MARK ONLY

By

T. F. POWYS

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Black Bryony

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Mark Only

CHAPTER
I

Heavy clouds darkened the Dodderdown Church one Sunday in December. There was a baptism in progress that afternoon.

Mr. G. Potten, the parish clerk and sexton, with the wise forethought suited to his office had, before the service, brought a cup of water into the Church and poured it into the font. But when Mr. Richard Hayball, who had only come to the cure the week before, peeped into the font, before taking the child in his arms, to see that all was as it should be, he could see nothing more liquid than the dead body of a centipede.

Mr. Hayball was young in the matter of holding babies, and he was nervous. While he had been reading the prayers, the beard of Peter Andrews, who was the father of the child, kept getting into the light. Mrs. Andrews stood quiet enough holding the infant, but Mr. Hayball had an idea that when she did speak he would be quite unable to hear what she said.

The baby did not make matters any easier for the clergyman, for it cried as loudly as possible, as though, whatever were its wants at the moment, to be a Christian was not amongst them. Its cries reminded Mr. Hayball of a pig that he once had the misfortune to see being killed, though now, if the baby could be the pig, he was in a ready mood to be the butcher.

As the water was all leaked away, Mr. Hayball was forced to send out Mr. Potten to the nearest cottage for another cupful. This would mean a time of waiting, that broke the service, as it were, in half; and the baby, who seemed to regard itself as being cheated of its just rights, screamed the louder.

Mr. Hayball looked at the book he held. In his nervous way he had turned over the leaves without knowing what he was doing and had lost the place.

He looked at the child, and wondered how it could ever happen that this wasn’t the last of them.

When the water came Mr. Hayball took the child in his arms; he thought it felt like a badly wrapped parcel of butcher’s meat that he remembered once having to carry back to a shop when he was a boy.

He said, “Name this child.”

Mrs. Andrews, in reply to this demand, said something that Mr. Hayball could not hear. The child screamed; he bent his ear nearer to the mother, but still he could not hear what she said.

Mr. Hayball knew that the cupful of water that Potten had brought would soon follow the other and be all run away, and there would only be the dead centipede left. He did not want to touch that. “It wouldn’t do,” he thought, “to baptize even the last child to be born in the earth with the decomposed body of a dead centipede.”

“What name?” he asked crossly.

“Mark,” replied Mr. Andrews, and then added a little louder, “Mark only.”

Mr. Hayball looked into the font. By putting his fingers to the bottom discreetly and warily, he might by good luck avoid the centipede.

“Mark Only, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

In the middle of the night Mr. Hayball dreamt that the Bishop was asking him a question about dead insects with a view to their being used for a certain purpose in the Church service. He then woke up.

“Can one really name a child Only?” he wondered.

“I wish I had sent Potten for a bucket of water,” he said aloud. “Then I should never have seen the centipede, and never should have named that little pig Only.”

CHAPTER
II

Although it was January, the bramble leaves in the hedges were still green and hid from the crafty eyes of Charles Tulk the rabbit that he was watching for. Winter fog clung about the hedges and made the bramble leaves shine. Charles Tulk looked searchingly into the hedge. He moved his lips but shut his teeth tight. He had a word in his mouth that, no doubt, would have destroyed the rabbit had it run out then. He opened his mouth and whispered the word. Charlie did not wish to make too much noise because he hoped the rabbit would bolt his way, so that the dog that was his side of the hedge might kill it.

Mr. Charles Tulk had come to Dodderdown in the guise of a gentleman of learning, that is of learning in certain country matters that intimately concern human kind. His father, as reported by Mr. Tulk himself, had once owned houses at Stonebridge. Beside the houses that had the ill chance to be burnt down, Mr. Tulk the elder owned something else. This was a woman who possessed pale sunken cheeks and down-heeled shoes, whom Mr. Tulk, with a praiseworthy desire to defeat some one, because he himself was defeated by the fire, had with constant ill usage, that took the form of kicks and body blows, prevented from the foolishness of living any longer.

When the lady retired from this world of tears that was, indeed, no lying world to her, her son Charlie thought he had better go away too.

Indeed, a change of scene was necessary, because he and his lame leg were getting rather too well known in certain official quarters, where conduct such as Charlie’s had been asked interesting questions.

With his lame leg and a few shillings, together with a store of gentlemanly ideas that constituted the knowledge before mentioned, Mr. Charlie Tulk came to Dodderdown. He became popular, almost at once, as he deserved to do. He soon learnt to snare and to trap rabbits, and when his leg became worse he lived upon the parish. Also he was now helped by the new friends he had made. Mrs. Beggwell, a farmer’s wife, who was both plump and comely and owned cheeks like red roses, allowed Charlie a sleeping-place near to her own dwelling. To this kind action of his wife, Mr. Beggwell had no objection to put forward, because Charlie Tulk, like the Pied Piper, with more promise than execution, had said that he could rid the farmer’s premises of rats with a new kind of poison that he alone, of all men, knew where to buy.

Mr. Tulk’s place of shelter was an ancient time-worn granary set up upon four stones in Mr. Beggwell’s farm-yard, with an old oak box inside as long as a man, where horse corn used to be kept.

Above this box there was a large beam, where, in spite of Mr. Tulk’s promise, rats would sit at night and clean their paws. A piece of rope lay in a corner, left there by some careless feeder of horses before the granary became deserted.

This residence Charles Tulk found very suitable to the state of his means, and by placing some of the farmer’s hay upon the oaken box, he was able to make up a very fair bed. His income consisted of eight shillings a week from the parish, free of any taxation, and whatever else in the shape of food or money he could conveniently lay his hands upon.

Mr. Tulk looked into the hedge and his eyes had the cold twinkle of a playful weasel.

The dog jumped into the ditch, scattering drops of moisture from the leaves. There was a scuffle and a scream, and Tulk uttered sounds of encouragement as though he held the rabbit too. The brambles rustled and the dog sniffed about and barked excitedly, for the prey had escaped.

From the other side of the hedge there came the report of a gun; the rabbit had bolted that way.

“Got ’en?” called out Charlie, who, since he had lived at Dodderdown, had fallen into the country way of talking.

“Dog have,” came the answer.

Charlie Tulk limped a little farther along the hedge to where there was a gate. James Andrews, the man who had shot the gun, met him there, carrying the rabbit that he had taken out of the mouth of the dog.

James Andrews had a right to carry a gun; he was the second son of old Peter, the Dodderdown small-holder, whose beard had grown grey since the Sunday that his eldest son had been named “Mark Only.”

James was of middle height. He was one who let his moustache grow but shaved his beard on Sundays. He was slow and sure and heavy in the feet. He had the appearance of a man who was willing to wait for what he wanted, not pressing after the game but slowly walking in its tracks. James carried the rabbit by its legs, and set his gun down by the gate. Four dead rabbits were hung upon a stick fixed into the hedge. James now hung the one that he carried along with its dead friends. The white bellies of the dead rabbits were soft and inviting, as though rabbits were meant to be killed merely that some one might have the pleasure of stroking their fur.

Charlie Tulk leant against the gate and rested his lame leg. He looked at his leg with annoyance, as though he wished he were able to pay it back for some of the pain it had given him.

James Andrews felt the rabbits with his brown hands. As they were no longer in their holes, but were in his possession, he had a right to do what he chose with them. He pinched them to see how fat they were, and coughed.

Charlie Tulk was aware that when James Andrews coughed, it was a sign that he had reached a proper pause in his actions, and was willing to listen to the sort of conversation that Mr. Tulk was so good a master of, the kind that is always of the highest interest to civilized countrymen.

"Rabbits be soft," said Mr. Tulk, watching his companion, who was still fumbling at the white fur.

James nodded.

"But I do know something that be as furry," remarked Charlie.

James Andrews coughed.

"There be one who do come to see I now and again in little shanty where I do live, and there be down on she's neck same as soft rabbit's fur."

Charlie Tulk smiled. When Charlie smiled, it showed that all was going merrily in his world.

"Only the servant," he said, "servant Emmie. Though a servant be a poor girl, 'tis one of them."

James looked up. "You never thoughted to get hold of t'other, did 'ee?" he asked, "for she do belong to some other folk that we do know of."

Charlie Tulk grinned, showing white teeth. "I do know that I bain't nothing," he said. "I do know that parish do help to keep I, and that Farmer Beggwell, who be the one to grow mangel, do let I sleep in the old granary, where Emmie do tap at door sometimes, though 'tisn't much that I do want wi' my lame leg."

"T'other bain't a servant, be she?" asked James.

“ ’Tis a help Nellie Holland be called,” answered Charles. “An’ a help be one that do all the work, though without the cap and apron.”

James Andrews coughed.

“She don’t go to ’ee then, Nellie don’t,” he said.

Mr. Tulk whistled. “Nell be a proud one,” he remarked, “though she do go after a worse fool than I be.”

James nodded.

The lower fields of Dodderdown, where the gate was that the men stood beside, were sheltered and well suited to conversation. It was in them that the cows fed contentedly all the year round, and the children ran about in cuckoo-time to pick the buttercups. There was a footpath near to the gate that crossed the field, and wandered lazily upwards, until, finally, it climbed the hill that sheltered the meadows. Anyone looking at the summit line of this hill, or high down, which is perhaps the better name to call it, at the time we are speaking of, would have seen two objects that broke the kindliness of the line.

One of these excrescences was a gaunt-looking tree, possessed no doubt of a sulky nature, because it occupied a position of solitude where nothing else of its kind was likely to grow.

The other projection out of the uniform line was of a more complex kind, consisting of a human figure, two plough horses and the implement they drew.

For some while the man on the top of the hill had remained as motionless as the tree. He appeared to be looking down into the Dodderdown meadow where the men were rabbiting. The horses stood with lowered heads as though they were cut out of the materials used to make a dark thundercloud.

A pause being come in the conversation by the gate, the gentlemen having suitable matter in their minds to chew, their eyes being unoccupied, both looked up at the hill-line where the figure of the man was standing.

The lonely ploughman was Mark Only. His place was the hills; James had the care of the lower meadows. James milked the cows and minded the other stock, with the exception of the horses, that were always Mark’s care. Sometimes they joined forces, as in harvest and haymaking, but as a general rule the paths of the brothers were separate.

The small-holder himself, old Peter Andrews, regarded the hills as a wilderness afar off, from which a half-dozen wagon-loads of corn came down, enough to make a small stack, and a few mangels if the high lands were kind. He believed, rather than knew, that his son Mark worked there together with black flocks of rooks and the wildest winds.

“ ’Tisn’t Church weather,” the old man used to say, “that do blow and frisky up on they stony mountains.”

Mrs. Andrews too had always looked, even when she was younger and understood what was happening, with a certain terror at the hills. She had always expected some fatal accident to happen there, and now that her mental processes were confused, her one desire was to keep her son James, the one of her four living children that she loved the best, from so dangerous a place.

“Mark be busy,” said James, watching the hill. “ ’E be busy waiting.”

“ ’Twould be something for we to do,” Charlie Tulk remarked slyly, half closing his eyes, “ ’twould be work for we to set a trap for thik merry maiden that do come these ways.” Charlie Tulk’s mind had a way of working sometimes rather like another pretty gentleman’s who once descended to this earth disguised as a young cherub.

“You might catch hold of she for fun,” he said, looking at the dead rabbits that James was stroking again.

James shook his head.

“You don’t know what I do feel about she,” he said. “ ’Tis easy for ’ee to speak that do know all the ins and outs of a maid, but I’ve looked more times than often at she, an’ ’tisn’t no use my looking. All be well for ’ee, Charlie, I do know, for thee can catch hold of servant Emmie when wanted, though they matters be different to I.”

“All same,” remarked Charlie, “ ’twould be a pretty thing to spill Nellie like a snared rabbit on grass; bain’t we no wires handy?”

Charlie looked down and saw near the gate a bundle of snares that James Andrews had intended to set that evening.

James looked at his watch.

“ ’Tis time for she to come,” he said, “and Mark Only be watching.”

“ ’Tis too far for ’e to see what we be doing, though,” observed Tulk, looking up at the hill where the man and horses were still standing motionless. James looked too.

Charles Tulk took up the snares. He limped in a business-like way to the footpath, and, kneeling down, he set in three different places in the footpath three wires, stamping the pegs that held them with the heel of his boot into the soft grass.

Smiling at these preparations for a moment or two, Charlie returned to the gate and sat down contentedly with his back to it, and filled his pipe. James Andrews leaned over the gate; he appeared to be thinking, but, whatever his thoughts were, he did not choose to tell them to his friend.

As sometimes happens when there is mischief in the wind, Nature takes upon her the garment of silence. Only one sound interrupted the silence; this came from the hill, where one of the horses shook itself and rattled the plough harness.

The fields were all quiet in their winter fashion; little birds rested upon the hedgerow twigs here and there, and now and again cleaned their beaks.

Near to Peter Andrews' farm-house the cows were lying down, and vaguely reflected that soon a man in a white apron, and a dog whose bark they were so used to that they hardly heard it when it came, would rouse them up and worry them into the stalls where there would be sweet hay to chew.

To an unknowing onlooker, such as Mr. Hayball perhaps, who was then standing at the study window of the Rectory, the resting valley of Dodderdown appeared as a gentle, peaceful place. To the cows it was indeed so, and to the small birds whom the winter had chilled just enough to make them happily and sleepily silent.

CHAPTER
III

Nellie Holland was busy dusting Farmer Beggwell's front room; in a moment or two she would be upstairs in her own bedroom, getting ready to go out.

Though she was but doing the ordinary labour of many another young woman at that hour of the day, she touched the things with a lightness that showed that she was thinking of other matters beside the marble clock.

Nellie Holland was, as Mr. Tulk had said, one of those female beings that are placed in the domestic category called "helps." There being the same sort of difference between a help and a housemaid, as there is in higher circles between a Countess and a plain lady.

Mrs. Beggwell was not, however, a mistress to take a mean advantage of a young person who wished to be higher than her fellows by a name. So instead of making Nellie, as most helps are made, as a just acknowledgment of their pride, work for at least fourteen hours in one day, she would let her run up to the hills of an afternoon to meet Mark Only, to whom, it was said in Dodderdown, she was soon to be married.

The marble clock had taken up so much of Nellie's attention because, as she had stopped it in dusting, she was forced to tip it up to make it go again, and now she looked at its face with no small degree of annoyance, seeing how the time had run on.

Leaving the mantelpiece for the moment, she ran to the sideboard, a stout object of farm-house furniture, and proceeded to apply her duster to a glass case that contained an enormous red mangel-wurzel. A little shrunken by time perhaps, but still an imposing monster vegetable of the fields. Finishing the case, Nellie went in two jumps to the mantelpiece again and began at the china dogs. As she dusted she looked into the mantel glass and blushed.

"Mark," she said aloud, "Mark Only."

In the looking-glass there was reflected a little round rosy face with lips like ripe cherries, and hair that was as fair as any girl's could be that was brown.

“Oh,” said Nellie, still looking at herself in the glass. “I know I’m pretty, but I do wish Mark Only was a little different.”

As she dusted the second dog, she whispered to it: “But all ’same I love you, Mark Only, though you be funny.”

The three men who were waiting, one upon the Dodderdown hill and two in the low meadows, showed no sign of any undue impatience. They waited as men who are content to wait.

“Did you ever wonder,” inquired Charles Tulk, wishing to beguile the time with a little harmless conversation, “which of you farmer’s sons would be master here when the old folk do die?”

“Mark be the eldest,” James Andrews replied unwillingly.

“But ’e be marked out as a fool,” said Tulk.

“ ’Tis father that do make so much of ’im,” remarked James, taking one of the rabbits from the hedge in order to remove its intestines.

“But the old woman,” he added, “she do only think about I; and they maidens don’t count for nothing wi’ she, nor do Mark neither. She don’t think of ’im, since ’e were named wrong.”

James spoke the truth. Since the day of his christening, Mrs. Andrews had looked with a kind of shame at her eldest son. And as time went on, and the Dodderdown mists crept into her head and softened the pulp of her brain, she grew more than ever inclined to treat him as a wrong one, not in name only but in nature.

She feared him too, believing that the hills that he ploughed were outside and unattached to the ordinary domestic affairs of the farm, being far-distant places where snow stayed long in winter, always waiting for more. There was something she felt that was dreadful and dangerous in Mark’s going so far afield, something that Mrs. Andrews believed was in itself a wicked spirit of daring. This wayfaring habit of Mark’s, this daily journey to the hills, she contrasted with the home-loving life led by her second son James, over whom no mistake had been made at the font, and who was always at home for the midday meal.

Charles Tulk remained thoughtful, watching James. “ ’Ave the old man made a will?” he asked.

“There bain’t no lawyer’s paper in house nor no will made that I do know on,” answered James. “An’ suppose Mother have made one, ’twould be I that would stand first, for she don’t like they hill-climbers.”

Having finished taking the entrails from the rabbits, James Andrews hung them up again, and stood beside Tulk, and both men began to watch the stile that was at the village end of the field. From the hill the form of the ploughman appeared to watch the same spot in the valley. And as though the anxiety of the human being conveyed itself in some subtle manner to the team beside him, the two plough horses, Polly and Ben, had raised their heads and were also looking down at the stile.

“Old Andrews be always borrowing our ladder,” said Charlie Tulk in a low tone, as though he addressed himself. “And ’tis likely there may be a step loose one of these days, for ’e don’t think I be worth speaking to, though I do live free and easy as a gentleman should.” The further discourse of Mr. Tulk that, no doubt, would have dwelt kindly upon his own gentlemanly qualities, was prevented by the renewed interest that he showed in watching the stile, over which a young girl was now climbing.

This was Nellie, whose thoughts, by a method known in nature as love, and in ancient poetry as divine adoration, had looked up at the hills. She came lightly, possessing the little foot of a young creature proud of its lightness, proud of being able to touch the grass so sportively, proud to show the coy spirits of a child that can make at any moment a gay sun to shine in dim January, proud of her warm flesh that was so firmly rounded, proud of the make and fashion of all her being.

When she was in the field and the men had become real to her—for in the excitement of running she had only seen them as two posts—she hesitated and came on more slowly, as a simple girl would, who fancies that her most hidden thoughts can be read by any man.

Charlie Tulk looked at James. “She do wear black for ’er mother,” he said. “Both she’s parents be dead now.”

“So folk do say,” James said, kicking the intestines of a rabbit into the ditch.

The two men leaned over the gate like lifeless forms, the dog lay beside them, and the afternoon mists crept about the lower fields of Dodderdown as though they were looking for a safe resting-place for the long night.

Then there came a quick surprised cry and the girl fell.

Charlie Tulk laughed loudly, and James Andrews called out:

“ ’Twasn’t Parson Hayball’s sermon ’ee were minding when ’ee slipped so easy.”

The two men moved slowly to the girl. Charles Tulk limped and James walked his usual steady pace.

Nellie had been taken in the third snare.

“Oh,” she cried, “James, why did you put them here in the footpath?”

“A fine doe rabbit we’ve a-caught,” laughed Charlie. “This ’ere be a nice fat one to take to farm, and a tasty bit, cut and come, we’ll have to our dinner.”

Nellie Holland turned her head away; she did not want to look at Charlie Tulk,

“Get me out, James,” she said.

“I can’t loose it, wi’ ’ee still standing,” said James, for Nellie had jumped up nearly as soon as she was fallen.

“Then I’ll hold up my foot,” she said.

James removed the wire but he still held to the girl.

“I’ve got ’ee safe now,” he called out. “You won’t go to no Mark nor to no Only to-day.”

“Let me go, please, James,” Nellie begged. “Do let me go.”

“I might tumble ’ee down again,” said James, still holding her.

“Meadow grass be a nice bed for a maid,” laughed Mr. Tulk.

“An’ if you ask it, there be a dead rabbit for a pillow.”

His nearness to the girl had given James Andrews a forceful feeling that so often in human life overcomes the ordinary peaceful habits of a man. James moved his hands, but Nellie, with a sudden backward movement, broke away from him.

She ran on, but as no one followed she soon looked round. James Andrews was stooping to take up the snares and Charlie Tulk was limping back to the gate again. “After all,” Nellie thought, “I need not have been so terrified.” There was something, too, that nicely touched her vanity in being taken notice of by James Andrews, even by his setting a snare for her, for he was usually so silent. Suppose Charlie Tulk had not been there, she would not have cared so much; it was he that made the incident unpleasant.

Nellie stopped hurrying, she even walked slowly. She began to climb the grassy path that led to the field where Mark was waiting for her.

When she gained the top, and before she went to Mark, she looked back again at the Dodderdown village. Below her was the lane that in the summer was white and dry, but it was now dull and muddy. James Andrews and Charlie Tulk were walking along this lane towards the village, Nellie heard Charlie laugh; the sound came to her flying with wings like a bat's. She waited, the laugh came again, even more unpleasantly. She thought they were talking about her. Nellie hurried along the top of the hill. Mark was now calling to her.

"Be that 'ee on hill, Nellie," he called. Mark Only was standing near to the plough. His horses, with their heads drooping, appeared large and motionless, like dead things made of the clay of the soil. They stood as though asleep. They stood as though doomed to stand for ever as a punishment for the crime of ever having been alive.

When she was a child Nellie Holland had loved and feared these Dodderdown hills. They had in those days seemed very far away to her small feet. Often when she had wandered there to chase butterflies, she had been seized with sudden dread and would run back to Dodderdown as though pursued. Once when she was a little older and gathering sticks for the fire, a man with a grey beard crept up to her with a live snake in his hand. He was Peter Andrews, who used sometimes to frighten the children.

It was partly her dread of the hills that led Nellie to fancy Mark Only more than his brother, who, in his silent manner, had shown more than once that he liked her. She nursed her feelings for the hills as she nursed her thoughts for Mark, as something that she shrank from and yet wished to get near. Nellie expected wonderful things to come when her fears led the way, things about which her thoughts always hinted at hidden delights. She felt in a simple way that she was like a painted flower in the meadow and Mark like a weed on the downs, a weed with sharp prickles to be dreaded and yet to be desired.

As Nellie approached him, Mark Only laughed. His laugh had a queer cackle in it, a shrill noisiness that in an odd way suited his surroundings; it was the laugh of a wise fool.

"No one didn't stop 'ee down there," Mark called out, indicating by a wave of his arm that he referred to the meadows.

“They be ferreting,” replied Nellie, “an’ I stayed a moment to speak to James as I went by.”

“Any rabbits?” inquired Mark.

“Yes,” replied Nellie. “I did see some hung up on hedge.”

Mark looked up into the sky and then across the field.

“Day be misty,” he said, “an’ I’ve been waiting a long while for ’ee to come.”

“What is it you want me to do, Mark?” she asked.

“Nothing that you shouldn’t,” replied Mark, laughing loudly. “ ’Tis a new furrow that I want to start across to t’other hedge; I’ve been and set up a stick, though I can’t see en.”

“Never mind about seeing the stick, Mark,” said Nellie. “I’ll go across to the hedge and stand still, and then you’ll see me.”

“You be a good thoughtful maiden,” Mark called out. “You be the one to help a poor chap, an’ I do think ’tis time we were married; so church it be when you do say en.”

Nellie Holland patted the horses. She touched Ben’s nose with her lips and fondled his head. She plaited a portion of Polly’s mane and stroked the mare’s ears. The horses answered by no movement. The bare field, the horses so like the dull day, and Mark’s laughter took away for the moment all hopes and dreads about what might happen if she did marry. The little pieces of currant cake that she had so often fancied herself as doing up in the tiny boxes like fairies’ coffins, slipped from her hands. The bare field had ate up her hopes before she cut the cake. While she was dusting those china dogs, her thoughts had danced and hit at her and bid her hurry out to him. And now here she was.

Mark was leaning down and scraping the plough, as though when once he had made up his mind to be married, the girl would but take her place in his life as the plough did in the field, each requiring perhaps a little scraping now and again.

Nellie left the horses and began to walk slowly across to the hedge. The field was ill-kept and full of couch-grass, for Mark was no good workman, and though James was always complaining about the dirty state of the fields, yet he rarely tried to help his brother to keep them cleaner. As Nellie walked on the loose earth, for she chose as a pathway a furrow where the plough had already gone, she felt that Mark was not so nice that afternoon as he generally was. When he was most unlike himself she liked him best, but this time had seemed so very unchangeably himself with his torn waistcoat, his half-smoked cigarette, his ill-fitting trousers and large worn-out boots. Then there was his laugh, but that had an odd quality of fear about it, as though he saw other things than most folk see. It drew her to him curiously, this laugh of his, as though it took away her own will and compelled her to see, or at least to try to see, what he saw and to feel what he felt.

By the farther hedge Nellie called out as loud as she could. “I’m here now, Mark Only, so you best begin to come.”

Mark turned the horses so that the plough faced the right way, but still he waited. He left the plough and walked into the field in front of the team and peered uncertainly towards the farther hedge.

“He can’t see me,” Nellie thought, feeling all her love for him come back to her. “His eyes must be getting worse; poor Mark Only, what can I do to make him see me?”

“It’s this nasty dress I’ve got on,” she said aloud, looking down at herself. “I wonder if I might take it off; there bain’t no one looking on these hills.”

Lifting up her frock, and bending a little, Nellie slipped it quickly over her head, and stood up in her white chemise.

A plover flew over her, giving its cry. Farther above there were rooks circling. Nellie fancied that these birds were looking at her. She folded up her frock and placed it by her side, ready to put on at a moment’s notice. She looked down at herself anxiously.

“Suppose some one had watched her,” she thought. “All Dodderdown would laugh.” She saw a darned patch in the chemise; she remembered so well tearing the rent when in her bedroom and then sewing it up again. Mrs. Beggwell had scolded her for being late with the breakfast that morning.

She never thought then that those little stitches would be shown to the earth-worms.

Nellie was really frightened at what she had done; she shivered too. “I must look ever so funny,” she said, “standing up here in a field without my frock on.”

Mark Only had seen the spot of white against the hedge and was now driving the plough towards it.

“I should hate James to see me,” Nellie was thinking, “but I don’t mind Mark so much because I’m going to marry him soon.”

The two horses came on, moving slowly towards her.

Nellie reasoned hurriedly. “He would never know what I’d been and done to myself,” she thought, “if I dressed quick again.”

Mark Only was half-way across the field when she slipped on her black frock. The ploughman came to her, and she moved out of his way while he turned the horses. As soon as he was turned and had cleaned the plough, he looked at Nellie in an odd way and laughed. “Blest if maiden weren’t as white as any chalk stone when I came over field. Where be all thik whiting gone that I did see?”

“Only my handkerchief that I waved,” said Nellie, looking away from him and at the same time taking from her pocket the very smallest one of its kind.

“ ’Tis a little bit of stuff to show so large,” laughed Mark Only.

He held the plough and looked across the field. “I bain’t got much more to do,” he said, “for horses be tired and ’tis time I took they to stable.”

A flock of plovers went over, flying in their slow soft way. Mark heard their wings and looked up. “They birds do know I,” he said. “They do tell I what a’clock it be when they do come.”

Mark listened. Another sound came from the other side of the hills where the village of Shelton lay. This was the Shelton church clock striking three.

“That be a slow clock,” Mark said.

He started the horses and reached the farther side of the field, the horses toiling slowly. He began to loose the horses from the plough. Near to where the plough was stopped there was the white chalk lane that went steeply down into the Dodderdown valley.

Beside a gate that led into this lane Nellie waited. She was thinking whether she could manage to buy silk stockings for her wedding. Dull heavy clouds came around her, pressing upon one another and bulging from the lowering skies. Perhaps the wedding thoughts of a girl, even when they referred to silken stockings, had brought the grey ponderous clouds near.

“No,” thought Nellie, “I must have different ones, or perhaps I might just manage one cheap pair for the day.”

She stepped over the soil to the last furrow that the plough had turned up. Many a little plan of Nature’s had been disturbed by this last overturning.

A mouse who had made its nest there, reasoning, no doubt, that land in that state could only have been intended by the creator of all things—to the mouse this creator was a rat—as permanent pasture. But the plough had turned over the little house, and the mouse became an infidel.

A hare had also chosen that particular lie in the land to rest in her form, hoping to be safe there, at least for a little while, from the teeth of the hounds or the sportsman’s shot. But the unexpected came—the plough.

The larks had settled there too, for there was a little dip and shelter just in that place, and had dreamed contentedly, seeing the condition of things, that man’s disturbing foot—a good riddance when gone—was departed; then the plough came.

A mole who had not been educated in Tull’s husbandry or, even if it had it might have been mistaken here, thought the field was intended as a pasture-ground for sheep—until Mark’s last furrow came.

Mark Only slowly opened the gate. He was in no hurry, for now he had once left off work there was no need to be. Nellie left the field and stood beside the lonely tree. The dull clouds had given birth to moaning gusts of wind. These gusts made the boughs of the tree sway to and fro. Nellie wondered what hat she would wear on the day. She left the tree and stood beside Mark, who was tying together two pieces of broken harness with string.

“We shan’t want very much for our house,” Nellie said, “for I suppose it will be a very little cottage.”

She held up her hand, meaning to count upon her fingers what she wanted.

“Now,” she said, “I must think of what we want, for ’tisn’t much. A table, Mark. Do you mind that Mr. Potten of Norbury makes good tables?”

“Not so good as ’is coffins be,” laughed Mark.

“A picture—the king, queen and princess, or an angel will do—and a flower for the window.”

“There be one thing thee’ve forgot,” said Mark.

Nellie looked down at the earth.

His interruption had come merely as a country convention, a word in its place to show a man’s way of taking cottage matters.

Nellie stepped back. “We must buy mousetraps,” she said.

“ ’Tis best we should,” Mark rejoined, “for I bain’t nor cat.”

Nellie laughed. She went near to Mark. She felt at that moment how nice it would be if he seized and kissed her, kissed her with all the rude force and clumsiness of a man. She felt her heart beat as though he already pressed upon her.

Mark did not catch her thoughts; he opened the gate and led the horses into the lane, where they began to feed by the wayside. He took some while to shut the gate safely and to fasten the wire that bound it. He found another piece of wire and began to twist it, so as to strengthen the gate-fastening. He bent his face very near to the wire. Nellie’s thoughts had come back to her cooled.

Mark’s actions were awkward, and his cheekbones showed large; the bristles of his moustache stuck out in a queer way. Nellie looked at him and could not understand herself. The reasons for her liking sank out of sight, and she wondered why she was going to marry such a man. James had looked at her—but—here was Mark Only. She had always wanted Mark, she wanted him now, she wanted to touch him. She went nearer to him.

“They bad rabbits do get through all cracks and crannies,” said Mark. “Wire-netting don’t keep they out; ’tis burrow under wi’ they rabbits. ’Tain’t no good to think of keeping they out of field.”

“You can’t see what you be doing,” said Nellie, touching his shoulder. “You don’t tie it right, an’ we’ll never get down into village if we be so long over it.”

“What be village to we?” Mark roughly answered. “ ’Tis a pity stable bain’t up on these high hills.” He leaned over the gate that he had vainly tried to transform into a barrier against the rabbits, and looked back into the darkening field.

“We’d best be going, Mark,” said Nellie. “ ’Tis getting late.”

“My home be up on these hills, when I bain’t down in horses’ stable.” Mark spoke as though he were talking to himself. “ ’Tis down in village that I be made a fool of.” His face twitched as though ugly thoughts passed in his mind. “ ’Twas a day ago that I did hear Charles Tulk a-talking, they horses do know what ’e did say. ’Twas Sexton Potten ’e were speaking to beside cross on green.”

“Never mind what ’e did say,” said Nellie.

“Lies, that’s what ’e were talking, lies,” Mark shouted. “ ‘E were telling Potten that Mark Only had never done a day’s work in ’s life. That were a pretty thing to say of a chap. And who were ’e to speak it, a lame b—— kepted by parish.”

“Mark, you mustn’t,” said Nellie, turning from him.

“What do Farmer Beggwell keep such vermin for?” shouted Mark. “There be Emmie that used to be a quiet good maid, and what be she now? . . . but ’tis like a maid to be taken up wi’ a bad woon that do know so much. ’Tis badness in a maid that do ask for badness. ’Twas a peaceful village before thik Tulk did come, a lying devil that ’e be.”

“You used to listen to him too,” said Nellie soothingly.

Mark Only turned and shook his fist over the village.

All was dimness there. A great lake of white mist lay below them, and only the Church tower and the Rectory chimneys showed above it.

In the dim mist that shrouded the village hovels there were shadows moving, shadows made of the denser part of the mire of time, shadows that are the thick sediment at the bottom of the great pool of waters that is called God. These shadows moved about with the noise of the clattering buckets and with the soft treading of soaked boots in the mud. To Mark Andrews they were forms risen up out of well-known places, and some with a sting in their tails.

There was James; he never looked kindly upon Mark. There were his sisters Susan and Kate; they saw him as an impediment in their speech, or as something that eats food that should have been theirs. There was the old woman, Mother Andrews; her tender care had always gone to James. There was the old man; his great beard had something of kindness in it, but even he talked to Mark as though his son were a post set in a field that he could rub his back against when it itched.

Mark had shut the gate, but he still waited, looking over the gate at his plough. Once or twice his lips moved as though he wished to speak, and at last he burst out with one of his laughs.

“Thik wold plough do know who I be,” he called. “Plough do know where ’tis best to stay, plough don’t go to no Dodderdown village where folks do bide that hate I.”

“But you’ve got me,” whispered Nellie, leaning up to him. “You’ve got me and we’ll soon make a home.”

Mark stroked her as though she were a little animal that had come up to him by chance for warmth and shelter. “James do keep on at I about the work,” he said. “James do say that I bain’t nor good at nothing, an’ that Charles Tulk wi’ ’is lame leg could do more than I. James be right most likely, for I bain’t no good.”

“Oh, yes, you are, Mark,” said Nellie, whose thoughts had run to him again. “You do all the work up here, you plough up the grounds.”

“Yes,” said Mark in a gayer tone. “I can catch hold of plough handles right enough, and horses do know my voice when I do drive they. I do but have to shake the reins and speak and they do go on. Hill be the place for I to work, and ’tis they liars that do say I bain’t nor good at nothing.”

Still looking over the gate, Mark saw Dodderdown with eyes that looked backwards. He had been down there when a child and had played with the kittens in the straw; he had run into the pond after the soft fluffy ducklings. His father had set him upon the great horse, with his little boots far from the ground as though they were lost to it. The other children used to throw mud at him because he had been baptized with “Only” for a name. That was a Dodderdown not unkindly in all its aspects. There were pleasures in it, sugar pleasures, cake pleasures, and the sunshine that makes a child shout with joy when he sees a minnow in a brook. Mark’s troubles, when he grew older, came very often because of the pride that he had in his work. He had always, since he had first been trusted by his father with horses and a plough, gloried in the drawing of a furrow. Even when he saw less and less well the opposite hedge—for his eyesight had been injured by a fall—he still believed that he was an artist at his employment and resented in no small measure any suggestion of incompetence.

Nellie Holland, who wished to please him and to get him in a more merry mood, said gaily, “Mr. Andrews thinks so much of you, Mark, he leaves all the work up here for you to manage.”

“Oh yes, I do know that,” Mark cried excitedly, waving his arms. “I do know the old man do like I. An’ up here bain’t none other that do work; clouds do come by and hailstones, an’ I still do stay. I don’t mind no storms of rain nor yet they snowstorms when I be out.”

