CHAPTER I

"WHERE'S WILL?"

THE GREAT HORSE, the Horse of Strength, was falling out of favour. Knights in full armour no longer clashed in off the country roads calling for stabling for a dozen noble beasts, asking which way the enemy had passed this morning. Sudden fights by fords and on open heaths, in cobbled towns and up narrow village streets, short sharp affrays that used to drop like thunder-showers out of summer skies, no longer surprised a sleeping landscape. A peace much resembling that which descends after Sunday dinner reigned in the England of nowadays.

There were still wars going on, two wars, but both were overseas, and to watch the gentry embarking for them from their London ports, all laughing and daffing together, clad in nothing more hostile than soft leathers and embroidered stuffs, carrying books of poetry and musical instruments, you might well mistake them for a party of young gentlemen taking holiday from the Universities. Light horse sufficed for them, for they carried only a very little body armour, blue-black in tint, wicked-gleaming, richly damascened. They could still fight it seemed, but these wars—hunting the wild red-headed Irish over their peat and purple moors, trailing pike against the dark Spaniards under long yellow Netherlandish skies, unloading gunpowder in the foggy crow-stepped market-squares of Low-Country

towns—seemed to breed more fever than renown. Dampish, drawn-out exiled wars, meanly planned and pursued only from the coldest self-interest, even the prince in whose name they were waged lent them but a dribbling aid.

For the prince, the peace-loving ruler of this fat new England, was a crowned nymph, a woman, a lady, indeed a virgin still, and one that knew her chaste tongue a cleaner, cheaper weapon for blood-letting than many young gentlemen's swords. She scared the Spanish Ambassador when she reared her jewel-stuck wig of dead, dyed scarlet curls at him, glanced at him sidelong out of her malicious little eyes and remarked in the most natural pleasing voice, as if she were relating a common story, that if he spoke to her like that again he would find himself in a dungeon. Forty-nine years had she, and she still summoned councils to discuss her princely suitors, still kept the bold ugly French *mounseer* dangling on month after month. Her last move had been to send him a panic-stricken message. All, she feared, was lost! She had forgotten to ask what was to be the religion of the younger sons of the marriage! Forty-nine, but one must not laugh, for while she kept her wits there would be no fighting in her country, but since there was no fighting the Great Horse, the Horse of Strength, bred only for the battle and the tourney, must pass out of favour, quite into decay.

"Ten years since I bestrode him, and that was only into the north to match some rebels that never showed face," thinks grandsire Sir Tom, squinting out of his bedchamber window as his barber lathers him, watching out of the corner of an eye the wooden paces of the old grey charger moving slowly through the morning

mists across the soft green park. "His trot was a thing to send your dinner home."

After the funeral which he attends, led next after the hearse, Grey Dallaville passes into the service of Master Dixon, glover, Alderman, Keeper of the Bear Inn, learns to draw an oblong closed wain with saffron-painted wheels up to the High Cross on Thursdays, learns to be content with a couple of sour fields stretching down to the sedgy river's bank, a stall in the corner of the old barn, a building ninety feet long and nine-bayed—the Saxon pattern, never bettered. Robin Ostler is now his immediate master, Robin who must have had another surname at some time, but he's seventy-six now, and so crooked and bow-legged that when he goes down into the orchard on rheumy autumn evenings to beat the cows home, you'd think he was dancing amongst the trees as bent and withered as himself. Never a cow escapes his cunning stick and waving arms though; he's crammed with dead knowledge of the habits of beasts, can rehearse to you the fifty-two diseases to which the horse is subject, give you the points of every breed from the Jennet of Spain to the High Almain.

"Now there's a true English horse for ye," says Robin to the young tradesman's son who is wasting an hour in the stables with him. (Mother scolds that Will has a taste for low company, but Will can't resist dropping into the Bear or the Swan by the back entrance after dinner, to see the world and pick up the news. Anyway, what's doing in the shop nowadays?) "A true English horse," grunts Robin, slapping Grey Dallaville on his broad quarters. "(Stand over, will ye?) By the which I mean one bred under a good clime, on a firm ground and in a pure temperature, none of your pampered

