CHAPTER V

THE MARRIED MAN

ANNE, with her surpassing beauty, had reached her seven and twentieth year unwed for the simplest of reasons. Every fellow who saw her for the first time was struck dumb by the gold locks, the chestnut eyes, the sculptured lips faint smiling as if lost in wonder at their own loveliness, but after that things went no further. An honest young husbandman needs other things in a wife. "Can she wash, wring, bake and brew, scour, dress a man's meat and drink, make the beds and do all for herself?" they asked of themselves. One and all the bachelors of her village went elsewhere to mate, took plainer wenches with perhaps less gold on their shoulders and more in their pockets, with smiles that meant something, and tongues that were quicker, if homelier. . . . Only a John o' dreams would have thought of bringing such stuff home to a farm.

Jugge had meant to have Will for her mistress from the moment he had kissed Anne's hand at the garden gate. Her father's death had made Anne's case desperate. She might not understand much, but sour glances and short commons from a step-dame are a language interpreted by the slowest. With the sure instinct of youth her lover had always guessed her a little older than himself. He must have seemed to her the greenest thing ever breeched. . . . But well

handled he might offer marriage—a husband at last! He absolved her. Jugge had done all, and you could hardly blame her either. Dreadful to think of the pair of them, though, upstairs in that sun-bleached farmhouse chamber, with the black oak bedstead carved with mermaids and wild men, bulbously pillared and dustily canopied, catching as many high lights as a blackberry. . . . A blackamoor too Jugge must have looked with her wrinkled walnut face and earth-hued hands, as she tied the laces and looped up the gold locks of her pearl-white mistress. "Now, my gosling, give ear, be sage, and I'll tell thee how to act so as to catch a bird, especially one of the younger sort. I'll instruct thee. . . . You must seem to do that fearfully which you commit willingly, to despise profit where you shall have most gain. We lose money by being backward. Nay, when Nature framed this piece she meant some gentleman a good turn! 'Tis a shame, I say, they've let such a paragon rest single seven and twenty seasons, which as you must know, my chuck, is a solemn age for womankind. . . ." And beautiful lank mawkish Anne, weighed down by her load of gold hair, fixing her great staring eyes on that wicked old face searchingly, as she did when you spoke seriously to her, yearningly as if you talked in a foreign tongue she was trying so hard to understand, must have lent ear and supped enough evil instruction to practise obediently.

Alas! poor Anne, too costly for everyday wear. Waited on hand and foot by a score of quick-witted servants in a great lord's palace, she might have done well enough. His was the fault for seeking to snatch from heaven a silver star, for placing on his needy finger a nobleman's jewel.

She could not read or write. Well, most daughters,

except great gentlemen's children, learnt little more than enough to catch the drift of a letter, sign their names in the right place and check the items on an inventory. By the time they reached wife and mother, in general they forgot with relief what had been driven home by whippings. Anne should have read poetry aloud in a sweet low voice, sitting in a trelissed arbour surrounded by a court of love-lorn lords and pages. Her voice actually was small and when roused above its usual whisper, rather piping and silly. Her choice of words was as small, and all were drawn from the narrowest village circle. She sometimes used expressions more suited to the farmyard than the parlour—Jugge's fault. Will realized with uneasiness that he could not recall a single wise saying of hers in all those long summer hours they had spent together in bright fields and shadowy woodland. When she had shown him a flower in the forest and called it "Sow's Bread," the ugly name had scarcely disturbed him. "A good amorous medicine to make a cold one hot in love, if beaten into little flat cakes and inwardly taken," she had murmured, looking down under her fringed lashes at the little flower stalk twirling in her finger-tips. When she smiled outright it spoilt her, for her nose was a trifle too long.

She had, it seemed, no friends of her own sex. Nay, because other maids were jealous. No gentlemen friends either. . . . Fie! gentlemen want but one thing of a maid.

She could not sew. Her beautiful fingers were all unhandy. Mother sent Joan out with Anne to buy stuffs for the babe that was to be—stuffs to be made up into little forsmocks and body-stitchets, caps and muckinders. They came home with a light basket and

money to give back. Anne had sat like an effigy in the shops, flicking over patterns listlessly, and Joan, who had foreseen to whom it would fall to make up what they purchased, had come away with as little as possible. After watching her daughter-in-law's efforts to hem a swaddling band, mother fetched out of the linen cupboard the garments put away after Num had outgrown them, worn gear because most of it had served for Will, Gib, Joan and Dick ere it descended to Num, let alone those three other children asleep in the churchyard.