A playful mood came to Nellie. It was impossible for the girl to stand beside a man so nice to tease without tormenting him. She picked up a long piece of grass and began to tickle his neck without his seeing what she was doing. Every time she touched his neck with the grass he put up his hand to scratch himself. Soon Nellie's laughter betrayed her doings, and he caught her hand in the very act. She let him hold her for a minute and then broke away with a laugh. He caught her again in a more telling manner and threw her rudely against the bank. She turned red and hot and struggled out of his grasp. But he took no advantage of the situation he had her in nor yet of her naughty mood, and went to the horses that were feeding by the lane side and started them going. He followed a little behind them.

In a moment Nellie had caught him up and was talking as any girl might do to a man that she knew. She told him now that she had fallen in the field below and dirtied her clothes.

"Where about were they snares that 'ee do tell of?" asked Mark.

"In the footpath," replied Nellie innocently.

" 'Twas done to catch 'ee," said Mark.

They proceeded down the hill in silence.

Suddenly Mark shouted out, " 'Tis I that be thik fool that don't never do no day's work. An' 'tis they that do know where to lay snares in path for to catch Mark Only's maiden. James did always want to take she away from I. When Nellie did first come to farm 'e did look for she on Sundays, an' 'e will get she yet, 'e will, for though James do crawl slow, 'e be sure." He turned upon her. "Go to 'e if thee do want it," he shouted. "I won't marry no maiden that do hanker after other folk beside I."

"Mark," said Nellie, "don't 'e go talking so foolish, you know I'm going to marry you; you know I've got a copper kettle and you've got ten pounds for the rest of the things, and Mr. Andrews is going to pay you more money for the cottage rent; you know he said he would."

Nellie hushed her voice and walked closer to Mark. "There be some one standing behind hedge," she whispered fearfully. "I do see a shadow that be watching, 'tis a shadow like a man, 'tis some one that do listen to we talking."

Mark peered into the hedge.

He laughed oddly. " 'Tis only they bramble leaves that be there," he said, "an' perhaps a rabbit, and if there be anything t'other side, 'tis only a tree."

Nellie had already begun to follow the horses, and Mark slouched after her.

“ ’Twasn’t nothing,” he said when he reached her.

As soon as they were gone there was a limping movement behind the hedge. Certain little birds that were perched there hopped farther away. They, too, must have thought that the figure that had been bent forward to rest his lame leg had been a tree. But now that the stumpy tree had begun to move, the little birds hopped from damp and shiny twigs to others of a like dampness and nodded their heads as though they had learned a lesson.

The lame man was beginning to talk to himself as he was sometimes wont to do when alone. He moved stoopingly away to gain the village by taking a short cut across the fields. “Tulk,” he said as he limped along. “A good fine fellow you are, Tulk; you be one to know how a maid do talk, but there be some that don’t like you, Mr. Tulk. Old Peter Andrews do like Mark, do ’e? Affection be a fine family thing, but all ’same old Peter don’t love Mr. Tulk. Mr. Andrews be a fine one to hammer up a pigsty by roadside, but ’e shouldn’t interrupt other folk when out walking. ’Tain’t right for ’e to say to Tulk when ’e be passing: ‘Charlie’—that bain’t the way to address a country gentleman—‘Charlie, you’ve an easy life living on parish. ’Tis we farmers that ’ave to keep all you lazy ones, bain’t ’e got no better work than ferreting?’

“That weren’t the way to speak to a gentleman out walking, whose father was near to being the Lord Mayor of a town. There be a small bird that do talk in Mr. Tulk’s head sometimes. ‘Tulk,’ it do say, ‘Gentleman Tulk, him that do know so much about women’s ways, though thee do live on parish, ’ee have a heart, Mr. Tulk.’ Little birds do speak to I at night-time when all be quiet in granary. ‘Dodderdown,’ they do say, ‘do learn many matters from the gentleman, for bain’t Tulk the one to know a thing or two, and maidens do always listen.’ There be the chaps too, they do like Mr. Tulk, and ’e’ve kept they laughing wi’ ’is jokes beside cross on green many a night-time. ’Tisn’t Charles Tulk that should be trodden on, little birds do say. ’Tis bad usage, that be, to a poor gentleman that do try and teach young folks about things they should know of. ‘Tulk,’ Farmer Andrews do say, ‘get I down wold Beggwell’s ladder, ’tis to rake out swallows’ nests that I do want en.’ ’Tisn’t a polite way of talking, that bain’t.”

Shaking his head as though to prevent the small birds from making any further remarks, Charlie Tulk proceeded upon his way to Dodderdown.

CHAPTER
IV

When Mark Andrews turned to go into the barton gates at Church Farm, Nellie Holland left him there. But she did not go home at once, she loitered for a few minutes, that drew very near to becoming half an hour, to talk to Fanny Maggs and May Potten, who were very busy parading the streets with the intention of showing off to the world the new pair of brown shoes that May Potten was wearing. The shoes being properly considered, and May's pride commended in bearing the pinch of their smallness, Nellie bethought her that she had better be going, because there was no knowing the exact moment when Mr. and Mrs. Beggwell might return from Stonebridge market.

Their early or late return generally depended upon Mr. Beggwell. If he met Mr. Parley at the Red Lion, who was the greatest of talkers, he would be late; if he missed him, he would be early.

Mr. Beggwell had a good market figure. His hat suited his whiskers, and his way of walking suited his overcoat. He was a tall and not an unkindly man who had once won greatness, and intended, and with reason, never to forgo the outward honour of his deportment. As to his inward welfare, he knew that nothing either on earth or in heaven would ever make him forget that he had once won the first prize at the Royal Show for the finest red mangel, the same red mangel that still showed its glory, though dimmed a little by time closing its natural waterways, upon the sideboard at the farmer's house in Dodderdown. About this red mangel and the field in which it was grown, Mr. Beggwell was never tired of talking, and he never failed to give due tribute to his workman Tolly, who, though possessed of a stout figure, could hoe a field with the best.

Some say that it was Farmer Parley who first gave to Mr. Beggwell the nickname of "Old Wurzel," a name by which he was known in all the neighbourhood.

Beside loving the great mangel so well, Mr. Beggwell loved his wife even better. He liked to look at her as well as at the mangel, about which monstrous root, alas! Mrs. Beggwell had some fault to find. She always supposed that in some way or other the mangel prevented her from having a family. Why she blamed the mangel we cannot tell; though Farmer Parley, when warm in his cups, had his own theory upon the subject which we need not repeat.

Nellie Holland walked slowly up the Dodderdown lane. She was a little nervous and excited, though she did not know why. Nothing had happened that afternoon to hurt her, she liked the thought of being so soon married, and there was no reason that she should not be as happy as any other girl who was being courted.

In order to reach the back door of the farm she was forced to pass by the kitchen window. As she did so, she heard her name mentioned. Nellie knew the voice well enough and she stayed for a moment to listen.

Emmie the servant was speaking.

“Nellie Holland be proud of black dress she do ’ave on, though ’tis all upper clothes wi’ she, for unders be in rags.”

A man’s voice whispered something, but in too low a tone for Nellie to hear. But she heard Emmie’s laugh.

“Oh, you be the one to know what a girl do wear,” Emmie said, “but mind, Charlie, ’ee’ve never been into kitchen, for Master did say you weren’t to. Now tell I, did ’ee say true that James Andrews did kiss Nell when she were fallen in field?”

A whispered word came next.

“Well, that be something,” said Emmie, as though astonished. “And wi’ you looking on too!”

Nellie Holland clattered her feet so as to be heard and went to the back door. Just as she came there, Charlie Tulk limped out smiling. He went by Nellie without speaking, and made the best of his way, as a crooked thing would do, to the old granary where he lodged.

Nellie went in; she stepped quickly by Emmie, who was busy poking the fire, and ran upstairs to her bedroom to change her dress. She knew that what she had overheard was merely the natural talk that always goes on everywhere. But she could not avoid wondering, as she took off her black dress for the second time that day, how far certain matters, that she knew well enough were in the wind, had gone with Emmie.

While she stood before the looking-glass in her chemise Nellie’s face flushed. Her thoughts had run back like playful kittens. Mark had pushed her down on the bank and had fumbled her clothes with his clumsy hands; that was all the kittenish thoughts had run to. “And we are going to be married soon,” Nellie thought a little regretfully.

After putting the horses into their stable at Church Farm, Mark Andrews went to the house to have his tea.

In the kitchen, which was the room used by the family, unless some event of unusual importance was occurring that drew them by force of custom into the parlour, he found his mother. The old woman was sitting in her high-backed chair by the fire, watching the flames and smoke with an interested look. There was a torn waistcoat upon her knees about which her hands were busy as if they worked. She held little pieces of wool and made motions with her hands as though she were busy mending the waistcoat with a wooden knitting-needle blunted at the point. All her days were now spent in this way; she would take up a piece of wool, pretend to thread it into the wooden needle that had no eyehole, and then go on prodding the waistcoat and taking out the needle as though she were sewing. The floor about her was covered with the pieces of wool that she had dropped, and near to her chair was a little gipsy’s table upon which old Peter Andrews always placed pieces of wool for her to take when she chose.

The grey hair of this old woman, who amused herself in so harmless a manner, was plastered back upon her skull by a habit of hers of continually patting her own head with a hand that was generally a little moist and greasy, so that her hair seemed to grow into her head again like bramble twigs in the soil. When she wasn’t watching the fire, and she rarely ever looked at her needle, she would fix her eyes upon something in the room, a chair or a tea-canister, and nod to it as though to say: “I know very well you are only pretending to be a vase of flowers, for in reality you are brother Joe.”

When Mrs. Andrews heard her eldest son enter the room, instead of looking to see who had come in, she commenced to nod her head at a picture representing Queen Victoria with a golden crown and a fat smile, before whom was kneeling the Prince Consort, Albert the Good, with a look of painful resignation upon his large moon-like face.

Taking no notice of his mother, Mark felt about with his hands upon the mantelshelf in his usual heavy way as though he were looking for something. Soon Mrs. Andrews began to speak to the picture in a sharp, jerky voice.

“Though thee do kneel so humble,” she said, addressing the good Albert, “before that fat maiden, I do know what thee’ve been a-doing, and though thee do kneel so still, thee be risen up an’ walking about room, brother Joe.” Mrs. Andrews turned to the fire again. “Joe be come in from fields,” she went on; “ ‘e be come in an’ ’e be looking for something. An’ I be a little maid that do work samplers, an’ Joe be fingering my work-basket. Joe did meet she out in they fields, and then ’e did come home an’ look for something. ’Tisn’t there, Joe, ’tisn’t there, ’tis there, rope be there that ’ee took out to stable to hang ’eeself wi’.”

“I bain’t your brother,” Mark called out loudly, “an’ I be looking for cigarettes, not hanging gallows.”

Mrs. Andrews patted her head; the voice of her son recalled her wandering thoughts to the present. “James came in a few moments ago,” she said in a lower and more natural tone, “an’ I told ’e to take they smokes, for ’e did want them.”

Learning, with no small annoyance, what had become of his cigarettes, Mark moved sullenly to the table, and sitting down he spread out his arms before him and looked into the fire.

Soon there was a shuffling in the passage, and Peter Andrews with his great beard before him burst into the room, bringing with him a rush of winter wind from the back door where he had been employed in serving the milk. The old man dominated the little room in his rough, wayward manner, as a friendly bear might have done, using a bear’s gentleness to the things that it loved.

“Don’t ’e now work too hard, old ’oman,” he said, laying his large hand upon his wife’s shoulder, “for mending thik waistcoat be hard for ’ee somewhiles; do ’ee take a rest the moment and watch fire burning.”

Old Peter Andrews now struck his son in a friendly manner. “A good boy, a good work-a-day boy, Mark be,” he called out. “Always at work where ploughing is to be done up on they high hills; ’tis a happy family we be to live in a small village, where a certain maiden do bide and where mother do work at thik wold waistcoat. And there be the Church too,”—the old man went on talking as he moved about the room setting the things in their places, and now and again flicking with his red handkerchief to scatter the dust.—“True, ’tis a pretty Church be thik of Dodderdown; for many years I’ve helped at the Church, doing this and that and going here and there to help Parson Hayball. I don’t never allow no workmen to come to Church when I can do what be wanted. ’Tisn’t praise that I do want for what I do up there, nor glory neither, an’ if I did want a ‘thank you’ given, ’tisn’t likely I should get en, for Mr. Hayball ’e bain’t a thanking man. He do think more of they falling raindrops than of ’is God’s housen. Only yesterday, Mother—do ’e hear I, wold ’oman, or be thee gone cowslip picking?—Parson Hayball were telling I of all they limestones, clays and marls, that be three hundred feet thick in some places. And they rains, that do rush like rivers through they chalks, but be stopped bang by they clays. I did ask ’e for a brush or something to rake out owls’ nests, snoring beasts that they be, up in tower, and all he did tell I about was ‘Zones.’ ’Tis a pity so clever a man shouldn’t love ’is poor Church better. Now there be Mark here, ’e don’t never name a zone, and yet—’e do go up to hill to plough. ’Tisn’t about raindrops neither that Mark do talk. ’Tis a good boy that do plough grounds each working-day, and I will mind ’e when I do die.”

Bustling about, with a word here and there, Peter Andrews took the cloth from the table-drawer and laid the tea, putting cups and plates in readiness and cutting the bread and butter in a careful manner. When all was ready, he went to the back door and called “James” with a great shout. When James arrived old Andrews surveyed the table with much pride and poured the boiling water from the kettle into the teapot.

“We do like to live, we poor folk do; we be the happy ones to sit down to a tea-table, bain’t we, old ’oman?”

Mrs. Andrews was busy with the wool.

He went near to her. “ ’Tisn’t daisy-chain making now, nor waistcoat knitting, ’tis tea-time that be come round once more in the home, and thee best come to table, Mother, for tea be made.”

Mr. Andrews moved his wife’s chair with extreme gentleness to the table, showing by his care, as indeed he did in all his other movements in the farm-house, that he had once been a sailor.

“You bain’t Uncle John, be ’e?” Mrs. Andrews said as he moved her, “for ’e did use to push my chair to table and did pull my hair that was put in papers every night-time and crimped each morning. Uncle John do fancy me, ’e do, only I do believe ’e be gone out to foreign places to make a fortune, an’ here ’e be come home and back to I.”

“No, no, I bain’t so fortunate as to be Uncle John,” replied the old man, smiling, as he poured her out a cup of tea. “Besides, ’tis more than twenty years since we heard from thee’s poor uncle, and then ’twas from prison ’e did write.”

Mr. Andrews helped her to some bread and butter.

“Tea-time be always a good time for we,” he said, “for now we can bring up what other folk did say that we’ve met in village. ’Tis a wise village that do have such wise men in en, for Mr. Hayball did say to wold Wurzel that this fine weather we be having that be caused by they Zones, or else a wind blowing from China, will last till the thirtieth day of the month, and then ’e did tell Potten about the sands and gravels that do bide in Stour and Piddle.”

James Andrews looked up from his plate at his father. “What were it parson did want ’ee to do for en up at Church?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing,” said the old man, “at least nothing much worth talking of. Mr. Hayball did speak a word to I about Church chuting that be choked up, for they rainy waters do gather on roof and do run out on God’s holy angel that be carved on Parson Denny’s tombstone. Poor man ’e were to drink ’isself to death up at Rectory, so father did say.”

“Do ’ee mean then to clean out they chutings for nothing?” James asked roughly.

“ ’Tisn’t much that have to be done,” the old man replied mildly; “and ’tis a good winged angel wi’ a half-nose and whole mouth, same as we have, that be spoiling. An’ father did used to say, at least to we children, that ’twas thik angel that did carry wold Denny to God wi’ brandy-bottle in’s hand same as when ’e died.”

“Blast all they b—— churches,” James said in the same tone that he used when he spoke of any sort of thing that took money away from the farm. “They be all for taking, they be.”

When she heard the word “father” spoken in the conversation, Mrs. Andrews had left off eating, and had turned her head a little in order to stare at the wooden settle.

“Father,” she said suddenly, “your pipe be fallen on your knees. You do look old an’ worn, Father, and yet thee be talking. Yes, I do know what thee be saying, ‘There be they stiles to mend.’ Yes,” said Mrs. Andrews, nodding at her plate and taking a little bite, “father do sit quiet on settle. Poor wold man ’e be that were locked up in Church coal-cellar last Sunday. ’e be always talking about heaven, leastways when ’e do forget hell, be father. And ’e do laugh when brother Joe do come in from snowy fields wi’ straw bound about ’is legs, and now Church be struck by lightning and little May’s grave be half-filled wi’ rainwater.”

Mrs. Andrews began to nod in a knowing way at the loaf of bread.

"Mother," she said, "thee's face be crusty, thee best wash theeself before going up to Church to be married. Father be the man for maidens, for Master Denny did catch thee two under hill where mossy bank be. Oh fie, Mother, fie! to be so catched."

"How do thee know that they were caught by parson, for thee weren't nothing then, but maybe 'tis about theeself 'ee be a talking," old Andrews called out with a loud laugh.

Mrs. Andrews stared hard at the teapot.

" 'Tis something to be a maid same as I be, sitting by grandfer's side, but when I do run out into mead bad boy Peter Andrews do follow I, and close by tree where magpie do nest 'e did come upon I. They boys bain't made same as we small girls be an' that I do know."

"Hush, Mother," said Mr. Andrews, interrupting his wife. " 'Tis tales out of school thee be telling, for I only kissed thee in meadow, an' that be all, I'll swear to."

" 'Hush, Mother!' yes, hush it be," said Mrs. Andrews in a whisper. "For we be in Church and Parson Hayball be coming. Baby be wet—they napkins bain't the right ones—how the child do cry, there bain't time to feed en. Mark, that be 'is name—young parson be deaf, I do think—what be 'e a-looking into font for? Mark only be 'is name. There be Tolly and Peach running after our Kate and Susan behind grave-mounds. Drat they boys an' maidens! Father be gone now," she said, turning to the settle again, "father be gone out to mend they stiles for nothing."

"Your father were the man to do things," Mr. Andrews said gravely. "An' I've always heard that 'is coffins did last in ground years after they Norbury makes be rotted; I do a thing or two up at Church my woon self, but I don't never come up to thee's father's grand ways."

" 'Tis best to leave Church alone, wold man," James called out, "for our ladder bain't long enough to reach they chutings, and besides, I do want 'e at farm here to climb hayrick."

"True, James," murmured Peter Andrews, "for boys do know more than their parents these happy days. I'll let our ladder alone if thee do want en, for old Wurzel's be the longest one an' Charlie Tulk do know that I do borrow en."

"Thee don't want to go borrowing nothing," James said rudely, "for bain't there all the work to be done down here at farm, bain't there our house roof to be mended, and what do 'ee get for scraping an' going up at thik blasted wold Church? What do Parson Hayball ever give away, where be any gain for the rest of we with your doing other folk’s work, what is it you do get by your Church goings?”

“Nothing,” replied the old man mildly, “I don’t get nothing, but something do draw I to Church though I don’t know what it be. ’Tisn’t carved angel on Parson Denny’s grave, nor ’tisn’t thik funny face that do grin over porch, but all ’same when I be once inside they Church gates I be happy.”

Mr. Andrews leaned across the table towards his son. “Do ’ee ever ask mother why she be silly?” he inquired in a whisper.

“It don’t make no difference what she be, ’tis you I be talking to; an’ thee’ll go to Church once too often, I be thinking.” James finished drinking his tea at one draught; he left the table and went out into the farm-yard. The moon was above, shining with its cold light. James became a moving dark line, as he went to the haystack in order to carry a bundle of hay to the cow-house.

Mrs. Andrews stared hard at the empty chair that James had pushed aside.

“Some one be gone out,” she said plaintively, “some one be gone out to kill little Minnie’s swimming ducklings. I be little Minnie, and ducks be all mine, for father did give I every one of the pretty ducklings.”

Old Andrews’ forehead wrinkled, as though he were trying to remember something; his usual happy frame of mind appeared clouded for the moment.

“Do be quiet, Mother,” he said; “you do worry me with your talk of past times. Times be gone, an’ ducks be gone, an’ there bain’t no pond ducks swimming nor no wasps buzzing these days, an’ I were trying to mind what I’d done wi’ they lawyer’s papers, so thee’d best go back to fire again.”

Mark pushed his mother’s chair to the fire.

“You don’t move I kindly,” she said, “same as James do; you do shuffle and pull as though I were an old bag of clothes only fit to be buried. ’Tis likely you do wish I to die, you don’t care for I nor don’t they maidens, ’tis only James that do love ’is own mother.”

Mrs. Andrews took up the waistcoat and looked at the torn place. For years she had found peace and contentment in trying to mend the waistcoat with her one knitting-needle.

Mark Only laughed at her.

“You be fond of sewing waistcoat,” he said. “I do suppose ’tis grandfer’s, who were sitting on settle at tea-time and be now gone up chimney most like, an’ you mind ’e don’t come down all sooty and snatch at en before ’tis mended.” Mark laughed again. His laughter roused her.

“Thee bain’t no child of mine,” she said, “though ’ee be christened ‘Only’; ’tisn’t no son of mine that do go each and every day to stony hills. You be only a man’s feet moving; now there be some one real sitting on sofa that I do see.”

Mrs. Andrews began to speak in her odd fancy tone again.

“Bide still, brother,” she said; “don’t ’ee go now, let sister Minnie look on ’ee for a bit. Rope don’t hang behind door, ’tis in cow-house rope do hang. Thee’ve a funny coat on ’ee, brother, there be worms in en.”

Old Andrews patted his wife’s head and laughed. “There bain’t nor brothers, nor hanging ropes, nor crawling worms neither, that be sitting on sofa cushions. There be son Mark in room and I, that be all.”

“Who be you?” she asked.

Mark laughed loudly; the cups rattled.

“Mother don’t know wold man, now,” Mark called out in high glee. “ ’Tis likely she won’t know her woon self come to-morrow.”

Mr. Andrews and his son stood beside her chair; they leaned over her and watched her bony hands that fingered the waistcoat. They looked at her as simple folk do at some oddity that had once been known to lick its own toe in a lane, and might, if left alone, give another entertainment of the same nature.

Mrs. Andrews, however, showed no sign of giving to the world at that moment any new matter for thought; her hands became still and she merely looked into the fire.

Mr. Andrews patted her head in a kindly way and began with great gentleness and care to pack up the plates and cups and to place them in a tray ready to be washed up, and Mark felt about again upon the mantelpiece as though he had forgotten that the cigarettes had already been taken. Feeling, rather than seeing, that his renewed search was hopeless, he went out in a stumbling fashion to where he found his stable lantern safe in its usual corner.

CHAPTER V

Mark's stable was of all his home surroundings the one place, other than the hills that he ploughed, that he felt glad to inhabit. He would take up his lantern of an evening and go there, as a tired dog to the well-known straw of its own kennel.

There was a warm softness about the stable, a curious meekness of meek things pervaded it, the sweet hay and the dung, the slightly acetous taste of the stuffy air, all helped to drug the senses of a man with a kindly quietude. The horse collars and other pieces of harness, that were hung on wooden pegs driven in between the heavy rough stones of which the walls were built, gave a pleasant feeling too, as being something for the eyes to turn to in a dreamy manner. The oaken corn-bin, with "Mark Only" carved upon it in great rude letters, was as good a throne as any king might rest upon.

Hanging the lantern upon its usual nail, Mark began to groom the horses who were contentedly munching the hay that was in the manger.

While he was doing so the stable door was softly opened, remained open for a moment or two, and then was as softly shut. Mr. Peach and Mr. Tolly had entered, and, according to their usual custom a' nights, had gone to their usual seat, the oaken corn-bin.

Two extremely dirty black heads had also made an entry, together with the small bodies of Sam Peach and Tom Tolly, that now rolled about in the straw between the horses' legs, and rubbed up against Mark Andrews to show him that they were come. After rolling in the most merry manner for some minutes, the two black heads hopped up into the bin where the horses had still a little chaff left from their supper, and called out loudly, almost into Mark's ear, "Ain't you got nothing for we?"

Mark shook his head.

"No sweets nor sugar nobs?" the heads called.

Standing near to the bin, Mark allowed hands that, if anything, were a little dirtier than the heads, to search his pockets. Soon a sound of crunching commenced that showed the searching had not been all in vain, and the heads rolled back into the straw, where they eased their minds of all worldly troubles by pulling the horses' tails until they stamped.

But a heavy hand soon caught them unawares, and the two black heads ran up the loft ladder like rats, and scampered about above and made nests in the hay, to the great annoyance of the real creatures that they imitated so well. Leaving them there, it may be well, for the sake of our story, to look at their male parents, who so wisely used the large corn-bin for a seat when they visited the stable.

Mr. Peach was a small man, by trade a thatcher; he possessed a moustache that hung down and side-whiskers that stuck out, giving his face both a merry and a dejected appearance. He looked, if such a man can look like anything except himself, like a bundle of old hay somewhat dampish. About his clothes, that had the smell of his profession together with a little humanity, there were pieces of loose straw still sticking, that showed as plainly as straw could that Mr. Peach had been at work upon Farmer Beggwell's stacks that same day.

Mr. Tolly, who had married Kate Andrews whereas Mr. Peach had married Susan, was large in body and red in the eye, and had an unfortunate habit of always bursting his buttons. Indeed, Mr. Tolly must have come some time or other to the conclusion that all buttons are but a kind of wantonness, or an unnecessary luxury, that have a right to burst away when an honest man moves or stretches.

The aged corn-bin, whereon Mark's two adult guests were resting, was high as well as long, and the two friends, who liked to be as happily seated as means would allow them to be after their day's labour, leant with their backs to the wall. The contrast between their boots was interesting. Mr. Tolly's were of the largest size, with very large and shining hobs, while Mr. Peach's were small and thin-soled, and the bottoms pressed into ridges by the rounds of the ladders he climbed in his daily occupation. Owing to the shortness of his stature, the thatcher's feet stuck straight out, whereas Mr. Tolly's hung down.

The two sat as though a gracious spiritual ease was sitting upon them, as indeed it was, a spirit formed and created by the long hours of a day's labour, a modest healing spirit, that alone can give the true calmness and repose to a tired man. There was a sort of waiting expectation about the way their eyes looked at Mark Only's lantern, as though they had but to look a little longer and the yellow flame would change, not into the back of a man, as an old French master once desired, but into a great flagon of mellow home-brewed ale. And as though resting in the full belief of the promise of this change from oil to beer, Mr. Tolly and Mike Peach sat in perfect contentment.

“Mark Only,” said Mr. Tolly in a smaller voice than one would have expected from such a man, “we’ve been talking.”

Mark’s horse Ben had ceased to eat and had lowered his head towards his master, who rubbed his ears, a kind of attention that the horse enjoyed.

“Mark,” said Mr. Tolly in a rather louder tone than before, “we’ve been talking about they women.”

Mr. Peach slowly raised his hand to his nose, and after scratching that member very thoughtfully, he allowed his hand to fall upon his knee again. After which he nodded a gesture of approval because he always left the opening of any conversation to his friend.

“ ’Tis a pity,” said Tolly, with an unsounded depth of feeling in his tone, “that women be women.” Something shot from Mr. Tolly and fell upon the floor. A button.

“ ’Tisn’t always fine weather at Stonebridge Fair,”—Mr. Peach shook his head—“but all ’same, sun shone thik day, damn an’ blast ’e.” Mr. Tolly’s tone was of the mildest. “Mike Peach an’ I were sitting in Rainbow Inn, for in they olden days the Rainbow did sell a drop of good drink. I do mind well thik bad day. I bought a little pig for father, and Mike here a pair of knee-leathers for ’is woon self. My glass were drunken to its last drop, worst luck for we, an’ I did shout out to Mike, ‘You take Susan Andrews into fair field an’ I’ll handle Kate the same way,’—I be sitting in Mark’s stable, bain’t I?”

Mr. Peach nodded.

“I thought I were,” said Mr. Tolly soothingly.

“Don’t ’ee now doubt where ’ee be got to,” remarked Mr. Peach, “but do ’ee tell Mark Only what happened next at Stonebridge Fair.”

“They wicked words,” continued Mr. Tolly, thus encouraged, “jumped out of my mouth like two hop-frogs. God’s ways bain’t Tolly’s and that I do know—now if I had but said it t’other way, things might have been better. ‘Peach,’ I should have said, ‘you towsel thik Kate, and I’ll watch out for Susan where she be best to be seen.’ Days, I won’t mention no night-time, do show up they women. For Kate, she don’t speak so very disrespectful to Mike Peach, nor do Susan spit out at I more than be proper. But Mark here and they well-fed horses do know how Tolly be trod on.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Peach, shaking his head mournfully, “we all do know how thee be treated.”

“ ’Tis strange,” said Mr. Tolly, “that Kate be Kate, for when I did go up to Church wi’ she dressed in window-curtains, I thought she mid ’ave been Lucy.”

“Lucy be a good peaceful name,” murmured Mike Peach.

“So bain’t Kate,” said Mr. Tolly.

Tolly turned his head to his friend.

“When did I last hear spoken a ‘please’ or ‘thank you’?” he inquired.

“Not last fall, I don’t suppose,” replied Mr. Peach thoughtfully, “nor yet haymaking.”

“I have never—” said Mr. Tolly in a loud tone, “I have never heard they two friendly words since my wedding-day.”

After making this remark Mr. Tolly raised his eyes and looked round the stable. In this upward quest his eyes saw two black heads peeping down from the loft and evidently listening to what was going on below them.

“Whose be they boys?” inquired Tolly, looking at Peach in a questioning manner. “Whose be they boys, I do ask ’ee, that be looking down from thik ladder-hole.”

“By right and laws,” answered Mr. Peach in a solemn manner, “they be both of ours.”

“Which be more rightly mine?” asked Mr. Tolly.

“They both do look the same in dirtiness,” replied Mr. Peach readily.

“So they do,” said Mr. Tolly. “Kate be the mother of one of they, and she be the wife that I be married to. That be the case, bain’t it?”

“By right and laws,” replied Mr. Peach gravely, “that be the case.”

“True,” said Tolly, “an’ I be blasted.”

“Mark Only,” Peach said in a still small voice, “you be treading on they boys.” Mark moved his foot. The two boys, who had come down from the loft while their parents were conversing, now rolled out of the straw, and following the bent of a new inclination disappeared through the stable door, leaving it open.

“Boys do know bedtime,” said Mr. Tolly.

“We don’t know nothing, where they boys be.”

Mr. Peach cautiously got his legs upon the floor. Sam Tolly did the same. Outside the stable door they both looked with one accord at the moon.

“ ’Tis light enough up there,” said Mr. Peach.

“ ’Tis something that do shine,” said Mr. Tolly. “An’ ’tis best we be going.”

“We be gone, Mark,” called out Mike Peach.

CHAPTER
VI

The full moon, that had been named as though for the first time by Mr. Tolly, shone high above Grange House, the home of Mr. Beggwell, laying a black shadow chimney beside each white one.

The farm-house itself was long and low, and bore upon it the heavy weight of a roof of stone slabs brought from a local quarry. The roof had accepted the changed aspect of many a day. It had been burdened by softly gathering snow, pelted by hailstones, cracked here and there by severe frost, and warmed with the love of the June sun.

Dodderdown Grange was one of those houses that had been added to and repaired at different times, though, whatever had been done to it by man or the elements, the same solidity of character was preserved and planted in the heavy stones used by the first creators. It was a true yeoman's house, having its roots deep sunk in bygone days, days more fierce and dark in their outer aspect than these modern ones, days that can tell a tale or two to a good listener.

Simple stories some, with the sound of probability about them, settled snugly in the old stones of Dodderdown Grange. There was Sir Silas Badbury, who had once owned the place, and whose descendants increased so much that, at one time, it was said that there was no boy born in Dodderdown who wasn't named Silas.

Though a good Churchman in his younger days, for every Silas was brought to the font, when he grew old in years this notable squire began to lead a sinner's life. He got to be so bad and wicked that he hunted on Sundays. And the hounds, it was said, owing to this unchristian behaviour, became fierce and unruly. When there was any lack of game, Sir Silas would set them after any poor labourer or starving outcast who might be abroad, who would be torn down and half-bitten to death before Sir Silas called them off him.

It was said that these dogs could still be heard if one listened long enough on a windy or a gloomy day. Dying folk were always sure to hear the scamper of their feet in the lanes, even though the windows of the cottage were fast-closed; and the healthy even, and especially those who had more than an ordinary fear of death, were troubled at certain times by the sound of these dogs running.

May Andrews, a child of ten, had been frightened by the sound of them; she declared that she heard their feet scamper in the lane. She came home with scarlet fever upon her, and the dread of those dogs hastened her end. Mark, though a mere boy, never left his sister, not so much, perhaps, for love of her, but because he heard the dogs too.

“Listen,” said Mark, who was sitting very near to the child upon the evening that she died. “Listen, May, for they dogs be out; listen how their feet do patter.”

May sat up in bed, flushed and terrified. “They be coming after I, they dogs be coming.”

“They be biting dogs,” said Mark.

“Oh,” called out May, faint with terror, “they be coming near.”

“They be got to churchyard,” whispered Mark.

“They be on to I,” screamed May. She lay back and the thin hand that Mark held became clammy and cold.

“They dogs be gone now,” Mark called out to his mother, who was below stairs, “and May be quiet.”

Even though a silver sword from the moon that cut her curtains lay across the bed, Nellie Holland slept peacefully. She had slept for about an hour when there came a soft knock at her door, repeated louder now and again until she awoke. The first thing Nellie saw when she peeped over the bedclothes was the white line of the moon’s painting, that roused fears in her heart, closely connected, she thought, with the shadow of a man that had stood behind the hedge of the lane.

Nellie allowed her frightened eyes to close and her head to go from sight under the bedclothes, where not one wisp of a curl could be seen.

Knowing how she would herself be affected by a like visitation, Emmie Paine, who had knocked at the door, entered without further notice. She carried a candle in her hand, the light of which penetrated to Nellie’s hiding-place, from whence she withdrew. Emmie shivered in her cotton night-garment.

“They rats do run about up in roof,” she said, “so I couldn’t rest.”

“Was it you,” asked Nellie in a voice that showed she was still deep in her fears, “who did come in late by back window, when house were locked up?”

Emmie’s eyes looked round and terrified.

“Yes,” she said. “Only don’t ’ee tell no one, for ’twas I that came in by window after master had locked they doors up.”

“You’ve been out to granary,” Nellie exclaimed, her eyes growing bigger too.

“Yes,” said Emmie, “only don’t tell they, for ’twasn’t long I stayed, but when I got to bed I couldn’t bide quiet, for I were frightened and they rats did gallop.”

Emmie began to sob. Nellie looked at her as a free rabbit on a misty day looks at a trapped one.

“Charlie were doing something to a ladder in the shed when I went to ’im,” said Emmie, forgetting her tears for the moment in her desire to confess. “ ’E did ask I to hold light for ’im; ’e were mending one of they wooden rounds in ladder. Charlie weren’t long a-doing it, and I helped ’e to hang up ladder on they great nails. I were just a going when ’e caught me hold.”

