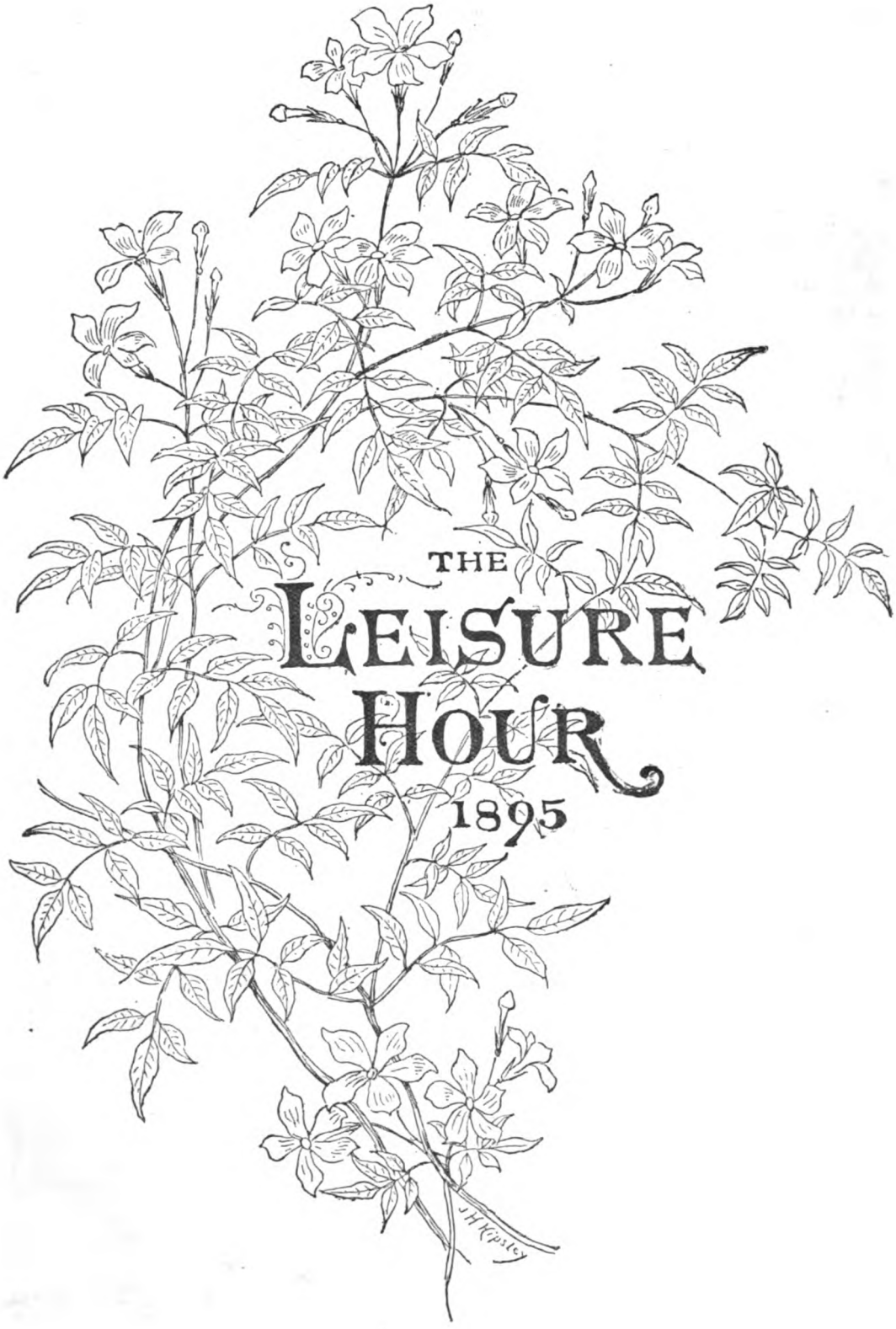

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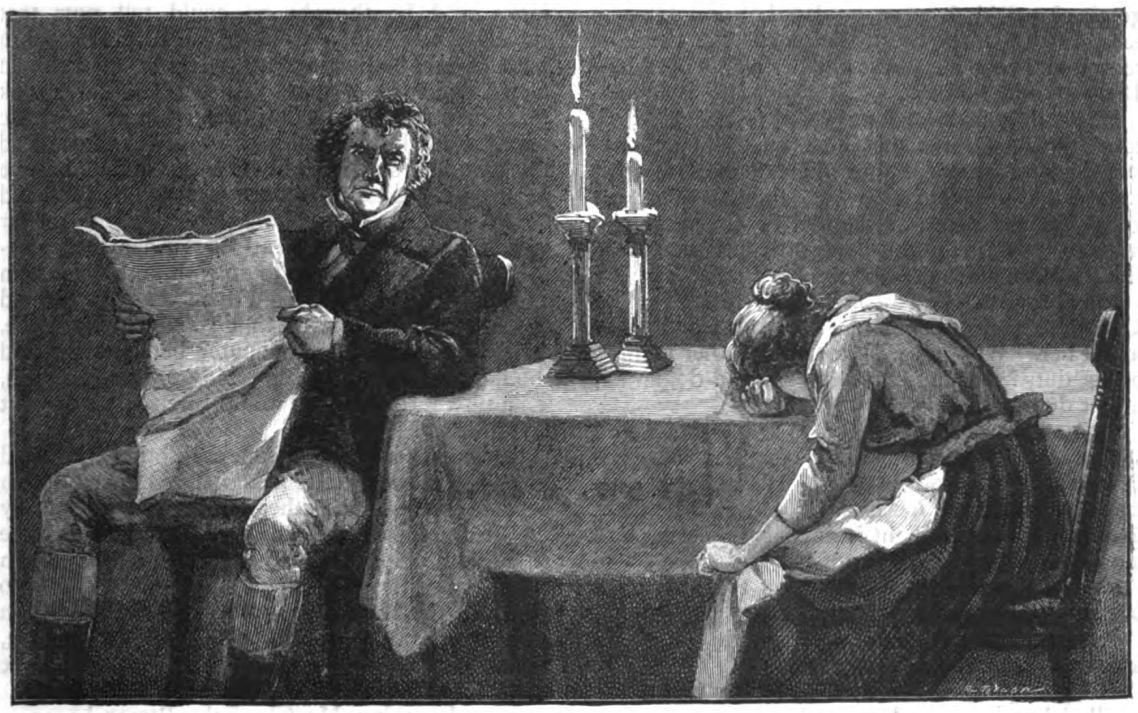
THE VICAR OF MOOR EDGE.

BY MRS. H. COGHILL.



HER VERY SOUL WAS PROSTRATE, BUT THERE WAS NO RESPONSE.

CHAPTER I.—AN UNHAPPY PAIR.

"PARSON has nowt to do with my affairs. Old Parson 'as taught me my catechiz himself, and married her and me, worse luck! he never melled with me, and new one shanna. Let him get a wife himself and manage her, and then happen we might let him talk."

There was a pause broken by whiffs of tobacco after this speech, and not a sound could be heard except now and then a heavy footstep, or the click of earthenware from the kitchen where the mistress of "Johnson's" was washing up her tea-things. The two men sat on a bench under the elm-tree in front of the house. Big mugs of home-brewed beer stood before them, but neither that nor the pleasantness of the evening brought any cheerfulness to their faces. Robert Clay growled out those words about the Vicar with a heavy frown on his face. And George Lane, prim and respectable in his everyday pepper-and-salt suit, sat by him and listened to them with an air of restrained disapproval. Parson, he thought to himself, was certainly one of those set in authority over us—particularly set in authority over him, the parish Clerk—but then Robert Clay was a substantial farmer owning his land, and his mother had been a Dissenter, so there was something to be said for his independence. The question in debate, too, was a difficult one, and George Lane was able to make some allowance for the aggravatingness of women, having, unlike the Parson, been rash enough in his youth to try the experiment of managing a wife of his own. She was dead long ago, and his existence since her departure had been peaceful. Still he did not like Clay's intended action. The Parson said it was unlawful—and at any rate it was a strong step.

"Give her a hiding, Bob," he said in his solemn tones. "You canna tell what a woman may do, that's true enough; but I reckon your wife's no worse than the rest of 'em at heart, and you're a good bit to blame yourself. Many's the time I've heard you trying to make her take a drop more nor she wanted. You'd say, 'Come, wench; take a sup of ale and be neighbourly,' when she'd no thought of touching it. And so I say you're bound to take all ways with her. Just you talk sensible to her, and, if needs must, give her a hiding, and see what that'll do."

"A hiding?" Clay answered with a laugh of derision. "Dost think I've never tried that? Why, George, you *are* a softy! When I found talking did no good—and that's a fine time ago—I took other ways. I've broke two good whips over her. That's the use a hiding is."

"Man! Two whips! Eh, poor Molly! Well, well, Bob, take your own way. But as nice a girl,

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and as comely, she was as any in our parish and the two next—and to see her now!"

"And you think I'm to blame?" Clay went on grumbling. "Can't a man bid his wife take a sup of his ale and make herself pleasant to him and his friends without teaching her to get drunk? Can't a man enjoy himself like a man, and the woman be content with her tea and her gossips? Did I ever grudge her anything in reason? Or, if she must drink, can't she drink in reason and keep her house and her maids in order? Does my wife do that?"

"No, Bob, no," Lane answered in a melancholy tone. "It's too true she's gone queer altogether of late days—gone queer altogether she is. I met her to-day, and the clothes on her, though they were good enough clothes in themselves, they hung on her so they didn't fare to be worth sixpence; and she that wan and miserable-looking. But why are you so set agen the Parson talking to her? You know he says you're bound to keep her and try to mend her. Why not let him try to put her in mind of her duty? There's no harm it could do, and it might do good."

"Good's over for her and me," Clay answered sullenly, "and no more talking—neither yours nor Parson's—will mend matters. We've been at a many fairs together, her and me, and we'll be there to-morrow; but to-night is the last night her and me will spend under one roof."

"Eh, Bob, that's an awful thing to say," Lane began. But Clay interrupted him.

"Let be, George, you've said enough. You can tell the Parson you spoke for her."

He got up from the bench and went into the small alehouse to pay for what he had had. Then coming out, he passed Lane with a nod, by way of "Good-night," and strode away along the country road.

"And there," said Lane to himself, "is Parson coming across the field from Moor Farm, and they'll meet this side the stile."

He sat upright, neglecting his unfinished mug of beer to watch the approach to each other, and the meeting, of the two men. Robert Clay went swinging along the road, a stalwart and comely figure, though too stout for his thirty-five years. He was extremely tall, over six feet; and so well and strongly knit that it was commonly said in the parish that he "could knock down a horse with a blow of his fist."

His dress was very much that of the usual representations of John Bull—a low crowned hat, a blue coat with brass buttons, cord breeches, and boots—and though it was pretty well worn, and lacked the smartness of a Sunday suit, it was not the dress of a poor man. A certain masterfulness in his gait, and especially in the way he carried his head, indicated that he had no small opinion of himself, and as he was now in anything but a good-humour the long spud he carried instead of a walking-stick went plunging about in a rather dangerous-looking manner.

On the other side of the fence, coming along a footpath that joined the country road at a right angle, was a man of very different aspect. The Reverend John Laurence was by no means so familiar a figure in Moor Edge as Robert Clay. He had been but a year Vicar of the parish, and it took a long while for the rural mind to get used to a new comer; especially when that new comer had the extra halo of strangeness about him, which belonged to his Sunday appearance in surplice or gown and hood. But George Lane, being parish clerk, was naturally well acquainted with the Vicar's looks, and he thought he could tell now that "Parson" was in a troubled mood. He was a man of middle height and well built, compact in figure, and alert of movement. He did not look more than forty, though his hair was grey about the temples, and his face pale and worn. It was indeed the face of a student who had spent much time among his books, and also of one who had suffered sharp sorrow. The scholarship and the sorrow were equally unsuspected at Moor Edge, but something which perhaps had to do with both made him as much respected and liked there as any man could hope to be in so short a time; and George Lane, as he watched for the encounter between him and the farmer, could not help saying to himself, "Eh, 'tis a pity. If only Bob would listen to him! But he never will."

