clock.

Catalogues of the Auctioneers, The Auction Mart, Winchbury

It seemed unjust—not to him, he deserved this open admission of his incompetence—but to Springhead. It appeared to suggest to the world that this farm of Springhead could not keep "Mr. Christopher Lowe, who is quitting", and that the farm itself had failed. SALE TO-MORROW was an insult to Springhead. Land never failed, it was always the fault of the men into

whose keeping its well-being had been placed. He had failed in that trust, he had broken faith with that stable thing, the land. He had forgotten that the land demands service from its dwellers, landlords, farmers, and labourers alike. Men come and go, but the land remains.

Still, it was no use moaning over past mistakes. He had failed, and the sale was to-morrow. He climbed over a pasture gate, and wandered slowly through his herd of dairy cows. They looked well, he thought. Up in good flight. They'd sell pretty well; good cows always did. He crossed through to the next field, where the twelve heifers he had bought from Bob Tucker some eighteen months before were grazing.

As usual, when he thought of them, he was reminded of Molly's illness and death, and for this reason he had never got any joy from their possession. Still, they looked splendid. They'd never looked back for one moment since he'd bought them. No doubt but that they would sell all right. People always went a bit dotty over young roan heifers at any sale.

He remembered his plans to increase his dairy herd. He would never see these heifers with their calves next year. Somebody else would have the pleasure of seeing his plans come to fruition. By jove, though, they'd make some grand cows. Roan was a pretty colour against the green grass. The pick of the bunch was still that strawberry roan. She'd kept her place at the top of the class all right. Ah well, he hoped some neighbour would buy them, not a dealer, and then it was just possible that he would get a chance to see her with her calf. She'd be worth looking at.

He swung round, and walked towards his home by another route, in order to avoid seeing those hateful bills again. The cart-horses were in the home paddock, and the head carter was there wandering round them, wishing them good-bye probably, Chris thought. God! What a painful uprooting a farm sale was. He dodged the carter, opened a wicket-gate into the garden, and crossed the lawn towards the house. Even the lawn seemed different. Oh yes! Of course the garden seats and the summerhouse were in the other pasture, somewhere in the ugly, mournful-looking rows of dead stock.

Everything was gone or soon would be gone—his wife, his home, his stock, his reputation, everything. And it was his own fault. Ah well, to-morrow would see the end of the whole sorry business, and he'd get through to-morrow somehow. Once the sale was over, he wouldn't mind so much. He'd be through the worst of it. There would only be the tenant right valuation, which was to take place two days afterwards, and he did not funk

that so much. It wouldn't be such a public thing, and the valuers would find little to pick holes in, when they walked over his fields.

He went round to the nag stables for just one more look at his hunter and Molly's chestnut. Then, realizing that he would need to be up early next day, he went indoors, ate his supper, and went to bed, where a merciful providence granted him a good night's sleep.

In spite of Chris's disparagement of himself, he had not got an enemy in the district. Everybody liked him, and this was the main thing which made his sale such a success. Farmers are always most prosperous when other farmers are keen buyers of farming stock and produce, of which they buy a far larger quantity than is generally known; and although there was considerable agricultural depression just then, all Chris's neighbours decided to turn up at his sale, and give it a leg up. Certain farming needs had to be purchased, and if they had to buy something, they reckoned that they might as well get it at a neighbour's sale.

The fact that the incoming tenant, Major Sykes, was a stranger to the district, helped Chris greatly. If another neighbour had taken his farm, quite half the potential buyers would have refused to bid against the incoming tenant. But greater help than all this was the presence of Mr. Morley, on business bent. As he put it to his cronies, Jim Marsh and Bob Tucker, "Chris may be a dam' fool, but he's a good feller, an' he've had plenty o' trouble. We'll see to it as nothing ain't given away."

So these three worthies and a few other friends gave everything a good start, and set a high price at the beginning of the sale of each class of stock, from which less enlightened buyers took their standard of values. An example of their genial style was shown when Molly's chestnut hunter was sold. Mr. Morley reckoned that, left unaided, the outside price the horse could be expected to make would be about thirty-five guineas. He rattled the bidding up to forty guineas very quickly; Gray had told him that Major Sykes was interested. Forty-one guineas was bid, and Mr. Morley promptly bid forty-two, to the audible accompaniment of a remark from Jim Marsh, advising him to go easy.

The bidding hesitated, so the auctioneer told Gray to run the chestnut up and down once more. Mr. Smith was enjoying himself. Nothing is more pleasing to an auctioneer than a sale which goes well. Not only does it put him in a good humour, and make his work a pleasure, but it makes him a better auctioneer. When Gray brought the horse back into the ring, Major

Sykes bid a reluctant forty-three guineas, and Jim Marsh whispered to his friend to let very well alone.

But all Mr. Morley's plans had gone too well that day for him to heed these words of caution. Chris was having a dam' good sale, he thought, so, flushed with success, he put in just one more bid, making it forty-four guineas, and there the bidding stopped.

"Dam' it," he muttered to himself. "I've a overshot the mark. Jim was right, and I don't want the blamed 'oss, neither."

The chestnut was run up and down once again, and when it arrived back in the ring the auctioneer appealed to the company for more bids, but got no response.

"Well, you've got him, Walter," said Jim Marsh in a loud voice, "but you've paid for him."

"What of it?" boomed Mr. Morley. "Can't I buy a decent nag for once in a way? A good 'oss is always cheap, and I made up my mind to have this un."

"Going, going," said the auctioneer, raising his hammer. "Ah, forty-five guineas, thank-you, sir. Going at forty-five. Against you there in front. Won't you follow your hand?"

He might as well have appealed to the bricks in the farm buildings for a bid, as to Mr. Morley. That astute gentleman's face was a mask. Horses apparently held no interest for him at all. And while the chestnut was being knocked down to Major Sykes, he busily filled his pipe. Not until he left the horse ring, to get a suitable position at the cattle ring, did he betray his satisfaction at the way things had turned out.

"Dam' near went too far, Jim, that time. Still, we got out of it all right. Now then, about these cows. Where's Bob?"

They sought out Bob Tucker, and went through their catalogues together. Mr. Morley had obtained from Chris's dairyman the inside information as to the merits of the individual cows.

"Number one, two, four, five, seven, eight, and ten are O.K.," he informed his companions, who diligently marked their catalogues accordingly. "We'll see that they make all they'm worth, an' if we get left with one or two, it don't matter. We can all do with a good cow, an' that'll give the dairy a good start."

“What about the stirk heifers, Walter?” asked Jim. “You goin’ to buy ’em? You weaned ’em, you know.”

“No!” replied Mr. Morley. “I don’t want ’em. But there’s no call to worry about them. They’ll sell all right. Roans always do. I’ve seen more foolery over coloury young stock than over horse racin’. Heaps o’ folk’ll have a shot at that bunch. Why even old Bob here’ll open his heart there, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“True enough,” said Jim, “but I shall go and have a look at ’em. I’ve just got time before the cows start.”

He wandered off on his own, and found Frank Parsons leaning over the gate, studying the stirk heifers.

“Pretty lot, ain’t they, Frank?” said Jim, joining his friend. “Just about your handwritin’. Goin’ to have a dip at ’em?”

“Yes!” said Frank, “I shall ha’ they.”

“What d’ye value ’em at? That colour’ll make ’em a bit tasty, I reckon.”

“I dunno,” said Frank, “but I shall ha’ they.”

“But they might go wild, Frank. There’s a big crowd here, an’ you know how folks’ll bid quite daft for roans. If you’m goin’ to sell ’em wi’ their calves next Fall, you mustn’t give more than nineteen for ’em, or twenty at the outside. You’ve got a year’s keep, an’ the risk of calvin’ ’em down.”

“Well, Jim. I do want just such a bunch, an’ what’s the good o’ trapesin’ all up an’ down the country to find ’em? I’ve got some work to do. Besides, if I do buy ’em a bit dear, t’ull do Chris a bit o’ good. But look here, don’t you clever devils run me for fun, mind. I don’t stand for that.”

Jim returned to his cronies, and reported that the fate of the stirk heifers could be safely left to the crowd and Frank Parsons. “We needn’t bother about them at all. Frank have fallen in love wi’ ’em. He’s fair set on ’em, an’ you know what he is.”

“I do,” chuckled Mr. Morley. “I’ll lay anyone a quid that they heifers go to Woodend. Good job, too, we don’t want to maggot wi’ everything. We’ll see these cows on the right road, an’ call it a day.”

Everything went according to plan. Mr. Morley and his friends each bought one or two good fall calving cows in the early part of the catalogue, and this send off caused the herd to sell well, right through. As usual, when the later calving cows came to be sold, the interest lessened, also the price

per head. Most of the company were willing to pay for winter milk, but spring calving cattle, which would not produce enough to pay for their winter's keep, were a different proposition.

The milking herd finished, the twelve stirk heifers were hustled into the ring, which brought about a general craning of necks to admire them, and a renewal of keen buying interest. Quite a number of people could do with such a sorty, coloury bunch of cattle, and the bidding was spirited up to twenty pounds per head, Major Sykes's bid, where it paused for a moment or two. Then Frank Parsons came into the picture.

He was seated, in full view of everybody, on a wagon, which had been drawn round to the side of the ring, as a sort of grand stand. He bid twenty pounds five shillings, and when challenged by the Major and one other buyer, he stolidly carried on the bidding in five shilling stages to twenty-one pounds ten shillings. There was no finesse about Frank's method. Woodend needed the heifers, and Frank had the money to satisfy the needs of his mistress.

Major Sykes, by this time, had discovered that the Springhead sale was a far more subtle business than running the regimental sports, and, much as he wanted the roan heifers, he felt that the rather bovine, rubicund yokel up in the wagon was yet another plant of the clever brigade, who had been running him all day. He thought that the last bidder could not possibly have the money to pay for twelve heifers at twenty-one pounds ten, or the sense to value them. Well, they'd run him a bit too far this time, he thought, and he decided to let them stand up to their last bid. Accordingly the stirks were knocked down to Frank, who was well satisfied with his deal. It was a good price for them, but if he had been pushed, he would have been willing to pay a bit more.

