

Fletcher Joseph Smith

Mr. Poskitt's Nightcaps. Stories of a Yorkshire Farmer



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Mr. Poskitt's Nightcaps

Stories of a Yorkshire Farmer

INTRODUCTION

Everyone who has had the pleasure of Mr. Poskitt's acquaintance knows that that estimable Yorkshireman is not only the cheeriest of hosts, but the best of companions. Those of us who have known the Poskitt High Tea (a much more enjoyable meal than a late dinner) know what follows the consumption of Mrs. Poskitt's tender chickens and her home-fed hams. The parlour fire is stirred into a blaze; the hearth is swept clean; the curtains are drawn; the decanters, the cigars, and the quaint old leaden tobacco-box appear beneath the shaded lamp, and Mr. Poskitt bids his guests to cheer up, to help themselves, and to feel heartily welcome. And when those guests have their glasses at their elbows, their cigars and pipes between their lips, and their legs stretched in comfort, Mr. Poskitt has his story to tell. Few men know the countryside and its people, with their joys, their sorrows, their humours better than he; few people there can surely be who would not enjoy hearing him tell of the big and little dramas of life which he has watched, with a shrewd and

sympathetic eye, during his seventy years of work and play, of cloud and sunshine. In some of these Nightcap stories (so termed by their hearers because Mr. Poskitt insists on telling them as preparatory to his own early retirement, which is never later than ten o'clock) he is sometimes humorous and sometimes tragic. I trust the re-telling of them may give some pleasure to folk who must imagine for themselves the cheery glow of Mr. Poskitt's hearth.

J. S. FLETCHER.

London, May 1910.

CHAPTER I

THE GUARDIAN OF HIGH ELMS FARM

In the cold dreariness of that February morning the whole glaze looked chilly and repellent in the extreme. There, on a little knoll, which by comparison assumed almost hill-like proportions amongst the low level of the meadows and corn-lands at its feet, stood the farmstead – a rambling mass of rough grey walls and red roofs; house, barns, stables, granary, and byres occurring here and there without evident plan or arrangement. Two or three great elm-trees, now leafless, and black with winter moisture, rose high above the chimneys and gables like sentinels inclined to sleep at their posts; above their topmost branches half-a-score of rooks flapped lazy wings against the dull grey of the sky; their occasional disconsolate notes added to the melancholy of the scene. And yet to an experienced eye, versed in the craft of the land, there was everything to promise well in the outward aspect of High Elms Farm. The house, if very old, was in good repair, and so were the buildings; the land was of excellent quality. But it only needed one glance to see that the house had not been tenanted for some time; its windows gave an instant impression that neither lamp-light nor fire-light had gleamed through them of late, and to enter the great stone-paved kitchen

was to experience the feeling of stepping into a vault. That feeling of dead emptiness was in all the outbuildings, too – the stables, the granary, the byres were lifeless, void; ghostliness of a strange sort seemed to abide in their silence. And beneath the curling mists which lay over the good acres of corn-land, weeds were flourishing instead of growing crops.

On that February morning two young men, so much alike that no one could mistake them for anything else than what they were – twin-brothers – stood at the stone porch of the house, staring at each other with mutually questioning eyes. They were tall, finely built, sturdy fellows of apparently twenty-six years of age, fair of hair, blue of eye, ruddy of cheek, with square, resolute jaws and an air of determination which promised well for their success in life. Closely alike in their looks, they carried their similarity to their dress. Each wore a shooting-coat of somewhat loud pattern; each sported a fancy waistcoat with gilt buttons; each wore natty riding-breeches of whipcord, which terminated in Newmarket gaiters of light fawn colour. Each wore his billycock hat inclined a little to the left side; each had a bit of partridge's feather stuck in his hatband. And at this moment each was nibbling at a straw.

"This is a queer place, Simpson," said one of these young men after a silence which had lasted for several minutes. "A real queer place!"

"It is, Isaac!" assented the other. "It is, my lad. The queerest place ever I set eyes on. You couldn't say a truer word."

Isaac Greaves nibbled more busily at his straw. He lifted the

rakish-looking billycock and scratched his head.

"What's the matter with it?" he said. "What's up with it, like? It's a good house; they're good buildings, if they are old-fashioned; it's good land."

"Aye – sadly neglected," said his brother. "Fine crops of thistles."

"That could be put right," said Isaac. "Matter of work and patience that – the main thing is, it's good land. And – why can't they let it?"

Simpson Greaves shook his head. He, too, nibbled more zealously at his straw.

"There's something against it, evidently," he said. "Those two last tenants they had wouldn't stop – cleared out quick, both of 'em. For why, I don't know."

Isaac threw away his straw and drew a cigar from his waistcoat pocket. He lighted it and took two or three deliberate puffs before he spoke.

"Well," he said at last, "there's no doubt about it, Simpson – if it's to be had at the rent we've heard of it's such a bargain as no man in his senses should miss. I'm in for it, if you are. It's better land, it's a better house, they're better buildings than what we've got at present, and we're paying more than twice as much. And, of course, our time's up come Lady Day. Look here – we've got the lawyer's directions; let's ride on to Sicaster and see him and hear what he's got to say."

"Come on, then," assented Simpson. "It's only another five

miles or so."

There were two stout cobs attached by their bridles to the garden gate, and on them the brothers soon rode into the nearest market-town. With no more delay than was necessitated by stabling the cobs and drinking a glass of ale at the Golden Lion, they presented themselves at the office of the solicitor who acted as agent for the estate on which High Elms Farm was situate, and in due course were conducted to his presence.

"I'll leave the talking to you, Isaac," whispered Simpson, who was more reserved than his twin-brother. "Find out all you can."

Isaac was nothing loath – he knew his powers. He plunged straight into the matter as soon as he and Simpson confronted an elderly man, who eyed them with interest.

"Morning, sir," said Isaac. "Our name is Greaves, Isaac and Simpson Greaves, brothers. We're just giving up a farm over Woodbarrow way yonder, and we're on the look-out for another. We heard at Cornchester market that you've a farm to let very cheap – High Elms Farm – so we thought we'd like to have a look at it and see you about it."

The solicitor looked steadily at both brothers, one after the other. Then he cleared his throat with a non-committal sort of cough.

"Yes," he said, "yes. Have you been over the place, Mr. Greaves?"

"We've been over every bit of it this morning," replied Isaac.

"Well?" said the solicitor.

"It's good land – badly neglected," said Isaac.

"Very badly neglected," added Simpson.

"That, of course, is why you're asking such a low rent for it," suggested Isaac, with a shrewd glance at the man of law.

The man of law consulted his delicately polished finger-nails. He suddenly looked at Isaac with a frank smile.

"The fact of the case is that I can't let it," he said. "It's been tenantless four years now. Two men have had it – one stopped a month, the other a fortnight. Each said he'd rather pay a couple of years' rent to get out than stop there any longer. So – there you are!"

