Black Bryony

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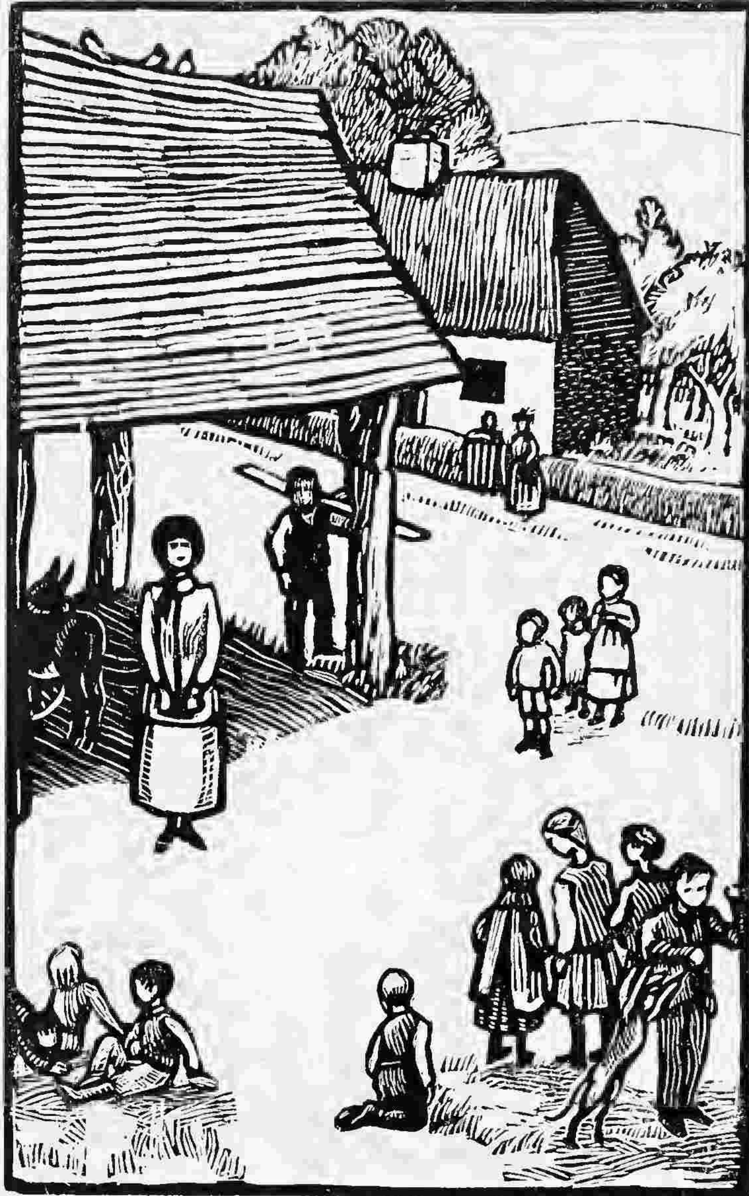

T. F. POWYS

BLACK BRYONY

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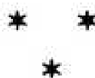

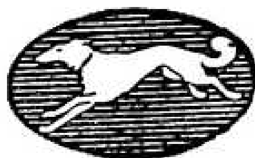

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Black Bryony

Chapter 1: Summer

Mr. Balliboy turned the handle: he turned it wrathfully. Mr. Balliboy expected no movement to follow, but it was necessary for him to show the others that he at least hoped to get the car to move. After turning the handle, Mr. Balliboy climbed on to the driver's seat again and firmly held the steering gear as though he expected great events to happen.

While he held the wheel he peered with interest at the open works. Cog-wheels and oiled parts there were in plenty, 'enough iron,' thought Mr. Balliboy, 'to make any engine move.'

This engine, however, did not move.

Mr. Balliboy climbed down again and walked slowly round the car; after doing so he looked up cautiously at the sky.

The time was evening, the month was June.

Mr. Balliboy was the Norbury carrier returning from Romantown.

It was the established custom of Mr. Balliboy's car to break down almost every other journey that he made.

Nothing better—it was said—could be expected of Mr. Balliboy of Norbury, nothing better could be expected of his car. Separate they might have got on pretty well in the world, but together they were forced to break down, it was their trade.

Some people even believed that the innkeeper of Wainfleet paid Mr. Balliboy so much a year to wreck his own car once or twice a week at a chosen spot near the finely painted sign of the Lion.

Others said that it was all the fault of the village of Norbury, out of which no good thing could be expected to come; so far did the village lie out

of the usual track of civilized conversation. It was also said in Wainfleet and elsewhere, that everything broke down in Norbury.

The church tower even was in some danger of falling, and Mr. Morsay, the Clerk, would swear before any sober company to have himself seen the said tower sway this way and that when any westerly gale happened to blow.

Part of the old Norbury Rectory had gone, and the breach, or rather all one side of the wall, had been restored with planks of well-seasoned wood. The matter of the restoration was managed by the local undertaker, who himself, like Bottom the weaver, took all the best parts in the labour. For during the two years that he spent at the work Mr. Potten was architect, builder, and carpenter.

The wood Mr. Potten used in the repairs had been for long years stored away in his shed, the reason being that affairs in his own line of trade had not come as fast as he hoped when he bought the timber. So that destiny fixed the planks of wood in the Rectory wall instead of in the lower soil of the Norbury Churchyard.

Mr. Balliboy had a theory of his own. He fancied that his car was a woman, a Norbury woman.

Sometimes his car reminded him of Mrs. Morsay, and at other times he caught the machine almost copying the manners of Mrs. Crossley, the Rector's wife.

The car was old and it certainly had an old woman's fancies. It liked some of the stretches of the Romantown road, while some other parts of the way troubled its mind.

The carrier's car could not be said, alas, even by its admirers, to run true. The thing had a way of only making up its mind at the very last minute which side of the road it wished to take when it passed any other travelling carriage.

It showed a most pronounced tendency, if by ill-luck it met a traction engine, to try to love the hedge on the wrong side of the road.

After slowly walking round the car again, Mr. Balliboy moved a little way off, going in the Norbury direction as though he meant to entice the car to follow him as if he thought it were a little dog.

But the car would not move. Drawn up, as it was, upon the side of the road, it appeared to have settled to remain there until it became a part of the hedge.

Standing afar off, Mr. Balliboy watched the car. In his mind his thoughts had gathered, as they so often did, all in a bunch in order to wonder pleasantly whether the vehicle could ever be persuaded to move again.

As the carrier had been late in leaving Romantown, he felt it more than usually unfortunate that the car should have broken down.

‘She might as well ’ave run on to Norbury ’aveing got so far on road,’ thought Mr. Balliboy.

To ease his mind of all responsibility the carrier made a mental effort. He tried to detach himself from the ownership of the machine, he tried to look back at it as though it were some one else’s car. In his mind he called the thing Mr. Potten’s, and began to wonder whether it would be proper to walk home and leave the car to its new owner.

But, however much he tried, Mr. Balliboy could not wholly turn away from the car. With all its faults Mr. Balliboy could not help loving it. And, after all, the queer old creature had got into his ways, and when good it would go along, at least for a while. Besides, as a general rule it broke down in the right place, in the place that suited no one better than Mr. Balliboy.

The carrier looked from his car to the sky; the June evening troubled him, it was so warm. Mr. Balliboy noticed that the stars had come out; he fancied that the stars were looking disrespectfully at him.

‘What did they stars want to come out so early for?’ he wondered. They always made him feel so late when he saw them.

The carrier could see no human use in the stars.

Besides the troublesome stars there was thick summer dust by the side of the road.

‘Perhaps,’ thought Mr. Balliboy, ‘the dust has got into the works.’

Mr. Balliboy coughed and looked back at the car. Coming out of the front part of the car he saw a man’s leg.

Chapter 2

The carrier had indeed wondered how long his customers would remain quietly seated within the car. The man's leg had been the first sign of the dissolution of their patience. The owner of the cautious leg now stood in the road, and two other men had also climbed out.

Mr. Balliboy watched them for a while, as though he were astonished that his simple-minded car should have given birth to three men.

The carrier wondered about them as a Trojan might have wondered when Menelaus, Diomede, and Ulysses stept out of the horse of wood.

As each man climbed from the car, he had been extremely careful not to touch the steering wheel, because he feared that there was some hidden magic in the thing.

The three travellers were standing silently in the road when Mr. Balliboy joined them. They were the carrier's usual market customers, and he could not hold himself away from them any longer. He thought he ought to speak to his friends and complain about the behaviour of the car.

'She didn't never do it just 'ere before,' Mr. Balliboy remarked, looking round him, perhaps to make sure that he was speaking the truth. By the side of the road there was a tall elm tree that Mr. Balliboy could never remember having seen before.

The first traveller to Norbury who had climbed out from the car was Farmer Told. The other two men were Mr. Morsay and Mr. Potten. These two last ones looked towards Mr. Told as though they waited for him to speak.

Instead of speaking, Mr. Told felt in his pockets. He first felt in one and then in another of his pockets. The number of hiding-places about the person of Farmer Told seemed unending.

The honest farmer searching out his pockets beside Mr. Balliboy's car and under the June stars lent a sense of mystery to the scene, and gave, moreover, a certain reckless feeling of world-wide insecurity highly pleasing

to the other watchers. The men forgot the car, they forgot the lateness of the hour, they could only look at Mr. Told.

Each man watched Mr. Told with an ever-increasing interest. Each man hoped, as Mr. Told turned out pocket after pocket, that the farmer would not find what he was looking for. As each new pocket was searched, the disaster of a great discovery hung suspended. But as the farmer went on hunting, the chances of such a discovery became more and more remote.

Mr. Morsay, the Clerk of Norbury, was the first to give words to the now firmly established idea in all their minds, that the farmer must have lost something.

‘What in world be the matter wi’ ’ee, farmer?’ Mr. Morsay ventured to say.

Farmer Told did not reply at once: he seemed to require time to collect his thoughts that had burrowed down so deep into his pockets.

Looking now at the wayside hedge, Mr. Told appeared to be intently regarding a climbing plant that grew there, a climbing plant with large, glossy, vine-shaped leaves.

After looking for some moments at the leaves of the plant that grew so luxuriantly in the hedge, Mr. Told searched his pockets all over again. The only marked difference between this second search and the one before being the gloomy sounds that the farmer made as he turned out his pockets.

The last pocket being found empty, Mr. Told looked again at the hedge in grim perplexity and uttered words.

‘I’ve losted me money,’ he said.

For some moments no one spoke. Each man wished the full and utter significance of those rooted words to sink deep. For the matter pronounced in them was far too exciting to be replied to by any common retort.

The Clerk did, however, at last venture.

‘Did ’ee lose a purse with thee’s money in en, farmer?’

The moon had risen.

The way the men stood showed an earthy, mellow, and friendly feeling, the happy outcome of many market journeys. Journeys besides which the elm tree, the white moon even, yea, the very stars themselves appeared to be but of recent creation.

Mr. Told looked the Clerk up and down; the farmer was justly annoyed.

‘ ’Twern’t nor purse,’ he answered gruffly, ‘ ’twere me wallet!’

An exciting silence followed after the farmer’s words, a stillness that hung and brooded round and about the men who waited beside Mr. Balliboy’s car.

Each of the travellers knew very well the farmer’s wallet; it was a large and generally a bulky book. It was the book that, ever since Mr. Told had been in possession of the Rectory farm, had been the envy of the village. For Mr. Potten himself, the undertaker, who knew the colour of a bank cheque, could not afford, even in a happy time of pestilence, to carry anything about his person so warmly filled with bank-notes as the farmer’s wallet.

‘Did ’e ’ave much money in thee’s book, farmer?’ questioned Mr. Morsay, with a placid grin of supreme contentment. As he spoke the words the Clerk looked fixedly up at the moon, in order that the twinkle in his own eye should not be noticed by the farmer.

‘Maybe a little,’ replied Mr. Told, in a tone that almost pointed out the large figure that he had really there.

‘Maybe a little,’ muttered the farmer again, as he cautiously edged himself nearer to the broken car.

Mr. Balliboy noticed the motion, and said a little mournfully, ‘Thee’s just step inside of ’er, farmer; no doubt thee’s wallet be there.’

A new cloud of possible disappointment touched the hearts of the onlookers as Mr. Told climbed in.

Inside the stranded car, from time to time, a little jet of flame would start up, as if by magic, and then slowly die down, only to be followed by another.

Mr. Told was striking matches. After striking the whole boxful, the farmer climbed out again.

‘Found en?’ inquired the Clerk of Norbury.

‘Nor I ain’t,’ answered the farmer.

Meanwhile the carrier was considering a new aspect of the situation, an aspect that apparently he had taken a long while to get the way of.

‘Somethink be gone wrong wi’ car,’ said Mr. Balliboy, as though for the first time in his life he had boldly discovered a great elemental secret.

Once having made his plunge into the wild waters of conjecture, the carrier bravely continued.

‘Somethink be real wrong wi’ car; she never broke down ’ereabouts afore.’

Mr. Balliboy seemed to consider for a moment.

‘She did used to break down by wold Wainfleet Lion,’ he said musingly. ‘ ’Twere always ’er place by wold Bewsley’s, an’ we be a long mile passed thik by now.’

‘Maybe,’ said Mr. Potten, who was wont at this juncture to offer his advice. ‘Maybe that some woon do live at Wainfleet who do understand they things.’ Mr. Potten indicated by a gesture of his hand that he meant the car.

Almost mechanically, as though a hidden force impelled them, but a force that had now become an exact idea in each mind, the moon-enlightened countrymen, each with his long shadow thrown upon the hedge, began to move in the direction of Wainfleet, the village that they had left behind them a little while before.

‘’Tain’t often she do get passed thik Wainfleet Lion,’ said Mr. Balliboy, hoping to shorten the long mile by speaking the friendly name.

Before going any further, however, Mr. Balliboy turned and looked back.

‘I s’pose,’ he said, after looking for some moments at his conveyance, ‘I s’pose as I ’ad best go back an’ tell she that the car be broke down.’

After taking this formidable resolution, the carrier slowly commenced to walk back again over the half-hundred yards that, in his longing for the Wainfleet Lion, he had placed between himself and his silent possession.

The three other travellers turned likewise and watched Mr. Balliboy walking.

The Norbury carrier moved slowly. His figure, so well known upon the Romantown road and so suitably placed there, answered happily the look of confidence bestowed upon him by his companions in the night’s adventure. To their minds indeed no time could ever have existed without the presence of Mr. Balliboy and his broken-down car upon the Romantown road. The very automobile itself, though an invention of recent years, had, by its association with the figure of Mr. Balliboy and the old-world village of Norbury, taken upon it the burden of the ages, so that even the machine was become, from its close contact with primitive man, as old as the wayside hills.

Arrived once again at the car, Mr. Balliboy adjusted and turned the front handle, rather less angrily perhaps than he had done earlier in the evening, but still with force enough to start the engine if it had wished to move.

After so doing, and by way of following the usual precedent that he had long ago set up for himself, Mr. Balliboy climbed into his seat and, with a set look of determination upon his face, he held the steering gear as though it was his immediate intention to pass with extraordinary dexterity a whole convoy of army tractors.

After this lively demonstration of the futility of setting a mere human will against the innate stubbornness of inanimate matter, Mr. Balliboy spoke from his seat, addressing words—though looking himself into the works beneath him—to some one who was still inside.

Chapter 3

‘Beg pardon, Miss,’ said Mr. Balliboy, as though he spoke to a bar of iron beneath him. ‘Beg pardon, Miss, but wold car be broke.’

There was nothing unduly nervous in the carrier’s tone. He was merely saying what he must have said a good many times since he had commenced his great venture—a venture that was to him as big an undertaking as the starting of the Durande, immortalized by Victor Hugo and owned by Mess Lethierry. But even though the car had broken down before, there was something in this particular June night that continued to trouble the mind of the Norbury carrier.

It might have been the moon, it might have been the ghostly shadow of the elm tree, or it might have been the carrier’s own doubt as to whether the back gate of the Wainfleet Lion would be unlocked for the travellers. Whatever it really was that disturbed him, Mr. Balliboy appeared to have lost his usual cheeriness of demeanour.

‘Beg pardon, Miss,’ said Mr. Balliboy again, ‘but car be broke.’

From inside the car there came the sound of a full, rich, female voice, a voice that deeply touched the sultry voluptuousness of the June night.

‘I hope you will not keep me long here, carrier. I promised my aunt, Mrs. Hinden, to reach Norbury to-night.’

‘Oh no, Miss, not long,’ said Mr. Balliboy more cheerfully. ‘I be only going back along to Wainfleet to get some ’elp. There be a man at Wainfleet that do know me car, Miss.’

‘What was that rude farmer hunting about for in here? He looked at me by the light of his nasty matches as though he thought I was a thief; I’m not used to being looked at like that, carrier.’

There was something about this complaint uttered by his female passenger that displeased Mr. Balliboy. He looked round at her. ‘Certainly she was,’ as he had thought more than once when he had seen her, ‘too pretty to be safe.’ And now, with that deep musical tone of hers, she seemed

to be in league with the night wind, in touch with the leafy fragrance of the woods.

Mr. Balliboy shivered.

‘Thik poor man were looking for ’is money, Miss,’ the carrier said, still deeply intent as it seemed in watching the silent works below him. ‘Only ’is money, Miss, that very like ’e dropped in road.’

‘Perhaps he may have,’ said the voice inside in an unconcerned tone, and added somewhat pettishly, ‘How long will you be before you get the car to go again, carrier?’

‘Twenty minutes,’ readily replied Mr. Balliboy, ‘or it may be half an hour.’

‘Very well then, I’ll wait here; I suppose I shall be quite safe.’

To see danger of any kind upon the Romantown road seemed to the carrier’s mind to be the very outside and height of improbability. Mr. Balliboy looked out into the still June night, he looked at the stars. The stars appeared to be a very long way off and very small. The stars were not likely to injure him, but the elm tree was nearer.

It was really to reassure himself rather than his passenger that he spoke so loud.

‘O thee be quite safe ’ere, Miss; they bain’t nor soldiers now to come by, only woon or two wold farmers mid be coming, Miss, and maybe thik Portstown mail. Now don’t ’e take no notice of what thik mail man mid say, for ’tain’t the first time ’ev seen me wold van in ditch, an’ as the poor man ’s got a live ’orse, you see ’e do make fun sometimes; ’tis natural that ’e should, Miss. But bless the wold ’oman, the ’ll be safe enough inside of she, Miss. I do mind when Mrs. Crossley did stay in thik car all woon night when I were woonce broke down.’

Giving his passenger this parting foretaste of what her fate might be, Mr. Balliboy left the car and set out at a brisk pace to rejoin his companions.

Chapter 4

When the Norbury carrier was out of sight, the lonely occupant of the car alighted and stood in the road. She had jumped lightly from the car, showing a suppleness of body very pleasant to the creatures of the night, whose eyes no doubt were watching from out the shadows of the hedge and from the leafy dimness of the old elm.

The object of interest, both to us and to them, was a young woman dressed in the uniform of the Army, as the great religious movement is called among its votaries, the word 'salvation' being usually omitted by the initiated.

Her uniform was not out of place in the road we have described. The still, summer night suited the dark blue colour, and the human touch the lonely woman gave to the scene went deeper into nature than mere words can tell.

It was proper that a solitary female preacher of a sadly stricken and outworn faith should stand there so wistfully in the moonlight, drawing out from the subconscious and deep-rooted vegetation the thoughts that twined and twisted around the fossilized feet of the older gods whose upper bodies have long ago been dissolved in dust.

Though the woman's touch went deep, she moved with a charming lightness of motion that expressed not only determination but wayward passion.

For some minutes she stood thoughtfully in the road, as though she waited for the environment of white radiance and soft greenery to enter into and become a living part of herself.

The moon, it might be said, had taken her figure into the lap of its whiteness, in order to caress her the more, for its white beams touched her cheeks and reddened her lips and cast against the hedge the shadow of her womanly form.

It was to this hedge that the lonely traveller turned, moving thereto with her usual grace. Standing in the road, she had been attracted to a climbing

plant that grew in the hedge.

Reaching up, the girl plucked away a part of the plant, and with a childlike impulse she placed the leaves like a chain around her neck. Somewhere or other she had heard that this plant was of a poisonous nature, and poison was what she loved.

During the time that Mr. Balliboy and his friends had been waiting, there had been a kind of joviality about this spot in the road where the Norbury car had chanced to break down, caused no doubt by the humorous simplicity of the worthy countrymen.

So far, indeed, the evening had been pleasantly human, and the life of nature had at least outwardly responded to the homely jests, the usual merry sallies of wit of the rustic travellers to Norbury.

This was now all changed.

Thoughts and feelings had come into prominence that were not friendly to human life; there were movements abroad that even in the loveliness of this summer’s night portended evil. The leaves rustled in the elm, but there was no wind. The curtain in the front part of the carrier’s car shook, but no one had lifted it. A shadow passed over the face of the moon, but there were no clouds.

A curious, uncanny feeling had come to haunt the night, a feeling that aroused the belief that under every green and lovely leaf there moved a foul and slimy worm, that sucked all the beauty of the leaf and contaminated the green glory with its wormy leavings.

There was an odour of sickness and corruption about the place that rose up out of the deep foliage of the wood that was beyond the hedge.

The evil odour moved near the broken car and hovered about the form of the young woman as she stood with the leaves of the climbing plant in her hand. It was as though, having once touched the dark green thing, its glossy vine-shaped leaves had entwined themselves in the very innermost womb of the young woman's future fortunes, and by holding it so near to her she had drawn out of the earth evil vegetable spirits that could hurt, and in their own good time even slay, the object of their hatred.

After thus amusing herself by pulling down the leaves from the hedge, our lonely young woman climbed lightly and easily into Mr. Balliboy's car, being not in the least depressed by her surroundings. Once again in the car, she settled herself in a corner from whence she could see the road.

After carefully looking first one way and then another through the car windows, she took from under her seat a wicker basket. Opening it cautiously she drew therefrom a heavy wallet, such as a rich countryman might use when going to market.

Slipping off the band, the young woman opened the book, that was, as she had hoped and expected, filled with Treasury notes.

Laying out the notes open upon her knees, the youthful traveller carefully counted them, forgetting, now that she was so engrossed in the excitement of the moment, to keep a look-out through the window.

The farmer's wallet was stuffed with one-pound and ten-shilling notes, the value of which the deserted passenger learnt, after doing her little sum of compound addition, was £110, 10s.

For awhile she dreamingly watched the notes that lay upon her knees, without even a passing thought that she might be interrupted in her reverie.

The magic in the money held her eyes down. She could read so much written there, more, far more, than was expressed by the mere numbers.

The girl started. There was movement somewhere.

Perhaps it was a mouse seized in the cruel claws of an owl, or a little wren that a large snake had taken.

The girl dared not look up, she could only watch the money.

Chapter 5

Just as the young uniformed woman was upon the point of putting the notes away, she heard another slight noise behind her.