A few more lots of livestock, the twelve yearlings, the pigs and the poultry, brought the sale to an end, and Chris retired from the field to the farmhouse with the auctioneer and one or two friends, where during tea he was congratulated by his guests on an excellent sale.

The next day he was busy seeing to the delivery of the various lots to their purchasers, and on the day following the valuation took place. As he had expected, this business went off without a dispute of any kind, and both Major Sykes's valuer and his own complimented him on the clean state of his farm. The fact that there was no hitch in the valuation brought about an early settlement, and Chris stayed on in the farmhouse for a week or two until this took place. When the cheques for the proceeds of the sale and the

valuation arrived, he sat down and paid off all his debts and his overdraft at the bank, which left him with some two hundred pounds in hand.

According to his agreement he had the right to half the farmhouse until the following March 25th, but in view of the fair and generous treatment he had received from Major Sykes throughout the whole business, he waived this right, and stayed at Fernditch with Mr. Morley for a week or two, until his furniture was sold. This brought him another six hundred pounds, so that he had a total of eight hundred pounds only to his credit, when all was settled up. And at the same date ten years before in 1921, he could have sold out easily for eight thousand.

Mr. Morley did not believe in people having nothing to do. He advised Chris to put his money into War Loan, and when this was done, he drove him over to Rookeries to take up his new duties.

Chapter 16

The day following the Springhead sale, Frank Parsons journeyed there in order to bring home his twelve heifers. Woodend was about five miles from Springhead, but the main road to it could be reached by a short cut over the downs in about a mile, and although Frank did not keep a car, he recognized that motor transport had its points, and on this occasion he decided to make use of the local bus service. His staff was small, and had he driven to Springhead, it would have meant that three hands would have been taken away from the farm; two to drive the cattle home, and one to bring back the horse and trap.

He was up betimes that morning, and after seeing that all was in order, he went to his sheepfold to help his shepherd get forward with the day's work. About nine-thirty, he left the shepherd's father, a crabbed old-age pensioner of seventy-nine, in charge of the flock, and accompanied by his shepherd and his dog, he set off down the hill to the main road, which ran along the valley to Springhead.

Their conversation during their walk was mainly technical. In the beginning they talked of their own sheep and the prospects of the following winter's keep, but as they left the downs, and passed through the fields of their neighbours they criticized mercilessly. Ten o'clock found them seated by the roadside waiting for a bus, when who should come along but Mr. Morley in his car.

He was taking some of his men to Springhead to fetch back the cows he had purchased there. He pulled up, and after due salutations, told Frank that he could give them a lift to Springhead. In addition to these passengers the car contained Bill Gurd, seated beside Mr. Morley, and a lad and a dog on the back seat.

"We best wait fur a bus, maister," said Frank's shepherd. "I 'low thease dogs'll fight."

In reality, he was afraid of cars. They went too fast for him, and having observed Mr. Morley's hectic methods of driving on several previous occasions, he considered that he would be much safer in the larger vehicle.

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Morley. "We'll fix that."

They did. Bill Gurd took his dog on his lap, and Frank, his shepherd, and their dog, got into the back with the lad. There the shepherd sat bolt upright in the middle of the seat, clasping his own dog firmly to his bosom, and hoping for the best. With its customary disgraceful hiccup Mr. Morley's long-suffering Morris-Oxford got under way, and in due course deposited its load safely at Springhead.

There Frank wasted no time. A short greeting to Chris, and then he and the shepherd went to the pasture nearby to get the heifers. They had a little difficulty in getting the cattle to leave the farm buildings, but there was no lack of helpers, and in a few minutes Frank was leading the way up the Springhead farm road, and the shepherd and the dog were bringing up the rear.

The heifers had travelled this part of their journey before in going up to and back from their winter quarters at the field buildings, so they settled down to a steady gait, and gave little trouble. The dog gave far more. He had been having a great time while the heifers were dodging round and round the home buildings, and he wanted to continue the fun. These large animals were more sport than sheep, he decided. His master's remarks, commanding him to restrain his exuberance, would not have given anyone the impression that he loved his dog, which he did, passionately. When the dog had been kicked by a horse some months before, his master had rubbed the injured hind leg and back muscles every evening for twenty minutes with the skill and patience of a trained masseur, until a perfect cure had been obtained.

"Coom in, 'ull 'ee, you limb o' Satan," he bellowed, shaking his stick at the dog, as he danced round the heifers. "Coom in, else I'll cut thee liver out. You usbird, you. Where's thee manners? Coom in, 'ull 'ee."

The dog retired about five yards behind him, and grinned at his irate master, who whacked his stick on the ground in a great show of temper. "Artful sod, thee bist. I'll larn 'ee. Thee bist jist mischiefin', zno. Thee come near I, and thee't get warmed smartish, I 'low." But it was chiefly show, for presently the old face wrinkled into a grin, and with, "Coom on, now. Quit yer jokin'. Thee't old enough to know better," the shepherd trudged on after the cattle. The dog decided that this funny, lovable old man really meant that he must behave, and in a few moments he was drooping docilely along at the heels of his master.

At the Springhead field buildings the cattle were halted for a few minutes to drink from the pond there, and then the procession wended its way along a grassy track until it reached the broad ride, which ran right

through Friar's wood from end to end for a distance of seven miles. After four miles of this, Woodend was reached, and the heifers were turned into a pasture near the farm, where there was a nice bite of fall keep, which Frank had been saving for this purpose.

The men shut the pasture gate, and stood leaning on it for a few minutes, watching the cattle.

"The end o' September, shepherd. That'll do 'em till they'll ha' to go to strawyard, won't it?"

"Ay," said the shepherd. "That'll fit 'em out a main while, specially if you do gie 'em a bit o' dry grub in mornin', when the frost do come."

" 'Tidn' a bad lot, shep. What d'ye think of 'em?"

"Gummy heifers," was the answer; but the adjective had nothing to do with any adhesive quality in the cattle; its meaning in this instance was that the cattle showed a wealth of promise to the expert's eye. "Gummy heifers. Got good barrels on 'em, and they be the right colour. Now, you wun't want I no more, zo I'll git back to vold, an' zee 'ow feyther 'ave a managed."

The shepherd considered that he had wasted enough of his valuable time on unimportant animals like heifers, and itched to get back to the love of his life, his sheep.

The first few weeks of the heifers' life at Woodend were uneventful. The weather continued open and they required no other food than the pasture grass. Frank inspected them at least twice daily, but beyond that they needed no attention. During October he was busy getting up his mangolds, and sowing his winter wheat, but when, in early November, frost set in, he fed the heifers a little hay each morning, in order, as he put it, "to hold them together".

The first week in December they were driven into a strawyard, and here they settled down, on a diet of oat straw and mangolds, to spend the winter in the same fashion, for all they knew, as they had passed the previous winter at Springhead. But the ordering of their lives was not in their hands. Their owner was to decide their fate, even to the most interesting and intimate happenings, and he had made up his mind, not only that these heifers should have calves in the future, but that these calves must be born in early October the following year.

The reason for this date being chosen was that the cattle should start their milk-producing career at the beginning of the winter, when milk was at its highest price, which meant that the beasts would make the highest

possible price, when offered for sale to farmers who had large, winter milk contracts to fulfil. To carry out this plan, it was necessary for Frank to buy a bull to mate with the heifers, so he went to a bull sale in Winchbury about a fortnight before Christmas.

For this purpose there was no need to buy a high-priced bull. A heifer's first calf was rarely weaned, its being assumed that such calves do not make such fine beasts in after life, as do calves from older cows. The heifers and calves, when sold, would not make any more money if the calves were sired by a pedigree bull than by a scrub animal. Any sort of bull would do provided he got the heifers in calf. A good young pedigree bull of the fashionable roan shade would cost about twenty-four guineas, while a rough scrub one, just as serviceable for Frank's purpose as the pedigree, would cost about ten pounds less.

But this bull was for Woodend, so an indifferent animal was out of the question; nothing could be too good for Woodend. Besides, these heifers were better than common, and it would be a sin and shame, Frank thought, to mate them with any animal but a well-grown roan bull to match them. And the extra cost would not be all lost. In all probability the bull would have served Frank's purpose by the following March, and, if a good one, he would find a ready purchaser in some neighbour, as the stock bull for a large dairy herd. Mr. Morley usually weaned a bunch of calves each season, and on several occasions he had purchased a bull from Frank in the spring.

This active gentleman was also going to the bull sale. Not that he wanted a bull, or was selling a bull, but he had decided to attend the sale on the principle that you never knew what might happen or what chance you might have missed by not being there. Also he did not consider that any important agricultural function in the district would be run properly without his presence and assistance. It would be another opportunity to meet people, to talk to one and another, to give and receive advice, and generally to keep oneself up-to-date with the affairs of the neighbourhood.

There was a general opinion amongst townsmen that farmers, as a class, wasted far too much time in attending fairs and markets, where they had no definite business to do; but Mr. Morley considered that this was time well spent. He had explained this carefully to his young hopeful, James, on many occasions when he had taken the boy with him to market.

"When you go to market, you need to be a good judge o' stock, or of anything else you want to buy or sell, but what's far more important is to be a good judge of your fellow men." There was no doubt that if continued

practice could make anyone proficient in this last qualification, Mr. Morley was a master craftsman.

On this occasion he had arranged to pick up Frank at the top end of Fernditch at twelve-thirty, and drive him to Winchbury, where the bull sale was timed to start an hour later. Punctual to the minute they met as arranged, and when they got to the bottom of the hill, they found Bill Gurd sitting on the bank by the side of the main road, with a bull-leading stick across his knees. "We ain't busy, so Bill's comin'. He's a knowledgeable chap wi' bulls, and if so be as you do buy one, he can lead him home," said Mr. Morley, as he pulled up for a moment to pick up his man, and shortly afterwards the three experts were in the sale yard.

They examined the animals offered for sale very critically. Roan colour was one good point. A masculine head was another. "I do hate cow-headed bulls. Don't seem natural," said Mr. Morley. A bull from a milking strain rather than from a beef strain was preferred, and a general appearance of health and fitness was essential. "Thick through the heart, a good colour, and a good toucher. Them's the main things you got to watch," said Mr. Morley, who, as usual, took charge of affairs. Whether a bull was a "good toucher" or not was tested by taking a handful of loose skin on the ribs of the animal, and finding out whether it would pull away from the ribs easily and elastically, and this rite was performed solemnly by all three judges on several animals.

