CHAPTER II

OVER TO HEWLANDS

"NAH!" said Robin Ostler, inspecting upside down something which he had drawn out of his left hand breeches pocket. "That's not what I would display to you. That's the smith's note for the shoeing and ploughing irons; that's what that is. For my master. Now what I would display to you. . . ."

He undid the metal acorn buttons of his jacket, revealing another, worse worn but its double, underneath—no vest. Will, sensitive to smells, stepped a little aside. It was past three o'clock, judging by the position of the sun over the crooked brick chimneys of the Bear; only two hours more of full daylight. If he was going to walk out into the country this afternoon, he ought to be gone now. It was foul underfoot and he would get mired overshoes, and Joan would notice and ask where he had been, in front of them all at the supper-table; on the other hand he had put on his brogues and taken a clean shirt this morning when he had fully meant to go, and he had his reason all pat—had to see Sandells about the barley sowing for next year's malt; also it was Saturday and they knew out there that this was his free day from the shop, and might be looking for him. Six weeks since he had been; there would be changes in leaf and hedge, and the free air would freshen him.

"There!" said Robin triumphantly, "that's what I would show to you. What I calls my good-luck piece. Handle it wary, for 'tis holy stuff. What would you call that now?"

He passed to the young man a scrap of linen, once white, of excellent quality, cross-soiled where it had been folded into four like a handkercher.

"What fair dame gave you this favour, old boy?" asked Will lightly unpicking it, seeing all that there was to be seen of it with one quick glance of his gay curious hazel eyes. At a flick from one of his long fingers the little square gathered itself back into its accustomed folds, and lay quiet and secret in his palm.

"No womankind," breathed Robin reverently, "'twas a young gentleman gifted it on me, in fee for my services and on account of his having nothing for the ostler in his pocket. Master Fox, he was called, and not ill-named neither, for he was a drawn fox when he got here. Used to be tutor up at Charlecote in th' owld Queen's days, but must flee for his life by reason of his un-popish opinion. 'My good fellow,' says he standing scant of breath where you stand now, 'you have cared well for my poor beast and I will benefact you. . . .' He feels in his pockets, and says more to hisself than me: 'I must get to the coast! Are you a free man?' says he, with the sweat standing out like peas on his lean forehead and his black eyes boring two desperate holes in my jerkin. 'Say, do you not abhor the abominations of idolatry?' To quieten him I told him that I thought as he did, whereat he gives into my hand instead of my groat this fair piece of cambric. And says he: 'take this then, friend, for 'tis part of a heavenly garment.' And so it is, for as he goes on to tell me, the shroud of which this piece was

once parcel, was the same worn by Master Ridley when they took him to be burnt in Bread Street (and there's a jest out of place) in Oxford-town, together with ancient Master Latimer, he that was our bishop in these parts. Eighty-four years had our bishop in his dish, and when in his clothes they tell that he appeared but a crooked and silly old man, but when he was stripped to his shroud he stood bolt upright and showed as comely a father as you might lightly behold. Master Ridley, though the younger, was the weaker vessel; he was weakly also in his inward parts," Robin touched his belt, "like me to my cost this many a year. 'It were best for me to go in my truss still,' says he to his brother martyr. 'Nay,' says our bishop, 'it will put you to the more pain, and it may do a poor man good.' 'Be it so in the name of God,' says Master Ridley, and unlaces himself. But alas for him, poor Willy, whereas our bishop received the flame as if it were embracing him and died in a very short time with little pain or none, Master Ridley, whose garment piece this is, by reason of the ill-building of the faggots under him, could not by any means come to his death. He cried aloud repeatedly: 'Let me come to the fire!' in a wonderful loud voice, intermeddling with: 'In manny dominy,' and 'Lord have mercy on me, I cannot burn!'; and even when he had got his death and fallen sideways in his chains from his stake, men saw that on the one side he was still whole and clean, shirt and all untouched by flame, wherefore many present hastened to get a rag of him, because, thought they, this is the garment of a saint and shall protect men from the devil. Well, for my part I know that for seven and twenty year my piece has sat in my pocket keeping from me plague, famine and other unhelpfulnesses. So handle it wary,

says I, for 'tis something holy. Mark you! I show not this to every soul."

"And that's what mother calls ill company," thinks Will as he makes his way out of the back of the town into the open country ten minutes later.

Eighteen years old last St. George's Day, and nothing in this world to do! Can you blame a young fellow when you feed him skimpily, and he has to have a brother's truckle bed in his attic chamber, that when he does get the chance he turns out to see some fresh faces and pick up the news?

"Is there naught in the shop you could be about?" screams mother when she sees him reaching for his hat from the perch behind the door. Will slips out silently. After five years of watching that decaying business he knows there is not much doing after dinner on a Saturday.

"Known in every tavern in the town." True, and yet not true, for although you might fairly write him down a haunter of taverns, he's no drinker. Never again after that one night, when a party of young swashers in from Rowington called him sneak-cup, forced him in very defence of manhood keep bottle for bottle for them. The two Skinners. . . . Mother takes no offence at mention of them, yet if she but knew they're far worse than the Cowpers who look as coarse as they are. Tony Cowper, that's the kind of fellow mother means. Well, Will likes him little enough, with his long lean shanks, thrusting shoulders, ragged head of black hair and foul-speaking mouth of blackening teeth, sharp-pointed like a dog's. Dick's as bad, though with a difference, plumpy, red-cheeked, deeming himself the devil of a lady-queller, staring down all the wenches with his popping blue eyes.

