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**Under the Spreading  
Chestnut Tree**

**A VOLUME OF  
RURAL LORE & ANECDOTE**

**By**

**WALTER RAYMOND**

**FOLK PRESS LIMITED  
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## Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree

### I. IN PRAISE OF CHESTNUTS

I WILL frankly confess to a predilection for chestnuts. Whether munched plain under the branches of a spreading chestnut tree, or eaten fresh-roasted upon a hearth, surrounded by a merry company, or merely used as stuffing to some more important comestible, a good old oft-repeated yarn does not arouse in me the derision it awakens in a truly superior mind. It comes as an old friend and its familiarity does not offend. With many people it seems to disagree. I just laugh at it.

Almost everybody to-day, of sufficient leisure, collects something old. Pewter-pots, Toby toss-pots, little china dogs and houses, the heads of club-poles and buckles "off shoes," all make appeal to the tenderest emotions of some human heart and move the soul to tears. My fancy has been for chips of ancient lore and old fireside tales—for quaint lingering customs and strange beliefs, such as for the most part passed away amid

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the great social changes which took place in English rural life during the earlier part of the last century. There seems a sufficient reason why, in a collection of old things, one should scarcely be expected to exhibit anything new.

Why a twice-told anecdote should be called a "chestnut" nobody knows. Many origins of the name have been suggested, but Mr. Murray himself is not sure. It appears that the term first came into use in America. In his "Reminiscences of J. L. Toole," Mr. Hatton tells us:

"In America they call an old story a 'chestnut' and several sticklers for novelty carry what they call a 'chestnut bell' which they ring—tinkle, tinkle—whenever in society or elsewhere any gentleman indulges in a twice-told tale. Out West the other day one of these worthies found himself almost for the first time in church though he had a fair acquaintance with the best of all books. In an oratorical application of his text the preacher began to tell the story of Jonah and the Whale, whereupon the new-comer rang his chestnut bell."

But while we are on the origin of terms how many people now remember the true meaning of the word "stickler" quoted above? The digression is pardonable, since the word was once in daily use in association with one of the most popular of ancient rural pastimes. When at fair or market two cudgel-players or back-swordsmen stood up before each other, on either side was a "stickler"—one who watched to see fair-play

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and had power to interfere if any rule of the game was broken. In a sense they corresponded to seconds in a duel. They raised objections, argued fine distinctions and decided debatable points. "A reg'lar stickler," became a common rural phrase to

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describe the over-punctilious, and this application of the word alone remains in literary English.

The most widely accepted explanation of "chestnut" is given on the authority of Mr. Joseph Jefferson, the celebrated "Rip van Winkle." In an old melodrama entitled "The Broken Sword" are two Characters—Captain Xavier, a sort of Baron Munchausen, and Pablo, a comedy part. Between these occurs the following dialogue:

XAVIER: "I entered the woods of Colloway when suddenly from the thick boughs of a cork tree—"

PABLO: "A chestnut, Captain—a chestnut."

XAVIER: "Bah! Booby, I say a cork tree."

PABLO: "A chestnut. I should know as well as you having heard you tell the tale these twenty-seven times."

At a stage dinner a comedian, William Warren, well known in the part of Pablo, interrupted a guest in the telling of a venerable yarn with the quotation—

"A chestnut! I have heard you tell the tale these twenty-seven times."

"And that," says Mr. Jefferson, "is, I truly believe, the origin of the word 'chestnut'."

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The country story was by nature perennial; but to understand the reason for this it is necessary to glance back upon the old social life of the village and the homestead. Rural folk were not without opportunities for the exercising of their tongues. There was the grist-mill, a regular centre of gossip. There was the market in the neighbouring town. "Measter" kept his markets, rain or shine, even more regularly than he kept his church. The smallest holder of land was "Measter" in those days and the good-wife even when she "wore the birches" always spoke of her husband as "my measter." There he learnt what things "vetched" and thus improved his mind, even when he had nothing to sell or to buy. Once on her back his old mare carried him safely home, for there were wonderful old mares before the days of steam. A good friend of my boyhood was invariably lifted in to his saddle in the inn-yard, drank one more grog, as they said "to kip un there," and arrived home full of news. His old mare was so "waywise" and understood him so well that he never suffered an accident, and his "Missus" was always waiting to help him down.

"He's that stiff like vrom his rheumatics," she used to explain. Thus should mishap befall a neighbour he felt entitled to become censorious. He became a moralist and could not for the life of him understand how a man could get so drunk. It filled him with wonder and regret.

"I never couldn't abear to zee a man zo lower hizelf as to get in drink," said he.

No discredit whatever attached to an occasional

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inebriation if not on an unsuitable occasion. Quaint phrases were in use to describe the exact degree of insobriety to which the reveller attained. "Market-fresh" signified no more than a pleasant joviality from the bar-parlour. "Just a bit intosticated" was a little

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on the side of fine talking and might rightly be spoken of one who carried his drink with dignity. "Tookt by the head" and "A bit staggery like in the lags o' un," explain themselves. "Staring drunk" and "surly drunk" rather indicate mental idiosyncrasies than the extent of the potations. Of one who had attained to the highest degree of incapability they said, "The fellar could neither stan', zit, nor lie."

My own particular spreading chestnut tree did not shelter merely a little smithy. Its limbs extended over a whole country far and wide. Wherever there were tongues there were chestnuts. In places populous or solitary—if there were but two, myself and another—there was the chance of a yarn. On the height of Dunkerry among the whortleberries and the ling, I have heard weird stories of "Jack-a-Lanterns" and of "Men a-lost" and on the lowlands around Athelney of floods and drownings and of packs of phantom hounds that hunt in the air of a winter night.

In the days before machinery, when the horse-rake was a rarity and the reaping machine unknown, at haymaking and harvest women worked in the fields with the men. Then, when they all gathered under the shade of some ancient oak in  
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the grassfield, or on the bank under a tall hedgerow by the arable ground, arose a charm of voices, followed by a hush of listening attention to some tale or oftentimes a song. For cider was abundant, and even in my day, a relic of a custom fast passing away, meals were sent out to the field. The working-day was long and had no definite limit when everything had to be done by hand. It lasted from daybreak through noon and "dimmet" to the verge of "darknight."

Judging by the names of them, meals were numerous. To begin the day well the labourer took a "dew bit" to stay his stomach against the morning air. That did not count and there was breakfast of course. There was also "vorenoons," often called "ten o'clocks," and "lebem o'clocks" which must surely have been the same thing. There was also "nommit," a contraction of noon-meat, and "nunch," which was a hunk of bread and cheese taken at an odd time when "a leary belly seemed to outrun the han's o' the clock like," and a great meal at three o'clock. But wherever there was meat and drink it was seasoned with lore and story.

So my chestnut tree spread everywhere over grass and plough and mead. And where, in the silvery dew of summer morning or the long cool shadows of late afternoon, the herd gathered in the corner of the meadow and milkers tucked their heads into the hollows behind the cows' ribs. And where by the garden hatch opening into the village street, "golden chains" bent over the purple "laylock" and the voices and laughter of lads  
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and maidens went on until one after another came the slamming of cottage doors, and the lighting of windows as day melted into the still of night. Also it must have overhung the thatch and gables of the solitary homestead midst its stalls and ricks and stacks, or how could there have been such a wealth of chestnuts around the hearth?

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II. EARLY REMINISCENCE

Now that the years are passing, strange little unimportant incidents of my early life arise out of the depth of oblivion and stand out vividly in my recollection. They are clearer than yesterday and might be trivial if they did not seem so real and human. The joy and the suffering of my childish days mingle in my memory, until I hardly know whether they bring smiles or tears. But I will write them down—yet only such as have to do with rural life and village people. It was in consequence of misfortune that I was born in a town, but my heart was always in the fields and with the folk.

My earliest rural education began in Marston Magna. As an infant in arms dying of typhoid, my mother having just died, I was carried there and nursed back to life. That was before the dawn of memory. By daybreak my grandfather was gone, the farm was given up and my grandmother was living in the school-house, her only remaining daughter having been appointed mistress to the school. My grandmother, deprived of the activities of her life, would sit silent by the fireplace  
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or at the window, and, when I was present, she made me sit on a little oaken footstool by her side and never ceased to stroke my head. My aunt, as fearful shrieks testified, was constantly administering corporal punishment in the school. There I spent the summers of my early boyhood. There my education commenced. My tutors were the village boys. My headmaster, given an occasional penny to look after me, was called Bill. His strong point was natural history.

Bill knew everything about "yalls." He used to take me to a muddy but fascinating millpool beyond the meadow to the east of the church. We carried beansticks, string, worms, and a penny-worth of eel-hooks. Bill caught "yalls" but to me only came bites.

"I wonder, Bill," said I, one day, "where all the 'yalls' do come vrom."

"What, doant ee know? Why they be nothen but hosshair. In the vust gwaine off, 'tis hosshair that do turn into yalls—every hosshair a yall. An' the hosshair that do get in the river do come to yalls, but to try it in a bucket don't act."

It was not for me to doubt the statement of one who could catch them.

We used to go bird's-nesting. Bill had a collection and found nests daily, of great variety and always with eggs. I found only thrushes' nests of the last year and filled with dead leaves. Bill climbed the highest trees to rob the kestrel and the crow and I stood below and quaked, not at all from fear lest he should fall—Bill could not fall—but from imagination of myself clinging to a  
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swaying bough at such a giddy height. At last came a moment of triumph. One morning in a hollow in a bank under a hedgerow I found a robin's nest with five eggs mottled with red lying within, dim in the shadow. A real nest alive and warm all my own—

"Doant ee tich o' 'em. If you do all your vingers'll goo zo crooked as a dog's hinelag. What, doant ee know that:

"The bobby and the cutty-wren

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Be God A'mighty's cock and hen."

and if you do take 'em you be sure to break a lag or a arm avore the year is out or otherwise one o' your near kin'll die so zure as the light. Maybe your grandmother."

The nest might just as well have been filled with dead leaves. I did not take the eggs. My respect for the learning of Bill was too profound to admit of my incurring the risk of such dire penalties.

We used to cut out ships from walnut shells and float them down the brook in the shadow of the church and the poplar trees. We called it racing. We started them side by side in the same eddy. It was an incomprehensible fact that Bill's walnut always outstripped mine.

Near the church-gate under a spreading tree stood the village stocks. We used to play at constable and rogue. I was always rogue and he would put me in and run away. It seemed unkind but it was in the game. Then I discovered that by not lacing up my boot it became possible for me to  
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slip my foot out and so the tears dried up. This outwitting of Bill filled me with secret pride. He did not detect this trick, but the game no longer pleased him, and was given up.

But always in my little breast lurked a secret humiliation, that troubled me deeply whenever my thoughts dwelt upon it. The illness had left me a weak and nervous child and I was afraid of cows. A uncontrollable terror kept me of an afternoon within the little schoolhouse garden, watching in safety above the corner where the roads met, until the milky sweet-smelling herds passed slowly by on their way to the stalls and after an interval slowly back. Then for that day the load was removed.

Bill was now old enough to drive stock and proud of it. One summer day towards evening Bill with his billycock trimmed up with honeysuckles came round the corner at the tail of the hindermost of his father's beasts.

"Come on down," he shouted up at me.

"No," said I.

"Why not?"

"I don't want to," I replied.

"You be afeared o' the cows."

"No I beant."

"You be I tell ee."

"I beant then."

"You be a little coward I tell ee. Come on down."

"I beant then."

"You be a little liar. You be afeared o' cows—

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afeared o' cows"—and he pointed at me with two fingers.

Accused and self-accused I leapt at an answer. "I beant then—not cows. But one o' the cows is a bull."

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Smarting under the taunt of lying I shouted it at him in a fury, for one of the cows was a bull.

Maidens popped out of cottage doorways and ran laughing into the village street. Children gathered on the opposite causeway and jeered. My aunt came out. The children vanished. I was marched indoors.

A universal curiosity, a desire for the identification of that cow, spread over the whole parish. Everybody inquired for her in the most friendly way, and asked whether she was a good milker. A kind old farmer with cheeks as plump and red as a peony and smiling from every wrinkle around his eyes, lured me by the gift of a couple of early stubbards. He bent down and asked me in a whisper:

"Now what colour wur thik cow o' yourn sonnie, a urd cow or a spark'ed?" The apple so juicy, so saturated with summer, turned to dust and refused to be swallowed. It would not go down. I ran away into the field and in the passage between two hayricks hid myself from the injustice of all the world. One of the cows *was* a bull.

I avoided Bill. He was now at work and looked down upon me. I avoided mankind, yet suffered a longing for companionship. One morning,  
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without understanding of what he might be doing, I saw the village sexton in the churchyard digging a grave. He was not frivolous like the rest of the parish. He was not insulting or unkind. He just went on pitching out shovelful after shovelful of earth. After a while he climbed out and stood by my side. He was a spare, wiry, grizzly, little man with a short whisker on each cheek and of a solemn respectability. By trade he was a carpenter and made coffins.

"There!" said he to himself, "that's a beauidivul dry grave—and to goo to one out o' the parish. Brought to Marston at her own wish. Never wadden no good to we. Never didn' spend nothen here, not so much as the price o' her coffin—all we've agot vrom she is her carpsse. That's the beauidivulest, dryest grave in all chich-yard."

Then he looked up at me: "In my mind like I 'loted thik grave to your granny. Your granny have a-bin auvis greatly respected."

There was such-evident friendliness in his intention that I attached myself to him and took to watching him at work in his shop. Nobody objected. The parish spoke of him as a man never known to let a "word o' trumpery pass the lips o' un." And I loved to see him ring the three bells for church. He stood on one leg with the other foot in a sort of stirrup he had knotted in a bell-rope. Then, with a rope in each hand, he set to work—Ding, dang, dong—Ding, dang, dong, with great precision and evenness. To that music we marched past the stocks, through the porch,  
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and up the alley to our pew. My admiration for the bell-ringing determined me to grow up to be a man and a sexton. But the summer visit came to an end. It was deemed inadvisable for me to stay at Marston any more. They said I was learning to talk so badly, and sent me to school.  
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III. DIALECT AND RURAL SPEECH

To the majority of observers of village folk and their "manner o' spaken" this title may probably appear to be a repetition of terms. In my opinion this is not so. True dialect in only a portion of the speech of dialect speakers, and many of the most amusing utterances of country folk cannot strictly be brought under that term. The real thing is archaic, and has come down "by word o' mouth" with little or no change from our Saxon ancestors. Humble rural people read very little. Many of them could not read at all. True dialect therefore is a direct inheritance and the rest an accretion, in the main leaving his every-day speech little altered.

There is an interesting instance in connection with the number seven. Seven is "zebem." Seventeen is "zebemteen." Twenty-seven is "zebem an' twenty," or probably—and this is where the point comes in—"a score an' zebem." Yet seventy with a true old dialect speaker was not "zebemty," but "seventy," though seventy-seven would be "seventy-zebem."

The origin and history of this carries us back to primitive life and is interesting.

The earliest form of counting was by aid of the  
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fingers—a method even to-day not altogether abandoned. This led to enumeration by tens. But some races carried their simple arithmetic further and continued to count upon their toes, thus arriving at twenty before recommencement. The Teutons stopped at ten. The Celts went on to twenty and a relic remains in the French "quatre-vingt." When the defeated Britons were brought into servitude many of their methods as to the work of everyday life remained unaltered, and the Saxons gave a name to the British twenty and called it a "score" because a notch was cut to keep count of the twenties. In homely village matters the custom remains until to-day. Garden plants are bought and sold and the weight of the fat pig is still estimated by the score. "The days of our years are threescore years and ten, and if by reason of strength they be fourscore—" Gradually the other form asserted itself, and seventy was accepted as it came and pronounced with a sharp "S."

The introduction of long words of Latin origin to the dialect contributes largely to rural speech. It is often very amusing. Mr. Elworthy, probably in that wonderful Word Book which abounds in characteristic phrases to illustrate the exact use of dialect words, gives an instance. The sexton of Withypool expressed his opinion upon concentrated chemical manures something after this manner:

"I doant hold not wi' these here new-vangled consecrated manures not vur the getten o' crops. Gie I good wold rotted dung."

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But to be sure the wonderful linguistic performances of Mrs. Malaprop are not confined to any one section of society. There is the good old chestnut of the provincial Mayor. His Worship, about to travel by train, having annexed a corner seat in a compartment, being fond of literature visited the bookstall. Although he left his hat to

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assert possession a lady had removed it and occupied the seat—recognising her error she apologised.

"I fear I have deprived you of your seat."

"No depravity, Madam," bowed his Worship.

An elderly gardener who worked for my father when I was a youth expressed himself in the richest dialect. His brain was a mine of wealth. I do not think he could read and it is certain that his writing was illegible; but, for all that, he was a scholar and did not sign with a criss-cross. His name was Thomas. We never called him otherwise nor shall I. Descendants are plentiful in the locality where Thomas Bourished, and they may be inclined to resent anything that may look like derision of their forebear. But laughter is not always derision; and I can only write of these "wold voke agone," the friends of my youth, with love from the bottom of my heart.

Yet Thomas was not altogether lovable. He was the most cantankerous, cross-grained, contrary mule of a gardener that ever an owner of plots and paths could wish for. He was short and thick, that is to say "a bunchey liddle feller," with cheeks slightly roseate from alcohol. His stiff, stubby, iron-grey whiskers and beard were trimmed [24]

short and took the semi-circular shape of the moon in her first quarter. Alas! They were lacking in her sweet perfection of outline. How many times and with what supreme delight have I watched Thomas clipping himself with the garden shears at intervals of rest when trimming the edges of the lawn. He had a way also, when lost in thought, of raising his hand to force the beard into his mouth so that he might chew off the ends of the bristles. An inordinately long upper lip, however, he carried with him to the barber on every Saturday night.

But a man is not to be judged by his personal appearance. The mind of Thomas was a store-house of lore—his conversation a running brook bemoaning the passing away of ancient customs—his gift of picturesque story-telling most rich and precious. Any more than usually remarkable narrative invariably closed with a defiant—"An' that I have a-zeed wi' my own eyes. Zo there!" But the tale of Thomas must await a later chapter.

He had a way of talking over his work. At bedding out for instance:

"Mus' pag in the line 'zackly straight."

That done he came with his dibble, his basket of plants and his measuring wand.

"Mus' mind they be all alike apart else do gie a sart or a zlumicky one-eyed look to the job."

Then when the dibbling was done and a plant laid ready at each hole, he stood up and surveyed his work with admiration.

"Now, can goo down drough an' puddle 'em in in rotashun."

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He seemed very proud of that word "rota-shun," and used it correctly. Whence he got it and how he arrived at the pronunciation is doubtful. I can only guess that he picked it up from some friend who read it in print and pronounced it after his usual manner as words ending in 'ation,' none of which can be true dialect.

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One day in the midsummer holidays he mislaid his line. I had recently made acquaintance with Euclid and proposed a scheme of measurement by which everything was to work out right. Thomas resented all new-vangled ways.

"That wouldn't never work," said he, with scorn.

"But it would, Thomas."

"No tooden, never cooden. Noo man 'pon earth cooden never put 'em in not in rotashun not thik fashion."

It became clear that "in a straight row" was what Thomas meant by "in rotashun."

The real heart of the dialect is in its forms. They are all archaic and were gradually eliminated in literary English but retained by rural folk upon whom literature exercised no influence. The redundant negative of which Thomas has just afforded us examples has come down without change from a remote past. Even in Chaucer may be found an abundance of double negatives and in spite of the schoolmaster a richness as to negation is still common in all West-country villages.

There is a quaintness inherent with the dialect which makes us laugh even though the foundation of our mirth defies analysis. Inspired by my  
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description of Somerset a lady artist determined to summer among the rhines and withy-beds of the level moors. I arranged hospitality for her in a small homestead in the neighbourhood of Athelney. She revelled in the glory of the sunsets and was charmed with the subtle colour of reflections of willows leaning over still water. After her departure I inquired of her host as to how she got on and what she did. A saxon giant, fair-haired and with blue eyes, he took time to think, and answered:

"She did bide—an' quat—an' skitchy."

A picture arises before my imagination—a dainty little lady, grey-haired, sweet and gentle, before an easel a-quat upon a little camp stool. The giant, bovine, open-eyed, and deeply contemplative, two fields away. Then I laugh and hope the laughter may prove infectious.

Yet why laugh? It would be difficult to say.

"Bide" is an aristocratic word of ancient descent and Scriptural. "Quat" is eminently respectable and beautifully descriptive. "Skitchy" contains an infinitive inflection used with unerring discrimination. It denotes an intransitive continuity or constant repetition. Thus a tailor "do tailory," a butcher "do butchery."

And if you would ask "Where be the maidens?"

"Why, the maidens be but out in whoam-fiel to milkey."

It cannot be used transitively. It is imperative to say to milk the cows.

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#### IV. SOME LORE OF THE ORCHARD

IN the consideration of all rural adages, verses, saws, and sayings deserving to be classified as lore, it must be remembered that they are of ancient origin and were established long before the change in the almanac, which took place in 1751, and as to solar time placed the months earlier by eleven days. Also many rhymes which appear to

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be mere makeshifts become perfect when one of the words is pronounced as in Early English or as in our familiar dialect. These remarks apply to the following verses:

"When apple-trees blossom in March,  
For your barrels you need not sarch;  
When apple-trees bloom in April,  
Some of them you may chance to fill;  
But when they blossom in May  
You may drink cider night and day."

The Ides of March are past, but brought us only cold and wet and many distempers. The stormcock built its ill-upholstered nest in the fork of a naked tree, upon which the only sign of life was a bough of mistletoe, the seed of which perchance he sowed himself, cleaning his beak in a chink of the wrinkled bark.

April came and went. Still the glades were dark  
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as winter, but for here and there, in some sheltered corner, an ancient "Marriage-maker," as it used to be called—whether as a nickname or in its own right can no longer be remembered—or an early "Stubbard," hollow and leaning on a prop amid trees young and erect, might be bold enough to coyly open their blushing petals in welcome of the spring.

But now in May the whole orchard had put on a bridal veil, light and diaphanous, through which the sunshine of mid-day can scarcely distinguish the chaffinch's nest, so skilfully built to match the lichen upon the branch on which it rests. The moonbeams peep between the blowth to watch the petals, shaken by the night wind, dropping noiselessly as snowflakes upon the grass. Then in the dew after a hot day the orchard is filled with an unsuspected fragrance delicate and sweet. And to our delight in this transcendent beauty our rhyme assures us in the expectation of carousals diurnal and nocturnal during the year to come.

The lore of the orchard begins before the new year.

Just as the bride upon whom the sun shines is said to be happy, so when the old folk saw the sunshine glistening on orchard twigs and brightening the ground below, they thought it a promise of good luck. They smiled upon each other as they wished "A Merry Christmas," and added, "The zun do sheen zo bright as gold 'pon the archet, zoo we be to have a good crop o' apples to year." But if Christmas Day was foggy or dim with rain or shortened as to daylight by reason of  
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impenetrable cloud, they made merry around a roaring fire and passed round the cup. If one of the company should happen to predict:

"Anybody can't look to make much cider to year. The zun hant zo much as a-squined at us out o' winder to-day," another would make reply:

"Then han' roun' an' all be gratevul vor what we've a got."

With so beautiful a sentiment the cup travelled round.

*The Salamanca Corpus: Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree  
(1928)*

Or there might be a sceptic present, who shock his head and did not "take much count o' these wold rozims." To his mind they did turn out wrong so often as right. But there was always somebody to set him straight.

" 'Tis only a-zed if the zun do zmile 'pon the archet 'pon Kirsmas Day, you mid look vor'ard to a good crop—but tis not a'zed 'If the zun is a-shut out you wont ha' none '."

So excellent an argument may with one exception be received with approval. Surely this saying can have nothing to do with Christmas. It is easy to imagine that worshippers of the sun may have considered sunshine propitious on the first day after the winter solstice!

In the West of England the great festival of the orchard took place on old Christmas eve. It was an instance of true folklore, even though its origin cannot be affirmed with certainty—a survival from the pagan worship of trees continued after its real meaning was lost sight of. It has been said to be a relic of the heathen sacrifice to Pomona, a  
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Roman goddess who presided over gardens and fruit trees, but this may possibly be a mere guess based on the name of the goddess. At any rate, the verses shouted are an invocation to the tree and libations were poured to the tree spirit. The avowed intention, even in Somerset orchards within the memory of people still living, was to secure a good crop of fruit and many believed and affirmed that the result would follow the ceremony. None, in my time, held that a bad season for apples must result from the neglect of it.

The great ashen faggot had burnt to embers and from the carousals which followed the bursting of each bind, the farmer carrying cider-sodden toasts and followed by the whole company, men and women, proceeded to the orchard. They marched straight to the oldest tree and placed the toast in the fork. Then they shouted and their voices could be heard far beyond the village:

"Apple-tree, apple-tree.  
I do wassail thee  
To blow and to bear  
Cap-vulls an' hat-vulls an dree-bushel-bag-fulls,  
An' my pockets vull, too."

They drank, they cheered, and those that had them fired off guns. It was of importance to be noisy and other parties of worshippers might be heard from other farms in the parish. They poured cider upon the tree. It was considered essential that the cider should be new. Then confident of an apple crop of surpassing magnitude they made haste home out of the winter wind to the warmth of their fireside.

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May 19th, St. Dunstan's Day, has been considered most dangerous for the apple crop. There is a legend that St. Dunstan went into business as a brewer, and that the devil entered into an arrangement with him to blight the apples and thus make cider scarce. The orchard was considered safe when the fatal day was passed without mishap

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from frost and without that heavy atmosphere which the old folk believed did not betoken rain but blight. But such a tale can by no means be classified as lore. It was believed and watched as folks took note of St. Swithin's Day and the forty days to follow, and continued to cling to the story even after they had seen it contradicted by the fact. It is of close kin to a story common in Devon, that on Culmstock Fair-day, May 21st, there is a fight between the devil and the malster, to decide for the coming year whether it was to be cider or beer, and that:

"Till Culmstock fair be come and gone  
There mid be apples, there mid be none."

The moon, by which the farmer of old sowed and planted, killed his pigs and regulated so many of his proceedings, has provided no especial lore for the orchard.

True it used to be said that apples gathered during the waning of the moon would not keep, but were sure to "shrump up." But something of the sort was to be predicted about any other fruit. The best time to harvest fruit was immediately after the moon was at its full and before the  
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waning had gone far enough to exert an evil influence.

"Gather your fruit the full roon past;  
For why? They will the longer last."

And when the apples were off the trees and lay on the grass in heaps, red and yellow, ready to be hauled to the cider press, the sprinkling that remained upon the branches belonged to the pixies. They were the pixies' hoard. When the crop was all carried away and the falling of the leaf exposed this remnant glistening upon the black twigs, the humbler folk came and carried poles "a-pixy-wordin," knocked the fruit down and carried it off on the same principle that the leasers gleaned in the wheaten stubble as soon as the last sheaf had been hauled to mow.

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## V. THE HEARTH

THE hearth was the very heart of the dwelling.

The "Chimbley," as wide as a small room at the base, was built out from the gable end of the house kitchen. What a dignity it has—this old-world projecting chimney! At intervals, with slanting lines, it narrows on its way to the roof, attains a decent square, and mounts above the ridge tall enough to carry smoke and sparks out of the way of the thatch. The kitchen was generally called the "house." The word remained from early days in the evolution of the homestead, when there was but one room on the ground floor. Upstairs bedrooms were always "chimmers," and in contradistinction the ground floor, when mentioned in a chimmer, was always "down-house."

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All the domestic and social life of the folk gathered around the hearth, other activities belonging to out-of-doors or to the wash-house, the dairy-house, or any other house for work. When work was done, and that was early for the men during winter with its short days, they came in and sat down around the hearth, with its roaring fire of logs blazing upon the iron dogs hammered out by some village smith now long "agone." There were "dogs" and "han'-dogs"

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—the latter greatly the larger and often very ornamented and of graceful design. They did not come into daily use, but stood outside their lesser relatives, and held the spit on occasions when roasting was going forward. And above was the "Jack," a mechanical contrivance with weight and chain, more reliable than the living "turn spit" of earlier days, which was not always to be found when wanted.

The hearth was very spacious, and there was room and a place for all. I have seen four generations around the fire of a Christmas hearth. The "wold gramfer," in a chintz-covered chair with high back and sides to shelter him from draughts, with hands resting on his knobbed stick the better to lean forward and listen to the talk and tales—an' round' an' about measter and missus and all the rest o' 'em, wi' the married daughter in the corner of the settle wi' her little three-year-old a-quat pon the oaken vootstool by her skirt. And built into the chimney on either side was a seat dedicated to lovers, and called the "courten-corner." From that position the romantic could look up and see the stars. The maid and the lad could cuddle in a quiet way, until some humorist would innocently heap on more logs and scorch them out. There was much practical joking in those days, not always kind, but it led to mirth in which the victims joined. And love was a never-failing source of humour. A great delight was to match up simple middle-aged souls shy of matrimony, and then give them no peace. But that is a tale to come.

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When the folk were alone, after supper they blew out the candles and sat by the firelight. The men smoked their churchwarden pipes, and the cup travelled from hand to hand. Their talk was of the farm and the village, but very early they went to roost. There was a frugality as to candles. In many farms the missus and the maidens boiled the tallow and dipped the wick, so no encouragement was given to the "can'le-waster." In summer they went to bed just about "dimmut," when the day was getting "dumpsy." For work began very early in the morning. Then, of course, candles were a necessity. So the lighting of candles, "can'leteenen," referred to the evening, but the putting out of candles, "can'le-douten," was the hour of a winter morning when the daylight became sufficient.... So "vrom can'le-douten to can'le-teenen" was a common form of saying from morning to night. Sometimes neighbours dropped in to find "open-house" and homely hospitality. They were not treated as company, and their presence rarely made a late night. The glory of the hearth was the unexpected guest.

There was a hearth, one of the oldest and most interesting in Somerset, at which my youth found always the warmest of welcomes. It was an ancient abbey reduced to a homestead. It has all been mine—the armchair, the settle, and the courten-corner. It was no more than a dozen miles from my home, and I had frequent business in the neigh-

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bourhood. They called me "a spry young fellar" in those days, and to walk of a clear night was  
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a delight to me. But it was most difficult to get away in good time.

We were such a merry party. There were the old folk and the unmarried sons and daughters, all grown up. The men did not sing, but the maidens did; old songs, good and quaint, that afterwards passed out of fashion, but have recently been rescued from the oblivion that threatened them. The men told tales, or if they could do nothing else proposed a sentiment, and so the cup went round.

I remember my first visit to that hospitable hearth. Towards evening, of a warm spring day, with a clear blue sky and a hint of frost in it, I stood looking at the ancient building. Farmer John Buck was coming homeward down the road. He was tall and stout, even corpulent, of a fresh complexion and a rosy jollity beamed from his face. He walked slowly, grasping a staff almost as tall as himself, and at his heels was a shaggy grey cow-dog. We had met on the road once before, and he stopped to pass the time of day.

"Come in. Come in," he cried cordially.

So in I went. The evening meal was on the table and he was the last to come.

"Zit down. Zit down. I wunt show ee roun' not till you've a-had some victuals. That's Missis Buck. That's Mary, that's Tilly, an' that's Jane. That's my sons John and Harry. Now you do know all."

It was impossible to resist the exuberant boisterousness of his welcome. All was natural  
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and frank without a trace of affectation, and the stranger became a friend at once. Before the meal was finished we were as merry together as if we had known each other for years.

"I shan't show ee roun' to-night. 'Tis too dark. You come in again the vust time you be a-passen. Don't trouble to knock. You ope the door and walk in. If you don't zee nobody, you hollar. One o' the maidens'll vind ee—quick enough. Come on. Zit round."

So we were round the hearth and very soon the cup was brought. It was one of the largest. It seems to me now that it must have held a gallon. A gallon of cider, hot and sugared, and spiced with a liberal addition of gin "jus' to zoffen the cider, like." The table cleared, the maidens came. We all drank—or, perhaps the maidens only kissed the cup—and by the time it was empty another supply was ready and steaming. At the bottom of the cup was the image of a frog staring up out of black beads of eyes, and we laughed at it every time. There was something in gin and cider hot and spiced that encouraged laughter, but it was a potent drink and your hosts always hoped to see you go away staggering. I felt the potency creeping into my head and made a show of taking a deep, deep, draught for nothing. But Farmer John Buck detected me.

"He do glutchy, but he doan't drink noan," laughed he.

A young man came in. He contributed nothing to the conversation, but sat with his eyes fixed upon Tilly. Then Jacob Toop, o' Buckstone, a miller



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who had ridden down from up the country to talk about wheat, turned up. His little red nag would "goo like a house a-vire."

Time was passing.

"I must be getting on," said I.

"Bide whur you be. You can't go eet. Miller Toop is jus' a-gwain to oil up vust an' then tell ee how he saw the colt-pixy."

Once more they filled the cup. The miller oiled up in a preliminary manner and passed it on.

There came a hush around the hearth; for although the tale had been "told up" and listened to hundreds, and may-be thousands of times, it was welcomed with even greater eagerness than when it was quite new.

The old song came down by tradition. The tale was usually some personal experience of the teller, or had come to him from his father or his uncle as something passing naturally to the next of kin. It did not get stale by age, because it possessed character, and there was generally both characterisation and a great deal of colour in the telling. Before the days of education, cheap newspapers, and book learning, nearly every man in the village was a character. His mind grew out of his own vitality and took the shape natural to it. His manners, being a reflection of his mind, were often very original. Men have lost much individuality by being turned out of the same educational mould.

"Now then, tell up, Miller Toop, how you was a-led away by the colt-pixy."

Miller Toop sat up, filled his pipe with great

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deliberation, and indulged in a final lubrication. He was a noted teller of tales and possessed gifts beyond his neighbours. His oratory had this essential quality. It raised images before the imagination clear and vivid. His words became pictures and were accompanied by imitative gestures. If Jacob Toop described a proud neighbour riding down the village street on a high stepping nag, he held back his shoulders and slapped his knee-breeches with his flat palms so that you both saw the rider and heard the beating of hoofs on the high road. Moreover, his narrative was so full of facts, well known to every parishioner, that it was not possible to doubt the remaining statements which otherwise might not have been convincing.

Many have been pixy-led, none but Jacob in that neighbourhood could claim to have been led by a colt-pixy.

"I had a-bin over to Job Simpson's over to Southwood about a zow he had to zell. Job mus' a-bin dead—oh!—up vifteen year. You can call the man to mind, farmer, a bow-lagged man lived to up dree score that did turn his vit in most turble as he did walk."

"He did so," corroborated farmer John Buck.

"He had a breed o' white pigs did grow a-most zo big as dunkeys, an' I bought a zow an' comed away. Job were a wonderful zober man a'most a taytotal."

"He wur," agreed farmer John Buck.

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"Southwood wur not the house that a man did come vrom an' zee double."  
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"It wur not. As you went in zo you comed out."

"Aye well! Twur o' a Thursday. I 'ould swear twur a Thursday, vor the bells wur a-ringin as I comed down drough—an' twur early December vor the ringers wur a-practisen for Kirsmas—an' twur nine o' the clock—not that I yeard un strike min'—but when I had a-passed an' got anighst the carner the ringers was a-hollaran 'good night' as they parted at the chichyard gate.

"Aye well! The moon wur a'most at the vull an' twur light as day. Why you could ha' zeed to ha' picked up a vowerpenny piece 'pon the dry road, vor there hadn' a-bin no rain vor more an' a wick and there wurden no mud. But when I comed down overright the poun' there at the vorches where the roads do part, I yeard a bit of a whicker like. 'Twadden a terr'ble loud whicker an' eet 'twur most wondervul clear like. An' eet 'twadden a whicker if you do understan' me—an' eet 'twur—if you can take my meanen. You sart o' zaid to yourzef, "Did I hear a whicker?" An' you was in doubt, but yet you did act like as if you knowed you did.

"So I went and looked in the poun' but there werden nothen there. An' the door were ope. An' to be zure Hayward must ha' locked un if he had a-put zome stray hoss in. Besides I could see there wurden, vor you could read every letter 'pon the vingerpost where the roads do part. I stopped a minute 'an looked all ways an' listened. There wur no win'. The volk wur a-bed. There wur no stock out an' I tell ee the earth wur zo still as a

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grave. Zo I wur jus' a-gwaine on, but lauk! I hadn' a-went no more 'an ten steps an' thur were thick whicker again.

