

**Author:** Hartier, Mary (Harriet Mary Russ) (1861-1936)

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**Produced by** Maria F. Garcia-Bermejo Giner

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"An Evening with Hodge"

It was a November night, and the road over Fuzzamoor was ankle-deep in mud. A fine drizzle was falling, and there did not seem any sign that it would clear. The moor was as bleak and barren a spot as could be found in the West Country, and yet in the summer sunshine, when all the land flamed with the yellow furze and flushed with the purple leather, it had a rare beauty of its own. Away in the distance a break in the hills would show the sea stretched fair and calm against a cloud-flecked sky. But all this was blotted out, and a weary traveller would be conscious of nothing but mud and mist. In one place the road dipped down, rising as suddenly to a greater height on the other side, and at the lowest point of the hollow stood the Foxhunter's Inn, the central attraction of the straggling hamlet of Fuzzacott.

The guests in the in-parlour were oblivious to the discomfort that reigned outside. It did not seem an occasion that demanded undue hilarity, hard drinking, or the exercise of wit. They were sleepy folk in Fuzzacott, and they took their pleasures sedately. Besides, Sarah Pat, the landlady; and her customers knew that excess of any kind, whether in drinking or discussion, would not be tolerated. And as there was no rival inn, not a man

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in the place would run the risk of incurring Sarah Pat's displeasure, and thus of losing the society that her house afforded. For it was undoubtedly the social instinct that brought these men together. One labourer may have been working in absolute solitude the whole day in a ditch, perhaps, till the mud and clay and water would gradually penetrate the thickets covering and strike a chill to his very bones. And the small tenant-farmers worked hard enough, and might often be seen getting in their roots or guiding their plough over the brow of the hill where the north-west gales cut like a knife and the hailstorms beat down pitilessly. But, whatever the men's occupation on this particular day, it had probably been incessant and monotonous, and the mere fact of foregathering with their fellow-creatures, smoking their pipes and drinking their beer in company, gave them a solid sense of comfort. The evening, as a rule, began with great solemnity. The same remarks were expressed time after time, only varying, so far as it might be "vine" or "turrabul" weather for the hay, "wets" (oats), "whayte," "turmits," or "rütes". As the inner man became refreshed with draughts of home-brewed ale tongues wagged more freely, until at length the genial atmosphere of the place called forth some jokes of a respectable age and even a song if Tom Gribble or Farmer Smale happened to be in good voice.

Sarah Pat seemed on this evening in a state of suppressed excitement. Her voluminous skirts swung around with such rapid jerks that Bill Mock and Zebedee Zeale tucked their legs under the bench they were sitting on to get hem out of the way. She had on her best cap, and the

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black and white lace bristled round her ample countenance, while the lavender ribbons flew out with each active movement as if they were in a gale.

"What's up wi' the 'awld dumman," whispered Zebedee to his neighbour.

Sarah's ears were sharp.

"Aw, yü men! Yü be so curyous as a passel o' women," she said. "There bean't nothin' out of the ordinary the matter with me, except that I've got a young woman come to bide with me for two or dree days. I shouldn't wonder if 'er com'th in yer vor help me a bit, vor 'er 's turrabul handy in her ways, so mind yü men behave vitty before 'er; I

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shouldn't like 'er tū be put out wi' our countried manners, livin' as 'er does in a gert place where they keep more servants than I can well count."

"What would 'er be now—high up in sarvice, or just a tweeeny-maid?" hazarded one of the younger men.

"Never yū mind what 'er be, Dan Mitchell. Yū've a-got one maiden to keep company with, so don't 'ee go vor be casting sheep's-eyes at no others."

Dan was quenched, but revived quickly when Sarah's young friend appeared in the doorway. She carried a tray filled with some pewter pint mugs that had just been washed and polished, and a few clay pipes to replenish the rack beside the hearth-place. Two candles in tall brass candle-sticks were on the tray, and the light from them revealed the girl to the solemn gaze of about a dozen pairs of eyes. It was a merry face, not exactly pretty, but very winsome, with a suggestion of piquancy and originality. The most striking thing about her was her intense vitality. She seemed brimming over with energy, which showed itself in the spring of her movements—the quick glance of her bright eyes passing from one to another of the guests, and leaving even upon those stolid natures the sensation of an electric shock—and in the way she dominated Sarah Pat, who on other occasions was accustomed to rule supreme in her rightful kingdom.

"Molly, my dear, dü'ee go and put on one o' my apurns. I can't abide 'ee vor mess up that tidy gown with old kitchen work," said Sarah, but her tone was apologetic rather than commanding.