The twin-brothers looked at each other. Each shook his head.

"That's a queer 'un, Isaac!" said Simpson.

"It is a queer 'un, Simpson!" responded Isaac with added emphasis. He turned to the solicitor again. "And pray what's the reason, sir?" he inquired.

The solicitor smiled – not too cheerfully – and spread out his hands.

"They say the place is – haunted," he answered.

"Haunted?" repeated Isaac. "What – ghosts, eh? Well, I don't think a few ghosts more or less would make much difference to us, Simpson, my lad – what?"

"Not that I know of," answered Simpson, stolidly.

The solicitor looked from one to the other and smiled.

"Well, I've told you what happened," he said. "Those other two men were neither of them any more likely to be impressed

by ghosts than you seem to be, but I can tell you that I've seen both of them labouring under such intense fear that they were on the very verge of breaking down. That's all."

Two pairs of blue eyes fixed themselves on the man of law's face and grew wider and wider; two mouths gradually opened.

"I'll just tell you about it," said the solicitor, who was plainly not averse to playing the part of narrator, "and then, when you've heard everything, you can decide for yourselves whether you care to go further into the matter or not. Now, until just over four years ago High Elms Farm was tenanted by an old man named Josiah Maidment, who'd been there for quite thirty years. He was a queer, eccentric old chap, who had never married, and who lived almost by himself. He never had a housekeeper, nor a female servant in the house – whatever he needed doing was done for him by the woman at the neighbouring cottage."

"That's where we got the keys of the house," said Isaac.

"Just so. Well," continued the solicitor, "a little more than four years ago old Maidment suddenly disappeared. He went out of the house one morning, dressed in his second-best suit, as if he was going to market – and he was never seen again. Never seen – never heard of! Nor could we find any relation of his. He had money in the bank, and he had securities there which proved him a well-to-do man. We advertised and did everything we could, but all to no purpose. We kept things going for a while; then the stock was sold, and very soon we let the farm to a new tenant. That's just three years since. And that was when all the trouble

began."

"With the ghosts?" said Simpson.

"Well, with something," said the solicitor, smiling. "The new tenant had no sooner got his stock in than he became aware that there was something wrong. The very first night he was there his sheep-dog, an animal which he'd had for years, disappeared. They thought it had gone back to the old home, but it hadn't – it had just disappeared. Then the horses in the stables began to make such noises at night that it was impossible to sleep. If you went to them you found them shivering with fright. Just the same with the cows. As for the sheep, they were always found in the morning huddled together in a corner of whatever field they were in. In short, the whole place was panic-stricken. But by what? Nobody ever saw anything. The farmer and his men watched for nights, without effect. Yet as soon as ever their backs were turned the thing began. And at the end of a month the men went – and were thankful to go."

The twin-brothers were now thoroughly fascinated. Their eyes invited more.

"The second man came, after an interval," continued the solicitor. "Just the same things happened to him. His sheep-dog disappeared – his horses, cattle, and sheep were frightened out of their lives. And then came worse. This man was a young married man who had a wife and one child. The child was a bright, lively boy of about five. One afternoon its mother was busy, and had let it go into the orchard to play under the apple-trees. As it was

a long time in coming in she went to seek it. She found it – yes, but how do you think she found it? Mad! Utterly mad! that poor child had lost its reason – through fright. And so that tenant went. There, gentlemen, is the story of High Elms Farm. It's queer, but it's true."

Isaac Greaves drew a long breath, stared hard at his brother, and shook his head.

"Well, of all the things I ever did hear tell of!" he said. "How might you account for it, now, sir?"

The solicitor spread out his hands.

"Account for it!" he exclaimed. "My good sir, ask me to account for all or any of the mysteries which baffle human knowledge! Nobody can account for it. All I know is what happened to these men. I tell you they were frightened – frightened in the worst way."

"I expect everybody hereabouts knows this story?" asked Isaac.

"You may be sure they do, or the farm would have been taken long since at this reduced rental," answered the solicitor. "There's nobody hereabouts would take it – not they!"

Isaac looked at Simpson. They regarded each other for a full moment in silence; then Isaac turned to the solicitor.

"You're asking ten shillings an acre?" he said.

"I should be glad to get a tenant at that," answered the man of law wearily.

"Make it eight, and we'll take it," said Isaac. "And we'll start

on to clearing things up at once. Ghosts, sir, don't bother me and Simpson much – we'll take our chance. But – " and there Isaac branched off into technical details about the conditions of tenancy, which showed the solicitor that he had a shrewd man to deal with.

On Lady Day the twin-brothers brought their live stock to High Elms Farm, and by nightfall everything was in place. The house had already received their furniture, and had been made spick and span by their housekeeper and a strapping maid. There was nothing cold and cheerless about it now.

"We might have been settled down for a year or two, Isaac," said Simpson as the two brothers sat smoking in the parlour that night. "Everything's in order."

"Aye, and the next thing's to finish getting the land in order," said Isaac. "We're not going to shift out of here as quickly as those other chaps did, Simpson, my lad – ghosts or no ghosts."

"I wonder if we shall hear or see anything?" said Simpson, meditatively.

Isaac glanced at a couple of up-to-date fowling-pieces which hung over the mantel-piece.

He wagged his head in a self-assured and threatening manner.

"If I see any ghosts," he said, "I'll let daylight through 'em. It'll be a fine ghost that can stand a charge of Number 4."

"Aye," said Simpson, "but then, according to what some folk say – "

He paused, rubbing his chin, and his brother stared at him

with the suspicion of a doubt in his mind.

"Well?" said Isaac, impatiently. "Well?"

"According to some folk," said Simpson, "there's ghosts as you can't see. You can only feel 'em."

Isaac mixed himself a drink and lighted a cigar. He plunged his hands deep in the pockets of his riding-breeches, and facing his brother, stared hard at him.

"I believe you're afraid, Sim!" he said.

Simpson stared just as hard back.

"Well, then, I'm not!" he retorted. "I'm afraid of naught – that I can see and get at. All the same we both agreed that this was a queer place."

"Queer or no queer, here we are, my lad, at a ridiculous rental, and here we stop," said Isaac. "It'll take something that I've never heard of to shift us."

An hour later, it then being nine o'clock – the brothers took a lanthorn and, after their usual custom, went round the farm-buildings to see that everything was safe for the night. They were well-to-do young men, these two, and they had brought a quantity of valuable live stock with them. The stables, the folds, the byres, the cow-houses were all full; the pig-cotes were strained to their utmost capacity, for both Simpson and Isaac believed in pigs as a means of making money. Not for many a year had the old farmstead contained so much life.