Asia jades that can't go thirty miles in a day. Here's a horse," says Robin, fussing round for the feed which Will has, "of a tall stature and of long proportions, straight-pasterned, ay," chuckling, "and with a great desire at this moment to a bottle of hay. (Stand, I say. It's coming. Thankee, Master Will. Tip it in there now.) Portage he has succumbed to, by the which I mean the bearing on's back of packs or hampers, and for such business he is scarcely apt, being over tall, indeed of an excellent gentleman-like height; nevertheless he is in one manner of speaking not so ill-designed for such low occupation, which is that you shall never find a back o' that breadth a'galling. A-ah!" A wise look comes into Robin's face, something remembered. Without warning, without moving a step, he raises his voice to a sustained scream. "Jack! Jack! I say." (From across the yard comes an answering yell.) "See you beat Cut's saddle afore she goes out again. Put a few flocks in the point. Poor jade's wrung in the withers out of all cess. Contagious sluggards, those lads," continues Robin, dropping his voice to the former grunt. "These stables never has been the same since Nick Badger died. Peas and beans we gets these days are as dank as dogs, and that's the next way to give my poor jades the bots."

"A-ah! Nick," nods his companion, spitting out an end of the straw he is sucking. "Poor fellow! never joyed again after the price of oats rose. That was the death of Nick Badger."

Will can talk just like Robin Ostler when he chooses. If it comes to that, he can talk just like Goody Clarke, the fat pedlar-woman (witch, some call her, mother can't abide her, won't have her in the house) who sells cross-garterings and buttons in the crowd around the

Corn Market; equally he can give you Sir Thomas entertained to a costly banquet by the bailiff and aldermen of the town. Mother's eye brightens at this. She likes to hear her boy speak gentle. Mother married beneath her, but save that she tends to wash herself more than the rest of us, you would never guess it now that she's borne eight and reared five. For what with the breakfast to get, and only one slut of a girl to help her, and the little lads to be dressed and set off to school, and father to the market or into the shop, and then the chambers to be swept and the beds made and the bread baked and the dish-boards cleansed, and Joan blubbering out that she's pricked herself at her spinning, and that old smell-feast Uncle Harry, father's brother, nosing in hoping to be asked to stay for his meat mother never seems to have a moment to sit down.

Even of a winter's night when the wind is maundering in the chimney and the bare branches stammer on the bottle-paned staircase windows as if they were asking to be let in, mother can't rest.

"What's to do now, wife? Can't I go?" says father, not stirring from where he sits at ease in his barrel chair in front of the warm fire, with his points unlaced and his feet in their sheepskin slippers. "Let Will go. Let Joan go." But mother hasn't even time to answer father. Off she startles, tap, tap, tap go her clogs overhead in that little chamber at the back, where it's icy. It must be years since mother has touched the pair of virginals which she brought with her from her sire's handsome house. All the things mother brought with her are good, and she has a carved oak coffer upstairs full of treasures of her maiden days. On the very top is a piece of bone lace in the making, the threaded needle stuck into the mimic hem, all ready to take the

next tiny stitch. When mother found that never again would she have leisure for fine sewing, she said, no matter, a daughter should finish that pair of cuffs some day.

Mother lost her two first children, both daughters; then came Will, next Gilbert. Still she talked of a Joan, to be called after her eldest sister who had married so well as the world's eye sees these things. Joan came; from the first there was no mistaking what stock showed in her, and following her close, Anne, who was just what mother had always meant, a fair little maid, slight, soft-voiced, who would stand in her long gown clasping her rag baby to her and looking up at you under her lashes with pansy eyes. Anne died, aged seven, and now Joan is thirteen, swart-skinned, apple-cheeked, low built, with plenty of black hair tumbling out of her cap, father's colour, father's lass, always willing to look on the bright side of things. (He is bald on the top now, but still thick at the sides.) Moreover, his only surviving daughter has inherited her sire's round bull-brown eyes, his protuberant lips always ready for a jest. A good lass, Joan, a big-bosomed lass for her age, but no more capable of fine sewing than of treading through a chamber without setting everything a'tinkling. "On your toes, wench, on your toes," cries father, as mother winces and platters fall. Joan can put her fingers in her mouth and whistle down the street to call back the milkman louder than any of the lads. Mother gave her such a buffet on the ear the first time ever she caught her at this trick. "This passes! Whoso-ever taught you that low-born lubberly stable-urchin's cunning?" Joan, stumbling against the wool-house door, splashing the milk blue-white as bleached linen all over the clean floor, snivels back; "Nobody ever

needed to teach me. I just watched others. It came jump."