They can't read or write, they go cowish in the presence of authority, their nails are bitten and they speak the same style as their own farm hinds. Still they always have plenty to chink in their purses and shall have more when the old man dies. Last Pentecost when there was a fair in the town they brought in with them some womankind, ladies they called them. For weeks before they were talking loud of how they would be bringing the ladies, and how the pretty sweetings would be plaguing them for comfits and ribbons and laces. One might have guessed from that, yet when they jangled into the yard, very late for their pompously bespoken dinner, each with a pillion load of petticoats behind him, Will, hurrying to help the ladies down could hardly utter for expectancy.

"Ladies . . ." There was a word to lead you prisoner in a red rose chain; lily-fingered, blue-veined creatures, so light-footed they might dance on flowers and not injure stuff as fair and forceless as themselves, ivory-flanked nymphs, always fleeing into their own secret groves where no man may follow, ashamed to kiss, ashamed to bear, yet mermaidens all the time, bound to sing, bound to ensnare, to set a man's heart a'thumping in his thick breast with one glance of their cool quick-turning eyes.

Will knew a lady when he saw one. One had come into the shop not a month before and spoilt him for work for a week, though she was no beauty when you had rid your brain of her soft velvet skirts and little green morocco slippers, and carcanet of pearls and enamel playing hide and seek among the silver laces that looked so simple but were so cunningly wreathed about her demure throat and musk-scented bosom. She lighted in calling for gloves because her hands

were a'cold, and outside in the street, grimly cloaked and peering disapproval after her, sat her three waiting women, their horses held by dapper grooms who stood in approved attitudes with toes turned out and eyes looking straight ahead at nothing. A merry dancing sparkling little gentlewoman, she darted into the brown shop like sunshine after the March rain, liked all she saw, liked nothing, snatched from the string where they dangled above her head the largest gauntleted horseman's gloves in the place, and posturing in the entrance called to someone to love her in this pair! She peeled off her light taffety riding mask, showing a parchment-hued brow, a pair of eyebrows arched but black as night. She is almost monkey-faced, yet when she lays her cheek on her muffle of sable furrings and reminds him that in their last encounter four of his five wits came off halting, a gentleman might die for her. She had with her a young gentleman, point-device languid, with a neat gold beard and a head of tight curls, and as Will learnt from the lad that had to run after the grooms with the lady's mask, and her little jewel-hilted riding-whip, and her own gloves of white kid sewn with gilt thread and silk roses—all left behind her—she was the only heir of a high house and shortly to be wed to a county.

There! that's what Will means by a lady, that's the kind of stuff for his worship—a creature free-spoken and sparkling as her own diamonds, standing with her hand on her hip, being witty at the expense of a real gentleman.

The Cowper lads' ladies were just two wenches off one of their own farms, come without the master's knowledge and full of their own daring and fears. The third of them who fell to Will's share was their

friend on a visit from London, older, with a curled front of Cain-coloured hair under a cheap new-guised hood. At a distance they might be mistaken for better than they were, but when they got close you must mark the crude angry dyes of their gum-stiffened mock velvets, their tawdry necklaces, satinisco hoods and burst gloves. When Will began to speak they stared at him, winked at one another and stinted their snickers. That was because Will spoke like mother, in the style of your young sprigs that have supped the sup of learning at Oxford or Cambridge. Once when he was hanging about the Swan, a gentleman from London mistook him for a fellow traveller and asked him from which Academe he came, but he has never tried to speak high-flown; like Joan's putting her fingers in her mouth to whistle, the thing has come by nature. Sitting tight-pressed between them to his meat, his distaste grew, and at the fair as he sauntered with the Londoner on his arm he would rather not have overtaken his old school-mate Ham Sadler.

Why can't our Will be like the Sadlers' Ham, mourns mother, that home-keeping youth, dutifully apprenticed to his uncle, and, at one and twenty, dutifully wedded to the brown little maid with a dowry that uncle chose for him? Will's features were aching from being twisted into an eager smile, he was dry and foot-sore though not hungry, when the Cowpers began to talk of more food. Dick and his little customer had squared, because he had put his great foot on her train and brought the skirt away from the waist. She had warts on her thumb and a laugh that made Will leap in his collar, but she was young, cherry-ripe, sloe-eyed and welcome after four hours of the mincing Londoner, who had been quick to find her cavalier of better under-

standing than her hosts, ranked herself with him, wanted to know how many men his father kept, and said he ought to get to London—his own notion, curse her.