"Then down t'other road—not my road, don't ee think it wur a hoss or a zomethen a-stood in the middle a-looken me well in the faece like an' the zide where the moonlight did vall on the ribs o' un had a chestnut look like. Zaid I to myzef, Massy 'pon us! Tis my chestnut colt! Zome fool mus' ha' let un out. An' he've a-trotted vull two mile or more all up here. Zo I crope on very quiet like zo as to get tother zide o' un an' I called un by name, 'Paddy, Paddy!' an' reached out my han'. 'That's what tis,' zaid I, 'vor he do know me an' know his name, too.'

"But he wouldn' let me tich o' un. The more I did creepy to un an' talk to un the more he did backy—an' backy—an' backy. An' then he turned tail an' went off, an' I couldn' do nothen but cuss. An' then I lost sight o' un altogether. But 'twur my chestnut colt right 'nough.

"Aye well! Tis quiet do do it a-handlen stock. I stopped cussen and got on the wayside so as not to make no zoun of a vootvall. Vor I couldn' zee thik colt. An' I didn' hear no whicker.

"Aye well! You do all o' ee know the drove there on the right han' zide. The hedges be zo thick dont never let no light in. Zummer an' winter tis knee-deep in mud 'ithout you do have a month o' vrosts. Mus' suppowse did lead zomewhere zome time but dont

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lead nowhere in particular these days. An' sure nough, there in the mouth o' it in a manner o' spaken wur my chestnut  
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colt. He wur a white-faced colt, an' I could ha' swore to un out o' ten thousand, an' he comed to the edge o' the road like an' looked at me wi' the moon a-shinen vull 'pon the face o' un. An' when I put out my han', he did backy—an' backy—an' backy. An' then he went off up the drove and stopped an' stared at me.

"Aye well! I went on ader un zo well 's I could. An' now I wur stogged—and then I did zink in knee-deep—an' once I wur in up to the york o' me. An' when I wur stogged he did whicker an' bide an' stare. An' when I did get out thik colt did trot off may be a gunshot or so an' then wait vor me. I did panky an' I did zweat. Vor I did carr' about a ton o' mud 'pon me. An' zez I to myself like, 'I shan't never get upzides wi' thik colt, for I'll be dalled if we shan't both o' us get to the land's end vust.'

"Then I lost un altogether. An' be blowed if he hadn' a-voun' a gap in hedge, an' up an' drough, an' when I comed if he hadn' a turned an' wurden a-stood 'pon top a-lookin at me.

"Aye well! I hunt thik colt about a two-acre grass-groun' up two hours. An' then be dalled! if he wurden out drough gap again. An' I zez to myself like, 'if he do but turn down-along we shall be right. But he didden. He bide a-waiten vor me an' when I comed he turned up-along. But 'twurden zo very vur then avore we comed out on a rough groun' a-covered wi' vuz. An' there he wur up to the same games. But we comed to a linney, or zome sart of a shed like, an' in the end I zeed un go in. I zeed un zo clear as 1 do zee this  
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han' avore my face. An' I zez to myself like, 'I got my gennelman now.' I crope in quiet like. There wur holes in the roof an' the moonlight vell drough 'pon a bit ov a wold manger an' a han'rul o' musty hay. But there wur no colt. Thik colt wur gone. He mus' ha' changed hiszalf back to a pixy an' gone undergroun'—or else climmed drough the roof.

"Zo then I knowed mus' ha' bin a colt-pixy. An' zo proved sure 'nough. Vor my colt hadn' never a-bin astray an' not a sign o' mud 'pon hoof nor fetlock. An' by the same token I broke un in an' drove un eighteen year."

A quietude fell on the company when this tale came to its end. Farmer John Buck reflected that there must be things "folk didden know nothen at all about."

I rose to shake hands and go.

"No. Zit still I'll put to the mare an' drave ee on a mile or two—ader I've a-talked to miller about the wheat."

"I really must be getting on."

"I'll drave ee to Stapleton Cross. Zit down I tell ee. I'll drave ee to Tingall. Zit down. Now I tell ee, now. Zit down a hour an' I'll drave ee all the way to Yeovil Town. Zo there!"

It was a fair offer not to be refused, and I sat on. They argued and higgled about wheat and the grandfather clock ticked and struck more than once. When at last Miller

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Toop got up to go, as we shook hands he said, "There be a plenty o' trout in my millstream if you be a visher and should be a-passen our way."  
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"You zit here," said farmer John Buck, "till you do hear I hollar."  
He did not hollar but at last he came.

"I've a thought better o' it. I never didden zay I'd drave ee to-night. I'll drave ee to-morrow vust thing."

"But I've got no things."

"Things! The maidens 'ull vind ee some things."

When at last we went up to roost everything was ready for me. The sheets smelt of lavender, but there was an apple-pie bed. On the pillow lay a most beautiful article of night attire, frilled, embroidered and embellished beyond the dreams of a mere man. There was a titter outside my door. But when I opened it the passage was empty.

I never could learn which of the maidens had provided herself and lent me such a truly bridal smock.  
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VI. THE "MILLER TOOP AT HOME"

THE invitation of Miller Toop had been too cordial and certainly too good to neglect. The man who has been led away by a colt-pixy is beyond all others worthy of attention and respect. What adventures, marvellous and untold, may not be contained in the storehouse of his experience, awaiting only some suitable opportunity, some recipient ear, to recount themselves.

Moreover to an angler, young and keen, there is a fascination in the unexplored banks of a running stream. The new acquaintance may become a companion, may grow into the friend in the end, a lover even and reveal unspoken truths and whispered confidences. For no two rivers are alike. No two brooks babble the same tale, have the same gleam in the sunshine, or are the same colour after rain. So I waited for the season when April showers bring mirth to running waters and started on an expedition to Buckstone Mill.

A journey of half an hour by train—a walk of two miles between hedgerows bursting into fresh green leaf and musical with the singing of nesting birds—a shower and sunshine, and a rainbow overhead—then a stone bridge over a gravel  
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stream, a mile of river-bank, and I was at Buckstone Mill. A little water was running over the weir, but the mill wheel was humming like a swarm of bees. The surface of the pool below the weir was braken into a ripple. Below the pool for some twenty yards or so the water passed between high banks strengthened with stone walls, then glistening like silver hurried in a straight line to join the main river. Upon this back-stream was an angler with his line hitched in a willow-tree. He was impatient. I could see wicked words rushing from his lips like sparks from a chimney on fire. Then he broke off in a temper. The sight inspired to greater haste.

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The millyard was noisy with voices and activity. A wagon with two horses was coming out of the gate, and Miller Toop, in shirt sleeves, watching it off, shouted instructions to the carter. His delight at seeing me was exuberant.

"Come in. Come in. You must be thirsty. What'll ee take? Glad to see ee. Which way did ee come? You'll have a good day. Come in. Come in."

We were hurrying towards the door, he leading the way, when he suddenly turned and asked with some eagerness:

"Did ee zee any vishers?"

"There's one at the back stream now as I passed."

He forgot our errand of hospitality and headed for the mill. "Come on. Come on," cried he. "He hant a-bin up to house. Come on, an' I'll show ee somethen."

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We entered the millhouse where the flour was running like a liquid from shoot to sack. "Come on," cried he, and I hurried after him up the stairs to the top of the mill. From a little window we could look down upon the millpool. The walled passage, the backwater and the fields lay before us like a map. The angler was standing some ten yards back in a meadow, his rod spiked in the ground, leisurely putting on a fresh cast.

"I don't vish not my own zelf," said the miller, "but I never zaid no to a visher in all my life, not if he comed to house an' asked. Thik fellar han't a-bin up to house. Come on. Come on. There's a plenty o' time."

He led the way to the weir. He stood beside the hatch and chuckled. He had perpetrated this joke so many times that his proceedings were carried out with a most experienced precision. He counted fifty, not too fast, so that the intruder might be within the walled alley and unable to climb out, raised a floodgate for two minutes by the watch and shut it down again. Fully satisfied, he led the way back into his mill. He had a humorous way of recounting this exploit without a smile. It always finished:

"I just cast an eye out o' winder like, but—eh!—he werden in zight."

We went up to cast an eye out o' window.

"Anybody couldn' expect to zee much of un vor up ten minutes. Do sart o' take 'em by surprise like, an' the stones be that slippery, a man is sart o' tookt off his lags like. There's a place made down below vor the cows to drink an'

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a rail. Sure as the light they do all go an' zit upon thik rail. Nine out o' ten o' 'em do zit thoughtvul like 'pon thik rail. We wunt hurry the man. Mus' gie un time to catch his breath like. Come into house. What'll you take."

We refreshed ourselves and then went down to the meadow. The prediction was verified, a dripping man was sitting on the rail. His hat was on the ground. He had taken off his coat and was trying to wring it out. He had taken off his waders, and hung them from the posts to drain. He had taken off his collar and his necktie because it was so sappy round his throat. His shirt was clinging to him like another skin.

"Hullo there! Hullo! Why you mus' ha' valled in," cried the miller in a tone of sympathy.

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"I was going up to the weirpool an' a rush o' water came and carried me off my feet," gasped the victim.

"Never!" cried the miller. "That was I lifted a hatch now. Why you mus' be wet drough."

"I fell down in it."

"Oh! you would," replied the miller in friendly agreement. "But how could anybody dream there was anybody there. There wur no need to lift the hatch that minute. Now, if you had a-called in to house I should ha' knowed. An' I didn' never say no to a visher in all my life. Oh! Dear, dear! I be terr'ble a-feared you'll get chilled."

"I was in a perspiration," shivered the fisher, "and now I am like ice."

"You ought to kip mooven. You'd better to

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come up to mill an' have somethen hot. Why didn ee come avore an' say you was there. Dear-dear-dear! You be out o' sight you zee jus' whur you was. An' I hant never said no to a visher in all my life."

So the angler picked up his clothes and his waders and we went up to the mill.

"You'd better to have zome hot gin and water. The kettle's on the boil," and truly a kettle hanging from the chimney hook was most hospitably steaming over the hearth.

"I should be grateful," shivered the angler.

"Why ever had'n ee a-comed up to house jus' to make known your presence like. I mus' vind ee a wold pair o' trousers an' a coat an you can zit by the vire an' the maid shall dry your things. Come out in backhouse an' slip 'em off, vor they be a-wettin the vloor here. Then we'll ha' a bit o' victuals—whatever there is—vor whatever you provided vor yourself mus' be zo wet as a zop. Unless you'd rather go to bed."

The guest disclaimed any such wish. He spent much of the day in slippers, a pair of black trousers, which the miller used only for funerals, and a heavy overcoat, sitting in front of the fire. The miller visited him at intervals, encouraged him with gin and water, fed and dried him. To do all this satisfied his sense of humour and gave him great enjoyment. He punctuated his expressions of sympathy with reiterated laments that the stranger "had not jus' comed up to mention his presence like."

Nobody could suspect so sympathetic and childlike

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a candour, and his victims often became his friends. This one walked back with me to the station. He was quite merry over the disaster, and only lamented that he had lost so excellent a fishing day. He was enthusiastic over the kindness and hospitality of the miller.

"A good hearted man that, and the very soul of hospitality. That's one of the really old-fashioned sort, and they are getting very scarce in these days."

He said he had given the maid half-a-crown for drying his clothes and that she seemed pleased. Did I think it was enough? He really talked as if he had enjoyed a happy day.

But the miller was obdurate about the preliminary call. His best friend must not fail in that compliment.

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Some time afterwards I asked him whether any fisher beguiled by such good humour and such open house hospitality and assurance that "swishing-out" was rare, had ventured again up the narrow way without notice.

"Never but one," replied the miller.

"An' what did you do?"

"I jus' swished un out o' it again," laughed the miller. "But I didden trouble to hunt vor un the second time."

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VII. HAYMAKING BY HAND

THIS sketch is a dream—a mid-summer day dream, made up of things seen long ago, idealised perhaps, but truthful according to the manner in which we think and dream and speak of that which is dead and gone. It is a summer reverie, imagined under the shade of an oak-tree in a meadow bounded by three hedgerows and a brook—a vague recollection of a season when everything went right. I cannot mention the exact date. It was the year "o' the night when the wold dame Coombes's cottage caught a-vire, an' they dragged she out in her smock, an' she had to go into the House." So when it is said that everything went right it must be understood that it was a perfect summer for the haymaking.

The dawn broke behind a thin mist low down upon the horizon, a sure sign of weather continuously fine and warm. The outline of the top of the wood upon the far-off hill stood clearly defined against the distant glory of approaching day. The trees below melted away and were lost in the grey dewy vapour that hung over the level meads. The stars were few and pale, only the star of the morning hung like a jewel on the bosom of the sky. Everything was motionless as peaceful

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sleep. All was silent, but for the occasional twitter of some hidden bird awakening to the increasing light and eager to carry food to its nestlings as early as food was to be found. Skylarks rose and burst into song, mounted unseen high above the mist into the clearer sky and, indistinguishable in the twilight, poured forth unceasing carol. A corncrake uttered his grating love-call—once and no more. And always brighter and brighter the light was spreading at the back of the hill until above the wood it leapt up in a flame of blazing gold, that lit innumerable fleecy clouds stretching like a belt across the sky, gilded their outlines and spread blushes on their cheeks. Not the gorgeous crimson that is a warning to the shepherd, but the soft reflected glow from the bosom of the "rosy-footed morn." The mist became no more than a veil, white and diaphanous upon the face of the moor.

Living things began to stir. In the village a dog barked. From the hill came the bleating of ewes. The corncrake started again and persisted. Rooks, not in great flocks but in summer parties, passed overhead all in the same direction. At last voices and laughter and footsteps were heard coming down the lane. They stopped at the gate. Eight stalwart men opened it and passed in Indian file close under the hedgerow to the corner of the grass.

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Each carried a scythe across his shoulder with a bundle tied up in a red handkerchief, hanging from the handle in front. Each carried a flagon in his left hand.  
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They set down their scythes, hid their treasures from the sun among the rank herbage in the cool ditch, stripped off their coats and roiled up their shirt sleeves. They wore little leathern straps to strengthen their "hand-wrists" and their fustian trowsers were tied up below their knees. For a minute they stood in silent contemplation of the job.

"Come on then, Soce," cried the foreman. He picked up his scythe, whetted the blade, spat in his hands for luck and mowed the first swath.

One after the other they joined in behind until the whole eight were in slanting line and eight swaths were falling to the swish and rhythmic swing of the eight scythes. The sun rose and looked at them over the top of an old hedgerow. Then Farmer John Buck rode down on the chestnut mare and looked also. The mist was gone. So were the fleecy clouds. The face of the sun was aglow with light that faded on ail sides into a translucent blue, cloudless and innocent of rain. The grass, all in full flower, was glistening everywhere with pendant dewdrops. Swallows were darting to and fro close to the new-mown swaths hawking the winged insects that had been disturbed by the scythe.

Farmer John Buck surveyed his field with a feeling that all was well. He saw that the mowing was clean and close. A capital set o' mowers to year, was his silent reflection, and he shouted at the top of his voice.

"All right, my lads, get on wi' it. You'll be pretty well a-zweltered to-day, sure 'nough. Wull!

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There's a plenty more cider up to house. Tull be ready vor the volks come nine o'clock. I do a'most zweet a'ready."

He rode home contented.

"Fresh aidge," shouted the foreman.

"Wull done, measter voreman," laughed the others.

They went to the corner—each mower drew his whetstone and put a fresh edge to his scythe—then lifted his flagon, threw back his head, and put a fresh edge to himself. It is not wise to mow long without a fresh edge.

Nine o'clock came,—only three hours to noon— and the sun was high above the heads of the tall elms. The mowers had been at work for six hours. The grass first cut was dry towards the light, and the ground between the swaths was not only dry but warm. Then came the "vokes" a crowd of them, "men-vokes an' wimmen-vokes" for a mower could provide work for two men and three women. Farm hands, old and young, their wives and maidens, all were there with some stragglers from the town, allured by the prospect of unlimited cider, and a few sober artisans of sedentary trades, who made a summer holiday of the haymaking and earned the cost of their living. Down the lane they came in little groups, each with a rake and a "pick," as the hayfork is called in Somerset, and each with a tongue, so that the "chackle chackle" of the voices was every



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bit as persistent as the rattle of the horse tedder that has since usurped the field. They put the rakes in the shade of the hedgerow elms, and then set  
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merrily to work, tossing the swaths abroad with their picks and spreading the loose grass evenly over the ground. I heard young voices singing at their work.

When all that they found mowed when they came had thus been spread they went back and turned it, and by that time it was noon. Then they laid down in the shade for rest and to eat their victuals. But the mowers ceased work for a long spell and slept during the heat of midday.

I overheard an eclogue in my dream.

"Harkey to un then! Measter Gookoo have a-catched a hose."

"Aye, an' how he do kickhammery, doant er?"

"Ah! the vust sniff o' hay. Then measter Gookoo mus' away. He got to goo then."

"Noo, noo, Billy—noo! He doant never vlee away."

"Whur do er goo then? If he doant goo away an' doant bide, there idden noo other place."

"But I tell ee he do bide, but nobeddy doant never zee un."

"If he did bide zomebody another mus' eitherwise zee un or dig un out or vall across un zomehow or nother."

"Not to know un, Billy. You do zee un, Billy, only he've a-changed hizzelf into a hawk."

"Ho! ho! That's a vine tale."

"But you can't watch un do it. Cause why—"

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if you do cage un, zooner an' do it the hosebird'll croak."

"Doant you tell I—"

"I tell ee, Billy, I yeard a passon say it—not a preachen, I doant mean that, but a talken sensible like, as you an' I mid. An' he zed tis a-zet down in a terr'ble wold ancient scripshur, that the gookoo do turn hizzelf into the hawk-zo there."

Billy shook his head. "A man can't goo against a scripshur. Come on."

They left their picks planted upright in the ground, for a pick lying that may take some looking for, shouldered their rakes, and marched back to the grass first cut. They raked it into straight "windrows," the stretch of a rake apart, and the warm breeze of afternoon played between the loose motes, and was more drying even than the sun. And towards evening they raked the wind rows into haycocks that offered the minimum of surface to the dew. They sang and were merry in the lane on their way home.

The mowers finished that job and came no more, but all the other folks were back as early as the morning had dried the dew, to spread the haycocks into "passels," broad strips with bare ground between, and they came and turned and went and came again, till the hay was fit to haul. Then they pushed it into "weales," straight ridges of hay, as

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wide apart as the hedgerows in the lane so that the wagons might pass and load up as they went.

The lads chased the maidens and buried them, and kissed them under the sweet-smelling hay,

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and called it "saving the hay." The wagons came—a boy to the horse's head—two loaders on the growing load—a pitcher on each side between wheels and "weale," and a woman to rake behind him. The boy shouted "hold vast!" The loaders steadied themselves. The wagon moved forward a few yards and stopped again, until at last a full load was hauled home to the rick.

The dreams of the past vanished. It was to-day under the shadow of the oak. From beyond one hedgerow came the rattle of the "mower," from the other the jangle of a "tedder to work," on the other side of the brook a horse-rake clanked as the teeth lifted to let fall the raking.

There was neither song, nor mirth, nor "chackle of human voices"—only the noise of a lifeless, but efficient machinery.

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VIII.

THE YOUNG JOHN SNOOK AN' MISS MARTHA GAY

HE was not really young but only some five or six years short of his "dree-score." But his father being alive he still went by the name of the young John Snook and only awaited the decease of his parent to become plain John Snook.

There is a little homestead; the first you pass as you enter the village, standing alone with a garden between it and the road. By the right of the house is a barton with stalls for some ten or a dozen of cows, and on the left an orchard of leaning apple-trees and certainly a couple of sows running with the poultry under the trees. It is a low house with the "chimmer windows" breaking the line of the eaves and running up into the thatch. There is a pond and ducks, a little barn with a pigeon-box against the wall, a waggon under a shed, a faggot pile and a grindstone. The homely little dwelling was for more than two centuries the home of the Snooks. That family held it on lives which were renewed to secure each generation. The young John Snook was the last of them, but as it was in his time this little farmhouse remains until to-day.

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The young John was a very quiet man with fair hair and blue eyes. He had a round face and cheeks of a fresh colour. You could scarcely see his eyebrows and his whiskers were as soft as silk. He was tall and broad and of great muscular strength—so strong that it was a common saying in the village that the young John did not know, had never put out, his full strength. And he was equally sparing of his words. That might have been from a lack of the sense of humour, for when they joked him he only stared. It was also a common saying that young John could not say "boo to a goose." But who ever

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wanted to say "boo" to a goose? It is no good to talk English to a goose. And young John was of such a simple nature and kindly heart that "nobeddy hadn' never a-yeard no beddy zay a word again un not in all their lives."

A few hundred yards farther along the road is a six-barred gate painted green with red-brick pillars instead of gate posts. If of a warm day in early summer, allured by the impressive character of this entrance you should be tempted to peep within, you will see a twelve-acre field of the richest grass and in the middle of it a small herd of dairy cows whisking their tails under the cool shadow of an ancient oak. An open roadway leads to a house of brick roofed with slate tiles. This was the house and the freehold of Miss Martha Gay. Her father having gone into the drapery and "done well" returned to the village, purchased the farm upon which he was born and reared and built this new house in which he lived and died.

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Miss Martha Gay was a little particular. Brought up in a town she was above all anxious not in any way to compromise herself. She was a thin-faced little lady with dark hair and eyes, and three little corkscrew curls and tortoise-shell comb on each side of a narrow forehead, who went to church every Sunday in a broad Leghorn hat and a "spicketty" gown and carried a large nosegay of sweet-smelling flowers and herbs at which to sniff if she should feel overcome during the sermon.

Young John Snook also was a regular church-goer. He went in "birches" and gaiters, a red waistcoat and a dark blue floptailed coat ornamented with brass buttons. He wore a flower in his buttonhole—sometimes a single one, a peony when in season for choice, or if not a "tutty" of clovegilawfers or cabbage roses or whatever his garden might happen at the time to be yielding.

Now the distance from Miss Martha Gay's house to the highroad and from the young John Snook's homestead to Miss Gay's gate was about the same, So if they both started when the church bells began to ring they were not unlikely to meet. Yet they had never been known to arrive at church together. For Miss Gay, if she were only a few yards in advance being the faster walker would bend and smile in a very friendly, and yet rather a distant, sort of way and quicken her pace. Whereas if she were a little behind she always remembered that she had forgotten something and must go back. This was not a question of

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social difference in the least, but due entirely to the maidenly delicacy of feeling of Miss Gay.

The Bucks and the Gays had intermarried and been friends for centuries. One evening at the Abbey John Buck said:

"Cousin Martha, you be no chicken. You did ought to look alive."

Miss Gay laughingly admitted to forty years.

John Buck said "All that."

The maidens giggled.

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"An' sich a likely young bachelor down there so handy. I tell ee what tis you be both o' ee in love an' wunt own to it. I've a-marked the love-light in young John's eye when he do squint at ee, zo timid like in church. That poor man is most terr'ble in love wi 'ee, cousin Martha, only too shy to speak. An' you be zo offish too—but that's a sure sign o' the beginnin' o' Love."

Martha Gay said "Trumpery nonsense! Pack o' fudge!"

But now that the ball was set rolling it did not cease to roll. They said similar things to young John and also pointed out how conveniently the fields lay together and the economy of only keeping up one house. And old Isaac, the labourer who managed for Martha Gay and wanted a cottage would be so handy in young John's house. Young John said nothing.

If of an evening they chanced to be both at the Abbey, the Buck maidens saw to it that they were seated side by side at table. On one occasion they managed to get them together into the courting

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corner. For Martha Gay arrived first and went in gaily and afterwards young John sat himself down in silent obedience; and so she could not get out. The Bucks inquired when the happy day was to be fixed and treated them exactly as any engaged couple. Such prudent arguments supported by such friendly attentions could not fail to awaken dreams of happy matrimony in the minds of the two victims. When sitting in the courting corner, however, Miss Martha Gay, being seriously alarmed lest she might be becoming compromised, squeezed herself as far away into the quoin as possible.

Thus time ran on until the 1st of April. It was a lovely morning. Birds were mating, lambs were bleating and rooks were feeding their young.

Farmer John Buck whispered to his maidens. "Do ee think you could 'tice Cousin Martha Gay into pound, an' slip out like an' shut her in? We'd have a bit o' vun."

It was Tilly who did it.

"Come into poun'," cried she, "an' zee the nest o' little vuzpigs."

Miss Martha Gay, being town-bred, did not know that there are no young hedgehogs until after Midsummer.

"Little vuzpigs!" cried she, "Oh, let me see!"

So they ran out and shut the door upon her and put two spargads through the handle that protects the latch so that the door could not be pulled open from the inside. Then farmer John Buck started off to tell the young Snook.

"Young John," said he, "you little black mare

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is in the poun'. My maidens saw her out in the road an' put her in."

The young John Snook held up his finger. "'Tis the vust o' April, Mr. Buck," he drawled.

"Oh, well! Our Tilly put her in vor 'ee. 'Tis jus' as you be a-minded. Only I thought you'd like to know."

Seriously affronted, Mr. John Buck turned tail and traipsed away.

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Young John reflected—then went to look for his little black mare. She was not there. A little later the Buck family, peering through the hedge saw him coming with a halter. He opened the door. The young John and Miss Martha Gay stood face to face, she in tears—he with the halter in his hand.

Side by side they walked homewards down the road. At Miss Martha Gay's gate they stopped. She was seen to open it, and they both went in. How it was brought about, who popped the question, and in what terms, cannot be affirmed. It was the subject of much inquiry, but nothing could be ascertained.

They were married by licence early in the morning as soon as it could be arranged, and none of the Bucks were there to see.

They were not going to be a "gape's nest," they afterwards explained. "They were both o' one mind about that."

There were two daughters of that marriage, but no son. And so in that parish the name of Snook died out.

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IX.

CHIPPING DOWN FAIR

IT was of a morning in the second week of May. A bye-road of little account had lured me from a dusty King's highway to seek adventure between its tall double hedgerows. It offered the irresistible inducement that it had nothing to say for itself. Of its destination it gave not a hint. No milestone set forth its distant relationship to some great city so grand that it knew it not. Straight as an arrow it just went on and on; was lost in a dip in the landscape but climbed out on the other side to mount a higher incline and hide again, until at last, a mere line on the side of a distant range, it disappeared into the unknown.

I was well freighted with an alehouse breakfast of eggs and bacon. My satchel was provided for a journey. Now in the morning the sun looked me in the face. In an hour his beams would glance aslant over a hedgerow and leave a cool shade upon the wayside grass. At the corner was a white thorn covered with blossom, I broke off a twig, put it in my buttonhole and trudged on. It was a good firm road, green with a thin carpet of moss. There were no ruts and only the faintest recollection of a passing of wheels. Above the dry ditches

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the banks were honeycombed, and at the sound of footsteps rabbits of a month went scuttling home across the road. A far in the landscape a cuckoo was calling. Nearer he came and nearer. He flew into an old oak sprinkled with opening, sunlit leafage, and intent on making known his presence went on calling until I had passed under the branches.

Less than an hour and this unfrequented way again crossed a white, dusty, turnpike road. But now the thin verdancy was scored by the tracks of many recent wheels—

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heavy wheels, coming from both directions but all agreeing to take the route that turned neither to the right nor to the left on the way to its unaffirmed destination.

In the distance a well-laden market cart was coming at a jog-trot along the high road.

"Hullo then! Where be off?"

That hearty voice was unmistakable. I turned, and sure enough there was the cart with farmer John Buck and Mrs. John Buck in front and the three maidens, the flowers of the Buck household, with their feet on the tail-board and their faces blushing like rosebuds, straining their necks to get a glimpse of the tramp so unexpectedly overtaken on the road.

"Well! Well! You gwaine to Chippin' Down Fair!"

"I did not know there was a Chippin' Down Fair."

They laughed like a peal of five church bells. Everybody on earth knew there was a Chippin' Down Fair.

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"Get up! Get up! What, didden ee zee the tracks o' the caravans an' shows?"

"Jump down Tilly an' get up here in the middle in vront. Then if 'tis a bid of a squeeze you can zit a bit 'pon my lap like," said Mrs. John Buck in her placid comfortable way."

"Yes, and if I sit behind in the middle, Mary and Jinny can both sit a bit on my lap, then, if there is a squeeze I can do the squeezing."

The peal of bells broke out again as merry as marriage bells. Then all being adjusted the old mare jogged on once more.

Tilly turned round to me. She was fair with bright hair, blue eyes and cheeks as clear as porcelain—a Ceres in her girlhood, not yet come into her own.

"What have ee got blossom in your buttonhole vor? If you should chance to go indoors wi' it folk'll holler an' drave ee out."

Then Mrs. John Buck turned her comfortable face and there was certainly a family likeness. "When I was a young maid I stayed in a house where they trimmed up a hearth in a parlour wi' a bough o' blossom. A vather and two children passed away wi' smallpox avore the winter." Jinny snatched the blossom out of my button-hole and threw it down behind the wheel.

Slowly the old mare hauled us up the incline to the top of the hill. There, on the open down, was the fair, one of those ancient, outlying fairs that now appear to be so inconveniently placed but still retain their utility. Caravans had arrived

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from every side. Booths, tents, platforms and shelters had sprung up during the night. There were streets of standings for the sale of fairings and ginger-bread nuts. Cheapjacks were shouting. Quacks were orating. On a stage in front of a travelling theatre a lady in spangles and a clown were giving a taste of their quality, while a knight in armour urged the crowd "not to miss this opportunity of patronising the finest dramatic talent in the world brought at great expense straight from Her Majesty's

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Theatre in London, now about to perform—admission threppence—threppence only—admission threppence."

"I never didden zee sich a zight o' volk in all my life," cried farmer John Buck.

"An' ver'ly and truly, I never did'n" agreed Mrs. John Buck, raising her hands in admiration.

So we alighted. It was arranged that if by chance in so vast a crowd we should get separated we were to assemble at three o'clock at a ragged little clump of firs a short distance on the outside of the dringet of the fair. It was a wise provision. Mrs. John Buck almost immediately fell in with elderly friends and sent us off to amuse ourselves. A little later we lost Tilly. But Mary and Jinny laughed at my distress. Jinny explained: "There's a young man—you do know un, Jacob Thatcher by name—have a-got a bit of a inkling ader our Tilly, but he don't speak out nothing no sense not eet. You'll zee they'll wed wi' one another one o' these days. Trust Tilly vor that. But don't say a word. No doubt they do understan' wi' nothen really a-zed."

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So we went around the fair—saw the fat lady in a low neck and bare arms sitting enthroned in state on a dais. She awakened wonder in the minds of all who drove or fatted beasts. "Coo. Her arms above the elbow be zo big as twenty-poun' hams." "Have a job to drave she to market." "She'd be down in road pirty quick, I'll warrant it." Experts in the matter of adiposity pinched her forearms or pressed a finger upon her neck and expressed satisfaction. Hour after hour she sat still and emotionless as putty, while the proprietor shouted her weight and measurements, diet and general habits of life.

We watched the cheapjack put halfcrowns into purses and sell them for a shilling a piece "in order to do business" he explained. A purchaser near Jinny bought one, and there was the halfcrown sure enough. Jinny bought one because she could have sworn she saw the half-crown go in, but she comforted herself with the reflection that the purse was well worth the money after all. We listened to the quack doctor's learned lecture on physiology, and watched his servant in livery hand out the sixpenny packets of powder that would cure all human ills. We saw him draw teeth. We agreed that the tumblers must verily and truly be made of indiarubber, and wondered how the man who ate fire could do it. We consumed gingerbread nuts, comfits, and rock cakes from a particular standing which the girls recommended as coming from the county town. At last we fell in with Tilly, who said, "Why, wherever have ee all a-bin to? I've a-been lookin' for ee

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everywhere." "Zo as to keep out o' the way, I spwose," laughed Jinny, and Tilly coloured up like a scarlet runner. So after a glorious day we all assembled at the fir-trees.

"There never was such a sight o' volk, an' a terr'ble nice lot o' ship," cried Farmer John Buck.

"Now, I'll tell ee what, you young volk walk down the steep an' we'll go back by way o' Bittleton. If you've a-had enough o' the fair, that is."

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"Where's Bittleton?" said I.

From the down you could see the landscape all around. He pointed to a village two miles away—a church tower and a few gables peeping between trees in a little hollow between hills.

"I never heard of it," said I.

" 'Tis the littlest, one-eyedest, woldest-fashionedest parish in all the country, sort o' shut off vrom everywhere," laughed he.

"I shall marry and settle down and live there as soon as I can make arrangements," said I.

Then the peal of bells rang out more merrily than ever.

"You can't fix that up now here right, and zo you'd better to ride home wi' we. You can't zay no or otherwise I shall kip your knapsack, zo there!"

We made merry about that also. He and his missus went off. I and the girls ran down the steep. Above our heads the noise of the fair grew louder and louder. We had had enough of it. We were all of one mind about that. Besides, it was really getting too rough. We were glad to sit down and rest.

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We had to wait some little time for farmer and Mrs. John Buck at the bottom of the hill, and we sat down on a stick of felled timber, and the Buck girls regaled me with chestnuts almost faster than I could swallow them.

"They've a-got a real witch, Elizabeth Butt by name, to Bittleton, or zo volk do zay," whispered Tilly.

"An' a conjuror, too," interrupted Jinny.

"Yes, Carter went to consult un when his wife were bad—" began Mary.

"But let Carter tell that. He'll be proud as a dog with two tails to do it," expostulated Tilly.

And so they went on speaking all at once so fast that I could hardly tell one voice from the other. Nevertheless, the narrative was clear enough.

"A labourin' man lived close handy to her—and they had a few words. Well, his hens did get in an' scratch up her onion-bed, and—. But still, her cat did carry off his chickens, though she said 'twere the rats, and—. But he called her a lying wold witch. An' she said he should prove his words. Now *that* everybody in Brittleton *do* know. Because hearing an altercation, all the street runned out to door.

"Now the man do tell another tale—He do zay he went to make up the quarrel—An' the door wur a-locked—An' he squinnied in, an' there wur no kay in the kayhole—An' that showed she wur out with the kay in her pocket: An' zo he went on to his work up the lane—a-layen a old hedge: An' a hare lopped across the lane in

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front o' un: Now zome do held that do prove the man's a liar—for he's a awful poacher—An' there idden a hare not in half a mile of his house—But others do contend that do prove the woman a witch—for if there can't be a hare—An' yet there is a hare: Do stan' to reason that hare mus' be a witch—There zum do say one thing an' zome another—But the man do zay he looked back—An' there were Elizabeth Butt on hans'



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and knees in the lane a-hammerin' wi' the heel ov a wold shoe—An' all to a flash, as if 'twere a red-hot knife struck into the heel o' his left voot—An' he could'n stan' an' zo he mus' needs vall down—An' when he looked up Elizabeth Butt wur gone—an' a hare wur a-loppen down the lane—But not in no hurry—An' he couldn' get up 'pon his left voot—For the heel did burn as if a score o' harnets had a left their stings in un—An' when he tookt off his boot not a sign to show for it—An' zo there could be only two ways about it—He mus' hop home, hoppety hop 'pon his right voot—or crawl 'pon all-vours.—An' that wur how he voun' it out—A-crawlen low down like, he eyed the head of a wall nail in one of his tracks—An' 'twere a left voot—An' in the heel all zo well—An' when he pulled un out 'twere a vive-inch nail—An' the burnen vire went out of his voot—An' he stood up—An' turned round an' walked back an' got on wi' his work."

The chorus paused. "An' if true, I do call it a very funny thing," reflected Jinny.

But Tilly objected: "What I can't make out is, when Elizabeth Butt turned herself into a hare,

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how she carried the wold shoe an' the vive-inch nail, and the vront door kay."

"But that's not the end o' it—Vather put on the man a strapper all one summer—An' he did carr' about the vive-inch nail—An' show un to everybody—But he had nothen to fear from Elizabeth Butt—That same night he waited in the road for her—An' scratched her all athirt the forehead wi' the nail so as to draw blood above the breath—An' he said a witch can't do no more, if once you do draw blood above the breath—Here they be."

The cart had come in sight on the brow of the hill, with farmer John Buck and his Missus side by side like a Darby and Joan. The mare was a chestnut with a blaze on her forehead. She was not young and certainly not old, but there was a look of wisdom begotten of experience about her as she picked her way down the steep very carefully among so many rolling stones. While the seat was being readjusted I stroked her muzzle, and she tossed her head in a friendly appreciative sort of way. She was an old-fashioned quiet sort of beast that had always been well-treated and well driven, and there seemed to be a way-wise look in her eyes as if she knew a thing or two she could not tell. And when we were all six up, the shafts were nicely balanced to take the weight off her back. So we jogged along a pleasant winding road between green hedges and under spreading trees until we came in sight of two cottages at a corner made by a lane.