In the catalogue, alliteration seemed to have had a great influence in the choosing of the pedigree bulls' names, and Frank finally settled on Dashwood Dalrymple the seventh, lot six, or Bowercombe Bashful the ninth, lot twenty-three. Mr. Morley snorted in disgust at the latter name. "Bashful! Good Lord! What a name to give a bull!" In each case the herdsman in charge proffered a printed pedigree for examination, but Mr. Morley waved these away contemptuously. He preferred his own judgment to the printed word, and so did his companions. He prodded and pinched both Dalrymple and Bashful. He got Bill Gurd to grasp their nose rings, and open their mouths, so that he could judge their age by their teeth. He grabbed handfuls of skin and flesh on both sides of each animal with a large dexterous hand, and he laid his stick, without which he never went outside his home, along their backs, to prove that his eye was not in fault in judging that they possessed the necessary level backbones. "A chink-backed bull ain't worth findin',"—and his final judgment was that, if anything, Bowercombe Bashful was the better animal.

It was obvious to anyone that Mr. Morley was interested in bulls that afternoon, and that he was probably going to buy one. Consequently, several other buyers made it their business to keep an eye on his movements during the coming sale; they knew that this astute gentleman was usually worth watching. Nobody took any notice of Frank, who, when the sale started, retired to a remote corner outside the ring far away from Mr. Morley, who took up a prominent position inside the ring beneath the auctioneer's box.

He bid for Dashwood Dalrymple up to twenty-three guineas, and shook his head mournfully when someone else made it twenty-four, at which price the animal was knocked down. He bid for one or two animals which followed, but was very careful to buy nothing. Lot twenty-three, Bowercombe Bashful was started at sixteen guineas, and the bidding ran quickly up to twenty one and a half. There it hesitated, whereupon Mr. Morley walked out into the middle of the ring, and scanned the animal carefully with a searching eye. Then, he pursed his lips, shrugged his shoulders as though he had discovered some serious hidden fault in the beast, and solemnly retired to his place under the box. From his horrified expression it would seem that the Bashful one was suffering from all the diseases in the veterinary dictionary.

Immediately, other buyers walked out, and searched diligently for whatever it was that had so shocked Mr. Morley. They could find nothing wrong, but possibly they wondered. The auctioneer obtained one further bid of twenty-two guineas from the far corner outside the ring, but could get no further, and the bull was knocked down to Frank Parsons. It was scarcely possible that Mr. Morley's antics had caused any other buyer to stop bidding —the majority of the company present had cut their eye teeth some years before—but he thought that he had perhaps influenced them, and felt very pleased with himself in consequence, which was the main thing.

Five minutes later Bowercombe Bashful set out for Fernditch in the custody of Bill Gurd, and an hour later Mr. Morley and Frank overtook them about a mile from home.

After tea Frank wanted to lead his bull home, but Mr. Morley put his foot down.

"That's just one fool thing that you ain't goin' to do, Frank. Damme, 'tis dark. You do never know wi' a bull. Bill have put him up safe for the night, an' he'll bring him up to the entrance o' the wood an' meet you there ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

“You needn’t bother Bill. That bull’ll walk along all right. Bulls are always quiet with me.”

“Don’t you worry about botherin’ Bill. He’s paid to bother. I ain’t, an’ I’d bother a heap if you set off wi’ that bull to-night. Sit still, fill your pipe, an’ quit worryin’. I’ll drive’ee back directly.”

As usual, Mr. Morley had his way, and the following morning Frank took over the custody of Bowercombe Bashful from Bill Gurd, to whom he presented five shillings as payment for his expert assistance. He took the bull home, and shut him up in a loose box where the animal resided in solitary state for some ten days or so.

Bowercombe Bashful was not exactly pleased with things during the first few days of his stay at Woodend. His life had been a series of indignities for some little time. A hole had been punched in the cartilage between his nostrils some few weeks prior to the bull sale in Winchbury, and a copper ring had hung therein ever since. The pain caused thereby had not been of long duration, and the wound had soon healed up so that the ring gave him no discomfort, but every time his agile tongue curled up into a nostril, he was reminded of those hideous few moments of pain and terror while the ring was inserted.

On the morning of the sale he had been led ignominiously, by means of this hated ring, to a motor lorry, and by dint of much pulling on his tender nose and vigorous prodding in his rear, he had been forced to scramble up a sloping platform into the vehicle, where he had been tied so securely that he had been unable to move at all. A few minutes later one of his fellows had been forced up beside him, and then followed a hideous, swaying journey into Winchbury, where they had been disembarked and tied up with chains around their necks.

Next he had experienced the pinchings and proddings of Mr. Morley and various other experts. Then came his actual sale by auction, during which he had been led abjectly round and round, while crowds of curious humans stared and talked. The humiliating walk with Bill Gurd to Fernditch followed, the longest walk he had ever taken. Once or twice he had tried to stop and to turn round, but always the man at his side forced him onwards, and kept his head straight by means of a stick attached to the ring in his nose.

They didn’t play fair, these humans. They didn’t give him a decent chance. It was outrageous that a bull of his magnificence should be so shamefully treated. If only that human being had got in front of his massive

head! Just once, so that he could have got a good look at him. Then he would have shown who was the master.

But the opportunity to use his head and shoulders had never come, and he had spent the night chained up at Fernditch in a thoroughly bad temper. The walk to Woodend next morning had been just as tiring and disappointing. Apparently all these humans knew better than to get in front of him. 'Twas as though they were afraid of him and realized their comparative weakness. He rumbled round and round the loose box, trumpeting occasionally in annoyance and boredom.

There was no doubt that he was bored. Granted he had been well fed, since he arrived at Woodend, but that was all. Nothing else had happened. Surely there was something more to life, for a fit young bull, than to wander alone round and round this small room. His splendid body must be needed for something better than this. Wait till that human came in next time with his food. If he got a chance, he'd show him. He rammed his sullen head against the door, and blared defiantly in anticipation.

But would he attack this man, even if opportunity arose? After all, there had been no cruelty and no pain since he had been in this man's charge. His voice was sort of soothing, somehow, and the way he scratched a fellow's forehead was rather delightful. Besides this man did not seem to be afraid, he seemed so unconcerned and so sure of himself when he came to visit the loose-box. Were these humans stronger than they looked? He wondered. Still, next time the man came, perhaps. . . .

On Christmas morning Frank was up early. He had been invited to spend the day at Fernditch, and he made the rounds of Woodend before breakfast. After his meal he ruminated for a while over a pipe. He had decided to turn out Bowercombe Bashful with the twelve heifers that morning before he left. "Rummy," he said to himself, "how we decide these things for animals, and can't decide 'em for ourselves. Last year this time, I reckoned I'd ha' been married this Christmas myself. Still, 'twouldn't ha' done. I couldn't leave Woodend, and Alice felt the same about Rookeries." Still, it would be nice to spend Christmas in one's own home, instead of being invited out as a lone bachelor, he thought. What was it his uncle had said to him? There's heaps o' women in the world, but only one Woodend Farm.

Of course, that was right enough. No doubt about that. Well, if he wanted a wife, he could surely get one from those heaps of women. But did he want one? Sometimes he thought that he did, and sometimes that he didn't. He was over forty. Too old to change his ways. It was best as it was.

That side of life would have to pass him by. Yes, that was the way of it. He'd quit worrying about it. After all, life wasn't so bad. He had Woodend, and he could still farm. By gum, yes, and if he was going to farm, he'd better turn out Bowercombe Bashful. Christmas Day was the correct date for this momentous occasion according to his plans. Just because he had decided that a married fife was not for him was no reason for postponing the mating of his animals in due season.

What a game farming was! Always planning ahead in faith for the future. Here he was planning part of the milk supply for next winter. 1931's winter milk was decided by the number of cows that were mated successfully between Christmas 1930 and Lady Day. Other farmers had planned 1933's supply now, by weaning heifer calves during the past few months of 1930. And most townspeople thought of farming as a haphazard occupation. Poor fools! They didn't know the first thing about it. Ah well, he'd best get on with it.

He left the house, went over to the buildings, and opened the top half-door of Bowercombe Bashful's box. The bull blinked at him sullenly. Frank grinned at him, opened the lower door, and with a "Come on, little feller," slipped his forefinger through the bull's nose ring before that surprised animal had made up his mind whether to attack this friendly human or not.

Unconcernedly Frank led the bull outside, and round the buildings towards the strawyard. So casual was he that he walked in front of the bull, feeling the animal's cold wet nose against his knuckles at every step. The bull forgot his decision to attack the man at this new experience. It was pleasant to get out into the sunlight and fresh air once more. He looked about him, his tongue licked both sides of Frank's hand repeatedly, he heard a heifer moo, and blared his response.

When they arrived at the strawyard they found the shepherd's old father looking over the gate at the heifers. Knowing what his master intended, he opened the gate, and with a slap on the rump, Bowercombe Bashful was ushered into his harem.

The bull's name had amused the ancient greatly.

"Bashful!" he chuckled, as Frank and he leaned on the gate for a few moments to watch the cattle. "Wot a name to gi'e a bull. Wot good's 'ee gwaine to be, if 'ee's bashful along o' that lot? They'll larn un, I 'low."

Frank nodded. The heifers were taking stock of the newcomer. Bulls were a new thing in their lives. This animal appeared to be just another

bullock, and as a stranger must be put in his place. They hustled the bashful one round the yard, and finally the strawberry roan heifer locked horns with him, and a grand shoving match took place.

"Tha's 'ow they do allus begin," remarked the old man. "Jist like wimmenvolk. Vight 'ee at vust, an' then, Lor' bless 'ee, they be all awver 'ee. Ho! Ho! Ho! Bashful be as bashful does. Thiccy strawberry'll gi'e un bashful. Look at 'er. But there, I 'low as 'ow she'll 'appen it avore night, vor 'ee's a tidy little chap. Put together right. 'Ee'll best 'er. I 'low I'll jist watch 'ow things goes wi' 'em for a bit, as 'tis a vine marnin'."

The old man had bred up a family of ten children, and his personal memories of married life made the cattle far more interesting to him than to Frank that morning, so, leaving his senior to his recollections of his own prolific youth, Frank got his horse and trap and drove off to Fernditch.