Mother never snivels, and only once has her family seen her weep. That was when she ascertained past hopes to the contrary that she was childing an eighth time. She might have thought herself safe—six seasons since Dick, and forty-four years in her dish. "This cheese," pronounces father at breakfast on a sharp March morning, when nobody is feeling their best, "this cheese is surely of a monstrous eager flavour, wife!" To the horror of all, mother, who has been sitting at the foot of the board eating nothing, gives a yell, and casting up her thin hands to hide her face, staggers out of the chamber screeching like a hen with its neck half wrung. "Poof!" says father, alarmed, and hurries his portly self after her, catches her round the waist on the narrow stair-turning. "Let me go," she snaps. "Not so," says father, manful, "for I will help you to your chamber, and your bed belike."

Then up in the middle chamber above stay father and mother a weary while, his voice sounding asking: "what's amiss?" and hers doing nothing but lament, during which time the little school bell ceases to clap from the Gild Chapel tower. "We'll be late! We'll be late!" Presently descends father alone, wearing a portentous air. "Daughter, go array your brethren for the school, you are too inadult for these things. Son William, stay here. I will speak with you."

So Joan takes herself and the little lads off, unwilling, and Will, unwilling, is left alone with father, who is sighing like a furnace.

"This Paternity is a fearful thing for a man to bear, son William," says he at length.

"For a man, sir," pipes Will, standing up slim and

straight in his russet tunic, wrinkling his fair brow under its oak-brown locks (mother's colour), "why, methought that was the woman's part."

"To do what, lad?"

"Marry, to bear, sir."

"You have supped wisdom early. Were it not that you were my poor rib's child, I should say that you had sucked it from the teat. (May not a man rebuke a cheese under his own roof, without bringing down on's head as much water as 'nigh wrecked Noah?) But we must use gravity here, son William, for this is a sad case. Your mother, poor chuck, is heavy with woe, indeed she is big with a thing of nought, which is to say a child of man. Is it not a prodigious mystery of Nature that the better-living a woman is, the more profligate she shall be of offspring?" muses father. "Having put down the lout that used to help with boots and ballots only this quarter too, and that wench Bet unable to dress a man a dish worth a man's eating after his sweat and toil of the day in his business. Item, the debt to Higford still unpaid, and he pressing. . . . Oh!" (with a roar) "that this thing should have come upon my house at such a time. I that used to keep two maids and a man, like a poor gentleman born, my wife at liberty to sit in her chamber in her branched gown, doing nothing, as she was bred to expect. . . ."

"What can I do to aid you and my mother, sir, in this unmerited strait?" asks Will, blushing.

"Unmerited, you may well say," groans father, casting up his hands. "Oh! these New Year's feastings and wassailings, warming the cockles of the heart, for how many offspring are they not accountable? But 'how can I aid you and my mother? What can I do?'

That is gallantly spoken. That's my brave boy. Why, now you must understand that your mother will go crazily this many a day, and they are divers manners in which you may aid her. Hum! ha! For example, you shall find her struggling with a fardel upon the stairs, whereat you may step forward, and bowing featly, entreat her thus: 'Let me carry that fardel, madam, it is too much for you.' 'Let me bear this burden for you, dear madam.' 'Gracious madam.' 'Sweet madam.' . . . Such words, costing little, are a great aid to a peevish woman."

"I think, sir," says Will briskly, "that you were best to take me from school. Then can I aid you in the shop and my mother in the house. Master Jenkins" (too true, this) "says that I learn nothing of him these days."

"There's my dapper boy!" cries father proudly. "My Oxford scholar, my eyas-musket! But pause. Reflect. This shall not please your mother. She is all for despatching her first-born to a learned Academe where he shall come to great worship."

"But now, sir, I lack both the learning and the means for such honours, and you lack an apprentice."

"Very true. Very true. This must be thought on. Well, get you to school now. Have me recommended to Master Jenkins, and tell him that your father stayed you. Tarry a little! Devise! On reflections take my greetings to Master Jenkins and to little Sir William and say that your father entreats their company at his house to dine to-day; the first to discuss a matter of moment (that's you), the second that he may gratify our table with a grace."

So mother, staggering downstairs an hour later, learns the jolly tidings that the schoolmaster and the

curate are invited to dine. Father and Will have, between them, hatched a notion whereby all our fortunes may yet be bettered.