The two men, hidden from each other by the tall thorn hedge, were quite near before either of them became aware of the other's approach. Suddenly the Vicar, crossing the stile into the lane with more vigour and quickness than would have been shown by most of his parishioners, found himself face to face with the farmer. He checked himself with a manifest desire to speak, and Clay, with a frown, and still swinging his spud, was forced to do the same.

"Good evening, Mr. Clay," the Parson began as pleasantly as he could. "You see I am coming from your house. I was sorry not to find you at home."

"I'm not much at home in the daylight," Clay answered. "Them that the land keeps must keep to the land, and it's my fashion to look to my farm." He seemed to have forgotten that he had spent the last hour drinking beer at Johnson's, and the Vicar probably did not know it. At all events the purpose of the latter at this moment was to pacify.

"I know you are a busy man," he said civilly. "But since I did not find you at home I should like to say a few words to you here."

"Well, sir," Clay answered with no more responsive civility than was barely conveyed by his words, "if you have any business of your own to speak to me about I'm very willing to hear it."

"I have," the Vicar replied gravely. "It is my business to tell you that if what I hear of your intentions with regard to your wife is true, you are in danger of breaking the laws of God and man. It is my business to beg of you most earnestly to give up the thought of committing this great sin."

"No business of yours, Parson, at all," Clay answered grimly. "You didn't even marry us, and if old Parson Greenway as did were alive now, I suppose he'd say he could not unmarry us, much less you. She won't be the first woman as has changed her master, I reckon. And I'm bound to

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be rid of her. Sin or no sin—but I don't hold it's a sin, you mind—I mean to get out of the hell she's made for me. And if there's no way but one to do it, why I'll take that one."

"There is another way," the Vicar cried, and seeing that Clay was trying to pass him he stepped back to the stile and stood in front of it, opposing his slight, close-knit figure to the other's huge, unwieldy strength. "There is the way of repentance and forgiveness. You speak of a hell—do you think you are the only one that suffers? Or that she is the only one that is wrong? Your wife is as unhappy as yourself—much more unhappy. She is so heart-broken and spirit-broken that a kind word from you would be everything to her—it would give her courage to be what she used to be. Have pity on her and your child—go home and tell her you will try a little longer. She has promised never to touch drink again—do you promise?"

"I'll promise her and you this one thing, and no other," Clay broke in brutally. "As you're so sweet on her, you'd better take her and manage her yourself, for the one thing I'll promise—and that I swear by any oath you like—is, that as long as you live you'll never see her in my house again after to-day. *Never*, do you hear? And so good-night to your Reverence."

He moved on a swinging stride or two down the lane, climbed the bank at a point where the hedge was weak, and in a moment had crashed through it and was crossing the field towards his own house, leaving the Vicar in possession of the stile.

"Poor woman!"—this was all it occurred to Mr. Laurence to say when Clay had vanished. He himself had been ungratefully and insolently treated, but of this he was hardly conscious. That unhappy, most erring, and now most helpless member of his flock filled his mind as, slowly and sadly ready to blame himself for being a clumsy mediator, and equally ready to try again if any other way could be found, he turned away towards the village.

George watched the parting as he had watched the meeting. He was perhaps the only one of the three who could have told afterwards what an exquisite evening had been witness to the scene; how peacefully the long shadows of tall elms and bushy oaks had crept across the meadows; and how busy and talkative the rooks had been in their great rookery behind the farm. Over all was the calm and sweetness of coming rest: the first star, golden in the yet daylight sky, shone straight upon Robert Clay as he went homewards, but he neither saw the star nor felt the soft influence of the sweet country quiet. He went over the rich meadow with heavy steps, striking his spud upon the ground now and then, and keeping nearly parallel to the footpath until it ended at a small garden wicket. Then he turned abruptly to the left, and skirting the garden hedge made for the adjoining farmyard and began an inspection of stables, cow-houses, and all the appurtenances of his business.

As he skirted the garden a woman looked out at him from a window of the house. It was a wide lattice window divided into three compartments, the middle one of which stood open; and within the open part the woman who had been for eight years mistress of Moor Farm sat huddled in a high-backed chair and looked out at her husband with despairing eyes. A little girl of five sat on the ground at her feet, her sturdy legs stretched out, and her fair, tangled curls rubbing against her mother's knee, while she tossed and fondled a wooden doll; but the woman kept her face turned to the window, and her thin hands grasped the arms of her chair with a nervous clutch.

The room in which she sat was a fair-sized, low-ceiled, and very comfortable parlour, communicating by a door with the big farmhouse kitchen. At the farther end from this door was a wide fireplace within whose ample bars there stood a big jar filled with flowers—a "beaupot" the sweetness of which floated through the place, while its colour was reflected in the broad flat top of a fender of polished iron. On one side of the fireplace was a deep press sunk in the wall; on the other, a mahogany corner cupboard, the glass doors of which showed a gay array of china within. There was a big table, dark and shining, in the middle of the room; one or two other tables, and a brightly-covered hard-cushioned sofa; finally the two big, high-backed chairs in one of which Mrs. Clay sat. It was altogether a room whose contents spoke of two or three generations of well-to-do owners; it was a cheerful room, too, by nature, well lighted and airy—a locality as little suggestive as anything could be of that "hell" of which the farmer had spoken. And if the woman by the window had so lived as to make of these commonplace, comfortable surroundings a region of misery, it was clear that she herself was the centre and focus of all the wretchedness.

"As nice a girl, and as comely, as any in the parish," she had been, according to George Lane, and there were still about her some faint reminders of former beauty. Her eyes were dark, and shaded by beautiful curving lashes, her head well set on finely shaped shoulders. But her hair, plainly twisted up under a thick white cap, was streaked and flecked with grey, and had a lustreless, wispy look very ugly to see; some of her teeth were gone, and her lips so colourless and flaccid that her mouth seemed shapeless. Her cheeks, which should have been as round and almost as rosy as her child's, were pallid, and hung loosely over her jaws; under her eyes were tints of purple on sunken flesh, and the skin of her face and throat was like that of a woman twenty years older than she really was. But much more than the loss of tint and shape was the expression of her face—a look of such utter, hopeless wretchedness, such helpless prostration of body and soul, as was more tragic in its stillness than any utterance of human tongue could be. She sat shrinking forward a little, almost as if she expected a blow—even when her husband passed the window she did not move, except her eyes, which followed him with a half-dazed look—and there it seemed as if she would sit with no desire to move until some one from outside should disturb her.

The Vicar had been with her for a long time that evening, and left her in a less passive mood, but

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when he was gone a horror of her loneliness and a still greater horror of the future had crept over her; and she had let her child slip down from her knee and gradually shrunk into her present attitude. She knew in the depths of her heart that her doom was sealed; and though she had raged against her husband first, and afterwards consented to plead to him, yet she had really no hope of escaping the sentence pronounced against her, nor even any fixed intention of resisting it.

After a time of contented playing with her doll the child got up and went away with it to the other side of the room. She was a pretty little creature, a perfect specimen of rural health and beauty, with light brown curls, ruddy cheeks, and blue eyes—all inherited from her father. She was well used to amusing herself, and talked away to her doll, while she put it to bed on the sofa, in a cheerful little voice that never disturbed her mother's sombre silence. Once or twice Mrs. Clay moved her head drearily from one side of the great chair to the other—once or twice a shudder passed over her—but otherwise she remained still and as if unconscious of little Betty's presence, till at last the child, having hushed her doll to sleep, made a swift rush across the room and flung herself with outspread arms upon her.

Then she started into life, and lifted the little one upon her knee, kissed the rosy cheeks and lips and the tangled curls, and held the child tight in her arms in a way Betty did not altogether approve of.

"Don't, mammy!" she cried, half laughing and half inclined to cry. "Let me go! You squeeze too hard!" But already the mother's mood had changed again. She kissed the child once more gently and almost indifferently; then she put her down on the floor, and, rising, began to walk about the room. She noticed that the red tablecloth on the side table was awry, and stopped to put it straight; she picked up some dead petals that had fallen from the beaupot, and put them out of the window. As she kept moving about she found herself opposite the cupboard in the wall; as if by instinct she stopped and felt in her pocket for a key; but the moment she had grasped it she had thrust it back again, and, clasping her hands together, went away hurriedly to the other end of the room.

Suddenly she stood still listening. Her husband had entered the house, and she could hear his voice in the kitchen speaking to a servant. While she listened the parlour door opened, and a woman came in, carrying a tray of supper things, which she set down and began to arrange. There was a small basin of bread-and-milk for Betty, and Mrs. Clay put the child on a high chair and, giving her a spoon, watched while she ate. Betty was hungry, and the bread-and-milk vanished quickly; the cold bacon, bread and cheese, and ale had only just been arranged on the table when her basin was empty. Her mother kissed her as she lifted her down. "Now," she said, "go and say good-night to father, and Sally will take you to bed."

As the parlour door opened to let Betty out Robert Clay appeared at it. He kissed the child in passing, and then, coming into the room, closed the door heavily behind him. He never looked at his wife, but went straight to the table, cut himself a slice of bacon and another of bread, poured out a big mug of ale, and, sitting down, began to eat. She also cut herself some bread and a morsel of cheese, and, taking her place opposite to him, made some pretence of supper. But her throat was dry, and her heart beating in great heavy thumps; she could swallow nothing, nor, for the moment, could she speak one of the words which were so ready an hour ago.

The meal went on—not long in reality, yet seeming to both the silent pair of interminable length. At last, however, it was over. Clay had eaten a substantial quantity; his wife had swallowed an inch or so of bread and crumbled the rest; he had had a glass or two of ale, and she a long draught of water. He got up from the table and went to fetch the small week-old newspaper that had been laid away in a corner, opening the door as he passed it, and shouting to Sally to fetch the tray. Then, as the supper was removed, he drew the flaring candles near to him, and, turning his shoulder to the table, set himself determinately to read the news.

His wife sat still in her place. Once or twice she looked at him as if she were going to speak, but her parted lips closed without a sound, and, leaning her elbows on the table, she rested her forehead on her hands. Yet she felt that it must be done—she had promised the Vicar, and she meant to do it. But the Vicar had said that he would surely listen to her, and his attitude now was so hopelessly unlike listening. She had been crushed that afternoon; the Vicar's kindness had softened her heart to its very core, so that anger had lost itself in repentance. But now, as she looked at that obdurate figure facing her, there was a little flame of bitterness beginning to flicker and sting in her bosom. Yet she was determined to speak, and to speak humbly. "Robert," she said at last, "I have a word or two I want to say to you."

Her voice was husky and unsteady. He did not turn his head, or lift his eyes from the paper, but he grunted out a half-articulate "Well?"

"Let me try again," she said. "Let me stay. I said I would go, but I can't leave the little one. And I'm sorry—and I'll promise to drink no more."

The phrases came in gasps, her hands gripping each other hard, and her forehead growing moist with the struggle to speak them. But he neither answered nor moved. Only when she stopped he gave a short, jeering laugh, and she half rose from her chair with an angry sparkle in her eyes.

He turned his paper, and she quieted herself and went on. "It's eight years," she said, "since I came here, and for four years we were right happy and comfortable. Why should not the good days come again? See, Robert, I'll swear, if you like, that as long as I live I'll touch nought but water. Will you make a bargain—for the child's sake?"

She stretched her hands towards him. "Speak!" she said.

"Ay!" he cried, suddenly turning towards her, and dashing down the newspaper with a bang. "I'll speak, you chattering, worthless jade! Why,

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it's as much for the child's sake as my own that I mean to get rid of you. Do you remember how, three days ago, I found you lying drunk on the floor and the child asleep beside you? You shall go, and if I had to keep you she should go. No child of mine shall be reared up by a drunken good-for-nothing!"

"Child of yours!" she cried as fiercely as he had spoken. "Is she more your child than mine? Do you think I'll give her up? You may kill me—no," and she quieted herself again with a last desperate effort of sorrow and patience. "No, Robert, I don't mean that. I mean, think of what you are doing. The child has nobody but you and me—no grandmother, no aunt, nor anybody that cares for her. What can a man do for a little thing like that?"

"Never you mind," he answered; "she won't be your business."