They went from stable to stall, from fold to byre, from cote to granary – all was in order for the night. The horses turned

sleepy heads and looked round at the yellow light of the swinging lantern; the cows gazed at their owners with silky eyes; the young bullocks and heifers in the knee-deep straw of the folds stared lazily at the two inspectors. Over this bovine life, over the high roofs and quaint gables the deep blue of the night hung, pierced with the shafts of a thousand stars.

"All's right," said Isaac, as they finished up at the pigs. "By the bye, where did Trippett fasten up that new dog?"

"Back-yard, I told him," answered Simpson, laconically.

"Let's have a look at him," said Isaac.

He led the way round to a cobble-paved yard at the rear of the house, where in a corner near the back-kitchen door stood a brick kennel. Out of this, at the sound of their footsteps, came a diminutive collie, who, seeing them, got down on his belly and did obeisance after his fashion. Isaac considered him attentively.

"I never did see such dogs as Trippett contrives to get hold of, Simpson," he said, half peevishly. "Why can't he get something decent to look at?"

"He says this is a rare good one with sheep, anyway," said Simpson.

"He says that about all of 'em," said Isaac. "I'll try him myself to-morrow. Come on – I see they've given him something to eat."

The dog, still grovelling, whined and trembled. He came the length of his chain towards the two brothers, wriggling ridiculously, wagging his tail, gazing slavishly out of his brown eyes.

"Doesn't look much of a plucked one," commented Isaac. "I expect he's another of Trippett's failures. Come on, Sim."

They went off round the house, and the new dog, whom the shepherd had that day purchased from a very particular friend for a sovereign, shivered and whimpered as the light disappeared. Then he retreated into his kennel and curled up ... listening as a frightened child listens in a lonely room.

The two brothers went round the house by the outer paddock. All about them lay the land, silent as the sea is when no wind stirs. There was not a sound to be heard, not a light to be seen save in their own windows. They stood for a moment under the great black-blue, star-pierced dome.

"It's a quietish spot this, Sim, at night," said Isaac, in a whisper which was quite involuntary. "I'd no idea – "

Crash went the lanthorn out of Simpson's hand – that hand, shaking, convulsive, gripped his brother's arm as if with fingers of steel.

"My God, Isaac, what's that! that – there!" he gasped.

Isaac felt himself shiver as he looked. Right in the darkness before him he saw what seemed to be two balls of vivid green fire – no, red fire, yellow fire, all sorts of fire, burning, coruscating, and ... fixed on him. And for a second he, like Simpson, stood spell-bound; then with a wild cry of "A gun, a gun!" he turned and dashed for the parlour, followed by his brother. But when they dashed back with their guns a moment later the eyes had gone. And from somewhere in the adjacent wood there suddenly

rose into the profound stillness of the night a strange cry, such as neither of them had ever heard before. It was a long, wailing cry as of something in infinite despair.

The brothers, breathing hard, went back into the house and shut the door. Inside the parlour, looking at each other, each saw the other's brow to be dripping with sweat; each, after one look, turned away from the other's eyes. And each, as by mutual instinct, poured out a glass of spirit and drank it off at a gulp.

"Isaac," said Simpson, "there is something!"

Isaac put his gun aside, shook himself, and tried to laugh.

"Pooh!" he said. "We're a couple of fools, Simpson. Happen it's because it's our first night here and we're feeling strange, and haven't forgotten what the lawyer told us. It was a fox."

"A fox hasn't eyes that size," said Simpson. "And, what about that cry? You never heard aught like that, Isaac, never! No more did I."

"An owl in the woods," said Isaac.

"You can't deceive me about owls," answered Simpson. "No, nor dogs, nor foxes, nor anything else that makes a noise at night in the country. Isaac, there is something!"

"Oh, confound it!" said Isaac. "You'll make me think you're as bad as the lawyer. Come on, let's go to bed."

And to bed they went, and nothing happening, slept. But very early next morning Isaac was awakened by loud knocking at his door. Then sounded the housekeeper's voice, agitated and frightened.

"Mr. Isaac, sir, Mr. Isaac, will you get up at once, sir!"

"What's the matter?" growled Isaac. "Is the place on fire?"

"That new dog, sir, that Trippett bought yesterday – oh, I do wish you'd come down quick, sir – we're that afraid!"

Isaac suddenly bounced out of bed, bundled on some clothes, and rushed out of his room. On the landing he met Simpson, similarly attired to himself, and very pale.

"I heard her," he said. "Come on!"

They ran down-stairs and through the kitchen to the little yard behind. There stood a group of frightened people – the shepherd, Trippett, a ploughboy or two, the housekeeper, the maid. In their midst, at their feet, lay the unfortunate little collie, dead. And they saw at one glance that his throat had been torn clean out.

Once inside the house again the brothers looked at each other for a long minute without speaking. They were both very pale and their eyes were queer and their hands shook. Simpson spoke first: his voice was unsteady.

"There is something, Isaac," he said, in a low voice. "There is – something!"

Isaac set his teeth and clenched his hands.

"I'll see it through, Simpson," he said. "I'll see it through."

"Aye, but what is it?" said Simpson.

"Wait," said Isaac.

Then began the same course of events which had signalized the short stay of their predecessors. The horses were frightened in their stables; the cattle were found huddled together and

panting in the folds; the sheep were driven off the land into the surrounding roads and woods. And the two brothers watched and watched – and saw nothing, not even the fiery eyes. Until that period of their existence neither Isaac nor Simpson Greaves had known what it was to come in touch with anything outside the purely material elements of life. Coming of a good sound stock which had been on the land and made money out of the land for generations, they had never done anything but manage their affairs, keep shrewd eyes on the markets, and sleep as comfortably as they ate largely. They were well-balanced; they were not cursed with over-much imagination; such things as nerves were unknown to them. But with their arrival at High Elms Farm matters began to alter. The perpetual fright amongst the horses and cattle at night, the cause of which they could not determine; the anxiety of never knowing what might occur at any moment; these things, conspiring with the inevitable loss of sleep, affected health and appetite. Simpson gave way first; he was a shade more susceptible to matters of this sort than his brother, and possibly not so strong physically. And Isaac noticed it and grew more incensed against this secret thing, and all the more so because he felt himself so impotent in respect to combating it.

One night matters came to a climax. In the very hush of midnight pandemonium broke out in the stables. The horses were heard screaming with fear; when the two brothers got to them they found that every beast had broken loose and that

they were fighting and struggling for life to force a way out – anywhere. They burst through the door which Isaac opened, knocking him down in their wild rush, leapt the low wall of the fold, and fled screaming into the darkness of the fields. Some were found wandering about the land in the morning; some were brought back from distant villages. But one and all refused, even to desperate resistance, to enter the stables again.

A few mornings after that Simpson came down to breakfast attired for travelling.

"Look here, Isaac," he said, "ask no questions, but trust me. I'm going away – about this business. I'll be back to-morrow night. Things can't go on like this."