"Aw! Mrs. Pat, how jealous yū be tū be sure! I 'll tell 'ee what 'tis," said Molly addressing the guests: "'er can't bear me vor cut 'er out, though there bean't much chance o' that when 'er 's got 'er best cap on, dü'ee think so, measters?" And she danced out of the room with no intention of covering the glories of her bright pink blouse and neat serge skirt with one of the landlady's ample aprons.

"How pert the maidens be nowadays, tū be sure!" remarked Farmer Smale.

"'Er com'th from these parts, I can tell from the tongue of 'er," said Zebedee Zeale.

"Don't yū be under no mistake, Zebedee. 'Er can put on a fine enough manner of sayin' 'er words when 'er tells tū the quality, but 'tisn't likely as 'er 'd take the trouble vor talk vitty tū a passel o' gert buffelheads like yū be," retorted Mrs. Pat.

"No offence, Missus," returned Zebedee, "I was glad vor see that such a fine young woman could be so pleasant in 'er ways."

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Molly came back at that moment with a tray of the best china, which she began to put away in the corner cupboard. A riding party had stopped at The Fox-hunter's in the afternoon for tea, and that necessitated bringing out the best linen, plate, and china, for Sarah Pat lived far enough out of the world to take a pride in doing her very best for her customers. Molly dragged forward a cricket, or three-legged stool, and mounted it in order to reach the top shelf of the cupboard and arrange its crowning glory of six silver spoons each in a tall punch-tumbler. The trim figure balanced itself cleverly on the rickety stool, and Molly was so engrossed in her care of the thin-stemmed glasses that she did not notice the slight commotion caused by the entrance of a belated traveller. The stranger looked with approval on the cosy scene before him, and contrasted it with the discomfort of the last few hours' tramp through the mud and mist of an unknown region. The logs burned brightly on the open hearth. Through the slight haze caused by the devotion of the majority to their clay pipes the faces of the men loomed indistinctly— some round and ruddy, others lined and seamed with age and toil. And the girlish figure poised lightly on the stool in the corner added a bright touch to the sombre scene. It was so lithe and supple in comparison with those bent, thickset forms, robbed of all their elasticity by the wear and tear of work and weather. Molly turned, and, seeing the stranger, hopped off her perch, dropped a demure little curtsey and vanished.

Mrs. Pat's instinct of hospitality began to assert itself.

"Git along furder, Joe Dummett, and let the genelman come vore and dry hisself," she said, inviting the stranger to

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take the corner of the settle nearest the fire. "My! Zir, yü be properly wet tü be sure. This yer mizzle dü go drü a body's clothes most so bad as downright rain. Now, if so be yü wouldn't think it tü be demeaning of yerself tü wear my measter's Sunday coat and a pair of his worsted stockings while your own be drying yü 'd be a sight more caumforable. My measter, he 's tü sea now, but he never takes no count of what I dü wi' his things when he 's away, though he 's a bit itemy when he 's about the place hisself."

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"It 's very kind of you to take so much trouble," said the stranger gratefully. "You must manage to put me up for the night too, as I lost my way in the fog over Fuzzamoor, and I don't feel inclined to turn out from these comfortable quarters, and perhaps miss the road again before I reach Torcombe."

"Well, Zir, I 'll dü what I can vor 'ee, I 'm sure," and she took up a candle to show the stranger to the low-roofed room, which was the only accommodation she could provide for him.

In the meantime Molly was making friends with the guests in the parlour.

"I 've heard tell as how yü can sing a very good song," she said to Farmer Smale.

The farmer looked overcome with confusion, but mightily pleased for all that. After several gurgling chuckles he found sufficient voice to answer: "Aw, now! Have 'ee sure? Wull! I dü manage tü tuney up a bit wan time and another. But yü can't be yurd to advantage in a low-pitched room like thease yer. Now, if yü was vor come to church Zunday I 'd sing out proper and let 'ee have a taste o' the trü quality o' my voice."

"But I can't bide yer awver Sunday," said Molly. "I must be back in my place afore that."

"Couldn't 'ee give the young woman a bit of a song just vor pacify 'er?" suggested Tom Gribble. "'The Exciseman,' now, 'ath a-got a güde rattling tune."

"I be troubled wi' such a hose in my throat, Tom, that I can scarce quilty [swallow], let alone sing drü twenty-vower verses. But there 's a little bit of a ditty I can mind so long as I can mind anything. 'Tis only dree verses o' un as I knaw, but I dü zim he had more wan time."