Too late Will remembered what commonly drew him to Perrott's tavern. He was thankful when they were seated with their backs to the angel picture which was the prize of the quiet place—not quiet to-night though, with the fiddles and rebecs still playing outside, and inside, God be praised, enough company for his to pass unnoticed, as so many leaves in a forest. The pale spring sky full of small tufted clouds began to darken behind the budding chestnut branches: inside with curtains drawn it was nimble warm and the victuals delicate as ever. The lads, getting over their awe at finding themselves in the costliest tavern in the town, called upon Will to give them one of his miming turns. Well, he was there at their expense, and until he was about his fourteenth year had been able to recite and imitate in a manner which had won him sundry drubbings at school and a few sweet commendations. At eighteen he knew that he had lost most of his art and was apt to find himself blank of brain and possessor of two large hands and a pair of bolting shanks. Aided to his legs, however, he passed one of those damp hands, all stinging in the palm, through his fell of hair, cast around a reproving eye that started laughter ere he had opened his mouth, and got to his business—two country fellows going a'birding, then the curate playing at bowls with the schoolmaster (very like, this), next the old dame that never carried tales. Helped by the music playing outside (music always laid a finger on his heartstrings) he did better than he would have credited. Everyone ceased to eat and slewed in his chair. "A young gentleman—comes here often—his

sire once our Bailiff," whispered the tapsters. As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, thought Will, threw his heart over and gave them the mongrel hound not trained for a lady's chamber.

"And I am to get nothing in my belly this night?" he suddenly roared when he had got them all roaring with him, shambled off amidst groans and sighs, plumped himself down again between the female stuff, a hero, and thought how motley-minded it was to sit pressing the hand under the table of one who can't get your name aright, and what's the use of dreaming of London?

A night with the Cowper lads meant a sore head the next morning, a night with the Skinners must mean worse, Will guessed; 'twas a thing he had not yet adventured. He had gotten a start when Dick Cowper had asked the elder Skinner with the knowingest look in the world how were all his friends out at Flyford? and then on the top of the question begun to mew like a cat or, as Will realized a second later, like a newborn child. . . . So Roger Skinner, lounging astraddle the board bench, picking his teeth, with his dark face turned away and a sour green patch on his thin bestained cloak, must be lickerish, must he? The Skinners, gentle by blood, were fallen into poverty, and Will was almost certain that the business they went about in their neighbours' parks on moonlit nights was not within the law. The younger of them had once plucked him by the sleeve and whispered him to know if he cared for a sweet haunch of venison. " 'Tis too rich meat for my stomach," said Will. Even if he had cared for the risk, how was he to explain the appearance overnight of half a dead deer in the larder at Henley Street? "For his station, he means," sneered the elder

Skinner. "We take conies for your sort." "I thank you," said Will, "I am not coney-hearted neither."

Some business for his father had taken him out to Hockley two days afterwards, and returning home late across the woody waste of Bushwood Common, he had sighted a knot of dark figures moving purposefully against the skyline. It was a clear July night with a full moon, and when he had topped the rise he came to a halt and looked around, but his midnight workers had vanished into thin air. The road hereabouts ran alongside Sir William Catesby's park for a good half-mile. Will stepped down into the ditch, cow-parsley and hemlock, sweet smelling on this warm night, showering against his cheek and shoulder; he parted the lower branches of one of the monumental beeches that overhung the paling, and saw through a leafy screen printed bronze against a sea-green sky full of pricking stars, the deer-park stretching silent and tenantless, its herbage bathed in fountains of silver light, its distant copses motionless as sentinels. A little cold thought, hardly to be called a fear, more of an expectancy, swift and overlight as the reflection from a mirror crossing a ceiling, entered his bosom. The people he had disturbed might have been of another world. . . . Robin Ostler saw such. He was full of tales of dwindling lanterns that led honest travellers into waist-deep swamps, tall male shadows that lurched up behind village maids on lonely roads, causing them drop their clogs in affright, things that got into the churn and turned the milk sour, neighings as from a sweet breeder that sent whole stablefuls of horses wild. Once he had nearly stepped upon a right fair lady, lying laughing mother-naked on her back on a thyme bank, round her white waist a garland of flowers thick

as your wrist, and in her arms what d'ye guess? Why, a mortal man child of two or three years, but black as your hat! And then Greenaway the carrier had seen coming towards him one dusk across the only field path leading to the farm he must seek, an old aunt in a flapping cloak, carrying her head under her arm; on her other arm, as trim as you please, a midwife's basket!

Will released the branches he had been holding apart, let them close to with a sighing sound, stepped backwards and lost his footing. As he got to his knees he heard an oath uttered by none than a human throat, and looking up he perceived that against every writhen trunk above him a fellow was pressed so tight that he almost melted into its shape. Moreover his own fingers were sunk in the soft fur of a stiffening carcase hastily thrust into the weed-sprung ditch—a fine deer, so newly slain that its muzzle was still wet and warm. "Chest me!" gasped Will, and then must laugh at the thought of having taken the Skinners for fairies. The moonlight catching a cheek-line and a ragged beard had told him the names of two at least of this party.

"Get back to your wool-packs and keep your mouth shut, Master Shopkeeper," came in a violent whisper. "You'll be wise. . . ."

Well, though he was sorry for the noble beast so meanly taken, he was alone and this was no gear of his. He scrambled out of the ditch, dusted his knees and bowed to right and left. "Good night, Master Copper-Spur. Good night, Master Starve-Lackey. God ye good den, gentlemen all, and give thanks that 'twas only a shopkeeper lit on ye this time!" Then he set off down the road, left, right, left, right, at a main pace, because he was insulted.

