

CHAPTER XVIII

JOURNEY'S END

HE had told them that it was not the Prince of Wales and the Princess Elizabeth who were coming to stay with him. It was two of his old fellows from the Bankside who would rather prefer an untidy house. They would expect no ceremony. One of them had been to prison several times.

All pleadings were vain. His daughters had seized upon the excuse of visitors expected from London to order something most distasteful to him. It was called the Spring Sweetening, and came as certainly as the cuckoo every march. While it went on a man's house was not his own and his life was not worth living. His female kind simply took all the furniture out of all the rooms and ranged it in the passages and courtyard. They had the very rushes off the floors and got the garden boy in to scrub the bare boards. Grottesquely disguised with their heads tied up in dusters and their skirts hidden by sacking aprons, they made war with besoms and beeswax upon cobwebs and clutter. Susanna had gotten from her husband a receipt of stewed herb-water which she sprinkled about the striped chambers. It made New Place stink like a Pest House. They called the cook-maid from her kitchen to help them, so cold meat was the fare for all during the sweetening week, served in a different room every day and at different hours.

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For some reason they always left the library till last. They had been in there all yesterday and this morning the master of the house was still bidden avoid it and enjoy himself in the garden. His guests were not arriving until supper-time. Susanna said that she believed New Place would just be ready for them. Ay, said Will, with half the books in his shelves standing on their heads, and last year's letters ranged on the top of this week's. He knew his library when the whirlwind had been through it. Would he like his house left unsweetened like that of a low fellow, then? Sweetening was an aristocratic rite. The nobility and gentry had it. The nobility and gentry, said Will, had other houses to go to while it took place. They were not bidden avoid their favourite chamber and enjoy themselves in the garden on damp spring evenings. Well, he had another house too. There had been nothing to prevent him going up to London and dwelling for a sen'night in that Blackfriars purchase he had never yet occupied. John would have borne him company. "Last time when I went away you lost my fellow Drayton's poem, of which he had no second copy," shuddered Will. "I marvel he consents to come here to-day." "He goes on from us to Clifford Chambers," smiled Susanna. "Marry, he may find my lady Rainsford's mansion larger than ours, but I warrant he will not find it cleaner. Ha! there comes the cart with the fresh rushes."

Truly if his fellows in London could have seen him now they would have thought their best author descended to the day of small things.

Susanna had been at New Place until ten of the clock last night and had left saying that she would be back betimes this morning. That would be her now.

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Will heard the latch of the porch door click and peered cautiously round the mulberry tree. He was sitting despondently on the hard wooden seat beneath it, reading in a little book on whose pages the early sunshine was casting a pattern of budding branches. Ay, there she was striding in with a determined look on her face and a brightly-coloured basket under her arm. He knew that look. It meant that before the day was out she would have fallen out with Judith. The sweetening always ended with a quarrel between his two daughters. Already last night he had heard one sharp voice asking another who had forgotten to feed the ferret so that my poor Snowdrop pined and died while her loving mistress was away at Ingon? This was a tragedy of which he had no knowledge. It must therefore have happened more than twenty years ago. Judith had the merciless memory of the illiterate.

His younger daughter had refused scholarship. She could not even write her name. At thirty-two she had still been unwed. She had been the companion provided for him by fate when he had retired at last. Naturally the brighter fairer sister would have been taken from him. Judith had small beauty and less wit. No man would want to marry her. Perhaps Will held no husband a better thing than any kind of a husband. He had not flown to arms when widow Quyny who did not mind what she asked had inquired: "Is it a disappointment to you, Master Shakespeare, that your younger daughter has never wedded?"

When he had got as far as the third week in April this year without the sweetening, he had begun to count himself safe from it. Judith's runaway match had upset all at New Place. If it had spared him the whirlwind he was prepared to admit that one good

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thing had come out of an unpromising affair. Even he surely could not be proud of his second son-in-law.

Tom Quyny was a younger son of that Richard who used to come up to London on Stratford business. Richard had been a prosperous merchant and a right dull neighbour. He was dead now and his widow kept a tight hold on the purse strings. When Tom had come to ask for Judith's hand Will had not jumped for joy as many had seemed to expect. He was fond of Judith; possibly he thought it a poor thing for her to cast herself away on a man four years her junior who did nothing for his living and had a horse-laugh.

