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November 1895.

VILLAGE CRAFT.

BY MARY HARTIER.

“ANNE, I can't bide in that house by myself any longer. If you and John will have me back again in the old place I don't care how soon I come.” So saying, Farmer Pearse dropped into a straight-backed oak chair by the side of the hearth, and began to fill his pipe with the air of a man whose affairs are settled to his entire satisfaction.

His daughter paused a minute in her work of polishing the brass tankards and bowls that adorned a huge oak chest standing against the wall opposite the fire. “Well, father, I think that's the most sensible thing I've heard you say for some time. There's your chair always placed ready for you in the chimney-corner, and when you are not here nobody else sits in it.”

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"Seems to me, my dear, I generally am in this chair. I've spent too many years in this old house for it not to seem more like home than any other place in the world. When I gave up the farm to you and John I thought I should be glad of a bit of quiet in my old age, but, bless my soul, I get properly tired-out and maze-headed with having nothing to do. If I am here I can get about and keep an eye on the men; but down at my little house, with no cattle and no crops to look after, 'tis about as cheerful as if I were tacked away snug in the old churchyard."

"I hope the children won't be a worry to you, father," said Anne Bonifant, as Tommy began to poke the burning logs with his grandfather's silver-topped walking-stick, while the youngest curly-haired

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girl of four climbed into his lap and demanded, "Tory, Granfer, one about big lions that roar," for children begin at an early age to appreciate the sensational and blood-curdling style of fiction.

"I'll soon settle the little wretches if they get too much for me," said Farmer Pearse as he seized his stick and flourished it threateningly at his grandson, who did not, however, seem greatly alarmed. "Drat the little twoad! Get along with 'ee," as Tommy began to give battle for his rights. "I shan't mind a bit of noise now and then. At any rate it will be a change. I'll tell 'ee what 'tis, my dear, I do miss your poor mother's tongue most *turrabul*. My! how 'er did chitter, to be sure; the dear soul never stopped from morning to night, and though I didn't take much notice of it while it was going on, yet it seemed kind of cheerless when it stopped."

"Did Betty Mock manage pretty comfortably for you?" asked Anne, working round in true feminine fashion to get at her father's reason for suddenly breaking up his establishment.

"I can't stand that old Mother Mock any longer," said the farmer, giving the logs a vigorous kick to relieve his mind; and the spoils danced up the chimney, while the renewed blaze flickered on the shining brass opposite.

"She's a drabitted old faggot, and never opens her mouth except to grizzle and growl about her rheumatics, and to say what a shame it is she should have to work so hard at her time of life. Then, when I suggest she had better have a maid to help her, she

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turns round and says she knows she's getting old, but it's very hard to have it thrown in her face that she can't cook properly, or do the work as quickly as she could once, and she supposes I want to turn her off in her old age, and have some flighty young gadabout in her place. Old Betty Mock may bide there as long as she likes, but she won't see me back again in a hurry."

Farmer Pearse, having given vent to his feelings and filled his pipe at the same time, picked out a stick red-hot at one end to light it with. This was accomplished safely, though his beard did appear in deadly peril from stray sparks, and he puffed away, a look of deep content gradually spreading over his features as he felt he had at last broken away from the tyranny of his ill-tempered housekeeper. The good farmer was a fine type of the old-fashioned yeoman. He was hale and hearty in spite of his seventy years, and his upright figure; and keen undimmed eye, told the story of a life led in the fields under the constant influence of sunshine and fresh breezes. He was something of an oracle in the village by virtue of seeing a daily paper sent to him by a London cousin when it was not more than

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four days old. Also, he had once heard some lectures on phrenology and mesmerism. This incited him to study books on these subjects, which resulted in his expounding to admiring mothers in what particular line of genius their sons might be expected to distinguish themselves, and in curing some old women of fits. The mothers believed in him implicitly, especially as he gave the children lollipops when he had felt the lumps under their curls. The old women enjoyed their cures with outward gratitude, but with inward perturbation as they were fully convinced that he was in direct league with the Evil One. Farmer Pearse had three distinct manners of speech. When talking with strangers he had command of very good English, flavoured perhaps with the fine Devonshire accent—the broad lengthened vowels, the French *eu* and the unstinted sound of the *r*'s—but pretty free from the provincial idioms. In conversation with his daughter he was still fairly grammatical, although a few expressive words and idioms would be scattered here and there. But to hear the farmer at his best you must listen to him giving orders to his men, or having a chat with a friend on the state of the crops. Then if you are a native of the dear old West Country yourself you will have a rich treat,

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but, if you have the misfortune to have been born in any other part of England, you will think you are listening to a foreign language.