Nellie Holland sat up in bed.

“ ‘E took I to granary wi’ ’im.”

Nellie looked at Emmie’s thin cotton nightgown. She was wondering how it felt to be really snared.

“ ’E do kiss nice when ’e be minded,” said Emmie. “An’ I don’t know nothing about what ’e did to I.”

“Mr. Beggwell never ought to have harboured up Charlie Tulk,” Nellie said in a voice that showed how excited was her virtue.

“ ’E pulled I in,” sobbed Emmie, “for though ’e ’ave a bad leg, ’e be strong.”

“Thee best go back to bed,” said Nellie, wishing to think her thoughts alone.

“We did use to talk at school,” whispered Emmie, “about men, an’ ’twere nice to laugh and joke behind they tall trees, but when once ’tis real begun a maiden bain’t herself no more. It do come like a wild bull that be savage, and a maiden do fear more to run than to bide. I did think quick ’tis only Charlie that I be wi’, and plenty of times I’ve spoke to ’e out in lane. ‘Charlie won’t hurt you, Emmie Paine,’ I did think. An’ then I minded that when I were a small maid at home, some one did catch I in dark; ’twas the night of the harvest festival. ’Twere some big boy, for ’e left ’is cap in my hand that I threw up over hedge. Up in dark sky I thought I saw a little ugly face. I do mind well how I ran home to mother.

“Charlie did ask I so nice and polite to hold light for ’im to see ladder wi’, and ’e did only want I to step into granary to see a new rat-trap where a rat’s head be catched. I didn’t mean ’e to shut door, but ’e did shut en. ‘I be only wi’ Charlie Tulk,’ I did say, for I were frightened. I do mind I saw a piece of rope in corner. He did kiss me nice at first, and ’is lame leg were so funny. Oh, I do think of ’e now.”

“Go to bed, Emmie,” said Nellie.

“No,” sobbed Emmie, “I be too afraid.”

“Get in with me, then.”

Emmie crept in as advised. She found Nellie warm and excited.

“ ’Twere those rats that frightened I,” Emmie whispered. “ ’Tis their tails I be afraid of. Once I dropped my prayer-book in Church and every one looked round. ’Tis nice to be kissed. ’e don’t like you, Nellie. ’e did say James Andrews were ’is friend.”

“Go to sleep,” said Nellie, “and don’t you never go to granary no more.”

Nellie Holland’s heart panted; Emmie shivered, nestled near to her friend and was silent.

The sword-like beam of moonlight lay sharp upon the girls’ bodies as though to sever them.

CHAPTER
VII

Mr. Charles Tulk was a gentleman of taste; he liked variety. Though not New York or London, Dodderdown provided a passable ground for his entertainments. If he amused himself by going ferreting one day, the next he would spend in some other manner. When his parish money became due—and Charlie had found no reason to object to being supplied with his daily bread from the same source as the King—he would take it with the gesture of a modest benefactor to an ungrateful country, and even say “Thank you” to Mrs. Magg when she gave it to him.

Mr. Tulk had found the world, even the tiny part of it that is called Dodderdown, as a place very much to his liking. There were so many things, even in Dodderdown, for a clever man to say, and he never wanted for a pleasant word. He had indeed all the merry matters of the countryside at his finger-ends, and could always choose at will a suitable story out of a full store-room of rival obscenities.

He was regarded by all Dodderdown, though some looked at him with a certain displeasure, as a wise fellow who knew a thing or two. Besides knowing a thing or two, he knew his company; for when he chanced to meet Mr. Hayball, and the clergyman inquired how his leg was doing, Mr. Tulk would talk knowingly about the flat stones of Purbeck and the rainfall in Wiltshire. One day he even went so far as to mention the Lower Lias, having found a leaf that was torn out of the county directory that gave him this information.

If Mr. Hayball chanced to mention Charlie Tulk to Mrs. Tite his housekeeper, he would do so with the proper beginning of “poor fellow,” and then would proceed: “Yes, poor fellow, he really does show a most remarkable interest in the Ackling Dike.”

Mr. Tulk had a firm belief that one could, although lame and poor enough to have to borrow an outhouse to sleep in, still take a nice profit from the trade of living: the profit in his case being the anticipation and consummation of a certain passion.

When Emmie Paine came as a servant to Mrs. Beggwell’s, Charlie Tulk looked at her as an old dog-fox would at a young pullet perched upon a bough close above its head. Emmie was just seventeen, she was shy and unhappy. There was a stepmother in her home, and her last place had been all hours of misery, with the exception of one hour a year when the sweep came.

The sweep, whose name was Mr. Thomas, possessed a wife named Jane who was in ill-health and made the most of it, and a cat who was always contented and made the most of that.

Mr. Thomas found Emmie a ready listener when he spoke of his wife's illness, and even more so when he spoke of his cat's contentment.

And Emmie, as she watched with admiration the friendly form of Mr. Thomas more than half in the kitchen chimney, told him in return all about the mean ways of Mrs. Ashton, her mistress, who kept the key of the store-cupboard tied to a ribbon round her neck where a silver cross also hung, the wise lady being a sound Catholic.

Mr. Thomas would breathe deep as he brought the soot down.

"There bain't much God Almighty in thik party's religion," he would say, "nor no Mister Christ Jesus, neither. 'Tis my advice to thee to go to Devil's 'ell sooner than stay in this Christian housen."

Emmie left.

At Dodderdown Grange Emmie Paine was much better off; Mrs. Beggwell hid no keys nor crosses. Emmie had moments even to look at herself in the glass, and as time went on to wonder at her own growing roundness. She would draw in her breath and then press herself out to see how nice she looked. Sometimes when she cleaned the kitchen grate she would forget how womanly she had grown, and wonder for a moment what had happened to her. But however different her body felt from a child's, her mind remained the same, and the new feelings that came with her altered state gave her new thoughts of pleasure, and sometimes she laughed, though she did not know why.

When Emmie thought of a man, she thought of Mr. Thomas the sweep. She wished sometimes that Mr. Thomas could see her in her new state of being, dressed in the clean cap and apron that Mrs. Beggwell gave her for the afternoons. She had heard very little of the good sweep since she had left Mrs. Ashton's, except that his wife had died. This news she read in the local paper. She wondered if the cat still lived. But seeing the name Thomas in the paper made her think of things: "Were all men like the sweep, as kind though not as sooty? He would have liked her even more," she thought, "if he had seen her a little fatter."

As soon as she saw Mr. Tulk, for she saw him the very first evening she arrived when she peeped out of her bedroom window like a young swallow, she expected him to be pleased with her. She perched happily at Dodderdown, modest and thankful, but with an almost impish longing to feel with her hands into dark corners, because dark corners frightened her.

At night as Emmie slept, the same yellow toad (see John Milton) that changed later into an adder, told his fine tales into her ear, and she would awake hot and blushing. And there would be Mr. Tulk watching outside for her blind to be drawn, with his mouth watering for the ripe grapes. He took his time however; he did not draw her from the bough with his eyes at the very first. Mr. Tulk was a gentleman and sure of his game, so there was no need for him to hurry.

“ ’Tisn’t for a quiet chap like I,” he remarked to James Andrews, “to run after the women.” Because Emmie, who very soon began to show a girl’s inquisitive and prying nature, could be caught so easily, Mr. Tulk had no intention to waste time about her.

There was Mrs. Beggwell, a more weighty matter in form and substance, with a bunch of black hair on her head that was not always as tidy as it should be. Mr. Tulk treated her with a proper respect, and waited. When old Wurzel told him he might sleep in the granary if he chose to, Mr. Tulk was thoughtful. Some one must have spoken kindly of him. A woman. Tulk had studied the history of his race in an informal, unabashed manner. He was not the man to try and spoil nature’s plans by trying to mow the corn in the green. A little care and waiting, and then prosperity. And meanwhile, a little pleasure, so thought wise Charles Tulk. Charlie had watched Emmie pull up her blind that morning; he coughed and nodded; he intended that she should drop, and so she did. She fell almost too easily, like a wounded sparrow, a plump girl’s warm body in a thin black frock upon the dry hay of his box-bed.

When he had done with her Mr. Tulk sent her off with a friendly curse, because she was crying. “Go to hell,” said Mr. Tulk, as he pushed her down the granary steps, “you maidens do always ask for it; now go, blast ’ee, to hell.”

Emmie went. Charles watched her going. After she was gone he admired the moonlight and became thoughtful. He had two minds to step down to the village green and see how nice the cross looked. He had once asked Mr. Hayball how old the cross was. And Mr. Hayball had replied that he believed it not to be so very ancient.

“But it’s nice to have it there,” Tulk had replied meekly, “for a lame chap like I to lean against.”

Mr. Hayball had passed on.

Mr. Tulk yawned, he would not go to the cross, he was tired, he would stay and meditate a little longer and then go to bed.

“Soft Emmie! Yes, she had the same sort of feeling as the white belly of a rabbit, and he had killed her too in one sense, but a killing that could happen again. Why had she spoken about a certain Mr. Thomas; who was he?”

Well, that was one thing done, but there were people that he had other things to do to. Mr. Tulk whistled. There were those in Dodderdown who, strange to say, had no love for him. Mr. Tulk knew how simple and stupid country people are. He liked excitement and he had his enemies. His lips moved. There was Emmie, the soft rabbit; there were others; Mr. Tulk was ambitious. He slept snugly that night.

The moon was still in the sky when old Wurzel’s barn cock began to crow, and the little world of Dodderdown, as complete a little world as anyone would want to see, began to rouse itself. Mr. Tulk was by no means the first in the village to be disturbed by farm-yard noises. He awoke about breakfast time, and after attending to his person as became a gentleman of means and leisure, he visited the back door of the farm in order to receive his customary can of tea. Mrs. Beggwell herself came to the door to give it to him.

After eating and drinking in thoughtful silence, and having observed when he went out that the day was a cloudy one, Mr. Tulk wondered what he had better do to amuse himself.

Two or three ideas came into his mind to be chosen from. He might go and sit under a sheltered wall near to the inn and wait there, in the hopes that some one who liked stories about women would invite him to take a glass when the inn opened. He might watch for James Andrews and have a word with him, or else lean against the village cross until some girl or other came by who would be sure to approach him for the latest news.

These diversions Mr. Tulk set aside because another and a stronger one took their place. This last idea was to visit Dodderdown Church. Mr. Tulk, having been born with an orthodox turn of mind, considered that a walk to the church that morning suited his feelings and the cloudy day.

He bethought him too that if he remained where he was, sitting upon the steps of the granary and watching the ducks and waiting for a word with Emmie, old Peter Andrews might come up to the farm and ask him to move the long ladder.

It occurred to Charles that Mr. Andrews might not be over-polite with his asking. He would most likely call him "Tulk," or even "idle Tulk," and would bid him help carry the ladder as though he were a mere workman, giving but a paltry twopence as a reward.

The long ladder was wanted at the church, and so were the prayers of a saint like Mr. Tulk wanted too. Charlie was humble-minded, he had no wish to follow so great a Lord as Christ and to bear a ladder as He had once borne a cross. His lame leg, a good excuse with some folk, was useless with Mr. Andrews, who had seen him do things. All things considered, Mr. Charles, with his desire to pray a prayer, or at least to watch events ordained by God or destiny, took up his stick and left the steps where he had been sitting.

Meanwhile Mrs. Beggwell, in a clean white apron and cheerful morning look, had come out to feed the ducks and hens. She was formed in merry fat lines, and every line of her called out that she was a woman. Mr. Tulk touched his cap politely and leant upon his stick and watched the lady.

Mrs. Beggwell called her hens and ducks. It was sad to see a young man, "not so very bad-looking," thought Mrs. Beggwell, "suffering from so uncertain a leg."

The stones in the old farm-house wall, that had seen Sir Silas at some of his merry pranks, had their thoughts too. Here was indeed a peaceful farm-yard, like many another in happy England, with a fine woman, warm and proper, calling "Chick, chick, chick!"

The turn and turn of affairs had brought her there again. The same morning that had sent old Wurzel off to his fields, had brought her out to feed the hens. The morning brought the usual smells, very different from the scents of the night, because in the night even the farm-yard smells go to sleep. Over Dodderdown was the grey sky that took no notice of Mrs. Beggwell; there was the mud of the yard, pecked and scraped where the corn had been thrown down, that took no notice either.

When the hens had been fed, Mrs. Beggwell looked kindly at Mr. Tulk and inquired whether his leg pained him much.

"Yes," replied Mr. Tulk, "it do pain most cruel." The proper attitude of a person in pain is to look far away into the distance. Mr. Tulk leaned heavily upon his stick and looked at the Dodderdown hills. Two objects as usual broke their line: the lonely tree and Mark Only ploughing. “It do hurt I cruel,” said Mr. Tulk as he limped out of the gate.

Mrs. Beggwell watched him as he went; she felt the nice feeling of a woman who watches a man whom she pities; she wished she had invited him into the kitchen, but he had gone some way now, so she did not like to call him back to her.

Mr. Tulk had Mrs. Beggwell in his mind too as he walked along. He looked at the heaps of mud by the wayside, and smiled. He recalled his adventure of the night before. He reviewed what had happened, bit by bit. Having done so, very much to his inward content, he went through it again, only this time with Mrs. Beggwell in the place of Miss Emmie.

So great was Charlie’s inward content that, as he passed Sam Peach, who was running out of school, he caught the child a sharp cut with his stick, which had the effect of making Sam dirtier than ever, because he was forced to rub his back in the hedge. May Potten had also run out, and as Charlie called after her a word or two, she turned to him, touched her frock with her hand, laughed and ran on again.

Charlie Tulk’s interest in gravestones, or in the names written upon them, not being great enough to make him pause in the churchyard, he limped into the building itself, the door of which he found conveniently open. Once safely inside, and not omitting to look round to see if anyone else were there, Mr. Charlie Tulk’s religious instincts led him, like many another patron and upholder of the Church, to examine the poor-box, out of which he received, with much shaking and labour, the sum of twopence. Indeed, had he waited at home and helped Mr. Andrews for a like sum to carry the ladder, he could not have expended more vital energy than in getting from the Dodderdown poor-box those two copper coins. But Mr. Tulk was a sportsman, and it was the excitement of the quest for individual wealth that led him on, rather than a mere stagnated will to labour.

When he had finished with the poor-box, Mr. Tulk looked into the vacant pews. Although a prayer-book had not so much within it to lead him on as the poor-box, yet Charlie gave himself the trouble to put the one belonging to Mrs. Peach into his pocket.

After doing so, he paused to listen. There were sounds outside that caused him to go to the nearest window and peep out. He saw Mr. Andrews slowly coming up the church path, carrying a ladder. Mr. Tulk knew the ladder. It was Farmer Beggwell's that usually hung along the cart-shed wall that was near to the old granary.

Peter Andrews carried the ladder upon his shoulder, his body stooping under its weight. Coming to the church, he set it up to the roof where the chuting had leaked. Mr. Tulk smiled; he hoped that old Andrews would climb up the ladder at once, but in this hope he was disappointed.

Mr. Andrews took off his hat, rubbed his head and beard with his hands, shook himself like an old horse that had carried a heavy pack, and stood on a grassy grave-mound to look around him. He appeared to Mr. Tulk, who was very observant in these matters, to be looking round in order to see if anyone was coming.

"What the hell be 'e waiting for?" whispered Charlie to himself. "Parson Hayball bain't in sight. Why don't old Peter climb ladder, 'tis ready for 'im up against church, 'e don't want to shake poor-box, do 'e?"

Mr. Tulk thought this last notion unlikely, but having a cautious nature, and not by any means wishing to be found where he was at that moment by Mr. Andrews, he silently climbed the stone stairs, worn each one in the middle by Mr. Hayball's Sunday boots, into the pulpit, and stooped down, though somewhat cramped, so that no one who entered the church could see him.

Mr. Tulk's wisdom in thus retiring from sight was proved almost at once. He had hardly had time, indeed, to damn the side of the pulpit that hurt his lame leg, when old Andrews walked with his usual church gait, as though the soles of his boots had been recently oiled, up the aisle that he knew as well as his own barn floor, and sat down in his usual seat.

Though he was a farmer, old Peter Andrews really preferred the trade of a carpenter. At home, and about the yards and cow-houses, he loved no occupation better than to patch and tinker and to saw away at wood. No living being, be he who you will, could have been happier on a moist winter day than Peter, when he was employed in building a new shed or in pulling down an old one. His tastes in creation and destruction were God-like; he would build and pull down almost in the same breath.

One day in a merry mood, he found some long boards that he thought would be just of a length for his own coffin. Mark Only, coming in from the hills with his horses, found his father at work with saw and hammer, and asked him what he was making. Mark's look of extreme terror when he heard what was being done, stopped the old man’s labours; he had just been measuring an upright board beside himself.

“I shan’t like to think of they ugly long boards when I be at plough on hill,” Mark had said, moving nearer to his horses and farther from the boards. “They be wormy, do ’ee now take and burn they, for thee bain’t the undertaker.”

“No,” said Mr. Andrews with a shake of his head and a loving look at the boards, “I bain’t the undertaker.”

Whether or no Mr. Andrews felt that he was encroaching upon another’s privilege, or whether the thought came to him that he might be inviting death to come by making a coffin, we cannot say, but he cut the wood up into little pieces, and with the most suitable of these he made a drawer to go under the shelf in his church pew, in which to hide his large Bible away from the damp and the dust.

He now leaned forward in his pew and took out the Bible.

The interior of an empty church has often the appearance of a parlour cat with yellow eyes. It stays still, looking and waiting, and its front paws are the altar railings.

Peter Andrews looked suspiciously at the bearded apostles in a window. He was glad they were not looking at him.

In the front of the Dodderdown Church pulpit there were little holes pressed in the woodwork, being in the form of a cross and each about the size of a baby’s finger. These little holes were formed from a mystic flow of fancy that descended one rainy day upon the pulpit-maker. They represented the Victorian spirit of decoration at its highest.

Through these little holes Charlie Tulk peeped.

What he saw kept his eyes very wide open. Mr. Andrews held in his hand a long-shaped paper that he had taken from an inner pocket. He opened this paper and spread it out before him with a good-humoured smile. After reassuring himself that the paper contained the writings that he had paid the lawyer to put into it, and looking at the window to see what the disciples were doing, Mr. Andrews placed it carefully in the pew drawer and covered it up with the large Bible.

It was Charlie Tulk’s nature to be inquisitive. He was born so. As a child he would tie treacle-tins to the tails of little friendly dogs to see what they would do. He never missed seeing anything that was going on. If any stranger came into the Dodderdown lanes, Mr. Tulk was the first to spy him there. And when he saw Mr. Andrews place the paper in the drawer, he wished to know what it was. He wished he could read.

The Dodderdown pulpit cramped his lame leg and Tulk cursed it. He began too to curse his father, and not without reason. Although he had owned houses, Mr. Tulk the elder had not given his son any sort of education. Charlie had been lamer as a child than as a man, and had attended no school, with the sad result, that must be noted here, that Mr. Tulk could not even read. It is true that certain officials who are interested in the teaching of the young had tried to get Charlie into a home for cripples, but without avail. For Father Tulk said that he would never have a boy taken from his home who could make his mother cry so nicely. Though Charlie had used his wits in so many ways, to understand the meaning of written words was not one of them. His story-telling, however, that pleased so many people, was helped rather than hindered by his inability to read. For all he told came from his own experience, heightened by a nice descriptive colouring, or else from tales told by his friends and adapted to his own form of personal expression.

His not being able to read may have given him, too, a greater desire than most of us have for pure truth and exact concrete knowledge of things in general. Mr. Hayball noticed this in him and praised the tendency. For Tulk never saw anything without wishing to know what it really was.

He would ask Mr. Hayball what the grass was made of, and why stones were sometimes flint-stones and sometimes chalk-stones?

Mr. Hayball was always glad to answer Charlie’s questions; this generally led to a long discourse from the clergyman as to why cows run down instead of up a hill, and to other matters as hard for the lay mind to understand.

This being Mr. Tulk’s nature, it was natural that he should now wish to know what the paper was which Peter Andrews had hidden under the great Bible.

Peter was now standing up in his place and looking at the apostles; he evidently considered his beard to be as good as theirs, for he shook it.

“As a picture,” said Peter aloud, “ ’tain’t much to look at.”

After giving his opinion about the painted window, Peter Andrews walked, in the same oiled manner as he had come, out of the church.

As soon as he was gone, Charlie Tulk peeped over the pulpit and looked at the poor-box for advice. Though emptied of its two coins, the poor-box, that was cut from a talking-oak, looked as though it spoke. Charlie understood. He softly went to the drawer where the paper was hidden, and taking it from under the Bible concealed it in his own coat. This done, Mr. Tulk placed himself at a window again, with the intention, no doubt, of seeing what the grey clouds were doing. We will leave him for the moment in order to see nearer what is doing outside.

A churchyard scene was being enacted there as natural and proper as the grey clouds in the sky.

The Rector of Dodderdown, Mr. Hayball, and his bearded churchwarden, Mr. Andrews, were standing on either side of a tomb.

Upon the tomb there was a carved angel cut from some material that resembled marble, and representing, as the little holes in the pulpit did in a like manner, the sculptural taste of 1880. The angel was reposing upon the tomb in a graceful attitude with its wings partly folded. The wings formed a basin in which water was settled. Near to the tomb was the ladder that Peter Andrews had set up, and above the angel was the stopped-up chuting.

Around the pool of water that lay between the wings of the angel there were certain black lines drawn on the white stone, as though some Simple Simon had thought the pool of water a naval dockyard, and had marked with great care the highest reach of the spring tides.

Peter Andrews stroked his beard and looked at the angel with pity. In its early youth it had lost most of its nose. Mr. Andrews had caught and beaten the boy who had done the deed, but he could never see the noseless angel without feeling sorry for it.

Mr. Hayball was looking into the angel’s wings where the water had lodged. He took a little notched stick from his pocket and measured its depth.

“Four inches,” he said mournfully, “and perhaps one inch more, but it’s all come down from the chuting.”

Mr. Hayball had come into the churchyard that morning to have a word with Peter Andrews, and also to ease his feelings, which were rather ruffled, by looking at the graves.

Although unmarried, Mr. Hayball had his trouble, and this trouble was Mrs. Tite, his housekeeper. It was this lady’s custom to give notice whenever she felt thirsty. This often happened, and then the clergyman would beg her to stay on, and Mrs. Tite would agree on condition that she might taste a little gin now and again for the sake of her headaches. Now and again, too, though not more often than once a quarter, Mrs. Tite desired to reform her nature and become a tidy woman. This fit for tidiness had just come upon her; she had entered Mr. Hayball's study when he chanced to be out of it, and laid her hands upon certain charts and diagrams that related to the rainfall of Tibet, and a long written discourse about the length of time a monkey's bones will lie in soft mud before they change into the likeness of a man's. With all these careful studies Mrs. Tite plied the fire.

This onslaught against the rainfalls and a new theory about bones was closely followed by an attack upon certain little stones. Now these little stones, contrary to the expert opinion of the curator of the Stonebridge museum, Mr. Hayball considered to be worked flints, hammered and chipped into many fanciful shapes by gentlemen who had lived about the time of the Great Flood. Feeling convinced that one unlucky day Mrs. Tite would spring-clean them away, Mr. Hayball had taken pains to hide them.

For this purpose he had chosen a place where much dust had collected, reasoning wisely that his housekeeper could not for many years have touched that part of the floor with a broom. This hiding-place was under his own bed. But Mr. Hayball was unlucky, for the stones were discovered. They were found in the following manner.

Mrs. Tite had always found the journey upstairs a tedious one, and being a sensible woman, she wished to help herself and make her work easy. With a bottle at the top waiting for her, she knew she would climb the quicker. She could put her lips to it when she gained the bedroom and all would be well. After burning her master's papers in the large study fireplace, Mrs. Tite had carried the bottle upstairs, and in putting it under the bed she felt the stones.

Mr. Hayball, being a kind gentleman, liked to teach all who were near him about the odd doings of nature. He had more than once informed Mrs. Tite that, after a certain period of time, loose soil becomes hard rock. Mrs. Tite knew very well that, for a long time, there had been dust under her master's bed, because she had swept it there herself. And now she was convinced, giving due credence to Mr. Hayball's lectures, that the dust had become in the course of many weeks hard flint-stones. Mrs. Tite did not like this sort of conversion, she feared for her drink. If dust changed to stone, the gin in her bottle, if nature used ever so little of its natural cunning, might become salt water. To allow no time for this change to happen, Mrs. Tite finished the gin.

After doing so, an excess of zeal for cleanliness overcame her, and she gathered up the flint-stones and carried them out into the garden in her apron and threw them into a ditch, saying as she did so, “ ’Twill be mud to-morrow.”

With these losses still fresh in his mind, Mr. Hayball went on speaking to Peter, whom he always found a ready listener.

“I have made of late a rather strange discovery,” he said, still looking sadly at the angel. “At least I think I have, though I am still making experiments. I have found out that certain parts of my garden attract the raindrops more than other parts. For instance, I am convinced that in our back-yard, near to the pigsty, the rain never falls as it should do.”

“ ’Twas a pretty angel once,” said old Peter.

“I believe,” said Mr. Hayball, taking no notice of this interruption, “that Mrs. Tite is a woman who understands. She has her faults, but she has understanding. She has told me for a good many years that the rain-gauge upon our lawn, from which I take the measurements that I send to the *Southern Mail* each month, attracts the largest drops to it. She even goes so far as to say that the rain-gauge, being where it is, brings the rain. Every morning after breakfast she used to say to me, in her usual manner, ‘Thik thing out on grass that do drink rainwater be full again, though back-yard be as dry as bare bones.’ That remark so often repeated by Mrs. Tite made me think, and a few days ago I went so far as to move the gauge into the back-yard near to the pigsty. By so doing I think I have made an important discovery. It is, I believe, possible that white pigs in a sty may have a drying effect upon the atmosphere. . . . But to make more sure about it,” remarked Mr. Hayball reflectively, “I came to the angel for help.”

“And did poor angel that do want a nose help ’ee?” inquired Peter.

“No,” replied Mr. Hayball ruefully, “I fear he didn’t. Although I have lost my foot-rule, I measured the water carefully that collected between the angel’s wings. In three days I noted that fourteen inches of rain had fallen. I reported this to the paper, but the editor replied ‘that he feared some little mistake might have been made, the fall being rather heavy for this district.’ I went to the angel in a storm of rain and I found——”

“That holy angel do drink church roof water.”

“Yes, Peter,” said Mr. Hayball.

While the Rector of Dodderdown had been speaking, Mr. Andrews had chanced to look towards the village. He now turned to Mr. Hayball.

“You be burning,” he said quietly.

For a moment Mr. Hayball fancied that he was become a little boy again, and was squeezing between his mother’s grand piano and an arm-chair in order to get as near as possible to the spot where a thimble was hidden. But this remembrance flitting by like a ghost, Mr. Hayball looked at his clothes, but could perceive no sign of fire.

“ ’Tis thee’s large chimney be a-burning,” said Mr. Andrews.

Mr. Hayball turned hastily; he walked down the churchyard path. He saw clouds of black smoke coming from the chimney that he knew to be that of his study.

“Mrs. Tite is tidying again,” he called out, beginning to run.

Andrews watched the smoke for a few moments until it lessened considerably, and then turned and looked up at the chuting. He moved the ladder, fixing it more firmly against the angel’s head, and began to climb.

Mr. Andrews was stout and weighty, but the thought of the Rectory chimney being on fire made him cheerful, so he climbed quickly. His beard blew merrily.

He had almost gained the top when an event happened that Peter did not expect. A round of the ladder gave way, his feet slipped to the next, but his falling weight broke that one too. He clutched at the chuting to support himself, and that gave. In a moment he was down. He struck the stone angel with his head, rolled on to the grass and lay very still.

From the broken chuting drops were falling like tears. The Shelton Church clock, the village that lies nearest to Dodderdown, struck one. A child laughed in the village, and a ray of sunshine that broke for a moment from the grey gloom above painted the hill-side yellow.

CHAPTER
VIII

At Dodderdown the middle of the day is usually a time of quiet. Carts have a tendency to stop there, and people who are out of doors to pause in what they are doing and listen. During this time the rooks rest, or fly slowly and consider the weather, most of them being perched in a thoughtful manner upon the trees, where they nod at any passer-by who carries no gun.

The other wiseacres, who appear more than anything else to find inspiration at this midday time, are the moles who move the grass and peep out at the life above, regarding it, and with reason, as a lamentable failure. The red and white cows take this time, as the most pleasant in the whole day, for chewing. It may be that it is then that the cows pray for the advent of their Saviour, Who will one day cover all the lands with eternal spring, and carpet the New Jerusalem with four-leaf clover.

The coloured maps, that are hung up on the otherwise bare school walls, begin to think of other things now than rude children. For the forms are empty, and there are no round and inquisitive eyes to wonder what the maps are put there for, or to fancy that the being who painted them had one favourite colour, and that colour red.

There was one person in Dodderdown, however, who had taken more than a usual interest in midday events. This was Mr. Tulk, who had spent so long a time in looking out of the church window. When Peter Andrews fell from the ladder, Tulk left the church as though nothing had happened. But his leg appeared lamer than usual as he went through the village. He wanted to speak to some one, and he spoke to Mrs. Peach, who was standing at her door as he went by.

“You bain’t wanting nothing, be you?” inquired Mrs. Peach.

Mr. Tulk had forgotten to take his dinner with him, and so he asked for a little bread and cheese.

“ ’Tis Mike’s dinner,” said Mrs. Peach, giving him some. “But ’e be out.”

Mr. Tulk limped to the village cross. He seated himself and ate Mike’s dinner very slowly, thinking of funerals.

The quiet of midday being over, the afternoon came into the kitchen at the Dodderdown Rectory in the form of a ponderous burden. It forced upon Mrs. Tite's notice that there existed—so wonderful is creation—certain dirty plates that she had herself conveyed from the dining-room table into the kitchen.

By the law of contraries, Mrs. Tite possessed a clean mind, and dirty plates were as inconvenient to her as fleas to a cat, so that when she raised herself from the comfortable kitchen chair in which she had enjoyed a sound sleep, instead of looking on to the table where the plates were, she looked out of the window.

Mrs. Tite was used to seeing the tree there that broke the monotony of the hill-line. Near to the tree there were other objects that Mrs. Tite now gazed at. During her sleep she had dreamed of the wonders of nature as instanced by her master's teaching and her own observation. Mrs. Tite looked at the hills and sleepily nodded her head.

" 'Tis most like," she said aloud, "that they low clouds above 'ave 'ardened into wood blocks."

Mrs. Tite's head slowly reclined again.

The wood blocks were Mark's horses. His ploughing was finished for that day. Mark was standing beside Nellie Holland and they were both looking down at the village. Nellie had not spoken for a moment or two, she appeared to be interested in something.

"What be looking at?" inquired Mark.

"There be people walking in churchyard," said Nellie, "but I don't mind no talk of a funeral." Nellie became thoughtful, she was wondering what could be going on.

"They bain't putting we under dirt, and that I do know," laughed Mark.

"Don't be so silly, Mark," Nellie said. "Some one might have died, for I can see people moving about just as if there is a funeral going on." Nellie's excitement was increasing. "I believe that's Mr. Hayball standing up, and there's a tall man and a little one, and dots like children running."

Two magpies flew by screeching.

"How those birds frightened I," said Nellie. "They don't bring no good luck, they birds don't; something must be happening down in village. They have brought a cart now to the church gate, and they're moving down to it, slow, as though they carried something."

“ ’Tis the angel that bain’t got no nose that they be carrying,” Mark said with a nervous laugh. “They be going to mend thik poor angel.”

“Why, you can’t even see the church,” exclaimed Nellie, “so how can you tell what they be carrying?”

“Oh, church be plain enough to I,” called out Mark, “and so be flagstaff wi’ a cock-sparrow perched on en.”

“Don’t talk so foolish, Mark Only; you know you can’t see nothing. But look, what be that! Yes ’tis—’tis they boys running over field to we. ’Tis Sam and Tom. What be they coming to we for? Something has happened in village now they be coming.”

Nellie was flushed and extremely happy. Her excitement caught Mark; he took hold of her and kissed her.

“Oh, they boys be always coming or else going,” he said. “And if we do lie down on bank they won’t see what we be doing.”

“Don’t, Mark,” said Nellie. “They boys will see.”

Mark let her go, and leading the horses into the lane he turned to close the gate. He appeared uneasy and his hands shook as he tried to find the round of wire that fastened the gate. His coat caught in some loose wire, and he tore a new rent. When the gate was fastened he stooped and felt about on the grassy bank with his large hands.

“ ’Tis my cigarette-holder that be lost,” he called out.

Nellie was watching for the boys and did not hear him.

“Maiden don’t listen to what I do say,” he muttered, “she don’t care what I be doing. I did lose holder because her couldn’t bide quiet. Maybe ’tis broke. When I be alone I don’t lose nothing, and now holder be gone. But what be they boys a-coming for?”

Mark went back to the gate; he opened it again and shuffled to where the plough was left. He took hold of the handles, heaved the plough up and moved it a little to one side. He stood for awhile, holding the handles as though he were loath to let them go. He seemed to wish that the horses were there to drag him along with the plough farther into the safety of the wide field. When at last he did let the plough go and closed the gate again, he felt along the railings for a few steps until he came to a rotten post. This he shook. He felt for the next; that proved to be a stronger one. He began speaking in a low tone, as though to the post.

“Something be gone wrong at Dodderdown,” he said. “They folk in churchyard, what were they a-doing? ’Tis quiet times that we’ve been having, but quiet times bain’t for always. ’Twere likely I did think once that Nellie would leave I and make up to James. But though that bain’t happened, something be.”

Mark listened. There was the sound of panting and the pattering of feet coming up the steep lane.

“ ’Tis they boys that be coming,” said Mark shakily, “ ’tis only they simple boys, ’tisn’t nothing more than they boys. ’Tis Sam and Tom, an’ there bain’t nor dogs wi’ ’em. ’Tis a loud noise that they boys do make, a footed noise. There bain’t nor dogs wi’ ’em, I do hope. But all ’same, they wicked hunting dogs be still alive in village. They do patter and follow when there be folk to die. Hill be the place for I, hill be safe from they dogs, ’tis only they flying birds that do come.”

Mark threw back his head and laughed. The sweet scent of the mild winter’s wind brought back to him former hours.

“Cuckoo time and they cowslips used to be,” he called out. “Cowslip time when I were little, and when I did look out for Nell in meadow grounds.” He stooped again and muttered: “They boys needn’t ’ave hurried; if a cow be bad I be a-coming; I wouldn’t go no faster for they boys’ hurrying.”

The boys met Nellie and danced around her, waving their hands as though they were telling her exciting news.

All three came back to Mark, the boys still dancing and waving their hands and clapping them.

“Wold man be dead,” they called out; “wold man be dead, fallen on top of angel; ’e be dead.”

Sam took Tom’s hand and they danced up and down the lane, kicking up their legs higher than ever.

Nellie, who was nearly as excited, stood and looked at Mark, hoping that he would perform his part in the play by bursting into tears.

Mark Only watched the boys. Nellie fancied that he could not understand what the boys were calling out. So she touched his arm and said quietly, “Something has happened to father, Mark.”