He had consented to the match, he could not prevent it, but he had insisted that Tom must bring to it assurance of a sum not less than two-thirds as much as the handsome dowry left in her father's will to the bride.

The widow had been adamant and so had Will. The result had been that on a February day the betrothed couple had taken Scots leave. They had returned a month later when their ready money had run out, giggling and blushing as if they had done something high and romantic. They had not been able to afford a licence and had got themselves married during the prohibited season. They had twice been summoned to appear before the Consistory Court at Worcester to explain their failure to comply with the law, and had taken no steps to obey the order. They seemed to think their formal excommunication and heavy fine a good jest.

Will had Tom into the library alone. The marriage might be declared invalid and this bride was bringing her husband an heir as soon as she honestly could—of course Judith would, poor wench! Tom had not known

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why he had felt so awkward, so unable to do anything but loosen his ruff with a forefinger and stammer large apology and promises of amendment. He knew his Juey's father well enough by sight, had seen him time and again at City functions and neighbours' feasts—a Quyny had married a Sadler. If old tales told true Master Will Shakespeare had no right to look down his nose at a willing bridegroom. Tom Quyny had taken his girl to church ere ever he asked aught of her, which was more than some had done.

But he hadn't been able to feel anything like that when straitlaced Mistress Hall had come into the garden and said that her father was waiting to see Judith and her bridegroom and would see Master Quyny first, alone, in the library. That didn't sound good!

Juey and he had crept round to the back window of the library and taken a squint into that apartment to see how the gentleman was looking.

Zounds! it was a handsome chamber and no mistake, good money spent like water. The sunset light was spilling gold on to the rushes and firing the gilt-tooled spines of all those printed books in tree-calf bindings, packed as tight as herrings in their shelves behind my master's head. The new oak chamber with its fretted plaster ceiling seemed radiant with gold dust like one of those enchanted isles won by our sea-dogs from the King of Spain's settlers—full of silver mines and emeralds hidden in cold earth. The master was sitting in his writing-chair in the opposite window bow, one elbow planted on the table t'other hand stuck in his vest, thinking, by the shape of him—arr!

He was no size in his plain country suit, he was party bald, he wasn't in London galley-slaving his players at the Globe Theatre!

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All the same, Tom felt like death. His heart was in his boots. He had to ask Juey to get him a cup of something strong ere he tapped at that door and as he did that he hideously remembered how Master Shakespeare who had influence at Court had been able to help his father over some business for Stratford Corporation years ago.

And then look you! he had found himself bidding for the approval of this high-spoken gentleman.

Talking as if Juey was some princess! Saying he would bear his lawyer with him to see the bridegroom's mother and her lawyer (Beard a cave of dragons!)

Fixed by the penetrating gaze of those hazel eyes, changing like running water, Tom found himself telling how he would like to work. Juey and he had thought to take a lease of the house where she had been born, and set up a tavern there—"Quyny's Tavern, corner of High Street and Bridge Street." Brave that sounded! And when little stranger arrived they purposed to call him for his grandsire—Shakespeare Quyny! That sounded not so ill neither, eh?

They parted sweet as sucking doves, father-in-law limping forward with a smile, holding out his hand and saying that his daughter and her husband would always find a welcome at New Place. Couldn't have been handsomer.

And faith 'twas a handsome man when it smiled, a very well shaped man, not to be equalled in this town for upright bearing and civil demeanour. Something about him. Tom felt himself a bit of a hero after all as he took his father-in-law's hand and blurted out a banged oath to look well to his wife and prove a son of whom no man need be ashamed.

Nevertheless the owner of New Place had altered his

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last will and testament after his younger daughter's wedding. When people heard that Collins had been sent for again from Warwick they prophesied that Judith was losing her portion. She was not doing that. Will had merely tightened up the provisions with regard to her so that however her husband behaved she should not easily find herself penniless. He appointed his other son-in-law, Dr. Hall, to look after her interests. The only actual piece of property Judith lost in this amended will was the broad silver-gilt bowl presented to her father by the Company at the Globe on his retirement. Belike he did not care to think of that shining on the dresser in Quyny's Tavern, the Cage.