Father's great notions! Four and twenty years ago, when he was courting her, mother put trembling faith in them. In the church porch on her wedding day she leant proudly on the broad breast of her handsome high-coloured bridegroom, as the neighbours came pressing up to kiss and congratulate. Only one of them said a sour thing, a widow who had always planned to have for her colly-molly son Mistress Mary and her large dowry. (Too large, said rich Master Lambert, who had taken Mary's elder sister with much less. Grandsire had left his monies as he chose.)

"Your husband has a stout arm I see, my mistress," said this shrewish widow. "That's meet, that's meet," laughing unmirthfully, while her eyes glanced daggers, "for, as all are saying, his own pair are the only arms he brings you."

A damsel of birth lost the right to bear a coat of arms when she married one who was no gentleman. Poor Mary, all her smiles wiped out, had only the spirit left to say that "until this moment she had never thought on such a matter."

Everyone knew who John was, because his father had rented a small farm from Mary's father. But John, a lad with a rise in him, had gone into town early and set up as a trader. Farm-products, which he well understood, corn, wool, malt, skins, meat and leather were the gear in which young John dealt with shrewdness and good humour. At the time of his marriage he was living in a little house on the north side of Henley Street, a thoroughfare so called because it led to the pretty market-town of Henley-in-the-Forest eight miles

distant. This was the home to which he would bring his Mary, and the sharp-tongued gossip who tried to spoil the wedding day had already tried to spoil the bride's picture of her home-coming. Was it, could it be true, asked Mary of her lover, that he and two of his neighbours had once—some years ago—been publicly fined by the Corporation for having allowed a dirt heap, or pile of filth to accumulate before their very thresholds? John did seem to remember something of the kind. He could show her surer signs than that of his need for a wife, said he.

So to Henley Street on a fine September evening came Mary as a bride, and it was as her husband had told her, a street in a good position and boasting worshipful inhabitants. At its best end, its High Street end, were the big new houses of Smith the haberdasher and old Alderman Whateley; a few doors below them came Bradley's, chief glover in the town. In front of Bradley's house was the cross-gutter or covered channel wherein a stream called the Mere crossed Henley Street on its self-willed passage towards the Rother Market and eventually the river. The stream seemed to mark a social boundary, for beneath it came Hornby's smithy and then a pair of cottages belonging to an odd tailor called Wedgwood, whose custom it was to sit cross-legged in his open window with the shutter let down onto two boxes in front of him to form a table, sewing for dear life and eating his dinner with his fingers off a latten platter. Wedgwood and Hornby, as neighbours, gave Mary a shock the first time she tripped past them with her new basket on her arm, for in his roaring red doorway stood the smith, with his hammer dangerously poised and his iron cooling on the anvil, while with gaping mouth he swallowed some news

brought by the tailor in such haste that he had carried along with him his shears and his measure and thrust his feet into contrary slippers. When they saw the gentle-born bride, they ceased talking and stared with such unblinking interest that she grew warm in the face, and fancied her hopes known. Doubtless they had never seen such beauty, said John simply when she told him. As for the scented cross-gutter, think how aptly its waters would come in next time there was a fire in the town!

After John and Mary's house came Badger the woollen draper's, and leaning against it a couple more respectable cottages; then the street rather tailed away. A Welsh tinker and several shepherds and wool-drivers lived in tenements owned by Alderman Wheeler, and were too prone to have bits of washing fluttering out of their windows.

When first he had come to town six years ago, John had rented the gabled house which was now his by purchase. It was the easternmost of three solid old-fashioned cottages, which had been thrown into one but kept their separate front doors. The other two stood empty, or rather were used for storage by their owner, a wool-merchant who lived elsewhere in the town. Black and cream was their colouring, plaster from Welcombe near-by, timbers from the forest. The upper floors were corbelled out over the lower, and several of the corbels were roughly carved with hearts and open roses. The windows were casements with leaded diamond-shaped panes, the under rooms low with heavy beams in their ceilings (easy to warm in the winter, said John, looking a giant in them), the upper rooms high raftered and draughty (cool solace in summer, said John).

The same thrust, good humour and fine physical presence which had won him a wife beyond his deserts, carried him to the chief office in the town in rather less than due time. From being burgess he became petty constable, from petty constable one of the two chamberlains of the borough. With his burly forties he developed an incurable love of the law and its high-sounding Latin phrases, and was generally bringing a suit against someone, usually with success. Still everyone knew that when Bramley's wife lay dying, John dropped a prosecution for debt as if it were a hot Virginia potato. Soon his days were as full of civic duties as a Yuletide pudding of raisins, nevertheless he kept the full glare of one brown eye on a prospering shop and business.

