CHAPTER IV

HASTY WEDDING

HAM SADLER was Will's best friend in the town. They had been book-mates at school, though Ham was nearly three years the elder, for honest Ham's brains did not gallop. On that dire night when he knew his life ruined, Will's steps turned as a man's should towards the house of an old friend.

Now that the blow had fallen he had steadied. Going first to Henley Street he knocked, and without stepping inside the threshold bade Bet ask his father to see him alone to-night. Did she understand?—speaking slowly. He must see the master without the mistress; after she had gone to bed. He was going round to young Master Sadler's now, but would be back by ten without fail. Through the half-open hall door he caught a glimpse of Num struggling squeaking down the stairs, thinking that he had heard a voice he knew. "Look to that child," said Will to Bet, and made off. Hewlands had always seemed to swarm with Anne's step-brothers and step-sisters. How many there were he did not know, but he could swear to three boys and two girls. Marvelling at the malice of Nature, which decrees that when a lad had scarcely brain enough to dream of being a lover he may find himself, to his inescapable horror, like to be a father, bound to make a husband, he took his way to Sheep Street.

Ham and Judith Sadler had been married over a

year now, and as the saying is, with nothing to show for it. Judith had been a little heiress, a Staunton of Longbridge. Will had heard Alderman Sadler, who had made the match for his nephew, explaining it to father. "Seven hundred pounds in gold and silver left to her by her sire on his death-bed, not to mention hopes from the sire's sister with whom she now abides." "I have heard of the young gentlewoman, and good words went with her name. Marry, neighbour, seven hundred pounds and possibilities is indeed good words!"

She might have been quite ill-favoured, but she was not. She had lived out at Longbridge with an aunt, and Ham had told Will how on their road thither, on the day when he was being taken out by his uncle to become betrothed, uncle had spoken to him while they watered their nags, of fancy, what a foolish fleeting thing it was compared with, for instance, seven hundred pounds. Ham might have nourished fancies for a maid of a different colour from what his wife would prove to be. What colour was she? asked Ham, alarmed. That, said uncle awfully, was not his point. His reason for speaking now was to ensure that Ham should act as he ought. When he was presented to the maiden he must advance with a good carriage, nothing halting, look at her straightly, but not too straightly, and when the elder folk drew aside—"I will give you a sign"—lead her a little apart to hold converse lightly.

Startled out of his wits, Ham begged to know of what he might discourse. Pish! said uncle, could he not inquire of the damsel whether she had liefer live in town or country? Could he not hold forth to her on the house with a garden that was being bought for them in Sheep Street? But, groaned Ham, how if she

should say suddenly that she had liefer remain in the country? No living woman, said uncle with authority, loved better to dwell among swine and hens than shops and markets. "Lord, what entertainment will she have got at Longbridge this sixteen year? I know your villages. One sheep-feast at Martlemass, another harvesting one; with good fortune a Maypole and Morris dancing on the green on Ascension Day (if there be not too great rains); all the antique folk who are too old to see, hear or speak, dragged thither in their chairs, babes that may not be left at home drowning the music with their wailing, half the mankind of the place fighting full of ale, and a mort of big bellies that had seemlier stayed at home, but dare not miss a show." Shattering Ham quite, uncle added that if the damsel seemed like to weep, it were best mannered to play unaware. Not that his wife had wept at their first meeting. ("Speak not this to your aunt!") Troth, any tears that might have been shed that day would have come from t'other quarter. Lord! Lord! how well he recalled his good father carrying him to his betrothal one spring forenoon as it might have been to-day, a great lubberly lad all beef and blushes, bursting his Sunday suit. A good marriage his kind sire had been at pains to get for him, and a good marriage it had proved, but when he had clapped eyes on the bride he had nigh swooned from chagrin, such doltish dreams fill up lads' heads. Marry, if truth must out, on their wedding day, when they had returned from the church, and he had seen her sitting in that bedchamber, all her boxes and ballots being carried in after her, and herself planted wooden as her chair, her sharp eyes watching the maids mishandling her new gowns ("You know your aunt, 'tis a diligent woman, a Christian woman and a singular

good house-wife"), he had fled from the house, had to take three turns round the town on his fine new-bought palfrey ere he came to his senses.

