CHAPTER XX

INISTOW FARM

"Clean, simple livers."—CRASHAW.

THE rowers in the leading boat were seven—four young men and three young women; and they pulled two to an oar—all but the bowman, a young giant of eighteen or thereabouts, who did without help. A fourth young woman sat beside, suckling a baby. And so, counting the baby and the two children and the old steersman, whom they all addressed as "Father," and omitting 'Dolph and the sheep, they were twelve on board. The second and third boats had half a dozen rowers apiece. The second was steered by a wizened middle-aged man, Jan by name. Tilda learned that he was the shepherd. More by token, he had his three shaggy dogs with him, crowded in the stern.

At first these dogs showed the liveliest interest in 'Dolph, raising themselves with their forepaws on the gunwale, and gazing across the intervening twenty yards of water. But they were dignified creatures, and their self-respect forbade them to bark. 'Dolph, who had no breeding, challenged back loudly, all his bristles erect—and still the more angrily as they forbore to answer; whereat the young men and women laughed. Their laughter would have annoyed Tilda had it been less unaffected; and, as it was, she cuffed the dog so sharply that he ceased with a whine.

She had never met with folk like these. They gave her a sense of having reached the ends of the earth—they were so simple and strong and well-featured, and had eyes so kindly. She could understand but a bare third of what they said, their language being English

of a sort, but neither that of the gentry—such as Arthur Miles spoke—nor that of the gypsies; nor, in short, had she heard the human like of it anywhere in her travels. She had never heard tell of vowels or of gutturals, and so could not note how the voices, as they rose and fell, fluted upon the one or dwelt, as if caressingly, on the other. To her their talk resembled the talk of birds, mingled with liquid laughter.

Later, when she came to make acquaintance with the Scriptures and read about the patriarchs and their families, she understood better. Laban with his flocks, Rebekah and her maidens, the shepherds of Bethlehem—for all of them her mind cast back to these innocent people, met so strangely off an unknown coast.

For she had come by water; and never having travelled by ship before, and being wholly ignorant of geography and distances, she did not dream that the coast towards which they were rowing her could be any part of England.

It loomed close ahead now—a bold line of cliff, reddish brown in colour, but with patches of green vivid in the luminous haze; the summit of the cliff-line hidden everywhere in folds of fog; the dove-coloured sea running tranquilly at its base, with here and there the thinnest edge of white, that shone out for a moment and faded.

But now the cliffs, which had hitherto appeared to run with one continuous face, like a wall, began to break up and reveal gullies and fissures; and as these unfolded, by and by a line of white cottages crept into view. They overhung a cove more deeply indented than the rest, and close under them was a diminutive grey pier sheltering a diminutive harbour and beach.

And now the voyage was soon ended. The boat shot around the pier-end and took ground upon firm shingle. The others, close in her wake, ran in and were beached alongside, planks were laid out from the gunwales, and in half a minute all hands had fallen to work, urging, persuading, pushing, lifting the sheep ashore, or round-

ing them up on the beach, where they headed hither and thither, or stood obstinately still in mazed fashion, all bleating. The middle-aged shepherd took command of these operations, no man gainsaying, and shouted here, there, and everywhere, sparing neither age nor sex, but scolding all indiscriminately, hallooing to his dogs and waving his arms—as his master described it later —"like a paper man in a cyclone." And the dogs were silent no longer, but coursed the beach with short, fierce yelps, yet always intent on their business, as 'Dolph discovered when, spurred on by his theatrical instincts, he made a feint of joining in the sport. A snap of teeth close to his fore-legs sent him back yelping, and he retired in dudgeon to a heap of seaweed; but by and by, when the sheep were gathered into a compact crowd, he made a really heroic effort to divert attention back to his own talents.

"Look to the dog, there—look to 'en!" cried a maiden of eighteen, pointing and then resting a hand on either hip while she laughed.

This was Chrissy (short for Christiana), the prettiest, though not the youngest of the girls. Beside her there were Dinah (it was she who suckled the baby) and Polly, and Rose and Sabina, and Charity; and of the young men John Edward and William, 'Rastus, Donatus and Obed. These were of the sons and daughters of the old steersman, with others of whom Tilda had not yet learnt the names. There was Old William also—Dinah's husband—a young man of thirty or so, but serious for his years; and Old William's two sisters, Sheba and Bathsheba—the younger a maiden, but the elder married to a youth they called Daniel; and Festus, who appeared to be courting Chrissy; and Roger, the young giant who had pulled the bow oar, and was courting nobody as yet. Quick though Tilda was to find her feet in a crowd and distinguish names and faces, she found the numbers bewildering. To Arthur Miles they were but a phantom throng. He stood on the beach amid the small tumult and, while the sheep blundered by, gazed back

upon the Island, still in view, still resting like a shield out yonder upon the milky, golden sea.