“Ow did ‘ee zim tü like strange passen s’ marnin, Varmer Payrse?” said an old woman to him, as he passed through the churchyard one Sunday. “Gude lawk! Mall, why ‘ee drawn’t h like a drimbledrane in a cow-flop!” returned the farmer. At the same time the Squire was passing with a friend, who remarked, “What on earth did that man say?”

“Well,” answered the Squire, “our friend, the Reverend Willoughby Sinclair, prides himself on the rare beauty of his voice when he is intoning, but Farmer Pearse thinks he drones like a bumble-bee in a foxglove.”

But we must return to the Farmer’s present difficulties.

“What shall you do about your house, father?” asked Anne, when he had finished his pipe, and was knocking out the ashes on the stone hearth.

“Oh! let it, I suppose, just as it is.”

“But where are you going to find a tenant? You know, father, you were saying yourself the other day that it was five years since anybody fresh came to live here, and that was only old Tom Conibeare, who came back to spend his last days because he couldn’t bear the idea of dying anywhere but in Berracot. Besides, his

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brother being a carpenter, he thought it would come much less expensive to be buried here.”

“Well, my dear woman, how could folks settle here if there were no houses for them to live in? I’m not quite in my dotage yet, and if I say I mean to let my house, let it I will, and before many days are over, too. If you’ve anything sensible to say I am ready to listen to it, but don’t talk foolishness, my dear.”

When Farmer Pearse was in this mood his friends had learned that it was well to leave him to himself, so Anne Bonifant wisely took her knitting, and went to stand at the door and watch for her husband’s return from the market town. Times were changing in Berracot, and a wife could now look out for her husband when he came back from the weekly market without dreading the state in which he would appear. A little extra hilarity on the part of the cheerfully disposed, or a slight deepening of

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moroseness in those who took a gloomy view of life might, perhaps, be looked for, but public opinion had changed in regard to down right intoxication. Farmer Pearse had always been a temperate man, but in his youth he had often purposely rolled from side to side on his horse as he entered the village, for a man was looked upon as a poor sort of effeminate creature if he had the bad taste to return sober from market.

As the coach passed through Berracot the following evening Farmer Pearse was standing at the door of the New Inn with a few companions, whose custom it was to meet and take stock of the passengers while the horses were changed. There were not many travellers, and those on the outside soon disappeared in search of the creature comforts they felt certain were awaiting them in the cosy inn-parlour. Inside the coach were three ladies, Miss Sarah Luxton, with her sisters, Miss Jane and Miss Euphemia. Their respective ages were fifty-nine, sixty, and sixty-one, but Miss Jane, who came in the middle, looked after the other two, and arranged all their secular affairs. Miss Luxton was sometimes appealed to on matters moral or spiritual, but was considered by her younger sister incapacitated on account of her age for any active work, while Miss Euphemia was looked upon as a mere babe, and petted accordingly. It was Miss Jane, therefore, who said, "I think, sisters, we will get out of the coach while it is waiting; it will be refreshing to change our position for a short time."

Farmer Pearse, who was nothing if not gallant, seeing Miss Jane wrestling with the handle of the door, rushed to open it for her, and

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carefully assisted each sister across the mud on to the two feet of cobblestone pavement.

"Can I help you to order any refreshment, ladies?" he asked.

"Indeed, sir, you are very kind," answered Miss Jane, "but we have everything with us that we require. Only we should like to walk a little if you are quite sure the coach will not start and leave us behind."

"Don't have any fear of that, ma'am. Sam Cowler, the coach-man, always looks after the ladies, and it isn't often he carries such a distinguished company as he does today," with an admiring glance at the three little figures before him. They were diminutive women, all very much alike, except that Jane had the brightest eyes, Sarah

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the blackest hair, and Euphemia the rosiest cheeks; but after you had known them for five minutes you never mistook one for the other. It was only outwardly they were cut after the same pattern.

"If you want a little walk, shall I tell Sam to pick you up at the top of the hill?" continued the farmer. "You will find it less muddy than on the level."

"That's a very good idea," said Miss Jane, setting forth briskly.

"Sarah, my dear, lean on my arm, and Euphemia, hold your dress up at the back and pick your way carefully. It will not do to drive the rest of the journey with damp feet."