"Oh think," she went on. "If you've been wretched, I've been more. Look at me. I'm not thirty years old yet, and I'm more like fifty. It's not been all my own fault, as you know very well, but I'm ready to take all the blame—only don't—don't try to part me and——"

Her head sunk on her hands and her body shook with sobs; her very soul was prostrate in supplication. But there was no response. He let her weep, never looking at her after the first moment, but seeming still to read his paper. Only when she grew quiet he said, with a sort of stolid brutality:

"Spare thy breath, lass. What I've said that I'll do. I suppose a man's wife is his goods, isn't she? A precious bad bargain you've been to me, and talking won't mend it. You're a fool, too, for you know well enough there's nought will keep you from the brandy bottle, and I'm giving you a chance for plenty of it. Go to bed and hold your tongue."

She got up as if to obey him, but instead of going towards the door walked round deliberately and stood in front of him. Her eyes burned with a sullen light and her cheeks were flushed; a little of her old beauty had come back to her, but it was fierce and ill to look at.

"If this is the last word then," she said, speaking quietly, though her voice rose as she went on, "I'll say what I think and not what the Parson bade me. It is you, Robert Clay, that have made me a bad bargain—you with your drinking every day and your drunken company coming about the house. Do you think a decent woman could live with you? And what do you think will become of the child? Won't she follow her drunken father and her drunken mother? And it will be you—you—you that has done it! Drive me out of your house, and the curse will stay behind. Now do what you like!"

He sprang from his seat and struck her. At the touch of his heavy fist she fell, and there was a dead silence in the room. He stood looking at her huddled on the floor, and his fist was still clenched as if he would have struck again if it had not been so manifestly useless. Then he remembered that this time she was certainly sober, and he wondered at her stillness. Was she shamming to save herself further punishment? Very likely—at any rate he was not going to pick her up. It was about bedtime with a busy day to-morrow, so he blew out one candle, set the kitchen door wide open, called out, "Sally, come and look to the missis," and went creakingly up the oak stairs to his bedroom.

CHAPTER II.—THE FAIR.

LYING on the high ground towards the Derbyshire border, high enough to be breezy, but not so high as to be bleak, Moor Edge is one of the prettiest of Midland villages. In these days its fine Gothic church draws visitors from a distance, and gives scope to much talking on the part of local archæologists; but in the days when Mr. Laurence was Vicar no one ever thought of pilgrimages—the old ones had gone out of fashion, and the modern ones had not been invented. Yet the parishioners had a vague sense of the beauty of their church, and especially were proud of the ancient sweet-toned bells with their quaint inscriptions; the life of the village clustered round the building; its triple line of roofs and lovely spire looked down on the village green and the houses on either side, and on the highway, once traversed by Roman legions, where such small stream of traffic as existed was bound to pass. From the low stone wall of the churchyard the green sloped gradually to the road. Perhaps long ago the whole square had been nearly flat, for though the open grassy space now inclined gently till it reached the lowest point, the two rows of houses hemming it in did not follow its incline, but kept themselves up on nearly the height of the churchyard, while, to make up for their elevation above the green, those of them that were nearest the road were approached by a pebbly causeway and various steps of rough stone. Almost all the year this heart of the village was sluggish enough: in the middle of the day the boys and girls played under some beautiful elms that were scattered about the upper part; in the evenings their elders loitered and gossiped there. But there was no stir of business or pleasure there except twice a year. In early summer a large cattle fair gathered the neighbourhood together, and in autumn the parish wake brought an equal crowd for more frivolous purposes. Perhaps the reason Robert Clay and George Lane had chosen to take their beer at Johnson's—which was but an out-of-the-way alehouse on the road to Moor Farm—was to avoid the noisy and dusty preparations making on Church Green for the business of the following morning. At any rate, the morning of the fair rose upon a scene of no little crowding and vociferation under the elms and all over the grassy slope below them. The whole space was now covered at the upper end with booths, at the lower with rough pens full of sheep, horses, and all varieties of the domestic cow. Here innocent and foolish calves were staggering about on their spindle legs; there stood groups of sturdy, wise oxen, too philosophical perhaps to care who would next wield the sharp goad over their solid flanks. Around and among this four-legged crowd was another crowd of bipeds—smart cattle dealers and horse dealers from distant places, rough drovers,

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and the slow-moving and white-smocked labourers of the district, with a sprinkling of the neighbouring farmers and a small proportion of women. At this early period of the day the women were chiefly those belonging to the booths; business was in full swing, but pleasure, and those who came in search of it, would be found later.

The animals had many of them been on the ground since the night before; many more had arrived by five o'clock in the morning; and by nine much buying and selling had been done, and some of the overcrowded pens were already emptying. As the pens emptied the beershops filled; there was one on each side of the Church Green, and at both of these breakfast was laid on long green tables outside the windows as well as within. Great hams, masses of cold boiled beef or bacon, loaves as big as beehives, and immense jugs of beer formed the provisions, and disappeared at a regular and very considerable speed. A few men, their day's work already done, sat with their pipes on benches under the trees. Altogether there were a good many people sufficiently disengaged to be easily attracted by any unusual sight or sound.

And, at this juncture, making its way slowly up one side of the green, between the houses and the trees that skirted the cattle-pens, there came a very unusual and curious little procession. First marched Robert Clay, in beaver hat and brass-buttoned coat, a strong, prosperous figure, looking defiantly from side to side as he went on. In his hand was the one end of a rope, while the other end was bound and strongly tied round his wife's waist. She, drawn steadily, but not roughly, along by this, followed him with feeble steps, her face quite hidden by a black hood, and her hands hanging powerless at her sides. All energy seemed to have left her; the only efforts she made were to keep on foot and to keep curious eyes from her face—otherwise she seemed entirely passive. Behind her was another man, who in that inland crowd had the unmistakable look of a sailor, though his clothes were like those of his neighbours—a sturdy man, with an ugly scar across his face and a wooden leg, who managed, in spite of his lameness, to keep close to the woman, and now and then spoke to her in a low tone.

She never seemed to pay the least heed to his words, though they were friendly and even respectful. She perhaps did not hear them, for a throng of young fellows and boys followed making a good deal of noise, and the whole place was full of the voices of men and beasts.

Clay seemed to be making for the top of the green, where in front of the church gates there was a small unoccupied space. He went on grimly, paying no heed to anybody, until this was almost gained, and then there came a sudden interruption. From the big iron gates there swiftly issued the Vicar in cassock and bands—his cassock flying behind him, his pale face and nervous figure all on fire with energy—until he stood opposite the farmer, and the two men looked each other full in the eyes.

"What are you doing?" the Vicar said sternly.

There was a pause—hardly perceptible—before Clay answered, but he spoke with no faltering voice.

"Selling my goods and chattels like my neighbours."

"Is that woman your wife?" was the next question.

"Ay, more's the pity!"

"Did not you marry her in this church?"

"I did. Will you buy her?"

"Did you not swear to love, honour, and cherish her?"

"Come, Parson, I married her—that's enough. I've kept her this eight years, and now I'll keep her no more. Better preach to her than to me."

"I will. But take notice, you Robert Clay and all you who hear me. You have got some notion that to sell a wife is not to break the law. I tell you it is to break the law of God and the law of England. No power but that of the High Court of Parliament can break a marriage, and no man, woman, or child in England can be sold against their will."

"Ay, ay," shouted the sailor suddenly; "but suppose it is with her will?"

The Vicar turned quickly to the woman.

"But it is not," he said eagerly. "Mrs. Clay, this is not your doing?"

She shook her head faintly, her face still hidden.

"She's half-dead," the sailor went on. "He's flogged her till she's stupid, and he'll kill her if she goes back with him. You should be glad, Parson, as she's got better friends."

"Buy her yourself, Parson," a voice in the crowd called out. "You want a wife."

A roar of laughter followed this excellent joke, and while it was still ringing over the green Mrs. Clay put out a hand and beckoned the Vicar to her.

Clay was rocking himself from side to side, repeating, "Buy her yourself, Parson, that's it," and Mr. Laurence passed him and came close to the woman. When he was quite near she lifted the side of her hood and let him see her face. Where yesterday the skin had been pallid there was now a hideous bruise. So dreadful had been the force of the blow that she was hardly recognisable, and it seemed really a miracle that she had survived it. She stood trembling for a second with her terrible hurt uncovered; then she drew down the hood again, and said faintly:

"It is my will—it is my doing. Let him alone."

Whether Clay heard these words, or whether he only thought time enough had been wasted, he gave a pull to the rope, and, the Vicar being no longer in the way, the group moved on a few steps.

Then the farmer stopped, and, facing the crowd, shouted, "Who'll buy a wife?"

There were two or three jesting bids from strangers, but only one known voice answered.

"I will," said the sailor, "and there's the price."

Five bright guineas passed from the one man's hand to that of the other, the rope was delivered up, the bargain was concluded, and Mary Clay had got her divorce.

The rope had passed from Robert Clay's hand to that of the sailor; he proceeded deftly to unknot it, and the woman who had been sold was

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released. "Molly," he said in a tone clearly audible to those standing near, "if, as Bob says, you were his chattel this morning, you're mine now. Come home, and be sure of one thing—you'll get neither hard words nor hard blows from me." [1]

He took her by the arm and turned round to lead her back down Church Green the way she had come. She was going with him submissively, in a dazed kind of way, when the Vicar again stepped to her side.

"Mrs. Clay," he said earnestly, "I must speak to you. Come first, for a few minutes at least, to the Vicarage."

"She goes nowhere without me," the sailor answered for her, "but she can go to the Vicarage with me if your Reverence likes."

"Come, then," said Mr. Laurence, and led the way through the gates and by a side path across the churchyard to his own house.

Not a word was spoken on the way, and, indeed, the Vicar's mind was full of trouble and perplexity. Though he had heard from both Robert Clay and his wife that their married life was rapidly approaching this extraordinary end he had hardly believed it. He knew very little of the rustic mind, and could not conceive that a proceeding so lawless would really be carried out. The evening before the fair, it is true, when Mrs. Clay had assured him that her husband had positively made up his mind, and even forced her to agree, to the sale, he had become alarmed and had seriously asked himself whether he ought not to appeal to the nearest magistrate. This gentleman, however, lived ten miles off, and even supposing it had been possible to have laid the case before him, what could he have done? Impossible that either Clay or his wife could be punished for an intention: he indeed might be punished for ill-treating her if she or her neighbours would bear witness against him; but most certainly they would not do this; and what was wanted was some present, immediate remedy. The only glimmer of hope remaining was that in the next hour, before Molly had entered the house of her purchaser, he might find some words in which to persuade her that all her past sins and sufferings were less than the utter perdition that now threatened her.

He hurried across the churchyard, followed by the two newly linked together. Molly still moved feebly and was still muffled in her hood. The sailor in spite of his wooden leg was strong and active enough to give her help if she would have accepted it, but she dragged herself along resolutely without touching his arm until they reached the door of the Vicarage, and Mr. Laurence led them into his bookroom and pushed chairs forward for them to sit down.

[1] Moor Edge is a real village, though maps of the Midlands call it by another name. The incident of wife selling is also a real one, and is not a solitary example. Undoubtedly wives were now and then sold by their legal owners, even within the memory of persons still living; it would not therefore be fair to suppose that in any part of England, or at any period, such bargains were frequent; they seem, indeed, to have been almost exclusively made by the roughest and most degraded inhabitants of towns, and to have called down as much reproof from decent people as they would do to-day. It is, however, within the writer's knowledge, that a farmer sold his wife in Derby Market-place about 1844 or 1845 to a man of considerable wealth, who had made his fortune as a cheese factor.

He himself stood upon the hearth facing them. Molly thrust back her hood, showing her disfigured eye and cheek, but it was not at her he looked. He was giving all his attention (and all the more because the man, though a parishioner, was almost a stranger to him) to her purchaser, and here he was completely puzzled. For this was not the type of face he had expected to see, nor did the man's attitude or manner express the want of decorum which he instinctively attributed to the maker of so strange a bargain.

"Will you tell me your name?" the Vicar said at last after a quite perceptible pause in which he had not known what to say.

"My name is Thomas Bell, your Reverence," the other answered briskly, "and I'm a native of this parish, as Molly there knows well. I went to sea ten years ago this May, and I served His Majesty on board the *Warspite* first and the

A NATIVE WHO WENT TO SEA TEN YEARS AGO.