As yet Tilda could not know that the old man had been married twice, that these stalwart youths and maidens were his offspring by two mothers. Indeed, they might all have been his, and of one womb, so frankly and so gently spoken they were one to another. Only the shepherd kept scolding all the while, and with vigour, using his brief authority which no one—not even his master—attempted to dispute. While this was going on two farm-boys from the rearmost boat had run up the hill, and by and by returned, each cracking a whip and leading a pair of horses harnessed to a lumbering hay-wagon. All scrambled on board, romping and calling to Tilda and Arthur Miles to follow their example; and so, leaving the shepherd to follow with his collected flock, the procession started, the horses plunging at the first steep rise from the beach.

Half-a-dozen children had collected on the beach and ran with them, cheering, up the hill, and before the cottage doorways three or four women, wives and widows, stood to watch the procession go by. These (someone told Tilda) were all the inhabitants left, their men-folk having sailed away west and north a month ago for the fishery.

"Wish 'ee well, Farmer Tossell!" cried one or two. "Sheep all right, I hope?"

"Right as the bank, my dears!" called back the old patriarch, waving a whip he had caught from one of the farm-boys. "The same to you, an' many of 'em!"

They mounted the hill at a run, and when the horses dropped to a walk Farmer Tossell explained to Arthur Miles, who had been thrust forward into a seat—or rather perch—beside him, that this bringing home of the sheep from Holmness was a great annual event, and that he was lucky, in a way, to have dropped in for it.

"The whole family turns out—all but the Old Woman an' Dorcas. Dorcas is my eldest. They're t'home gettin' the supper. A brave supper, you'll see, an' the

preacher along with it. I dunno if you're saved . . . No? P'r'aps not, at your age. I was never one for hurryin' the children; bruisin' the tender flax, as you might say. . . . But you mustn't be upset if he *alloods* to you. . . . A very powerful man, when you're used to 'en. So you've a message for Miss Sally? Know her?"

The boy had to confess that he did not.

"Curious!" the farmer commented. "She's one of the old sort, is Miss Sally. But you can't get over to Culvercoombe to-night; to-morrow we'll see. . . . What's your name, by the way?"

"Arthur Miles."

"And your sister's?"

"She's called Tilda; but she—she isn't really——"

Farmer Tossell was not listening.

"You'll have to sleep with us to-night. Oh," he went on, misinterpreting the boy's glance behind him (he was really seeking for Tilda, to explain), "there's always room for one or two more at Inistow; that's what you might call our motto; and the Old Woman dotes on children. She ought to—havin' six of her own, besides nine of my first family."

The wagon had reached a short break in the ascent—you might liken it to a staircase landing—where the road ran level for about fifty yards before taking breath, so to speak, for another stiff climb. Here a by-road led off to the right, and here they turned aside.

The road ran parallel, or roughly parallel, with the line of the cliffs, between low and wind-trimmed hedges, over which, from his perch beside Farmer Tossell, the boy looked down across a narrow slope of pasture to the sea. The fog had lifted. Away and a little above the horizon the sun was dropping like a ball of orange flame in a haze of gold; and nearer, to the right of the sunset, lay the Island as if asleep on the waves, with glints of fire on the pointed cliffs at its western end, and all the rest a lilac shadow resting on the luminous water.

He gazed, and still gazed. He heard no longer, though

the farmer was speaking. There was indeed some excuse, for the young men and girls had started another hymn, and were singing with all their voices. But he did not even listen.

The road rose and dipped. . . . They came to a white-painted gate, which one of the young men sprang down to open. The last glow of the sunset fell on its bars, and their outline repeated itself in dazzling streaks on the sky as the horses wheeled to the left through the gateway, and the boy turned for a last look. But Holmness had disappeared. A brown ridge of stubble hid it, edged and powdered with golden light.

Turning from the sea, the wagons followed a rutted cart-track that wound downhill in a slow arc between an orchard hedge and an open meadow dotted with cattle. High beyond the orchard rose a cluster of elms, around which many rooks were cawing, and between the elms a blue smoke drifted. There too the grey roof of the farmhouse crept little by little into sight; and so they came to a second gate and the rick-yard; and beyond the ricks was a whitewashed doorway, where a smiling elderly woman stood to welcome them. This was Mrs. Tossell, forewarned many minutes since by their singing.