Sam heard her speaking.

“Dead,” he called out, climbing up the bank and rolling down again upon Tom, who was beginning to climb it too.

“Dead,” called out Tom from the ditch. “ ’E don’t move or say nothing.”

“Tom do tell truth,” shouted Sam, “for granfer were turned over same as wold red cow by Uncle James.”

Sam began dancing again.

“Same as Farmer Beggwell’s boar pig that were stuck yesterday,” he called out. “ ’E were rolled over like boar pig on killing-board and sicked blood.”

“Grass be red,” shouted Tom, crawling out of the ditch and jumping about, “and poor angel’s wing be broke.”

Sam ran up against Mark and stopped dancing. He appeared to have other matter to speak of that required a more serious telling.

“Charlie Tulk be sitting beside cross on green and there bain’t no one speaking to ’im. ’e did call to we as we were running, and ’e did say, ‘What be all thik running and going up at the church?’ ’e did say. ‘ ’Tis granfer,’ I did tell Charlie, ‘who’s been and cut ’isself.’ ”

Tom lay on the bank and watched his uncle. The boys both expected some kind of performance to begin from him. They could not tell exactly what it would be, but they waited and looked as children do at the chief mourners at a funeral.

Mark moved to where the horses were feeding; he began to fumble with Ben’s collar; at last he turned it round as though he meant to take it off.

Sam called Tom’s attention to this new method of showing sorrow. To them it appeared to be something more entertaining than tears.

“Tom,” said Sam excitedly, “do ’ee see what Uncle Mark be doing? Blessed if ’e don’t think road be stable, for ’e be taking Ben’s collar off.”

Tom went near to Mark.

“You be out on hill,” he shouted. “You bain’t in no horse-box, you be up on Dodderdown hill.”

Mark grumbled out something in reply and put the collar straight again.

“Mind they horses,” he called out to the boys, and began to walk down the hill. Nellie followed a little behind him.

“I do hear the same noise,” Mark said, addressing the empty road in front of him. “An’ ’tis a noise that I don’t like neither; ’tis an ugly noise.”

“What be it?” asked Nellie, coming up with him. “What be it that you do hear?” Nellie asked her question in no very interested manner; she fancied vaguely that Mark might have heard a rabbit rustle the hedge. Her mind was full of so much matter at the moment, matter of so much consequence to her.

There was the black that took the first place and needed so much consideration. Her mother had died some months ago in a tiny cottage at Shelton, but Nellie still wore her black because she liked to hear people say, “ ’Tis her mother that be dead.”

Even a mourner’s clothes wear out, and the shabbiness of Nellie’s troubled her rather. But here came this new event, unexpectedly, and threw with a sudden gesture black upon her once more, for she must walk with Mark on the day. All was new wonder before her, the new black now, and then, later, her wedding frock.

Already she fancied herself going with the carrier to the town. She must dress up for that too. She would wear her princess petticoat in case the motor broke down and they were all killed, and she would be reported at the inquest as the young lady with the nice lace underclothes. Her heart had beat as fast as the boys’ legs had skipped; she hurried already from shop window to shop window, getting Peter Andrews’ funeral and her own wedding into a sad muddle. At Swift’s drapery stores she chose a cream satin frock, as pretty as could be. In the same shop she was trying on black gloves. Moor’s was the best for black dresses, and she went to Moor’s. There were also nice hats there for weddings, and the young ladies who serve are more polite at Moor’s. She saw black shoes and white shoes side by side at Mr. Johnson’s, but she must go back to Swift’s for the white stockings and her veil, and to Moor’s for the black stockings and her crape.

Mark still stood in the lane. “What had he heard?” Nellie wondered impatiently; “some stupid rabbit,” she expected.

The two boys had climbed upon the horses’ backs and were letting them feed, in order that the journey home might last the longer. Now and again they kicked their heels into the horses’ sides, though Ben and Polly paid no heed whatever to this polite encouragement to go on.

Mark had not replied to Nellie until they came to the bottom of the hill, and then he stopped again.

“Nellie,” said Mark, looking at her and speaking the words very low, “do ’ee know, Nell, what I do hear sometimes?”

“Oh, I do know,” answered Nellie, “ ’tis they nasty owls you do hear; they do come out from church tower to fly about when people die.”

“No,” said Mark, walking on as though Nellie were not there, “ ‘tisn’t they night owls, ’tain’t nothing like they owls, ’tis a noise like dogs’ feet a-pattering. Noise do come silent at first, it do come soft. When all be quiet I do listen and do hear. Soft they do come, as though they be treading on moss-ground. They dogs do come like thunder that do sound first far off, and ’tis best to turn when we do hear they. I be afeard of they dogs.” He stopped and looked round.

“Bring on they horses,” he shouted back to the boys.

He went on.

Nellie began to call up remembrances tending to help her interest in the present event.

“They don’t never keep a person long who dies sudden,” she remarked; “only when they’ve pined away, they be kept. Do ’ee mind Uncle Bert who fell out of a cart and were killed? Though no one had anything ready they buried poor uncle in two days. They may have it on Thursday. Mark and I should come first, for Mark be the eldest son. But there’s Mrs. Andrews, she and James will walk first, I do expect. Do ’ee think the old man have left you any money, Mark?”

Mark peered about around him, as though he more than half expected to see the money his father had left him lying in the road.

“Father did always say ’e would mind I,” Mark said. He turned and shouted again to the boys to bring on the horses.

When they reached the green, Nellie hurried away. There was no one by the cross; the hoof-marks that the cows had trodden in the soft grass were still filled with water. There were even two daisies to be seen; a blackbird was singing.

“I have to go now,” Nellie had said; “there is the churn to scald out and the milk to serve, and Mrs. Beggwell will be sure to want to hear all the news.”

Nellie nearly ran. Stepping into a puddle, because she had looked back at Mark, she laughed. The puddle had not heard of the death any more than the daisies had heard of it.

Mark watched Nellie. She was carried away by natural crude excitement. The beasts full of eyes ran with her, she was fanned with the gust of their sixfold wings. She felt herself a gamester in the acts of God.

Nellie Holland ran on; the wonder of life and death panted in her quick heart-beats. She longed to tell all her news to Mrs. Beggwell. She hoped no one else had said much. He had looked funny, the boys said, and there was the red grass and the staring eyes. Every simple thing was hallowed by the event, everything became a story interesting to the observers. Sam had mentioned a rook upon the elm-tree and a black cat on a grave. They meant something and would have to be told about. All Dodderdown was changed, all things spoke and told tales, all things were made alive by death.

Nellie ran on.

The sight of the stable door quieted Mark's fears, for no dogs' feet ever pattered in there. In a leisurely fashion he unharnessed the horses and gave them their feed. When he had finished rubbing them down he stumbled out of the stable and entered the back door of the farm. In the dairy, James Andrews was scouring a milk bucket.

"Field be near ploughed," Mark called out to him.

"Then you'd best go to cold hill next," James called back, "for thik be for barley."

For some while now James had planned and arranged matters, telling his elder brother what to do as though Mark were a mere workman. Like many another old man, Peter Andrews had been content to fancy that, by merely pottering about in a bluff happy manner, he had been both doing and arranging all the work of the farm. But in truth he was only the figurehead of the ship, painted and carved in rude ponderous form, with flowing beard and a hammer in his hand. He was ever in front and splashed with the wet spray. He would tread the mud of the road in a determined stride, swinging his great arms like the sails of a windmill, to the immediate peril of any little child who happened to be near. He would set out with his hammer, like a giant who scents the battle from afar, to nail up a small tile or a loose board, and his tail-coat and beard would playfully blow as he worked, as though they at least were on holiday. Upon Dodderdown Church roof there is still to be seen a stone that Andrews set crookedly, though it was once straight. Peter was a figure that all countrymen could admire—good rest be to him!

When Mark Only moved in his usual hesitating fashion into the kitchen, he found his sisters, Susan Peach and Kate Tolly, sitting upon the settle near to one another, while Mrs. Andrews was in her usual place with the waistcoat upon her knees. She was talking to it.

“Granfer’s ’tis, or else father’s, I don’t mind which, but ’tis a good waistcoat for a cold day. ’e will wear en when they little pigs come to be fat. I must run in and dress; where be they clean clothes that I put ready on bed, boys be bad ones these days! My hair be crimped for market-going. Hark, I do hear something. Father be loading of they pigs. I must mind to put on my ring. Peter did meet I fair-day and did give thik ring. ’Tis a bold boy Peter be to have ’is way wi’ a maid. Waistcoat won’t be ready before they pigs be got into cart.”

Susan Peach moved when Mark came in; she moved her whole body with a sort of jerk, as though she had only that moment come to herself and remembered where she was. She began to cry in forced, heavy sobs.

“Mark be come, Mother,” she said, her words and sobs coming together. “Mark be come, ’e couldn’t come before to save poor father who were lying wi’ a blooded face in churchyard. Here be we doing it all, and ’e out a-laughing wi’ Nell Holland on hill. We’ve both been up in bedroom, bain’t we Kate, wi’ father bursting out blood to ceiling.”

Kate Tolly looked at her sister and nodded.

“We didn’t find nothing,” Kate said.

Susan’s sobs died down to a mere snuffle.

“Father did tell James ’e were going to put papers in Church Bible. And whilst they men were carrying ’e down home wi’ Mr. Hayball coming after and wringing ’is hands, James did look for en. James don’t want to hurt no one.”

“Farm stock be mother’s,” said Susan, “if nothing bain’t found.”

“ ’Tain’t much for we then,” Kate remarked crossly. “Now if we’d married husbands that were something else than talking men, they’d ’ave helped we.”

“ ’Tisn’t much they’d ’ave done, for they be but lazy men,” Susan sobbed.

Kate Tolly went to her mother. She took hold of her shoulders and shook her.

“Farm be yours now, Mother,” she called out into her ear, “for nothing be found.”

Mrs. Andrews turned the waistcoat over on her lap and found the knitting-needle, and reached out for a piece of wool. She could find none; Peter had always prepared her pieces of wool, but Peter was upstairs.

The shaking Kate had given her had failed this time to bring the consciousness of things present back to her, the worn garment upon her knees was telling its tales again.

“Some one be a-knocking,” she said; “bain’t father, be it? ’is waistcoat bain’t finished quite, though I be trying well wi’ en for a little maid. There be some one a-knocking, an’ I be frightened. There be two feet with hobbed boots that do try to open door of their own selves. They two feet be a-talking to shut door.” Mrs. Andrews patted her feet upon the floor. “Door be open now, door be open. Father’s feet be come in first.” She took up the waistcoat again and crooned over it as though it were a baby.

Susan shouted at her.

“Talk sense, Mother, can’t ’ee, there bain’t no one dead but our father; ’tis ’is feet that you be telling of. Here be Mark stuck up to wall holding dresser from falling, Mark bain’t dead.”

“Mark,” said Mrs. Andrews, “yes, I do mind Mark, ’e did hurt I—cruel, when ’e were born, an’ doctor did call out at I for screaming. ‘Try again,’ ’e did say, ’an’ bide quiet.’ No, there bain’t nothing in font save a little drop of barrel water.”

Mark Andrews came near to his mother, he put his hands upon her shoulder and laughed.

“Mother be well to-day,” he said. “She do talk loud.” He laughed again.

“Mark be a fine one,” said Kate Tolly to her sister Susan. “ ’E be a fine one to laugh out loud when ’is poor father be lying dead as a drowned cat upstairs.”

Mark leaned over his mother and began rubbing her head with his hands. This pleased her and reminded her of something.

“Be thik barrel tapped ready, Peter?” she asked, looking into the fire as though some one was sitting upon the hot coals. “For Uncle William and Aunt Jane do like a drop of drink to their supper. I be married to-day; ’tis all real, bain’t it, Peter? I do hope young Mr. Hayball never noticed nothing! ’Tis hard to kneel pretty up at altar like I be got, and they young men do look at a maid. ’Tis they tight stays that be the trouble. ’Twill be next month I do expect. An’ I did always say we’d go down dark lane once too often.”

“Hear what she do say,” Mark shouted. “Mother were the maid for thik merry game; she do know more than Charlie Tulk, mother do.”

“Poor father do lie upstairs dead on’s bed in darkness,” Susan sobbed, slowly swaying from side to side, “and down here mother be a-talking and Mark be laughing, and no one don’t know who furniture do belong to.”

Kate Tolly began to look with a new interest at a vase of flowers that was upon the table. “ ’Tisn’t much that I’ve got at home,” she said sharply, “and when mother ’ave stopped talking and do die, that be mine.”

Susan looked up. “ ’Tis a flower-vase that father did bring home one day from Shelton Fair, and ’e did say, when ’e’d tied up cow ’e’d bought, ‘Vase be Susan’s when I do go.’ ”

“I’ll ask James whose vase be when ’e do come,” Kate said darkly, “for James be the one to ask now there bain’t no paper to be found. Mother did always say to lawyer that James were the eldest.”

The clock ticked; the figure of Mark standing beside his mother appeared fixed. The silence of the room was waiting. James had let some one in by the back door; a bucket clattered; there were steps moving in the room above.

“What be it?” inquired Kate.

Susan nodded to the ceiling. A dark patch had come there that slowly grew larger. There was something soaking through from above.

“I bain’t going upstairs no more,” said Susan. “ ’E upstairs bain’t nice. I did look all round room for paper when ’e were first carried in, ’is beard were muddy. There bain’t no paper to be found. What be the use of going upstairs no more.”

“What be Mark looking at?”

Mark was staring up at the ceiling at the stain that grew larger.

“You be just James’ man now, Mark Only, for no paper be found, ’tisn’t for you to take no interest in furniture. Dresser and clock be mine, for old man did say so.”

“You best ask James about that,” said Kate sneeringly, “for all be his to do what ’e be minded wi’.”

Mark shook himself as though he had suddenly awakened from a long sleep.

“Paper be somewhere, paper be somewhere. Father did carry paper about wi’ ’im, ’e did lay en down to take up ’is hammer.”

Mark moved about the room, feeling everywhere with his hands as though he played blindman’s buff.

“Mark Only ’ave lost ’isself,” whispered Kate Tolly.

“What be Mark looking for?” inquired Susan with a heavy sob.

Mark moved slowly, he reached here and there, and at last overturned the vase of flowers. The vase fell upon the floor with a loud crash. Mrs. Andrews started and looked round.

“There won’t be nothing left for we when Mark ’ave finished wi’ the home,” said Kate crossly. “ ’Tisn’t stable ’e be in, and we bain’t horses.”

“What be it you do want?” asked Susan, speaking a little more kindly than her sister.

“ ’Tis somewhere,” said Mark, “they maidens can’t ’ave burnt thik paper; father did always say he would mind I when he came to die.”

“ ’E’s looking for father’s will,” Kate explained in a superior tone to show the company that she at least knew the right word to use.

Mrs. Andrews was watching her son.

“ ’Tis brother Joe,” she said in a frightened whisper, “and ’e be out looking again; ’tisn’t done yet then, and yet I dreamed ’twere done. No, no, don’t ’ee take en. ’Tis hung behind door, rope be. I know you did say that when father beat ’ee next ’twould be a hanging. ’Tis soon Joe will come back wi’ rope round ’is neck.”

“Do be quiet, Mother,” said Kate, “you do make my head ache wi’ your lies.”

Mark stopped wandering and feeling the things, he leaned against the dresser and pressed his hands to his head as though he were trying to hide himself from the world. Soon his hands dropped wearily to his side.

“Mother were always for James,” he said gloomily. “James be master here, an’ I bain’t nothing, though father did say ’e would mind I when ’e died. Paper bain’t stolen, be it?” he asked suddenly, looking towards Susan.

“How am I to know,” Susan said, “where paper be? Bain’t you looking for en? An’ ’tis best ’ee go upstairs and ask ’e that do bide there where paper be.”

“No, no,” Kate Tolly remarked, smiling at her sister. “Mark Only won’t never go upstairs now, ’e don’t like death.”

Mark trembled. Kate’s last word had come upon him unexpectedly. He had kept the word behind him till that moment, but now he knew that he both touched and smelt it. Mark wanted to hide amongst the trees in the garden. The trees were his stable.

He felt his way out of the room. James was in the dairy, counting over some dirty pence that a child had given him for milk. Mark went near to his brother.

“Who be that a-moving,” he asked in a low tone, “upstairs in bedroom?”

James pushed the money away and looked into Mark’s face; he waited a moment before he answered, and then he said slowly, “ ’Tis Potten’s ’oman that do wash the dead folk, and she be cleaning the dirt off ’im.”

Mark breathed shakily; an unpleasant stuffy smell came to him; the word spoken by Susan in the parlour kept very close. Mark took up his lantern; he lit it with shaky hands. Death had visited the upper room and his one idea now was to get to the stable. There was his safety. In that soft place there was so much to quiet, to dull his fears. A deep religious sense, known to all simple people, dwelt where the beasts are cared for: a sense of safety that is always associated with straw and trodden dung and stable spiders. Mark had spent so much of his time there, more time indeed than he had ever spent in ploughing upon the hills. He used to be there in the early morning, in the late afternoon, and again in the evening.

Mark was a good host in his retirement; he never put rules upon his visitors as to how they should behave or as to what they should say in his presence. He regarded no one but the horses, and only once had he been known to make any protest as to what was being said or done there.

He was now flying away from a word—from “death.” The word touched him strangely, he knew its smell. To his sisters, to Nellie Holland, to James, and no doubt to Mr. Charles Tulk, the word was necessary enough, and not so very dreadful. It meant at least a good talking time with a passer-by in the road. And there might be, if one was lucky enough to be a relation, a funeral supper where many an interesting report would be given as to how the one, who had been moved out of his doors, had looked at the last, and how well or ill he had taken the final thorny fence. A good useful household word, this one, for the Dodderdown valley. A word to be placed ready with the baker’s bill, unpaid perhaps, in the biscuit-tin with the girl in pink painted upon the lid. And something in it too to ease one’s mind on a winter’s morning when the bell tolls for another, though touched with a little jealousy, maybe, when a married man, who has spoken to a girl now and again, hears that another’s wife is dead.

Without death, how would Dodderdown prosper? But sadly, we fear. Only now and again some one would turn and see this named thing—with the light of a sick imagination—walking under the dark trees. Mark Andrews had seen it there, and its sound and smell followed him always. Those dogs’ feet pattered behind, it was hard to forget them. On the hills he could perhaps, for the plough was companionable and friendly and the birds sang. There was safety in those birds, safety for one whose eyes were not too good at seeing. The autumn thronging of the rooks drove other black wings away, and when a flight of starlings turned, obeying some unknown law of movement, and flew close above Mark, he would forget the pattering of those rude dogs.

But hidden in the tin where the pink girl is painted, next to the baker’s bill, there would still be that word to mind.

CHAPTER
IX

Mark Only was wont to wander from farm kitchen to stable, from the stable to the Dodderdown hills, and from the hills to the stable again as one who dreams dreams in the daytime, but whose dreams are sometimes disturbed by ominous sounds.

When he walked, his gait was uncertain, as though he expected to meet heaps of mud moving towards him that he would be likely to fall into.

Once, as a child, he had been allowed to drive a blind horse to the station to bring back some coal. When he started to come home, he called to the horse from behind the cart to go on, without going to its head to lead it. The horse walked straight into the station wall.

This was a queer thing to happen and Mark was frightened. To be blind was one thing, but to walk into the station wall was another. The horse had done something very odd indeed.

As Mark drove home that day, he wondered why the horse, though she was blind, had not known that the wall was there. A curious thought crept then into the boy's mind—that there might be a station wall somewhere that he could not see.

Mark now entered the stable with the idea fixed in his mind that his father might have hidden his will in the loft. A day or two before he died Peter Andrews had nailed up the hay-rack. While he was doing so, he noticed that a board in the loft was broken. In order to mend it, he climbed up into the loft with his hammer and nails, and remained there happy and busy for the whole afternoon. When Mark was come in with the horses, he heard his father laughing and hammering above in a merry manner, and then calling out, as though he had been thinking over the matter for some while, "Thik paper be always poking into I from breast pocket. Lawyer's paper do want I to hide en. 'Tis afraid of maidens that do help mother paper be, for Kate an' Susan do always light fire wi' anything."

A great laugh shook the loft, so that Mark expected every moment his father to fall through the very board that he had been mending.

In Mark's stable there was now the usual company.

Mr. Peach and Mr. Tolly, whose cottages were opposite one another in the main street of Dodderdown, had met as was natural on such an eventful day, to discuss affairs in the middle of the road. Both were waiting to escort their wives to the farm-house where the dead man lay.

“They women,” remarked Mr. Tolly, “bain’t ready yet, so there be time for we to look at our pig.”

Sam Tolly opened his garden gate in a polite manner and followed his friend to the pigsty. The pig was busy with the stalk of a cabbage. It had eaten all the greens and had now only the stalk left. It bit the stalk angrily as though it fancied it was being cheated.

“Pig be still living,” said Mr. Tolly in the reserved tone of a proud owner of property.

“Yes, so I do suppose,” said Mr. Peach a little jealously. “An’ so be we.”

“ ’Tis a wonder,” said Sam Tolly thoughtfully, “that we be living, when we do mind they women that we’ve a-married.”

“ ’Tis a wicked danger for poor folk,” said Mike Peach, leaning over the sty and trying to reach the pig with his hands, “that they wedding rings be sold so dirt cheap; now if I had me way”—Mr. Peach fell forward into the sty—“I’d tax all they blamed rings.”

“Be there any worldly land,” inquired Mr. Tolly as he helped his friend up, “where there bain’t no women?”

“You best be coming,” came a sharp call from the road.

“ ’Tis they,” said Mr. Tolly dejectedly.

With a dead man upstairs, and all the village watching, Susan Peach did not think it proper to go this time to the back door of the farm-house. So she tried the front, through which her father had been carried that same afternoon. She found the door locked. Kate Tolly stamped and wondered if Mrs. Magg could see. She turned to her husband.

“ ’Tis your fault,” she said, “that James did lock door, and drive we, father’s own daughters, to go round by back way; no, thee best come in wi’ we and not go sidling off to stinking stable.” Although neither Mr. Tolly nor Mike Peach had ever been known to contradict their wives in open word warfare, they were wont to do so by the peaceful action of their legs.

As they moved away Mr. Tolly carried a last word from his wife about his buttons, quick in his ears, and was in consequence all the more anxious to remove himself as quickly as possible from the society of the ladies.

Sitting upon the corn-bin in the dark before Mark came in, the two friends listened contentedly to the munching of the horses and a rustling in the straw.

"You be boys and not rats, bain't 'ee?" Mr. Peach inquired as the rustling grew more pronounced.

" 'Tis boys I do think," said Sam Tolly, "or else pigs be got in."

"Stable be a poor resting-place," remarked Mike Peach, nodding his head sagely, "when Mark Only be gone out of en."

"Stable be Mark's," said Mr. Tolly, in confirmation of his friend's kindly sentiment.

" 'Ave 'ee ever seen a dead man?" asked Tolly suddenly, though in a true earthy tone.

"I've seen the drowned boot of woon," replied Peach. " 'Twas when I went down to river for a bundle of they soaked spars, an' the foot of poor Tom were sticking up out of water. ' 'Tisn't for Mike Peach to disturb God's doings,' I did say, so I did let they spars bide."

"You don't thinkie," inquired Tolly, "that God 'Isself did pitch poor silly Tom into thik river, for if 'e be so playful 'tis most like 'e did take and throw wold Peter off ladder."

" 'Tis when I be up thatching farmer's high barn that I do think most of wold God's manners," said Mr. Peach, "an' I do think that if 'e were minded to cast I down, 'e'd a-do it wi' a finger-push. But I do mind when ladder be shaky that woon day when I did fall from barley stack, that God did move a girt stone from under en, so I fell on soft straw instead of on thik stone."

" 'Twas a pity," said Mr. Tolly, whose mind turned naturally to the churchyard, "that thik Potten of Norbury and 'is brother our sexton did start on words over east and west in Church service. 'Twould 'ave worried poor Tom to 'ave heard they. I do mind when coffin were pushing I, that sexton did say to we bearers, 'What the hell be brother pointing out so serious to parson? I did dig grave so poor Tom's head should bide near to window for 'e to hear they choir children a-singing on Sundays, and now they be pointing and saying that 'is feet bain't eastwards, and that 'e'd rise up on's 'ead in heaven.' "

"They brothers do talk," said Mr. Peach.

The two figures upon the corn-bin now relapsed into a grateful silence. They were both thinking about Peter and his sudden end. Now and again a horse would stamp and Mr. Peach would nod his head in the darkness, as though to acknowledge the fact that Sam was trying to climb upon Ben's back by means of its tail.

When Mark came in, the cheerful light of his lantern gave to the scene a more lively body, forming a positive building upon mere words and sounds, although Mark gave no greeting to those present. He hung the lantern upon its usual nail, but instead of beginning at once to groom the horses, he moved about the stable feeling with his hands as though he searched for something that was lost.

Mr. Peach and Mr. Tolly watched him with a lively interest, and when Mark climbed up the loft ladder, they began to question one another as to what he might be looking for.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Peach, " 'tis the peck measure that 'e do want."

"Or else," said Tolly, " 'e may have dropped a penny somewhere."

"Be it for they boys that Mark be looking?" inquired Mr. Peach, crossing his legs in order to prevent the cramp from coming, a complaint that he was subject to.

"I hope it bain't for I 'e be feeling for," said Tolly nervously, who always suspected anyone who wanted him of being in league with the police.

" 'Tis best not to look for lost things," observed Peach, "for times be that they come back when they bain't required. I do mind once soon after I were married"—Mr. Peach rubbed his leg and peered around the stable in order to see that no other company besides those that he knew so well could be in hearing—"soon after I were married to Susan——" Mr. Tolly groaned heavily. "She were gone out to Pidden to visit her aunty's. Sam were left crying in cradle. 'Poor baby,' I did shout at 'im, 'poor baby, 'tis sad pity you've got a mother that should ever come 'ome to 'ee.' "

"You did mean," interrupted Mr. Tolly, showing a gracious willingness to correct mistakes, "that 'twas a pity she shouldn't come home to baby."

"She were gone," said Mr. Peach, taking no notice of his friend's remark, "to aunty's, an' I did stand at garden gate, an' as it so happened thik night there were they stars up in sky. I did look at they stars, that bain't much to look on, and then I did look at thee's window that were across road. Thee's window had a light in en, and Kate were talking where light was."

"She do talk," said Tolly, "when I be sleepy."

"Light went out soon." Mr. Tolly nodded. " 'Susan will never come home,' I did say, speaking to they foolish stars that don't know no one, 'for Susan be gone to aunty's and be lost same as Mark Only's peck measure. Poor baby,' I did say, ' 'ave lost 'is mother.' 'Twas a happy night for I, thik were, an' I will always mind they shining stars."

"What be Mark doing up in loft?" inquired Sam Tolly, believing that his friend's story had come to a natural end, " 'e bain't 'anging himself, be 'e?"

"His feet be coming," said Peach in a relieved tone, for he had not liked Sam Tolly's suggestion, "but 'tis best we do speak when 'e come down, for 'e may have hurt 'isself."

"Mark," said Mr. Tolly, when Andrews was safely down upon the stable floor, " 'tis most likely, Peach do think, that you've lost something."

Mark came to the corn-bin and, getting as near to Mr. Peach as he could, he whispered loudly, "Father always said 'e would mind I when 'e died."

"But 'e never hid nothing for you, did 'e, no shot-gun?" inquired Peach, who was somewhat alarmed at the mysterious way Mark had approached him.

"There be thik paper that be lost," said Mark.

Sam Tolly stretched; a button flew off, and he called out:

" 'Tis old man's will that Mark be looking for."

"Do 'ee know where it be hid?" Mark asked eagerly.

"No," replied Tolly, "I don't, nor do Peach that be sitting here."

Mark leaned against the stable wall, he appeared to be wondering about something. He had broken out of his usual stable manners when he looked for the will, he now waited to regain them again. Presently the usual matters crept around and touched him, the stable spiders whispered that the horses needed grooming.

Mark Only felt for the nearest horse and began to brush it.

" 'Tis lost, Mark, so don't 'ee trouble no more," remarked Mr. Peach, as if he were the Fates.

"Some things there be," said Sam Tolly, who always liked a digression, "that are lost when they should be found."

“And there be others,” observed Mike Peach, catching quickly at his friend’s reasoning, “that be found too easy.”

Mr. Tolly opened his mouth wide as though to acquiesce in a forcible way, when the stable door opened and a face peeped in.

“ ’Tis lost,” the face said with an ugly grin, and shut the door again. The face belonged to Charles Tulk.

In former days Mr. Tulk had a full right of entry into Mark Only’s stable. He was so certain of himself and of his power to amuse, that when the unexpected happened no one was more astonished than Mr. Tulk himself. Filled with pride and the sense of his own worthiness, Mr. Tulk had let himself go in his stable talk with a more than ordinary desire to draw out laughter from the dullards, as he would have called those who frequented this safe retreat. Mark had often noticed what was being said, and had waited with his hand around his favourite horse’s neck to listen. He even welcomed Charlie’s droll tales in the same way as did Mr. Peach and Mr. Tolly, with loud laughter. He had never given the least sign that he was in any way displeased by this sort of conversation.

But however little sign there was of a fire that burned below, one day it was forced to appear.

The eruption came one peaceful Sunday evening when the moon shone upon the hills and the Dodderdown people were standing in little groups and talking about one another, and the young boys with fiery cigarettes were following the girls in large Sunday hats.

Mr. Tulk had strayed into the stable and was leaning up against the wall, with the balance of one who had come there to say some good things.

Miss Maggs had run by, and Charlie heard her say something about the postman to a boy who was following her. This remark gave him the clue to certain disclosures that he intended to make for the amusement of the company. Mr. Tulk liked minute details, and he would follow “the tasty bit,” the name he was wont to give to the young lady of his story, like a red ferret into all the cracks and corners of the adventure. He began by telling how Millie Millwood, a resident of Stonebridge aged seventeen, who wore only the most simple and necessary clothing, had gone with him and five other gentlemen, one of them being Miss Millie’s own father, into a pretty wood on a summer’s evening. We do not care to describe what happened under the green bushes, when all happenings in such a situation, hung pleasantly with summer leaves, should have been seemly and delightful.

Mark Only laughed loudly at his narration, so that Mr. Tulk, feeling how nice the Sunday atmosphere was, considered the moment to be a good one to bring matters a little more to a personal point, knowing well enough how the personal element helps in a good tale.

After remarking mournfully that the Dodderdown girls were wanting in certain arts that are taught in the town schools with more directness of purpose, Gentleman Tulk, winking upon Sam Tolly, told how only the last Sunday Nellie Holland had followed him, uninvited, into his granary and had asked him a question about linen buttons. “She showed I what she did mean,” said Mr. Tulk.

Discovering himself in the mud of the road a moment after making his last remark, and feeling a little shaken in consequence, Mr. Tulk very naturally wondered how he had got there. There had been, as far as he was aware, no earthquake to account for his sudden removal from the comfortable friendliness of the stable wall into the mire of the road, to provide a stepping-stone for Miss Maggs, who was running away from some one.

Mr. Tulk had spat, sworn, and sat up to consider things. He had evidently become the muddied effect of some hidden cause. And when he raised himself and limped home, for his stick had been thrown after him, he muttered grimly and persistently that “Mark Only should pay for it.”

Mr. Charles Tulk would sometimes take the air of an evening. And in limping about the lanes the same evening that Mark Only had been searching for the will, Tulk had chanced to go by the stable door, to the which, with his usual desire for more light upon things hidden, he had applied his ear at the moment when Mr. Tolly made his remark about things being lost. Wishing no doubt to add, in a praiseworthy manner, as every good man should, truth to truth, Mr. Tulk opened the stable door and gave his word of help. Having done so, he hobbled off to his own place of residence, being in a good humour with himself, the angels and the world. But alas! the happiest of men have their disappointments, and Charlie Tulk had his. Before he was gone many steps up the lane, he remembered the usage that he had once received at the hands of Mark Only.

He had craftily approached Nellie Holland on more than one occasion that he judged to be propitious to his design, which was to revenge himself upon Mark by means of the girl. But all to no purpose, for Nellie had a natural dislike of the cripple that he could not overcome. But Mr. Tulk resolved to bide his time, feeling that with so many trump cards in his hand he would be sure one day to win Mark's Queen for himself or for another.

In the granary, Charlie lit a candle and looked round to see what he could find. He was glad to see that his wants had not been forgotten. A friend had been there. Upon the box that served him for a table, Tulk beheld a large slice of bread, a piece of cheese and a bottle of beer. This contribution towards his inward welfare Charles greeted with suitable chuckles, and ate a merry supper. After which he produced a pipe from his pocket, which he lit, although he knew that smoking was against the farmer's orders, who had always a secret dread that fire might one day destroy his prize mangel. Without caring a thought for the farmer, Mr. Tulk smoked pleasantly and waited to see if any visitor would come. Sometimes it had chanced that Mrs. Beggwell herself had peeped in to inquire how his lame leg took the damp weather, or else to offer him something to eat, for Mrs. Beggwell liked all creatures to be well fed.

One visitor he thought would come. This was Emmie Paine. Mr. Tulk had his experiences and he knew a little. He knew that however he used Emmie now, she would still come. He chuckled, knocked out his pipe and looked at his bed. Charlie's bed was ready.

Mr. Tulk moved back the hay and opened the bin; there was a little old corn still in the bottom of the bin, in which Mr. Tulk now groped with his hand. He soon brought out what he sought for. It was the same document, hidden in the church by Peter Andrews, that Charlie had been advised by the poor-box to take possession of, in strict accordance with the natural law of findings being keepings.

Mr. Tulk opened the paper and cursed his father. For aught he knew to the contrary, Mark Andrews might be the one named for the money when Mr. Andrews died. Charles knew the letters, and he tried to spell out Mark's name. He could not find it; but this fact by no means convinced him that Mark would not have the money. Old Andrews had always promised to remember Mark, and the name was there, no doubt, hidden away amongst all those magical words.

Mr. Tulk felt displeased; he had mastered so many worldly lessons in his day, that to be beaten at this moment by mere words written upon paper—as though they ever meant much—annoyed him vastly. He hoped his father was in hell, which was a little unnecessary of Charles, and began to make unseemly remarks about his own home life, relating to the day of his birth, and even going as far back as the time of his conception, in order to bring in a certain oddish word.

Hearing a step in the yard, Mr. Tulk cut himself short in a remark of Eastern origin, about what he would do to old Wurzel, unless he gave his wife and farm up to him, and hastily hid the paper again in the bin, arranging his bed over it as though nothing had been disturbed.

When some one knocked, Charlie hoped that it might be Mrs. Beggwell or even Nellie Holland, from whom he expected one day or other a contrite submission.

But the knocker proved to be Emmie, who, instead of bringing with her the tobacco that she had promised, brought a message from Mrs. Beggwell that "she hoped Charles would be careful."

Mr. Tulk was a man of distinctive outline himself, and he disliked uncertainty. He found himself uncertain now as to what he had to be careful about, and he began to question Emmie, after he had got her in with him, closely, in the manner of a true Catholic inquisitor.