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Mrs. John Buck turned round. We were at a considerable distance but she spoke in a whisper.

"That's where the witch do live." They were pleasant old thatched cottages with gardens and a few apple-trees in full blowth. "She's out in front," whispered Mrs. John Buck. "Don't stare at her. It might give offence. Not that I do believe in any such nonsense. But it can't be no good to affront her. Everybody do zay she is a witch."

Elizabeth Butt was bent down weeding her garden plot by hand. Perhaps I stared. She looked up and looked at us. She presented none of the features that we are wont to associate with the idea of a witch. Her nose was not hooked; her chin was not unusually

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sharp, nor her eyes strikingly keen. To me it was not the face of one who cherished evil, but the hunted, tired face of one who suffers it. We were strangers. In her language no doubt the word for us was "foreigners." She fixed her eyes upon us with a look of inquisitiveness and watched us out of sight.

Mrs. John Buck turned round once more, but now she spoke out loud.

"She came of a respectable family. She used to go out nurse-tending, but now she don't. All the folk do wonder how she do live. She don't never beg, neet work, without 'tis in her garden. But 'tis a-zaid the devil do make a pact wi' a witch that she shall never go cold an' never go hungry. But then tis a-zaid, too, that the devil don't never kip his word." Then she laughed.

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"But I don't pay no attention to talk o' that sart myself."

Mile after mile we jogged on. The mare went her own pace with a knowledge of where she would find her corn. The afternoon sun glimmered through the spring foliage of lofty elms, and a thrush sang his loudest from a topmost twig. From overhead came the continuous warbling of unseen larks, hidden in an intensity of light. The birds of the hedgerows did not cease to twitter their happy confidences or sing their joy. And the simple hearts in the cart were jolly enough going home fram fair. The maidens even sang "Oh! who will o'er the downs" and "Three Blind Mice," as they said, to pass the time. As if when time is free from troubles it were a good thing to hurry it.

We overtook the drover taking home the sheep that farmer John Buck had bought. He was pleased with them, and pleased with the way the drover had brought them on, and we crawled on behind the Rock for a while. We came to a gentle incline.

"Well, you've a-got plenty o' time. Come along quiet like. I shall be there. Gee-up."

But the mare did not gee-up. She stood like a rock.

"Just lead her on."

The drover led her past the sheep. But she shivered, although the day was hot, and stopped again. She was more inclined to back than go forward, although her head was turned towards home.

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" 'Tis a very funny thing!" cried farmer John Buck. He got down and looked her over, and the harness also, to see if anything "did wring." Nothing could he find. He stood back and surveyed her. Now he was down, of course the shafts had lifted, and the bellyband was tight; but this was not so when he was in his seat.

"But she's all to a tremmle. 'Tis a very funny thing."

Farmer John Buck took off his hat and mopped the perspiration from his forehead. "An' how she do zwear. But that's nothing. Zo do I, too."

The drover came and shook his head.

"I do know what 'tis maister."

"What is it then?"

The drover only shook his head the more. Farmer John Buck got up in the cart again.

"What is it then?"

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"Did ee come drough Bittleton?" drawled the drover.

"Well, what then?"

The drover looked as wise as a barn owl, but his head shook an emphatic refusal to explain.

We all knew what he meant, but nobody said so. The mare stopped a quarter of an hour and then started off of herself. The drover put it about that Elizabeth Butt had overlooked farmer John Buck's mare. But the Bucks all said, "Pooh pooh!"

To each other they said, "Still! It was a very funny thing."

And so it was, for that mare has never behaved in an unseemly manner either before or since.

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X.

THE WOOING OF TILLY

HEAT waves had never been heard of in those days. All the same Farmer John Buck walked about for a week in shirt sleeves and mopping his forehead with a red handkerchief.

" 'Tis terr'ble hot. Most terr'ble hot! Hot as a ubem!" was his constant cry, except for one variation in the early morning. "Zo terr'ble hot, couldn' get a wink. Not one wink!"

"Then whatever made ee snore zo loud, John?" innocently inquired Mrs. John Buck.

It was just between haymaking and harvest of a Saturday in the cool of the evening. He had been hauling hay all the week, and now was sitting on the seat under the medlar tree in the garden puffing his churchwarden pipe. Convenient to his right hand was a quart cup. By his left side, leaning against the seat, was his double bass. Tilly was watering thirsty flowers—gilawfers, bloomydowns, none-so-pretties, and clove-gilawfers, all so bright in her flower knot beside the little lawn. Their fragrance mingled sweetly with the fresh scent of the moistened earth. But everywhere the smell of newly-made ricks permeated the atmosphere so

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thoroughly that Farmer John Buck now and then shook his head as to whether in his delight at such terr'ble hot weather he had not "picked up zome o' it a bit too gay." But this was not the moment to think of that just when the church musikers were coming. He stood up, took the bass and the bow, and, puckering his brow with concentrated attention, produced sounds profound, prolonged, and very comforting.

His instrument attracted the admiration of all strangers who were privileged to see it. It had been venerable, and by nature was of a light complexion inclining to yellow. But some years ago Farmer John Buck developed a "whitlow" on the middle finger of his left hand, of so stubborn a nature that it was feared he might never be able to press a string again. He was badly missed. The deep notes of the double bass, resolutely bowed, gave a foundation to the church music, and were a great support to the congregation. Then Peter Trip, the wheelwright's son, was fired with ambition to become a musiker. Farmer John Buck gave encouragement, lent the double bass, and even marked with

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chalk the exact position that Peter's fingers should take for certain notes in difficult passages. Peter's progress was phenomenal—likewise his pride and his gratitude. All went well far years, until Peter married and set up in business in another village. Anxious to make some return for disinterested kindness, he skilfully painted the double bass a rich chocolate colour, which he felt he could "warr'nt to wear." When the instrument came

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home Farmer John Buck expressed himself, as they say, "in all the words he could lay his tongue to." But Peter was married and gone.

Time is a healer, and anger had melted into regret. Now he only reflected: "Ah! Ever since thik feller gi'ed un dree coats he do zim to I to gie out a zart o' a woolly zoun'."

There had recently been a difficulty in the village. It was not disputed that musicians, "in partic'lar he what do blow the flute or the serpent," must feel from time to time in need of liquid refreshment. Yet some contended that cider ought not to be consumed in the parish church. It ended in a compromise, Farmer John Buck invited the musikers to practice at his place every Saturday night. He was now awaiting them out of doors, because the weather was so hot. There was a plenty of room for five on the seat around the trunk of the medlar tree since the double bass must stand.

The first to arrive was Jacob Thatcher.

He had commenced amatory life a diffident, silent lover, overcome by the impressive presence of Matilda Buck. But that day was past. As he passed the mill on the way to the practice he had brought along a grist in his pony cart, and he now stepped across the lawn sprightly and confident, a forty-pound bag of flour thrown over his shoulder and the case containing his bassoon tucked under his arm.

He wore "corden birches" with three little brass buttons at the knees, and hose of grey colour. Tilly put down her water-pot and accompanied

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him to the flour barrel, handy to the "bricken ubem " in the back kitchen, and they emptied the bag in company. They were a little pressed for time, because of keeping the musikers waiting. But no doubt they made the most of it, and when Tilly got back to her watering, her hair was certainly rumpled, and her cheeks glowed like the red-hot pokers in the corner of her flower-knot. She ran to the rainwater-butt under the shoot and filled her can.

Jacob Thatcher threw the empty flour bag down upon the grass, opened his case, fitted together his bassoon, and became engrossed in his tuning. He was standing with his back towards the flower-knot close to the treacle-flower that Tilly was watering. Tempted by some spirit of mischief she turned round, and cautiously, but liberally, watered the calves, shapely as flowers, within those woollen hose. The rose on the spout of the water-pot was fine, but the holes were numerous, and the drops fell in plentiful profusion. The church musikers under the medlar-tree nudged each other, stopped tuning, and were silent. Jacob became aware of something unusual in the surrounding conditions and looked around. Tilly was innocently watering her flower-knot, her back towards him and her arms against her sides. By this time the water had penetrated his

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woollen hose. Jacob, caught sight of grinning faces under the medlar-tree and discovered the joke. He laid his bassoon upon the grass and picked up the flour-bag. There were no more than two steps between him and the unconscious Tilly.

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The next moment she found herself enclosed to the waist as completely and comfortably as a bolster in a pillow-case.

Roars of laughter came from the medlar-tree.

Tilly dragged off the flour-bag with both hands. She could not see herself, but everybody did his best to make good the deficiency.

"Why, Tilly, you head's every bit zo white as the vlowers there 'pon your znobball-tree," cried young John Snook, who held his boxwood flute breast high, with his fingers carefully placed on the holes and keys ready for him to blow the first note with unquestionable accuracy. Everybody had noticed that young John had "come out a goodish bit" under the genial influences of matrimony.

"Ah! But I'd bet a guinea now, you'd vind cheeks zo red's vire if you was to run in an' vetch out the belleses an' blow 'pon Tilly's face a bit," cried the smith, who blew the brazen instrument which folk always called the "serpent."

"No need o' that," said the musiker with the fiddle. "That'll wipe zo easy as the bloom off a snag."

Their homely wit delighted them greatly. Then mirth became so noisy that Mrs. John Buck and Mary and Jinny came running out of the porch to find out what was the matter. They were as full of sympathy as Job's three comforters.

"Why you won't get the vlour out o' your hair not vor a wick," cried Mrs. John Buck.

"An' you dursent to wash your head, Tilly, or

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t'ull all goo to paste an' stick your hair together in rapes," was the encouragement given by Jinny.

"T'ull be brush—brush—brush, till your arms do ache vit to drop off," said Mary.

Then the musikers chimed in again: "I don't doubt but what young Jacob would be willen to groom Tilly, so as to make amends like," suggested the serpent.

"To be sure, he can't anyways offer no less," added the young John Snook.

"I can't zay but what our Tilly asked for what she got," said Farmer John Buck, shaking his head with the gravity of a judge. "An' so 'nough zaid—'nough zaid." And he drew his bow across the two lower strings of his double bass to call attention to more serious matters.

Then Tilly found her tongue.

"A ignorant stupe!" cried she. "What's a drop o' water to a man? Why, he'd walk drough brook any day o' the year to get tother zide. But I shan't vorget it very quick. I'll be upzides wi' ee—to make a laughen-stock o' me—an' gie zo much trouble an' make zo much work. If I do wait ten year, I'll vind zome way to get upzides wi' ee—"

But the smith, holding out the serpent to command silence, and add emphasis to friendly advice, interrupted:

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"Don't ee talk about ten year, Missie. I'll tell ee how to get upzides wi' un. Marry un to once. You'll be upzides wi' un. Why, wi' a little tact yon can make every day o' his life a misery to un—  
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an' eet not go zo vur as to drave un to drink nor tempt un to pizen ee."

What could the poor girl do when everything was turned to a joke? Tears made little tracks in the flour on her cheeks.

Her mother said, "There, come on in, Tilly, and look at yourzelf in the glass." And so she did.

"Now then—now then, be all ready? *"Not all the blood of beasts."* Farmer John Buck waved his bow to mark the time—One—two—dree—off!"

The church music consisted of a violin, a flute, a serpent, a bassoon, and the double bass. In the still of the cool of the evening it could be heard all over the parish.

Other lovers were by a stile in the lane. Their love was too serious to admit of joking.

"How beauidivul music do blend," said the lad.

"It do," sighed the maid.

Many ways lead to church. A week or two afterwards came an invitation to the wedding of Miss Matilda Buck and Mr. Jacob Thatcher.

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XI.

THE RIGHT TIME

IT was late summer and I had a holiday tramp on a little-frequented road. It lay across a broad undulating moorland and nowhere in sight was there a traveller coming or going. Yet the landscape was not unpeopled. Dotted about among the purple ling were little family groups of maybe three generations of women and children—the old, the matured, and the young—bent or on their knees with their heads only just in view above the heather—all "a-pickin' o' hurts" as they call them. The schools were closed because the whortleberries were reported to be ripe, so that the children might make picnics of what is often a very lucrative employment. The families of pickers start at daybreak so as to get the first of the picking and because they must be home in the afternoon to meet the cart that collects the fruit.

Distant voices broke the silence of the moor. On the slope of an undulation a party was standing up the better to watch the approaching stranger. Then a young girl started

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to run across the moorland to cut me off upon my way. As she ran a pair of curlews rose and whistled over her head and called to their young. She was waiting for me  
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standing beside a clump of gorse on a mound by the wayside. The pale sky of midday was behind her back. She was tall and straight, a real daughter of the moorlands, and her brown hair was windblown across her eyes. Her cheeks were flushed, her breathing quick from running over the heather. In her right hand was the tin cup in which she carried her picking to the basket. Her fingers were stained purple and so were her lips. She stood in the borderland between a child and a young girl, and her eyes were merry as she said:

"Could ee be zo kind, sir, as to tell us the right time."

I told her. We laughed at each other because we were young and life was good.

"How far is it to Bittleton?" I asked.

She reflected—then replied, "Vower mile." And I trudged on my way.

Half an hour, the descent of a steep hill with rolling stones and outcropping rock, and the moorland was left behind. A broad highroad, straight and dusty, lay in front. On either side was a grassy waste, and at intervals rectangular piles of stones ready for the cracking. Tall hedgerow trees cast their dark shadows across the white clust and dog-roses and honeysuckles clambered over the hedges. There was an old stone-cracker at work in the cool under the thick leafage of an ancient oak. He heard footsteps, looked up, and ceased to hammer.

"Could ee be zo kind as to ten me the right time?"

"A quarter-past three."

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"The coach is a bit late."

"How far is it to Bittleton?"

He raised his eyes to the sky for inspiration.

"Vive mile," said he deliberately.

"I came from Norton across the moor. Did I come the wrong way?"

"I never didn' hear tell o' nother-nother."

He did not appear to be a humorist, but gravely went on with his cracking.

Another mile and there was a direction post with only one arm bearing the word "Bittleton" and a finger pointing down a by-road. The day had been hot. The journey had not been rich in places of refreshment. I overtook a woman of forty behind three leisurely cows with full udders. They knew where they were going and acquiesced. If one were inclined to loiter she gave it a slap on the rump with her brown hand. Her face was tanned and lean. The weather-stained sunbonnet had lost its original colour and hung untied upon her head. One divined that as well as cows there were pigs and poultry and many children.

"Could ee be zo kind as to ten me the right time?"

We walked on together.

"How far is it to Bittleton?"

"Some ways," she replied doubtfully.

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"But how far? It cannot be very far?"

"A goodish step. I never han't a-bin there."

We came to a rose-covered cottage with a row of bee-butts in front. The orchard was laden with fruit, and the cows knew their way into the yard. She was kind enough to spare me a drink

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of milk, and as she took the glass she fixed her eyes thoughtfully on the nearest cow and said:

"Must to up two mile to Bittleton. When you do come to the road turn to your left. But I never han't a-bin there myzelf."

This last estimate proved correct. Half an hour brought me into Bittleton street.

My visit had been pre-arranged and it was known that a "foreigner had agreed wi' Susan Triptree vor to bide at The Rose and Crown vor wicks." Although not a soul was to be seen, Bittleton was in fact astir with expectation. It was also understood that he was toming "a-voot" from some distant place of origin known by name but where nobody had ever been. When therefore a youth, dusty from a twenty-mile walk carrying a satchel on his shoulders, passed down the street his arrival created no little excitement. From porch and window, from behind garden shrubs or ranks of kidney-beans, watchful eyes glanced with latent disapproval. When he had passed, women-folk of all ages came out into the road to gaze upon his back.

" 'Tis to be hoped Zusan Triptree do know who she is a-taken into her house," said one. " 'Tis to be hoped she do. Vor she han't a-zed," said another. The neighbours were not pleased with the reticence of Susan.

"The Rose and Crown" was in sight, an alehouse pure and simple, unprepared to put up any unexpected stranger for the night. But Susan had yielded to the request of someone known to her, and agreed as a favour to take in this unknown

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"foreigner," whose character and financial soundness were guaranteed. The landlord was also the carrier. He had already returned from the town, and my bag was on the doorstep awaiting me.

In the passage stood a tall eight-day clock. Surely my pace for the last two miles must have been phenomenal! I took out my watch. At that moment Susan Triptree came out to welcome me.

"We do auvis kip our time ten minutes vast. That's Rose an' Crown time—ten minutes vast. But in course when Urchett do goo into town he've a-got to reckon it back in there. Now Mrs. Sprack down to shop she do kip hers twenty. She do zay then she never can't be behine. Twenty vast is Mrs. Sprack's time. But the clock in church tower there! Nobeddy never can't tell what his time is. Zometimes he's vast. Othertimes he's slow. But most times he's a-stopped, 'cause why he's out o' order or else sexton have a-forgot to wind un up. Zo he don't do zoo very much harm when you do know un, 'cause we don't pay no 'tention to un."

"Does everybody keep a different time then, in Bittleton?"



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"Everybody o' any account do kip their own time," replied Susan, thoughtfully. "Well, no. There is one young man o' the name o' Brook that mus' have the right time. He do scoff at we vor what he do call these devices vor getten avorehan' wi' the day. He do take the time o' postman every marnen on his way down street an' correct his watch to the very tick. But there 'tis a-zed he do  
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stud to rule the planets, an' that do want the very minute. To be sure that's why volk be partic'lar to mark the time o' birth in the family Bible. He do read the Astrological Almanac drough an' drough, an' vind that every day alike all that they do zay do come true. He went up top o' hill to zee the zun dance of a Easter mornen. He looked out the very minute o' zunrise, got up early and climbed in good time to the top of the hill. He do zwear the zun wur ten minutes late! It gallied un zo much that he could scarce whisper it."

"Did he never hear of Greenwich?" I asked.

"I don't know nothen about that. I had the right time, zes he, and the zun were ten minutes late."

It was a Bittletonian, no doubt, who in more recent years, having to go to London, found himself with a few hours' leisure and went to look at the Houses of Parliament.

He looked up at Big Ben and then took out his watch. He walked up to the policeman in control of the traffic.

"Look yur," cried he, "Lunnen time is vive minutes vast by Bittleton time."

It must be when they come in contact with the outer world that village people recognise that there is a "right time." Their private approximations are no good when they go on a journey or have to meet the whortleberry man.

"You would like to zee your room."

Mrs. Susan Triptree led the way upstairs, paused on the landing, opened the door and stood aside  
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for me to enter. The chamber was obviously a spare room which relatives of distinction might occasionally occupy as honoured guests. Not a trace of the spirit of the public-house could be detected. It was whitewashed as clean as a lily. A heavy oaken beam as smooth as adze could fashion it ran across the ceiling. There was a four-post bedstead and an oaken coffer at the foot of it. That was the old arrangement. In the coffer the family treasures were kept. And in the event of a housebreaker being heard in the house below, the wife was to jump out of bed and turn the coffer with its lock towards the bedstead while the good man loaded and primed his pistol. She was then free to enter the fray according to circumstances as her notions of strategy might suggest. Her natural weapon was the poker.

Everything was homely and nothing was new. The patchwork quilt could never have been bought. By slow accumulation of many coloured patches, with infinite patience it must have been made at home. The bed curtains, also the blinds and window curtains, were snowy white, and so was the valance that hung below the quilt and reached the floor. On each side of the bed was a "rag-mat" made from coloured shreds of cloth—the

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scarlet of the hunting-coat and the blue of the Sunday swallow-tail brightened the more sombre brown, greens and greys. The uncovered floor was scrubbed clean enough "to ate off o'," as they say. The washstand was of oak but very small, with a round hole to take the basin and a shelf and a drawer below having a little brass ring  
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with which to draw it out. On an oaken chest of drawers, also with brass handles, which served as a dressing-table, stood a moveable looking- glass.

" 'Tis very plain," curtsied Mrs. Susan Triptree, "but I do hope an' pray, you mid be able to make yourself comferable."

At my assurance that the room was attractive beyond measure a smile passed over a face that must have been beautiful in girlhood and still, as it journeyed towards three-score years, retained a fine symmetry of feature and had found the comeliness that rewards a simple life innocent of wrong-doing.

"An' if zo be there's anything I can do vor ee you mus' plase to spake."

Her grey eye cast a last glance round. She stepped to the fireplace and adjusted the china dogs upon the mantelpiece to a finer accuracy of position. Only her hands gave evidence of a life of toil. They had baked and brewed and milked and carried buckets to pigs and brought up a family of children now grown up and dispersed, and they were large and strong. But all had been done cheerfully, and labour had left no trace of weariness upon her countenance. With this last touch she hurried off and left me.

There was leisure now to look around for smaller objects alive with personal, inference-yielding significance.

Hanging on the wall were two old samplers and above the china dogs on the mantelpiece hung a family group—an early Daguerrotype. The larger  
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sampler was a work of art of considerable merit and importance. On the top—

The alphabet in capital letters.  
Then the alphabet in small letters.  
Then the alphabet in written capitals.  
Then the alphabet in running hand:  
Then the ten figures.

then a row of beautifully executed roses and this poem—

"Look! My child! and do not scorn  
From a little flower to learn.  
See the petals all so neat  
Blush so red and smell so sweet.  
Roses red and leaves so green  
All so beautiful and clean."

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The verses on the face of them are home-made. They must have been "made-up" round the hearth. And note in the dialect "scarn" does rhyme with "larn," and that "beautiful and clean" does not express two qualities but extols a superlative cleanliness.

Below this was a picture of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, Eve having just plucked and bitten the apple, easily identified by the colour as a Kingston Black, is holding it out to Adam as if proposing to consume it in the approved manner of Somerset youth by alternate bites. The species of bird, of bright plumage, with his head on one side, watching with ill-bred interest from the top of the tree, could not with certainty be identified. This sampler bore the name:

"Keziah Triptree, aged eight years. 1775."

the other was less ambitious and was signed—

"Elizabeth Greenwell, aged nine years. 1824."

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It was necessary to unhang that specimen of early silver-plate photography in order to hold it in a satisfactory light. A certain angle revealed a wonderful group. In the centre the two old people he in breeches and hose and she in a prodigious cap. And such numerous progeny. One hesitated to number them lest it might be unlucky. But they justified statements made in, old folk-songs of a prolificacy hitherto incredible.

"Now many a year this couple dear

They lived in harmony.

And children had both lass and lad

I think 'twas thirty-three.

The sons so hale did wield the flail

And like their fathers grow.

The maidens sweet like mother were neat

And clean as the Barley Strow."

They were delightfully self-conscious, and the early artist had posed them in positions unnaturally quaint beyond description. And lo! On the right Elizabeth Triptree herself, the same age, the same features, and smiling countenance as when she talked to me five minutes ago. "The very moral o' her," as the folk say. It must have been her mother. So they were Greenwells, this group marshalled in pride to be "tookt off" in all their numerical grandeur. I fancy their parents had never lost a child. One could divine for these Triptrees and Greenwells a humble but very ancient respectability. Maybe they were as old as Bittleton and came down from the free folk of an early settlement.

Hunger impelled me to haste, and below-stairs my repast was ready.

"I do hope an' pray that you do like nottlins

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and chitlins vor we've just a-killed a pig."

I liked everything.

I was sitting in a parlour little bigger than many a large cupboard. The window was open, but neither the beat of hoof nor the creak of passing waggon-wheel was to be heard from the road. In the house there was not a sound of voice or footstep. The

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quietude of early evening had fallen upon the village. The work of the field was over for the day and the "menfolks" had found their way home to the red herring or the bacon and fried potato. It seemed as if human activities had ceased. A sense of remoteness from all the strife and restless desires that distract human life crept over me. In fact, Bittleton was very busy—at supper. But after a long tramp and a sufficient meal of knotlings, chitlings, and home-brewed, the man who experiences such peace and tranquility is on the high road to sleep.

"Now 'tis a-gettin' dumpsey like; maybe you'd wish vor a can'le."

It was almost dark, but the house was filled with voices, mirth and laughter.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Triptree: I'll come into the kitchen."

"There's a goodish company to-night."

With a little smiling nod of self-congratulation she led the way.

The guests were playing at shovel-board—at that time, a game still lingering in out-of-the-way places. They called it "shove-hapenny." The table board was dark with age, and the lines required for the game may have been cut centuries  
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ago. The coin projecting over the edge was struck with the palm to one mark after another. The owner of the coin that stopped the nearest to the lines in the greatest number of instances pocketed the ha'pennies.

As the "foreigner" entered the game stopped. The arrival of a stranger in the village had awakened curiosity and at least six were present. Mine host of the "Rose and Crown" gave me a cordial welcome. The others were less demonstrative—one might say a little reserved.

My eyes were fixed on the shovel-board. "I'll play ee vor a quart."

The challenge came from a little black-eyed "curdley-headed" man in gaiters of about forty, whom they called "farrier." But everyone in Bittleton went by his occupation. And everybody laughed if farrier only said nothing.

"Come on," cried I.

"Come on then," shouted he.

My ha'penny jumped—it trundled—it went off the board. It refused to move more than an inch. Amid loud applause, the farrier triumphed. But the ice was broken. The smith thrust out a gigantic fist.

"I'll take ee on vor a quart."

It was evident that I was to become a popular player. The smith was not so delicate a hand as the farrier—but he won.

All wanted to play for a quart a-piece, and the measure does seem so much larger and more intoxicating when pronounced like part.

On the ground of fatigue and under the promise

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to play any one of them at any hour on any future night I was excused, and we sat down for improving conversation.

With a halfpenny and an hour devoted to secret practice on the morrow when the "Rose and Crown" would be empty, surely something could be done.

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XII.

THE OLD HOUSE

AN old thatched, gabled, buttressed house, with Tudor windows, stringcourses, mullions and diamond panes, and a porch as big as a small room, with seats on either side, stood in a narrow garden quite close to Bittleton Church, and was the most striking feature of the village street. On a flat stone between the upper windows was a sundial from which the gnomon had disappeared. From the road its motto was even in those days no longer legible; above the dial the initials "T.P." still boldly affirmed themselves, but the crumbling figures below spoke indistinctly of a date going on for three centuries ago.

It is still there. In comparison with even the smaller country houses this dwelling was not large, yet it possessed a homely dignity which its neighbour of to-day—a modern and doubtless more convenient dwelling—cannot claim. It gave assurance of a past which made appeal to the imagination, but no promise of a future to distract the attention. The front door, heavy, oaken, studded with nails, no longer creaked upon its hinges of wrought-iron, but always open lay back against the passage wall. Its latch with

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the ring handle, except by children in their play, had not been lifted for some few years; never since the old place was divided into tenements, the front doors of which open into the passage on either side. There was an almost human look about the wrinkled face of that ancient house, as if its creviced old walls had witnessed strange doings in its day and gravely pondered over various experiences.

I thought of it as the habitation of minor gentry. In such a place Tusser might have lived and written his "Five hundred points of good Husbandry." Between the leaning trunks and behind the tops of an old orchard on the side away from the church, the grey walls and red tiles of considerable farm buildings seemed to give support to the dream.

Domestic history is soon forgotten. Nobody could be persuaded to say much about it and inquiry did not earn a living wage.

"Twur where the Pitmans used to live years ago—or zo I've a-heard tell," was as much as could be got from any of the villagers; though Susan Triptree did reflect.

"Now I have a-heard—though not vor years—that one John Pitman, a wicked old bachelor-man what do lie in the church, did use to walk—but that's all gone out ver sartain sure."

Nor would one ever have desired more, but for some little evidences of old-world manners, and an old belief which came to light quite by accident. On a tablet in the chancel the name of

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"the wicked old bachelor-man" was easily found with a record of almost incredible virtues.

Another tablet recorded a marriage which seemed to be of interest to me. Shortly afterwards, during meanderings of an entirely idle antiquarian research, two old wills of the name of Pitman of Bittleton came under notice. The earlier was proved quite at the beginning of the eighteenth century and the other about five and twenty years later.

In the first, one Thomas Pitman, gentleman, having two sons and wishing to deal justly by them, could think of no plan better than to divide the house as well as the land. It was a devise not altogether uncommon in former days under these circumstances. The old house faces plain south, and, in this instance, Thomas devised the kitchen and the parlour

*"which do stand off the east of the entrance passage to my son Thomas and the great room and the little buttry, which do stand on the west of the entrance passage, to my son John. And the great chamber and the little chamber to the east of the staircase to my son Thomas and the guest chamber and the inner chamber to the west of the staircase to my son John and the entrance passage and the staircase to be held in common to my sons Thomas and John to be used by them without let or hindrance."*

Every part of the house was mentioned in  
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greatest detail, and the garden, which is square, lent itself to an absolutely equitable partition—

*"All that parcel of the garden that lyeth to the east of the middle garden path to my son Thomas and all that parcel that lyeth to the west of the middle garden path to my son John and the middle garden path and the garden house which standeth at the end of the middle garden path to be held in common by my sons Thomas and John to their use without let or hindrance."*

Nothing could be more complete, more thoughtful or more fair, and yet it would appear that the arrangement did not promote brotherly love and unity.

From the second will, which is the will of John Pitman, of Bittleton, gentleman, it will be seen that Thomas married and was prolific, and it may be considered well-established that John remained a bachelor. He mentions no children of his own, but descendants of his brother to the second and even third generations.

*"To my brother Thomas the sum of one shilling."*

*"To Thomas, the son of my brother Thomas, the sum of one shilling."*

*"To Anne the daughter of my brother Thomas the sum of one shilling."*

The legatees are legion, but the end was reached at last with:

*"To Anne the daughter of Thomas the grandson of my brother Thomas the sum of*  
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*one shilling to be paid on the day when she attaineth to the age of one and twenty years.*

As John was without issue, his portion of the old house returned to the Pitmans, but not an acre of his land did he leave to any of his own name. He merely bequeathed all relations a shilling apiece to show they were not forgotten. He would not even have his name recorded on the same stone with them, but instructed his executors to erect a suitable tablet to his memory in the parish church of Bittleton. However, all this talk of the wills is but a preamble to a discovery which has since occurred.

A short time ago the old house came into the market and found a wealthy purchaser anxious to restore it. Alterations were made to meet modern requirements, the great chimney with its adjacent oven was built up to endose a kitchen range, and hanging within, from a nail driven into the chimney beam, was found the heart of some animal no longer with certainty to be identified, but stuck full of ancient nails bound together with twine. Smoke-dried and shrunk to about the size of a walnut, but for the nails and the twine, it might have passed for a lump of soot. It was in the chimney of Thomas at the east end of the house.

There is no evidence to associate it with the family feud; but one cannot help remembering the wills, also the nails were of an obsolete pattern and might easily have been hammered out two centuries ago—it may be the wife of Thomas, or even Anne practised this sorcery and perhaps  
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believed it successful: perhaps the whole family joined in the incantation:

"It is not this heart I wish to burn  
But the heart of John Pitman I wish to turn  
Wishing him neither rest nor peace  
Till he is dead and gone."

Such hearts were sometimes used as a countercharm against witches believed to have worked spells either upon people or cattle, or to prevent some dreaded witch from entering the house by way of the chimney. The heart of a bullock or a pig was substituted for the old waxen image well known to the sorcery of ancient Egypt, and was expected to bring about the death of any person against whom the spell was uttered. As the wax melted in the heat of the fire so the victim would waste to death. Doubtless the idea of a likeness was associated with the image, and our ancestors may not have considered themselves experts in the modelling of wax. But whether of bullock, pig, or man—a heart is a heart. When filled with nails, needles, pins, or thorns, and brought under the spell, it must surely bring about a painful and speedy death.

A belief in such sympathetic destruction has been held by all races and at all times. It would be easy to quote instances gathered from every quarter of the globe, if it were not undesirable at present to wander from our English village street.

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I fancy when the heart was merely protective, hag-riding was the dreaded evil sought to be prevented. The horseshoe on the threshold kept  
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the witch out by day, and the heart in the chimney prevented nocturnal incursions.

Bittleton has greatly changed since first I knew it. It has been "developed," as they say. There are villa residences and bungalows. A large garage with glaring advertisements, petrol-pump, and all, stands at the entrance to what was once described as the "littlest, most-one-eyedest" village in the country.

But the old house is there to-day, restored, but not out of recognition. Unmoved, with solemn dignity it looks down upon the summer procession of charabancs that carry trippers from far distant cities to picnic on Chipping Down.

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XIII.

THE OLD GRIST MILL

A BROOK as clear as crystal runs down the village at Bittleton, and at the bottom of the village is a bridge of one bow upon which gossips used to congregate of a summer evening. Sometimes the miller's boy strolled up the bank of the stream with his concertina and sat upon the wall, while the lads and maidens danced to his tunes until dark. But that was a modern innovation, a sort of survival from merrier days. The old grist mill is little more than a furlong below, but few go there now.

Sweetly placed in that quiet valley, its roofs half hidden among tall trees, the little grist mill, seen from the bridge, suggests the secrecy and seclusion of a bird's nest even when a column of rising smoke announces the presence of a home. A mill was there before the church tower was built. It occupied that site before Domesday came to record it. And all down the centuries it was the heart of the village social life until at last its pulse had almost stopped.

Under the feudal system the mill was the possession of the Lord of the Manor, and the use of it was compulsory upon all. Freeman, villain, or

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serf, all must carry their grist to the lord's mill. It was worked on his behalf by a millward, a very important personage in the life of the village. He ground the corn and took the toll for his lord. His ancient title still remains in the rhyme which children sing to the great dusty moth, supposed to be the soul of a dead miller:

"Millerdy, Millerdy, dowsty-pole.  
How many pecks have you a-stole?"

And in dialect, except when his trade is associated with his surname, a miller is still a "millerd." Gradually the ward changed into a tenant, but he was not able to alter the tolls. He must clearly set them forth on a board in the millhouse for all to see, because



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the bringers of grist had a customary right to the tolls established on the manor. For this reason tolls varied in different parts of the country. A modern mill with no established custom was free to make such terms with its customers as might be agreed upon between them.

But this is ancient history, having nothing in this world to do with the modern industry of chestnut gathering. And why should the sight of a boy in a smock sitting on a wall and playing a concertina direct my mind to the subject of customary tolls? It also directed my steps to the old grist mill.

The mill-wheel was still and a jet of water was running over the weir. The gate into the mill-yard was open and held back by a great stone. The mill-house was also open but the door

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of the dwelling was closed. It was of old oak studded with large nails and it had a brass knocker and was entered by three steps, so that it had a most respectable appearance. The steps might be a reminiscence of days long ago when the yard was subject to floods. The roof was tiled with flat stones now covered with green moss and yellow lichen. The purple button of the house-leek, growing from the chinks and crevices between the stones were opening into flower. That roof was a wonder of colour.

I stood hesitating whether to knock or to go as I had come, unnoticed, when the door opened and a young woman came towards me.

"Did you wish to zee my vather?" she asked.

I am fond of all old places and was admiring the house-leek on the roof, I explained.

" 'Twas a-planted there a-purpose, or zo they do zay, time o' mind. The house where 'tis can't never be struck by lightin' ne'et can't catch vire. An' 'tis a wonderful cure vor all complaints. My vather is to market. If you be a-minded to look round you be welcome—an' I'll be pleased to show ee what there is."

She was of medium height and rather comely than beautiful. A blue pinafore covered her from neck to skirt. She came of a race that was proud but suffered no affectations—that was full of prejudices, but honest at heart even when its judgment was unsound. Their name was Chilcott. It was something to be a Chilcott, and every Chilcott knew it. Her hazel eyes looked me in the face without a trace of self-consciousness. A

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film of flour, thin as the bloom upon a plum, lay upon her cheek and upon her brown hair. She began to talk spontaneously, without restraint, as one child to another.

"Yes. 'Tis a terr'ble wold ancient place. To hear some talk there mus' ha' been a mill here avore there were hands to build un. There! The Chilcotts have a-bin here two hundred year. 'Tis our own—or 'twas—an' is, zo vur as I do know."

She was leading the way to the mill-house and stood aside for me to enter. I saw her cast a rapid, eager glance at the road leading to the millyard, and then at the footpath across the fields. Then she entered. An ancient toll-board was on the wall in the full light of the open door. Even then they were scarce, and I stopped to read—

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"For every bushel of wheat, rye, or meslin—one quart.

"For every bushel of malt—one pint."

"A low toll!" laughed she, "one corn in two-an-thirty. But double if the miller vetches the com and carr'ed the meal home. Meslin was a mixture of rye and wheat, and made a brown bread. Now they do want it whiter 'an snow. Then they baked household bread. Now they must have baker's bread."