Shannon afterwards, till, as your Reverence sees, I lost a leg. I've a pension and a bit of prize money, and the cottage at the bottom of Church Green that belonged to my old mother. So I can keep her comfortable, and I mean to."

A light came into the Vicar's face as Bell spoke. This was no surly brute such as Robert Clay, but, as he could now perceive, a man with frank, kindly eyes, and a voice that sounded honest. Though he had not recognised him at first he now remembered much that he had heard about him. His cottage was the neatest and prettiest in the village—a white nest perched on the high bank at one corner of Church Green, surrounded by a good strip of garden and kept with exquisite trimness. It had so happened that Mr. Laurence had never yet

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exchanged a word with Bell, but he was well acquainted with his housekeeper, tidy old Goody Till, and she had been garrulous in his praise. She would have been in the workhouse, far away from her native Moor Edge, if he had not taken her in and given her a comfortable home. Thomas Bell seemed to be the instinctive helper of his helpless neighbours. The question was, however, whether in his last enterprise some feeling much more personal than philanthropy might not undo the good he meant to do. For the words "as Molly there knows well" had meant much more than they said—had betrayed plainly the fact that Molly had not been without share in shaping the young man's earlier life.

"I'm glad she has a friend," the Vicar said. "Mrs. Clay," he went on, turning to her, "were you able to do what you promised me last night?"

"Yes, sir," she said faltering, "I did what I promised—I told him what I would do—and I begged him to let me stay, but, oh!" and her passion broke out again in tears and sobs, "the child is mine and I must have her. I'm battered and dazed, and glad to get away from him, but I want my little lass! And he said he'd send her away."

She had risen from her chair and stood looking round her like a creature distraught. Bell took her hand and drew her back to her seat.

"You shall have your little lass, my dear," he said, "if I have to steal her for you."

The Vicar went to a queer angular sofa that stood near the window and began to shake up unshakable cushions.

"Now, Mrs. Clay," he said, "come here and lie down. When you've been quite quiet for ten minutes we'll talk a little more. Make her lie down, Bell."

He left the room, and came back carrying a glass of milk and a slice of bread. "Eat and drink," he said, "and then rest a little."

She had had no food that day, and the want of it was adding to her faintness. She took the glass thankfully and drank, and Bell watched her with satisfaction.

"Now," said the Vicar, "I want to have a few minutes' talk with Mr. Bell. You are to lie still, and we are going into the room opposite and will come back presently."

They went away, Bell following obediently enough, and she lay still, quite out of the turmoil and the uncertainty; some barrier passed that seemed to her vaguely like that of death, not a thought of the future in her tired and confused mind except the one thought—and even that hushed out of its sharpness—that she must not lose her child.

She was so exhausted that presently she fell asleep, and so the two men found her when they returned to the room, her death-like face lying quietly on the dark leather cushion and her hands hanging half open in the nerveless abandonment of deep sleep. The Vicar's face was grave again, and he sighed as he looked at her.

"May God pity her!" he said softly, and turned away to go back to the opposite room.

He had a mind to shut the door and kneel down and pray for guidance in this strait that seemed too hard for him, but to his surprise Bell followed him and stood within the door as if he had yet something to say.

"Your Reverence," he began, looking vaguely from side to side, and seeming to find his words with difficulty: "I'm not a brute like Clay—no, nor a heathen. I've told you what I meant, and I say again that to my thinking Molly is my wife now as she should have been ten years ago. But all the same she shall make her choice. It is true, as you say, that she's dull and half crazy with trouble and ill-usage, and I'll take no advantage of her. Let her have a week to get herself rightly alive again, and then we'll see. Only I say this—and I mean it. If Robert Clay molests her, or if I hear of anybody trying to bring them together again, I'll take her away. I may have to steal the child, as I said, but anyhow I'll take her away, and there's not a soul in Moor Edge will ever see her or me again."

He struck his stick sharply on the floor as he finished this long speech, which had been given with growing energy from beginning to end, and looked fiercely at the Vicar to emphasise the concluding threat. But Mr. Laurence felt the day was gained. He held out his hand eagerly to the sailor.

"Thank you," he said. "That is right. You are a brave man, Mr. Bell, and an honest one, and I wish with all my heart she had been your wife. If you will leave her here with my old housekeeper, I promise nobody shall say a word to her in favour of Clay."

Bell shook his head.

"That I can't do," he said. "She'll have to be my housekeeper, I reckon, though I've got one already. If I were to leave her here, or anywhere, the neighbours would say I had not paid for her—they'd be telling her she ought to go back. But I'm better off than some, and your Reverence can come if you please and see that she'll have a decent place to live in, and a decent woman to look after her."

"I don't doubt it," said the Vicar, fearful of pressing his point lest he should lose what he had so unexpectedly gained; "and I will come to see her if you will let me. I have been once or twice to your door," he went on, "but you were never at home."

"That's true. I'm not fond of sitting by myself. Well, I must wake the poor lass and take her home."

They went back to the bookroom. Molly was awake now and sat up as they came in.

"Oh, sir," she said, "I am ashamed at my ill manners. I've been sound asleep."

"You needed rest, and need more yet," the Vicar said kindly. "I should like you to stay here for a day or two, and let my good old Mrs. Hardy nurse you."

"No, no," said Bell hastily. "Come along, Molly; you shall go home and rest there."

She looked at him in a curious way, half inquiring, half defiant. Then her head drooped again, and she moved towards the door. She stopped just before she reached it to curtsey and say "Good

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day, your Reverence, and my humble thanks for all your kindness"; and then she passed out of the room and out of the house without another word or look for either of the men.

CHAPTER III.

THE dulness of Moor Edge at ordinary times was nothing to its dulness immediately after a fair or wake. The great fair came early in summer, the parish wake in autumn; for these two festivals everybody bestirred themselves. The pursuit of gain or the pursuit of amusement roused all classes, from the richest farmer who drove his wife to the village in his smart gig, to the poorest old man in the almshouses. But great and heavy was the lethargy that followed each of these periods of dissipation. And many a man, usually pleasant enough to his neighbours, was at such times not to be approached except with fear and trembling.

Robert Clay was one of the worst of these. It had been for some years his habit to intoxicate himself pretty thoroughly at every merry-making. Even in the early years of his marriage, and before Molly had learned the evil lesson of his example, he had been fond of boasting that he could "carry" a quart more of the home-brewed ale at Johnson's than any of his friends, and lately he had gone from bad to worse. His enormous bodily strength still held out, but his shrewdness nowadays often failed him, and his temper almost always. The "hell" which he had accused his wife of making was indeed quite as much his work as hers; and her absence was no reason for the return of peace and quiet life.

He had got home and to bed somehow on the evening of the fair day. After many hours of heavy sleep he was awoke by the voice of little Betty outside the door calling loudly, "Mammy! Mammy!"

He had forgotten for the moment all that had happened, and still half-asleep, he shouted impatiently, "Molly! answer the child, can't you?" Then waking a little more, "Curse her for a drunken jade!" and then rousing still further, he remembered that his wife was far beyond hearing either the child's call or his curses.

And then for the first time there penetrated dimly his drink-benumbed brain the question, "What will Betty do?" At this moment Betty was crying loudly for her mother—she was coming up the stairs, climbing slowly step by step, for they were steep for her little legs—she was at the bedroom door trying to turn the handle, and always vociferating "Mammy, Mammy!"

Of course he could soon pacify her, he thought to himself, or Sally. There, in a happy moment, was Sally, calling her away with delusive promises of "a sugar piece," to be had below; and now for a little while he might be quiet again. But he was fairly awake, and by-and-by got up and went downstairs.

Hitherto, ever since Betty had been big enough to sit in her high chair and feed herself, she had shared her parents' meals; her place had been beside her mother, but her father had always talked to and petted her, and in these last months of growing discord the child's presence had been the one thing that made the gloomy meetings endurable. But to-day there was only one place prepared at the table. The great piece of cold boiled bacon stood as usual in front of Clay's chair, and near it stood the big jug of home-brewed beer; but Mrs. Clay's little brown teapot was not visible, and the side of the table where she and Betty had hitherto sat was altogether bare and empty.

Clay called out to Sally, who was making a great rattling of pots and pans in the kitchen: "Where is the child? Bring her to her breakfast."

"She's had her breakfast an hour ago," Sally answered; "and she's gone out wi' Jim to see the calves."

"Why did you give her her breakfast without me?" Clay asked angrily.

Sally turned round from her pots to answer him. "Why, maister," she said, "what could 'ee do with

SALLY TURNED ROUND FROM HER POTS TO ANSWER HIM.

the child? And the poor thing wanted her bread and milk an hour ago!"

He stood for a moment, wishing to give a savage answer, and not finding one; then went back to his solitary meal. It was a good riddance that he had made of his wife; but he did not altogether like the absence of Betty. "She will be here at dinner," he told himself, and so ate what breakfast he could, and went away round his farm. This was about eight o'clock; towards eleven something took him to the dairy, and there he found Betty sitting on an upturned milk-pail and eating bread and cream with much satisfaction. She did make her appearance at dinner, but very dirty, as Sally had not had time to wash her, and entirely without appetite for the boiled beef and suet puddings. She was rather cross, too, and finally struggled down from her chair and declared she "would go to Mammy."

Clay tried in vain to coax her. She had always been delighted to go to him as long as her mother was there—being used to nothing but spoiling

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from him; but to-day everything was wrong. Though she had been following her own devices all the morning, she felt lonely and deserted, and somehow, though she did not know how, Daddy was to blame. Finally she crept upstairs, and

THE CHILD WAS EATING BREAD AND CREAM.

finding the door of her mother's bedroom shut, she sat down outside it, crying bitterly, and so cried herself into a long, sound sleep.

It was Clay himself who found her there and carried her down to the parlour. He tucked her up on the sofa, and told Sally to listen for any sound of her waking, and then he rode off to Oakhampton, four miles away, and did not come back till night.

Day followed day, and things were much the same. Clay insisted that the child should have her breakfast and dinner with him; but, as a matter of fact, it was little pleasure to either of them. Betty missed her mother's care and did not "behave herself." Clay looked on in perplexity, and sometimes scolded her, but rarely, for the little creature was the only thing in the world that he consciously loved. He had a vague notion that he must get somebody to take care of her; but whom? He had already two women servants, Sally and the dairy maid; to keep three, even if he could afford it, would have been a serious matter, enough to set all the tongues of the parish to work upon his extravagance. He had no near relation—the only person he could think of was a cousin's widow who kept a shop and had her own children to look after. He might possibly send Betty to her; but to part with the child was a thing he did not like. No, somehow he must try to keep her.

There was no doubt that she soon began to lose her pretty ways. She escaped from the house now whenever she could, and found playmates among the labourers' children. There was a winding narrow lane that went from the farm to the village, opening into the highway a little to one side of Church Green. The lane was nearly a mile in length, and Betty had never yet traversed its whole extent; but she had made her way into it, and to some farm-cottages that stood nearly half-way along it, where there were children of her own age and thereabout. Here she was a great personage, and here her father found her one day enjoying herself immensely, and behaving, as even he could see, like the veriest little ragamuffin of the community. He put her on his shoulder and carried her home; and though she had always been delighted with a ride of this kind, she sulked and almost wriggled off her perch before the end of their journey. What should he do? he asked himself. This state of things was not at all what he had anticipated.

As Clay approached his own house, he saw a man leaning against the doorway, evidently looking out for his arrival. It was Sally's father, Tom Evans—a burly farm-labourer, and his soil-stained smock and muddy boots showed that he had just come from the fields.

"Good day, Maister Clay," he said, stepping out of the house to allow the farmer to enter, "I've a word I wanted to say to 'ee, if yo plase."

"A word to say, have you?" Clay answered. "Well, come in, then."

"I amna fit to come in, maister. Sally, she's cleaned the floor, and she wonnot have it filed she

SALLY'S FATHER HAS A WORD TO SAY.

says. And it's about Sally as I be come," he added, twisting his old felt hat about in his fingers nervously.

"Well, what is it?" Little Betty had gone indoors, and Clay was manifestly losing his temper.