Looking back, it seemed that the only sad thing that had happened during those years was the loss of the two first children, and even this John managed to present to advantage. "Gentle blood! Crazy gentle blood!" sighed the big handsome man going round getting his dinner and sympathy from one after another willing neighbour, while pale Mary lay abed listening for the sounds of the carpenters arriving, bringing round the little coffin. Rich brother-in-law Lambert, from Barten on the Heath, no longer ashamed of the connection, rode over for the funeral, marched by John's side with bent head and rueful countenance first in the procession that went down to the fine church by the glassy river's side. His wife stayed behind to comfort her sister, gave the scared only maid bustling well-meant directions how those swaddling bands and caps and skirts (her own gifts to her god-child) must be made in a great parcel and thrust to the back of the linen-cupboard, how the ladder must be fetched and

that cradle got out of sight up into the loft above the empty back chamber until it should be needed again.

Next time, said John, all should be well, for now, God be praised, he could afford a second maid to help his ailing wife. Next time lingered, and came at last on a showery April morning when the daffodils were beginning to peer in the strip of garden that ended in grey-green country fields behind the house, and to the back door came Avice Clarke, the pedlar woman, who was younger then and dwelt over the dale, coming in to town only on market-days. She left behind her in the wet meadow her companion for that season, a broken-down, red-nosed scarecrow of a fellow whom she supported rather than the other way, since his only skill lay in singing a couple of naughty catches and nipping into his bag trifles left unguarded on washing-lines.

Avice would have told Mary's fortune, began to promise great things for "that young gentleman with whom you are big this time, my mistress." "That doxy at my door! Drive her out with a besom. Woman avaunt!" cried Mary with face aflame, ran upstairs to hide herself, stumbled round the awkward corner made by the chimney stack, and was taken with her pains. She would have liked her son to resemble her husband. John and she were still lovers then, and in the evenings with his barrel chair pulled forwards into the light and warmth of the wide hearth, John would hold forth on the further wonders he meant to accomplish.

"I will have mine coat of arms conceitedly emblazoned with a bird of prey brandishing a weapon, in token also of the great deeds done at Bosworth Field by my sire's sire, for the which services rendered in battle he received a grant of lands from her Majesty's

sire's sire," mused John, seeing himself already Bailiff of the town, Justice of the Peace, and applying to the Heralds' College for authority to write himself "gentleman."

His son and heir was fifteen months old when the expulsion of one Botte from the council of Aldermen left vacant a seat to which John was elected. His Alderman's thumb ring, massive, well-suited to its massive wearer, came round from the goldsmith's in Bridge Street and provided an evening's happiness—more dreams, more schemes. He had to wait three years more until he attained the highest honour in the gift of the Corporation, and by that time there were two male children on their legs in his house, two fine sons ready to poke their mop heads out of his dormant windows and watch the noble sight of the Aldermen and Burgesses in their robes coming to escort the High Bailiff. With a silver mace carried pompously before him by a Serjeant clad in warlike buff, and great boots, John paced to prayer or council meeting. His household got to know council days by two signs, the little bell speaking from the Gild Chapel tower and father's robes lying on the hall chest, ready for him to assume when the long-skirted procession of civic worthies approached, filling up the narrow street. His Serjeant waited on him daily and the Town Clerk once a week. Mary saw less of her husband, but there was a third child on the way.

A much more remarkable company came clattering down Henley Street, calling to know which was the Bailiff's door, on All Hallond's Eve, in the first year of John's bailiwick. "What's the noise? What's the sport? Be there bears come to the town?" cried the maids rushing to their window: but there was better

