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THE LORD OF THE HARVEST

BY

M. BETHAM-EDWARDS

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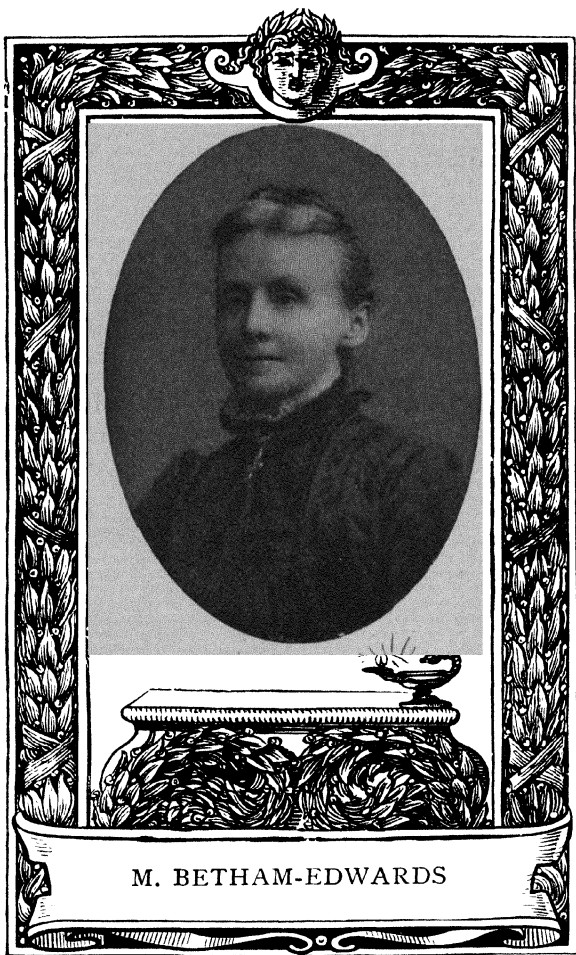
‘A novel to be recommended to all readers of taste.’—*The Times*.

‘Simple and interesting—admirable opening scene.’—*The Westminster Gazette*.

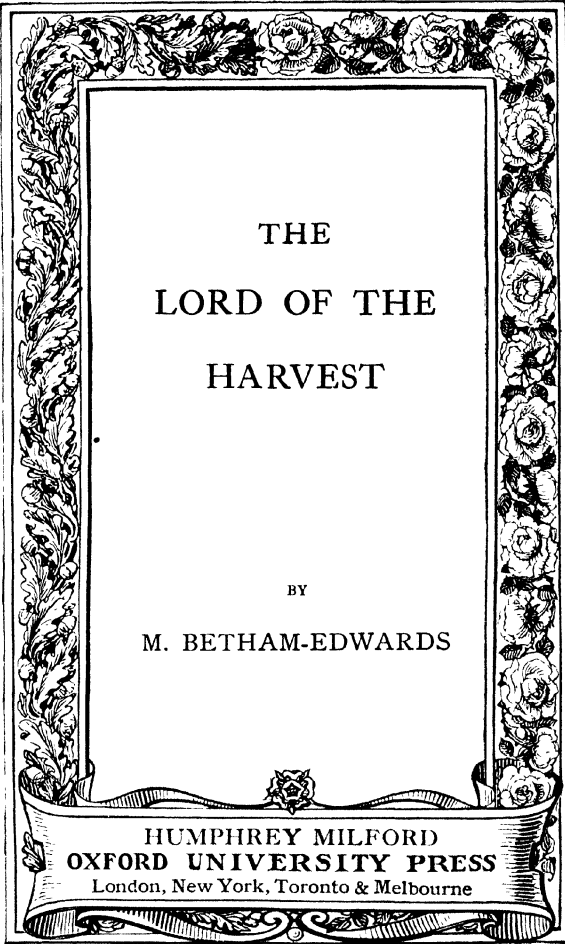
‘Carries us along. The farm-house maids are delightful.’—*The Daily Chronicle*.

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‘Toutes ces scènes de la vie de campagne dans le Suffolk d’autrefois sont rendues avec le sentiment très juste et très profond de la nature.’—*La Revue des Deux Mondes*.



M. BETHAM-EDWARDS



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HUMPHREY MILFORD
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
London, New York, Toronto & Melbourne

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LORD OF THE HARVEST**

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M. BETHAM-EDWARDS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY FREDERIC HARRISON



HUMPHREY MILFORD
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
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INTRODUCTION

THIS delicious idyll is a home-made picture of East Anglia in the early days of Victoria, now some seventy years ago ; an age of corn tillage and high rents, of old-world farming, and quaint provincial life ; innocent of railroads, free trade, popular education, cheap press, and labourers' Unions. In those far-off days the squire was a local magnate indeed ; the parson, the justice, the beadle, the constable, each in his degree, held a semi-feudal authority, sanctioned by ancient custom ; and the Lord of the Harvest was a little king of the hour, ruling over his village subjects.

This tale, then, written by the *doyenne* of our English novelists, who was brought up in the very heart of this country-side, has an historic, even a social and political value, quite apart from its beauty as a poetic landscape of old England, quite beside the charm of its home-spun dialect, and along with its simple truth to nature and human life. These are the yeomen and the peasants whom George Crabbe knew

and told us of in rather prosaic verse ; and I sometimes think I find more real poetry in the lady's simple prose than in the parson's somewhat halting couplets. In this little book there is not a sentence which rings monotonous or artificial ; all is racy of the soil ; a plain tale told by 'one who knows', by one 'who was there then and saw it' ; by one who knew these Elishas, Karrenheppuchs, and Ezekiels, and has made us know them.

As I am myself somewhat older than our authoress, and lived in a quiet country village as far away as the time of William IV, I have asked leave to express my admiration in re-reading this tale in a new form, to bear my testimony to its faithful picture of Old England in the ministries of Wellington and Peel ; before rural life was transformed by the railway system, imported corn, and the incalculable changes wrought by passing from country life to town life, from agriculture to manufactures, from a semi-feudal and provincial conservatism to an imperial, cosmopolitan, or at least, trans-atlantic democracy.

This is not the place to enlarge on these crucial problems, nor am I at all the man to deal with them, at any rate whilst asking the reader to revel in what is a work of art, without a trace of 'purpose' or 'problem' in it. But

it opens a fascinating vein of thought which can hardly fail to rise in the mind even of a youthful reader of romance, and must surely strike deep into the reflections of the more serious reader. Was England, say in 1843, a land less happy in a high sense, less great, less religious, less humane, than it is in 1913? We all know that the change was inevitable, has infinite sides, promises infinite compensations in the future. I do not answer the problem; I hope no reader of this tale will think of finding any answer to the problem, until he has drunk his fill of 'Bever', has brought his harvest home to barn, has given Smiler his last feed of corn, has spent the last penny of 'Largess', has seen Elisha Sage, Lord of the Harvest, installed in the Hall Farm after all.

Away then with politics, problems, and sociology! Let us taste this harvest home-brew, and listen with all our ears to the harvesters' japes, the 'nannicking with the mawthers', Karra's Bible objurgations and unadorned rhymes, Amma's 'hudderren' swains, and Smy's monkey tricks and Scriptural railing even as Nabal railed on David the king. These people knew their Bibles, though very few of them could read, Church-goers or 'meeteners', all alike. There is a touch of

Ruth about this tale—of Ruth, that idyll of old Israel; there too was ‘a servant who was set over the reapers’ by Boaz, a Lord of the Harvest in primitive Bethlehem-judah. There is, perhaps, a faint ray of Ruth, the Moabitess, in the foreign Aimée, who is mated at last with the master of these rich acres.

The whole tale is redolent of Bible ways, and no doubt this is the basis of its perfect truth and simplicity. ‘Talk of Sodom and Gomorrah,’ cries little Smy, the bandy-legged, ‘three-quarter’, ‘baccus’ imp, ‘they were a flea-bite to the like of you. Jezabel herself wouldn’t sit down to tea with any such.’ ‘You brazen Gehazi,’ hissed Miss ‘Ria, ‘well may you look as if you expected to be swallowed up like Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, Elisha Sage!’ ‘You go to bed, I’ll read a chapter of Nehemiah, first,’ says Karra, to console her husband after a mishap. ‘We’ve all of us a Sanballat to laugh us to scorn, I reckon, but the Lord will prosper His servants who desire to fear His name. Why, you haven’t taken off your high-lows!’ Then ‘Karra brought out the family Bible, a quarto printed in great primer, having full-page illustrations. Her eyesight was not over good, but she hardly needed a farthing dip, so at home was she with the cupbearer’s beautiful story’. The Bible was the only

literature known to East Anglian peasants in those pre-school days, days of the paper-duty, and thirty-shilling novels for the 'quality'.

The story, again, is rich in what it is the fashion to call 'atmosphere'. South-east Suffolk of the Stour and the Orwell is not a country that smiles on us 'Shiremen'—(they who dwell west of a line drawn from the Wash to Southampton Water are *Shiremen*, to those who dwell in Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex, Middlesex, Kent, Sussex, and Surrey)—but even we of the Shires must admit the charm of the great Anglian corn-lands. These farmers and harvesters love it, and it is painted with patriotic glow by our East Anglian authoress.

Elisha's drift was a perpetual glory [a drift is a field lane with hedge and trees]. When spring came its banks were covered with purple and white violets—none to gather them,—later on every bit of hedge being garlanded with wild rose, honeysuckle, and traveller's joy. All the year round, whether clothed in richest foliage or in wintry white, its veteran oaks and elms made a beautiful show, throughout the summer-time tenanted by myriads of singing birds. The paramount charm of the drift was a solitude sometimes unbroken throughout the entire day.

Master Sage, for a shilling a week, rented an ancient cottage with large brick-floored kitchen,

from which a rude wooden stair led to two bed-chambers. His garden had some fine old fruit trees and flowers adorning the front path.

Here flourished 'Welcome home, husband, tho' never so drunk'—as, nobody knows why, country folks always called the yellow stone-crop—'granny's night-cap', or monk's-hood, sweetwilliams, picotees in abundance, with lavender and rosemary for sweetening bed-linen, a few pot-herbs, and rue to drive away fleas.

These hard-working sons of the soil had scant leisure to admire scenery—but the calm of evening, or the call of love, would give it a new meaning. Edward Flindell, the solid farmer of the harvest, has told his tenderness and hopes to the dainty governess of the rector's children. Love became to him an education in beauty.

He now took heed of everything, rosy cloudlet, bloomy blackberry, oak leaf tingling with last sun-ray, little caressing lay of red-breast, social twitter of ground-lark above the sweet-smelling turnips. Sights and sounds familiar to him from childhood were for the first time realized.

And as the book ends, and all the worthy ones are left in happiness, and the gentle trials of youth and girl, of labourer and lady, brought

to a close, a brooding peace succeeds to the husbandman's jubilee.

As a soft purple cloud, myriads of tiny blossoms coloured the fallow, wild thyme, peppermint, and minute heartsease; these last, so many little cheering eyes invoking hope and dreams of merry springtide.

Of course the tale is full of rustic proverbs and quaint phrases, that recall to us Mrs. Poyser and Silas Marner. The Hall Farm is choice—'you might ride a black mare white' before lighting on such another. The lucky farmer of it prospered; but he did not 'eat five-pound notes between his bread and butter'. The housekeeper at the farm wonders how 'farmers can keep so much as a cat since Bobby Peel, the old scoundrel, abolished hanging for sheep-stealing'. The head horseman's wife will never believe that her 'Lishy would be tempted of Satan' to steal barley. He loved his favourite plough-horse—'he had made a graven image' of his pet Smiler.

Naturally, too, the tale is spiced with East-Anglicisms, which the young reader will miss, as his way is, and which will send the thoughtful reader to his Dialect Dictionary. I note that very many of these locutions, so mysterious to us of the Shires, are to be found in Shakespeare, and are still heard in Long Island, New York,

U.S.A. 'Mawthers' are 'asked in Church'—or else go off 'to the Shires' in service. Cut wheat falls on the 'stover'. A girl 'fleets' the milk, and when it rains, 'roars in the clothes' off the line. A lad climbing is as 'safe as a tomtit on a laylock bough'. A 'pitman pig' is nearly choked in a 'pightle-gate'. The lanes are 'good tightly rough'. 'Weddeners' to-day throng at society weddings, but they are not so described in the *Morning Post*; and 'meeteners' are still to the fore in country parishes, but they do not claim the title themselves. In the Shires we do not call a month a 'moon'; and I am at a loss to explain 'put on farins¹', unless it means soft words.

The tale has within it a pretty bit of love-making between a plain and generous farmer and a dainty but penniless girl of breeding and culture. But the essence of the story concerns the labouring men in the first half of the last century, 'when Queen Victoria was a maiden', and harvest was ruled by its 'Lord'. Elisha's pride in his work, his love for his plough-land, his affection for his beautiful horse, colours the whole book. It begins and ends with his daily routine—in 'stacking the haulm', in 'a-carting muck', in a loud sob as he parts from his Smiler for ever. There are few 'head horse-

¹ East Anglian for 'behaviours'.—M. B.-E.

men' now, fewer harvesters, and far fewer corn-farmers left—almost no Smilers at all. American machines and steam ploughs do it all. It was a breezy cheery world once !

How jocund did they drive their team
afield !

How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy
stroke !

FREDERIC HARRISON.

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THE LORD OF THE HARVEST

CHAPTER I

BEVER

No inglorious son of Adam was this leader of men, although his title depended neither on parchment nor escutcheon, and his dignities lasted for one moon only. But such lordship was self-earned, and therefore all the more to be revelled in; it was authoritative, a tribunal beyond appeal. This Suffolk usage dating from the olden time recalled Homeric story; just as the strong, the wise, and the bold obtained a crown in legend and romance, so, when Queen Victoria was a maiden, harvestmen of East Anglia chose for their chief the best among them. Greater honour could befall none. For a brief space and over a circumscribed area the Lord of the Harvest reigned supreme. The first magistrate of London uttered no weightier yea or nay. On his shoulders rested the order and conduct of the cornfield. Did any hireling break rules, shirk his duty, or abuse the beer-can,

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he was summarily sent about his business. Bad language, brawls, unseemly behaviour when women-folk were about, he must keep in check and punish : no easy task when a quick harvesting was imperative, and soldiers, pedlars, and even gipsies, had to be hired at a pinch.

Elisha Sage, Master Sage as he was called by his employers, the title of Mister being reserved for farmers and tradesmen, stood five feet eleven inches in his well-greased high-lows. He possessed the brawny limbs of the able-bodied man, of him who could shoulder a coomb of corn and claim his full ten shillings a week. Heavy-faced, dull-eyed, no one would guess that he carried off kettle after kettle at the yearly ploughing match, and although unable to read or write, was first-rate at reckoning up. Elisha's career as a son of the soil had begun forty years before. From rook-scaring and stone-picking, when barely breeched, to the position of head horseman, was certainly a stride, but a stride that meant the same routine. To sow and to reap for others was he born, the poor-house would shelter his old age, for thus seemed it good to the Almighty.

Harvest evoked a jovial mood, and even the stolid Elisha felt himself at a kind of fête. His white teeth now gleamed, his eyes very nearly

sparkled as he suddenly threw down his sickle, sprang to his feet, and, glancing along the line of serried reapers, shouted :

‘ Halt for bever ! ’

‘ Yes, my lord.’

With the utmost alacrity one and all gave the same response, and followed their lord’s example. Rhythmically the shining sickles fell to the ground, and rhythmically the blowed sweated harvesters rose to their full height, filing off towards the nearest hedge.

It was just upon four o’clock in the afternoon ; no need for Elisha to take out his ponderous old watch, he could tell that by the sun ; time therefore had come for the collation of harvest cake and beer called by its name derived from the French.

The motley group squatted down, half a dozen strangers being easily distinguishable from the village folk. Alike garb and physiognomy proclaimed the shiremen, or those who had come from the shires, a term including newcomers generally. This geographical designation was vague, but the simplest understood by it one thing, namely, that the shires lay beyond London.

A hundred yards off, in broad-brimmed straw hat and shirt sleeves, the farmer was shocking

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his sheaves. Without a word he now took up his grey frock coat and set off in the direction of a low tiled roof, nestled amid apple trees close by, as he went every eye watching him impatiently. A few minutes later and the oddest little figure imaginable was seen alongside the uncut corn, his appearance, or rather that of an enormous can of beer on his arm, being the signal for a wild outburst of hilarity. The battered old soldier threw up his cap and shouted, 'God save the Queen', the pedlar performed a wonderful pantomimic feat with the leg, the sheep-shearer, a lank veteran renowned for his wit, put on the simper of a love-sick maiden, and blew the grotesque little Ganymede a kiss, the three shiremen whistled a bucolic air, only Elisha and his neighbours remained passive. They wiped their steaming brows, and turned to their frails or flat baskets, getting out drinking-horn and harvest-cake.

'Come, my lord,' cried old Nat, the sheep-shearer, 'just hasten yonder smart little chap, will you, or we shall be kept dry here till night. Don't you see how he lags behind, hoping that your Amma will overtake him. He is always thinking of the mawthers, and no wonder, for they won't let him alone, the beauty that he is.'

There was no intended disrespect in the word : mawthers, in local phraseology, standing for girls or maidens ; nor were Nat's personalities meant ill-naturedly. And heartily did the object of them join in the general laugh. Little Smy, as the undersized, crooked, monkey-faced man was called, knew his comrades too well to take their jokes amiss. They might get entertainment out of him, but he got something more to the purpose out of them ; in harvest time, with the able-bodied, he fared sumptuously, throughout the winter he was welcome at the poorest board.

'I'd 'ammer your skull if I had a muck-fork handy,' growled the little man, setting down his heavy can. Smy prided himself upon choice invective ; those big lubberly chaps might rail at his bandy legs, apology for a nose, and dwarfish size ; with the tongue he was more than their match. 'Talk of Sodom and Gomorrah,' he muttered, 'they were a fleabite to the like of you. Jezebel herself wouldn't sit down to tea with any such. Amma indeed ! I want no Ammas, and Ammas don't want me that I know on. But come now, 'Lishy, don't keep me waiting till wheat-sowing. I'm wanted yonder.'

Smy being barely a three-quarter man, and

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therefore not eligible as a reaper, owed no allegiance to the Lord of the Harvest, at other times known as 'Lishy. Hence the familiarity.

The doling out of the strong, sweet, sparkling old home-brewed now began, each man making a pantomimic show of ecstasy as his especial horn was filled. The large wheatfield must be reaped ere nightfall, and extra hours were always fêted in this way. When the can of 'old harvest' was caught sight of the men knew what the farmer expected.

Paying no attention to the jokes of the others, little Smy sipped his draught, then, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, limped away, ejaculating to himself. The jesters might shout and give way to uproarious mirth at his expense; he never so much as turned his head, the superlative qualities of the beer driving out every other thought. At every step he formed a new interjection, some fresh term of approval.

As to the harvestmen, faces grew ruddier, tongues became more loquacious, but, wonderful as it seemed, none got drunk. Each with infinite content munched his hunk of harvest cake, that excellent dough-cake, well sugared, spiced and sprinkled with currants, made in the shape of small loaves, and never seen except during this season.

The one sober, silent figure present was Elisha Sage. He was naturally a pallid man, and although gaunt of limb and muscularly strong, not particularly robust. Truth to tell, like his wife, he was afflicted with a delicate stomach, and being unable to digest the usual ploughman's fare, fat salted pork and flour and water dumplings, lived mainly on bread and cheese.

Naturally, also, a man of few words, to-day he said less than usual. He was evidently brooding, his thoughts far from this hilarious scene.

'You don't look as if master's old beer made your very big toe tingle,' said Nat, the sheep-shearer, turning to his chief. 'Why, my lord, what matters the Hall Farm to you? Farmer Betts may be dead now, or live as long as Methuselah, you won't get the offer of his lease, I'm thinking.'

There was a general laugh, which Elisha took very quietly.

'And you won't get the half-crown offered to the first man who minds his own business,' he replied, dipping his head into the drinking-horn and taking a long draught.

'Well,' continued the irrepressible sheep-shearer, 'what Teddie yonder is a thinking on morning, noon, and night we all know well

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enough, and what Mrs. Betsey is a'thinking on we needn't scratch our polls about either. I'll lay, the widow gets the lease, women-folks somehow always circumvent us men.'

The persons alluded to were Mr. Edward Flindell, tenant farmer, owning this wheat crop, and Mrs. Elizabeth Askew, his neighbour, also a tenant farmer, and on the same scale. Without intending disrespect country folks thus familiarly called their employers.

Elisha's face had grown sombre as he listened. Nat's speech evidently displeased him.

'It's not for you to say who will get the lease, nor for me either,' he made somewhat surly reply. 'Nobody is dead at the Hall Farm that we know on, and I call it downright wicked to put fellow-beings into their coffins afore their time.'

Nat affected a ludicrous air of penitence.

'See if my lord don't put on a white choker and take to preaching o' Sundays,' cried the wag; 'if so, I'm blowed if I don't turn meetener.'

'The meeting-house mightn't do you much good, it wouldn't harm you leastways,' Elisha replied. Then leal to duty as the hand of a clock, the Lord of the Harvest slowly rose, the word of command was given, and mechanically each reaper fell into his place.

What a scene was that cornfield under the hot August sky ! Fiery red glowed the faces of the harvestmen, against the golden background, a sea of waving wheat, the famed ruddy-hued wheat of Talavera. Not a cloud obscured the burning blue heavens, whilst beyond the standing corn showed here and there a bit of foliage, lofty hedge starred with wild rosés or low pollard oaks of deep rich green.

As the afternoon drew on, the sultriness increased, and such brilliant contrasts of colour grew more intense. Southern warmth and gorgeousness seemed to invest the Suffolk harvest field. But the bucolic mood of the reapers had passed. Whilst the sickles moved automatically backwards and forwards, not a word passed their lips, a regiment of deaf-mutes were hardly quieter. From time to time, at a signal of the leader, each stood up, wiped his brow, shook himself, took a draught of beer, interchanged a word with his fellow, then resumed work vigorously as before.

The sun sank behind the pollard oaks and twilight succeeded, hardly bringing coolness. A little later, although no breeze sprang up, pleasant freshness lightened their labours ; another and yet another drink from the master's can lent new strength ; long after moon-rising,

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that mechanical swing of forty arms, that gleam of twenty sickles went on. Deep, almost solemn silence reigned over the cornfield. Only the rustle of footsteps and wheat falling on the stover broke the stillness, a stillness and monotony emblematic of these noiseless, unheroic lives, the tide of human existence that perpetually ebbs and flows, leaving no memory behind.

CHAPTER II

THE MUSE OF THE DRIFT

SEPARATED from the harvest field by a mile of undulating meadow stood Elisha's house, known as the cottage in the Drift. An enclosed lane or cart-way leading from field to field is—or was—always thus called in Suffolk. Elisha's Drift was a perpetual glory. When spring came, its banks were covered with purple and white violets—none to gather them;—later on every bit of hedge being garlanded with traveller's joy, wild rose, and honeysuckle. All the year round, whether clothed with richest foliage or in wintry white, its veteran oaks and elms made a beautiful show, throughout the summer-time tenanted by myriads of singing birds. The paramount charm of the Drift was a solitude sometimes unbroken throughout the entire day. Cattle were driven this way, occasionally a turnip-cart or waggon passed, and at morn and eve one or two farming folks traversed the lane, that was all. Few such solitudes existed hereabouts even so long ago.

Master Sage had little to complain of in the

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matter of house-room and garden. For a shilling a week he rented an ancient cottage with large brick-floored kitchen, from which a rude wooden stair led to two bed-chambers. The garden possessed some fine old apple trees, a row of veteran gooseberry bushes, potato and pumpkin beds, flowers adorning the front path. Here flourished 'Welcome home, husband, tho' never so drunk'—as, nobody knows why, country folks always called the yellow stonecrop, —'granny's night-cap' or monk's-hood, sweet-williams, picotees in abundance, with lavender and rosemary for sweetening bed-linen, a few pot-herbs, and rue to drive away fleas.

A pallid woman in neat lilac sunbonnet and well-patched cotton gown sat on the doorstep sewing; from time to time she glanced towards the gate, as she did so her expression changing from gentleness to indignation. It was a mild, pathetic, and even refined face under that flapping sunbonnet. Not a trace of coarseness marred the large, sallow features, and not all her privations at home nor her labours afield had imparted a hard, rustic look. This poor woman, like many another, was the victim of local diet, that perpetual fare of fat salted pork, only found digestible by the strongest. A daily bit of scraggy mutton was her ideal of worldly

good, her highest conception of material enjoyment.

She had compensations. Nature, in denying a sound digestion, had endowed her with something much rarer, the poetic faculty. Karrenheppuch Sage was a poet. She could not write, but she could put her verses together for the more accomplished to transcribe. And she could read; the Bible, the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and *City of Mansoul*, the *Dairy Man's Daughter*, the *Shepherd of Salisbury Plain*, *Cælebs in Search of a Wife*, the *Cottagers of Glenburnie*, and Baxter's *Saints' Rest*, forming her library.

On this sweet summer evening, as she sat sewing her gleaning-poke or large pocketed apron, the meditative glow on her face suddenly changed to rising wrath.

A click of the garden gate, the appearance of a slender girl's figure, and youthful copy of her own features, in white sunbonnet, had wrought the transformation.

'It's a pity you didn't stay away altogether, I think,' began the mother reproachfully; 'days and days ago I sent for you. Ah! Amma, were your poor sister Delphie alive and well I should have some comfort in my mawthers.'

Amma, as Emma was pronounced in those parts, had unfortunately survived a more

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promising sister, Philadelphia, a girl of much winningness and promise. The loss of that fourteen-year-old idol had wellnigh broken Karra's heart and wrecked her intellect. She could not help it, she said, but neither Amma nor her brothers, Nehemiah and Isaiah, must ever expect to be loved like Delphie.

'The butter wouldn't come; it's not my fault, mother,' Amma replied very complacently—she was used to these maternal ratings—'and yesterday and the day afore we were busy a'washing.' Then, with a look that said, 'Have your say and have done', the young woman squatted down and began to munch a green apple.

'Amma,' said her mother, fixing on the girl her large, light grey, ever tearful eyes, 'who rode home from Ipswich last Saturday week in the miller's cart, and got out with the mark of a floury arm around her waist? 'Tis well you had on your dark shawl, madam, or such 'haviour would be unbeknown to me perhaps, till too late.'

'Was I going to maul myself in the boiling sun for three miles when offered a lift?' Amma retorted, 'and if I got some flour on my shawl, what else could you expect in a miller's cart?'

‘Such farings lead to—you know what,’ was the severe reply. ‘Remember Martha Smith and the poor fatherless child she brought into the world—remember Ann Birch.’

‘Don’t talk to me of Martha Smith and Ann Birch,’ exclaimed Amma in high dudgeon; ‘thanks to the Almighty I have not disgraced myself up till now, nor shall I in time to come.’

‘Do you suppose that the Almighty troubles Himself about silly mawthers like you?’ Karra went on. ‘He has that old serpent which is the Devil to look after; but I’m your mother, and married at church, and if you don’t go and do likewise, you know what to expect.’

A positively vicious look came into Karra’s usually mild face, and she shook her fist at her daughter menacingly.

‘A good horse-whipping and out you would have to turn, no mercy must you count on from me or your father. To think of nannicking’ (fooling) ‘with a miller’s son.’

‘I tell you I wasn’t a’ nannicking, mother; who’s been impinging my modesty, I should very much like to know?’ Amma had the maternal trick of picking up fine words.

‘If letting a fellow, and him a mere hudderen’ (hobbledehoy), ‘put his arm round your waist isn’t a’ nannicking, what is?’ Karra continued,

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‘ Never mind how I heard on’t, and I shall hear of anything else that goes on, you won’t baffle me, and remember Tat Turtle may give you a lift in his father’s cart, he won’t take such as you to church, he’ll look higher.’

All this time Karra had no idea of what was going on in the girl’s mind. Amma did not flinch from that sharp maternal gaze, her own face remaining wholly unreadable. Plain she undoubtedly was, but a certain pallor and plaintiveness, recalling her mother, lent something that the neighbours took to be gentility and something more. Unlike Karra, she had dark hair and eyes expressive of patient resolve and immense self-possession, even subtlety of character.

‘ Tat Turtle may look as high as he likes for all me,’ she replied in her provoking passionless tone. ‘ So, mother, if that’s all you have to say, I’ll be off. We’ve been a’ churning all day ; the butter, as I’ve just told you, wouldn’t come, and Miss ’Ria is as cross as two sticks. I’ll tell you what it is, I can’t bide her any longer ; at Michaelmas I shall better myself.’

‘ Think on what I say any ways,’ Karra said. ‘ You’re my only comfort now, Amma, if comfort you are, and think of poor Delphie, that blessed lamb in Heaven.’

Amma tied her cotton bonnet-strings, her thin red fingers twitching nervously. She inwardly reproached herself for the feeling but could not overcome it. The very name of this dead sister, ever flung at her as a reproach, aroused bitterness and rebellion. It was 'Delphie this, Delphie that,' year in and year out.

'It isn't my fault that I am not a blessed lamb in Heaven also,' she replied with as much warmth as she was capable of. 'You wouldn't have me go and drown myself, I suppose?'

'Amma, will you mock your own mother?'

'I'm not a' mocking you, but such harpings on poor Delphie are more than flesh and blood can stand. Well, good night, mother, I must be off to fleet the milk.' She had reached the little wooden gate when Karra called her back.

'Have you heard any news of the Hall Farm?' she asked.

'I've seen neither feather nor bone of any one from the Hall,' was the curt reply, whereupon the white cotton sunbonnet disappeared behind the trees. Her mother sewed and mused.

Just over against the cottage, crowning glory of the Drift, stood a magnificent old elm. Karra never tired of gazing at that ancient tree. Unlike her neighbours she was of a reflective turn and loved Nature. Every one cultivated

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flowers, the poorest thatched cabin had its roses, daffy-down-dillies, and sweet-williams, but these were regarded rather as so much furniture than ideal wealth. Of beauty in the abstract, beauty as a consolation, only Karra had an inkling.

She could not join the stone-pickers' gang or go a' weeding, on account of feeble health, and in her long hours of solitude the tree had become a companion, almost a fetish. Had Karra learned the elementary laws of composition she might have turned her artless rhymes into poetry. Thus ran two verses on the old elm :—

Indeed it is a very fine tree,
And its dress is a beautiful green,
When the autumn winds blow, its dress will lie low,
There'll scarce be a piece to be seen.

At Christmas most likely we'll see the old tree
Dressed up all in silvery white,
And although the cold snow is pinching to bear,
It's a grand and beautiful sight.

Rhyming and meditation did not interfere with housewifely tasks. As folks said, you could eat off her brick floor, the deal flour-hutch was white as snow, tin kettles, her husband's prizes at the ploughing match, and saucepans shone bright as silver. Carpets, sofas, and works of art had not yet found their way to cottage homes, but on a little side table covered with

bright-patterned oilcloth lay the family Bible, half a dozen books, a pair of ornamental china candlesticks with snuffers and tray, and lacquered tea-caddy. Over the high fireplace with dog-irons and enormous chimney hung a sampler and two little prints representing bucolic scenes, in black wooden frames; an old-fashioned clock, deal table, and six wooden chairs, completed the furniture; leading out of the kitchen was a small back-house, or scullery, with copper and bake-oven.