OVER TO HEWLANDS

Sir Walter Arden, of Park Hall, descended from Ailwin, Sheriff, Great Guy of Warwick, the Saxon King Athestane and Alfred the Great, had been the head of mother's family. Let the Skinners match that! It was true that her high kin took no manner of notice of mother. For all that they had concerned themselves she had been at liberty to die in childbed eight several times since she had ceased to bear their name. In return she took bitter haste to make no slightest claim upon them. If she ever mentioned them it was with disparagement. Father always said that if any of his sons made a fortune, the whole Park Hall family would come running to call cousins. Unluckily things were going quite the other way. Alderman Cawdrey's wife—almost the only one of her old gossips whom mother could suffer—had once suggested that Will ought to go as tutor to some noble house. A letter sent to Park Hall now. . . .

"To Park Hall?" says mother, icy. "And who of our acquaintance dwell at Park Hall? Husband, I pray you pull in pieces that woodcock and help your neighbour. Truly, they that eat nothing must prattle."

Poor Gossip Cawdrey went home soon with a scorching face, and next time that she came to the door asking was the mistress at home, Will went hot and cold to hear Bet, the serving-wench, giving short answer as she had been bidden: "Yea. But she is busy." Poor Gossip Cawdrey, who was alone all day, since her husband's shop was in another part of the town, who had hurried through her chores, changed into her second best at five o'clock and trotted off through the darkling streets with her lantern, all primed for a fire-side talk about her only son who was a fugitive Catholic priest, and her pretty daughter that had gotten a bad husband, must turn about, since a door

was shut in her plump mournful face, must turn back in no haste through those very streets she had traversed so jauntily five minutes ago, all the clocks still telling short of the quarter, and what to say to the maids since she had bade them not look for her ere seven?

A tutor to some noble family. . . . Alas! Will knew that he could scarcely play the part with credit. The neighbours accepted him as one of choice and great learning, because he could read through any book at a sitting, and write so fast that his pen seemed to skim the sheets. "And what do you learn at school this month, son William?" "Marry, sir, the usual. Seneca, Terence, Cicero and the rest. There was a rare tale of the good old Mantuan we won this day. . . ." But he had quitted school early, and while he had been there, to tell truth, had learnt just what he liked. When he pleased, when he must get the drift of a story, he could tear the heart out of a book, let it be in Latin, French or even Italian. Set him to teach the grammar of any of these tongues, though, set him to translate exactly so as to please a scholar. . . . He knew that he could never deceive a skilled patron for ten minutes together. After five years his Latin was middling rusty. He'd as soon read his Ovid in English, since it would be got, and no candles wasted. When he thought of it, he pictured his brain as a rag-picker's trophy these days, a rag-bag packed with strange scraps of stolen finery. Oh! Dido, Thisbe, Alceste, Grizel, Helen, Polyxena, Philomela, how lovely are your names, how heart-stirring your histories, but I never shall, thought Will, meet your like, for I'm no true scholar, I lack patience, and the drop of your noble blood that works in me, that calls me to you, is like the one bad grape in the bunch, just enough to turn the whole vat sour.

The pity of it was that when he did encounter folk of a better sort they favoured him, questionless. He had once, only once, been taken to the rich Reynold's on a winter's night for a New Year's merry-making, Hall's Close, that fine house in the Old Town down by the riverside, two and twenty servants kept and wax candles shining a welcome from every window. My lady mistress was born a Blount of Glason's Court and had everything handsome about her—sweet music sounding in every well-warmed wainscoted chamber, satin curtains full of silk, their colour fine and fresh, and on the tables enough food for a wedding; silver-gilt dishes of gleaming oysters, carp an ell long and salads garnished with blue borage flowers and sugar violets. She was past mother's age, but Will thought her a princess with her frosty curled head tired with stars, her carnation velvet farthingale—carnation at her age, cried mother!—and her blue eyes bright and sharp as ice water. He had made her laugh, and she had said that he must come again, but when she had heard how he was called her fine brows drew together and she did not press him.

When he had been younger, Will had often rehearsed to himself a scene in which he found an antique lord in full armour being attacked by bandits, all his hireling servants run away, and the gentleman, though laying about him right and left, hard pressed. "Young sir," says the gentleman when Will has beaten them all off—some nine or ten—"that was featly done." Sir Walter himself, of course, and after a fine fiddle-faddling dialogue packed with smart puns, comes the moment of recognition. "My grandsire had a grandsire bore your name, sir" (humbly spoken). "Jupiter!" (exploding in a great white beard) "Is't possible!" Easily and softly,

as things always happen in the world of the rich and noble, Will finds himself carried along to Park Hall. . . .