Charles questioned her with a persistence that soon brought Emmie to tears, and then, as a wise torturer would do, wishing to get a little more pain from his subject—(see *Woolman's Journal* and the keeping of negroes)—he changed his instrument. Charlie Tulk now sat Emmie down upon his bed and played with her. This sounds very pleasant and childish, and so it was. For Charlie took the rope that was in his shed and, making a noose of the end, placed it around Emmie's neck and pulled it tight. Being a very simple kind of girl, not born in London, Emmie by no means understood this sort of merriment, and as the rope began to hurt her she began to cry. Smiling, because he had brought her to this state, Charlie removed the rope necklace, and considered with pleasure the pretty red mark it had made on so much whiteness. After pinching that same whiteness, Mr. Tulk began to amuse himself in another manner that soon brought the girl to a state of meek contrition, so that she even begged that his pranks might continue.

But Mr. Tulk was in no mood just then to play at sharp, he preferred buttoned foils, and wished, the more Emmie clung to him, to get rid of her. So, in order to achieve this object, which was certainly kindly meant, he took up the rope again and applied the end in true seamanlike manner to Emmie's shoulders, so that she was forced to go, "to hell," Charles suggested. Emmie went across the farm-yard crying, and praying fast in odd broken little prayers for Mr. Thomas to come. Why she thought of her friend the sweep just then she did not know, but he had a queer way of appearing before her in her distresses, as though he might one day save her.

This visitor being gone and the hour being somewhat late, Mr. Tulk betook himself to his couch, having had the wise forethought to make Emmie put it straight for him before she left.

Charlie slept peacefully, for the squire’s rude dogs never disturbed him in his rest. He dreamt that Farmer Beggwell had died, and that he was sitting in the farmer’s arm-chair and cutting large slices out of the prize mangel.

CHAPTER
X

For a while after his wife died, the Mr. Thomas whom Emmie Paine sometimes thought of, lived in his cottage at Norbury. He spent the time, when he wasn’t out sweeping chimneys, sitting on one chair and looking at his cat, who sat on another.

Mrs. Thomas had never been very kind to her husband. When he used to come home dirty, she would send him down to wash in the river, instead of allowing him to scrape his face with his knife in the back-kitchen, and make a clean finish with any little piece of soap he might find about.

Mr. Thomas was simple-minded. He supposed all wives were like that, unless there was a baby in the house to make them kinder. When Mrs. Thomas’s grave was patted down and made neat and tidy like an asparagus bed in early spring, Mr. Thomas had gone sadly home with his mind full of sorrow to the cat.

“She did always mind to feed ’ee,” said Mr. Thomas to the cat, who looked at him with its large eyes; “if there did bide a flea in ’ee, she’d crack en.”

The cat, a black one named Titty, opened its eyes wider than ever. The next day Mr. Thomas made exactly the same remarks to the cat, and so on for a fortnight. Then the cat left the cottage and never came back. And Mr. Thomas began to think about Emmie.

He was a plain man and believed in God. He saw God talking to him in a dream, and God said: “ ’Tis Emmie, thik servant, ’ee do want, if so be she bain’t married.”

Mr. Thomas chose Madder as the best place to go to in order to hunt for Emmie. Madder Hill reminded him of a large chimney, and he thought that one day he would meet some one on Madder Hill who would tell him where Emmie was.

As soon as he was settled at Madder as a lodger at Mrs. Billy’s, Mr. Thomas began to go about the countryside asking questions.

The time of year was February. Peter Andrews of Dodderdown had been near a month in the grave when Mr. Thomas came to Madder and began to ask questions. His questions were always about chimneys, and he would sweep them when he was invited to. He never forgot the remark that God had made to him, and he always expected God to talk again. Or else a chimney, for it was by means of some large chimney that he expected to be helped to see Emmie.

One morning at breakfast time, Mrs. Billy divided a dish of fried bacon between herself and Mr. Thomas, leaving to Mr. Billy only bread and shop margarine.

Mr. Thomas did not eat his bacon, he looked out of the window instead. He heard some one say in the sky, " 'Tain't right nor proper." Mr. Thomas recognized the voice as the same that he had heard in his dream, as God's. Mr. Thomas left his breakfast for Mr. Billy to eat and went out.

There was a strong cold wind blowing, and Mr. Thomas climbed Madder Hill. From Madder Hill Dodderdown can be plainly seen.

Upon Madder Hill Mr. Thomas came upon a gentleman who looked, at first sight, rather like himself, because he was dressed in black. This gentleman was walking about in a stooping position, evidently trying to keep his face as near to the ground as possible without actually falling upon it. Sometimes he would take up little white shells or small flint-stones and look closely at them.

When Thomas came near to him, this gentleman, who was Mr. Hayball, stood upright and asked the sweep whether he had seen any ashes about. Mr. Thomas looked up into the sky before replying. But before he had time to answer, Mr. Hayball explained that a large meteorite must have fallen somewhere there. He had observed it cross the sky in the night like a ball of red fire and fall on Madder Hill. He had searched all that time and had found nothing, and was now inclined to believe that the curator of the museum was right and he was wrong, for the curator had always said that stars fell as ashes, and not as hard rocks, as Mr. Hayball supposed.

Mr. Hayball now shook his head sadly at Mr. Thomas.

Mr. Thomas touched his hat.

"There bain't nor wide chimney that do ask to be swept that way?" the sweep inquired, nodding towards Dodderdown—"for Thomas be come about."

"Mrs. Tite," replied Mr. Hayball, "says that my study chimney is too big to sweep, so she lets it catch fire instead, and it's hardly more than a month ago that it burnt itself out."

“Thik fiery chimney,” said the sweep decidedly, “do ask for Thomas.”

Mr. Hayball shook his head. “Not yet, don’t come yet,” he said. “But perhaps by next September or about that time I may be ready for you. I will take away some papers that I have put behind the pictures, for Mrs. Tite always breaks the pictures when a sweep comes.”

Mr. Thomas went away wondering what this Dodderdown chimney would have to say to him when he came to sweep it. He felt sure that Mr. Hayball’s chimney would tell him about Emmie.

He wondered as he walked home to Madder what he would do if she were married. “Should he go off like Titty?” The cat had no doubt gone off on purpose to get into the way of the keeper with his gun. If Emmie was married, Mr. Thomas decided to go too. He saw his grave snugly patted down as his wife’s had been, and began to wonder to whom to leave his sweep’s brushes. Who would like them as well as he had liked them?

He sighed as he walked.

“If Emmie was married,” he wondered, “would she allow him to leave his sweep’s brushes and the soot-bag to her first baby?”

He did not think it likely that she would, because when he swept chimneys all babies were taken out of his way, and he used even to hear certain mothers frightening their children about “the black man.”

As Mr. Thomas walked he listened. He also looked up.

The finger of a cloud’s hand pointed to Dodderdown.

CHAPTER
XI

However much and however humanely the Creator of the world may regret His misplaced confidence in a creature endowed as John Milton has it —though John Calvin thought otherwise—with free will, which means, we suppose, the right to do or not to do, He still permits time to go on.

So that whatever man does or says or thinks, the seasons, in those countries that are granted them, change concurrently. The clouds rise up in October like huge white castles, and the January ice cracks as little Molly timidly sets her foot upon the Grange mead pond.

Although Kate Tolly is always calling her husband “a fool whose buttons do burst,” time still goes on. The April sun calls out the bees to the willows, and primroses are dropped in the road, and Mark Only moves behind his roller upon the hills. The roller turns in clumsy fashion, but it makes music that is near good enough to start the very stones singing. A fine corn-fed note it makes, a gracious clanging, that sends sounds mighty of their kind into the future. The roller awakes the larks, that rise before it upon the wing, regarding it as the supreme deity, with Mark, who follows, as the humble attendant.

Every time that Mark came to the end of the field that was nearest to the village, he stopped to rest the horses and looked at what he thought to be the church tower.

His wedding was to be the next day. Nellie Holland had been busy and their home was prepared. This home was a tiny cottage that stood by itself beside a dirty lane, and looked somewhat like an old woman sitting huddled up on the green grass. Some furniture had arrived, though it was not yet paid for. But, as Nellie had wisely represented her young man as a large farmer with acres and acres for corn-growing, Mr. Ward had sent her a small load of the things that she had ordered; the whole of which, had they all come, would have furnished a large castle.

Mrs. Beggwell had given her blessing and a present, and even Mrs. Andrews had asked to see the maid, though when she came into the farm-house parlour, Mrs. Andrews welcomed her by saying:

“Bain’t ’ee the Nellie that brother Joe did go out wi’, that did drown she’s baby in Grange pond and were hanged for en?”

While Mark rolled the barley, Nellie Holland had gone to Stonebridge to fetch her dress and the orange blossom, so Mark did not expect her to visit the hills that afternoon.

When the time came for him to loose the horses from the roller, he did so in his usual slow, hesitating way, and also spent some little time in untying and then tying again the piece of rope that bound up a weak place in the roller shaft. At last he left the roller, giving the shaft he had newly bound a friendly pat when departing. Shouting to the horses to make them go on, Mark followed behind, his thoughts being employed, not about his wedding, but in considering what he had better put on to Ben's shoulder that had been a little rubbed by its collar.

In the lane at the bottom of the hill Mark Andrews was joined by Charles Tulk, who had been out, as any gentleman would naturally be on such a nice day, for a little turn in the April sunshine.

Mr. Tulk limped along beside Mark, and appeared from his cheerful aspect to be in a playful tale-telling humour.

" 'Tis said," observed Charlie, throwing out the remark with a happy nonchalance, "that there is to be a wedding to-morrow."

Mark laughed uneasily.

" 'Tis good to be married," continued Mr. Tulk more thoughtfully, after a little pause, "and 'tis good to marry a maid that do know a little." Charlie smiled pleasantly at the horses who plodded in front. " 'Tis nice," he said, "that Nellie Holland do know more than Mark Only do think she do. 'Twas a dark night, last night, weren't it?" He looked up at Mark, who nodded. "Yes, 'twas a dark night, and I did come out for a little, and two did pass I in road that were hitched up. Perhaps if I do think, I might mind who they two were. Yes, I do mind they now; Nellie Holland were one and James Andrews were t'other; they were telling about what a wedding be for. 'Tis a pretty maid, Nell be, to know things."

Tulk dropped behind. The horses looked more than usually tired; they plodded slowly along the lane with their heads bent. Above them, fast-driven clouds began to cover the sun and cold drops of rain fell. Mark walked stumblingly behind the horses. Tulk was coming along, and Mark heard him say to little Sam, who was playing in the lane:

"Uncle Only be to marry a knowing one."

CHAPTER
XII

When Satan's child and grandchild, both begotten by the same father, became resident upon this ball of sad, some say of happy, clay, the divine law, that compels every creature that is tormented by these two unnecessary visitors to paint itself either a bright or else a dull colour in order to escape for a little moment from the certainty of destruction, began to operate in man.

The clever employed themselves in many divers arts or fancies, the dull employed their time in pretending that they were clever. While many a man who was born between these two extremes, in order to hide himself from his own thoughts, would find a toy to amuse him. This toy may please him by being dangerous, by carrying a man in the sky or by making a loud bang on the earth. Or it may be simple and harmless, being but a collection of mosses that flower in February, or June butterflies, or fossilized shells, or old bones.

As one may easily imagine, the Rector of Dodderdown disliked loud sounds, so instead of anything that exploded or carried you fast, he took for his playing raindrops and stones, giving all Nature a full licence to help to amuse him by her past performances. Indeed, Nature must have thought of Mr. Hayball, for what other sensible reason had she to twist and turn the under earth in so odd a manner into all kinds of contorted strata, unless for his entertainment? By so doing in past times, Nature enabled him now to dive in a moment, by the modest means of a rabbit's thrown-out burrowings, into an earth of a million years ago, and to take up a little shell in his hand. This shell he could place in his collection as belonging to, God only knows what a time, of the earth's ancient dancing. The people of Dodderdown soon became shadowy pictures to Mr. Hayball, who held to his toys, but would explain his mystery, when he had a chance to do so, to Mrs. Tite or Charlie Tulk.

He would also write letters to the papers about the raindrops, and correspond every day with the curator of the local museum, a gentleman who, if the truth must be told, preferred good port to playing with marbles, but whose politeness never failed him, and who replied always to Mr. Hayball with the willingness of a true toy-master.

But, alas for man! even such simple toys as raindrops or fossils will not always succeed in keeping away unpleasant things. Mrs. Tite rebelled though the rain was measured, and the poor gentleman at the Rectory could only sit undisturbed and quiet in his study, where he had now begun to hide stones under the table, by allowing his housekeeper as much drink as she wanted.

Her weakness being conceded to, Mrs. Tite began to be a lady who saw visions, and who soon came to believe, as her master did, that Nature always hid its best secrets. An ordinary-sized bottle proved to be too small for her daily allowance, and she hoped to find one day that Nature, in answer to her prayers, would bring a very large bottle full of London gin down from the clouds, or else change some handy tree-stump into one upon the earth.

On his way to the church to perform his office at the wedding of the day, Mr. Hayball couldn’t avoid looking to see how much water had collected between the angel’s wings. The chuting had been mended by other hands than those of old Peter Andrews, but his weight falling upon the marble had made a crack through which the raindrops now leaked away.

Mr. Hayball sighed and walked into the church. Passing the font on his way to the altar, he peeped into it as though he expected to find another dead centipede come to play an important part in Mark Only’s marriage, as the first had at his christening.

The weather was dull, and the amount of interest taken in the wedding was but small. Mrs. Magg sold only threepennyworth of rice, and Sam and Tom lost their contribution in the churchyard before the married ones appeared.

Mr. Potten rang the bells for but five small minutes, having to hurry off to plant his garden.

When he was alone with Nellie in the cottage after the breakfast guests were gone, Mark felt his usual uncertainty as to where his cigarettes had been put. He hunted about for them until his wife put them into his hands. Mark kissed her then. But Nellie did not stay long to be kissed.

As she moved about, putting the kettle on the fire and arranging the table for tea, she said a little reproachfully, looking not at him, but down at the floor: “Couldn’t you see me, Mark, when we were against they railings, and Mr. Hayball did tell ’ee to take my hand?”

“I were hearing something,” said Mark, “but it weren’t Mr. Hayball talking.”

“You should have listened to what ’e did say,” remonstrated Nellie. “And there weren’t no need either for ’ee to push I away from James in vestry, ’e weren’t going to hurt nothing.”

“ ’E did go near to kiss ’ee,” said Mark.

“ ’Tis right for the men to kiss a girl that be married; ’tis what be always done; and you did break a flower off and I couldn’t stop to get en again.”

Mark Only laughed.

“Don’t laugh like that,” Nellie said. “People will hear outside in street that you be laughing, and they will talk about us before night-time do come.”

Mark sat down and began to smoke cigarettes. The pleasant smell of the wood fire mingled with the tobacco. Mark leaned back in his chair contentedly.

Tea-time came and went, and the evening slowly darkened. The tiny cottage room shrunk into itself as the shadows came, and Mark’s cigarette became a living thing, a vital spark that burnt and glowed. Mark put more wood upon the fire, and watched the smoke curl up the chimney until it went out of the roof into the spring stillness.

Nellie lit a candle for herself; she was employed in the little lean-to back room in washing the dishes. She wiped the plates hurriedly, as though she were a little girl again and had to hurry because she was going to a Christmas school-treat at Mr. Hayball’s, where there would be crackers to pull with toys inside them.

When she came back to Mark and lit the lamp, she moved about in the room setting things straight.

In going by him she touched his shoulder. Mark threw his cigarette into the fire and got up. He straightened his back as though his short wedding holiday was already over.

“I be going out for a bit, Nell,” he said.

Once outside his cottage, Mark bethought him of his usual retreat; he remembered the sweet smell of old hay that always clung to the stable whatever the season; he thought how time had moved there with a merry wink of the eye when Peach and Tolly were talking, and how the boys would scuttle about in the loft like happy rats.

The village appeared curious and silent that evening, and Mark, feeling a desire to do so before he went on farther, sat upon a low wall near to the green and began to talk to himself, no doubt wishing to express to himself a little more clearly than mere thought can do, what had happened that day.

“Church bain’t a good place to be in,” he muttered, “ ’tis a place where folk do look, and where noises do look. Every one did stare at I an’ I did hear something. ’Twas they dogs’ feet a-pattering. Mrs. Magg were staring at I, and I did think—they dogs be shut up in church tower. Parson Hayball ’ave shut up tower door so that dogs shouldn’t get out at I. But I did listen while folk did stare.

“Up and down tower steps they did scamper, same as I heared they about in lane when father died. I did thinkie up by golden rails, when parson were talking, ‘Who be they after now with their red tongues hanging out, bain’t I, be it, bain’t I?’

“ ’Twasn’t right of brother James, no ’twasn’t right. ’e shouldn’t have laid hold of she in vestry wi’ they dogs above. I did hear they feet patter in vestry over roof. Oh, Nellie, Nellie, up on windy hills when horses’ manes were blowing I did think of ’ee, and in stable while time did pass quiet I did wish for ’ee. I do know I be always called a fool in village, but ’twasn’t a right thing that James should take an’ hold ’ee so near. I do suppose ’ee be mine own now, Nell, I do suppose ’ee be, though they dogs were about.

“I’ve been up to church wi’ she, but maybe she bain’t best pleased wi’ I. Charlie did use to say that maids be best to a chap when they bain’t married, but what were thik ’e were a-telling about James and she being out on dark nights? ’Tis strange too that I be out here sitting lonely on wall; I’ve a wife at home to cuddle to, and yet here I do bide out.

“What be I looking for in evening darkness; be it stable, or be it they hills? Nell were the one to take a chap away from they high hills, she ’ave draw’d I down away from blowing winds, she ’ave draw’d I down to where they dogs do patter and go.”

Mark looked back at the light that shone from the window of his cottage.

“She be there,” he said, “a nice maiden be there that be just married to a man. An’ what be she’s man doing sitting out on wall, why bain’t ’e in along wi’ she, I do wonder? There be light burning from little room. She be now cutting up they little bits of cake, I do fancy, or else putting her churchgoing clothes into painted box upstairs. Mrs. Magg did say what a pretty dress she was a-wearing, an’ I did fear to touch she in en. A pretty dress ’twere, and she be a pretty married maid.

“What be I shaking for? ’Tis cold on wall, I do suppose. Tulk did often tell I what a maid be at night-time; ’e do know something, do Charlie.”

Mark laughed strangely. His own laugh seemed odd to him. “She be quiet in house now,” he whispered, “she bain’t singing to no one. She were singing when I came out first into lane, but she bain’t singing now no more. I be some one out, I be, I be some one out on wall. Who be I out on wall in darkness? I do know now who I be. ’Tis a pity they rolling boys bain’t here, and I do wish wold Tolly were talking. I bain’t lonely wi’ they voices sounding.

“Thik be a cottage, bain’t it, down lane wi’ light burning in’s window, and there be some one’s shadow that do show on blind, I do thinkie ’tis a woman’s. I’ll mind thik cottage, where she do bide, but first I’ll step across green and ’ave a look at stable, for stable be lonely, I do fancy, same as I be.”

The way to the stable lay across the green. On his way there, Mark heard two men in the road speaking to one another. He knew the men by their voices, but he did not stop.

When he reached the stable door he heard voices in there too. He passed the door without going in, and went to the window.

It often happened that the village children would go to this window in order to hear what was being said inside, and Mark thought he might find some one there now. He was not disappointed. He felt two heads that rubbed his legs, as though his legs had come there at that moment to relieve a sort of itch that those same heads often suffered from.

Mark gave no reproof or no welcome to the heads, he merely remained and listened as they were doing.

Inside the stable two voices were speaking, but they were not the voices of Mr. Peach and Sam Tolly. The fact that the boys were out of the stable showed that the present occupants were not of the same kind as those who usually were there, who always welcomed the children.

The two black heads nestled against Mark, now and again giving a rub when they itched.

Mark waited by the window; he seemed to be of some use there, at least to the tickling heads. As others were inside, he had no wish to enter his retreat that evening, and he knew well enough the sort of things, because he had said them himself, that country people say about a merry bridegroom who leaves his bride on the wedding night.

The heads had whispered to Mark that “they two in there upon corn-bin were Uncle James and Charles Tulk,” who were talking as people will talk of current affairs.

Outside the window, in company with the black heads, Mark remained silently.

Inside the stable, and within Mark’s hearing, conversation was proceeding amicably.

“True ’tis,” Mr. Tulk was saying in a merry tone, as though he swam in a very natural word element, “true ’tis they women be best got hard, for when they do run after a chap ’tis over and finished without a thought to the fun. Don’t ’ee now be worried by nothing, for she’ll be the sweeter for ’ee now she be safe married. They nice girls do want a little learning about married life afore they be ripe an’ ready for we men.”

“Charlie,” said James, paying no heed to the worldly wisdom of his friend, “all the night-time he will be holding Nell near to ’isself.”

“And what be that,” said Charles with a laugh. “ ’Tis only what be always a-doing, and when thik be over she’ll set up merry for the rest of we. Don’t ’ee mind, Jim, when you and I did snare she in field, Nell might have loosed wire of her own foot if she’d been minded, only she preferred to wait for ’ee to touch ’er. ’Tisn’t only a touch you’ll ’ave wi’ she, James Andrews, when we do snare Nellie again.”

“Nell were but a little maid,” said James, “when I did want her. I do mind one day when old man did send I up to they hills to scare rooks off barley, maidens were playing beside brook an’ Nell she were jumping over and laughing. I did want she then. ’Twasn’t only then, neither, but times after that I did think of she as mine, until thik day I’d been cleaning out dirty ditch in lower meadow grounds. You weren’t come to Dodderdown then, Charlie, an’ every day ’twere raining in those past times. One day I were wet and tired, and I did go into wold shed, that old man did put in lane, to shelter. She and Mark were up in waggon when I crept in, and I shall ever mind they flowers that be painted on waggon. They flowers danced when Nell were laughing at I.”

“ ’Tisn’t nothing,” Mr. Tulk remarked consolingly. “They maids be always out for the game, it don’t matter what they do, so long as we do ’ave our way wi’ ’em, ’tis all a fancy living wi’ they girls. But ’tis,” said Charles decidedly, “what they be put into petticoats for, and life be dull without a bit of merrymaking. I bain’t lived in Dodderdown for nothing, an’ I’ve gone my ways an’ taken my share of what be going, and I do know well enough that if you do wait a little all will come to ’ee.”

Mr. Tulk laughed.

“Thik blind fool Mark, ’e don’t know nothing; ’e do plough they hills, don’t ’e? ’e do harrow and press they soft round clods of clay, but ’tain’t Mark that will throw corn into ground; ’tis James that will plant thik maiden’s field.”

Tulk looked knowingly at James, who bowed his head as though his thoughts were biting him.

Whether or not Charlie fancied that he had proceeded far enough upon a certain line, or whether he considered this a proper moment to probe another sore; anyhow, he changed the subject of the discourse.

“ ’Tis nice to be a son that ’is mother do trust wi’ things,” Mr. Tulk observed. “An’ ’twill be a sadness when poor mother do die, even though lawyer should make out a paper for thik good son to have near all, now father’s will be lost.”

“Wold ’oman may last long time yet,” muttered James, into whom Tulk’s last words had sunk deep. “She don’t never get her coughs now same as she used to get them.”

“This bain’t no time to cough,” answered Charlie. “Warmer days be come now, but when warm times be gone and damp mists be come about, then some may find that they bain’t always to be living,”

“She don’t never go out,” said James, “to catch none of they colds, and she did always get over they coughs so easy, an’ time she do live I bain’t got nothing.”

“Poor woman,” Charles remarked reflectively, “poor wold ’oman! ’Tis well indeed for poor wold Mrs. Andrews, who be always talking to things gone past, that I be so clever as to know of a cough medicine. Though I were but a poor lame boy and didn’t go to no school to learn to read what be said on paper, still I do know the way to stop a bad fit of coughing. ’Tis a cure, mine be, that ’tis best spread between bread and jam an’ to be taken at tea-time. Do ’ee mind I, James, for when summer be over and old woman do get one of they coughs that you and Mrs. Peach do tell of, you send along for

Gentleman Tulk, whose father were a house landlord, though ’is poor son do live in a granary and sleep upon hay.”

“I be glad,” said James in a more cheerful tone, “that you be as good as a doctor, Charlie, an’ if old woman do catch a cold I’ll tell ’ee.”

Mr. Tulk leant nearer to James and whispered something into his ear.

James Andrews nodded his agreement to what Charles had said.

James straightened himself, but a fancy with sharper teeth than the others bit him. He stretched out his arms; his fingers moved as though he were feeling the white softness of a rabbit’s belly.

“I must feel she, I do long to crush and beat little Nellie. There bain’t no woon else that do want she like I. I’ll take and get gun from parlour and shoot they together, and drag Nell from ’im, same as I’ve pulled kicking rabbit from hole; I’ll be a man to she more than ever he be.”

“Be quiet, you fool,” said Tulk contemptuously. “You don’t need to rave so mad-like; do ’ee want gallows hangman to wive thee. ’Tis only Nellie you’ll please wi’ thik nonsense talk, for she’d sit happy enough in cottage having been the death of two men, which is what they all do want. You be a blamed fool to shout so loud. The way to they maidens bain’t by killing folks; ’tis only a fool’s way, thik be. You may trust a nice maid to get all she do want. She must make a beginning somewhere, and Mark will but flatten she out for ’ee to cuddle.”

James sat more quietly, listening to his friend’s wisdom.

“Nell have stayed afore this day by barton gates, talking to I,” he muttered.

“An’ in vestry,” continued Tulk, following up the advantage he saw he had gained. “When you did take hold of Nell, when Mark Only were putting ’is cross in book, and Parson Hayball were looking out of window at the blue sky, didn’t she give ’ee kiss for kiss, happy an’ rosy, an’ she never shook off your hands neither where they did wander to.”

James’s head dropped slowly, he was seeing things, he was looking at a female body. The body was soft and white, he had crushed it to death, and now he was stroking it. His head dropped lower. Words touched him.

“Gentleman Tulk be the one to help a friend, an’ ’tis only a few shillings now and again that Charlie do want, an’ when a man once be master, if ’e should fancy a tasty bit of goods to’s supper, ’twill be his for the asking. Tulk be a good friend, ’e be.”

Mark Only moved away from the window. What he had heard seemed to affect him very little. Nellie's name had come in, but that did not matter very much to Mark. She was the girl of the wedding night, and so, of course, she was the one to be talked of. But his place was occupied; his stable had, for this evening anyhow, these visitors, and he felt annoyed at that. He would have talked as they had talked about a newly married girl, because he knew how soft a thing a rabbit was as well as they did, when laid down in the dewy grass. Besides, Mark knew how Charlie Tulk could talk. Charles always had something to say, and perhaps he had really found a good cure for a cough. James had called out rather wildly, but then he hadn't a clinging warm thing, whose heart would beat so lovingly against his that same night.

Beside the yard gate some one stepped up to Mark, and a wet cheek was pressed against his coat.

"I thought you weren't never coming home," Nellie said tearfully, "so I came out to see where 'ee were biding so long."

"Oh, I were coming fast enough," laughed Mark.

There was cheese for supper, all laid ready in the cottage, and a little beer left over from the breakfast.

Mark ate fast, bolting great pieces like a large savage bird, and putting his head nearly into his plate. He made a loud munching sound as he swallowed, and would drink beer, swallowing that too, noisily.

Nellie ate a little and watched him; she appeared fascinated by his rough manners; she found herself wondering how large a piece of cheese he would break off next, and how often his throat would move up and down when he drank a draught.

As soon as he had finished he leant back in his chair, making a loud common sound, and began to feel in his waistcoat pocket for the end of a cigarette that he had put there during the day. Finding one, he struck a light and, moving his chair to the fire, began smoking.

"You do know what be good for yourself," Nellie said, blushing and clearing the table.

"Bain't I married?" laughed Mark, peering up into the sooty darkness of the wide cottage chimney.

The table cleared, Nellie put the flower-vase, a wedding present from Mrs. Magg, into the middle of the table. She touched the vase, stooping over the table, took it up to admire the lily of the valley painted on the glass, and set it down carefully with a happy sigh.

“I’m going on now,” she said, lighting a candle. Nellie opened the stairway door, took a last look at the vase, and disappeared.

Mark Only searched his pockets; at last he found what he wanted; this was another half-smoked cigarette. Lighting it, he bent his body over the ashes of the fire as though the season were mid-winter. He began to make a curious sound, a sort of snuffle as though he drowsed.

The cigarette end dropped from his half-open mouth and fell into his lap, where it burnt itself out. The room was filled with the smell of smouldering cloth. Mark moved his chair back a little and began to take off his boots, with his head bent down very near to them.

Letting the boots remain upon the floor exactly where he had taken them off, the man who was marked out as a fool in Dodderdown blew out the lamp, and finding himself in total darkness, approached the stairway door. This he opened, and stood on the first step of the rickety stairs and listened.

“I do hear something in road,” he said, “something that do run by. In stable I never heard they dogs a-running, but they be out now in Dodderdown. ’Tis well door be locked and lamp be blowed out, for hunting dogs do notice lights, they do.”

“Who be you upstairs?” he called. “There bain’t nothing up wi’ ’ee, be there?”

There was a patter of bare feet across the room above, and Nellie stood at the top of the stairs in her chemise, with her hair newly plaited. She rubbed her eyes like a child who is tired after a late party.

Mark peered up at her. “Bain’t I seen ’ee before in thik dress,” he said. “I do mind seeing ’ee somewheres like it.”

“Oh, do ’ee come to bed, Mark, for I be tired of waiting,” whispered Nellie, who feared that he really might have heard steps outside.

CHAPTER
XIII

An English summer is often quick at going. We know this well enough without taking the trouble to read Lord Byron's poetry. Indeed, this year the summer hardly lit up the red flowers of the poppies before she blew them out again with her cold winds. When summer has a mind to hurry off fast, she runs and bustles, blows or shines sharply as though she were scolding us. In her hurry she never gives a chance to the blossoms who want to show their happiness, and she teases the green leaves until they sulk and turn brown in revenge.

The gay season marches out, and the sunflower turns her face away, to shun the winds that are bringing the mists of winter in their loosened skirts. Also the tree upon the hill bends its branches away from the weather, and the leaves in the valley fall off before their right time. But, however much the wetted corn and the blue butterflies were troubled by the unseasonable weather, it did at least please the Rev. Mr. Hayball, who discovered that as much rain fell in July, counting by the rain-gauge near to the pigsty,—for the churchyard angel was quite unreliable now with the sad leak in its wings—as in the month of December, 1843.

Mr. Hayball spent a happy August, he wrote to the papers, and he made calculations upon foolscap sheets that he hid behind the bookcase for fear Mrs. Tite might discover them.

It happened that another gentleman, who resided in Yorkshire, and who had a daughter who kept fowls, noted a letter of Mr. Hayball's in *The Times* newspaper and contradicted it. This led to a long correspondence, during which time the daughter who kept fowls drowned herself in the pond, and the King of England (who read the letters), having no trust in angels' wings, bought a new rain-gauge, that he took the prime minister to see when he invited him for lunch. But Mr. Hayball was not the only one who made merry in Dodderdown on account of the raindrops.

There was old Wurzel. He was happy, although his corn was near spoilt, because the mangels were growing well. Mr. Beggwell would regard the clouds with a good-humoured smile each morning, say a friendly word to Charlie Tulk if he passed him, and walk off with a measuring tape into his fields. In the lane he would usually meet Sam and Tom, and would throw them some pence and invite them to stand on their heads in the mud, which they always did.

In the middle of his root field, Mr. Beggwell had selected a very plump and promising mangel to measure, and he measured this one with as much care each day as Mr. Hayball measured the rain. The only man to whom the farmer would entrust the hoeing of this root was Samuel Tolly, who was supposed to go out once a week and to hoe round this mangel with the utmost care. Mr. Tolly regarded this sort of ritual in the same kind of way that a priest of old did the service of Amen Ra, and would kneel beside the root and cautiously pull out all the little weeds with his fingers. And every Sunday night he reported to Mike Peach how well the god looked and how fast it grew.

“ ’Tis like to burst ’isself,” he would say, “it do plim so large.”

In early autumn the Dodderdown pigs, if unlucky enough to be fat by then, are taken to Stonebridge market. So there was nothing unusual in the fact that one day James Andrews harnessed Ben, Mark being employed with Polly in the horse-rake, in order to take the three fat pigs, that were asking for the knife, to be sold.

The sale being over, according to the custom of the town, James attended at the auctioneer’s office in South Street to take his money. When he came out from Mr. Paul’s office, James stood for a moment and looked up and down the street, for mere friendliness, no doubt, in order to see if anyone he knew was in sight.

Seeing no one who recognized him, James opened a door with a brass plate upon it: the brass plate and the door both having the equal honour of belonging to Mr. Pratt the lawyer. Through this door James went with the readiness of an expected visitor to whom the name on the brass plate had nodded a welcome. For thirty-five minutes James Andrews was a forgotten being in the Stonebridge market world, a world that continued during those moments to follow its usual ways: ways, for the most part, that were in favour of the town tradesmen who were winning, while the simple country men were losing, their pennies.

Millie Millwood, whose eyes shouldn’t have been quite so child-like, had led, with the help of her low-necked blouse, simple John Peacock, of Norton Lower Farm, along with her to the riverbank, a little out of the town, and Corn-Merchant Mead had given his tenth cheque for wheat threshed in harvest-time, and had drunk, in consequence, his tenth glass and smoked his tenth cigar, when James Andrews in his market gaiters appeared in the street again, buttoning his overcoat.

Whatever had been his business in the lawyer’s office, it was now over, and James went to his inn, took out his horse and drove home.

When he entered Dodderdown, Mrs. Tolly was standing by the gate looking crossly at the mud in the road. Without looking at his sister James said, as he drove by, as though he were speaking to the tail of his horse, “Mother bain’t so well to-day, she’ve twice let waistcoat fall.”

Although she had leisure to look at the mud in front of her own door, and to listen to her own pig grunting for more cabbage in her back-garden, Mrs. Kate Tolly was not the kind of woman to be either contented or happy.

Kate Tolly and Susan Peach were alike in most ways, but not in all. Kate’s attitude towards life had more of motion in it than Susan’s. When Kate was quiet she was really watching; in the same manner as a hovering hawk that appears from a distance to be utterly still, but is really intent upon making a fine pounce upon a little lark.

Susan’s habit of life was of the octopus kind, and she liked carnal thoughts with large heads. Whereas Kate Tolly despised such vanities as being beneath her. About material things they thought a little differently.

Kate liked brooches and rings, while Susan preferred enormous vases and large painted biscuit-boxes. But sometimes they derived the same excitement or interest in the same natural objects. These objects were often cheap furs, the interior of butchers’ carts or new shoes worn by others. A girl with new shoes gave to each of the sisters a lively sensation of annoyance. But not more so than when they saw, in other windows than their own, larger pictures or more gay-coloured wallpaper.

Unless Mrs. Tolly was always getting these sort of things for herself, life showed itself to her as a wide nasty desert. All her thoughts hung with bats’ claws upon the pieces, bits and round things, large or little, of household furniture or any useless ornament. If she let anything alone, it was but to employ her claws to scratch Mr. Tolly.