Happy Ham, who thought as every man did came back from his betrothal grinning as if he was entered for a match through horse-collars. Will was waiting for him. "Well, man, what cheer? What news? Unbosom. Give joy tongue. Speak! Can you like her who is to be your mistress? Is she as fair as you hoped?" Ham, blushing as if he were the bride, said that he took her to be of a dark complexion, like an ouzel, said he, dark, little and merry, reached only up to here on him. With round eyes he muttered that she could read and write like a princess, and her aunt had displayed to them needlework, such a fine spot you would have thought it sewn by Queen Mab. . . . She had held good manner when uncle left them alone to become acquainted (uncle's sign had been to halloo "To her, boy! Edge up! Speak spritely now!") and they had sat in the window, the elder folk within earshot though at a distance.

"You can see the river from the street where our house is," said Ham. "From the windows?" whispered pretty virginity with hanging head. "Nay. But from the doorstep." "I'faith, can you that?" very low. "Ay, that can you, and 'tis a seemly street and a busy. Sheep Street, 'tis called" (sticking thumbs in belt), "and you should see it alive on a market morning." "Alive! With what?" "Marry—sheep." Heavens! how sweet her face when she smiled at nought like that.

Will thought so too when he was presented to her. From the day of the wedding he had been made welcome to his old friend's new home, and he had fallen

gladly into the habit of dropping in there when the noise and disorder of Henley Street turned his stomach. For all her accomplishments Judith was a house-wife. The table was always turned up and pushed to the wall, the chamber cleared and the bride herself fresh as a wind-flower when neighbours came trooping in with their viols, citterns and lutes bulging under their cloaks, ready to fleet a winter's evening making harmony. Judith had a sweet small voice, and solid Ham could hold his part in glee or madrigal. Or sometimes they would just sit gathered round the fire, telling tales and speaking their minds or listening to a book read aloud by Will, who could not sing, though music moved him beyond discretion. There had been a dreadful week or so during which he had imagined that it was not the innocent music of the little house in Sheep Street that roused his sportive blood. Filth and scum! what a world, if it was to be sent to him to desire his best friend's bride! Eighteen-year old Will, who had never known a pretty creature closely before, trembled at villainy, began to tell himself that he must stint his calls to Sheep Street, must if needs be, pass away, fade out altogether.

He went on going just the same, and one evening helping them to hang curtains tore a button off his doublet. "Come to the parlour. I'll settle that for thee," said Judith. Ham stayed upstairs to finish the hanging and Will followed the bride down to her work-basket which she kept in the inglenook of the little sitting-room, dark but for the firelight. With button in palm he waited, watching her tossing out a tangle of bright divers coloured threads, choosing a stout one, holding up her needle and filling its eye. He had begun to take off his padded doublet with its small

white ruff, and stood bare-necked in his shirt, puffed breeches and yarn hose. "Or wilt thou have it on?" he asked suddenly. "The button," cried Judith, holding out her hand for it. "Marry on." "Nay, the doublet," laughing nervously, drawing closer to her bent head, so close that he could catch the scent from the spray of rosemary tucked in the cross cloth over her bosom. There was a pause, then: "I shall do it quickest off," said Judith briskly, "and Ham's old jacket hanging on the perch in the hall will stop your shaking." It did that: the corner on the mountain of glass was turned, and Will no longer need fear coming too often to Sheep Street.

To-night, as he arrived at the door, it was opened from within and Ham stood before him

"Will! trust me! I was just going round to your house."

"Is your wife at home?"

"Ay, but speaking of bed, poor chuck, and liefer for my room than my company; she has a weakness in the head this night."

They passed into the small wainscoted parlour with its cupboard showing three silver goblets glinting in the shadows, a blue Lambeth Delft jar filled with branches of scarlet white-thorn berries, a cross-bow on the wall and two high-backed forms filled with orange tawny cushions flanking the hearth. Judith's eyelids were heavy, and Will saw that she had been crying, but she came forward cheerfully. "Will! you're welcome. Keep my poor carl company an hour and I'll remember you in my orisons." Looking him up and down: "What! in your doublet and hose this raw rheumatic eve! You two must have a quart, I see." She ran out of the room, protesting that it would put her to no

trouble, she was brewing a draught of marjoram for herself to tame a raging tooth, had it on the boil even now.