Looking quickly around, she saw the eyes of a young man at the window. The eyes were fixed upon her. The owner of the eyes did not give her time to replace the farmer’s wallet in her bag, although, in the excitement of the moment, she had succeeded in crushing the notes in a confused heap into the wallet.

The young man who now climbed into the car pointedly raised his hat, saying as he did so, in a tone of mock politeness,

‘Good evening, Miss Crowle.’

‘I found them,’ Miss Crowle said nervously. ‘I shall say I found them all in the road.’ In a sudden flash of imagination she saw herself finding them.

All the way from Romantown the farmer’s pocket had been so very near to her, and the farmer had been so excitedly talking about the price of corn to Mr. Potten.

‘I found the money in the road,’ Miss Crowle repeated with more force, being a little recovered from her fears.

The young man laughed.

‘You will say nothing of the kind, you thief! Though, come, we will share the spoil; it will go the quicker.’ The young man watched her eagerly. Miss Crowle trembled under the intense scrutiny of those searching eyes.

‘I didn’t know you could be so wicked,’ she said meekly.

Looking into the young man’s eyes the girl felt the full force of all the earthiness about her, drawn up by the summer night’s warmth. It was as though an inner voice was saying to her: ‘The vegetable planted by God must grow. Mud-sodden, encrusted with wormy slime, it must grow. Out of the deep weedy bottom of the sea it must grow. In the mud of the far past, in the mud of the far future, it must grow. There can be no end to its growing.’

‘You remember,’ she said coaxingly, ‘you must remember how we met once by the Romantown wall.’

‘And now I catch you stealing,’ the young man said rudely, ‘and you want to take me back to the Romantown wall. But you see I take more interest in a girl who steals than in a stone wall. We are quite alone now, dear; the Norbury folk don’t leave old Bewsley’s very soon when they are once settled in. I heard the old farmer grumbling about his wallet when I passed the inn, the wallet that you stole.’

Miss Crowle was silent; she looked around as any trapped creature might have looked for a way of escape.

She remembered so well their meeting near the Church training college at Romantown. She had met him again, too, by the old Roman wall.

It was one of her whims to meet him there. The old piece of Roman wall had always attracted her. Indeed, she had often fancied that she would, if she had lived in those ancient times, have given herself, body and soul, to those tall soldiers of the empire, with their hatchet faces and short sharp swords. She remembered now that even beside the wall, in the lamplight, she had been upset by the young man’s dark eyes. Miss Crowle could not help feeling, as he looked at her now, how cold they were, those eyes of his.

The eyes still watched her intently. She was rather pleased now, as she had been by the wall, that she, a poor railway porter’s daughter and a simple Army girl, should be talked to at all, even in a rude way, by the son of the Rector of Norbury.

Chapter 6

Hugh Crossley looked at Mary Crowle more meaningly.

The young man was attracted by the situation, by the heavily scented June night, by the simple dark uniform of the girl.

Hugh Crossley had lived what is generally called a good life up to that moment. He had really only against him just the one unfortunate affair that sent him down from Oxford. Even that unfortunate matter had not been wholly his fault—there were others implicated. And the idea to undermine the path across the old court that the Dean always used when he went to chapel was almost irresistible to any young man of spirit. The thing, too, had been done so well and skilfully, with the help of so much pioneer knowledge brought from overseas. How could the boys know that the foolish old gentleman would fall so heavily that he must needs break his neck? a neck, too, that was by no means one of the thinnest. It was quite amusing to watch from young Cannan's rooms the old white-headed man, thinking perhaps of his apple orchard in Kent, and walking so innocently into the trap.

Hugh had found the change rather a comedown of course: all the strict ordeal of the Romantown training college after golden Oxford; but it was the best, indeed the only course that could be taken in the circumstances.

Finding in Mary Crowle no creature of shreds and patches, but a being who knew well how to take and eat of the dark bread of human passion, Hugh had felt he was within reach of his final when Mary Crowle informed him that she was going to Norbury. Missing the carrier, Hugh followed on foot.

'We are not at Romantown now,' Hugh murmured. 'We are alone.'

Mary was silent, she was looking at him, she was trembling.

She still held a leaf of the green climbing plant in her hand.

All at once she pressed the leaf to her lips and kissed, kissed, kissed.

The night, thick and heavy with growing plant-life, listened; the fronds from the hidden roots spread and grew.

Nowhere in the summer night was there virginity, nowhere was there pure negation. All was growth.

Hugh looked away from her at the moon; as he looked the moon grew red as blood.

Hugh Crossley was now thinking of Mary coldly and concisely. His thoughts were leading him on. His thoughts? No, they were not his thoughts; they were the night's, they were the moon's, they were the urge, urge of immortal matter—the urge that bade all vegetation to grow in the night in order to meet the dawn.

Hugh looked at her eyes; they were shining like stars. 'You did steal that money,' he said.

Chapter 7

Less time had been occupied in this affair of the passions than might have been expected.

For passions drive on apace, and however long the opening chapters of a love story may be, the consummation itself, when reached, is quickly over.

Hugh Crossley now held his companion's hand. The two sat quietly near to one another, hardly speaking.

Perhaps they were a little humbled, and might have wondered whether the soft June night, and even Mr. Balliboy's car, and the moon too, had, after all, witnessed anything so very interesting or surprising.

Presently Miss Crowle released her hand, though she still permitted Hugh to sit near to her.

She began to speak a little more kindly, but still in the same tone that she had used to Mr. Balliboy when he had left her in the car alone.

'That stupid carrier said he would be back in half an hour,' she nearly laughed.

Hugh Crossley wondered how she could speak so lightly at such a time; he could not force his passions in a moment to become normal again. Hugh tried not to care, he tried to fancy the world as a gay place where such events came naturally and went easily, where free love was an everyday affair in the streets.

But he could not force his mind to see it in this happy way. He began to dread the still, June night, he began to dread the moon, he began to see fear even in the dark green plant that grew in the hedge. He heard everywhere an unmistakable voice that promised him dread reprisals.

Hugh remembered that when he had helped to kill the old College Dean, he had been sorry, moderately sorry. But afterwards, when he was alone in his rooms, he had thought with more than half a smile that there were plenty of Deans, and that the old man with his foolish craze for monograms had always been rather a trial to the College.

Hugh could not understand Mary. 'She should have been as excited as he was,' he thought, when, instead of excitement, there was a quietude, a peace about her, exactly the same peace that there was in the still growing matter of the summer night. It seemed to him as though Nature had really been in league with her, bending the tall trees at her bidding, softening the hard earth of a man, twisting the individual force so that it became universal. Whereas in Hugh all was different. There were dark foaming waters that dashed together and roared unseen, as they beat against his life.

Hugh tried again to make the matter common to his mind, to laugh it away, to hold God's hand off the affair. Hugh tried to excuse himself. He fancied it was the uniform that had led him on so far.

'One never knows,' he thought, 'what such simple clothes will do for a girl; they often make her a thousand times more desirable. A uniform has a wonderful way of enhancing values; it sets a girl off as a hidden thing, a thing to be discovered. Without a uniform a girl was just a girl, but garbed so dramatically she became different, almost as different as if she had been naked.'

Hugh climbed down from the car and stood beside Mary Crowle, who had already stepped out. She was looking at the green leaves of the plant that grew in the hedge.

Mary Crowle had never before been so impressed by any kind of vegetation. But this plant—and she could not get the strange idea out of her mind—had spoken to her. Mary turned to Hugh and inquired in an ordinary, commonplace manner what the plant's name was.

'Oh, the thing's called Bryony,' Hugh replied sullenly. 'There is White Bryony and Black Bryony—this is Black Bryony.'

'It's poisonous, isn't it?'

'Yes, the berries are.'

He wondered again how the girl could talk as if nothing had happened. Hugh stood a little aside and watched her as she pulled down some more leaves from the hedge. She was smiling.

'A girl never really cares,' Hugh thought, 'never.'

Hugh wished that he had never started to follow her on foot from Romantown. He wished that he had gone instead to the prayer-meeting got up by Mr. Wilson, one of the senior students.

Mr. Wilson amused him sometimes. He was a man who was always prating about the folly of the Reformation, and yet he liked prayer-meetings.

And, of course, instead of going to the prayer-meeting, Hugh might have taken a little evening stroll down a road called, he fancied, 'Mill Lane.' There would have been the chance of meeting a girl whom he had seen a day or two before talking to a railway porter; even then the girl had looked away from the porter and smiled at him.

Mary Crowle yawned, as if she had grown tired of his company and tired of the warm summer's night.

'Oh, there's some one coming on a bicycle,' she said.

Hugh looked in the Romantown direction and watched the approach of a solitary figure.

Chapter 8

Seeing by the side of the road the broken-down car and the two young people standing near to it, the new-comer, a tall, bearded man, dismounted from his bicycle and politely asked if he could in any way help them.

‘This lady wishes to get to Norbury.’ Hugh Crossley spoke as if he had just met her.

‘Yes, it was most unfortunate the car breaking down,’ Mary Crowle remarked without the least nervousness. ‘Most unfortunate. My aunt, Mrs. Hinden, will wonder what has happened to me.’

Without replying at once to her complaint, the new-comer bent down to examine his lamp. When he straightened himself again, he said in a slightly altered tone,

‘You are very welcome to ride this bicycle to Norbury, madam. No doubt you have noticed that it is a lady’s. My own having been badly punctured, I was forced to take this one from the shop because they had no other. Of course you can ride?’

‘Oh yes, I can ride a bicycle,’ Mary said, laughing.

‘I am going to Norbury too,’ the stranger remarked, ‘but I would rather walk than ride.’

After demurring for a little, and being assured again that the traveller really wished to walk, Miss Crowle accepted the offer from the bearded stranger, and giving a last quick look at the eyes that had betrayed her, she mounted the bicycle and rode away. As she passed on, the moon, as if it spoke the last word in the night’s adventure, threw a fleeting female shadow upon the hedge.

When the young woman was quite out of sight, the stranger introduced himself. ‘I am Matthew Hurd, the new schoolmaster at Norbury,’ he said quietly, though in a tone that showed him to be more at his ease with a gentleman than with a lady.

‘Oh yes, I have heard of you,’ Hugh Crossley replied absent-mindedly. ‘My father, you know, is the Rector of Norbury. I hope you like your work?’

‘Well, to tell the truth,’ answered Matthew Hurd, who seemed pleased to have some one to talk to, ‘I am not as happy with the children as I had hoped to be. You have heard the phrase “country matters.” Hamlet uses it. It is only “country matters” that the children of Norbury are interested in; so, of course, they are a little annoyed with an interloper coming into their scheme of things and trying to put other matters into their heads. You see, any one who wishes to really educate becomes in more than one way an enemy to the people.’

Hugh had not been listening to his companion.

While Mary had been near the night had been so alive, so impressively on the watch. As soon as the female figure had departed all this was changed. The stars looked down at the world coldly from afar off. The moon had paled, the very hedges became dusty and dull-coloured. The magic of night was gone.

Hugh Crossley saw himself. He was merely walking to Norbury with the new schoolmaster, a commonplace thing to be doing at the best. He was a little late, the summer night was warm; that was all. No doubt there would be something to eat when he reached home. He would call up Mathilda and she would come down, rubbing her sleep-sodden eyes. Mathilda would get him some cold meat and lemonade, and, of course, he would go to bed. Oh yes, of course.

He was now walking beside the schoolmaster; ‘the schoolmaster,’ he repeated to himself. The name was familiar to Hugh, but what of that? so many people had the same name in the world. The schoolmaster was talking again, but not about women. Why was he not talking about women? No, the schoolmaster was talking about himself. ‘He had come into the country for quiet, because there had been troubles in his life, troubles.’

Hugh did not care.

There was something uncouth about the schoolmaster. Hugh thought it was the way the fellow’s beard spread all over his face so untidily.

Hugh was still kissing her, still kissing her.

But supposing the schoolmaster had come first to the car, would Nature have planned mischief between him and her? Perhaps the beard would have got in the way. Would the dark Bryony plant have twined soul to soul and lips to lips?

Oh no, it could not have been so; Nature could never have made a new world for him with that beard! Nature would have hidden herself under her green garments. She—Mary—would have ridden away on his bicycle; nothing would have happened. What dust there was in the road, and near to the road there were the plain, common fields.

Hugh remembered the farmer's pocketbook. Mary had let it fall after she had stuffed the notes in, and he had picked it up.

Had Mary really stolen it from the farmer?

Of course he had not meant to say that she had stolen it. But all the same the idea had served him well, and she seemed guilty.

Hugh remembered the crisp look of the notes. He saw the money concretely. The notes took the form and substance of pleasant things, of white wine and cigarettes and merry music. It even became new suits of well-cut, gentlemanly clothes, it became the bright eyes of charming girls, of girls like her.

Why should he not keep the money?

Hugh walked along more happily; he even smiled.

He might as well keep the farmer's wallet, he thought. Mr. Told would never have taken the numbers of the notes.

Oh, these farmers! Hugh saw the farmer as merely a peasant tradesman, the most sordid and reactionary kind of man upon the earth.

All tradesmen stole, he told himself; they never did anything else, their whole lives were made up of thieving, they stole whenever they could lay their hands on anything that could be moved.

Hugh had once seen the rich farmer stealing a piece of string that had been left upon a station bookstall.

Hugh began to grow disdainful of the world he lived in. After all, a summer's night was but a summer's night. It passed away, and then the birds sang; their silly chirpings were always beginning, always beginning at dawn.

Hugh Crossley looked at his companion. A long, lean, pitiful, bearded fellow of a schoolmaster, he thought him. A long, lean cat on the white moonlit road.

Should he, after all, give up the farmer's wallet; would Mary talk?

Oh no, not as long as she remembered the Bryony leaves. Wonderful, wonderful leaves, vine-shaped and shining so clear in the moonlight. Of course Nature had helped. Nature always helps the man, always helps the man.

Hugh's thoughts still went running on.

Mary had kissed the leaves, they had got themselves pressed near to her lips. She had kissed them in an agony of love; she would have kissed anything, anything, then.

Chapter 9

A gentle summer night's wind met the walkers as they climbed the little hill and passed the first house in Norbury. This first Norbury dwelling-house was the village inn. A happy house, wherein during the proper hours of entertainment the cheerful Mrs. Hinden dispensed many friendly and kindly words along with her well-filled cups.

A friendly destiny—no doubt in answer to her kindliness to others—had helped her to a small private income derived from the part ownership of a Weyminster trading vessel, of which her late husband had been the captain.

Through one of the curtained upper windows of the Norbury inn, Hugh Crossley could see the shadow of a girl undressing. Hugh waited for a moment in front of the window. In a moment or two there stood before the curtain the girl's figure unclothed.

Hugh remembered, as he overtook his companion, that Mrs. Hinden had a niece in the Salvation Army. He had heard her talked about, but he had never suspected her to be the very girl that he had met by the Romantown wall. Hugh also recollected that, when he was last at home, he had overheard Mr. Morsay informing his father that a woman preacher was coming to the village.

Mr. Morsay had told the news very gloomily, having got into his head that the preaching woman was a Mormon, and that she was coming to decoy the Norbury girls to Salt Lake City.

The travellers had now reached the middle of the village. Opening the schoolhouse gate, Matthew Hurd bid his companion good-night, saying at the same time that he had nothing to offer by way of a supper.

Before proceeding up the hill in the direction of the Rectory, Hugh Crossley stopped for a moment and listened. From the Romantown direction a sound came to him; it was the slow murmur of a distant machine.

The sound stilled, died away, and then became more distinct as the still far-away car turned the corner behind the hill and entered the local Norbury road.

Hugh Crossley smiled.

Mr. Balliboy was returning from market.

Chapter 10

Returning, as it is proper we should do, to find our other wayfarers of this summer's night fantasy, it is necessary for us to enter the Wainfleet Lion by the back gate of that cheerful inn.

Here Mr. Balliboy and his friends were happily met, as their habit was when the carrier's car broke down. Sitting upon benches in the back-yard, the lines of their homely faces expressed a complete concurrence and a happy connivance at all God's earthly laws—laws concluded and completed by the last dread and certain climax of death.

At the time we enter, the good gossips were employed in watching the kindly landlord, Mr. Bewsley, and waiting for events to occur.

Farmer Told alone looked mournfully down at his own boots, his thoughts still dwelling sadly and dismally upon the loss of his wallet.

Every now and again he had mechanically gone through the same ritual of feeling in his pockets, a business that he had already performed twenty or thirty times since he had left the car.

Mr. Told could now only look at his boots, for his rustic mind at last saw his loss as an unrecoverable necessity. In the farmer's mind his own boots now took the form of a valuable dead creature that belonged to him—a horse perhaps?

A very prominent local figure had joined the company in the person of Mr. Thomas Stole, the Wainfleet blacksmith, a man of might and readiness at his trade, and a fine player at quoits and ninepins. Mr. Balliboy had met the blacksmith in the Wainfleet street, and together they had proceeded to the inn, in order that they might attain unto the suitable and hopeful frame of mind that added so much to the chance and likelihood of Mr. Balliboy's car being at last mended.

Mr. Stole knew exactly what had happened. He had remarked to his wife that the carrier's conveyance looked more than usually shaky as it passed through the village. Mr. Stole then and there licked his lips in imitation of his own cat, who expected a supper that evening of bacon ends. Mr. Stole

knew that the same trouble always happened to Mr. Balliboy's car, it was always the same breakage; he could set the thing going again very quickly when he once reached it.

But Mr. Stole loved to move slowly, and he likewise loved beer and lively conversation. There was a natural and solid merriment about the blacksmith's leisurely walk that was always a pleasure to see. No one could watch him pass up or down the Wainfleet street without believing the joyful fact that such a thing as native and earth-born humour really existed in the world. In one respect, and in only one, the blacksmith was a mystic. To Mr. Stole Mr. Balliboy's car was a symbol of a better world, not with harp-playing, but with Mr. Morsay's droll tales and Mr. Potten's gruesome ones as fitting entertainment.

It was a pleasant pastime for Mr. Stole to step up to the Lion of a summer's evening in company perhaps of the rich Mr. Told, and to sit in the back-yard with the other good folks, while the cups clattered, and each man grinned like a happy ape at the moon. And soon—almost too soon—to walk out into the well-known road so graciously with the jolly beer in 's belly, and discover the broken car, and so to the mending with many a little quip and jest about his ears, until the thing slid merrily away.

It had come to be an established custom at these meetings at the Lion that Mr. Told should pay for the beer. But upon this unlucky first evening of our story, Mr. Told, having lost his wallet, could only, as was his habit in misfortune, place upon the ground before him the dead body of a horse or valuable cow. No one in the company knew exactly what would occur now that the farmer had seen so clearly the sad creature and therefore could not pay. And so in every man's mind the simple question repeated itself over and over again—who would pay?

Of course Mr. Morsay could not be expected to, for being Clerk at the Norbury Church, he was in virtue and consideration for the grand office totally and wholly exempted.

' 'Twould a bring bad luck to all of we if I paid anythink,' Mr. Morsay remarked. 'An' I don't want to 'urt no woon.'

This praiseworthy and peaceful sentiment of the good Clerk's was naturally and properly applauded.

The guests looked at one another, while Mr. Bewsley, the landlord, proceeded cautiously to the yard gate and silently locked it. Returning again

to his guests, Mr. Bewsley feelingly explained to them how sad and uncertain was the temper of the village policeman.

‘ ’Tis as ’ard for I to put up wi’ ’im as for ’is own wedded wife,’ said Mr. Bewsley. ‘ ’E mid be thirsty or ’e mid not be thirsty, that’s ’ow thik poor man be, an so ’s we be best to bide ’ere quiet like.’

It was at this juncture during the evening’s proceedings that all the company, with the one mournful exception of Mr. Told, looked at Mr. Potten. One watched the undertaker’s lower garments, another intently regarded his hat, while the blacksmith appeared to be counting the buttons of his waistcoat.

The Clerk of Norbury was the first to break the waiting silence.

‘ ’Twill be an un’ealthy fall this year,’ he remarked, wishing to start Mr. Potten’s thoughts in the hope and cheerful prospect of business that might lead to beer for all.

‘Mark me words,’ continued Mr. Morsay, hitting his own knee as though he were hammering in coffin nails, ‘mark me words, gossips, thik green climbing plant that I did see a-growing by wayside do tell tales of woe. Me ’erb book ’id in ’ousen thatch do a-know what thik do say. ’Tis known well there that they green leaves a-climbing up so strong do mean a fat churchyard in late summer-time.’

‘I’ve ’eard the same,’ said Mr. Balliboy, who was willing to affirm anything that would aid so righteous a cause as the getting of a drop of drink. ‘Yes, I’ve ’eard same about thik green, climbing, snaky thing. True ’tis this coming autumn will be a sad woon for we poor living folks. ’Tis to be afeard that some of we a-sitting ’ere mid be wanting they four planks a-varnished.’

This bringing the matter so very near to home in no way pleased the Clerk, although he had been the first to touch the subject.

‘There be wolder woons,’ he said, ‘than we. There’s thik wold Susan Gale; ’er won’t a-live long wi’ brandy bottle aside of bed, an young William be sure to want a brass-furnished woon.’

For a while Mr. Potten remained thoughtfully rubbing his chin. He then looked up at the moon. There was something corpse-like about the moon that pleased the undertaker. Mr. Potten listened; in the distance, at some farm-house, a dog howled. Mr. Potten understood the sound as a portent of doom.

The undertaker ordered the beer.

Chapter 11

‘She won’t ’ave ’e, then?’

It was Mr. Told who, awaking from his lethargy, asked the usual question, the cheerful beer having effected his release from the prison of his sorrows.

‘Nor,’ replied Mr. Bewsley mournfully, ‘she won’t.’

The company became interested, the moon itself seemed to listen.

The time had come at the Wainfleet Lion, as it always came—if the gossips waited long enough—for the prime discussion, the ever-loved discussion of Mr. Bewsley’s matrimonial project.

‘To me own thinking, thik Mrs. ’Inden be a-making a grand mistake,’ Mr. Morsay said solemnly, ‘though I don’t like to say nothing again the ’oman.’ The Clerk held out a lean, earthy finger in the direction of Mr. Bewsley. ‘All ’s same, but there be a fine great bachelor man standing up there again ’is own pump ’andle, and bain’t Mrs. ’Inden, I asks all ’ee ’ere present, a ’oman whose ’usband be dead?’

‘ ’Ow many times ’ave ’ee asked thik ’oman?’ said Mr. Potten, intimating by a gesture that the cups could be filled again.

Upon this inquiry being made there was a general hush as though a king’s speech were to be read.

Looking in the direction of his own back-door, Mr. Bewsley called,

‘John, bring out thik slate.’

Between this command and the fulfilment thereof there was an interval that seemed to add to the importance of the occasion—a pause of gentle negligence, long enough to make the gossips wonder whether John was in hearing, but not too long for the patience of those in waiting.