That name of ill-omen was all that was left of the original building in which Judith had been born and of which she appeared to have happy memories—marvellous! Its echoing stone chambers had tottered and crashed to the ground caught in the great flames that had also destroyed the Sadlers' house in Wood Street, the little house into which Judith Sadler had vowed wrathfully that errant Will Shakespeare should never set foot again. She need not have troubled, he never got the chance. The Great Fire had seen to that.

Judith Sadler and he were friends again now, had been many seasons. She had come forward like the brisk little gentlewoman she was and said: "Will, I have been in the wrong. I am sorry for my fault." "Ah," said he, "your fault was an atomy, mine was a leviathan."

So that was well again and Judith confessed how she had feared that he would try to draw her Ham away after him to become a great writer of stage plays in London! That black fear had been at the bottom of her heart all this while. Will was retired now and a

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right Stratford man again, and his grandchild played with Ham's children.

Will had left his daughter's child his presentation bowl and all his plate. His wife's beauty, fair Anne's legendary beauty, after missing both daughters had descended to a granddaughter with interest. It was not lost. Susanna's child was of such flower-faced loveliness that even her father, grave Dr. John Hall, admitted the fact. He said that he hoped it might not prove a temptation to her. Elizabeth was her name, one new to the family, the princess's name. She was in her ninth year and still an only child, a matter of regret to her mother. Dr. John never said what he felt. He had not grown an easier man with years. Susanna had had to grow graver. There had been a time during which the happiness of that marriage had seemed to hang in balance.

Will had come home to lead a peaceful life. It was to her father not her husband that Susanna came raging on a cloudy June evening when she had been five years a wife. Young John Lane was taking away her character in Stratford! He had said that our fair Susanna had the running of the reins and had been naught with Rafe Smith up at the Palmers! He had said it at the Sadlers' and Ham like an honest neighbour had ordered him out of his house, but not everybody would do that, and if he had dared to say it at the Sadlers' who were own uncle and aunt to Rafe, he must have been saying it everywhere, this five weeks past.

Susanna's face made one feel hot to look at it, her small eyes spat lightning, her nose was sharp as a pen. She certainly did not look like an erring matron.

Will sighed and pushed papers about on his table and asked her what she wanted him to do. "Kill John

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Lane!" said Susanna. Why should not her husband do that? Now came the sad part of the story.

Susanna and her John had differed. He did not love her as he ought, as he used, he came home cross and refused to go out to neighbours' houses. He kept bones in his wife's bed-room. Susanna struggled not to weep and succeeded because she was passing wrath. It was John's fault that any of this had befallen. If he had gone with her to the dancing at the Palmers' that night as she had entreated him, young Lane could not have started scandals. Ay, she had gone alone after some sharp words with John. She had run upstairs, put on the red gown which he said was Babylonish and gone off with warm cheeks and a beating heart to enjoy herself for once in a way, even if she was the drudge of the sourest-natured man in Stratford.

Young Lane's sister had married Cousin Thomas Greene's brother, so there was kinship of a sort between New Place and the mischief-maker. Will asked what qualities had this young fellow and was told that he was one that held himself to be a great heartbreaker. For herself Susanna always took him down. No doubt she had! Will said wearily that he would inquire into the matter and if he found the scandal was spreading would assist his daughter to prefer a charge of slander. Susanna kissed him smartly and went out and he turned back to reading a letter.

The Globe Theatre of which he was still a sharer had been burnt out. This was not his lucky day. That thatched roof never approved by Peter Street had caught fire during a performance of *All is True*. Heminge, dear fellow, took care to explain how the audience had been so held by Will's play that they had kept their seats long after the smoke was rising in puffs and

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wreaths. One of the cannons' shot off at the entry of King Henry to Cardinal Wolsey's house (Will would know the scene) had been stuffed with wadding, a piece of which had alighted smouldering on the roof. Within an hour the whole house had been laid in ruins, but God be praised nothing had perished save wood and straw and a few forsaken cloaks. One man had his breeches set on fire, but by the benefit of a provident wit had put them out with a bottle of ale. The Company would not be greatly inconvenienced as they could move at once to the Blackfriars and act there for the rest of the season, but the sharers would suffer a sharp loss of income. Heminge enclosed a sonnet upon the pitiful burning of the best playhouse in London.