The friends were left together listening to the feet of unseen citizens slippering past the shrouded street window in the rain. Ham broke the silence awkwardly, saying that his wife had gotten a piece of news even now. A cousin of hers, wedded the same day as themselves was lightly become the mother of a fair son. Judith did not grudge her coz the pleasure, but she would have liked the same for this house. . . "Lord!" said Will, "but there's a jest in this sending of children, it seems, could a man but fathom it." "A sorry one, to my thinking," said Ham. "Soft, she comes again." Judith did not linger when she had carried in a tray loaded with a dumpy glass bottle and two mugs decorated with bearded masks. "Well, husband—anon," holding up a cheek. "Dig you good den, Will," giving him a hand. "I am sorry," gently, "that you are not well." On the wings of her shy observation she quitted them.

Ham who had overfilled a mug, and was in the act of carrying it gingerly towards the settle, turned to look at his friend.

"Man! you look very ill!"

"I am—in my mind. Give me some good counsel."

"Marry that I will gladly, very good. What's the matter? Hang it, lad. Come to the point. What is it?"

"Get yourself your drink and I'll tell you."

With Ham's back turned on him Will addressed the bright logs.

"I desire you to help me, since I must now take a gentlewoman in the way of matrimony. This week. That is all indeed—la!" But he had to hurry on fiercely to check Ham's exclamations. "There is no

remedy. I must to it. And I find myself not acquainted with her. . . ." Between his teeth he added: "I boarded her in a fancy."

Ham's chuckle sounded. "Boarded her, do you say? I am sure she has kept you above decks."

"No! I came in under hatches." Dropping his head in his hands, Will swore brokenly. "God! I'll never to sea again!"

Ham, who had just filled his mug, set it down as if it had burnt his fingers. For a long moment he stood stockstill, his face going radish-red, his lips pursed upon a soundless whistle, then busied himself setting the bottle straight on the tray, the tray just so on the table. Presently, tiptoeing like one in a sick-room, he made his way over to the fire-side, and laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Man! Look up! I'God's name tell me what I can do? We are all in His hands above."

Ham might be slow, but he was kind. Father was not slow, but neither was he kind. The house in Henley Street was quiet when Will returned to it and father, sitting with his points untied in front of a greying choked hearth, said sleepily that Will had interrupted his one hour of peace in the day. Will asked where was his mother. "Did you get my message?" "Where should she be but in her bed like an honest woman at this late hour? How oddly you spoke that—'Where is my mother? Did you get my message?' Ay, I got your jackanapes message, and I have sat up for you. Now what's your will, for I am for my bed?"

Father was surly, a thing rare with him save when he scented trouble. "Your father," as Ham had dubiously said, "will never put his fingers in a fire he need not."

"I must ask your pardon," began Will unhappily. "I make bold to press with so little preparation upon you, but there is reason for it. . . . I must get married . . .!"

Father reached for his left slipper and stuck a toe in it.

"You will make a fool's head for yourself then."

"I have child-charged a maid," said Will.

Father stood upright in his one slipper.

"You . . .!"

"Ay, sir," briskly.

"You are mad," decided father, bending down with an elderly gesture to help his right foot home. "You're not eighteen. Try not your ill-company quips on me."

"No quip, sir, unless a woman four months forward is one."

"Woman! What woman?"

Will could not speak her name.

"A young gentlewoman of honourable family, sir."

"Honourable aunts! I know the kind. Four months forward—finds a young one in my son. Well, she has picked an empty pocket you can tell her. You can bid her from me to be off, aroynt, pack, vanish like hailstones! A trull, a baggage, a quean, an old cozening quean, I'll be sworn, common to her village for seasons."

"Sir, you are wrong. Alas! she has known no touch but mine. You knew her father—at Hewlands."

No! thought Will, as he crept upstairs to his room quietly, so as not to arouse Dick, it could not have been worse. He had had to stand a sermon on continence so grossly worded that he believed he could never feel the same towards his father again.

"What did he want?" demanded Dick's drowsy voice.

"He—who?" asked Will shivering, as he pulled off his hose.

"Why, the Ass, of force."

It seemed ages since Master Will had served Master Aspinall with a pair of gloves.

"Ask him yourself to-morrow. Go to sleep!"