The following day he was informed by this elderly student of bovine emotions that his prophecy as to the fate of the strawberry roan heifer had been fulfilled, and that Bowercombe Bashful had proved that his second name was a scandalous libel.

Chapter 17

The heifers and the bull lived together in the strawyard during the remainder of the winter. In early April they were turned out to grass for the third time in their lives, and their husband departed from Woodend to take up his official position as head of Mr. Morley's large dairy herd. His new owner paid Frank the same price as had been paid for the bull in December, so that the mating of his twelve heifers had cost him only the bull's strawyard keep for a few months, a scarcely noticeable expense.

The summer of 1931 was a depressing period; it rained almost continuously until October. However, in spite of the bad grazing conditions, the heifers throve amazingly, and, no matter how busy he might be, Frank found time to wander lovingly round them at least once daily. They were all unmistakably in calf, and the heavier the heifers became, the more Frank admired them. In this respect, he thought, cattle were different from human beings. Women in like condition rarely looked pleasing to the eye, but good roan in-calf heifers were lovely; the hint of a future wealth of production became more definite each succeeding week, and this particular bunch looked splendid.

Despite the wet season, Frank, Mr. Morley, and other expert farmers of similar thrusting dispositions, managed to make at least two-thirds of their hay crop in good condition. Frank achieved this by means of a lifelong knowledge of the weather and the job in hand, backed up by intense personal toil for long hours on the occasional fine days. Mr. Morley succeeded by utilizing similar knowledge, helped by his inherent gambler's propensity for taking chances and cutting obvious losses, a virtue which no farmer could do without, he said, "in this dam'bitch of a climate". In addition, he carried his "worritting" to the *n*th degree of intensity that haymaking, thereby ensuring that everyone under his control worked almost as hard as Frank did.

Everybody at Fernditch longed for the finish of haymaking that season, for Mr. Morley was a difficult being for anyone to live with or to work for during that harassing period. He drove his wife, his family, his staff, his horses, his implements, and himself to the limit of their endurance and beyond. During the rare gleams of sunshine he careered madly in his car from field to field, over bumps and hollows, sometimes even through ditches, like a man possessed. Generally the weather was dull and drizzly in

the mornings, and did not clear up until about tea time. About four o'clock Mr. Morley would drive out to the field for the umpteenth time, and discover that the hay was almost dry enough to pick up. Then his car would fly madly back across the field to the farm buildings, while its owner-driver bellowed orders to everybody en route.

"Jist when we be got 'ome, zno, 'ee do come a bawlin' fur us to goo carryin', an' then when we be jist got out there, down do come the rain. 'Ee cain't zim to bide quiet fur a minnit. Still, 'ee done well last Thursday," was the comment of one of the older labourers.

The triumph thus referred to took place one evening after a dull, damp forenoon. At three o'clock Mr. Morley discovered to his surprise that he had some forty acres of good hay fit enough to chance. His elevators were set in the middle of another field of hay nearly a mile away that had been practically spoilt by the rain. Most men would have decided that it was not worth while to leave the indifferent hay and shift all the tackle so late in the day, and they would probably have been quite content to have picked up some of the poorer quality in the evening. But not Mr. Morley. He hated messing about with spoilt hay. "Goin' to be a fine evenin'," he muttered to himself, glancing anxiously at the heavens. "Well, if 'tis, an' I don't get some good hay, then dog bite me." He got into his car, returned to the farm, and there things happened. The weather had deposed him from the management of his affairs for far too long a time. Now he was in the saddle again, busy, happy, and running things.

He rang up several of his neighbours, and managed to hire from a man who had decided not to carry any hay that day, three two-horse hay-sweeps in addition to his own tackle, which consisted of a pair of two-horse sweeps and his latest pet, a small sweep attached to the dumb irons of an old Buick motor car. Having sent a motor lorry off to fetch these extra implements, he dashed off to Winchbury, and returned in a short time with six of that town's unemployed, whom he had coaxed or bullied into accompanying him.

By four-thirty his hurried plans started to bear fruit. Two elevators were set in the middle of the field, one on each side of a straw bedding for an enormous hay stack. His own sweeps were hard at work, and the borrowed ones were being unloaded from the lorry. By five o'clock the carrying operations were in full blast. The unemployed were unemployed no longer. They had been mixed judiciously with the regular hands, and felt that they had been suddenly caught up in a relentless machine from which there was no escape.

This wasn't work, they thought, this was slave-driving. They wouldn't go on. After all, nobody could make them. It was after five o'clock. A beneficent government had ruled that after five o'clock the unemployed were sacred from the demands of capitalistic business, except at their own inclination. But the old farm labourers carried on placidly as if this were the ordinary routine of things. The horse sweeps came in with steady regularity, and Bill Gurd in that cursed motor car dodged in with a sweepful to either elevator, whenever there seemed a chance of a momentary breather.

And in addition, there was that red-faced, bursting, bull-necked dynamo of a man in his car, who dashed about from one point of activity to another. With most employers, they were the masters of their fate, but, with this sire of perpetual motion, they hesitated to take the risk of ceasing work and thus thwarting his avowed purpose that evening.

There seemed to be no rules and regulations about this haymaking business. No trade-union rules anyway. The only rules seemed to be those made by this fiend of a farmer, and if they disobeyed them, who knew what he might do? They felt that in his frenzy he would drive his car like a juggernaut over anything, or anybody, who came between him and his hay. It was all wrong for an employer to have so much power over the men he paid. It ought to be stopped. There ought to be a law against it. They were great on law, and knew the law of the dole backwards. But every time they looked at Mr. Morley their courage weakened. He seemed to be above all law that evening. They toiled.

"By God!" said one of them, after watching Mr. Morley's activities for a moment. "He'm a devil, an' a red-faced b—— at that. I 'ouldn' work fer 'ee reglar, no, not fer five poun' a week."

"Well, thee attn't likely to git the chance. 'Ee'm a bit pertickler. But 'ee bain't zo bad, zno, when you do git used to un. 'Ee do allus git into a tear at 'aymakin' an' 'arves', but 'ee cain't 'elp it, an' 'ee do farm. We shall git thease vield this evenin', an' I 'low we be nigh the only lot as 'ull git any hay to-day," replied one of the regular hands, who, like all farm labourers, looked on all dole drawers with scorn.

The weather remained fine until nine o'clock, when down came the rain once more, but by that time the forty acres of hay was safe in an immense stack, and Mr. Morley's grim, red countenance relaxed into a grin of satisfaction. He liked running things. Not one mote of hay had he touched during the whole proceeding, but his car had kept up an almost ceaseless sentinel duty between the stack, the sweeps, and the horse-rakes, varied by

occasional journeys back to the farmhouse to see that its inmates were carrying out his orders satisfactorily.

Between nine and ten, Mr. Morley fed the whole gang in the big barn, and allowed enough beer to make the unemployed forget their blistered hands, and agree that there were worse employers in the country when he drove them back to Winchbury, about ten-thirty.

Haymaking finished, still it rained. The corn harvest was carried out under similarly depressing conditions. A large proportion of the grain crops were laid and twisted by the rain, and when, after much trouble and expense, they were cut and stooked, the bad weather continued. In addition the price again slumped badly.

Late in September, Mr. Morley finished his harvest, and, being thoroughly sick and tired of the whole sorry business, the following evening he drove to Woodend to find out how Frank had fared. Possibly he had not yet finished and, if so, the loan of some of his friend's equipment might be a godsend. But this proved to be unnecessary. He found that Frank had also made the best of a bad job, and after a discussion of the season's trials the conversation turned to plans for the future.

"I tell 'ee what 'tis, Frank," said Mr. Morley, "we'll ha' to quit this grain job, an' grass it down. Why, wheat's down below thirty bob. Less than 'fore the War. 'Tis chuckin' money down the drain to grow it."

Frank said something to the effect that he would not care for mere grass farming, and that every season was not as bad as the current one.

"No, but we don't get one good grain year in five. You know Dibben over at Coombe Wallop. Well, he's a baker as well as a farmer. Got the village stores. He told me that he was all grass now. I chaffed him that, bein' a baker, he ought to know better, an' that he ought to grow wheat, but I tell 'ee, he opened my eyes."

"What did he say?" asked Frank.

"Told me English wheat wasn't any good for bread-making most seasons. Said you couldn't depend on it like foreign, because it varies so. 1921 wheat, yes; 1929 wheat, yes; but what about this year's, he asked me? Said he couldn't afford to risk his little connection by using flour from such poor quality, damp stuff, as most of it'll be."

"He's right, too, Frank," Mr. Morley went on. "Sensible, hard workin' little chap. Said our job was to produce the perishable things, where we could beat the imported stuff for quality. Apparently everybody's so well off

now, that they all want the best. Thank God, I ain't too old to learn from anybody. He've grassed down that little farm, and got quite a tidy little milk round belongin' to it now. He's makin' money, an' we'm losin' it, an' that sort o' thing don't suit Walter Morley, an' tain't goin' to go on much longer." He expounded this new farming policy at length for some time, and then Frank suggested, that as the rain had stopped for a while, his friend might like to look at the in-calf heifers. "You weaned 'em, Walter. Come an' see 'em. They haven't done too badly."

They walked out to a pasture, and inspected the cattle. Mr. Morley was impressed. "By gum, Frank! They'm toppers. I don't know when I've seen a better bunch. Damme, an' I weaned 'em. Bill Gurd told me I was a fool when I sold 'em, an' I was. Milk's down a bit for next season, but you'll do all right out o' these, Frank."

They watched the cattle in silence for a few minutes. Good in-calf heifers, close to calving, were satisfying things to look at for any farmer. There was a definite promise of almost immediate fulfilment. The previous three years' work was soon to yield its return; in one case, very soon. Mr. Morley spotted this.

"Close to their work, Frank, some of 'em. That strawberry roan'll calve in less than a week, I reckon. Ain't that a lovely heifer, an' ain't she makin' a bag? Lord! That's the calf I bought in auction. Dibben bred her." He chuckled at the remembrance of the calf's journey home to Fernditch in his car, and after complimenting his friend once again on the quality of the heifers, Mr. Morley walked on with Frank to inspect the other departments of Woodend.