He had noticed and admired the way that great folk never thought you could have another engagement. At home when there was someone coming to dine, one commonly knew it a week before, but when people like Sir Walter met a friend they would cry: "Dine with me to-day!" or "Come, come, you must lie this night under my roof. You have with you your lady and her nieces? They are welcome too!" That was the life! Able to leave home at a moment's notice taking with you any number of servants. No having to wonder who would put the dog out o' nights if you were not there, no Black Fridays with nothing but salt fish to eat, and the hides waiting to be taken to market stinking the roof off all day. At Park Hall there would be fishing parties with witty ladies on blue forenoons by crystal river's banks where birds sang on every bough, and hawking parties with real gentlemen in their own chases, where the fallow deer stepped delicately through veils of leaves showering down like so many golden ducats. . . . On grey mornings they would hunt the hare through the long grass of heaven-kissing hills, at sunset walk through the mists and reddening stubble after the fat brown partridge. None of your Skinners' work for him, gentlemen's tastes without gentlemen's means. If he could not have his sport in the high style, Will would rather rest ignorant and town bred. Only as things were all he got was an occasional day's birding with the Sturleys (when one of the sons was ill or at Oxford), and sometimes leave from the Sadlers to cast his line in their piece of water down by the mill. . . . And he was right to set his Sir Walter in a great suit of armour on a Horse of Strength, because Sir Walter,

if he had been alive now, would have been passing old—well over an hundred. Will did not even know the name of the present owner of Park Hall.

His road this afternoon was just a foot-path, what they called a balk hereabouts, trailing across a succession of moist-ribbed fields, ditched and ditched again to cope with winter floodings, land too heavy for rye, and even when rye was mixed with white wheat, apt to lose half its crop from mildew. A gale was blowing from the south west, stinging his left cheek, and already most of the colour of the short autumn day was gathering into the lower sky ahead of him, sending silver yellow reflections sliding down the wet furrows on either side of his slippery track. If he wanted to be home again before dark he must not linger out at the farm however much they pressed him, and he would be wise to say early that he must be back for supper, lest they offered him a lantern as they had often done when he had been eager to stay. But then it had been spring and summer, and the balks softly clothed with grass between the lands, and the furrow weeds as pretty and precise as in a silk embroidery, all their simple bright colours swearing at one another, yet keeping company as country neighbours must—wild yellow mustard, blushing pink cuckoo flowers and trembling corn cockles, the moon getting up in the thick blue velvet sky as round and shiny as a silver dish at a Lord Mayor's banquet, flitter-mice swooping past and himself with his heart at the trot as his arm slipped towards a swaying waist. . . . He wouldn't have known it for the same walk.

Three twilled banks with boughs split and laid down against cattle-bite divided it into three nearly equal parts. He had come to the first stile and swinging

over, caught his hose on a thorn. These winds and rains were thinning all foliage, and twigs and briars were poking out of hedges gone brown and red in patches, like patterns of leather from the dyers. Though he disengaged himself carefully, he had gotten a three-cornered tear that would mean a darn, and in a place that would show too. Now, thought he, he would look perfectly the part. He saw himself as others must see him on these expeditions for which he had lost the relish, lanky Master Tradesman's son, half-grown, half-green, come out to court his country sweeting on his little Saturday afternoon, in his comical unsuited townish garb, come out to be led by her side up the village street, following half a dozen other such boobies, past those staring open cottage doors—"buzz," "buzz." "Hoping to get wed some fine day b'yr ladykin." "Hoping for a cot of their own when he can overtake one and twenty, save him!"

By God, not he! and he wouldn't be on this road now but for manners' sake. If only he could have stayed away and let absence tell its own tale. . . . But he dared not take the risk of someone coming in to Henley Street to ask for him. There was a bold old piece whom Anne called "Nurse," though she called Anne "Nan" sometimes, a hateful old thing, sly and fat like a sow, with hair growing out of her face in all the wrong places, always rootling round and popping up at moments when you could have done without her. Jugge was her name on the farm, a common country form of Joan, and she had borne, had a daughter, "My wench Audrey." If he had ever pondered it, he must have expected to find the offspring of such a hag a monster, still his first sight of Audrey had startled Will. She was nothing like a woman, almost a mis-

creature, only just in her senses. Whenever she saw him coming she hid her face in her apron and burst into uncivil laughter. She thought herself not so simple though, for when he had unwisely asked her why she carried about with her everywhere a crab-tree cudgel: "To keep the lads off!" roared Audrey, affronted. "Shall not a maid be honest?" They worked hard, he supposed, at any rate they were always filthy. He believed that he could have suffered them better if he had never sat at table with them, but on a July evening he had supped coarsely with them on the flags outside the house, and Jugge had slain flies which she declared were about to settle on his meat, and Audrey picked rabbit's bones out of her mouth, while Anne, Anne sat silent as a silver star, noticing, he supposed, nothing....

His reason for keeping quiet about his visits to Hewlands had been at first quite colourable. 'Twas a name that roused grumblings and sour looks at home, a name with a bad debt and a broken friendship trailing after it. As long as twelve years ago father had stood surety for a large sum owed by Anne's father to some neighbours. When the time for payment had arrived, nothing had been forthcoming from Hewlands, and an injunction had been issued against father. He, happy-natured man, might have forgotten the indignity, but mother had not, and to-day to be sure, the money would have come in usefully. But the debtor had died a twelvemonth ago. Ay, Anne was an orphan, certainly a pity, and though she never complained Jugge hinted that the step-dame misused all but her own brats. It sounded likely, for the only son of the first marriage had soon quitted and gone to a farm of his own at a distance, and a younger sister—a taper to the sun—was gladly betrothed to a suitor none too appetizing.

But he had scarcely seen the step-dame, because from the beginning he had come and gone softly from Hewlands. Jugge had always been ready to get a piece in her pocket for news when the mistress would be from home. He hoped, against probability, that he might not have to see Jugge to-day, for he felt squeamish.