Anne made no offers to help in the house-work. Faith! she would only have been a hindrance since she marred all she touched, and it must not be forgotten that she had a reason for languor. Will was a good lad to his wife, brought back his wages to her every week, and when he had finished in the shop—where he was working much harder—would sit by her bedside for hours in that back-room, carry up suppers to her, and when she would suffer him, take her out for strolls in search of amusement. Like many persons of vacant mind, she delighted in prospects of entertainment. The reality always disappointed her. Will took her round to Sheep Street one night when there was going to be music. The Sadlers made much of her, and gave her the seat of honour by the fire, but when two airs had been played she was plucking Will's sleeve to know when the dancing would begin. She could not believe that folk would sit to listen evening-long to a set of sad drawling madrigals when they might have bid the musicians break into a jig! On the second occasion that they went to Sheep Street worse befell, for when Will had done reading a sonnet and turned to his bride—"Oh! my dear!" his smile became a rueful laugh. Anne had fallen asleep.

The hours that she could sleep began to frighten him. She was drowsy when he drew the sheets gently over her again and left the house in the morning. By dinner-time, as often as not, she was still in her smock in front of the mirror, with her hair brushing her unlaced bosom. In the afternoon she would put on her cloak and go through the streets, gazing at the shops and markets. She had a curious tripping walk that attracted attention, and though it was winter she still insisted on wearing a great plaited hive of a straw hat which she brought from Hewlands. She did not ask for money to spend, you must say that for her. She had no idea of values. When Will—unwise young husband—asked her what she would like for her seven and twentieth birthday in February, she said that she thought she would like a rope of pearls.

When she came in from her profitless stroll—and if the day was foul or it was a Sunday with no shops open she had to be pressed to take the air—she would sit about downstairs yawning her head off till supper-time. Sometimes she could not last out till supper, and on such days all that Will saw of his wife was a head on a pillow when he went to work and a head on a pillow when he came back. When she stayed up she frequently fell asleep in her chair, her white hands resting along its arms, her face turned from the light, sleeping, sleeping, while Gib clouted Dick's head, Joan whirred her spinning-wheel, Num yelled at having his face washed and Bet clashed the pewter. It seemed a cruelty to keep her up when she was plainly so far beyond taking pleasure in anything.

One or two of the neighbours came round, curious to see Will's wife, surprised to hear that he had got one. Like the bachelors of her own village, they did not come

again. The unmeaning smile, the beauty so unsuited to her station, the silence which they mistook for haughtiness, put them all off. So like that poor Will, said they to one another, to choose a maid unable to do a hand's turn in an honest man's house—those gold-dust braids, those jewel-brown eyes, that queen-of-the-castle air—too much, my lad, too much!—such beauties lead to no good end! Anne reminded them of all sorts of old romances, none too chaste. They could see her letting down those gold braids out of a turret window to pull up a lover—bearded kings and knights in armour fighting for her amongst blood-boltered bedclothes, little pages running with naughty notes to forsworn priests and haggish sorceresses.

"Your brother's wife makes no great cheer for a man after his toil and labour," ventured one of them to Joan, watching the haggard young man fresh entered from the shop, bending to kiss a hand which fell like a plummet from his as soon as he had saluted it. Anne lay back in her chair with her feet on a footstool and a cushion behind her head. She did not open her eyes on her husband's entrance.

"She is sickly," said Joan staunchly, but to her mother later when she repeated the remark, she added that to her mind Will's wife was good for nothing but to eat, drink and sleep. "Peace!" said mother sternly, "art thou such a monster of perfection that thou shalt be set in judgment over thine elders? Thy brother's wife is heavy with reason. When she is lighter we shall see."

"That's what I said," quoth Joan.