Every one in the neighbourhood of Romantown knew John and his complexities and shortcomings. Old John of Wainfleet was indeed the very counter-type of the good and willing fellow with whom the merry prince and

the fat Falstaff were wont to jest. Though our own Wainfleet John was somewhat greyer and older than the other, he had the same innocent manner and the same quaint harassed smile as Shakespeare's tapster.

Time, you know, loves to watch the minutes playing at Wainfleet, until they gather round the human heads, to mock or hurry those that are waiting.

In a moment or two, however, the back-door was opened and the old servant appeared. It was easy to guess from his uneasy though not unhappy gait and somewhat untidy appearance that his wits were broken and scattered, and had run on into the happy regions of careless uncertainty. With the bar lamp burning behind him and a large jug of ale in hand—for he thought his master had called for it—John might have walked out of an old German story-book as a natural cousin of a guileless Hans.

John filled the mugs and waited.

'John,' said Mr. Bewsley once more, 'bring thik slate.'

Although he heard very well what his master said, the aged retainer did not at once retire, but glanced first at the moon and then at the company, as though he beheld a sort of connecting link between the human faces below and the lunar orb above.

Having apparently satisfied himself that the man in the moon had no cup to fill, John shuffled indoors. After a few minutes the old man wandered uncertainly out again, carrying a slate that he brought near and held up to the eyes of his master. The slate was covered with chalked crosses.

Receiving the slate as a king in the olden days might have received a crown, with a look of fitting pride, Mr. Bewsley, feeling himself to be the centre of interest to all beholders, handed the slate to the Clerk of Norbury, asking him as he did so to count the marks.

Mr. Morsay counted slowly.

No miser could have counted his gold with more intense care than the good Clerk of Norbury bestowed upon his task.

Mr. Morsay felt his own greatness.

That Mr. Bewsley believed that he could count, and that he therefore entrusted him with the task before the eyes of the others, filled Mr. Morsay's heart with pride.

He felt as great as when, in the Norbury Churchyard, Mr. Crossley intimated by that little downward motion of the hand that the 'dust to dust'

moment had come for the handful of earth to be sprinkled upon the lid of the lowered coffin.

'I do make they come to woon 'undred an sax.'

No accountant could have expressed a decision with more unalterable confidence than did the good Clerk of Norbury.

Mr. Bewsley looked round at the company, his face showing the sure pride of one who is certain of applause.

'They crosses do show the number of times that I've asked Mrs. 'Inden,' he remarked sadly, trying to squeeze into his merry face a mournful expression.

'Don't 'ee be fearful, landlord,' Mr. Morsay murmured. 'She'll come round to thee's beck and call woon of these summer days. 'Tain't nature for she to bide at Norbury lonely like; we'll drink thee's wedding in before swallows to go. I do mind now me wold 'oman dreamed t' other night of new-born babies; no doubt thik bad dream do mean thee's wedding, landlord.'

Mr. Morsay coughed pleasantly.

No one of the party in the Lion back-yard was more impressed by the number of the crosses than Mr. Told. The mysteries of marks and signs had always attracted him. Sacks of corn he knew could be added up in this way, and now there were these grand question crosses that could increase too.

Mr. Told did not take his eyes off the landlord of the Lion; the farmer was considering the situation. He wondered why Mrs. Hinden had refused so many times so good a match. The farmer expected to see something in or about Mr. Bewsley that would explain. At last Mr. Told ventured.

'Be thee too wold or be thee too stout for thik 'oman?' he inquired, regarding the landlord as he would a prime beast in the Romantown market-place.

'If thik be all,' Mr. Morsay said, interrupting the farmer, who was about to speak again, 'if thik be all, the plant by wayside would take 'ee down a bit if thee drink 'is root in white wine, so do say me wold granfer's book under thatch at Norbury.'

Mr. Bewsley shook his head and listened. Far away a cow lowed. Mr. Bewsley moved slowly in the direction of the yard door.

This movement of the landlord's expressed better than words could have done the natural and proper wish of the proprietor of the tavern to climb up into the great four-post bedstead, so near to the mighty emblem of the king of beasts that swung newly painted outside. A fine resting-place it was too, this old lion bed, fixed and settled by the weight of its owner into the front bedroom floor. And so securely lodged that old John, the servant, had given up for more than twenty years trying to move it.

The sign for departure having been given, Mr. Balliboy and his friends rose reluctantly, their stay at the Wainfleet Lion having been this evening more than usually pleasant. And now that they were forced to move, the old twists and tangles of their former selves became real again.

'I never minded thik preaching 'oman in car; maybe she be a-getting tired of waiting for I,' said Mr. Balliboy. And added, as though to throw in a touch of wisdom for the general good: 'They 'omen be somethink; sometimes they will wait for I, and sometimes they won't wait for I. How's a man to know what they 'omen will do or won't do when they be so minded?'

Chapter 12

Mr. Balliboy moved towards the yard gate.

Mr. Balliboy's feet being geometrically inclined, he endeavoured to move in circles, a mathematical proceeding that lengthened the distance very considerably that he had to traverse.

Mr. Stole followed slowly, the blacksmith's instincts being of the peace-loving kind that follow a master.

Once in the road they waited, the feet of the carrier being still employed in the formation of mystic geometrical figures. After his feet had proved the angle, that they were trying to fit into the half of a circle, to be impossible, the carrier spoke.

' 'Tis best to be merry in night time,' he said. 'Who do know what be about in this wold world; 'tain't safe, this world bain't.'

'Nor 'tisn't,' Mr. Stole remarked cautiously, looking up at the moon, as though he expected to see a horned devil sitting astride upon it.

Hearing the feet moving of the others who had now left the inn, the carrier and his friend proceeded quietly towards the spot where the car had broken down.

Reaching the vehicle, Mr. Balliboy regarded it for a while remorsefully, as though he felt that he should not have let it remain there so long alone. With a praiseworthy endeavour to redeem his promise of an earlier return, he called out as loud as he could: 'We be all come, Miss.' For Mr. Balliboy shrewdly expected—considering the time of night—that the young woman he had left behind was fast asleep in the car.

Having done his duty in the matter of informing the supposed occupant of the car of their arrival, Mr. Balliboy, following his usual precedent, stood aside and watched closely the movements of the blacksmith.

At first Mr. Stole appeared to the carrier's somewhat affrighted eye to be beating the sides of the car, as though the thing had really become an old woman. Mr. Stole had indeed patted the sides before he applied himself to

the task of fixing the nut that was wont in Mr. Balliboy's travels to become loose. And so he went on from one thing to another until he came to the real cause of the disaster, an easy matter to mend that he now put right without further waiting. Having done so, Mr. Stole stood in his turn aside, with his hands in his pockets, in order to watch the course of events.

Meanwhile the other travellers had been grouped—with their human shadows in the road—near to the great elm.

They saw nothing out of the common in the night.

Mr. Potten was troubled because his pipe would not draw. The undertaker coughed and spat in the road.

The tree, a wonder of white colour and shadow, and the hedge filled with the night life of summer, gave to the travellers to Norbury no exciting thoughts. To them the wonderful summer's night was but a mere mask of winter, a commonplace trick of the moon's, or else, at best, a mild peep-show of green leaves.

The others had moved a little way off, but Mr. Potten still stood and looked at the elm. The undertaker was wondering how many coffin planks he could get out of the trunk.

Mr. Potten sniffed because the people of Norbury had a curious desire to live and not to die.

What do they go on living for? he wondered.

The Clerk of Norbury watched the car with a frown. From the inside of the car there came the familiar sound of the striking of matches. Mr. Morsay had lent the farmer his box of matches.

As each new match was struck, Mr. Morsay groaned in spirit. The Clerk could so easily see all his worldly goods being set fire to and destroyed. The fact being that Mr. Told was again looking for his money.

At length, after striking the last match and throwing the empty box into the road—a proceeding that almost brought tears into the good Clerk's eyes—the farmer spoke, addressing his friends, who were now seated with him inside the car.

' 'Tain't 'ere nor she bain't 'ere.'

'What do 'e mean, farmer?' meekly inquired Mr. Potten, who alone had heard the farmer's remark, and who, now that the excitement of the beer was over, began, alas, to disbelieve in the near prospect of an unhealthy autumn.

‘Why, thik ’oman of course,’ replied the farmer gruffly.

Mr. Potten sighed.

He could see the Norbury people going about their business in a healthy fashion, he could see them all going on, on, on, almost to the point of living for ever. In his inward eye the undertaker saw Parson Crossley, a large, quiet man, talking to the Clerk in the Norbury Churchyard in a friendly manner, as though neither the one nor the other had any intention to step below for many a long year.

Mr. Potten sighed, his pipe was stopped up again.

He might as well, he thought, buy the elm tree for himself for his own four varnished boards.

Farmer Told carefully took off his hat. Once he had placed a note inside his market hat, so he now looked carefully into it.

Finding nothing there he muttered to himself again,

‘Thik ’oman be gone an’ me money be gone.’

The other travellers took no notice of his complaint; they were watching Mr. Balliboy, who was turning the handle. After a final turn the engine was started.

Seeing that all was ready and the lights burning, Mr. Balliboy boldly climbed into his seat and, looking down into the shaking works, grasped a lever and the car moved.

When once safely in motion, Mr. Balliboy remarked rather loudly,

‘We did come back to ’ee, Miss, after all.’

The only answer the carrier received after he had called came from Farmer Told, who replied scornfully,

‘Miss thee woon b—— self; thik ’oman be gone.’

Chapter 13

The village children had just left the Norbury school and were playing with the dust in the road. Little Jimmy Potten was crying; an older girl had thrown dust into his eyes. And because he cried and said he would tell his mother, the girl had beaten him on the head.

After they had finished playing with the dust, the children ran up a bank that was near by, in order to find some hard clods of earth to throw at one another.

Very soon the boys, finding that the girls beat them at this game—being braver and more reckless throwers than they were—turned their attention towards Mr. Told's sheep.

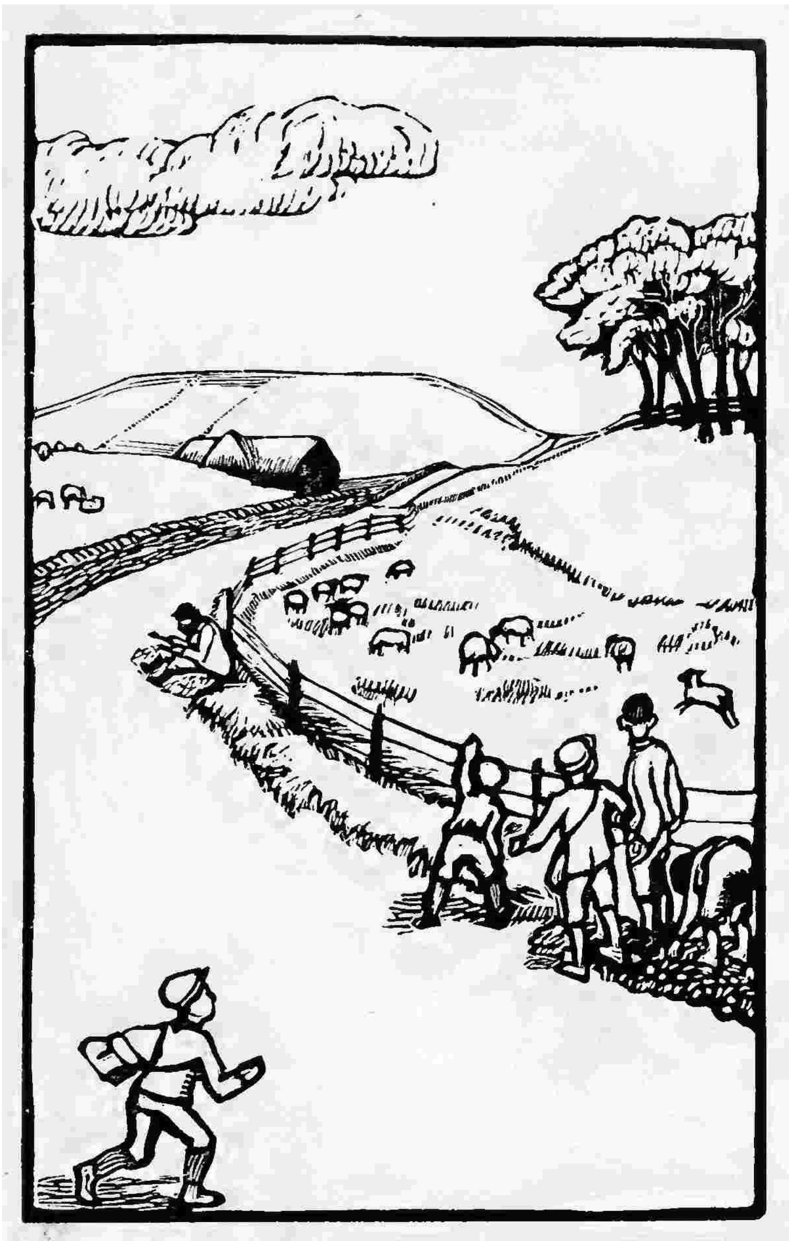
A convenient stone heap providing the right kind of ammunition for their entertainment, and the sheep being more docile than the girls, the sport was happily continued in true country fashion. After a few throws one of the sheep was hit with a stone and its eye cut.

'That'll learn thik sheep to mind I,' said the boy who had cast the stone.

Where the children played the gentle summer air was filled with ugly unseemly words, much noise and shouting.

When any child uttered an unpleasant sound all the children laughed.

All that day the lessons had toiled drearily on. From behind the curtain where the infants were taught, the rap of a ruler against a child's fingers had often been heard, followed by a pig-like squeal.



The infant mistress had a sulky fit and was very cross. In the middle of the afternoon school she had come to Matthew Hurd and had told him in a loud voice, before all the children, that she had found lice in her hair and that it was all his fault.

The mistress said she had caught the lice from Letty Morsay, the child having looked over her shoulder while she played the hymn before prayers.

‘You ought to have noticed the dirty state of Letty’s hair,’ Miss Tongue, the infant teacher, said rudely. ‘You know it’s your place to examine the children.’

Matthew Hurd tried to quiet the woman and to get her back to the infants, who were scampering about behind the curtain. He explained that he knew so little about lice, but that he would look the matter up in his nature books and see what could be done.

When he said ‘books’ Miss Tongue contemptuously shuffled her feet.

Turning to his own class, Matthew felt rather than saw that Miss Tongue had at last moved away, rubbing her head in a dismal manner as she walked. When she was gone, Matthew Hurd called Letty out. The child came willingly, having expected the call.

Matthew Hurd handed Letty a short note to give to her mother, and sent her out of the school.

After the rest of the children were gone, Matthew Hurd remained for a while in the class-room, so as not to be obliged to walk down the village street with Miss Tongue.

When at last he left the school, and went through the village in order to reach the schoolmaster’s cottage that stood near the green, he heard Mrs. Morsay talking about him. He had listened to the same voice before, he fancied, scolding some one.

As he passed this time, she called mockingly, as though to a neighbour who lived across the way,

‘Thik b—— soft fool don’t know a louse when ’e do see woon.’

From inside Mrs. Morsay’s cottage came the voice of the Clerk grumbling and blaming his daughter. The girl joined her mother at the door, and began to peer about in a strange way at the ground, as though she looked for serpents.

Chapter 14

When Matthew Hurd lived at Romantown he had always longed for the country. But now that he was in the country he thought differently. After passing the Clerk's cottage, his thoughts had run back to an old adventure.

Matthew looked back to the time when he was an assistant master at Romantown; he remembered the days of his one wayward adventure. There was, of course, a girl in the adventure. Once, and only once, Matthew had met her in the town, and they had walked together to the old Roman rings, though it was quite by chance that they took that way.

The November evening was wonderfully peaceful and quiet, and so dark, too dark even to see what she looked like.

And yet, even in the darkness and damp, she was so careless of herself, so abandoned. Matthew had never really felt the wonder of a girl so near before.

She thought Matthew was some one else, she said, but she had thrown her arms about him before she knew of her mistake. Of course she was afraid of the stranger, but Matthew kept her in his arms and kissed her again and again.

'I hardly thought he could have grown quite so tall,' she said, still clinging to Matthew. . . .

Near to the school cottage Matthew Hurd paused to listen.

He heard behind him the screams of a girl and the sound of heavy blows.

Breaking through the gentle June air, the evil tones of a woman's voice came to Matthew's ears.

'I'll beat they b—— lice out of thee's dirty 'ead.'

The foul screaming sounds bit at Matthew's soul like jackals, so that by the time he entered his own door he saw no June sunshine, but only dark shadows about him.

Chapter 15

The schoolmaster’s cottage overlooked the village green. Matthew Hurd lived alone, but an old woman recommended by the Rector of Norbury came in and attended to his wants. This old woman’s name was Mrs. Bone.

She was the most evil-looking person the schoolmaster had ever seen, and extremely dirty. Although Matthew Hurd had only been in Norbury a few days, he had already begun to hate her.

Almost the first day that he had seen Mrs. Bone he had tried to avoid her as much as possible. She offended his taste in every way. He could not get her out of his mind any more than he could the children or Miss Tongue.

Even upon this most lovely of June afternoons, she must needs be in his room, upsetting his books and making a mess.

Matthew Hurd went at once to his bedroom, for his bedroom was the only part of the cottage that he could claim as his own when the woman was about.

Even though he hated her presence, he could not dismiss her. He had a feeling that she was become a part of his destiny, that a line giving her name in full was written in the palm of his hand. It seemed inevitable that Mrs. Bone should torment him.

Matthew Hurd locked his bedroom door, and began to think of his father. ‘The kind doctor,’ his father used to be called.

Matthew remembered only too well how his father had gone out of his way to be kind to the poor, and how the poor had always taken a mean advantage of his kindness.

At one time there had been more hopeful plans for Matthew’s future than the profession of a mere teacher, but all these plans had to go.

The kind doctor could never see poverty or trouble written upon any human face without dipping into his own purse to relieve it. It was not long before the lines of suffering that the doctor had hoped to take away from the poor had bitten only too surely into his own life. It was not hard to see how

the good doctor's love for the people would end. And Matthew was not, after all, so very much surprised to find, when walking in the wood of larch trees one spring morning, his father lying dead, with his grey head in the last year's leaves and a bottle of poison beside him.

Matthew had seen at once that all was over. His father was looking upward at the trees, his face bluish perhaps, but not, after all, so very ill-looking, and with the lines of sorrow gone.

Matthew remembered certain words of his father's, for the doctor would allow his most secret thoughts to go out to his son.

'Fight for the truth to the uttermost,' he once said, 'only never be proud of the fight.'

'I have failed in my life; you know, Matthew, that I have failed. But if you chance to do better for your fellow-men than I have done, remember to humble yourself in the dust. Matthew, my dear, my own pride has kept me from the Man of Sorrows, my pride has kept my head too high up so that I could never bow to Him. Human pride can go too far, Matthew.'

The schoolmaster had been resting upon his bed; he now started up.

These last words of his father's had been spoken in Matthew's mind so very distinctly and so very near.

Matthew lay back and listened; his remembrance had opened the unseen gates to the beyond. . . .

A noise from downstairs roused him. Matthew Hurd began to move restlessly to and fro about the room.

Mrs. Bone, he thought, must still be downstairs.

Matthew looked out of the window at the green. Letty Morsay and a few other children were standing about.

The children were standing near to a young woman who was preaching to them. Matthew Hurd had seen the same young woman a few evenings before; she was then standing near to Mr. Balliboy's car.

Letty Morsay had brought back to him the borrowed bicycle the next day.

Matthew saw that Miss Crowle was still dressed in her uniform. The children stood around, slyly watching her, as though they wondered what kind of creature she was, and whether she would utter words or grunts. Whenever she paused, Letty pushed little Tom Told nearer to her.

Presently Mr. Potten walked by; the undertaker was carrying a plank of wood upon his shoulder; he was on his way to the Rectory to mend a hole in the wall.

The scene was peaceful, the sweet summer stillness was everywhere. Matthew could see the gentle sheep feeding on the hills, and two cows standing in a meadow pond.

Chapter 16

The Norbury schoolmaster went to a drawer and took out a photograph. He held the photograph near to the window and looked at it.

The photograph showed the likeness of a clean-shaven young man, tall and thin.

Turning again to the drawer, Matthew put the photograph away.

He went to the looking-glass and stroked his beard; apparently he wished to note the difference between a clean-shaven young man and a roughly-bearded one.

Meanwhile he heard the cottage door open and shut.

Looking from his window he saw the old woman, Mrs. Bone, in the act of departing; she was carrying away something carefully secreted in her apron. Matthew smiled. Somehow or other, at that moment, he did not mind her stealing things.

A real vice made her more human and less ugly.

Matthew Hurd went downstairs; he put the tin kettle on the stove. The stove smelt unpleasantly; perhaps the old woman had been touching it?

It was, then, for that sort of creature that his father had given his all, for her and her ugly kind.

'My father.'

Matthew Hurd repeated the words aloud.

Clearly, more than ever clearly, those old days came back to him. He saw so plainly again that gentle, forgiving, though troubled look upon the face of the doctor as he returned from the slums. Matthew knew how deeply that same troubled look had eaten a way into his own heart.

After tea the schoolmaster left his house and walked out to the village green. As he walked there came to him through the summer stillness the sound of a hay-cutting machine.

Matthew breathed deeply; even with Mrs. Bone so near, summer happiness could yet be happiness for him.

Upon the green there were still the same little children. And near to the children Mr. Morsay was standing, with an oil-can in his hand. Mr. Morsay was on his way to fill the church lamps, a matter that he always remembered in the summer, when there was no need to fill them. He had stopped by the green, however, hoping to hear something added about Salt Lake City, because he still thought that Miss Crowle was a Mormon.

But the preacher herself was taking no notice of Mr. Morsay. She was taking no notice of the children, she was taking no notice of the languorous summer scene. Her eyes were looking upwards towards the unfathomable blue of the heavenly skies.

In a religious ecstasy she was being carried beyond the earth, beyond matter, into the realities of God. Mary Crowle's rich, full voice rose and fell in gentle modulations. She was preaching of Christ, of redemption, of salvation, and of eternal life.

Matthew Hurd watched her, but his thoughts were not going toward heaven. He fancied he saw Mary Crowle with the same young man whose photo he had taken from the drawer in his room.

The two were sitting under a steep bank of short grass; it was a mild winter's evening.

Mary was talking of love.

They sat there, those two, like children hidden by the night, in order that they might embrace and vanish.

Matthew Hurd thoughtfully stroked his beard.

Mary Crowle was still speaking eagerly.

All things evil, thought Matthew, have come from a woman. But does she not also show, as Mary was then showing, where all true good is to be found?

Chapter 17

The Rev. James Crossley, the Rector of Norbury, had always tried to do his duty in his parish.

Mr. Crossley had entered the Church rather late in life, being beguiled into so doing by his wife, who had a taste for keeping accounts.

Mr. Crossley had married her, not for her beauty, for she was one of the plainest of women, but because she was the only person who would ever listen to his ideas about prayer.