Two stiles cleared meant half-way. He remembered with disbelief that once when he had been obliged to show his face at home during an afternoon he had made this journey twice in a day. And he hadn't been sleeping o' nights at that time either. Several mornings he had risen before it was light, crept from his bed down the stairs and out of the shrouded house. He had wandered till dawn about the confines of the town, stealing into thickets and round corners when he had seen anyone coming.

Eight months ago he had taken this road upon the same errand that was making his excuse this afternoon —malt. Hell take all malt then! He had mistaken his path, come by chance upon Hewlands, and hearing voices rippling on the thin spring breeze hung on the gate to watch a pretty scene. Up behind the farm ran an orchard, and down a flight of steps out of the thatched house, over the smooth flags and into the dappled grass, had come a young piece of womankind and an old, bearing between them a basket of linen. His first view of Anne had been a fleeting sideways one, but enough to make his heart check and his brain tell his heart that if the face matched the form, here was a wonder.

He waited, saying to himself: "You're always looking out for signs and wonders," reminding himself how he had been fooled by a fell of hair before. Red-headed wenches after dashing you with a mantle of flame would

turn round and show you a freckled gaping mask that made you want to swear.

Anne and Jugge knelt down among the daffodils under the flowering apple-trees, the one like a royal ship furling her sails, the other like a blind mole, earth returning to earth. They were fastening with large stones at the four corners some new sheets that must endure a bleaching. He could not disturb them, so lovely were Anne's gestures, besides he had lost his tongue. When they were done with their simple task Jugge picked up the empty basket, but Anne, as if he had been calling aloud, came down towards the garden gate, shading her eyes with a hand. Her hair was the colour of a straw stack in the sun, the gold of the golden fleece or the apples of the Hesperides, he told himself, a fabulous tint rarely seen on earth, never seen before by him. He unbonneted and began to ask his way, but her hand laid key-cold in his with a mild uncomprehending smile, dammed up his speech again. He could only stare into her brown eyes, colour of the chestnut newly released from its shell. He believed that he caught a flash of recognition in them. Up behind them, speaking enough for all three, came Jugge. . . .

As he soon learnt from her, this wonder was a maid still. By some miracle she had escaped the world's great snare. As if he had opened a window in a close chamber where there was stupid company, breathed pure air and hastily slung his limbs scrambling through the casement after his bemused head, Will found himself a man and in love. For the first time he experienced that quickening of perception and rise of spirits that wipes out all limits. Like one in a fever with every sense sharpened, he entered upon a fresh significant life. They were true then, all those old love-tales he

had always wanted to believe, as authentic in their beauty as fruit blossom printed against an azure sky, something everyone has seen at some time, marked according to his capacity and mostly laid aside in memory as a thing lavish but of little use. Every old face he saw in the sunny streets set him thinking: "Have you known it? Must have. Why didn't you tell me? It would have lightened my toil."

It was Jugge, not Anne, who had invited him to their sheep-shearing feast the next month. After that he had come to Hewlands every Saturday, his heart afire, his brains alas! turned to lead. Straying with her by the stream-side he had envied the fishes below the bridge because they swum in her shadow; he had told himself that if Anne called to them the birds must bring her berries in their bills. All the same, it was she who had spoken the first word of what was bursting his bosom: "Courting, Will?" He started, as much surprised as if a saint had stepped down out of a shrine, yet as he quickly told himself, there was something angelic in the direct and homely phrase to which she condescended. He took to coming every evening after work, met her in the fields; sometimes she came as far as the second stile to meet him, her lank form moving with classic grace against sunset skies.

On a breathless August Saturday, when the step-dame was away at market and even the shepherds all out of sight seeking some shade, Jugge had told them sharply that they would do better indoors, and he had entered the house at last. Anne had led him upstairs, grave and incompetent as a child told to play host. Blue reflections from the blue sky outside and green ones from the sleeping trees and fields glittered in every cool dim chamber. A black oak bedstead carved

with mermaids and wild men, bulbously pillared and heavily canopied, caught as many high lights as a blackberry. Down the worn floors and along the beamed ceilings crept the jewelled lights, green and blue as if one was happily drowned and living under-seas. . . . . .

Who would have believed that she was falling-ripe?

Three stacks of the rough hay called stover, kept to fodder the sheep in winter, rose grey against the westering sky now. Richardson's farm was the earliest sign of the village when you came out across the fields from the east, and a square of orange light in its lower windows, its white shape gleaming like a pearl above the evening mists or rearing bat-black and jagged below a night sky of limpid blue, had often been welcome as a guiding star to him, telling him that his journey was almost done. The last field before it was striped for common culture and was any man's tying. A couple of lean horses with their quarters turned to the wind and their rusty manes blowing awry stood patiently cropping where they had been hobbled overclose to the pasty path. In summer when the chestnuts and hawthorns raised screens of juicy green against slumberous heavens full of sailing clouds, and the squeaks of children and the whirr of spinning wheels sounded from cottage doors, this little hamlet of a score of homesteads by a murmuring stream was an exile's picture of merrie England. Parched bearded men with their sweating brows tied up in pied handkerchiefs, sweeping across the Spanish Main in their barks loaded with silver ingots and rose emeralds, dreamt of such a scene. To-day a faint air of desolation overhung it. The fading tints, the late afternoon hour, the unfriendly wind did not suit it.