She never heard those hunting dogs running as did her brother Mark, but she heard other sounds: she heard the eternal movement of things being sold, things of all sorts and kinds that she wanted to buy herself. One day when Tom bought a sugar pig at the shop with a penny Mr. Beggwell had given him, and showed it to his mother before dividing it with Sam, Mrs. Tolly hurried off at once to the shop and bought from Mrs. Magg three shillings’ worth of sugar pigs. All these she ate before tea-time, without keeping even one little curly white or pink tail for Mr. Tolly, who liked sweets.

Mrs. Tolly loved her sister Susan in a natural way; she loved to watch what she took. Her love took the form of carefully looking to see that the pint of milk that James allowed his sisters to take from the farm each day did not become a quart in Susan’s jug. There was Susan’s half-pound of butter too, that had an odd way of becoming greater than itself, contrary to all proper laws, if Kate Tolly did not keep sharp eyes in her head and hands ready, when her sister was out of the parlour, to feel what was in her basket.

The pools of muddy water in front of Mrs. Tolly’s door had nothing to say in reply to her looks. Mrs. Tolly was wondering at that moment if the waistcoat her mother had dropped twice would be of any use to her. She went on thinking about other people who had things that she might use if they were hers. There was one person above all others that she knew of, who always troubled the mind of Mrs. Tolly in these little matters. This was Nellie, once help to Mrs. Beggwell, whom her brother Mark had married in the spring.

Whenever she saw Nellie pass from her cottage with her shoes nicely blacked, Kate Tolly would look at her with a sulky hatred like an August thundercloud at a lonely red poppy, and say vindictively, “Blacking bain’t all she do buy, nor owe for neither.”

The mud in front of her door having been stared out of countenance by Mrs. Tolly, now found a playmate. This was the boy Tom, who jumped in the puddles to make them splash. All boys were a bother to Mrs. Tolly, and hers most of all. She would often mistake him for Sam Peach, who was just as dirty, and this mistake always irritated her.

“ ’Tis strange,” she would say to her husband, “that they be so alike, for Peach be a little man an’ you be a big woon.”

“ ’Tis easy,” Sam Tolly would reply, “to make thik out, for their two mothers be sisters.”

“So we be,” Kate would reply, “worse luck for we.”

Mrs. Tolly now called for the boy to come to her, but Tom, understanding from her tone that she intended to beat him, splashed her with a well-judged leap into the largest puddle near the garden gate, and ran off as fast as he could to find Sam.

Beside the pig, Mrs. Tolly kept a few fowls, and before getting ready to go to the farm, she carried out a little corn in a cup to feed them. She threw the corn into the pen and watched the birds eat. One hen was moulting and remained apart from the others, with drooping feathers. Now and again this hen would make an odd noise in its throat as though it wanted to cough. It also looked down at the ground as though it were watching an old piece of rag that had been blown into the pen. The appearance of the poor bird tickled Kate's sense of humour. The hen reminded her of her mother, and so she laughed. The bird's ill-looks called her, too, to hurry to the farm to see what was happening there.

Kate dressed herself more quickly than usual, without pausing even to look out of the window to see who was passing. Near to the farm she met Charlie Tulk, who was taking the air, and a pipe of cool tobacco, with the aid of his stick. He stood still, smiled at Kate, puffed a cloud of smoke into the air, and nodded in a knowing and friendly manner towards the windows of Church Farm.

"Wold 'oman do cough in there," he said.

Kate Tolly went into the farm by the back-door. As she entered she was aware of two simple facts in nature: she knew that her mother had a cough and she knew that her mother could not live for ever. This idea of her mother not living for ever made Kate think the more readily. Her father's will had not been found, so it was her mother who had the money to leave. James would have the doing of that, of course, and he might put down something for Susan and she. In country matters all things go by fate and destiny. No one thinks before them, unless they are told to do so. James managed things and so, in home matters, James was fate. Kate Tolly hoped for the best.

Pleasant thoughts began to play in her mind in all concord and amity, and some unpleasant ones began to wriggle too. Susan would have to have some, and perhaps even Mark. If she had been the only child, she could have been set up as a fine farmer's wife and entertain Mr. Scott, the pigman, in the best parlour, but that could never happen, for there was James, and she could not dismiss him with a wish. Kate Tolly's interesting thoughts kept her standing in the back-kitchen for a few moments. In the kitchen she could hear her mother coughing.

Kate entered the room and sat down upon the settle. She watched her mother. Mrs. Andrews drooped like the moulting hen. She had let the waistcoat fall again, and her head had dropped forward nearly upon her knees. On the floor beside the waistcoat there were many little pieces of wool. Amongst these there lay a knitting-needle. Mrs. Andrews moved her hand about as though she expected to find the wool and the waistcoat floating in the air, or else she might have expected her daughter Kate to pick them up for her. As neither the one event nor the other happened, Mrs. Andrews still felt about with her hand.

In a little while Susan Peach came into the room and sat beside Kate, and looked at her mother as though she were a side-show at a fair, and she had paid a penny to see her. When she coughed, Susan nodded at her sister, as though to say, “Perhaps she will choke the next time she does that.”

Very soon Kate and Susan began to talk as though the old woman had not been there.

“There be three expecting in village,” remarked Kate Tolly, “beside one that shouldn’t ought to be.”

“You do mean Emmie,” said Susan Peach. “An’ there haven’t been no death since father’s.”

“There were thik baby Mr. Potten did bury at night-time.”

“I don’t count she,” Susan replied. “ ’Tis Potten that do work at more than grave digging.”

“So ’e do. An’ ’tis a hard five minutes, ’e do say to folk.”

Susan had turned her head a little to listen to footsteps in the passage. James had come into the dairy and soon the well-known sound, like the very loud buzzing of a bee, was started. The separating had begun.

The sisters listened; they had both filled their jugs with the first lot of milk that had been brought in, so they were saved from the skimmed milk that James would give them when they came late.

The great bee buzzed itself out and the noise ceased, and they heard James pumping water. Soon he came into the room where they were. He did not speak, but took a key out of his pocket and unlocked one of the two table-drawers, out of which he took an important-looking paper.

“Bain’t father’s, be en?” Susan asked anxiously.

“No, ’tis mother’s,” said James, “and Kate best sign for she.”

“Be there anything writ down for we?” Kate inquired.

“There be something,” James replied. He folded the will so that only the place for signature was revealed.

“You’re to get the pen and ink and write down mother’s names here,” he said, pointing to a place where the lawyer had put a mark in pencil.

Kate did as she was told.

“Mother, you be writing your name,” she said.

Mrs. Andrews coughed and searched with her hands for the waistcoat that was still upon the floor.

James leant over the table and wrote the name “Charlie Tulk” in the place the lawyer had told him that the witnesses should sign. Susan, thinking it improper that she should be left out of the fun, scrawled under that of Charles Tulk her own name.

“Mother’s made her will, and ’tis in table-drawer,” James said, putting the paper away and locking the drawer again.

As the drawer shut, Mrs. Andrews coughed again. She also raised her head and pointed with her thin fingers out across the table at some one she saw.

“I be coming,” she said, “I be coming, thee best bide for I, Peter. ’Twas ’ee then, Peter, that did take granfer’s waistcoat to wear en. Don’t ’ee now be a-going off to fair without I, and mind out I bain’t going to be late home, for they lanes be dark at night-time, an’ ’tis a pressing boy that ’ee be. ’Tis a good thing ’tain’t happened yet what I be afeard of, but all same ’tis hard to stop a strong boy from doing what ’e shouldn’t.” Mrs. Andrews chuckled, and then a frightened note came in her voice, and she spoke in a lower tone. “What ’ave ’ee been doing, Peter?” she asked, “for thee’s cheeks be pale; maybe one of they cows ’ave hooked ’ee, for thee’s face have blood on en. ’Tain’t nothing, be it, Peter? no, ’tain’t nothing, for Peter do smile at I. Do ’ee go out a minute and wait in street, for I be just coming.”

Mrs. Andrews spoke as though to herself.

“I best dress myself out fine to-day, for they boys do like a maid to look nice. But where be I got to?”

Mrs. Andrews coughed; her head drooped again; she felt in her lap for the waistcoat and moaned. No one moved to pick up the garment that she wished so much to mend.

James went out of the room to open the back-door because some one was knocking.

“ ’Tis Emmie Paine,” he called back to his sisters. “She be come with something.”

Emmie followed James into the parlour. “I’ve brought something from Charlie,” she said by way of explaining her presence. Emmie handed to James a little tin that had once contained a brand of tobacco called “Bishop’s Sermon.”

James opened the tin.

“ ’Tis medicine,” he said, “for mother’s cough.”

Kate Tolly took the tin and looked at the powder inside. “ ’Tis the same kind,” she remarked, “that Charlie Tulk do cure Mrs. Beggwell’s fowls with when they be moulting.”

“Charlie did say,” explained Emmie, “that you do shake a little on old woman’s buttered bread and put strawberry jam on top.”

“That’s me,” said Mrs. Andrews, all at once waking up to what was going on. “That’s me they be telling of, I be the wold ’oman who have caught a cold.”

Susan Peach took the tin. “ ’Tis a pity for poor mother to cough so bad,” she said. “ ’Tis a nice powder to look at, this be, an’ ’tis best to give she some at tea-time.”

“Mother be always coughing at night,” said James. “An’ I do bide awake and listen to she.”

“Charlie did say,” repeated Emmie, as though she had been told to be sure to give her message correctly, “that ’tis to be taken at tea-time, covered with strawberry jam so as she don’t taste en.”

Old Mrs. Andrews nodded her approval; she liked strawberry jam.

Emmie went away.

“You best bide for tea,” James said to his sisters.

“ ’Twill be nice to see she take en,” Kate observed as she laid the cloth.

Susan nodded; she went out into the pantry to fetch a pot of strawberry jam that she had seen on a shelf. Sometimes the sisters stayed like this at the farm for meals, instead of merely coming in between times to see to their mother. If James invited them to stay longer, they always did so.

Coming home from thatching a stack for Mr. Beggwell, Mr. Peach walked and dreamed; he dreamed of the happy evening when he and the baby were left alone in the house. In the road, near to his cottage, Mr. Peach found Mr. Tolly standing and talking to Mark Andrews, while Sam and Tom rubbed their backs and heads against a gate-post. When Mr. Peach came to them, something large and red appeared like a great glowing coal over the Shelton Church tower. This was the full moon rising.

Mike Peach watched the moon and so did Mark Only and Mr. Tolly; presently the boys came up and sat in the road with their legs crossed like little tailors.

“What be in thik moon?” inquired Mr. Tolly, looking down at Sam.

“A man,” replied Sam readily, “wi’ a bundle of sticks an’ a nose same as Potten’s.”

“Clever boy,” said Mr. Peach approvingly.

Mr. Tolly decided to ask another question. “Where do thik man go when ’e do die and be buried?” he inquired.

“To heaven,” answered Tom.

“And where do our married wives go?” asked Mike Peach, anxiously.

“To hell,” said Sam.

“They boys do know,” remarked Mr. Peach gladly, “more than parson’s Bible.”

The Church having entered this moonlight inquiry, Sam Tolly was moved in spirit to ask another question of the children.

“When Parson Hayball, him that do watch they rain-clouds, do stand up and cough out words in pulpit, ’e do sometimes name ‘a soul,’ ” said Mr. Tolly, looking down at the black heads whose eyes were winking. “Now what I be asking of they two wise toads be this, what be a soul?”

The two heads bumped together as though to consult. They were trying to remember what was the most exciting thing they had ever seen in their lives.

Mr. Tolly was a wise questioner; he wished them to take their time before they answered; but he thought he ought to help them a little with certain hints, and so he began:

“Mrs. Beggwell do sit in front pew in Church, an’ she be a fine large woman wi’ a feathered hat. An’ on thik table through railings, there be tall silver candles an’ a great golden flower-pot.”

“Sam Tolly do look when ’e be out,” observed Mr. Peach, “for ’tis all there, same as ’e do see en.”

“And in front of pew where I do sit, there be Mrs. Magg——”

Tom looked up, having found the true answer.

“A soul be—” he said, “a soul be a hedgehog.”

“Good boy,” murmured Mr. Peach. “Good boy! ’Tisn’t likely Mrs. Tite could say better, though she mid name a bottle.”

Mr. Tolly wished to hear more.

“Parson Hayball,” he said, “do sometimes tell of folk going down into the pit.”

Mark Only laughed.

“But I do wonder what ’e do mean by thik pit?”

“I know,” shouted Sam.

“What be en then?” asked Mr. Peach.

“ ’Tis Uncle Mark’s deep pocket where bull’s-eyes be.”

“When I do listen,” observed Mr. Tolly thoughtfully, “to they boys talking, I do almost fancy that I be a wise woon myself, for—’tis a wonderful world.”

“But there be wives in en,” whispered Mike Peach, who thought he heard steps in the distance.

“And pigs,” said Tolly graciously.

“But I can tell they boys,” said Mr. Peach hurriedly, “what a fool be.”

Mr. Tolly looked at Mark Only.

“A fool be,” said Peach, “a man who do leave a good warm inn where beer be sold, to go out to fair-ground where maids’ frocks do blow up, and watch they legs a-dancing; ’tis all up wi’ ’im then.”

“ ’Tis my daddy that be talking,” said Sam.

“No, ’tain’t, ’tis mine,” called out Tom proudly.

The steps Mr. Peach thought he had heard now proved themselves real. Unfortunately for Mr. Tolly, he had no time to get in to his own door before the women came up. Kate Tolly looked at her husband’s clothes.

“ ‘Tisn’t right for poor Susan to see ’ee wi’ all they buttons gone and bursted,” she said.

“We’ve been waiting for ’ee,” Tolly remarked meekly.

“Poor Susan bain’t used to seeing such badness,” Kate said, looking at her sister to see how much her modesty had been outraged by the unbuttoned state of Mr. Tolly’s garments.

“Be Mike gone in?” asked Susan, who had taken no notice of her sister’s kind thoughts for her.

“No,” a boy’s voice called from the ditch near by. “ ’E be gone out.”

“ ’Tis to stable thik lazy b—— be gone, after Mark, I do suppose,” said Susan.

Kate turned to speak to her husband again, but he was gone too. Two boys scrambled out of the ditch and scampered away.

“We bain’t got no tea to put on for they devils,” Kate Tolly remarked, as she went into her doorway.

CHAPTER
XIV

Things had happened to Mr. Thomas since the day that he had met Mr. Hayball hunting for stars upon Madder Hill.

The sweep had lived peacefully at Madder with the Billys, but he could not help keeping his ears open.

It was not only about the breakfast bacon that Mr. Thomas heard remarks made in the sky.

Mr. Thomas's ideas about domestic affairs were old-fashioned. He believed in family affection as well as in God, and he thought that Mr. Billy ought to have been treated in a kinder way by his wife.

Troubles come in odd ways to the home. Corbin, a friend of Mr. Billy's, had given him a garden-roller. Mr. Billy accepted the roller because he thought it would have a genteel look when he wasn't in the garden himself for passers-by to notice. But Mrs. Billy did not like the roller. She did not like the way the handle poked up, which this roller's handle always did. She told Mr. Billy that he had pulled the roller upon her wallflowers. And one morning she talked even more angrily and found fault with the way that Mr. Billy drank his tea.

"Thee be always swallowing," she said.

Mr. Thomas held up his hand.

"Some one else be talking," he said.

Mr. Billy listened, and so did Mrs. Billy, for the some one else to speak a little louder.

"Bide quiet, 'oman! Thik some one did call," remarked Mr. Thomas, looking out of the window.

Mrs. Billy did not approve of the way Mr. Thomas had repeated the words, so, instead of allowing her lodger's sheets to dry in the garden, she made his bed with them damp as they were.

Mr. Thomas caught cold, the cold brought other disorders, and the sweep became very ill. During his illness he dreamt that he was looking out from a great chimney and seeing Emmie drowned in a sooty sea near by. But even when at his worst, Mr. Thomas had plainly heard a voice telling him “to bide where he was and not to go off like the cat.”

When Mr. Thomas was quite out of danger, Mr. Billy expressed his pleasure by moving the garden-roller, that had caused all the trouble, off his wife’s wallflowers, and by putting a stone upon the handle to keep it down.

His strength came slowly back to Mr. Thomas, and by the end of the summer he was able to sweep chimneys again. And now, as this new morning was come to Madder, he thought he would walk over to Dodderdown and sweep the Rectory chimney, as he had been invited to do some months before by Mr. Hayball.

Even in the wettest time a sunny day now and again appears, like the smile from a cross girl. Mr. Thomas walked in this smile, and carried his sweep’s brushes. He came to Dodderdown by way of the Madder Hill, and went by two grey rocks that lie in a field. Upon the largest of these rocks a black rabbit was sitting that looked at Mr. Thomas instead of running away. The rabbit reminded him of Titty.

The sweep walked on; he came to the Rectory and knocked at the back-door. The door was opened by Mrs. Tite.

“I be come,” said Mr. Thomas.

Mrs. Tite rolled her eyes, she shook her head and went to her master. Mr. Hayball at once invited Mr. Thomas into his study and pointed politely to the chimney, as though he were offering a distinguished guest the most comfortable chair. After showing Mr. Thomas the chimney, Mr. Hayball collected all his papers from the various hiding-places about the room and thrust them under the bookcase.

The study chimney at the Dodderdown Rectory has been mentioned before as being very wide. It belonged to the old part of the house and had been built a great many years ago.

Mr. Thomas carefully carried out to the garden the hot coals that were in the grate, and then proceeded to nail a dusty curtain, that he had brought with him for that very purpose, across the wide fireplace. As soon as this was done, he chose from his brushes two short ones, and, moving the curtain a little to one side, he disappeared into the chimney, allowing the curtain to fall back again into its place.

Meanwhile Mr. Hayball had gone out to find Mrs. Tite; he wished his housekeeper to hang sheets on his bookcases. He remembered when he was a little boy hiding behind sheets put up to protect the furniture when the sweep came.

He found Mrs. Tite wandering in the garden and talking to herself, and saying over and over again:

“ ’Tain’t nor sweep, but a walking bottle that be come.”

There are some very old chimneys still left in country places that an experienced sweep will prefer to climb, rather than to use his long brush, in order to sweep them properly. Mr. Hayball’s study chimney was of this kind, and to Mr. Thomas it spoke as to an old friend, and invited him to climb by means of bricks that are often to be found like steps in these old chimneys.

Mr. Thomas swept carefully, climbing slowly towards the light above. As he worked, he questioned the chimney about Emmie, and the chimney answered him in its own language.

The higher he climbed, the more sure Mr. Thomas became that this might be the last chimney he was to sweep in this world. The chimney had been telling him things. But it promised also to show him more than it told.

Mr. Thomas had arrived at Dodderdown at about one o’clock, and it was a little after two when his head and brush appeared at the top of the chimney.

Mr. Thomas rested and looked around him. He saw all Dodderdown.

In the village a waggon was standing beside the barton gate of James Andrews’ farm. A horse was harnessed to the waggon. Mr. Thomas nodded in a friendly way at the Dodderdown churchyard; it was there that the dead were laid to rest. Mr. Thomas remembered Titty. He grew thoughtful. “Perhaps the keeper, after shooting the cat, had thrown it into a dirty ditch. But did it matter much where one was thrown to or who patted you down?”

Mr. Thomas rubbed his eyes.

He looked now in a new direction. There was a high stack across the way with a man thatching it. The man was perched like a large grey bird upon the side of the stack nearest to the Rectory. The man was Mike Peach and the sweep watched him. Mr. Peach was acting in a queer way. Mr. Thomas saw him carry a bundle of thatch to the top of the stack; this was natural and proper. In order to lay this thatch it was necessary for Mr. Peach himself to be upon the top of the stack, from whence he would naturally look over to the other side. But Peach, having climbed up and given one look over, came half-way down the ladder again and did nothing. After a few moments he went up and looked over the top again. This time he appeared so agitated that he nearly fell off the ladder altogether. He managed to hold on again about half-way down.

Beholding the thatcher behaving in this odd way, Mr. Thomas began to wonder what was happening below the stack on the other side. He did not have to wait long before the truth discovered itself.

Soon a girl walked away from the hidden side of the stack. The girl stopped in full view of Mr. Thomas and began to pick out pieces of straw that were stuck to her clothes. The sweep knew her at once; she was Emmie. Mr. Thomas listened as well as looked.

Another person, who limped, now came upon the scene from behind the stack. This new arrival followed the girl, and when he reached her he hit her across the legs with his stick in a merry fashion. He also made a pleasant remark to her about country matters that the sweep overheard.

Presently the pair walked off towards a large farm-house that was near by. Mr. Thomas held his head a little sideways. He had heard a man’s voice upon the earth, and now he expected a voice to speak from the sky. The voice did speak:

“Best to go an’ get ’eeself put in dirt,” the voice said.

Mr. Thomas nodded. But again he heard some one speaking, and this time the voice said:

“But if she bain’t married, ’tis best for ’ee to bide above ground.”

Mr. Thomas slowly descended the chimney. When he reached the bottom he took his curtain away and folded it up, and carefully carried the soot out into the garden.

All was now silent in the Dodderdown Rectory. Mrs. Tite had fallen asleep in her chair and was dreaming of a great man-shaped black bottle.

Mr. Hayball had gone off to Madder Hill to look in the rabbit-holes for little shells.

Mr. Thomas walked off another way and did not hurry.

CHAPTER
XV

Saturday being a holiday, there was no school open for the Dodderdown children to waste time in by counting up meaningless figures or writing copies. So they were enabled to employ their time in learning about real life outside.

Towards evening, Sam Peach and Tom Tolly fixed upon the cross on the green as being a good subject for a learned discussion between friends with open minds. They sat upon the grass in front of the cross like two frogs, and Sam began to speak, partly to the cross and partly to Tom.

“You be only a stone,” he said, “stuck up for Mrs. Magg to look at. When Mrs. Magg do peep out of she’s window between they flower-pots that do bide in en, she do see thik.” Sam nodded at the cross.

“Suppose it were taken off green,” Tom suggested.

“Why then,” said Sam, waving his hand in the air, “poor Mrs. Magg would have to look all along the world.”

“ ’Tis well,” Tom commented, “that stone do catch ’er eye first or she would be lost.”

“Stones do bide about,” remarked Sam.

“Yes,” said Tom, “there be some up in churchyard that be same as thik. An’ in Church there be a man in window who bain’t got no clothes on.”

“ ’Tis only a picture,” Sam said scornfully, “of thik poor gentleman Parson Hayball do talk on, an’ ’tis same that Charlie Tulk do name when ’e be talking. Maybe ’tis Charlie’s father that be put there?” Sam grew thoughtful.

“Mr. Hayball do say,” Tom observed, as though he were by no means certain that he had got hold of the right end of the story, “that a man were pinned up to thik cross one dark night-time.”

“I don’t mind that we did see ’im,” said Sam. “An’ I dare say ’e would ’ave cried out when they long pins did prick, same as farmer’s cat did squeak when Charlie did nail ’is foot on to barn-door.”

“That were fun for Charlie,” Tom remarked.

The two black heads now looked in a new direction for entertainment.

A doctor’s car came by the green and stopped at Church Farm. Tom felt in his pocket for any weapon that could puncture a tyre, but finding nothing sharper than a broken pencil, he let the car alone. It soon spun away. After the car was gone, Mr. Tulk limped down the road, pressing hard upon his stick as though his lame leg were grown feebler. He stopped beside the green and looked at the Church Farm. Where one looks others look too. Sam and Tom had learnt all they could from the stone cross, and now they expected this human dwelling-house to give them a lesson too.

Something was happening there. First the look of the parlour window was altered by the blind being drawn down. Sam now watched the kitchen window; he hoped that something would happen there too, and it did. The blind came down.

Tom turned his attention to the bedroom windows. The night had not come yet to merry England, but the night had come to some one, it seemed, for the bedroom blinds were being drawn.

For no reason except, perhaps, to tell him that he was alive, Tom’s head began to itch. He rubbed it against the stone cross. For no apparent reason either, Mr. Tulk changed the plan of his afternoon stroll. He had intended to walk round the green and to pass the Church Farm. He now limped off in another direction.

Earlier in the afternoon Nellie Andrews had left her cottage in order to meet her husband upon the hills. Mark had gone up there with a horse and waggon to bring home some barley rakings that had become mere pigs’ food from having stayed so long in the wet.

As Nellie walked along the path to the hills she happened to look up at the sky. Clouds were gathering in the sky in wild shapes, like heavy rocks thrown about by a giant.

Nearer to Dodderdown Church Nellie had passed Charlie Tulk, who was leaning over a gate in order to rest his leg. Charlie had been polite enough to lift his cap to her. He was pleased with himself because he had heard Mrs. Beggwell scolding Emmie for having gone out to the barley-stack.

Nellie felt that she did not dislike Charlie as much as she used to. He had won her over to him by the easy habit of lifting his cap when he met her. But easy though it was for him to do this, Nellie, on her side, fancied that it must be because she looked so like a real lady. She had even gone so far as to stop to speak to Charles in the lane sometimes, and to call him “Mr. Tulk.”

On these occasions Mr. Tulk would always converse quite properly about the weather or Mr. Hayball's sermons. If he spoke about Mrs. Beggwell, he would name her with much respect, and in order to get a little personal colour into the conversation, he would praise the scarf that Nellie wore round her neck the last Sunday that she went to church. He had also talked of Emmie Paine in a truly virtuous way, lamenting to Nellie how great a trouble the girl was to him, and how she blamed him for what he hadn't done, hinting darkly that he had seen others out with her.

"I do have to bolt granary door to keep she out," he had said. And then he would mention Mark and smile knowingly, as though to imply that Nellie had her troubles too.

Nellie thought of these dark hints as she walked along. She knew Mark spoke to Emmie sometimes.

" 'E don't stay much wi' me, now," she thought. "An' even at night-time 'e be different. They people do stare at 'e in road. 'e do look funny, Mark do." She smiled; to think of Mark in that way amused her. "But did this funny man meet Emmie sometimes? Good Charlie had hinted of things going on."

A rabbit came out of the hedge and loped slowly across the road. It stopped and looked at Nellie as though asking for help, and then went on down the lane as though it were tired.

Nellie turned round to see where the rabbit went. She saw a little red-and-white beast run out of the hedge and follow the rabbit.

The giant above ceased to throw clouds about when Nellie climbed the hill, and the sun shone out again. Mark had loaded the waggon with the few rakings that were left, and was leading the horse to the gate that was near to the lonely tree. Nellie had climbed the railings to meet him and was coming too; Mark hardly noticed that his wife was there.

To reach the gate they had to pass by the tree. Ben the horse was tired, and, according to custom, stopped when he wanted to. He now stopped near to the tree.

"There be a man there," said Nellie in a frightened whisper. " 'Tis a black man under tree."

Mark, who saw all things but dimly unless he was very near to them, left the waggon where it was and walked towards the tree. Nellie followed closely behind him.

Under the tree a man was resting, or rather working, for he was employed at the moment in sharpening a large pocket-knife upon a stone, with a vigour that clearly showed that he intended some prompt business. Nellie shrunk back farther behind Mark. The stranger's face was black and his clothes sooty. He had removed the scarf from his neck although the wind blew coldly, and continued sharpening his knife as though he were not in the least put off some intended action by the presence of visitors.

"Why, 'tis a sweep," said Nellie, who, having grown a little braver, had come forward.

Mark Only peered down at him. "You be a chimney-sweep, bain't 'ee?" he inquired. "A chimney-sweep who be a knife-sharpener."

The sweep touched his knife's edge with his black nail and instead of answering Mark's question, that indeed hardly needed a reply, he inquired in a gentle voice for so black a man: "Do 'ee happen to know of a maiden called Emmie biding up these parts? A servant," he added, "wi' cap and apron."

" 'Tis Emmie Paine 'e do know," said Nellie.

"She bain't married, be she?" inquired the sweep, shutting his teeth fast and firmly holding the knife.

"No, she bain't married, but she should be," Mark said, laughing loudly. "She be as good as married, though she bain't gone to no church," he added.

"She don't never ask for no one, do she?" inquired the sweep, still holding his knife firmly.

"She did use to mention a Mr. Thomas," replied Nellie.

The man very slowly shut up his knife and put it into his pocket; he put on his necktie, touching his throat thoughtfully as he tied the knot.

Rising from the ground and nodding to the sky, he took up the soot-bags and sweep's brushes that had lain beside him, and began to walk across the field, going in the opposite direction to the village of Dodderdown. When he was gone a little way he turned and called loudly, "Tell servant Emmie, who be as good as married though she bain't, that Thomas do ask for she."

After the sweep was gone, for some reason or other, Nellie appeared to be discontented. She had been a good girl and had not done as Emmie had done before she married, but queer strangers had never rested under lonely trees and sent messages to her. "Every one was after this Emmie."

Nellie looked at her husband.

Mark Only had led the horse and waggon out into the lane, but it was not his custom to hurry from the hills, so he came back to the gate while the horse ate of the grass by the wayside.

Nellie looked dully about her; she thought of past days when those hills made her legs tingle to run to them.

“All be too quiet in Dodderdown,” she said crossly, “nothing don’t never happen down there.”

“How be mother?” asked Mark.

“Don’t ’ee know,” said Nellie, “don’t ’ee never go to see how she be?”

Mark shook his head. “I don’t like to see no woon hurted,” he said. “An’ Kate do say that thik medicine Charlie did bring to stop ’er cough, do make she sick an’ groan.”

“Come, let’s be going,” said Nellie.

Mark answered her by sitting down on the bank.

“Who be waiting for, not Emmie, I don’t suppose?” Nellie spoke sharply. “An’ ’ee do stay too long down in stable,’ James do say, wi’ they stupid fellows Peach and Tolly. ’Tis most likely Emmie do visit ’ee there, for Charlie do say ’tain’t ’e but another.”

Mark Only rubbed his hands.

Nellie was always annoyed when he did this; she now looked at him more angrily than ever.

“James do say ’ee don’t bide home enough,” she said scornfully.

Mark looked at her; he straightened his right arm and pointed down the hill; his lips trembled.

“Thee best be a-going,” he said.

Nellie’s face flushed, she looked as though she would reply, but instead she turned from him, passed the horse and waggon, and walked on towards Dodderdown without looking round. She wished now that she had married James.

Mark Only remained sitting upon the bank; he saw his wife go, a moving blot on the white chalk lane; he heard the horse munching the grass, and he held his hand to his head as though to shut out some sound.

He rose and shook himself, as though to get rid of the noise that he heard by action. He led the horse carefully down the hill. At the bottom he stopped the waggon. He leant against the shaft and put his hands over his face. The evening was darkening.

“They hunting dogs be about again,” he muttered fearfully. “I can hear they panting. All bain’t right in Dodderdown when dogs’ feet be pattering. I do know what they do look like, they be long dogs wi’ red tongues a-hanging.”

Mark started the horse again and came into the village.

Sam and Tom were rolling over one another on the green. When they saw Mark coming they ran up to him, shouting: “They blinds be draw’d, they blinds be draw’d.”

“ ’Tis wold ’oman who be dead this time,” called Sam.

“She be toad cold,” said Tom in a voice of mystery, “and we be to see she soon.”

“Yes,” said Sam, who had become too a little subdued at the thought of this new excitement. “Wold Mr. Deadman do poke ’is head out of she’s mouth, ’e do, and we’ll see ’im.”

Mark moved the horse on; he left the waggon in the farm-yard without unloading it, and led Ben into the stable.

All was the same in there: Polly was feeding quietly, there were even Mr. Peach and Mr. Tolly sitting upon the corn-bin and talking in whispers. It might have been noted by a careful observer that Sam Tolly looked a little thinner than usual, and that his buttons remained in their proper places with more propriety. They had, no doubt, soft and tender feelings, these buttons, and did not like to burst away from their natural lord and master while death was so near; if a wedding had been the event, they would have been merrier.

Mark unharnessed Ben and began to rub the horse down, treading cautiously. Mr. Tolly noted the careful way that Mark placed his feet down when he stepped, and said softly, “They two bad boys bain’t in straw now, Mark, they be gone up to see how granny do look.”

Mark went to the door; this he shut tightly.

Mr. Peach nodded knowingly.

“Mark Only do want to keep wold death out from stable,” he said.

CHAPTER XVI

“Mark Only bain’t been up on they cold hills to-day,” said Mr. Peach to Sam Tolly four days later.

“No,” replied Mr. Tolly, “for ’e did go wi’ we to ’is mother’s funeral.”

The stable was the same, but Mike Peach and Sam Tolly were different. They wore black clothes.

“They hills that Mark do go to be very high,” said Peach, who preferred any kind of talk to silence upon such a day.

“So they be, an’ steep,” replied Mr. Tolly.

“I do mind the day,” ventured Mr. Peach, putting his hand to his mouth and taking it away again, as though he were taking out the first piece of his story, “I do mind the day when wold Peter Andrews were hauling dung up on they high hills, and horse and cart did topple over into meadow grounds, and dung did spread its own self about as though ’twere a living thing.”

“I do believe ’ee, Peach,” said Sam Tolly, “for they do say down Shelton way, that pigs’ dung do start a-grunting when it be carried into the wrong grounds, and true ’tis ’tain’t suited to all fields.”

“ ’Tis too warming for carrots,” remarked Peach very solemnly.

Mark Only left the horse he was grooming, and going nearer to the corn-bin, he began to finger his black trousers, as though he wondered why he was wearing them. He moved his hands up and down, making a scraping sound, and as he did so he looked at the door. Two black heads were peeping into the stable, and after a moment or two of watching, they called out:

“You be all wanted at farm, for cake be on table, an’ Aunt Susan be looking at wine bottles.”

Mr. Peach slowly slid off the bin. Tolly followed his example.

“You be wanted,” Sam Tolly called to Mark.

The picture, that the black heads threw in at the stable door, of events in progress at the farm, proved a true one. There was cake upon the front-room table and Susan Peach was looking at the wine bottles. James Andrews sat at the head of the table with a paper before him of a formal cut and written in a lawyer’s legal hand. A chair in which another person had sat in every day for some years, looking at an old torn waistcoat, was pushed into a corner, and a sofa was pulled out in its place. Kate and Susan were sitting near to the table.

Mr. Peach and Sam Tolly took places near to one another, while Mark stumbled around the table, feeling with his hands what was upon it. The two black heads had vanished, but a sound as of hidden merriment under the table revealed to anyone interested in their doings where they were.

The party were all seated now except Mark. There was a kind of silence in the room that comes over simple people who wait for the spirit to move them.

A sound did come into the room, however. This was the sound of a stick that tapped the road outside, as though a lame man were walking by.

“ ’Tis Charlie Tulk,” called out Tom, the sharp child’s voice coming oddly from nowhere. “ ’E do tap like thik when ’e be pleased.”

Another sound came, this time inside the room. This was an exulting cry, half laugh, half cry, from Mark Only. In feeling about on the table, he had come upon the will.

“ ’Tis old man’s paper that be found,” he called out. “Father always said ’e would mind I when ’e did die.” Mark took up the will and held it near to his eyes, blinking at it.

“Bain’t father’s, ’tis mother’s will that ’ee’ve a-took up from table, and in en she do leave farm to I, so ’ee best sit down,” said James proudly.