Will set it aside, for somebody was scratching at the door. It was Susanna again. She had come, she said for her little basket. Bending down over the back of Will's chair she added in a somewhat trembling voice: "You never asked me if it was true." "True?" "About Rafe Smith. He was one of my old—playmates you know."

Will remembered very well the days when Rafe Smith had come stumbling through his porch door with messages from Uncle Ham and plants for the garden. His had been one of the heaviest faces at Susanna's wedding to great Dr. John. He was a bachelor still and lived with his widowed mother in a small house in Sheep Street.

"He was there that night," said Susanna. "We danced, but I soon tired, having been put so far out of temper. So then we sat awhile in the arbour alone and he said I looked weary and I wept and—we did kiss. That was all."

And that was all, except that Susanna did bring her

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suit successfully, and Dr. John accompanied her to the court with such a look in his cold blue eye and such a thick cudgel under his arm that all agreed it was well for young Lane that he had not appeared to defend himself. The dark cloud threatening Hall's Croft dissolved in gentle rain and Dr. John remembered not to leave bags of bones in his wife's bedroom and Susanna ceased to vex him to go to dances. Poor weak Rafe Smith would never have been the man for her.

Will saw that his friends had been wrong when they prophesied that he would find the quiet of Stratford unendurable. He had retired cautiously inch by inch. Everyone had been so certain that he was making the mistake of his life in leaving London. For the first three years after he had come home he had continued to write plays—comedies again, and as good as any he had ever done. He hadn't got to the bottom of his barrel of beer yet, said the Stratfordians. None of your taplash! These last plays had the grace of the calm morning after a storm.

Now he had ceased to write altogether. He had bought a house in Blackfriars but for two seasons had not occupied it, having grown so in love with home. Last time he had gone up to stay in London he had taken Dr. John with him. They had gone for a fortnight and come back at the end of a week. Will said he had done everything that he wanted in that time, seen all his old friends. He had not been to Court. The rainbow that had shone in the Royal firmament a dozen years ago had pined and faded. The Prince of Wales, the hope of England, had died, as those whom the gods love are apt to do. His successor was a sickly froward child. The Princess Elizabeth, a being whom it was impossible to stellify more than nature had already

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done, had married and left these shores to enter on a career of many sorrows. With these two gone all that had been ethereal of Court had fled. There was nothing left remarkable there.

"I love straggling journeys abroad no more. Travailing by horse, for want of use, is become wearisome to me. Let me be."

Susanna looked unhappy. Her husband had told her that her father was not strong.

"Moreover," said Will marking that look, "how could I go back even if I had the mind?" He pointed to the broad silver-gilt bowl presented to him by the Company at the Globe after a rare supper and heart-rending speeches such as players love to make.

Susanna thought that he ought to go on writing at home, poems perhaps. She rather fancied the picture of him sitting scribble-scribble-scribbling at that table and herself telling the neighbours when the new book was to be printed, and what it was to be about—magicians and blackamoor generals, glimmering Athenian forests, a princess supposed dead in child-bed tossing upon Grecian waters in a golden coffin. . . .

He said he had no time for stringing idle verse while yonder mad fellows Will and Tom Combe were planning to enclose the common pastures of Stratford Bancroft and plant pigsties thereon. The Corporation had applied for his aid in presenting a petition to the Privy Council and he had a multitude of letters to write on their behalf against the pigs.

Like his sire, he had come to love little law-suits. His handwriting was over driven to the verge of illegibility. The capital S in his surname looked like a snail.

Also, said he, was there not the preacher coming to stay this week? This silenced Susanna, for she knew

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that he had offered the hospitality of New Place to an itinerant Puritan preacher solely to please her husband. It could not be imagined that her father would find much in common with that guest.

But you never could tell. He loved playing the host and entertained freakish company. There were those two ill-favoured old men the Cowpers, scarcely to be termed gentlemen. They drank too much, they were disgracefully poor. One of them had married a wench off his own farm, a creature that dared not open her mouth, the other had gotten a fine shrew more of an age to be his mother than his wife. Will said that Tony and Dick Cowper had been friends of his misspent youth.