"Sally and me," the old man answered, "has

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settled as she must take harvest work along o' me at Squire's. My old woman canna work this year for her back, and we canna lose the harvest money. So Sally thought I should tell you as she must leave."

"Oh, she must leave, must she? Come here, Sally," he called, and very slowly, rubbing her bare arms on her apron, Sally came.

"What does this mean?" the farmer asked roughly. "Do you want to go and work at the harvest?"

"It's feyther wants me," she answered stolidly.

"So I said—so I did," Evans replied. "Not all in a minute, maister—a month's warning, that's it."

"Now—why?"

Sally went back to her work—her father stood gazing at Clay's angry face till he burst out into sudden anger too.

"Why? Because I won't have my wench in a house with a drunken maister and no missis—that's why. But my wish was to be civil—nay, I'm not a woman, maister?"

Clay had suddenly struck out, thinking in his rage that he should fell Evans as he had more than once felled his wife; but the old man moved quickly aside, and the striker was almost upset by his own impetus. Evans skurried off, with a grin on his wrinkled face, saying as he went: "This day month, maister, I'll fetch Sally's box."

"A drunken master and no mistress!" This was what people were saying; and very likely they were saying that there was a motherless child going to the bad. After all, was the former state of things so much worse?

Robert Clay sat alone in his parlour and wondered what he should do. Though his habits had gradually for years past been growing more and more those of a drunkard, his age, his out-of-door life, and his extraordinary physical strength had still preserved to him in the intervals of drinking a remnant of clearness of brain which, at this moment, did not add to his comfort. Had his wife been there, he would probably have maltreated her, for his temper was just as fierce and tyrannical as ever; but since she was not there, nor any other person to provoke him, he could suffer himself to see the real forlornness of his child's position, and in a smaller degree of his own. He even went the length of asking himself whether he would have done better to let Molly take the child—but no! In his furious anger with her he had been willing that another man should take his wife, but he could not have given up to any other—not even to her mother—his own child.

Yet what was he to do? He guessed well enough that it would be almost impossible for him to replace Sally by any decent girl—old Evans must have been backed up by the opinion of the neighbours before he ventured to say what he had said—and he could not trust the little one to any but a respectable woman. Already she was getting into bad ways—what was he to do?

He found out now that, except for an hour or two at a time, Betty had never yet been neglected. The change in her was glaring and all-pervading. She had always seemed most sweet-tempered and "biddable"; now she was generally cross and often sulky. The man could not understand, nor could the child explain, that she was almost always uncomfortable, feeling and resenting the want of her habitual washings and brushings. After a week or two she adapted herself to Sally's hurried and extremely primitive methods of dressing her; but her appearance changed dolefully for the worse. Her skin began to lose its sweet freshness, and the pretty fair hair grew into a tangled mop, through which Sally dragged a comb when she had time. The baby lessons her mother had begun to teach her were being quickly forgotten; wandering about all day long, she learned the language of the stables and the farmyard. More than once she made her way into the pigsties; and one day, when Sally and her father had looked everywhere else for her, they found her lying fast asleep among a litter of very small white pigs, with her head on the bristly side of the mother.

For this naughtiness—innocent enough—she was so well whipped that she avoided the dangerous temptation in future; but the change only threw her back upon human playfellows, not very much more desirable than pigs. There was a certain red-haired Jack, a boy of about twelve, employed in all sorts of odd jobs about the farm. For a while his company seemed to Betty the best she could find, and she trotted after him with great perseverance; but Jack, though he was amused at first, soon found his baby admirer a nuisance and escaped from her more or less roughly. One day his master heard a dialogue between the two in the lower part of the farmyard, when Betty thought she was out of reach of law and order.

"Dzack! Dzack!" she was saying coaxingly, "I'se going with 'ee. Take me up, Dzack."

"No, missie, you bain't a goin'," Jack answered. "It's not a place for you. I'm goin' to fetch up the cows; and th' ould red cow, her'd swaller you like she did Tom Thumb."

"Her wouldn't, and ye'ar a leear!" cried Betty, adding ugly words; and the next moment, her father, stepping out of an out-house close by, had caught her up, and was bearing her away into the house. He was speechless—struck to the heart. His little Betty—the one white spot in his besmirched life—was she come to this, that her baby tongue shaped so glibly the coarse talk of his lowest servants? With the instinctive habit of years, he laid the blame on his absent wife; and yet a remnant of conscience told him that never, while Betty had a mother, could she have learned this manner of speech. To-day he did not whip the child as he had done already two or three times. He took her into the parlour and tried to make her understand that she was "a little lady," and must keep in doors except when he or Sally took her out; but she understood very little and remembered still less of what he said to her. She hugged and kissed him, and said, "Yes, Daddy," but by to-morrow was quite ready for another escapade; and so things went on, very disastrously for the lonely child.

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THE VICAR OF MOOR EDGE.

BY MRS. H. COGHILL.

IF THESE LAST YEARS COULD BUT COME OVER AGAIN, HOW DIFFERENT SHE WOULD MAKE THEM!

CHAPTER IV.

NOR was the other side of Clay's life—that which he spent away from home—much more satisfactory. He had begun his manhood with a great many advantages: an excellent farm, which he knew thoroughly well how to manage, the kind of position which results inevitably from a man's ancestors having dwelt in comfort and respectability on the same acres for a couple of hundred years; a decent education; a shrewd wit; and lastly a good-looking face and a tall, well-proportioned, and singularly powerful figure. When he married pretty Molly Tate, an orphan with a little fortune of a couple of hundred pounds, he was regarded by the whole parish, and even as far off as Oakhampton, as one of the most substantial and altogether enviable of the farmers attending the weekly market. The fact that Moor Edge had no resident gentry made the importance of a large and well-to-do farmer greater than it might otherwise have been. Robert Clay ranked in the minds of most of the people next to the parson; and if the gap between him and old Parson Greenway had been always rather wide, that had resulted from the eccentric conduct of Robert's father, the churchwarden, who, unmindful of his dignity, had brought to Moor Farm as his wife a dissenter! She was also something of a termagant, and had taken pleasure at times in speaking against dignities. Although her husband paid little attention to this, and insisted upon her going to church and taking Robert with her, the boy had learnt certain catchwords from her, and in perverse moods thought it fine to talk about parsons, and even churchwardens, as Popish tyrants and a "brood of bloodsuckers." To be sure these utterances never reached his father's ears, and, indeed, ceased after his mother's death; but they had been carried to Parson Greenway, and were never forgotten. Robert had, very likely, looked forward to succeeding his father as churchwarden; but, in that respect at least, the sins of his youth soon found him out, and a much smaller farmer than himself stepped into the vacant place. Nobody at Moor Edge ever dreamt of this or any other office changing hands frequently; if the office-bearer died, why then, of course, somebody must succeed him, but as a rule only death disturbed the once elected. In this case Robert Clay represented the opposition to authority—represented it very mildly and harmlessly for several years, but as his character deteriorated the instinct of rebellion against possible reproof grew in him.

When old Parson Greenway died things had

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already begun to go very badly at Moor Farm. There were no relations on the side of either husband or wife who might have exercised a saving influence. Molly, who had begun her married life with a sincere and ardent devotion to her husband, and Robert, who had begun his with a great deal of pride in his pretty wife and careless affection for her, had begun to be mutually hurtful to each other, and mutually intolerant of each other's misdeeds. The vice to which both were yielding themselves had naturally made quicker inroads on the woman's health of body and soul than on the man's. He was sometimes—and more and more frequently—possessed by the demon of drink. She was weakened, demoralised, tortured by it almost without intermission. With her, health had failed, beauty had faded, happiness had vanished; yet in her, far more than in him, there was place for repentance.

This was the state of things when Mr. Laurence came to the parish, and before very long the parson's anxious and penetrating scrutiny had brought him to a clear understanding of it. In this quiet village he had scarcely expected to find a tragedy, but he saw here all the elements of one, involving souls and bodies together. Coming, before many months were over, to a sufficient acquaintance with Mrs. Clay, he soon began to hope her life might yet be redeemed and her happiness recovered. The great obstacle to this was in the character of her husband, and that lay beyond the parson's power to reach.

There was enough of conscience in Robert Clay to make him feel the parson's blame—enough to make him feel it with resentment, not with contrition. He decided in his own mind that "that jade had got round the parson"; were they not natural allies, the woman and the priest, against all family order? It is true that he could not have put his feeling into these words, nevertheless that was his feeling. He never noticed that after a visit from Mr. Laurence Molly roused herself to be something of the good manager, the stirring housewife, the pleasant hostess of past times. He never saw how she struggled with her weakness of body, her despair of soul; but when the inevitable slip came, brought about, perhaps, by some brutality of his, he heaped abuse upon her—every insulting word his often half-drunken tongue could fashion—or struck her in mad rage, till the wonder was that she escaped with life. Month by month things grew worse in the household, and month by month, in just retribution, Clay's popularity began to wane out-of-doors. But the signs of this, which he was slow to notice, did but exasperate him more, and though at the time of the Fair he knew very well that George Lane and the more stiffly respectable of his neighbours blamed him, he had to traverse a considerable distance in his social descent before he reached the depth at which old Tom Evans could tell him his house was no place for a decent girl. After that things seemed to move more quickly. He grew sore and furious as he noticed that the women of his own class avoided speaking to him, that none of the farmers asked him into their houses unless there were money to be made by it, that the only companions who were ready to join him as he rode to and from Oakhampton market were drunken fellows like himself.

And when he carried little Betty away from Jack and the farmyard, the first prick of real compunction he had perhaps ever felt just pierced the armour of his self-satisfied nature—just pierced it and no more, but left a tiny sting behind to be taken with him when he rode off by-and-by to William Lane's farm beyond the village.

The two Lanes—William, a farmer and bailiff for a small non-resident proprietor, and George, ex-schoolmaster and parish clerk—had been among the most intimate friends of the Clays from the beginning of their boyhood. George was considerably the elder, but William was just Robert Clay's age, and had married a girl about the same age as Mrs. Clay and in some respects like her. But only two years after her marriage Mrs. Lane had had so severe an attack of small-pox that she had become blind and a very unsightly object. This was the kind of misfortune for which Robert Clay had only a contemptuous kind of pity. He could see no sense in visiting, or letting his wife visit, such a "mawkin," and consequently Molly and Mrs. Lane had not met much since Betty's birth. Nevertheless, Clay would have said that William Lane was one of his chief friends had a question on the subject been asked him.

William Lane, however, would have given a different answer. The man who could make a blind and sickly wife one of the happiest women in the parish was not likely to approve of Molly's summary dismissal; and when, after a time, it was known that she had been lying ill, visited by the Vicar and carefully nursed by old Goody Till, the Lanes with one voice joined in declaring her husband a drunken brute, who should be made to go and beg her pardon on his knees.

"And I do hope, goodman," the blind woman said with extraordinary energy, "as you and George will let him know what we thinks of him. A pretty thing, indeed, to make such a scandal among decent folks!"

William Lane had certainly no intention of seeking out Robert Clay (who was about half a dozen stone the heavier of the two) in order to tell him he was a blackguard, but he took various less aggressive means to show his disapproval. They continued to meet, as they had always done, at the market dinner at Oakhampton; but Lane now rode into the town earlier and returned home earlier than formerly, and they never made the little journey together. Clay had noticed this, but never felt quite sure that the avoidance was intentional, and when he reached Lane's house on this particular day he certainly did not expect to meet any want of hospitality.

To reach the dwelling from the high-road it was necessary for all visitors to pass through a gate, then to follow a broad path paved with cobble stones which skirted the farmyard, and finally, if they were not already on foot, to dismount, and enter the front garden through a wicket. When Robert Clay entered the farmyard he saw the blind Mrs. Lane sitting knitting by her own door-step. In opening the gate and shutting it again after

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him he made a good deal of noise—quite enough at any rate to give warning of his coming, and he was aware that Mrs. Lane called a girl, who came out of the house and looked at him. He lost sight of them both for a moment as he followed the cobble road, and when he came in full view of the house door again, Mrs. Lane, her chair, and her knitting, were all gone, and a tail of the girl's striped petticoat was just disappearing in the shadows of the interior. He left his horse at the wicket, and passing the narrow strip of garden knocked at the open door. The great oak-beamed and brick-floored kitchen was empty, and there was what seemed to him quite a minute's pause before the girl he had already seen came out of a passage at the back.