The strawberry roan was the first of the heifers to calve, as Mr. Morley had predicted. Frank knew that she was due first, as he remembered the shepherd's father's remark that she had " 'appened it" on the Christmas Day, when the bull had been turned out. Therefore, according to nature's ruling, she should calve about October 1st.

When that day arrived he made it his business to visit the heifers once every two hours, but at ten o'clock in the evening the strawberry roan was still grazing peacefully with her companions. Consequently, Frank went to bed, worrying. He wished that her calf could have been born in daylight, so that, if necessary, he could have given the mother every attention. He felt sure that the event would take place in a few hours, and made up his mind to get up as soon as it was light, and see that everything was all right.

Next morning at five-thirty, he went outside into a misty, wet world. Through the misty veil which shrouded everything he squelched across the pasture in his rubber boots. He found eleven heifers lying down in a bunch, but the strawberry roan was missing. “Drat the mist,” he muttered. “Now where’ll she be got to?”

He left the other cattle, and plodded along the hedgerow, making a circuit of the field. Presently the dull shape of the missing heifer loomed through the mist. He walked towards her until he got near enough to see the calf, which was lying in the grass at her feet. “Then that’s all right,” he said to himself, and walked onwards to make a closer inspection, thinking how wonderful it was to find two animals, where he had left but one only a few hours before.

But the mother had other views. Whilst this human being who was coming towards her seemed vaguely familiar, there was this curious, squirming, little replica of herself to be considered. After several sharp spasms of pain several hours ago, this strange small animal had appeared. Strange it might be, but it was hers. Alone she had left her companions, and unaided she had brought this weak little animal into the world, and it was now under her care. The whole of this novel business had excited her, and until she felt more settled, and more accustomed to this small companion, who had stood up and sucked her teats some time ago, she would brook no interference.

Frank was so used to handling cattle of all kinds, that he walked towards her unconcernedly, and it was lucky that they were near the hedge, for the strawberry roan ordered him out of his own field in no uncertain fashion. Realizing that while to argue with a man or a bull was moderately safe, the man who argues with a woman or with a cow with a calf is a fool, he obeyed orders, and retreated to the other side of the hedge, from where he surveyed the animals.

“Like that, is it?” he said to himself. “Ah well, I don’t blame her. We’ll get her in after breakfast, when she’ve settled down.”

“Yes, you’re the boss, my lady, all right,” he said aloud to the heifer, who stood over her calf and glared at him.

Presently the calf struggled awkwardly to its feet, and in a few moments its mother walked slowly away through the mist, with her baby tottering behind her on its four straddling, wobbly legs. “An’ that’s all right,” said Frank, as he returned to the farm, “but we’d best be a bit careful with her. She’s a bit of a madam.”

However, Frank was unjust in his opinion of the heifer, for when the sun had dispersed the mist, and she had become more accustomed to her calf, she proved to be a very quiet beast. A madam in appearance, certainly, but in other ways, she was docility itself. With the help of a man Frank got her into the buildings, tied her up, milked her out, and then stood back, admiring her.

"That'll be the best heifer I ever put my name to in a catalogue," he said to himself, and the same evening he entered her to be sold in Messrs. Smith's auction in Winchbury some ten days later.

When the day arrived he set out very early in the morning, in order to get his beast safely through the streets before the usual traffic Bedlam of Winchbury's market day had commenced. The calf was placed in a milk float, which was driven by a lad: the heifer followed close behind in great anxiety, putting her head into the vehicle again and again to see that her offspring was still there; and her owner walked solidly and sedately at the rear of the procession. For three miles along the broad ride through the wood they journeyed silently and peacefully, meeting nobody, but after they left the wood and were going down through Fernditch, they were spied by Mr. Morley, who rode across from his sheepfold to have a word with his neighbour and inspect the heifer.

"She's a beauty, Frank. Damme, I'm full up. I don't want any heifers and calves, but I'll give her a leg up to a bit over thirty pounds. She'll make more. Won't be much change out of thirty-five, I reckon. Your name's worth a bit, but a good start'll set her on the right road. Let's see, they cost you twenty-one ten at Chris's sale, an' you got 'em all in-calf. If they all come down like this, they'll pay handsome."

"They won't. She's the pick of the basket, Walter."

"So she is, but t'others are a good sample. Well, I'll meet you in market." And away bustled Mr. Morley on his fat cob, while the Woodend cavalcade plodded steadily on to Winchbury.

By ten o'clock Frank had got his animals safely into the auction yard, and was having a second breakfast with the lad, in a small restaurant nearby, while their horse munched contentedly at a nose-bag outside. Breakfast finished, they drove round to various shops and stores, where they loaded the milk float with various farming necessaries, and then the lad set off for home, leaving Frank free to advertise the merits of his heifer to all and sundry.

As he was walking back to the sale yard, he congratulated himself on starting early enough to get his heifer safely into the yard before ten o'clock. It was now a quarter to eleven, and the streets of Winchbury were confusion worse confounded; they were a noisy, helpless, bad-tempered maelstrom of livestock, pedestrians, and road transport, both ancient and modern, utilitarian and luxurious.

Shepherds cursed cattle-drovers, and were cursed back in return, the shepherds winning on biblical allusion, and the drovers on the more modern forms of blasphemy. Lorry-drivers gnashed their gears, and swore fluently at farm carters, with much filth and many American phrases. Cattle dodged this way, sheep flowed that way, and pigs of all sizes darted in all directions. One small porker in his terror got underneath a small private car of the class denoted by the word "baby". Its back must have touched the hot exhaust pipe, for, to the accompaniment of agonized squeals, the car's occupants experienced a good imitation of a small boat in a choppy sea, whilst the elemental smell of singed pork drifted up through the footboards. But fate decided that this small pig should live a little longer before frying, for, in a moment or two he burst into the open once more, none the worse for his experience, save for a black streak of burnt flesh across his pink back.

Drivers of private cars sat over their wheels, wearing looks of bored resignation. Most of them, being local dwellers, were used to it. Winchbury market day was Winchbury market day, and this absurd condition of the town's streets was as unalterable as the law of the Medes and Persians. Drivers of horsed vehicles looked with deadly hatred at all mechanical transport, and mourned the peaceful, clean, sweet-smelling days of long ago. Their horses had long passed the stage of being frightened at any modern road monstrosity, whether car, lorry, traction engine, or motor cycle, but as one of these noisy, stinking, buzzing things was backed almost on top of them in the general shuffle, they wrinkled their sensitive noses in proud disgust at the evil-smelling exhaust gases.

Solid, good-humoured, country-bred policemen valiantly attempted to control this medley, and, with great skill and tact, they solved one seemingly impossible jam after another. Almost everybody concerned knew that the local corporation were proud of their market, and considered that the conditions under which it was held were ideal. There would be no improvement therefore until it was forced on them by some outside influence such as the Ministry of Transport or the Ministry of Health. Winchbury market was Winchbury market, and somehow or other it began

and ended in the one day in each week, and they presumed that this particular market would follow suit.

A large Packard, driven by a typical American complete with horn-rimmed spectacles, cigar, and a twang like an out-of-tune banjo, had been hopelessly jammed for some ten minutes or so. Its driver, who had been mildly amused at first at the habits and customs of the old-fashioned English, was getting impatient. The policeman appeared to be far more concerned with getting the livestock a free passage than with other problems. Quite definitely, the Packard came last in his mind as having any right to a clear passage through Winchbury on a market day; carriers vans, milk floats, cattle lorries, dilapidated Ford cars loaded with eggs and other farm produce, and farmers' cars were all far more important than any American's swell vehicle.

In the course of his duties, the bobby came alongside the Packard. "Say, officer," drawled the American, "what's a car for in this island, anyway? To drive or just to park? I guess I don't want to stay on this spot all day."

"You should a stayed in America, zur," even the police training had not taken the Z from the Wiltshireman's speech; "I have heard that they put 'em on the spot out there, but I don't think it's as comfortable as where you are." When it came to sarcasm the older civilization could hold its own with the new. "Now then, Bill, away you go." This was to a lorry filled with cattle, as a gap opened before it between a milk float and a timber carriage.

The lorry buzzed noisily away, and the policeman turned to the Packard. "Now, zur, we won't keep you any longer. Sorry to hinder you, but it's market day." "You betcha," said the American, as he let in his clutch. "Thanks for the information. I guess I thought it was your Lord Mayor's Sunday, or the changing of the guard."

As Frank stood watching this hotch-potch, he was greeted by Mr. Morley, who scanned the disgraceful scene for a few moments in great disgust, and then gave tongue in a loud voice. "An' that's what they gave his Worship the Mayor an O.B.E. for, I suppose. A pretty kettle o' fish. He ought to be made bide in the middle of it, wearin' his bally medal, if he's so proud of it. Look out, Frank. That heifer means mischief."

Five heifers, who were following their five calves in a milk float, were vainly seeking a way through the maelstrom. One of them had been so badgered and bullied during the journey through the town, that she was utterly bewildered. Her calf was somewhere ahead of her in this nightmarish place. But where? She looked wildly all around her, and a backing lorry

touched her on the flank. She darted away towards the pavement, slipped between two stationary cars, barking her hind leg on the mudguard of one of them, and disappeared into the haven of an open doorway of a house.

"That's torn it," said Mr. Morley with a grin—it wasn't his heifer—and Frank vanished in the wake of the animal.

Compared with the street the house seemed to be a peaceful refuge to the heifer. There was nobody about. She walked sedately down a longish passage, Frank following quietly. He noticed that her belly brushed the walls on either side, and thought that it was a good job that most of the pictures were hung above her back line. She whisked her tail once in agitation of mind, and flipped the corner of a large photograph of a Victorian-looking gentleman with a flowing beard, which settled back at a drunken angle. "Grandpa'll be feeling annoyed," muttered Frank, as the old gentleman leered crookedly at him when he passed.

The heifer stopped for a moment, with her head and shoulders in the doorway on the right-hand side of the passage, and her hindquarters in Frank's view. He stopped also. No good rushing things, he thought, and he wondered whether there was anyone in the room. No, there couldn't be, else he'd have heard shrieks. But where were the occupants of the house?