At other times of the year, Elisha's dinner hour was three o'clock in the afternoon, when all ploughmen returned from the field; during harvest the order of things was reversed. Men, as well as masters, now dined at midday, beer being taken abroad, and supper as occasion served. More changed was the meal than the meal-time. Instead of salt pork and hard dumpling, the big boiler hanging from the spirket now contained a bit of beef and a plum-pudding. As Karra laid the cloth she brought out, not the usual flet cheese, i.e. Suffolk cheese made of skimmed or fleted milk, but a piece of genuine Derby.

Complacently the Muse of the Drift made all things in readiness for her good man, then again took up the gleaning-poke.

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This was a large wide apron of coarse whitey brown calico, prepared expressly for the harvest field, the hem being turned up so as to form an enormous pocket. Karra's mild watery blue eyes beamed with satisfaction as she contemplated her handiwork. Gleaning corn meant the fortune of the year, golden windfall of the poorest. There are gleaners and gleaners, and none could fill a poke quicker than Karra. To her, gleaning corn was not the mere vulgar filling of children's bellies, it implied the luxury and distinction of a doctor's bill. Ever an invalid, ever proud, Karra held aloof from the over-worked parish doctor. Seven miles she tramped across country to consult the best esteemed medical man in the neighbourhood, and seven miles more to pay his bill with the proceeds of her gleaning, that is to say, the corn was taken to the windmill, duly ground and weighed, then its money value deducted week by week from Elisha's wages. Karra prided herself hardly less upon her ailments and what they cost, than upon her poetic faculty. We have all our little weaknesses, and even a poor digestion under certain circumstances may become a title of honour.

It was dusk when Elisha entered, the pair sitting down to supper by a farthing rushlight.

Karra sipped a cup of tea and ate daintily. The Lord of the Harvest fell to with right goodwill.

‘ Our mawther has been here, and I gave it to her pretty well,’ began the wife. ‘ To think of her a’ ridin’ on the Queen’s highway with a man’s arm round her waist, and him a miller white from the mill ! ’

Elisha’s thoughts were evidently elsewhere.

‘ Any news from the Hall ? ’ he asked.

‘ Not that I knows on, a pretty thing, ’Lishy, if so be that master does get the Hall Farm and our Amma should meanwhile run after Tat Turtle and have a misfortune ! You wouldn’t be head-man long, I’m thinking. Well, Amma knows what to expect from me if she disgraces herself. Skinning alive would be nothing to it. I’m not a holy woman, but a good living one, and I’ve tried to bring up my children respectable, though I don’t take them to see folks hanged, as Mrs. Warner does her mawthers, my inside wouldn’t stand it.’

Elisha was slow in replying. Women ever had the best of the argument hereabouts. The last word and the spending of the weeks’ wages were tacitly acknowledged as feminine privilege.

‘ If master don’t get the farm and Mrs. Askew do, Jerry Hammond and his wife will crow over us finely, for in course he’ll be her head-man.’

‘ We haven’t the ruling of principalities and powers, so must submit,’ Karra said, helping him to more plum-pudding. ‘ Like the fowls of the air we must take our chance.’

Then the pair lapsed into pensive silence. Both were prone to pondering, and this dream of a head-manship afforded constant matter for thought. To be head-man at the Hall meant, for Elisha, to be called Mr. instead of Master, to attend Ipswich market with samples of corn when his employer was prevented from going himself, to be invited to the rent-dinner, occasionally also to pay the men o’ Saturday nights, and last, but not least, an extra shilling or two a week and no deduction for wet days. To Karra it meant much more. As head-man’s wife she would be consequently in requisition at the Hall, now to help in ham-pickling, now in beer-brewing, at the big monthly washes, whenever a pig was put down, to say nothing of spring-cleanings and preparations for company. Helping, as charing was called, meant sixpence a day with meals and a basketful of odd pieces to carry home.

CHAPTER III

MISS 'RIA

MR. EDWARD FLINDELL, Elisha's master, was a bachelor of forty, farming a hundred and sixty acres at a corn-rent ; that is to say, when prices went down he suffered little, but when prices ran up he did not, in local phrase, eat five-pound notes between his bread and butter. Bad times but moderately affected him, by good times he profited less than his neighbours. Farmers made money at this period, and the lease of a good holding was then as difficult to get as a seat in Parliament, perhaps more so. Just as a constituency is nursed long before a seat becomes vacant, every available expedient being resorted to by the rival candidates, so leases would be watched for, strategically striven after, awaited with a persistence and diplomacy often grimly humorous or pathetic.

The Hall Farm of Burridge, the Hall, as folks usually called it, was by far the most desirable occupation in that part of Suffolk. You might ride a black mare white, so folks said, before lighting on such another, three hundred acres

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of good mixed soil, plenty of meadow-land, few trees in the fields, a fine old manor-house to live in, excellent premises, and only three miles from market with one toll-bar on the way.

Now Mr. Flindell came of first-rate farming stock, which was an immense recommendation to landowners. His brothers, like their sire and grandsire before them, were all what was called substantial men, well known for their clean farming, fat bullocks and sheep, and impregnable respectability. They went to church, voted Tory, above all, could show a full stack-yard till the following haysel, or hay harvest—undoubted sign of first-rate management and solid means. To thresh out within a few months of harvest had an unprosperous look. But among the numerous applicants for Burr ridge Hall, Edward Flindell knew that he had at least one redoubtable rival, that rival a woman. Women farmers were pretty numerous in the county. Any landlord who should deny the renewal of a lease to widow, daughters, or even sisters, of an irreproachable tenant would have dubbed himself a churl. When a farmer died without male issue, the lease, like the crown of England, passed as a matter of course to the female line. This rival, by name Mrs. Betsey Askew, had unusual claims also on the Honourable Captain

de Medue, a retired officer, one of the largest landowners in the county, whose hobby it was to have as many women tenants as possible. For this predilection he gave reasons eccentric enough. Women could not go to the poll, he used to say, and he objected to political farmers, they might or might not vote with him, but when precluded from voting at all, there was an end of the matter.

Again, Widow Askew came not only of substantial but of moneyed stock.

'My last cow has calved,' she had lately said, alluding to the handsome legacy of a rich old uncle; the Captain knew well enough that if she had no more expectations she was already in a position to farm high and he liked tenants who farmed high.

Thinking of these things and weighing his chances, the farmer quitted the harvest field. Crossing a pightle, or enclosed meadow, he reached his home, an ordinary farmhouse of the humbler kind, red-tiled, with white-washed walls. In front, a small flower and fruit garden led to a well-stocked orchard, at the back were barn, granary, neat-house, fowl-houses, and farmyard. Like many another in these parts Walnut Tree Farm had no direct communication with the outer world. Elisha's Drift and a

parallel cart-way led to the high-road a mile and a half away. With many another Walnut Tree Farm possessed only one attraction, that indescribable unspoiled as yet aspect of old-world rustic England. All was not idyllic, but the poetry of a fast vanishing epoch and condition were here. No railway had reached the ear of its youngest inhabitant. The sound of the flail still echoed on the threshing-floor. The tinder-box stood beside the housewife's bed. In his best corduroys the labourer set off to church or meeting-house.

Quietly as a mouse Mr. Flindell unlatched the scullery door, a sharp snappish voice calling from within :

‘ I hope you are wiping your shoes ? ’

Scrape, scrape, went the master's high-lows on the rude iron scraper, rub, rub, on the straw mat.

‘ I haven't been carting muck that I know of, ’ he replied, meekly ironic.

Mr. Flindell was not without a touch of humour (few Suffolks are), but he stood somewhat in awe of his housekeeper and was constantly restraining himself.

‘ Muck or no muck, Mr. Flindell, there are no carpets abroad, and it's my business to keep your floors clean. Thank God I'm not

as clean as some folks, your sister Martha for one; if I were, a pretty life of it you'd lead.'

The farmer smiled to himself, but made no reply. He was a man of few words and she was a woman of many: better, he always thought, to let her have her way.

'Will they finish cutting the home-field to-night?' she asked as he washed his hands at the sink. Had Miss Maria Studd, Miss 'Ria, as the farming folks called her, been Mr. Flindell's wife, she could not have testified more affectionate interest in his concerns, a compliment accepted by him rather ruefully, but a compliment not to be rejected. When two people sit down day after day to the same board, one must of necessity draw out, the other consent to be drawn.

The question being answered satisfactorily they passed into the keeping-room, as a farmhouse parlour was always called, Maria having her heavy key-basket in one hand. She was a ruddy-cheeked, bright-eyed little woman of about thirty-five, and, the fact was apparent at a glance round the house, a first-rate house-keeper. Another fact equally apparent to the casual observer was this, Miss Maria Studd had made up her mind to marry Mr. Edward Flindell

Less obvious to outsiders remained her employer's attitude in the matter. Only those well up in the book of human nature would detect a certain passive resistance and recoiling, and at the same time a half acknowledgement of his adversary's superiority. The pair were indeed playing a game in which everything depended upon coolness and skill. Miss 'Ria could not more resolutely decide to become Mrs. Edward Flindell than the farmer decide to leave her a spinster. Hence the piquancy of daily intercourse. It was a perpetual parry and thrust, catch and throw, touch and go.

'Mr. Betts is much the same ; it is wonderful how some people hold out,' she said with the complacent self-approval of the faithful steward. 'I got Smy to waylay the postman and inquire. You see, if anything happens, you must not lose a moment in seeing the Captain.'

Mr. Flindell sugared his apple-turnover—he ever supped lightly—cut it into mathematical little squares, then, before poisoning one on the edge of his black-handled knife, made reply :

'It's a bad business waiting for dead men's shoes.'

'We must take the bad business with the good,' she rattled on, her speech having a ring of unmistakable decision and self-assurance, no

matter the topic. 'Remember what happened about Reaford Hall. For weeks and weeks afore Tom Smith died, Ralph Spooner kept a horse saddled night and day, and no sooner was the breath out of the poor man's body than off he set in the dead of the night, galloped straight to London, saw Sir Theobald Gosford, and came home with the lease of the Hall in his pocket. I should like to see any one of the name of Flindell doing the same !'

'You ain't likely to,' rejoined the farmer.

His family—there were seven of them, all in the farming line—had their code of honour ; one article of faith was decency in business matters. No one's mouth could water for the lease of Burridge Hall more than Edward Flindell's. The notion of riding to London on such an errand shocked his moral sense.

'We wriggle on, if we don't make money as fast as some folks,' he added, as he ate his turnover ; the perfection of turnover it was, crust light as a feather, the ribstone pippin apples spiced and baked to a turn. Mr. Flindell was very particular about his turnovers, as Miss 'Ria knew.

'Wriggle on, you may well say that,' the little woman continued with flashes of her dark eyes. 'But how are farmers to do that if Sir Robert

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Peel gets his way ? He ought to be hanged with darning-cotton and drawn to his grave by hopping-toads, the scoundrel ! ’

Mr. Flindell had an immense respect for ‘ the wealth and talent of the country,’ as he styled Government, whether Whig or Tory, but he let his housekeeper rail on. It was not in the Flindell family to abuse great folks. Miss Studd, as he knew well, came from a slightly lower social stratum. Thus he excused her vituperations, whilst for her part she regarded strong words as a tonic of which he stood sorely in need. Truth to tell, he was a trifle phlegmatic.

‘ I’ll be on the look out, never fear,’ she added, then with a change of tone put the question, ‘ I suppose you don’t intend to go to market to-morrow ? ’

During haysel and harvest, farmers frequently absented themselves from market, Mr. Ederd, as Edward was called by his own people, among the number.

‘ Were you wanting to go yourself ? ’ he asked.

‘ I should say I have something better to do,’ was the contemptuous reply, ‘ what with drawing beer at all hours of the day and the washing still about. I only asked because I want some groceries, and as well have them put in your

gig as pay the butter-woman for bringing them o' Saturdays.'

The farmer's richly-bronzed complexion took a ruddier tone, and he suddenly coughed as if a crumb had gone the wrong way. It was a trick of his when conscious of blushing, a trick that fortunately Miss 'Ria had not found out. When the impediment was dislodged he merely said :

' Yes, Richard and Samuel will be there, and I want to see about some oil-cake.'

' Well, you've only to tell me how much beer is to be drawn, I'll look after the people, never fear.'

Miss Studd loved to sit beside Mr. Flindell in his gig: hardly less flattering was the fact of being left in charge at home.

Her companion answered mechanically, and was now left alone, off bustled the housekeeper to draw the men's supper beer, see that the cats had not got into the dairy, that the fowl-houses were locked, the maids behaving themselves, and everything in order. Meantime an expression stole over Mr. Edward's face that rendered him for the moment positively beautiful. He seemed to catch the reflex of some heavenly vision, to consort in that commonplace little keeping-room with angelic visitants.

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In bounced Miss 'Ria, bearing key-basket and rushlights in tin candlesticks.

'Don't you think it as well to save fire and candle when we can?' she asked, and suiting the action to the words, snuffed out the tall tallow candles. 'Never you fear, I'll drive the men and maids to bed.'

The energetic little woman was fond of strong language. It was 'Roar in the clothes,' if a heavy shower fell just after filling the line; 'are you going to sit guzzling there till Martinmas?' if Amma and 'Liza lingered too long over their dinner, and so on. A mild expletive was never used when a vehement one could be thought of. Alike words and deeds were in Mr. Flindell's interest. How then could he object to either?

CHAPTER IV

THE DRIVE TO MARKET

SOON after five o'clock next morning Mr. Flindell was abroad, and his well-known 'coop, coop, coop,' resounded from one end of the premises to the other. Before, indeed, their master had descended the granary steps, his feathered dependants were impatiently awaiting the morning meal; dun-coloured hens, gorgeous cocks, and the beautiful white and grey guinea-fowls, or come-backs, so called from their cry, 'Come back, come back,' now flocked about him in such numbers that he could hardly move. And still to the sound of that reiterated 'Coop, coop, coop,' they came, the farmer as usual doing his best to insure an equitable distribution. Some especially greedy ones he roughly drove away, but, as he often said, Solomon himself could not have here seen justice done. Certain of his family hens would outwit the Lord Chief Justice himself. With an alacrity quite unusual to him, Mr. Flindell got through the daily routine, fed the pigs, gave out corn and oil-cake for horses and

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fat stock, set Smy to work at jobbing, next visited the buds or young steers in pightle and meadow, lastly the harvest field.

Precisely at noon he was ready for the hurried Tuesday's dinner on market days, a mere snack of cold meat and glass of beer. Clean-shaven, in his best black stock and well-ironed collar neatly adjusted, a fine yellow silk handkerchief in the pocket of his black cloth surtout, he well represented the substantial tenant farmer.

To-day Miss 'Ria did not dine with her employer. After the manner of farmers' wives when not accompanying their lords to market, she 'got him off', as the phrase went, before sitting down to table herself.

'Have you thought of the beer-bungs?' she asked as Smy came up with the gig.

'On my word I had clean forgotten them.'

'Some one must have bunged up your senses this morning; you forget every mortal thing,' cried the little woman, with affected impatience. In reality she was delighted at finding herself so useful.

The bungs, of which he required duplicates, being neatly wrapped up and put in the gig-box, she watched him mount and drive off.

'Tell your sister Marthy not to expect me till

the moon after next,' she called after him, as she did so saying to herself, 'If that doesn't show him and his family that I study his interests, what will? As if I did not prefer going out to tea to putting down pork and ironing all day, or getting red as a turkey-cock over the jam saucepan!'

Mr. Flindell was soon rattling down the Drift; she had never known him in such a hurry. Once on the high-road he drove faster still, his brown, humorous, kindly eyes lighting up as he approached the toll-gate.

Yes, he was in luck's way to-day. There she stood, beside good Mrs. Pipe, the toll-gate keeper's wife, awaiting a chance ride to Ipswich. The young governess at the Rectory could seldom count on a seat in the Rector's four-wheeler, it being packed with children, and as the family liked the liveliness of market day, she was free to go marketing also, provided that some one would take her up. The slender figure in fan-shaped Tuscan bonnet, blue muslin gown and white gauze scarf worn so daintily on the shoulders, was distinguishable to certain eyes a long way off. Mr. Flindell felt sure that he could not be mistaken. Other girls wore blue muslin gowns and white scarves, but the wearer, the way of wearing, made all the difference.

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As he drew up to pay his fourpence, Mrs. Pipe turned to her companion :

‘ Now, Miss Aimay, jump in. This is the seventh gig that has passed since she ’s been a’ waiting, Mr. Flindell, and all choke-full, true as I stand here. But there’s luck in some numbers, so folks say.’

Mr. Flindell’s face showed that here he agreed with the good woman, it shone like the brand-new fourpenny-bit he handed for toll. Meantime the girl modestly awaited an invitation.

‘ The seat wants filling,’ was all he said, as he arranged the gig cushions.

Lightly she sprang to her place, only just displaying a neat little foot, white-stockinged and sandalled after the fashion of the day. Then nodding to Mrs. Pipe the pair drove off. Miss Aimay, as she was always called, could hardly be styled handsome or even pretty, but she did not in the least resemble local beauties, hence, for some eyes, her charm. The face was thin, not with the thinness of emaciation or poor health, rather of delicate symmetrical proportion. On each cheek, shaded by auburn curls, seemed to have fallen a pale pink rose leaf, so pure and fresh was the healthful carnation. And

attribute, loosely called expressiveness. A direct, arch glance now intoxicated the farmer.

‘ Is your horse lame that you drive at this snail’s pace ? ’ she asked suddenly.

For no sooner had they passed the toll-bar than Mr. Flindell slackened speed, gig after gig, sulky and cart, rattling by. A poor pretext is better than none at all.

‘ You should always walk a horse uphill,’ he replied, conscious of arch-hypocrisy.

Now it would require a very strong imagination to find a hill in the whole county of Suffolk. Here the ground just perceptibly rose. That was all, but Mr. Flindell did not drive Miss Aimay to market every day. He was in no hurry whatever to reach Ipswich.

‘ This a hill ! ’ the young lady cried, bursting into a merry laugh. ‘ What would you say to the hills in Dauphiné, the part of France I come from ? ’

Mr. Flindell now pretended to hurry his horse a bit, and after hearing a little more about Dauphiné, said :

‘ There is one place in France I should well like to see, I mean Waterloo. Is it anywhere near the mountains you speak of ? ’

Again his companion’s face beamed with

mirthfulness, but she checked herself, and replied very gravely :

‘ No, Waterloo, although close to France, is in Belgium, on the frontier ; why do you so much wish to see that ugly battlefield, Mr. Flindell ? ’

For the look of the thing, as neighbours were constantly passing, he had now put Jack to a slow trot. He replied in the same easy, confidential manner, it seemed so easy to speak of his feelings to her !

‘ You know much more about history than I do, but nobody forgets the things that he sees and hears, as a child. Well, when I was an unbreeched boy, Bonaparty wanted to conquer England, as you know, and “ Bony is a’ coming, Bony will eat you ! ” was enough to quiet us, whatever mischief we might be at. That is why I should like to see Waterloo.’

‘ I am glad Bonaparte never did set foot in England, but he was a Corsican with not a drop of French blood in his body. No Frenchman would have treated women as he did,’ Miss Aimay exclaimed, with great decision. She then elucidated that little remark about Napoleon’s origin, much to her companion’s admiration. How excellent a thing is learning ! he thought, ruefully calling to mind his own

modicum of instruction, the dame-school to begin with, followed by two or three years under an old village schoolmaster, whose very name was synonymous with pedagogic incompetence, a proverb in folks' mouths.

The company of this young girl indeed transported him into a wholly new atmosphere. It was as if he gazed upon some lovely exotic, caught its fragrance, realized the existence of far-off, more beautiful regions.

Perhaps, too, he was conscious of the difference between her attitude and that of Maria Studd; overmatched by his housekeeper in fetches and expedients, he yet saw through all. Miss 'Ria regarded him as her legitimate prey. Here the position was entirely reversed. Airily naive and at her ease, without a vestige of coquetry or self-interest, the little governess bewitched him, hardly seeing, perhaps hardly caring, whether it was so or no. For him to adore, covet, dream of from morning till night, instead of, after a fashion, being adored, coveted, dreamed of was a delicious sensation. Maria's hankering after the name and position of Mrs. Edward Flindell hardly warranted a sentimental adjective. Mere sentimentality were more bearable. The girl now caught his glance directed at her reticule, a little

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velvet bag with silver clasps, on its upper side embroidered the name—*Aimée*.

‘You are perhaps wondering why I should have a French name,’ she asked. ‘I will tell you. My mother was a governess, as I am, and named me after a favourite pupil, a little French girl, called *Aimée*. She thought it a good omen, because, although *Aimée* is a proper name, it is the past participle of a verb, and means “Beloved.”’

‘You would always be that, I am sure.’

The farmer had never before heard of verbs and past participles, but he understood Miss Aimay’s speech, and got out those terribly venturesome words in a low voice, and with his eyes fixed on the reins. His companion continued vivaciously enough. Perhaps this kind-hearted, homely, middle-aged farmer wore a fatherly aspect in her eyes.

‘I don’t think the Rectory children are of your opinion,’ she said; ‘they would hate any one who set them to French grammar and sums. But let me tell you about mamma.’

‘Yes, I like to hear about your mamma,’ was the low-voiced reply.

Mr. Flindell could not at all understand himself to-day. As his steady old nag trotted by field and meadow, past blacksmith’s shop, wind-

mill and ' Barley Mow ', familiar objects looked strange and new. He felt somehow that the world had turned upside down, and his too well-known Ego with it.

Miss Aimay prattled on.

' Mamma married a Frenchman of English descent, named de Richefont ; he used to say that he was descended from the royal dukes of Richmond. Who knows, it may be so ? But the name did not bring good fortune.'

' Your poor mamma and papa are dead and gone then ? ' asked the farmer compassionately.

' Oh ! dear no, thank God, both are as well as possible,' said the young lady ; ' I go to see them every year at Grenoble, where they keep a pension, that is to say, a boarding-house.'

What could her parents' calling in life matter to him ? Yet his face fell. Farmers were very aristocratic in their way. They rang the side door of titled landlords, and were never invited for refreshments beyond the housekeeper's room. But among themselves reigned an exclusiveness and an etiquette equally stringent with that of the gentry. With shopkeepers they seldom visited, and a boarding-house had positively a low sound. Every moment he was falling deeper in love, every moment her concerns began to

look like his own. France, however, was not England, that was a comfortable reflection.

‘ You can have a seat home, and welcome,’ he said, after a little ; ‘ I shall leave the “ Crown and Anchor ” yard at five o’clock.’

‘ How kind of you ! I always tell mamma that the only nice people in Suffolk are the farmers. But I am to drive back in the Rector’s four-wheeler, and I will get down at St. Margaret’s Green, if you please.’

Certain moments of life are veritable eternities. Brief as they are to recall, they seem to have lasted indefinitely. Now, to Edward Flindell came one.

When he drew up by that old-fashioned tavern, ‘ The Woolpack,’ gigs, sulkies, four-wheelers, and carts half-filled St. Margaret’s Green. The place was deserted.

Mr. Flindell could have prolonged those last minutes till nightfall, for ever. With graceful spring she reached the ground, again displaying the small feet in white stockings with open-work and sandalled shoes ; distractingly engaging too, in his eyes, was the slim, genteel figure, and gauze scarf worn with such elegance. More distracting still was the curtsy of thanks and farewell.

Suddenly possessed by some daemonic force he said as he drank in the vision :

‘Do you really mean what you told your mamma about us farmers?’

‘You would not ask the question if you were the governess of some people’s children,’ was the reply. Then, with a smiling inclination of the fan-shaped Tuscan bonnet, she tripped off.

The everyday world came back as Mr. Flindell alighted in the ‘Crown and Anchor’ yard. With the habitual retiringness of his class, he always entered by a back street. To dash up from the Cornhill was only becoming in the clergy, gentry, and independent people, that is to say, folks who lived on their means.

‘I began to think you weren’t a’ coming,’ reproachfully exclaimed a bluff, rubicund copy of himself. Mr. Samuel Flindell always felt aggrieved if his brothers stayed away from market. Whether or no farmers had business on hand it was clearly their duty to be seen o’ Tuesdays.

‘Is Marthy here?’ asked Edward.

‘No, we don’t like to be both away just now, what with bever beer to be drawn, and so much else to look after abroad. She said most likely you would be a’ coming next moon.’

‘The moon after next, Sammel,’ replied Edward with decision. He was a stay-at-home man, seldom visiting even his own people, and

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at this particular time he had especial reasons for avoiding Martha. His unmarried sister, too, was a bit of a match-maker, and between her plotting and Miss Studd's counter-plotting he felt, as the local phrase went, 'like a toad under two harrows.'

Having nodded to this neighbour and that, the pair sauntered on to the Cornhill, just in front of the inn-yard, always a busy scene on Tuesday afternoon, but in those days far from an imposing one. No palatial structure, as now, ornamented the square; alike Corn Exchange and streets showed the plainest architecture.

Little business was doing to-day. Few farmers had brought the usual brown paper bags of sample corn. But if not within, at least outside the Corn Exchange, there was active buying and selling. In every gig lay a large frail or rush-woven basket to be filled with household necessaries. Folks were too well off to stint themselves of tea at five shillings a pound, and as yet no cheap American cheese had driven rich Derby and Cheshire out of the field. The prevailing atmosphere was of solid sober prosperity. The townsfolk were all abroad; mingling with the rest, many a Quaker, in collarless coat and broad-brimmed hat, and Quakeress in

coal-scuttle bonnet, little black shawl, white lawn kerchief and drab or brown dress.

‘How do thee do, friend Edward?’—‘Glad to see thee, friend Samuel,’ suavely said one and another to the two jolly farmers as they threaded the crowd.

The scene was certainly exhilarating. The chats alike at street corner and in tavern parlour were for the most part personal. But comfortable circumstances beget a charitable frame of mind and honest dealing. As a spectacle those tenant farmers thronging the Cornhill and adjacent streets engendered confidence in humanity and in the conduct of human affairs.

CHAPTER V

A FLIRTATION BY RUSHLIGHT

AMMA SAGE might well toss her head and 'put on parts', as the phrase went. In those days it was not the village lass that sighed for a lover, but the lover that sighed oft-times in vain for a lass. Emigration had hitherto concerned felons only. The vast Australian continent hardly boasted of a sheepfold. No grain-laden ships reached Liverpool from the Far West or Argentina ; no Chicago stockyards or Scandinavian dairies as yet supplied the provision merchant and the buttermilk.

Thus it came about that in one sense, and that a most important one, this Suffolk village, with many another, was a veritable Arcadia. Alike the able-bodied, the three-quarter man, and the hudderen or hobbledehoy were in request. Not one could be spared by the farmer ; and as occasionally young women did 'go into the shires', in other words, accept situations beyond London, whilst their fathers, brothers, and sweethearts stayed behind, the hirsute, the courting sex, ever remained a decided majority.

Amma, with her large languishing eyes, complexion of genteel paleness and slim waist, was fully alive to the above-named advantages. She was a farmhouse maid, receiving two shillings a week as wages. She could barely read or write, and had not a well-to-do relation in the world. But she was a woman and conscious of feminine power, often capriciously, even cruelly used.

According to custom, Mr. Flindell boarded two young ploughmen, so that Amma and her fellow-servant 'Liza enjoyed the society of the stronger sex at supper and every meal o' Sundays. In this farmhouse, as in every other, the most rigid decorum was preserved. The maids' bed-chamber ever adjoined that of the master and mistress, whilst the men slept in an attic approached by a back-stair. But neither bolts, bars, nor yet the ubiquitous eye of housewives like Miss Maria Studd could prevent soft glances, whispered vows, Sunday walks, and the sending of Valentines.

'Well, Ebby,' said Amma, addressing the elder and taller of the two youths, brothers of twenty-two and seventeen; 'how I've been a waitin' and a lookin' for you!'

'It's all very fine to say that,' rejoined the swain, sullenly.

Men may follow the plough, fare on fat pork

and flour and water dumplings: the spark of romance, of poetry, is nevertheless not to be extinguished in their humble breasts. For Ebenezer Murphy, Amma's big brown eyes were the luminaries of the universe, her smile or frown, the day's destiny.

'Why all very fine, pray? Here, Zeky, you catch.' As she spoke, she threw across the kitchen a bit of home-made toffee, called treacle-sucker. Every one here made treacle-sucker.

Zeky, or Ezekiel—for every one gave children Bible names—opened not his palm, but his mouth. In went the sweetmeat, unerringly aimed, as unerringly swallowed. 'Liza, with a hand on each hip, laughed aloud. The stout, red-cheeked, unromantic, and imperturbably cheerful dairy-maid was a girl who, in local phrase, 'had had a misfortune.' Young women, in such case, Miss Studd said, made the best possible servants. They did not mind how hard they worked, nor what they ate, so long as they got plenty. And they were not perpetually running after men-folk, having had more than enough of them to their cost. The four sat down, Zeky's eyes brightening at the regale; a chunk of cold plum-pudding was allotted to each and the pewter mugs showed suggestive foam. Ah! that good old harvest beer! There-

in lay the secret of tremendously long working-days, and prevailing good humour. Higher wages certainly counted for something; the occasional taste of beef and the daily plum-puddings must also be taken into account. But it was the sweet, strong, sparkling home-brewed that, for the time being, made life exhilarating and toil almost a gracious dispensation.

Ebenezer Murphy, like his younger brother, was heavy-featured, square-built, with flaming complexion and yellow hair, recalling the hues of full-blown poppies and ripe corn. He was a typical Suffolker, drawling in speech, first-rate at ploughing or ninepins, not without a touch of native wit, and absolutely inoffensive. No half-penny newspaper had as yet opened his mind to wider intellectual and social horizons. A head horseman's place, a cottage with garden, and Amma—beyond these limits ambition soared not.

'Why all very fine, pray?' he repeated, with a look in his light blue eyes as of some timid animal entreating mildness at the hand of its captor. 'Because you know that you are never a'waiting and a'looking for me.'

'I was, Ebby, but what I had to say isn't pending,' she replied provokingly. 'If so be you are curious, ask 'Liza.'

'Liza was more addicted to giggling than speech, where, as she expressed it, a good bellyful was concerned. Miss Studd was a slave-driver, a Tartar, but she did heap her serving-people's board. 'Liza vigorously plied black-handled knife and fork with only a wink by way of reply.

'I'm going to leave at Michaelmas, I'm going into the shires,' pursued Amma.

'How can you go into the shires?' asked Ebenezer, the first word being on the note, the last on its upper octave. Every one's sentences hereabouts formed a gamut after this fashion.

'I suppose the coach will take me there as well as any one else,' Amma replied, quietly scornful.

Both 'Liza and Zeky laughed immoderately, but Ebenezer remained grave. Love may render some blind, others perspicacious. He was ready to credit Amma with any enterprise, however daring.

'Why should you go to the shires?' he asked.

'Why should I want to stay here?' was the merciless retort.

Susceptibilities were not keen in this workaday world. Folks called things by their names, and saw them as they were. Amma reasoned

in this way : ' If Ebby cares for me, and I don't care for him, the more fool he ; am I to blame ? '

' Because Ebby wants you,' chuckled 'Liza.

The excellent soul entertained positive veneration for the wedding-ring, although she had missed it herself. She knew that here was one at Amma's service.

' Has he lost his tongue then, poor little dear ? ' the girl said, quizzing her adorer's habitual poverty of speech.

Ebenezer took a deep draught of beer in order to give himself a little courage.