"Drunk again!" commented Dick unjustly, and did so.

It was only a moment before Will heard even breathing coming from the truckle bed. But he could not sleep, worn out as he was. That old woman's voice still rang in his ears——

"The devil and his dam! Never wish to see her face again: Let me never come in mine own bed again if you get off with that! The question now is concerning marriage, my young sprig, and you must speak positively. Tell us your mind. Will you marry my mistress? By gar! if you won't do her this good turn, poor lady-bird, I'll shut your head in the door. I'll give you some scratches won't leave your face so pale. You with your catamount look!" (imitating him) " 'I pray you, give me leave awhile. I must go home. I am not well.' Go home to your manor of Pickt-hatch, would you, leaving your wife in her necessity to shuffle, to trudge, to lurch? You have at the moment no means! 'I pray you, give me a reasonable time for preparation.' You will not marry, you! You shall! you shall! if I have to chase you into the trap with my besom. I'll live to see you peer through the grate like a baboon. You with your ope-the-lattice phrases. I'll make you skip like a rat!"

Father had promised nothing, except that he would break the news to mother. "Will you acquaint my mother, sir? If I am to bring a wife home this week. . . ." "Rest certain your mother shall hear! But you bring none of your light-skirts under my roof. I forbid ye both my house." "But, sir! you know I have

nowhere else to bring her and I am almost out at heels."

Ham Sadler lent Will the horse on which he rode to Worcester to get the licence for this hasty marriage—a dreadful journey, since Sandells would not speak to him until the document was procured and safe in Richardson's wallet. Will too discovered something to dumb him. He knew that he was a minor, an infant in the eyes of the law and he affirmed his parents' consent. "And the bride?" sniffed the bishop's commissary's clerk, putting his pen between his teeth, shaking sand over his entries, blinking up at them. "In her seven and twentieth year," said truthful Richardson quietly.

Friday morning came, and Will was indebted to Ham again for a horse—on which to ride to his wedding this time. When he got round to Sheep Street he was surprised to find two horses with pillion seats strapped on behind, waiting outside the house. Judith was coming to see Ham's best friend married. She would come, muttered Ham, and a wife who had brought her husband seven hundred pounds could not be treated quite like other women. Will's bride, as he had learnt from Richardson, would bring her husband six pounds, thirteen shillings and fourpence, being the sum left to her by her father to be paid on her wedding day.

Judith came down the stairs wearing a smiling face. "Save you, Will! The sun don't favour us, but we three old companions can make merry without."

Will took her hand. "Mistress, this is kind in you. I will never forget it."

"Oh! let it rain potatoes, let it thunder to the tune of 'Green Sleeves,' " grunted Ham hopping about on one foot. Horses were fresh this chill morning. Will shot Judith up behind her husband, her fingers took a firm

grip of Ham's belt; after a glance at the empty pillion behind, Will swung himself into his own saddle and they were off at a trot through the early empty streets.

If it had not been for the Sadlers no friend of the bridegroom would have attended this marriage. Mother had not spoken to Will since he had returned from Worcester. She seemed not to notice that he was in the house. He had learnt from Bet, though, that the mistress had ordered an extra cover to be laid for dinner to-day. So he was to be allowed to bring his wife home. Father had never said so, but Bet with eyes half closed from weeping (why should she weep?) told him between furtive curious glances that the back chamber was being made ready for two. Ay, Mistress Joan's own room, sweet maid, and she as meek as a dove up there with the mistress now, helping carry away her few poor things. Oh! Heavens! He felt he must speak to her. Brother and sister met on the stairs, and Joan, ashamed of her swollen face, would have pushed past. (Was he never again to see a woman that did not look as if she had sobbed for a week?)

"Joan! Stay a minute. I must say that I am sorry. Your little chamber!"

Joan stopped. "Why Will, so am I, but there 'tis. What's done can't be undone. And I am not to judge. Mother says," repeated Joan looking at him strangely, "that maids and men be not alike. A modest maid cannot judge." (So mother had said that, had she?) "All the same," said Joan for herself, stabbing him to the heart, "I had always hoped that you would bring us home one day a sister of whom I should be proud. I have never known a sister, and I had always thought that your wife would be like one of those princesses in your old tales—very fair . . ."