She had come straight from preparing the feast, and her face was yet flushed with the heat of the kitchen fire. The arrival of the extra mouths to be fed did not put her out in the least. But she looked the children over with eyes at once benevolent and critical—their clothes and their faces—and said frankly that they wanted a wash, which was only too evident; the *Evan Evans* being a peculiarly grimy boat, even for a collier.

"The sooner the better," agreed Tilda with the utmost alacrity.

"Well, and I'm glad you take it like that," said their hostess, nodding approval. She called "Hepsy! Hepsy!" and an elderly serving-woman answered the summons. "Run, Hepsy, and fill the wash-house boiler," she commanded.

Within twenty minutes two long wash-trays stood ready and steaming—one for Tilda in the wash-kitchen itself, the other for Arthur Miles in a small outhouse adjoining; and while the children revelled in this strange new luxury, Mrs. Tossell bethought her of certain garments in a press upstairs—a frock and some underclothing long since outgrown by Sabina, a threadworn shirt and a suit that had formerly habited Obed, her youngest, all preserved and laid away on the principle (as she put it) that "Store is no Sore."

It was Chrissy, the pretty girl, who carried his clean garments to Arthur Miles; and he, being caught naked in the wash-tub, blushed furiously. But Chrissy was used to brothers, and took stock of him composedly.

"My!" she exclaimed, "what pretty white skin you've got!" And with that her quick eyes noted the mark on his shoulder. "Well, I never—but that's funny!"

"What's funny?" asked the boy.

"I'll tell you later, in the kitchen," she promised, and went off to Tilda.

The kitchen was of noble size—far larger even than the refectory at Holy Innocents' Orphanage—and worthy of the feast Mrs. Tossell had arrayed there to celebrate the sheep-bringing. The table, laden with hot pies, with dishes of fried rasher and hog's-puddings, black-puddings, sausages, with cold ham and cold ribs of beef, with apple tarts, junkets, jellies, syllabubs, frumenties, with mighty tea-pots and flagons of cider, ran close alongside the window-seat where the children were given their places, and whence, turning their heads, they looked out upon a garden set with clipped box-trees, and bordered with Michaelmas daisies, and upon a tall dove-cote of many holes and ledges crowded with pigeons settling down to their night's rest. On the outside of the table ran an unbacked bench, and at top and bottom stood two ample elbowed chairs for the farmer and his wife; but Mrs. Tossell had surrendered hers to a black-

coated man whom all addressed as "Minister," though in talk among themselves they spoke of him rather as The Rounder. Before the company sat he delivered a long grace with much unction. Tilda—a child of the world, and accustomed to take folks as she found them—eyed him with frank curiosity; but in Arthur Miles his black coat and white tie awoke a painful association of ideas, and for a while the child sat nervous and gloomy, without appetite to eat . . . Tilda for once was unobservant of him. The Minister, with his long thin neck, straggling black beard, weak, eloquent mouth and black shining eyes—the eyes of a born visionary—failed, as well they might, to suggest a thought of Dr. Glasson. She was hungry, too, and her small body glowing deliciously within her clean garments. Amid all this clatter of knives and forks, these laughing voices, these cheerful, innocent faces, who could help casting away care?

Now and again her eyes wandered around the great kitchen—up to the oaken roof, almost black with age, and the hams, sides of bacon, bundles of potherbs, bags of simples, dangling from its beams; across to the old jack that stretched athwart the wall to the left of the fireplace—a curious apparatus, in old times (as Chrissy explained to her) turned by a dog, but now disused and kept only as a relic; to the tall settle on the right with the bars beneath the seat, and behind the bars (so Chrissy averred) a couple of live geese imprisoned, and quietly sitting on their eggs amid all this uproar; to the great cave of the fireplace itself, hung with pothooks and toothed cramps, where a fire of logs burned on a hearthstone so wide that actually—yes, actually—deep in its recess, and behind the fire, were set two smoke-blackened seats, one in each farther angle under the open chimney.

Before the feast had been twenty minutes in progress the farmer looked up and along the table and called for lights. His eyes, he explained, were not so young as they had been. Roger—tallest of the young men—jumped up and lit two oil-lamps that hung from the

beams. The lamps had immense reflectors above them, made of tin; but they shone like silver, and Tilda took them for silver.

"That's cheerfuller!" shouted Farmer Tossell with a laugh of great contentment, and fell-to again.

But as the light wavered and anon grew steady, Chrissy leaned over Tilda, touched Arthur Miles on the shoulder, and pointed to the wall opposite. Tilda stared also, following the direction of her finger.