Nellie came in at that moment; she had been sent by Susan to borrow some more wine-glasses from Mrs. Magg. Seeing her husband moving about the room dejectedly, as though he had lost his way in the world, she guided him to a chair that was set by itself.

Nellie placed the wine-glasses she had borrowed upon the table, and then there was silence again. After a few moments, hidden Tom shouted out loudly:

“Aunt Susan do know where drink do bide.”

Mrs. Peach thrust down her hand so as to catch hold of a boy’s boot.

The boot disappeared.

James Andrews leant back in his chair with an air of authority.

“I bain’t a-going to read no will,” he said. “Mother be buried and done wi’, and I do know what be in will and so do they maidens. They maidens be to ’ave a little, but Mark ’aven’t nothing.”

Mr. Tolly shuffled with his feet, a button burst somewhere as though it asked a sudden question.

“Don’t ’ee begin to speak,” said Kate Tolly, looking at her husband as though he really had spoken, “for none of we don’t want to hear thee’s face talking, nor trousers neither.”

James filled the glasses; Nellie carried one to Mark, who finished it in a gulp. He asked for another. James filled the glasses again.

After he had drunk his fourth glass, Mark rose unsteadily from his chair and laughed.

“What be doing?” asked Nellie.

“Father’s paper be lost, mother be put into grave, and I be drunk.” He sat down again, laughing.

Susan Peach leaned forward in her chair to get nearer to the bottles. She was a heavy woman and her weight was badly balanced. Her flesh appeared to be piled about her in lumps. Her hands sprawled upon the table with the wine-glass between them like two dead fish that had been cast ashore. These fish had chapped red backs and dull dirty-white bellies.

Mrs. Tolly sat bolt upright, and eyed the proceedings with a sharp cunning look, as though to say, that she knew more about a funeral than anyone else who was there, but had no intention of telling what she knew in such a company.

James sat drinking, casting a look now and again at his brother’s wife. He had put on his market gaiters over his black trousers, and he thrust out his legs so that he could see the gaiters.

A feeling floated about the room in the form of a warm mist. This feeling was the gift of the wine that was being drunk. Susan and Kate were beginning to fill their own glasses.

In carrying her husband’s glass to be filled again, Nellie stood near to James. James put his arm round her and drew her to him. She looked quickly at Mark and moved away from James.

Mark was smiling.

Peach and Tolly were talking in low tones about dung.

Susan began feeling on the table with her dead-fishlike hands for her glass, that had vanished after she had filled it. Very soon a boy’s hand appeared over the table and placed an empty glass upon it.

“They boys be worse than bad,” Susan exclaimed.

Kate Tolly began talking about the flowers that had been carried upon the coffin to the churchyard.

“Mr. Hayball’s must have cost near a pound,” she said.

Nellie blamed Mark for spilling the wine on his clothes. Mark laughed foolishly. No one paid any heed to the boys who were under the table, though conversation came from them as though little demons were talking.

“Did thee see wold granny?” Tom asked.

“Yes,” replied Sam. “Aunt Susan took I upstairs, and she did lie in a box as long as a house. Aunt did say, ‘Kiss poor granny, Sam,’ an’ gran’s face were like Mrs. Magg’s puppy that Charlie drown’d after ’e’d poked ’is eyes out.”

“Did ’ee hear,” inquired Tom, who seemed intent on pursuing the same interesting subject, “what wold Potten did say when coffin went splash into water at bottom of grave? Parson were telling about dust when there were only mud on dirt heap, and Potten did whisper, ‘ ’Tis well wold ’oman be dead, or thik bloody puddle would have drownded she.’ An’ chalk stones did rattle down on thik box, same as hail an’ rain on school window.”

“Will thik box go up to heaven?” asked Sam of the everwise Tom.

“ ’Tis most like it will,” replied Tom, “for God may take a fancy to they shined handles, and box when wold gran be tipped out will do fine to ’old ’is winter onions.”

“Mother did cry in church when anyone did look at she,” whispered Sam, “an’ Uncle James did wipe ’is nose with’s coat sleeve.”

The blue mist, brought by the wine into the room, now enwrapped more than ever the human forms who were drinking. In this mist Nellie found that she was often looking at James, and that he answered her looks with a meaning question. The warm mist became hot. There was a goatish smell abroad, and anger muttered in the sodden human brain-cells like distant thunder.

Mark rose unsteadily; he began to move about the room, feeling with his hands. Under the table the boys were laughing.

“Uncle Mark be a-dancing,” they said; “ ’is feet do move sideways.”

“ ’E do want bottle,” called out Tom.

“Where be thik paper?” Mark called out fiercely, shaking his fist over the table. “Where be father’s paper that be lost?”

Nellie went to the sofa and sat there, so as to be farther from her husband. She looked at James and smiled.

James went to her. He pulled her roughly to him and kissed her.

Mark, who thought his brother was still in his place by the table, shook his fist at the empty chair.

“Where be paper?” he shouted, “for wold man did say ’e’d mind I when he did die.”

Sam peeped out from under the table and shook with laughter. “Uncle Mark be talking to a chair,” he said, stealing back to Tom.

Mark felt about the table until he came upon the will again. “ ’Tis father’s,” he shouted, “ ’tis father’s paper.”

“No,” said Kate, laughing at him. “ ’Tis mother’s and you bain’t got nothing.”

Mark Only felt his way to the door. “I bain’t going to bide here no more,” he muttered. “I be going to stable; they horses do want I.”

Mark went out.

Tom and Sam continued to chatter under the table.

“Aunt Susan’s boots be wold; one of they be there and one be there, as though they’d a-quarrelled,” said Tom. “Aunt Kate’s feet be near together, she do tap floor sometimes wi’ they shoes——”

“ ’Tis when mother do drink,” said Tom.

“Poor boots tucked in under t’other chairs do look mournful.”

“They be like sleepy wold crows.”

“Four buttons do lie on floor near to they sleepy feet.”

“Daddy’s buttons,” said Tom.

“Tom,” remarked Sam in a loud whisper, “they gaiters be moving. Yes, they be moving to little feet that do bide at sofa end——”

“Little feet be watching; they be afeard of they gaiters; they be trying to hide in ground same as a worm that be trampled on.”

“What be Uncle James a-doing?” inquired Sam. “Aunt Kate be sitting still. ’Tis she that be laughing——”

“An’ mother do grunt.”

“ ’Tis she’s way of laughing,” said Sam.

The wine mist became a thick living presence in the room. It hung low over, as though to couple, the two forms upon the sofa. The sisters, Susan and Kate, watched with a dull stare. Susan’s head leaned towards the sofa.

Kate smiled.

Mr. Peach and Sam Tolly were looking at each other and were talking about docks and couch-grass. They appeared to take no notice of what was going on.

“A funeral be a sad time,” remarked Mr. Tolly. “An’ they dock weeds be bad in a garden.”

“I once did see a black head poke up out of Rector’s chimney,” said Mike Peach.

A scuffle and stifled screaming came from the sofa, and Nellie pulled herself away, and escaped, as she appeared to wish to do, out of the room.

The sisters eyed the room; their natural greed was sharpened by the wine mist. Their fingers lengthened out and their nails grew longer. They both thought gladly at the same moment that the old waistcoat was in the rag-bag, and that the one upon whose lap the waistcoat used to be was in a rag-bag too.

“They fowls bain’t shut up,” said Mr. Tolly.

Two black heads rolled from under the table, and disappeared out of the door.

“Rats,” said Mr. Tolly, nodding.

“No, ’twere boys,” observed Mike Peach.

Mr. Tolly looked seriously at his own trousers.

“I bain’t dressed proper,” he said, getting up and going out of the door. Mike Peach followed him.

Kate and Susan looked at their brother.

“We want our money,” Kate said.

James opened the drawer where the will had been kept and took out two bundles of notes. He gave these to his sisters.

“Pigs be sold and woon cow to get thik,” he said crossly.

The women counted the notes. Each packet contained twenty pounds.

“ ’Tis named so in will,” James said. He pushed pen and ink before them and they signed the receipts.

“ ’Tisn’t much,” said Kate.

James was locking the drawer again. Susan Peach moved and got upon her feet. Kate Tolly got up more easily. When Susan moved to the door it was as if an ill-smelling pool of stagnant water had been stirred.

James Andrews sat alone by the table.

The wine mist hung drooping, it became cold and sticky.

The mist sank down and became a dead stench.

CHAPTER
XVII

One night a few days after Mrs. Andrews' funeral, Mr. Charles Tulk was in a merry mood. He had driven to Stonebridge Market that same day with James Andrews, and had limped around the town, passing remarks about the ladies and receiving drinks from his friends.

Charlie had many friends because he had many tales to tell. No one could describe the doings of a lady better than Charles. He knew all their life's story. He knew them deep down; he knew them as well as a diver knows the bottom of the deep sea with all the pretty shells and soft sponges and the long suckers of the devil-fish. He knew them as well as Charles Darwin knew the muddy pond at the bottom of his garden where the little red beetles lived. He had noted so well, in different circumstances, each item of their behaviour, and he knew so much about their clothes, that he could give a detailed account of exactly what Mrs. Beggwell wore on Sundays at church.

Mr. Tulk had such a merry way with him that he could always obtain a good reception and a good glass from the farmers at the best inns in the town. These gentry were gratified by his sound views about local government, for Mr. Tulk used his ready wit to mock at any sentimental provision made by soft-hearted legislators to protect dumb animals from cruelty. He would narrate in a merry way, to show that he suffered from no such sick pity, how he had once helped to skin a sheep that was not quite dead; and add a story or two about cats to show what a true sportsman he was. If a rich farmer spoke to him, Mr. Tulk would discuss the idleness of working men, and mimic Mr. Peach to a nicety, and throw in, if they were standing near to the Blue Lion, a few telling instances of the lively habits of country girls, a sort of creature, he would say, who knew how to kick.

On his way home from market Charles grew more serious, and he disclosed a plan to James, a plan that if successful would give James what he had wanted for so long.

James had sipped, but that sip of his, at his mother's funeral, had but heightened his longing to drink the whole cup. He had spoken too and hoped; and now that Charles stated his plan, he saw success as certain. He was on a sure scent—a red weasel—the doe rabbit with its soft body and white fur was growing tired. He had her near now, his claws and teeth were ready.

Mr. Tulk liked his granary; he would sit there of an evening. Sometimes during the day he would help in the farm-house out of kindness, for, since Mrs. Beggwell had lost Nellie Holland, she had managed the house with only Emmie. But Mr. Tulk preferred to take his meals in the granary, where he was now, for old Wurzel had a way of ordering him out of the kitchen, in words that offended the nice manners of Master Charles.

After enjoying a hearty supper of bottled ale and cold meat, Mr. Tulk waited, as a wise man should, for certain other wants to be supplied. Those other wants had been more quickened than quieted by his limping about and watching the women in the town of Stonebridge. But as there was no hurry, and he was sure at least of one to come to him, Mr. Tulk sat upon his hay bed and thought about the world. He liked it. There was no mistake about that. He liked it. He had proved matter to be a thing malleable and movable. He could drop it down from a ladder and make it sick blood. He could make it groan in unspeakable agony upon a bed, and then turn it into a clod of dirt to sleep for ever. Such fine doings!

Mr. Tulk decided to live to a very great age. He saw himself at ninety limping around Dodderdown, a grandly dressed old gentleman, on the look-out for any very young lady who chanced to be abroad. Such an old gentleman as he would be—and who more proper—could assist the general urge of procreation, by advising the young not to waste their time by merely looking on at the game.

Mr. Tulk never felt more friendly to the world or to his future than he did that evening, and he saw all life as good, at least to him.

Hearing steps coming, Charlie took up the rope that he used to play with sometimes, and hid himself behind the door. A timid knock was repeated again and again, and after waiting for a while Emmie Paine, who was the knocker, opened the door.

As soon as she entered, the rope was thrown over her and she was dragged backwards. She did not scream because she had learnt not to, but she said meekly, “Don’t ’ee hurt I, Charlie, for ’ee do know I bain’t well.”

Mr. Tulk spat in the direction of his bed. Emmie went there tiredly.

An old rat ran along the beam in the granary roof and watched. Now and again it licked its paws. The rat had been hungry itself that evening and had eaten its own young ones. It fancied that Charles was making a meal too.

When Emmie sat up on the box the rat ran away. The lame man-rat had but, it thought, been laying the cloth for a sure meal on a later day. The rat understood and went his ways.

Charlie sat by Emmie’s side.

The rope still lay upon the floor; Charlie had not troubled to throw it into its usual corner. He now pointed at it.

“Rope do know how to tickle a maid,” he said.

Emmie looked tearfully at the rope that was so alive to its master’s wishes.

“James Andrews ’ave a-got to ’ave Nell,” Mr. Tulk remarked. “ ’E won’t bide without she no longer.”

“But Nellie be married.”

“Married be she?” said Charlie, taking the rope.

Mr. Tulk looked at the door, drew Emmie near to him and whispered to her.

Emmie began to cry. “I won’t,” she sobbed, “I won’t. Nellie were always a kind woon to I.”

Charlie took up the wise rope that knew how to tickle a maid.

“ ’Ee do talk pretty,” he said, “an’ ’ee do cry nice, but rope be able to speak too.” In order to show the sort of conversation the rope could manage, Charles struck his companion on the face. He pulled her hands away that covered her eyes and made her look at him.

“But suppose Mark did fancy I were she?” Emmie said, still crying.

“You be a nice maiden,” sneered Charlie, “you be a nice good little Sunday one, who do sit on a stool wi’ skirties pulled over knees, for fear that poor Parson Hayball mid peep. You be a nice churchgoer, to call up poor Farmer Beggwell to bedroom when mistress were out of way. You’re a pretty one to visit folk’s granaries and to be afeard of what blind Mark mid do to ’ee.”

Emmie looked at Charlie in a frightened way; she was a person who had run very fast down a hill, and who never again can stop her legs from going. She now longed more than ever for the sweep who had once been kind to her. A message had come from him in a mysterious manner, but Emmie had heard no more. Mr. Tulk governed her will and led her on as he chose. But when in distress, she could always remember the black-looking brush with which he had swept Mrs. Ashton’s chimney when Mr. Thomas advised her to leave her place to go to another.

She cried again and murmured words.

“Oh, you do want to die, do ’ee?” laughed Charlie. “Well, that be easy, ’tis done like this.” He took a knife from his pocket and opened it.

“Don’t kill I, don’t kill I, Charlie,” she sobbed. “I’ll do all ’ee do want, for now that I be like I am, nothing don’t matter. I’ll do same wi’ Mark Only as wi’ master, for it don’t matter what I do do.” She lay down, hiding her face in the hay, while her body moved in shaking sobs.

Mr. Tulk watched her with a smile. His pleasures were so much connected with the gentler sex, and he knew their ways so perfectly, that he was never deceived by the sort of tears that they shed. Were they tears of anger, Charlie knew how to manage them. Were they tears of sorrow or of shame, Mr. Tulk, making the best of the chance, would help the shame to go deeper and the sorrow to cut the sharper.

Charlie saw the tears of Emmie as a useful blend. Here was a simple maiden, who had been pulled by her mistress Nature—Charlie was too modest to see himself as anything but a tool in the matter—into a pretty mess of it, from which her friend the sweep even could not easily save her. Her girl’s nature having brought her where she was, Mr. Tulk had her safe, and her tears were safe tears, to be noted by him and to be smiled at, as a mere child who cries in the lane.

When Emmie went across the farm-yard to enter the house, she was still crying.

Mr. Tulk lay down upon his bed; he did not go to sleep because he was thoughtful. One lust that is satisfied opens the door to another. And as a good general would do, Charlie, after a victory, tempered his joys by thinking of his defeats. Mr. Tulk was a proud gentleman and he did not like to be repulsed. When Nellie was at the farm he had, out of politeness, invited her into the granary. She had not replied even, and he hated her. Now all was different. Nellie had spoken to him about the weather, and he to her about the muddy roads, but yet his anger remained where it had been when she first refused him. From that day when she had turned from him with burning cheeks because of what he had said to her, he had brooded with great contentment over his intended revenge. He watched James Andrews and he knew all about what James wanted. When he could do so, he would put in a word about the softness of a rabbit, that kept the fire in James's heart well alight.

Tulk was patient; he knew that a nut has to be cracked before you can get to the kernel. A master can do much he had decided, and now James was master in the home.

Mr. Tulk knew what young women are made of, and he hoped with a little care to give James what he wanted, and to give himself what he considered as a just revenge. There would be certain rewards, already agreed upon, that would come to him if he needed them.

That night Charlie dreamt he was a rat.

CHAPTER
XVIII

November came in cold to Dodderdown, and Susan Peach and Kate Tolly would often go to the farm when they could to watch each other and take what happened to be lying about.

One afternoon when they went there in the hopes of finding a funeral bottle not quite emptied, they found James in the parlour sitting at the table.

Susan Peach entered in her usual heavy way. She sat in a chair and placed her dead-fishlike hands upon her knees and sighed, as though to signify to James that he had all the comforts in life, while she had none. Kate Tolly, who was more decided about her rights, went up to the sofa and put the cushion straight, and then lit a candle that was upon the table as though it were her own. After doing this to show that she wasn't afraid of her brother, she sat down too. The candle burnt dim at first and then grew slowly brighter.

"I be grown tired," said James, "of getting my own meals."

"We be always ready to help 'ee," said Kate, "same as we used when mother were alive."

Susan looked at the cupboard where the wine had been kept. " 'Tis right we should help brother," she said.

" 'Tis Nellie that I do want," James shouted. He unlocked the table-drawer and took out two bags of silver money. These he set down upon the table before him. He struck the table with his fist. " 'Tis Nellie that I must 'ave," he shouted again.

"Bain't there no other maid?" Kate Tolly asked.

James put the money back into the drawer.

"There were five pounds in each of they bags," he said, "an' 'tis for they who do bring Nell to farm."

James put his elbows upon the table and pressed his hands to his head; he saw dead rabbits hung upon a stick and was feeling them.

In each woman's mind desires had been set in motion by the sight of the money. These desires grew legs like spiders. They began to free their fat sticky bodies, with the help of these spiders' legs, from the mind's mud. This mud was the same as a toad loves to sleep in, only it was denser, colder and more congealed. The desires were like toads, only with spiders' legs. At first they gripped at things with these spiders' legs. Little things that women can take easily: a table-cloth, a piece of carpet, a worn curtain, an old fire-screen. When the spiders' legs held to a thing, an eye was born in the sticky bodies. Each desire grew fatter as it rolled in the mind's mud; they touched many things and became full of eyes. The eyes looked at a bed. The pleasure of taking a young girl to that bed to be greasily thumbed quieted the spiders' legs for the moment. The desires sank into the mud.

Susan Peach pushed out her feet wider apart and swallowed loudly, as though she were feeding the desires that had grown so alive inside her. Kate was looking at James. She was thinking how nice it would be if she could help her brother to get such dainty fare.

"Be Mark in stable?" James asked.

Kate nodded.

"An' where be they boys?"

A chuckle came from under the table.

"Why, 'tis here they be," said Susan, as the two black heads rolled out from underneath. "They boys must 'ave come in wi' the cat."

"Mark bain't nor good for nothing now," James said, "for when 'e do go up to hill 'e don't plough a good furrow."

"Nellie do 'elp 'e," remarked Kate.

James's face darkened. He looked down at the boys. "Mark Only bain't to work no more for Mr. Andrews," he shouted. "Go you to stable and tell 'im so."

The two black heads went out with the cat. When they were gone, Susan looked at the cupboard.

"Just a little drop of drink, James," she urged, "for this be a cold time of year."

James Andrews shook his head. "Drink will come when Nell do come," he said.

The sisters went out. A cat was mewing in the darkness and Susan stooped down to stroke it.

Kate stopped too. “Nell will be a proud one,” she said.

“But they pounds would be nice for we,” observed Susan, who still stroked the cat.

The boys were not noticed when they crept in at the stable door.

Mark was standing beside Ben, with one arm thrown over the horse’s back. He was resting as one rests who is happy at home.

Sam swung on Ben’s tail for a moment, and then two heads popped up from under the horse and stood beside Mark.

“Aunt Nell be wanted at farm,” both heads shouted together, “and thee bain’t to come to stable no more.”

Mark put his hands upon the heads and stroked them gently. The children rubbed against him as though he were a kindly tree.

“Stable bain’t mine no more,” Mark said, looking towards the corn-bin, that was inhabited as usual.

Mr. Tolly’s face became very red; he turned suddenly to Mike Peach and shook his fists.

Mr. Peach, not expecting this sudden attack, ducked his head and covered his face with his hands as though to protect his eyes from damage.

“Peach,” shouted Tolly, still waving his fists dangerously near to his friend, “ ’tis our ’omen. A biting rat be a good toad to what they be, an’ thunder that do strike a man dead bain’t nothing to they. No, Peach,” continued Tolly a little more quietly, “though we mid sit so restful in stable, there be always they wives of ours outside a-thinking of something evil.”

Mike uncovered his face and clenched his fist too, though in a milder manner than Sam Tolly.

“Samuel Tolly,” he said in a mournful way, “we’ve bided in Mark Only’s stable many a night-time wi’ thik lighted lantern on ’is nail. Stable be like to ’eaven for we poor married folk, where no women bain’t to come. A born baby be red an’ kicking, and some men that do die be blue and plimmed up, an’ we poor working men be tired enough by night-time wi’out they women to prick at we. ’Tis nice to shut gate when she be cursing, an’ to walk along road; maybe a laughing maid do pass, maybe she don’t. And then to hear they t’other feet a-coming slow, for they be Sam Tolly’s. There be a star above or thik moon, or else Mrs. Magg’s light in shop, for there be always something to see on way to stable.”

“Be they boys gone?” inquired Mr. Tolly.

“No,” replied Mr. Peach. “Though they be rats, they bain’t rats.”

“What be Uncle Mark doing?” Sam Tolly called.

A murmur came from under the straw.

“ ’E be crying,” the murmur said.

CHAPTER
XIX

One day Farmer Beggwell decided that his largest mangel, that had been tended so carefully during the summer and early autumn, had ceased to grow. The farmer waited patiently until the next Saturday market, and on the morning of that happy day he took the root up with the help of Sam Tolly, and placed it with great care in a hamper filled with straw.

Mr. Beggwell desired to show this new wonder to Farmer Parley and other friends at Stonebridge Market. The mangel was weighed by Charlie Tulk. The older one was taken out of its glass case and placed beside it, looking sulky and crestfallen. The new mangel was the largest. Tolly had expected it to be, for holding it in his arms in the field he had remarked knowingly: “ ’Tis a girt root.”

The hamper being put into the trap, Charlie Tulk, taking upon himself on this occasion the office of stable-man, harnessed the mare Betsy, and watched contentedly Mr. Beggwell drive off with the hamper between his knees, and Mrs. Beggwell, round and ripe as the mangel, sitting beside him.

Mr. Tulk smiled. The mangel, he knew, must surround old Wurzel with a glamour that would bring him more than simple praise. Pride would compel him to treat his friends, and his friends in their turn would treat him, and so the cups would clink merrily, until the stag’s horns that graced the porch of the old Stonebridge inn danced in an odd manner. “It was not likely,” Charlie thought, “that the master would be home very early that afternoon.” Mr. Tulk smiled again. He smiled because he had a little merrymaking of his own arranged for that day.

When the afternoon came he sent Emmie off upon a mission of kindness. The girl went off tiredly. In the Dodderdown lanes, as Charles had expected, she met Nellie Andrews gathering sticks.

When Nellie saw Emmie coming, she let her sticks drop. Nellie did not want to be considered as a poor one who has to look for firing, and to Emmie, too, who was but a servant. The few sticks she had let fall lay as though a foolish rook had wanted to build its nest in the road. Nellie looked at Emmie in the free and easy manner of a lady just out for a walk, and when Emmie asked her to come and see Mrs. Beggwell’s new yellow kitten, she condescendingly accepted the invitation.

“Perhaps,” she thought, “the yellow kitten may be more interesting than stick-gathering—to a lady.”

In Mrs. Beggwell’s kitchen there was a bright fire burning; there was also Mr. Tulk, who poked it and made the flames roar.

“They be gone off,” said Emmie.

Mrs. Nellie Andrews knew who “they” meant.

Besides the pleasant warmth of the fire there was the bright hot flame of the lamp. Kind Mr. Tulk had seen to that too. The Dodderdown lanes had grown cold, and the hedge sticks had been colder, and Nellie felt the warmth pleasant. It was this pleasant warmth perhaps that made her forget that she had come to see Mrs. Beggwell’s new yellow kitten.

When the tea was ready, Emmie Paine went out. “She be just gone to post a little letter,” Charlie said carelessly. He began to wait upon Nellie, handing her what she required, that was but a small slice of bread and butter and a cup of tea. Nellie allowed her eyes to wander round the kitchen as she ate. She remembered the merry times that she used to have with Emmie when they were alone in the house.

The warm kitchen murmurs, that tell of good cooked dinners, surrounded Nellie and made her thoughtful, until she more than half wished that she had never left Mrs. Beggwell to be married. There was the large lamp burning, as though it knew all about the fat barrel full of oil in the outhouse. Nellie looked at the lamp, and she thought of her own cottage.

Was there even a candle there, she could not remember. But Mark would be out perhaps, and, if he were at home, he would not mind sitting in the dark. He could feel his own way to the sofa. Nellie saw the sofa; Mark had bought it at Mr. Lear’s sale for a few shillings. It was worn down to its bones already.

Mr. Tulk did not eat any tea, he said he knew his manners better than to do that. But, when Nellie had finished her own, he limped near to her and said in a respectful voice:

“ ’Tisn’t often that you do go to church these days, Mrs. Andrews. No doubt ’tis tiring to ’ee to hear Mr. Hayball preach, and all’same some do go that do dress grand.”

Nellie looked down at her shabby frock; she had bought no new clothes since her marriage.

“ ’Tis a mortal pity,” sighed Mr. Tulk, speaking sadly as though he looked at all the wickedness in the world with the eyes of a bishop; “ ’tis a mortal pity that they married men can’t live quiet, but poor father did say, when he bought the houses, that they were the worst.”

“Do ’ee mean the houses?” asked Nellie simply.

“No, no, they were large houses; I do mean they married men. An’ ’tis a pity they all don’t live as quiet as James Andrews do down at Church Farm, though poor farmer did always love one maiden.” Tulk sighed again.

“Emmie be gone a long while,” Nellie said. And for some reason, that even we cannot explain, she thought she saw her cottage sofa again.

Mr. Tulk looked at her mournfully. “Emmie be a bad one,” he said.

Nellie started. Something had creaked. Oddly enough, the sofa came into her mind; the sound she had heard was like it when sat on.

“Emmie bain’t very bad, be she?” asked Nellie.

“She do tell lies,” said Charlie, as though he, at least, very much regretted having to tell the truth. “And who would have thought that a married man, whose eyes bain’t good at seeing, should ’ave got she into trouble so quick! An’ where be Emmie now?” he asked, as though he suddenly remembered that she existed in the world.

“James would never touch a girl,” said Nellie, “and his eyes be good enough.”

“But Mark Only be a sly one,” whispered Charles, as though the rude truth had been at last forced from him. “An’ ’tis a mortal pity she should go to ’is own cottage, to marriage-bed or elsewhere.”

Nellie heard odd noises again, in herself this time; she jumped up. She saw it now clear enough—the sofa, Mark and Emmie. He had often laughed about Emmie; Nellie knew the reason at last. The warm kitchen murmur crept about her again and whispered “that she had much better have married James.”

“Emmie do tell of a sofa in cottage,” remarked Mr. Tulk, opening the back-door politely for Nellie, who hurried out. “An’ Mark be a sly one.”

Nellie went out into the darkness.

“There bain’t no yellow kitten living here,” Tulk shouted after her.

She hurried on through the darkness of the lanes. Something soft hit her cheek. She was frightened and stopped, wondering what had touched her. Again something touched her face. It was a dead leaf falling from the trees. Nellie caught this one in her hand. She went on again.

Her troubles had all come from Mark Only, she thought. She had been blown to him by a night wind, like the leaf that she had caught; he had held her fast when he should have let her blow on. If she had but drifted on, she might have become the mistress of Church Farm, and be sitting reading a nice novel instead of running into falling leaves.

Mark had not even given her a child to nestle up to her and feed from her breasts. No, he had brought her nothing but woes and troubles, varied only by his silly laughter, or else his talk all about the horses in the stable.

The cottage roof leaked, but Mark did not care. The rain came upon the bed, but still he would do nothing. The rain drove in in other places too, and the kitchen floor was always damp in wet weather.

Coming downstairs once in the morning to clean up, she had found two large worms under the table, in a puddle of water. She took them up with a shovel and threw them out of the door. She decided then that her house was little better than a grave, with her husband worse than the sexton. And now she could not even go out to visit a yellow kitten without her own sofa creaking at home.

Nellie Andrews opened the cottage door; Mark Only was not the kind of man to lock a door: that she knew well enough. There was no light burning in the room, and all seemed very still. She had not expected to find a fire, because the little heap of sticks so like a rook's nest that she had gathered from the hedges was still, no doubt, lying in the road where she had dropped them.

Nellie found a match-box upon the table and struck a light. Yes, there they were upon the sofa together, and that was why it had creaked so loudly that her inmost hearing had heard it.

Nellie, when she lit the candle, laughed; they looked so queer and so like the two worms. Mark disentangled himself from this troubled position and stared at the candle. Emmie Paine shook herself to rights and began to cry.

After he had watched the candle in a dazed way, Mark looked at his wife. He had thought Emmie was different, though she had not spoken. He went out at the door.

As soon as he had gone out, Nellie felt curiously detached from herself. When the candle had first shown her what was happening, she had two minds to take the two human worms up in the shovel and throw them out of the door as she had once done the two earthy ones. But now that one was gone, she had no objection to the other remaining.

It was not what she had seen going on that troubled her, but she only felt more than she had ever done the discomfort of the little room. The one candle burnt dimly; the lamp, she knew, had been broken. There was the usual earthy smell, as of charnel damp, that was always in the house when no fire was burning. She began to think of what Charlie Tulk had said about James Andrews only having loved one maid. Should she go to him? He had asked her more than once on the sly. Why should she not give up the cottage to the worms, they seemed already to regard her sofa as their own?

Some one knocked at the door, and Nellie called out, “Come in!” Nellie did not appear in the least surprised to receive these new visitors, who were Kate Tolly and Susan Peach. She was no more surprised than she would have been had she known that Gentleman Tulk had limped down the road, shortly after she herself had left Mrs. Beggwell’s, to pay a little visit to Church Farm.

While Susan Peach was smiling because the cottage had a worse sofa than her own, Kate Tolly was regarding with stern looks the weeping Emmie.

“You best be a-going,” she said, “dirty bad thing that ’ee be.”

Emmie had wanted to go before that moment, but Mr. Tulk had told her to stay until some one else came. Here was her dismissal come at last, that she dutifully obeyed by the simple means of going out into the darkness. When Emmie was gone, Kate Tolly took Nellie by the arm.

“You best come to farm with me,” she said. “You do know now what Mark ’ave been a-doing, an’ Emmie mid as well ’ave all of ’e, for she’s child be ’is that be coming.”

“ ’Twill be best for Mark, too,” urged Susan, “for James will send food an’ drink to ’is cottage.”

A large piece of soot, loosened by the wind that blew, came down the chimney and fell with a dull crash and covered the floor of the room. The charnel smell changed to a sooty odour. Nellie saw the mess and was ashamed. She allowed herself to be led out; she did not care very much where they were taking her, so long as it was away from that room.

Mark Only’s cottage was left in silence. But the candle, that in an hour or two would burn itself out, still gave a little light to this home.

Human things lay too about, showing that the late occupiers had been a man and a woman. An old pair of boots, that Mark was wont to make use of indoors when his working ones were wet, lay one here and one there beside the empty hearth, as though they had lost their owner. A red flannelette petticoat had been carelessly thrown on a chair near the window. Nellie had intended to put a new tape into this petticoat when she came home from sticking.

There was a vase of dead flowers, late autumn flowers such as grow in cottage gardens, upon the table. Nellie had meant to throw these away some days ago, but still they were there—there to watch Nellie herself being thrown away; for even culled nature can sometimes have the laugh at the harvester.

Only the chief actors in this little affair, and those dead flowers, knew what household changes were being made that evening. Neither Sam Tolly nor Mr. Peach knew what was happening, although a word or two about the promised money may have reached their ears. They had not gone to the stable since it had been shut to Mark and the care of the horses taken from him and given into the hands of John Dell, the new ploughman.

When they were shoo’d out into the roads by their wives, they had found nothing better to stand beside than the stone cross upon the green. Mr. Peach chose the cross because he wanted something to lean his back against that reminded him of the stable wall.

Sometimes Tom and Sam would play near by, sometimes they would be running or else rolling in the mud of the Dodderdown lanes.

When Mark Only had been taken in the very act of adultery, and had gone out into the darkness of the night, Mr. Tolly and Mike Peach were by the cross watching.

They were watching the front window of Church Farm because there was a light inside. Footsteps went by the green that the friends took to be their wives’ footsteps. The front door at the farm opened, and three women went in. Mr. Tolly whistled softly. The light in the parlour grew brighter than ever; more candles must have been lit.

Sam Tolly and Mike Peach watched the strange phenomenon with intense interest, for no light ever burnt in that room unless at a wedding or a funeral.

They were so entertained that they never noticed how time went on. They waited for something to happen, and it did. The front door opened again, and this time two women only came out, whereas three had gone in.

Footsteps passed the green again; Mr. Tolly and Mike Peach knew their wives for a certainty this time. The footsteps halted, shifted and went sideways, and something chinked that sounded like silver money as they went by.

The two men nodded to these sounds in the darkness, as though their wives’ feet or else the clinking had spoken words and they were nodding an answer. They looked at the farm-house again. The light was on the move. It left the parlour, but soon appeared in the best front bedroom, and there it stayed. Mr. Peach and Sam Tolly watched the light until it went out. Church Farm was in darkness.

Peach felt the cross, in order to make sure that it had not vanished too like the bedroom light. The cross was still there. A strange and unexpected vision came to Mr. Tolly. He fancied he saw a red beast with claws tearing and biting the white furred belly of a snared rabbit.

Mike Peach was about to leave the cross, when the soles of four very worn boots appeared as though balanced in the air exactly in front of him. The boots belonged to Sam and Tom, who had crept upon the green in order to practise standing on their heads.

“What be doing?” Mike Peach innocently asked of the upturned feet. “You bain’t trying to save shoe-leather, be ’ee?”

As though to contradict such a praiseworthy desire, that was indeed very far from their thoughts, in this matter of economy, the boys changed their formation and appeared with their heads at the top.

“I be glad our uncles be out,” said Tom.

“ ’Tisn’t uncles that they be, but fathers,” Sam remarked, wishing to be accurate.

“Sam be right,” observed Mr. Tolly, “for we be fathers.”

“Uncle Mark be out too,” said Tom. “ ‘E do say ’e be looking for they squire’s dogs. Uncle be covered wi’ mud, an’ ’e be listening.”

“Bain’t Nellie home in cottage?” asked Mike Peach.

“Auntie Nell be gone across to farm where door be locked,” replied Tom.