Joan and Anne were doing one another no good. On a certain spring evening when he had returned from an errand into the forest, better exercised in body and

easier in soul than he had been for a long while, Will got a great start. His wife and sister were the last to take their places on the bench drawn up to the supper table, and as they settled themselves—Anne a great size by now—Joan gave a sharp yelp. "Ow!" She swept up her sleeve and sure enough on her plump upper arm was a pucker of nipped flesh, a white half-moon going blue as a bilberry where nails had tweezered it.

"Wife!" cried Will. "How could you? The poor wench is nigh bleeding. Joan! be quiet for a tell-tale!"

"She pushed me," whispered Anne, pale and trembling.

"She pinched me," said Joan, bursting into tears.

Late that night mother drew her abject son aside and told him that she was not easy in her mind about his wife. He must have noticed for himself that she was scarcely witting of what she did and said. Well, these last weeks of waiting were weary work, as mother knew from old experience, but Anne's condition troubled her. The child would be here by this time next month, and never a word about it had she uttered yet. She showed no glint of pleasure in the clothes being made by Joan. She would sit withdrawn for hours, demuring at nothing. She ate too much, and did not move enough. If it were to be God's will that this child did not come into the world alive, as had happened in the case of her own two first children . . . Mother shook her head and refrained from saying that 'twould be a mercy. In her heart of hearts she could not bring herself to believe that anybody as lazy as Anne would ever accomplish a living child.

She was wrong. Anne who was late with everything kept them all waiting a three weeks longer than had

been expected, still a three months short of what a bride should. On a night in May, exactly six months from that day he had brought her home from the damp discoloured chapel by the riverside, Will was running for the midwife, with his cap on the back of his head and his garters untied, while Anne crouched in bed with the sheets drawn over her tear-wet face, was shrieking to Bet the maid to bar the door, never to leave her and not to let anyone in to touch her.

The comfortable woman arrived (out of breath, from having had to trot beside a long-legged husband who seemed to think that he might find himself a father before she had packed her bag for him to carry), and a long brilliant spring day began. It was cattle-market day, Thursday, and the sounds of lambs bleating, oxen lowing and heavy salt wains being unloaded at the hide-sellers' cross, floated in through the shop windows. Country customers to the wool house, struck by the goose-look of the young man who dropped everything and gave them good den at ten in the forenoon, learnt from the lad who ran errands the state of things next door, and wished my young master a young master to carry on his business.

At dinner, to Will's amazement, the good wife whom he had summoned so imperiously nine hours before, came down to munch a hearty meal with the assembled family, after which she arose and waddled out of the house, saying that she would return to supper in case they had need of her by then. Joan was in tears, Bet in tears, mother invisible. When he tapped on the door of the back-room she opened it only a crack and bade Will be off; he could not see his wife. Sobs from within in a voice that he did not recognize set his own eyes a'pricking and told him that mother was right.

By supper time Bet had let the kitchen fire out, so busy had my mistress kept her, running up and downstairs with this and that. Will re-lighted the fire, Joan slopping round and wiping her eyes on a dish-cloth, set to work to cook them something, and the boys, fighting one another on the staircase, were bidden to go to hell and lay the table. They got to their meal an hour late, father groaning, and saying that no child of his had ever given his poor wife so much work as she was getting this day—not a morsel passed her lips since breakfast, this business would kill her surely, and then he might order three coffins. Mother sent down a message to bid them set aside some cold meat for her and to tell Joan take the boys and herself to bed. It was only three years since Num had been born, but Will could not remember that it had been anything like this.

Towards midnight father got to talking of Anne as a head of hair such as we shall never see again in this world, and went off to his couch yawning, the midwife reappeared, and uneasy silence settled over the house. It was dawn again before she came to the turn of the stairs nodding and becking to the young man who lay in front of a dead fire watching grey light outline all the curtains.

"I'm to bid you come up and visit a stranger, my young master, one that shall be your master hereafter belike—Nay! 'tis a girl, then, a lovely girl, though somewhat of the smallest, and as like to you as cherry is to cherry."

"And the mother is dead!" affirmed father loudly, appearing out of his bedchamber with his nightcap askew.

"Ssh, sir! No, indeed, no such thing, though she

made a slow business of it and helped me as little as any woman I have ever had dealings with. She recovers well."