The lamp-light, playing on the broad chimney-piece with its brass candlesticks and china ornaments, reached for a yard or so up the wall, and then was cut off by the shadow of the reflectors. But in that illuminated space, fronting the children, stood out a panel of plaster, moulded in high relief, overlaid with a wash of drab-coloured paint. The moulding was of a coat-of-arms—a shield surrounded by a foliated pattern, and crossed with this device—

. . . this with two antlered stags, collared, with hanging chains for supporters; above it a cap of maintenance and a stag's head coupé for crest; and beneath a scroll bearing some words which Tilda could not decipher. She glanced at Chrissy, alert at once and on the defensive. She had recognised the four diamonds, but all the rest was a mere mystery to her.

"He's got just that mark on his shoulder," said Chrissy, meeting her gaze and nodding towards the shield.

"Has he?" said Tilda disingenuously.

But she was jealous already, and by habit distrustful of her sex.

"Didn't you know? I noticed it just now when he was stripped. And I thought for a moment . . . you

two coming and asking for Sir Miles . . . But I'm always supposing some secret or other. Mother says it comes of muzzing my head with books, and then putting two and two together and making 'em five. . . . It's fanciful, of course"—here Chrissy sighed—"things don't happen like that in real life. . . . But there's always been stories about Sir Miles; and when I saw the mark—it *is* queer, now——"

But Tilda kept a steady face, her eyes fixed on the escutcheon.

"What does it mean?" she asked. "I don't know about these things."

"Why, it's Sir Miles's coat-of-arms; of the Chandons, that is. Inistow Farm used to belong to them—belonged to them for hundreds of years, right down to the time Miss Sally bought it. Father farmed it under them for thirty years before that, and his father, and his grandfather, and his great-great-back ever so long. He was terribly put out when it changed hands; but now he says 'Thank the Lord' when he talks of it."

"Changed hands?" Tilda found herself echoing.

"Yes. Inistow has belonged to Miss Sally these five years now. I thought maybe you'd be knowing all about her and Sir Miles—coming like this and inquiring for them. She's a good one, is Miss Sally; but when a woman sees a man poor—well, of course, that's her revenge."

"Is—is Sir Miles *poor?*"

Tilda's hopes were tottering, falling about her, she hardly knew how or why. Vaguely she had been building up a fabric of hope that she was helping Arthur Miles home to a splendid inheritance. Such things happened, almost as a matter of course, in the penny fiction to which her reading had been exclusively confined. To be sure, they never happened—they were wildly unlikely to happen—in the world of her own limited experience. But in the society to which the boy belonged by his gentle manners and his trick of speech, which could only come as a birthright—in that rarefied world where

the ladies wore low gowns, with diamonds around their necks, and the gentlemen dined in fine linen with wide shirt-fronts—all life moved upon the machinery of romance. The books said so; and after that romance she had been pursuing, by degrees more consciously, from fugitive hints almost to certainty that a few hours would give it into her grasp. And now——

"Is—is he poor?" she repeated.

She could not understand it. The story-books always conducted the long-lost heir to rank and wealth in the end.

"Well, he don't *spend* money, they say," answered Chrissy. "But nobody knows for certain. His tenants never see him. He's always abroad: he's abroad now——"

"Abroad?"

This was worse and worse.

"Or else shut up at Meriton—that's the great house—with a lot of nasty chemicals, trying to turn copper pennies into gold, they say."

Tilda caught at this hope.

"P'r'aps 'e'll manage it, one of these days."

"That's silly. Folks have been trying it for hundreds of years, and it'll never be done."

"And 'Olmness? 'As Miss Sally bought 'Olmness too?"

"No; he wouldn't part with it, for some reason. But father rents the grazing from him; same as before, when th' island belonged to Inistow Farm. There's a tale——"

But Tilda was not to hear the tale, for just now Mrs. Tossell pushed back her chair, and at her signal the feast ended. All left the table, and exchanged their benches for the settle or for chairs which they drew in a wide semicircle around the fireplace. Across the warm chord of this semicircle the sheep-dogs, stretched before the blaze, looked up lazily, and settled themselves to doze again. 'Dolph, lying a little apart (for they declined to take notice of him), copied their movements

in an ingratiating but not very successful attempt to appear bred to the manner.

Tilda remarked that the company took their new positions with some formality. The shepherd alone comported himself carelessly, slouching around to the back of the fire, where he lit a clay pipe from the embers and seated himself on one of the ingle-ends, so that his tobacco smoke had a clear passage up the chimney. Then, almost before the children knew what was happening, the Minister gave out a hymn.