"Farmer in?" he asked rather impatiently.

"No, he bean't," the girl answered.

"Where is he, do you know?"

"I knows nought about it," the young woman replied, one hand on her hip and a decidedly saucy tone in her voice.

"My wench," observed Clay, "thy manners would bear mending. Ask Mrs. Lane to speak to me."

"Missis canna speak to nobody. Her's lying down with a pain in her head."

"She hasn't been lying down long, any way," Clay exclaimed, fairly losing his temper; then suddenly struck by the real meaning of the scene, and as suddenly enraged with himself for risking further retorts from an inferior, he turned and strode away. Once out on the highway he took the road that led away from the village and rode straight on till his big black horse was speckled with foam. Lane should pay him, he swore to himself, for the mortification he suffered; but when at last he had made up his mind exactly what he would say and do, and was going homewards, all at once he altered his mind. "A pack of women!" he muttered contemptuously, and decided that there was nothing in it. Only, at the back of his mind he knew that there was something in it, and that Mrs. Lane and her servant were only two items in the mass that made his world.

A few days later than this he met George Lane strolling, pipe in mouth, along the road towards Johnson's. The clerk was a great man at Johnson's, and when he pleased to drink his evening mug of ale there, he had a gratifying sense of giving honour as well as profit to the establishment. He liked the bench under the trees where he could sit and see who came and went by the two country roads that wound away in full sight of the guests; and until lately he had liked the strong probability that on any day but Wednesday or Saturday Robert Clay might come across from the farm and join him. Lately he had not cared about this, nor had Clay come so frequently—the quiet company and comparatively sober potations at Johnson's had not satisfied him; so that it was rather a surprise to Lane to find him evidently making for the very place where they had formerly had many a talk, and not very long ago the one in which poor Molly's fate had been so brutally commented on.

They met, however, outwardly just as they had always done, and were presently seated side by side on the bench with their mugs of ale before them and the evening sun shining through the elm-branches over their heads. The clerk had decided in his own mind that if their talk was to touch at all upon personal matters it should be by Clay's leading and not his. He was a peaceable man both by nature and profession, and he had gone, he thought, to the very farthest point possible for him in his previous pleading for Molly; if the Vicar could not do anything, how could he?

For a quarter of an hour perhaps the slow talk rolled on uneventfully and he began to feel himself safe. But Clay was not in a mood to forget his own affairs, nor of a temper to conceal the discomfort which had taken possession of him. He burst out suddenly—

"So I'm to be sent to Coventry, am I?"

George Lane started. "What's that?" he said, pretending he had not understood.

"The parish means to give me the cold shoulder, does it?" Clay repeated; "all the old women with Parson at the head of them, eh? Perhaps you can tell me what they mean to do next?"

"I can't tell what they mean to do first," Lane answered sedately; "I don't know what you are talking about—nor I've heard nothing about you neither from Parson nor any old woman whatever."

"Now, look here, George Lane," said Clay in a quieter tone, "if you were not parish clerk and a man as can't fight I'd say that was a lie. But if it is truth of one kind, it's no truth of another. You aren't so very far off being an old woman yourself—and I'd like you to tell me when you were in my house last?"

Lane sat silent for a moment. He was parish-clerk and a man of peace, but he did not like being told he was almost an old woman, so he spoke deliberately, taking all risks:

"I've not been in your house since you drove your wife out of it, and I don't know as I'm likely to be in it again."

He wished to finish up this speech with a drink of ale, but as he put out his hand to lift the mug it occurred to him that his arm felt shaky, and that Clay might think he was frightened, so he sat still.

But Clay did not fly into a passion, which was strange. On the contrary, he looked at his companion with something like a smile—or a grin.

"*That's* truth, anyway," he said. "I suppose it's pretty much the same answer as I should get from anybody else of your lot. It means as I'm a brute beast, I suppose, and *she's* an ill-used saint. You can all be civil to her, I warrant."

"Civil? why not?" Lane asked rather sulkily. "She's no saint as far as I know; but she's an ill-used woman, and if Tom Bell weren't a good deal a better man than you—or me either, perhaps, for that matter—the poor wench might have gone to destruction. Don't you talk to me about her, Bob Clay," he went on, getting up as he spoke; "I'm a man as won't fight, you say, and it's none of my business to fight; but I won't sit quiet and hear you abuse your betters!"

He turned sharply into the house as he finished this speech, and Clay laughed loud, and called after

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him that he was a dunghill cock that crowed and then ran away. But as he did not come out again the laugh died away, and a look of dull anger and almost misery succeeded it. No man, especially a vain man used to popularity, can endure to feel all the opinion of his world against him.

CHAPTER V.

ABUTTING on one corner of Church Green, and raised considerably above the level of the road which formed its lowest limit, was the cottage inherited and inhabited by Thomas Bell. It was a rather long, low building of rough stone, whitewashed, and with a deep thatch forming eaves; its doors and window-frames painted black, and its diamond-paned lattices as bright as hands could make them. A high box hedge surrounded the strip of garden extending along the road, but in front of the cottage itself this was cut away to exhibit a couple of peacocks and a pyramid, all ingeniously shaped in separate yew-trees. Between these decorations the front of the cottage could be seen, the glossy leaves of a small ivy and the plentiful clusters of a pink climbing rose breaking its whiteness; and at this time of year, when the door stood open all day, a glimpse could be had of the red-floored living-room, with its round table of black oak and high-backed settle.

In the days that followed Mary Clay's banishment from her own home, the Vicar paid frequent visits to this well-to-do and pretty little dwelling. She had fallen ill after the excitement of the Fair day, and the first time he had seen her she was lying white and exhausted in a room under the eaves, the window of which looked out upon Church Green. She had thought herself dying, and had asked to see "Parson," that she might give him messages to her child; but after a few days she had begun to revive, and next time he came she was downstairs, propped by cushions on the settle and tended by old Goody Till, Bell's housekeeper. Bell himself was away at the time of this second visit. "He can't bear to see me look so white and so old," Molly said, with a half-smile, "so he's gone away to Hampton for the day."

She was very apathetic, the Vicar thought, and this time she did not speak of little Betty; but he guessed that the entire abandonment of all stimulant, which he knew she had carried out, was still causing a feeling of utter prostration, and he deferred certain things he had to say to her for yet a few days longer.

The third time he came the cushions had been discarded, and she sat in the corner of the settle sewing. Bell was just outside, looking after his flowers, and when he had ushered the Vicar into the house and put a chair for him, he went back to his work, and, with the natural courtesy that made him unlike his neighbours, gradually withdrew to the farther part of the garden.

A curious liking and respect for this man had rooted itself in Mr. Laurence's mind. If in the crisis of poor Molly's fate she had fallen into the hands of a ruffian, what could anyone have done for her? And undoubtedly that was what the Vicar had expected and dreaded: that she would be dragged away from Moor Edge to the terrible Black Country just on the other side of Oakhampton, and there lost beyond the reach of pity or help. But this she was not; there was still, thanks to the character of the man who had bought her, a hope of her restoration to peace and pure life. And what better proof could there be that Bell, though he more than half believed even now in the validity of his bargain, loved the unhappy object of it with a true and generous affection than the manner in which he withdrew himself and left her free to talk with an adviser who would certainly not be on his side? One thing was evident—the Vicar could say no ill of Bell in his absence.

After a little talk of her health, Mrs. Clay turned to the subject of which her mind was full.

"It's ten days now," she said, "since I saw my little Betty, and I hear she's running wild about the place. Has your reverence seen her?"

"No," he said; "I will try to do so if you like, but when you are quite well you can see her yourself."

"I mean to," she rejoined; "but I shall never go to the Farm, sir—never! And yet I can't go away from here—that's the worst of it. Tom wants me to say I'll go to America with him; he says he'll get hold of Betty, and that when we get there we can be married—rightly married, he says—according to the laws out there; but I can't."

"You are right," the Vicar answered. "Don't you remember how when you were married the parson said these words: 'Those whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder'? Your marriage is still binding on you both, and I hope you will keep it sacred as long as you live."

"I think I shall," she said in a low voice. Her face had been very pale a few minutes ago, but as she spoke the red grew deeper and deeper in her cheeks.

"Perhaps I ought to have married Tom," she went on. "He liked me all my life better than anybody. He wanted me to marry him, but I couldn't. He was just a friend somehow; and then Robert wanted me, and I said 'Yes' to him—and Tom went away to sea. And Robert and me were married, and I liked him—oh, I liked him! and I meant we should be so happy, and now I *hate* him. I want to hurt him as he has hurt me; I want to punish him for this!"

She was trembling with excitement, and she ended her speech with a gesture that pointed to her surroundings and that was dramatic in its natural vehemence. The Vicar was startled, but yet—perhaps because something of a poet's imagination was in him—he seemed to read in this hatred and anger nothing less than a survival of love; and when, ashamed of her "bad manners," she looked anxiously into his face, she found there nothing but sympathy.

"We all feel, now and then, that we want to punish those who have wronged us," he said quietly. "Happily we can very seldom do it ourselves, and perhaps after a while we see that vengeance is in better hands than ours. Have you heard anything of your husband lately?"

"The neighbours come to see me," she answered—"that's one reason why I won't go away from

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Moor Edge. Here everybody knows me, and they don't blame me—not for this, at least—but strangers would. No ; I've heard nothing of Robert, only that he's kind to the little one. She was his pet always ; drunk or sober, he'd never hurt the child."

"I should hope not, indeed," said the Vicar with some warmth, and as he spoke it so happened that his eye fell upon the ugly mark of that brutal blow on Molly's temple. "God forgive him," added the parson under his breath.

He got up rather hurriedly. "Good-bye, Mrs. Clay," he said, "I shall have a word or two with Bell in the garden. His roses are better than mine."

"Ay, he's a rare gardener," she answered, as she curtsied her good-bye at the door.

And then she went back to her corner and her sewing ; but she said to herself, "I've got to see the child somehow, and I *can't* go to the farm, nor Tom couldn't fetch her for me. How in the world am I to manage it?" and this was subject enough for her thoughts for a long time after the Vicar had walked away homewards.

That longing to see her child grew upon Mrs. Clay as the days went on. The first time she went outside the cottage garden was in the dusk of a soft summer evening, when old people were sitting at their doors and young ones were joking or making love under the trees on Church Green. She slipped past the open space, keeping near the hedge on the farther side of the road, and took the lane that led towards the Farm. It was market day at Oakhampton, and almost certainly Robert Clay would be there still, miles away in the opposite direction. He would stay drinking at the Red Lion with men rougher than himself (for, as George Lane said of him, "he liked to be king of his company") until at least a couple of hours later than this, so she might be sure of not encountering him. She went on till she came to the half-way cottages, and there, leaning over the garden wicket of the nearest one, was its mistress, an untidy, sickly creature, to whom Mrs. Clay, in her better days, had been kind.

"Eh, mistress," said she in surprise, "is that you?"

"It's me, Peggy. I'm glad to see you out this fine evening." ("And she spoke," said Peggy afterwards, "just as if she was Mrs. Clay of Moor Farm as much as ever!")

"Well, I'm a poor thing," Peggy responded, "and as weak as water, as you know, mistress; but I did hear you were none so peart yourself."

"I've been ill," Molly answered ; "but that's done with now. Good evening, Peggy."

She moved on a step, when Peggy spoke again.

"We had little Betty here to-day," she said ; "wandered all this way, she did, from the Farm, and was playing with my children when I came home from the shop. I took her home myself, for Master Clay he was right-down vexed when he found her here before."

Molly had turned sharply round, and stood looking eagerly at the woman.

"My Betty was here?" she repeated. "Alone?"

"Yes ; the little thing come wandering along all by herself. She wants somebody to play with, I reckon."

"Did you take her back to Sally?"

"Yes, I did. Next time I'll bring her to you if you like."

It was a terrible temptation. If Bell was ready, as he said, to steal the child, he would surely not refuse to give it house-room when it was brought to his door. But to that proposed theft there was a condition attached ; unless she would fulfil the condition she could not have her child—and that

"MY BETTY WAS HERE?" SHE REPEATED. "ALONE?"

she could never do. After a moment's struggle she said :

"You must not do that, Peggy. But," with a sudden yearning, "if she comes again, send and fetch me, will you?"