' I sometimes wish that you had lost yours, Amma,' was all he made reply.

The rebuke sobered 'Liza and Zeky, even Amma felt herself worsted.

' What can you do in the shires ? ' pursued Ebby.

' Isn't there a registry office at Ipswich ? Didn't Betsy Last get a housemaid's place beyond London with independent people, and have a lady's time of it ? I'm going to do the same.'

Ebenezer looked downcast enough. Was ever so unaccountable a creation as womankind ? Why on earth must Amma's head run upon the shires and independent people ?

The bouncing in of Miss 'Ria put an end to further talk.

'Have a care, what 's all this bobbery about ?' cried the little woman, rattling her keys. 'If you can't be quicker over your supper you must go without cold plum-pudding, that 's about it. 'Liza, have you got the tinder-boxes ready ? Amma, take the bread and cheese into the store-room. Am I to be kept driving you to bed till midnight ?'

Mute and sheepish, the young ploughmen took off their high-lows, then Ebby holding a rush-light in a lantern, the two crept up their attic stair, Miss Studd following the maids in the opposite direction, noisily bolting and barring doors as she went. The weather was sultry, and male night-gear here unheard of, bare as Adam the stalwart youths soon snored side by side.

Without a whisper 'Liza and Amma undressed in their bed-chamber adjoining the house-keeper's, their shapely arms not as yet covered at night with the matronly bed-gown.

Decently, comfortably, nevertheless, were those farm-folk housed fifty years ago, after lordly fashion indeed, compared with the accommodation of liveried lacqueys in some other countries. Nor was Walnut Tree Farm the only

household in which the temptations of the flesh were guarded against. Rigid supervision was no peculiarity of Miss Maria Studd.

'Liza no sooner laid her night-capped head on the pillow than she was sound asleep, but Amma gave a quarter of an hour to day-dreams. 'Mother may jaw me as she likes, but I'm not going to church with a clod-hopper, not I. When I marry it shall be some one who wears a black coat o' Sundays, and is called Mister. Tat Turtle is not the first tradesman who has put his arm round my waist, or would like to. And I've heard tell of a right down gentleman marrying a poor man's daughter afore now.' Nor did Miss 'Ria immediately put away daily concerns, and what with her did duty for romance.

In neat frilled muslin night-cap and short white bed-gown she remained at the lattice-window, watching the flitting bats and pondering, half her faculties given to Mr. Flindell's worldly interest, half to himself.

She had a habit of thus keeping awake, and even of roaming about the house when every one else slumbered. The usual notice, 'Man-traps and spring-guns set on these premises,' did not, as she knew, deter nightly marauders; tinkers of gipsy tribe would occasionally poison pigs

and rob fowl-house, orchard, and potato-clamp ; even stack-yards were not safe.

Miss Studd yearned after a bit of successful thief-catching. She had lately heard, or fancied that she had heard, footsteps round the granary at nights, but without opening her lips on the subject. What an arch-triumph for her, the pouncing upon fowl-stealer or corn-purloiner ! She knew Mr. Flindell to be a just man ; ‘ Right is right, and justice is justice,’ he was perpetually saying. On his conscientiousness she could rely. It seemed plain as day that he would consider himself immensely indebted to the woman thus careful of his property, thus ever watchful on his behalf. Only on the practical side was her employer attackable. She realized that the evoking of sentiment was quite out of the question. Edward Flindell might, or might not, have felt for some other woman the fascination of the bee to the flower, the moth to the candle : he would never be thus drawn towards herself. Sentiment was out of the question on her side as well as his own. But she had made up her mind to marry him, and to prove the best farmer’s wife in that part of the country. No modest ambition as things went ! Another train of thought followed. To surprise a lurcher in the farm-yard would improve her hand vastly ;

to forestall Mrs. Betsey Askew with regard to the lease would be a veritable ace of trumps. These big landlords—ah! she knew their ways so well—were as difficult to manage as Mr. Flindell himself. If her own game required extraordinary skill, so did the applicant's for Burrige Hall. Captain de Medue was whimsical, hasty, apt to take sudden likes and dislikes, but he was also a sharp man of business, ever contriving to get the best men and the best rents. You never knew which way the wind blew with him, folks said; he might seem to be ready to let you a farm to-day, and turn his back upon you to-morrow.

Could she only help Mr. Flindell here, procure for him ever so slight an advantage, an influential word, better still a first hearing!

Neighbour Betts had rallied, the poor man might live some days, nay, weeks yet. Miss Maria Studd pondered and pondered, attaining a happy solution ere launched into night-cap land.

CHAPTER VI

THE OLD HUNDREDTH

CHURCH-GOING at Burridge might be likened to the Camera Obscura, that temple of marvels opened on the Harwich sands for sixpence. There the delighted traveller—for a trip from Ipswich to the sea constituted travel in those days—beheld the curved shore at a glance, the animated panorama around passing within a radius immediately under his nose. In the same way did morning service here prove a centre of convergence, a microcosm, as was the sea-side picture, representative of many another.

Not that every homely figure now passing up the lane through the old wooden lich-gate was an orthodox church-goer. Many a meetinger attended simply because the meeting-house was closed, service being only held there in the evening. The Rector—good, easy man—bore such defalcations bravely, comforting himself with the thought that when Christmas drew near his congregation would be complete. Two hundred years before, some well-meaning parish-

ioner had bequeathed a certain sum to be laid out upon beef, coals—here whimsically pronounced cools—and woollen petticoats, consequently, by the last week in November, a parish census might have been taken from the pulpit.

Typical as congregation, were church and churchyard. Hundreds of such grey, ivy-covered churches, perched on the highest spot available, characterize England of the olden time, one and all standing in the midst of grass-grown graves and abundant greenery. Here too, as elsewhere, a small gabled building abutting on the west side indicated the village school, still as much an appendage of the church, and as completely under clerical jurisdiction, as the burial ground itself.

Whilst the male population, veterans, middle-aged, and huddereens in Sunday smock or corduroy, lingered outside the porch till the last bell tolled, the women walked straight in, neither looking to the right nor left, each carrying her prayer-book between neatly folded pocket-handkerchief.

The village boasted of one old maid only, and all eyes respectfully followed the much revered figure of Sarah Weedon as she now passed along, personification of unassailable reputation and feminine austereness. Although

far as yet from the sere and yellow leaf,—still pursued by elderly swains,—a cruel disillusion to many, a sphinx to all, she held aloof from courtship and wedlock. She had elected single blessedness, but would never give the reason why.

Most likely it was of the simplest, an objection to muddy high-lows on her speckless brick floor, to matronly cares, and perhaps the smell of tobacco. Be this as it may, she preferred the smooth routine of a washer-woman's life, wheeling her baskets of clean linen on a hand-barrow herself to Ipswich, beholden to none for daily bread. The appearance of the younger and flightier fair would evoke side-long glances, tittering comments among the younger men.

Amma, with her masterful brown eyes, might stare them out of countenance, the next girl was sure to be quizzed or criticized. This sort of thing went on every Sunday and compensated for the dullness of church-going. In very truth nothing could have been duller.

With their elders conversation would be sober, even edifying. They took counsel together on the matter in hand, discussed wheat-cutting, carting, and the weather.

‘Day, Master Sage, hope I see you well?’

‘Day, Master Hammond, I’m good tightly, thank you.’

Thus the rivals greeted each other, Elisha and Jerry no less eager for the place of head-man at Burrige Hall than their respective employers for the farm itself. Just as Elisha enjoyed Mr. Flindell's confidence, so Jerry stood high in the estimation of Mrs. Betsey Askew, for years being her head horseman and Lord of the Harvest. The pair were not quite equally matched. In bodily strength and a good stomach, Jerry had the advantage, mentally and morally, he was inferior.

'You've nearly cut yer wheat?' asked Jerry.

The two were now running a neck-and-neck race in the harvest field. Mr. Flindell and Mrs. Askew grew about the same acreage of corn. The first to get the wheat all carted and stacked might fairly boast of superlative management.

'Well nigh on it,' was Elisha's proud reply.

Jerry looked a trifle disconcerted. He had a habit of keeping his mouth open and uttering truisms, was indeed a kind of Sancho Panza without his wit, if we can imagine such a being, the clayey envelope without the divine spark.

'I never see'd such a crop of Talavera,' he went on, 'nor so much stover either.'

'We can't have wheat without stover,' Elisha answered sententiously. 'Why, even the Lord's chosen hadn't the like of that.'

Being Sunday Scriptural allusion seemed appropriate. And the Lord of the Harvest was an assiduous student of the Bible. He could not read, but had he not a most capable pre-lectress and expounder by his side? The companionship of such a woman as Karra was indeed an education in itself and, as times went, a pretty liberal one.

‘I suppose you’re right there,’ Jerry replied, with the air of a man who has just learned something. Then they chatted on of crops and weather prospects, how the barley looked, how the tares had yielded, and so on. Some naive listener dropped from the clouds might have supposed these men to be Lords of the Harvest in the fact, owners, or at least sharers of the wealth under discussion, sweeps of golden corn and silvery barley, fields of sweet-smelling turnip, luscious meadow and pightle full of young stock.

Could human meekness go farther, long-suffering reach a higher level? There was no envy in these slow, drawling utterances, perhaps none in these honest breasts, only an occasional feeling of wistfulness and wonder. Was it so all the world over, a Heaven-sent dispensation, that some must sow whilst others reaped?

The bell now ceased and the Rector took his place. His appearance was anything but sacerdotal. Shock-headed, slovenly, blustering, uncouth, the outer man ever revealed the inner. The Reverend Mr. Pascoe was about as fitted to officiate at the altar as to wear the triple crown itself. There he was, and perhaps parishioners might have been, in their own words, 'a sight deal worse off'. In an enormous pew immediately under the pulpit sat Mrs. Pascoe and her elder children; in an overflow pew adjoining, Miss Aimay frowned down the younger and led the village choir.

One and all of the little Pascoes were imbued with an overwhelming sense of rectorial supremacy. Outside the Rectory, as outside the Church of England, existed neither manners nor morals, to say nothing of salvation. But their governess was more than their match. She had the little crew well under command.

Miss Studd seldom accompanied the farmer to morning service, preferring the shorter afternoon ceremony. 'If I don't baste the duck myself it would be burnt to a cinder,' she had said to-day. Mr. Flindell chuckled. In his capacity of churchwarden he attended pretty regularly, and as good fortune would have it, his pew adjoined the Rectory annexe. Thus,

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throughout psalms, lessons and hymns, he could feast his eyes on a captivating apparition close by, Miss 'Ria's absence rendering enchantment more complete. He felt free, more at liberty to drink in the sweet picture.

That business of choir-leading might have been onerous to a girl of less spirit than Aimée de Richemont. Few and far between were the village churches provided with an organ, harmoniums were not as yet in use, night-schools and parish societies unheard of. Here half a dozen of the elder Sunday scholars were taught the Old Hundredth and a few other hymns by the Rectory governess, on Sunday gathering round her pew, and singing under her direction. On the whole, it was a case of every one doing her best, and due consideration was shown for shortcomings. To-day, somehow, things went as wrong as possible.

The lessons ended, Mr. Pascoe announced the Old Hundredth, whereupon half a dozen Sunday school girls quitted their low bench in the church and formed a semi-circle by the open door of the annexe.

In a clear, loud, well-trained voice the young choir-mistress began :

'With one consent let all the earth
To God their cheerful voices raise.'

What possessed Fanny Bent, Polly Cage, and Lizzie Last, Miss Aimay's best girls? Usually they followed suit with right goodwill, the other three, and here and there the congregation, joining.

But something this morning had upset the minxes, either a hudderen more bold than the rest was making faces to them from the gallery, or the Rector's gown had been put on inside out. Aimée found herself in the cruellest dilemma, her six pupils, scarlet in the face, stuffing their handkerchiefs into their mouths to check their laughter, the whole audience tittering.

Even well-meaning folks are led astray un-awares. The few singers in the body of the church were mute; Mr. Turtle, the miller, reseated himself with a severe expression of face, motioning Mrs. Turtle to do the same. The Rectory children giggled aloud. A grave scandal seemed imminent. Mr. Flindell had not much of a voice, and was nothing of a musician, but he always joined in the hymns, and, as churchwarden, exercised hardly less authority within the sacred precincts than Mr. Pascoe himself. Over against Aimée's pew was a little side door, now standing open on account of the great heat. Jumping up, he put his hand on

Fanny Bent's shoulder, pointing to the exit with a gesture impossible to misunderstand. One by one the crestfallen offenders filed out, Mr. Flindell closing the door after them. Then confronting his neighbours, inciting them to repair their ill-behaviour, he added his deep bass to Aimée's pure contralto, taking up the verse :

'Glad homage pay with awful mirth
And sing before Him songs of Praise.'

Chivalrousness may prove even more infectious than cowardly initiative. Hardly a voice now remained silent. Many who had never sung before contrived to do so to-day. With a volume of sound, a heartiness and spontaneity, unexampled in Burridge annals, the words rang out :

'Oh! enter then the temple gate,
Thence to his court devoutly press.'

Aimée was not a young lady addicted to the smelling-bottle. In that slender yet strong frame beat a stout heart. But tears of mortification had risen to her eyes when she found herself unaccompanied, and the usually sure, steady voice had faltered. The predicament over, Mr. Flindell encountered a glance and a smile that rewarded him only too well.

CHAPTER VII

SHAKESPEARE AND THE MUSICAL GLASSES

NEXT day, at dinner-time, Mr. Flindell found a note from the Rector, begging him to look in that evening on parish business. As churchwarden the farmer was often thus summoned to the Rectory, and even before Aimée's arrival the command ever gave pleasure.

After a chat with Mr. Pascoe in his study, the pair would adjourn to the drawing-room : music, a charade, acted by the children, or a recitation filling the interval before supper. Here Mr. Flindell gained a glimpse of that world from which he was otherwise shut out, the world of gentility, Shakespeare, and the musical glasses ; in plain language, he could realize, however faintly, the existence of art and letters and what goes by the name of culture.

Mrs. Pascoe, despite, poor woman, of ever-recurring cares of maternity, contrived to keep up her slender accomplishments. Her flowers, painted from nature, in Mr. Flindell's eyes were works of art ; her French and Italian sentences, interchanged with the children's governess,

savoured of high life and good breeding. Then at the tea or supper table, in her soft lisp—a lisp betokened aristocratic birth—she talked familiarly of great writers, of a poet named Shakespeare, of a novelist named Sir Walter Scott, of a critic named Dr. Samuel Johnson,—to himself, mere names. Oh, dear! thought he, with Juliet's nurse, what a thing was eddication to be sure!

Very expeditiously he now mixed the flet milk and barley-meal for his pigs, always the master's job; next gave out oil-cakes for the fat stock, and corn for the horses, finally changed his coat and swallowed a hasty tea.

There were important matters to be discussed to-night, church and school-house repairs, last Sunday's scandal, and so on. When the Rector and his guest passed out of the study, Miss Aimée was taking the younger children to bed.

A turbulent set of boys and girls the young governess had to deal with, but in the matter of discipline papa and mamma were her steadfast allies. As the boisterous little crew filled the entrance-hall, the Rector cried:

'Don't forget, Miss Aimée, if Jack doesn't say his prayers properly he is to have a good thrashing to-morrow, and Miss Esther Ann, another fib, and instead of a box on the ear

you'll get my cane—remember—aye, and smartly too.'

The words were hardly out of his mouth when down came Bob, an unbreeched harum-scarum of four, sliding from top to bottom of the banisters.

To catch up the offender, administer a few stinging spansks, and send him blubbering back was the Rector's work of a moment, Aimée evidently distressed, hardly acknowledging Mr. Flindell's nod, coaxing her charges upstairs.

'Humph!' murmured the Rector gruffly, 'it's well that I've three promises for the Blue Coat School—off these youngsters will go as soon as they are ten years old.'

The little drawing-room looked cheerful and inviting. Mrs. Pascoe lay on the sofa reading aloud; the poor lady was rarely, if ever, in a comfortable state of health. Cassy and Anna, tall, handsome, unkempt-looking girls of fifteen and twelve, were copying pencil drawings at the table.

Mrs. Pascoe, smiling sweetly, lay down her book, *Modern Society*, by Catherine Sinclair. 'It is very good of you to come at this busy season,' she lisped. 'As Mr. Pascoe says, he can always depend on *you*. Indeed, were it not for one or two such parishioners, where would

poor parsons be nowadays, with meeting-houses on the increase everywhere? But, Cassy, my love, and you, my little Anna, show Mr. Flindell your drawings.'

The farmer recognized a house or a tree, even a bridge or windmill, when delineated on paper or canvas; here his artistic perceptions began and ended.

He felt bound to be encouraging and complimentary.

'Ah! young ladies,' he said, affecting to inspect the drawings. 'What a thing it is to have such a ma! Make the most of your chances; try to be as ingenious.' Mrs. Pascoe gracefully accepted the flattery. The Rector put in with rough good nature:

'Farmers know more about porkers than pictures, don't they, Mr. Flindell? But come, girls, hurry down your governess, and give us some music; our neighbour likes a merry tune.'

Just then Aimée appeared. The look of discomposure had passed from her face. In seeming to smile at all, the visitor made sure that she smiled at him. All the old intoxication came back. The simile of the toad under two harrows was clean forgotten, alike Widow Askew and Miss 'Ria for the moment were non-existent,

and he fancied, nay, he felt sure that in Aimée's glance he detected a kind of answer to the feeling, a secret sympathy, an attitude of trustingness and appeal.

She wore—but what did it matter how she dressed? She would never look like any other woman, or rather, no other woman could ever look like her. An indescribable freshness and purity of outline, an exotic daintiness and finish, lent this girlish figure in light muslin its stamp and charm. There was, moreover, a self-possession and sparkle about every act and word that made outsiders forget her dependence.

'Here we are, Miss Aimée, all waiting impatiently for the "Battle of Prague", or the "Siege of Valenciennes",' exclaimed the Rector. 'Well, how did your pupils say their prayers? Any to be whipped to-morrow?'

'Really, Zachary,' put in Mrs. Pascoe, 'you would have Mr. Flindell think that you are a second Dr. Busby to your children.'

'They deserve one sometimes, I'm sure,' was the blunt reply. 'But thump away, Miss Aimée, or supper time will be here. "The Battle of Prague" first, and the "Siege of Valenciennes" afterwards.'

'No, indeed,' lisped his wife. 'Mr. Flindell

must hear the girls' duet, when Miss Aimée has got through her first piece.'

'Thump away, I tell you,' repeated Mr. Pascoe. 'I will explain the movements to our neighbour as you go on.'

Mrs. Pascoe's musical albums of former days were now discarded. 'Rory O'More,' 'Sich a gettin' upstairs,' and other delightful melodies of her girlhood being superseded by Rondo, Divertimento, and even Sonata. But as a drawing-room piece, and a touchstone of domestic virtuosity, Kotzwarra's *chef d'œuvre* still held its own. Every young lady who could show herself off at all, played with 'The Battle of Prague'.

'You'll hear what a wonderful composition it is,' said the Rector. 'The march to battle, the word of command, the signal cannon, the bugle horn, the trumpet-call, and the attack. On my word, that 's music, if you like.'

If Amy Richmond, as she was often called, thumped away on the old-fashioned square pianoforte in good earnest, it was hardly her fault. Musical excellence meant this sort of thing, as much thunder and lightning as folks could get for their money.

Away flew those nimble fingers, bringing out the utmost possible din from the well-worn in-

strument, bloodshed and battle triumphantly rendered by flats and sharps, arpeggios and staccatos, allegro and crescendo.

‘Flying bullets!’ said the Rector, nudging his guest. Mr. Pascoe always followed the performance, music in hand, an edition having for frontispiece the scene thus made subservient to sweet sound. Thereon was represented naively as in the Bayeux tapestry, fort and plain, foot-soldiers and cavaliers, hand-to-hand combat and fury of contending hosts.

‘Horses galloping! Don’t you hear them?’ continued Mr. Pascoe, beating time on his knee; ‘and now, rat-tat-tat, boom, boom, boom, that’s the beating of drums, the roar of cannon, those loud notes. Can’t you fancy you see the poor fellows, hear the shrieks of the wounded? Well done, Miss Aimée, feelingly you give this part, and now comes the trumpet of victory, and “God save the King” to wind up with. But why we should ask God to save the King of Prussia, I don’t see.’

Mrs. Pascoe laughed away the unclerical speech with a ‘Really, really, Zachariah!’ Meanwhile Mr. Flindell was trying to frame an appreciative remark. He dared not blurt out his honest opinion, namely, that the squeaking of pigs seemed equally melodious in his ears;

but Aimée's extraordinary skill, for that he felt no praise could overshoot the mark. And, music apart, this evening spent in her company was pure enchantment.

'And how do you like the piece?' asked his hostess sweetly. Mrs. Pascoe ruled nursery and schoolroom with the severity of her husband, but dissent was rampant, parsons and parsons' wives could not make too much of the orthodox.

'Oh! you mustn't ask me, Mrs. Pascoe,' cried the farmer. 'Where the pianoforte is concerned, I don't know a heron from a heronshaw. But if I might be so bold as to ask it, I'd like a song.'

'Let Miss Aimée sing "In my Cottage near a Wood", my dear,' put in the Rector good-naturedly. 'Then we will have the girls' duet, and go to supper.'

Aimée turned to the visitor before re-seating herself on the music-stool.

'I shall always think of Mr. Flindell's kind help on Sunday when I sing now,' she said, addressing herself ostensibly to all, but in reality to one.

The farmer was dumbfounded. Then, of course, he stammered out quickly the opposite of what was in his mind.

'It isn't worth while doing that!'

‘ Well, Mr. Flindell, I have arranged something else in the way of a choir,’ said the Rector. ‘ Now for the song.’

Aimée turned her face to the piano and began in a pretty, not untrained voice, this sentimental Rosa Matilda ballad then in vogue :

‘ In my cottage near a wood,
Love and Rosa now are mine,
Rosa ever fair and good
Charm me with those smiles of thine.

‘ Rosa, partner of my life,
Thee alone my heart shall prize,
Thee the tender friend and wife,
Ah, too swift Life’s current flies !

‘ Linger yet, ye moments stay,
Why so rapid is your wing ?
Whither would ye haste away ?
Stay and hear my Rosa sing.

‘ Love and you still bless my cot,
Fortune’s frowns are for our good.
May we live by pride forgot,
In our cottage near a wood !’

Poor although music and words were, both were unpretentious, and not devoid of a certain artless grace and plaintiveness. After the flashy clap-trap that had gone before, Moreland’s ballad seemed melody indeed, at least to the naive hearer. Mr. Flindell hearkened as if the very heavens had opened, letting in angelic minstrelsy.

There was no opportunity of thanking the singer. Hardly had she reached the keynote when all were hustled into the dining-room.

‘We must have the “Siege of Valenciennes” another time,’ cried Mr. Pascoe; then he added, for the blustering, burly Rector dearly liked a joke, ‘Come, Mr. Flindell, you are a lady’s man, I know; just look after Miss Aimée, and help her to what she wants.’

There was intoxication of milder kind about the supper-table, with its floral centre-piece, its silver forks, table-napkins, hereabouts a great and aristocratic novelty, cut glass saucers of confectionery, and claret-jug. The farmer did his best to behave like others, manipulated the unaccustomed silver forks gingerly, and took care not to cut his bread or misuse his knife. Aimée sat beside him, but he dared not look at her, much less open a conversation.

‘Mr. Flindell,’ exclaimed Miss Cassy—Miss Pascoe, as she insisted on being called—a big, good-looking, but ill-finished girl of fifteen, ‘we want a ride in your waggon; ma says that clergymen’s children may do anything, and we should so love it.’

‘Cassy, my love,’ lisped her mamma, ‘Mr.

Flindell will, of course, understand my meaning. Had he daughters of his own I am sure he would not permit them to ride in his waggon. With you and Lady Louisa's children' (Lady Louisa was a distant relation of the Rector's wife, who occasionally visited her) 'the case is quite different; you will never have anything to do with the farming people, and so need fear no familiarity.'

'When I begin to cart you may have a ride, and welcome, missy.'

'All of us?' asked Anna, the second girl, a hoyden of twelve, dressed in the delectable style of the day, low-necked, short-sleeved frock, barely reaching to the knee, and white trousers, tucked and starched, all but touching the ground.

'The waggon would hold you all, I fancy,' said the farmer, seeing in this scheme a delight for himself, 'and if you come at bever time, and your ma doesn't object, you shall taste bever cake and harvest beer.'

The child clapped her hands in ecstasy; truth to tell, in spite of plate, cut glass, and claret-jug, the nursery fare at the Rectory was Spartan—home-made bread, often a week old, a scrape of dripping by way of butter, and dough-cake just floured with seeds and coarse sugar. To

sit up to supper, when visitors came, was a treat of the first water.

‘ I shall be very pleased to send them all under Miss Aimée’s care. It will be quite a picnic for my poor darlings,’ Mrs. Pascoe lisped ; she ever spoke thus endearingly of her children, although as good at spanking as the Rector, ‘ and so like you to propose it, dear Mr. Flindell ! ’

‘ May we go to-morrow ? ’ asked Anna.

‘ As I said, I haven’t begun carting yet, missy, but I’ll let your ma know when I do. You must come to see the last waggon brought home trimmed with boughs and flowers, and hear the harvest-folks sing.’

The matter being happily settled, host and churchwarden discussed the proposed choir. Yes, it was quite impossible to go on in this way any longer. The Bishop and the parishioners must be appealed to, a fund raised for purchase of a second-hand organ, a choir formed.

It was past ten o’clock when the farmer quitted the Rectory. As the night was dark he did not betake himself to field paths, but kept the turnpike road, to-day hardly less fragrant and solitary. Sweetbrier and honeysuckle scented every inch of the way. The very genius of peace brooded here, and such influences of time and place harmonized with

the wayfarer's mood. His sweet and wholesome nature was unconsciously alive to the evening's experience, a feeling of rapture took possession of him, a feeling more akin to spiritual revelation than mere hope and joy.

CHAPTER VIII

AMONG THE HEN-COOPS

AMMA sallied forth into the orchard, one part of which was dotted with hen-coops. It was her business to tend these late broods the last thing, scatter corn and refill saucers with water.

A miller's cart stood at the back gate, and naturally where the flour-sacks are, there will the miller be also.

Without once turning her head, but all the time quite well assured of Tat Turtle's movements, Amma now went from coop to coop, replenishing the red earthen saucers, and scattering corn from her quart measure. As thus engaged on her knees a voice of lover-like insinuation whispered in her ear :

'I've been a'lookin' for you high and low, Amma.'

'I hope you don't think I've been a'lookin' for you,' was the brisk reply.

Amma understood, none of her sex better, the worth of sheer outspoken contemptuousness in dealing with the other. Show a man that you don't care a farden' for him, and he will

crawl on his hands and knees before you, was her favourite dictum, a dictum on which she acted. Hence her enviable position ; every damsel hereabouts owned a lover. Amma could boast of a round dozen.

Now the miller's son was not like Saul, the son of Kish, a choice young man and a goodly. Outwardly, Tat Turtle possessed few attractions. The much-despised Ebenezer was by far a finer specimen of humanity to look at, being tall and well-proportioned. His rival, on the contrary, was short, thickset, and pugnacious of feature. The elder Turtle enjoyed a wide reputation for personal strength. In the matter of thews and sinews no one would vie with him ; none dared encounter him in the wrestling-ring. The younger prided himself upon the inheritance of these qualities. He, in turn, promised to be the strong man of his own generation, as his father had been that of the preceding one.

But Tat Turtle occupied a different social position to that of Amma and her family. His sisters were apprenticed to dressmakers and milliners at Ipswich, and were called ' Miss ' this, ' Miss ' that ; his father had an account at the bank, went to the poll on election days, fulfilled the office of churchwarden and actually took in a weekly newspaper.

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In view of these considerations it might be supposed that Amma's manner would change, become softer, more engaging. But no, the saucy little baggage was as consummate a coquette as Calypso herself! In dealing with the men-folk, she knew well enough what she was about.

The swain stood arms a-kimbo, watching the adorable figure before the hen-coop.

'No, I'm not such a gaby as to expect any attention from you,' he replied, moving a step nearer.

Amma was now kneeling in order to push her saucers through the bars.

With a sudden movement he now stole behind her, bent down and kissed the dainty neck, set off by snow-white, turn-down collar and pink ribbon.

With a movement deft as his own, the young woman raised her bowl and threw it backward, the culprit receiving the full contents in his face.

He mopped himself briskly, his lover-like ardour not at all damped; on the contrary, the deliciousness of that stolen embrace seemed thereby enhanced. Inadequate payment for another were a veritable ducking!

'You confounded little hussy,' he cried, 'I've

all the mind in the world to get into my cart and drive away.'

'And why don't you?' coolly asked Amma, rising and making for the next hen-coop.

'Just let me finish, will you; get into my cart and drive away without saying what I had to say, was what I meant.'

'You'll be coming again this side of Christmas, I daresay,' said the maiden with an air of absolute indifference.

'Some news will keep and some won't,' the young man replied, his voice and manner thrilling Amma, despite her careless attitude.

He drew nearer, this time for the purpose of speaking low.

'Father's had some money left him,' he began.

'Is that all?' quoth Amma, feigning disillusion; 'why, I thought at least you had 'listed as a soldier, or was goin' to Ameriky.'

The uncomplimentary suggestions evoked a yet more lover-like glance.

'Father's a'going to take a farm,' he began.

'Fine parts you'll be puttin' on then,' interrupted the girl. 'I think I see you a'drivin' to market in a gig, your hat shinin' like master's o' Sunday.'

'Father wants me to marry,' said the adorer.

‘ He wants to be rid of you, well he may,’ quoth the adored, looks and behaviour saying : ‘ and pray what is your marriage to me ? ’

‘ You’re not to talk to any one about this, nor about something else either. I shall be asked in church with you or nobody, that ’s the long and the short of it.’

‘ The short, most likely. Lor’, Tat, you must have been under your father’s beer-tap, drinking the barrel dry ; as if he would ever let you go to church with a poor mawther like me.’

‘ When I do a day’s work for him and take a day’s wage I am bound to please father. When I take a missus, I take her to please myself ! ’ Tat said gallantly.

‘ My ! ’ said the young woman, ‘ how fine you do talk, Tat. But how contrary things do happen to be sure ! I’ve given Miss ’Ria warnin’ ! I’m going at Michaelmas to a place in the shires.’

‘ No, you’re not,’ was the sturdy reply. ‘ Father ’s in a hurry to see me settled, and I’m in a hurry too.’ Just then the speaker caught sight of Mr. Flindell by the gate.

‘ Teddie will think I’ve been looking at his walnuts,’ he added hurriedly. ‘ Good-bye then till Sunday.’

With all the aplomb imaginable, for, compared

to Ebenezer, Tat Turtle was a finished man of the world, he shouted :

‘ Hullo, Mr. Flindell ! What might you think of asking for your nice little brush of walnuts ? ’

The farmer made for his interlocutor, and Tat, nothing loath, awaited him among the hen-coops. Amma went on with her task. She held aloof from the pair, never once looking back.

A pretty girl is the poetry of the workaday world, and Tat Turtle knew no other. When in their survey the two men moved nearer that slim figure his heart gave a leap ; when she was hidden by the fruit-trees, the place seemed empty.

‘ You’ve got a beautiful lot of damsons too, I see, Mr. Flindell,’ he said ; having discussed the walnuts, he contrived this excuse for further loitering.