While she was talking we had ascended the stairs. From the little window above she scanned once more the road and the footpath. Then she pointed to the trough.

"That's the hopper that do take the corn. When the mill is at work a little wheel do shake

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the hopper an' kip on a-clacken. They do tell me I've a-got a tongue like a mill-clapper. 'Tis a saying. But all the Chilcotts be talkers. Always was. All the Chilcotts do marry young an' live long. Always did. Vather married at eighteen. I can remember my girt gran-vather. The tales that old man did tell. An' I did zit an' listen. Why the mill-yard must ha' bin like a fair them days. Coming an' going all day long. The poorer sort did bring their grist an' vetch their vLOUR—the better off did pay in money. An' now 'tis zo quiet as a church wi' no congregation."

Once more she looked out of the window.

"He could play the fiddle, too—an' zo could granfer. The fiddle is a-hanged 'pon a nail in house, but the strings be all a-broked. Of a summer he did zit 'pon the wall an' play, an' they did dancey here in yard till dark. Why 'twur merrier 'an a maypole an' nothen to pay the fiddler—an' a drop o' cider when they did sweat. An' eet there wur discontent, too. Not one in a hunderd could believe that a millerd could take fair toll. They couldn't zay zo very much, cause why? the next mill is dree mile to carry the grist. But they did sort o' pretend to talk about the millerd's bitch. You never heard tell of a millerd's bitch? Well. They meant a cunnin' little bag a-hanged up 'pon one zide under the stones to catch a bit o' the meal that wur a-rannen down to the shoot. Or they did zay he took toll twice, or changed the corn. But now there's nobody even to grumble."

"But I heard the mill humming only yesterday."

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"Pig's meat! A cart do bring it an' vetch it, an' they be always in a hurry. They can't spare a minute to talk. Why in the old days half an hour was nothen vor a gossip, an' if a lie bigger 'an common did go back wi' the vLOUR-bag, up in parish staid volk did shake their wold heads an' zay, 'Ah! Thik's a mill's tale, I do know well!'"

We were out in the yard. Not a soul was to be seen.

"It all went wi' the coming o' the horserake," she sighed. "I can remember when the leasers did come home in the dimmet, every woman o' 'em wi' a good sheaf 'pon the head o' her. Vather do keep hopes that things'll mend. I've a-got no hopes. Time do come an' time do goo—but time can't never bring back times that be past."

Her eyes were on the footpath, and her voice was sad.

"Come again when vather's home," she said, and went back into the mill.

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My hostess at "The Rose and Crown" was inquisitive. It was so strange to have a resident guest that she always wanted to know where I had been.

"I have been down to the old grist mill."

"Millerd is to market. Was anybody there besides Millerd's Priscilla?"

"Not a soul. She showed me the mill."

"She's a good girl, Prill Chilcott. But I've a-got no patience wi' the old man. Prill have a-got a young man—son o' a farmer here handy. He's

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mostly there o' market days. Vor the wold Chilcott won't hear a word o' it. He's a widow man. He can't spare her. He could vind a ooman to kip house-easy—enough. An' Prill won't wed to leave un. But the Chilcotts be terr'ble for their kin always was. I do call Millerd a zelfish old man. The maid did ought to ha' wed years ago. She do bide an' ate her heart out, an' the years do pass. Millerd is that stubborn. But the Chilcotts be stubborn. Always was. An' Prill too—Jus' zo stubborn not to leave un."

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XIV.

A REAL LADY

I MET her of a morning tripping down the village, obviously a maiden lady, but by no means an old maid. Her grey pelisse was as neat and fitted as closely as the plumage of a willow wren, as did also the plaited straw bonnet, tied beneath her chin with strings of grey ribbon and the grey cotton gloves on her small hands. Her dress was only ankle-long and white stockings appeared above low-heeled black shoes.

Lying on the hillside of a sunny sleepy afternoon, I watched her on the opposite side of the combe, searching, stooping to pick, botanising as it seemed, until she disappeared around the slope carrying a double handful of wild flowers. Yet later, in the wood, with camp-stool and easel, she appeared to be painting in water-colour the ruddy glow of the declining sun, gleaming like flames on the erect trunks and twisted branches of a group of firs. Truly she was ubiquitous. But whatever she might be or whatsoever she might be doing, her occupation revealed culture and refinement, and her movements an inborn grace that was not native to Bittleton.

"Who is this coming, Mrs. Triptree?"

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It was Sunday and church had been out about half an hour. I was in the window-seat and Mrs. Triptree was laying the cloth. She came forward but fearing to be seen stepped back in haste.

"That's Miss Arabella," she whispered, as if there might be a danger of being overheard. "Oh! She've a-got her little basket. That's barley-water. Jane Simpson's third—a little bwoy is bad wi' the chin-cough. Miss Arabella do always make barley-

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water when anybody is a-tookt bad. She've a-got a recait that there idden another 'pon earth like it. That's where she's off—down to Jane Simpson's."

"But who is she? What's her other name?"

"She's a real lady," replied Mrs. Triptree, still in a whisper. "An' very pleasant and merry. Vavisser by name. They do tell up that once they was French an' once they was Irish an' now they be nothen. Tis a-zaid that their vather an' their gran'vather drowed away everything. But they don't trouble. They be merry as crickets. I don't doubt but what their circumstances is limited"—Mrs. Triptree's diction had a way of sometimes rising to the occasion—"But they be real ladies. They've a-got pride in theirzelves like but they don't show none o' it to simple volk."

"You say they. How many are there then?"

"There idden but two, Miss Arabella and Miss Mary, but wi'outs 'tis to church or in their own house, you don't never zee 'em together an' zoo you can't tell 'em apart. Vor they do dress all off one piece an' they be o' one size and they've a-got the same gait. Their faces be'nt the zame an' eet they do feature one another too. Volk do laugh.

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But vor all that they do like 'em an' spake well o' 'em. They be real ladies, min' that."

Mrs. Triptree bustled away to fetch the repast.

To old-world simple folk the term "a real lady" possessed a clear significance, and they applied it with precision. It meant descended from gentry. Among themselves was no pretension. Their names went back to the beginning of the register. They had inter-married and were all more or less akin. They knew each other, and, except on the ground of character and decent behaviour, they cherished little idea of better and worse. In Bittleton there was no real labouring class. There were poor and prosperous. The man with nothing made hay for his cousin the largest farmer, and at harvest earned his living elsewhere or perhaps worked as a strapper in some other parish. Many were the neighbourly customs of mutual help. The giving of labour for labour was simple enough; but no dream of co-operation in business had ever disturbed the sleep of a Bittleton brain. Nor did they suffer the unrest of social ambition. Gentlefolk were by themselves on a height unattainable by humble folk, who, by instinct, recognised the real thing. If the women of Bittleton were to accept a wealthy stranger of no lineage as "a real lady" she must be one of Nature's gentry. What better can there be?

The name, of course, was Vavaseur. It was very easy to idealise these little bird-like women. They had a vivacity which was French and a humour, which triumphed over the circumstances diagnosed by Mrs. Triptree as "limited," because it was

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Irish. Their united means, with economy, enabled them to live in a remote place such as Bittleton without want. Incapable as canaries of earning a wage, they spent their days in amateur pastimes, delightful, commendable, but of small account. They were friendly to the humble and kind to the poor, but as to a nondescript lodger at "The Rose and Crown," attired in venerable garments insufficiently brushed, how could a more undesirable person be imagined? Yet by an accident we were to become acquainted.

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There had been distant thunder and late in the afternoon a heavy shower. The hedgerows, the tall willow herbs and hemp-agrimony in the ditches were dripping wet. The air was laden with the scent of the August honey-suckle. It wanted an hour to sunset, and the gaps between the heavy purple clouds that lingered in the west were gleaming in crimson and gold as if from fierce conflagration in the heavens beyond. The sides of the elms, the tops of the hedgerows glistening with raindrops, sparkled with a various brilliancy of colours not their own, but borrowed from the sky. It was heaven taking a glance at earth. And behind was the deep gloom of the cloud, dark, ominous and threatening. Yet on it, far away, hung a brief segment of a rainbow, although rain was no longer falling in the lane. It was a moment to stand enthralled, enraptured before the glory of that cosmos which at best we only glimpse, and which no human mind as yet can grasp.

Struggling with awkward haste to cross the road  
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was a toad. The shower had called him forth. The toad does not awaken affection within me. Admitting his harmlessness and utility, yet an hereditary antipathy remains from the countless generations by which he has been feared and hated. With my stick I humorously tapped upon the stones behind him. He went no faster. He was doing his best. So I also went upon my way.

Everything was still. It was too late in the year for the singing of birds. The air was close and the silence was oppressive. Suddenly behind my back arose a clamour of youthful voices. A group of boys has come out of a field, and among them one bigger than the rest.

"Hobbledoy—Hobbledoy, Hobbledy-hoy—  
Not a man and not a boy."

They had found the toad. He picked up a flat piece of wood left when the gate had been repaired, placed the toad upon it and struck with his stick. Click! The wood and the toad leapt into the air and fell in the lane. I saw one of the real ladies—was it Miss Arabella or Miss Mary?—clamber over the gate and run. The boys stood in astonishment. She picked up the toad. But why should this foreigner come interfering? The hobbledyhoy began to talk. They found the toad. The toad was theirs. And that was the right way to treat a toad. This may have been his argument. His voice was audible enough, but the words were not distinguishable. So I yelled with all my might as I ran towards them!

The boys talking and jeering drew reluctantly away towards the village.  
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Trembling with agitation she was standing with her face towards the light. The tears in her eyes were larger than the raindrops on the leaves. She was of that fairness which easily blushes and the glow of the sunset heightened the crimson upon her cheeks. Her eyes were fixed upon the toad lying motionless upon the palm of her hand. Truly it

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looked as beautiful as tortoiseshell. The look of pity on her face was from within and finer than the sunlight on the heads of the elms.

"I do not think he is really injured. Let me put him in the moist ditch and he will recover."

"No, no," she said quickly. "The boys might come back and find him. I will carry him home and put him in our garden. She took out her handkerchief and wrapped the toad in it.

"Oh! how could they do it! Cannot they see the beauty in living things?"

Then I saw that the pity was for the boys.

"You must let me come with you and carry your things," said I.

She hesitated, and a look of fatigue flitted across her countenance.

"It would be very kind of you," she said.

As we walked up the village street she recovered sufficiently to talk freely.

"You must come in and see my sister Arabella. My sister and I have entirely different tastes. But that is quite a good thing. We say it doubles our interests."

She gave a little twittering bird-like laugh.

"We go our own ways. But in wet days and in the evenings we read aloud— half an hour each

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by turns. Last night we began a new story. Arabella is a beautiful reader and did you justice. We both wished we could know you. But there was no expectation of it. Arabella will be glad."

They lived in the little thatched house with the old brass knocker, so often to be found in a village. The garden was well kept and beautiful. Miss Mary led me in; Miss Arabella cordially welcomed me.

"I was beginning to feel just a wee bit anxious," she confessed. "But Mary! by what wily stratagem did you annex him?"

They laughed most merrily. Then Miss Mary told the woeful story of the toad.

"Horrible little wretches!" cried Miss Arabella. Her next thought was of pity for them. "Can nothing be done? Is there no way of showing them better?"

"Did not Hannah More establish a night school?" I suggested, half in jest.

"A night-school! A night-school!"

We were uncertain about Hannah More. The idea seemed excellent—then impossible.

"We could not do it, Mary."

"Not without assistance, Arabella."

I told them nothing could be done until the short winter days. The first step would be to find a room. That almost at once I was going away to a wedding and to spend a few days at home. That my intention was to return for the winter, and we might make the attempt then.

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XV.

THE WITCH OF BITTLETON

WHEN everybody believed in witchcraft doubtless there were a great many who secretly practised it. The poor wretches who repeated at the foot of the gallows the confession which had brought them there had most likely committed acts of sorcery, and did not depart with a lie upon their lips. Others innocent of malice suffered years of misery and persecution. The reputation of Elizabeth Butt was widespread; but, of course, the minds of those people who still believed in witchcraft would greedily swallow any tale that assured them of the existence of a witch. Moreover, the mothers of Bittleton instilled fear in the minds of their children. Elizabeth Butt once gave a drink of goat's milk to a weakly child who was coughing in the road before her door. It was considered dangerous to accept a gift from a witch. The mother was furious. The children of Bittleton were warned in the most impressive manner.

"If Elizabeth Butt do ever offer to gie ee anything, don't you take it. Don't you tich o' it. Don't you so much as look at it. Mind that now. If tidden no more 'an an apple or a gooseberry. Mind that now."

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Infancy grew into adolescence, leading to early weddings and another generation, and the tradition was carried on. Yet with all their fear and detestation of Elizabeth folk were very anxious not to offend her.

Her ways were strange. Nobody in Bittleton had ever kept goats, but Elizabeth possessed two "nannies." She led them into quiet corners of unfrequented ways, and tethered them on bits of waste sward. She was not interfered with. More than once of a cold winter a smallholder who dreaded the evil eye, and knew what harm a witch could do to stock, had given her an armful of hay for her goats. But goats! Why, the devil is the goat's barber! A billygoat goes to the Wold Nick to have his beard trimmed.

She worked industriously in her little garden. Dug, sowed and planted, flat-hoed, round-hoed, went on her marrowbones and weeded by hand; and the goats ate of the "rubbage" every leaf and root that was edible by an animal whose mentality can hope to extract nourishment from a dishcloth blown from a clothes-line. Those who cultivated weeds were sure that "the wold Nick comed by night an' done a bit o' gardenen vor she." She was often seen on the road with a hearthshovel and a goat harnessed to a deal box on wheels, and yet when they saw the beauty of her crops they wondered how ground that never was dunged could keep in such good heart. "Vor you can't count thik bit she do pick up in a tayspoon." Then they shook their heads. It was well known that by spells a witch could appropriate

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the fruit and crops by good right belonging to another soil.

Neighbours returning after candlelight from some distant market now and again noticed a light in her downstairs window, and wondered what devil's game Elizabeth

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might be up to now so late. But when the house was dark they only hoped the wold witch was a-bed, and not out on her broomstem to hag-ride some poor body tired out with a hard day's work. It was impossible for one with the reputation of a witch to do anything that did not give ground for suspicion.

At the fourcross-way generally known as "Bittleton Vive Elms," Elizabeth had tethered a goat under the trees, and stood watching it feed. Her back was towards me. She gave no heed to a mere passerby. I stopped as if to look at the goat. On a Somerset road folks speak to each other without hesitation, and strangers often even stop and talk. Indeed, it was formerly unusual to go by without a salutation.'

"She has a bit of good herbage in the shade," said I.

She turned quickly but did not reply. She fixed her eyes upon me with a look that seemed to ask, how dare you speak to me? They were keen grey eyes in a face of something less than threescore, even-featured but sunburnt and weather-beaten. The superstitious might indeed feel afraid of them. She saw a stranger, maybe a wayfarer; for how should she learn that a visitor was staying at "The Rose and Crown"? Here was one who had never heard of her—never thought ill of her. The hard  
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look melted away. Her apprehensions vanished. A gentle light as of secret welcome softened her countenance.

"I do do my best to kip 'em well, vor they do a'most kip me."

She spoke with the varying modulation, so noticeable to strangers from distant parts who say that the speech of West country folk is a sing-song.

"They are wayward and obstinate, are they not?"

"Oh no! dear no! You can larn 'em anything, if you do go at it patient and quiet. I've got a wold table an' chair out in back garden. When I do tell 'em, they do jump up 'pon top an' I do zit knees under table an' milk 'em. You can't zit to a goat like you can to a cow. 'Tis volk that do trate things bad that do zay they've a-got noo sense. You can harden the heart of anything by ill-treatment in time—whether 'tis man, ooman or beast."

She spoke with heat. It might be resentment at the memory of some cruelty practised upon a tethered animal.

"Are they safe by the roadside? Don't boys ever throw stones at them? or set on a dog to worry them?"

"Boys!" she cried almost fiercely, "Boys ud be afeared o' their lives what I should do to 'em. I do goo in no fear o' boys, thank God."

She had turned away and seemed to be giving expression to the emotion aroused by the word "boys," rather than to the answering of my

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question. Did she really believe herself a witch? Or did she value the reputation that protected her?

"But what could you do?" I asked.

She came to herself at once. "Nothen at all," she answered, quietly; "I should never goo to law nor have 'em up. But they can't know that."



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She paused a moment. Then stretched a lean finger towards the goat.

"When I do come up on a main road like this I do wait till she do stop aten an' lie down. Then I do lead her home. All I wish vor is to be left alone in peace. I don't want to harbour no spite in the heart o' me. Ne'et to have words nor bickerens. My little house is my own. I do want to be alone wi' my own thoughts. I've a-got vive butts o' bees too. I do ate the milk an' honey o' Scriptures an' I do pray vor milk an' honey in my thoughts. I do wish not to think no evil. I do wish to do nobody no harm. If volk have a-doned me wrong I do wish not to dwell 'pon it. I do wish vor to vorgie. I do wish to live by myself in peace until do plase the Almighty to call me. An' the little house is me own. An' he'll bury me wi' no call 'pon the parish."

And they thought she was a witch—this woman with the spirit of an anchoress. She glanced at the goat still browsing busily.

"She must ha' bin leary," she said. "She do mean, to have a belly-vull, sim-zo."

I was tongue-tied as a fool. There was nothing that could be said.

"There is times when I do long to speak out  
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to zomebody," she went on. "Vor years an' years I've a-talked to nobody but my ownself. When I looked ee in the face I simmed to veel as if I had a-zeed 'ee avore. But I han't never zeed 'ee avore an' I shant never zee 'ee no more. They do zay I be a witch. There was a wicked drinken veller told up lies about me. Vor years an' years I've a-turned my head away vrom everybody. But I zaid in myself like here's one that wont go about an' yappy, if I do tell un my secret thoughts. You won't yappy will 'ee, zo long as I do live, an' when I be gone 'tis no odds—

"I wur like the rest once. I set all my heart 'pon a man but it comed to nothen. Then I did goo out a-nurse-tenden vor years. But I couldn't kip on wi' it. I could'n kip on a-bringen children into th' wordle—vor other wimmen."

The nanny had stopped feeding and came from under the trees and lay down in the sun.

"I shall be this way again in the winter and then I shall look for you."

She only shook her head, took the tether and led the goat away down the hill towards Bittleton.

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XVI.

A TALE OF THOMAS

My intercourse with Thomas was seriously curtailed when I went away to school, and thus my education suffered. Holidays were short in those days. In the summer we were taken to the seaside. At Christmas we had only three weeks, chiefly occupied in seasonable festivities. On my return on one occasion I learned that Thomas had passed out of sight. The story of his unpremeditated departure was narrated by many tongues, each commenting upon the conduct of Thomas from a different point of view.

My father said, "I put up with that man quite long enough. Insolent fellow!"

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The cook said "A pretty thing indeed if a body is not to have a clean pat o' butter—  
an' zo many lies about it all so well."

The housemaid said "If there is one man more 'an another I do hate—'tis a liar."

It was evident that the outstanding difficulty in that matter of the fetching of the butter had come to a crisis. After diligent inquiry and piecing of the reports together, this seemed to be the history of a very lamentable event.

An elderly dairy farmer of genial disposition,  
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stout, rubicund, and highly-respected, had retired to a homely little dwelling by the roadside on the outskirts of the town. With the house went a paddock, an orchard, and five acres of grass. His name was John Budd, and with him lived his daughter Amelia, a long, lean, bony lady of between forty and fifty, whose name was also Budd. John Budd was a genial humorist. Amelia was of a becoming severity deficient in humour, but some fairy godmother must have bestowed upon her the richest of earthly gifts—" a wonderful cool han' vor the maken o' butter." They reared poultry—geese, ducks and pullets, and kept three cows, two red Devons and an Alderney, and Amy continued to make butter of superlative excellence. Everybody knew that Miss Budd was a very worthy woman. Nobody had ever accused her of a folly, and Amelia's temperament was not subject to attacks of self-accusation. Thomas could not have displayed his weakness before any human being more unsuitable and more unsympathetic.

The surplus of butter beyond Miss Budd's requirements was coveted by all the town. We had known the Budds when they lived up the other side of Wells, and were privileged purchasers. When grass was plentiful and the cows in full pail, rather than imperil this position we consumed butter regardless of the established principles of household economics. In winter we were sometimes driven to the grocer. But the Budd butter, being a recognised favour, had to be fetched. Thomas "could not a-bear the vetchen o' budder."

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A summer day—a dry and thirsty day—a market day in the afternoon. Dust lay upon the road inch-deep as white and fine as flour. Flocks and herds were passing in constant procession, so that the road was half-hidden in a cloud of dust.

"I never didn' zee noo jitch smeech o' pillum not in all my born-days," grumbled Thomas.

He had already taken a glass too much, for he talked aloud as he passed down the street with the basket on his arm. He turned into the Ring of Bells—the old inn at the cross roads just at the end of the town where the coaches used to meet. There he bawled his discontent to the company in the taproom:

"Tidden noo job vor a gardener to be a-zend 'pon arrants to vetch budder. Be dalled if I do stan' it. I'd zooner to lef'."

The little crowd encouraged Thomas. They roared with laughter to find him so "fesse." A pig-jobber who had known him when he was a labourer stood him a pint, and Thomas staggered on his way, elated but more truculent than ever. The leaves of the hedgerow were white with dust. Thomas hurried past a flock "zo as to git avore out o'

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the smeech," and found himself at the tail of a herd. He puffed and blew and wiped the sweat from his forehead, and muttered to himself all the way.

"I be dry—terr'ble dry. I be that dry I couldn' spit a zixpence. Not vor ten poun' I couldn' spit a zixpence. I be that dry. . ."

But there was always a glass of cider at Mr. Budd's. Very soon he was rapping at the door of

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the lean-to dairy at the back of the house. A slip of a maid came out to door.

"I be that dry"—but she took the basket and ran in. Thomas turned and contemplated the orchard.

"A goodish crop—a tidy crop. A plenty o' cider to year—"

There came a footstep on the dairy Ragstones. Miss Budd stood in the doorway. Thomas greeted her with a smile.

"Good addernoon, Miss. 'Tis teerr'bl hot. I be zo dry. I be so dry I—"

Miss Budd fixed him with a grey eye uncompromising and cold as steel.

"I shall not give you cider. You are in liquor already—and scarcely in a condition to be trusted with butter." But she strode towards the kitchen gardens to procure cabbage leaves to line the basket as was her wont.

"A girt, long-lagged, scraggy, nip-cheese ov a shamblen maypole ov a wold maid." Thomas did not say it to her face but behind her back. He was only talking to himself, and a delighted little red-cheeked maid stood sniggering in the doorway. The lady strode back into the house. The slip of a maid, subdued almost to tears, brought out the basket, floored, upholstered, and roofed with cool cabbage leaves—the precious butter, enclosed in a spotless napkin secure as the yolk in a white egg-shell, concealed within.

A drover and his boy witnessed the accident.

"One o' Thomas's veet sart o' hitched hiszelf up wi' tother an' down he comed. An' the

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bastick turned auver an' there wur the budder all auver the shop. An' Thomas zot down an' they helped un scrape it clean like wi' a bit o' stick out o' the hedge, an' they put it back vor un tidy like, an' he went on." That was the story told on the following market day.

Thomas gave a different explanation. He said it was "Rots. Thik would house is vull o' rots. Why you can zee the toothmarks."

"Rats!" cried the cook. "Why, there's the dust o' the road all over it. An' you yourself be zo white as a miller."

Then Thomas retorted: "To vetch budder an' not zee it a-put in is a girt respons'bil'ty. I wunt vetch no more budder. I'd zooner lef."

Thomas left.

He worked on farms as a strapper. His wages were lower, and when he brought them home his wife nagged. In the winter he was out of work. Then he joined the Rechabites. There was a stubbornness in that man's nature, and once identified with that society, then active in the neighbourhood, he became stubborn against himself.

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Thomas had come back.

Perched on the topmost rung of a ladder he was clipping back the "ivory" which covered the east end of the house. Thomas loved clipping back "ivory." It harboured birds. It encouraged snails. He had nothing but abuse to bestow upon ivy and its only merit was that it could be clipped. Get him against an ivy-covered wall with shears  
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in his hand, and as he snipped he knew himself an artist and would talk as fast as any barber.

"Thomas!" I shouted up at him. "Did you ever hear of anybody being hag-rod?"

He began to descend the ladder.

"When I wur a bouy we lived next door to a witch. Vather an' mother an' all o' 'em was a-hag rod. Thik wold witch she did ride a broom stem an' come down chimbley and goo up in chimmer an' zit 'pon their chestes one ader another—one night one, next night tother. She did goo round to 'em zo reglar as the nights did bring sleep, an' they vound it very illconvenient—mos' terrible illconvenient."

He stood in the path and chewed his beard.

"Thik wold witch did sar my poor zister awful. Jus' zo very zoon as my zister did shut her eyes an' vall off to sleep like, her'd come an' hag-ride thik poor maid. Her didn' act always alike, mind that. Woone night her'd come and zit herzelf down quat right 'pon tap o' the maid's two breastes—an' 'nother time her'd bring a liddle dree-legged milken-stool an' zit 'pon he, an' that wur the wo'st, cause then thik wold witch did bide and wiggley an' rocky. Her wur like a ton weight 'pon tap o' anybeddy. I do reckon her could git up a-straddle o' thik liddle milken-stool an' ride wherever her wur a-minded zame's her could 'pon a besom vor sartain-sure. Oh! T'were agony. An' my poor zister did try to hollar—but she could'n make the leastest zoun! Poor blid! She valled away mos' terr'ble, and werden no other ways 'an a natomy—a reg'lar skelington.

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"Do what we 'ood, we couldn' kip the hag out. The poor maid wur like to die sure enough. Could'n never git a wink o' sleep. Then woone day, there chanced to come a cousin o' mother's. He wur a terr'ble knowledgy man, he wur. An' he said, 'Mine this. Noo witch can't never come atween two edges.' Zo vather, he got two wold zives, an' hanged woone o' em under bed edge up, an' tother athirt 'pon tap, like, edge down. An' that's how we got avorehand wi' thik wold hag. Her never didn' come no more. But my poor zister, her never didn' pick up not proper like. Her wur a'ways a-troubled wi' the information, an' suffered at times wi' sich a hesitation in her inzide."

"That must have been a dream, Thomas, about the three-legged milking stool."

"I tell 'ee, when thik poor ooman did come down in marnin', there was the prints o' the dree lags, whur thik wold hag did rocky and wiggley. Vor I zeed it wi' my own eyes. Zo you can belave it or no jus' as you be a-minded. But there's a wuss cuss 'an

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witchen"—he waved the shears up and down. "Drink. I wunt never tich o' it not by lip neet han'. I'll vetch budder, but I wunt never goo noo arrant vor drink. Zo there!"

He moved the ladder, mounted three rungs, and clipped savagely.

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XVII.

THE EVE OF THE WEDDING

THE engagement of Tilly Buck and Jacob Thatcher was formally settled, with the giving of a ring, at the reconciliation which took place on the Sunday following the Saturday night tiff. Tilly could not go to church, but remained at home brushing the flour out of her hair. Jacob knocked. Tilly was forced to run downstairs—just as she was with a towel over her shoulders and her hair down her back—because there was nobody else in the house. Tilly was both surprised and confused. The contrition of Jacob was most pitiable.

"Will you please to walk in, Mr. Thatcher," said Tilly. Tilly admitted that her hair being fair, it was not quite the same as if her hair had been black. Jacob explained with emotion that up a week ago he had fixed on this Sunday to come over and pop the question. He had loved her ever so long. He had come to think that Tilly did care for him a little. He had provided himself with a ring—in case—words failed, but in proof he produced the ring from his waistcoat-pocket.

Tilly admitted that her thoughts had sometimes dwelt upon Jacob, or she couldn't have walked out with him as she sometimes did. He took her hand.

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"La, Jacob! However did ee guess the size so exact?" So they were reconciled and engaged, all in ten minutes. It was summer, with no fire on the hearth. They sat together in the courting corner and loved without the trouble of words, until the hymn, "Not all the blood of beasts" was heard from the village church. Then Tilly jumped up.

"I mus' hurry an' put up my hair," cried she. She bent down and kissed Jacob once more. "Vor they mid come in vrom church any minute now."

They came. Jacob said nothing. When Tilly came down with the ring on her finger the excitement was very great.

At once arose the question of the choice of the wedding day. Placid Mrs. Buck was not in favour of long engagements. The girls were for having the wedding as soon as the bridesmaids' dresses could be made. There were long consultations and frequent references to the almanac.

"An' when would be the most convenient time to you, John?" asked Mrs. Buck.

"The quickest you be a-minded ader the harvest is a-carried," cried Farmer John Buck.

"But when will that be?" submissively inquired his wife.

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"How can I tell that, Missus? That don't res' wi' I. I don't control the weather," he replied testily.

"But there's many arrangements to make, John."  
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"Noo doubt."

"Wull! You can't marry a maid like zellen a bullock. I should think the end o' September would be a good time. Bring on the almanac, Jinny."

"La, mother. 'Tis vull moon September the 10th. The moon is dead against it all the end o' the month. 'Tis zaid September the first is a very lucky day to marry." Jinny had learnt the almanac by heart.

"What day do that come on?" asked Mary.

"A Wednesday," cried Jinny. "That's all right."

"Monday for wealth,  
Tuesday for health,  
Wednesday the best day of all;  
Thursday for losses,  
Friday for crosses,  
Saturday no luck at all."

"Couldn' be better. September the first."

The girls clapped their hands.

"How would that be, John, do ee think?" asked Mrs. John Buck.

"I tell ee what 'tis, Missus. I be a bit tired o' zo much chackle. 'Tis nothen else marnen, noon, an' night. Vor all the world like a passel of wold hens."

Farmer John Buck carried off his pipe to the quiet shade of the medlar-tree.

"Zo that's all right," whispered mother to her maidens. "Let's vix on September the vust wi'out more talk. The next time you do chance to vall in wi' Jacob, Tilly, you'd better to call to mind to name the day—September the vust."

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This was but a mere "vust gwaine off," as Farmer John Buck quickly discovered, though he was not again consulted on any detail.

Daily the excitement increased. There were such measurings—such matchings—such tryings on—such takings-in and lettings-out. Jinny was certainly full in the back. "Why 'tis like a zackbag 'pon me—zo big as a bolster," she cried. And then Mary was every bit so tight. "Why, if I should lift a arm I shall go pop," she predicted.

"An' what can Tilly have for something old?" They both cried at once:

"Something old,  
Something new,

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Something borrowed.  
Something blue  
And a sprig of vuz."

"I've a-got yer gran'mother's wedden shoes a-put away, an' she wur a very happy wife an' brought up eight, an' I wur the littlest—an' more 'an that, I wore 'em my own zelf when I wed wi' your vather, an' there han't a'ben nothen to complain o'. Zo do tokenny well. An' they be white satin, as good as new," said mother.

"To be sure, a bride is a'most all new," said Jinny.

"An' I'll lend her a shimmy for borrowed," chimed in Mary; "but what shall she have for blue?"

"I don't want to wear anything blue. A bride ought to be all in white," objected Tilly.  
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"But you mus', Tilly."

"To kip your love true, Tilly."

"Both your loves to the very end, Tilly."

With a toss of her head Tilly declared that there was no need to wear blue for that. Nothing on earth could ever make her love cool off. "An' I do veel all zo sur e o' Jacob—zo there. An' he do zay the zame."

Both the girls argued that there were so many tales about married folk that it was just as well to take every precaution. At last a compromise was arrived at. A little bow of blue baby ribbon was to be put under Tilly's sleeve, just at the very armpit, where it would be unlikely to attract attention.

"An' I do know where anybody can always make sure to vind a bit o' vuz in vlower," cried Jinny in triumph.

"I won't have vuz—nasty prickly stuff."

"But do bring gold, Tilly."

"Then you can put it in tother armpit if you do wish vor it zo much. But no prickles—mind that. An' now there is one thing I do want o' ee. 'Tis terr'ble unlucky to lie under a patchwork quilt you've a-made your own zelf wi'out help. When I put my patchwork quilt away I left dree patches. They be put away too, all han'pat in readiness, an' maybe now you'd put in a patch apiece—now that I have a-got a use vor un. I had it in my mind to ask ee if ever I should wed."

The sentiment was recognised as beautiful even touching. When Mrs. John Buck came to

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sew in her patch she had to get Jinny to thread the needle, and the tear fell upon the stitch.

Time so industriously employed could not fail to pass quickly, and almost before they were aware of it the 31st of August brought the eve of Tilly Buck's wedding day.

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The Thatchers had a wealth of relatives sprinkled all over the country, and so had the Bucks. As by law, weddings in those days must be celebrated before noon, folk from a distance drove down on the eve of the happy day, and quite early in the afternoon the Abbey yard was filled with market-carts all fitted in, the shafts of one under the tailboard of the next in front. There is no end to the number of human beings who can pack themselves upon important occasions into a market-cart.

And so the kitchen was early filled with guests. And all the friends were there—Miller Toop, the young John Snook and his wife, Mr. John Budd and his daughter, Miss Amelia Budd.

Then the women grew sentimental and gave warnings.

"An' whatever you do do, Tilly, my dear, don't ee turn your head to catch zight o' yourself in the glass not ader you be dressed vor church. Vor there idden nothen more unlucky."

And the men as they grew merrier and merrier became more and more facetious, so that Amelia Budd had to shake her head and frown upon her father more than once.

Then alas! when it was growing on to dusk,  
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heavy clouds arose and covered all the sky and a steady rain came pattering against the windowpanes. But they made haste to close the shutters and tried to forget it. Mrs. John Snook assured Tilly it would be fine to-morrow because the little woman was out in her weather box, and she had never known the little woman tell a lie. Yet now and again Tilly ran to door to peep and truly the rain did seem to be less. So she cheered up.

"An' verily and truly, Tilly," said her mother, "I do believe all is ready, an' we havn't a-vorgot one single thing."

"No, mother, I don't believe we have. As I zaid to Jacob, all is prepared—an' all we've a-got to do now is to pray vor a little sun."

Then John Budd in the chimney seat laughed outright and shouted, "Don't ee offer too many petitions, Tilly, or you mid be answered wi' a twin, or mid be a triplet. Cheer up. I can count dree stars up chimbley."

The promise of the three stars that Mr. John Budd counted overnight, looking down the chimney at him through a rift in the cloud as he sat in the corner, was fulfilled. The ringers came to welcome the wedding morning with an early peal. Tilly jumped out of bed and ran to her window that looked out upon the orchard. The thousands of unripe, yellow-green apples that covered the twigs of the old trees as close as grapes were glistening in the early sunshine. The face of the sky showed not a trace of a care or a frown, but smiled upon roof and church-tower beyond the trees serene as the countenance of a soul with

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nothing to conceal. Jinny was already in the garden attaching wedding favours to the tops of the bee-butts.

Tilly sat in the window-seat and saturated herself in the slanting beams of the morning light. But Jinny caught sight of her, and presently they all came and buzzed around her and brought her food and attended upon her as workers attend upon a queen



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bee. They would not let her come downstairs. For fear lest Tilly might catch sight of herself by accident and to make sure, her mother turned the looking-glass face to the wall, just as she did in expectation of thunder and lightning.

"For what can Tilly want to look at herself vor, when there be dree pair o' eyes only too eager to zee that all is right?"

When it came to dressing Tilly, her mother said:

"Now we mus' all dree hug ee an' kiss ee Tilly, avore we do begin, 'cause why, we dursent no more an' look at ee ader you've a-got your things on-an' not look zo terr'ble hard nother—vor veer we should crumple ee."

So they fell on Tilly's neck and all wept. But no bride can hope to be happy in her married life if she can keep dry eyes on her wedding day. And the tears were not of sorrow, but of love.

"You be the vust o' 'em, Tilly, to take wing," sobbed Mrs. Buck. "An' a mother don't bring up no second brood. I do sim I shall miss ee even if I do zee ee every day. I do zim 'tis the beginning of a new start off, zomehow."

"But tidden as if I wur a-gwaine vur, mother."

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"No, vather an' I could'n wish no differn't. We both agree you've a-done well vor yourself."

For Farmer Thatcher had two farms, and the young couple were going into the smaller homestead.

" 'Tis but a mile to walk along the tow-path on the river-bank, an' then the short cut athirt grass viels."

They consoled themselves, cast away sentiment, and set to work. Jinny first splashed the bride's eyes with cold water and rubbed down her neck with a towel. They turned her to one side and then to the other. They put forward different opinions as to which was best.