sport than a bear-baiting towards. The Players, the Queen's Own Company of play-actors, with the light of a smoky red sunset shining on their faces and dresses, had arrived in the town and came to ask John's formal permission to act their mysteries in his Gildhall. They came accompanied by half the populace at the run, stout men that had not hastened this score of years, decent wives tugging roaring children by the hand, a ragtail of shouting lads and barking dogs. There seemed to be a goodly number of them, many mounted on showy horses that curveted and gambolled, and by their persons you might guess what characters they would personate when lights were low. They were led by a great gross fellow mounted on a skewbald and blowing a trumpet: a couple of youths in diced doublets beating on gilt drums came behind him, and somewhere in the midst of the affair a little hook-nosed dwarf was taboring and piping fit to set lame legs a-jigging. Further there was amongst them a lantern-jawed longshanks, who would probably play the Devil or the ghosts, a wild-looking, battered fellow, with an outlandish felt hat decorated with plume of tail feathers pulled low on his pock-marked brows, a murderer beyond doubt, and several sad-faced gentlemen soberly clad in garments of rusty black satin—something noble in their air—fallen monarchs or counsellors. In the middle of the show lumbered a waggon bulging with quite plebeian-looking parcels, some very insecurely fastened, but mostly hidden by the folds of a great curtain of scarlet and silver tinsel. On the cart, looking languid and fiddling with garlands of false flowers, lolled half a dozen lovely lady-faced lads, lacking beards—princesses after dark. A couple of executioners wearing blackamoor's masks

and a little goat-bearded, shivering Jew, at the sight of whom all the boys in the crowd blew cat-calls, brought up the rear of the procession with the pack-horses, whom alone of the troupe looked like ordinary folk's pack-horses.

Players in the town! Never before in its history had such an entertainment been offered or sanctioned. John had had trouble with his Council. City worthies and players never made good company. Only the highest and the lowest of society, pronounced Alderman Sadler, could afford to mingle with the writers and actors of plays. Look at London! Again and again the keepers of the largest carriers' inns in the city were being admonished and fined for allowing performances in their yards. Never whisper what destruction of foolish virgins, what enticing of apprentices, what naughty suppers and dicing and drinking parties took place in the dressing-rooms and secret places of an inn flung open to actors. And then the riff-raff they brought with them—masterless men by the dozen calling themselves carpenters and horse-holders, horse-thieves calling themselves grooms, whoremongers calling themselves goodness knows what, not to speak of coney catchers, purse-slitters and probably plotters of high treason.

John said that no inn in this town need be polluted. The Queen's Own Company (dwelling on the words) could perform four edifying pieces, chosen by the Burgesses themselves, here in their own Gildhall, jerking his thumb; as to secret places for tiring rooms, the actors could very well have this single large chamber in which we now sat.

The Town Clerk was commanded to read aloud the list of the plays proffered, and either some magic in

their names, or the weather, which was abominably dreary, settled the matter. The players arrived in the town on All Hallond's Eve, and the next morning half the boys of the school played truant (since the school was unhappily in the same building), flattening their noses against the windows of the Gildhall, and watching the erection at its upper end of a solid stage made from planking set upon barrel-heads.

John attended the first performance in state, as he had foreseen.

Enter the Master Bailiff, leading by the hand his first-born, a fair male child in its fifth year, on his arm his lady (in hopeful case) leading by the hand a second male child.

On a hoary autumn evening when the grass in the fields behind the house was as stiff as scrubbing brushes with early white frost, they hurried through the sharp cold streets behind the bobbing yellow eye of the Serjeant's lantern. No fear that people were not going to the play. Before they got in sight of the Chapel Tower, they found themselves caught up in a flight of cloaked and hooded figures all bending the same way. At the Gildhall doors a passage had to be cleared for them, and they got a cheer from the shivering stamping crowd that waited with their breath rising like smoke into the torchlit glare. John enters, bowing to right and left, hale and grand in his long furred robes and gold chain; behind him comes Mary in her branched black velvet gown with its thin upstanding lace collar, her fair hair catching lights from the many tapers on the walls, her profile a little pinched like the Queen's on a coin.

The hall, a noble chamber of great length with glossy black timbers in its roof and glittering green diamond-paned casements down either side, is steamy

and packed. At the back, where folk of the poorer sort are standing, the smell is somewhat strong. John takes his seat of eminence and rolls an eye around. Everyone who matters is here, and many you would not have credited have come scuttling to see a Show. Alderman Sturley is here, trying to look as if he were not, since he was the one who thumped with his fist on the Council table, and said that he knew of one man in this town who would never countenance players. He has brought his two gentlemanly sons from Oxford. Alderman Cawdrey is here with his popish wife and daughters. Well, poor souls, they will relish an outing. Barber, Host of the Bear, has brought along a party of six, and Dixon, owner as well as Host of the Swan, seven. The Sadlers are here in strength, Alderman John, two sons, a nephew, a wife and three daughters.