"Oh yes, I could do that. Only Sally was terrible cross with her for coming, poor thing, and perhaps she won't let her out of her sight again."

"Sally was terrible cross with her"—Molly went on a little farther along the lane repeating these words to herself. Sally was a good girl, but she had a quick temper, and very likely now, left with the sole charge of the house and the little one, she was more worried and therefore more cross than she used to be. Poor little motherless baby! She wondered now how she could ever have been the woman who risked, not only her own future, but her child's, so recklessly. If these last years could

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but come over again, how different she would make them! Was there anything she could not bear better than this that had come upon her?

Yes; she was obliged to own to herself that the present was better than the recent past. To go back to Robert, even if he would take her, seemed impossible. There was no use in thinking of it, for he would not take her; but even if he would, she did not feel yet that she could return to that existence of blows and curses. Though she hated, with all her soul, the habit she had now broken, she believed Robert would have no faith in her amendment, but, drunken good-for-nothing as he was himself becoming, would treat her worse and worse. Even the Vicar had never suggested to her to go back to her life of misery. He had bidden her keep the purity of her marriage sacred, but he had made her feel that while she did so he had nothing more to demand of her for the present. He would advise and help her, she was certain, in any way of living decently; would he help her to regain her child?

All her thoughts came back to this central one. She had walked a little way farther along the lane and then back, keeping, as she returned, on the farther side from the cottages, and it was quite dark when she came into the garden, where Bell sat smoking his long pipe.

"Been for a walk?" he said cheerfully. "That's right, my lass—you're getting hearty at last, ar'n't you?"

"I'm well enough," she answered quietly; "but I'm tired to-night. I've been most of the way to the Farm."

"Silly wench! What did you go there for?"

"Yes—I'm silly; I went for nothing, but I heard some news. I heard that my Betty goes about the lanes by herself—and she but five years old! I'm going indoors, Tom—I'm tired."

She went in, and he looked after her wistfully. Goody Till was getting supper ready by the light of a "dip," which left most of the house in shadow. Through the shadow Molly passed, and went up the steep stairs to the little room under the eaves where she slept, and Bell sighed, for he felt that she was no nearer to him now than in the days when she had chosen Robert Clay for her husband and him only for a faithful friend.

CHAPTER VI.

BEFORE the expiration of Sally's month's warning a substitute was found to take her place at the farm; not a very promising substitute, but Clay had been right in thinking that no respectable girl of the neighbourhood would come to his house, and he had resisted the temptation to bring a woman from Oakhampton. So he finally engaged Widow Fox—a very decent but very depressed person—and things went on without any absolute breakdown. Mrs. Fox had by some extraordinary chance been christened Theresa, and was known to her intimates as Terry, but since the loss of her husband she had stood so much on her dignity as his relict that most people called her Widow Fox out of respect. She was rather grey and grim, and had never in her life had anything to do with a child, but Betty "took to her" fairly well, and Clay believed her trustworthy. Betty, however, who had been well watched over during the last days of Sally's reign, soon found out that she was now more at liberty, and began again to wander wherever her fancy took her.

It was a busy time on the farm, and her father was rarely indoors except for the midday meal and rest. Widow Fox took care the child was visible then, but in the afternoon she almost always escaped, and on one afternoon, remembering her playfellows at the Half-way Cottages, she set off to visit them, her linen hood hanging down her back, and her fair curls tossed untidily round her little sunburnt face. She marched along full of her purpose until she saw the cottages before her. Then she set off to run, thinking to get to them quicker, and a big stone came in her way somehow, and she toppled over and lay in the dust for a second or two, mute with surprise, before she could begin to cry.

But having begun she cried lustily, frightened chiefly by seeing blood on her dirty little hand, and while she screamed somebody flew to her, and, picking her up, held her so closely and passionately embraced that she had to stop from mere suffocation.

"Hush, my darling," Molly said in the midst of a dozen kisses; "hush, my baby, it will be all right now." And with cries of "Mammy! Mammy!" Betty clung to her lost mother and kissed her in return.

They went hugging each other, and Molly's steps faltering in her joyful excitement, into the cottage, where the invalid Peggy gave them a welcome. Molly asked for water and bathed the bruised hand and bound it up; then she did all she could to improve the child's appearance, longing beyond words to take her away to Bell's cottage and her own loving care. But she knew that was impossible—all she could enjoy was but a glimpse of her darling. Peggy was not without a glimmering of sympathy. She made an errand into the adjoining cottage after a while, and left the two together. But when she came back they were gone. Molly had decided to run the risk of meeting her husband and to take the little one back quite to the gate of the Farm, and they had gone away together, not by the lane, but by a field path where they could sit down under a hedgerow and have a long talk.

Betty reached home that afternoon very tidy and very subdued. She had cried a good deal at parting, but went indoors submissively at last, with the promise that Mammy would come to her again. Poor mother! She did not cry while her baby was in sight, but many and bitter were the tears she shed that night.

Ten days after this meeting a rare and remarkable circumstance occurred. Robert Clay took it into his head to go to church on Sunday morning and to take Betty with him. It was years since he had been anything like a regular churchgoer, and since parting from his wife he had never entered the building. He had not forgotten the Vicar's reproofs, and for a time had bitterly resented them. As weeks passed on and he realised that life was by no means perfect without Molly, his anger died down. Nothing would have dragged from him a

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confession that he had done wrong, but he would have gone so far now as to allow that Parson might have been right from his point of view, and that perhaps if Molly had had Parson to talk to her sooner things might have been different. And the "little 'un" must not be brought up a heathen—that was quite clear to the man who did not mind living a heathen's life himself. So he resolved to take her to church, and Widow Fox washed and brushed and dressed her almost as carefully as her mother would have done, and they set off together.

Moor Edge has a fine old peal of bells, and their last sweet sounds were just dying away as Clay led his little daughter up the aisle and seated her in the pew where, until about a year after her birth, he and his wife had, Sunday after Sunday, sat side by side. By the time she was settled the "Parson's Bell" was ringing its quick silvery summons, the last loiterers hurried into church, and the blind organist began to play Purcell's "I was glad when they said unto me" as a voluntary. Clay straightened himself up and cast a defiant look round the congregation, for, to his surprise, he felt strangely uncomfortable and abashed under the fire of accusing eyes; and then, as his glance had made the circuit and was returning to the pews in front of his own, it was caught by a sight that made him draw a deep breath and wish he had never come into the place.

The Vicarage pew at Moor Edge occupied a corner just under the pulpit, and as it had happened for many years past that there was no Vicar's wife, it had been, and still was, occupied by the Vicarage servants. It was a square pew, with a table in the middle, and in the two corners nearest the door sat an old man and a young maid-servant. In the third corner, nearest the pulpit, sat the housekeeper, a white-haired, handsome old woman; and in the fourth, very plainly dressed in black, and with her eyes bent down on the Prayer-book she held, was Molly. Molly! It was strange that he had never thought of this. According to his ideas he himself had remained respectable—his wife had been dismissed into the outer darkness of a world where she was nobody, a creature without rights or duties, except such duty as she might owe to the man who had bought her. He knew, of course, that she was still at Moor Edge; but that she should go to church and be sitting there in the Vicar's pew, in a more honourable place than the one he could have given her—this was bewildering!

The service began, as usual, with the morning hymn. Everybody knew it and everybody sang. Only Clay, standing there with his child beside him, staring at his wife, and too confused to remember anything, kept silence. One of the strangest things to him was that this Molly was not the one he had driven from him, but the one he had married eight years ago—older, and very pale, but certainly that Molly, with her smooth cheek and beautiful eyes. All the time the hymn went on (and there were many verses sung) he kept staring, and when the music ceased, and the Vicar began to read the Confession, it seemed unreasonable to him that he should be obliged to plunge into the enclosure of the high pew and interrupt his examination.

So far, Betty, though perched on a wooden bench, had not been able to see more than the gallery and the top of the pulpit, and these had sufficiently amused her. But when next the congregation stood up she climbed on to the seat, and, grasping her father's shoulder, joyfully inspected her surroundings. Some children she knew and a crying baby occupied her nearly all through the *Venite*, but at last, as Clay had begun to expect, she turned her face towards the Vicar's pew. Suddenly her eyes lighted up—before her father could interfere she clapped her hands together wildly with a cry of "Mammy; oh, Mammy!" that sounded from one end of the church to the other.

He lifted her down hastily, and deposited her on the floor, but even as he did so he met his wife's eyes. She had turned at the child's cry, and stood quivering, ready to run to her, only restrained by the place and time. And, not meaning it, she looked at her husband for one second with a strong appeal in her gaze—just for one second—then she sank down in her corner and Betty was hidden from her, and the moment of emotion was over.

The service went on without further interruption. Clay managed to quiet the child, and did not allow her again to mount high enough to see her mother. In the time of the sermon she fell asleep on his knee, and that so profoundly that he was able to carry her from the church and well upon the road home before she awoke.

That night after she was in bed she had a long and almost unconquerable fit of crying. It being Sunday, and also because he had been much more uneasy in his mind that day than he could account for, Clay was at home and quite sober. He could not bear to hear the child in distress, and went upstairs to try to comfort her; but she would only say, "I want Mammy!" over and over again, and he had to leave her to Widow Fox, who unblushingly promised that Mammy would come in the morning. He went back to his farm accounts, which he had thought this a good opportunity for making up, but even the very primitive system of marks and tallies was more complicated than he could manage. The dairy scores were no business of his, naturally—Molly ought to have been there to look after them. She had neglected them and everything else for the last year or two, and many losses might have been fairly enough laid to her charge; but he remembered to-night chiefly the good days when she had looked well to the ways of her household, and even he had been different from what he was now.

He spent a miserable evening. After the ale that came with his supper he felt a little more contented than before, but he still thought himself a most unlucky and a very ill-used man. "What did she want?" he said to himself. "Hadn't she everything a woman could wish for? It was all that cursed drink." Not the faintest whisper so far suggested to him that his drink had been the excuse for hers. No; a man was one thing and a woman another. But to-night he might have gone so far, perhaps, as to say that if she were really cured of her evil habits it might have been possible for him to forgive her now that she had

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been punished. But then—Bell? No; there was no undoing what had been done.

Next day all was as usual. It is quite true that the sight of his wife, so purified from the degradation of these recent years, had stirred the heavy depths of the farmer's mind, but in the press of harvesting work which was now beginning he had very little time for thought. From dawn till dusk he was afoot, working or overseering, and little Betty was less looked after than ever.

One thing, however, he did, hardly knowing why. On each of the following Sundays, though the week's hard work might have been a good excuse for staying at home, he went to church, but without Betty. She demanded, with many tears, to be taken to see Mammy, but he resisted. Each Sunday he stood and looked across the intervening space at the woman who ought to have been beside him, and each Sunday she seemed to him less the Molly of their evil days and more the Molly he had loved and wedded.

CHAPTER VII.

BREAKFAST was over at the Farm, and Robert Clay was standing outside the door watching the last milk-pails put out into the air after their morning washing. The dairymaid came and went, hurrying over her work, and in the "house-place" Widow Fox was also bustling about in unusual liveliness.

On a wicket that led from the stone-paved yard into the farmyard Betty had climbed, and was swinging to and fro, amusing herself by watching the calves of various ages that at present occupied the straw-covered space. She would have liked to go in among them, but dared not with her father standing by; she knew very well that he would by-and-by be gone, for he had on his best coat, and as soon as he should be out of sight she meant to escape from Widow Fox and have a wander all by herself. She meant to go along the lane to the cottages, where she always enjoyed herself so much, and perhaps farther still into the world towards the church where she had seen Mammy. It is true that she could not have expressed all these intentions in words, but they were in her little brain clearly enough for all that.

She had to wait a long time, however. Though Clay had put on his best coat and hat directly after breakfast, he meant to see all the work about the place done up—"fettled"—before he went away. Otherwise, as he knew very well, it would be slurred over, and the cowman and stable-boy would be off to the wake for the rest of the day. On Church Green there were already drinking and dancing booths put up, and drums and trumpets were making hideous noises as they invited merry-makers; but the Farm was beyond reach of these attractive sounds, and it was only in imagination that Jerry and Dick and Dolly could hear and be influenced. Widow Fox was not going to the wake—her amusements were of a less noisy kind, and she was going to have two neighbours of about her own age to visit her. For their entertainment cake and apple-pie had to be made, and this was why she was busy.