Presently the animal disappeared, and Frank followed on carefully. She insinuated herself between the wall of the room and a table, on which lay the remains of somebody's breakfast. Then she minced daintily through another door into a scullery, and then turned left-handed, through yet another doorway, outside into a small, square, sunlit yard, where the lady of the house was hanging up some washing on the line.

She was a solid, determined old lady. She gave one look at this apparition, took a clothes peg from her mouth, and said in a loud voice, "My God! Wot be at?" Then, seizing a tablecloth from the line, she flapped it vigorously at the heifer, and said, "Shoo!"

The heifer retreated. There was no calf in the yard, and this flapping white thing was beyond her comprehension. She backed into the scullery, where she turned without doing any damage, and went back the way she had come. Frank dodged out of her way round the breakfast table, and followed her up the passage, and out into the street, where Mr. Morley, who had been keeping a clear road for her, whacked her firmly with his stick. They helped her drover to get her safely to the auction, and then went to inspect Frank's heifer.

The sale was timed to start at twelve o'clock, and it was then eleven-thirty. They found one of the auctioneer's men busy sticking numbered labels on the rumps of the animals, according to the catalogue; Frank's heifer was adorned with ticket number eighteen. Many people came up and admired her. Intending purchasers expertly drew a stream of milk from each of her teats, to find out whether she was an easy or a hard milker, and to satisfy themselves that all her four quarters were sound. These connoisseurs of cattle were very varied in appearance. There were farmers of all classes, some in immaculate lounge suits, some in well-cut breeches and leggings, and others in dirty, shabby, working clothes. But their clothes were no true criterion of their financial position—in many cases this was in the inverse ratio. Bob Tucker was there, with a long white coat covering his faultless riding breeches. He represented the modern dealer, but the older type were in evidence also. These wore hard black hats, a cross between a bowler and a topper, and their coats were just too long for lounge coats, and just too short to be described as tails.

Mr. Morley's remark to Frank early that morning, to the effect that his name was worth a bit to the heifer, was a very true one. When a farmer who had a large dairy of cows sold a good-looking milking beast, there was always a "why" attached to the animal in the minds of the buyers. It did not matter how perfect the beast seemed to be; even when she satisfied the most searching tests of the experts, this "why" usually crabbed her sale by several pounds. After all, this was reasonable. A man who had to fulfil a large milk contract did not sell a good cow without a reason. Even when the only apparent reason seemed to be that the owner was hard up, the "why" still loomed large, for even a bankrupt farmer did not sell his best cows until his bankruptcy was officially declared.

But in the case of a man like Frank, who kept no milking herd, this damaging "why" was absent. He calved down heifers, and sold them to get a profit, if possible, but he sold everything, good, bad, and indifferent. Moreover, Frank had been doing this sort of thing for several years, and when he said that a heifer was all right, the company knew that she was all right.

The strawberry roan, number eighteen, was something outstanding even for Frank. Bob Tucker, Jim Marsh, the auctioneer, and many other friends had complimented him on such a fine beast, and by great good luck, Chris, who had come to Winchbury on his employer's business that day, also looked in at the cattle sale, where he saw his one-time heifer in all her glory.

He chatted with his friends for a while, and when the sale started, joined them at the ring to study the trade.

Old Silas Ridout, Mr. Dibben's dairyman, had journeyed to Winchbury that morning. His master could not get into market until twelve o'clock, as he had to do a bread round before leaving, but he sent Silas off early in the milk float, to pick out one or two good heifers and calves ready for his inspection later on.

The old man enjoyed this job. It was a fitting compliment to his knowledge of cattle, and while Mr. Dibben might think that he was going to buy a heifer, and while he, not Silas, would write the cheque for her, in reality Silas reckoned that he was choosing a heifer for himself. His master might own the cows, but Silas looked after them. They were his cows, and any addition to the herd must conform in every way to the standard of excellence deemed necessary by the old expert.

Mr. Dibben's herd had grown during the last three years from seventeen to twenty-five, and now that he had grassed all his holding, it was necessary to increase it still further until the long-desired forty head was attained. He reckoned that he could manage to make it up to thirty head before Christmas, and if affairs still continued to prosper with him, the following spring should see the other ten beasts acquired.

Of course, if he were to be content with second class cattle, he could get the increased numbers more quickly, but that would be, in his opinion, a penny wise and pound foolish policy to pursue. It cost just as much to keep an indifferent cow as a good one, and he had decided to go slowly but surely, and to buy only the best.

In the market Silas met his friend, Bill Gurd, who had come in with his master, and these two expert judges proceeded to inspect the milking beasts offered for sale. There were three or four which satisfied the old man's requirements, but number eighteen was his favourite. When he learnt from Bill, who knew every detail of the strawberry roan's life since she had arrived at Fernditch, that this chosen animal had been bought by Mr. Morley in Winchbury market three years previously to make up his bunch of weaners, the old man became greatly excited. He scanned the animal carefully.

"Ha!" he snorted with satisfaction at the end of this scrutiny, "I knawed she afore thee's 'ad 'er, Bill. I 'low I zeed she dree minnits atter she wur born. Tha's Wold Dolly's calf, as zure as my name be Zilas. An' she've

growed into a sweet pretty cow. Jist about. I maun put a bit o' 'eart into the Guvnor, else the price'll vrighten un. He'm a nervous li'l veller, zno."

When Mr. Dibben arrived, this heartening process was carried out with such force and insistence that he joined the ring as number eighteen followed her calf into it, fully determined to buy her. He would go as high as thirty-five pounds, which, according to the recent fall in milk prices, was, he thought, at least five pounds more than any heifer could be worth to anybody.

But low milk prices, and a widespread agricultural depression could not prevent a coloury roan heifer, free from all blemish, carrying a square bag, and warranted all right in her quarters by her owner, from fetching a good, even a silly price. She was started at twenty-five pounds, and reached thirty-one, before Mr. Dibben came into it. At Thirty-four ten—the bid against him—he hesitated.

"Come along," said the auctioneer. "We've only just started. Thirty four-ten, a farmer's price. Now's the chance for the retailers to get hold of a good one. Who wants a milk walk?"

Mr. Dibben had a milk walk, and a growing one. It was true that he made more money of most of his milk that way, than if he had sent it off by rail at the wholesale price. Yes, he could afford just one more. He winked portentously at the auctioneer, to Silas's great satisfaction; the old man's beard was wagging rhythmically as he champed his toothless gums in his excitement.

"Thirty-five, thank you," said the auctioneer. "Going, going, ah, thirty-five ten. Now, who fills it up to three dozen?"

"Doan't 'ee falter," whispered Silas. " 'Tis Wold Dolly's calf, an' she didn' die in debt. A good un's allus cheap, an' a bad un's allus dear, an' she'm a topper."

"Go on then," said Mr. Dibben, pushing his way out of the ring, as though annoyed at his own foolishness.

No more bids were forthcoming, and in a moment or two the auctioneer's hammer fell at thirty-six pounds. Number eighteen slowly followed her calf out of the ring, where Silas took charge of her with great satisfaction, being as Bill Gurd put it, "zo proud as a cat wi' two tails".

The old man milked out the heifer, while Mr. Dibben wrote the cheque, and fetched the milk float, There was no time to lose. Silas had his cows to milk at three o'clock, and Mr. Dibben had both shop and farm duties to

perform. Soon after one o'clock the calf was in the float with Silas, and Mr. Dibben followed his heifer out of the yard into Winchbury's traffic problem.

By journeying through some tortuous back streets they managed to dodge most of the traffic, and just before three o'clock the strawberry roan heifer returned to her birthplace after an absence of three years.

Chapter 15

Like all villages situated within a few miles of a fairly large provincial market town, Coombe Wallop had grown rapidly since the War. There had been repeated housing schemes by the local authorities, most of which had been backed by the spendthrift, fatheaded sentimentality of the District Council and the Government of the day. In the years immediately following the War, "houses fit for heroes to live in" had been the agreed aim of both ratepayers and bureaucrats, and although money had been squandered recklessly, regardless of common sense, or utility, the results had been disappointing. Once again desire had outrun performance.

The new houses satisfied neither the eye of the beholder, nor the wants of their occupiers. Chimneys smoked, roofs leaked, the slightest gale of wind flipped the slates in all directions like playing cards, and the interiors were torrid ovens during the summer, and ice chests in the winter. Moreover their rents were about three times that of the average farm cottage. Let the bus drivers from Winchbury live in them—the Wallop labourer remained snug in his old thatched cottage, and hoped that he would be able to stay there undisturbed.

As the bottom of the ratepayers' purse came in sight, and the flow of money from the national exchequer dwindled, the county housing zealots conceived the idea that still cheaper houses must be provided; non-parlourhouses, little houses foraged couples, and small houses for the newly-married, which should suffice their needs until time and circumstances should increase their requirements. In these last cases it was presumed that as the children were born, suitable officials would move the families into larger houses, from which they would eject people as their children grew up and left their homes. The countryside was to be disciplined and organized into an official's paradise, and people were to be moved about like cattle. It would be so much better for them than the old haphazard methods, said the enthusiastic public spirited busybodies. Reasons such as these there were in plenty, but the real reason—the continuance of the services of the housing fanatics on the District Councils, and of quite half the paid officials—was never mentioned.

So, of late years, still cheaper houses had been the cry, and the public authorities, in consequence, had effected rows and rows of slums in every village in the county, including Coombe Wallop. Hideous rows of glaring

slums, of flaring red, squalid, unlovely grey, and sickly, repulsive ochre. And these horrors they set down amidst the serene, dignified green of the countryside, where they shrieked their offensiveness at the surrounding landscape; blatant evidence of man's lack of decency and good taste, a paradox of post-war England, which with one hand destroyed the slums in its towns, and with the other built slums in its rural districts. Nature mourned at the insult, but, as of old, quietly set about toning down the uglinesses, while the inhabitants of these slums assisted her by planting creepers to hide the more horrible colours.

Mr. Dibben, although like all countrymen he deplored these unsightly erections, realized that Coombe Wallop was growing thereby, and he had set about increasing his dairy herd in order to supply the needs of his consequently growing milk round. He had a retailer's mind, and while he hated the new houses and longed for the peaceful days gone by, he realized that these new inhabitants required milk, and that if he did not supply their needs in this direction, somebody else would be sure to do so.