Said Mrs. John Buck: "We'd better to zen' an' vetch Mrs. John Snook, as her father done so well in the drapery trade, to step up an' zay what she do think."

Martha Snook spoke with certainty as to what can be done with propriety and what can not. She was found an invaluable support and stayed and helped dress the bridesmaids.

At last they came down the broad stone steps that monks had worn into hollows centuries ago altogether and of one mind. "If zome volk do wish to vind a-fau't—why! let 'em do it."

The guests were waiting, two and two, an even number, as the occasion demands. It is inviting misfortune to have an odd number of wedding guests. Farmer John Buck, in his beaver hat, the blue floptail, the red waistcoat, buckskins, and top boots that he only wore to church, offered his arm to his daughter as they stood in the front garden

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and waited between the mulberry tree and the flower knot. The little crowd of villagers, all with "tutties" in their button-holes or on their breasts, and the youths, with further

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floral decorations in their hats, peered through the gates, and the women-folk agreed that Miss Tilly did really "look a angel in her white and veil."

But still they waited.

At last the church dock began to strike the hour of eleven. It is unlucky if the clock should strike while the bridal party is in the church, and there was no need to stop the clock, since they were sure to be out before twelve. How slowly the strokes followed each other while everybody silently counted! At last all was safe. Then the procession proceeded slowly along the raised causeway, paved with flagstones, which abuts upon the orchard wall and passed out of sight into the church porch. Many questions of supreme interest as to what really took place at certain points of the ceremony afterwards yielded subjects for discussion at the wedding dinner. But it is certain that long before the striking of the hour of noon the church musickers were marching well in front vigorously playing a tune which nobody identified; the village children, all in their white as if it were Whitsuntide, were strewing flowers in the path of the bride, and the sun was shining so brightly on her face that she had to half close her eyes even under the bridal veil.

"If it rain in the morning tide,  
The groom will live to bury the bride;  
If it rain in the afternoon,  
The bride will live to bury the groom."

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No prediction was possible. Not a drop of rain fell for a week.

The wedding banquet had been spread in the house—the room that people to-day would call the kitchen—and the door was locked upon it that nobody might go in. Since then the times of meals have greatly altered. Before the days of the "wedding breakfast" the nuptial feast was called a dinner. But the repast was always cold, and without vegetables, for there must be nothing green. That colour was ominous in connection with marriage.

"They that marry in green  
Their sorrow is soon seen.  
Green and white,  
Forsaken quite."

Many garments in green had at one time an undesirable significance. At a wedding dinner there must not be a sprig of parsley—there might not even be a leaf of lettuce; but the provision although homely was bountiful. There was a sweet pickle ham of impressive size, cured by Mrs. Buck and smoked a year ago, that had been hanging for months from the kitchen beam; the cockerels were of the plumpest; the bread was home-made, and so was the cake. It was a homely feast, of which nothing was boughten

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or foreign but the wines, white wine and black wine—as they used at one time to call port—to drink good wishes to the bride and bridegroom.

Scarcely was the carving-fork thrust into the  
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breast of a fowl than the mirth began. By the time the merrythought was cut off it had become boisterous. There was a moot point as to whether the bride or bridegroom rose first. One was sure that the bridegroom's knees were off the ground first, but it had to be admitted that the bride came the quickest to her full height. This left a question as to which was to "wear the breeches."

"Vor all that, there can't be no doubt that Jacob'll be butter in the han's of his missus," predicts Miller Toop.

"An' very lucky vor un, too, vor he'll be the best o' butter," shouted Mr. John Budd.

"But why should Mrs. John Snook all the time shed tears?"

"An' not a tear now and again, but both eyes a-trickle."

"An' not a bit o' good to try to bay it back wi' her handkercher."

"An' no real relief when she did sniffy."

"Now—why was it Martha?"

Then Mrs. Snook confessed that she couldn't but weep when she thought how happy a thing is married life.

"We used to assure ee o' it, Martha, but t'wur years avore you'd listen," and Farmer John Buck shook his carving-fork at her.

Then Mr. John Budd must have his say.

"Well, Mrs. Snook, if you do happen to have a wealthy next o' kin an' he should die zudden like, an' no will a-made. An' if you should carr' a onion to the funeral a-wropt up in your handkercher, so as to be sure to show a proper respec' to the

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poor departed—you'll never gie better proof of a feelin' heart an' what you have to-day."

It came to the cutting of the cake. Everybody pronounced it perfect and all the maidens put away a bit in order to dream of their lovers. When they drank to the happiness of the bride and bridegroom young Jacob Thatcher was found to be no orator, but when he lost himself Tilly prompted him in a whisper and he did well. While Tilly was gone to change herself they all told him what a lucky man he was, and no bridegroom on earth ever looked happier or ever will. Old shoes and a half-peck measure o' wheat were found concealed behind the front door. The bells rang. The efforts of the musickers were more marvellous than ever. Every throat shouted and the company poured wheat over the bride to ensure prosperity and a numerous progeny and some of it went down her back. And the biggest of the old shoes hit the bridegroom plump between the shoulders as they drove away in his two-wheel cart amid cheers and almost at a gallop.

Everybody was unanimous that it had been the luckiest and the prettiest wedding that ever had been and that the young couple were sure to be happy.

"Happy!" cried Mr. John Budd. "They be boun' to be happy—zo zure as God A'mighty made little apples."

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To the mind of the West Country nothing has given more convincing assurance of the wisdom of Providence than the creation of little apples.  
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XVIII.

THE PICNIC IN THE FRYINGPAN

THE matter had been well reasoned out in advance.

"Tull be vull early for nutten, zo if 'tis a vine day we'll have the girt wold wagon and goo vor a picnic in the vryinpan," was the conclusion arrived at, and instructions were given to the carter.

So the bride and bridegroom having departed early and in haste for some destination not disclosed, lest the love of practical joking might make them victims of ignorant and inconvenient attentions, and the bridesmaids having changed into frocks more suitable to a picnic, the company assembled at the gate, and there was not long to wait. Carter had got everything ready. The tailboard was down, and the great wagon was backed against the causeway, so that elderly people had nothing to do but to walk in. The great wagon of the past was a wonder to behold, and you may travel far to find the like. There are wagons in plenty, but they lack the beauty of the days when the village wheelwright designed his wain, and, with his sons or journeymen, built it in his workshop without aid from the outside. The raves—

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those projections that hold up the load above the wheels—are little better than shelves to-day, but in the girt wold wagon of Farmer John Buck they were ladder-like frames that swept over the higher hind wheels in graceful curves and passed with a more gentle line over the lesser fore wheels. The old wagon was a thing of beauty, with its blue sides and its lettered and ornamented foreboard giving the name of the owner and his farm, and the tail-board announcing the craftsman who built it.

A carter was always a proud man. He and the shepherd had greater responsibilities and higher wages than the others, and were therefore of the aristocracy of rural labour. To-day carter was prouder than ever—I never heard him called anything but carter—and there was a sound foundation for his pride. If for once I may use an alien word, he had made a *pergola* of his wagon. Tall wands of hazel and withy wide apart and made fast to the sides, but bent to meet and form an arch at the top, being dressed with boughs of laurel made an arbour cool and shady, yet open to the breeze. His plough—he always called his team his plough—had been groomed and rubbed into shining sleekness. His three horses—they were always called "my hosses"—were all bays, and the same sun that had conferred happiness upon the bride lit up their glossy coats and glistened on the brass ornaments that adorned the leading-reins, the martingales, and every eligible site on his harness. Into their manes he had plaited bright-coloured ribbons—red, white, and blue—

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and their long swish tails were masterpieces of equine hairdressing.

But the greatest glory was the set of bells that crowned the housing of the forehorse. They were fixed high above the collar, raised upon two rods that held up the board from which they hung, half-hidden behind a fringe of bright yellow and red—five good-sized bells, loud and each speaking a different note.

"Vok! I'll hear we a-comen a mile avore we do get there," laughed Mr. John Budd, and added, "in a manner of spaken."

And carter, standing in the causeway in a marvellous smock fresh and white from his missus's washtub—there was no time to look at it at that moment—his grey locks protruding beneath a billycock hat trimmed with a wedding favour that made him look as if he had just taken the Queen's shilling, held up his long carter's whip, with its brass ferrules rubbed brighter than gold, and shouted back:

"There wunt be noo witchen o' we not to-day. Ne'et noo pixies—not to come a-botheren the plough."

The custom of carrying large bells on the forehorse of a team, formerly common, had already gone out of fashion, much to the disapproval of carters. They affirmed that horses loved music and went prouder to the bells, and were saved from being overlooked, and all other evils. Upon great occasions, such as the going to an important fair, they managed to put them up, and certainly the carter and the carter's boy went happier for the

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music and were prouder than ever when folk turned round to admire them.

The carter's boy was perched on the forehorse. He also wore a smock with a great tutty of cabbage roses as big as a half-gallon cup under his chin and a garland of honeysuckles around his billycock hat.

So we walked into the wagon and sat down, some on rush-bottomed chairs, some on footstools, and two on the hamper. But the young chose to sit side by side on the raves between the wands under the laurels. Maidens and lads, they matched themselves up with discrimination. Mr. John Budd grinned, and half-closed his wicked little eyes until they were no more than slits.

"Ho! ho!" he shouted, " 'Tiz a-zaid one wedden do beget another, but be dalled if Tilly's wedden idden a-gwaine to beget ten."

Carter took his reins, climbed up and sat down upon the foreboard with his feet upon the sharp.

"Gee up!" shouted he, and cracked his whip.

The horses tossed their heads and off we went, the hobnails of the carter's boy resting on the tight chain-traces.

The young ladies and gentlemen of to-day, who go to picnics in a charabanc on springs over smooth tarred roads at thirty miles an hour cannot imagine the advantages and the delights of being hauled, like the young folk of the past, in the "girt wold wagon wi' a plough o' dree." The steam roller had not come. In places there were deep ruts, and always an abundance of rolling stones. The more we were shaken the more we shook with laughter. When a more vicious jolt

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than usual almost threw us off the raves, the lads and maidens clutched each other, shouted "Hullups!" and only laughed the louder. And we had time to look at things as we went by.

On our road to the fryingpan that wedding day our bells were the admiration of everybody. The harvesters on the other side of the hedge stopped to look at us. The reaper with his arm around the standing wheat held his reap-hook for a stroke, and the women who were binding stood sheaf in hand, and, seeing it was a wedding party, shouted jokes. The stooping leasers on the distant stubble stood up "to vine out what wur a-gwain on."

So on we went from village to hamlet and hamlet to village green, where there were stocks under a group of stately elms—by cottage and homestead and the manor house beside the ancient church—by the more modern dwelling of a wool-stapler, with his lofts hard by, and through a park with spotted fallow deer and over a bridge where the tail of a mill came rushing from the humming wheel to foam between the buttresses, until at last we came to the foot of a steep hill, on the crest of which was our fryingpan. There the lads and maidens jumped down and walked to the top.

We were on an ancient British camp, afterwards held by the Romans, and on the sward was a circular excavation with sloping sides and an entrance very like the handle of a pan. Once a Roman amphitheatre, where gladiators fought and blood was shed—now a summer resort, where  
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picnickers played "kiss-in-the-ring," called it the "Fryingpan," and wondered what it meant.

We opened hampers and took out cakes, bottles, and cups. We lighted a fire and made tea. And having fed and refreshed ourselves in a manner suitable to our years, the church fiddler, who was of the party, pulled fiddle and bow out of his blue baize bag, and we set a-dancing reels and other old-world dances, and when the fiddle squeaked every lad kissed his partner. Then we sat upon the slope to rest, and told tales and asked riddles time-honoured as the hills.

"An' what's that?"

"Head like an apple,  
Neck like a swan,  
Back like a longdog,  
An' dree legs to stan'."

There might be a visitor from town who did not know. Then we all watched and smiled at his perplexity.

"Why, a han'dog to be sure an' I'll point it all out when we do get home."

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Then we walked about in pairs and Jinny took me to hear the story of the carter's smock and make him tell us how he went to see the conjuror. There was not time to speak of that then. The fiddler tuned up. We hastened back to the fiddle and the dance, and were merry and light-hearted as children until the dusk brought down the dew. Then we packed up, the horses were "hitched in" we climbed into the wagon, and went home by the road we came. But all the way we sang rounds and catches, glees and madrigals—for the days of

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"Catch and Glee Clubs" were not quite forgotten.

The mill had stopped, the harvesters were gone. We met the leasers carrying sheaves upon their heads, and it was dark by the time we got home. We had supper, cleared away, and danced again, until morning brought the festivities of Tilly's wedding to an end.

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XIX.

AN IDYLL OF A SMOCK

THIS is the idyll of the Carter's Smock:

The wagon was drawn up near the road, at a respectful distance from the picnickers. The horses, "unhitched" and tied up, tossed the nosebags on their muzzles and scrunched. Carter, seated on a little rush-bottomed chair taken from the wagon, a red handkerchief spread on his lap, was also engaged in mastication. His flagon was handy by his side. His billycock lay on the ground before him. Carter was some years past middle age, but still hale and strong. His was one of those heads, not infrequent among the labouring class of the West Country, that look to have come from some altogether superior race. It may be that the conqueror was not always the better man except in fighting. His hair was still plentiful, but grey and long and straggling in separate locks. His eyes were intelligent and kind. His features, absolutely symmetrical, quite worthy of the masterpiece of the smockmaker's art that hid the ends of his red neck han'kercher.

"Zit still, carter," cried Jinny. "We've only come to see how you be gettin' on—in your gran' smock an' all."

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His countenance beamed with delight.

"You never didden zet eyes 'pon a better Missie."

"I never didden."

"An' you never wunt, Missie. Looky-zee."

He stood up, and holding his arms away from his sides, as if he might be a pump with two handles, turned slowly round that we might inspect at leisure the beauties of his garment before and behind. As a matter of fact the back of the ancient smock corresponded with the front.

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I once had a dear friend really pining to possess a smock. After anxious search, prompted by a desire to save his life, one was obtained and sent to him. In a letter overflowing with gratitude he also made known his grief.

"It is impossible for me to put it on because I cannot make up my mind which is the front. Yet, if I should ever ascertain which is the back, by a process of exclusion I hope at last to arrive at which is the front."

He is now in good health. Whether the problem was solved or not he has never made known to me.

\* \* \* \*

There was about carter's smock an indefinable quality—an excellence, a subtle beauty that escapes analysis and makes description vain. It was like other smocks in every inventorial particular. It had two flap collars to turn down one upon each shoulder. The pleated squares upon the breast and on the back were identical, and so were  
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the worked scrolls on the sides of them. The pleats on the shoulders matched like a pair of gloves, the pleats that drew together the rather capacious sleeves so that they might be buttoned close at the wrists were a twin. And yet there was an indefinable something—

True, the needlework was finer and more delicate than anything ever seen in smocks, also there was more of it. But it was not that. I was just inclining to think it must be in the hang of the skirt—or did it arise from the skill with which the garment was drawn in to fit the body?

"That smock was made by the best smock-maker that ever lived," said Jinny.

"An' the best 'ooman that ever trod shoe-leather," added Carter almost defiantly, "an' I ought to know."

"An' that's true," agreed Jinny.

"An' now, can arn o' ee tell I how 'tis these here zmock have a-got a look about 'un, as mid zay a 'pearance like, that narn o' tother zmocks in parish hant a-got? I do look down at un now an' agen an' zes I in mezelf like. Ah! You be the squire in these parts an' all tother zmocks be poor simple volk be the zide o' ee. I don't never hang un up 'pon a nail—vear he should get a-tored or a-strent. If I do goo in house wet, I do peg un up 'pon clothes-line, an' I do look up at un every whips-while, an' zes I in myzelf like—Ah! you be the vlower—an' there idden another like ee—not spring, neet summer, neet vall. There's volk do come an' look at I an' chackle about nothen, nor noo purpose else than to look at these zmock.

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There's volk have a-offered money vor un times an' agen. Looky-zee. Do ee zee that?"



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He raised his finger and tapped upon his shoulder. The flap collar was most skilfully embroidered with crosses and with hearts—always two hearts and a criss-cross between them.

"Ah! There's nothen can't come where that is. The craftiest wold witch can't mutter no spell to tich that. Noo pixies won't come and worrit ee where that is. Why the very wold Nick hiszelf have a-got to shamble off wi' the tail o' un atwix the lags o' un when he do eye that. An' she what doned it put a meanen all of her own zelf too. Zess she, when she gied un to me an' that wur the night avore we went to church. Zess she, they two hearts be our own two zelves—an' the chriss-cross, wull! we do all know what he is. An' I wored un to church next marnen, vust time, when I wed wi' she. Mind, she wur a-knowed vor the best smockmaker in-these country. Miles round one an' another ud zend, if there was a neighbour a-comen that way—or zome strapper a-put on vor zummer work. All she did bag o' em was the height o' the man an' roun' the chest of un. An' then when they did vind a means to zend the money she did zend the zmock. She do own she never didden make another like these-here. 'Tis the most beauidivullest zmock in the wordle. Zo there! But n'arn o' ee hant a-zed how do come about that he is zo beauidivul."

"Because she was such a skilful smock-maker," I suggested. But Jinny did better: "Because she meant to marry you, Carter."

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Carter laughed. Then because his wisdom was untaught and homely, he lowered his voice and became as serious as if he were imparting a truth that none but himself had ever even surmised.

"Because the vingers that made these-here zmock worked vor love. There wur nothen to do wi' a zmock that thik ooman didden know—an' all she knowed she done—wi' not zo much as a thought o' pay. Work must be paid vor, we do know. Poor volk ud zoon starve if they did do much more an' they wur a-paid vor. That's why I be glad I be carter. I do love my hosses, an' I wouldn't stint work vor 'em night nor day. But it comed about the like o' this here. The vust maid I wed wi' we was both young. But she could't bide wi' me noo more 'an two years an' she wur a-tookt. Twur a most terr'ble whisht thing. She pined away like—an' zome zaid she wur in a decline. But I knowed what 'twur. An' I knowed who 'twur had a-done it. 'Twur years avore I could bring my mind to think o' another vor veer o' what mid bevall. An' then I did walk out wi' she—an' I walked wi' her up two year avore I zed anything. An' she made these-here zmock in the hours o' the night. No eyes but hers zeed these-here zmock till she gied un to me, an' she zed she could'n think not where to put in the niddle vor another stitch—vor all she did know she had a-doned. But no witch 'pon earth could'n do nothen to she. An' there she is now—an' every whip's-while, I'll warr'nt it, a-peepin out to door to zee when we do git back—"

It was then that the fiddle struck up. The

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wedding guests were dancing again in the fryingpan.

"I think we'd best to get back," said Jinny quickly.

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So we praised the smock once more. Carter took the bung out of his flagon and prepared to moisten his throat. Without hearing the story of the conjurer we went back to the party.

"I'd give pounds for that smock," said I.

"Why! He'd be no good to you," laughed Jinny.

"It should be a wizard's robe. I should put it on to write idylls."

She looked perplexed. "What, love letters, I suppose. Well, if that smock is ever to be got, I'll zend un to 'ee," said she.

Shortly afterwards I left the neighbourhood, and did not go to the abbey again for years.

Two years later I received a letter from Jinny. It told me that Carter was dead and that he was buried in his smock. It added: "Everybody said he was the most beautiful corpse they had ever seen."

I was abroad. Before it reached me the letter had been long unanswered.

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XX.

FAREWELL, SUMMER

AFTER the picnic a yearning led me to make a pilgrimage and bid farewell to summer on the Mendip Hills. I left so many friends there in the spring, and there in April turned the money in my pocket in response to the first call of the cuckoo. True, my pocket, had not been altogether impecunious since that showery morning with a rainbow in the sky. But he was gone, and so were my other friends.

I did not miss, certainly did not lament the cuckoo. He paid me no personal attention, but called, without discrimination, to all the passing lady-cuckoos in the landscape, until at last he fell hoarse, contracted laryngitis, cracked his voice, and there was an end of that unceasing repetition of his name.

But what of the little wheatear that appears so early in the spring? And could not let me pass between the loose stone walls of that road—so solitary, so long, and so unbending—without seeing me a bit upon my way. He endeared himself by everything he was and did. Whether he perched on a stone, expanded his pale buff waistcoat, flopped his black tail and clacked, or

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whether he ran along the bank, discovering that the base of his tail was white as snow, and stopped and turned to lift and drop it once or twice, and waited as if for my company—or suddenly took flight, swift but short, and perched on the wall this time and clacked again "the little stone cracker," as some folks call him! he was always bright; and quick, and charming, and always something of an enigma, too. For whether his clacks are for company or in defiance; whether his runs and his flights, and the jerks of his tail are in comradeship, or merely an escorting one off the premises of a nest with a treasure of some half-a-dozen eggs, which might be of polished turquoise in a hollow

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of the wall or in the mouth of a rabbit-hole, more than half a century of acquaintanceship has not convinced me. At last he turned back, and reached home in one flight. Yet companionship was constant. There was always another. Now there is none. They have followed the departing summer, and flown to the downs near the coast. There, on the barren heights beside the cliffs, they assemble to await the irresistible impulse that impels their flight across the sea.

Many birds that from time of mating, throughout the months of spring and summer, enjoy something like domesticity, flock together as soon as the duties of parentage are fulfilled. They need not be averse to neighbours. There are generally several nests of lapwings in the eligible mead or pasture. When six months before I crossed Blackdown more than one "peewit" circled above the head of the intruder, uttered their plaintive [158]

cries, rose, fell, flapped their rounded wings, and shammed disablement to lead me from the precious eggs or young. But before the fall of the leaf, or the purple has altogether faded from the ling, the lapwings congregate in flocks. When, on this sunny autumn day, I reached the land of enclosures and stopped at a gate in a tall hedgerow to look upon the shining furrows, a company of peewits rose from a fresh-ploughed stubble. They moved with marvellous unanimity. The little army wheeled as one. As it in obedience to a word of command, a thousand white breasts suddenly flashed in the sunlight. But their progress was loitering. They alighted to feed, and rose to search for another feeding-ground. Without the fixed destination of the ocean migrant, they linger to be weather-driven southward as the north becomes frostbound.

There is a rocky slope facing towards the west half-covered with clumps of furze and a slanting zigzag path, or it may be only a sheep-run, winds between the prickly bushes from the bottom to the top. When I climbed it early in the year, the sky was blue and the edge of the hillside a mass of gold. Linnets were nesting, and in one clump were five nests. There was no wind, or if any the shelter of the hill was complete, and the air was filled with a confusion of sweet song. I sat on an outcropping rock with my back against a slab of grey limestone. Less than a score of yards away a cock linnet was perched on a projecting spray of golden flowers, and he stood out in strong relief against the pale blue sky. His breast was the colour of a ruby, and [159]

his little throat quivered as he put his heart into his song. Now and then he rose into the air, sang upon the wing, and, always singing, came slowly back to his sprig of flowers. There were many of them on the slope.

My autumn tramp was in a contrary direction, and my way was down the slope towards a road on the level ground between the hills and the sea. Here and there on the gorse was a sprinkling of yellow, but the linnets had gone. They also had collected into parties and gone to the coast, some ready for foreign travel and others to wander round about seeking places never mowed or reaped, where plantains, docks, thistles, and such sturdy weeds flourish undisturbed and shed abundance of seed.

On the road about a furlong in front of me plodded an old man and a small boy. The man stooped, partly from age and also, it may be, from the burden he carried on his

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back. The boy lingered, and then ran to catch him up. I saw that he was a bird-catcher, fully equipped with clapnets and the stakes to set them up. They were not fast travellers, the one because of his age and the child on account of his infancy. A few minutes and I was beside them.

"Good morning."

He acknowledged the salutation without cordiality. He wore a threadbare, green hunting-coat from which the brass buttons had been removed. It was so faded and stained and patched that nothing remained of the original colour. His fustian trousers were dragged up and tied around

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with string below the knees. His boots were so caked with mud that they could not be seen. The boy carried two small cages slung in a large blue handkerchief.

"I am going as far as The Dragon," said I.

The statement appeared to awaken interest, but he made no reply.

"Yes. I used to know the landlord—Philip Brown. I suppose he is there still?"

"He's there."

"I bought a linnet and two goldfinches of him once."

"Maybe I caught 'em," he admitted with a grin. "Have ee got'em now?"

"The linnet died almost at once."

"Ah!" he grunted as if he knew the reason why.

"Well, come along. I'll stand you a quart for the good of the house."

He turned to the child. "You come on, my dear, zo well as you can. An' then come in to the Dragon. An' your gran'vather'll wait vor ee there."

I took the bundle. The little cages contained call-birds.

The old man considerably accelerated his pace. His tongue also was completely loosened.

"I never caught thik linnet you had. He must have a-bin a-catched in the spring. They don't never live not long. They wunt zing vor all 'tis zingen time. They don't seem to have no heart to live, when they be a-catched in the spring. Do ee want another? When they be a-catched in fall

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or winter they be tame in a wick, an' be the time the spring do come they have a-come to theirzelves like an' they'll zing—Oh! they'll zing."

He had his quart. The child arrived and we went to a rough waste in sight of the sea. The clap-nets were fine and light, most carefully folded around a thin board, as a tailor folds his cloth, and carried in a canvas wrap. When set up opposite to each other they made an alley some twelve paces long and one could scarcely reach up and touch the tops of the stakes.

Then he placed the call-birds on the ground and we withdrew and laid down to watch.

"Harky to 'em! They do know zo well as we do." His dull face brightened with enthusiasm as the birds called to their kind—and the urchin, with a bird call in his

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mouth, proved himself an artist. We had not long to wait. The cord was pulled. The nets fell together. The linnets were caught.

So we have learnt the art and mystery of the bird-catcher and it may be something more. Beneath those carmine feathers dwells the soul of a poet.

When intuitions of approaching spring awaken visions of blue skies and golden furze and promise future love and inspiration and song, to cage the linnet is to break his heart. If you imprison him then, he will pine and die.

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XXI.

MAN A-LOST

THERE was a bite of winter in the air, and flies were scarce. For some days swallows had been congregating on the battlements of the church-tower, on the roofs of the homestead, and on the ridge of the barn. They were of one mind that it was time to take flight to a land of sunshine and plenty, but they sat side by side as if they hesitated to spread their wings and depart upon so long and perilous a voyage.

The next morning there came the sound of voices in the street below my bedroom window.

"Terr'ble sharp vrost, Abram."

" 'Tes, sure! When I went out day-marnen to vetch in the cows did lie 'pon the grass zo white as znow. There wur cat's ice in the tracks whur the beastes do goo to pit to drink, aye, an' a clinkerbell vingerlong whur the water do drip in vrom the drainpipe."

"Wur it now!"

" 'T wur. An' I'd take my coronal oath o' it."

" 'ood ee then! An' eet I wurden not a-looken vor it, good now, not by the looks o' the sky last night!"

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"Neet I. But looky-there! 'Tis the end o' volks garden vlowers, idden it?"

"I tell ee what 'tis, Abram. I do 'low we be in vor a hard winter. Zo there!"

"An' zo do I, too. Vor the berries do cover the white thorn zo thick 'z a red coat do cover a hunter."

"An' ther's a tidy sprinklin', too—there'pon the yew in chichyard."

"But mind, vor all that I do belave 'tis better vor health."

"An' zo do I, too."

"All the seasons in due order. That's what I do zay."

"An' zo do I, too. Wull, must be getten on, I do suppose."

"An' zo mus' I, too. Zoo long!"

A glance at the street. The weather prophets had already passed out of sight. In the gardens of the cottages opposite, the dahlias, yesterday so tall and bright, now bowed their heads, and their leaves were as limp as rags. The sky was clear and filled with a soft light, but not a swallow was to be seen. At the back of the cottages were meadows.

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(1928)

A flight of redwings flew from hedge to hedge—on the grass a party of blue fieldfares, with here and there a song thrush in their company, were making their way across the field. The spirit that urges to migration stirred within me. Besides, by whatever devious ways, it was imperative to get to Bittleton before the setting-in of the winter.

For a day or two the sky remained clear. But  
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although the sun was warm at noon, the air became chilly after sunset, and in the morning the ground was white with rime. Then the country of hills and hedgerows was left behind, and in front lay miles of level moorland. My way was by a long, straight road, with on either side a rhine deep and stagnant and a row of pollard willows. Between these trees the traveller might proceed with confidence, even when the waters of a winter flood were up to the nuts of his wheels.

The season for floods had not yet come. The fields were as dry as when it was summer, and red in places with the warm colour of dead docks. In expectation of future snows and thaws the flags and rushes had been cleared out of the rhines, and lay in heaps along the banks. These and the gates standing alone give some indication of the divisions of the fields. For every gate stands on a low stone arch, which serves as a passage from field to field. When the moor is under water the gates may still be seen, and would seem to serve no purpose on that broad mere.

To the stranger this low, flat country may have little beauty or interest, but I have seen it golden with buttercups; and nowhere does the sun set with nobler grandeur than when he brightens the sombre willows and gilds the intersecting rhines or when gleaming through winter clouds he reflects his glory on some shallow mere. Certainly on that day the dusty road was deficient in incident. Within gunshot a heron rose out of the rhine, slowly and with laborious clumsiness. Then

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mounting high into the air, his legs stretched out behind him and his long wings flapping with deliberation seemingly too proud for haste, he was soon out of sight. It is said that when the heron takes short flights and does not know his mind, it is a sure sign of coming rain. On this occasion he was certainly no prophet. Yet he might have known, for the sky was already overclouded, and preparing to fulfil the prediction that follows three white frosts. And all the afternoon the heavens grew darker and more sullen. Then a fine rain began to fall. Gradually it thickened until the sky looked "vull o' it!"

Not for hours had a human being come in sight. Then a boy stood waiting by a gate to stare at the approaching stranger. The impression made by the knapsack was unfavourable. He was a boy of about fourteen, of the type classified as "stunpole," but usually qualified and seasoned with adjectives such as "battle-headed," "dunder-headed," "nogheaded," and in any combination, one or all according to taste. He was "gettin' up a hard bwoy now." His smock was long to allow for growing, and apparently unacquainted with the wash-tub—his boots full large and filled out with a whisp of hay. His hat was an extinguisher, and his "neckhangkercher" had once been green. His nose

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was short, his upper lip inordinately long, and his mouth was the mouth of a frog, but always open.

"Is there any short cut to Langport?"

"Oh! Zo that's whur you be a-gwaine, be ee?"

"Unless you can tell me of some place nearer."

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"He took me to be a peddler. "What have ee a-got to zell?"

"Nothing. Do you know of an inn anywhere near?"

He paused to reflect, evidently believing this to be an invitation to drink.

"Not'z I know. I be a-comed down to drave in the beastezes—got to ha' 'em in by night now the vrostezes be a-comed."

"I'll come with you, and they'll tell me at the farm."

" 'Tis back along t'other way. You do zee they there trees. That's another farm. They'll put ee on a short way. An' tidden zo very vur geate to geate."

With that he went off to his "beastezes." The drizzle had become thicker and thicker, and the distant trees were dim in the blue mist of it. At first all was easy. The gates lay in the right direction. But as evening came and the dusk was added to the drizzle, my landmark melted into the gloom. The starless night would be absolutely dark. It seemed wise to get back to the road as quickly as possible. I turned about, but the gate was no longer to be seen. The fine soft rain, scarcely more than a fog, was more wetting than a steady downpour. By mere luck I came upon the gate. By that time nothing was to be seen but the faintest shimmer of the rhine on either hand. Instructed by many a fireside tale, there was but one tradition to follow.

"Man a-lost! Man a-lost! Man a-lost!"

There was no response. Useless to hallo oneself

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hoarse; it was wiser to save a voice to shout again. By remaining at the gate there was no danger of being drowned, or even of getting "kneedeep in a rhine." After all, the worst that could befall was a night in the wet. The silence became intense. There was not even a patter with the rain. I cannot guess how long this lasted, but it seemed like many dreary hours.

From afar came a faint, melancholy wailing, more sad than the moaning dirge of a funeral wake. It was coming—coming rapidly. Into its unfaltering crescendo entered shrieks and screams, wild utterances as of an unearthly anguish. It changed into the baying and eager yelping of a pack of hounds in full cry, passed overhead and melted away into silence.

An uncanny misgiving crept into my heart. "The whisht-hounds," that phantom pack that hunts on desolate heaths and solitary moors of a dark winter night had gone right over my head. Even to hear them is the worst of luck. If they go over a house someone within will die. I knew that they were but curlews, with perhaps other wild birds in company, but my courage sank at the thought of so ill an omen. It was a case of all night for certain—cold, wet, clinging to a gate with a prospect of an early morning frost. A

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pack of the most damnable of hounds in full pursuit—pneumonia, laryngitis, bronchitis, pleurisy, with apoplexy, and hæmorrhage—

Surely that is a rumble of wheels!

"Man a-lost! Man a-lost!"

"Whur be?"

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"I don't know. I am at a gate over a big rhine."

Presently a lantern came in sight.

"Whur be? Hollar out."

I hollared out. The fields were well known to him. He soon found me and stood and laughed.

"Come on," said he.

In the road was a two-wheeled cart and another man. They were brothers, and very merry, returning late from the funeral feast of a distant relative. So after all I was dried, warmed, and comforted at a little thatched homestead among the trees.

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XXII.

CARTER AND CONJURER

THE wayfarer if he be a pilgrim of love, on some road hitherto by him untrodden, shall of a sudden find himself arrested—called upon to stop. There is no audible voice. The summons comes from within. He must stand, captivated and spellbound. Then if he be a painter, equipped with colours and experienced in technique, his picture shall be an interpretation to rejoice the hearts of other folk—or if not, it shall restore his soul and hide away within, to arise perchance unrecognised in some sweet dream or live again in memory after a sleep of many years.

There is a valley down which a winding river and a long straight road journey together in unbroken companionship, now side by side, and then a space apart, but the murmur of the river never passes out of the hearing of the road. The hills are none so lofty that they demand statistics and a record of their height in feet. In some places they widen. There the slopes are hidden beneath woods of oak and beech and silver birch, and between them lie level watermeads—elsewhere they close, are steep and rocky, and the narrow passage becomes no more than a gorge. The river

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runs where it may, and the road as straight as it can. For the most part the waters, darkened by overhanging branches, or slabs of grey rock, rush between boulders at the foot of one of the hills. Then they cross and hasten to regain the company of the road, and the traveller, well above the danger of winter floods, looks down upon a dancing, foaming torrent, fed by numberless springs and mountain rills, and clear as crystal.



*The Salamanca Corpus: Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree*  
(1928)

Where the valley takes an abrupt turn there is a good stone bridge, and the road crosses to the other side. And this is one of the ways to Bittleton.

\* \* \* \*

I perched upon the wall of the bridge. The air was still and, but for the many voices of the river, all was silent. The sigh of the ripple on the pool, the whisper of the eddy under the bank, and the laughing trill of the shallows dancing over the stones blended to produce a low diapason that murmured under the arches of the bridge. For an hour I had not seen a human being, and now the hum of the river was like a song of lamentation that complained of solitude.

In the night there had been heavy rain. Now the sun, looking over a hill top, was shining upon one side of the valley, on the ruddy withered leaves still clinging to the oak, on the white stems of the silver birch with their patches of rich brown, and on the shining ivy that hung from crevices in the blue rock. The river turned out of the hidden mystery of the shadow into the enlightenment of the sun, and returned and came again.  
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And the rainpools on the levels and on the road were mirrors in which the sky might see its face or the dark woods reflect their shadows.

Around the distant bend a wagon came in sight, empty on its way to fetch some load. With little strain on tugs and collars the horses stepped out with freedom, nodding their heads with pride at every step. No doubt I might have a lift—a mile at least, to the alehouse at the four cross-roads. On it came, rumbling and creaking along the almost imperceptible declivity of the road to the slight ascent where it reached the bridge.

"Carter!"

He had not recognised me.

"Coo! Whoever 'ood ha' thought twur you a-zot up there 'pon burdge. I zeed ee. I did sure. I zed in myself like, Ah! Here's zome vootsore feller'll want a ride. But I never didden know ee till now I be a-comed 'pon ee vull-butts like. Ah! You hant a-got your wedden garment on to-day. Have ee?"

And so we laughed and I clambered up and sat beside him.

" 'Tis a pity you werden a half-hour later—I should a-catched ee up vull two mile back. Where be gwaine?"

"To Bittleton."

"Ah! There's a terr'ble strong witch to Bittleton. Zo volk do zay. Though nowadays zome do zay there idden no witches. I be zorry for 'em. They mid ha' other book-larnen. But they can't belave the scripshurs. An' more 'an that I do know there is."