"She is that," said Will.

It was a raw dark November morning, with a fine drizzle thawing last night's frost. Underfoot the road was slushy, the hedges displayed only a few tufts of brittle brown foliage, and from the spiny thorns hung great crystal drops. In the ditches the long grass lay down grey and frost-bound, drifts of fallen leaves dark as sodden leather were piled in rimey places where the sun never got, and a few puddles still crackled with ice. They had come out of the town as if making for the bride's home by the high road, but ignoring a turning to the north, kept alongside that same little brook which ran past Hewlands on its way to meet the river. A countrified road, intimate and pleasant, by waterside the whole way, it only took them twenty minutes to reach their destination. It was, God be thanked, neither his village nor Anne's village, it was very small, but its chapel was in the parish to which they both belonged.

"Look! the sun," whispered Judith as he lifted her down. A thin lemon wafer had risen in the grey sky overhead, a pale ray of gilding was trembling across the wide mist-patched surface of the silver river, flowing down flood-full between hoary winter banks screened by slanting willows. "The clouds are lifting." Everything in the scene, though, suggested sad, unhelpful thoughts. The tiny brownish chapel crouched like a hare in the rank churchyard grass, was dripping thawed waters from every point, huge drops from the stark trees which overhung the lych gate splashed on to their shoulders as they tied up their horses. They could hear the river fretting through trembling reeds and vagabond flags already rotted from continual motion. The few cottages which formed the obscure hamlet lay

beyond the chapel, but news of what was afoot had brought out even on this discouraging morning a dozen of those folk who live to weep at weddings. They stood in a group clustered around Whittington the Hewlands' shepherd left in charge of the horses from whose flanks arose a steamy halo.

The bridegroom had arrived on the stroke of the appointed hour, but the bride and her friends were already waiting in the porch. Something pathetical in that. He saw a figure which might be Anne's, cloaked, muffled and hooded beyond recognition, weighing on Richardson's stiff arm. Sandells came hurrying out into the rain to meet them, seemed struck by Judith's presence and gave a civil greeting, but soon burst into "Come, you're the last. We are all here now and the vicar ready. Let's go in."

He had not brought his wife, Will noticed bitterly, nor that sister who was betrothed to Richardson, a widower. There was nobody present who could have been Anne's step-mother. Her own sister had not come. Yet she had companions of her own sex—Jugge looking two yards round in a circular black cloak, and—horrible!—Audrey in a scarlet gown with pendant ribbons of every hue flaring about her head.

The vicar's voice sounded, saying "Con.e. Is the bride ready?" "In her good time, sir, in her good time," begged Jugge haughtily, waddling forward to fluster round the shrouded figure on Richardson's arm. "What, would they hie you to the altar in your cloak and muffler, my honeystalk, all mazed and undight?" Petting and patting as if encouraging a child, she unpicked the swathings from her mistress's throat, twitched back the hood, pulled forward the curl on the brow, unfastened the cloak-strings. "It is so

cold!" complained Anne's voice, sounding listlessly for the first time. She submitted like a doll while Jugge swept away her last warm covering, and with the air of one letting strangers see a great masterpiece of painting or sculpture the old nurse stepped back triumphantly at last.

Ham Sadler was startled. He had not been prepared for such authentic beauty. Upright and smiling faintly stood the bride, her rich brown eyes fixed on space, her white hands resting lax on either side of her full skirts. The violet-blue shadows under her eyes, those vine-tendril curls of legendary gold, her whole waxen face of pinched regular features, had a delicacy which took him quite by surprise. Her dress was a plain bodice of black velvet sloping to a point in front over bunchy, many-pleated skirts of grey frieze. To his unapt eye there was nothing in her lank figure to tell her story. Her hollow cheeks with their varying colour, her languid pose, her shape at once gaunt and solid only reminded him vaguely of those crowned and mantled saints that used to preside in a haze of candlelight over every chapel, and still watched from the high inaccessible west porches of many churches over market-place and cloth hall.