But the side lights are being doused, the red and silver coat of a herald flares up, the only colour left in the hall, and to a great intake of breath drowned by a crackle of trumpets, the piece begins—*The Famous Victories of Harry the Fifth.*

John lifts his first-born on to his big knee, and there the child sits as taut as if he were wired. Two Archbishops in embroidered skirts and towering mitres are sweeping about the stage, speaking mellifluously. Under a canopy on his throne sits the King, glorious Harry himself, now a monarch with a stern brow under a crown flashing with large cold jewels, but one to whose name clings the fragrance of a misspent youth. He wants to go war with somebody, brave national fellow, and so he shall! The stage begins to fill with heavy-treading figures in clashing armour, sounds that awake memories in grey-beards and echoes in the roof. Even the clown is going to fight the French. And then

to see the foolish French in their blue tents spangled with fleur-de-lis—that Dolphin, a creature that can think of nothing better than boasting of his horse and drinking, the night before a battle. Great Harry is praying on his knees as a soldier should. One knows things must fall aright, but until he has captured his foreign-speaking princess and led her blushing to the altar and the Archbishops again, nobody dares let his breath.

Three hours of it, and nothing with amorous gesture to wound the eye, nor with slovenly speech to hurt the ear of the most chaste! What's the piece to-morrow night? *Mankind, a Morality.* The bailiff's younger son has to be carried out screaming, for there's an awful moment in the middle when the Devil is announced and bellows from some moist helly cabinet—really the council chamber, of course, though it doesn't seem possible—"I am coming—with my legs under me!" A flare of powder and an explosion of fireworks follows, but no Devil, only a collection is taken. "God bless you, my master. I know you will not say me nay. Gracious thanks, gracious dame"—rather unwilling fumbling for pence and groats to give into the hats of these exquisite-speaking persons.

To *The Ravishment of Lucrece* the bailiff takes only his brother and his first-born, wisely enough, perhaps, for people at the back soon begin to shout out to the simple Roman gentleman not to leave his wife alone with that great prince who is bending such unseemly looks on her. No use, the silly husband departs and here's the poor dame sleeping like a dove in her bedchamber, while round the door are creeping the greedy long fingers of one who means no good. Ay, here comes that dreadful black-a-vised Tarquin, muttering to himself as

he strikes a light with his naked falchion on a flint. His taper burns up, the whites of his wicked eyes glitter and so does his murderous blade. Anyone but a simpleton has guessed what's in his mind ever since the costly banquet. Several members of the audience cry out to Madam Lucrece to wake up, hop out of bed and have a run for it, they even clear a way for her to the window, but all to no purpose. A tragedy, this piece, for in the last act after the poor dame has lamented her sufficiently, she slowly presses a dagger into her broken heart, and everyone goes off to kill Tarquin as is only fitting. God give all chaste wives the strength to act likewise.

The Players stayed a week in the town, and then left as suddenly as they had arrived, and no harm done as far as eye could see. Mary, to be sure, got a shock when she found her dish-faced maid Bet leaning out of her window and calling to a gentleman called Romeus in the garden, and even father after supper was wont to sigh for a while that "in sooth he knew not why he was so sad," but after a month or two the town quieted down and began to talk of other things, and the Players, like Christmas, became a memory, something enjoyed last year, and God willing, to come again. . . .

John had been prospering when he made his advantageous marriage, and for some years yet, like the wool-trade, he was to prosper. He was presently able to buy the two other cottages adjoining his own. The family moved into them, and left to be used as shop and warehouse the first little home in which the children had been born. To their neighbours it seemed that good fortune could have little more to offer them, but John still had his dreams. (And indeed, when the Queen had made her progress into these parts, if only she could have come seven years earlier—while he was

bailiff—and gone fifteen miles further—into this town —who could say what might not have happened? "Arise, Sir John!") When the troubles began, just at the wrong time, when neither of them was exactly young, he did not tell his wife, because he did not believe in them. He continued to do as he had always done, spend what he hoped to make next year, borrow, which was still easy, and hope for the best. When it was no longer possible to pretend that things were as they should be, he found that his good partner had aboded the truth for some months and been saving already—a blow, as he had come to her full of hopes of startling economics. She did not say that she had been waiting for this moment ever since she had leant against her bridegroom's broad breast in the church porch on her wedding day. Mary had to do something that she did not like, invite her rich sister and brother-in-law over to dinner, feed them well, and then leave John to make a proposal to Lambert. It was easily done, a simple family arrangement that need never come to strangers' ears. Asbies was the name of Mary's property at Woncote, left to her by grandsire. The manor-house was long and rambling, larger than this house, and with it went sixty broad acres. When John had made enough money they would go to live there during the summer months, and perhaps retire there altogether in their old age. The Lamberts were kind. They even seemed glad to lend the money, and brother-in-law would not hear of taking interest. He would be well content, said he, stroking his curled white beard, his rosy cheeks beaming, his blue eyes sparkling with benevolence, to receive merely the rents and profits of the estate until the loan should be repaid.