Then he made a pretence of eating and went off, and Isaac heard nothing of him until the next afternoon, when he returned in company with a stranger, a tall, grizzled, soldier-like man, who brought with him a bloodhound in a leash. Over the evening meal the three men discussed matters – the stranger seemed mysteriously confident that he could solve the problem which had hitherto been beyond solution.

There was almost a full moon that night – at nine o'clock it was lighting all the land. The stranger took his bloodhound out into the paddock in front of the house and fastened it to a stake which Isaac had previously driven securely into the ground. At a word from him the great beast barked three times – the deep-chested notes went ringing and echoing into the silent woods. And from somewhere in the woods came in answer the long, despairing wail

which the brothers had heard more than once and could never trace.

"That's it!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

"Then whatever it is, it's coming," said the bloodhound's master. "Get ready for it."

He spoke a word to the hound, which immediately settled down trustfully at the foot of the stake. He and the brothers, each armed with a shot-gun, took up a position behind a row of shrubs on the edge of the garden, and waited.

Some minutes passed; then the bloodhound stirred and whined.

"Coming," said the visitor.

The bloodhound began to growl ominously – in the moonlight they saw him bristle.

"Close by," said his master.

In the coppice in front of them they heard the faintest rustling sound as of a body being trailed over dried leaves. Then —

"The eyes!" whispered Simpson. "Look – there!"

Out of the blackness of the coppice the two gleaming eyes which the brothers had seen before shone like malignant stars. They were stationary for a moment; then, as the bloodhound's growls grew fiercer and louder they moved forward, growing larger. And presently into the light of the moon emerged a great, grey, gaunt shape, pushing itself forward on its belly, until at last it lay fully exposed, its head between its paws, its baleful eyes fixed on the hound.

"Steady!" whispered the visitor. "It'll get up – it's wondering which side to go at him from. Wait till I give the word."

The grey thing's tail began to lash from side to side; its body began to quiver. Little by little it lifted itself from the ground and began to creep circle-wise towards the bloodhound, now tearing madly at his chain. The fierce eyes were turned slantwise; there was an ugly gleam of bared white fangs; the tread was that of a panther. Suddenly its back arched, its limbs seemed to gather themselves together.

"Now!"

The three guns rang out simultaneously, and the grey shape, already springing, jerked convulsively and fell in a heap close to the tethered hound. There it lay – still. Simpson Greaves fetched a lanthorn which he had kept in readiness within the house, and the three men went up to the dead animal and examined it. Till that moment they had felt uncertain as to what it really was that they had destroyed – they now found themselves looking at a great dog of uncertain breed, massive in size, more wolf than dog in appearance, with a wicked jaw and cruel fangs which snarled even in death. And one of them at least began to have some dim comprehension of the mystery.

The noise of the shooting had roused the other inmates of the house; they came running into the paddock to hear what had happened. There, too, came hurrying the woman from the neighbouring cottage who had cooked and tidied for Josiah Maidment in the old days. And gazing at the dead beast in

the light of the lanthorn she lifted up her hands with a sharp exclamation.

"Lord ha' mussy, if that there isn't Mr. Maidment's gre't dog!" she said. "It went away wi' him that very mornin' he disappeared."

"Why didn't you tell us Maidment had a dog?" growled Isaac. "I never heard of it."

"Why, mister, I'm sure I never thought of it," said the woman. "But he had, and that's it, as sure as I'm a Christian. It were the savagest beast ever you see – wouldn't let anybody go near the old gentleman. Where can it ha' been all this time?"

"That," said the bloodhound's master, "is just what we are going to find out."

He released the hound from its chain, and putting it in a leash, bade the brothers follow him. Then he set the hound on the dead animal's track – hound and men broke into the deep woods. There was no break in their course, no turning aside, no loss of scent. The baying of the usurper had been instantly answered by the former guardian of High Elms Farm. Through thick undergrowth, by scarcely passable paths, beneath thickets and bushes, the three men, led by the straining hound, pushed on until they came to a deep valley in the woods, where a limestone crag jutted out from beneath overhanging trees. Here, behind a bramble-brake, which concealed it from any one in the valley, the hound stopped at a hole just large enough to admit a fully-grown man. By the light of the lanthorn which Simpson had brought

with him they saw the footprints of a dog on the loose soil.

"There's a cave in there," said the bloodhound's master. "Give me the light – I'm going in."

"So shall I, then," said Isaac, stoutly.

"And I," said Simpson.

The tunnel leading into the cave was not more than a few feet in length; they were quickly able to stand upright and to throw the light around them. And with a mutual fear they gripped each other's arms, for there huddled on the floor lay the body of an old, grey-headed man, who had evidently been stricken with death as he was counting over the secret hoard of which he had made this lonely place the receptacle.

"We will give that poor brute a fitting burial," said the bloodhound's master, as they went back to the farmstead. "He was a primitive savage in his ways, but a rare upholder of what he felt to be his rights. Bury him under the big elm-tree."

CHAPTER II

A STRANGER IN ARCADY

Where the animal which subsequently became so famous in the village to whose sober quietude it brought an unexpected breath of romance first came from no one ever knew. Its coming was as mysterious as the falling of rain or growing of corn in the night; it must, indeed, have arrived in the night, for it was certainly a part and parcel of Little St. Peter's when Little St. Peter's awoke one morning. Those early birds who were out and about before the gossamers on the hedgerows had felt the first kiss of the autumn sun were aware of the presence of a remarkably lean pig, who was exploring the one street of the village with inquisitive nose, questioning eyes, and flapping ears. It went from one side of the street to another, and it was obviously on the look-out for whatever might come in its way in the shape of food. There was an oak near the entrance to the churchyard; the stranger paused beneath it as long as there was an acorn to be found amongst the fallen leaves. Farther along, there was a crab-apple-tree in the parson's hedge, the fruit of which was too bitter for even the most hardened boy of the village; it stopped there to devour the fallen sournesses which lay in the shining grass. But always it was going on, searching and inquiring, and its eyes grew hungrier as its swinging gait increased in speed. And coming at

last to a gap in the fence of Widow Grooby's garden, it made its way through and set to work on the lone woman's potatoes.

It was an hour later that the marauder was driven out of this harbour of refuge, bearing upon its lean body the marks of the switch with which Widow Grooby had chased it forth, but within its ribs the comfortable consciousness of a hearty meal. When it had uttered its final protest against the switch, it went along the street again, furtive and friendless, but this time with the more leisurely pace of the thing that has breakfasted. Widow Grooby gazed after it with an irate countenance.

"I could like to know whose gre't hungry beast that there is!" she remarked to a neighbour who had been attracted to her cottage door by the pig's lamentations as he quitted the scene of his misdeeds. "It's been all over my garden and etten half-a-row o' my best potatoes, drat it. And it couldn't have done that, Julia Green, if your Johnny hadn't made that gap in my fence when I ran him out t'other night for being at my winter apples, no it couldn't! I think your William might ha' mended that gap before now – that's what I think."