"Who giveth this woman to this man?" gabbled the vicar, and bleak Richardson bowing and laying an arm on her waist to push the bride forward answered "I do, sir." "Hold up your hand, Anne," urged Sandells, watchful from just behind Richardson's elbow. "No, no, wench, save us! your other hand." Flushing, Anne did as she was told, held up her left hand stiff and straight as if she was being called upon to swear an oath. The vicar was busy with his book (though he knew this service by heart it looked well to consult his

book when wedding unlettered folk), so when the moment came Will dropped the ring on to Anne's finger still held upright in that heraldic attitude. It was an antique hoop of silver garnished with a small heart-shaped ruby, and had come to Judith Sadler she knew not whence, but among her dead parent's gear. She was sure that she had never seen her mother wear it and thought that it must have belonged to a sister of her father who had died young, of plague, if truth must be told, but she had not told that to Will when she pressed it upon him as a wedding gift. The Sadlers knew that Will had not the money to buy a new-fashioned ring with a stone of which every person in the town could calculate the cost.

He was acting the bridegroom well, facing it out, prompt, alert and clear spoken, and when Audrey's voice was heard in the middle of one of his responses protesting suddenly that she didn't want her Mistress Anne to be married, he turned and smiled over his shoulder at the abashed congregation trying to hush her.

The short service unhelped by music and gabbled through half inaudibly by a single parson, eager to earn his ten groats and be off, took only a very short time. Will was issuing from the chapel with a wife on his arm less than ten minutes after he had entered it. The rain had ceased and he would have led her straight out into the graveyard without waiting for kisses and greetings. He was eager to be away from that pernicious hag with her clownish daughter, those two straight-faced husbandmen and that knot of whispering peering strangers. But Jugge could not be denied. She must array her mistress for the journey in the porch in space and comfort, taking her time. Will, driven off,

had to occupy himself presenting the bride's neighbours to the bridegroom's friends, speaking the Sadlers' names as often as possible as if in hopes to draw attention from the fact that his guests numbered only two. "Master Richardson, I am glad to see you well. Learn to know my fellow townsman, Master Sadler. Ham, 'tis Master Richardson, a great acquaintance of my wife's father, God rest his soul."

"Sir, I am happy to meet you. Everyone knows your worshipful father's name even in our parts." "I thank you. I am nephew to the Alderman. In your parts you keep some wonderful fair maids." "Ay sir, ay, I am a simple man, but I believe Anne a well coloured girl enough and a good girl, and I wish her happy. Her worst fault is that she is something peevish and given to idleness. That nurse is a very tattling woman and does too much for her. . . ."

Jugge had not waited to be made known to Judith.

"God bless your ladyship. Ay, I was her nurse, so I have reason to weep this day. Nay, why should I be ashamed to confess that I gave her suck, her poor mother's milk running out at the sixth week. . . . The prettiest babe I ever gave nipple to, though Lord! how she would tug. . . . By your leave, sir, by your leave, I am not made of wood, am I? ('Tis her bridegroom burning to get her from me.) I am the better that it pleases your honour to ask, and I thank your honour, and here's your wife ready for you and I'll be sworn on a book that she loves you and all shall yet be well, and in time to come she shall thank me lovingly for this service I have done her, for I have been her go-between and assistant to procure unto her a gentleman of excellent breeding and one that shall be heard of hereafter in his town. Oh! Audrey, he is taking her

from us! She is going. . . . She is gone! Weep, Audrey, weep wench, haloo! blubber! give a loose to grief, for she is gone, our sole delight, and you are all that is left to me in a workaday world."

Before the wives were bestowed upon their pillions Will bade his bride give her hand to Judith.

"Anne, we must thank Mistress Sadler for coming to see us wed this raw day." Judith, very friendly, was ready to kiss the bride, but Anne, still smiling that faint unmeaning smile, did not seem to expect it, so the younger and smaller woman forbore.

"You have gotten a fair one, Will," whispered Judith as he mounted her. He had gotten a silent one, or was she sullen? Nearly every word that came out of her as they ambled homewards had to be dragged forth by direct questions. How did she like the horse on which they rode? It was a loan from Master Sadler. Was she warmer? Was she hungry? She brightened at the mention of dinner and asked Judith "Do you come to dine with us, my mistress?" Awkward, as needless to say the Sadlers had not been invited. They came round to Henley Street to see the young couple safe home. "Don't jump me," said Anne, drawing back as Will advanced to help her down. In the hall dinner was all set, and on the threshold, just within the door stood mother in her everyday gown, but without her apron, and father, very noble, posed with his hand on her shoulder, the expressions of deep grief, righteous wrath and saintly resignation all pinned on his features as plain as it were a placard inscribed "Here is a Christian gentleman behaving as he should."