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It seemed better not to question him, but to leave him to himself.

"I've a-zuffered it my own zelf—an' proved it."

"Tell me."

For a minute he was silent, and then began:

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"As years do vlee thought o' the past do sim to call things back like. We be terr'ble happy, me an' my missus. An' eet as theas wold plough do rattle on an' never a word 'ithouts tes to holler Wug or the like o' that to the hosses, or wi' my hans 'pon the tail o' the zull an' rooks auverhead an' a polly-wash-dish a-urnen in the vur, there's thoughts do come o' things and volks long agone, aye, an' maybe a-passed out o' mind for years. I do sim to zee my poor vust wife. Coo! We beganned to swithhearty when we was little better 'an children. Then we did courty and I walked her out vor years. We wed wi' one another avore we was vull a-growed up. Wull! She mid a-bin. She wur a little ooman an' zo quick's a bird. But I werden nothen like vull-growed."

\* \* \* \*

He pulled up his smock, took a packet of tobacco from his trousers pocket, and I held the reins while he filled his pipe. "But she werden to bide wi' me long. There wur one chile, but he died to once. 'Twadden long avore she did sim to vall away mos' terr'ble. Coo! She wur no better 'an a atomy—zo white's a lily wi' a splotch zo red's a piny in the cheeks o' her. Doctor, he comed once a wick an' gied her zome stuff. But all the volks zed, Ah, tidden one mossel bit o' good. I do know what 'tis!  
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An' they all shookt their heads an' zed, 'Now there's a strong conjurer, do live at a cross-roads not mor 'an a mile out o' Yeovil-town. You goo to he. He'll tell ee quick 'nough.'—Have ee got a lucifer handy?"

I found him a match and he lighted that short, black clay, with no more than an inch of stem.

" 'Twur a Zunday late in June, an' the hosses out in viel. I wur up avore daybreak an' got there, handy 'pon twenty mile, vull early, but he wur out o' house a-waiting vor me. An' he zeed me an' hollered out, 'I got a good mind to zend you whoam purdlen! You ought to ha' comed zix month agone.' I feeled my knees gie out under me an' I zed, 'I do hope you wunt do that,' an' he zed, 'Come wi' I.'

"I vollared un drough a little garden along a rank o' broad beans in vlower to a pit an' he put his vingers to his mouth an' whistled an' he drowed zummat into the pit. An' there comed up a girt jackveesh. I do 'llo w twur a familiar sperrit.

"An' he zed 'Come wi' I.' An' we went down-along the garden path. An' he hollowed out Job an' Vanny. An' be dalled if two girt twoads didden come out off the splat. An' the name o' thik man wuz John Cooper.

"An' the man zed, 'Your wife is auverlooked. I can drownd what do do it in the Red Zay. But t'ull take a deal o' work—an' money to buy what's required. How much have ee a-got?'

"Zo I gied un what I had an' he told me what to take an' he zed, 'Kip up a good vire an' pon' the stroke o' midnight burn it.'  
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"We doned it but 'twur too late. Little better 'an a wick the poor ooman brought up blood an' passed away.

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"I do tell my missus my thoughts. She's a wundervul ooman herself to think. She do zay, 'I do belave mus' be a Providence, zoo as when you come to the place, whur we mus' all goo, whur there idden no marriage neet no gi'en in marriage, you shant veel zich a stranger an' out o' face like when you do mit'."

A man was waiting in the road and Carter drew rein.

"I be a-comed to the end o' my journey. They be terr'ble shart o' ood vor viren whoam to farm. I be a-comed vor a load o' theas here woak poles."

So I got down. On the hillside some acres of young oak grown for the bark had been cut down early in the year and stripped. There were piles of naked yellow oaken poles and the clean scent of bark still lingered in the air. The river turned aside. The road hid itself among woods. But a footpath across fields proved to be a short cut to the little alehouse in one of the corners of the four-cross ways.

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XXIII.

ANY PERSON FOUND TRESPASSING  
IN THESE WOODS WILL BE  
PROSECUTED

THIS warning was on an old board nailed to the trunk of an oak so venerable that half the limbs were dead. Lifted like naked arms, having superfluous elbows and all twisted by rheumatism, they seemed to implore pity of a threatening winter sky. The living branches still retained their leaves, parched and dry, and of a pale yellow-red, spreading over a gate somewhat pretentious and painted green, but sadly in need of repair. The gate opened upon a ride, long and straight, narrowing in perspective until it lost itself among the trees.

I stopped to read—pondered, then read again.

Was it a warning after all? On a second reading it seemed to change into an invitation. Here was a promise of adventure, of discovery, of flight, of pursuit, of evasion, or if that should be impossible, of prosecution. "Let's go and be prosecuted," said I within myself. With a perverse whimsicality, which might have been the bane of another man's life, but has been the blessing of mine, the answer was in the affirmative. "By all means,

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let's go and be prosecuted." The gate, faithful to the last, refused to open, but by taking off the satchel there was room to creep between its broken ribs. Thus the explorer entered this forbidden and mysterious wood.

At first on either side was hazel copse, with here and there a sprinkling of pale yellow leaf; but very soon the wood became more open, with groups of spindle-tree and dog-wood, and sometimes an old hawthorn strangled with woodbine and half covered with a tangle of traveller's joy, now grey as an "Old Man's Beard." There were clumps

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of shining holly, and the sunbeams, glancing through a rift in the clouds and between the branches of foreign trees, found them out and spangled their dark leaves with silver. There were also open spaces, where tall, pale grasses were intermingled with the more sombre tufts of the woodrush. Among them, bright as flames, gleamed the orange-crimson of the firmly clustered berries of the stinking iris. Why the plant should be thus insulted it is difficult to suggest. On the authority of Sowerby it was formerly called the roast-beef iris, because the leaves when crushed were reminiscent of the aroma of the turnspit, a name which surely should endear. But the seed has no scent and keeps its vivid colour all the winter. Its brightness fairly clamours to be picked, even by the wanderer who has no use for it.

The ground was wet, green with moss, and ruddy with dead leaf, and sobbed at every step. I came upon a shallow pool with the bubble of a spring. A little rill had cut itself a channel, and

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babbled away, ambitious to grow into a brook. From this swamp a woodcock rose. Away it flew, darting and twisting to avoid the branches. Scarcely was it out of sight before a cock pheasant got up in a fluster and went off in the same direction.

"If there be a keeper down there anywhere, he will know that something is moving up here." This reflection led me under a holly-bush to wait awhile. And none too soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Almost at once a tall man in a new velveteen coat of which the buttons were bright, hurried into sight amid the trees and stood to listen. He was erect and still and scarcely to be distinguished from the trunks around him. His dog, something of a retriever, crept under the dead bracken and laid down out of sight. The man held his gun before him ready to lift for a quick shot. It was not the time of day for a professional poacher. Flowers, nuts, and all temptations to the ordinary trespasser were gone. He surmised that a dog had got into his wood. All that was quite evident. I had only to go on peering at him through a gap between the dark leaves and the crimson berries until his departure; then presently go away in the opposite direction. The time seemed endless, but at last he was satisfied. It must have been only a passing dog that had cleared the hedgerow, taken a gallop round and returned into the road to follow his master. He shouldered his gun and kept

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on his way. The dog took a cast to right and to left. Evidently there must have been a shoot yesterday and the keeper was looking round to pick up a dead bird or a runner. They did not come near my holly bush. But they went into the ride. Without doubt the excitement was now about to commence. He could not fail to see my track and would hunt me down with the greatest ease.

The best plan seemed to be to watch him out of sight. Then make a run for the hazel copse and get across to the old green gate. If I should win that little race, once on the King's highway, and quite unknown, what could he do?

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The copse was successfully reached but the hazel, being thick, progress was both slow and noisy. Dead sticks kept snapping at every step and the leafless boughs, when thrust aside, scraped each other and rustled as they might in a hurricane. When I stopped to listen for a pursuer the wood became as silent as a desert. Ominously silent as it seemed. He must have some device for outwitting the trespasser. However it seemed better to go on.

I must be very near the gate. And then the dog barked. A voice scolded "Bosco!" But the dog was close and came on growling. "Bosco? Bosco?" I knew a dog of that name once and lo! as I spoke he crawled forward. When I bent down to pat him he licked my hand. The richer colour of new velveteen peered between the ruddy green of the hazel wands and above it grinned a wellknown face. I was patting Bosco. A voice said:

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"Well! I'll be dalled!" A most appropriate ejaculation! Here was one known to me as a boy, now grown into manhood. Jimmy Pilton, the son of a gamekeeper in Hampshire, a most important friend of my bird-nesting days who had once sold me a honey-buzzard's egg. Now a full-grown keeper in the fresh livery of his first place. He pushed through the bushes, held out his hand, and beamed on me as I shook it.

"What on earth be ee about in here?"

"Just looking round in case there might be something to see—a honey-buzzard's nest for instance."

"Ha! Ha! Ha! But vor all that there is zummat to zee. But I can't show it to ee till up handy 'pon zunzet. Where be a-gwaine to?"

"Nowhere."

"Come on then."

\* \* \* \*

So we traipsed together to a cottage at the other end of the wood, and on the way he told me all about it. He was married—was looking after a 1,000 acres, outlying estate, single-handed, with only a boy to help. No poaching to speak of. No trespassing any count. "Quite a pleasure to zee your track an' I knowed I should nab ee. Only one track up an' a neat boot. No way out but the gate. Zo you was bound to run into my arms. You mus' stop the night an' I'll really show ee a thing you hant never avore a-zeed. Not my missus—no—I do'llow you have a-zeed she."

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He kept me in suspense. All the afternoon we tramped over the estate, until towards evening we came to a round hill with a plantation running along the side. The undergrowth was mostly of laurel and evergreen. We sat on a stile in a hedgerow at the foot of the hill to watch. Already flights of starlings were coming home from all points of the compass and they joined into one great flock, that rose and wheeled and sank and turned and encompassed the hill like an army. Still they came in larger and larger flights from every side, but these were at once lost in the countless multitude. Sometimes they

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closed together into a mass that looked like a cloud and then spread out into a thin veil upon the pale face of the evening sky.

"There," cried Jimmy Pilton, "Idden that a zight then? They've a-tookt thik plantation for a roost, an' ther's millions o' 'em. Nothen can't stop 'em—nothen can't turn 'em—nothen can't drive 'em. Me an' the boy have a-stood an' shot vover barrels into the thick o' e'm an' they never knowed it. Well, they what was knocked down must sure 'nough, vor we picked up bucketvulls—but tothers never swerved not zo much as a hair. There! Harky to 'em. Their wings do hummy like high wind."

Truly the humming rose and fell like the moaning of a wind among mountains. They were long in settling, often rising again and wheeling and circling, all of one mind but with constant changes of it. It was nearly dark before all was still.

In the night we went into the plantation with  
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lanterns, and they were close together on every limb and stick thicker than leaves. Some of the boughs were broken and others hanging low under the weight of such strange fruit. Nothing could be done, and eventually the plantation had to be destroyed.

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XXIV.

BACK TO BITTLETON

THE church clock was striking four as I trudged into Wynport Street, half an hour behind my time. Without doubt Triptree would wait, as the front seat of his van was booked, and my bag must have been delivered to him by another tranter as on a previous occasion. It was a dull November afternoon and the lamplighter, his ladder on his shoulder, was hurrying along the pavement. In the market square were many vans drawn up upon all four sides, one behind the other, like ships alongside the wharves of a dock. "The Bittleton van? That's he—override the butcher's shop." Sure enough a group of Bittleton women unusually numerous had gathered around the tail of the van—it might be awaiting my arrival—as country folk loiter about the church porch until the parson has gone in.

On the top was the familiar bag, and Tranter Triptree himself securing a tarpaulin over the luggage, as the clouds threatened rain. "Oh! zo there you be! Then I'll make haste to hitch in the hoss," was the welcome he shouted. His face wore an aspect of unusual solemnity never witnessed at "The Rose and Crown." Was he vexed

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at my delay? But a tranter carries upon his mind the weight of all the "chores an' arrants" on his van.

Very soon we were jogging along the road to Bittleton.

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In the front of the van, above our heads, was a small window. As the passengers were many it was opened for ventilation. "Else the breath inzide 'ull zoon be that smeechy—vit to stifle a body."

Tranter Triptree was silent, but that was just as well. My mind was busy with projects—the night-school and the little ladies—the Christmas customs still lingering—Elizabeth Butt—she had talked to me, a stranger, but when she learnt of my wintering in Bittleton would she not include me with Bittleton folk and suspect and shun me as she did the rest of that little world? I must waylay her and convince her of my sympathy. Perhaps the little ladies with their botanising and sketching might know something of her movements—my thoughts were interrupted by voices from within the van. They were talking of Elizabeth Butt.

"No, what I do zay is this. She mid—an' eet she midden."

"An' that's true as the light. Mind, I could'n zay my own zelf that she wur or she wurden."

"Né'et I. An' I never didden."

"An' what all the wordle do tell up idden auvis every word o' it gospel—mind that."

"Never idden."

"An thik feller what vust told up thik tale

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is well-knowed to ha' bin the most outdaciousest liar that ever trod shoe-leather."

"Still vor all that, he carr'd about thik vower-inch nail in his pocket vor a proof like."

"That don't volly. Anybeddy can procure a vower-inch nail, vor his own ends like."

"To be sure he can. An' carr' un about, too."

"Who's a-gwaine to buy her little house?"

"Nobeddy. There idden noobeddy in Bittleton don't want 'un."

" 'Tis a terr'ble wold-ancient place."

"An' eet tidden such a very bad little house."

"I 'ooden buy un not vor a vi'pun' note."

"An I ooden live in un my own zelf not rent vree."

"If she should'n be happy in zome other place—she mid come back." Tranter

Triptree coughed to clear his throat and called to his horse.

Somebody in the van said "Hush!"

The conversation ceased.

\* \* \* \*

I remembered the story of the man who went lame because Elizabeth Butt drove a four-inch nail into his foot-print, which was the foundation of her reputation as a witch. I gathered that there was a reaction in her favour now that she was leaving the parish. And so we jogged on until we arrived at the "Rose and Crown." Susan Triptree was waiting at the door and curtsied a welcome smiling and sincere.

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"Your supper'll be ready zoon as you be."

*The Salamanca Corpus: Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree*  
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With this assurances he lighted me up the stairs to the familiar bedroom. Nothing was changed. Its homely simplicity made me glad to find myself there once more.

The kitchen of the "Rose and Crown" was filled with company and conversation was in full swing. In reality it was more like a club than an inn. In winter the same guests came night after night. They marked the bowls of their long clay pipes and occupied the same seats. A great fire of logs was blazing on the hearth and every Bittleton man of any account was present. Even old Israel Batson, a lean hatchet-faced farmer, who lived in a homestead in a field off the lane by Elizabeth Butt's house, and was described as "the properest wold hunks of a wold skinvint that ever walked," was there and had managed to secure the easiest arm-chair. He, to whom it was death "to part wi' a varden," nursed a great jorum of hot drink, clenched tightly to his knee with one hand, while he stirred with the other. All the while his grey eye roved from speaker to speaker, as if to get something all to himself from every word. Triptree was standing in the midst looking around to attend to the wants of his guests. He had many names. In his van and at market he was Tranter. To his wife he was often Triptree or more frequently "Maister," but in his inn among convivial friends he was invariably "Urchett."

Farrier was speaking. "I tell 'ee what 'tis, Urchett, volks' eyes, an' partic'lar poor volks' eyes,  
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be magnifyin' glasses that do make their own bit o' property look ten times zo big as what tis. I never didden hear Elizabeth's valuation o' her little house. But I'll bet you a guinea you don't get it."

" 'Tis the like o' this," said the smith. "A ooman do ax a price that do choke a man zo as he hant a-got breath not to make no offer. Then when she can't zell, zome fine day she'll jump at half the wo'th."

"There's a beaudivul well. The driest saizen he wurden never a-knowled to urn out."

"Wull! Everybody in parish is o' one mind that noobeddy ood'n never live under thik roof. There's things have a-happened under thik roof that noobeddy don't know nothin' about."

"Aye. An' though Elizabeth mid be a-gone herevrom an' you don't zee her about parish; noobeddy can't never zay whur she is to. Why a witch can work things hunderds o' miles away. She can zwim a welch-nut shell in a bucket an' blow wi' the bellesses an' zink a ship at say. Though mind, I don't make no accusation like."

" 'Tis a matter I don't never talk about my own zelf," said the farrier. "But this I can zay. I've a-zeed cases o' hosses an' pigs an' bullocks that the best o' physic did really sim to do more harm 'an good to. There's things the mind o' man can't fathom."

"We do know," added the smith, "that a witch have a-zold her soul vor the things o' this wordle—an' tis no more 'an reasonable to conclude  
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that the wold Tantarabobus can zend her 'pon any arrant he is a-minded. But, mind me, I don't zay this in respect o' Elizabeth Butt."

Old Isaac Batson rose and put his empty glass down on the bench.



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"The wo'th o' Elizabeth Butt's property is the wo'th o' a house that noobeddy wunt live in—an' the wo'th of a well where noobeddy don't wunt to draw water—an' the wo'th of a splat o' garden ground mid be in all thirty lug to a quarter o' a acre."

It was a thin, raspy voice sadly in need of lubrication. When it spoke truth there was no joy for ears that listened. The truth that voice loved best was a thin fact as lean as itself. He took up his hat and stick and glanced round the circle. His smile disclosed a set of teeth in ruins. In appreciation of his humour a short laugh rattled in his throat.

"Good night all."

He went away triumphant.

"A wold—"

Urchett held up his hand. "Hush! Till he's out o' hearen."

" 'Tis easy to see he do want to buy Elizabeth's bit o' lan'," said farrier.

"A wold nipcheese!" cried smith. "He hant a-treated his leathery wold stomick to a hot drink not vor years."

It was late and the company soon dispersed.

"Does Elizabeth Butt think of leaving Bittleton?" I asked.

Both Urchett and Susan looked at me with

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open-eyed wonder. It was inconceivable that the news was unknown to the outside world.

They answered in an awesome whisper.

"Elizabeth Butt is dead," said he.

"Died a-Tuesday," added Susan.

\* \* \* \*

The unexpected death of Elizabeth Butt quite startled me. It may seem strange, having witnessed her satisfaction in the confidence that her little house would bury her, that the thought of death did not occur to me; but the conversations were mysterious, and the deeper import of the saying in the van that she might "come back again" did not suggest itself. The thought that she might yearn for the place where she was born and had spent so many years of her life, however miserable, did not seem unnatural. My heart sank in the perception of the infinite misery of those years.

Urchett and Susan Triptree went away. I heard the turning of keys as they locked up the house. I sat down in front of the fire. In a minute or two they came back, and then in awesome whispers they told me the story.

"We wur children together and playmates," said he sadly.

"She've a-made a will an' put in Urchett to be executor," added his wife.

"I be a distant kin. I've a-carr'd goat's milk to a house in town vor years, an' zold honey, an' the teddies above what she could ate, an' twur along o' that we vound out she wur bad. She

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had zome teddies to part wi'. But I could'n make nobeddy hear. Then she crope to winder an' drowed out the kays. An' if't had'n a-bin vor that, the poor zoul ood ha' passed away untended an' alone. I nipped off sharp vor Dr. and Zuzan hurried down to look to her."

Susan took up the thread. "We knowd 'twur noo good vrom the vust. She did'n wish not to live. But her min' wur partic'ler bent 'pon her funeral. She told the names of her own volk she did wish to be axed. Zome o' 'em had'n a tookt no notice o' her vor years but they be all a-gwaine to come. There's zome to believe there mus' be money a-hid away in zome wold stocken. But the most o' 'em be more a-feared o' her dead than liven. They do belave she'll be that troublesome that she'll walk. Zome do zay a-ready that she do go again an' zwear they've a-yeard a pair o' pattens goo clacketty 'pon the vlagstones o' the path, but could'n zee nothen at all."

"Her poor min' wur all a-zet 'pon a funeral that noobeddy could'n pick noo faute wi."

"We be forced to ha' it here," whispered Susan.

"'Tis all ready. We shall shut up the "Rose and Crown" to all but mourners. They be to goo to zee the carps, and then they be to come here an' then goo down to the little house to volly the coffin to the grave. Then to walk back here two an' two. When they've a-had all they do want, then lawyer is to rade out the will to show what 'thority Urchett have a-had a-put 'pon un."

"'Tis the best coffin money can buy—polished  
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woak an' brass fittens—an' the bearers a crown a-piece."

"An' Urchett have a-brought back the bestest pall in Wynport. An' we thought mid be more comfortable vor ee to come in wi' 'em to your victuals if you didden min', as the house'll be vull an' we shall be terr'ble busy."

I assented. Susan lighted another candle and we retired to rest.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Butts, the Craddocks, Triptrees, Greenwells, and the Batsons had become so intricately intermarried, and Elizabeth's list was so complete, that the "Rose and Crown" could only just accommodate the flood of mourners that poured in from all directions. They were all in their black. The garments ancient, often hereditary, were of various periods and styles, but so well cared for that the nap rarely showed evidence of wear. The fit being only approximate was often quite wonderful. Many of the relatives met but seldom, and the greetings were cordial. It was in fact a reunion of kinsfolk and relationships were as accurately remembered as when there were heralds to record them. The hum of conversation was full of salutations.

"What! Cousin Jemima Butt! Well I never! An' Cousin Tamsy Batson! Why Cousin Tryphena Tamsy, you be a-growd up quite the 'ooman Ver'ly an' truly you really be!"

Everybody turned to admire and comment upon the admirable growth of blushing Cousin

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Tamsy Batson. But Susan Triptree said that everything was in and ready. So the mourners sorted themselves up and sat to table by their own particular friends. Nothing that could ennoble a funeral feast was lacking—also there was cider of the strongest, home-brewed of the oldest, wines both white and black, and spirits of all sorts.

Gradually the talk grew louder. Now and then there was a laugh. Then in response to the "rozims" of one or two recognised humorists there was laughter continuous and increasing until the oaken beam overhead must have shaken with mirth. A thin voice found its way through the noise, as the note of a piccolo makes itself heard through an orchestra.

"But we mus'en vorget what we be a-comed here vor."

The laughter ceased. The talk sunk into whispers insufficient to cover the clatter of the knives and forks. But almost imperceptibly the voices rose—the humorists began again, and a merriment more boisterous than ever—

"But we mus'en vorget what we be a-comed here vor."

It was the voice of old Israel Batson, who loved decency only a little less than he loved money.

Then Urchett warned them that the minute bell was tolling, and the mourners with great solemnity walked two and two down to the little house.

The mourners stood in the garden on each side of the flagstone path, the men very solemn

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and the women each holding a white handkerchief with a black border to assuage her tears. The procession moved slowly towards the church. The sexton had muffled the bell-clapper in an old hat, and the tone was very melancholy. Every window-blind in Bittleton was drawn. In some instances shutters were closed. Neighbours who had shunned Elizabeth for years followed her to the grave. There was an old belief that the dead did not find rest until three days after the funeral, and in their hearts folk were still afraid. As Elizabeth's little house lay to the west, the procession made a circuit by the north side and round the east end of the church so that the corpse might not be brought to the porch against the sun. And when at last the coffin was lowered into the grave and the dust had settled upon the oaken lid, and people had glanced into the pit as a last token of respect for one whom they had ill-treated for years, the crowd dispersed whispering, in complete agreement that Bittleton had never before seen so beautiful a funeral or such a lovely pall. Then the mourners, the little house being tenantless, marched solemnly back to the "Rose and Crown," while from the church tower rang out an unmuffled peal.

The mourners were scarcely ready for another feast. One or two thought they could just pick a bit, and most of them felt it necessary to assuage thirst. Old Israel Batson affirmed that he "was terr'ble dry an' mus' moisten the clay," and sat as before stirring the jorum on his knee. He did not, however, cherish it as when it had to be paid

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for, but drunk with disrespectful haste and called for another.

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A quietude of expectation settled upon the company. There was no mirth. It was understood that the lawyer, Clutterbuck, might arrive at any moment, and would read the will. Sure enough, there came his two-wheeled gig—but the lawyer had sent his clerk.

In reply to the question, "What'll you take?" the clerk's choice was hot port wine and brandy.

A dapper, sharp-faced little man, he drew the will from his breast pocket, and lost no time in getting to business.

The will proved to be very simple, although in appearance it was long. It gave minute particulars as to the funeral—coffin, pall, bearers, and all. It mentioned by name all the relatives who were to be invited, and the list was very considerable. Then it devised the little house and bequeathed the furniture therein, "and all other possessions subject to the behests as set forth in this my will, to Richard Triptree, who has done me many kindnesses."

"I should ha' thought she could ha' vound one o' the name o' Butt vor the little house that have a-bin in the family o' Butt vor hunderds o' years," said one o' the name o' Butt.

Then the shrill laugh of Israel Batson piped in. "If there's one o' the name o' Butt is willen to pay the expenses an' the debts an' take the property, I'll bet a guinea Urchett'll make a deal o' it!"

"She had no debts."

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"There's a lawyer's bill—ha! ha! ha!—I'll goo bail."

The clerk admitted that, of course, there was the drawing up of the will.

No further objection could be raised, and they returned to the feast. Many agreed that the house was very old, and it was to be hoped that Urchett would see his money back. The manner in which he had carried out the wishes of the poor departed was strongly commended. There never had been such a funeral, and it was to be hoped the poor soul was now in peace. They had never believed her to be a witch. Still, for all that, she was strange in her ways. The feasters spoke of her with a large charity, hoping in their hearts that she would not "come back."

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## XXV.

### SENTIMENTS

THE social evenings at the "Rose and Crown" resumed their normal routine. Sometimes there were arguments on subjects profound, unfathomable by human wit, but mostly the evenings passed happily with tale, song, and sentiment.

In the old social life around the hearth, to the merriment of which everybody was expected to contribute, there could not fail to be occasional guests unable to oblige the company either with tale or song. These were not permitted to go free. Something they must do, be it only to ask a riddle or make a jest. Not without reason did Master Slender

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wish for his "Book of Songs and Sonnets," and inquire for his "Book of Riddles" when invited to enter the house of Master Page. The ordinary life of country people, as seen in the Elizabethan drama, underwent very little change until the beginning of the last century. But not much was required to fulfil all demands. It was enough if the person of only ordinary gifts could raise a laugh. And a man was not wise to require a great deal of pressing, because during the talk the cup loitered, not only for the company but for himself.

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The procedure was as follows. A singer of repute sang a ballad or a humorous song, or a really beautiful melody to words often full of charm and sometimes of simple pathos, and came to an end. Then followed applause, and the cup went round. On ordinary occasions the drink was hot gin and cider, or hot gin and ale according to whether it were an orchard county or not. In either case it was spiced with nutmeg. Before drinking each one addressed the singer by name, and added, "Your health and song." When the cup had completed its circle somebody, probably the host, turned to the singer with a "Now then! Tes your call." The singer then called upon whom he chose, and the company supported the call.

I remember that whimsical, round-faced, rosy-faced old humorist, John Budd, who was accounted among the singers, although being afflicted with a chronic hoarseness he had never uttered a musical note in his life. He used to sit smoking in modest silence, but aware that his turn must very soon come.

"I call 'pon Mr. John Budd."

"No, no. I be out o' voice. I can't zing to night. If God A'might have a-gied ee a good voice you must take care o' un."

Then everybody roared simultaneously for Mr. John Budd.

"I can't only call to mind one song. 'Tes a very very wold song. He's gone out now. You don't so very often hear un nowadays."

"Goo on then, John. Goo on."

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" 'Tes a zaddish song. Zome mid call un dismal."

"Never mind about that. Goo on."

" 'Tes a zong wi' a funny title to un, I do call. 'The Raven an' the Yoe on Callow Down.' A terr'ble wold song, I don't doubt."

"Now! all quiet, for Mr. John Budd's song!"

Then, amid silence, John would press his chin down upon the knot of his neckerchief, and at a moment when the deepening purple of his face threatened apoplexy from somewhere between his throat and his nose came a most amazing croak. It was lifelike. He was a Mendip man, and during his boyhood ravens were still nesting on the ledges of Cheddar cliffs.

"Goo on, John!"

"That's all 'tes."

"Then what about the Yoe?"

"She wur there. But no more passed between 'em. The Yoe were dead."

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Mr. John Budd's songs were considered "shart an' swit," but were quite welcome. They provided merriment, and the cup passed after an interval shorter than usual.

"Mr. John Budd, your health and song."

A common form of entertainment, at one time universal among all grades of society, was the recommendation of a sentiment. It lingered in rural life long after it had been given up elsewhere, and may even still be met with at the occasional village festivity, which now and then occurs as a sort of reminiscence of some bygone feast. Sentiments were very various. They might be

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sentimental, didactic, quaint, epigrammatic, or merely humorous. When a pastime for the educated they were expected to be original. Among humbler folk there was, no doubt, a great deal of repetition, but many bore an unmistakable stamp of being home-made.

Only a few years ago I spent an old-fashioned evening at a remote farmhouse. The people were of a good old stock, and their name was in the village before the days of the parish register. Being several miles from a railway station, and more from a town of any consequence, and, moreover, being of the hard-working, stay-at-home sort, they had not entirely forgotten the ways of their forefathers. My host, being pressed for a song, at last compounded with a sentiment.

"Mid nobody never want nothen o' nobody!"

To work out the equation of these redundant negatives seems to me beyond the compass of human wit. Nor is it worth while, so brightly is the wish illuminated with aspiration after universal welfare and independence. It is one of the greatest instances of rural negation cherished within my memory. Though another, comparatively deficient in the spirit of broad humanity and good will, and less concise, runs it close in richness of style. "A Dorset labourer, describing the character of his late employer, said: 'Not vor no skinflint, noobeddy didden never not zee the likes o' he not never in all their lives.' This crowd of negatives can claim the respect given to ancient descent. Once this was good English, and remained so with gradual simplification until later

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than Chaucer, who constantly used a double negative. For instance, in "The Prologue," speaking of the knight, he says:

"He never yet no vileinye ne sayde  
In all his lyf, unto no manner wight."

A subtlety offering a difficulty to a not over nimble bucolic mind was often a very effective feature in a sentiment.

"Mid us all climb the hill o' success, but never meet a frien'!"

"I don't zee that. A man do want frien's don't er? An' to meet em all so well, else why be we here?"

Then the man in the know might laugh and the maidens titter until the critic began to show heat.

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"Well then, I'll drink your health—but not your sentiment. I don't want to lost my frien's. Zo there!"

"Why, you fool, they must be a-comen down the hill vor he to meet ' em."

"O-ho—Aye. To be sure—down the hill. Here, gie us the cup. Your health and sentiment."

Here is another once frequently proposed, which was undoubtedly of very great antiquity, and, apart from the puzzle involved, recommends itself by its quaint alliterative:

"Mid the Vower-Alls flourish avore All."

"The Four-Alls" is a quite familiar sign of a wayside ale-house, and the phrase must have existed before it could be adopted as a sign. No doubt, the four lines explanatory of these four alls were handed down from a very early period

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of English social life, and are as old as the little rhyming childrens' prayers and quaint verses formerly in use, which can scarcely find a place under our present heading.

The "Four-Alls" are thus explained:

"The farmer he do zow vur all,  
The sojer he do faight vur all,  
The passon he do pray vur all,  
But the King hiszelf is auver all."

Now and then the number five was substituted for four, and the quartette of worthies to be recommended to universal gratitude became a quintette. The seaman was included, with the line:

"The sailor ploughs the say vur all."

But this was never truly adopted, and when suggested often begat argument. The old folk shook their heads. It always had been "Vower alls"—there was the ale-house sign in great big letters of gold to prove it. Sometimes it even bore pictures of the four alls in little compartments like quartering in a shield. Granfer he always used to say "Vower Alls" and never "Vive." Old folk would have no change.

The fact that five was occasionally urged, yet never established, would appear to have a significance and to strongly support the claim to antiquity just now set forth. The four lines belong to a time before the seaman was recognised as of great importance to the realm. It is inconceivable that after the defeat of the Spanish Armada he could have been overlooked. It was

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quite another thing to introduce his name. Probably the attempt was associated with the idea of commerce which did not make deep appeal to the rural mind.

The instruction to be gathered from these humble matters is more often from what may be inferred than from what is said.

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"May our stock o' beliefs rest on a staddle o' sound judgment. That is my sentiment."

"Walter Raymond, your health and sentiment."

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XXVI.

THE PARISH CLERK'S TALE

IT was the second night after Elizabeth Butt's funeral, and we were sitting before the dogs, with a roaring fire blazing up the back. The weather was rough and wintry outside, and at times the gale roared in the chimney and drove down a puff of smoke. Nevertheless, it enhanced our comfort to hear it so rough outside while we were snug within. Of course, the conversation kept returning to so recent an event. It would drift off and presently return. But now and again one of the company would cut it short with some remark that seemed to close the door upon it.

"Well! The poor lady is in her grave," reflected the farrier. "So let us hope she mid rest in peace."

"Ah—main!"

We all turned round. There stood Peter Mogg, the parish clerk, an infrequent visitor, who had come in unobserved.

"Come up to vire, Peter," cried Urchett. We shuffled about to make room.

Peter Mogg came forward, diffidently casting his eye around for a vacant place.

"You be wettish, Peter. Get on inzide."

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So Peter took his seat in the chimney-corner, almost facing the semi-circle of neighbours drawn up in front of the hearth, and set about filling his pipe.

"That's a wish that had another meaning to one time—an' not zo very long agone nother," he added.

"How wur that then?" asked the farrier.

"Ah! I could tell 'ee a vunny tale if I wur a-minded. A tale zo true as the light. Vor I knowed the man. One born an' bred in these parts, too. An' 'tis a vunny thing—when he went herevrom he went up tother end o' Mendip where the coal is—up Radstock way—an' that's where I wur bound 'prentice to the carpenterin' an' wheelwrighten. Thik man wur very vriendly like wi' my maister. I've a-talked wi' thik man hunderds o' times. To be sure I werden never zo very interment wi' the man. All zame time, vor all that I laid un in his coffin—"

"But what's the tale, Peter?"

Peter shook his head in impatience of the interruption, and began afresh.

"Thik man beganned life wi' next door to nothen. A wondervul upstandin' man, an' pirty quick wi' his vistes, too. Noobeddy 'bout here could'n stand up avore thik man. But lauk you've all a-heard tell o' un. I'll warr'nt he've a-zot avore this vire manies an' manies o' times. Jonas Splat by name, down to Banford. That's whur he wur a-born an' bred to—"



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"Wull! What about un, Peter?"

"Things was differnt in days agone. Twerden  
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not zo terr'ble sure that folk could lie in their graves. There wur they that did come the night ader a-buryin', or the next ader again, an' carr' off the corpse. Why I my own zelf have a-bin hired to watch dree nights to zee that all wur quiet an' noobeddy didn't come. I've a-zot dree nights 'pon a tomb an' smoked my pipe, but noobeddy never did'n come—"

"But what have that to do wi' Jonas Splat?"

"Ay, tell up theas-yere vunny tale about Jonas."

"Zo I be," cried Peter, indignant at frequent interferences.

"You baint."

"Wull then! This Jonas Splat wur a man, or zo I've a-year'd tell, that volk could'n very well make out. He wur very well liked, an' gentry did take notice o' un because he had a-winned two prizevights. But t'wur zaid he did get about by night. Zome thought mus' be a-poachen—zome zaid he was in wi' the smugglers, but one that mus' a-knowed declared he could take his oath that Jonas had'n never a-handled a tub in his life—or not in these parts, that is. The keepers zeed 'un. But he did zim to kip to the road—an' he never did'n have no dog. There werden never noo robberies not hereabout an' there werden never the leastest whisper that Jonas did stop travellers 'pon the high road."

Peter paused to cast his eye round upon the expectant faces.

"An' then one vine marnen who should drave down drough parish but Jonas Splat, a-  
stood up  
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in a empty wagon wi' zo useful a plough o' horses a-hitched in un as anybeddy could wish to clap eyes 'pon. You can judge vor your own zelves how t'wur—Hullo, Jonas—whose plough's that, then? I never did'n zee he avore—all down street.

"But Jonas he did'n answer 'em not straight out like. He told 'em whose t'wur he wurden a-gwaine to zay. He wur a tryen o' 'em. He zaid he had a sart ov a vancy that if he could pick up a wagon an' hosses wo'th the money like, he'd jack up an' goo in the coal trade. An' volk did commend his silence. To be sure Jonas werden a-gwaine vor to yappy an' maybe spwoil his deal—not very likely.