Mary's two unmarried sisters died the next winter

within a few weeks of one another, two gentle spinster ladies; Will had got just the same long, pale high-bred face and ever so slightly receding chin. Each left Mary her little share of the old grandsire's patrimony. John, going further afield, sold these outright to others of his wife's kin—the sons of her stepmother by a first marriage. Still all in the family, said John, but Mary began to fancy that her sisters and their husbands no longer cared to visit her and, tightening her lips, she ceased to ask them to a house that was not as neat as it had been.

When she had seen nothing of the Lamberts for nine months, a little clutching dread which came to her in the middle o' nights sent her bravely out to Barton, uninvited on an autumn day. She returned looking as if she had caught cold, and in a whisper told John that he must send for Alderman Sturley, the lawyer. When she had mentioned Asbies, her sister had smiled and turned from the subject, while brother-in-law stroked his white beard in a manner she did not like.

The loan was due to be repaid in three months. John had to put his pride in his pocket and go to his friends. None too soon the exact sum was scraped together and he rode out to Barton with it stowed in his saddle-bags. But now—preserve an honest business man from gentle kin—brother-in-law Lambert, quite changed from what he has been, with an absolute admonishing air, explains shortly that he has made many improvements at Asbies; other sums are owing to him, and he must accept all or none. He hopes, nobly, that his wife's sister and he may not part friendship; Asbies will be in good hands; indeed there have always been many who have thought it right strange and unmeet that the youngest daughter of

eight shall have the largest inheritance. Now things will be as they should ever have been.

So Mary is relieved of her country manor-house on the fringes of the forest, with its sixty broad acres and its kine yielding great pails of milk more like cream, and its wide starry skies across which the starlings murmur towards the little wood on autumn evenings. Her bed-time stories suffer a change. "There was once a princess of France that dwelt in a palace left to her by her sire, because though she was the youngest, he loved her the dearest," prompt the town-bred children. "Was there not such a tale once? Was there not such a tale?" in pop-eyed alarm. "Ay," says mother, leaning her bitter head on her sad hand, "I believe there was once such a tale—used to weary the world."

When Joan's birthday comes Godmother, as she is wont, sends her namesake a handsome gift. John has failed in his lawsuit against the Lamberts, but they bear no malice. Mary seizes the parcel, stows it in her basket and marches off with a slam of the door to buy her own child just such another in the town. She cannot do it, of course. The Lamberts' gifts always cost beyond belief. Snivelling Joan gets back the pretty mammet, the rag baby dressed as a Chrisom child in fine swaddling clouts, and Mary begins to learn to send humble thanks for trifling kindnesses to her growing children. . . .

Father's fair furred robes lie out on the chest, the little bell calls, but he never stirs. How can he, when half of those he is bound to meet know that he is as far as ever from returning their monies? How can he, when he must beg to be excused from paying his part towards every subscription for relief in the town? He hates to shun his fellows, but in due course, as must

be, he is deprived of his alderman's gown for non-attendance. He comes to sit about the house at all hours, slovenly-dressed, doing nothing, longing for a caller, a baldish, high-coloured, garrulous man, full of mirth and affliction. Mother has no time in which to solace him. Now she is the busy one—tap-tap-tap about the untidy house, so changed you would never know it for the same; only one serving-wench left, five grown children and that last-come infant to feed and dress. With her fair hair hanging in faded wisps out of a cap rakishly askew, her beautiful hands red as fire, her eye sharp as a knife and her voice gone shrill as a penny whistle, mother is the picture of a shrew as she goes openly about the meanest daily duties.

"Where's Will?" cries mother. "Where's my lord, that he lends not a hand to clear away? Past three o'clock, and the broken meats and foul platters still on the table; curses his piece, bolts it and is off to stretch his long shanks in some low tavern, I warrant ye. He shift a trencher! He scrape a trencher! Girl, where's your brother? There's a butt to be moved in the bolting-house, and he knows it. Where's Will, I say?"