Early in life Mr. Crossley had conceived the rather remarkable idea that prayer has to have a carrier, a kind of medium in the mass of matter, before it can reach up to God.

His idea slowly worked itself out in his mind. The bare barren heart of man appeared to Mr. Crossley to be so closely bound to darkness that merely to speak words, even from the heart, carried a man no nearer to God. But, on the other hand, by praying, as it were, to the wind or to the sea, to the fire or to the smoke, the element, being by its pristine innocence nearer to the magic circle than man, could carry the prayer up to the higher regions of the immortal Godhead.

There was another way, too, that the good man had thought out of catching the heavenly ear. And this was to take an innocent creature, a simple animal or a human babe, and teach it to pray, using, if possible with the child, as with himself, the elements as a medium.

Mr. Crossley had tried this plan with his own son while the boy was still an infant. But the experiment, alas, had turned out a total failure, the little Hugh apparently not having the spiritual aptitude for such a proceeding. And so, after a few attempts with the wind, with sea, and with fire, Mr. Crossley was obliged to give it up—at least for Hugh.

No one who knew the wife of the Rector of Norbury would ever have suspected her of being in any way different to the other wives of the clergy who were her near neighbours.

But the intelligence of the good country people, sharp enough in some ways, missed the primary note of an almost occult happiness that there was even in Mrs. Crossley's dull life.

It may have been the very simple life that the lady led that drew her on to consider the magic in number. And although she thought herself quite her own mistress when she counted up or subtracted the figures, yet the truth was that she must have evoked, by her constant brooding over her accounts, forces that bound her as their slave.

She could not help sometimes feeling a little queer about the figures. Indeed, she always did the sum over again, with the hope of finding the mistake, when the total came to £13, 13s. 3d. Once she had a strange belief that the figures were adding themselves up in her mind: so that in a moment, and without counting them herself, she saw the correct answer, proved indeed by subsequent addition.

After that day she never permitted herself to take any notice of figures that wrote themselves down in the deep places of her own mind. If any came there Mrs. Crossley disregarded them, and merely continued to add or subtract as the case might be in the normal way.

By keeping so carefully her weekly and monthly accounts, Mrs. Crossley seemed to herself to be performing a very simple and ordinary housewife's task, in which there was nothing deep or queer.

But, however harmless and necessary she thought her calculations were, the fact remained that the extreme quiet of Norbury had strangely touched her reason.

The same sounds were always there, and the same quiet, and the same rural pictures. It all, no doubt, even the blackbird that had a white feather in its tail, tended to make her brood and to think so strangely of the numbers.

And it certainly seemed as though they had, these numbers, a sort of influence over her, forcing her to speak for them by the formation of mystic combinations as though a new kind of life moved in the numbers that the Rector's lady so correctly joined together or separated.

Chapter 18

The summer afternoon that we have come to in our story Mr. Crossley felt to be oppressively warm.

The Rector of Norbury had taken off his priest's hat and held it in his hand when he said good-bye to his son, who was returning to the College at Romantown. After saying good-bye to Hugh, Mr. Crossley softly closed the gate. The gate shut easily, because the dry weather had tightened the aged posts so that it could swing exactly into the proper position.

The summer sun streamed down upon Mr. Crossley's bare head. The priest moved slowly indoors, allowing his left leg to drag a little. He sat down in the cool shade of his study in order to finish the book that he was writing.

The book was to be called 'Prayer and the People.'

The book explained at some length how the people had lost so much of the actual and binding contact that used in former times to exist between mankind and the elemental forces of nature. For had not the waters of the flood carried the prayers of Noah up to God? for the waters must have reached heaven in order to drown all the earth.

Besides the waters there was the wind and earthquake that prepared the ears of Elijah to hear the still small voice.

Even our Lord Himself, Mr. Crossley felt, had spoken to Nature, and through Nature to His Father.

There were numerous other instances that Mr. Crossley culled from the Bible, all going to prove the necessity of a medium between God and man.

Upon the other side of the table, opposite to where Mr. Crossley was sitting, there were many pieces of paper littered.

Upon each piece of paper there were minute and exact calculations about the cost of living. In each little sum every figure was set down with extraordinary care. Mr. Crossley musingly looked over the table at these figures; he then turned from them to his own book.

A rich beam of summer sunlight came through the window, turning the backs of the row of eighteenth-century Henry Bibles into pure gold. Mr. Crossley wished to catch the last words for his book. But the words would not come.

He wished to end the matter up with a triumphant flourish of trumpets glorifying his idea of prayer.

But instead of the greatness in prayer, all Mr. Crossley could think of was the foolish quarrel that he had lately had with Farmer Told. He could only wish now that he had never spoken to Mr. Told about the incense. After all, he might have known, had he paused to think for a moment, that the farmer would dislike the idea, simply because incense cost money.

Mr. Crossley gently straightened out the foolscap before him and took up his pen.

Of course, he thought, Mr. Told, as churchwarden, liked to hold a good balance of Church pounds. The farmer was one of those careful ones who had only recently given up his stocking hiding-place for the grander hiding-place—the farmer could never believe it to be the safer—of the Romantown bank.

Mr. Crossley had heard the news that Mr. Told had lost his wallet, and at the time he tried very hard to feel sorry for the farmer.

But now he thought, ‘They are always drinking and losing their things, these farmers, and instead of allowing the wind to carry their prayers to God, they only curse the wind.’

Mr. Crossley allowed his eyes for the moment to rest upon his inkpot.

How often had he carefully filled the inkpot in order that he might go on writing his books. But now he had come to the end of his ideas.

After all these simple years of thought and service, he had only come to quarrelling with Farmer Told.

Mr. Crossley wondered if he ought to tell his wife that he had quarrelled with the farmer. He thought he had better not; it might worry her to know. She was always so happy, so contented with her everlasting calculations. He knew that her figures had become a kind of religion in her life, a religion that set her mind at rest and gave her peace.

Mr. Crossley admired her gentle happiness, he almost envied it.

What if he gave up writing his books upon prayer, and allowed the money that he spent in printing them to go to her housekeeping account?

Mr. Crossley put down his pen. What a foolish thought that was. To have more than she exactly needed would spoil it all. If he gave up writing, even the matter of his using less ink would put her out, the inkpots so often had halfpennies about them: halfpennies that would sometimes so exactly fit into her shillings.

The Rector of Norbury slowly put the half-written sheet of foolscap back into the drawer.

The right words would not come. But still he felt he must go on printing his books, for what else could he do? And it would be at least well to prove to the people that incense is a help to prayer. He would only call it 'a help'; that would be a moderate word to use.

Even though he had found that word, Mr. Crossley felt despondent about the people of Norbury. He feared that in their hearts the people had no wish to pray any kind of prayer.

The Rector moved sadly to the window.

He fancied that the Devil had come into his heart, and was trying to kill and take away his hope in prayer.

Owing, no doubt, to the fact that the Devil was come so near, Mr. Crossley's mind was now shadowed by dire misgivings.

The Rector of Norbury looked through the window towards the hills; the misty, summer aspect of the hills pleased him.

In the distance Mr. Crossley saw his son, a tiny, black, human figure, climbing the white road that led to Romantown.

If only, he thought, if only he had been able to teach the babe to pray.

Chapter 19

Mr. Crossley softly closed his study door, left the house, and went out into the garden.

The summer sun had burnt the grass brown. He heard the laughter of a child in the village street.

Mr. Crossley blessed the child. It was not the child who prevented him from finding the right words to complete his book.

The priest took a hoe from the garden house and walked up the Rectory drive. He carried his hoe carefully, holding it under his arm as if it were a gun.

The Clerk of Norbury passed the Rectory gate.

Mr. Crossley knew that the Clerk had hurried by because the man feared that his master might have asked him to hoe the church path.

The summer warmth was oppressive; the Rector of Norbury felt tired. He saw, as if it were from behind, his own black legs moving forwards. He thought his long shadow must stretch out as far as the garden hedge.

He saw his own feet move slowly and painfully in their black, shiny boots, crunching the little stones. The sound seemed eternal.

Mr. Crossley could imagine himself passing up and down there for ever, and for ever, for ever crunching the little stones.

Near a large tomb in the Norbury Churchyard, the Rector began to hoe the path.

The tombstone lettering showed that the grave belonged with all its earthy rites to a former Mr. Told, the father of the present churchwarden. The midsummer evening seemed more than ever hot and breathless now that the sun had sunk lower. It was as though hot, moist, fevered hands touched the Rector's face. Mr. Crossley leaned the hoe upon the farmer's tombstone. The hoe slipped and fell.

The Rector looked around, but no one had seen.

If he was unable to even balance a hoe upon a tombstone, what could he do?

Well, he could pray.

Was there anything in prayer?

Evil misgivings, like little black demons, crept up around him.

Mr. Crossley picked the hoe up from the grass and leaned upon it.

How the churchyard grass had grown! But, of course, in the summer time grass did grow.

The Rector had seen written so neatly in one of Mrs. Crossley's calculations how much it would cost to cut the grass. He remembered now that she had told him that the grass must not be cut too soon in the summer, for if it was cut too early it would require cutting again, and this second cutting would mean more expense.

Mr. Crossley continued to slowly hoe the path, and while he hoed, he thought about his books.

No one had praised his books. When he printed the first, he sent a copy as a present to the Bishop.

The Bishop's secretary had coldly thanked him upon a typed card.

Mr. Crossley thought this rather a poor response for a man's life thought about prayer: a response not calculated to help the author in his future labours.

As he hoed the path Mr. Crossley smiled at all the wonderful things that he had expected to happen. Wonderful advancement, wonderful preferment. He used to imagine a visit from Archdeacon Seacroft, who would say in his rather sly and sticky voice, 'That so good a Christian as Mr. Crossley should be at the very least a cathedral canon.'

The Rector of Norbury leaned the hoe against the tombstone again; balancing it more carefully this time, in order to show any one who came by that he really could get the hoe to stay where he placed it. Leaving his hoe against the tombstone, Mr. Crossley entered the church and wearily turned over the leaves of the great Bible in order to find the next Sunday's lessons.

As he turned over the leaves a strange thought came to him.

What was it really all about, he wondered, this book of books? What could there be in this book to make it so wonderful for man?

Mr. Crossley closed the Bible; he had not found the lessons, he had merely wandered here and there in the big book.

Returning to the Rectory with his hoe under his arm, Mr. Crossley stopped by the churchyard hedge and plucked a green leaf from a plant that grew in the hedge. The leaf was glossy and vine-shaped. Mr. Crossley held it in his hand and looked at it.

He remembered reading somewhere that the heart of a leaf beats like the heart of a man.

He was seized with a nameless dread.

The leaf he held in his hand must be dying, even then its heart must be flickering, failing.

He had innocently plucked the leaf, but not more innocently than a simple-minded murderer would take another man’s life.

What was the name of the plant whose leaf he had so brutally killed?

Mr. Crossley thought it was Bryony. He would now go home and look into John’s botany in order to make sure. He could not rightly remember even this simple plant’s name, and yet he had killed the leaf!

When Mr. Crossley had quarrelled with the farmer, Mr. Told had called him an old fool. The Rector now believed that the farmer had named him correctly, he felt very much an old fool.

A sudden movement of happiness touched his soul.

The dying leaf would perhaps carry a prayer to God?

Wonderful green leaves, how they grew and grew out of the sun-warmed earth. What a mystery life was. But, after all, the earth was a simple affair, merely a mud ball covered in different places with moving things. How queerly all the moving mass lived and died. Everywhere the green plants grew and their roots clung to the earth. Everywhere in the summer was the new luscious life, so new above, but so old, so old beneath. How it all clung living and, a little later, clung dying, and under it all there were the little maggots.

Entering the Rectory gate, and for want of anything better to do, Mr. Crossley looked through the window into his own study.

He saw his wife sitting there in her usual chair.

What a funny, careworn, curious old creature she looked.

Mr. Crossley knew that she was counting up exactly how much it cost them to live each day.

Sitting there so still, she seemed to be mesmerized by the total she had come to in one of her calculations.

Leaving the window, the Rector of Norbury sadly and slowly turned the handle of his own front door.

Chapter 20

After preaching to the children upon the green, and singing a hymn to them, Mary Crowle returned to the Norbury Arms, the homely thatched inn that was kept so clean and neat by Mary’s aunt, Mrs. Hinden.

As she went by the bar-window, Mary heard the voices of Mr. Potten and Mr. Morsay in close conversation. Looking into the window she saw the undertaker sitting back in his chair with his hands in his side-pockets, and smiling at Mr. Morsay, who was leaning forwards with one elbow upon the table.

The two men were talking about the overcrowded state of the Norbury churchyard. From the meadow near by there floated into the inn doorway the fragrant scent of new-made hay, pleasantly mingled with the voices of little children, who were tossing and throwing it about.

As Mary entered the inn, she heard the coarse sound of Mr. Told’s voice swearing at the children for scattering the hay.

Mary Crowle found her aunt sitting in the large parlour, flushed and happy. Mrs. Hinden was talking to a half-witted old man who had brought her a letter. The man was standing patiently near the door of the parlour holding his hat in his hand.

When Mary came in he was asking in a subdued and nervous voice what answer the lady might wish to return to his master at Wainfleet.

The widow was considering what she ought to do. The matter of this summer episode was simple.

‘Mr. Bewsley has sent old John to ask me again,’ Mrs. Hinden said to Mary as she came in.

‘Tell the old fool to go.’ Mary Crowle looked scornfully at John.

Mrs. Hinden blushed. She looked as though she had been caught doing something wrong. She gave the ancient innocent a shilling and he walked away, muttering sadly to himself that he had no answer to carry.

Outside the inn, the Norbury children who had been playing in the hay made foolish gestures at old John. They did this at the old man in revenge perhaps for what Mr. Told had said to them. But John went his ways like the pilgrim of old and gave no heed to them.

‘What did you want to give the man money for?’ Mary asked angrily. ‘And you know you must never marry, Aunty; it would be wicked.’

Mrs. Hinden rose from her chair. Her pleasant female body appeared set out, made, and created for feasts and bar-parlours. She looked so contented and comfortable that she might have been the goddess of all inns.

Over the large parlour fireplace there was a fine piece of glass set in an ancient gilded frame.

Mrs. Hinden watched herself complacently in the glass. She could see herself a well-grown woman, mellowed by the years, and ready to become for the second time the counterpart of a kindly man.

She knew that no woman in the world could fill a housewife’s place better than she could. Almost every other day Mr. Bewsley would send his man to her—his poor servant John—with the grand question. Gaily old John would walk to Norbury, with a swing in his step that surprised those who knew him, but he always returned sadly.

Time after time, in her own heart, Mrs. Hinden decided to have Mr. Bewsley. But as often as she decided to have him, her niece from the town would come with her fine Army ways and preach her out of it.

Mary had now begun to be more than ever strict with her aunt upon this point. At first, when Mr. Bewsley began his courtship, Mary had merely found fault with him; but of late she had come repeatedly for the sole reason of warning her aunt against marriage.

When Mrs. Hinden had looked proudly at herself in the glass, she spoke quietly,

‘Why would it be wicked for me to marry him, dear?’

‘Oh, don’t you know why, and you have been married?’

‘But, dear, yes, of course I know.’ Mrs. Hinden blushed. ‘But you know, dear, if one is properly married in church, there can be no wickedness.’

‘All that kind of sinning is wicked,’ Mary Crowle said decidedly.

‘Every one of us then is born from sin,’ Mrs. Hinden ventured to humbly remark.

‘Yes, it’s all sin,’ Mary replied. ‘Sin’s our world, Aunty. Life is sin, we come in sin, we live in sin, and we die in sin. To move is sin,’ she cried, with a stamp of her foot. ‘The whole world is one great rotting sin, the sun itself is a mass of burning wickedness, and we, born of the sun, must sin, sin, sin.’

‘Yes, dear, I know that we are all very wicked, but the Bible says it is not good for man to live alone, and perhaps old John does not always remember to air Mr. Bewsley’s sheets; his slippers, too, I doubt if they are ever put before the fire.’

Mary Crowle stood near the open window. The gentle mists of the summer evening spread in slowly darkening folds around the old inn.

Down the village lane, and upon the green, there were little children still happily playing. They danced, they sang, they frolicked. Their happy voices entered the village doorways with the evening shadows.

Through the open window Mary Crowle saw the pleasant hay-field. The last light of the day shone upon large dark leaves that grew in the hay-field hedge.

Mary Crowle spoke thoughtfully, as though an idea had that moment come into her head.

‘I want to know, Aunty, whether it is possible to make a medicine out of a hedge plant called Bryony. Is it good for anything?’

‘You mean the climbing plant that grows in the large hedges?’

‘Yes, it’s quite common about here,’ Mary spoke carelessly.

‘Oh, I know it,’ said Mrs. Hinden. ‘Yes, it’s poisonous, though I have heard old people say that it used to be taken sometimes by wicked girls.’

‘What for?’ inquired Mary abruptly.

‘Oh, I mustn’t tell you that, dear,’ Mrs. Hinden replied.

Chapter 21: Autumn

At the Romantown station one afternoon in late August there was much hurry and bustle going on, and Mr. William Crowle was busy.

In the high and mighty matters of his life's labours, Mr. Crowle had not so far distinguished himself in the eyes of his fellow mortals so very exceptionally.

Mr. William Crowle had not so far in his career been knighted by the king, or even been created mayor of his town by the people.

But in spite of this want of recognition, he felt himself still to be a man.

Mr. William Crowle knew his place and understood his position.

He had no need to study any such learned book as *Man's Place in Nature* in order to find out what he was.

Mr. William Crowle knew what he was.

Upon this late August Saturday, the moment not yet having come for him to start upon his week-end holiday to his sister's at Norbury, Mr. Crowle was employed at the station in weighing the luggage of a commercial traveller.

The gentleman, and owner of the luggage, stood nearby, watching and smiling at Mr. Crowle from under a wonderful silk hat, and through the fumes of a still more wonderful cigar.

The luggage turned out to be a large number of pounds overweight. Mr. Crowle saw this fact very clearly, and so did the traveller.

But, strange to say, Mr. Crowle passed the luggage without extra payment.

The simple fact being that Mr. William Crowle understood his fellow-men, and likewise understood their place in nature. He could distinctly see other Mr. Crowles at all the railway stations upon the line. He could trust these other Mr. Crowles to weigh as he had weighed, and to take, as he had taken, the wage of a worldly-wise action.

Mr. William Crowle believed in the fellowship of mankind. He believed in gaining things for himself by this mutual fellowship.

Mr. Crowle liked to hunt with the pack if there was anything to be got for himself by doing so; if not, he preferred to hunt alone. Saturday was Mr. Crowle's lucky day, and this happy Saturday he had a shining half-crown in his pocket that he could carry to an inn. He did carry it.

Mr. Crowle looked round the bar at the station hotel; he hoped to see some one there from the line, some truant about whom he could tell the stationmaster, some one who had not asked a proper leave as he had done. He was so very thoughtful for others, was Mr. Crowle.

The friendly railway porter leaned contentedly over the bar counter and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his coat.

He told the young lady who stood behind the bar knitting that he was going to spend the week-end with his sister at Norbury.

The young lady peered through the darkened glass of the bar-window, and said that she hoped the weather would be fine.

After drinking his beer, Mr. Crowle left the hotel. While he still drank, he fancied he heard the voice of the stationmaster himself in the back parlour. Wondering how he could make a wise use of this vision, Mr. Crowle made his way to the well-known starting-place of the Norbury carrier.

On the pavement Mr. Crowle chuckled.

The world suited Mr. Crowle; it was the kind of affair he might have made himself if he had been ambitious to create worlds.

When the porter was more than usually merry, he was wont—as a good husband should—to remember his wife.

The last view Mr. Crowle had of his wife was the poor woman bending over a large tub of nearly cold water, washing his shirts. He liked to think how dirty he made his shirts.

'Let 'er work,' he muttered gleefully. 'Work be good for she.'

It gave Mr. Crowle especial pleasure to contemplate the fact that his wife was doing so much hard labour for him. And even if he did not happen to be there, she would be sure to have to work for some other man.

Mr. Crowle liked Nature's arrangements. He could start on a pleasant holiday to visit his rich sister at Norbury, while his wife worked on a Saturday even. What could be better?

But even with such a pleasant matter to think about as his wife working on a Saturday, Mr. Crowle could not be entirely happy. Strange as it may seem, Mr. Crowle had his trouble. This trouble he now began to think of.

Standing at the street corner, watching the people go by and waiting for the carrier, Mr. Crowle cursed his daughter Mary.

He felt her so very clearly as a thorn in his flesh that stabbed into the pleasant world of his being.

It was more than usually annoying, he thought, that Mary should be even then staying with his sister.

After giving her to all the demons he could think of, Mr. Crowle cast her out of his mind, and began to think of his tips. This new train of thought brought to his remembrance the way that he spent the money that was given to him.

To let the secret out, as we must do, it was ordained under the immutable destinies that Mr. Crowle should be gifted with an unfortunate desire for women. And thus many of the extra shillings that the worthy man earned went that supremely human way.

After waiting for some while in silence, and only moderately pleased with his own amorous thoughts, Mr. Crowle was joined by Farmer Told, and the two men climbed into Mr. Balliboy's car.

The August sun made them drowsy. The farmer wiped his forehead. Mr. Told had only a few minutes before come from the bar of the Bear Hotel. Another farmer had that afternoon done the treating, and, not wishing to cast scorn at generosity, Mr. Told had taken his full share of the cups.

The farmer did not sit very quietly in the van; every moment or two he altered his position, and always, when he moved, he felt in his breast-pocket to see if his wallet was safe.

He had a new wallet. Having of necessity to purchase one, he had bought the largest he could find.

In the shop the farmer had complained about his loss, and the seller of wallets had advised him to tell the police.

'The police are wonderful,' the shopman said, 'the police know everything.'

Mr. Told did not tell the tradesman how much he hated the police, because they had once rudely spoken to him about beating a horse to death.

He had then replied to the police that ‘He believed he could do as he liked with his own horse,’ and there the matter ended, except that the farmer could never forget the insulting way in which the policeman refused the offered shilling, thinking, and no doubt rightly, that it should have been a pound—and a pound it became.

Mr. Told moved a little farther away from Mr. Crowle. He felt again in his pocket; he was pleased to find that the wallet was still in his pocket. Mr. Crowle had not stolen it.

Chapter 22

The early autumn day, for the month of August was nearly past, was very sultry.

There was no wind moving to rustle the leaves of the trees that encircled the town. The burning rays of the sun scintillated from the hot pavement.

But for all the beauty and warmth of the day there was a look of sickness in the sky. The sky seemed almost to be putrescent, as if it were rotten like an overripe apple.

Although the heat clung and festered upon all human things, the upper heavens were merged in warm mist, that hung like thin smoke over the town.

One could notice, too, as a harbinger of coming woe, that some of the people who walked in the streets were beginning to talk about the winter, as though they could see coming behind all this heat and mist the ice-cold hand of a northern giant.