" 'Twur a yaller wagon. In about a wick's time Jonas gied un a coat o' blue paint. Did zim more suitable to the coal trade, he told 'em.

"Zoo then they knowed he had a-made a deal. An' zo zoon as the paint wur dry off he went. He comed back vor to vetch his wife and their rottletraps, an' then—good-bye to Banford! But he doned well. When he died he had a string o' carts a-haulen coal ud reach herevrom down to tother end o' parish. An' that's all Banford ever knowed about thik wagon an' hosses. But I knowed the man as I zaid, not intermently till I laid un in his coffin—"

Peter stopped to refill his pipe.

"Vor all that I do know the rights o' it about thik wagon an' hosses."

Peter screwed up a piece of paper to light his

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pipe—puffed half a dozen rapid whiffs, and went on:

"'Twur the like o' this. We worked vor Jonas Splat—builded all his carts an' doned his repairs an' he wur very frienly wi' my maister an' told un all about it, an' ader he wur a-tookt that's how I yeard o' it.

"He zaid—in his early days he wur most terr'ble discontented wi' his lot. He could'n a-bear to be ardered about wi' a little snippet ov a man he could a'most pick up wi' between vinger and thumb an' chuck auver hedge. Zome times he did think to jack up an' goo abroad. An' he wur half a-minded too to try his luck at the prize vighthen—an' when he could'n a-bear hiszelf like, he did goo out an' walk about no matter what the hour.

"One night he got zo vur as 'The Dragon' at the vower cross-roads mabbe a couple o' mile out o' Banford. Volk did'n stop there, but the coaches did meet and change hosses an' there is a biggish yard. There wur a wagon an' hosses in the yard and a lantern 'pon groun' close handy. He zaid in hizzelf like that he had'n never a-zeed thik waggon avore. There wur a sart ov tarpaulin on the wagon an' he had the cur'osity like to lift un up an' peep. An' there wur a zackbag a-drowed across a coffin—the cheapest sart o' pauper's coffin. He knowed what wur up. There had a-bin a buryen in Banford thik very day. He nipped roun' to the vront an' peeped in drough a chink in the shutter. There wur two roughish fellers a-zot down. They wur half-slewed as twur, an'

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the publican wur a-putten down two steamen glasses 'pon the bench avore 'em. Jonas knowed they wur a-gwaine to snatch thik carps.

"What did 'em want a coffin vor?"

"What did 'em want a coffin vor?" asked Urchett. "The carps wur in a coffin a'ready!"

"Ah! there you be," cried the sexton, holding up his finger. "They had to have a coffin to kip inzide the law. There wur a time when a carps did'n belong to nobeddy. The man wur dead. He could'n do nothen. But min' me—if you did steal a shroud or zo much as a stitch o' the graves clothes, let alone the coffin—that wur the property o' the executors or who mid be that paid vor the buryen."

"I can zee that," said the farrier, shaking his head. "Goo on, Peter."

"Wall! Jonas Splat zaw he had a plenty o' time. He went back 'pon tip-toe an' he climbed up into thik wagon an' he got into thik coffin. He could zee it all. They'd drive to zome quiet carner, then creep athirt a fiel or two to chichyard, an' when they had a-got un, they'd bring the carps in the zackbag an' put un in the coffin. But they wur boun' to go by his house. Mus' ha' bin vull early for their job, vor Jonas simmed he wur a-crumpt up in thik coffin a terr'ble long time.

"Howsomedever in the end they comed an' they clombed up, an' wur a sart o' half a-stood up an' half a-zot 'pon the voreboard—an' Jonas, he kipt his mind a-vixed 'pon the ups an' downs, vor the road is a bit knappy, an' when he thought

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he mus' be a-getting a-neast his house he crope out o' thik coffin.

"What wi' a drop o' drink an' the rattle o' the empty wagon 'pon the stones they never yeard un, an' he comed close behind 'em—an' he gied the mmost awfulest scritch and he hollered close to the ears o' em like—

"You robbers o' corpses  
Come to hell. Come to hell."

They hollared. They jumped down. They thought the very wold devil wur ader 'em an' urned vor the very lives o' 'em.

"Nobeddy never did'n make noe claim vor thik wagon an' hosses. An' Jonas chopped the coffin up for vire'ood.

"But thik wagon an' hosses wur the foundashon o' Jonas's farcheen!"  
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XXVII.

ON A DAY TO BE COSY

SOME of you may remember the "real ladies" of Bittleton and the proposal to establish a night school. I lost no time in going to call upon them.

A dense November fog filled the valley in which Bittleton lies sheltered and hid the cottages on the other side of the street. The church was blotted out, but here and there in the churchyard a headstone pale as a ghost loomed through the mist. Great drops, as if there had been heavy rain, fell from the overhanging branches of leafless hedgerow trees along the road. Surely Miss Mary and Miss Arabella would be at home.

"Come in," cried Miss Arabella, and from the parlour came the voice of Miss Mary, "Oh! Come in. Come in."

They had closed the shutters and lighted the lamp. A fire was blazing in the little grate with the hobs. On the table was an herbarium with which Miss Arabella had been busy. In the corner of the room stood a harp, and on a chair by the hearthrug Miss Mary had laid down her book.

"We thought you might come this afternoon," said Miss Arabella.  
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"We heard you were here," explained Miss Mary.

"We feared the day might be too dismal and that you would sit and write and write."

They spoke alternately and sometimes together, like vocalists performing a duet, and now it was Miss Mary's turn.

"We welcome a dismal day," she laughed.

"We both say—" began Miss Arabella.

—"Now let us be cosy."

"It is a sin to be cosy on a fine day," declared Miss Mary.

"Because it is a duty to go out," chimed in Miss Arabella.

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"But when we are agreed that the dismalness warrants our being cosy—"

"—We light the lamp," confessed Miss Mary.

"No matter what the hour," Miss Arabella solemnly shook her head.

"And determine to encourage cosiness with secret revelry. It was delightful of you to come just in time."

The cover of a mahogany liqueur-case on the sideboard was raised and the doors were open. Four small decanters were ranged in a row and two glasses of the same pattern stood ready in front. To these a third was immediately added.

"My sister made these and many others—some from very old recipes—and some she invented. Do begin with the one we have named *La Consolatrice*," advised Miss Mary.

With complete confidence the advice was followed.

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We sat and sipped. The cordials of Miss Arabella were gently alcoholic, but the strength of the spirit lay unsuspected under a most subtle blend of flavour and bouquet. There was a suggestion of garden flowers after rain, of wild herbs that fill the air with aromatic perfume when trodden under foot, of seeds that bear the added name of spice. Each cordial had a character, an individuality, and a pet name. *La Consolatrice* guaranteed a sense of well-being that could outlive a winter of rain. One was distinctly humorous. Paddy O'Brien could lure with smiles, keep the point to the end, and surprise you into a cough with it. Miss Arabella was a genius at the blending of flavours and Paddy finished with a practical joke. But alas! the day of home-made cordials is past. Only sloe-gin survives, enervated and enfeebled. In this era of haste and petrol the fruit is not left upon the thorn to suffer sufficient frost. There were, however, disappointments that even *La Consolatrice* could not dismiss.

"Our idea of a night school for Bittleton is hopeless," lamented Miss Mary.

"Everybody is against it," sighed Miss Arabella.

"They say it is not wanted."

"Not wanted! They say the boys would not come."

"And there is no room—" "And nobody will let us one—" "And reading and writing are no good to farm boys—" "They have no wish to read whatever—" "They would read instead of keeping rooks off corn—" "Their statements however contradictory are invariably

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adverse." "So with reluctance we are forced to give up the idea."

The spirit of *La Consolatrice* warmed my heart, and my words were a-glow with conviction.

"It was high time for me to return," I laughed. "You have proceeded unwisely. You have mentioned night school, and raised unwelcome mental pictures. What is night? A nothing to those who sleep, and as ombre misery to those who cannot. A darkness when witches ride on broomsticks to squeeze the breath out of the lungs of sleeping victims. And school is the nightmare of every healthy intelligent boy. It is necessary to act with duplicity—"

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"Then you will have to provide it," interrupted Miss Arabella with a laugh.

"With pleasure. But avoid self-righteousness. You know you have a secret still in the attic."

In a moment hope was restored and they rejoiced in their temperamental joyousness. "Show us what is wanted," they cried, "and we will show you examples of dissimulation almost sublime."

"Very well. Night school must be dismissed and another idea substituted. You need not exactly fib. But eh! You meet Mrs. So-and-So. Oh! Mrs. So-and-So. We have been thinking it over. You were right. Bittleton does not require a night school. And then to the next. Oh! Mrs. So-and-So. There is no room for a night school. Nothing can be done without a room—"

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"That's quite simple," interrupted Miss Mary, in haste to get on. "Tell us what to substitute."

"A concert—penny readings without the penny—a magic lantern. Bittleton has never known an entertainment of any sort, not even a tea meeting. Only speeches at election time in a granary behind the old house. With a little diplomacy we might get the granary. We must arouse enthusiasm—discover local talent. My friend Peterson will be here, a painter, and a good amateur conjurer. We could have a concert—a conjurer—a one-act play—"

"And Arabella shall act," Miss Mary clapped her hands. "Because you were always so good at charades, Arabella. You know you were. And once you acted Mrs. Bouncer splendidly in 'Box and Cox.' I came across the book upstairs in a drawer only a week ago."

"The very thing. We will do 'Box and Cox.' We should want somebody to do Cox".

"We have a cousin on the stage," cried Miss Arabella. "He is such a dear boy and very clever. He would come for certain. He is always out of work."

So we settled to astonish Bittleton.

\* \* \* \* \*

We were very merry. They changed from gloom to sunshine as easily as flowers when the cloud has passed. "You are better than a cordial, *M. le Consolateur*," laughed Miss Mary, and refilled my glass.

"You tempt me to ask a favour," said I.

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"What! What!"

"The little house which Elizabeth Butt lived in is for sale. I could get the key and should be grateful if you would tell me whether it seems habitable. It can be bought, furniture and all, for very little. My mind is set on finding an hermitage. Also the kitchen might come in for the magic lantern, with a little reading, writing, and arithmetic as a sort of ballast."

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They were delighted. It was too late for that afternoon and too dark to see anything—but to-morrow at ten they would be there.

\* \* \* \* \*

You would search in vain for such a little house to-day. Even then it was a survival from social conditions that remained only here and there in some remote village such as Bittleton. The house-kitchen was large and so was the open hearth. There was a narrow strip of carving under the "davytack" as they used to call the mantelshelf, and two china dogs and two brass candlesticks on the top. The pride of Elizabeth had kept the 'and-irons on the hearth as bright as silver. The floor of the "chimmers" upstairs rested uncovered on the dark oaken beams and joists as in the cabin of a ship and under the stairs was a cupboard. There was a dresser, a grandfather's clock, a table board of oak standing on trestles with a form to match on either side, an old settle and some chintz-covered arm-chairs. The floor was of concrete. At the parlour door was a step, the floor within was of oak, and the

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carving under the claytack a little more elaborate. There was nothing that did not belong to a small homestead with the exception of a seaman's chest of mahogany and with brass handles. "Urchett" afterwards told me that one John Butt had been a mariner, more than a hundred years ago, and sailed his own brig.

We went upstairs.

The bedrooms were divided by a wall—a mere projection like the division between the stalls in a stable. The roof was frankness itself. You could see the thatch between the rafters.

"You would have to put a ceiling," said Miss Mary doubtfully, but Miss Arabella dismissed the misgiving.

"That costs very little. It is only lath and plaster." We were all charmed with the place. With the house—with the parlour for a study with the garden. We drew water from a well with a chain and a bucket.

"We should love to put it in order for you," cried Miss Mary.

"And make it very cosy," added Miss Arabella.

That evening I bought the little house and its contents for £50, and Urchett signed a paper to that effect.

The company at the "Rose and Crown" watched with keenest interest.

Said the farrier—"Zoo you do mean to become one o' we."

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XXVIII.

CHRISTMAS VISITORS

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SUSAN was coming down the stairs, a pail in her left hand—her right, extended like a steelyard, clutched a cloth and a scrubbing brush.

"My friend, Peterson, is coming to-day. We want to spend Christmas at the Rose and Crown, and he will stay and help me into my cottage," I explained.

Susan was evidently excited.

"Wi' all my heart! Nothen could'n vall out better!" cried she. "An more an ever 'cause why we have a-had a letter. Iss! Urchett and cousin Reuben an' Selina, that 's his wife, an' little Master Philip, all zo well, be a-coming vrom Lunnon. Iss! A beaudivul bwoy, by all accounts, ten year wold an' good as gold. Iss! Or zoo his mother do say an' she ought to know. We hant never a-zeed 'em—a vust cousin once removed—a-comen to-day—the day o' Wynport Christmas Show."

Here was Urchett ready to start.

So we went to see Wynport Christmas Show.

Peterson was already waiting. The Londoners arrived just before dark. Already the Square was magnificently illuminated. Such was the public  
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spirit of Wynport that the tinker at the corner had put a sprig of holly or of mistletoe in the spout of every kettle in his window, and two Chinese lanterns hanging above added a sparkle to the rubies of the one and the pearls of the other. This was magnanimity! Who wanted a kettle? All eyes were for the grocer's front. Such figs! Such currants! Such almonds and raisins! All hearts were divided between the rival butchers. At least a score of people stood spellbound, gazing upon the rumps and sirloins of butcher Trim. A dozen turkeys were hooked by the neck six on each side. Under the glare of a naphthalamp the breasts of geese superlatively fat put on an enticing golden yellow. In front was a row of boars' heads each with an orange in his mouth.

The light fell also on the Londoners, who received even more attention than the turkeys and the beef.

Cousin Reuben Triptree was a middle-aged man, tall and stout, with a face almost too red and prosperous. Everybody knew he was coming.

Butcher Trim hurried out to speak to him.

In his hearty voice which was heard all over the market place, Reuben explained:

"I've long had a wish to visit the place where my father was born and bred."

"I respect that feeling," concurred butcher Trim. He felt there was no pride about Reuben Triptree.

Mrs. Reuben for the present was in the shadow. She had long cherished a wish to go to Bath.

Master Philip pushed forward and stretched

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out his neck until his sharp little face almost touched a boar's snout. He wore a new cap with a shining peak—a dark blue jacket and short trousers warm from the tailor's goose—a new pair of elastic-sided boots; all of a style so unfamiliar that it could not fail to command the appredation of Bittleton.

Butcher Trim stopped talking, lifted his steel and began to whet his knife.

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The boy turned from the boar with the orange to gape on butcher Trim.

"Do pigs eat oranges?"

The voice was a clear treble. The crowd laughed. The butcher dropped his steel and tested the blade with his thumb.

"Only when they can get at 'em."

The sense of humour was so keenly alive both in Wynport and Bittleton that the laughter became boisterous. A fond mother stepped forward and withdrew her wonderful boy with the smiling explanation:

"He is always asking these clever questions."

Silence followed—a silence of intense interest.

She was a plump lady of middle height, wearing a spreading hat and a still more spreading crinoline—a fashion never before seen in that neighbourhood.

A shout from Urchett, "I've a-hitched in the hoss."

All eyes were fixed upon her and the crowd parted like the Red Sea before the Israelites. Every mouth gaped with admiration as she wrestled with the refractory hoops, and finally

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disappeared through the narrow entrance to Urchett's van.

Then we all got up and jogged home to Bittleton.

By heredity, and instructed by the traditions of his grandfather, Reuben was keenly alive to the merits of the Triptrees. It was something to be a Triptree. A vague idea of an origin remote but glorious had taken possession of his mind. His visit to Bittleton was, therefore, a pilgrimage. He divided his time between ferreting rabbits and visiting graveyards—and whether shivering by a hedgerow while the ferret laid up, or peering to decipher epitaphs on crumbling headstones overshadowed by some ancient yew, he was equally jolly. The boy eager to go rabbiting on the first occasion would go no more. Perhaps he was gun-shy. Nor could he delight in tombstones. A biting wind searched the most sheltered churchyard and left him cold.

Mrs. Reuben, although she brought a considerable fortune, had no illusions as to her family. All recollections of her grandfather she dismissed without ceremony. In appearance robust, she enjoyed every known ailment, and her glory was the physician. The journey from Wynport had shaken her. She must not be exposed to cold, or overdo herself, or get her feet damp. She complained of rheumatism, and blew up the fire. But Susan made her sit with the bellows at her back, which is a certain cure.

We pitied Master Philip, and so did Susan. Peterson, being a painter, drew caricatures of

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him out of affection. Susan promised to make a little farmer of him. The boy was fascinated with the milking of cows and the serving of pigs, and sometimes she would give him a teacup full of tailing-wheat that he might feed the fowls all by himself. He loved Susan, and was quite a happy boy.

One morning the child was standing by the duck pond. The geese, all that were left, three geese and a gander, kept lifting themselves in the water and flapping their wings.



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Then they sailed slowly to the shallow, where Urchett's horses used to drink, and waddled out. They gabbled and stretched out their necks. Closer they came slowly and without menace. Master Philip welcomed them, and lo! their necks became snakes, and they hissed and hissed. He turned and ran. The gander caught him hold by the calf, and there were shrieks.

"What he do want is some bwoys vor playmates, and there idden none," reflected Susan.

Christmas Eve came. We were all in the best of spirits. In honour of the Londoners, Susan had provided two Christmas candles of prodigious size. At the moment for the ceremony of lighting, taper in hand she advanced.

"Vo'ced to stick 'em in agg-cups. Thur idden no cannelsticks to hold 'em. How they do burn zoo the comen year 'ull turn out. If they do guttery vust gwaine off do bring awful bad luck." Trembling we watched. Her hand shook. Yet both wicks were lighted and burnt still and clear

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without sign of an overflow. Our minds at ease, we turned to the great ashen faggot.

It lay ready in front of the hearth, "han'pat" to be lifted on to the dogs. In the West Country the Yule log, which is of oak, is unknown, but our "fakket" must be of ash. The oak was the sacred tree of the Druids. Scandinavian peoples worshipped the ash. In either case the bonfire was in glory of the winter solstice. The "fakket" had many bonds and whenever a bond burst the cup of "lamb's wool" went round. Compounded of hot beer and gin and spices, it carried a head of cream-coloured foam that entitled it to its name.

The Christmas candles were burning perfectly—no strangers in the wicks, no thieves, no winding sheets. Then we had supper—a bowl of furmety. Wheat simmered in milk to a sufficient softness, spiced with cinnamon and served with cream. The waits came. We listened in respectful silence to the old carols and the candles burnt with the tranquil serenity of the morning and evening stars.

The mummers came bedecked and beribboned, and there was confusion to clear a space for the play.

Suddenly Susan raised her hands.

"An' that's certain death avore the year's out!"

Master Philip having found the snuffers had snuffed both Christmas candles out.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was the morning of Christmas Day.

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"He's 'quisitive an' meddlesome, but there idden 'nough mirschie in un not to rear un up healthy," admitted Susan. "What he do want is half a dozen playmates."

And lo! a group of village boys was passing at that moment. "They be a-gwaine a-hunten the wren," cried she, and ran to the door and called to them. "Oh yaas, they'd take care o' un."

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So Master Philip went hunting the wren.

He enjoyed a glorious morning. The boys were quite kind to him. They filled his pockets with stones, and started along a hedgerow between a ploughed ground and a green field. There is always a wren in a bank under a hedgerow, and she will run like a mouse among the roots and from one shelter to the next. Terrified with the shouts and the volleys of stones, she dare not fly. The chase might be long, but with little hope of escape—so the wren was not difficult to obtain.

They killed by a clump of gorse. The boy looked at the crumpled little bird and asked:

"What do you want it for?"

"You be boun' to kill a wren every Christmas Day," they told him with all solemnity, and cut a branch "o' vuz " and hung the mangled little carcase in the midst of the prickles.

"Come on! Come on! Athirt ten acres."

Running athirt ten acres was a ditch, not broad, but deep in mud. Master Philip trembled on the brink. "Come on!" they cried. "You can jump it close-vooted." They were leaving him behind. "Come on!" Philip jumped—pitched in the mud and fell on his face. The boys ran back and  
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pulled him out. From the peak of his cap to his bare foot—for one elastic-sided boot with its sock remained in the mire—he was one cake of mud. "Come on! Come on!" The boot would not go on. The biggest boy carried Philip picky-back, but they soon fell behind. "Get on," he shouted. "They wunt gie nuthen when they have a-zeed he."

The others were singing in front of "The Rose and Crown," but they had already made the collection when Philip came in sight.

"We hunted the wren for Robbin the Bobbin.  
We hunted the wren for Jack of the Can,  
We hunted the wren for Robbin the Bobbin.  
We hunted the wren for every one."

There are many verses, but the meaning is not evident. The last line quoted seems to indicate that the sacrifice was to benefit the whole community.

His father, mother, and all in the household were standing at the door when Philip was put down on the steps—shivering, tearful, and afraid.

But the spirit of Christmas was merry in every heart.

Susan whisked him off. Urchett shouted after him to make haste to be ready to "ate the wold gander." Reuben gave the pickyback boy sixpence—even his mother, suffering from furnety and lambs' wool, was in good spirits. Reuben had consented to start for home to-morrow by way of Bath.

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## SOME LORE OF CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS

THE mistletoe was plentiful in the orchards of Bittleton, and although many a bough travelled in to Wynport on the roof of Urchett's van to decorate the halls of the houses in the town, the one most richly bedecked with berries, which the maidens had eyed and set their hearts upon, was in little danger of being interfered with.

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, when the glow of the sinking sun gleamed between the trunks and sparkled among the branches and twigs of the apple-trees, a merry laughing party, the youth of the homestead, used to sally forth to cut that precious bough. A lad climbed up the tree, made fast a line to the bunch of leaves, and threw the end of it over the leafless limb, so that the spangled treasure might be slowly lowered into outstretched arms. The maidens cried "Mind out! If he do vall to groun' tull het half the berries off o' 'em"—" an' every one o' 'em mid be a kiss." The laughter became merrier than ever, but above it rose the rasping of the saw. There was a hush as the bough came down within reach of hands. "Now don't ee shake un, whatever [225]

you do do." Gently they insinuated a stake between the twigs of golden leaves and pearly berries. "Don't ee knock none o' 'em off." Not a berry was sacrificed. "Come on! Hist un up careful like." They did not trust the sacred burden to one or two, but carried it into house shoulder high with shouts and jokes, and hung it safely on the hook in the middle of the kitchen beam.

Bunches of red-berried holly were already on the clavy, the eight-day clock was covered with ivy as thick as on the trunk of some old hedgerow elm. Tendrons bearing shining leaves ran along the dresser shelves in front of blue plates and saucers and behind the hanging cups and jugs.

The bringing in and hanging up of the mistletoe bough was the last and crowning ceremony. The Christmas decorations were complete, and they all stood back and congratulated themselves.

The firelight danced upon the stone floor and kissed the rosy cheeks and lips of the girls. The "chackle" of their tongues was louder than the crackle of the blazing sticks.

"Zo there he is." "Ay, he's up saf."

"I don't call to mind that I ever zeed noo jis zight o' berries in all my life," squeaked the wizened old "grammer" who sat in the corner. "An' he han't never a-tiched o' the earth, I'll warr'nt un." "I wonder why he didn't ought not to tich the groun'," said the youngest of the maidens.

Then the old woman croaked such ancient wisdom as remained unrecognised in lore. "Volk don't trouble now—only here an' there vor their [226]

own zelves, like. 'Tis the wo'st o' luck. He don't belong to earth. You couldn't not grow un in a garden splat. They don't know the good o' un. Why, when I wur young a many did carr' a double leaf about 'em to kip off the fits—an' boil down the berries too—an' gie it to the beastes too—when they wur bad did cure' em—an' when they wuz wull did make 'em better. Volk don't know nothen not now. Tes all gone out. That's why zo

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many be bad now. If he do tich o' the groun' he do lost all his power. Tes the wo'st of luck. . ."

Her voice sank lower and lower until, although her lips still appeared to mutter, the words were no longer audible.

To say an action was lucky or unlucky provided an acceptable and sufficient reason for respecting it. On such meagre support among humble folk it might survive a millennium as a mere custom, or be restored to life by the learned, free from superstition, but out of a respect to the antiquity of its origin. What could Bittleton lads and maidens know of Druids, Sungods, and the Solstice? Yet they were still cutting the mistletoe with ceremony on Christmas Eve, at the turn of the year just when the Druids used to reap it with a golden sickle and catch it before it reached the ground. With many ancient peoples it was a holy plant. With our British forefathers and with the Saxons and after the Christian Church had grafted its religious observances upon pagan festivals for centuries it remained in honour and was included in the Christmas decorations of churches. But the mistletoe had been sacred to the Saxon  
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goddess of love. Some very occasional kissing is all that to-day remains of her rites, but in the more boisterous times of Merry England, Christmas mirth was of a wilder character, and the mistletoe was the centre of much of it. So the plant lost whatever may once have been sacred in its character, became secular, and was no longer used for any but domestic decoration. Yet it long retained its reputation as a universal medicine for man or beast—whether leaf or berry, to be swallowed or rubbed in, or merely carried in reliance upon its magic virtues.

In Bittleton the holly was called a holm, and a holly-bush a "holmenbush." But holly with red berries serviceable for decoration, had no name, even before it was cut, other than "Kirmsas." "There's a beauidivul lot o' Kirmsas up in 'ood. I've a-got my eye 'pon it, if only the plagues o' birds 'ull lef it lone long 'nough," might be heard as early as the shining leaves were half-covered with crimson. It has been used for the decoration both of church and dwelling from the earliest times. No West Country lore of it has been picked up among my gleanings. It has been suggested that, previous to the introduction of Christianity, it may have been already used here by the Romans, who sent it as gifts at the festival of the Saturnalia, which took place towards the end of December. Thus it might easily have been established and passed on to the Christmas festivities. However, the decorative qualities of the holly are surely enough both to have recommended it and to retain it in its universal popularity.

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Ivy also has been used from the earliest times for Christmas decorations, and the same must be said of rosemary and bay.

The constant mention of rosemary in poetry and old plays reveals the honour in which it was held by our forefathers. It was both strewed and carried at marriages, borne at a funeral and dropped into the grave. It added a flavour to the potations of both the wedding and the burial feasts. From no carol or lyric that rejoices in Christmas decoration is it absent, and yet it always seemed to me to belong to the hall rather than

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to the homestead. The rosemary must have been more common in earlier days, for Dekker speaks of it in the cottage garden, and says that where it flourishes "the grey mare is the better horse." Also Ben Jonson in "The Tale of a Tub," apropos of the arrival of a bridegroom, "look an' the wenches ha' not found un out, and do present un with a van of rosemary and bays enough to vill a bow-pot or trim the head of my best vore-horse."

There is a proper time to have done with the Christmas and New Year rejoicings and to take down the decorations, and should you keep them up after the 1st of February you do so at your peril. There is yet a month to run, for our forefathers were liberal in their holiday feasts, but on Candlemas Eve we are warned by Herrick:

"End now the white-loafe and the pye,  
And let all sports with Christmas dye,

\* \* \*

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Down with the rosemary, and so  
Down with the baies and mistletoe;

Down with the holly, ivy, all  
Wherewith ye dressed the Christmas hall,  
That so the superstitious find  
No one least branch there left behind,  
For look, how many leaves there be  
Neglected there, maids trust to me,  
So many goblins you may see.

The mistletoe might be given to the cows for the good of the milkpail.  
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XXX.

## THE MOST AGGREGATENEST WOLD BUNDLE

WHEN Susan Triptree heard that Mrs. Sprack was to be asked to exhibit a bill in her shop window she laughed. " 'Tis the most aggregatenest wold bundle that ever walked," said she. When one morning Miss Arabella, as publicity agent in advance, entered the shop, Mrs. Sprack came forward and welcomed her with smiles.

"We have been thinking, Mrs. Sprack, that there really ought to be an entertainment in Bittleton."

Mrs. Sprack rested her knuckles on the counter to support the shock. Her lips parted to their widest possibility. She disclosed the full circles of the whites of her eyes and panted with surprise. Open-mouthed astonishment did not show Mrs. Sprack at her best. She was very stout, of no particular shape, very red, short of breath, and "gap-toothed." As the post-box was in her window, she returned the compliment by dressing her hair after the pattern of Queen Victoria on a postage stamp. The atmosphere of the shop was

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heavy with the mingled odours of cheese, tallow, lamp oil, red herrings and onions. It permeated  
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everything, even Mrs. Sprack herself. She was temperamentally and officially against any innovation or change whatever.

She pulled herself together.

"I be agast to hear it. I never avore did'n hear noo sich thing—not in all my born days," she gasped, but immediately consoled herself with the thought, "There, could'n never be doned, Miss, not in Bittleton."

"That's just it, Mrs. Sprack. Every other village does something to keep itself alive. There is Critch, the other side of the hill, and Banford a few miles down the brook. You see them mentioned in the Saturday paper—but Bittleton never—What's that bacon, Mrs. Sprack?"

Mrs. Sprack took down a remnant of flich and regarded it with that look of personal admiration that coerces a doubting customer.

"It looks very nice. I'll take that piece. But what I really came to see you about—you know everybody, Mrs. Sprack. Could you recommend two good singers, a young woman and a young man?"

"But volk wunt never come an' pay to hear they. How much be the zeats?"

"There will be nothing to pay," explained Miss Arabella. "We mean to give the entertainment. And my sister would like to accompany them on the harp. She will also play a piece on the harp. And we have two gentlemen of great talent from London—one is a prestidigitator and the other a young man of remarkable histrionic ability."  
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Miss Arabella spoke quickly. She was at a disadvantage when talking to a dialect speaker and wished to get on equal terms. The wold bundle gasped: "the former will produce living rabbits from the lining of any man's hat and a sitting of eggs from the sidecurls of any lady in the audience. But we also want local talent."

Mrs. Sprack was subdued. She fixed her eyes on a box of red herrings and considered.

"There's Jarge Adber's Tamsin up to Barton have a-got a beaudivul voice. But tidden vor I to recommend the name o' any young man, Miss, not my own zelf. May be she could."

The wold bundle sniffed and tossed her head. "We shall also want a lot of candles, Mrs. Sprack, the largest and brightest—"

"There's zixes and there's wax'n an' there's composites—"

"But that must wait for the present. We wanted to ask you to be good enough to exhibit a bill my sister is preparing—with pictures—on a board all ready. If you would be so kind as to put it in the window—or in your shop where everybody could see it. Of course all the parish would want to see it. She would be very grateful."

"I could'n zay not all to once," replied Mrs. Sprack with dignity. "I should require to zee what' tis on un avore I did gie consent. 'Tis a Post Office zo well's a shop, mind that."

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An' theas-year agitater fellar you mentioned, what have he a-got to talk about? I bent zo very much vor they there urn-about's a-upzetting volk's minds."  
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"Not an agitator, Mrs. Sprack. A professor of legerdemain. Well, a conjurer from London, who does very wonderful things. You'll see."

"Oh! I could'n come. I never did'n goo to no toory-loories not when I wur a young maid. Well, there never wurden none. Zoo I never han't—an' I never shan't—not now. Noo, Miss, I do kip my shop—I do kip the Post Office—an' I do kip my church. An' I bent a-gwaine to do no otherwise."

"Well, Mrs. Sprack, you are the first to be invited anyway. Remember that. And I'll bring down the bill for your consideration to-morrow."

Thus Miss Arabella, carrying her bacon, tripped smiling into the open air. Not a soul was in sight. But in the old-world rural life nothing in the village passed unobserved, and the length of her visit had not escaped attention. Behind her back from all directions womenfolk just "popped over" or "zipped across," or "urned down for half a minute," if only to hear what Miss Arabella had a-got to talk about zo long—" an' what she have a-bought." By the time Miss Arabella reached home, and, with her hand on the garden gate, glanced down the village street before going in, quite a little crowd of neighbours had gathered around the shop. Mrs. Sprack, leaning on her half-hatch was voluble, and kept shaking her head in disapproval. Miss Arabella could plainly distinguish the constantly recurring alternating phrases. "An' zoo I zaid—" "An' zoo she zaid—" But she had done a good morning's work. For the rest of the day all the talk of  
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Bittleton was of harps, conjurers, rabbits in hats, and agitators under a different name.

It was now Miss Mary's turn, and after a hasty lunch she started for Barton to find and interview Jarge Adber's Tamsin.

Even in winter the door of the little thatched homestead was open. The ring of the latch served for a knocker. A fine girl with black hair and eyes and a fresh complexion, smiling with health, five feet eight inches in height, came running to the door with a song on the tip of her tongue. Her hands were strong and useful, and her biceps—but surprised to see so important a visitor she quickly turned down her sleeves, silently ushered Miss Mary into a little parlour, pushed forward a chair, said "I'll tell mother—"

"It was you I wanted to see, Tamsin."

"I'd better to tell mother," said Tamsin.

Mother and daughter stood side by side before their visitor, seated in the chair. They were very much alike. Mrs. Adber was about forty, and her hair had as yet scarcely a trace of grey, but all the glow of youth had already departed. Barton was a small farm and poor, and her face was lean and weather-beaten with labour in the fields. It was hard, like the head of a peasant carved in oak. She was not unhappy, but the life of the Adbers was a struggle with land that was hungry and never generous. Miss Mary felt a sinking of the heart. Twenty years hence would this young girl, now so vivid in colour and rich in every outline, have become like that? The question begot goodwill towards them both.

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"My sister and myself wish to give an entertainment—to begin with a short concert. We are told, Tamsin, that you have a good voice. It will be in the granary, and we want you to sing."

Surprised and in doubt, the girl glanced at her mother.

"I do ver'ly belave you could, Tam," said the woman.

"We shall have a nice stage, and light it well, and we want everybody to come."

Such wonders were laden with misgivings.

"Oh! I don't never think—I never could'n."

"I do ver'ly belave you could, Tam."

"Of course she could," cried Miss Mary.

"And I should like to play the harp when you sing."

"Oh! I never could'n."

"I do ver'ly belave you could, Tam."

"So that's settled," cried Miss Mary. "And could you tell me of a young man who sings?"

Tamsin looked down, blushed, and shook her head.

"I do ver'ly belave you could, Tam."

"Well, could you see him for me, Tamsin? Could you persuade him? Could you come to-night and bring him, and then we will decide?"

The pace was very fast. Tamsin was out of breath.

"I do ver'ly belave you could, Tam."

"Of course she can," laughed Miss Mary, and got up to go. "I am going straight home. Come, both of you, as early as you can, and we will settle everything."

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Miss Mary hurried home, rejoicing in the discovery of an idyll. "The mother was like a parrot with one phrase; but I could feel both ambition and pride in it, and it made me quite love her," she said.

Very soon after dark Tamsin brought a captive, a young James Beston, the son of the wheelwright. With blushes they admitted the ability to sing a duet. It was a quaint old love song, and Miss Mary pronounced it very charming. She easily learnt the simple tune, and provided an effective accompaniment.

On the following day all Bittleton put the question "What do a harp sound like, Tam?" "I could'n tell ee that," replied Tamsin, after deliberation; "but I myself should call it heavenly." This seemed to be a corroboration of Scripture, and the parish was satisfied.

After that the village was kept in a ferment. The young man of histrionic ability arrived, and was a very merry young fellow. My friend Peterson puzzled the guests of "The Rose and Crown" with a few simple conjuring tricks. The carpenter put up the stage in time for rehearsals, and, as the young actor knew a wrinkle or two, carried away tales of wonders. Everybody was coming, and said so. Everybody with the exception of the wold bundle.



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Modified by the expectation of a deal in candles, her opposition was not violent, but determined. She understood there was to be play-acting, and she did "not hold wi' the theaytre." She said so to everybody, calmly but irrevocably, on her [237]

way to church. "I do not hold wi' the theaytre."

She was an imposing figure on a Sunday. She wore a stiff watered silk gown, made out of "weepers," which would stand up of itself like an extinguisher. Her bonnet, also black, of the coal scuttle variety, completely covered the postage stamp. She wore black gloves, which also came from a funeral. In summer she carried a sprig of boy's love, the scent of which is most refreshing. There was no aroma of the shop, because summer or winter, being afflicted with spasms, she sang and made her responses in an atmosphere of the strongest peppermint.

On her way home she told them all again, "I do not hold wi' the theatre." [238]

XXXI.