"Our William's summat else to do than mend gaps," said Mrs. Green sullenly. "And the gap were there before our Johnny came through it. And it's none our pig anyway, for ours is in its sty at this here present moment, a-eating its breakfast, so there!"

The styless and proper-breakfastless pig, unconscious of this discussion and of its possibilities of development into a good, old-fashioned, neighbourly quarrel, went farther along the village

street, still prospecting. There were people about now, men and women, and the door of the Fox-and-Fiddle had been thrown open, and one or two habitués stood within the sanded hall, taking their accustomed morning glass. The pig passed by, and as he passed turned an inquisitive nose towards the scent of stale ale and tobacco. He went forward, and as he went, one man put his head out of the door after him.

"Whose pig's that there?" he said, scratching his ear. "I don't rek'lect seein' that pig before, nowhere."

Another man, standing at the bar, strode to the door and looked forth at the stranger. He was a curious-looking individual, very porcine of appearance, very red and greasy of face and hand, and as bald as man could be. He wore a blue linen apron over his clothes, and from his side a formidable steel dangled from a leather belt. He was, in short, the butcher and pig-killer of the village, and had a professional interest in pigs of all classes. And he surveyed the wandering pig with a keen eye, shook his head, and went back to his ale. He knew every pig in Little St. Peter's – this was a stray-away from somewhere else.

"That's none of ours," he said, with a sniff of disdain. "Jack Longbottom's pig's the only one in Peter's that's in a badly way, and it's a stone heavier nor what that pig is."

"It'll be a poorish pig, then!" remarked the other man. "But Jack were never much of a hand at pig-feeding."

The ownerless pig continued his explorations. He went up a by-lane or two, looked in at the gates of a farmstead here and

a farmstead there, but always returned to the street unsatisfied. He managed to get a light lunch off a bowl of potato peelings which a woman threw into the road as he passed, but he was still hungry, and had visions of a trough, liberally furnished with pig-meal. And at noon, being famished, and remembering the gap in Widow Grooby's garden fence, he went recklessly back to it, and finding that William Green had not yet repaired it, pushed his way through and once more entered on work of a destructive nature.

This time Widow Grooby on discovering him made no personal effort to dislodge the intruder. She was doing a day's starching and ironing, being by profession a laundrywoman, and she and her assistant, a young woman from a few doors away, were as throng, said Mrs. Grooby, as Throp's wife, and were not to be interrupted by anything or anybody.

"Blest if that there dratted pig isn't in my garden agen!" exclaimed Widow Grooby. "That's the second time this morning, and now it's at them carrots. Howsumever, it's not a woman's place to take up stray cattle – Martha Jane, slip round to James Burton's, the pinder's, and tell him there's a strange pig on my premises, and I'll thank him to come and take it out at once and put it in the pinfold, which is its lawful place. Them as it belongs to can come and pay for it – and then I'll talk to 'em about paying me for the damage it's done."

The pinder, interrupted at his dinner, came slowly and unwillingly to perform his duty. It was no easy thing to drive a

stray pig into the village pound; stray horses, donkeys, and cattle were not so difficult to manage, but a pig was a different thing.

"Whose pig is it?" he inquired surlily, as he followed Martha Jane and munched his last mouthfuls. "If it be that rampagious rorp-scorp o' Green's, why don't they fetch it out theirselves?"

"Then it isn't," answered Martha Jane. "It's an animal as comes from nowhere, and you've to put it in the pinfold this minute, Mrs. Grooby says."

"Aw, indeed!" remarked the pinder. "An' I wonder how she'd like breaking off her dinner to put pigs in pound. Howsumever —"

There were boys and girls coming from school just then, and Mr. Burton enlisted their services in driving the stray pig out of the widow's garden and conducting it to the place of incarceration. Pig-like, as soon as it began to be chivied it showed a powerful inclination to go anywhere but where it was wanted to go. In a few moments the quiet street was riotous with noise and commotion.

The pinfold lay in the shadow of the old lych-gate which gave admittance to the churchyard, the spreading yew-trees, and the ancient church itself. Like all the rest of the things about it, it was grey and time-worn, and redolent of a long-dead past. A square enclosure of grey, lichen-covered walls, against one of which stood the village stocks, against another the mounting-steps from which many a fine old squire and sprightly damsel had taken saddle to ride homeward after church, its interior, now

rarely used, was a mass of docks and nettles; its door was green and mouldy, and would scarce have withstood a couple of sturdy kicks from a stout ass. When that door was opened, however, for the reception of captives, most of them backed away.

The pig proved himself as unwilling to enter the pound as any of his many predecessors. He looked in, saw the uninviting gloom, the nettles, the docks, the absence of anything amongst which he could root, and he turned and made valiant efforts to escape his captors. He doubled this way and that; he struggled out of corners; he tried to wriggle through the lych-gate. The pinder, remembering his interrupted dinner, shouted; the boys yelled; the girls screamed. But the stray pig, dodging hither and thither, still eluded their attempts to impound him, though he now screamed a little and was getting short of breath. Suddenly he collapsed against the churchyard wall, as if wearied out.

It was at this moment that Miss Lavinia Dorney, who occupied the pretty house and garden close to the church, came down to the foot of her lawn, attracted by the unwonted commotion, and beheld the exhausted pig and his tormentors. Miss Lavinia was a spinster lady of fine presence, very noble and dignified in manner, who was noted for her shawls and her caps, both of which she wore with distinction. She looked very imposing as she stood there, half-concealed by the shining holly-hedge whose neatly clipped edges fitted in so well with the elegance of their surroundings, and Burton touched his cap, the boys pulled their forelocks, and the girls curtsied.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Miss Lavinia, lifting a pair of elegantly-mounted pince-nez to the bridge of her aristocratic nose. "Dear me, what a noise! Oh, that's you, James Burton, isn't it? And what is all this commotion about?"

"We want to get that there pig into the pinfold, mum," answered the pinder, wiping his forehead. "But it's the contrariest beast ever I see! It's eaten up nearly all Mistress Grooby's kitchen garden."

Miss Lavinia looked more closely and saw the fugitive.

"Dear me!" she said. "It must be hungry, Burton. Whose animal is it?"

"Dunno, mum," answered the pinder, in a tone that suggested an utter lack of interest in the subject. "But it's none a Little Peter's pig – it's too thin, there's naught but skin and bone on it. It's my opinion, mum, it would eat anything, that pig would, if it had the chance."

"And who is going to feed it in the pound?" asked Miss Lavinia.

Burton shook his head. He was much more concerned about feeding himself than about feeding the pig.

"Dunno, mum," he replied. "It's none of my business. And nobody might never come for that there pig, and it's naught but skin and bone as it is."