Mr. Crowle looked through the door of the car.

He saw Mr. and Mrs. Crossley, who were walking slowly upon the shady side of the street.

The Norbury Rector and his wife were evidently coming towards the carrier's car. Mr. Crowle watched them with interest, while the farmer, with his market hat tilted back, could only blink drowsily at the roof of the car.

The new arrivals stopped for a moment or two before a grocer's shop.

Mrs. Crossley gazed intently at the shop window, while Mr. Crossley looked upward at the blue mist that hung in the sky. He thought the mist was a thin kind of friendly smoke. Mr. Crossley smiled at the hot mist; he was more than half inclined to begin a prayer.

The Rector's wife did not enter the shop. She merely took out of her handbag a large notebook and, after carefully examining some figures

written therein, she shook her head. She shook her head as though she were replying to some question put to her by the honey-pots in the shop window.

An eternity of warm autumn days settled around the two old people as they stood in the street. Their homely figures, so natural to the town, so complacent, appeared to be burnt into the place where they stood.

Even Mr. Crowle felt sure that he had seen them there before. But it was one of those days when matter becomes strangely talkative and might even have spoken a word or two to the gross mould of Mr. Crowle's mind.

Slowly and with care, Mr. and Mrs. Crossley climbed into the carrier's car. They were closely followed by the Clerk of Norbury, who followed his master as a shadow follows a man.

Mr. Crowle was for a moment a little disappointed. He had expected to see Mr. Potten, whose general custom it was to visit Romantown on market days.

Unluckily for our company—for Mr. Potten always talked so well—the undertaker had that afternoon been helping to inter a customer of his, Mr. James Bone by name, in the Shelton Churchyard.

All being seated safely in the car, the passengers to Norbury waited for Mr. Balliboy.

Mr. Crowle had even remembered to touch his hat to the clergyman, though he qualified the act by thinking what a poor old creature the gentleman looked, so different to the rich commercial traveller who had given him the half-crown.

Mr. Crossley was immensely pleased by this mock politeness, and wondered how such good-mannered men could ever possibly want to strike for more wages.

After an hour of waiting, there appeared at the far end of the street the figure of Mr. Balliboy. No one knew where he came from. Not one of the occupants of the car had seen him all that day. But they knew it was the custom of the carrier to disappear directly he reached Romantown, and only to appear again some half-hour or more after his proper time for starting home.

Coming up to the car, Mr. Balliboy placed with great care a small parcel that he carried in his hand in a narrow box under his own seat. After so doing he seized the front handle.

The engine hummed, Mr. Balliboy climbed to his seat, and the car started.

All travellers who pass along the road from Stonebridge to Romantown know very well a patch of pleasant green grass that is situated only a few hundred yards beyond the Wainfleet Lion. This wayside grass—there is almost a little meadow of it—is a good resting-place for a tired walker.

During the spring, daisies and primroses grow there, and in the autumn there is yellow hawk-weed.

Sometimes a farmer's man, leading a bull to market, allows the creature to rest and eat grass at this spot, and even to be held by a small boy—should one be handy—while the drover took his glass of beer at the inn.

Long before they reached this pleasant place, Mr. Balliboy had been looking down into the works of his car. He might have even been holding a sort of conversation with his shaking engine, inquiring how it did, as though it really were a rheumatic old woman.

When the car passed the Wainfleet Lion, Mr. Balliboy looked wistfully at the inn door. When the car reached the pleasant patch of grass before mentioned, a not unusual event occurred.

The engine clattered and shook, it groaned, it gave an iron and convulsive scream, the car ran on to the grass and stopped.

Mr. Balliboy looked surprised. He saw the hawk-weed for the first time in his life. He slowly moved a lever up and down, and then turned the steering gear backwards and forwards.

It might have been the first time the car had ever stopped in that way. Mr. Balliboy fancied it was. After waiting in his seat for a few moments, the carrier slowly climbed out and examined the wheels. He found them intact.

The next thing he did—according to custom—was to peer again into the engine. As far as he knew the conjoined parts appeared to be whole and entire. He then mournfully turned the handle in front, but there was no response to his turning.

Slowly and deliberately Mr. Balliboy put his head through the door of the car. He spoke to the clergyman.

'Car be broke,' he said.

'How long will it take you to repair it?' asked Mrs. Crossley, who spoke for her husband.

‘Only a quarter of an hour, ma’am, for there be a man at Wainfleet that will soon put t’wold engine a-working. Stole ’is name be.’

‘We had better wait,’ said Mrs. Crossley quietly, ‘and I can do my accounts.’

Being roused by a judicious pinch from Mr. Morsay, and looking disdainfully at the clergyman, Mr. Told, closely followed by the Clerk and Mr. Crowle, climbed down from the car and shortly after overtook Mr. Balliboy, whose legs had already carried him some distance towards the desired haven.

Left in the car alone with her husband, Mrs. Crossley bent over a page of figures.

The evening slowly settled into night, but Mrs. Crossley still appeared to be adding and subtracting. The magic of the figures could never desert her. That strange £7, 7s. 7d. that she had come to after adding up the groceries gave her so much to think of.

To help her thoughts, Mrs. Crossley had taken off her homely bonnet, placing it upon the seat by her side.

All around was stillness itself, no sound, no movement roused the Romantown road.

It might have been the last night in the history of the world.

Mr. Crossley sat silently in his corner and watched his wife.

For some years he had grown conscious of the fact that she was becoming an old woman. He was sure of it now.

‘An old woman.’ The Rector’s thoughts ran wistfully into the past; he longed to catch and hold something that she once had been.

His thoughts searched in vain; he could find nothing.

But there was something now that his wife’s white head reminded him of, though at first he could not think what it was.

After a while he remembered. It was the white wool in an open coffin.

Mr. Potten had carefully made the coffin, and the wool was so like her hair.

The undertaker had carried the coffin into a cottage where Mr. Crossley was praying with the relations of the dead.

Before the coffin was carried upstairs, it was placed upon two chairs in the front room, so that it might be properly admired. Inside the coffin was the softest white wool: wool so very like Mrs. Crossley’s hair.

Mr. Crossley looked away from his wife; he looked through the car doors down the long white road. The road stretched down beyond Wainfleet to the lower water meadows near Romantown. Mr. Crossley was aware of a dim mist that covered the marshes near the town.

Would the mist carry a prayer to God?

The moon had risen.

Mr. Crossley believed that all nature was longing to carry prayers to God—the prayers of men.

But no men ever used nature now as in the olden times, as the medium for prayer.

Mr. Crossley bent his head and prayed.

He hoped that the mist would carry his prayer to God.

Chapter 23

At the Wainfleet Lion the homely gossips were gathered, as their wont was.

Indeed, Mr. Stole had seen the car go by, and had followed it up as far as the inn, taking with him the little pair of pincers that he always used when he repaired the engine.

Near the inn the blacksmith waited. There was no need for him to meet trouble half-way; he preferred to wait for it by the inn.

Mr. Stole had not to wait long. One by one—so as not to attract undue attention—his friends appeared.

Cautiously entering the back-yard of the Lion, the wayfarers sat down as usual upon the benches prepared for them.

Mr. Crowle, who was already known to Mr. Bewsley, found himself treated with extreme deference, even to the very highest limit, gin being mixed with his beer.

Coming near to the brother of Mrs. Hinden, the stout landlord of the Wainfleet Lion said sorrowfully that Mr. Crowle's daughter Mary had taken of late to driving old John out of Norbury with rude words—the old man had even spoken of stones. But whatever it was that she had sent after him, John had refused to go to the Norbury Arms with any more of his master's notes.

Mr. Crowle slowly moved the hand that held his cup round in the air. He then thoughtfully drank his gin and beer, and said, with a look of deep disdain, that was natural to him when he spoke of women,

'What be she?'

After a moment or two he replied in one expressive word to his own question,

'Nothink,' said Mr. Crowle.

After inscribing another circle in the air, the porter proceeded to express himself more smoothly.

‘Take thee and marry sister, landlord, take and marry sister; don’t ’e listen to thik b—— preaching little cat. ’Ow many times ’ave ’ee got to now with thee’s question, Mr. Bewsley?’

Knowing his master’s wishes almost before he could speak them, John hobbled with his usual shaky step out into the yard, bearing the token of his master’s many disappointments in his hand.

Mr. Bewsley looked approvingly round at the company. Even though John had refused to go to Norbury any more, the grand question had certainly been asked a great number of times, as the crosses proved.

Mr. Bewsley looked proudly at the slate and then winked at the company.

‘ ’Tain’t nor good,’ said the friendly landlord, trying in vain to look very sorrowful, ‘ ’tain’t nor good, gents all, she be beyond I, an’ I do know it. Thik preaching lady do a-say true; ’tis sin to think of she that marriage way.’

‘She bain’t nor lady!’ cried out Mr. Crowle. ‘Me daughter she bain’t nor lady. What do ’ee think, landlord?’

The imaginative sense of the railway porter having risen into his head with his drink, Mr. Crowle, being inspired, described in forcible and realistic language a few of his own affairs with the girl in Mill Street.

It was so easy to do; he had only to put his own daughter into the girl’s place—he chose Hugh Crossley as the man.

The stars had come out, the moon was high above.

Every one listened attentively to Mr. Crowle’s stories.

The pleasant, soothing influence of the good drink curtained the inn-yard with mild contentment.

The story-teller went on telling the tales, the moon looked calmly down. The shadow of old John’s tottering form always entered the inn with him to help to fill the jug.

Chapter 24

After one hour asleep and one awake, the Rector of Norbury stretched himself and stood up.

He had grown tired of waiting in his corner.

Rather stiffly and slowly he climbed out of the car, and walked up and down the road. Very soon he saw he had made a narrow human path in the dust.

During one of these turns he stopped. He stepped up to the hedge and examined the leaves of the same Bryony plant that grew in his churchyard at home. He touched the berries cautiously, and stroked the leaves. He almost fancied that the plant was speaking about the coming winter and about its own death.

Mr. Crossley still touched the leaves.

Years and years ago there had once been a girl—a passing girl—whose young cheeks had felt as cool, but, alas, so many years ago.

Mr. Crossley sighed.

Returning to the roadside again, the priest leaned against the car.

Inside the car he could see his wife's head still bending over her book of accounts.

A profound melancholy gathered in the heart of the tired priest, gathered as dry leaves do in the autumn—silently, softly, each new leaf making one more in the mass.

A new idea that he should write a book about flowers and birds came to him. He saw himself taking notes and watching so carefully the movements of birds and the opening of the flowers.

But somehow or other Mr. Crossley could not see himself watching the birds. He knew his mind would be sure to leave the birds and their wings to go farther, farther upwards himself. Oh, so terribly far upwards! As far as his God!

And God, what of Him?

The moon told no tales of Him, the trees shook out no words of His with their leaves. The night whispered and whispered, but where was He?

Did prayer ever rise up to the great white throne? But mild columns of smoke rose sometimes, rose up from the heart of man.

Mr. Crossley loved wood fires.

He had once seen a fire in a pine forest, and the smoke had gone up in a majestic mountain of white vapour far into the distant skies.

A noble prayer there must have been in that forest smoke!

The priest's mind grew smaller, it dwindled and shrank, and became enclosed between four walls.

The wide mountain of the smoke-cloud sank and dissolved.

But why should not a soft blue smoke hover around the heads of the worshippers and help them to pray?

As Mr. Crossley leant against the car he had a happy vision of all his congregation praying earnestly amid the beautiful silken fumes.

But this would not satisfy his own longing; there would not be enough flame.

How still the night was, how very still; the priest's soul leapt within him.

Why could not all this autumn stillness be changed into glowing, rushing, tearing flame? Flame of fire that burst, roared upwards, carrying towards heaven the vast token of its being, the towering smoke-cloud.

How still the moon shone above him, how still and cold. Is not the moon perhaps the true hell of the damned, the cold hell?

And what is God?

Is not God a raging fire that devours all evil. A fire burning up the dead, black rafters of the house of man, running in tongues of flame to and fro in the earth, licking up the base, unholy waters in man's life.

Is not that God?

Mr. Crossley's questioning thoughts rose higher in the stillness of the night, higher than the stars! He saw all dissolution as a cleansing fire, a burning that strips the flesh from the bones and destroys the bones in due time.

All nature, thought Mr. Crossley, is on fire, all burning. The climbing plant in the hedge, the great trees, all drawing up the hot flame in their roots.

All life burning and waiting for the last great day! The glorious day, when all His created works shall rise in one prayer, burning to the high throne of God.

Chapter 25

After waiting for some while as a mere atom in the silence of the brooding night, Mr. Crossley was shaken out of his reverie by hearing certain human sounds in the road.

Turning round to see what it was, Mr. Crossley beheld the Clerk of Norbury in the act of trying to climb into the car.

The efforts of the good Mr. Morsay did not appear to be attended by much success. This may have been partly because Mr. Crowle was trying at the same moment to climb in, and partly owing to the Clerk's own embarrassment at being so near to his master.

Whether it was one or both these reasons that troubled him we cannot say, but Mr. Morsay stumbled upon the step and fell backwards into the road, dragging Mr. Crowle after him.

The two men lay in the dust, blinking and smiling at the moon, until Mr. Crossley kindly helped them to climb up into the car.

Meanwhile, Mr. Stole's ingenuity being happily applied thereto, the broken vehicle soon proceeded upon its homeward way, its departure being watched with a critical eye by the blacksmith, who wished it, now that it was out of the compass of his destiny, a pleasant journey.

And as its custom was, even after many vicissitudes, Mr. Balliboy's car did at length arrive at Norbury.

Slowly and a little dreamily, as though they had been drinking a draught of the moon's own recipe for slumber, Mr. Crossley and his wife entered the Rectory gates.

It was the hour of midnight.

Mrs. Crossley smiled at her own shadow; the shadow looked to her like a monstrous eight.

Somewhere between the Rectory gates and the house itself—Mrs. Crossley could never remember exactly where it was—the returning

travellers heard the wailing of an infant.

At first they thought the sounds came from some animal, a lamb perhaps, or even a caught hare. Coming nearer to their own door, the cries became more human, so that the old people quickened their steps, anxious to see what could be the matter.

When they reached the house the mystery explained itself. Upon the top step was a clothes-basket, wherein lay a babe wrapped in a blanket.

The baby was crying.

Mrs. Crossley held up her hands in wonder; she could hardly believe her own eyes.

Her mind went instinctively back to a story that her mother had told her, about the kind storks that bring the babies. For sixty years she had forgotten the story, and now she remembered it again. Mrs. Crossley looked up into the sky; she expected to see the wonderful bird, with its long legs outstretched, flying up to its nest in the moon.

Mr. Crossley did not follow his wife's gaze upwards; he could only look at the babe.

The good priest's heart was full of happiness and wonder. It seemed to him so very sure that the child had been sent as an answer to his prayer.

Mr. Crossley blessed the child. After blessing the child, he gently rocked the basket in order to quiet the little one.

Mrs. Crossley opened the door and called for Mathilda. The servant came hurriedly out; she had been asleep in the kitchen. She rubbed her eyes and looked about her as though she was still dreaming.

Couple looking at baby in basket on their front steps

At length, however, she permitted her frightened eyes to rest upon the form of her master, who still rocked the infant.

Mrs. Crossley went into the house, almost falling over the infant as she entered. Mathilda followed her mistress.

As they entered the dining-room, Mathilda was saying that the baby was no child of hers.

While the mistress and the maid were considering together what had better be done, the master of the house came into the room with the clothes-basket in his arms.

He placed the basket upon the table. The child had stopped crying.

Mr. Crossley had already grown extremely fond of the tiny creature. Its romantic arrival at his doors had touched his heart. He could see the infant growing happily in the Rectory garden like a flower; he could see himself showing it the wonder of fire and smoke, and teaching it how to pray.

The Rector gave his finger to the babe, who grasped the finger and smiled.

The infant's smile made the priest wonder about many matters.

His work as a clergyman had held him out, a whole church's length away from the babes.

He felt how hideously adult it all was, the sermonising, this talking to the old women, this scolding the farmers.

How adult all life was!

In order to escape from the adult, from the fixed part of it all, Mr. Crossley had married.

But there at once he found himself involved in a secret, an aged system —a system that reached so very far back into the ancient ways. There was so much about marriage that touched the very core of the old-time world. So much that ate back again into Adam, that returned to the old ways of the cave-men, that went indeed almost as far as the four hundred beasts.

Even Hugh had been born with an old look, as though he had but come again out of the long, long past.

But this new babe was more like a messenger from heaven. A new child of God, who could play with the world in a lively temper of gladness. No mark of the earth could be upon him, no blemish.

But, perhaps, after all, this little one was not without blemish. Perhaps it, too, had an aged earthy history like the others.

Mrs. Crossley was still busy talking with Mathilda about the babe. The white head of the old lady and the dark head of the servant were close

together.

As they talked, they would at certain times look round at the priest, as though they wished to know by his manner what he really thought about the child.

The Rector of Norbury took a candle in his hand. He wished to know whether the child was from earth or from heaven. He held the candle near to the child's face.

By the light of the candle Mr. Crossley saw very clearly a distinct mark in the skin of the child's forehead. The mark was like a vine-shaped leaf.

Chapter 26

About a fortnight after the new-born infant had been taken in at the Rectory, Mr. Morsay discovered his loss.

Judged by its monetary value, there was very little loss at all. But still the matter stolen was Mr. Morsay's, or rather, up to that point in the world's history, it had been Mr. Morsay's.

Of course, even without other complications, the simple fact that a possession had been taken away from him was enough to drive the good Clerk mad with rage.

Even though this particular matter was a small one, there was no knowing how much he might miss it.

The sad knowledge of Mr. Morsay's loss came to him in this way.

The Clerk awoke rather early in the morning with a pain in his side.

He had, indeed, honest man, often cracked his joke beside some one else's pain-rocked bed, and had even said a merry word or two at a grave-side after the priest was gone.

But now that he was the sufferer, he did not feel in the least like joking. Mr. Morsay was awake and in pain. These two annoyances combined to render the Clerk's early morning temper none of the pleasantest.

To ease himself a little, and at the same time to communicate to his wife that something in the nature of a catastrophe was in the air, Mr. Morsay lifted his fist and brought it down again, in the fashion of a sledge-hammer, upon exactly the place where his wife's head usually reposed.

It was fortunate for Mrs. Morsay—and luck was sometimes upon her side—that she had that morning gone down earlier, hoping to find the egg that she believed her neighbour's hen had laid within reach of her long arm, aided by a crooked stick.

The simple fact that no awakening scream came from the bed, but that screams enough came from the garden, informed Mr. Morsay better than

words that his wife had gone down and was employing a few spare moments in beating the girl.

And not without reason.

For little Letty had found the egg first, the child having also noticed the nearness of the neighbour's nest.

Letty was in the act of sucking it, in the hopes of hiding the matter from both mothers, when she was discovered.

His girl's screams did not rouse Mr. Morsay to any sense of pleasure in life. He rubbed his side, but the pain would not go. Feeling still very ill at ease, the Clerk rose from his bed and dressed, and, without wasting words upon his family, he went out of his own back-door.

Just behind the old water-barrel that was placed there, like a Bewick's basket, to catch the rain droppings, Mr. Morsay, standing upon a slab of stone, carefully inserted his hand into a hole in the thatch.

Drawing out his hand again from this dry and secret hiding-place, Mr. Morsay looked gloomily around.

His 'Culpepper's Herbal,' the book of cures and charms, the book of the full mystery of healing, was gone.

The Clerk of Norbury slowly walked round his own lowly dwelling.

He might, he thought, when he last used the book to find a remedy for corns, have put it back into the wrong place.

After walking round his own low walls as many times, though not as silently, as the soldiers of Joshua encircled Jericho, Mr. Morsay stopped short.

He had discovered that the book of herbs was really gone, and, what was worse, he believed some one had stolen it.

Mr. Morsay felt that his pain was getting worse.

For want of anything better to do, he wandered down the centre path in his little garden.

The Clerk looked at his garden; the book was certainly not there.

The pain still troubled him. Mr. Morsay saw only rotting potato stalks, and cursed them.

An exquisitely beautiful little bird flew by, and lit upon a twig not far away. Mr. Morsay wished the bird dead.

There was only one little matter that could comfort him in his loss; this was that there was no pressing necessity for him to work that day. As luck would have it, Mr. Crossley had given him, only the evening before, his year's salary—£3, 6s. 6d.—as Clerk of Norbury.

Breakfast over, the good man, still in pain, walked into the fields.

Chapter 27

Mr. Morsay had no particular reason for walking in the fields, unless it was that the fields adjoined his garden.

He hoped, too, that he might find his book somewhere. It was not in his own thatch, so it might, he fancied, be in Farmer Told’s fields as anywhere else in the world.

Mr. Morsay also wished to take himself away from his own home, a place of discomfort that he now so closely connected with the beginning of his own pain.

In a field known as Cusack’s Long Acre, Mr. Morsay met Mr. Told.

The farmer was carrying a bucket of meal in one hand and a gun in the other.

That very morning Mr. Told had awakened with a very strong impression that the rats were hurting him. A day or two before it had been the government, and now it was the rats, while to-morrow it might be the labourers.

Although Mr. Told could not torture the government or the labourers, he could torture the rats. And he did. He wanted a poison, he had remarked to Mr. Bicer, the chemist, a few days before, ‘that would wriggle ’em up.’

The phrase delighted the chemist, who sold the farmer a new-fashioned sort of poison that he promised would do all that Mr. Told wished to the rats.

Near the hedge of Cusack’s Long Acre, Mr. Told explained to Mr. Morsay all about the poison.

‘Thik be a proper food for a rat,’ the farmer said, winking slyly at Mr. Morsay. ‘They rats do a-think market tea be a-come when they taste thik.’

Mr. Told said that he had watched one rat going round and round in frightful agony as though after its own tail. He had found another dead one that had eaten a hole in its own side.

While Mr. Told was speaking, he carefully laid some of the meal—that had been already mixed with the poison—by the hole of a rat, using a wooden spoon to put the bait there.

Mr. Morsay watched with interest; he hoped that a rat would come out, eat of the poison, and perform some kind of rustic dance for him to admire.

But Mr. Morsay was disappointed, for no rat came. Mr. Told had turned to some other holes that he had baited with his poison the day before. Returning to the Clerk, and noticing the look of disappointment upon his face, the farmer said,

‘Oh, they rats do go round in ’oles before they do die; they won’t show we all their antics.’

Mr. Morsay turned away sulkily. But, on second thoughts, he told the farmer about the book that he had lost. He explained further that he always used the recipes out of the book when he was in any pain. But now that the book was stolen, ‘he might,’ he said, ‘die of his sickness like the rats.’

Mr. Morsay was beginning, indeed, to be more than ever occupied with his pain.

He did not like the idea that it was possible for a human being to be in as great torment as a poisoned rat. The idea brought a man down.

