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[664]

FIRST IN THE FIELD
BY MARY HARTIER

It was drawing towards milking-time on a May afternoon, when Robert Balsdon, the miller, sauntered out of his gate to the little bridge that led into the churchyard. He leaned over the low wall, while the stream went merrily on its way beneath him, and the sound of the mill-wheel droned in his ears. He looked meditatively across to the goodly bit of meadow-land which lay next to the churchyard. Three prosperous cows stood in the far corner under the shade of the elms that rose from the hedge, and patiently flicked their tails and chewed the cud as they waited for the pretty milk-maid, Leah Parminter.

The miller filled his pipe and lighted it; then he dropped into soliloquy.

"Wull, there! 'Tez a weist world. 'Tez so: as nice a bit of medder-land as a man could wish for, and to think poor Dan Parminter hath a-got vor leave it and come t'other side of the hedge. 'Tis the burying to-morrow, so I must mind Eliza Ann to put my black clothes in readiness. I should like to pay him every respect, and the bigger the burying the more comfort for them as is left.

"I wonder now if the widow will keep on her little farm. I 'd rent this yer bit of land if 'er 'd got a mind to give up, but I reckon 'er 'll stick to it. That there John Marlin 's got his eye on it too, I know, for it lies as handy to his place as it does to mine. Then his

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Dick 's keeping company with Widow Parminter's maid—and a tidy little maid 'er be—so I shouldn't be surprised if he doesn't think he 'll get hold of the land that way.

"There's another way, besides, but 'twill hardly have come into his mind yet, and if it has, two can play to once at that little game."

Here Robert Balsdon became so lost in thought that his pipe went out.

"I 've heard tell as widows is always willin'. Still I 've been a bachelor over fifty year, and 'twould go hard to give up my freedom. Her 's a pretty masterful sort, is Martha Parminter. But 'tez a bütiful bit of medder-land. I 'm danged if I don't have a try vor 't. I 'll go in aisy, so as I can draw back if I can't bring my mind to it, but I 'll be first in the field, anyways."

And the miller, after hunting in vain for a match in the many pockets of his flour-dredged garments, strolled back to the house to get a light for his neglected pipe.

As he left his post of observation Leah Parminter came into the field to fetch home the cows. If she had called she need not have walked to the far corner by the stream to drive them, for she was a little later than usual, and an occasional "moo" of expectancy showed that her charges were only too ready to obey her summons. But she had evidently no desire to save herself this trouble. She made a fair picture as she hurried across the daisy-starred meadow. Little vagrant curls escaped from the sun-bonnet which had been hastily tossed on, and framed a face that seemed akin to the apple-blossom rioting in the next orchard. And when Dick Marlin jumped over the hedge the faint tinge of the open bloom turned to the deeper tone of the rosy bud on her face. It was no wonder that to see this change Dick should contrive every excuse for being in the orchard at milking-time.

"I mustn't stay," she said.

"Just a minute, to let me see how yü 'm looking, my dear." He turned the girl's face to his, and noticed with concern that tears seemed very near.

"It 's all dreadfully sad, and everyone 's so busy, there doesn't seem any time to think of poor father." A little break carne in her voice, and she looked so touching as the sense of her loss came home to her that Dick tried to console her to the best of his ability.

"Dear little maid," he said, and his arm went round her, but to his surprise she drew away.

"No, you mustn't be kind, and that," she said. " I shall cry if you do."

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He was a little bewildered, but "and that" happened before he had time to think, and then she did cry, and let herself be comforted in his arms.

"Yü 'll walk with me at the burying to-morrow, won't 'ee, Leah?"

"I 'll try, but I 'm not sure if mother'll think it proper."

"How is she bearing up?" enquired Dick, trying to be sympathetic, though he did not like Mrs. Parminter.

"Poor mother, she 's in a terrible way," the girl answered. "She cries all the time, and says she 's got nothing left to live for, and when the neighbours come in she takes on worse than ever. I 'm afraid she'll be ill next."

"I 'm more afraid you will, my dear. It comes hard, having to look after her and manage everything, and you such a little maid. Leah, when are you going to let me look after 'ee? I couldn't say much when I knew how you were wanted to nurse your poor father, but you won't keep me waiting long now, will 'ee, my dear?"

"Oh, Dick, you mustn't say a word about that. Think how lonely-like poor mother'll be! I couldn't leave her."

Then suddenly finding that the cows had left the meadow and were probably at home in the milking-yard before this, she hurried away, while Dick gazed after her with longing eyes.

He went moodily back to his own work. "If Mrs. Parminter is the woman I make her out to be," he muttered, "she won't be lonely-like for very long. 'Tis always the ones that takes on most that is soonest consoled."

The next day the May warmth and sun-shine had vanished and March seemed to have returned with blustering winds, while April flung behind her the showers she had failed to use in their season.

The "burying" was a large one, and the widow, within her voluminous crape draperies, exulted in the fact. She was an emotional woman, and the unstinted flow of her tears gave her some secret satisfaction. She felt they formed the crowning point of her wifely duties. Her daughter's calmness during the sad service provoked her. The girl had put a great restraint upon herself, but she had broken down at last as the procession moved homeward, and sobs shook her as she leaned heavily on her lover's arm. This was as it should be, and the widow felt appeased.

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In the orthodox fashion all the women kept their faces buried in black-bordered handkerchiefs to hide their tears or their absence of tears, as the case might be. It was an occasion on which they felt the proud superiority of their position. The men on whom they hung, having no shelter for their countenances, wore abashed and miserable expressions, as if fully conscious of how mean and niggardly their display of grief must appear by comparison with that of their female relations. As the long black line reached the gate of Mrs. Parminter's home a little disorder crept into its ranks, and Miller Balsdon found himself close to the widow.

"Don't 'ee take on so, Mis' Parminter," he murmured, with sympathising accents. "Yü 'll never want vor friends, and I 'll be one tü 'ee my own self. Being neighbours I 'll drop in often and help 'ee not to feel lonely-like."

The widow slowly withdrew her hand-kerchief from her face, and made of it a screen from the bystanders. A belated tear was in the act of hurling itself to destruction over her high cheek-bone, but the ghost of a twinkle glimmered in the eye from whence it came.

"Yü'm too late, my dear," she said. "John Marlin, he spok' afore sarvice."