Will entered the back-chamber on tip-toe. Its window was tight shut and on the threshold a blast of noisome hot odours almost choked him who was breathing so unhappily. The little room, usually so cold and bare, was crowded and disarrayed beyond recognition. There were bowls of herbs stewing on pans of steamy water, tubs shrouded by cast bedclothes and towels, pots and kettles jostling one another in the rushes, and the midwife's bodice flung on top of the mirror, gave the place an unseemly look. As he came in mother passed out, bending under a load of some sort. He fell on his knees beside the bed, burying his face in the coverlet, groping for Anne's fingers.

"A terrible child-bed hast thou had, my dear?"

She turned from him, shaking off his hand. He had thought from her eyes that she had known him. The tails of her crumpled gold braids were all that he could see of her. After their eyes had met, she had humped her body round and hidden from him.

The midwife touched him on the shoulder.

"Be ruled by me, sir, and go. Only a short visit this time. You disturb her. Ay, she shall sleep now by your leave. Get you across to your good mother and take in your arms that piece of yourself that she has carried in to show the grandsire in's bed. O, 'tis a pretty child, a pretty puny child, and you, my mistress, for all that you won't look on it now, shall like it better when you feel better."

Will's daughter was baptised Susanna at the handsome parish church approached through an avenue of budding limes, down by the shining river. Anne chose

the name, and Will professed himself pleased with it. Longing to know what fancies thronged the brain of this fair creature whom he called wife, he pressed to know of what the name reminded her. "Jugge once had a babe called Susan," said Anne darkly. "It died. . . ."

Will's Susanna did not die, but at three months it was still such a scrap of ever-wailing misery that mother sent for the doctor, not Rogers the apothecary, or More the physician from Church Street, but the French doctor, a very strange-speaking person who lived in a tiny cottage behind the stables and outbuildings of Alderman Sadler's fine house. The cottage was not much bigger than the Alderman's dovecotes which overlooked it from the orchards, and the backway in which it stood had an ill name, but Mounseer de Boys did not understand enough English to think that people might not care to send for the doctor from Dead Lane. His household consisted of a woman who came in by the day to wash and cook for him, and a lubberly lad named John Rugby, whose work in life was to run errands, be cursed in gibberish and carry behind his master a green leather bag. ("*Garçon!* my *boitier vert!* Intend vat I say? Vetch me my green-a-box." Oh! a rare pair the French doctor and his assistant if you were in the mood for a laugh.)

In front of a new-lit fire in her own chamber sat mother with the babe stripped naked on her lap, her fine eyes glancing up at the doctor with a sharp question in them, her mouth primmed together. She looked ashamed of her grandchild, as she well might. Behind her stood Will, biting his lip as he watched quick foreign fingers feeling those thin stick-like legs and arms on which the purplish flesh hung in folds this cold morning.

"*Fé! fé! fé!*" grumbled the French doctor in his beard, his eyes shimmering angrily at the wailing Susanna. Guarding the door waited John Rugby with crossed arms and a pleased smile on his face, the only cheerful person in the room.

The doctor finished his inspection and nodded to mother to re-swaddle the babe. When she lifted it up to lay the bands under it on her knee it leapt at her bodice with an eager changed cry. Mother laid it down again and began to bind it. It screamed as of yore, but there was a wet dark stain on the front of mother's neat elderly bosom.

The French doctor said Susanna was suffering from starvation. Dreadful it sounded, uttered in that murdered English, accompanied by fatalistic spreadings of the hands and shruggings of the shoulders. "You do not vant to lose dis child, *hein*? Den I vill tell you vot you vant to do. You vant to get a *nourrice*, vat you call vet-nurse." Indeed they didn't. At that he burst out like an angry cat, "And I am not to see de mother, *hein*? She is not to show her face?" After seeing Anne and getting a surprise, he agreed with mother that a wet-nurse would be a great expense. Let them proceed as before for a little.

They went on, but not exactly as before, because mother had Anne into her bedroom four times a day, and when she was too busy to sit there and watch her she sent Joan and locked the trio in. Susanna began to thrive instantly and Will, who had felt a kind of fear of the hideous little mammet with the outrageous roar, wrinkled face and puff of coal-black hair, knew that he would have been sorry to lose it. He began to quarrel with Anne over it. Once, maddened by its continued screams, he came running in from the shop to see what

was the matter. He found Anne sitting in front of her mirror in the back-chamber pinning up her hair. On the bed, with all its limbs drawn up and its mouth stretched open like a cave, trembled the babe. It got its breath and gave a howl loud enough to wake the seven sleepers.