For by simply losing a book out of his own thatch, he might incur the risk of rolling round after his own heels in default of a proper tail.

Mr. Morsay felt that after all a man was not so very far removed from the lower animals. He wished he was. The Clerk of Norbury rubbed his side.

In front of him there was a large clod of earth. Mr. Morsay spitefully kicked the clod.

The two men walked over the field together.

They both watched a sea-gull that was lazily flying over their heads. The bird was splendidly large and white, its beautiful wings shone in the September sun.

Mr. Told raised his gun to his shoulder and shot the sea-gull. The bird fluttered upon the ground in agony; it had been hit everywhere by the little, piercing, wounding shots.

Mr. Morsay and Mr. Told watched the sea-gull flopping about and soiling its splendid wings with the clay sod.

‘Another of them flying birds,’ was Mr. Told’s comment.

The Clerk was pleased too, and began to feel better. It interested Mr. Morsay to see what a man made in God’s own image could do when put to it.

A man so made could make a rat die in unspeakable agony, and fill all one side of a harmless bird flying in the air with little lead shot.

When the Clerk began to feel better, he also began to reason. If only he could get the farmer to the Norbury inn? Mr. Morsay had a poor man’s cunning; he knew that farmers, like other men, are always ready to be flattered.

The Clerk began to praise Mr. Told’s skill with the gun, as the fox in the fable praised the voice of the crow that had the piece of cheese in its mouth.

After praising the farmer’s shooting, Mr. Morsay, whose bait-laying was as crafty as the farmer’s own, turned his attention to guiding Mr. Told’s footsteps towards Mrs. Hinden’s tavern.

His plan was this:—

He walked a little to the right—for in that direction lay the inn—and from a short distance away began to address the farmer, asking him a suitable, though rather low-muttered, question about the church coal.

In order to hear what the Clerk said, Mr. Told was forced to go nearer to him. And Mr. Morsay, repeating the manœuvre like a lapwing leading a schoolboy away from its nest, by degrees drew the farmer towards the inn.

A few hundred yards away from Mrs. Hinden’s establishment there was a tall hedge still rich in greenery. As the two men approached nearer, they saw a figure kneeling down beside the hedge.

Nearer still the figure became a woman in uniform.

Mr. Told knew her very well; she was Miss Mary Crowle, the niece of the landlady. Seeing who it was, Mr. Told at once felt his pocket. His wallet was safe.

Mary Crowle had not heard their steps. She still continued to dig with a trowel in the ground below the hedge.

She was digging up the roots of a plant.

As the two men passed by her, they saw some of the roots that she had already dug up.

They were lying in a neat row upon the grass. The roots were black. Beside the roots was Mr. Morsay's 'Culpepper's Herbal.'

Chapter 28

During the summer Matthew Hurd put down all the faults of the children to the excessive heat.

At the end of each day’s lessons he hoped that when the autumn came they would do better.

The schoolmaster knew how hard it must be for them to work with the harvest waggons passing towards Mr. Told’s barn.

The children’s summer holidays had been taken earlier than usual that year owing to an outbreak of scarlet fever in the village.

Matthew Hurd himself had spent the holidays in trying to escape from two people of note, Mrs. Bone and God.

The first one of these two people Matthew managed rather easily to avoid by simply being away all day and only returning when he was sure that Mrs. Bone would be out of the way. The latter person indicated was not so easy to escape, owing to the fact that Matthew felt a portion of Him in himself.

Matthew Hurd could not all that holiday-time free himself from the feeling that a constant pressure, friendly and loving, was being applied to his mind.

Once, as he walked beside a wonderful patch of blue summer flowers, he heard the voice of God speaking to him out of the flowers, and he fled.

When the school opened again in September, Matthew applied himself more than ever diligently to the children’s tasks.

He hoped that he would find them more tractable. But now even October had come, and they were just as tiresome as of old.

Whenever Matthew tried to put into their heads a taste for better things, he found their minds like wood.

But in other matters, such as cheating, stealing, lying, they showed an almost supernatural sharpness, that was only equalled by their capacity in

the matter of telling tales of one another.

Most of the children’s faces expressed the brute clearly and forcefully, and Matthew could never tell which was uppermost in their minds, folly or knavery.

At first the children of Norbury had looked at their new schoolmaster as though they were immensely interested in his personality. So interested indeed, that they could not, for a long time, listen to one word that he said.

But after they had studied him well, they had gone on, as their usual custom was, doing their own lessons badly.

When he first came to Norbury, Matthew wondered why the children looked at him so queerly. He thought he saw a kind of power in their gaze, a power that if only he could get applied to their lessons would carry them far.

He put the children down in his own mind as unformed mud.

Mud with eyes that looked angrily, because he tried to mould it, at him.

Matthew Hurd was curiously conscious, too, that the children were the reflection of his own moods. When he was unhappy, they were sullen and spiteful. When he was more friendly to the world, their eyes would be brighter and their gestures would be more kind.

One thing Matthew was sure of, that the children were always trying to get the upper hand of their master.

It was all a battle, with Norbury school as the field, between him and them.

The children were alert and scheming. The slightest wavering of his out of the path of strict discipline was always noted and remembered as a breach in the wall to be entered in force on another day.

Apparently their constant object in life was to break down his nerves and to create a panic in his heart.

Matthew Hurd noticed that all his class watched him very intently when he spoke to the girls, and once or twice, when he had put his hand upon the thinly clad shoulder of Letty Morsay, there was a smothered titter in the room, as though he had given them the sign for a general assault upon himself.

It was not long before he discovered that country school children are only a mere outpost of the phalanx of ignorance.

Ignorance, that black monster, who, as Matthew well knew, had a good reason—its own preservation in fact—for being on guard against schoolmasters and reformers.

One day he thought he would try to help the children, and broaden their outlook towards nature by teaching them about the flowers.

Matthew hoped that if they could once learn that all sex excitement is in reality a mere naturalness, and as little out of the common in the ordinary run of things as their own daily bread, they could at least be started in the right line of thought.

Hoping they would like a little change in their lessons, the schoolmaster explained to them one day about the fertilization of plants. He used the most simple terms he could think of, such as father and mother flowers and baby seeds.

'Of course there are even more simple forms of life than the flowers,' Matthew said, after he had done his best to explain the lesson, 'but the flowers are the prettiest form of life that any child can learn about.'

After the lesson was over, Matthew Hurd walked dejectedly home.

As he went by the Clerk's cottage, Mrs. Morsay rushed out upon him, and in a violent voice accused him of telling her little Letty wicked stories.

'She do know enough,' Mrs. Morsay shouted, 'as 'tis.'

It was the first of the misty days that autumn brings, and a thin rain was beginning to fall. Matthew Hurd went indoors and tried to read, but he could not read.

The very words in the book became ugly, evil faces—evil children's faces—as he looked at them.

When Matthew went to bed, and was just upon the point of falling asleep, he saw more faces.

He knew, of course, that most people do see faces at the moment when sleep comes nearest to them.

The faces that Matthew saw came and went quickly. But one face was always there. This face remained in the background. It was the face of his father.

Matthew started up in bed; he found himself saying loudly,

'He saved others; himself he cannot save.'

Chapter 29

Upon another occasion, instead of going home one afternoon, Matthew Hurd stayed by the green to hear the preaching.

He knew that Miss Crowle had begun to preach again after her recent illness.

Matthew watched her with interest; she was thinner than when he had seen her last, and very pale. He had heard it rumoured that she had gone out too soon after her influenza. It was said in the village that Miss Crowle had gone out to dig up roots from the hedge, so that she might make a medicine to prevent her from catching the same kind of illness again.

She was now gazing up, as she usually did when she preached, at the skies.

Matthew watched her eagerly. She was preaching of the wonders of salvation. Her pale face was filled with longing for the land that is afar.

Still thinking of Mary Crowle, Matthew went on his way to the school. He knew now for certain that he loved her.

When he arrived at his cottage, Matthew found Mrs. Bone cleaning up. As was usual during such times, the house was full of dust. But in order to keep the dust well indoors—she complained of a cold—Mrs. Bone had shut all the windows. In the passage there were two heaps of dust, and Mrs. Bone was still sweeping.

Matthew was well aware that the woman had been idling for some hours in his house, clawing his clothes, and reading his letters. She could have only begun to sweep when she saw him coming.

Matthew remembered that when he had been listening to Miss Crowle, he had seen Mrs. Bone's hideous face at his window. When the master of the house stepped into the passage, Mrs. Bone retreated up the stairs and began to make clouds of dust arise from the stair carpet.

The smell of all this disgusting stuff found its way to the very bottom of Matthew's lungs. He could feel in him, and about him, all the little evil

particles raised up by the old woman’s broom.

Matthew waited for a moment; he wished to lock himself into his bedroom, and to wait there until the woman was gone. But Mrs. Bone still remained upon the stairs, raising, by some extraordinary process, more and more dust; and, what was worse still, out of the dust the old woman’s words were coming. She was speaking about Miss Crowle.

Mrs. Bone must have seen him, Matthew thought, listening to the preacher upon the village green.

‘The influenza were a funny complaint for she to ’ave,’ Mrs. Bone was saying. ‘An’ then to go out root-digging, and so to make ’erself bad for ’nother month, that were funny. An’ to tell folks that they roots, black roots so I did ’ear, would a-stop thik influenza a-coming again, that were funniest of all. An’ she do look thin after thik illness.’

Mrs. Bone’s awkward body filled the whole space in the stairway. She was muttering some more words about Mary Crowle, and was wagging her head.

Matthew Hurd could listen no longer; he fled out into the fields.

Though the sun had gone, it was still light, and a mild wind was blowing without rain.

Matthew walked dejectedly in the fields. He could only think of the girl who had preached upon the green, only of her.

How far her look had gone upwards, upwards to the hills of heaven. Her look had come out of the dust, but never would return. In that look she was saved, saved. . . .

And Matthew loved her.

Chapter 30

Matthew found himself walking across a lonely stubble. At one end of the field there was a disused lime-kiln. The schoolmaster wandered up to the shed that had once been used for storing the lime.

In the shelter of the shed there reclined a man and a woman. The pair were forgetting all the rest of the world in one another's arms.

Matthew Hurd drew near unnoticed.

As he came near the woman drew her companion's face to hers and kissed the man's lips with quick, pulsing, burning kisses.

Matthew stepped quietly back; he had noticed that the woman was dressed in the uniform of the Salvation Army.

The schoolmaster walked slowly home. Around him the autumn air moaned. All the earth and heaven had become a dull leaden grey.

When he entered the schoolhouse again Matthew found that Mrs. Bone was gone.

The schoolmaster went at once up to his bedroom and took out of his drawer the photo of the clean-shaven young man. He looked at it carefully, and then he put it away.

After putting the photograph away, he carried the candle to the dressing-table and looked at his own bearded face in the glass.

He fancied that his face was changing. A new troubled look had come into it, the same kind of look that he had so often seen upon the face of his father.

His father had come to be like that because he had loved all mankind too well, while himself, the son, was reaching the same look because he hated the people and loved one girl.

Matthew went slowly to the other side of the room, and took out of a drawer a bottle that was well corked and appeared to be more than half full of a white powder. Matthew remembered how carefully his father must have

corked the bottle after taking the poison. It was like his father to be so careful.

The Norbury schoolmaster shook the bottle; the powder seemed to be in good condition; the stuff had kept well.

While he was examining and shaking the bottle, Matthew had moved again near to the window.

Outside all was dark. Looking from the window out into the road, the schoolmaster saw a female figure dressed in dark clothes, with her arms outstretched towards him as though she prayed. Matthew knew that the dim figure outside could see him plainly by the light of his candle.

Why was she watching him?

Noticing that he had seen her there, the woman moved down the lane and turned into the cottage that was inhabited by Mrs. Bone.

After putting the bottle away where he had found it, Matthew Hurd went downstairs and lit the lamp in the sitting-room.

He took a book from one of his shelves and tried to read. The book was about the stars.

Matthew repeated aloud to himself the old, very old names of the stars—Arcturus, Sirius, Vega.

But was not man, Matthew thought, older than them all? Older in mind, older in greed, older in malice?

The schoolmaster put the book down; his thoughts, repulsed by the stars, drifted to his parents.

His parents' lives had been just human lives; they had gone through it all from the cradle to the grave. They were both dead, safe and dead, both in one grave.

'I like to break myself upon the wheel,' his father had once said to him. 'That is the very best thing we can do, the very best.'

'But there is no best and no worst,' the son had replied.

'No, I don't think there is either, but there is sacrifice,' Dr. Hurd had said very quietly.

That night, as Matthew Hurd was just falling asleep, he saw a face that he thought he knew. It was the face of a young man, with large, burning eyes.

Chapter 31

The next day was damp and misty, a true autumn day.

Matthew Hurd endeavoured to raise up his drooping spirits by walking quickly to school.

On his way he met little Tommy Told in the street. Matthew took Tommy's hand in order to lead him to school.

Tommy was frightened, and bit the hand that was helping him. The schoolmaster laughed and let him go.

'I ought to make a lecture out of that,' he thought, 'and bring in the primeval instinct of fear. Of course Tommy expected me to eat him up alive.'

During the school hours the children were more than usually naughty.

Even during the opening lesson Matthew knew that the children bandied some joke between them.

Later on in the day he discovered a piece of paper that was being handed by a girl to a boy. It was an obscene drawing of a man.

In his secret heart Matthew could not help seeing something of interest in the picture. It might have been the work of a gnome. Its crudities were monstrous, but its outline was determined and real.

All the school watched him looking at the picture, and expected to be kept in.

But Matthew said nothing to them.

On his way home he saw Letty Morsay blushing and smiling at him. Matthew knew quite well that she had drawn the picture, because Letty had been lately staying in a neighbouring village under a great prehistoric giant that was carved in the chalk downs. And even though the picture had 'Matthew Hurd' written above the man's head, yet Matthew could easily recognize the giant.

The schoolmaster looked away from Letty to the hills.

On the top of the hills he saw, standing upon a mound, a man and a woman. The two figures were silhouetted against the dull grey October sky.

Matthew's eyes were opened; he saw them as the eternal mystery.

Looking up at them he forgave the children for being ill-mannered, he forgave the world for being what it is. But before he reached his home, the troubles of his life had gathered like dark shadows round him again.

All the evil of it bit into him. He saw it all, the children, the village, the same old wearisome monotony of routine. All the hopeless striving of his teaching.

How bound down it all was, this teaching! It was teaching, nothing but teaching, everlasting teaching without rhyme or reason, without common sense or wisdom, that aimed at nothing really good, nothing noble, nothing great.

Outside the schoolhouse door Mrs. Bone was shaking carpets. Clouds of the most evil dust were flying about, blown this way and that by the gusts of wind.

The old woman's face had for a long while obsessed Matthew; he was quite unable to get that hideous leer of hers out of his mind.

How could any God find an excuse for making a creature so ugly? She was the last word in the book, the ultimate answer to the ultimate question. Through all the world's back worlds, beyond worlds, spirit worlds, there could be found no reason for her. Why did he not strike her down, beat her, the foul, dust-loving thing that she was! And it was for her, for this kind of gross being, that his father had rent his soul in twain!

Matthew Hurd went up to his bedroom and shut the door.

He heard a confusion of noises downstairs. Mrs. Bone was moving about, putting down a carpet.

There came the loud noise of something falling below. Mrs. Bone must have upset the bookcase.

All his loved books would now be soiled, thumb-marked, fouled by her evil touch.

The schoolmaster pressed his hands to his face and shut his eyes. He saw his father. His father had a careworn, troubled look, and was walking in the

wood. Matthew saw him stop to watch a little shrew-mouse. His father smiled at the mouse, but still went on walking in the wood.

Matthew Hurd opened his eyes and moved across the room to the chest of drawers.

He opened a drawer, expecting to find a corked bottle inside.

But the bottle was gone.

Chapter 32

Never in all their lives had the two simple-hearted old people at the Norbury Rectory been so happy.

In the old days, that seemed to them now to be so far away, when their son was a baby, their happiness had been kept down by numerous little troubles.

But when this new babe came, they at once gathered up to themselves all the little movements in its life, little significant movements, that Mr. Crossley blended with his thoughts of prayer, and his wife with her figures, in order to love them the more.

Mr. Crossley was indeed so happy that he forgot his books, he forgot Mr. Told, he forgot to write his sermons. And Mrs. Crossley could now spend her money in so many ways of baby expenditure. The three-farthings that pleased the washerwoman pleased Mrs. Crossley too. They would add so nicely into the pence, and the pence would all run up so well.

There were the tiny baby garments to be bought, and often there were farthings in their price. And how great her excitement was, she only knew, when she compared all the pieces of paper upon which she had put down her estimates, and there was just that happy balance of £3, 3s. 3¾d.

The Rector would often wheel little Bryony out in his baby-carriage. The vine-shaped leaf engraved by nature upon the little one's head had given it a name, and Mr. and Mrs. Crossley were its godparents.

Mr. Crossley touched the child delicately, as a good priest would do, and allowed it to pull his grey hair, and made sport for it in a thousand little ways. He watched it, and played with it every day, and loved it more and more as each new day came.

Mr. Crossley prayed for Bryony in the church after the evening service, when the half-extinguished lamps gave a smoky look to the building, and Mr. Morsay was the only other human being there to see the folly of his master.

Slowly all the hopes that had left Mr. Crossley when old age came returned to him again. All his old happy thoughts were renewed in his heart, more spiritual and more real.

He had failed, of course, in the way of fame; he laughed at himself for ever expecting to get laudatory letters from a bishop.

His one longing now was to teach the little one to pray.

He wished him to use the wonders of nature as a medium. He hoped to teach him to look upward to God in the old natural manner, the old symbolic way.

Mr. Crossley desired to show the little one the smoke of burning rising to heaven, that ascension of the most rarefied element, that sublime example of the true prayer of man.

Stopping for a moment one autumn day as he wheeled the child up the village lane, Mr. Crossley watched long and thoughtfully the smoke rising up from a cottage chimney. It was a peaceful October day, and the village was wrapped in the garment of silence.

No sound came from any cottage. All the people of Norbury might have been sending up one prayer in the smoke to God.

The babe watched the smoke. It held out its arms as though it wanted to touch the smoke that went up so straight into the sky.

Mr. Crossley knelt down in the lane and prayed.

Chapter 33

Mr. Told, the farmer, could never bring himself to agree with the Rector of Norbury about the incense. It seemed to the honest farmer to be mere burning of money, without any qualifying gratification to the senses as was the case with the fumes of tobacco.

Because he hated the idea so much, Mr. Told would hardly, if he met Mr. Crossley in the Norbury lanes, raise his hand to his hat.

Being disappointed in the matter of the church incense, Mr. Crossley began to acquire a taste for lighting bonfires. Whenever the weather was suitably fine he collected dry sticks, and he was often to be seen those autumn days, climbing the hills to fetch the best fuel.

Upon one of these visits to the hills, Mr. Crossley met his son walking out with Miss Crowle.

Mr. Crossley looked at the pair lovingly, and spoke about the beauty of the hills.

When he reached the summit, Mr. Crossley turned round and blessed the village.

He then bent down to gather the little broken bits. The sticks smelt of the earth, they were earthy. Mr. Crossley loved the sticks for their very earthiness.

As he gathered the sticks Mr. Crossley thought of his wife.

All roads lead to God, he thought; all roads, diverse and twisting though they seem to be, all roads lead to Him. It was all wonderful, the joy that his wife obtained from her simple figures, so that by mere counting she could always find contentment and peace. It was all a wonderland of blessings. She in her way could obtain joy, and he in his. There was no way that would go nearer to the great mystery than another, but all life bent that way, as to the great, the living sun.

But a sad break came to the happiness at Norbury Rectory.

One afternoon Mr. Crossley had come into his study and found his wife sitting there more than usually silent.

Hugh Crossley had been to Norbury that day. And even his father was surprised to see how fashionably the boy was dressed.

The Rector was pleased to see his boy looking so well and so grand.

But it was not until his son was gone that he knew there was something wrong.

‘I can’t think,’ Mrs. Crossley said to her husband, as he came in, ‘I can’t think how Hugh paid for all those new clothes and for his expensive walking-stick and tie-pin? I know it could not have come out of the money—I mean out of what we gave him. I was going to buy a suit of clothes for him next May, on the 26th; I had it all put down. And now he has these grand ones.’

Mrs. Crossley looked away from her husband.

The Rector quietly suggested that perhaps their son might have picked up some money in the road. He himself had once picked up a sixpence that he afterwards gave to Mrs. Bone.

Mrs. Crossley looked intensely unhappy. She moved aside the sheets of paper covered with neat figures that were lying before her. She then watched her husband tearfully and gravely.

Mr. Crossley felt sure that somehow or other he had made a fearful mistake in saying what he had said.

He felt as if he had told his wife that one of her addition sums, that she always used to add up three times, was wrong.

She was still looking sadly at him with the same heart-broken expression upon her face, as though he had done something very dreadful, something quite unlike his usual conduct—perhaps blasphemed.

After watching her husband for a full minute she said very quietly,

‘Oh no, dear; he could not have got it in that way; no one ever picks up money like that in the world.’

Mr. Crossley’s mind was lost in a wilderness. He had never expected this trouble to come.

How did one get money when one hadn’t any? he wondered.

But of one thing at least he was certain; there could never be a mistake, not the least tiny bit of one, not one stroke of a five missing, in his wife's accounts.

He felt he must think it out, that he must explain it somehow. Without any preparation he was brought face to face with a dreadful crisis in their lives. He could see so plainly the slender thread of silk that his wife's only pleasure in life hung upon. If the thread broke, as it seemed inclined to do over these unlucky new clothes, her whole joy in life, her very belief in God even, might go.

Mr. Crossley could never explain why at this precise moment he should think of Mr. Told. But he did think of the farmer, and remembered, too, the talk that there had been in the village about the farmer losing a wallet—a wallet that contained, so the farmer had told every one, an immense sum of money.

Mr. Crossley blushed like a girl.

Stepping softly up to the babe Bryony, who was asleep in the room, he gently stroked its head.

Mr. Crossley had a sure feeling, all the time that he stood by the cradle, that he was being repeatedly asked a sinister question by his wife.

Was his own son a thief?

It could never before have entered into Mr. Crossley's head that the thing was possible.

He had brought Hugh up in all kindness of heart and in all goodness, so that the verb 'to steal' could have no place at all in the boy's life's grammar. The whole idea was so utterly unthinkable.

Mr. Crossley turned to his wife; she was gravely watching his movements, with her pencil in her hand. She was looking at him as though he had told her that two and two could never again in her life make four.

She slowly gathered up the papers before her, and moved to the fireplace as though to burn them.

But before she could throw the bundle into the fire, her husband stopped her hand.

'That would be waste,' he said very quietly, 'let little Bryony see them burn to-morrow in the garden. The babe is asleep now, but to-morrow he will send a prayer up to God, a prayer for his brother.'