Then there had been the Sandells. Everyone in Stratford knew that Fulke Sandells' daughter Mary, Susanna's own age and unwed, was carrying a child. The unbending old farmer had taken this disgrace as might be expected, shutting himself up in his house—the second house you saw as you went to Shottery across the fields—and refusing all comfort. When he had to come into town on market days he plucked his hat low on his brows and pretended not to know anybody. Will hurried after him down Chapel Lane, calling: "Ho! neighbour! Neighbour Sandells! stay a moment. I lack a word with you." He took the stricken man by the sleeve and accused him roundly that he came no more to New Place. Keeping his eyes on the cobbles Sandells growled in a frightening voice, had they not heard that there was sickness in his house—ay, a taking sickness? "I have heard of your daughter's illness and was sorry thereof," said Will cheerfully. "Will you not choose a day to dine and bring her too!"

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Susanna took example from this, and offered to stand sponsor to the misbegotten waif, and did so, bearing it to the font herself and giving it her own name, a kindness that cost her small pains as the child soon died.

It was almost evening and the library was finished. The sweetening was done for another year—heigh-ho! How he had writhed to evade it this time! But his daughters would not see him shamed before London folk.

It was getting cold and he was still out in the garden. Susanna unpinned her apron and straightened her cramped back. She must call him in. At any moment the guests might be arriving, ill-matched travelling companions who were sure to have squared thirty times on their road here. She knew them both of old.

The younger, the bigger, was Jonson. He was the one that was always in and out of prison, and no wonder when you heard the sort of things he said, even about the King and Queen who had shown him so much favour. He announced himself one of the first men in London these days. He was extremely uncouth, jealous and quarrelsome, but without malice, and there was something Herculean even in his vanity. They said that when he argued with her father at the Mermaid Tavern the pair resembled a Spanish great galleon and an English man-of-war. Master Jonson was the former, built far higher in learning, solid but slow in his performance; the master of New Place was the English man-of-war hooray! lesser in bulk, but lighter in sailing, able to turn with all tides and tack about taking advantage of all winds.

She felt some natural shame at the thought of encountering his companion Drayton, since poor Judith

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had so lamentably burnt his verses by mistake during last year's sweetening. He was at work upon a labour of magnitude, a chorographical description of England in thirty books of rhyming couplets. The whole was to be called *The Polyolbion*. I do not think that I shall care to read it when it is printed, thought Susanna. Those many long lines stretching right across so many pages without any alleviance. . . . Indeed it had turned out after the accident that John who had spent an evening over the Warwickshire sheets sent for her father's approval, was the only person who had ever managed to get through them. He had said that they were true poetry!

Poor thin withered Master Drayton had never got the recognition he accounted his due. When one of his great works was given to the world his friends hid themselves behind newel posts and statues when they saw him coming. The only things that had brought him fame were some short musical stanzas which their author held in contempt. He was Will's age but looked less with his faded red curls, pale eyes of the turquoise shade that often goes with that complexion, and pleasantly civilized manners. Will still called him a lad. "Two of the lads are coming to-day."

When they had been younger Susanna and Judith had stolen out of bed one night and peeped through the keyhole to see what manner of lads their sire entertained after fairy-time. It had been a sad taking down for them, they could hardly believe their eyes, when they saw the company to whom he gave this jocund title—nearly all baldish, mostly over fifty, some sitting forwards with their elbows on the table, others pushed back on their stools with their dry old shanks stretched at ease, their faces flushed rosy above their white ruffs,

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and their arms flung about one another's shoulders. Some of them puffed at those long clay tobacco pipes from which arose a smoke that turned the chamber pale blue. Now and then one of them said something at which the rest roared fit to have the plaster off the ceiling. Watching this company around a table you could almost fancy yourself in London, thought Susanna, with the dark river outside and ships bound for the Indies and the Levant slipping down old Thames past the lighted windows of some famous tavern. 'Only, said Judith, you knew that there was nought but the Gild Chapel sleeping in the moonlight across the lane outside, because truly this was Stratford-on-Avon.

Judith was coming downstairs from their mother's apartments now. She looked forspent. The sisters went to the garden door with their arms about one another's waists, and Susanna called out to the lonely figure straying like a hound in the dusky orchard to come in: "Sir, your worship's Great House is sweetened."

He must have caught cold somewhere. Judith, her dish face puckered with fright and her large hands ashake was ready to swear that it had been at little Hart's funeral then. People always caught cold at funerals, standing about with their hats off by gravesides, everyone said so.