Gradually the villagers and farm labourers were forced into the new houses, where they mourned the lost privacy of their detached cottages. A new type of dweller was coming into Coombe Wallop. Motor transport, both by bus and by the cheap light car, made it possible for people of all classes, who worked in Winchbury, to live in the comparative peace of the surrounding villages, and carry on their occupation in that Tower of Babel, which Winchbury had become.

Many of these cast covetous eyes on the old thatched rural cottages, which could be transformed into charming dwellings, if a little money were spent on them. The building of new houses by private enterprise had been killed by the activities of the public authorities, but this middle-class demand for village dwellings provided business for the private builder. Consequently, whenever a chance came, the thatched cottages were bought up and renovated to supply this new demand, and their original dwellers were driven into the new slums.

A Mr. Geoffrey Martin, head cashier in one of Winchbury's banks, had acquired one of these renovated cottages, in which he lived happily with his wife, his son and heir aged three months, and their small maidservant, Mary. Outside in the old woodshed, which had been transformed into a garage, dwelt their other baby, a small Austin car, which transported the breadwinner to and from his toil each day, and carried the whole family far afield at weekends, or otherwise on pleasure bent.

One day in October, shortly after the return of the strawberry roan heifer to Coombe Wallop, Mr. Martin returned from work to find that the happy nest he had left in the morning had become an abode of gloom. The dire news that his son had failed to register the customary weekly increase in weight was reported to him by a panic-stricken wife before he had closed the doors of the garage on his trusty Austin.

His experience in the banking world had taught him that, as a sex, women were not infallible in mathematics, so he suggested airily that in all probability the weighing had not been performed accurately.

"But we've weighed him three times," wailed his wife, as they entered the house. "There's no mistake, is there, Mary?" This last was to the maid, who assisted Mrs. Martin in the intricate business of caring for the baby, and occasionally did a little housework.

Mary backed up her mistress as to the accuracy of the weighing, so Mr. Martin strode through the house to inspect his son, who was sleeping in his perambulator on the front porch.

"Can't see much wrong with him," he said to his wife. "Take his grub all right?"

"Oh yes, dear, but it's the first week since he was born that he hasn't gained. In fact, he's nearly an ounce lighter," and she burst into tears on her husband's manly shoulder.

"Here, here, cheer up, dear. He's bound to have his ups and downs. Let's have tea, and we'll weigh him again, when he's put to bed."

Mrs. Martin dried her eyes, and remembered that this heartless monster, who could think of tea while his son was in a rapid decline, was her husband, and expected tea when he came home from work. Dutifully she gave him his meal, and then the business of putting the baby to bed took place.

The bathing, the drying, and the powdering finished, the baby was weighed once more, and his father was forced to admit that his son had lost a trifle in weight since the previous week. Accordingly Mr. Martin lit a pipe to ease his troubled mind, whereupon his wife stormed at him and asked if he must smoke a foul pipe in the room where his invalid son was to spend the night. She also rebuked Mary for being both clumsy and slow. During the final business of encasing his son in weird and wonderful night attire, and feeding him with his bottle of Mullinbury's patent food, Mr. Martin retired downstairs, almost regretting his bachelor days.

This fatherhood business, he thought, as he sat down in an arm-chair and relit his pipe, wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Still, there couldn't be much wrong with his son. He felt sure that no other baby in the world had had such care and attention bestowed on it. As a bachelor he had fought shy of babies, and he had often wondered why some of his pals got married and had children. Then somehow or other he had got married himself, and before he knew where he was, he had become a father, and had to do heaps of things which he had never dreamed would fall to his lot.

His wife had been unable to nurse the baby, who had been fed on Mullinbury's food, which had proved eminently satisfactory up till now. And he, of all people, had made the blame stuff every morning for his son's early feed. Made it darned well, too. The alarum went off at ten minutes to six, and he rolled out of bed on the instant. In the passage outside the bedroom were placed the primus stove, the kettle, the tin of food, the baby's bottle, and the thermometer.

As the word thermometer crossed his mind he felt horribly guilty, for he remembered that, two days ago, he had omitted to use it. Still, that couldn't have made any difference, because every morning, when he took the bottle of food into the bedroom, his wife tested the temperature against her cheek, a procedure which had always annoyed him. No, that couldn't be the cause of his son's loss in weight. Still, he would never omit to use the thermometer again.

He wondered if his son was going into a decline. He racked his brains to remember whether there was any taint of tuberculosis in his wife's family or in his own. When his wife came downstairs they rang up the doctor to find that he was out on a maternity case, but that he would call the following morning. Why didn't these doctors look after the babies already in the world? The nurse could do all that was required for those about to be born. After much anxious worrying they retired to bed, and next morning, after very carefully preparing the food, Geoffrey was cheered by the lusty way his son pulled at his bottle.

After breakfast Mr. Martin kissed his wife, and set off for his daily round of toil in Winchbury. Work did not go very well that day. Geoffrey was worried. It was October, 1931, and the British pound was in a precarious condition, which caused the branch manager to fuss through the building as though he were personally responsible for England's financial condition.

But Geoffrey Martin cared for none of these things. The pound could go down to twopence for all he cared. Something much more serious than

trivial financial matters was causing him to worry. His son and heir had lost an ounce during the last week, and his father's world was shaken to its foundations.

All days come to an end, and at about four-fifteen Geoffrey found himself free to return home. Usually he had a cup of tea and a hundred up at billiards with a friend before returning home, but on this occasion he drove home the moment he was free to do so, at a somewhat reckless speed.

Arriving home, he hurried indoors, eager to know the worst. "Where's baby?" he asked his wife. "Is he all right? What did the doctor say?"

"He's quite all right, darling. Doctor says that he's grown out of his food, and that now he's three months old we must put him on milk. After you've had tea, I want you to go down to Dibben's, and ask him to leave a half-pint in a bottle morning and afternoon. We can take up what we want as usual, but I must have baby's in a bottle."

Now that his mind was relieved about his son's welfare, Geoffrey did not see why he should go down to Dibben's to order the milk. Hang it, he thought, I've been at work all day. "Why can't Mary go down?" he asked aloud.

"Because," said his wife, "it's Wednesday. The shop'll be shut, and Mrs. Dibben won't like it if we send a maid to bother them after hours. She's like that, but she won't mind, if you go down yourself and order it."

"But Dibben doesn't like bottling any milk, especially half-pints. After all, the milk's all the same. Why can't you take what you want for baby from ours?"

Thereupon his wife read him a lecture on clean milk—she had been reading it up in her baby book just before her husband's return—on the dangers of dust contamination contracted when the milk was delivered in the road from a bucket into the customer's jug, and she deplored the fact that her baby's father cared so little for his son's welfare, that he funked ordering a mere tradesman to comply with his wishes.

Accordingly, after tea, Geoffrey obeyed orders, and set off down the village street. During the short walk he hoped that he would see Mr. Dibben when he called. He realized that Mrs. Dibben was a bit of a madam, and he thought that to bottle and deliver a half-pint of milk could hardly be a paying proposition. Milk was fivepence per quart; a half-pint therefore was only a penny farthing. Why, dash it, it was worth that to wash the bottle, let alone to produce the milk, to fill the bottle, seal it, and deliver it. If he could only

catch Mr. Dibben, he would put it to him as one married man to another. Probably Mrs. Dibben wanted unreasonable things sometimes. Her husband would realize the position when it was explained to him, and comply with his request as a personal favour. Decent little chap, Dibben. Doing well, too. His banking account was a lot more healthy than a good many of the larger farmers. Yes, it would be all right if he could catch Mr. Dibben.

But Geoffrey was unlucky. Mr. Dibben was up at his farm that evening with Katenemily, and Mrs. Dibben was at home alone. As it was the weekly early closing day, she had changed into her black dress, and was seated in solitary state in the front parlour, busily darning the family's stockings.

The bell rang, and she rose with a pleased smile on her face to answer it. For this bell was the front door bell, not the shop bell's hated ping. The shop was closed.

Mrs. Dibben had attained her heart's desire at last, for when Mr. Dibben had told her of his wish to buy ten more cows to increase his herd, she had put her foot down. She had given way in the matter of the purchase of a motor van some time before, but there was to be no more expenditure until she had her front door. Mr. Dibben, realizing the justice of this demand, had given the necessary orders to the local builder some ten days before, and now the front door, complete with bell and porch, was an accomplished fact.

To Mrs. Dibben's great disappointment, her front door had not been in working order on the previous Sunday, in spite of all her urgings to the workmen to get it finished before then. It had been her turn that day to give their minister a dinner, and once again he had entered her home, through the shop.

But now the front door was finished. In the future, on Sundays and on Wednesday evenings, Mrs. Dibben would be no longer Mrs. Dibben the grocer's wife, Mrs. Dibben the baker's wife, or Mrs. Dibben the milkman's wife. She would be Mrs. Dibben, mistress of a private house. And on this Wednesday evening, the first evening since the front door had been finished, she was wondering whether anyone would call on her, and who would be the first of her friends to use her front door for this purpose.

So at Geoffrey's ring, she went to the front door in great good humour, but only to find that in the eyes of such people as the Martins, she was still the milkman's wife, who could be knocked up at her private entrance for any trivial reason connected with her husband's business, even when the shop was closed. When Geoffrey stated his errand the pleased smile on the good

lady's face was replaced by a look of haughty contempt and indignation at such an insult.

The ghosts of all the socially outraged tradesmen's wives south of the Thames for generations were ranged on her side. The accumulated annoyance of not having a private entrance to her home for twenty long years was visited on Geoffrey's head—this bank clerk, her first caller, who had dared to profane her front door in such sacrilegious fashion. Any consideration for the welfare of her husband's business vanished from her mind at such an indignity. She would tell this bank clerk what she thought of his conduct. A bank clerk! The very idea!

For Mrs. Dibben was scornful of bank clerks, civil servants, school teachers and the like. After all, who were they? What were they? Merely servants, people with jobs, people who had no capital invested in a business, people who employed nobody, but who were merely of that lower order of beings, the employed class. Her husband was a master man; he had a business and a farm of his own. He employed several people. Was she, his wife, to be at the beck and call of one of these poor sort of folk, when the shop was closed? Was her cherished front door to be desecrated by such callers? No, not if they took their custom elsewhere. Besides, in her opinion, Mrs. Martin gave herself airs.