The little ladies had not gone far, and were beginning to pant with the steepness of the climb, when the long strides of the stalwart farmer overtook them. He was brewing schemes in his artful old head, and he put on his most genial manner. As they said in the village, "Varmer Payrse 'ath a way with 'un, 'er 'ath, that thur baint no gettin' awver," and now he looked at Miss Euphemia out of his merry blue eyes until she began to feel quite sentimental, while Miss Jane was eager to extract information from him, and Miss Luxton felt she should like to say a few words for his moral and spiritual welfare.

"Your hills are rather trying for old ladies," she gasped. That was not at all what she meant to say, but somehow the farmer looked so hale and fresh in body, it seemed as if his soul must also be in a healthy condition.

"Well, they might be, ma'am," he replied, "but that remark does not apply to anybody here. You go up like a bird, and so do your sisters, and I had hard work to overtake you."

The ladies smiled, and being too breathless to continue the conversation, they turned to admire the view. That is a harmless device, and a long pause of speechless admiration is as complimentary

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to your cicerone as it is comforting to yourself. Certainly it was a fair sight that spread before them. At their feet nestled the village, the hills rising on every side except where the level fields and marshes stretched away to the yellow sand-hills that bounded the broad sweep of the bay. The autumn tints were tinging the trees, and were made more

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vivid by the glow of the setting sun. Some apples in an orchard near shone as if they were illuminated, and away in the distance lay the sea, dark and full against the glowing sky.

The eldest lady was the first to recover her breath. "What thankfulness such a scene should arouse in our ungrateful hearts!" she ejaculated solemnly.

"Really, I feel inspired to write verses," murmured Miss Euphemia.

"It seems to me," said Miss Jane, "that there's money in the place. Is it not, sir, a particularly fertile soil and a prosperous neighbourhood?"

"I've seen worse, and I've seen better," replied the farmer, with the cautiousness of his class, "but those who live in Berracot wouldn't leave it for a mere trifle like prosperity or adversity."

"Indeed! is it celebrated for anything in particular?" asked Miss Jane, with interest.

"Well, ma'am, I think I may say it is noted for something very particular," and Farmer Pearse looked deep and inscrutable things.

"And what might that be?"

"For the longevity of its inhabitants. Folks really seem to be able to live as long as they like in Berracot."

"Dear me! And are there, sir, any houses to be let in the neighbourhood?" asked all three voices in one breath.

Farmer Pearse chuckled. "My dear ladies! Is it likely such a chance of living to a hundred would be allowed to go begging? If one dous fall vacant it is caught up in no time."

The sisters sighed with disappointment. "Ah! well, the time of our earthly sojourn is ordered for us wisely," murmured the eldest with pious submission.

"All the same, Sarah, there is no call for us to choose the place of our earthly sojourn foolishly," retorted Miss Jane, and her tone was a trifle snappish.

"It did just come into my mind the other day that I might let my own house," remarked the farmer, casually, "and I thought better of it, for if a rumour of that kind got about there would be a fine uproar, and I should be pestered to death choosing a

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tenant. My daughter is terribly anxious to get me to live with her, but I tell her I can't run the risk of offending all the people I should have to refuse as tenants."

During this speech, the interest of the three listeners became alert

"I should think," said Miss Jane, stoutly, "that the most sensible thing would be to fix upon a suitable tenant in your mind, and then tell her — I mean him — that you would allow him to rent your house."

"That's uncommonly good advice," replied the farmer, reflectively. "But, you see, it wouldn't be easy to fix on a tenant I should altogether like. I'm fond of the old place, and it isn't everybody I should care to see using the furniture that belonged to my dear old mother. She died there not so very long ago, at the ripe age of a hundred and one." This was perfectly true, and not part of the advertisement; but Farmer Pearse suppressed the fact that his wife was only seventy when she died, that age seeming to him the very prime of life.

"But are there no people in the neighbourhood who would suit you? Ladies, say, who would take a pride in looking after the furniture, and keeping everything in order." Miss Jane looked a little confused as she offered this suggestion, and walked on quickly.

"Ah! ma'am, if I could only be sure of getting such tenants as you would be! But we are rough and humble sort of folk about here, and ladies of distinction, of such attractive appearance and elegant demeanour, are very seldom met with."

"Sarah, would it not be advisable to explain our circumstances to this gentleman," said Miss Jane, who felt that this was a crisis at which the wisdom and experience of age must be consulted.