DRAMA IN BITTLETON

THERE had never before been a show in Bittleton, and very few Bittletonians had been venturesome enough to attend one elsewhere. There were no travellers in that parish, and many elderly people had scarcely been out of it. Urchett's tranter's van easily accommodated the few who had occasional business in the market town. Only those who had relatives in Banford had ever visited that little village two miles down the brook, but such was the efficiency of our self-advertisement that it was rumoured that everybody in the parish was coming except "the wold bundle," and that some had invited friends from Banford. Doors were to open at seven. The concert was to begin at seven-fifteen and to finish by eight-thirty.

In anticipation of such a multitude we were agitated as to our seating capacity. We had lent and borrowed every possible chair, but thought it wise to wafer a notice inside the shop window, setting forth the wisdom of bringing a chair to make sure of a seat. When at the hour of six we went down to light up and have a preliminary rehearsal, one wizened old dame was seated on a rush-bottomed chair by the granary door nursing a lantern.

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She explained: "I thought I had best to be in good time zo as to get a good place, because you zee I've a-got a game-lag an' I bent noo good at all in a hurry-push."

We took the old lady inside and perched her close up to the stage. The young man of histrionic ability had been on tours, and the lighting was left in his hands. As candles were lighted with covers of biscuit-tins to act as reflectors the old soul shifted back her chair a foot or so at a time. By the time the row of lanterns that served as footlights were ranged along the front of the stage she was in the middle of the room. When at last the

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curtains were drawn, what with the light from concealed lamps and the crosslights from two carriage lamps judiciously placed, the illumination was so impressive that she took flight "hoppetykick" to the distant wall and could not be induced to come forward.

When the church clock struck seven and the door was thrown open the prediction of a crowd was fulfilled. It is no figure of speech to say that Bittleton poured into the granary. Young and old, men, women with babies in arms, and children. The only portion not represented was the infant population of an age that could be put to bed and to sleep and then be safely locked in without fear of their waking.

And wonder of wonders there was "the old bundle." She had sent her arm-chair in advance, and was seated quite in front with a crimson cushion at her back. She was addressing those around:

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"Tidden to say that I have a-changed me mind. I do not approve o' the theaytre. But I did think that since the ladies have a-tookt zo much trouble an' gone to great expense, I really did ought to patronise it."

She was in her Sunday silk and bonnet and had not forgotten the peppermint drops.

We opened with an overture on the harp. One or two perhaps from Banford shouted "Encore" and others caught up the word and yelled it. Miss Mary returned and played some Irish airs. Tamsin sang to the harp accompaniment. The audience managed somehow to make a chorus of the last line and the performance was encored vociferously. The young man of histrionic ability sang a comic song with such success that he had to sing three. The duet with harp accompaniment received applause not so noisy but insistent. When the curtain was drawn on the concert, Banford had to admit that they had never had a curtain. This was a triumph. The clock had some time ago struck eight.

The conjurer stood behind his table, his coat off, his sleeves turned up beyond all possibility of concealment. He invited a gentleman and lady to come upon the platform and produced eggs, half pounds of butter and rashers of bacon from their hair, ears, noses, and mouths in a very surprising manner. He stepped down and found a white rabbit with pink eyes hidden in the bonnet of the wold bundle and it hopped about on the stage. He borrowed a watch and bid the lady wrap it in a handkerchief. He beat it with a

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hammer, trampled it under foot and set fire to the handkerchief. Yet the watch was found alive and ticking in the gentleman's pocket.

There was some applause but also there was a murmur as of misgiving and a voice cried out:

"I tell ee 'tis witchcraft."

The conjurer assured the audience that his tricks were "very easy and simple when you knew the way." He suggested that they should choose one of themselves to come on the platform, someone of experience and high intelligence who would observe and tell them how it was done. And would the gentleman bring his hat.

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They chose "one o' Banford," and he ascended the steps carrying a beaver hat—a serious elderly man, clean shaven and grave as a Puritan in a picture and bent on discovery.

"Would you kindly put your hat upon the table. No. Brim up if you please."

From the drawer he took a tablecloth, shook it out to prove that there was nothing in it, and covered up the hat. He did other little tricks and restored confidence by explaining them to the satisfaction of the company. He returned and removed the tablecloth and lo! there was a bottle in the beaver hat. He took it out and stood it on the table.

"It is labelled rum," said he. "Now if we only had glasses. Why. There are two glasses."

He placed them on the table.

"Now if anybody can lend us a corkscrew, sir, we—bless my heart! There *is* a corkscrew!"

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Amid roars of laughter he laid the corkscrew on the table.

"Your foresight, sir, has been most commendable. But tell me—how do you manage to put on the hat? You will allow me to officiate."

The conjurer placed the bottle between his knees and drew the cork with a pop. As the delight of Bittleton was expressed in shouts of laughter, clapping of hands, whistling, stamping of feet and every available noise, nobody heard the pop.

The conjurer poured or appeared to pour liquid into the glasses, filled them up with water from a decanter on the washstand provided as a part of the bedroom furniture for "Boxand Cox."

Meanwhile the face of the old gentleman had been growing longer and longer. His expression was very grave.

The conjurer stepped towards him, a glass in each hand. The old gentleman stood up. He was respected and a welcome was added to the noise. He waited for the lull that followed:

"I have a-bin a taytotler vive an' thirty year, an' there never since hant a-bin a drop o' rum not in my head let alone my hat. An' how many here can zay that?"

He took up his hat and resumed his seat.

The conjurer admitted that his own teetotalism was not of such long standing. But the glasses were filled. Would two of the company oblige by testing the quality of the rum. There was quite a rush to oblige. The two winners pronounced the spirit excellent.

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"It is of no use whatever to us teatotlers," said the conjurer, "You may as well take the bottle."

"You ought to kip a public, sir," cried a voice from the audience as the curtain was drawn.

Curiosity, universal and intense, was felt concerning the quality of the rum. It cannot be said to have been satisfied. The bottle was found to contain nothing stronger than water.

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The disclosure of the apartment of the egregious Mrs. Bouncer, with the young man of histrionic ability in the character of Mr. Cox, was as perplexing to the Bittleton audience as would have been the above opening sentence. They had no idea of a play. The jokes of a clown at a fair were the nearest approach to acting that any Bittletonian had ever seen. But the young actor—though temporarily out of employment—had toured, played in winter barns and on summer sands, and was full of antics to produce a laugh.

His hurried toilet was good fooling. He lathered his face, cut himself with a razor and staunched the bleeding with the towel in a lifelike manner. The time he wasted through getting his arms into the wrong armholes in his haste to get on his coat tempted a youth to jump up and hold the garment for him. Being so late he left without saying "thank you." Then appeared Miss Arabella. In her make-up the parish refused to recognise her, and an argument took place:

"I tell ee 'tis then."

"I do know tidden then."

It had to be silenced by those who wanted to  
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hear. So the story unfolded, and the ingenious device of the day-lodger and the night-lodger was made perfectly clear by the arrival of Box. So clear, indeed, that the audience accepted all as fact, and did not cease to point out the errors of that remarkable pair.

"What's this?" cried Box, as he takes the gridiron off the fire.

" 'Tis beacon, Maister."—" 'Tother feller put it there."—"Thik what you don't know nothen 'tall about."

Thus friendly assistance was shouted from all parts of the house, and comment only ceased with the end of the farce. But the entertainment was a great success. When at last all was over, the lights blown out, and the granary locked, there were still people with lanterns and carrying chairs both in the village street and on the hillsides.

There was a unanimous verdict:

"Ah! That idden Bittleton—that's Lunnon."

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## XXXII.

### GOING INTO RESIDENCE

THE purchase of my cottage presented no difficulties. The title was clear. The lawyer held the deeds. The purchase money £50 (fifty pounds) did not call for a mortgage. My friend Peterson, the conjurer, a fair-haired Scotch painter, fell desperately in love with the place, and proposed a partnership. The purchase being completed, I granted a lease to myself and Peterson, "hereinafter called the partnership," which provided for everything. As, to save expense, we drew the deed ourselves, it proved to

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be not only law, but literature. Humour, a quality often deficient in legal instruments, added brightness and lucidity to every clause.

On a crisp winter morning, the sun shining on a frost-bound land, laden with knapsacks, campstool, colour-cases and easel, with Urchett and Susan waving farewells from the steps, we issued from the Rose and Crown, marched down Bittleton Street, and went into residence.

Everything was in order. The house was clean. Shining plates and dishes on the dresser shelves glistened in the firelight. Elizabeth had cherished as sacred all family furniture and table and bed

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linen marked in the name of Butt. We sat down for a smoke.

A "house warming" is a festivity to celebrate the occupation of a new-built dwelling. But the house had been warmed already with the activities of more than two centuries of inhabitants. From door to hearth a gentle hollow in the floor bore testimony to the to-and-fro of human feet. Two pairs of initials, side by side, had been burned into the beam in the year 1710. Were they lovers newly-mated, or a young couple newly-wed? For what useful purpose had the iron been heated that lent itself so readily to sentiment? The dark, charred patch in the middle of the "clavy board"—was it, perchance, the record of some stupendous "Kirmsas fakket" of such magnitude that the flames outleapt all reason and threatened black destruction to the little house? Everywhere a question, and none to make reply. Everywhere a riddle, and the answer lost beyond remembrance. But because the house was alive and warm with human interest—so much the more reason for an inaugural festival, and the heaping on of logs. The Misses Vavaseur were expected to tea.

"At what time are they coming?" asked Peterson.

"They said very early—to help to prepare tea."

We laughed in very pride of our domestic arrangements.

At that moment old Josiah Perrin opened the door without knocking, and came staggering in under a stick of crooked oak as big as his body. He

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laid it amid the flames against the "chimbley back," and stood up and stretched himself. He also was somewhat crooked and stiff at the elbows, but still able for a moderately stiff job. He wore a kettle smock buttoned with a band about the waist, "corden birches" and lambs' wool hose. His shaven face was a picture—even features and inclined to be aquiline. Many a frontispiece to the biography of the distinguished gives less assurance of intelligence than did the countenance of this simple unlettered man.

"Thur then! He'll be all ablaze by time the ladies do come. You wunt zee the last o' he not these zide o' Zunday next—I'll goo bail. An' Keziah'll be on in a minute to look out the sheet."

The Perrins lived in the cottage at the opposite corner of the lane. Bittleton born, they had contentedly trodden Life's journey to the last stage, too humble for envy and above reproach. A shadow that clouded their middle life had smiled as a blessing upon their latter years. Their son got into trouble, ran away, and sailed for Australia before

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the warrant could be served. But he did well, and sent money to buy a few acres for the support of their old age. Their only sorrow was that he could not come home. Still, Josiah liked to earn a bit in his old age. When it was known that we meant to live in the little house, they applied—he to do the garden, and she to do for us and be caretaker when we were away.

"Aye. Keziah can put her han' 'pon the sheet vor ee," he repeated, and then hesitated. "Keziah  
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do wish most terr'ble she could zee the madgylantern. But she 'ood'n dare to ax ee."

"Of course she can, and you too."

"Don'd ee tell I told ee. Here she do come."

Keziah appeared in the doorway—an old woman of middle height, still active in mind and body, with grey hair under an old pink sunbonnet, hazel eyes, and cheeks that had not lost their colour. She tripped upstairs to fetch the necessary sheet. When she returned Josiah was gone.

Peterson had sent for the magic lantern, and after dark we were to lure the boyhood of Bittleton to the path of learning. Open-mouthed with wonder Keziah watched us hang the sheet to a beam.

"What's he vor?"

"Pictures will come on the sheet," explained Peterson.

She summoned courage to speak.

"Perrin 'ood most terr'ble like to zee these here Madgy-lantern as volk do call un. But there! He 'ood'n never dare to ax."

"Of course. Both come and see," cried Peterson.

"Don't ee tell I told ee. I can glimpse un drough winder wi' another log."

They went off together—a bow-legged Darby with a waddling Joan following a yard behind—each secretly glorying in a successful stroke of diplomacy.

The ladies came. The first ceremony was to inspect the house once more.

"Everything strikes me as being so eminently  
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respectable," laughed Miss Mary as we were coming downstairs.

"Everything strikes me as being so eminently worthy of respect—which is quite a different matter," was the comment of Miss Arabella.

Lo! As if by a miracle the table was spread. The teapot and the tea-caddy had been placed "han'pat" on the corner. The kettle hanging from the "chimbley-crook" was both singing and steaming from the spout. But nobody was to be seen.

"The brownies frequent this hearth," said Miss Mary. She was always laughing.

"Unless the ghost of Elizabeth really has come back to give us welcome," suggested Miss Arabella.

Well! Peterson drew a jug of water from the kettle. Miss Mary warmed the pot. Miss Arabella measured in four spoonful and one for itself. Miss Mary wetted the tea—

There came a kick upon the door that made us jump, and Peterson sprang to open it. Keziah, apologetic but smiling, with her head on one side, bobbed a "curchey."

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"I could'n 'ope the door wi' both han's vull."

She advanced two steps, and leaned her head towards the other shoulder.

"I simmed I should dearly like to make ee a crock-kek if you'd be so kind as to accept o' un."

Acceptance was universal and exuberant.

"I thought mid be better to make un auver to our place an' cover un up wi' a nice clane cloth an' zlip auver wi' un all hot."

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She placed it uncovered on the table—a cake of the cottage and homestead, moist with chips of apple, sweet-smelling and delicately browned.

"An' could ee plase to vin' a use vor a bit o' honey?"

We thanked her cordially. "And be sure to bring Josiah early."

Simple, humble soul! As she began so she went on. If she did us a kindness, it was we who conferred the favour. She scrubbed for us, baked for us, washed for us, and took a pride in it. She took possession of us, called us "my gen'lemen" when she told of our strange ways to her neighbours. She presented savoury entrails when Josiah killed a pig—faithfully tended and mothered us for years—until she died.

\* \* \* \* \*

We were to open the night school after dark.

"Only four recruits," lamented Miss Mary.

"More to-morrow!" cried Miss Arabella gaily.

"Better not begin the moment they come," said I.

"Sit them in a row on the settle and give them a bun," proposed Peterson. "And Arabella shall tell stories," continued Mary. We drew up a programme.

*Stories accompanied with mastication of buns.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*One picture under pretence of arranging lantern.*

\* \* \* \* \*

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*Slates, Pothooks, and Hangers.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*The Magic Lantern.*

Keziah brought Josiah very early, and the boys were not late—four little bird-keepers of about ten years, from the winter wheat. The stories did not escape criticism.

"Thik wold 'ooman what did live in a vinegar bottle wur a witch."

"Noo beansticker never wurden stuck into a splat that 'ud hold up thik bwoy."

Slates were a novelty, and pothooks and hangers good jokes. But the Madgy-lantern! Well, there were moving pictures in those days. The most popular was a

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sleeping, snoring man with his mouth wide open and a procession of rats running down his throat.

On the following day recruiting was brisk.

\* \* \* \* \*

The night school, name of forbidding omen which might be written but must on no account be uttered, continued winter after winter with varying success until the Compulsory Education Act made it of no further use. A small sprinkling of dullards appeared to be incapable of learning to read and write, at any rate in the little time that could be devoted to them, but most of the boys attained to one of the well-recognised degrees in rural scholarship.

Many in Bittleton could have saved their necks

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by giving a satisfactory answer to the question of Cade:

"Dost thou use to write thy name? Or hast thou a mark to thyself, like an honest, plain dealing man?"

The form of that satisfactory answer would invariably have been:

"I beant noo scholarl."

The village craftsman who exercised his craft for his neighbour usually received cash. The cooper, for instance, wheeled home the tub or pail, the price of which had been arranged when the order was given, and after a little higgling and a small abatement "for luck" the settlement was by "money in hand paid"—and there was an end of the matter. But if the customer were affluent it was often more convenient to have an account. The craftsman carried every detail in his head, and got a "scholarl" to write a bill to his dictation. He knew well enough what was owed, and carried the paper up to the house. The money was paid and the bill handed to him to sign.

"I beant noo scholarl."

So his name was written, and he laboriously added his mark—most frequently a criss-cross or perhaps a heart. It was a trying moment for that "honest, plain-dealing man," for under a heavy hand quills would split or double up under an upstroke, or drop blots, or sputter, or smear. And fingers were apt to get inky and then he wiped them in his hair. But there was compensation for this want of scholarship in the possession of a

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memory such as the man with a note-book rarely enjoys. There were transters who could not write, who of a market day purchased and sold, delivered letters—the addresses of which they could not read—messages "and bring back an answer" for all the parish and for other parishes on the road to and fro. They carried money and brought back money, and kept the accounts in their heads. Nobody ever claimed to have found them forgetful or in error.

The first real step on the ladder was mounted when the scholar could sign his name. Many stopped at that. Others, whose opportunities in youth had been few, when success rewarded industry and increasing business brought a growing demand for signatures,



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took pains in later years to learn to write their names. They often accomplished quite a creditable feat of penmanship and were proud of it, though with an affectation of humility they might add:

"That'll sar. But there! I be but a poor scholar."

Then came the man who was said to be "a very tidy scholar." He was able to write out his own bills and now and then to indite a quite unintelligible letter.

I once saw a bill sent out by "a tidy scholar" to the rector of the village.

A ood bar an a ooden do an a ooden bar an a ood do.....£00 15 00.

It came from the village carpenter and was of the nature of an historical record. The rector  
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had agreed with the carpenter for a wheel-barrow of certain dimensions at a price of fifteen shillings. The barrow when delivered being found not to fulfil the specified requirements the carpenter quite willingly made another. The bill was a memorandum of the whole transaction and may be read as follows:

A wooden barrow and he would not do, and a wooden barrow and he would do.

Man, woman, child and thing all remain "he" in the dialect, as you will find them in the old Saxon chronicles.

In the days before the introduction of compulsory education the necessity to send a letter was a very rare occurrence with humble folk. The villagers did not travel far from home and almost always married in the neighbourhood. When relatives wished to send news to each other they waited until somebody was going that way and sent a message. Or the labourer who drove stock to market met with friends. They gossiped and thus interesting information was passed around by word of mouth. It travelled fast because everybody who heard was glad to have something to tell. So little was writing required that the pen even of the most scholarly was wrapt in paper and put safely away together with the ink bottle at the back of the top shelf of the dresser or in the corner of the kitchen cupboard. There the ink dried rusty brown and the nib when required wanted mending for want of use. Many "a tidy scholar" for lack of practice lost the art of penmanship. The old-fashioned country folk did not  
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willingly write. Farmer John Buck once confided to me:

"I'd sooner to ride ten mile any day than to write a letter. 'Tis not only a save o' time but much more satisfactory like. What by the time you've a-tookt out your things—an' what by the time you've a-changed your mind woonce or twice an' a-tored up the paper—an' what by the time you've a-sarched about to vind a endelope, an' then to git a stamp—why you could be there an' back. An' more 'an that, mark me"—he raised his finger, half closed his eyes and gave a nod of deep significance—"you do zee the man."

This was said in days before the auction-mart was thought of; when men acted on their own judgment and brought a craftiness to their dealings and an intuitive perception of what was passing in the mind of the other man. There were born dealers then, who felt the slightest change of voice or sign of wavering on the part of the other dealer, buyer or seller as the case may be. Some men always bought for less and sold for more

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than their neighbours. It must have been by the same sort of intuition that makes a good poker player. It was worth the ten mile ride to "zee the man."

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The little learning of the humble was usually acquired at a dame's school. I never really inspected one, but have peeped in summer through many an open cottage door at a row of infants seated on a low form presided over by some elderly  
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"widder-ooman" probably of "tidy scholar" type. There was no such school in Bittleton. The old dame Weeks had retired a few years before my discovery of that village, but still lived in the cottage with the step projecting on to the causeway almost opposite to "The Rose and Crown." Her business was still with children. She made lollipops and had the whole trade of Bittleton to herself. Bottles of striped bulls'-eyes ornamented her window, and long twisted sticks of a sort of toffee leaned aslant against the panes. Penniless infancy gazed in and longed to enter where it had once been eager to get out.

The old dame Weeks was of good height and broad-shouldered, but neither lean nor stout. Her wrinkled, hard-featured face carried a hairy mole on the right side of the nose. A few long curly hairs on the chin might have been the promise of a thin beard to come or the miserable remnant of a crop that had failed. A great talker, with these advantages she had become a personage in the village. She was the most striking figure in any Bittleton group, and always glad to get you sitting in her cottage for a gossip.

What her little scholars learnt cannot even be surmised. Her writing was almost indecipherable, and her spelling worse than the carpenter's. But she never ceased to talk of the days when she kept school, and to lament the sad decline in manners which followed close upon her deposition. She had little to say about scholarship, but was extremely proud of her prowess as a disciplinarian.  
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"I did use to kip a little halsen or a withy stick a-hangen up to a nail on the wall, but only vor how like. But lawk! I didden never have to use un, not once in a blue moon. If I did but vix a chile wi' my eye like—bwoy or maid, he did quail. But if I should gie un a beaten, mind, he didden never forget it. He didden never ax vor another."

She held the purpose of education to be "to make childern behave theirzelves."

Now and then a freckled urchin would tap at the door.

"Come in."

"Ha'penny cushion."

"Where's your manners, then?"

"Plase, Missus Wicks."

"Ha'penny vust." And she held out her hand.

The coin being deposited in her palm, she produced a streaked peppermint of large dimensions, and the boy ran away with a swelling under his cheek.

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XXXIII.

JOSIAH AS SCRIBE

IT was the morning before Christmas Eve—a warm day in one of those spells of mild weather not infrequent in mid-winter, that used to make people argue that the character of the seasons was changing and agree that "when 'tis zo muggy like, 'tis wusser vor the wold volk an' when 'tis vrosty an' cwold."

Josiah had brought the ladder to our largest apple-tree and was perched in the middle sawing off superfluous limbs. A branch came crackling down, and he stood up to rest his back.

"Ah! That'll let zome light an' air in. Hullo! Here's pos'man a-comen down street. Merry Christmas vor one o' ee or tother, I do suppose."

Ours was the last house in the village. Quite certain that the letter must be for me, I walked down and stood at the garden-hatch. The postman carried but one. He held it up and laughed.

"Nothin' vor you to-day, sir," and he turned in to Josiah's cottage. Josiah's attention was occupied. He had half sawn off another limb.

"Postman has gone in with a letter for you," I cried up to him.

The saw stopped. Josiah showed no excitement and his attitude did not change.  
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"He's vor Keziah. He do come year ader year—though I never avore knowed un to come avore Kirsmas Day. 'Tis a little pictchur in a endelope an' to wish a Merry Kirsmas. Keziah do veel most terr'ble proud when he do come. A little chile do zend us—well, be sure, mus' be a middle-aged lady by this time—whur Keziah wur in sarvice a nus', avore she wed wi' I. Avore you can look roun' she'll be yur wi' un to show un roun', I'll goo bail." Josiah laughed. The rasping of the saw recommenced.

But already, with hasty steps, Keziah was coming up the path. Her face was not bright with the anticipated pride and joy, but agitated, eager, anxious, and the hand that held up the letter trembled.

"Pos'man can tell by the looks o' un, he wur a-zend vrom Horstrallyer," she faltered.

Josiah came slowly down the ladder. He took the letter, turned it over and over and gravely looked at it, face and back.

The unexpected letter awakened misgiving. They feared what it might have to say. There are people even to-day who see with alarm the telegraph boy pedalling his red bicycle up to the door.

"Urchett Triptree is in to town to-day, zo Cousin John Pike's Jane 'ud be in a-shoppen vor sartain sure," said Keziah.

"Cousin John Pike's Jane do swear she don't talk, but what Cousin John Pike's Jane did rade to-day 'ud be the chackle o' the parish to-morr'."

Cousin John Pike's Jane had lived in a town, had even served for a year or two in a small drapery

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establishment. She was therefore quite competent either as reader or scribe. Now, a middle-aged spinster, she kept house for Cousin John, and was willing when at leisure to read any letter and write the reply for the moderate fee of "tuppence."

"I do know when we have a-laid out tuppence wi' her avore things have a-comed roun' like," sighed Keziah. "But what be us to do?"

"I wish I wur a scholard my own zelf. There mid be things not meant to be blabbed about," reflected Josiah.

I divined an invitation to myself, and volunteered to read the letter and to write the reply if that were desired. My help was joyfully accepted, not without secret exultation over the saving of tuppence.

We went into their cottage and closed the door. The mystery of it was so impressive that I found myself unconsciously dropping my voice into a whisper. It was just as well that the contents had not come under the eyes of Cousin John Pike's Jane. I shall divulge nothing of the letter, but presently quote a few phrases to reveal the spirit of it.

The young Josiah, a stripling, ran away from England to evade the law. Then he could neither read nor write, but now he had the hand of a clerk and signed his name with a flourish. He wrote plain English, with only here and there a word or the turn of a sentence that was reminiscent of Bittleton.

*"I would have you both to know that I should love to send you a present apiece, the thing*

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*dearest to the heart of both. I was young and could change my ways. If I was to send riches you would never change your ways of life—the season for planting out is passed. So my mind could never picture father and mother in another place—you would be lost in a big house, and lonesome in a town. But if there is anything you want just send the word."*

"I've a-got no wish in life but vor he hiszelf, to zee un an' hab un here," murmured Keziah.

"Ne'et I," added Josiah. "Ithouts 'tis to wish I wur a scholard to write back."

On Christmas Day we wrote the answer, and it also contained secrets. Moreover, it told of the coming of "my gentlemen" and gave our names. They dictated Bittleton news in the broadest dialect much faster than pen could write. Misgivings came crowding into my mind while with all my might I wrote. The letter to be answered was quite modern, well written, well composed, well spelt. Would the recipient be expecting this old world speech and perhaps glory in it. If I put it into English the whole spirit of this budget from the old country must evaporate. Written as spoken, but in a hand unfamiliar and confessing itself of another class, the penmanship seemed to suggest a derision which was far indeed from my heart.

At last we came to this:

"A wick agone come Vriday your Aunt Mary comed across to zee I. Her had a-bin bad a-baid up dree wicks wi' the sintantony vire. Her have apitched off an' valled away a'moost out o' knowledge.

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'T'es a terr'ble pity, cause why her wur sich a jolly piece."

Translation was clearly impossible.

"Last Friday your Aunt Mary came to see me. She has been confined to her bed with erysipelas for nearly three weeks, and was thin almost beyond recognition. It is very sad, because she was once so stout and jolly."

However, we compromised with correct spelling, St. Anthony's Fire in full and a little alteration of the pronouns. Thus the letter went in a sort of Biblical English.

"I wish I wur a scholar," moaned the old man. "Do ee think 'tis too late to larn?"

"You could try," I encouraged him.

"Did ought at my age to do zo well as they little nog-headed bwoys."

"Why not?"

So he joined the night school, and we also gave him private lessons. Alas! hoe and plough, scythe and hayfork had made his hand so heavy that the stick of slate was for ever breaking off under its weight. Unconscious of the interest awakened in the minds of his fellow-pupils, for he was much too intent upon his work to look up, he persevered throughout a winter season. The earnestness of his endeavours was most pathetic, and his hopefulness more than sad. He said he thought he should soon learn if he could but bear in mind not "to breeze zo hard." When spring came he announced an intention to pick up a tile somewhere

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or other, and practise at odd times during the summer. We often saw him sitting in his garden on a bucket turned upside down, his head bent over the slate tile on his knees. Winter came again and the night school reopened, but he did not return. Keziah would not allow it. She said it was bad for him, for he thought, of writing all day long, and talked about it in his sleep.

Late one winter night a stranger knocked at our door. He told us who he was, and we took him in.

He was tall and thin and tanned, with nothing of the well-nourished look of the true Bittletonian. Did we think after all these years that folk would recognise him? We advised him to experiment upon his parents. He stayed with us the next day, talked with them, gardened with the old man, and even went in the cottage and talked with Keziah. They did not recognise him. Keziah took to him wonderfully.

" 'T'es one a body can talk to, vor he idden a bit a-stuckt-up. An' there's a somethen about the vaice o' un, too—I caint sim to tell—"

In the evening we broke the truth to them.

We sent him to the tailor in the country town, and he returned in new attire as our visitor. Not a soul suspected him. At last, as our little house was full, he took a room in his parents' cottage, and Josiah no longer yearned for scholarship.

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## SOME PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOOSE

THE personality of the old teetotaller, into the crown of whose beaver hat a bottle of rum had been conjured on the night of the Bittleton entertainment made a deep impression upon Peterson. He frequently remarked upon the grave dignity of the man—admired his self-possession—the tactful humour with which he swept aside that incident—his unwavering good temper—the beauty of his colour, more wonderful still because obtained without assistance from alcohol.

These considerations led Peterson to infer that he must be a Scotchman; or, at least, in spite of such prolonged and resolute abstinence, have Scotch blood in his veins.

"I wish I could have a shot at his head," cried Peterson at all hours of the day, and now and then of a wakeful night would awaken me with a yell. "Do you think he would give me a go at his head? But this was Peterson's idea of a joke, and intended to express both personal regard and good humour.

The excitement of Bittleton rather increased than diminished. For full a twelvemonth no Bittletonian could meet Peterson in the village  
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street without smiling, or sit with him on the alehouse bench without talking of Mr. Silas Adams and the bottle, the glasses, or the corkscrew. Everybody respected him, and discussed his merits by the half-hour over a quart cup periodically replenished.

"I doant agree wi' Mr. Silas Adams not in all things—well, not about the drink now—not my own zelf. But, mind me, he've a-got headpiece. An' the way he'll discoose—" began Urchett.

But the farrier chipped in. "There's nothen a man don't never want to ax o' un that he can't tell ee. An' more 'an ever I do ver'ly belave since he wur a-hooked by the bull."

"I've a-thought that, my own zelf," corroborated the smith. "But he do take leisure now—an' rade."

"Aye, an' as Urchett do zay. He can discoose, 'tis zomethen beauidivul to listen to. He can that."

We more than ever desired to make the acquaintance of this gifted neighbour. True, his home was four miles down the brook. The year was still young, the weather bitterly cold. By loitering we might meet him by accident. Yet discourse, as sweet as honey and as melodious as song, cannot take the bite out of an east wind. We dared not call. He probably despised us already as frivolous play-actors and intemperate "foreigners." Christmas festivities were over. We came to the gloomy resolution to leave Bittleton until the coming of spring. Meanwhile, Peterson

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occupied himself with a sketch of Josiah bending over the firelight to put on another log.

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Snow had fallen in the night. We had cooked and eaten our breakfast, and were by the window watching the birds that came for our crumbs where the ground was bare under shelter of the wall. The clouds had passed. The morning sun was shining and the coming thaw beginning to drip from the eaves. The garden path, as yet untrodden, glistened under a diaphanous veil of opalescent reflection.

"They call snow white," cried Peterson. "Snow never was white and never can be. Look at it. You can see the pale rose from the morning, and a deeper blush from the red face of the sun peering through the mist. And the blue from the sky above. And the silver greys, and cool greys, and warm greys—and greens! Yes, by God! greens! I do from the bottom of my heart pity those poor devils who can't see colour, or only see it in things with a price upon them. Gold say—or silks, or precious stones."

"Caint he discoose. 'Tis zomethen beaudivul to listen to."

Peterson had no time for retort. Above the horizon of the steps from the garden hatch arose a beaver hat. The tall figure of Mr. Silas Adams mounted into full view and advanced up the path. On our stage he had worn Sunday black. Now he was attired in a jacket of faded green with brass buttons. A black stock, with two little snowy  
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peaks of collar indenting his rosy jowls, and breeches and gaiters. He had lived more years than had been evident by candle light. On his shoulder was a single-barrel, muzzle-loading fowling-piece. He bent forward as he walked. His footprints in the snow turned out more than is usual. A livercoloured spaniel followed at his heel.

With unmistakable cordiality we ran to let him in. Breakfast was still on the table. The coffee-pot warm on the hearth. The sketch of Josiah stood on the easel.

"I dared to intrude thus early," he began with deliberate gravity, "for reasons that shall be made known. A sart ov a zoun' or a whisper came to my ear—" (he raised a hand to shelter his lips, and the second-hand whisper became so confidential that another repetition must have been inaudible), "that duck were seen night and morning in the water meadows. By the wisdom of Providence duck were ordained to veed wi' their heads upstream. Foreseeing the invention o' gunpowder at the appointed time man was endowed wi' the wit to creep up the river bank to within gunshot unzeed. In the earlier days o' bows an' arrows this was uncertain. So I rose at daybreak and walked up the stream."

"You must be famished," cried Peterson. "Sit down. Have some coffee. Have some ham."

He expressed his thanks, laid his gun on the top of the dresser, and sat down.

"Do you think Providence was quite fair on the duck?"

"In an excellent work, 'The Twopenny

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Encyclopedia,' " he answered me, "which occupies many a leisure hour, there is a page headed 'Compensation.' What is withheld on the hay is a-gied on the aftergrass. What is a-lost on the carn is a-voun' 'pon the roots. So you do zee—one bang!—and all do vlee. But I don't hold myzself wi' these-here new-vangled breech-loadin' guns. That's outside the intention o' Providence, because do arise vrom covechousness an' upzet the balance

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o' things. I do call it slaughter—zo I do kip to my wold gun. Besides, vor all that he do carr' vurder an' kill more in the end. But 'tis done vor to-day. I can walk straight home athirt the hills."

"Then you've got plenty of time," said Peterson. "You'll stay to lunch?"

"Thank you," he accepted. "But, you zee I baint quite my own zelf to-day. I be what is a-called a depitation, a-comed to bag o' ee to come an' do zome o' your tricks vor our volk. I've a-promised to zit up an' lend 'em the hat. They do all most wondervul want to zee that. Taytotalers idden numerous wi' we. They do laugh at I an' my hat."

"Of course—of course, I will with pleasure."

"That's right. An' we'll vetch ee—an' you'll bide the night—an' we'll drave ee back next day.

An' you all zo well, sir."

I told him I was leaving, and my bag already packed. Constantly his eyes had been wandering to the canvas.

"Excuse me," he said. "Once let a thought rise, my mind never can't rest till I do understand.

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Why have you a-tookt off Josiah vrom behind? To my mind the backside is not the zeat o' the intelligence."

"It is only a study of firelight," explained the artist, and reached another canvas from the back of the settle. "There he is full face."

"Ah! There you've a-got the real man. The very image. The very moral o' Josiah. 'Tis a mystery! 'Tis a mystery how that's a-doned."

"Sit down in the settle and I'll show you."

The light from the window shone upon the old man's face. The dark brown of the oaken settle made a perfect background. Truly it was a remarkable countenance in feature, in colour, and in character.

"Fix your eyes straight on that bookcase. Talk as much as you like. If they wander they can find their way back."

"I don't know whe'er or no you've a tookt note o' the northern lights. They've a-bin most wonderval bright to year. Nobody don't sim to tell ee where the light do come vrom. But where there's smoke there mus' be vire, an' all zame thing where there's light. The sun's avire we do know, an' the middle o' the earth, zo they do zay. An' they do zay, too, that the earth do turn roun' 'pon a axle. I don't belave there idden no poles ne'et no axles. What twixt heat an' wear axle-bars mus' be a-wored out or a-burned out years agone. Depen' 'pon it, there's a hole right drough, and zoo the inzide vire do shine out both ends; but can't catch the earth alight outzide, 'cause why the snow do melt an' doubt it back.

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But when the win' do blow drough do vflare up. An' that's how 'tis you don't always zee it. 'Tis zo clear as daylight to my mind, an' that's how I do zee it."

Thus he discoosed and refreshed up until lunchtime, when he stood up and looked at the picture.



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" 'Tiz myzelf! The very moral o' me!" he cried, then hesitated. "I do suppose now thik picture 'ood cost money. Maybe a poun'—maybe two."

"I did not paint it to sell. Now I'll tell you what. I'll finish it the best I know and you shall have it, if you'll sit for another for myself in memory of the hat and the bottle of rum."

The agreement made, we sat down to lunch.

"You are a wonderful man, Mr. Adams; you look as if you had never been ill in your life."

"Not zince childhood. An' more an' that, all the years I've a-hunted an' had to do wi' stock, hant never a-had an accident. That's taytotalism, noo doubt."

"But they told us that a bull had tossed you over a double-hedge and broken half your ribs."

"That's true. Ten year agone. But that was noo accident. How could that be a-called an accident? Thik bull acted wi' intent."

He left us a duck when he took his leave. In shaking hands with me he said:

"An' zo 'tis good-bye wi' you, young sir."

We walked up the street to "bring him gwaine," as folk say in the West.

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They were a friendly lot in Bittleton. On our way home they popped out to say "Good-bye."

Even the most aggrevatenest wold bundle leant over her little shop door and said:

"And zoo 'tis good-bye I do hear."

"Good-bye."

THE END