About nine o'clock, Clay, having seen cows and calves, horses and pigs, properly looked after, having watched Dolly turn the key of the dairy and depart, and having nothing else to keep him at home, called Betty away from her favourite hen-coop, where she was dropping crumbs to the fowls shut up for fattening, and led her indoors.

"Now, be a good wench," he said to her, "and play with your dolly. Don't you go running out and getting dirty, and you shall have a fine lot of gingerbread to-morrow. I'll bring you a king and queen all over gold from the wake."

It was a most unlucky promise. Betty took up her doll and sat down in the most inconvenient place to nurse it, but her thoughts went straight off after her father. He washed his hands in an iron bowl, dried them on a towel hanging on the kitchen door, smoothed down his hair with a pocket comb, and departed, and Betty sat and wondered what was meant by the wake of which she had heard a great deal lately, and by what means her father was going to get her a king and queen. She wondered so much that she sat perfectly still for some time, absorbed in her thoughts. Then Widow Fox nearly tumbled over her, and she was made to take herself and her stool out of the way. She moved into a corner, and still wondered; but presently the moment came when thought must needs result in action. Choosing a time when the old woman had left the kitchen, she jumped up, and, still clasping her doll in her arms, ran straight out of the house, through the yard, and down the cart-track into the lane.

She was out of breath by that time, so she sat down on the grass. It was a warm, soft, autumn day; plenty of unripe blackberries hung on the hedges, but they were above Betty's reach, and so were the graceful masses of traveller's joy; but she did not want to gather anything. There were two objects before her, and both lay far onwards in the mysterious world beyond the Half-way Cottages—her mother and the gingerbread king and queen. She wanted them, and she expected to find them, but not in a hurry. She sat a long time, as she thought, on the soft grass without the smallest compunction as to her disobedience, or any fear of being caught; then she got up leisurely and went on her way.

Meanwhile, the village had got fairly into the tide of its day's entertainment. Church Green was alive with women and young folks; but whereas on the day of the fair Church Green was the centre of everything, on the day of the wake there had been from time immemorial another attraction which drew the men and boys to the outskirts of the village. Just beyond where the scattered houses ended lay a triangular plot of grass bounded on one side by the high-road, on another by a stagnant pool bordered by a railing, on the third by a lane—this was the bull-ring, and the scene for one day in each year of the wildest crowding and excitement. It was to the bull-ring that Robert Clay had gone, and with special reason, for the fine young bull which was to be baited had been reared on his farm, and was still in part his property. It had been for some days in the keeping of its other owner, Tomkinson the butcher, but Clay

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felt his own credit concerned in its fitness to show sport to the assembled neighbourhood.

When he arrived at the ring the bull was not yet visible, but the strong stake, deeply planted in the ground, the ring, and chain were all ready, and a number of men, many of whom held dogs in leashes, were standing about the open space. He was greeted on all sides; for though there had been a strong feeling of disapproval of his conduct about in the parish, and though he had been made to understand, even by some of those present, that he had disgraced himself, yet this was not the time when he could be easily or conveniently snubbed. He thoroughly examined the ring and chain, and then took his place at a little distance from the post, standing on the side farthest from the village, and leaving room for those whose dogs were to attack the bull to pass in front of him.

The church clock was striking eleven as a party of boys rushing along the road proclaimed the approach of the animal which was to be the victim of the day's pleasure. The butcher, blue-smocked and top-booted, came next, and then two of his sons, young men hardly inferior to Clay himself in height and strength, leading the bull. He was blindfolded and covered with a cloth, but he was already so alarmed and excited by the strange sounds all about him, that he darted from side to side flinging up his head, and almost succeeded in freeing himself from both his mufflings and his halter. As he was brought to the edge of the green he suddenly stopped, planting his feet firmly on the ground, and uttered so fearful a bellow that dogs and men alike shrank back from his neighbourhood.

Nevertheless, neither respect for his courage and beauty, nor pity for his certain tortures, could move a single spectator. Amidst a crowd that surged up again as closely as their own safety would allow, he was brought to the stake and fastened to the ring and chain prepared for the purpose, and then the sport began. One after another, dogs of the strongest and fiercest kinds were let loose against the chained creature; now and then one was tossed back bleeding or even dead; now and then a small terrier rushed into the fight and clung for a moment to the bull, adding a sharp wound to those already given; now and then a man would step forward with an ox-goad, if the excitement seemed to be relaxing; all was wild uproar; never had a bull given better sport at Moor Edge.

And meantime, far away on the other side of the village, little Betty was pursuing her pilgrimage. She arrived at Half-way Cottages and found them empty and shut up, but it was not so great a disappointment as it might have been, because she had already made up her mind that both Mammy and gingerbread were to be sought farther on. She only rested a little while, therefore, sitting on the step of the farthest cottage door, and then marched seriously and steadily onwards towards the village.

The lane was fully a mile in length, and the child began to grow tired and to feel lonely. After this state of things had gone on for some time, and she had bravely tried to keep her heart up by thoughts of gingerbread, she suddenly began to cry. She sobbed "Mammy!" at intervals in a deplorable way, but she still kept on walking, getting slower and slower, and wondering why somebody did not come to take care of her.

She was almost at the very end of her courage when the lane suddenly widened before her, and she found herself at the place where it was swallowed up in the high-road. A very little way ahead on her right was the church spire, which she could see from various other places better known to her, and between her and it were cottages, gardens, a green space full of beautiful erections, with pictures and flags and much music, and beyond that a pretty little white house standing high. She stopped crying—curiosity got the better of fear and fatigue; this must be the land of gilt kings and queens—and she made a little run forward. But then as she came nearer she saw crowds of strange faces, and shyness took possession of her. She went on, but she kept to the farther side of the road, glancing at the booths and merry-go-rounds and the conjurer and cheapjack in a sidelong way, made up pretty equally of fear and desire.

Nobody paid any attention to her. There were crowds of children about, though those as young as Betty were generally clinging to the skirts of their elders, and everybody was engaged in pursuit of amusement. At the white cottage (almost alone in the village) there was no change from the ordinary quiet. Bell, in spite of his wooden leg, was mounted on a sort of step-ladder, gathering pears from his last tree, and Molly, in her usual place by the hearth, was keeping an eye upon the dinner cooking on the fire while she knitted a long grey stocking. She was thinking of her little Betty, wondering whether on this day, when her husband was sure to be out amusing himself, she might not venture to the very doors of her old home and try to find her child. She knew the present state of things could not go on much longer, she felt it for herself, and the Vicar had told her so. Her health was now re-established; her evil habit had been torn from her and would never tempt her again. She must go out into the world and work for her living—how, she did not yet know. She had resolved to tell Bell of her plans that very night, but she hoped to see the Vicar first, and to take final counsel with him as to what she could best do.

The Vicar himself was spending a comfortless morning. There were other parishioners besides Mary Clay who were sick or sad, and for whom he had kind and anxious thoughts, though none, perhaps, for whom there seemed such desperate need of some intervention of help. But to-day it was the people at the wake—especially the bull-baiters—who most disturbed him. He had tried all that remonstrance could do to hinder the cruel and brutalising sport, but he had been laughed at. "Parsons and women," he had been told, "can't bear the sight of blood, but the men have always had their bull and always will," and all he could do was to say to himself, "Next year perhaps, or the year after," and to wait.

He sat in his book-room till nearly twelve o'clock, and then found his hat and strolled out. He took care to have some pennies with him, and when he got out on Church Green among the stalls where marbles, toffee, and gingerbread were for sale,

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these pennies quickly made their way from his pocket to the fingers of the smallest urchins. They all knew him, whatever their elders might do, and stood about him with sticky hands and rosy faces, answering his questions and chuckling delightedly over his gifts. He disengaged himself from the throng by-and-by, and walked slowly down the side of the green. He was approaching Bell's cottage, though still at a little distance, when he noticed a child going along the road below him. She was quite alone, a chubby little thing, better dressed than some of those he had left behind him, and as she went she dangled a wooden doll, head downwards. He did not recognise the child, but suddenly as he looked at her a thought struck him —if it *could* be little Betty, why was she here? and why alone? Did her mother know? No; for the little girl was wandering on; in a minute or two she would have passed the cottage, and there was no sign of Mrs. Clay. He quickened his steps, turned the corner of the cottage, and was quickly on the bit of grass in front of its garden gate, some five feet above the road. In the road, quite in the middle of it now, a solitary little figure, Betty was going along, looking up at the wonderful creatures in yew that decked the garden hedge.

All at once the air seemed to fill with a shrill outbreak of sound—shrieks and shouts and the noise of thundering footsteps on the hard road. From Church Green an answering shriek came, "The bull! the bull!" and every soul turned and fled as they best could. Blind and mad with rage and pain the bull had broken from its tormentors; with head down it came rushing along the road, and in its path, struck motionless with fear, stood little Betty.

At that moment Mary Clay, startled by the noise, came to the cottage door. Below her, in the road, she saw her child, half-a-dozen yards farther on the bull—half-a-dozen yards between Betty and a fearful death. She flung open the wicket—her place was down there, but some one passed before her. The Vicar had leaped from the grassy bank, snatched up the child and flung it to her feet and to her arms; and then there was darkness.

On the dusty high-road there was a great stain of blood, and a little to one side the Vicar lay, surrounded by his people. The bull had taken vengeance indeed in a ghastly manner. A doctor had been sent for and some simple effort made to staunch the bleeding, but everyone knew it was useless, and that the last drops of life were flowing quickly away. With his tanned face robbed of all its florid colour, and red, horror-stricken eyes, Robert Clay stood by the Vicar's feet; close by his side Molly knelt, holding her child in her arms. He was already faint, but entirely conscious, and he turned his head and smiled at little Betty's frightened face.

"Mrs. Clay," he said, "ask your husband to come to me."

She looked up, but her lips trembled and she could form no word. Robert came and placed himself beside her, the child being between them.

"See, now," Mr. Laurence said again, "you two cannot part if you would. Neither of you would part with Betty, neither of you can really part with the other. Mr. Clay, what are you going to do?"

The eyes of husband and wife met. Yes, he was right; nothing could really part them. Madness had come between them, but it was over.

"Molly," Clay said, "come back home. Happen you're better than me."

He held out his hand and she put hers into it. They could not do more "before folks." Little Betty got hold of the two hands and held them close together in her chubby fingers. The Vicar's face was full of content.

"'Those whom God hath joined together,'" he murmured, "'let not man put asunder.'"

It was just then that the doctor arrived, and the group had to break up for his approach. Clay took Betty in his arms, and the three stood back a little, waiting. They heard the Vicar say, "Don't try to move me, doctor, it is very nearly all over," and in a minute the doctor in turn drew back; there was nothing anyone could do even to delay the end. But though women were crying and men looking on with pain and regret on their faces, there was no sign in the Vicar's that this was otherwise than a happy moment for him.

His head lay back on a cushion—he was looking at the group brought together again after their long separation, and he spoke not to any of these rough country people, but as if he had a listener close at hand of his own class and mind.

"See," he said, "I was puzzled. I knew it must be done, and I could think of no way to do it, and the Master has cleared it all up."

Molly heard him, and her sobs broke out. She left her husband and knelt down in the dust, timidly taking the Vicar's hand in hers. He smiled at her and pressed her hand feebly, but just then a sound close to him, made by some one out of sight, reached his ear. It was a deep breath—almost a groan. He drew his hand gently from Molly and raised it above his head, holding it out to the unseen person.

"Is that you, Bell?" he said; "come where I can see you."

Bell came, and as Molly drew back he leaned on his stick and took the hand.

"Ah, sir," he said, "you've robbed me."

"No, for you were not the true owner. But because you are an honest man and love her well you will be glad to give her back."

He raised himself a little, and looked at the other with a bright smile. "You and I, Tom," he said, "are brothers, and our inheritance is—something better than our own will."

The last words, spoken slowly, were very faint. The parishioners of Moor Edge had heard their Vicar's farewell sermon.

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