‘ They’re worth nothing, for sale I mean,’ replied the farmer ; ‘ if your people make damson cheese they’re welcome to a peck or two.’

What a sight was that orchard as the sun sank ! No need was there of lover-like raptures to turn it into a scene of enchantment. The veteran trees were laden with fruit, damsons making a soft blue cloud here and there ; in

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striking contrast, the old-fashioned bullace, its pale yellow globes just touched with crimson ; patriarchal too, was every pear and apple tree, some of these evidently in the last stage, yet like serene old age, beautiful to the last, bent, leafless branches being adorned with mellowing fruit. The orchard, with every other feature of Walnut Tree Farm, had no pretension to symmetry or horticultural art, but damson trees had been grouped in one spot, pear trees in another, and so on ; their especial fruit and foliage being massed together ; fragrant and rich-hued above all was the walnut-leaf now tingling with warm sunshine.

Farmer and miller strolled hither and thither, neither, perhaps, accounting to himself for his secret transport. Nature and its varying aspects, like life and its accidents—birth, marriage, and death—was taken very much by these country folks as a matter of course. They no more went into raptures over a fair prospect or a lovely sunset, than into depths of despair at bereavement or calamity. Existence here was singularly free from complication, simple to artlessness, yet sane and robust.

Why were the peace and pleasantness of this familiar scene so brought home to the two men to-night ? Such rosy glow, such wafted balmi-

ness, such placidity were things of every day, yet both seemed conscious of all for the first time.

Tat Turtle tasted by anticipation the bridegroom's happy portion, dark eyes to shoot their ineffable glances, a brisk tongue making merry the hours, a second and more piquant presence to enliven his home.

CHAPTER IX

THE LAST WAGGON

PERFECT weather had favoured the harvesters. Mr. Flindell's stack-yard showed a goodly array of wheat stacks, only one field now remained to clear, that field dedicated to rustic ceremonial, festive song, and love !

From time immemorial the return of the last waggon had been here celebrated with exuberant joy and triumph. Boughs and posies decorating the piled-up corn, reapers and their women-folk accompanying it with merry chorus.

At the Rectory all was delight and expectation. Capacity for affection and docility had not been wholly spanked, cuffed, and boxed out of its turbulent little crew. These innumerable boys and girls were ready enough to like their governess, when not interfered with after Spartan fashion. Let alone, Amy Richmond would have found her task supportable. To-day, however, not a ripple troubled the surface. Nursery and school-room treats were as rare as when the lonely little Princess Victoria had trundled a hoop in Kensington Gardens ; a plum-

cake on birthdays, the annual flower-show at Ipswich, a bag of nuts, oranges, and gingerbread from the May Fair, were here the only extras. No wonder, therefore, that Mr. Flindell's invitation put one and all into extravagant spirits.

At last came the ecstatic moment of departure. Singing, pirouetting, shouting, Amy's little troop poured into the cool, umbrageous Drift, leading from the turnpike road to Mr. Flindell's stack-yard. The afternoon was sultry. Bloused and scarlet were alike harvestmen and gleaners, even this delicious avenue seemed heavy with warmth to-day. But the children exuberated, and Amy too, breathed the air of romance.

The farmer's brown eyes now shyly, yet adoringly, meeting her own, now brightening with kindness and quiet humour, had of late changed daily routine and the current of her ideas. A girl can no more help dreaming of love than a stripling of bridegroom's rapture.

It was the sense of entire freedom, also of feminine supremacy, that rendered Mr. Flindell's homely fête so exhilarating. A woman's unerring instinct told her that these simple preparations were not all made for half a dozen boisterous children. Would Cassy and Anna have noticed whether he wore high-lows, and

was in his shirt sleeves or no ? Would the little ones be any the wiser for his semi-Sunday and market garb ? When their host met them at the stack-yard gate, she saw that he wore well-polished boots and pepper and salt tweed sur-tout. Above his black silk stock showed a rim of white collar ; a new handkerchief of rich oriental pattern, in orange and crimson, protruded from his pocket. His bronzed, ruddy face was close-shaven. Alike in dress, person, and manner, the well-to-do tenant-farmer was here admirably represented.

‘ There is the waggon, it will soon be unloaded,’ he said, pointing to the bright blue waggon with red wheels inside the stack-yard. ‘ And here comes Smy with the bever.’

For a moment the children were literally transfixed with delight. Even the coming ride was forgotten, lost in anticipation of another kind. There came Smy, muttering and making grimaces, as was his habit, his odd, crooked little figure bending under the weight of two enormous frail-baskets, the one piled to the brim with bever cakes, the other showing a two-quart stone bottle of harvest beer, drinking-horns, and goblets.

‘ I don’t want to make these little ladies’ and gentlemen’s heads go round, so I have sent to

the "Barley Mow" for some ginger-pop. They'll like it better, I'll be bound, and it don't make folks' tongues run on,' explained the host.

The children clapped their hands and danced for joy. Ginger-pop and a penny bun had ever rewarded them after the agonies of tooth-drawing, and now they were to have as much of it as they wanted, and bever cake to boot, without the dentist and his horrible forceps.

Wriggling and writhing, curling and uncurling his mis-shapen limbs, mouthing and mumbling, Smy contrived to free himself from his burden.

'Mussy on us, I've to go back, Miss 'Ria says, another prog basket's a' waitin',' he said, pausing a moment to mop his face, that small face, monkeyish as it was, an anticipatory argument in favour of Darwinism, yet alert with boorish wit and rude good nature.

'I s'pose we're all a' going to eat for a week,' he added; 'leastways, I'll match the best at that game, if I have a chance.'

Busy as were the harvesters, two atop the half-stacked wheat, two pitchforking the sheaves from the fast-emptying waggon below, they found time for a joke.

'That's it, Smy, don't go without anything for want of axing,' said one.

'Miss 'Ria 's a' callin' you, Smy,' said another; 'she'll have you by the ears if you don't mind.'

'And be sure not to stop a' nannicking with Amma,' cried the third.

The fourth just showed his ivory teeth, but said nothing. Too busy for jest or merriment to-day was the Lord of the Harvest. From sheer force of habit, Elisha's heart now rejoiced unenvyingly in the plenteousness around him—the piled-up corn he had helped to sow, reap, and garner; the abundant evidence of a rich and prosperous season. By the time Smy's comical figure re-appeared, the waggon was empty, and the fascinating business of packing in began. First, Mr. Flindell aided Elisha to stow away the frails and arrange a seat of sacks for Aimée and her eldest pupil; next the ladder was adjusted for their use, the rest preferring to do without. Scrambling up with the agility of sailors boarding a ship, aiding themselves by wheel and shaft, the noisy little troop took possession; a few minutes more and they were off.

Aimée had not a vestige of sentimentality in her composition. But the isolation of dependency, the natural hauteur of clerical employers, made the least show of interest and liking,

especially in the other sex, welcome indeed. Occasionally she had chaperoned the elder girls to some neighbouring vicarage or rectory, when a dance would be improvised. That sleek young curate who should invite a governess to quadrille or lancers must expect a covert reprimand. The governess's business was at the piano, her share of the evening's gaiety the playing for others.

Upon one occasion a visitor from London, not, however, in holy orders, had committed the transgression.

'Arn't you allowed to?' was the rough yet good-natured query of a young lawyer, whom she refused.

She was certainly 'not allowed to', although the condition formed no part of agreement. As Mrs. Pascoe blandly observed:

'Miss Aimée was uppish about many things, but she did know her place.'

The girl's pride served to stave off humiliation.

'Oh! that dear little man, he will fall, I am sure!' cried Esther Ann, at sight of Smy climbing to his seat.

The small mis-shapen figure at the last moment had caught hold of a dangling rope, and fixing one foot firmly against the shaft, literally swung in mid-air.

‘Don’t you be afeard, missy,’ said Elisha, smiling gravely; ‘Lor’s a’ mussy, he’s as safe as a tomtit on a laylock bough.’

That slight perturbation over, how delightful the jig-jog through field and lane, how enthralling the present moment, how blissful the moments to come! Leaning on the edge of the waggon the children sang, shouted, danced, hurrahed. The thumps and bumps, the jerks and lunges by the way, only heightened their enjoyment. It was so much pleasanter to ride than go afoot, and so much more delightful to ride in a waggon than be mewed up in papa’s four-wheeler!

On Aimée equally had the spell fallen. She knew well enough that her presence, and her presence only, made the farmer’s festival. He said little, readiness of speech was not Edward Flindell’s strong point, but a certain reticence, a shy, almost tearfully joyous glance—an impulse to speak held in constant check, these things may be more eloquent than any words.

And alike wooded lane, corn-field, and pightle echoed with the stock-dove’s note, that low, tender, unwearied call, as if it were the very genius of love summoning its votaries, the one voice of all to which none of mortal born are wholly deaf!

‘ Halt for bever ! ’

‘ All right, my lord.’

Squatted under a hedge near harvestmen and waggons, the children had impatiently awaited the summons.

‘ When *are* the frails to be unpacked ? ’ little Esther Ann had asked again and again, almost crying of hunger and impatience. The Rectory dinner, always called lunch for gentility’s sake, had been dispatched earlier than usual ; visions of bever cake eaten abroad took away all relish from cold boiled beef and flour and water dumplings. Tantalizing too was the sight of Smy standing between the prog baskets, as he called them ; now the little Jack-in-the-box of a man poised himself upon one foot, now upon another, his small, sharp eyes watching Elisha Sage, his ears alert, not for a second that railing little tongue of his still. Expletives, jeers, innuendoes poured forth in a veritable cataract.

‘ My lord, indeed,’ quoth he, ‘ his whistle don’t wan’t whetting as mine do, I’ll lay, or he wouldn’t stand there, a’lookin’ as grave as the prophet Elisha himself. Come, Master Sage, here we be hungry and dry, and the clock gone four. If it warna for these little ladies here, wouldn’t I creep up unbeknown and give you

a kick in your hinder part? Lor's a mussy, how folks would split with laughin' to see him sent half-across the field. Tomtit, he called me! I'd Tom-tit him, if it warna harvest time, and he lorded it over master's old ale.'

Thus he muttered and ejaculated, Amy answering the child's question.

'Esther Ann, what can you be thinking of? Don't you know that we've all changed places like the people in *Arabian Nights*? Elisha Sage is Grand Vizier. Were the Archbishop of Canterbury here himself he would have to wait for cake and ale till yonder good man gives permission.'

Hardly was the mechanically uttered bidding out of Elisha's mouth than the scene changed. With the swiftness of stage machinery, rakes and pitchforks were laid aside, horses tethered under the shade, then in a long file, as soldiers summoned to bivouac, the harvesters sat down, each provided with a small frail containing stone bottle and cake. Hilarity reigned. Settling-day, Harvest home, and Largess-spend-ing were near. The crowning labours of the field would soon receive crowning reward. None now took full harvest wages o' Saturday nights. Alike full-bodied, three-quarter men and hudd-erens, had a balance due for extra work, that

balance to be paid when the last load of barley should enter the stack-yard.

Mr. Flindell and his guests sat under the same hedge a hundred and odd yards off, Smy acting the part of waiter. For the matter of that, ceremony was set aside. With his huge clasp-knife the farmer now cut off large hunks of bever cake, first serving Aimée, then her pupils. Next he bade his whimsical cup-bearer tilt the heavy stone bottle of 'old harvest', himself holding a battered silver goblet. Bright and sparkling as sack or canary, effervescing as sea-foam, the potation he now proffered, Aimée the beloved toasting him with a smile.

'If I live to be as old as grandmamma, now in her ninetieth year, I shall never forget that draught,' she said, restoring the goblet.

He stared as one whose senses reeled with reckless drinking. Edward Flindell was as temperate as a man could well be. He had never been drunk in his life till now! Smy, muttering and gesticulating all the while, had begun to serve the children. Pop, pop, pop, went one ginger-beer bottle after another, the little tipplers shrieking with delight, clamouring for more and yet more. Mr. Flindell's dazed expression soon changed to one of rapture; if only he could have put that rapture into words!

· There was something incongruous in Aimée's reminder of a nonagenarian, the coupling of vision so exquisite with bald, toothless, wrinkled age! The hinted hold on memory, the notion of being recollected throughout a lifetime, the implied interest in himself, could but arouse passionate thoughts. Without the ability to say so, he felt that existence now possessed only one meaning for him. Edward Flindell had ceased to belong to himself. The world of every day seemed slipping from him as the solid globe slips from the balloonist.

‘It is only old harvest ale,’ he got out at last. ‘We farmers cannot offer anything better than we have.’

The speech was modest to humility: intoxicating as had been her words, doubt and self-depreciation succeeded to rapture. How could creature so dainty, a young lady able to speak French and play the pianoforte, care for a tenant farmer without education? What had she in common with dairy-maids and market-women? How unsuited those slender white fingers for the churn and the bake-oven, the business of pickling hams or making gruel for sick cows!

Men and women only read each other's thoughts by fits and starts, at rare intervals, and under peculiar circumstances. Well aware

of her host's embarrassment, with feminine intuitiveness imputing it to the true motive, her thoughts ran thus : oh, heart of gold, thou art then mine, mine ! This young girl was neither mercenary nor a coquette, but with the revelation of triumph came day-dreams of less romantic kind. Hitherto existence had been hard ; schooled in human nature and versed in fortune's caprices, she knew, none better, the priceless of modest independence, the dignity of an assured position. This unpretending, but prosperous, tenant farmer, was as the fairy prince to Cinderella.

Meantime the picnic went on gaily. Deep hidden emotion yields to happy circumstance and the exigences of the moment. Edward Flindell could not be loquacious or mirthful, but he could enjoy things in his own way. The children's voracity evoked a quiet smile.

' I am glad the little folks don't find bever cake amiss,' he said.

' We had dinner, lunch I mean, but, of course, the little ones' dinner, earlier than usual,' replied Miss Cassy, adding, with the patronizing air learned of her mother, ' and if we ate nothing you might think that what you offered us was not good enough.'

' Pray eat all you like,' Mr. Flindell replied,

his huge clasp-knife being in constant requisition. The glossy brown loaves rich with currants and spice were disappearing as if by magic.

Love knows not the commonplace. The Beloved can never speak, behave, or look after commonplace fashion. Whilst thus employed, the farmer's attention was wholly given to the distracting figure opposite. Aimée wore fine black silk mittens setting off ivory hue and glossiness of taper fingers and rounded arm. As she daintily broke off bit after bit of her cake he contrasted the action with the children's, that ravenous sticking into their morsels with the teeth, that cramming and stuffing as if for a wager.

Then her voice, vivacious, yet gentle, by no means monotonous, yet never abrupt, and graceful diction, how unlike his housekeeper's rasping speech, interlarded with invective, or even sister Martha's blunt utterances! Most of all did her looks betoken superior birth and bringing up; fair as those of court beauties in Martha's *Keepsake* were this girl's features, a certain composure and self-control adding dignity and charm; no frowns, twinkling of the eye, compression in pouting of the lips, no contortion, whatever her humour might be. Miss Maria Studd, on the contrary, knit her

brows, nodded, winked, gesticulated with every syllable.

When, in Scriptural phrase, every one had eaten and was filled, he rose, stone bottle in hand.

‘I must go to the men now,’ he said. ‘Perhaps the little ladies and gentlemen will like to cut boughs and gather posies with Smy till the last waggon is ready. There are plenty of pretty flowers in yonder barley field.’

Aimée and her charges set off. Smy following, he too, as he forcibly expressed it, ‘being full to the bung-hole.’

Mr. Flindell made for the harvesters.

‘That ’s it, Teddie,’ shouted Nat, the sheep-shearer; like all wits, he was no respecter of persons. ‘We’ve been a’longin’ for your old harvest, Teddie dear, as David for the water of the well at Bethlehem.’

The farmer took no notice. Such sallies formed part of the season’s programme. Walking straight up to Elisha he put the stone bottle in his hand. Then as silently, amid jokes, shouts, and guffaws, the Lord of the Harvest made the round, filling each man’s drinking-horn. Bever ended, carting went on more diligently than ever, the children and Smy being busy enough in the adjoining field.

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Amid this sea of pale gold, wave upon wave of ripe barley, bright flower-heads showed here and there, the corn-cockle of deepest carmine, the wild periwinkle, blue as a baby's eye, fiery-red poppies, wild marigold, and purple loosestrife. Smy creeping along the stetches could gather these, but it was the hedgerow that attracted the children.

'That will do for nosegays, now for the green boughs and garlands, Master Smy,' they cried.

Obedient to their behest, the little man climbed bank and tree like a squirrel. With shouts of delight, Aimée's pupils pounced upon each treasure as it fell, now a trailing mass of honeysuckle, traveller's joy, and wild rose, now a branch of sycamore, with its pale yellow tassels, now an oak bough showing many an acorn.

If entrancing this task, even more so was that of decorating the last waggon, for all here could lend a helping hand.

Whilst the Lord of the Harvest and his men covered the piled-up corn with greenery and flowers, Aimée and the children garlanded horses and harness. Elisha's favourite, Smiler, must have his necklace of poppies, the rest their floral adornments.

‘On my word, a bowery indeed,’ observed Mr. Flindell, eyeing the waggons.

It was evenfall when the joyous business of preparation began ; twilight faded ere it came to an end. Then indescribably beautiful, and only to be faintly suggested, became that rustic scene. The group of harvesters had now considerably swelled. One by one came wives and sweethearts to participate in the jubilation, and add to the general air of festivity. From his perch on the piled-up sheaves Elisha caught sight of Karra’s pale, emotional face, Ebenezer of Amma’s slim figure. The presence of their womankind, the only amiable influence they knew, rendered these toilers all the gayer, more expansive. They whistled, sang, shouted, with the self-abandonment of Burgundian vintagers. Troubles and hardships were forgotten, jollity and rollicking fun held sway.

Hitherto the prevailing loveliness had been of subdued hues and mellow sobriety.

Amid pearly tints the sun went down, light clouds just touched with purple and rose soon giving place to soft uniform greyness. For a brief spell cornfield and hedgerow, waggon and harvesters formed part of a neutral landscape, outlined features hardly deeper in tone than their dim surroundings.

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But all at once, just as sudden passion transforms a beautiful nature, so was this scene changed, enriched, glorified.

It was the rising—rather, revelation—of the harvest moon ; here came no heralding illumination, no preparation rays, as at sunrise. This vesper world, so uniformly grey and quiet the moment before, now seemed afire. From that resplendent orb, trembling above the horizon, emanated a glory wrapping heaven and earth, and perhaps, although unconsciously, not a soul here but was impressed by the sight. Every year rose the harvest moon, brightest, largest, most irradiating of the year, yet the experience lost not novelty. Folks gazed and admired as if they had never seen it before.

At last, noisily and joyfully, the procession moved off, some before, some alongside, others behind the waggon.

‘ We are clergymen’s children, remember, and can do anything,’ Cassy had reminded her little brothers and sisters.

So the six abreast fell in with the others, brandishing rakes, cheering, hurrahing lustily as any.

Just behind followed their host and governess, the farmer having no word to say, Aimée’s sprightly talk ended. Side by side they kept

measured pace, the fact of such nearness affording new, unaccountable pleasure, were indeed pleasure the word! That long, joyous spell of holiday, that understanding brought about by simple happiness mutually shared, had changed to deeper, untranslatable feeling. In such moods speech is indeed not needed. It suffices for lover and beloved to breathe the same air, gaze on the same scene, take part in the same event.

The long wooded Drift, more beautiful than ever, thus irradiated, was now left behind, and the stack-yard reached.

Here, as the wreathed, garlanded waggon turned, the procession broke up; instead of a long file, the harvesters and their guests formed a compact crowd at the gate. A final cheer, and the glorious evening would be over.

‘Have a care, Aimée,’ cried the farmer; almost unconsciously he had called her by her French name of such sweet significance.

Around the stack-yard, separating it from the thicket, was a deep ditch, partly choked up with brier and undergrowth; as the waggon turned in, folks fell back so eagerly that there was barely standing-room. In ignorance of the pitfall Aimée suddenly receded, her cavalier’s outstretched arm being only just in time to

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prevent a mishap. For several minutes she stood thus imprisoned, no one before them stirring an inch. Unable to utter a word, Mr. Flindell held her tight, the pair trembling, weeping, smiling. Passion suddenly awakened to consciousness is slow to find expression, deepest feeling is shy to unutterableness. These two had now only one thing to say, but although voiceless, each reached the other's heart, probed the other's nature. The tell-tale kiss, the one kiss that has no fellow, which fates us against our will, did duty for words.

How could the farmer know that her lips would meet his own with such utter self-abandonment, that indeed she was waiting for it, soul and body suddenly his, and for life? These things are riddles.

'Make an errand to Ipswich next market day,' was all he whispered. 'My gig is as good as yours, you know.'

CHAPTER X

A MIDNIGHT SUMMONS

FROM broken yet happy slumbers, with sweet dreams, the farmer was rudely awakened.

That low thrice-repeated knock, that hushed yet so clearly reiterated 'Mr. Flindell, Mr. Flindell,' could not surely belong to dream-land ?

He rose in his bed and felt the hands of his large old-fashioned watch, long habit enabling him thus to dispense with flints and tinder-box. It wanted a few minutes to midnight.

'Mr. Flindell, Mr. Flindell,' cried Miss 'Ria, in the same penetrating undertone. 'You must get up at once. There is not a moment to lose. Don't stop to strike a light.'

The door was now opened an inch, and a rush-light in a chamber-lantern pushed through, bedroom candlesticks being as yet a luxury. Thinking that fowl-stealers were about, or that a horse had been seized with the gripes, neither being infrequent occurrences, Mr. Flindell jumped out of bed and into his nether garments. A minute later the door was thrown wide.

There stood Maria Studd, like himself, clothed certainly, but presenting an unaccustomed vision to bachelor eyes. The little woman, perhaps, showed to no disadvantage in her mixed day and night gear. The frilled night-cap quite becomingly set off twinkling black eyes and ruddy cheeks, whilst the plaid shawl, thrown over bed-gown and 'coat', as underskirt was here called, although displaying well-turned stockingless ankles, at the same time answered every requisite of decorum.

The farmer's eyes seemed elsewhere; nor, indeed, had Maria Studd just now thought of effect. Her power lay in a wholly different direction. She did not wait to be questioned, but blurted out—

'Mr. Betts breathed his last exactly three-quarters of an hour ago.'

'How on earth came you to know it?' asked the farmer, with a bewildered look.

'Never mind that now; what you have to do is to saddle Jack and post to London. Captain de Medue I hear is at Brighton. You will then have a day's start of every one else.'

Mr. Flindell tried to put in a word.

'First come, first served, has been Captain de Medue's motto more than once,' she went on with the same familiar peremptoriness. 'He

isn't the man to refuse a tenant like you the offer of the Hall Farm, when you have travelled over a hundred miles to ask for it. And you have not five minutes to lose.'

'I'll tell you what it is, I don't like putting myself so forward,' he said, his slow wavering accents in striking contrast to her own; 'and how can I be away in harvest time? Barley-mowing begins to-morrow.'

She laughed derisively.

'Can't I set the men to work every bit as well as yourself? I know which field you said you should have mown first. Master Sage, too, wants no looking after at harvesting.'

'You have said right there,' the farmer replied absently. He felt netted, entangled, whilst a few hours before the future had seemed clear as day, straight ahead as a turnpike road!

Thus, on the homeliest, as on the most splendid, stage of human existence, Fortune ever wears a twofold guise. The nod of propitious fate must be followed, but not without anxious questioning and flutter of apprehension and lingering looks behind.

'It won't do to stop talking, hand me your tail coat and black trousers, I'll go and put them up with a clean shirt, and something to

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eat and drink on the way. And when you're dressed, we'll get Jack saddled between us in a jiffy.'

With that she left him. The swift shutting of the door cut short further discussion. Mechanically he undressed and dressed again, now wearing second-best or market clothes. The plain, practical, and welcome fact was not to be argued away. Complications and imbroglios occupying his mind a moment before might prove chimerical or easy to deal with. One thing was quite certain. He now stood a chance of obtaining the most desirable occupation in that part of the country. Etiquette in such matters was strict and clearly defined. No farmer, however mercenary, would ask the reversion of a lease during a tenant's lifetime. His wishes might reach the owner's ears in a roundabout way; indirectly, he might seek to influence him. A direct offer for the farm could only be made when it became tenantless by death. Thus, his journey savoured of nothing mean or underhand. Under such circumstances every man was free to do the best for himself. And the late occupier of the Hall Farm left neither widow, son, or son-in-law who should stand first. The field lay open to all.

Moreover, he knew Captain de Medue's

character well. The wealthy Squire and retired Militia officer was a sharp man of business, a whimsicality, and the lover of a joke. This stealthy ride, this taking opportunity by the forelock, this forestalling of Widow Askew—and how many more rivals?—would be sure to tickle his fancy.

The Captain was fully alive to the advantage of securing a good tenant. Yes, sure enough, he should return from Brighton, with the lease in his pocket.

Downstairs he found Miss 'Ria, now, like himself, fully dressed, and holding lantern and cloak-bag.

'What about money?' she asked, much as if she were already his wife. 'Will you take all the cash I have?'

'Haven't I time to go to my bureau and write a cheque?' he asked. 'Suppose I don't get back in time to pay the men?'

'Lor'! how you do talk, Mr. Flindell! As if I spent sixteen pound a year on my back! Here are ten guineas, and I have more than enough for Saturday upstairs.'

He brought out his knitted silk purse with silver rings, gold pieces at one end, silver at the other, and counted the former.

'I'll take just five,' he said; 'and you can

square off the sum with the egg and butter money. Turtle, too, will bring thirty shillings for the walnuts.'

'Never mind the money, but be off,' she said, pettishly, again with familiar insistence; neither wife nor sister could have testified more anxiety about the success of his errand.

They crossed the farm-yard and entered the stable.

At the door he turned round sharply: 'You are sure that poor Betts is really gone?' he asked.

'As if I shouldn't be the first to know!' she replied; 'why, Mr. Betts' nurse always sends to me if she wants anything, and now she begs me to go and stay with her a bit.'

'Who came with the message?' again the farmer asked.

'Dick, the old baccus boy (back-house meant scullery, hereabouts); I wouldn't keep him a moment.'

After a few more words on business he mounted horse, and at a walking pace passed quietly out of the farm-yard.

Miss Studd closed the stable door with a significant nod. She had a habit of muttering to herself in such moments. As she now re-entered the house, little chuckling ejaculations passed her lips.

‘I shall nab him at last,’ she muttered to herself.

Once out of the Drift Mr. Flindell put his horse to a canter. So flushed the landscape, and so dry the turnpike road that had it been frostbound his horse’s hoofs could hardly have aroused wider echo. Bodily exercise so brisk precluded alike calculation and sentiment. The farmer could neither prepare himself for the coming interview, nor review the day’s deliciousness. All his energies must be bent upon one object, namely, that of reaching the London coach, and getting to Brighton as fast as possible.

Yet a thrill ran through him as he passed the Rectory gate. Tears for an instant rose to his eyes, his lips trembled. He pictured his Aimée as she lay, so fair on her white pillows, and wondered if she slept indeed, or in a wakeful moment, might hear him pass? And true enough, between dream and dream, Aimée caught the echo. She even half rose to listen, then fell back with a smile. What were nightly messengers and the clatter of swift horses’ hoofs to her? How could any errand of life or death affect her newly-gained possession—a true lover’s heart?

CHAPTER XI

THE STOLEN BARLEY

It was the night after Mr. Flindell's departure.

Miss Maria Studd was no devotee of the work-box. Few farming women were that. What with kneading bread and churning butter, curing hams, chopping sausages, ironing, pickling, and jam-making, their hands became too stiff and horny for skilful plying of the needle. As a rule, therefore, very little needlework was got through by farmers' wives and daughters. The notion of making a gown or trimming a bonnet would never have entered into anybody's head. Dressmakers, milliners, and sempstresses therefore had no better customers than those of market day.

Miss 'Ria, however, was consistency itself, and, having formed a plan of life, never in the least particular deviated from it. She had made up her mind to marry Mr. Edward Flindell. To this end all other aims and inclinations were subservient. Thus she had ever lying about some ingratiating reminder in the shape of needlework ; now a basketful of her master's

white collars or grey woollen stockings to be mended, now a cotton shirt in need of collar, front, and wristbands. Both jobs tried her sorely. Not that she was near-sighted or a botcher, but she hated sitting still, and the stitching of linen shirt-cuffs seemed next door to oakum-picking itself. Ennui and secret disgust availed nothing. The heart's desire is no more obtained without an effort than a leg of mutton or a smock at fair time without climbing a greased pole or footing it bravely. To win Mr. Edward Flindell might be a far harder task than the winning of such prizes. But of success she never doubted.

So unbroken the hush around that she seemed alone on the premises to-night. Fowl-houses and granary had been secured long before, ploughmen and maids snored in their attics; although not yet nine o'clock the place was quiet as a graveyard.

'I'll just take a look round,' she thought to herself. 'It's not the first time that I've heard footsteps by the granary late o' nights. And two fowl-stealers were caught at Woodbridge last week. The wonder is that farmers can keep so much as a cat since Bobby Peel, the old scoundrel, abolished hanging for sheep-stealing!'

Musing thus, she put on a nankeen sun-bonnet, and stole out of the back-house door.

All was quite still, only as she passed the fowl-house some hens more wakeful than the rest gave an uneasy 'cluck, cluck' and fluttered on the roost. Otherwise not a creature stirred. Neat-house, stable, and pigsty gave no sign.

The harvest moon shed gentle light, and as she reached the granary steps she noticed a dark object half hidden by the lower rung. Stooping down she felt the round smooth surface of a four-peck measure; a second touch told her that it was piled with barley.

To step aside, secrete herself behind the nearest shed, was the work of a second. Then holding her breath she peered and waited.

But not long. Five minutes later she heard a slow, stealthy step, and discerned a tall man's figure making for the stolen corn. As he stooped Miss 'Ria pounced upon him, neither cat nor ferret more murderously seizing its prey.

'You scum, you vile toad!' cried the infuriated little woman, all but throttling her prisoner. 'Men and maids, wake up, wake up, d'ye hear? Thieves, murderers, on the premises! Ebby, Zeky, mawthers, will you leave me here to have my throat cut?'

So startling and immense the hubbub created

by that single throat, so shrill and piercing Miss 'Ria's cries, screeches, yells, that not only were those leaden slumberers in attic and chamber aroused, but fourfooted and feathered folk in the farm-yard. Horses neighed, cows lowed, pigs squeaked, cocks began to crow. Tumbling down back-stairs, in various stages of undress, came 'Liza, leading the way; at her heels, truth to tell, quaking with fear and only half-awake, the young ploughmen; Amma, always mindful of appearance and the proprieties, having stopped to put on slip and stockings, brought up the rear.

'Lay a-hand, seize him, fetch a linen line, cable him to the banisters; you, 'Liza, pop on your gown and run like a hare for Mr. Mumpford.' Mr. Mumpford was the parish constable. 'Amma, you go to the pightle gate and halloo your father,' vociferated, at the top of her voice, Mr. Flindell's intrepid housekeeper. 'Oh, you're trying to wriggle away, are you?' and with that she gave her prisoner a doughty kick.

By a desperate effort the stalwart figure, thus held in a vice, managed to free his throat, but attempted no further resistance. There he stood, his knees a-tremble, his face white with shame and terror, unable to articulate a word.