The thought of the next day’s bonfire pleased Mr. Crossley. He hurried out of the room with the papers, which he placed in the shed near the dry sticks that he had gathered that day.

When he returned to the study again, he found his wife weeping silently. Her head, bent over the table as she sobbed, looked, as Mr. Crossley had noticed before, like cotton wool, waiting, and indeed ready, to match the other wool.

Mrs. Crossley was crying, crying because her occupation was gone.

Her husband leant over her lovingly, and his tears fell upon her white head.

She did not move.

Her pencil, broken in two halves, lay upon the table.

The old man kissed her hair, but she made no reply to his caress.

When the next morning came, Mr. Crossley took little Bryony into the garden to show him the bonfire.

The Rector of Norbury struck the match, the fire burned brightly. The babe held out its hands and laughed. In the smoke Mr. Crossley’s prayer went up to heaven.

Chapter 34

The front parlour of the Norbury Arms was occupied one November evening by a domestic circle.

There was Mrs. Hinden, who sat in state upon her high-backed chair, exactly under a picture of the late Lord Norbury, who died—being the last of his line—of a wound he received in a duel during the reign of Queen Anne.

A little way from Mrs. Hinden sat Mr. Crowle, the railway porter, who was drinking pints of his sister's beer in great contentment and peace.

Near to him, and at a decent distance—as dictated by his modesty—from Mrs. Hinden, was Mr. Bewsley of the Wainfleet Lion, the good and faithful landlord having come over to ask—this time in person—for the hand of the lady.

Standing behind Mr. Bewsley was his serving-man; for old John had not refused to come with his master. John had spent the greater part of the evening in looking at the picture of the late Lord Norbury, until at last he began to think that the gentleman in the picture could be none other than the wicked German Emperor.

Sitting away from the rest was Miss Mary Crowle, clothed in her uniform, with her bonnet drawn forward as though she wished to hide her face.

Behind her bonnet she was flushed and excited, being by no means pleased with the affairs in progress.

From time to time Mr. Bewsley would look at Mrs. Hinden, as though he wondered what was going on in her mind, and how many more crosses he would have to put on his slate at home before she would really have him.

After a somewhat prolonged silence, disturbed only by the not very pleasant sound of Mr. Crowle drinking, Mr. Bewsley stood up in his place and formally asked Mrs. Hinden to marry him.

Mary Crowle answered instead of her aunt.

‘She will never marry you, Mr. Bewsley,’ Mary said. ‘Auntie is going to retire to Romantown and help the Army.’

While Mary spoke, Mrs. Hinden could only shake her head, though at the same time she smiled kindly at Mr. Bewsley, who in his turn looked in a scared and curious way at Mary Crowle, as though he expected her at any moment to change into a vampire bat.

One person, however, was not daunted by Mary’s determined manner.

‘The Army be damned,’ cried out Mr. Crowle, with real anger in his voice. ‘Whenever did any of they Army preachers give I a sixpence?’

Mr. Crowle looked scornfully at his daughter.

‘Don’t ’ee listen to any of they, sister; they never give any one anything, they don’t; a glass of good beer is worth any kingdom of ’eaven to I. Oh, bless you, ’tis! Listen to I, Sister ’Inden, for once in thee’s lifetime. ’Tis a good inn Wainfleet be for callers, and policeman, ’e don’t listen to nothink. A drop of good drink do stop ’is clatter soon enough. Thik Wainfleet policeman don’t see ’imself taking a good man like Mr. Bewsley to court, when there still be Germans about.’

‘I won’t have you marry him, Auntie,’ Mary said in a low voice, when her father was quiet again. ‘I won’t allow it, I will forbid the banns in church. I respect you, I love you too much. Marriage is wicked, Auntie.’

Roused by these last words, that Mrs. Hinden regarded as falling foul of all wedding carriages, white rosettes, orange blossoms, little merry bridesmaids, cake, and old slippers; a paraphernalia that the good landlady dearly loved, the troubled lady of the house spoke out more loudly.

‘Marriage don’t seem to me to be more wicked sometimes than a single life,’ Mrs. Hinden said, looking more boldly at Mary. ‘A single life is not always a good life.’

Mr. Crowle at once caught at this new idea of his sister’s.

‘Sure ’tain’t,’ he said, ‘sure ’tain’t.’

Mr. Crowle saw in those very words of his the merry goings-on of the girl in Mill Lane.

‘Sure ’tain’t,’ said Mr. Crowle again.

Moving by degrees up to the great chair under the nobleman, Mr. Bewsley solemnly kissed Mrs. Hinden’s hand, that she held out to him as graciously as a queen.

Returning to his place after he had shown this very proper state of his feelings, Mr. Bewsley as solemnly lit his pipe.

He was mentally marking a large last cross upon the slate.

Mary Crowle stood up her full height and looked at the company, her uniform being able to express anger as well as religion. She was breathing quickly. Lithe and supple she stood like a tigress ready to spring. She was cornered by the dogs and stood at bay. She spoke to her father.

‘You drunken brute,’ she said, ‘a nice one you are to give advice to a good woman, a fine one, with your harlots and your thieving, with your base lying and drinking. And as to you, Mr. Bewsley,’ she continued, in a voice of suppressed passion, ‘you should be thinking of better things than marriage at your age—and have you forgotten Portstown and what you did there? You know you can’t hide anything from the Army, Mr. Bewsley.’

The landlord of the Wainfleet Lion moved uneasily in his chair; he half expected that Miss Crowle would spring upon him like a wild cat and tear out his eyes.

He answered her in his usual quiet voice, a voice that even the most undisciplined drunkard in Wainfleet had learned to reverence.

‘Don’t ’ee upset theeself, young preacher, about I, for ’aven’t I put real marriage before ’er eyes like a true man these many years. ’Tis true enough that I did go to Portstown a year or two agone. But I don’t mind what I did there, for I do believe I was drunk from time I left train to time I got in en again wi’ no ticket, an’ all me money gone. But the Lord ’elped wold ’Inden to die, and maybe if it is ’Is will to do so, ’E’ll ’elp I to me wedding day.’

Mary Crowle turned to the door.

‘You are all as bad as one another,’ she said. ‘You are all wicked.’

She raised her hand as though to defy them. Mr. Bewsley looked at her in terror.

But Mary’s passion was now gone. Her whole attitude changed; she appeared as another person.

Her anger was melted into religious fervour. Both her arms were uplifted, her soul reached to heaven. The same far-away look came into her eyes as when she preached to the little children upon the green. Her body, so rich in the juice of the earth, shrunk to nothingness, she became only a burning soul on fire for salvation.

The only one in the company who was proof against so marked a change in her manner was her father.

‘Thee best take an’ go to the devil, if th’ wold woon’ll ave ’ee,’ Mr. Crowle remarked.

Mary did not reply; she opened the parlour door and went out into the road.

Chapter 35

In the road outside the tavern Mary Crowle was met by cold gusts of autumn winds.

It was hard for her to stand, she was blown this way and that, and was forced to believe that she was still upon the earth. Mary Crowle bent her head low. She had been moved, or rather had been blown down the street, and found herself, at last, in the shelter of the school cottage wall. She opened the little gate and knocked at the schoolmaster's door.

The door was opened by Matthew Hurd.

Matthew peered out into the darkness; he thought that it might be Mrs. Bone. Mrs. Bone had an unpleasant way of coming to borrow things from him after dark: sugar or tea or whatever she happened not to have stolen enough of.

Matthew Hurd looked more intently out into the darkness. Meanwhile, the person who had knocked had stept back a little farther under the shadow of the wall.

It could not be Mrs. Bone.

Presently a chastened voice came out of the darkness and said,

'May I come in, Mr. Hurd?'

At first Matthew did not answer. He still looked out into the darkness, but he half guessed who was there. He remembered the ugly rumours about Mary Crowle's illness, and how she had nearly died of a cold that she caught from going out before she was really well. But why did he leave her standing there in the rain?

'Yes, you had better come in,' he said.

Matthew Hurd warmed her by the fire and gave her some tea.

'I can never preach again about heaven,' Mary spoke wearily.

'We all feel like that sometimes,' the schoolmaster said.

‘What do you know about preaching?’ Mary asked suddenly. ‘You told me once that you believed in nothing.’

Matthew Hurd stroked his beard. He was not altogether surprised that Mary knew him, although his beard made him look so very different. He would have spoken earlier when he found that he really loved her, only it was then that he learned how intimate she was with Hugh Crossley.

He had not suspected an intrigue when he found them together beside the carrier’s car when he first left Romantown, and for a while after that even he had only watched her movements with interest from behind the shelter of his rough beard.

Matthew Hurd looked into the fire.

‘A man often says that,’ he remarked, as though to the flames. ‘But when did you discover who I was, you never knew my name?’

‘Oh, that wasn’t very hard; I paid Mrs. Bone to steal the photo. She told me once that there was a pretty photo of a young man in your drawer. You may be quite sure that Mrs. Bone knows exactly what there is in your house. Of course I wanted to see the picture of the pretty young man. Even though I am a preacher, I can’t help being a girl, too.

‘You see, I had fallen in love with the young man in your drawer, and there was something else that I needed. I thought first that some of Mr. Told’s rat poison would do, and I collected some from the rat holes after Mr. Morsay had taken the herb-book so rudely away from me. But I did not eat the rat poison. I saw a rat die of it, and I did not like the sight much. Of course, if Mr. Morsay had not taken away the book, I might have made something out of the Bryony roots that I had dug up. But after seeing that rat die, I did not even like to take your poison.’

Matthew Hurd dared not look at her. He lay back upon the couch and watched the fire.

‘You must remember,’ Mary Crowle spoke bitterly, ‘you must remember when you first met me by the Romantown wall. Those were happy days for me. I had made a bet with another Army girl that I would entice more young men than ever she would to the shadow of that old wall. I wonder if girls made bets in the time of the Romans? I dare say they did. But anyhow, I am sure I won my bet.

‘I was one of the prettiest preachers in the Army, quite the prettiest, perhaps. And I thought I really could convert the young men under the shadow of the wall.

‘I found you that night so very passionate. Oh yes, so very interested in me, in all of me! I had been your first, I think, hadn’t I? I remember how you trembled. Oh, we girls have colder blood than you men! I thought you would come again to me after what happened that night, when we walked to those grassy rings. But you did not come. Of course I could not blame you; how could I when I knew . . .

‘There was so much that was like sinning in the Army religion. I like to become good in this way; it made me feel how deep my sin had been, how deep and how lovely.

‘I tried to convert mother, but she did not listen. Oh dear, no; she was always so busy washing and ironing, and she had quite an extraordinary love of fried fish. The smell of fried fish always filled our house. Mother used to buy stale fish cheap from a little shop by the old church, and she didn’t mind the maggots.

‘Matthew,’ Mary spoke in a low tone, and her eyes were shining, ‘you know the little baby called Bryony, who has been taken in at the Rectory. Bryony is my child and yours. Of course you must have heard stories about my illness. It would have all come out, and my character would have been ruined if it had not been for old Mr. Crossley. He begged me off because he loved the child. You know it is not quite proper to leave babies about upon doorsteps in England.

‘Mr. Crossley is such an old grandmother. I have seen him hoeing the churchyard path with Bryony asleep near to him. Mr. Crossley works for a while, and then he lays his hoe against a tombstone and rocks the pram.’

Matthew Hurd threw some more coal upon the fire. He had become fatefully involved in her story. He could not shake off her presence; she was in him, about him, around him. He had grown his beard at Romantown on purpose to avoid her, and had come to Norbury to be out of her way. But now he seemed to be more than ever in her net, as she sat in his room dressed in her uniform, an interpreter of strange dreams.

‘Oh, don’t worry about me,’ Mary Crowle went on. ‘I know how to take care of myself. I remember so well one of the queer things that I did at Portstown under the shadow of the Army. It makes me smile now to think of it. I had dressed myself up fine just for a joke, and painted my face and walked in the streets. Not far from the Central Station I met the portly old Wainfleet innkeeper; he had come to buy his Christmas drink at the brewery. I was with him all the night, and he was funny. He kept calling out for his old servant John. I believe he really thought I was John sometimes. Once he

fancied the devils were after him, and cried out that one of them was Mr. Morsay, and another Mr. Potten, and a third was the blacksmith.

'I suppose I used to react sometimes against the religious ways of the Army; the captains at Portstown were so serious. I believe Mr. Bewsley half guessed who I was to-night. It was a queer affair, I can tell you; girls are strange creatures. No girl can be sure of herself for long; we are all of us born under the moon. After that I did not want old Bewsley to marry Auntie. She is so good. She nursed me all through my illness, and even carried little Bryony up to the Rectory. Of course we knew Mr. and Mrs. Crossley had gone to Romantown, and the car always breaks down on the way home.

'You remember young Crossley and that lovely June night. Well, Hugh did take something from me that night; he took Mr. Told's wallet. No doubt the farmer told you, amongst others, of his loss. But Hugh dared not spend the notes at once; he had to wait until the affair was forgotten.'

Mary was silent for a few moments, and then a sudden fury like a hot wind caught her. She looked at Matthew, and her eyes burned. Taking out of her bosom a little corked bottle, she threw it into his lap.

'There,' she cried. 'Take and eat it if you will. Kill yourself and rot like your father. You know all about me underneath—and you leave me here without touching me. Oh, you fool!'

Matthew Hurd looked at her. His own thoughts were far away. He was bending down over the ferns in a wood, and raising up a grey head.

Mary Crowle's mood changed.

'A girl is a very funny bit of stuff,' she said. 'Mr. Crossley talked to me about that one day. I remember he said: "Don't expect to be always the same, because you never can be. God alone is always the same." '

Mary rose from her chair.

'I will go back to Auntie now,' she said quietly, 'and say that I am sorry that I made such a disturbance in her house. Then I will go home to my mother and help her to wash father's shirts and fry the fish.'

With a quick motion she reached the door and was out again in the windy night.

Chapter 36

On gloomy days Mr. Crossley used to light bonfires near the house in order to please little Bryony. He used to wheel the babe in its little carriage to where the child could safely see the fire. And as he watched, Bryony would laugh and clap his hands and look upwards.

One day more than usually gloomy the fire would not burn. This was disappointing to both the onlookers, and Bryony cried.

To see the child cry was the one thing that Mr. Crossley could not bear. So in order to start the fire, he went into the lean-to wooden shed that was at the back of the house, and close to where he had laid the fire, in order to fetch the paraffin can.

By an unlucky chance, as Mr. Crossley was lifting the paraffin can out of the corner, he knocked it against the sharp point of a pickaxe, so that the oil leaked out into the shed.

Seeing so much run out, and fearing to lose it all, the Rector of Norbury hurried out to the bonfire and poured the remainder of the paraffin over the wood.

Mr. Crossley was upon the point of striking a match again when the servant called him.

He was wanted in the study, Mathilda said.

Leaving the fire unlit, the Rector wheeled Bryony indoors.

In the study he found Mr. Told waiting to see him.

The farmer was standing near the writing-table in an uneasy attitude. He had upon first entering gazed at the fire, and from the fire he looked at the books in their shelves.

The Rector's room met his aggressive ignorance with a kindly, though firm, look of religion and learning.

It was just this gentle peace, this serene air of contemplation about the Rector's study that irritated Mr. Told.

What did folks want so many books for? the farmer wondered. Ploughs moved on without books, sheep lambed and calves came into the world without books. No one in the good days of high war prices needed books, and no one will need them again in the good war times to come.

When the Rector entered the study, the farmer at once began to be ill-tempered. He had primed himself and set his rather dull courage upon edge by drinking whisky.

He began by telling Mr. Crossley that, as chief of the school managers, he had that very morning summarily dismissed Mr. Hurd, the schoolmaster.

'He had given the man his money,' the farmer said, 'and had told him to go.'

Mr. Crossley looked grave.

He was sorry, he said, that Mr. Told had taken such an unusual course, and hoped that no harm would come of it.

Mr. Told sniffed indignantly.

' 'Tis 'is morals we school managers object to,' he said. 'All they talks about flowers that do set they children at all manner of wickedness. Us can't get no boy now to drive rams into flock; they say they do know all about thik little business, and that schoolmaster 'ave told they. 'Twere different when I were a child,' cried the farmer, bringing his hand down roughly upon the table. 'Us don't want nor flower teaching, nor weed teaching neither in our little village. Thik schoolmaster would 'ave been telling they boys to sow docks in the corn come springtime, the wold beggar. An' sure they children be bad enough without they dirty flowers being brought into Norbury matters.'

Mr. Crossley did not reply; he could only feel sorry that Matthew Hurd had been sent away. The schoolmaster had helped him so much in the village.

The Rector of Norbury looked sadly at the farmer, and intimated that he might depart.

But Mr. Told stayed. He had something else that he wished to communicate.

After tapping his pocket in order to be sure that all was safe there, the farmer spoke again.

'Village people do say that thee's best send thik bastard to work'ouse.'

‘Why?’ inquired Mr. Crossley, rather amazed at this rude interference in his home affairs.

‘Because if thee don’t, they’ll be a-saying that ’tis thine own.’

‘Well, why shouldn’t they say so?’ the Rector said quietly. ‘Of course Bryony is mine; I have adopted him.’

Mr. Told spoke again.

‘I’ve writ to church lawyer about thee’s bastard, and thee’ll soon ’ear from ’ee, thee wold sinner.’

Mr. Crossley did not reply. A personal insult he cared nothing for, but he was getting a little weary of the farmer’s presence in his room.

Mr. Told went on talking rudely to the priest.

Mr. Crossley paid no heed. For years he had willed only one ending for his body, that it should be changed into a prayer: the very crudest and most humble one perhaps, but still a prayer.

With such an end and object for his life, it was impossible for him to get angry with the village or with the farmer, or to care what they or he said.

Mr. Told was disappointed; he had expected to see Mr. Crossley go down upon his knees and beg him not to tell. But the Rector of Norbury merely smiled at the farmer, and showed him out by the back-door.

Chapter 37

After showing out the farmer, Mr. Crossley went into the dining-room. His wife was sitting by the side of the large table, with nothing before her and thinking of nothing.

A great wave of love passed through the being of the aged priest.

He felt that he would do anything to make her happy again.

He knew that he could not change the little world of Norbury into righteousness, but, so far as it lay in his power, he wished to make at least the human creatures that lived near to him happier. And how could he bear to see his wife so continually wretched and despondent?

That very morning Mr. Crossley had prepared a plan, and it was now brought to his mind by a certain clinking of coins that he heard in his pocket.

He felt sure she would believe him. There was at least that reward after all his years of truth-telling, the certainty that she would believe his one lie.

Mr. Crossley tenderly kissed his wife, and after he had kissed, he brought her a pencil and a sheet of paper, and said quietly,

‘Oh, it’s all right, dearest; I gave Hugh the money for those clothes. I wish I had told you at the time, only unfortunately I had forgotten that I had given it to him. It was the coal club money that I gave to Hugh; you can go yourself and see that the drawer we kept it in is empty.’

Mrs. Crossley jumped up as lightly as a girl. She hurried out of the room to return again in a moment or two in triumph. She had found the drawer empty.

During the time that she was absent, Mr. Crossley had softly opened the window and thrown a small bag that contained silver and notes into a laurel bush that grew outside. After doing so, he closed the window again.

Mr. Crossley watched his wife lovingly. She sat herself at the table again and took up the pencil; her eyes shone with joy. She was soon busy putting down an estimate of the probable cost of clothing little Bryony in breeches

as soon as the child could walk. She also planned how she could save in her housekeeping each week certain shillings and halfpence that would, in course of time, replace the villagers' contributions for their Christmas coal.

Chapter 38

It was late when the Rector of Norbury and his wife retired to rest.

The night was clear and cool, while above in the heavens there were bright shining stars.

Mr. Crossley had not hurried to undress. He opened the window of his dressing-room and looked out.

He saw the shining stars, but their light was not bright enough for him. He longed for a midnight sun to be born, a sun that should rise up as a wonder amongst the stars and touch the hearts of men with joy and love.

After he was undressed, Mr. Crossley remembered that the farmer had interrupted his prayer; that the fire had not burned, that his prayer had not risen up in the smoke clouds to heaven. He felt that he could not go to sleep until the fire burned and the smoke soared up through the skies to God. He felt he had, more than ever, need to pray. Mr. Told had certainly said some very unpleasant things about him. Not that he cared about that, but he did not want little Bryony's life rendered miserable by mysterious stories about his birth.

Mr. Crossley began to wonder why the minds of men were so evil.

He had been reading Dr. Donne's sermons of late. He had read therein of a wonderful purging by fire that should purify the heart of man.

The good priest wondered why men did not introduce into their sinful bodies this same burning essence, that would change the dross to spirit and give the spirit beauty and loveliness.

Mr. Crossley still wondered about men.

Mr. Crossley leaned out of the window; the cool air of the night touched his face lovingly. From his window across the starlit village he could distinguish the schoolhouse.

'Perhaps the schoolmaster was already gone,' he thought. 'The children have driven away their best friend, who taught them simple lessons about

the flowers. And how odd that the children, and even Farmer Told, should have thought the lessons so wicked! Surely the world was sunk lower, far lower than in those old times when Nature itself was considered a godhead and when man worshipped the flowers.'

Mr. Crossley looked up at the stars.

He longed to see his prayer going up to the stars in the white smoke of a midnight fire.

The Rector put on his dressing-gown and went out into the passage. He knew his wife was sound asleep in the large bedroom; happiness always made her so sleepy.

The nursery door was open; Mr. Crossley stood for a moment to listen.

Mathilda, the servant, slept in a bed next to the child. Mr. Crossley could hear the heavy snoring of the nurse.

After waiting for a moment, he went softly downstairs and out into the yard, to where he had built his bonfire near the old shed.

The wind was blowing, but it seemed to Mr. Crossley that it blew away from the house.

There can be no danger, he thought, in lighting the fire.

Before striking the match, Mr. Crossley stood awhile and looked upwards into the heavens. He was stricken with a feeling of immense, of eternal cold.

It must be all so cold, those deep, empty spaces between the stars. The earth was cold too.

Mr. Crossley stooped down and touched the bare ground with his hand; the winter's chill had got into the earth, it was all cold.

To touch the earth was to touch the face of a corpse.

All matter was cold, cold and dead.

The Norbury children were dead, Farmer Told was dead, all were dead. All save the fire of God's spirit, all save prayer.

Mr. Crossley struck a match and lit the paper that he had placed under the sticks. The cool night wind had dried the sticks so that they burnt well.

Mr. Crossley looked gladly at the fire, the paraffin was beginning to burn. A great sheet of flame leapt up. The priest watched the flame with

gladness, the flame seemed alive. A curling snake of flame ran and leapt along the rubble and broken pieces of stick that always lay about beside the old shed. The snake of flame leapt merrily along right into the old shed where the paraffin can had stood, and where so much oil had run out.

The shed happened to be near the place where the old Norbury Rectory had been repaired with Mr. Potten's wood.

Very soon the whole shed and the wall of the house were red with bright, glowing flames.