"Daughter," said mother taking Anne's hand gravely, "come within. We stay for you. These be your brothers, my sons, and your sister, my daughter." She

would not say the word welcome, but Anne smiling her diffident smile did not seem to notice, and during the meal that followed the bride made a good impression, particularly upon her father-in-law. She ate of every dish that was offered to her, scarcely uttered, and when Mary suggested that Will should take his wife upstairs, rose with swift obedience.

The little back chamber had never looked barer, although Will could see that several pieces of furniture not there before had been brought into it. He led Anne over to the window to show her the country view over the garden to the fields. He had just got the length of slipping his arm round his wife's waist to beg for a kiss when she asked if he thought someone could come to help her undress. It was not three o'clock in the afternoon and she had eaten a good meal scarce five minutes before. Startled and alarmed, telling himself to remember her condition, which indeed he had never been able to forget since he had first seen her to-day, he asked if she felt unwell. No, she did not think that she was unwell, but she thought that she would like to go to bed. Reminding himself of the early hour at which she must have arisen, the chill in that obscure chapel, the ride home, he agreed that she might well be tired. He would ask the others to excuse her and take himself out for a stroll round the town. But, she persisted, would he send someone to help her undress? Here was a problem. Bet would be washing up the dishes. Mother might not like Joan . . .

"A waiting woman," said Anne, looking at him with her dull rich brown eyes. He took her hand in his. "Dear heart, what manner of a home do you think that you have come to? Cannot you make shift to unpin for yourself like a poor man's wife?"

"Jugge," said Anne, sitting down helplessly on the bed, letting her cloak and hood slip to the boards, "said that there would be waiting women to attend on me. I can never make do for myself. I have so much hair. It tires me to comb it. Your sister has much hair, but coarse like a horse's tail, and of an evil colour. Jugge has always waited on me. Has your mother no gentlewomen in waiting?"

"Not one," said Will.

"I thought as much when I saw that she did not wear a branched velvet gown as you told me. Why did you tell me that she had a branched velvet gown?"

"She has—packed away in a coffer in her own chamber together with other rich trifles and exquisite fripperies. If you ask her some time she will display them to you—to-morrow belike, if she be not too busy."

"I would it were to-morrrow then," said Anne, "since there is to be no feasting or dancing to-day. Will there be people coming to-morrow?"

"Not that I wot of. Did you hope for company to-day?"

"Jugge said that there would be a feast—boar's head, sturgeon and the like, and all persons of worship in the town bidden to meet us with music and dancing. Why were there none asked to eat with us?"

"Your new kin desired to enjoy you alone mayhap, Mistress Anne."

"Well, if there is nothing better a'doing I'd as soon to bed."

He hastened downstairs and found Bet scraping trenchers. Could she go up and help his wife to bed?

"S'wounds!" cried Bet, whipping off her apron. "She is crazed upon us already!"

"Not she, God be thanked, but she is somewhat aweary."

"Nay, 'tis her dinner then," nodded Bet, running down her sleeves. "I bethought me when I saw her taking of dish after dish with no observance. 'Tis ever the same with my sister, she that is married to the grave-digger. When she is carrying, comes down flat at your feet like an elm in still weather if she has taken the least morsel more to her dinner than would nourish a mouse."

Bet went upstairs readily, and when Will came to the door a moment later he changed his mind about going in, for he heard his wife and the maid chattering together like jays, friends in a moment. He had to set forth without his cap or cloak, but that did not matter greatly, since he could hardly visit friends alone on his wedding day. He slipped out of the house by the shop entry, nobody heeding. It was three o'clock on a November afternoon and cold enough to keep any soul save had business within doors. The streets were as empty as if it had been a Sunday afternoon, instead of Friday, indeed there was a Sundayish air about the closed doors, shuttered windows and echoing footfalls of the few pairs of clogs about the town. The rain had lifted and from the clearness of the vacant skies he guessed that it was going to freeze again. He wandered down to hang on the bridge and watch the river, for though it was his wedding day he had nothing better to do.