Maria fell back, no less consternated than

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himself, for a moment; the rest were equally overcome.

‘ You,’ hissed out Miss ’Ria at last. ‘ So it ’s you, oh, you brazen Gehazi ! ’

The Lord of the Harvest, for indeed it was he, did not reply; his teeth chattered, he was shaking from head to foot.

‘ What are you all a-gaping at ? ’ continued the bloodthirsty little woman; this capture was to her a moment of sweetest triumph. How would her employer praise such vigilance, appreciate such care for his interests ! ‘ Do as I bid you or you ’ll all repent it. ’

Then she turned to her prey : ‘ Well may you look as if you expected to be swallowed up like Korah, Dathan and Abiram, Elisha Sage ! To Ipswich jail or Botany Bay you ’ll go, to a dead certainty, picking oakum and turning the treadmill in company of strumpets and card-sharpers, or road-mending in chains with highwaymen and false coiners. How long, pray, have you carried on this nice trade, fattening hogs on the sly or guzzling beer brewed with your master’s barley ? We want spring-guns and man-traps for our own folks, it seems, not for travelling tinkers and gipsies. Nicely you’ve done for yourself ! Who do you think will give you a job when you come out of jail ? ’

Crushed though he was, Elisha retorted almost scornfully, Amma slapping his back by way of encouragement, whispering in his ear, 'Give it to her, father, give it to her well.'

''Twas neither for hog nor beer-barrel of mine that I filled this here measure unbeknown,' he said, 'but for master's own horses——'

'And you don't call that stealing?' Maria stormed on. 'But judge and jury won't be of your opinion, and so you'll find out to your cost. Humph! Of course, it's the ploughing match you're thinking of: your horses must be the sleekest there; as if Mr. Flindell starved any brute beast on his premises!'

'The horses don't get no corn to speak of in harvest time, Miss 'Ria,' put in Elisha: despite Amma's promptings, remaining meekest of the meek.

'Why on earth should they when they've next to nothing to do? But don't stand there defying me. Into the house with you till Mr. Mumpford comes. Ebby, where's the linen line?'

Now Miss Studd knew well enough that Elisha was harmless as a lamb, and even if he had any place to run to, would no more dream of running away than of preparing his own legal defence before judge and jury. But the bare

mention of linen line and banisters sounded awful in Elisha's ears. Many years before, a farm-yard marauder had indeed thus been made fast to this very staircase until the arrival of the parish constable. Elisha, with a shudder, recalled the incident which he had witnessed as a lad, the bemired, tattered, dishevelled wretch tied to the banister, with a hang-dog look, bearing taunts of lookers-on. And to find himself in the same degrading position, laughing-stock of his neighbours, butt of raillery and outrage!

But Miss 'Ria was reckoning without her host. Full of filial ardour, having charged 'Liza to summon Karra to the scene of action, Amma now placed herself between captive and captor. 'Who lays a hand on my own father must first lay hands on me, his daughter lawfully begotten,' she cried. 'Do you suppose master's the man to take anything father should do for his own horses amiss? Hasn't Mr. Flindell summered and wintered father for years and years, and you've only been here a twelvemonth come Michaelmas?'

'Have a care, Amma,' Elisha said in a low voice.

'There, go home and tuck yourself up in bed, father, do!' Amma continued, growing bolder

and bolder. 'There's nothing to be afraid of, you've not been stealin', only givin' the horses an extra bait without leave.'

Matters seemed coming to a climax when Karra bustled up, her cheeks aflame, ready with a cataract of words; immediately behind, followed Mr. Mumpford, the village carpenter and sole representative of law and police in Burridge and the neighbouring hamlets.

'Lawk's a mussy me, Miss 'Ria, what's all this bobbery about? My husband, though I repeat it as shouldn't, as Mr. Flindell says, to be trusted with untold gold, and you a'treatin' him as if he was dirt under your feet only fit for the gallows.'

To Karra, as to her daughter, this conflict with the unpopular middle-woman was by no means disagreeable. 'And what do you think is your business here, Mr. Mumpford?' she added, turning to the meek-faced embodiment of police. 'Lawk's, go home, you know Miss 'Ria, always a'makin' and a'meddlin' with us poor folk.'

'Parish constable,' shrieked Miss Studd, 'do your duty, you see before you a night-prowler, a thief——'

'No names, ma'am,' Karra cried, shaking her fists in the other's face. 'Law and justice when beftin', but no names!'

‘ Mr. Mumpford,’ again remonstrated Maria, ‘ you hear this ? ’

‘ And he’ll hear more if he don’t go back about his business, and that pretty quick,’ Mrs. Sage went on. ‘ I’m not a’goin’ to see my husband, as honest a man as ever wore high-lows——’

‘ You hear her, parish constable ? ’ put in Miss ’Ria.

‘ As I say,’ Karra continued, not one whit abashed, ‘ I’m not a’goin’ to see ’Lishy treated like one of your trampin’ folks caught a’fowl-stealin’ ; home with me, his lawful wife, this night he’ll go, in his own bed he’ll sleep, and those who want him will know where to find him to-morrow, if the Lord sees fit to spare us all, the righteous and unrighteous together,’ here she glanced viciously at the housekeeper. ‘ Come along, ’Lishy, I say, what ’s the use of me a’spendin’ my breath to the last gasp whilst you stand there mute as Guy Fawkes on Gunpowder Plot day ? There, come along.’

‘ Mr. Mumpford,’ once more interposed Maria, this time with an air of portentous severity. There stood Ebby making signs to Amma, the linen line playfully swung over his shoulder, there stood ’Liza and Zeky giggling and tittering, and there was Karra, in defiance of all authority,

tugging away at her husband's coat-tails, trying to drag him homewards. The situation was critical; Miss Studd felt that her dignity, her authority, her very future were at stake; that idiot of a parish constable not lifting a finger, men and maids in open defiance, and to make matters ten times worse, cocks crowing, hens cackling, ducks quacking, guinea-fowls 'come backing' as if foxes were making themselves at home in a fowl-house!

Meekest of the meek, and ever in terror of feminine tongues, Mr. Mumpford had always a thunderbolt in his shirt sleeve. Terrible is the majesty of the law, and under an almost girl-like exterior he knew how to brow-beat the most daring.

Putting on an air solemn as that of any judge delivering sentence, he turned to the house-keeper, 'I must please put a question or two to you, Miss Studd.'

'As many as you please,' was the brisk reply.

'No offence then, Miss, but now for number one. Did the prisoner at the bar make an assault upon your chastity?'

Now it spoke volumes for Mr. Mumpford, and the way in which he exercised his judicial functions that the propounding of this question was listened to breathlessly and with an awe-

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struck look by all ; only Maria blushed and smiled ; the very suggestion savoured of romance, and recalled sweet episodes of boarding-school fiction.

‘ Lor, Mr. Mumpford, what are you thinking of ? ’ she replied.

‘ As I said just now, Miss, no offence meant, but the law is the law, and as matters stand it ’s Mr. Flindell who ’s the plaintiff and no one else.’

‘ I told you so ; there, come along, ’Lishy,’ said Karra, again tugging at her husband’s arm.

‘ Till Mr. Flindell lodges a complaint against Master Sage, nobody else can do anything, so we’d best adjourn.’

Mr. Mumpford loved legal phraseology, and as Miss Studd looked unwilling to let the episode pass off thus quietly, he added, ‘ You see, Miss Maria, we’ve a Habeyus Scorperus in this country, and we must abide by the consequences, so I’ll wish you good night, Miss. Master Sage, we know where to find you when wanted.’

Elisha, on reaching home, still looked and felt the veriest coward alive. ‘ You see,’ he said, ‘ I feel that bad and low that if the Ipswich police constable were to show himself at the door I believe I should drop down dead.’

‘There, don’t be so cut up. Take off your high-lows and eat your supper.’

‘I couldn’t swallow a morsel, I couldn’t really. She called me Gehazi,’ Elisha said, gulping down a sob.

‘Oh, she’d better read her Bible, a’thinking of herself,’ quoth Karra. ‘She isn’t Elisha the prophet, leastways, and there is no turning folks into lepers in our time.’

Elisha watched his wife’s face. She had not as yet realized the worst.

‘Drink a drop of beer,’ she added, and going to the little cask of home-brewed harvest ale in the back-house, filled his pewter pint. The draught imparted courage to speak out.

‘You don’t think I shall be sent to the Assizes?’ he asked.

‘I’d raise a hue and cry through the country first. I’d tramp to London and petition the Queen, and if so be that to jail you go, ’Lishy, out you would soon come, like Margaret Catchpole,’ quoth Karra. ‘With a couple of sheets and my clothes’ line, I’d baffle judge, jury, and jailers as true as my name is Karrenheppuch and we were married in church.’

Intensely pious as she was, of tried integrity also, the good woman refused to see crime, even wrong-doing here. The barley had been

purloined, but for its owner's beasts, not to enrich the thief.

'You haven't thought of one thing,' at last her husband got out, painfully anticipating the effect of his words. 'Master may overlook this business, but what if he turn me off after harvest? And whoever else may get to Burrige Hall, it won't be you and me, I reckon.'

'There, don't talk any more, my poor head is all of a swim,' replied Karra, on the point of breaking down again. 'Try to get down a bit of this onion-turnover, it's easy to swallow, and very temptin'. I do believe I could eat a dollop myself.'

'If you will, I will,' Elisha replied.

Karra was renowned for her turnovers; as she now cut open the compound, the small discs of pork garnished with onions, recalled white marble having green veins. The sight was certainly appetizing.

With one hand on his shoulder, helping herself from his plate as she stood, she ate a mouthful or two whilst Elisha made a meal. The food and drink invigorated; much more power of resistance, mental and physical, was accorded by that wifely caress. There was no sentimentality in these rustic partnerships, but wedded couples stood loyally by each other till

the workhouse, or a kinder friend still—Death—separated them.

‘ You go to bed, I’ll read a chapter of Nehemiah, first,’ Karra said, when he had done. ‘ We’ve all of us a Sanballat to laugh us to scorn, I reckon, but the Lord will prosper His servants who desire to fear His name. Why, you haven’t taken off your high-lows ! ’

Meek as a lamb, Elisha unlaced his heavy, well-greased boots, and in his stockings—slippers being unknown—climbed the creaking stairs.

Karra brought out the family Bible, a quarto printed in great primer and having full-page illustrations. Her eyesight was not over good, but she hardly needed a farthing dip, so at home was she with the cup-bearer’s beautiful story. All country folks had their favourite book or chapter of the Bible, and Karra’s was this. Devotional, resigned, the Scriptures yet appealed to her intellect rather than to her heart. In those marvellous pages she sought less for spiritual solace than for mental upholding and enlightenment. Nor was she disappointed now. That building of the wall, despite scoffers and detractors, by the light of to-day’s events seemed an allegory. Elisha Sage was a God-fearing man, and thus would

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his good name be re-established, however his enemies might strive against him.

As later the pair lay side by side, the Lord of the Harvest felt a certain sense of security steal over him. The heavy sleep induced by weariness at last closed their eyes. And not even the thought of jail came as a nightmare, not even the echo of Miss 'Ria's threats could disturb those leaden slumbers.

CHAPTER XII

AT THE TURNPIKE GATE

THE longed for comes at last, and next market day Aimée woke up to an all too happy world. Everything had turned out well.

‘Mr. Pascoe will take the dear children to Ipswich to-day, and give each a halfpenny to spend as a treat, not one having been whipped for a whole week,’ lisped out Mrs. Pascoe, after breakfast, which consisted of bread and milk, or bread and treacle for the younger fry, dripping toast and weak tea for the elder. ‘So, the afternoon is at your own disposal, Miss Aimée; unless, indeed, you prefer a quiet reading of *Corinne* with myself.’

‘Thank you,’ was the quick reply, ‘but I particularly want to go to Ipswich this afternoon.’

‘Ah! there are the requisites for Cassy’s wax-flower making. The dear child is wild with delight at the thought of her first lesson, and I confess I long for the result. What so decorative in winter as wax-flowers? But five

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shillings, Miss Aimée, remember, I cannot go beyond that sum. These accomplishments will soon compel Mr. Pascoe and myself to forgo warm underclothes, and winter at hand! Do you hear, my poor darlings?'

Although well accustomed to threats quite as distressing, the young faces fell. Sad, indeed, it seemed, that on their account poor mamma should have to leave off buying flannel petticoats, and papa his woollen vests! But thus were things ordered. They had been taught to regard themselves as so many trying dispensations. How this had come about they did not understand.

Once again lesson time went off like a rocket, and Aimée found leisure to finish that long, ecstatically fond and blissful letter to her mother begun at dawn. There could not be any possible reason for concealment. Mr. Flindell was no Lovelace, whose pastime it was to win and break maidens' hearts. This sober farmer, with the kindly brown eyes and humorous smile, would never, she felt sure, tread on a worm, much less wrong a fellow-creature, especially a woman. His whispered charge was nothing else but a declaration, an honest offer of marriage. 'Mind and make an errand to Ipswich next market day,' he had

said—‘ *my gig is as good as yours.*’ Such words from a man of his stamp and calibre could mean nothing else.

One nail drives out another, but love in a sound, wholesome nature intensifies rather than weakens prior affections. Immediately after Aimée’s first sense of triumph, the consciousness of empire over a manly nature, came a second and hardly less overwhelming joy. That sorely tried, ever fond and anxious mother, what would be her delight and satisfaction at this good news ? Her father, too, how he would revel in the thought that his child would not grow pinched and grey in dependency ; instead, become a happy wife, mistress of a highly respected, substantial house. The woman, however deeply she may be in love, is of necessity more prosaic, less given to romance than the man. A girl’s existence is entirely altered, her lover’s only modified, by wedlock. He can give all his thoughts to sentiment, she must perforce dwell on worldly circumstances. Aimée was not alone in thus counting up welcome accessories, anticipating in detail altered and happier fortunes.

This wealthy farmer, so at least he seemed to her, knew nothing, would never know anything of the petty carking cares amid which she had

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been brought up. And who could tell? The prosperous union might end in another circumstance longed for if less romantically, yet with deep pious fervour. Already she saw her parents settled within reach of their daughter, perhaps under Mr. Flindell's supervision, like their frugal but independent neighbours in France, cultivating a few acres, living upon the produce of their labour.

The crossed and re-crossed letter folded and wafered, dinner over, the Rector's phaeton off, she set out for the turnpike gate. Mr. Flindell was a very punctual man, and never spent more time at market than he could possibly help. His turn on the Corn Exchange and general business over, in company of Samuel, and perhaps a neighbour or two, he would take a glass of sherry at the 'Crown and Anchor,' putting down a shilling without taking change, 'for the look of the thing,' then drive home.

She knew when he was sure to quit the Drift, and of course he would neither be too early, nor too late on this especial occasion. The afternoon was intensely hot, but weather so glorious accorded with her exuberant spirits. She had perhaps bestowed less thought on her toilette to-day, knowing well that the Beloved can do no wrong. Yet no neater, daintier figure, and

certainly no happier, tripped under that bright heaven.

Every sound of wheels flushed her cheeks and made her heart beat quicker. Already she seemed to see the lover-like glance of those kindly brown eyes, to hear those shyly uttered words, hardly needed by way of supplement. Neither looks nor speech indeed were needed. She knew it, oh ! how well she knew it ; his heart was hers.

One, two, three gigs came rattling behind her, but without slackening pace as they approached. Should she stroll on, or await him under the tall shady hedge ? But no, folks might talk, better reach the toll-bar in the ordinary way. If any one else offered her a seat she could frame an excuse. She stole a hasty glance or two at her watch, smiling at impatience so foolish, so uncalled for. In his anxiety not to miss her, Mr. Flindell would naturally start a little later than usual, whilst she had started a good quarter of an hour earlier.

As the moments wore on, her listening powers became painfully acute, yet, she asked herself, why hearken to gig wheels with such desperate eagerness ? His own were only a little behind.

When at last the turnpike gate came in sight the buoyant step dragged slowly, the slight,

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graceful figure showed signs of lassitude, the face, so radiant a few minutes before, showed unmistakable signs of suspense.

Good Mrs. Pipe, standing at her post, her left hand full of small coins, nodded cheerfully.

‘ All the Burridge folks be gone, Miss Aimay, but Mr. Pain, of Battleigh, will be here, I dare say ; he ’s a family man, you can ride with him.’

Over Aimée’s features flashed a look of anxious inquiry. Only half interpreting it, the toll-gate keeper added :

‘ It ’s no use a-waitin’ for Mr. Flindell. He ’s in the shires—somewheres the other side of London anyhow.’

Pride for the moment got the mastery.

‘ I’ll just stroll on, thank you, Mrs. Pipe,’ Aimée said, not giving the good woman time to notice her scarlet cheeks and rising tears.

Once more alone on the high road, disappointment, mortification, and wounded self-love would have vent. She felt inclined to take a field-path home and seeking some secluded spot, there weep her fill.

‘ How cowardly, how cruel ! ’ she murmured between her sobs.

The first impulse was soon checked. Wiping her hot cheeks and subduing her tears, she

hastened on, her little head higher than usual, her slender feet self-assertively striking the ground. Schooled in adversity, not without experience of the human heart, Aimée de Richemont possessed one priceless treasure, one goodliest, unpurchasable gift, namely, an adequate share of feminine pride. No woman should ever be lessened in men's eyes through conduct of hers, no masculine arrogance be increased by her own self-depreciation. Ah, that self-depreciation of her sex ! For how much wretchedness, debasement and folly has this vice to answer !

It naturally crossed Aimée's mind that Mr. Flindell's behaviour meant one thing and one thing only. He had repented of his advances and was drawing back. Otherwise, why no letter ? How easy for him to have sent a line, or even a message ! The Rector and his wife would, of course, comment on either. Well, were his intentions straightforward and manly, what of that ? Nor did the shires lie at the Antipodes. Every morning the postman brought London letters, and from distances beyond, the transit now occupied only twenty-four hours.

'Can I offer you a seat, ma'am ?' shouted a bluff, good-natured voice close by.

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Indignation had blunted, as hope had just before sharpened, her hearing. There sat jolly Farmer Pain in his high gig, and she had never so much as heard his wheels.

She jumped in, smiling her thanks, and the pair drove off at a brisk trot, for Mr. Pain was late.

‘Time out of mind I’ve seen you a’driving with the Burridge folks, but I don’t know who you be?’ he said, by way of opening conversation.

An uncommonly genteel girl, thought the family man; wouldn’t I like her for Abraham?

Abraham was his eldest son, a prosperous fellow, but a bit of a clown, holding a nice little occupation in an adjoining parish. ‘Eddication’ was now beginning to be thought of in the farming world, many a governess having settled down as a farmer’s wife.

Mr. Pain loved to joke young ladies about matrimony; it was indeed considered a compliment among his set, and topics of conversation were few and far between.

‘Yes,’ Aimée replied, forcing herself into composure, ‘I am governess to Mr. Pascoe’s children, and we often go to Ipswich on market days.’

‘Mr. Flindell, of Burridge, has took you up

in his gig sometimes, hasn't he?' asked the farmer.

'Yes,' again Aimée said. 'The children dearly love a drive, and Mr. Pascoe's four-wheeler won't hold us all.'

'Come now,' pursued her good-natured conductor, 'shall I tell you what I think? Drivin' to market, you know, often ends in drivin' to church.' He just tickled his horse's sides, quickening the pace. 'There was Miss Crisp, teacher to Squire Chaplin's young 'uns. She can play the pianoforte and spell anything, such a beautiful writer, you never see'd; well, Mr. Simpson, of Stowe Farm, my neighbour, married her last year, and a notable wife she's turned out to be.'

'I think I have seen them driving to market,' Aimée got out, feeling compelled to say something.

'And I shall see you doing the same some day, I'll lay. With all your learning you wouldn't look down on a farmer, if he be a proper sort of a man, would you now? There's Ederd Flindell, what a husband he'd make, sure-ly!'

Aimée felt that her powers of endurance were giving way.

'I will ask you to set me down at the "Wool-

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pack," please,' she said, desperately, keeping back her tears.

'Just where you like, and if you want a lift home, be at the "Crown and Anchor" yard before five. You know I'm a family man, and my old woman won't be jealous.'

'Thank you, I may be very glad to accept your offer,' the poor girl replied; then, to her great relief, he said no more.

'Lord!' muttered the farmer, as he watched her spring to the ground, curtsy, and hasten off. 'I'm blowed if I ever set eyes on such an ankle, and such a stocking, so fine you can see through it, and fitting like her skin!'

A rucky, ill gartered, above all, soiled stocking, was regarded as next door to disreputableness by country folks. Aimée, schooled in French fastidiousness, was, to use Farmer Pain's expression, 'a right down pictur' as she jumped down; a queen couldn't be better shod.'

Hastily and excitedly she got through the afternoon's business, making her way back on foot. Oh, to be hundreds of miles away, she thought, to take farewell of once too happy, now ever hateful Burrige, for once and for all!

CHAPTER XIII

DRAWING THE STETCHES

MR. FLINDELL did not return.

After several days of alternating hopes and fears the Lord of the Harvest felt himself again. Hilarious Elisha Sage had never been ; exhilaration was a mental phase absolutely foreign to this as to other sons of the soil, but passiveness, perhaps conscious resignation, did duty for joy. Elisha, no more than his fellows, was religious in the ordinary sense. His mood partook rather of philosophy. Things were as they were because the Almighty so willed it ; no one with a grain of good sense could affirm that they might not be better.

Teddy Flindell was an upright man, very exact in business dealings and it seemed unlikely that he would pass such a dereliction by ; on the other hand, his head-man had worked on Walnut Tree Farm, year out and year in, for wellnigh forty summers. Surely he would not let his mind be poisoned by that cross-patch, that meddlesome hussy, Miss 'Ria, and pay him off after Halloo Largess, to say nothing of

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going to law ? With Largess-spending harvest virtually ended, odd hands were dismissed, wages dropped to the normal.

What if the woman did get her way, 'and for the first time in his life he had to look out for a job ? The neighbours too ! Elisha felt as if wasps and earwigs were stinging him when he conjured up Jerry's offensive wink and Lyddy's still more odious smirk o' Sundays.

Then the huddereens, they meant no kind of harm, poor lads and knew no better, but they could no more help jeering any one in evil plight than the little children of Bethel could help mocking his awful namesake of the bald head.

On this especial morning depression had fallen from him as a garment. It was a ravishing day to begin with ; delicious the fragrance of turnip fields, bright the heavens with swiftly scudding, silvery clouds, untouched by autumn as yet the rich foliage of Drift and pigtle. But for Elisha the charm lay elsewhere.

For the first time since harvest he resumed the plough. In company of his favourite Smiler he was to spend the long day a-field, from seven in the morning till three in the afternoon, drawing stetches, by force of natural aptitude and habit making them straight as mathematical

lines, the accomplishment having won for him local renown.

For just upon thirty years Elisha had drawn stetches, and his horses had been regarded as so many comrades. But cart-horses, like human beings, are not all formed after one pattern; there are degrees of intelligence, docility, and affectionateness. Now, Smiler, in Elisha's eyes, resumed all the excellencies of his species, and, having never known any other master, had attached himself to him with dog-like devotion.

'As true as I stand here,' he would say at ploughing matches, 'that there animal knows as much as most folks that can speak. I believe that if he had but a tongue he would answer Bible questions before the best scholar of the Sunday school.'

But for the capacities of the enormously strong lamb-like creature he should never have won kettle after kettle at the ploughing match. Smiler had an eye for a straight line and turned at the sound of 'Come hather', and 'Wouree', the ploughman's call to right and left as a soldier at drill. Tim, his yoke-fellow, was an excellent beast, but between Tim and Elisha existed no such understanding and sympathy.

'And lor' bless you,' he had often said over

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his pot of ale at the 'Barley Mow', 'though book larnin' hasn't done it, there's as much difference between those two horses as between parson and myself.'

Much pride too he took in Smiler's beauty, and in his own adornment of fine proportions, sleek coat, and long tail. Smiler was far and away the handsomest animal of his kind to be seen for miles round, and like all Suffolk cart-horses possessed a long plume-like tail, which was combed, brushed, braided and trimmed as tresses of a court beauty. A wealth of fancy and fondness was lavished upon this task, and no equine hairdresser in those parts was here so skilful as Elisha. Not Karra's poetic reputation, not Amma's facility of repartee, not the good character of his hudderens, more elated him than Smiler's repute.

Well pleased then was he once more to breathe the air of the fallow and freshly turned earth. Scythe and sickle meant good fare and jolly comradeship, but at the same time strain and sweat. The autumnal job of carting manure from Ipswich was not to his taste. He little relished the pot-house talk of town loafers, nor the coarse jokes of ostlers. Here he had the broad field and Smiler to himself.

What does the ploughman think of all day

as he automatically draws stetch after stetch ? Perhaps none could answer the question, but the hours pass, and not so slowly as lookers-on might think, Hunger, not ennui, is found in the husbandman's vocabulary.

On this especial evening, as he was turning into the Drift, more cheerful than he had felt for days, Miss Studd called him back. The events of that terrible evening had never once been mentioned since.

'Master Sage,' she said, with the tone of every day, 'you're not to go a'ploughing to-morrow, but to ride Smiler to Mr. Sammel's, so your master writes word. Take the fields and don't heat him. I daresay you'll get a lift home by the road.'

Elisha stood stock-still, his mouth agape. Not Jerry Hammond himself could have looked blanker, more tongueless just then.

The housekeeper fumbled in her pockets and brought out sixpence.

'You're sure to get victuals and drink at the house,' she said, 'but here's something for a pot of beer on the way home.'

Still Elisha looked positively moonstruck, his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth. He had become white as when surprised at the granary steps.

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Not till he saw her turning away did he manage to stammer, ' Arn't I to bring that there horse back, Miss 'Ria ? '

' No, Master Sage, Mr. Sammel wants the best cart-horse your master can spare, and the best is no other, he says.'

' You're right there and no mistake,' almost groaned Elisha, Miss 'Ria paying no attention, her thoughts seemed elsewhere. Without waiting to hear more she went indoors, merely pausing at the back-house scraper for a parting injunction.

' Have a good look at the horse's shoes afore you start,' she shouted, ' those lanes are good tightly rough.'

The Lord of the Harvest waited for a moment, all the manhood having gone out of him. Then he moved a step or two in the direction of the house, a wild, almost insane, impulse prompting him. He would seek his master and out with a bold : ' Mr. Flindell, if so be that Smiler goes for good, you'll pay me off come Saturday.'

But an instant later his true position flashed upon him. ' As things had happened,' he asked himself, ' what right had he to put on such parts and farins (behaviours) ? Why, master may be a'turnin' me off o' Saturday anyways, and how should I look then ? '

The thought came too, though not to stay,

that his favourite horse was thus to be got rid of as punishment for having been held too dear. But no, Teddy Flindell was not the man to give any one a back-handed slap, and besides, the stolen corn had fed Tim as well ! Was it Miss 'Ria's doing, a nasty turn of her contriving ? Women were more crafty than men-folk, there was no circumventing a female, and the harridan owed his missus a grudge. Again, he negatived the idea. No, Mr. Flindell was about to take the Hall, stock, crop, and valuation ; he had a horse or two to spare, and Mr. Samuel, as he knew, had lately lost one by the gripes. Things were merely taking their course.

Nevertheless Elisha could not shake off a certain sense of retribution. What else was the loss of his favourite but the penalty of wrong doing ? And right was right and justice is justice in small matters as in great ; why had he not left the barley alone ?

Put in another way, perhaps his self-reproach really ran thus : Why had he not kept the stolen bushel out of Miss 'Ria's sight ? The corn certainly was Mr. Flindell's, but so were the horses' bellies. Here lay a metaphysical problem beyond his capacities to solve. So many peccadilloes seem pardonable to most folks unless found out !

He said nothing of the next day's errand to

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Karra. For the first time in life he felt that the wife of his bosom could not comfort him, and fortunately that night she was not chattily inclined.

As they sat down to their pork and onion turnover, bread a week old, and flet cheese, it became evident that her thoughts soared upwards. Whilst Elisha drew deep draughts of home-brewed from his pewter pot and she sipped her tea, she said :

'Lawks' a mussy me, 'Lishy, my head is that a'runnin' on Sanballat and the rhymes accordin' that I forgot to bile you a tater. Sanballat and ballad go together, but ballad isn't a Bible word, and salad is wus, not but that the Egyptians had leeks and onions, but we don't hear talk of 'em being served with mustard and vinegar.'

She did not inform him that she was inditing a parable in verse appropriate to passing events. 'Lishy was no king's cup-bearer like Nehemiah, to be sure, nor was Jerry quite a second Horonite, but had he not winked last Sunday as her husband passed by, and did she not know as well as he could tell her what that wink meant ? Miss 'Ria, the spiteful hussy, had, of course, let the cat out of the bag, and made the most of that paltry corn ! Well, in good time, she'd hear of herself too, perhaps even read of herself ! Karra's literary ambitions as yet remained secret.

CHAPTER XIV

‘ NEVER, NO MORE ! ’

NEXT morning Elisha was up earlier than usual.

‘ I shan’t be in to dinner, master’s sendin’ me on an arrand,’ was all he said as he left the cottage, then swallowing a little beer and stuffing a chunk of bread and cheese into his pockets, he set off for the stable. To-day Smiler made a spectacle even for urban eyes, that wonderful coat of his shining like burnished copper, the long flaxen plume, not a hair out of place, artistically coiled.

And the animal world has its little vanities no less than the human. Conscious of beauty as strength looked Smiler, thus prepared for no common occasion : so much the sagacious animal divined. For his toilette varied as that of his master’s ; it was not the same when drawing stiches for Mr. Flindell or before crowds for a prize kettle.

Thus Elisha had tidied but not be-Sundayed himself. His coarse whitey-brown shirt was speckless, his corduroys not ‘ seated ’, i. e.,

patched in the nether region ; over his red waistcoat he wore a linen slop.

The day promised to be one of extraordinary splendour, but at present brilliant heavens were a promise only. Dew lay heavily on bank and hedgerow ; like jet gleamed blackberries amid leaves of bespangled vermilion, of frosted silver seemed every spike of wild oats or barley. No Raja's diadem ever scintillated as did wayside fruitage and leaf under the swiftly advancing sun.

From end to end of the level landscape came notes of stock-dove and field-lark, whilst every coppice rang with chirps and pipings, and around every wayside pool flashed kingfishers, wagtail, and yellow-hammer. Rural England of sixty and more years ago yet remained a bird-haunted, bird-beautified land. In lane and spinney folks listened to woodland singers, instead of identifying them in that mausoleum of animal life, the Natural History Museum.

Upon any other occasion, such a journey to Elisha Sage would have been an adventure, holiday of rare and instructive kind, as such to be made the most of. His eye would have remained wide open during each inch of the road ; for weeks after, his tongue would have been loosened at home, at bowls and in the ale-

house parlour. To-day he coasted meadow and field, hardly glancing around him. Nothing arrested his gaze, neither young stock at grass, pigs acorning on the fallow, pyramidal wheat and barley in wayside stack-yards. With a dejected, almost morose face, he pursued his way, no more pitiable figure under that mellow heaven.

‘ Halloo, Master Sage, it is you with the horse, is it ? ’ shouted Samuel, cheerily, as he caught sight of the pair. ‘ There ’s nobody handy about just now, but we’ll bait him and then you can go indoors and have a bit of wittals yourself.’