"'Ot 's un called?" asked Tom.

"I don't rightly knaw as he 's called anything," answered Farmer Smale. "When you 've a-yurd 'un yü can christen 'un yerself."

Before the song began the stranger entered, clad in a pair of white ducks and a baggy short coat of dark blue cloth, such as old sailors love to wear on Sundays. His appearance overcame Molly altogether. She was perched at the edge of a high oak chest, but after the first half-stifled burst of merriment she recovered quickly and fixed her whole regard on the singer. The stranger took up his position a little behind her and paid as much attention to her countenance as she did to Farmer Smale's, whereby he lost the full effect of the song. The good farmer fastened his gaze upon the hams that were

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hanging to the rafters, and, with his most funereal expression, helped on by an occasional shake of the head, he sang the following dirge-like ditty—

*Slowly, with great expression.*

Whu'v'ee a bin tü all the day, Bil-ly, beuoy  
Bil-ly? Whur'v'ee a-bin tü all the day,  
Bil-ly, beuoy Bil-ly? I've bin yur  
I've bin thur, I've bin iv'-ry other ...whur, A-  
lü-kin vor a yong thing tü taake 'er from 'er mam-my.

"Can 'er baake, and can 'er brew,  
Billy, beuoy, Billy?  
Can 'er make a Hirish stew,  
Billy, beuoy Billy?  
'Er can baake, 'er can brew,  
'Er can make a Hirish stew,  
But 'er be a yong thing tü taake 'er from 'er mammy.

" How awld be 'er then,  
Billy, beuoy Billy?  
How awld be 'er then,  
Billy, beuoy Billy ?  
Twaice zix, twaice zebban,  
Twaice twanty and eleben,  
Yet 'er be a yong thing tü taake 'er from 'er mammy.

This song met with some applause. Molly swayed backwards and forwards in uncontrollable mirth. It was a relief to be able to laugh openly at something, after the apparition of the handsome stranger in Cap'n Pat's Sunday attire; and the song

given with such imperturbable gravity was really very funny.

The men were less moved to mirth, having had the privilege of listening to the song several scores of times before.

"I bean't much of a hand at figures, but I can't make out as 'er was too yong vor be married, after all," remarked a dull-looking youth in the window-seat.

"Aw, thee gert gapshly!" retorted Farmer Smale. "Why, don't 'ee zee they'm a-makin' fun of the woman?"

"I don't zee no fun in tellin' lies," muttered the youth sullenly.

" 'Tis no manner o' use to maake a joke avoore he," said Farmer Smale. "He's a most turrubal literary chap." (The farmer meant 'literal,' but it was quite near enough for his hearers, who allowed their ears to be pleasantly tickled with his occasional long words without troubling their intellects to absorb them.)

"There's been more than one güde joke make here avoore now," remarked Zebedee Zeale, trying not to look conscious that he was leading up to his own masterpiece in that line.

"Iss fy! Zebedee, and if I remember rightly, yü said something smart yerself wance," said a neighbour, who had no paltry feelings of jealousy and was willing to help him on.

"Aw! yü've all heard thiccy joke times enough," answered Zebedee coyly.

"Wull, I reckon us'll have to stand hearing'n a time or two more, and with the genelman and the young woman yer 'tis a chance yü mightn't get again in a hurry."

"Let me zee! 'Twas about the beer, wasn't 'er?"

"Git on, measter," said Farmer Smale. "Yü shoul'n't never keep the ladies waitin'."

Zebedee beamed.

"Wull," he said, "us was remarkin' that 'twas an uncommon güde brew as us got tü drink yer."

" 'Er can baake and 'er can brew," sang Molly softly.

"And the I up and I sez, sez I: 'Iss fy! 'Tis a very güde tap yü'll find tü The Foxhunter's whichever way yü dü turn 'un.'"

Molly was again shaken with laughter, and the stranger's rare smile came and stayed.

Zebedee looked delighted with the effect of his wit. Farmer Smale was a little put out that the laughter came before he had expounded the joke, as it generally followed his



share of entertainment. However, they should not go without the explanation, though their mirth was untimely.

FARMER SMALE SANG A DIRGE-LIKE DITTY.

" 'Tis a joke upon our landlady's name, Zir, and Zebedee dü mane that 'er's as güde as 'er tap, and her tap's as güde as 'er. Turn 'tap' backsivore and he makes 'Pat'. Aw! 'tis a joke us 'ave laughed at many a time, and Zebedee, he made a mark by 'un that he won't lose in a hurry."