"The poor animal needs food and rest," said Miss Lavinia with decision. She turned and called across her lawn. "Mitchell – come here," she commanded.

A man who was obviously a gardener approached, looking his curiosity. Miss Lavinia indicated the group in the road below the holly-hedge.

"Mitchell," she said, "isn't there a piggery in the stable-yard?"

Mitchell, coachman, gardener, general factotum in Miss Lavinia's small establishment, gathered an idea of what his mistress meant and almost gasped. A pig in his scrupulously kept preserves!

"Well, ma'am," he said, rubbing his chin, "there is certainly a sty, ma'am. But it's never been used since we came here, ma'am."

"Then we will use it now, Mitchell," said Miss Lavinia. "There is a poor animal which needs rest and refreshment. Burton and the bigger boys will help you to drive it in, and Burton may have a pint of ale, and the boys some apples. See that the pig has straw, or hay, or whatever is proper, Mitchell, and feed it well. Now, all you smaller children, run home to your dinners."

No one ever dreamed of questioning any order which Miss Lavinia Dorney issued, and the stray pig was ere long safely housed in a sty which had certainly never been used before.

"Nice new job for you, Mitchell!" said Burton, over a jug of ale in the kitchen. "And if you want a word of advice, keep the beast fastened in – he's a good 'un for gardens."

"You don't know what direction he came from?" asked Mitchell, anxiously.

"Not I!" answered the pinder. "What for?"

"Nothing," said Mitchell. "At least, if you did, I'd send my

son on the road, making inquiries about him. He must belong to somebody, and I don't want no pigs in my stableyard. And you know what the missis is? – if she takes a fancy to anything, well – "

Mitchell ended with an expressive grimace, and Burton nodded his head sympathetically. Then he remembered his dinner and hurried off, and the gardener, who had not kept pigs for many years, begged another jug of ale from the cook in order to help him to remember what the staple sustenance of those animals really was. As he consumed it his ideas on the subject became more and more generous, and when Miss Lavinia Dorney went into the stable-yard after luncheon to see how her latest protégé was getting on she found the new-comer living and housed in a style which he himself may have dreamed of, but certainly never expected two hours previously.

"I'm glad to see you have made the poor thing so comfortable, Mitchell," said Miss Lavinia. "Of course, you understand what pigs require?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am!" replied Mitchell. "What a fine pig like that wants is plenty of good wheat straw to lie in, and the best pig-meal – that's crushed peas and beans and maize and such-like, ma'am – and boiled potatoes, and they're none the worse for a nice hot mash now and again. They're very nice eaters, is pigs, ma'am, as well as uncommon hearty."

"Don't you think this is a very thin pig, Mitchell?" asked the mistress.

"Yes, ma'am, he's uncommon thin," replied Mitchell. "I should say, ma'am, that that there pig had known what it was to feel hungry."

"Poor thing!" said Miss Lavinia. "Well, see that he has all he can eat, Mitchell. Of course, I must advertise for his owner – you're sure he doesn't belong to any one in the village?"

"I'm certain he doesn't, ma'am!" replied Mitchell. "There isn't another pig in Little St. Peter's as thin as what he is. Nor in Great St. Peter's, neither, ma'am," he added as by an afterthought.

"Well, as his former owner, or owners, seems to have neglected him," said Miss Lavinia with severe firmness, "I shall feed him well before advertising that he is found. So see to it, Mitchell. And by the bye, Mitchell, don't you think he is very dirty?"

Mitchell eyed the pig over. His glance was expressive.

"I think he must have been sleeping out, ma'am," he replied. "When an animal's homeless it gets neglected shocking."

"Couldn't you wash him, Mitchell?" suggested Miss Lavinia. "I'm sure it would do him good."

Mitchell stroked his chin.

"Well, ma'am," he said, "I never heard of a pig being washed unless it was for show or after it had been killed, ma'am, but I dare say I could, ma'am. As soon as I've an hour to spare, ma'am," he continued, "I'll get my son to help me, and we'll have some hot water and turn the biggest hosepipe on him in the little yard – I'll get it off him, ma'am!"

Miss Lavinia cordially approved this proposition and went away, and Mitchell remarked to himself that no man ever knew what a day might not bring forth, and went to smoke in the loneliest part of the garden. Later in the afternoon he and his son performed the pig's ablutions, and the junior Mitchell, remarking that it was no use doing things by halves, got a stout scrubbing-brush from the scullery and so successfully polished the animal that he looked as if he had just been killed and scalded. Miss Lavinia, going to see him next morning on her usual round of the stables and poultry-yard, was delighted with his changed appearance, and praised her gardener unreservedly.

Mitchell, however, was not so much enamoured of his new occupation as he professed to be in his mistress's presence. For one thing, he was just then very busy in the garden; for another, the pig began to make more and more calls upon his time. It speedily developed, or, rather, made manifest, a most extraordinary appetite, and by some almost malevolent prescience discovered that it had only to call loudly for anything that it wanted to have its desires immediately satisfied. No one who had chanced to see its entry into Little St. Peter's would have recognized it at the end of a fortnight. Its ribs were no longer visible; it was beginning to get a certain breadth across its back; its twinkling eyes were disappearing in its cheeks. The weekly bill for its board and lodging amounted to a considerable figure in shillings, but Miss Lavinia neither questioned nor grumbled at it. She was delighted with the pig's progress, and she believed it

had come to recognize her. There was distinct regret in her voice when one morning she remarked —

"Now that the animal is so much better after its wanderings, Mitchell, I think we must advertise for its owner. He will no doubt be glad to have his property restored to him. I will write out the advertisement to-day, and send it to the newspaper."

Mitchell stroked his chin. He had different ideas — of his own.

"I don't think there's need to do that, ma'am," he said. "I've been making an inquiry about that pig, and I rather fancy I know who it is as he belongs lawful to. If you'll leave it to me, ma'am, I think I can find out for certain, without advertising of him."

"Very good, Mitchell," agreed Miss Lavinia. Then she added, half-wistfully, "I hope his owner will be glad to have him back."

"I don't think there's much doubt about that, ma'am," said Mitchell, glancing at the pig, who at that moment was stuffing himself out with his third breakfast. "I should think anybody 'ud be glad to see a pig like that come home looking as well as what he does."

"And so beautifully clean, Mitchell, thanks to you," said Miss Lavinia.

Mitchell replied modestly that he had done his best, and when his mistress had gone into the house he slapped the pig's back just to show that he had better thoughts of it than formerly.

"Blest if I don't make something out of you yet, my fine fellow!" he said.

That evening, after he had had his supper, Mitchell put on his

second-best suit and went to call on a small farmer who lived up a lonely lane about three miles off. He spent a very pleasant hour or two with the farmer and came away full of that peaceful happiness which always waits on those who do good actions and engineer well-laid schemes to success.