"God's bread, woman!" cried Will, snatching it up. "What manner of mother are you, leaving your child to burst itself while you tire your head for the day?"

"My head was made, she pulled it down while I was nursing her," said Anne. "'Twas an ill-natured thing to do. . . ."

Another time he had reason to complain of observance, not neglect. Fingering idly round his child's neck, he jerked out a cord from which hung a little bag. It smelt ill and looked foul. "What's here, wife?" beginning to unpick it. "You leave that alone," piped Anne, colouring. "You'll spoil the charm."

"What's your superstition?"

He drew out of her that the loathly little bag contained, amongst other treasures, a newt's eye, a frog's toe, the finger of a birth-strangled bastard and a scrap of a Jew's liver."

"Who gave you this filth?"

"Jugge," whispered Anne with hot cheeks and eyes gone hard and glazed.

"What! do you still keep tryst with that old witch? You may tell her from me, on pain of a beating, I'll have none of her hell-broths slung round my children's necks. Do you take me? Hah!" Really angry, he flung the good-luck bag in the fire.

A few weeks after Susanna's birth, Alderman Sadler died. He left his mills to his eldest son, John, and

the Bear Inn to his second son, Tom. When Widow Sadler died, the first-born should inherit also the fine house in Church Street with all its linen, silver and furniture. John had been looking to get marrried for some time, but the maid he fancied was a schoolmaster's daughter and had no dowry, father wouldn't hear of her. A year after the Alderman's death John announced that Isabella and he had fixed the day, and they hoped all their acquaintance would honour them at a trifling small feast they had towards. A wedding at the Sadlers' who never did aught meanly! Everyone in the house in Henley Street was agog and meant to go, except mother who said that she would stay at home and look after the children. Anne had lately weaned her child, so there was no reason why she should not go—if she got an invitation! Will thought it like enough that he and his wife would not, but when the Sadlers' man Peter came round with his list all was well—he was bidden summon my master and his mistress and their fair daughter, and my young master and his fair mistress.

The wedding feast in Church Street was all that Jugge had prophesied for Anne eighteen months ago—the house garlanded with spring flowers and green boughs, the whole town invited, food to fill an army and musicians hired from Coventry. Father came out of his retirement to escort his family, his face dressed to represent nothing but respect for a departed friend and sympathy for a widow, but when he had got to the widow's side and heaved a sigh or two, she hopped up saying folk would guess her plagued with corns if she sat here longer. She led off the dancing with Alderman Dixon of the Swan Inn as her partner, and everyone saw that old Dixon, twice a widower already,

meant to end the ancient rivalry between the Swan and the Bear.

The bride, whose husband had waited so long, was another surprise, just a well enough favoured lass of two and twenty, with a patient look about her; Anne outshone her manifestly. Ay, his wife outshone them all. Will saw that from where he stood propped against a wall with Tom Sadler, whom he had always liked best of the brothers. Tom was the one who, when they were fishing down by the mill on a school holiday, had ever been like as not to roll over on his back in the grass and, lying with his hat tilted over his eyes, begin slowly "Will, for jest of their own do the gods enter a man into this weary world? Is it like killing flies to them. . . .?"

One of their schoolfellows, the eldest son of Cawdrey the butcher, had died suddenly when they were all about sixteen. He had been the brightest wit of them all, and when he killed a calf would do it in a high style and make a speech about it. "If Rafe had lived," Tom said solemnly, "he would have been of some purpose in this world." But Rafe had died (had suffered too; Hancbeam the surgeon had cut him open with knives, and neighbours had heard him screaming), and Tom and Will, good shallow young fellows, had been left, wondering what sport the gods got out of the affair.

The dancing lasted until the May night was worn out, and husband and wife went home together, Will's arm round Anne's waist, in the sweet of the dawn, when the sky behind the elms which embosomed the town was growing cowslip-coloured above the river fields, and the lark was calling the ploughman from his bed.