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

In a bottom on the skirts of the forest like a worked border on a petticoat, stood Hewlands Farm, just in Wealden where there was a tradition that a squirrel could hop from bough to bough across the whole breadth of the county. This countryside was divided into two parts, Fielden and Wealden. South of the river lay Fielden, tractable land over which the husbandman might smile. But already the woods were shrinking. Deeper and deeper into the forest every year went the salt boilers eager for so much young pole timber so easy cloven. When Will wanted a holiday in the greenwood he had to make a whole day of it. Twice last season when he could not keep from her neighbourhood but told himself that he must not try to see her, he had whiled away a dawn till dusk alone in the forest not five miles above her home. He had spent most of an afternoon cutting her sweet short name on a tree trunk, and towards nightfall when the glades began to start and whisper, had carved another device of greater boldness—his initials and hers entwined within an open heart. Why not? All the lads did it. Time and again he had watched them tracing and nicking away in happy or dubious solitude, accord-to their case, big fist trembling, tongue in beefy cheek, bulging blue or smouldering black eyes screwed up. "MOLL. I LOVE YOU!" "ROBIN SNUG LOVES ALICE TOLLEY." "I'D FAIN GIVE KATE X X X X." Things cut on trees lasted for ages, folk said, generations, they grew and spread and changed like families. . . . Somewhere in the depths of the greenwood even at this chilly hour there were wounded tree-trunks crying aloud: "ANNE! ANNE! ANNE! . . ."

He quickened his steps, skirted the dovehouse of the Manor farm and came by back ways without having

passed in front of a single cottage to tap on the back, the buttery, door of Hewlands. It was not a place to revisit on a stormy autumn day. Damp and discoloured the long narrow farmhouse seemed to have turned its shoulder from the muddy road in ill-humour. In the shelving uphill orchard the wind was tearing through the trees, stripping withered leaves from rheumatic jointed boughs, and fallen apples lay rotting in the rank grass. A sharp-nosed dog, chained to a gnarled stump with an upturned barrel for kennel, burst into a frenzy of barking. He could see what the next half-hour was going to be like if the mistress was at home and he had to stay whispering at a window in this wind and through that noise.

He saw Audrey at once. She was straddling beneath the weight of two pails of milk across a sea of mire down by the cow-houses, her uncouth shape backed by a horn-yellow sunset and a fret of trees blown sideways. When she espied a figure in breeches she set down her pails with a mortal yell, and throwing her apron over her head ran in to hide herself among the hens. The milk lipped over into the mud, and halfway across the yard she left a straw-filled wooden slipper. He was turned away, staring with distaste after her when he became aware that the door had opened and Jugge was before him, bursting with speech like a narrow-necked bottle held upside down.

"There now!" cried she, throwing up her hands. "Now he's come and she's not here. What did I say? Persuade me not! "As sure as you go to Tysoe," said I, "he'll come. I'll lay fourteen of my teeth (though to my teen be it spoken that I have but four) that if you budge 'twill set my young master's shanks on the road hither."

"She's not here," she repeated, her voice sounding very loud after his silent country walk. "She's away. Oho! dancings and feastings where she has gone, I warrant ye, and gallant companions. Nay!" (peering in his face) "I'll not tease you. 'Tis to her brother she's gone then, to keep him company while his wife lies in, and a great work they had to get her trudge, so allicholy and musing as she has been. 'Oh, Lord!' sighed she, 'must I go?' 'Go,' quoth I, 'and 'twill work like a charm.' 'Oh Lord!' sighed she, rolling up her eyes like a duck in a thunderstorm, sweet thing. But I run on. How does your worship and all your worshipful family this long time? Will not your worship come in? Oh! what a neglectious long while since you have been out to see us! There was a hot venison pasty we had for dinner this day. . . ."

She stood back breathless, beckoning him into an interior redolent of strong cheese, leather and ale. He could scarcely bring himself to look at her, so ugly she was in her unseasonable cotton gown of green and yellow spots, her dusty hood and half-buttoned bodice. Round her fat neck she wore a tippet of coney-skins, and the greasy fur blown apart by the draught on the door-step, displayed many a bald patch. His call had surprised her plucking a bird, which she had dropped on the threshold, and some of its feathers clung to her apron. Jugge must always be poking and pushing you while she spoke; she needed two hands to press her meaning home. Will had propped himself in the doorway with one arm above his head, shading his face from her darting glances; with his left hand he felt in his pocket for a coin to end an interview that need not be long. He did not know yet whether he was glad or sorry of her news.

"I thank you," said he without stirring. "I am not a'hungry—I thank you, and must shift shortly." He continued awkwardly: "Nurse, commend me to your lady and tell her that I protest . . ."

"Good heart and i'faith," cried Jugge clapping her palms, "but I will gladly tell her as much. Lord! Lord! she will be a joyful woman."

"What will you tell her?" he asked sharply. "You do not mark me. I have not yet spoken one good word."

"Good word! good cabbage!" grinned Jugge. "I will tell her, sir, that you do protest, which, as I take it, is a gentlemanlike offer."