"It'll benefit him and it'll benefit me," he mused, as he went homeward, smoking a two-penny cigar which the small farmer had pressed upon him in the fulness of his gratitude. "And if that isn't as things ought to be, well, then I'm a Dutchman!"

Next day, as Miss Lavinia sat in her morning-room, going through the weekly accounts, the parlour-maid announced the arrival of a person who said he had come about the pig. Miss Lavinia looked dubiously at the spotlessness of the linen carpet-cover, and asked the parlour-maid if the person's boots seemed clean. As it happened to be a bright frosty morning the parlour-maid considered the person suitable for admittance and brought him in – a shifty-eyed man with a shock of red hair who ducked and scraped at Miss Lavinia as if he experienced a strange joy in meeting her.

"So you have come about the pig which I found!" said Miss Lavinia pleasantly. "You must have been very sorry to lose it."

The caller elevated his eyes to the ceiling, examined it carefully, and then contemplated the inside of his old hat.

"I were sorry, mum," he said. "It were a vallyble animal, that there, mum – it's a well-bred 'un."

"But it was so thin and – and dirty, when it came to me," said

Miss Lavinia with emphasis. "Painfully thin, and so very, very dirty. My gardener was obliged to wash it with hot water."

The man scratched his head, and then shook it.

"Ah, I dessay, mum!" he said. "Of course, when a pig strays away from its proper home it's like a man as goes on the tramp – it don't give no right attention to itself. Now, when I had it, ah! – well, it were a picture, and no mistake."

"You shall see it now," said Miss Lavinia, who felt the caller's last words to contain something of a challenge. "You will see we have not neglected it while it has been here."

She led the way out to the stable-yard or to the sty, where the pampered pig was revelling in the best wheat straw and enjoying a leisurely breakfast – even Miss Lavinia had noticed that now that it was certain of its meals, and as many of them as it desired, it ate them with a lordly unconcern. It looked up – the man with the red hair looked down. And he suddenly started with surprise and breathed out a sharp whistle.

"Yes, mum!" he said with conviction. "That's my pig – I know it as well as I know my own wife."

"Then, of course, you must have it," said Miss Lavinia. There was a touch of regret in her voice – the pig had already become a feature of the stable-yard, and she believed that he knew his benefactress. "I suppose," she continued, "that you have many pigs?"

"A goodish few on 'em, mum," replied the man.

"Would you – I thought, perhaps, that as you have others, and

this one seems to have settled down here, you might be inclined to – in fact, to sell him to me?" said Miss Lavinia hurriedly.

The red-haired person once more scratched his head.

"Well, of course, mum, pigs is for selling purposes," he said. "But that there pig, he's an uncommon fine breed. What would you be for giving for him, mum, just as he stands?"

At this moment the pig, full of food and entirely happy, gave several grunts of satisfaction and begun to rub its snout against the door of the sty. Miss Lavinia made up her mind.

"Would you consider ten pounds a suitable sum?" she asked timidly.

The red-haired man turned his head away as if to consider this proposal in private. When he faced round again his face was very solemn.

"Well, of course, mum," he said, "of course, as I said, he's a vallyble animal is that there, but as you've fed him since he were found and have a liking to him – well, we'll say ten pounds, mum, and there it is!"

"Then if you will come into the house I will give you the money," said Miss Lavinia. "And you may rest assured we shall treat the pig well."

"I'm sure of that, mum," said the seller. "And very pretty eating you'll find him when his time comes."

Then he got his money, and drank a jug of ale, and went away, rejoicing greatly, and on his way home he met Mitchell, who had been to the market-town in the light cart, and who pulled up by

the road-side at sight of him.

The red-haired man winked knowingly at the gardener.

"Well?" said Mitchell.

"All right," answered the other. He winked again.

Mitchell began to look uneasy.

"Where's the pig?" he asked.

"Where I found it," answered the red-haired man. "In the sty."

"Why didn't you bring it away?" asked Mitchell. "You said you would."

The red-haired man again winked and smiled widely.

"I've sold it," he said. "Sold it to your missis. For ten pounds."

He slapped his pocket and Mitchell heard the sovereigns jingle. He almost fell out of his seat.

"Sold it! – to our missis! – for ten pounds!" he exclaimed.

"You – why, it weren't yours to sell!"

"Weren't it?" said the red-haired man. "Well, there you're wrong, Mestur Mitchell, 'cause it were. I knew it as soon as I set eyes on it, 'cause it had a mark in its left ear that I gave it myself. And as your missis had taken a fancy to it and bid me ten pound for it, why, of course, I took her at her word. Howsumever," he concluded, putting his hand in his pocket, "as you put me on to the matter, I'll none be unneighbourly, and I'll do the handsome by you."

Therewith he laid half-a-crown on the splashboard of the light cart, winked again, and with a cheery farewell strode away, leaving the disgusted gardener staring at the scant reward of his

schemings.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN WHO WAS NOBODY

I

That was one of the finest of all the fine mornings of that wonderful spring, and Miriam Weere, when she saw the sunlight falling across the orchard in front of her cottage, and heard the swirl of the brown river mingling with the murmur of the bees in their hives under the apple-trees, determined to do her day's work out of doors. The day's work was the washing of the week's soiled linen, and no great task for a strapping young woman of five-and-twenty, whose arms were as muscular as her gipsy-coloured face was handsome. Miriam accordingly made no haste in beginning it – besides, there was the eighteen-months-old baby to wash and dress and feed. He woke out of a morning sleep as she finished her breakfast, and began to make loud demands upon her. She busied herself with him for the next hour, laughing to herself gleefully over his resemblance to his father, big blue-eyed, blonde-haired Michael; and then, carrying him out to the daisy-spangled grass of the orchard, she set him down beneath an apple-tree, and left him grasping at the white and gold and green about him while she set out her wash-tubs a few yards away.

Miriam Weere had never a care in the world. Her glossy hair, dark as the plumage on a rook's breast, her clear hazel eyes, her glowing cheeks, the round, full curves of her fine figure, combined with the quickness and activity of her movements to prove her in possession of rude and splendid health. There was only another human being in Ashdale who could compete with her in the appearance of health or in good looks – her husband, Michael, a giant of well over six feet, who, like herself, had never known what it was to have a day's illness. The life of these two in their cottage by the little Ash was one perpetual round of good humour, good appetite, and sound sleep. Nor was there any reason why they should take thought for the morrow – that is, unduly. Higher up the valley, set on a green plateau by the bank of the river, stood Ashdale Mill, between the upper and nether stones of which most of the grain grown in the neighbourhood passed. And Ashdale Mill was the property of Tobias Weere, Michael's father, who was well known to be a rich man, and some day Michael would have —

That was the only question which occasionally made Miriam knit her brows. What would Michael have when old Tobias died? The mill, the mill-house, the garden and orchard around it, two or three acres of land beside, and the fishing rights of the river from Ashdale Bridge to Brinford Meadows belonged absolutely to Tobias, who had bought the freehold of this desirable property when he purchased the good-will of the business twenty years before. He had only two sons to succeed to whatever he left –

Michael and Stephen. Michael was now general superintendent, manager, traveller, a hard indefatigable worker, who was as ready to give a hand with the grain and the flour as to write the letters and keep the books. Stephen, on the other hand, was a loafer. He was fonder of the village inn than of the mill, and of going off to race meetings or cricket matches than of attending to business. He was also somewhat given to conviviality, which often degenerated into intemperance, and he had lately married the publican's daughter, a showy, flaunting wench whom Miriam thoroughly detested. Considering the difference that existed between the two brothers, it seemed to Miriam that it would be grossly unfair to share things equally between them, and more than once she had said so to Michael. But Michael always shook his head.