"Certainly, sister, it would seem as if we were being led in such a direction," was the solemn reply.

"I could trust him with anything," sighed Miss Euphemia.

Miss Jane, thus encouraged, started off boldly. "You have been so very kind, sir, in taking us into your confidence, that I should like in return to tell you something of our affairs."

"You do me much honour, ma'am. My name is Pearse — Farmer Pearse they call me in these parts — and if there is any way in which I can serve three charming ladies, I shall go home a happier man than I was when I started out this afternoon."

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The farmer was in his element, and would plunge headlong into compliments, now he saw they were not resented. "My! what a tongue the varmer 'ath a-got, tü be sure," was said in the village. "'Er bayt'th the wimmen-folk themselves at they pleasant sort o' little lies!"

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"Thank you, Mr. Pearse," returned Miss Jane, gratefully. "Our name is Luxton, and we are three sisters who have kept a shop for fancy work and stationery—quite in a genteel way, I assure you. We have saved just enough for our old age, and are anxious now to settle in a quiet, healthy neighbourhood."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but it is strange that you should all bear the same name. Did you happen to marry three brothers?"

"We have never married," said Miss Jane, serenely. "We are—though now I come to think, it has never struck me in that way before—we really are old maids."

"Say 'maiden ladies,' dear," expostulated Miss Euphemia, with a blush.

"Is it possible!" cried the fanner, throwing up his hands, and looking unutterable things. "Good heavens! what fools the men are, or else, ladies, your hearts must have been uncommonly hard."

The sisters were quite enjoying themselves. They had, indeed, an underlying suspicion that compliments from a comparative stranger ought not to be encouraged, but such a small share of pretty speeches had fallen to the lot of these dear ladies, that they could not help expanding in the glow that is born at appreciation.

"We are on our way now to Torcombe," continued Miss Jane, "which we have heard is famous for its pure air and bracing sea-breezes, but what you say about this place — Berracot, is it not? — makes me wish we could take up our abode here. Why, dear me! here is the coach! How quickly it has overtaken us!"

"If you like the look of Berracot, why not stop here?" said the farmer, "My house is at your service, as I am staying with my daughter, and if you should find yourselves comfortable, who knows but that I might have the good fortune of keeping you there as my tenants!"

The sisters were all in a flutter. Even the prompt and business-like Jane looked startled and taken aback. Farmer Pearse soon settled matters. "Sam," he called out,

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“hand down the luggage that belongs to these ladies. They’re not going any farther to night. I’ll send a man to the inn to bring the boxes down to my place.”

The ladies looked astonished, but much relieved to find their affairs arranged for them in such a summary fashion. Miss Jane, in her excitement, gave the coachman a more liberal tip than was her custom, while Miss Euphemia, in the joy of her heart, slipped another piece of silver into his hand when nobody was looking, an act of independence that would have horrified her sisters. And so Farmer Pearse set off in triumph, with Miss Luxton on one arm and

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Miss Euphemia on the other, while the brisk Miss Jane tripped along unaided, and kept a watchful eye upon her charges.

It was with great pride that the farmer led his future tenants up the neat gravel walk with the box edges, between the borders where old-fashioned autumn flowers bloomed, and some late bees hovered over the lilac Michaelmas daisies. The little square cottage looked snug and homelike, with the myrtles climbing to the bedroom windows, and a few roses still lingering on the tree called by the farmer “Glory de John.”

The amazement of Mistress Betty Mock was so great that for the first time in her life she forgot to scold.

That evening Farmer Pearse and his son-in-law sat one on each side of the hearth smoking their last pipe with great content. Anne Bonifant was folding a damask table-cloth, which she had been adorning with minute and exquisite darns.

“I’ve let my house,” remarked the farmer.

Anne dropped the table cloth in her astonishment. Her husband was a man not easily excited. He merely said, “When are they coming in?”

“They’re there,” was the reply.

The statement was a little premature, but Farmer Pearse was too astute a man to be out in his reckoning.

They are there still, all of them, though the story I have been telling happened twenty years ago. The little ladies are almost as active as ever. Are they not in Berracot,

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where one may live as long as one likes? And their white-haired old friend is able on fine sunny days to walk down and see them, though he is glad to rest and drink a glass of home-made wine before he returns to his place in the chimney corner, where Tommy's children now demand stories and run away with Granfer's stick.