All sang it lustily, and when it was ended all dropped on their knees. The Minister broke into prayer—at first in smooth, running sentences, formal thanksgivings for the feast just concluded, for the plenty of seedtime and harvest, for the kindly fruits of the earth, with invocations of blessing upon the house and the family. But by and by, as these petitions grew more intimate, his breath came in short gasps. "O the Blood!" he began to cry; "the precious Blood of Redemption!" And at intervals one or other of his listeners answered "Amen!" "Hallelujah!" Tilda wondered what on earth it was all about; wondered too—for she knelt with her back to the great fireplace—if the shepherd had laid by his pipe and was kneeling among the ashes. Something in the Minister's voice had set her brain in a whirl, and kept it whirling.

"Glory! glory! The Blood! Glory be for the Blood!"

And with that, of a sudden the man was shouting a prayer for *her*—for her and Arthur Miles, "that these two lambs also might be led home with the flock, and sealed—sealed with the Blood, with the precious Blood, with the ever-flowing Blood of Redemption——"

Her brain seemed to be spinning in a sea of blood. . . . Men and women, all had risen from their knees now, and stood blinking each in the other's faces half-stupidly. The Minister's powerful voice had ceased, but he had set them going as a man might twirl a teetotum; and in five or six seconds one of the men—it was Roger,

the young giant—burst forth with a cry, and began to ejaculate what he called his "experience." He had been tempted to commit the Sin without Pardon; had been pursued by it for weeks, months, when alone in the fields; had been driven to wrestle with it in hollows and waste places, Satan always at his ear whispering to him to say the words of blasphemy, to cross the line, to have rest of mind though it were in damnation. To Tilda this was all mere gibberish, but to the youth and to his hearers all real and deadly earnest. His words came painfully, from a dry throat; the effort twisted him in bodily contortions pitiful to see; the sweat stood on his handsome young forehead—the brow of a tortured Apollo. And the circle of listeners bent forward to the tale, eager, absorbed, helping out his agony with groans and horrified murmurs. They held their breath, and when he reached the crisis, and in a gush of words related his deliverance—casting up both arms and drawing one long shuddering breath—they could almost see the bonds burst on the muscles of his magnificent chest, and broke afresh into exultant cries: "Glory!" "Hallelujah!" "The Blood—the Blood!" while the shepherd in the ingle-nook slowly knocked out the ashes of his pipe against the heel of his boot. He was a free-thinker, an ex-Chartist, and held himself aloof from these emotions, though privileged, as an old retainer, to watch them. His face was impassive as a carved idol's.

The young giant dropped back into his chair, and doubtless a second spiritual gust was preparing to shake the company—you could feel it in the air—when Godolphus intervened. That absurd animal, abashed by a series of snubbings, probably saw a chance to rehabilitate himself. For certain during the last few minutes he had been growing excited, sitting up with bright eyes, and opening and shutting his mouth as in a dumb effort at barking. Now, to the amazement of all, including the sheep-dogs, he lifted himself upon his hind legs and began to gyrate slowly.

Everyone stared. In the tension nobody yet laughed,

although Tilda, throwing a glance toward the chimney-corner, saw the shepherd's jaw relax in a grin. Her head yet swam. She felt a spell upon her that must be broken now or never.

"'Dolph!" she called, and wondered at the shrill sound of her own voice. "'Dolph!" She was standing erect, crooking her arm. The dog dropped on his fore-paws, crouched, and sprang through the hoop she made for him; crouched, sprang back again, alighted, and broke into a pæan of triumphant yelps.

Tilda was desperate now. With a happy inspiration she waved her hand to the ancient jack against the wall, and 'Dolph sprang for it, though he understood the command only. But he was a heavy dog, and as the rusty machine began to revolve under his weight, his wits jumped to the meaning of it, and he began to run like a turnspit demented.

"Faster! 'Dolph!"

The Minister had arisen, half-scandalised, on the point of calling for silence; but his eyes fell on Tilda, and he too dropped back into his chair. The child had raised both arms, and was bending her body back—back—until her fingers touched the hem of her skirt behind her. Her throat even sank out of view behind her childish bust. The shepherd's pipe dropped, and was smashed on the hearthstone. There was a silence, while still Godolphus continued to rotate. Someone broke it, suddenly gasping "Hallelujah!"

"Amen! 'Tis working—'tis working!"

In despite of the Minister, voice after voice took up the clamour, Farmer Tossell's louder than any. And in the height of the fervour Tilda bent her head yet lower, twisted her neck sideways, and stared up at the ring of faces from between her ankles!