Unlike his brother, Samuel Flindell was a garrulous man and asked twenty questions whilst the business of stabling Smiler went on. Elisha dawdled and dawdled, but his companion was not to be got rid of. The farmer must talk to somebody, the perpetual sound of his own voice constituting a necessity of existence second only to that of air itself. His listener’s capacity was quite a secondary matter.

When at last they left the stable, he said :

‘ That horse is turning his head round, he knows you’re leaving him, I’ll lay, but he’ll be well off here, never fear.’

Elisha did not look back, he felt in a dream.

They entered the kitchen where all was bustle and activity. Martha and her maids were in the midst of ham-pickling, on the hob simmered a boiler of harvest beer emitting spicy odour, one stout wench plied pestle and mortar, a second carefully deposited hams in earthen pans, whilst the mistress stirred her seething compound.

‘Mornin’, Master Sage,’ said Martha. ‘Just sit down, will you. Thank Mr. Ederd kindly for setting us up with a horse. We have had a sad misfortune with one of ours, as you know. Poor creature, how he suffered, sure-ly, and took his gribbals (gripe-balls) like a Christian. But, lor bless you, never were so many horses carried off by the gripes as this year! Well, sit down. Here, Sukey,’ she added to the wielder of the pestle, ‘lend a hand with the boiler, but don’t pour out till I come back.’

Away she went to draw Elisha’s pot of ale and fetch his bait from the store-room, her jolly mawthers nothing loth. What so much interests every Eve as the first Adam she meets? Sukey and Sally relished the society of the other sex above all things, and during their mistress’s brief absence contrived to obtain what did duty for a flirtation. Elisha Sage, in his own words, had never ‘nannicked with

a female in his born days,' but he was a man, as such to be made eyes at, joked and giggled with, flattered into coquetry. These buxom lasses did not lack admiration of a certain kind ; what a Transatlantic writer calls ' the pathos of unsought women,' was a pathos wholly unknown in this Arcadiæ. But an Adam was an Adam whether comely or ill-favoured, sober pater-familias or dashing heart-breaker.

• ' I say, Suke,' said Sally, looking up from her ham pan, ' aren't men-folk good-looking at Burrige ? '

Quoth Sukey, not to be outdone, ' And I'm in just the trim for a kiss. But if I let this here blessed beer boil over, shouldn't I catch it ! So you can get one for me.'

' That 's easily done,' was the reply, and before Elisha could remonstrate, up sprang Sally and put her arms round his neck. Now Elisha had no natural surliness in his disposition, but he was just then in little mood for a joke—moreover, he entertained positive aversion for what in local parlance passed as ' outdaciousness in a female', that is to say, want of decorum in the fair sex. Time and opportunity admitted of no fitting reproof. He had only an instant in which to disengage himself and quietly threaten the sauce-box with ' a smack that

would send her into the middle of next week ', when Martha returned with a pewter pint of ale and a plateful of bread and meat. Elisha had little more stomach for the mistress's dainties than for her maids' rough coquetry. He munched the appetizing cold beef-pie hardly knowing what he ate, then, having swallowed his ale, rose to go.

' You're very welcome, I'm sure, Master Sage,' said Martha, as he stammered out his thanks, ' and Mr. Samuel left word you were to have a shilling, here it is, my respects to my brother, and good day to you.'

At any other time the windfall of a shilling would have brightened Elisha's stolid countenance. Housewives, who hereabouts always laid out the weekly wages, generally contrived from time to time to allow their husbands a few pence, as pocket money. Karra, indeed, boasted that Elisha had ever a piece of silver in his breeches' pocket, there to remain intact, like the Miss Primroses' guineas. With others, he had his pet luxuries but rarely gratified: a little tobacco, a game of bowls, an occasional half-pint at the ' Barley Mow,' in such items an extra shilling went far. To-day the biggest gold piece of the realm would have seemed a mere clod.

Pulling his front hair, hat in hand, the

countryman’s most respectful salute, and nodding to the maids, he went out, stood for a moment as if pondering, then crossed the back-yard leading to neat-house and stable.

Just at this hour the farm-yard was silent, the ploughmen were afield, Mr. Samuel and his odd hands were busy clamping potatoes in the potato garden, the pigs were acorning on the fallow, only the flail sounded on the barn floor. Elisha was evidently irresolute; should he make at once for the high road or take another look at his favourite, bid him final farewell ?

His first impulse was to master the longing and stride off fast as legs would carry him. And the consideration for another’s feelings were uppermost, that other the mute four-legged companion of years.

Throughout the last troubled hours, indeed, his pity had been rather for Smiler than for himself.

‘ I know all about it,’ he mused; ‘ that it must be so and can’t he helped, but how should a poor dumb thing understand ? How will he feel when the mornin’ comes, and he hears another in the stable ? For never no more, never no more, ’twill be mine, Smiler.’

Looking cautiously to the right and the left, creeping along like a thief, he now hastened

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across the farm-yard, and unlatching the stable-door, entered softly. The gentle creature turned round, then, as if re-assured by the sight of his old master, again dipped his head into the well-filled bin.

‘He thinks I shall be a’takin’ him home later,’ mused Elisha, and once more hesitated, half turning to go. But no, if he now tore himself away, no good-bye said, Smiler in some dim way would feel tricked, heartlessly abandoned. Better to make him understand the truth, for, reasoned Elisha, folks may prate as they will, some things dumb beasts understand as well as any judge and jury, better then to make him understand than that at night a stranger hand would fill his bin, next morning some other voice would summon him to the furrow, that indeed they should see each other ‘never, never no more’. Poor Elisha’s piled-up negatives, implying as they did the climax of desolation, again rose to his lips.

He approached the bin and patted the bent down neck: Smiler was evidently relishing his oats to the utmost.

‘I’m a’goin’ to leave you, Smiler,’ murmured Elisha, ‘you’ll see me never, never no more.’

The voice broke down, and, with a loud sob he threw his arms around the animal’s neck.

Smiler had turned again quickly, and into his eyes also flashed the anguish of that artless adieu. The good horse realized as well as his master that they were parting, that they should never again belong to each other. No one was by, no need, therefore, for false shame or enforced self-command. Again and again Elisha kissed the broad forehead, wetting it with his sobs. Bitterer tears the Lord of the Harvest had hardly shed by his little Delphie's grave years before, and from those patient yet how expressive eyes, fixed on his own so wistfully, tears now streamed plenteously also. The Suffolk cart-horse wept for sorrow as had done his immortal predecessor of Homeric story.

‘ No more, never no more ! ’ Elisha murmured, but the sight of Smiler's grief was more than he could bear. With a last inarticulate word of endearment he closed the stable door, as quickly as might be, gaining the high road.

CHAPTER XV

TWO SIDES TO A QUESTION

WHEN Edward Flindell again found himself at Burrige, it was much with the feeling of one who had just circumnavigated the globe. Although a bibliographer, and a man of the world, Captain de Medue relished homely wit and farming talk. He had a hundred questions to ask about rural affairs. His brother-in-law, too, wanted agricultural training for his second son. The lad's godmother had left him a small estate, and he was to spend the next few years as pupil in a farm-house. Flindell might perhaps entertain the matter himself ; a hundred guineas yearly was worth having. ' I should think so indeed,' had ejaculated Mr. Flindell. It was the Dean's express wish that Robert should go to plough ; he would thus earn his keep. So, despite some show of resistance, the Suffolk farmer was carried from Brighton to Chichester, lodged in the Deanery, and, as he afterwards related, ' there saw high life, and no mistake, the ladies at dinner without stay or habit-shirt ; ' thus he described the fashion of low dresses ; ' the

valets so thick you stumbled over them ; the dinner-table so crowded that what with plate, crystal, and flowers, you couldn't find room for a pin.'

Then the Captain, who was of a restless, mercurial disposition, bethought himself of sundry purchases in which Mr. Flindell's experience would be valuable ; he wanted a horse for his luggage-cart, and several farm implements.

' You must really give me a day or two in town, Flindell,' he said. ' We will lie at my Piccadilly lodging, so that you are put to no expense on my account, and every one visits London nowadays. You shall see some of the sights.'

The Captain was also a fidgety, fractious bargainer, and by the time he had decided upon a horse, a sulky, a churn, and a chaff-cutter, little leisure remained for sightseeing. However, the results more than satisfied Mr. Flindell's wildest ambition. He saw that marvel of modern times, the Thames Tunnel, the legislative palace, in which, to quote this Suffolk farmer, ' we are governed by the wealth and talent of the country,' and to wind up spent an evening at Vauxhall, crowning experience of sherry-cobbler, illuminated gardens, fairy dancers, and a blaze of fire-works. It was a gala night,

and the fire-works being of unusual splendour, positively awed Mr. Flindell.

No wonder that he returned home with a bewildered mind, an aching head and a disordered liver !

Miss 'Ria felt as nervous folk do in a thunder-storm when she heard her master's wheels. Did that slow deliberate pace indicate the depression of failure, or the modesty of too much success ? When Mr. Flindell's gig turned into the Drift she was, in local phrase, 'cleaning herself' for tea, that is to say, putting on a stuff dress, fresh collar and neck-ribbon, and carefully readjusting the loops of hair on her temples. Not without visible trepidation she went downstairs, key-basket in hand, Mr. Flindell meeting her by the doorway.

So glum, so utterly cast down, and so wretchedly ill did he look, that she concluded things had turned out as ill as possible.

As a rule, none knew better when to hold the tongue, but, to-night, suspense got the better of prudence.

'You haven't travelled all those miles for nothing, I hope ?' she said, as soon as the door was shut.

'No, indeed,' was the almost morose reply. 'I have brought back a splitting headache.'

She paused, debating in her own mind whether curiosity might go further. Had she not a right to be taken into his confidence ?

‘ And something more worth having, I hope,’ she said, opening the tea-caddy.

The keeping-room wore a warm welcoming look ; Mr. Flindell was a chilly subject and those evenings of early autumn were fresh. A bright, but economical fire burned on the hearth ; in the least little particular Miss Studd ever made ostentatious display of her thrift ; with thoughtful decision a teaspoonful or two of brandy was poured into his tea instead of cream, with the wifely remark :

‘ Nothing like a drop of brandy in one’s tea after a journey.’

And instead of hot buttered toast, as on market days, she now prepared the thinnest possible bread and butter, adding, as she helped him :

‘ Don’t eat too much ; when one is out of sorts just a snack is best, and that of the plainest. Perhaps you would prefer a bit of dry toast, there it is at your elbow.’

Could any mood fail to melt under such influence ? And with womanly wile, Miss Studd had not repeated her question, bided her time, every sigh of self-restraint and self-abnegation

making Mr. Flindell feel doubly indebted. Then she chatted of the barley and bean harvest, fat stock, and the rest ; things had gone on precisely as under the master's eye. And as for Master Sage, no more purloining of barley ! She had taken good care of the granary key, and, well, of course it was not her business, but for the sake of example, such pilfering ought to be severely punished.

All this time Mr. Flindell sipped his tea, and munched his dry toast with an absolutely blank face, Miss Studd's not more skilfully veiled than his own. She began to think that after all she had committed a blunder, that his errand had failed, and he lacked courage to tell her so. Plain-spoken, unversed in the ways of the world, apt to call a spade a spade, he ever shrank from anything like secrecy.

At last, when the tea and cordial had somewhat revived him, he looked up and began slowly:

‘ You meant well, I know, in calling me up the night poor Betts died.’

‘ Course I make it my business to study your interest in everything,’ the little woman blurted forth with flaming cheeks and aggressively bright eyes. Her manœuvre had failed then ? She must make the best of it. The farmer continued deliberately as before :

‘And in course I shall always feel beholden to you, Miss Studd, but I am not so sure that I have done the best for myself, and there are always two sides to a question.’

Miss 'Ria chuckled inwardly. The glow on her ruddy cheeks was now of relief rather than misgiving, the sparkle in her eyes had changed from suspense to triumph. Mr. Flindell would go to the Hall and she with him. No need for another word.

‘You are always afraid of something or other, Mr. Flindell,’ was all she put in.

‘The Hall is a fine occupation, I don't deny it, an out and outer and no mistake, and poor Betts' folks would carry it on till Michaelmas twelvemonth I daresay, but all the same, it is a big business; I've plenty to think of.’

‘Humph! If Captain de Medue has not twenty applicants for this farm, you could find fifty to take it off your hands to-morrow, stock, crop and valuation. Turtle, the miller, for instance, you heard it, I daresay? He has come into some money.’

The farmer mused.

‘In course,’ he said after a pause, ‘no occupation in these parts is a drug in the market nowadays. But as I said, I have plenty to think about, and you know, as well as I do,

that there were scores after the Hall; some folks will owe me a grudge.'

Miss Studd tossed her head with marked assumption.

'So that 's all the thanks I'm to get for helping you to one of the best farms in the county! But now, what about Master Sage? You are surely going to make an example of him, head horseman too.'

'I'll see about that at Michaelmas,' was the reply. Mr. Flindell had bitterly resented his housekeeper's action in this affair.

'Well, all I can say is, you must take your choice, look out for another horseman or another housekeeper.'

And with that she flounced out of the room.

Mr. Flindell's sunburnt face took a deeper tone as he looked after her, but it was an expression of relief, not of vindictiveness, that came over him.

The farmer's worst ailment was remorse. During the turmoil of the last few days again and again he had seem Aimée the Beloved as in a vision. Now they were taking bever with the Rectory children, and now side by side were following the last waggon. Then he recalled the flaming harvest moon and the strange heart-beating, with which had been stolen, nay,

accorded, that passionate kiss. Last of all he remembered his words, 'Make an errand to Ipswich next market day. My gig is as good as yours, you know.'

Ten days had elapsed since. What must she think of such behaviour? The appointment unkept, no apology forthcoming, not so much as a message from him!

More than once indeed he had made up his mind, even dipping his pen in ink and getting as far as 'Dear Miss Aimay. I hope this finds you well——' But letter-writing was ever an onerous business to so poor a scholar, the composition of a love-letter seemed utterly beyond his powers. Again, epistles were few and far between in those days. Every one at the Rectory would know from whom Aimée's came, and the poor girl would be teased about it from morning till night. He should see the Rector blundering into his keeping-room with a blunt 'Come, come, Mr. Flindell, this is a case of banns, of course? I want to know the when and the where,' or something of the kind.

So matters stood as he drove to market the day after his return. And as he was loyalest of the loyal, and in the words of his own people, 'would not tread on a wurrum,' as moreover,

he was still Aimée de Richemont's not mere adorer, but would-be suitor, he determined to repair the mischief in the only manly and honest if not exactly prudent way. He should be sure to overtake her some market day soon. He would then put the question point blank :

' Miss Aimay, will you go to church with me —on a week-day, I mean, and straight away come in my gig ? '

Thus and thus only could he state his case. Love-making in the ordinary acceptation of the word, flowery speech, compliments, were impossible to him. As he now neared the toll-bar, suddenly his bronzed, comely features deepened in tone, his eyes dilated with joy, so confused did he become that he pulled out half a sovereign for Mrs. Pipe instead of the usual coin. There she stood, evidently waiting for him, the sylph-like figure arrayed as he had last seen it, but looking lovelier, even more bewitching. She carried her head high : not a lady in that part of the world had such a carriage, erectness adding great dignity to girlish bloom and grace.

' Jump up, Miss Aimay,' cried good Mrs. Pipe. ' I told you Mr. Flindell would be coming along ; no, no, sir, toll is as it was afore you went into the shires ; here 's your half-sovering, and I've

plenty of change if so be that you are out of fourpenny bits.'

With trembling hand Mr. Flindell fumbled first in one pocket, then in another, at last bringing out a shilling. Having received his change and asked Aimée if she were comfortably seated, he drove on.

'I wanted to see you, Miss Aimay,' he began; he had tickled Jack into a trot. It seemed easier to say what he had to say when driving fast.

'And I wanted to see you, Mr. Flindell,' Aimée replied.

The farmer turned round quickly. Something in her voice told him all. It was no longer the Aimée of ten days ago who sat beside him, but a stranger! The voice that had seemed a caress in the harvest field now chilled his very veins, paralysed his speech, rendered him powerless to make an effort on his own behalf. The face lately so radiant, so confiding, so easy to read, was hard, cold, enigmatic.

Nothing more rapidly matures the character than wounded self-love; precocity of insight is oft-times but another name for precocity of feeling. Aimée de Richemont had seen more of the world and of human nature than most young women barely twenty-four. Not for the first

time she now smarted under the slight put upon dependence, not for the first time she realized the questionable boon that beauty may be to the portionless. Thus, at least, she regarded Mr. Flindell's affront, mere negligence, forgetfulness, press of business it could not surely be.

'I wanted to say,' she continued in the same quick, matter-of-fact tones, 'how sorry I am for what happened in the stack-yard. You were wrong to behave as you did, and I was still more wrong to permit it.'

With a slight blush and just perceptible tremor, she added :

'You had ever showed me kindness, and I was very grateful. I thought too that there was at least one person in Burrige who forgot my position, to whom it made no difference that I was a poor governess.'

'Miss Aimay,' began the poor farmer (he was on the verge of crying), 'I've never deceived any living creature yet, leastways a woman. No such thoughts as you speak of ever entered my head.'

'We need not say another word about the matter,' she went on, her composure and readiness of speech only adding to his own confusion. 'But I waited for you at the turnpike gate because I had this to say, and because I may not

have another opportunity. I think of going back to France.'

'Miss Aimay,' again began the farmer, desperation not lending eloquence, but at least restoring powers of utterance, 'I had to go away on business; I am no scholar or I would have written to say that I could not be at market last Tuesday, and if you'll go to church with me, I'll have the banns asked as soon as you like. No man can say more than that.'

Aimée's cheeks reddened haughtily.

'Nay, Mr. Flindell,' she retorted, 'you utterly misunderstand me. The indiscretion was chiefly mine; it was not to obtain redress from you that I sought this interview. You are under no sort of obligation, and shameless indeed were any woman so to punish a man for his folly.'

Mr. Flindell was crushed. What weapon of self-defence had he with which to meet that ready speech, those proud, castigating glances? More helpless than ever he felt thus confronted, thus worsted at the first blow. Oh! for skill in words. Oh! for the power of laying bare his thoughts!

'I wish I could make you understand,' he began.

'We had much better not say another word on the subject,' was the unconciliating, perfectly

composed answer. 'And that reminds me, Mr. Pascoe would be glad if you could send him half a load of straw for the stable. I was within an inch of forgetting his message.'

Just then a neighbour passed slowly, greeting the pair as he drove by, the farmer, making a tremendous effort, swallowed his tears and put on a semblance of every day. But for the life of him he could not feign a smile or get out more than a monosyllable. Aimée asked him about his journey; how had Brighton struck him; what did he think of London? and so on. 'Yes, no, no, yes,' her companion made answer, to-day not lengthening the drive as usual when having her by his side; on the contrary, he was as eager as herself to have it over. The pair meantime looked straight ahead, and had it been otherwise neither would have read the other's thoughts. Passion may blind or confer double vision, rendering men and women inscrutable, maybe transparent. Love is at times an interpreter, at others, a lying prophet. We are alternately sphinxes and oracles to those we love, whilst to the world in general we remain as common parlance.

'Will you set me down at the "Woolpack", please?' Aimée said, as they came within sight of St. Margaret's Green.

On former occasions that setting down of his lovely burden had spoiled the rest of the day. This afternoon it came as a relief. With accustomed lightness and grace Aimée sprang to the ground, and with all the old elegance and finish of manners she curtsied her adieu and thanks. But the joyfulness and witchery were gone, and the last touch to the poor farmer's disenchantment came with her parting words.

'I shall see you before you go back to France?' he murmured, in a distressed, appealing voice.

'Oh, yes,' was the apparently careless reply, 'on Sundays, after church, of course.'

Mr. Flindell generally interchanged a few words with the Pascoe family after service. On Communion days he usually chatted with Aimée and the children till separating at the Rectory gate. But she had at least said 'Sundays'. The date of departure then was not fixed.

She tripped off, the Tuscan bonnet with its pink top-knot, yellow spencer, white gown and small sandalled feet fast disappearing behind St. Margaret's Church.

The farmer brushed his eyes with his coat-sleeve, and slowly took the back street leading to the 'Crown and Anchor' yard, to his satisfaction meeting no acquaintance on the way.

CHAPTER XVI

MARKET DAY

THE folks we seldom want to see, however, are sure to cross our path when we want to see nobody at all. As with a downcast face Mr. Flindell now turned into the inn yard, the first person he lighted upon was Mrs. Betsey Askew.

Farming women might be the best possible managers out of doors as well as in, a match for the best farmers going, but they affected no mannishness, they sedulously shunned anything that looked like eccentricity. Thus Mrs. Betsey, though quite capable of administering gribbals to a horse that had eaten too much green food, or gruel to a sick cow, was scrupulous about appearances. She did not herself handle the reins on market days, but was driven by a former back-house boy, now a well-grown hudderen tidily dressed in black cloth and wearing gloves, an indisputable mark of respectability.

‘Good day, Mr. Flindell,’ she said, dropping a curtsy, and what a curtsy! It was the

veriest parody of Aimée's graceful obeisance, burlesque after fairy movement. She wore a shawl folded angularly according to the fashion, and her large heavy person, as she now plumped down, seemed indeed a mockery of the vision that had gone before.

'I hope I see you well, Mrs. Askew,' the farmer replied.

'That's more than you are, I lay,' she cried, stepping back and staring at him. 'Goodness gracious, you look for all the world like a come-back in a thunderstorm, or a chicken that has got the pip.'

'So would you if you had a splitting headache,' rejoined Mr. Flindell.

'So you've been into the shires and got the lease?' added the widow.

It was not necessary for her to specify which lease.

'As you seem to know my business better than I do myself, I won't detain you,' replied the farmer huffishly. He was irritated with her, and still more so with himself. Why had he taken Maria Studd's advice and posted to Brighton? In his present mood he did not care two straws about the Hall Farm, or indeed about anything.

'No offence meant, and I've a good many

things to do, so good day, for the present,' she added with malicious insinuation. The range of business on market day was circumscribed. Neighbours jostled each other not once but twenty times during the afternoon.

Hardly had Mrs. Askew's large figure disappeared than Samuel caught him by the button.

'Marthy particularly wants you to drive round to tea this afternoon,' he said in a low, confidential tone. 'You will get the moon by waiting half an hour later, but she 's here, somewhere,' he added, looking round. Miss Martha Flindell had just stopped for a word with Mrs. Betsey. She now came up, ambling as she walked; corns and bunions from time to time made her almost lame, and she was one of those women who affect years, apparently taking as much pains to look old as others to look young. Dress, too, in those days was no rejuvenating, beautifying process. The large square-shaped straw bonnet covering the ears, the shawl with its angular folds, the stuff dress, ugly in design as in colour, the heavy shoes and coarse white stockings, would have prosified Venus herself. But Martha's standpoint in life was not that of sex. Her shrewd face, humorous smile, and kindly expression betokened a very different character to that of Mrs. Askew, and one much

more engaging. Here was the same homeliness, but unallied with vulgarity, virtues of the workaday world, as in her brother Edward's case, softened by innate self-respect and a sense of propriety. Nothing more delighted Mrs. Betsey than a broad joke or highly-spiced dish of scandal. Martha Flindell's humour was of finer quality. She somewhat tyrannized over her family, but in her own words, 'for their good,' and she carried herself high.

'You've come back then, Ederd,' she said, eyeing the traveller almost proudly. In their way, these Flindells were what was called 'a united family'. The numerous brothers and sisters never quarrelled, a rare exception in family annals of the period. Railways had not as yet accomplished their beneficent mission of enabling relations to get away from each other easily and expeditiously. Folks had to take brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, cousins-german, and cousins once removed, as they took partners in wedlock, 'for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse.' There was no crossing the charmed circle.

'Thank God, yes, Marthy, and glad enough to.'

Her eyes, to use a Shakesperian phrase, coasted him round. She did not like his depressed

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look and dismal voice. Had that inconvenient and costly trip been made in vain ?

‘ You’ll drive round to tea and tell us—what you thought of London,’ she said. An ostler was taking out Mr. Flindell’s horse and another gig-full had just driven up. She durst not here venture upon more direct questions.

‘ I can’t to-day,’ replied the farmer, speaking so pettishly that Martha’s first thought was of disaster. He had been then a fool for his pains ?

‘ I can’t to-day,’ he repeated as the three moved down the inn yard. ‘ You’ll see me next moon, sure enough.’

Just as they turned into the Cornhill, Samuel was waylaid by a neighbour. Amid the crowd and prevailing hubbub, Martha now found her opportunity.

‘ You got the farm ? ’ she asked in an undertone, stopping short, her large bonnet screening her from passers by.

‘ I suppose so,’ he replied, his indifference puzzling the listener.

‘ Maybe a long lease ? ’

‘ Maybe,’ he replied in the same tone.

‘ And maybe means must be, where something else is concerned ; you know what I mean, I suppose, Ederd ? ’

‘Not more than the dead in the grave, Marthy.’

‘It’s so much and no more,’ she added, always with a sly twinkle ‘you know I’ve always been against a certain somebody marrying you, but if she’s been the means of your getting the farm, why, you can’t but marry her.’

The farmer opened his lack-lustre eyes.

‘How came you to know that I was called up in the night by Miss ‘Ria?’ he asked.

‘We’ve always been friendly,’ his sister replied, ‘and she had to write to me about some ducks’-eggs. So she just said how it was: we’d been a-wondering enough about it.’

He turned towards the Corn Exchange.

‘I’ve some samples to show, and time is going. If I don’t see you again to-day, look for me next moon,’ he said, and with that he turned away. The brothers and sisters rarely shook hands, whilst as to a warmer embrace, that was reserved for final leave-taking on earth, the death-bed solemnity. Martha, still with that meaning look in her eyes, went one way, Mr. Flindell another, each being stopped every five minutes by some neighbour.

Modern Ipswich no more resembles the Ipswich of two generations ago, than the townfolk of to-day their sober grandparents. Despite its

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veritable grove of churches, little splendour characterized the East Anglican metropolis, although such simplicity was more than compensated by picturesqueness and natural charm. As some superb heirloom found in middle-class households, some masterpiece of the goldsmith's or woodcarver's art, rose that Ancient House in the homely Butter-market, magnificent pile of sculptured oak, without its rival throughout England. Farther on, not far from the busy wharves and river, the stranger came upon Wolsey's Gate, then, as now, a piece of sad and beautiful antiquity, apparently crumbling to pieces ; then, as now, propped up by substantial modern buildings. That bit of ruin, so imposing in decay, doubtless, to many, recalled its builder's fate, the majesty and downfall of Ipswich's greatest son, him whose name even at this time figured on the legendary shop-sign. Edward Flindell, with his neighbours, ordered their Christmas beef of Mr. Thomas Wolsey, principal butcher in the place, and, as he proudly boasted, ' a relation of the late Cardinal.' The farming world had heard of Henry the Eighth and his numerous wife-murders. Mr. Wolsey's naiver customers, as he chatted to them of ' his relation the late Cardinal ', whilst weighing a quarter of suet or three-pennyworth

of bones, would ask if he remembered the great man, and in which parish he happened to be buried? Ever a stronghold of Nonconformity and progress, Ipswich yet plumed herself on her Wolsey.

It was not till he approached the river that a stranger would realize the graces of Gippiswick. How comes it about that no poet has arisen to immortalize these romantic banks of Orwell, no romancer to give the sweet haunts around Ipswich a local habitation and a name? By an irony of fate, as fairy-like a dell as ever inspired lyricist, obtained the name of Hog Island. To those who gambolled there as children, to whom Hog Island afforded the first lesson in natural beauty, the first thrill of impersonal joy, this misnomer matters little; it recalls exquisite enjoyment of dimpled sward, shady nooks, noble trees close to the flashing river. A flash of light indeed, was that clear tide amid densest foliage. And as it widened towards the sea, the wooded banks diminishing in height, the blue expanse gaining in splendour, Ipswich holiday-makers were unanimous on one point. The world had surely no more delightful cruise than their own little trip from Hog Island to Landguard Fort. .

To-day, and on every market day, farmers

and farmeresses seldom got beyond the streets abutting on the Cornhill. Thus, they were perpetually running against each other, and at any other time the circumstance would have appeared mere matter of course. Now Mr. Flindell resented these perpetual encounters; never, throughout the course of his existence, had he felt so disposed to curse and swear, mutter maledictions forbidden by Scripture and the usages of society.

Having shown his samples in the Corn Exchange he made for the saddler's close by, and why on earth must Mrs. Betsey Askew be there too, joking, insinuating and jeering as before? The good lady was inspecting some horses' collars under repair, but looked up and curtsied with a loud—

'Come, Mr. Flindell, you're the man for roaming about the world; how do they trim horses' collars in the shires? He's just been to Brighton,' she added to Mr. Croft, the saddler, an old acquaintance of both.

'Humph! I wish, Mr. Flindell, you had taken me with you as your wallet' (valet was the word intended), 'I'm sick of sticking here, year out and year in,' replied Mr. Croft; he was a bit of a wag and also of an inquiring mind.

‘Lor! don’t wish that, my good man,’ quoth the widow; ‘why, you might come back like him,’ here she pointed to Mr. Flindell, ‘cross as two sticks, full of prickles as a bit of hulver. Well, that will do, mind I have the things by next Saturday’s butter-woman, or you’ll get the length of my tongue, I’ll warrant you.’

‘She’s a proper lady for a joke,’ observed Mr. Croft, ‘but I’d rather have the length of her tongue than the weight of her hand. Didn’t I catch that one day when I contradicted her? I’m blest if she didn’t clap me a box on the ear, playful-like, in course, but a stinger that makes me tingle all over when I think on it. So you’ve been a’gaddin’, Mr. Flindell? Ah! no gaddin’ for poor me till I gad to the grave.’

With all possible dispatch the farmer ordered some new cart-horse traces and belly-bands, then turned into the grocer’s, and, of course, Mrs. Askew must be there also. A third bob, or curtsey, and more innuendoes about his recent journey, neighbours being by, aggravated Mr. Flindell’s ill-temper and depression. And the last hair was laid upon the camel’s back by a benevolent old Quaker, head of the historic foundry for which East Anglia was famous.

‘How do thee do, friend Edward?’ asked the

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great ironmaster blandly. 'Glad to see thee back again, have heard of thy expedition—to Brighton, was it not? Thee will surely have much to tell us?'

The very name of Brighton irritated his listener beyond endurance.

Mr. Flindell was a courteous man, and at any other time would have delighted in chatting with the Quaker. To-day he edged away awkwardly. Making what haste he could he got his horse put to, and cleared the 'Crown and Anchor' yard, as good luck would have it, without again encountering Marthy and Sammel. For the first time in his marketing experiences he had forborne the conventional glass of sherry!

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. KARRA OPENS AN ABYSS

AND for the first time during Miss 'Ria's reign the domain over which she presided as tutelary goddess appeared an unbearable place. Hurrying over his tea, anxious to be quit of that most harrowing fellowship, the *vis-à-vis* of a peevish woman, Mr. Flindell took up his hat and went abroad.

To-night he did not feed the pigs, on account of wearing Sunday clothes. Just glancing round the farm-yard, he now crossed orchard and pightle, making straight for Elisha's cottage in the Drift.

There might be reserve between farmer and man, but never ceremony. Mr. Flindell lifted the latch and walked in as if at home.

'Has Master Sage come back?' he asked.

Karra, with Miss Sage, was in a tetchy humour. She divined her master's errand.