"I have offered you yet," said he coldly, "nothing, and you know it. Hum—and so your mistress has gallant companions at Tysoe. Belike," choosing his words, "there are those there with whom she is long acquainted."

"Never a whit, sir," burst in Jugge vehemently. "Oh no, no, no! Not at Tysoe, never a soul! She will be strange to all, I warrant ye, oh! passing strange. Oh! if any as much as give her the leer of invitation she will make a riot of the matter. For she is good and fair; a good maid and a fair maid, and when that is said there is no more to be said. That is all, indeed, la!"

"All indeed," agreed Will lamely. "Your lady has as you say good gifts. It is a wonder to me," he added, "how she has escaped so long single."

"So long! What do you mean by so long?" shrieked Jugge, her voice cracking. If he had trodden on one of her famous corns she could not have looked more murderous at him.

He explained with quiet sincerity.

"It has ever been a wonder to me that the younger sister and so much the less fair should be the first demanded in marriage."

Either his tone impressed her, or she had decided for some reason not to quarrel with him. She stooped and picked up the dead bird, hiding her face from him for a moment, but from the workings of her fingers as they savagely caressed the limp plumage, he could tell that she was still angry. When she spoke again, however, she was no more than commonly malicious.

"Kate is a fish-fag to my mistress."

"A candle to the sun," he suggested civilly.

"The sun, that's better. Nay, she is a region of Guiana, all gold and bounty. Shall I tell you a lie?" Jugge looked baleful. "I do despise a liar as I do one that is not true. Well then (come closer, this is spoken like a Christian), my mistress is—an honourable maid! There!"

It was cold standing here, staring at a back window full of tallow ends; cold and mean the scene, and cold and mean he knew his thoughts. He stifled a sigh of impatience as he replied: "You have said so before, and I do not doubt it."

"Ah! but I could tell your honour more. 'The first demanded in marriage.' Pish! Faugh! (I pray you come a little nearer.) Marry now, this is the long and short of it. Nay, I know Nan's mind, never a woman in Shottery knows more of Nan's mind than I do, or can do more with her than I can—I thank Heaven!"

"Good woman," said Will, dropping his arm from the lintel, "you have told me your mistress is not here, so I'll not wait. When I see her next she can tell me her own mind."

But out into the mud after came Jugge, jerking the unhappy bird by the neck until its legs danced, flourishing it in his face.

"By the rood no! that a'cannot, nor will, poor lady-

bird! Bless you, sir! can't you see? Have you no eyes in your head? You that have brought her into such a calamitous state as 'tis wonderful! Why, the best courtier of them all when the court lay at Warwick could not have brought her to such calamity. Yet, there have been esquires, I warrant ye, esquires and" (her eyes swelling) "nobles, riding their horses this way for years past in hopes of a glimpse of her—in their coaches—coach after coach—letter after letter, gift after gift, smelling so sweet, all musk and gilding and written in such alligate terms as would have melted any woman's heart. But I promise you they never could get an eye-blink of her. I have myself at sundry times been given as much as twenty angels—but I defy all angels in such sort, as they say, but in the way of honesty. . . . And I warrant you they never could get as much as a sip at the cup, not the proudest of them all—esquires and knights, all were the same to her. Lord! there was a gentleman from—but let it pass—there was, I say, a great gentleman, not a six month ago, hissing hot as horseshoe—but she had as lief see a toad, a very toad. . . . But I have ever been your friend, sir. Old folks as you know have discretion, as they say, I know the world. (Bless you, sir!) 'What do you say to young Master Will, then?' quoth I to her at length. 'Marry,' says she, little and low, looking as pale as any clout in the versical world, 'what would you say?' 'Marry,' said I, 'he has eyes of youth, he writes verse, he speaks holiday, he smells April and May . . .'"

"You spoke wrong," said Will, interrupting her. "You should have said: 'This gentleman is no good having, he keeps wild company, he is of too high a desire for his estate, he thinks too much, forget him!'

Well, I shall not see her to-day and light fails. Commend me. I am in haste. Here's for your pains."

They went through the usual comedy.

"No, truly sir, not a penny."

"Go to, I say you shall."

"Farewell to your worship then" (bobbing a curtsey, bird and all). "Out on't!" suddenly seizing him by the sleeve again. "What have I forgot? I was to bid you come again. I was in no case to let you depart without you promise. Her last word to me as she left my arms, poor lamb, her eyes scorching me up like a burning-glass—'Nurse! if he should come while I am not here ensure me that he shall come again. Appoint a day and hour.' Come, sir, she returns Monday. Tuesday, now."

"I cannot come Tuesday. I am bound to friends in town."

"Wednesday then, I will tell her."

"You know Wednesday I must to market. Not Thursday," writhed Will. "I cannot tell . . .!" He was reduced to using guile. "What? Are you grown so lavish here?" He pointed into the middle of the yard, where three curs and a cat had sunk their strife to plunge eye-deep in the deserted milk pails, and Jugge, perceiving, fled from him, calling down curses on her Audrey, who emerged from the hen-house on hands and knees.

"Where have you been?" he heard as he went off. "You dolt, you carrion. By the rood, what manner of milk-maid are you? I'll flay you, you tallow-face, you baggage." "But he came after me," whimpered Audrey, "when I had not my cudgel. Shall not any maid in this house stay honest?"