She informed Geoffrey that Mr. Dibben was out and that the shop was closed until eight o'clock next morning. Her manner suggested that until that hour came round she knew nothing about milk, groceries, or bread, and that she cared less. She pointed out that as the bank closed on Saturdays, so the shop closed on Wednesdays. She could not say whether Mr. Dibben would be able to deliver the half-pint bottle of milk on the morrow. She informed Geoffrey that her husband would never dream of calling at Mr. Martin's private house in connection with business—she laid great emphasis on the word business—at any time; and that she wondered that Mr. Martin should have thought it fitting to call on business—still more emphasis—at Mr. Dibben's private house especially on a Wednesday evening.

Geoffrey was helpless in the face of these arguments. Being a man, he recognized the justice of Mrs. Dibben's attitude. In that portion of his inmost heart, the piece which he kept secret from his wife, he thoroughly agreed with her. If Mr. Dibben had called at his house on any evening about bank business, or for any reason, his own wife would have been most irate. Still, he couldn't go back to the mother of his son, and say nothing could be done about the bottled milk until the next day. No, he simply couldn't face his wife with an admission of failure. No argument would be of any use with

her over this matter. He was between the devil of Mrs. Dibben's righteous indignation, and the deep sea of his wife's maternal anxiety. He chose Mrs. Dibben as the lesser evil, and pleaded his cause still further.

Mrs. Dibben stood in her doorway, obviously waiting for him to depart. So far as she was concerned the argument was finished. Mr. Martin had been guilty of a gross breach of manners in coming to her front door on a trivial business errand, and she reckoned that this had dawned on him by now. Why then didn't he take his leave?

But he didn't. He stood there, and pleaded his case in a most charming manner. He apologized for troubling her when the shop was closed, he pointed out that only grave parental anxiety would have caused him to do such a thing, and he admitted shyly that it was an impertinence to disturb her on a Wednesday for any purpose. He was so charming and apologetic, that the good lady relented. After all she had proved her point, and maintained her position. Besides, she knew how young folks worried over their first baby. As a great favour she promised the delivery of a half-pint bottle of milk on the following morning, but said that any further deliveries of such a small quantity in bottled form would have to await the decision of Mr. Dibben. And with that, Geoffrey had to be content.

When Mr. Dibben returned home with Katenemily, his wife informed him of Mr. Martin's call and request. She also gave her husband a pithy résumé of her views on the matter, which was punctuated frequently with the remark: "The very idea of ringing my front door bell for such a reason," and it was finished by Mrs. Dibben's hope that her husband would not be fool enough to bottle any more half-pints. Not only was this sort of business unprofitable, but there was no need for it. "Look at Katenemily," she said. "They never had bottled milk, and where would you find better grown girls?" Mr. Dibben would be a fool to comply with such trumpery notions, and there was a lot more about the stuck-up airs and ideas of such people as Mrs. Martin.

Like his wife, Mr. Dibben considered himself to be far superior in almost every way to a bank official, or, for that matter, to any man dependent on a salary. Every time he called at the bank in Winchbury, and saw Mr. Martin behind the grille, he was reminded of a squirrel in a cage. 'Twasn't a man's job. 'Twouldn't do for him. To have to arrive at a certain time, and be compelled to perform mechanical routine duties for a certain number of hours each day, without ever taking the responsibility of deciding things for oneself, especially of ordering one's own doings. He, Mr. Dibben, might work longer hours than Mr. Martin, but he obeyed no one's orders but his

own and the weather's. He was master of his own fate, a veritable king, by comparison.

But Mr. Dibben knew that it took all sorts of people to make a world. He recognized that the stress of business and its resultant success had harshened his good wife, and perhaps himself also. Life moved so quickly in these days, he thought, and most folk were less gentle in consequence. Pity there wasn't more gentleness. Pity life wasn't a slower, more leisurely business, as it had been years ago, before the War. Then, if you worked hard and did your duty, you were sure of placid success. But now nothing was sure. Everybody rushed about. Speed was everything. Things which were new one day, were old-fashioned a few months later. All this talk of bottling milk now. A lot of tommy rot. And bottling half-pints was idiotic.

Still, the bottled side of his business was increasing. No doubt about that. 'Twasn't the actual bottling that was the chief trouble, it was the washing of the dirty bottles. If this demand for bottled milk went on as it was going, he'd soon have to get a bottle-washing machine. Always something, nowadays. A man couldn't settle down and just carry on his business comfortably. Always seemed to be striving for something just out of reach. Still, the milk round was sound business on the whole. If he didn't bottle milk, somebody else might start, and that would never do. Coombe Wallop's business, a good thing for one milkman, would be no good at all for two. Anyway, his wife had promised the half-pint for to-morrow morning, so he'd best go down to Silas's cottage, and tell him about it. Whatever happened, a customer must not be let down. He'd ask the old man's advice about going on with this half-pint bottling.

He went out and called on Silas, who, to his master's great astonishment, supported Mrs. Martin in her request for a half-pint bottle of milk every morning and afternoon.

"Voolery! Course 'tis voolery," said the old man. "But did 'ee ever know a 'ooman wi' 'er vust baby as wadn' a vooil? They do vuss an' vinick, marnin', noon, an' night awver the vust, but when they do git to 'bout the tenth young un, they do treat un rational. But there, a young 'ooman, 'oo wun't vuss awver 'er vust baby, bain't wuth vindin'. We'll let 'er 'ave 'er 'alf-pint bottle. Look 'ee zee, 't'ull 'elp keep the bizness together. P'raps she'll 'ave an 'ole skein o' childer. Thee dussent know, neet do she. She'm only beginnin' like. Predenly 'appen they'll want a gallon stead o' 'alf a pint."

Mr. Dibben agreed, inquired once again after the health of the strawberry roan heifer, told Silas that he would take her calf to market on the morrow, and wished him good-night. Next morning Mrs. Martin received her milk all right from the hands of Kate, who left a message that the small bottle would be forthcoming both morning and afternoon in the future.

The following afternoon the strawberry roan heifer entered the cowshed to find that her calf had disappeared. This worried her greatly. She would not stand still, she refused to eat her cake, she rattled her neck chain, and blared repeatedly in anxious wonderment. Presently Silas went to milk her, and noticed that she had refused her cake.

"Noo then, my pretty. Thee got no call to take on zo. Bless 'ee, it do come to all ov us. Childer do come, an' jist when you be gettin' a mite o' pleasure vrom 'em, they do go. Thee't git used to it atter a vew more 'ave come an' gone. Noo then, stan' still, oot. I know thee bag be main 'ard an' uncomfor'ble. Thee let I at un fur a vew minnits, an' thee't veel better."

The heifer moved restlessly from side to side, refusing to let the old man sit down to milk her.

"Coom on, zilly. Thee't 'a' to be'ave. Thee attn't an 'eifer no longer. Thee't a cow. Strawberry we'll call thee. Yer, Bill."

One of his helpers, a lad of about fifteen, came in answer to his call.

"Jist keep thease zilly vathead up agen the wall, while I do pull it out ov 'er. She'll be all right in a day er two, zno, but she be main fashed jist now wi' losin' 'er calf."

The boy obeyed.

"Noo then, little 'eifer. Noo then, Strawberry," said the old man, sitting down carefully and quietly and starting to milk quickly and expertly.

Some minutes later he rose to his feet with nearly two gallons of milk in his bucket.

"That'll do, Bill. She'm a milker, all right. Look 'ee zee, nigh on two gallon."

"I tell 'ee wot 'tis, Strawberry," he continued, as he stroked the heifer's rump. "Thee't lost thee baby, but we got another one in Wallop, as do want zum milk. We'll take 'is dose out o' thine s'atternoon."

They did so, and in due course a half-pint bottle of Strawberry's milk was delivered at Mrs. Martin's.

This good lady received it as a matter of course. One ordered a bottle of milk, and, at the customary time, it appeared on one's doorstep. That was all there was to it. She had not the faintest conception of all that had taken place in the neighbourhood of Coombe Wallop during the previous three years, which had made it possible for this particular bottle of milk to be available for her baby's feed that evening.

An hour or so later, Mr. Martin returned home to find that his son had imbibed his earlier milk feeds without any ill effect, and that his home was once again a haven of peace. He went upstairs to see his heir tackle his bottle after the evening rites of bathing and powdering had taken place.

Mrs. Martin prepared the feed herself according to the doctor's instructions. It would be some time, she thought, before her husband, a mere man, or Mary, a scatterbrain if ever there was one, could be trusted to perform such an intricate operation. After great difficulty she had taught them to prepare the Mullinbury's food correctly, and now she would have to go through the business of teaching them this new method.

She sat in a low chair, and nursed her son, while Mary handed her the feeding bottle. A touch with it to her cheek to prove to her once again that the thermometer had not lied, and then her son was pulling lustily at his supper. His little helpless hands strayed awkwardly up to the bottle. He sucked vigorously, and blinked owlishly at his mother.

The liquid in the bottle rapidly lessened. Presently there was a sigh of contented repletion, and the rubber teat slipped out of his rosebud mouth. In the cot she laid her already drowsy son, and covered him up. Mother and father stood bending over him in adoration, while Mary watched from the other side of the room in awed pleasure and content. A dribble of milk was wiped away with a Harrington square, which was then tucked carefully under the chin of the lord of the household in case of accidents.

All was well, and Mrs. Martin, realizing for the first time for several days that she was a wife as well as a mother, prepared to take up this secondary rôle. Mary departed downstairs, laden with the various impedimenta of babyhood, Mrs. Martin took her husband's arm, and they crept quietly from the presence.

Out on the landing, she squeezed Geoffrey's arm joyously. After all, he wasn't a bad old buffer. Her baby was all right. Now it should be her husband's turn. She was happy once again.

"Oh, Geoffrey," she said, "isn't life wonderful?"

But whilst one mother rejoiced that all was well with her baby, and that life was altogether wonderful in consequence, the other mother, Strawberry Roan, was wandering disconsolately round and round one of Mr. Dibben's pastures, calling and mourning her lost calf.

July, 1932

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Strawberry Roan* by Arthur George Street]