" 'Tis a trü joke, too," said Bill Mock. "If I dü feel a bit out o' soarts I can make use of a drop of Mrs. Pat's home-brewed better 'n I can make use of anything. It sort o' lies plim on the stomach, it dü.

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At this moment Mrs. Pat bustled in, and said to the stranger, "If you please, Sir, I've got supper ready vor 'ee in the best parlour, and I 've put in a bit of fire, as I reckon you 'll like to sit there after and smoke a pipe."

"Thank you, Mrs. Pat. I shall be glad of some supper, but I shall come back to this comfortable corner for my pipe, if I may. I can't hear Farmer Smale's songs in the best parlour."

"No, nor yü can't go staring at pretty maidens in the best parlour," said Sarah to herself.

"Hadn't 'ee better taake yer knitting out by the kitchen fire while I 'm lükin' after the gentleman?" whispered Mrs. Pat to Molly.

"Oh, I 'm all right," the girl said. "I 'll just rin back and forth with the logs of wood they 'll be wanting here presently."

"I don't like leavin' 'ee, but I sha'n't be long," and the old lady departed.

Molly was raking the wood ashes together before putting on fresh fuel when she heard a newcomer enter. She looked up and saw a man standing in the doorway with a dazed expression on his face, and, indeed, the blaze from the logs must have been dazzling after the gloom outside. Presently he spoke in a hoarse whisper—



"Missus is gawne!"

"When?" asked a voice from a dark corner.

"Now."

"How awld was 'er?"

"Zixty-vower."

"Poor dear heart! Come vore, man, and 'ave a drop o' güde beer vor wash down the grief."

The bereaved husband accepted the invitation. He drank the beer which Molly brought for him in solemn silence. For five minutes not a word was spoken. Then a sense of the sympathy of his companions stole upon the man.

"'Er was the cleverest hand at nattlings and bliddy puddens I ever comed across."

"And turrabul kind 'er was, too, in sending a neighbour a bit of pork when 'er killed a peg," remarked another voice from a dark corner. It was only those whose countenances were not seen who had enough courage to express their sympathy.

Another long pause.

"Wull! I'll be getting home-along now," and he went. And let no one think he went back to his desolate home without the comfort he had sought in his dim way among his fellow-labourers. Few words were spoken, and those not of a kind to recommend themselves as the highest type of condolence, yet in what way superior are the most eloquent and refined phrases at such a time? If the spirit of sympathy is abroad, pig-killing may be as comforting a subject as angels, and certainly it was more intelligible in the present case.

After the departure of the newly made widower, the guests were much subdued. Mrs. Pat came in and bewailed the loss of a kind neighbour. The stranger soon followed, and took his place in the corner of the settle. Then the talk wandered round to the cause of the woman's death.

"'Er puzzled Doctor, I 'm thinking," said the landlady. "He couldn't find out no reason why 'er should fall right away like. The poor dear soul got more and more weist-lookin' till at last 'er was a proper rames. Then he said 'twas the consumption, but Joanna Pick hadn't got no more consumption about 'er than I have."

"What dü 'ee think the disayse was, then, Missus?" inquired one of the men.

"'Tisn't always disayses that folks die of," answered Sarah.

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"Yü don't think 'er was awverlūked, dü 'ee?" asked Zebedee in an awed whisper.

'Tisn't vor me to say as 'er was or 'er wasn't," was the unsatisfactory answer; "but I dü zim as 'twas very strange the Picks should have had such a run of bad luck. Dü 'ee mind last year how they lost a fine bullock ? What should *he*\* 'a' died for if somebody hadn't been begridging the Picks and wishing 'em evil? And then they got swine-fever and had to kill all their pegs, and the awverseer come down upon 'em with a proper old fuss about whitewashing and such like tü get the rids of infection. White witches would 'a' bin more tü the purpose than white - washing, I'm thinkin'."

"I did hear tell as how George Pick went tü Exeter vor consult the White Witch," remarked one.

"I heard so, too," said Sarah, "but I never inquired intü it, vor I won't have no dalins' with such things. And if us get tellin' up old witch stories I shan't get a wink of sleep this blessed night. Lük 'ee yer, Tom Gribble, as us be on the subject of poor folk that 'ave lost their wives, yü tell how you lost yours and found 'er again."

Tom, being thus suddenly called upon, looked rather alarmed, but he did not dream of questioning his landlady's command. He took his pipe reluctantly out of his mouth, and began at once.