'It's always us females who get the lecturin', she thought. What else should the farmer come about but the stolen barley?

'I'm not my husband's keeper,' she replied,

snappishly. 'And 'Lishy's a'cartin' your beans, and nobody else's. You ought to know, if any one does, where your own men are, Mr. Flindell.'

Dropping into a chair the farmer looked ready to take these acerbities in good part. That threat of Miss Studd's, that flouncing out of the room, had wonderfully raised his spirits.

'I wanted to see Elisha,' he began.

'No sort of need to tell me what for,' quoth Karra, more aggressively than before. 'That meddlin' and makin' upstart of a woman up yonder,' here she pointed towards the farm, 'wants to carny you over by spyin' and pryin' on us poor folks. If 'Lishy took the corn unbeknown, was it for the fillin' of his own belly?' .

'Look you here, Mrs. Sage,' mildly interposed Mr. Flindell, 'I don't want to make a piece o' work about that. I'm not a'goin' to prosecute this time—'

'I should think not, indeed,' quoth Karra. 'And you needn't be afraid, Mr. Flindell. The granary key might lie on this here table year out and year in now for all 'Lishy would be tempted of Satan. It was the horse you sent to Mr. Sammel he stole corn for. Many a word have I had with my husband about Smiler; a good beast enough, and more sensible than half

the folks as go to church and walk on two legs, only a bit of a guzzler ; them animals have their failin's like the rest on us, and lawks, 'Lishy had made a graven image of that there one, he humoured every whim. It's better he should be gone.'

'Mr. Sammel had lost a horse by the gripes, and I had one to spare, so I let him have Smiler,' Mr. Flindell replied, carelessly. He knew that the head horseman loved his team dearly. How could he divine that any special attachment existed between Elisha Sage and the big, shiny-coated Suffolk cart-horse bred on the farm ?

'And a good job if somebody else would go too,' Mrs Karra continued ; 'but, lawks a mussy me, Mr. Flindell, you men-folk be as blind as bats where us females are concerned. Don't you see what Miss 'Ria is a'drivin' at ? She wants to be missus in your house. Aye, and once missus, she'd be master too.'

'Well,' Mr. Flindell interrupted, rising from his seat, 'I've said what I had to say, so I'll wish you good evening, Mrs. Sage.'

Karra's expression changed from vindictiveness and irritation to profound gravity. She rose also, and with quite a solemn air closed the door.

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‘I’m not for a’forgettin’ my place, Mr. Flindell, but if you won’t hear a word in season from me who laid out your poor ma, then—the quotin’ o’ the Scriptures is never insultin’—I’ll take it upon myself to say that you’ll be like the wild ass alone by himself spoken of by Hosea. That audacious baggage yonder is takin’ away your good name afore you’ve made it over to her in church.’

‘Come, come, Mrs. Sage, that ’s neither here nor there ; you are talking at random.’ Nevertheless the speaker resumed his chair.

‘I’m never for a’interferin’,’ Karra went on, ‘but you’re a good master, Mr. Flindell, and I can’t sit quiet whilst folks talk against you behind your back. What did I hear with my own ears the last time I went to Ipswich ? The Rector gave me a back-seat in his four-wheeler, and a’ridin’ with him in front was Mr. Webb, of Fordham, him who lost his grey horse by the gripes three weeks come Sunday. Says the Rector in his jokey way : “ I’ll bet you sixpence, Webb, Ted Flindell posted to Brighton after poor Betts’ lease ! ” Mr. Webb looked that concerned you can’t think. “ Humph ! ” says he, “ I should never have thought it of Flindell. I suppose my neighbour, Joe Frost, will be after my lease next afore the doctors

have given me up!" "A better fellow than Ted Flindell doesn't breathe," says Mr. Pascoe, "but I wish you farmers would not be in such a devil of a hurry—parsons can swear in season like us lay-folks—to step into dead men's shoes." These be the very words, and if I repeat them, Mr. Flindell, 'tis for your good.'

The farmer writhed as he had done under Aimée's stinging reproaches, and naturally enough he now reproached Miss Studd rather than himself, the inciter, rather than the agent, of what began to look like a dirty trick.

Those who serve us with more zeal than discretion soon wear the guise of enemies. This trying to do one's friends a good turn is ever a ticklish concern. Most often we drive them head foremost against a brick wall, ourselves being ignominiously sent backwards. No! alike in matters spiritual and material, in love and in lucre, the golden rule, the only liveable axiom among friends is that of 'Let alone'. Just now the farmer's would-be benefactress, the energetic little woman who had helped him to the best farm in the neighbourhood, seemed his worst foe.

Mrs. Sage, perceiving her advantage, thundered on :

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'But it's not only what folks are a'sayin' of

you that keeps me awake o' nights,' she said, 'there 's something worse to come,' here she eyed her visitor with quite a startling look of dismay and foreboding. 'A bad name——'

'Come, come, Mrs. Sage, you forget yourself ——'

'I'm not a'forgettin' myself, Mr. Flindell; well, a name no longer what it was, then is bad enough, but a whole family a'swoopin' down upon you without shirts and shifts to their backs and without good livin' principles, that 's a sight deal worse than waggin' tongues. Maria Studd, the person you hired at the register office after your poor ma died, who 's she? You don't know perhaps, but I do; and when once you've taken her, as she hopes you will, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in church, 'twill be too late to learn. Why, her father kept a public-house at Eye, and was sold up, leaving I don't know how many mawthers to shift for themselves, not that they haven't kept themselves respectable. I'm not a'goin' for to take away any poor female's character, but just think o' the lot of 'em—there 's Eliza now a'leavin' her situation, there 's Mary Anne, who can't go out, poor thing, because she has fits, there 's Caroline, that mannish and gruff-speakin' you'd fancy it was some fellow dressed

up—she 's a female jailer at Bury as I've heard tell—the lot of 'em, I say, are only a'waitin' a good home with Miss 'Ria when she's got to be ma'am'd and missus'd in your house, Mr. Flindell; ah! and I'm blest if I haven't forgot Arabella, she what 's left a widow with three children and not a fardin' to bless herself with. You'd be like a toad under a harrow, like a pig squeezed in a gate. I can't bear to think on't, as I say, having laid out your poor ma and known you since you were breeched——'

Mrs. Karra stopped from sheer want of breath, and Mr. Flindell seized the opportunity of escape.

'Well, you'll tell Master Sage what I've been sayin',' he said on the doorstep; the kitchen, of course, opened on to the garden. 'I'll not think any more about the barley this time, but he must mind what he 's about, and set a good example. I'll wish you good night, Mrs. Sage.'

Karra dropped a curtsey, the reverence usually reserved for squiredom and rectory folk.

Master's not a man of many words, but he thinks the more, she thought. I've opened his eyes. We shan't have that meddle-makin' baggage a'drivin' us like brute beasts, that I feel sure on.

The farmer did not go straight indoors.

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Aimlessly, pensively, yet with a sense of relief, he strolled along the Drift, that delicious alley never more inviting than at evenfall and at this season of the year. Nature to the farming world meant bean-carting and wheat-sowing, haysel and harvest, not the fragrant yellowing and purpling of meadows with cowslip and violet, the flash of kingfisher and wagtail athwart willow-banked ponds, the thousand-throated carol of drift and pightle.

But newly-awakened feeling is an immense educator. As Edward Flindell now trod familiar ground all seemed sweet and strange. By little and little the cruelty of Aimée's reproaches lost its sting. Her outburst of womanly pride but heightened his admiration, and somehow, how he could not tell, Karra's warning was as a mallet upon fetters ; forewarned is forearmed, he felt free. Yes, Maria Studd should be taken at her word. Unconsciously paraphrasing the speech of a French king, he said to himself that he could find twenty housekeepers, but where to look for a second Elisha Sage ? Punctual, inoffensive, skilled, his Lord of the Harvest was a treasure upon any farm ; on a larger occupation he would be invaluable. The incident of the stolen barley was really as a blessing in disguise. Had it not proved an eye-opener, a finger-post, a storm-

signal? But for this most fortuitous occurrence, this windfall of windfalls, he might, rather he must, have drifted into unpropitious wedlock against his will.

In the strangest mood imaginable, sweet because it was sad, and none the less sad by reason of its sweetness, he gazed around him, mused, pondered.

He now took heed of everything, rosy cloudlet, bloomy blackberry, oak leaf tingling with last sun-ray, little caressing lay of redbreast, social twitter of ground-lark above the sweet-smelling turnips. Sights and sounds familiar to him from childhood were for the first time realized.

There is an ecstasy of love, there is an ecstasy of hate, perhaps the ecstasy of deliverance outdoes both. It was this consciousness of regained freedom that made Edward Flindell's heart beat quicker, and his eyes shine now. Aimée the Beloved had not promised to be his wife, but Maria Studd, in homely phrase, had given warning. Joy maketh afraid, hope deferred maketh the heart sick, to loose one's feet from skilfully-laid toils brings the keenest satisfaction man or woman can feel.

CHAPTER XVIII

A RUSTIC PALADIN

THE Sunday afternoon or evening tryst was regarded by village lovers as solemn and binding. Barely in their teens, mawthers and hudderens 'walked together', but a stroll taken hand in hand often ended there. Very differently folks regarded the rendezvous of suitors' appointing. Herein they saw nothing less than a direct offer of marriage, preliminary of the asking in church to follow. Did any flighty wench play her follower false, he felt straightway at liberty to go a'courting elsewhere. Did any swain so scurvily trick his mistress, the best thing she could do also was to seek consolation in another quarter. Neither by the one nor the other could such an affront be otherwise interpreted. With States and legislatures, rustic society possessed its unwritten code, its court of equity.

Had Tat Turtle been as good as his word, Amma would already have heard his name coupled with her own in church. But the proud moment was deferred. Thews and sinews do

not always represent moral courage, and it was well known that both the miller and his son stood in awe of Mrs. Turtle. Spare, acrid, with a voice of ringing quality, boasting also boarding-school reputation for genteelness, the little woman ruled her household as Deborah ruled Israel. No weakling dreaded a big bully more than the two strong men of Burrige dreaded their housewife's wrath. So the last time that Tat had caught sight of Amma at the granary steps, with hangdog air he confessed the truth—he dared not again open his lips about the banns for the present.

‘Mother gave me the length of her tongue, and no mistake, last night,’ he added, with a drawing together of the lips as if being pinched; ‘but she’ll cool down, and she shan’t prevent me leastways from walking with you o’ Sundays.’

The courting day had come round, and Amma, whose evening it was out, set off for the Drift. She generally awaited her lover at the farther end, then, instead of turning into the high road, they would strike across the fields, now in one direction, now in another, always getting as far as possible from home. There were no hills or dales within walking, or for the matter of that, driving, reach. Few folks hereabouts had ever

seen so much as a monticule ; but honeysuckle gathered in the next parish smelt unlike that of native bowery, and if anything to be called perspective remained mythical, at any rate the level landscape before their eyes was not Burridge.

A young woman could not be well freer from sentimentality than Amma. With her, existence was no happy-go-lucky affair, no matter of odds and hazards, but of diplomacy and calculation. As she now arrayed herself for this meeting, it was less with a flutter of alternating hopes and fears than with a deliberate weighing of chances. Would Tat Turtle fail her or comport himself gallantly ? Such was the problem now revolved and revolved again. The probabilities were in his favour, and indeed, but for this conclusion, Amma would have stayed at home. Of no brittle quality that heart of hers, but she wanted to marry a Mister, a wearer of broadcloth, possible churchwarden, and one who did business at the Ipswich Bank. The evening was of intense, almost southern beauty and voluptuousness, of deepest, ruddiest gold the facets of sunshine amid the oak leaves, of faint caressing sweetness the breath of travellers' joy and wild thyme, a personal love-note too, inviting softness and

passion, seemed the stock-doves' cooing; accompaniment of the pastoral; other sounds were heard between-whiles, in the hedgerow, twitter of wren and robin, from afar the cawing of rooks, the wood-pigeons were everywhere as much a part of the hour and scene as sky and languorous air.

Amma's mood just now was of impressionability, if not of sentiment. These subtle influences affected her, but not in the ordinary way. For the most exquisite visions, rather revelations of the outer world, to which none can be wholly insensible, act very differently upon opposed natures. Such an hour as this, with its wooing deliciousness, would have driven many a girl into her lover's arms—and perhaps into the gulf of destruction. A kiss would have done duty for wedding-ring. Over Amma came a spell of quite another kind.

Dairy-maids could no more lay claim to a watch than to the style and title of Miss, but Amma could reckon the time without help. Farming folks carried a clock as well as a calendar in their heads.

The cool, wooded Drift led to the high road, now hot and dusty enough, but on one side a little spinney or plantation of larch trees offered shade. It was a sweet corner, the mossy

ground being broken up into little knolls, the young trees making brilliant avenues, light screens of emerald against a background of clearest, warmest blue. An excellent hiding-place was this, and here Amma hid herself, now determined that if Tat came an hour behind time, he should come for nothing. The position of the sun soon told her that it was long past the appointed hour.

By and by, she did perceive a man's figure on the other side, and her heart gave a leap, not the leap of relief or allayed misgiving. As she caught sight of Ebby's square although not ungainly form arrayed in best corduroy, a sudden thought struck her. Starting up from the brushwood, she cried engagingly :

'Where may you be making for, Ebby, looking that long-faced ?'

Utterly taken aback by the lovely apparition, imagining Amma to be far away, strolling across distant fields with her miller, the young man dropped his eyes and stammered out :

'You know I'm a meetener,' he said, with a shamefaced air, 'leastways when there's a meetin' to go to.'

'There, leave the ranters alone for once, and come along a' me.'

Religiousness in the proper acceptation of the

word was as foreign to Ebenezer and his fellow ploughmen as aesthetic perception or intellectual rapture. But when a man can neither read nor write, when, moreover, he cares not to go a'courting, the meeting-house offers a better-than-nothing in the way of recreation, a veritable pastime. Any local preacher holding forth in the village Bethel was therefore sure of an audience.

A ray of ecstasy came into Ebby's pale blue eyes, followed by a look of almost vindictive disillusion.

With all his untutoredness, Amma's lover possessed a manly soul and some sense of moral dignity. A crushing taunt of a week or two back, 'You shall be one of my weddeners, never fear,' was fresh in his mind, it galled, stung, festered still. With bold retort he turned on his heel.

'If you want to see Tat Turtle and me a'goin' at each other like fightin' gobblers, it shan't be on a Sunday, Amma, and so I tell you.'

Amma hastened after him.

'Look you here, Ebby,' she said, 'I'm not a'jokin'. I'll keep company with you, true as I stand here.'

'I know all about that,' Ebby got out mockingly, yet drinking in the ineffable picture with

mingled rapture and despair. Never before had Amma looked so genteel, so superior to the rest of BurrIDGE womankind ! No face was hers round and red as an apple, no pudgy proportions recalling the distich of ill-natured urban rhymester :

You can see at a glance, could not be mistaken,
These misses of BurrIDGE have thriven on bacon.

Milk-white was Amma's complexion, setting off those large brown eyes so full of changeful, mysterious expression, very fair too the long neck, becomingly arrayed in white collar and pink neck-ribbon ; any lady of the land who played the pianoforte and rode single might own those small hands uncoarsened, unreddened by toil. And her slender symmetrical proportions would have graced silks and satins as well as neat print or figured muslin. But after all it is not the setting, it is the jewel that implies priceless-ness. Amma's character, parts, ready wit, made her exceptional, not pearly skin, big eyes, nor slender waist.

'No, you don't, you know nothing about it at all, Ebby,' she replied, turning with him, motioning him to go on, 'nor did I afore the clock had gone six this day. But let us cross yonder fields towards Tuddenham.'

Ebenezer's tall, athletic figure looked pro-

portional, even graceful, when wielding scythe or sickle in his shirt sleeves ; the Sunday suit and shiny boots made him gawky and loutish. But Amma was in no critical mood just then, this devoted lover could now serve her turn, and should be duly rewarded.

‘Don’t stand there a’turnin’ up your eyes like a duck in a thunderstorm,’ she cried impatiently ; ‘I tell you you’re to go to Tuddenham along o’ me.’

The road before them led straight to Ipswich, that behind to Helmingham, but over against the coppice a five-barred gate opened upon wide fields with enticing little paths under lofty hedges.

Before Ebby could reply, his companion had cleared the gate, her action rousing him from his stupor. Amma possessed a shapely foot and the prettiest leg imaginable, black cashmere boots laced at the side, and coarse but speckless white cotton stockings fitting to a nicety. She wore too a many-tucked, well-starched and ironed white muslin slip, now shown under the daintily lifted blue and pink skirt.

She walked on quickly, never turning to look round, and they were soon at the gate of the next field. Here she paused, letting him somewhat awkwardly help her over. Then she did

just glance towards the road left behind. No one was there.

‘Till the clock had gone six I took Tat Turtle to be a man of his word, and if a marf won’t have me when he might, when he would, he must go without. That’s the long and the short of it, Ebby, my dear.’

Ebenezer, who had been gathering nuts for her, now pressed them into her hand with extraordinary self-confidence and hilarity. She permitted the lover-like grasp and began at once to crack the nuts with her strong white teeth. There was not a vestige of romance in her composition. Before the realistic novel was thought of, Amma regarded existence from the realistic novelist’s point of view.

Ebby, on whom the most dulcet flavour of nuts was wasted just then, watched his enchantress with dilating eyes.

‘I’ll give it to him, or I’ll try to,’ he said.

‘Now, Ebby, don’t you go a’gettin’ yourself into a scrape, but leave Tat this or Tat that to me. Don’t you s’pose it will be a’givin’ it to him enough to hear our banns asked in church?’

The young man looked positively awe-struck. Of course Amma would have her way, an enchanting, intoxicating way too; he was only ‘bound’, as the phrase went, to Mr. Flindell

till Michaelmas. He would then be free to quit the farmhouse and earn the weekly ten shillings of an able-bodied labourer. But the finding of a cottage, the furnishing of it? His whole savings amounted to just six pounds, which his master kept for him in his bureau.

With Amma's brisk utterance, mental hobgoblins and bogies vanished as mist before the sun.

'You just leave everything to me, Ebby,' said the young woman, speaking coolly, as if the matter under consideration were a half-holiday for visiting the fair, 'everything except the asking in church, I mean. We're close upon Michaelmas, master will want a sight more hands at the Hall, and if Miss 'Ria spites me, she don't spite you. And whether father is made head-man or no, there'll be a couple of ploughmen wanted out of doors as well as in. And the little cottage with the bowery, poor old widow Watts', stands empty at a shilling a week. And a help is always wanted two or three days a week at the Rectory, what with washin' and brewin' and bakin', that's a shillin' a day and a bellyful. And——'

On rattled that facile tongue, Ebby listening with the stupefaction of overjoy, Amma speaking gaily, mortified self-love and bitterest disillusion lost sight of in this foretaste of revenge.

CHAPTER XIX

HALLOO LARGESS

LARGESS-SPENDING has long since become matter of hearsay, legendary as stage-coaches, tinder-boxes, man-traps and stocks on the village green. But veterans of the plough still live to recount that jovial celebration, and many a looker-on then in pinafores can remember how ‘ My Lord begged round and held his hat,’ and how, when it was full of shillings from squire, farmer, and friends—in the words of the Suffolk bard just quoted—

Up they got and went to Halloo Largess.

Nor have they forgotten the lusty chorus—this of local origin—sung after supper outside the village inn :

With a full flowing glass of old harvest beer,
Here ’s your master’s good health, boys, join in the cheer.

That filling of the hat with shillings was often a matter of time. It was, moreover, a recognized tax on the sportsman.

No sooner was a popping of guns heard amid the turnip fields than—‘ the shooters, the

shooters !' shouted my Lord to his men. As the party drew near, he would hold round his hat, sure enough of shillings and half-crowns rattling in ; this little business over, the men formed a ring, the leader shouting, 'Halloo, halloo, halloo largess,' three times. Then would burst forth a ringing cheer, with a reiterated 'We thank Mr. So-and-So for his largess'.

Captain de Medue was no patron of the chase ; he leased his shooting, but Elisha Sage's 'Halloo Largess' always resulted in a hatful for 'Largess-spending'.

Once more the jolly day had come round, and once more, under favourable auspices, the shooters had been no less numerous and liberal than usual. When my Lord's hat was emptied on good Mrs. Cage's table, the plump, rosy-cheeked landlady of the 'Barley Mow' lifted up her hands.

'I'm not a'jokin', Master Sage,' she said, 'but if you all stuff and guzzle away thus much in a single night, you'll none of you take any harm if you go hungry and dry for a week.'

Elisha always left everything, excepting his own immediate concerns, to other folks. And a jollification of this kind did not suit his Puritan nature and weak digestion, to say nothing of his present mood. But he must

perforce walk in the steps of his forerunners. Largess-spending meant that, no matter the consequences, every shilling collected for the purpose must be eaten and drunk upon that especial night. He comforted himself with the thought that his own small capacities as a reveller were exceptional, and that, as usual, from the highways and byways, all, as many as they found, both bad and good, would be bidden to partake.

He shook his head gravely, whilst the hostess counted the money.

‘No, no, missus,’ he said, ‘sufficient unto the day is the eatin’ and drinkin’ thereof. We shall all want our pork and dumplin’s to-morrow, I’ll lay, though, maybe, we’ll be a bit picksome.’

It was growing dusk when, one by one, Mr. Flindell’s harvestmen sauntered up to the ‘Barley Mow’, a neat, low-pitched house, with adjoining smithy, for Mr. Cage combined the business of publican and blacksmith.

At right angles lay the village street, consisting of a dozen cottages, some having thatched roofs and whitewashed walls, others of more modern appearance. Here stood the general shop, where could be had tobacco, snuff, tea, farthing dips, and peppermint-lozenges, the worthy mistress charging ‘a halfpenny for

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paper', when the order was unprofitably small or required an extra sheet of packing paper, at that time no very cheap commodity.

Shyly enough, for shyness accompanied any act if not of daily occurrence, the revellers stole up. All were tidied as for a ploughing match, or any other week-day occasion; nobody wore Sunday clothes. The first to arrive was little Smy, his small, fiery-red face grimaced with delight, his whimsical person fantastically equipped.

It was the fashion in those days for elderly men of the better ranks to wear swallow-tailed coats for best alike indoors and out; some waggish benefactor had bestowed such a garment upon Smy, and the quaint little man, partly from vanity, and partly from need, took to it, as to the manner born. He thought also that his swallow-tailed coat would contribute to the general entertainment.

'My, Master Smy!' cried Mrs. Cage, who, with her neighbours, mightily relished a joke, 'you look the very effigy of a gentleman; feel like one, I daresay?'

'I daresay I shall when I've filled my belly,' was the ready reply. 'True as I stand here, Mrs. Cage, I haven't swallowed bite nor sup since mornin'!'

‘The more fool you, then, though I say it who shouldn’t, for, my poor dear little poppet of a man, it couldn’t surely be because you had nothing to whet your whistle with, harvest time too?’

‘Bless the good soul, haven’t she the sense of a pitman pig?¹ Why, in course, I didn’t waste wittles and drink at twelve o’clock, knowin’ as how I should be filled to the bung-hole afore night. No, no, Mrs. Cage. Largess-spendin’ is Largess-spendin’, and it don’t come twice a year.’

‘It hadn’t need to, I’m sure, what with your guzzling and the shindy you all kick up afterwards,’ quoth the dame. ‘There’s old Nat, always first to come and last to go where drinkin’ is a’ goin’ on.’

‘What be the pretties you’re a’sayin’ about old Nat, my dear?’ interrupted the sheep-shearer.

But matrons hereabouts, however fond of a joke, did not relish familiarity.

‘Dear, indeed! Have I ever cost you anything?’ cried the landlady of the ‘Barley Mow’. ‘I’ll teach you to call me names,’ and, jumping up as a bantam daring a Cochin-China to the fight, for she was short of stature, and Nat

¹ Pitman, the smallest pigling of a litter; generally made over to farmers’ children as pocket money.

stood six feet two in his stockings, she dealt him a ringing slap on the face.

‘A soft answer turneth away wrath, and if any man smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him thy left also ; so another stinger, darlin’, then let us kiss and be friends.’

Thus saying, the lank, grotesque figure dropped upon one knee, inviting the blow.

‘Kiss, indeed ; I’d as soon kiss a squiggling pig caught in a gate. Have a care, or you’ll catch a bucket of soap suds on that ugly mug of yours, which, for once, don’t want it. But there’s Master Sage and the others. William, take up the taters.’

The last sentence was addressed in a high key to her husband ; Mr. Cage being what was called a domesticated man, upon these occasions, helped alike in back-house and kitchen. Those Suffolk housewives of two generations ago were notable women, and for the most part reigned supreme. ‘Cleaned up,’ too, for the day, that is to say, having changed her print gown for a stuff one, and donned a smart cap, Mrs. Cage could not be expected to dish up taters and plum-puddings. William, a spare, meek-faced, but by no means incapable man, had only laid aside his leather apron and given himself a good sousing at the pump. In his shirt sleeves he

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now bustled about, Jem, the baccus boy, helping him by the big, old-fashioned fireplace. Hanging from a spirket¹ was a huge boiler, in which danced two gigantic plum-puddings, the round of beef with other meats being served cold.

'No apin' the quality here; no bakin' and roastin' after dark; no smell o' dinner along the turnpike road o' nights in this house,' had its mistress decreed long ago, and from such ordinances there was no appeal.

The Lord of the Harvest, as he slowly approached, did not look as if good fare or a drinking-bout were to his mind just then; his usually slow deliberate pace was slower, more deliberate than usual, there was no more elation in look or gait than when bringing home a heaped-up turnip-cart or waggon-load of manure from Ipswich.

The sheep-shearer welcomed him with a merry 'whew!' Then a word rose to his lips, but he only got out the first two syllables, 'Geha——'

There he stopped short suddenly, recollecting that Elisha's reign was not over yet. An unseemly jest, an unwarrantable liberty taken with the Lord of the Harvest might cost him his supper.

These convivialists made little attempt to

¹ Or hook.

shine at conversation. They had met to eat and drink, the being merry was no condition tacked to Largess-spending. During that long, slow consummation of cold boiled beef and hot potatoes, only the sheep-shearer's irrepressible drollery and Mrs. Cage's brisk repartee varied the monotonous clatter. Black-handled knives and steel forks were plied as if from a sense of duty rather than gastronomic enjoyment. Satisfaction were indeed a most appropriate term in this case. Even upon such occasions, folks ate first to appease natural cravings, quite secondarily came the notion of a tickled palate. Most likely others present had followed Smy's example of preliminary fast, so swiftly diminished the enormous joints at each end of the table.

'Come, Master Sage,' cried the little landlady, as she moved behind the table, now admonishing a gourmand and now encouraging a shy feeder, 'to see you pingle one might think you ate beef and plum-pudding like rich folks every day of your life. A good tight slice, now, before it is clean gone!'

Suiting the action to the word, she transferred a temptingly thin round on his plate.

Elisha quietly put it back.

'I thank you kindly, Mrs. Cage,' he said, 'but I want no invitation to this here table.'

The courteous reproof was taken very good-naturedly.

‘No offence, Master Sage ; but you harvest-folks are that uppish, to be sure, one musth’t look at you ! Well, have just a tater to please me.’

The Lord of the Harvest inspected the dish of potatoes, and without a word prodded the most tempting. Then, glancing round from time to time, he went on with his supper. It was his place to see that all were behaving themselves. Nat must, of course, play the tomfool. Now the born buffoon mimicked one fellow-guest, and now another ; making a trumpet of his hands, he next imitated drum and bugle for the benefit of the two soldiers present, extra hands returning next day to their barracks. Monkeyish tricks, singing, whistling, speechifying, were as yet kept within due bounds and for the best possible reason. The sparkling ‘old harvest’ was reserved for the Halloo Largess abroad later on. Only Mr. Cage’s mild ale circulated at the supper-table.

Table-talk was limited alike in range and volume.

‘I s’pose we shall be a’cuttin’ beans o’ Monday,’ observed Zeky to his neighbour, one of the gallant redcoats before mentioned, who,

getting gradually intoxicated upon plum-pudding, replied that they might be cutting beans, pumpkins, capers, or one another's throats, for all he cared a d—n. Smy, endeavouring to be equally agreeable to the other wearer of the loyal uniform, made the remark, 'I'm blowed if ever I see'd any one tuck in like you soudgers.' Whereupon his companion, by way of deserving the compliment, stuck his fork into poor Smy's last slice of plum-pudding and demolished it amid much merriment.

'Where to will you be a'movin' now, Nat?' he asked of the sheep-shearer, who, like the wandering Jew and the local rat-catcher, went from place to place in the pursuit of his avocations.

'Lord, you sucking babe, as if I knew more than the dead! Perhaps into the shires, where I hear they're still a'harvestin', perhaps to Father Abraham's bosom. Hold your jaw,' was the reply.

Mrs. Cage's upright clock had gone nine when the leader arose and pronounced the customary thanksgiving: 'For what we have received may the Lord make us truly thankful.'

That quiet benediction was followed by an outburst of boyish excitement. Jumping on benches, playing leap-frog as they went, singing,

shouting, whistling, the harvesters now poured into the village street, where a little crowd awaited them. Foremost amid these stood Jeremiah Hammond, Elisha's rival in the reaping field, the ploughing match, and former candidate for the head-manship at the Hall. Other neighbours helped to form a semicircle, for the ceremony of Halloo Largess implied a general invitation. All friends and well-wishers were welcome to a glass. The group was a representative one. Mr. Pipe, the toll-gate keeper, had put in an appearance; with him had come Tom Potter, the parish clerk, who read the responses o' Sundays, making good scholars titter with his 'Peelican in the wilderness', his 'Cherubyum and Seraphyam'; o' week-days, his grand talk about Old Moore's 'highloripikes'. Behind these, come merely to look on, were the women-folk, tittering, giggling, nudging each other, no one, as Karra severely observed, 'behaving as she should do'. How was it, folks, gossippers, asked that Tat Turtle was not there, a'hangin' about Amma?

Immediately in front of the 'Barley Mow' stood Mr. Flindell's men, Elisha's figure a little in advance of the rest. From glass to glass the host of the 'Barley Mow' now moved, with his huge stone bottle of strong, sweet sparkling

old harvest '. Then in a voice of real command, for the occasion savoured of solemnity, the Lord of the Harvest led the toast :

'Now the harvest is ended ; our labours are o'er,
And we've met to spend Largess together once more.'

There was no sentimentality about this celebration. The tremendous cheer that now resounded from one end of the village to the other, audible at the Drift and the mill, was a matter of ceremony and custom. Had Mr. Flindell been a niggardly master, even a nip-cheese, churlish of temper, no employer of cripples and ' three-quarter men ' in winter, no impartial doler out of parish beef and coals at Christmas, church-folks and meeteners ever faring alike during his churchwardenship, Largess-spending must have ended in the same way, although not in the same spirit. But the tenant of Walnut Tree Farm, without being a hero, without aspiring to magnanimity, possessed that enviable attribute, a good name. No one could say evil of him. So louder and louder, heartier and heartier, went up those old-fashioned couplets, improvised by some Lord of the Harvest in times gone by.

'Now the harvest is ended, our labours are o'er,
And we've met to spend Largess together once more.
With a full flowing glass of old harvest beer,
Here 's your master's good health, boys, join in the cheer.'