Mr. Crossley looked joyfully at the bonfire; his heart was filled with the glow and warmth of the burning.

He looked upwards.

Clouds of white smoke ascended up into the skies, volumes of smoke that carried many prayers.

He could not leave the fire he had lit. He laughed with the flames; they were making merry with him, the rich, red, nimble heat flowers.

He felt that all his life was being burnt up, all his most personal affairs, all the books that he had thought so much off. All was burning now. He saw his kind deeds burning, his kind deeds unnoticed by himself and so easily forgotten by the village. And now they were all being changed into a misty vapour by the fire.

Mr. Crossley's soul gathered power as the flames roared. He was like Empedocles, and he, too, spoke the same terrible words:—

> 'Is it but for a moment?
> —Ah, boil up, ye vapours!
> Leap and roar, thou sea of fire!
> My soul glows to meet you.
> Ere it flag, ere the mists
> Of despondency and gloom
>   Rush over it again,
>   Receive me, save me!'

The whole world had now become a wonder, a wonder of shining tongues of flame. All the fiery tongues were telling the same story, asking for the same release, begging for the same deliverance, as he himself was, from the base thraldom of matter.

Mr. Crossley's thoughts were on fire.

What better thing could a man do than to change this mortal body of base desires into a blessed, burning prayer?

At that moment Mr. Crossley remembered Bryony.

Why was not the child watching the wonderful tongues of flame, and the wonderful rolling smoke that rose fold upon fold up into the heavens?

A thought of extraordinary tenderness to all humanity passed through Mr. Crossley's mind when he remembered Bryony. He saw foolish Mr. Told, with his enslaved, rustic mind, but withal with the honest grit and bold humour of the earth clinging to it. A simple man, who talked like an old grandmother about the wickedness of the flowers. And there were the others, the Morsays, the Pottens, and the village children, all so simple and really so blameless, all crawling with the worm and moving with the ant. He loved them all.

Chapter 39

When the burning roof of the shed fell in, Mr. Crossley realised with a strange kind of suddenness that his house was on fire.

He felt as if he had awakened from a dream. He rushed through the back door, and called out loudly to the maid Mathilda to wrap up Bryony in a blanket and to bring him down.

Hearing her master call, the servant awoke out of a sound sleep. She was in a dazed state, and she hardly knew what had happened; she thought that some one said that her Sunday dress was stolen. She soon hurried downstairs carrying a bundle in her arms.

Mr. Crossley called to her to carry the babe into the garden and to let it watch the flames. He never doubted for a moment that it was little Bryony that was wrapped in the blanket the servant held so close to her heart.

Obeying the commands of her master in the way easiest to her, the terror-stricken Mathilda rushed into the garden.

After seeing her safely out, the Rector of Norbury went to his wife.

Mrs. Crossley was sound asleep, dreaming of figures.

She had seen in her dream so many pretty figures, all symbolizing some wonder of calculation. The figures had danced about her, arranging themselves into columns of credit and debit, and then adding themselves up with always the proper balance on the right side.

There was no end to the numbers that she saw in her dream; they went on for ever, there was an eternity of them, so that she saw the whole earth covered with calculations and figures.

It was only when Mrs. Crossley saw so clearly the number 13, larger than all the rest, that she awoke.

She hurried into the garden with her husband only just in time. As soon as they left the house, the whole building seemed to be enveloped in one vast flame.

Mr. Crossley was strangely excited, the power of the fire still held him; he hurried to Mathilda, who stood shaking with cold and fear near the garden hedge.

The Rector of Norbury wished to know how Bryony was enjoying it all. He expected to find the child leaping and dancing in the nurse's arms.

But Mr. Crossley did not find Bryony.

Mathilda had been 'too upset,' she said, to think of anything. The nurse had fled into the garden alone.

The blanket that should have contained the child had been filled with Mathilda's own private property—her Sunday dress, her Church prayer-book, her silk blouse, and two photograph frames. She had also put her two summer hats into the blanket.

'Baby was sleeping so soundly,' Mathilda explained.

He ought to have known, Mr. Crossley said to himself, he ought to have known; of course the girl would wish to save her own things. It was only natural.

Mr. Crossley left Mathilda and plunged into the burning doorway that gaped open to receive him, like the mouth of hell.

Chapter 40

In the Rectory garden there were the well-known faces and forms of the Norbury villagers. They had crept up one by one until they were all assembled.

Almost the first arrival had been Mr. Balliboy. But however much he desired to watch the fire, the carrier dared not stay. He had been seized with a sudden fear that a burning spark might blow right across Norbury and set the shed on fire wherein he kept his car. And so he was forced to return home, and open the shed doors, and make all preparations for a hurried escape.

But even without Mr. Balliboy the rest of the village could enjoy itself, and in every face a secret pleasure glowed, lit up by the flames.

Mr. Told was the bravest, he even lit his pipe with a burning brand, and then went near to the house and threw a bucket of water against the wall. In the excitement of his feelings the farmer threw the bucket after the water.

Every one seemed to know that the baby had been left in the house. It was what the people always expected in a fire,—for some one to be left to be burnt.

Mathilda had been crying in the garden, and had told every one before Mr. Crossley went to her. She even called out to Mr. Potten to save the child. But Mr. Potten had discreetly handed on the information to Mr. Morsay.

After rushing in through his burning front door, Mr. Crossley had hesitated a moment. It was necessary for him to find out whether the stairs were intact. He knew that even he could not climb up naked tongues of fire in order to get to the nursery.

A gust of wind cleared away the smoke, the flames leapt up, and the onlookers outside saw Mr. Crossley climbing the terrible stairs.

The people of Norbury talked together in groups. They might have been watching a merry-go-round at a fair. The red light flickered and glowed in every face.

Mrs. Crossley was standing, a thin white figure wrapped in a shawl, upon the drive near to the burning house. The fierce heats of the fire swam about her, but her mind was a blank except for the number 13 that she had seen so clearly when she first awoke.

No one had spoken to her; she had stood solitary ever since her husband had gone to look for little Bryony.

The Norbury people were still whispering together and watching the flames, when a tall, burning figure appeared in the doorway coming out of the fire. The tall figure, burning like a torch, came out of the house and on to the lawn.

Standing on the grass, Mr. Crossley took from under his cloak a little blackened and charred body. He laid the body tenderly down upon the ground.

Once again he turned to the burning house. Looking up, Mr. Crossley raised his hands to the heavens to where the smoke was rolling, as though in supplication, and then fell dead beside the burnt body of the child.

Chapter 41

Kneeling beside her husband, Mrs. Crossley looked at him as though she still dreamed.

But soon her thoughts moved in real things again. She saw the coffin, she saw the black clothes, her own clothes and her son's. And she saw herself paying for Mathilda's black dress. She had once made a calculation about a funeral; she fancied at the time she made it that it would be her own. And now it was to be his, but the cost would be very much the same, only it would be his funeral instead of hers.

Mrs. Crossley never turned her eyes to look at the dead child; she only saw her husband.

At last the Wainfleet policeman really did arrive at Norbury; though, before he left his own village, he frightened Mr. Bewsley nearly out of his wits by saying that all Norbury was burnt to the ground, and that Mrs. Hinden had become a common cinder.

Coming to the scene of the fire, the good officer, by dint of many threats and promises, got the bodies carried to Mr. Potten's shed—a place where the careful undertaker was wont to keep certain small family possessions, such as Mrs. Potten's cats, some old rags—used in the trade—and the spare coffins that he made in his idle hours.

The undertaker had helped—as it was most natural he should do—in the removal, becoming, as was now his proper right to be, the most important person, next to the Wainfleet policeman, in the night's adventure.

Almost at the first outcry of fire, Mrs. Bone had carried the exciting news to the schoolmaster's house. She was, however, disappointed in her quest for Matthew Hurd, for although the door was unlocked, the house was empty.

As she was lighting a candle in the kitchen, Mrs. Bone remembered that Farmer Told had informed her earlier in the day that he had sent the schoolmaster about his business.

‘So maybe,’ thought Mrs. Bone, ‘the man ’ave gone to Romantown.’

Finding the coast clear, Mrs. Bone placed everything of any value that she could lay her hands upon into her apron. After doing so, she opened the window, so that she could report the matter in a proper way to the police another time.

After informing Mrs. Hinden, who was in bed with a cold, what was happening at the Rectory, and then dropping the valuables safely at her own cottage, Mrs. Bone had returned joyfully to watch the fire.

When it was all over, she viewed with a morbid interest the blackened and disfigured corpse of Mr. Crossley.

After seeing the bodies safely conveyed to Mr. Potten’s shed, Mrs. Bone returned to her own upstairs room, and looked by the light of her candle at her own face in her cracked looking-glass and smiled.

Mrs. Bone had seen death, and she now saw herself as something different to death.

Mrs. Bone smiled again.

Chapter 42

Mr. Balliboy climbed down from the car and walked forward to examine the fallen tree. Himself, his car, and his customers were returning from Romantown. The tree in their way was a tall elm that had fallen across the road.

There had been no wind, and the elm had fallen, as this kind of tree will fall sometimes, from internal rot.

Mr. Balliboy rubbed the bark of the tree with his hand. He tried even to push the heavy thing, as though he wished to prove to himself that he could not move it. When he came back from examining the tree, Mr. Balliboy turned the handle that was in the front of the car.

He turned the handle with vigour until the engine hummed.

After doing so, Mr. Balliboy stepped into the road again. He had only turned the handle this time to show that it was not his fault that he could not get on.

The car was stopped at the spot in the road where the Bryony grew. Inside the car were the four worthies—Mr. Potten, Mr. Morsay, Mr. Crowle, and Mr. Told. There were also Mrs. Morsay, Mrs. Bone, and Letty Morsay. All the carrier's company were busy talking, and had hardly noticed that the car was stopped.

Letty Morsay was talking about the wicked behaviour of the flowers. She told the others how the pollen was driven about, and fell anywhere on the ground, or else caught hold of bees' legs. Letty said she thought it was very nasty of the pollen.

Every one agreed.

The day was Wednesday. Mr. Crowle had taken his holiday in the middle of the week, instead of at the end, this time.

The day before had been fixed for Mr. Bewsley's wedding, only unfortunately the Vicar of Wainfleet had heard from Mary Crowle, who

made this one last effort, that Mr. Bewsley had a wife living, so the wedding never came off.

Instead of Mr. Bewsley's wedding—as though to give some consolation to the neighbourhood—there had been the Rector of Norbury's funeral.

Slowly, one by one, Mr. Balliboy's customers left the car and began to walk back again towards Wainfleet. Very soon they were all snugly ensconced in the back-yard behind Mr. Bewsley's inn.

Mr. Bewsley had built a shelter all round his yard with fir poles and beams bought from the Government. Under this shelter he had placed more forms and seats. 'To lend to the Vicar for the school treat,' the landlord told the policeman.

In the shed there was a lantern hung up upon a nail.

Presently Mr. Bewsley appeared, and very soon the blacksmith came in.

' 'Tain't sure thik wold car broke again, be it?' inquired Mr. Stole, who had just stepped round to see what had happened.

'No, no, car be going all right,' replied Mr. Balliboy. Mr. Stole looked up to the roof of the new shed, as if he expected to see the car going there.

'What be 'appened then?' asked Mr. Stole.

'There's a girt tree in road,' replied the carrier.

It occurred to Mr. Stole that Mr. Balliboy must have been drinking beer that afternoon at Romantown.

After waiting quietly for half an hour, the blacksmith, in order to think alone upon the mystery, walked to the inn-yard gate and looked up at the moon. He saw a little cloud passing just above the moon. Mr. Stole was sure that the cloud was the Devil coming out of the moon.

As Mr. Stole was standing there looking through the gate, a car came down the road from the Norbury direction that seemed to the blacksmith's excited imagination to be Mr. Balliboy's. The car was running well, and in a moment it was gone.

Mr. Stole looked up at the moon; the little cloud above the moon had gone as well as the car.

There was no doubt whatever in Mr. Stole's mind that the Devil had stolen Mr. Balliboy's car and had taken it up to the moon.

After seeing the Devil drive Mr. Balliboy's car away, Mr. Stole returned to the company. The blacksmith was much too wise to tell what he had seen, because he quite naturally feared that if Mr. Balliboy knew, he might wish to chase the Devil and so forget to pay for Mr. Stole's drink. So he contented himself with hoping that the Devil would bring back the car as soon as the fallen tree was removed.

No one in the company at the Wainfleet Lion was more contented than Mr. Crowle, who sat drinking his beer. At times, however, his thoughts went to his daughter, whom he seemed to dislike more than ever, because she now really tried to help her mother at home with the work. But he would relieve his mind by saying that she ' 'ad upset 'is peaceful 'ome,' and then fall to thinking of the girl in Mill Lane.

When John, the serving-man, carried the beer jug round the third time, he chanced to espy Mr. Potten and Mrs. Morsay sitting together in a corner.

Turning to his master, John called out loudly that 'Thik Potten, 'e don't want to die 'is woon self!'

After thus wisely explaining the private feelings of the undertaker, old John shuffled into the house.

After a time of cheerful and homely conversation, Mr. Bewsley stood up in the middle of his guests, as though he were going to make a speech.

'Folk do say I be a married man; thee've 'eard that, I s'pose,' he said.

'We be sorry for 'ee, landlord,' all his customers murmured.

Mr. Bewsley turned round and round; he began to execute a kind of wild dance as though he were a Red Indian. He held his glass to his lips and drank bumpers to his own health. He smiled and laughed and capered and shook himself, and, last of all, he shook all his guests by the hand.

'Never mind,' said Mr. Bewsley, kicking out one leg and standing firm upon the other. 'Never mind, I'll introduce thee to me new 'ousekeeper, an' we don't keep more beds than we do need in our poor 'ome.'

At that very moment an elderly lady, plump and comely, came from the inn, carrying in one hand a jug filled with beer and in the other a clean slate.

'Thik be she,' cried Mr. Bewsley.

All the company looked at the lady in mute astonishment; she was Mrs. Hinden of the Norbury Arms.

‘An’ she wouldn’t marry I up to the very last,’ Mr. Bewsley explained, winking at the silent company.

The first one of the company to understand what had really come to pass was Mr. Crowle, who, seeing his sister as chief tapster, called out at once for another cup of beer.

Looking at Mrs. Hinden with immense approbation, and pleased with the joy that his friends took in the situation that had been for so long a topic of conversation amongst them, Mr. Bewsley spoke again,

‘ ’Tis the way with they ’omen,’ he said. ‘You pull the reins wrong and they go right, you pull the reins right an’ they go wrong. But all’same I be ajoyful man now she be come.’

Half an hour after Mrs. Hinden had joined the company, the news came that the road workers had cleared away the fallen tree.

Leaving Mr. Crowle behind, Mr. Balliboy and the rest of the Norbury travellers trailed along the road to the spot where the car had been left.

‘Thik be the moon,’ Mr. Stole remarked to Mrs. Bone as they walked.

Mrs. Bone looked upwards with interest. The moon was a stranger to her; she could never remember taking any notice of it before.

When the wayfarers reached the place where the tree had blocked the way, they looked at one another. The tree had been pulled to one side, and only little twigs remained in the road.

Mr. Balliboy’s car was gone.

‘It did use to break down of itself, but never did I know it go off itself,’ said the carrier thoughtfully.

‘ ’Tain’t gone to the moon, be it?’ questioned Mr. Stole, looking up at the sky.

‘There be somethink like a man in moon,’ said Mrs. Bone.

‘ ’Tis thee’s own ugly face,’ Mr. Balliboy called out angrily, because he was annoyed at the idea that his car had gone so far.

Farmer Told stood aside. He did not feel easy in his mind, he did not like the familiar tone that the others used when they spoke of the moon.

‘Thee best leave thik moon to ’is woon self,’ he said with emphasis. Then Mr. Told smiled. He felt in his pocket; his wallet was safe. Some one else had been robbed this time, his own money was safe; Mr. Told was glad.

Slowly, in twos and threes, the travellers began to walk to Norbury.

After watching Mrs. Bone, who was the last to go, turn the corner of the road, Mr. Stole returned to Wainfleet, having, for the first time in his life, failed to mend Mr. Balliboy’s car.

Chapter 43

Upon this same Wednesday, during the late afternoon, a woman clothed in the uniform of the Salvation Army was kneeling beside a small new grave mound in a corner of the Norbury churchyard. A young man was also standing beside another grave that was nearer to the church.

After bending down, with her face almost touching the soft mould, the woman rose, and going to where the young man was standing, the two left the churchyard together.

On their way towards the Romantown road, the pair stopped for a moment at the Norbury Arms. They found the inn door locked.

A short while before Mr. Stole saw his vision, these same two travellers encountered the fallen tree. After climbing over the tree, the woman exclaimed,

‘Why, here’s Mr. Balliboy’s car!’

Mary Crowle looked at the car with interest.

Hugh Crossley was thoughtful for a moment.

‘The very thing for us,’ he said. ‘We can drive fast through Wainfleet, and then take the road to Portstown.’

Mary stood beside the hedge, while Hugh busied himself with the car.

The evening was come. The moon was now high overhead, and showed clusters of red berries upon the bare Bryony stalks that still clung to the hedge.

Hugh lit the car lights.

‘We must get off by the boat at Portstown before she finds it out,’ he said. He started the engine and turned the car.

While he turned the car, Mary plucked strings of red berries from the hedge; the berries came easily, being still held firmly by the tendronous fibres. Hearing the sound of men’s voices near at hand, she climbed into the

car so as to be out of sight. Mary sat still, holding the Bryony berries in her lap. They were red and luscious, as her own life had been sometimes, and yet the green leaves were withered, and only the yellow stalk remained.

The car was moving now.

Never before had Mr. Balliboy's car started going at such a pace. It was as if some bold crack-ropes had tied a bunch of nettles under its aged tail, as they did to Don Quixote's unlucky courser at Barcelona. But Mary saw nothing unusual in the pace the car was going. Her own life had rushed like that sometimes. But why, with this new wayward rush of events, should her passionate nature, subtle and poisonous, with the red berries in her lap, become so still?

The car bumped and shook, the crack-rope called Hugh was making it go to a fine purpose, but Mary's heart was very still.

This stillness had come to her before, but generally after her preaching; sometimes even it came after she had satiated her firm girl's body with other matters. Sometimes, when the ecstasy of love was quieted, the stillness of God came in. But now these two were strangely met.

Suddenly she heard her own name—'Mary.'

The voice who called her by name was Matthew Hurd's. And then she saw him, and his face showed a perfect stillness, such as she herself was feeling, only more lasting, more intense, more godlike. Mary was used to visions, but she wondered a little what this new one meant.

When Matthew had been dismissed from the school, she did not know where he had gone to. Mrs. Bone had seen him, she said, 'standing somewhere on a hill,' but what hill had she seen him on? Perhaps he had gone to visit the house in which the good doctor used to live; he had spoken of a little wood being near to it.

The faster and the more dangerously the car rushed on, the more sure Mary became that she was going to see Matthew soon.

In the Norbury churchyard Hugh had persuaded her to go off with him,—to Portstown, he said. All the man in him had looked at her through those dark eyes, and all the woman in her ran to meet that look, even as Mr. Balliboy's car was running on now to an unknown destination.

'We will forget everything to-night,' he had said. 'We'll only know love.'

‘Mary!’ There was that voice again, sounding so clear amid all the rattle and bustle.

She had told Matthew that she was going to her mother’s. And she had gone to her, and the meeting in the Norbury churchyard was quite unintentional on her part. She would soon be home again, she expected, perhaps? and wash those shirts, and pick at a maggot from the boiling fat in the frying-pan. She would settle down as the waves of the sea settled down after rough weather. Mr. Crowle would say nasty things, and try to do worse, perhaps.

Mary smiled, because she liked to think of a man at his lowest sometimes. Let him behave ill, what did it matter? She might even stay with her aunt again; she had gone off, Mary supposed, to that old Mr. Bewsley. She had tried to prevent that; jealousy, perhaps, for he had been so funny at Portstown. But she did not care now. It was through all that sort of silliness that the great fish called God had to be netted.

Hugh had shown her a lot of money in the churchyard. He had taken another wallet, and wanted a girl to help him to spend it. She might preach in the day-time, he said, if she liked.

There would be the band to follow, and the old gentlemen watching, who always had their pennies ready for a pretty girl in those clothes.

Hugh was now shouting out that they had taken the wrong turning and that the brake was jammed. They were beginning to go down the Romantown hill instead of having taken the Portstown way. The nettles appeared to sting Mr. Balliboy’s car more than ever. The car rattled and jumped.

Some one else jumped. This was Hugh, who called out to Mary to save herself, and threw himself on the grassy bank by the side of the road. Though the car jolted and shook so, Mary was able to smile about Hugh. He would now walk to Portstown, and then go on to France, as he had intended. There are plenty of other Maries in France, she thought, and smiled again. But yet she wondered, would that dread stillness, called God, ever come to Hugh? She hoped it wouldn’t; she had loved the way he had fed upon her with those eyes of his. She didn’t want God to have him.

The wildest and most utter madness now possessed Mr. Balliboy’s car, as though it were an old woman who had seen the Devil. It leapt a bank in the same easy fashion as the cow is pictured who jumped the moon, and then rushed merrily down a steep, open field. Then came its last act of

merriment; being an endeavour to climb a large tree that was in a little wood at the bottom of the field. But this ended its crazed journey, and it fell upon its side in a sad and broken condition.

Mary Crowle crept out of the car unhurt; she was battered about rather, but that was all that had happened to her. She stood in her blue uniform as though she had only come into the wood for a moment to admire the trees in the moonlight.

‘Poor Mr. Balliboy,’ she said, smiling.

The little wood to which the car had so hurriedly brought Mary, was filled with red fallen leaves and dead ferns. The moon shone white and clear above the great trees.

Mary heard her name spoken again. She walked on under the trees deeper into the wood.

Her vision had been no lying vision. In a space between two great trees she found him. Matthew Hurd lay there dead.

The perfect stillness had called him, and he had accepted it, as his father had accepted, as the kindest of God’s gifts to man.

Chapter 44

After the fire at Norbury Rectory, Mrs. Crossley resided at Romantown, living in two neat little rooms in the Portstown Road.

One day, looking over Mr. Crossley's passbook, she was surprised to see that her husband's account at the bank had been overdrawn.

A cheque had been made out for £300, and was dated the day before her husband had died. The cheque was made payable to Hugh Crossley, Esq., and signed apparently by the young man's father.

Mrs. Crossley looked carefully at the signature upon the face of the cheque. On the following day she visited the bank.

A cheque has been forged, she said, that would upset all her husband's—or rather her own, for she had done it for him—carefully written will.

Hugh Crossley was away upon a holiday, so she could not question him. She had given him three pounds after the funeral to go to Portstown for a week.

Mrs. Crossley leant her head over the bank counter and cried like a child.

The bank manager looked grave: he hated scenes, he hated old women, and he hated robberies.

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.

[The end of *Black Bryony* by Theodore Francis Powys]