\*In Devonshire everything is *he*, except a tom-cat.

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"Yü all know, neighbours (though seein' the young maiden and the genelman be furrin', perhaps they don't), that after I was married I was took a bit queer-like in my head. Whether 'twas from having a woman always jiggiting about the place, and hearing so much chitter-chatter when I 'd been used to bide quiet, I can't tell 'ee. Anyways, I began vor to have buzzin' noises in my ears, and tü see things what they tell me never took place (though I 've got my own notions about that), and the queerest maggot of all I got into my head was that my wive wanted to murder me. Then I thinks tü myself that there 's two can play at that game, so I was continually turnin' awver in my mind how I could kill her first. 'Twasn't all the time I felt like that, but I never knawed when the fit would sayse hold on me. Wull! Albertina—that's my wive—'er got most out of patience

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at last. I 'd say tü 'er between times when I was all right: 'My dear wive, I be proper fond of 'ee; don't 'ee go vor tü take no notice of what I say when I beant myself.' And Albertina, 'er rapped out: 'Take no notice, indeed! A pretty pass I should come to then! As like as not I should find myself lyin' on the hearth with my brains all a-blawed out. I 'll tell 'ee what 'tis, Tom Gribble, the next time yü begin vor tü take old items into your head off I go. I can earn my own livin' and I won't be beholden tü a man what thinks I want to murder 'un.'

"Wull, the fit come on again, and sure enough 'er went. The place did zim lonesome and quiet - like without Albertina. My old aunt that lives out Torcombe way came and did vor me, but I couldn't abear tü see 'er slewchin' round where my missus used tü go dapping about so peart's a bird. Times I wrote and axed 'er to come back, vor I felt certain I was properly cured. I didn't feel no call to murder my aunt, and I 'm sure that might have been excusable, vor 'er was a most cantankerous old twoad. But Albertina never took no notice of my letters, though I was reckoned to write a very good hand. Then I got desperate and thought I 'd go and have a word with 'er. So I harnessed th' awld mare in the spring-cart and off I went tü Yard where 'er had hired 'erself as servant. 'Twas getting on vor the dimmits, and I hitched up the mare and went vore tü the back entrance. As I passed the kitchen winder I seed Albertina sitting there all alone, because 'er master and missus was well-to-do, and sat in the parlour evenings; and I zim tü go all of a tremor like. Then I unsped the door and I said, 'Wull, my dear, how be 'ee ?' and my wife 'er lüked up startled like and rapped out, 'None the better vor seein' yü.' That wasn't what yü might call encouraging, but I knawed the ways of 'er, and I seed that 'er breath come short, and 'er dropped the stitches of 'er knitting. So I went vore and sat down alongside of 'er and says, 'My dear wive, 'tis cruel weist without 'ee. Won't 'ee forgive me and come back again?'

" 'No, Tom Gribble, I won't,' 'er says. 'I knaws when I 'm well off.'

" 'Yü knaws more than I dü, then,' I said. 'I don't call it being well off tü serve other folks and live in a strange 'ouze, and be called *Jaane*, when yü might 'ave a nice little home of yer own, and a sarvant-maid to help 'ee, and be called *Albertina*. And I 'm sure I be cured. I never want tü murder Mother Prance, and 'ers a deal more trying than ever yü was.'

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"Wull! I talked to that woman vor the best part of a hour, and 'er wouldn't listen tü rayson. Then I got up vor go, and I says, 'Goodbye, then, my dear wive, and God bless 'ee. I don't suppose yü 'll have to bide in sarvice long. I've got a tidy bit of money laid by, and I 've put 'ee down for it all, and I don't zim I shall last out the year. I went tü doctor last week, and he telled me one lung's ago and t'other 's a-tiched, so I sha'n't keep 'ee out of yer nice little home much longer.' Then I walked away, and as I passed the winder I seed 'er was cryin' fit tü break 'er heart. So I called out, 'What 's the matter, my dear?' and 'er says, 'Aw! nothin', only I reckon I must come and lüke after 'ee.' And 'er came; and that were a matter of twenty year agone."

"How about yer lungs that was a-tiched?" suggested Zebedee.

"I shouldn't wonder if 'twasn't the onaisiness of my mind that was a-preyin' on 'em," said Tom. "They didn't give me much trouble after Albertina came back. My dear Sose! why, 'tis close upon ten o'clock. Us must clear out of this or Mrs. Pat 'll be vor turnin' us out."

So, with much knocking out of pipes, scraping of chairs, and stamping of heavy footsteps, they departed.