"Share and share alike," he said. "I ask no fairer, my lass."

"Then," she answered, "if it's like that, you must try to buy Stephen out, for he'll never do any good."

"Ah, that's more like it!" said Michael.

Miriam was thinking of these things as she plunged her strong arms into the frothing soapsuds and listened to her baby cooing under the apple-trees. She had heard from a neighbour only the night before of some escapade in which Stephen had been mixed up, and her informant had added significantly that it was easy to see where Stephen's share of old Toby's money would go when he got the handling of it. Miriam resolved that when Michael, who was away on business in another part of the country, came

home she would once more speak to him about coming to an understanding with his brother. She was not the sort of woman to see a flourishing business endangered, and she never forgot that she was the mother of Michael's first-born. Some day, perhaps, she might see him master of the mill.

Save for the murmur of the river flowing at the edge of the garden beneath overhanging alders and willows, and the perpetual humming of the insects in tree and bush, the morning was very still and languorous, and sounds of a louder sort travelled far. And Miriam was suddenly aware of the clap-clap-clap of human, stoutly-shod feet flying down the narrow lane which ran by the side of the orchard. Something in the sound betokened trouble – she was already drying her hands and arms on her rough apron when the wicket-gate was flung open and a girl, red-faced, panting, burst in beneath the pink and white of the fruit-trees.

"What is it, Eliza Kate?" demanded Miriam.

The girl pressed her hand to her side.

"It's – th' – owd – maister!" she panted. "Margaret Burton thinks he's bad – a stroke. An' will you please to go quick."

"Look to the child," said Miriam, without a glance at him herself. "And bring him back with you."

Then she set off at a swift pace up the steep, stony lane which led to Ashdale Mill. The atmosphere about it suggested nothing of death – the old place was gay with summer life, and the mill-wheel was throwing liquid diamonds into the sunlight with every

revolution. Miriam saw none of these things; she hurried into the mill-house and onward into the living-room. For perhaps the first time in her life she was conscious of impending disaster – why or what she could not have told.

Old Tobias lay back in his easy-chair, looking very white and worn – his housekeeper, old Margaret Burton, stood at his side holding a cup. She sighed with relief as Miriam entered.

"Eh, I'm glad ye've comed, Mistress Michael!" she said. "I'm afeard th' maister has had a stroke – he turned queer all of a sudden."

"Have you sent for the doctor?" asked Miriam, going up to the old man and taking his hand.

"Aye, one o' th' mill lads has gone post haste on th' owd pony," answered the housekeeper. "But I'm afeard –"

Tobias opened his eyes, and, seeing Miriam, looked recognition. His grey lips moved.

"'Tisn' a stroke!" he whispered faintly. "It's th' end. Miriam, I want to say – summat to thee, my lass."

Miriam understood that he had something which he wished to say to her alone, and she motioned the housekeeper out of the living-room.

"There's a drop o' brandy in the cupboard there," said Tobias, when the door was closed upon himself and his daughter-in-law. "Gi' me a sup, lass – it'll keep me up till th' doctor comes – there's a matter I must do then. Miriam!"

"Yes, father?"

"Miriam, thou's a clever woman and a strong 'un," the old man went on, when he had sipped the brandy. "I must tell thee summat that nobody knows, and thou must tell it to Michael when I'm gone – I daren't tell him."

Miriam's heart leapt once and seemed to stand still; a sudden swelling seized her throat.

"Tell Michael?" she said. "Yes, father."

"Miriam ... hearken. Michael – he weren't – he weren't born in wedlock!"

Michael's wife was a woman of quick perception. The full meaning of the old man's words fell on her with the force of a thunderstorm that breaks upon a peaceful countryside without warning. She said nothing, and the old man motioned her to give him more brandy.

"Weren't born in wedlock," he repeated, "and so is of course illegitimate and can't heir nowt o' mine. It was this way," he went on, gathering strength from the stimulant. "His mother and me weren't wed till after he were born – we were wed just before we came here. We came from a long way off – nobody knows about it in these parts. And, of course, Michael's real name is Michael Oldfield – his mother's name – and, by law, Stephen takes all."

"Stephen takes all!" she repeated in a dull voice.

Old Tobias Weere's eyes gleamed out of the ashen-grey of his face, and his lips curled with the old cunning which Miriam knew well.

"But I ha' put matters right," he said, with a horrible attempt

at a smile, "I ha' put matters right! Didn't want to do it till th' end, 'cause folk will talk, and I can't abide talking. I ha' made a will leaving one-half o' my property to my son, Stephen Weere; t'other half to Michael Oldfield, otherwise known as Michael Weere, o' Millrace Cottage, Ashdale, i' th' county – "

The old man's face suddenly paled, and Miriam put more brandy to his lips. After a moment he pointed to a bunch of keys lying on the table beside him, and then to an ancient bureau which stood in a dark corner of the living-room. "It's i' th' top – drawer – th' will," he whispered. "Get it out, my lass, and lay the writing things o' th' table – doctor and James Bream'll witness it, an' then all will be in order. 'Cause, you see, somed'y might chance-along as knew the secret, an' would let out that Michael were born before we were wed, an' then – "

Sick and cold with the surprise and horror of this news, Miriam took the keys and went over to the old bureau. There, in the top drawer, lay a sheet of parchment – she knew little of law matters, but she saw that this had been written by a practised hand. She set it out on the table with pen and ink and blotting-paper – in silence.

"A lawyer chap in London town, as axed no questions, drew that there," murmured Tobias. "Wants naught but signing and witnessing and the date putting in. Why doesn't doctor come, and Jim Bream on the owd pony? Go to th' house door, lass, and see if ye can see 'em coming."

Miriam went out into the stone-paved porch, and, shading her

aching eyes, looked across the garden. Eliza Kate had arrived with the baby, and sat nursing it beneath the lilac-trees. It caught sight of its mother, and stretched its arms and lifted its voice to her. Miriam gave no heed to it – her heart was heavy as the grey stones she stood on.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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