Their aunt's well-meaning little husband had died of a lingering sickness eight days ago leaving the poor woman with three great lads all short of fourteen years. One of them, Will, said that he was going to be a player. They had lived in the old home in Henley Street since the granddam had died. She had never recovered from the loss of her last-born, that player son who had been taken away so suddenly in London.

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None of her sons had attained old age—Uncle Dick, pining of a chill caught at his lambing, Uncle Gib, who looked so foursquare, panting his soul out a week after he had got wet through watching a dog-racing in a hailstorm on Cotsall.

Dr. John said that their father had appeared to him to be unwell before the gentlemen from London had arrived. It was the greatest mischance that he should have eaten and drunken so heartily with them when he was already feverish. But he had seemed so merry that night, sitting up with them till the candles were burnt out, clapping them gustfully on their backs as they all stooped upstairs to their fair chambers. Could he be gravely ill so quickly? John said that any illness was grave at their father's age. But he was only two and fifty, eight years younger than mother who looked like living for ever.

It was his birthday this morning and a shining April day, Tuesday, White Cross Market in Stratford. Through the open casement of this sunny bedroom one could hear the saffron-wheeled wains crunching up Church Street drawn by their heavy English horses with red and green ribbons plaited in their coarse manes and tails; country voices crying, "Have you any wood to cleave?" "Buy my fresh wick yarn, two bundles a penny!"

"Really warm at last," said neighbours meeting in the street. "I shall get my old mother down and out into the sun to-day." There were dogs lying at full length on half the doorsteps in Stratford this morning. It was warmer out of doors than in. Directly one came over the threshold a still radiance like an unquestioning benediction saluted all souls.

Judith was hanging her cloak on the perch behind

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the door. She had been sent home early last night. In her condition she was apt to weep at anything, and was better out of a sickroom when possible. Susanna had elected to stay at New Place, and from the fact that her husband had made no attempt to dissuade her, she guessed that he thought her father's condition serious. She had sat up all night, for he had been so feverish he had scarcely slept for more than ten minutes together. The strong light of the new day was dazzling to her heavy eyes, as if the sun were dancing upon water or caught in the silver flood of a mirror's surface. She had to mop her eyes with her handkercher as she went to the door and called the maid-servant to come in and neaten this room while she spoke to Mistress Quyny.

Out in the passage where pale gold and azure reflections from the valiant morning outside shone on the dimpled white-washed walls which were barred with stalwart strands of black oak set crooked, the sisters exchanged news in whispers, their small eyes snapping at one another.

"I have taken Elizabeth round to the Sadlers' for the day, as you bade. Uncle Ham says may he come to see father this afternoon? How does he do? The Reynolds want to know. I met a servant from the Nashes at the door here. What does John think? How has he slept? The Quynys want me to go back to dine and tell them all. I said I must ask you."

Susanna, waving away another maid coming up the stairs on all fours at work with a hand besom and a clattering dust-pan, whispered back that he still seemed hot and uneaseful. He had not slept long. John had been before breakfast and was coming again at noon. Mother kept sending to ask why he had not been to give

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her good morning. What would be best to tell her? What indeed!

It was darker and cooler, there was a draught out in the passage, which had at its far end a high window with bottle-end panes standing open and giving an unmeant view of chimneys, roof ends and part of an apple tree in flower. It was so quiet that you could hear the trot of a horse down Chapel Lane making no more noise than two fingers playing on a table.

"Has he fancies still? Has he asked for me?"

Susanna hesitated. He had only said one thing during the night and that was something she had hardly understood. Judith demanded to hear it and she repeated: "Nobody knows what I suffered." Judith said: "Did he mean in this sickness? John said he was not suffering greatly last night. What did he mean?" and Susanna said wearily that it had sounded as if he was thinking of something that had happened years ago.

She wanted to go round to her own house and down to the kitchen here to order John's dinner. He was coming to dine at New Place, and had said he would sup there too. It was settled that Judith should stay for the morning and come again at three in the afternoon, so that Susanna could get some sleep in preparation for another night.

But this last arrangement was not necessary, for when both of the sisters were in the house, as three o'clock was sounding from the Gild Chapel tower, the door of the best chamber was jerked open and Susanna's voice called to her sister just arriving in the hall:

"Judith! Come quick! I don't hear him breathing!"