Queer sounds came from Mr. Tolly that at last became words. The words were: “They bracers bain’t nor bloody use no more.” Mr. Tolly kept his hands to his sides.

“Now, young boys,” said Mike Peach in a voice that sounded a little nervous, “they dogs that Mark Only be out listening for bain’t real, be they, for if they be I for woon do think it best to let ’e drown ’isself in peace and quiet, as wold mother always said ’e were going to do?”

“They women,” said Sam Tolly thoughtfully, “would no doubt be glad enough to see poor Mark hurted; so ’tis for we to follow ’e up, or cut ’e down, though they dogs’ feet do a-patter on ground.”

“ ’Tis right,” agreed Mike Peach, “that we should find ’e. Only they boys best go in front, for ever since I did look up at sun when ’e were once darkened in daytime, that blamed sun do shine in my left eye when ’e bain’t invited.”

“If thee’s got a shining sun in eye, ’tis best ’ee do go backward before all of us,” suggested Mr. Tolly.

“ ‘Tisn’t no sun that do shine, ’tis a sun that do blind,” explained Mr. Peach, “an’ so they boys ’ad better go on afore.”

This wise arrangement being settled, Sam and Tom led the way to where they had last seen Mark Only. He was still there, leaning, a dark stooping figure, under the wall of the lane.

“Mark,” said Mr. Tolly in as gentle a voice as he could manage, “don’t ’ee bide out listening for they dogs no more.”

“Mark,” said Mr. Peach, “you be out in darkness.”

Tom and Sam nestled up to Mark. “We bain’t no dogs,” they said soothingly, “we be boys.” They held his hands and induced him to move. They led him to his cottage. They went in with him. Sam lit a match and found a little piece of candle beside the burnt-out one. This he lit and placed carefully into the candlestick. The boys went out of the cottage and softly closed the door. Mark was alone.

Mr. Peach peeped through the window.

“Mark Only do look at light,” he remarked.

“So ’e do,” said Tolly, “but maybe ’tis darkness to ’im, same as thik blinding sun ’ee did tell of. Or else ’tis they dogs ’e do see.”

“ ’Tis best we be a-going,” Mike Peach whispered.

Mark was alone. He began to feel about the room as though he looked for something that was lost. He was looking for his wife, for sometimes, when they were first married, she would hide from him. He felt the sofa; no, she was not there. He leant to look under the table; in doing so he struck his forehead. The pain from the blow hurt him; he rested against the table. The pain went and came again, as pain will. Mark wanted Nellie. If ever he had come home with his hands cut, she had always bathed the wounds carefully and bound them up in clean rags.

Once Ben had grown impatient because Tom was pulling hairs out of his mane, and had stamped upon Mark's foot. He had limped home to Nellie, who nursed and took care of the foot. Where was Nellie now?

Soon Mark began to feel about the room again, hoping to find her. On one chair he found a half-finished glove that she had been knitting. Mark felt the glove as if he suspected that his wife's hand was in it. He began to call for her, but received no answer. "Nellie," he called, "where be 'ee hiding, Nell?"

He sat down upon the sofa and took off his boots. His boots were filled with paper, that he had put in them to keep the damp out. Once Nellie had caught him tearing up her Bible, that had been given to her when she was a child at the Sunday-school. He was stuffing the Bible, cover and all, into his boots. He now took the paper out of them because his feet had hurt him. After doing so he opened the stairway door.

Mark stood a moment on the first step and listened. He heard nothing.

"Nellie," he called, and laughed. " 'Ee be gone on to bed, an' 'tis in bed 'ee be hiding, I do suppose."

Mark heard nothing. "Nell be tired," he said. "It do tire a maiden to pick up they little sticks; she be sleeping, I do expect."

He climbed the stairs, gently placing his stockinged feet upon each stair so that he might not wake her. In the bedroom Mark felt the bed, expecting to feel the warm body of a girl gently breathing in profound slumber. But no girl was there. He still felt about clumsily with his hands. He took up something: this was a chemise that Nellie had carelessly thrown upon the bed. It was the same garment that had guided his plough before they were married.

"Nellie," said Mark, "be 'ee gone an' left I?" Still holding the girl's chemise, Mark Only lay down upon the bed. No Nellie had answered his question.

Mark sat up and listened.

“Where be they death dogs now?” he said aloud. “I would pat an’ stroke they bad dogs if they was to come.”

An ivy bough beat the window.

Mark listened. He lay down again.

The wind outside grew quieter.

“Nell be gone,” he said, “an’ I be tired.”

CHAPTER
XX

At Church Farm the next morning there was cold bacon for breakfast. James Andrews ate greedily. He had never felt so hungry before. He looked at Nellie, who poured out his tea, and was surprised to see that she ate nothing.

They hardly spoke a word to each other. After breakfast, James went to turn the cows out. Nellie cleared the plates away and washed them up. She next went upstairs to see to the bedroom. She was a servant again, not a help this time, but just a servant as she had been before she came to Mrs. Beggwell's. She was the woman who serves the man. Something had pushed her into this new place.

She hardly knew what had happened. At home in her own cottage she had eaten so little of late, for money had nearly failed them. And then, after going to see the yellow kitten, she had found Mark with Emmie. A little later the creeping mist, hot and wine-fed, moved about the farm parlour until bedtime. She had wished to go back then to Mark, only James would not let her go. And what could she do against a strong man? She would have to live with James now, she supposed.

Nellie shook up the feather-bed, just as she used to do at Mrs. Beggwell's, and straightened it out with her hands. She made the bed carefully. As she turned back the sheets she was startled by a girl's voice screaming below stairs. Nellie wondered who the girl was who was making such a noise. She hurriedly finished the bed and ran down to see. In the kitchen she found Emmie Paine being pressed against the dresser by James Andrews, who was kissing her greedily on the mouth.

Because she had become a servant again, Nellie's first thought was for the cups and dishes; she knew all about the farmer's brute strength now, and she feared they would all be broken. She called out, asking the two struggling ones to be careful.

James stepped back a little.

"They maidens do wake up a quiet chap," he said. His face burnt and his eyes were red with the struggle. He looked at Nellie, caught hold of her and began to fondle her too. Nellie repulsed him, and going to the dresser, put two plates straight that had been shaken out of their places.

Emmie looked at Nellie too, as though she was astonished to see her so peacefully inclined even after this second intrusion.

"I be only just come," she explained tearfully. " 'Twas Charlie Tulk that did send I for cough medicine, for wold Wurzel 'ave a-caught a cold standing in Stonebridge street showing off 'is mangel. An' when tin be give to I, there be the strawberry jam to buy over at shop."

James watched the girls, first one and then the other, with a hungry look, as though he wondered which to bite next.

"This be the tin, bain't it?" asked Nellie, taking down from the dresser the same tin that Emmie Paine had brought to the house before Mrs. Andrews died.

"Yes, that be en," said Emmie, taking the tin, "an' Charlie do say 'tis an expensive medicine to buy."

Emmie turned to the door. James stopped her; he began to pull her to the dresser again. Something rolled in at the door, pulled James's leg and rolled out again. This was a black head. James released Emmie, who went out after a boy's black head.

Nellie began to tidy the room. "It was nice," she thought, "to have good furniture to dust." Hers had been good at first, until the shopmen came and took most of it away, leaving only the rubbish behind. After tidying the kitchen, she found the brush and pan and went upstairs to sweep the bedrooms.

James sat in a chair beside the kitchen fire. He had apparently forgotten that he had a farm to see to. Instead of thinking about the farm he was thinking about women. There was Ivy Gale, who used to come and fetch milk sometimes; she always had a merry word to say. When she came next he meant to invite her in; he would take her to the parlour where the couch was; there was money in the drawer to pay for such doings.

He saw Nancy Squibb, who had once or twice driven a Madder sow from Farmer Mew's over to the Church Farm-yard to be left for a few days with the Andrews' white boar. Nancy had said some funny things. Nancy was a big plump girl, who waddled like the sow she drove, but she was just the one to accept all James's new behaviour with a relish. He saw her with him.

And there was Rose Pring; she was a little young perhaps, but decidedly kittenish. He saw her on the couch too.

James leant back in his chair.

“ ’Tis I that do know they maidens now,” he said, and laughed.

Some one knocked at the front door. James knew that no one except visitors of note knocked at that door, so he went to open it himself. In the passage he paused to listen. Some one was sweeping upstairs—a girl. As soon as he had answered the knock James intended to go upstairs.

The girls he had thought about in the kitchen had grown together and had become one. This one was the girl whose brush James now heard sweeping so virtuously.

James opened the door. The knocker was Mr. Hayball, who was standing in the porch and looking up at the sky.

“In the year of our Lord 1502,” said Mr. Hayball, “rain fell for exactly ten minutes in the Sahara.”

James Andrews invited the clergyman to come in; he had a subject, too, to talk about that morning, as well as the clergyman.

Mr. Hayball chose a chair from whence he could look out of the window.

James Andrews went into the passage and called Nellie. “You be wanted,” he said. Nellie, hearing her new master call, came obediently downstairs.

James pushed her in front of Mr. Hayball. “ ’Tis a woman,” he said, “that be mine.”

Mr. Hayball looked at Nellie as though she were a new kind of thundercloud that, instead of coming from the sky, had risen up from the Church Farm kitchen floor. He had looked so long at flint-stones and Roman bricks and rain-storms, that he had near forgotten that there were other matters than rain that made holes in soft soil and broke up virgin ground. Here was this James upon whom drops of a strange nature had been falling, until a crack came in his mass and he was exploded.

Mr. Hayball had often seen Nellie walking down the road, touching the mud so nicely. “A pretty married woman”—he had looked at her as that, and Mark Only’s wife.

But why Mark Only—whose fault was that? Not the dead centipede’s, surely, though there was no need for it to choose the font to die in.

How foolish to have misunderstood the mother and to have named the child so oddly. Hailstones must have fallen in Mark’s life because of this odd second name—hailstones and coals of fire. Hailstones that could not be measured as soft rain could be measured. And here was Mark Only’s wife risen up as a thunder-storm before him.

In order to quiet and keep down the strange thoughts that had come to him, Mr. Hayball looked out of the window. “Does this window face the south, Mr. Andrews?” he asked mildly.

James did not answer.

“Don’t you know which way your own window faces?” the clergyman inquired again.

“Do ’ee know what a maiden be like?” James asked in his turn. “For if ’ee don’t, I’ll show woon to ’ee.”

James held Nellie nearer.

“ ’Tis a woman,” he said, “an’ you may feel what she be.” He pulled up Nellie’s sleeve so that her arm was exposed to the shoulder. And before she could prevent him, he had torn open her blouse and under-bodice, and her breasts like meek twin doves were seen.

Mr. Hayball’s face turned very red.

“You be a fine woon, you be,” James shouted. “You do know all about field stones and dewponds, but ’tisn’t none of they that do make a man know ’is life. Thee be a dry woon wi’ all they drops of rain and running waters. ’ee do know what there be under chalk stones, but do ’ee know what do bide under a woman?”

Mr. Hayball walked to the door, but James, letting Nellie go, stood in his way.

“A woman,” he shouted, “did ’ee ever hear thik word afore? How many drops of water be in the eyes of thik word? There be blood in en, and what be thik blood made on? I do know thik word of blood now, an’ if they women be a-going for money, bain’t I cows to sell?”

Mr. Hayball tried to get out, but James barred the way. He was still shouting.

“You be a nice woon to hunt out they Roman pennies, but ’ave ’ee ever held a maiden down who fought in thee’s arms, yes, and pushed and cried out when ’ee did master she as a man should do.”

James Andrews stood aside.

“ ’Tisn’t raining, be it?” he inquired. “ ’Tisn’t raining to-day, so ’ee needn’t run to Rectory to measure they little drops. Ivy Gale mid be a-coming, an’ I’ll bide and wait for she, or else for they t’others. No, ’tain’t for rain-storms I be a-waiting, ’tis for maidens.

“Go,” he shouted, throwing open the door, “you do know nothing, you bain’t nothing, but I be something, for I do know what a maid be.”

Mr. Hayball walked slowly home. A cold wind was blowing, and he seemed unable to resist its force; he felt himself to be what he was—an old friendless man. He had collected stones all his life, “but would some one at the last give him a gravestone?” he wondered.

He sat in his study chair and looked at the monthly report that he had been preparing about the rainfall. He could not, however, take away his tired years by looking at that. He took up his notes and threw them into the fire. He leant back in his chair and closed his eyes. But though his eyes were closed, he saw two soft dove-like breasts and the white bare arm of a girl.

CHAPTER XXI

For many years a certain cottage in the main street of Shelton had been left empty. Mr. Pink, the landlord’s agent, had “let it go,” so people said, as though it were a horse bolting, and the little Shelton boys had thrown stones through the windows to make it go faster. The last inhabitant of this ruined cottage was old Miss Thorne, who “did not like other people,” so it was said.

This may have been true, though Miss Thorne must have disliked herself as much as she disliked others. Her aged body must have offended her in some old bygone times, for she treated herself badly enough. She ate what pigs refused, never washed herself, never took off her clothes, and spent her day in playing with the shillings that she drew for her old-age pension instead of spending them.

During the last month of her life, little children would often peep in at her window to see what she was doing. She would generally be seen to be kneeling on the floor and rolling the shillings that Mr. Marks, the postmaster, always kept on purpose for her when she came on Fridays.

One day about dinner-time, the children reported to their mothers the interesting news that Miss Thorne was rolling herself about instead of rolling the shillings. They had looked at her, they said, through the window. She was rolling from one side of the room to the other, and then back again.

Little Peggy Pim, being an accurate child, described her thus: “The wold ’oman do roll same as Farmer Mew’s dog did howl and roll when farmer shot en.” The resemblance was proper, for as Miss Thorne rolled she howled too.

The next day after this report was made, quite a little crowd collected to watch at the window, some of whom clapped their hands when Miss Thorne rolled again, though there was a general feeling of disappointment about the howls, for they had become mere low moans of awful agony. It was then that Mr. Potten, the undertaker, who was on his way home to Norbury, happened to pass by the window, and being interested in what he saw, remained to watch too.

“She’ll be stretching out soon,” he carelessly remarked. From his long experience in the last particulars of human life, Mr. Potten understood what was happening. In a very few minutes Miss Thorne did “stretch out,” as he said she would. She made an odd gulping sound in her throat, rolled over once more and finished the game.

Mr. Potten called at the doctor’s, who was smoking his after-dinner pipe, and took all the credit to himself for having discovered that Miss Thorne had died of a cancer on her own floor amongst dust and shillings.

The cottage went quickly after that: the thatch fell off and the windows began to get more broken. But no children lingered beside it, because Peggy Pim had been heard to say that Miss Thorne was still seen rolling there even after her dead body was taken to the churchyard. Peggy’s mother blamed her little girl for telling lies, “for dead people,” she said, “can’t be in two places at once.” But Peggy still persisted in telling her story.

About the same time that Nellie Andrews was sweeping the bedroom at Church Farm, a man who was walking through Shelton paused in front of Miss Thorne’s cottage. He was looking up in a professional manner at the chimney. The man had a sweep’s brush over his shoulder and carried in his hand a soot-bag filled with other possessions. He stood thoughtfully and looked at the ruined cottage.

Mr. Pink, the landlord’s agent, was walking his horse by, because there were stones in the road and he feared his horse might pick one up in one of its four feet.

“ ’Tis empty,” the stranger remarked to Mr. Pink; “ ’tis an empty house.”

Mr. Pink stopped his horse, got out of the trap and proceeded to lift up each of his horse’s feet in turn.

“Do ’ee think house will do,” inquired the sweep of Mr. Pink, “for a servant who bain’t married but should be?”

Mr. Pink nodded as though he thought it might.

“An’ what may the rent be?”

“Six pounds a year,” answered the agent.

The stranger thought for a moment. “There bain’t no objection,” he asked, speaking very slowly, “to a respectable sweep, aged fifty or sixty, taking of it, be there?”

Mr. Pink did not think there ought to be.

“Nor no objection to a servant named Emmie that should be married though she bain’t, biding as a married ’oman wi’ thik respectable chimney-sweep?”

Mr. Pink was considering which of his horse’s four feet was the most likely to pick up a stone when he started again, so he got into the trap without replying.

“ ’Tis a very good chimney,” the stranger said, “an’ they bricks be bricks.”

He tried the door. It opened at once. He stood in the low porch and looked out into the street, as though the house had been his for at least half a century.

“Sweep’s name be Thomas,” he called out to Mr. Pink, who shook the reins cautiously, hoping the horse would move without gathering up any stones. The horse, for no reason at all, happened to look round at Mr. Thomas in the doorway. It at once started off at a gallop, nearly shaking Mr. Pink out of the trap.

Towards evening Peggy Pim ran home in terror. “ ’E be come,” she called out to her mother.

“Who be come?” Mrs. Pim asked.

“T’wold black man,” Peggy replied. “ ’E be come after wold Mother Thorne.”

“But she be buried,” said Peggy’s mother.

“ ’Er ghostie bain’t,” answered the child. . . .

CHAPTER
XXII

Ever since Emmie Paine had dropped into the open maw of Gentleman Tulk, she had felt that some one was watching her. Who this some one was she did not know. At first it had merely watched, but now it was beginning to pull. It wanted to pull her away from Mr. Tulk's pressing endearments, away for ever.

A few days after Mr. Pink, the agent, had let Miss Thorne's cottage, when Emmie was putting on her hat to take her evening out, the thing pulled harder still; it not only pulled but it looked at her until she saw what it was. The thing became white and real; it became a chalk-pit in the downs, beyond Shelton, where she used to play as a child. "Just one step over my grassy edge and all will be finished," it said, giving her another pull.

If Emmie had cried instead of going out, Charlie Tulk might have drawn her to him again. But instead of crying, she walked through Dodderdown towards Shelton.

The evening was dark, but Emmie saw before her the steep whiteness of the Shelton chalk-pit all the better for the darkness. Going through Shelton she noticed that most of the houses had pink curtains, but she saw her house shining now as all white.

But why should Emmie stop? The thing still pulled and yet she stopped!

She was standing before an uncurtained window and looking into a clean whitewashed room where a man was peeling potatoes. Was she back again at Mrs. Ashton's, with that good friendly sweep, who, though himself half up the chimney, was advising her to choose another place where she might eat butter instead of margarine? Mr. Thomas's queer message had stopped the pull for a while of either Charlie or the other thing. But they soon began to pull again. And now both those pulls ceased.

Emmie watched Mr. Thomas eagerly, as she did when he gave her good advice at Mrs. Ashton's.

Although his clothes showed what his occupation in life was, Mr. Thomas was surrounded by neatness and cleanliness. Hearing a slight noise outside his window, he dropped the potato that he had begun to peel, into the bowl again, and opened the street door.

“There bain’t no woon outside talking to the dark night, be there?” he inquired. “There bain’t no woon named Emmie in road who be a servant?”

Within a few moments after Mr. Thomas had asked these two questions the scene in the sweep’s whitewashed room was changed; a girl was added to it; a girl who, although she had been pulled two ways to destruction, could now rest in safety.

Mr. Thomas sat beside the fire, and looked with pride first at the wide clean chimney that he had swept nearly every day, so that there should be no soot to fall when the servant came, and then at Emmie, who had taken the knife from him and was busy peeling the potatoes.

When he took her home to Dodderdown, Mr. Thomas explained what a good chimney there was in the cottage, and how every one in the neighbourhood clamoured for his attendance upon their chimneys, and that when she married him, which he wanted her to do at once, the sooner a baby came to play with his sweep’s brushes the better pleased he would be.

Emmie said “good-bye” before they were quite into Dodderdown, because she heard heavy unsteady footsteps coming behind and she wished to run on.

She left Mr. Thomas standing, a black figure in the road. The unsteady footsteps drew nearer to him.

CHAPTER
XXIII

Charlie Tulk was now in the habit of expecting good things. He expected, and the good things came.

The visible shapes that pleased him the best when they came were women and bottles. Wine he had begun to wish for, and wine bottles were brought to him by Mrs. Beggwell. Port he preferred, and port wine came to him.

But alas! there is no state of being, however felicitous, that entirely satisfies human desires. Mr. Tulk had begun to be dissatisfied with his bed. He wished for a feather-bed with white sheets and soft blankets and an eiderdown quilt. This new wish of his showed how promising was his striving after betterment, but unfortunately, because he could not at once have his wish fulfilled, the disappointment made him look at certain other things with annoyance. The hills of Dodderdown he never liked, but he now began to call them vulgar. He thought of them as mere beggars' backs covered with lousy moss, and his annoyance became excessive whenever he looked towards them.

When the other pulling had taken Emmie Paine down the Shelton road, Mr. Tulk sat in his granary, and having shut out the sight of those vulgar hills, he sat upon his bed and looked at a port-wine bottle that he had just opened. He had tasted one glass of it. And he now wanted Emmie. Mr. Tulk had not a jealous nature, but when he wanted a girl he expected her to come to him.

As he waited for Emmie, with the rope near to him, he tried to ease his impatience to be a doing by thinking of other things.

Being naturally of an altruistic nature, he always had a loving wish to help others. And that was why, when he heard that Mr. Beggwell had caught a cold showing off his mangel, he had sent Emmie for his tin of cough medicine and the strawberry jam. This he had handed to Mrs. Beggwell, advising her to give it to her husband if the cough got worse, under strawberry jam, though not much at a time. Mr. Beggwell coughed more and still kept his bed. This Charlie thought to be, considering the good quality of his medicine, a little curious. He had a question to ask Emmie about that, with the rope handy.

After a while of waiting, Mr. Tulk began to think that he had better amuse himself with the wine first and Emmie afterwards, instead of Emmie first and the wine afterwards. He even went so far as to explain to himself why Emmie had not come. He thought it likely that old Wurzel had been taken worse and that Emmie was sent for the doctor, or else, and this he considered the more likely, for Mr. Potten of Norbury. Mr. Tulk drank off three glasses.

The world now began to please him more than ever; he had shut out those beggarly hills and the wine made him merry.

To aid his happy state by seeing money, Mr. Tulk took from his pocket ten Treasury notes of one pound each. James Andrews had given him these for services rendered. Mr. Tulk put them back again in his pocket and spat on the floor. He moved his hay bed to one side and opened the long box. From this he took out Peter Andrews' will. He wished to have the will in front of him and drink to it, so he opened it out and nailed it up on the granary wall as though it were a picture.

Charlie drank again and continued drinking. And as he drank the more frolicsome he was, and the more ready for the appearance of Emmie.

In the happy state that he was now in, Mr. Tulk began to play with the rope. There was still a noose at one end; this he put round his own neck, intending to do the same to Emmie when she came.

He drank to Peter Andrews' will and finished the bottle. He climbed up upon his bed, kicked the hay down and began to dance. The rope got in his way, so he threw the loose end up over the beam, where, unknown to Charlie, a large knot that was in the rope-end caught in a nail.

Had Gentleman Tulk possessed two legs of equal dancing power, all might have been well. But as he hopped to and fro, he chanced to go too near his bed's edge and his lame leg slipped and Tulk fell. The distance between the bed and the ground was but three feet, but the rope that was caught firmly by the nail in the beam just prevented his feet from touching the granary floor, and so he hanged by the neck; which method of hanging, according to some sad human experiences, is not calculated to prolong a man's life. . . .

For some while this same evening Mike Peach and Sam Tolly had stood beside the green, waiting to see if Mark Only would come to the cross. Mark did not come, because, the wind being still very cold, "working up for snow," Mr. Peach said, he wandered the Dodderdown lanes in company with the ravens.

Though Mark did not appear, some one else did. This was Mrs. Tite. Her master had sent her to catch the last evening post at Shelton with a letter he had written to the editor of the *Southern Mail*, saying that he could send no more reports about the rainfalls.

After posting her letter, Mrs. Tite paid a visit to the Shelton Inn. Coming out from thence, she proceeded on her way home somewhat unsteadily.

"Never no more," Mrs. Tite mournfully remarked, coming near to and addressing Mike Peach. "For when a night be come that a black bottle in road do talk, 'tis time to give up drinking."

"What were it thee saw in road?" inquired Sam Tolly.

" 'Twas a black bottle," replied Mrs. Tite, waving her umbrella in the direction of Shelton, "that did tell I to stop the drinking and to mind me master's meals. An' so I will too, wi' God a-helping to lay table-cloth." Having expressed herself thus, Mrs. Tite walked up the road with a sober step.

" 'Tis best we be moving too," remarked Mr. Peach, when she was gone, "for me left foot be lost."

"I hope 'twill come back to 'ee," said Mr. Tolly considerately, beginning to walk up the Dodderdown lane.

The friends walked on until they came to the sheltered wall of Mr. Beggwell's great barn that was exactly opposite the granary where Charles Tulk resided. A light came from Mr. Tulk's window because his candle was burning.

Sam Tolly and Mike Peach felt the want of Mark's stable more than ever now that such cold weather had set in; Mike even had dreamt once that he crept in again as a spider and made a fine web above the corn-bin.

The light in the granary window reminded Mr. Peach of Mark Only's lantern and made him very mournful.

"Some folk," remarked Peach, "be fortunate."

"Yes," said Tolly, gazing at the light too, "some be."

"There be living in thik place," went on Mr. Peach, talking as much to keep himself warm as for any other reason, "a gentleman named Mr. Tulk, an' 'tis said that 'e be favoured."

“So ’e be,” assented Sam Tolly, “by they women.”

For a few moments the two onlookers watched the granary light with silent envy.

“They do say,” burst out Mr. Peach, overcome by his own thoughts, “that ’e do ’ave wine an’ beauty brought to him free an’ gratis.”

“I should like,” said Sam Tolly, “for to see this happy man. His life be pleasant, nothing do Charlie ’ave to worry him; no wives, only women; no weddings, only wine bottles; no work, only rabbiting.”

“When I be rick-thatching,” remarked Mike Peach, looking into the winter sky and gazing at the constellation of Orion as though he were thinking, as indeed he was, of climbing up to thatch the Giant’s Belt with good stout reed,—“when I be rick-thatching, I be thinking.”

“ ’Tis as well ’ee should,” said Sam Tolly.

“And sometimes,” continued Peach, “I be watching.”

Tolly nodded.

“An’ I’ve seen happy Tulk, that do bide where light be, do things to they maids that bain’t proper for a simple married man, same as I be, to witness.”

Mr. Peach watched the sky, and the cold stars looked back at him. “ ’Twould take,” he said, “a score of spar bundles and a waggon of reed to thatch thik stack of stars.”

“Do ’ee think,” asked Tolly of Peach, “that thik happy man, where light be, would let we sit for a while out of the way of they staring stars?”

“Maybe ’e might,” replied Mike Peach, “if there bain’t no maiden wi’ ’im.”

Mr. Tolly, who was closely followed by his companion, went up to the granary door and knocked softly. Receiving no reply to his polite knocking, he began to hammer the door in real earnest. “Happiness do make a man silent,” he said.

“Perhaps,” hinted Peach, “wine bottle bain’t finished.”

Mr. Tolly opened the door.

Inside the granary there were spread about the floor evidences of the merry habits of the occupier, who was himself hanging from the beam with an evil look, death marked, upon his face.

“Samuel Tolly,” said Mr. Peach, whose eyes were glued to this dreadful picture of happiness, “do my spoken words sound?”

“Be thee talking?” inquired Tolly in his turn.

“Sam,” said Mr. Peach, “we bain’t here, be us?”

“No,” replied Mr. Tolly, hastily retreating, “we be in bed.”

Once outside, Mike Peach carefully closed the granary door, and the two friends walked slowly to their homes without speaking one word more.

CHAPTER XXIV

During the cold weather Dodderdown Village felt like a young girl whose husband, for no sensible reason, begins to be rude to her. Real winter had come before, but only for hours, and had merrily hardened the meadows for a day or two, or covered them with a night's garment of snow for the cows to wonder at in the morning.

But now, even Sam Tolly's pig lay in its inner sty, from whence it but looked and begged Mr. Tolly, as well as a pig's eye could beg, to pull the trough into the shelter. Sam Tolly, who loved his pig, did what it asked.

It was not until after Gentleman Tulk's funeral that Peter Andrews' lost will, which had been found in the granary, was laid open for inspection, after being shown to Mr. Pratt the lawyer, who charged the usual statutory fee for seeing it, upon the front parlour table at Church Farm.

Mr. Tulk, whose unexpected but natural death was a useful delight, coming in such cold weather, to all who heard of it, as anyone else's would have been in a similar case, had been followed to his grave as chief mourner by no less a person than old Wurzel himself.

His presence there, not as one who is carried by others, proved to the onlookers that Farmer Beggwell had recovered from his cold. Certainly his recovery had been by no means hastened by Charlie's cough medicine, and for a simple reason—because the honest farmer had never tasted any. When his cough was at its worst, Mrs. Beggwell used indeed to take it up to him at tea-time, according to directions, between the bread and the jam. But it happened that each day, about that time, Sam Tolly had called to ask how his master did, and to report about the spreading of the dung upon the chosen field that was to be ploughed ready for the mangels of the next year.

Mr. Beggwell always asked to see Sam Tolly upstairs. And Mrs. Beggwell would leave the man with her husband and go downstairs.

Tolly's bedside behaviour, as soon as he was left alone with his master, might appear to any unknowing party as being a trifle queer; but by no means really so, if we may explain here that Sam Tolly considered himself to be a far better doctor and to know of a far better medicine than Charlie Tulk. On each of his visits, Mr. Tolly would drag out from under the farmer’s bed the hamper that contained the great mangel, and would proceed to cut out a slice of the root for his master to eat.

“ ’Tis a cure for all they illnesses,” Sam Tolly would say.

As Farmer Beggwell did not wish to insult his wife by not taking her cure too, Sam Tolly, with the natural distaste that one doctor has for another’s preparations, threw the bread and jam every evening out of the window. And the next day Mrs. Beggwell would be surprised to find dead hens in the back-yard.

Everything in the Church Farm parlour was prepared as for a festival in honour of the discovered will.

A servant had been working there, a servant who had a master. This servant was Nellie.

Her master had settled down into the sullen life that he had always led. He merely fed himself upon Nellie as though she were an extra slice of treacle pudding. His first burst of excitement over a woman’s body soon died down. Nellie was become but an indoor cow, who worked at making the butter from the other cows, and who sold skimmed milk at the door.

In this kind world, when once a man hurts his brother, he wants to go on hurting him. James had hurt Mark, and though he was not more cruel than anyone else, still he wanted to go on hurting him. He had gone on hurting him, and now he wished for Mark to come to Church Farm so that he might give him the lost will of his father to hold in his hands.

Susan Peach sat beside the parlour table near to her sister Kate. Her fish-like hands lay in her lap. She was waiting for the household servant to bring her meat. Kate Tolly held her handkerchief in her hand, ready to wipe her mouth when the time came. James sat moodily in the great chair that the servant had placed for him at the head of the table.

“Emmie Paine be going to be married to sweep,” Kate said, biting her lip crossly.

Susan nodded, blinking at the table-cloth.

“ ’Tis to be hoped ’e’ll beat she,” Kate snapped, replying to her own remark.

Under the table a conversation was being carried on in loud whispers.

“Auntie Nellie be doing all the work,” said Tom. “An’ now there bain’t no gaiters moving to sofa, nor no little feet asking for they gaiters.”

“All be very quiet,” whispered Sam. “An’ there bain’t no Charlie to tap ’is stick on road.”

“What be it like to be buried?” inquired Tom, creeping near to Sam. “It don’t hurt ’ee, do it?”

“No,” answered Sam, “I don’t think it do, unless they do drop ’ee down into grave, an’ then a man do wake up in ’eaven to rub ’is bad back.”

“Mr. Potten do dig ’ee in, and God do dig ’ee out,” remarked Tom thoughtfully.

“Our fathers be quiet,” said Sam. Sam spoke truthfully. Mr. Tolly and Mike Peach were sitting near to each other, but without opening their mouths. Since their visit to the granary, Sam Tolly had grown thinner and his buttons remained in their proper places. And Peach always saw a distorted, blackened face in his left eye, that had taken the place of his old enemy the sun.

“Boys,” James Andrews called out commandingly, “go and bring in Mark Only, for father’s will be found.”

The black heads went out at the door. No one spoke a word while they were gone except the north wind that howled and moaned like a wild beast in the chimney.

The black heads returned alone.

“Where be Mark?” asked James.

“ ’E be out in falling snow, looking for they dogs.” The heads spoke together.

“You told ’e father’s will be found?”

“We told ’e so, and all ’e did say was that ’e wanted nothing now, only they dogs.”

The black heads went to the door; they wanted to find their uncle again and to get him into his cottage out of the cold.

James called them back. “Bide where ’ee be,” he shouted.

Servant Nellie set out glasses and plates upon the table; she went to the pantry and returned with a large ham. She asked James about the wine.

“Bring out all they bottles,” he said.

Tolly looked at Peach, who sat with his left eye tightly shut.

Even though Sam Tolly saw that face too, he was forced to ask his friend one more question. “Be there another written word that be worse than ‘Damnation’?” he inquired.

“There be,” replied Mike Peach, “an’ ’tis ‘ ’oman.’ ”

Mr. Tolly looked at Susan Peach.

She did not return his look because the wine was come. . . .

Mark Only crouched beside the cross upon the green. Soft fluttering things like white gnats touched his face. These were snowflakes. Mark got up, and went towards his cottage; there was shelter there and food, food that the ravens had brought. He came to the wall that he had rested upon on his wedding night. Here Mark stayed and listened—he even spoke.

“They be good dogs,” he muttered, “they be gotten quiet; they do want to lick I now, they good quiet dogs.”

Mark moved away from the wall.

“They be gone,” he said, “they be gone up to hills and they do want I to follow.” He began to stumble along the path to the hills. The wind moaned round him in freezing gusts; he climbed the steep lane slowly, staggering from side to side like a drunken man.

Mark found the gate into the field.

“Here,” he called, “don’t ’ee run from I no more, I do know ’ee do bide about somewhere on hills.”

Near the farther hedge a drift of snow had collected. Mark dimly saw the whiteness of this drift.

“ ’Tis Nell,” he said aloud; “she were a-wearing thik frock when she did guide I. Nellie be standing near to hedge; ’tis a good maid to guide I to end of field so well.”

Mark stumbled over the hard ground that the thin driven snow barely covered; he had not slept for many nights and was worn out and very tired. He slipped and fell down. He did not try to get up, but remained still.

A wild rush of wind passed, and near by there was a crash. This was the lonely tree blown down.

Mark spoke again. “ ’Twas a kind maid to lead I to they quiet dogs,” he murmured. “In olden times I did use to fear they death’s dogs, but now they be all round a-licking of I. They dogs be kinder than warm stable, they dogs be, an’ there bain’t nor wife nor maid that be so loving kind as they good dogs.”

Mark Only said no more. The wind blew his coat and shirt open, and his neck and chest were laid bare. The lonely tree was fallen, and Mark was fallen too like the tree. The dogs had him, the good dogs.

“ ’Twas strange,” James Andrews said to his servant, who was now also his wife, spring-time having come again to Dodderdown, “that father’s will should ’ave been same as mother’s.”

“Lawyers do copy they papers all like one another, I do expect,” answered Nellie wearily.

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 *Mark Only* by Theodore Francis Powys]