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And according to custom, the toast-master now varied his burden :

‘ For he ’s a good man, he provides us good cheer,
Long life to Ted Flindell, drink up your beer.’

Just as comedians bring down the house with some happy allusion to current topics, so the altered version, composed of course by Karra, heightened general enthusiasm. Again and again rose that volume of sound, the hearty three times three many heroes of showier triumphs might well envy.

Whilst friends and neighbours were bidden to a glass, the traditional woman’s part was that of looker-on. Folks who ‘ frequented ’, ‘ walked together ’, or ‘ kept company ’, might break the rule, slily toasting each other out of the same goblet. To-night, but for his mother’s tongue, Tat Turtle would proudly have armed Amma to the festive spot, none ever readier for a kiss and a drinking-bout. Anyhow, he could not for the life of him help starting off at the last moment. As he explained to the family law-giver, if he stayed away people were sure to talk, would say he had gone so far that he dared not look Amma in the face. Unheroic was this paragon of thews and sinews, but, after his own fashion, he adored Karra’s daughter, and his notion was that she would wait and wait and

wait, and that somehow things would come right in time. Of a favoured rival he had no inkling.

So having framed a plausible excuse for last Sunday's perfidy, he now sidled up to the girl; he knew Amma as well perhaps as any one; he was prepared for an outburst when next they should find themselves alone; but publicity, gaping eyes, and gossiping tongues would befriend him. Amma might 'take on' in private, she would be only too pleased to welcome him here, flaunt her superior lover before the world.

'Come, Amma,' he said, drinking-horn in hand, 'just sweeten this for me, will you? That's what I've come for,' he whispered in her ear. Amma stood in the front row of spectators; before this crowd of women and girls were the rollickers forming a semicircle, both groups well-lighted by the inn lamps.

'Then you'll get something else, I can tell you,' quoth Amma. Without a second's hesitation, and with the deftest imaginable movement, the ale was dashed in his face, and the bearer sent sprawling backwards. Then belabouring him with her hands, calling on the rest to aid, he was driven ignominiously away: never was luckless wight boxed and buffeted as the strong

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man's son to-night. But it was not the smart of blows under which he writhed, for he knew well enough that though Tat Turtle might become a substantial farmer, a compeer of the best, henceforth he was a fable, a butt of raillery, a reproach in folks' mouths as long as he lived. Amma was avenged !

CHAPTER XX

HALLOO LARGESS—(*continued*)

A MAN may be a second Goliath, the terror of his compeers : he were a savage and sure to be treated as such, if using his fists or his heels against a parcel of girls. So, freeing himself from these village Maenads as best he could, hurling threats and imprecations, vowing to pay out alike aggressors and lookers-on, the young miller made good his escape. The affair had taken place too quickly to admit of interference on Elisha's part ; moreover, with the womankind and mere spectators he had nothing to do. His jurisdiction and mastership of the ceremonies did not extend beyond the harvest supper and its participants. But he had seen and heard all, and the incident, with its revelations, only deepened his unfestive mood. It added also to poignant self-reproach, for in his present state, the least little circumstance wore a retributive aspect. If Tat Turtle had given up Amma, what else did it mean but disapproval of her father ? Folks had been poisoning miller Turtle's mind against him and his : the latest check was of a piece with the rest.

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Since the business of the stolen barley and the melancholy journey with Smiler, Elisha had not been himself. Quiet, dogged resignation had changed to brooding melancholy. The one pleasure of his life seemed taken from him, so he said to himself. His good horse's affection made up for many things, so cheerfully did it lighten toil ; and Smiler did not sleep the sleep of death. He could not help dwelling on the faithful creature's wistfulness, his hopes perhaps of again hearing the familiar voice, feeling the touch of the well-known hand.

But again the strain broke forth :

‘For he’s a good master, he provides us good cheer,
Long life to our master, drink up your beer.’

With this final toast, in which outsiders now joined, Elisha relinquished his glass and his dignity. The Lord of the Harvest, as the Lord Mayor of London, once more became a commoner, a mere citizen, if forsooth the last epithet could be applied to the hind of two generations ago. There was not a trace of conviviality in his look or manner as he now stepped back, intending to slip away and make for home. The last toast drunk, the ‘old harvest’ drained, he became once more Master Sage, a village nobody.

Not thus quietly was he allowed to steal home. As is the case with wit in high places,

rustic waggeries will oft-times take the form of ill-nature. When the blood is heated and the brain muddled with over much eating and an extra bout, delicacy is out of the question.

For Nat, the sheep-shearer, such an opportunity was golden. Natural frolicsomeness is much rarer than the occasion calling it forth; to-night all were in the humour for a joke, and a little bird had whispered every tale into every ear. The whole village knew of the hidden bushel, the night-capped, bed-gowned interloper, the Biblical reprimand. But the matter was much more than a joke to one or two. It was rumoured abroad that in spite of Elisha's breach of trust, in spite of Miss 'Ria's threat—for at Burridge everybody knew everybody's business—the Lord of the Harvest was to follow his master to the Hall, there to be installed as head-man. Now, in so far as the obtaining of the lease was concerned, Elisha could not be accused by any one. Folks, however, were not logical, and he vicariously seemed an interloper. Thus it came about that Jerry and Lyddy, and indeed all Mrs. Betsey Askew's work-people were in a mischievous mood to-night, determined not to let their neighbours return home quietly.

Just as Elisha was moving off stealthily,

motioning Karra to do the same, he felt a grip from behind.

‘Come, Master Sage, you’re ‘among well-wishers, stand there friendly like, and tell us all about that there little job, Miss ‘Ria a’s seizin’ you like a ferret a’s springin’ on a rat, yourself all of a tremble like an ashen-leaf, and the old harridan dinnin’ Gehazi, Gehazi, in your ears.’

‘Now, together,¹ just behave yourselves as you should do,’ cried a shrill feminine voice from the crowd, ‘the parish constable has his eye on you, I’ll warrant.’

Mrs. Karra’s interposition did not prevent Elisha from giving Nat a violent push backward, sending the tall spindle-shanked, spidery-figure straight into the arms of his neighbour, Jerry Hammond. Open-mouthed, staring blankly, showing his large white teeth, the rival seized his opportunity. Jerry had never yet outdone Elisha in the ploughing match; witless of the witless he could nevertheless fling his shaft.

‘It’s all very fine to put on farins, Master Sage, but there’s no other thief in this here company that I knows on.’

Elisha felt his patience going, but still remained outwardly cool. Again he tried to edge

¹ ‘Together,’ in Suffolk used for ‘all of you’.

his way out of the semicircle and make for home, and again he was held back.

‘I’ll teach you to mock me, and that in a jiffy, if you don’t leave hold,’ he said at last.

He was not given to vehemence either of speech or action, blows and bad words were not in his line ; but to-night he felt somehow afraid of himself, for the first time realizing the pitfall of exasperation.

Wounded self-love, the soreness brought about by irritating banter ; above all, the nasty little pricks, just pricks and no more, of conscience, were doing their work. He felt under the influence of moral poison.

‘There, there, darlin’, I wouldn’t be that peevish if I were you, we only want to have a little harmless fun,’ pursued Nat.

‘Which you won’t at my cost. Have a care and leave go.’

‘Did you ever ? I never did,’ Nat replied, winking at his fellow toppers, most of them, with himself, being in local phrase, ‘a trifle groggy.’ ‘Here ’s our ’Lishy,’ the wag went on, ‘tetchy as a teethin’ babe, and all because I term him Gehazi instead I s’pose of terming him after his namesake, the prophet.’

Groups of harvesters now broke up into two, each member straightway becoming a partisan.

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A mere trial of strength to begin with, this rough play soon developed into a fierce combat, both sides being urged on by the beholders. Immediately behind Elisha, trying to free their chief, were Ebby and 'Zeky; manfully emulating the bravest was the little Smy, one gallant wearer of the uniform hanging on to the flaps of his tail-coat, the other aiding the assailants, headed by Nat and Jerry. Away they tugged and tugged amid indescribable uproar, the women also separated into two camps, cheering, expostulating, threatening, one or two even joining in the fray.

Cries were raised for Mr. Mumpford, the representative of law and police; above threats, abuse, and banter rising Karra's voice. ' 'Lishy,' she now shouted, in a voice of sternest wifely command, 'have a care! Let me see your hand once raised against your brother and no wife will follow you into the land of Nod. And you, Lyddy Hammond, a'egging on your husband, doing your best to make a Cain of him; shame on you!' With fiercer and yet fiercer invective she harangued the rest. 'Get to bed, you children of Belial, you tempted' of the Evil One. Not if I know it, shall any soul be dragged to the bottomless pit, where will be weeping and gnashing of teeth to-night.'

Now it happened that Mr. Flindell was supping at the Rectory, and having mentioned the fact of Largess-spending, the children begged leave to hear the hip, hip, hooraying.

They need not go farther than the garden-gate, pleaded Esther Ann, Dick, and Bob, and it would be so nice for Miss Aimée !

‘ Well, well,’ quoth the Rector in his rough but good-humoured way, ‘ off with the whole troublesome crew of you ; as I’m in my slippers I’ll ask Mr. Flindell to halloo you home in an hour’s time, and if you don’t come at once, you’ll get my cane to-morrow, be sure of that.’

‘ You forget, Zachariah, that it is Saturday night,’ lispingly interposed Mrs. Pascoe ; ‘ which means,’ she added, smiling at her bachelor guest, ‘ tub night—the copper fire was lighted half an hour ago.’

‘ Oh ! never mind,’ her husband broke in, ‘ ring for Mary Ann to put it out, the children can be scrubbed down on Monday instead. Halloo Largess, like Gunpowder Plot Day, only comes once a year. Now, Flindell, let us go into my study, and talk over that business of church repairs.’

The churchwarden followed his Rector with quite a beaming face. For the first time since that wretched drive to market he had inter-

changed a few words with Aimée, the Beloved. On being shown into the drawing-room just before, he had found her at the piano hearing Bob's scales. The boy, of course, delighted to be set free, bolted like a young colt escaping the halter; Aimée could but come forward, proffering her little hand—and a smile!

What may not an apologetic smile do? In this sweet half-French, half-English face, he now read self-reproach, apology, all that a proud woman would wish to say under such circumstances. She had indeed cruelly misjudged him, and she knew it. Every day, every hour of her hard life but brought out in clearer light the homely steadfast devotion she had so scornfully spurned. Every day, every hour made her feel the goldenness of such love as Edward Flindell's.

'You are not going back to France just yet?' he asked eagerly.

'No, Mr. Flindell,' was the quiet friendly answer, 'I remain here anyhow till the spring.'

He had just time to murmur a low 'Very glad,' when the Rector entered, jocular as he ever was when in unruffled temper.

'Come, come, Flindell,' he cried, 'flirting with my little governess! Well, as you know, I'm always ready to tie the matrimonial knot; what else are we parsons good for?'

Mr. Flindell looked shy as the veriest hudderen caught a'nannicking with some mawther under the mistletoe. Without a change of countenance, Aimée put away Bob's music-book, closed the piano, readjusted music-stools, and left the room.

'On my word,' said Mr. Pascoe, when the pair found themselves alone, 'if you were a marrying man you might do worse! She's the briskest, cleverest, nattiest little creature I ever came across, and would manage a farmhouse as if to the manner born; you know we English are all loutish compared to the French. They can turn their hands—or brains—to anything.'

The business of the evening then came up, a bit of church wall was crumbling; how much could the churchwarden squeeze out of his fellow-parishioners towards reparation? Again, Burrige was scandalously behind its neighbours in the matter of church accommodation. Every parish for miles round had long ago replaced the old-fashioned pews by the more commodious system of benching. Could not folks' feelings here be worked up on this subject? The indecency of sleeping open-mouthed just under the pulpit too! Surely, benches would do away with such acts of irreverence? Pew-

corners, on the contrary, invited somnolence, were veritable arm-chairs enticing even the well-disposed to sleep and snore instead of following the sermon.

Mr. Pascoe's harangue was interrupted by the bursting in of Dick and Bob.

'Papa, Mr. Flindell; Mr. Flindell, papa!' shouted both; 'the men are not hip, hip, hooraying, but fighting, trying to kill each other; do go, papa, Mr. Flindell.'

The Rector rose, much disconcerted.

'You farmers will have to put a stop to these Largess-spendings,' he said, looking round for his boots. 'Come, Flindell, let us see what we can do; but, of course, Mumpford ought to be there.'

'Mr. Mumpford is in bed with the tooth-ache, folks say; there's nobody there to stop the fighting.'

'It's a regular battle, papa,' put in Bob; 'do make haste; Miss Aimée made us run.'

'Run, indeed! well she might; fetch my stick; there, the big one with the knob; aye, I'll use it too if words won't quiet the block-heads,' said Mr. Pascoe. 'Flindell, where's yours? You haven't a stick, then fetch my second big one, Bob. That's it. Sophy, my love,' he shouted at the drawing-room door,

‘ Mr. Flindell and I are only going to break a few heads at the “ Barley Mow ” ; don’t be alarmed if you see me come home with my own bandaged up.’

Now there can be no doubt whatever that there is nothing half so delightful to the general run of mankind as the prospect of a rattling scrimmage. The good old Mohawk days are over ; more harmless folks in the main than these honest Burridgers did not wear corduroy and high-lows, yet the notion of bludgeoning a few into tractable behaviour to-night, stimulated Mr. Pascoe, as the beating of drum-ecclesiastic in other fields.

No sooner had the little party quitted the Rectory gates than the sounds of tumult burst upon them. The ‘ Barley Mow ’ lay but a furlong off, and as they approached, suggestive shouts reached their ears, one or two voices, notably shrill feminine ones, rising above the rest.

‘ Worse, all of you, than Sodom and Gomorrah ! ’ clarioneted Karra ; ‘ brimstone and fire are a sight deal too good for the lot of you.’

‘ There, don’t be buffeted about like a molly-coddle, give ’em a lesson, father ! ’ trumpeted Miss Amma.

‘ Who stole his master’s corn ? ’ viciously piped Mrs. Lyddy.

With these shrill notes and the penetrating squeak of little Smy, were mingled bass notes, threats, and objurations of the able-bodied partisans respectively of Elisha and Jerry.

‘ Who thinks he ’s a’going to be head-man at the Hall ? ’ Jerry was heard to shout.

‘ Who thinks he can mock folks as he please ? ’ was Ebby’s manful retort, presumably accompanied by a blow.

‘ And that there ’s no jail in Ipswich, though the parish constable be abed with the mulligrubs,’ screamed Karra.

Then above the scuffle and confusion, *mêlée* of village Montagues and Capulets, Guelph and Ghibelline, were heard alarming shouts of ‘ Murder ! Help ! ’ with ‘ Seize him ! Give it ’em ! Punch his head ! ’ and the like, half smothering the remonstrances of outsiders and the frightened cries of the children.

Not one whit daunted, hastening past Aimée and her charges, the burly Rector, with lifted bludgeon, forced his way into the thick of the fight.

‘ Churchwarden ! ’ he thundered out—his voice was by far the most powerful in the parish—‘ I call on you in the Queen’s name to do your duty. Blockheads ! *blackguards ! be-sotted idiots ! That ever I should own such a lot

of parishioners ! Hands off ! Desist ! Quiet ! Do you suppose that because the parish constable, by the grace of God, is confined to his bed, the law of the land is to be set at naught ? I'd have you to know then, one and all, churchgoers and ranters—a pretty set all of you—I'd have you to know that the authority of your minister is not confined to the pulpit. Lay about with your cudgel, churchwarden, I take upon myself all responsibility. Home, meek as lambs, every mother's son of you, or it's not the ringleaders alone, I'll warrant you, who'll find their way to the treadmill.'

The unexpected onslaught had immediate effect. Mr. Pascoe's sudden appearance, brandished weapon, and stentorian shouts sobered brawlers, separated combatants, cowed the bullies, and silenced the women. Just as a crowd melts away when overtaken by a hailstorm, so the Largess-spenders now dispersed ; some scuttled in one direction, others slunk away in another, all with the utmost possible dispatch getting beyond reach of the Rector's knobstick and vituperations.

It was the latter that most impressed. In those early days villagers might be meeteners, indifferentists, infidels, so-called, but a certain kind of divinity did hedge a parson. The least

devotional, the most uncompromising Noncon., the openly irreverent, in the person of a clergyman respected much that he would have found it difficult to define. And as yet the pulpit still represented an immense amount of temporal power, up to a certain point, excommunication itself? Could not the parson cut off Christmas beef and coals, charge what he chose for a bricked grave, refuse consecrated burial ground to the unbaptized, even the Table to the disreputable? His theology might be called into question: quite otherwise was it with his weight as a servant of the Crown, a magnate second to none.

A few minutes later and the 'Barley Mow' was barred, shuttered, silent. Never wore Burridge a more peaceful aspect than when Mr. Flindell returned home, once more dreaming happy dreams!

CHAPTER XXI

THE CUTTING OF THE GORDIAN KNOT

BUT a nightmare had yet to be shaken off, dispelled for once and for all, Heaven only knew how ! When next dawn Mr. Flindell was aroused by the ' Come back, come back ' of the guinea-fowls under his lattice, the disturbing, the terrible reality flashed on his mind. Michaelmas Day was at hand, Miss Studd would now learn that her challenge had been accepted, in other words, that when he took possession of the Hall Farm, Elisha followed him. What if she chose to put self-love in her pocket and stay, stay, and stay and stay ?

It hardly discredits the stronger sex, oft-times the reverse, to say that they lack moral courage, as a rule, and detest the necessity of doing or saying an unpleasant thing. Women, on the contrary, even the best principled and the least aggressive, seldom have scruples of this sort. Perhaps it is the maternal instinct, inherited and diluted, that accounts for the possession. Apart from the touching, gracious aspect of motherhood, all must acknowledge a certain hardness pertaining

to such condition. Any woman rightly enough will face fire for her nurslings, hence by a process of evolution the sex has acquired a disregard of consequences, an apparent insensibility to the feelings of others from which men are mainly exempt.

Edward Flindell was an instance in point. Who so able as himself to decide upon the culpability of his horseman? Who could claim any right whatever to dictate to him upon the subject of retaining Elisha Sage?

In a pet Miss Studd chose to throw up her situation. Was he not free to take her at her word?

For all that, the farmer accused himself of ingratitude. In his secret heart he deplored the step she had forced upon him, and the good fortune of which she was author. So long as he lived he should hear of that nocturnal alarm and be twitted about that stolen march upon his neighbours; yet he must admit that, materially speaking, he was greatly her debtor. Come good seasons or bad, peace prices or war prices, corn-rents or fixed rents, a long lease of such an occupation meant prosperity, a pre-eminently enviable lot. And utterly as he had failed to read one woman's heart, blind as he had been to the real reason of Aimée's indignant outburst,

here he could not be mistaken. Maria Studd thus zealously cared for his interests because she wished, nay, intended, to become his wife. Such then was the problem that confronted Edward Flindell on Michaelmas Eve. Several weeks had now passed since Maria's threat, his own decision about Elisha must by this time have reached her ears, yet she gave no sign. And it seemed clear as daylight that her capitulation, if accepted by him, entailed the final farewell to love and romance, to Aimée the Beloved. The future lay in his own hands, all the same he felt helpless.

Daily tasks brought counsel ; whilst scattering corn to his feathered tribe and doling out milk and barley-meal to his pigs, he bethought himself of a way out of the dilemma.

'Just bring round my gig at eleven o'clock,' he said to Smy, who always helped him at feeding time.

The odd little parody of a man eyed his employer with a cunning, animal-like expression. Had parson and master put their heads together about last night's rumpus ? Were the whole lot of Largess-spenders to be sent up to the 'Sizes' ? Smy pondered and pondered, getting out just as they had emptied their pails,

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'I only halloo'd and tugged at the "Mow", master; none can say as how I laid hands on any one or sauced my betters.'

Mr. Flindell's thoughts seemed elsewhere.

'What might you be a'saying?' he asked, absently.

'I was only alludin' to the bobbery at the "Mow",' replied Smy, in a low pleading little whine, 'and mentionin', which I know as none can deny, that I meddled and maked with no one, I only halloo'd and draw'd when asked to.'

The farmer smiled.

'Don't be afraid, Smy, every one knows that you're harmless as a tom-tit,' was the uncomplimentary yet soothing answer.

Mr. Flindell had just before, and most luckily for himself, remembered a Michaelmas sale announced for to-day at Needham Market. He wanted to see Samuel, who was sure to be there, he wanted a drill, above all things, he wanted an excuse for absenting himself. The errand would keep him from home for several hours, most likely till tea-time. And, meanwhile, what easier than to settle matters in writing, leave a letter on the keeping-room sideboard? He had only to enclose a quarter's salary, thank her for past services, and express good wishes for her future. And if a storm should break

over his head on his return, he determined to take refuge in silence. Not a syllable either of apology or self-defence would he utter.

Bold decisions and Michaelmas sales are in themselves cheerful enough, but Mr. Flindell could not shake off misgiving. Over the twelve o'clock dinner at the 'Greyhound' he met this acquaintance and that, and nobody said anything disagreeable to him. Even Samuel refrained from allusions to 'a notable wife,' and the usual, 'look out and you haven't far to look, Ederd, for such-like.' The sale was well attended, and he succeeded in making one or two excellent bargains. With improved spirits he set out for home, but had hardly driven two miles when an appalling vision met his eyes.

From the opposite direction rattled Mr. Cage's light spring-cart, and seated in it—there could not possibly be any mistake—was Maria Studd!

The road here slightly curved upwards, so that Mr. Flindell, with slackened rein, crawled up-hill, for up-hill would seem this just perceptible slope to all Suffolkers. The innkeeper's pony-trap, driven by Smy, came downwards at full speed. Before the farmer had time to collect his thoughts, goer and comer were face to face.

But instead of a fury, a termagant, or at least a shrew, he now saw the placablest, most

exuberating, most hilarious visage imaginable. Under her big straw bonnet, the little woman's cheeks glowed ruddier than ever, her eyes twinkled as he had never seen them twinkle before, her countenance beamed, shone, sparkled with joy and benignity.

'I can't stop a moment, Mr. Flindell,' she said, 'only half a one to tell you that the keys are left with Mrs. Cage, who will see to things till—' here she leaned forward, and turning her back upon Smy, added in a low significant voice, 'till my uncle Josh is dead—or well—the last not being at all likely. He's taken bad and sent for me, and I'm much mistaken if that doesn't mean a sight of money. The old gentleman is said to be worth ten thousand pound, if a penny.'

Mr. Joshua was a bachelor uncle of the numerous Miss Studds, a jobber, as cattle-dealers were called in those parts, and universally held rich. But another reputation, that of being 'a so-called 'gay man', had hitherto damped the hopes of his nieces, and, to their credit be it said, had kept them aloof from a disreputable relative. In the 'eleventh hour, the septuagenarian seemed to remember that blood was stronger than water, and that if a man was at liberty to do as he liked with his

own, it looked respectable and eased the conscience, to befriend his brother's children at the last.

Mr. Flindell stammered out something, it little mattered what : Miss Studd had no ears.

' Drive on, Smy,' she cried, nodding and smiling adieux.

Then, as Smy put the pony to a brisk trot, she turned round, shouting at the top of her voice :

' You'll hear from me come Sunday.'

Gig and pony-cart were soon out of each other's sight, the farmer rousing himself as from a dream ; Christian freed from his burden did not realize a more complete deliverance.

It was clear that Miss 'Ria's eye had not lighted upon his letter. As clearly stood out the fact that she herself had cut the Gordian knot. He was now a free man, at liberty to send cheque and boxes after her, to announce his engagement of a successor—or his marriage !

CHAPTER XXII

CONCLUSION

AUTUMN had come, the beauty and softness of October compensating beforehand for dark bitter days in store. Broad and splendid now were the golden shafts of afternoon sun, mellow the foliage of Drift and pightle. A soft brooding peace succeeded the husbandman's jubilee ; in to-day's landscape there was no exhilaration, no overflow of life, no superabundant fruition ; instead, the quietude of harvested labours, the benison of repose. As a soft purple cloud, myriads of tiny blossoms coloured the fallow, wild thyme, peppermint, and minute heartsease ; these last so many little cheering eyes invoking hope and dreams of merry springtide. Wheat-sowing had not yet begun, nor turnip-pulling, but the interregnum was well filled. There was the clamping of potatoes for winter use, the carting of manure from Ipswich stables, the stacking of haulm, with minor tasks enow alike in farm-yard and field, stock-feeding, turnip and chaff cutting, and the like, whilst from

morning till night the flail echoed on the barn-floor.

Then there was the 'acorning' of the pigs, and weed-burning, both features of this season in the good old farming times. When the beans had been garnered, last crop of the year, came the Largess-spending of the pigs. Wherever, either in meadow or cleared fields, stood oak trees, pigs were turned out for their 'acorning', as the phrase went.

Were, indeed, an euthanasia devised for these creatures, some painless and peaceful falling asleep after playing their homely part in economic history, how happy were they! The sight of acorning pigs would then be one to afford unmitigated satisfaction: the grunter's lot would become a parable. How the harmless, comely things here snorted with delight! How they jostled each other, as much from good fellowship as from gastronomic impatience! How they scrunched the sweet young acorns!

At this season, weed-burning also took place, and a pictorial sight was that of ruddy flames rising above the neutral-tinted landscape, copperish column against the pale blue heavens. Weeds would thus be consumed before breaking up the fallow; brambles and brushwood being pitchforked on to the heap in order to expedite

matters. On this especial afternoon some of Mr. Flindell's men were so employed, himself, in straw hat and shirt sleeves, aiding the business.

A joyous volley of young voices roused him from his reverie.

'Mr. Flindell, Mr. Flindell, do let us come in and pitchfork too!' cried half a dozen little Pascoes at once.

Glancing up he saw the two boys boarding the nearest gate; behind it, with her elder pupils, Aimée the Beloved. It was a half-holiday, and all had been blackberrying by the hedge rows. Without waiting for permission the noisy crew poured in, their governess following slowly.

The farmer's eyes brightened; for a moment he forgot everything but the vision before him; then the radiant look changed to one of intense humility. Aimée, ever mistress of herself, came forward and held out her hand, the children meantime frisking and shrieking round the bonfire like so many imps of mischief, Zeky giving Jack a rake, Esther Ann a pitchfork, Smy piling bramble upon bramble for their delectation. With every fresh flame rose a joyous shout from the children.

'I wanted to see you very much,' Aimée now

said, in frank friendly tones. Younger by far in years, much older by virtue of experience and intuition, this girl read her simple-minded lover through and through; she realized how wide the difference between an Aimée de Richemont and an Edward Flindell, the one living in a world he knew not, the world of books, pianofortes, and cosmopolitan intercourse, the other's interests strictly confined to his farm and immediate surroundings. His sterling qualities she recognized now, above all the compensating all in all, wholly independent of circumstances that bind two human beings together.

'I wished to say how sorry I am for having spoken to you as I did,' she said, calmly meeting his wistful look; 'I own that I was somewhat hasty, but I felt aggrieved with myself and with you as well.'

'You *were* a bit hasty,' he began in a tone of fondest reproach; 'you are a good scholar and genteelly brought up, and I am a plain man. I could not say what I wanted to say, or make you understand.'

Aimée felt her tears rising.

'No one here ever showed me real consideration but yourself,' she said.

'You are too clever, too much above a plain

farmer. I mustn't look so high,' he murmured. Then his voice died away in a sob.

'No, no!' she cried, eagerly. 'Never say that again, it is you who are too good for me, forgive, forgive. I did not understand you, I did not understand myself that day when we drove to market.'

Then in a transport of pity, self-reproach and love, she caught his rough hand in hers and raised it to her lips.

That unexpected, bewildering kiss made things even between them, relieved Aimée's conscience, and gave her lover a voice. It told, as she could never have told in words, what store she set by such devotion as his, and made him realize that the only equivalent to give in return was her own. The poor little gifts and graces, the value of which he so much overrated, her boarding-school accomplishments, her superior knowledge of men and manners, how poor were these by comparison with a heart of gold? Mr. Flindell, for his part, was metamorphosed by that magic kiss, and from trembling, self-abasing suitor, changed to joyous confident bridegroom. He now beamed upon her as if already they belonged to each other, in full assurance that no future misunderstandings were possible. The children were frisking about the burning

weeds, he could safely say the little, yet all in all, that he had to say.

‘Aimée—the Beloved,’ he said, his eyes fixed on her upraised, adorable, half-French, half-English, face! ‘You will always be that, as I told you when we drove to market in harvest time. But I should like you to write home, my dear, afore I speak to the Rector about banns. And be sure and tell your ma and your father, that though he is a Frenchman, they’ll be welcome to the Hall when you are missus there.’

Aimée could only thank him with twin smile and tear. Then they rejoined the weed-burners, talking freely. Already they seemed to have known each other all their lives.

This field had been the scene of their romantic holiday-making in mid-harvest. As the fiery columns now shot upwards, with prickly thorn and noxious weed, many a fair blossom being consumed, did they herein read a parable? Thus, in their own hearts, had passion been consumed, mistrust, recrimination, bitterness giving way to a reign of hope, springtide of love and joy following angry conflict. And the sights and sounds around, the gold and purple eyes of the tiny hearts ^{sease} on the fallow, the twitter of hedgerow robin, the mellow glow of autumn,

hardly to be called sunshine, but even more beautiful—what were all these but so many hints of quiet happiness, suggestions of the peace, joy, and loveliness that still soften and embellish the human lot ?

The first person the farmer met on returning home was Elisha.

‘ You’ve finished stacking the haulm, Master Sage ? ’ he asked, in a voice of suggestive pleasantness.

‘ Yes, Mr. Flindell, and I s’pose I’ll be sent a’carting muck to-morrow.’

‘ That ’s it,’ was the reply. ‘ We shall have wheat-sowing upon us in no time.’

Then he added significantly :

‘ I’ve talked to your wife, as of course she told you.’

‘ Yes, Mr. Flindell, and I thank you kindly.’

There was no exhilaration about Elisha’s look or manner as he said this, nor any display of feeling on the other’s part. Even on solemn occasions, at christening, marriage, or burial, farmer and ploughman never shook hands or indulged in sympathetic little outbursts. To-day, both men were drawn towards each other. Was not Elisha the agent of deliverance, thought the master ? Would not some men have sent him to jail for a lesser offence ?

mused his servant. Yet the two behaved with the stolidity and aloofness of every day.

‘ You’ll have thirteen shillings a week at the Hall, but you must set a good example to the rest,’ was all Mr. Flindell added, and made for the house.

Elisha looked after him with filling eyes and quivering lips.

Oh ! the pathos of the unspoken word, the word so easy to say, the saying of which would set all things right, yet for ever remains unsaid.

Elisha knew it well enough. He had only to unburden himself to Mr. Flindell in a sentence, and the old, contented, happy life were his again.

‘ Master, never mind about the extra shillings a week, let me have Smiler back, and I’d lay down my life for you.’

But it is just the destiny lying in our own hands that remains unfulfilled, and something more than timidity, a sense of the fitness of things held Elisha back. This blank in his existence, this cruel wrench, wore the aspect of retribution, of a stern Scriptural lesson. Had not the son of Sirach said, ‘ Be ashamed of theft in regard of the place where thou sojournest,’ and after all, a theft was a theft, no matter the

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circumstances under which it might be committed.

And what also troubled his mind was the fact of tarnished dignity. Not only as a steward of other men's goods had he sinned, but in his capacity as leader of men, as Lord of the Harvest !

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