CHAPTER VI

THE PRIMROSE PATH

ASPINALL had heard of a village school five miles distant that would be lacking a second master after Michaelmas. It was a post that would lead to better things, for the present master would be retiring ere long. Just as he had fallen into the way of hurrying out to Hewlands as soon as his work was over, Will now came to sit day after day in Field's back parlour studying books to which he had said a gleeful farewell nine years ago—Lilly's Latin Grammar, Æsop's Fables, Caesar, Sallust and Ovid in abundance. Outside it was midsummer, June, July, August. Anne was free to leave her child now, but she cared no more than before to walk and no longer seemed to need his company.

On an early August morning Will told his father of his desire to quit the wool-shop and set up as a pedagogue, using the post offered to him as a shift till he could pass to further advancement. When he returned for supper that evening his wife and sister seemed unusually well accorded and Joan had some jest about three birds in a cage. It had all been settled for him, as he discovered from mother an hour later. Anne and he were to leave Henley Street and have a house of their own. Father had taken for them the lease of a house that Anne liked passing well. He had been able to get it cheap because it was in a somewhat disrepaired condition and belonged to the Corporation

who had no use for it. Yea, Will must know it: for it stood on a good site on the corner of High Street and Fore Bridge Street and several of its rooms were of a fair size because of the use for which they had been fashioned. He knew before she mentioned its name—"the Cage," a fearful sound and a fearful place he had always thought it. It had been a prison in the days before the New Gaol had arisen further down the High Street, and it was built in hewn stone, with lance-headed windows which would have admitted little sunlight even if they had not for the most part happened to face north. Its scarred black oak door had a weighty handle and knocker in the likeness of a flat-nosed bulge-eyed dismembered head carrying between its blubber lips a massive ring. There had been a time when Will had so much disliked that knocker that he had passed to school on the other side of the road.

"Well," said he drearily, "'twill be a change—as the old cow said when they hurried her out of her stall to go to the shambles."

Marry, cried mother, affronted, it might not be a palace, but his wife favoured it, and the old woman said that she and her daughter could manage it for them. Old woman? Ay, it was the abhorred Jugge coming back into his life again. She had, it appeared, been arriving at Henley Street every day for the past three months, to get her dinner and walk out with her old mistress. Mother would save on the lease of the Cage compared with what these two women from Hewlands ate under her roof. Will opened his lips to say what he thought of Jugge, but mother would not give ear. The old nurse, as she called her, seemed to love his wife, and the daughter was a rare lover of small babes. Well, she was getting one of her own. Audrey

with child! Monstrous picture! "Not in wedlock, I'll be bound," snorted Will. Mother had to admit that, but the poor wench, she added, seemed contrite, and the step-dame at Hewlands was unmercifully turning her out o' doors. (All this had not gone so easily, though, when mother had spoken with Jugge. "And there's my daughter, poor Barbary hen, ready to cherish her mistress's child as well as her own." "Your daughter! Is she married?" "Gar! was I married when I got her? Not but that I have known husbands in my day, ay, buried three husbands and eke my Susan, as chaste-born a child as ever saw light. Well, Susan is with God, she was too good for me, but she brought me my first wedding ring. Bless her. And had my Audrey but come for counsel to me I'd a got her a ring to show too. By the mass, if there is blame to be fixed, 'tis on your grandchild, my sweet dame, for putting thoughts in her head. I should ha' foreseen. 'Mother,' whining all day, 'why can't I have a little mammet like Mistress Anne's?' Faith, the long and the short of it is that she lolloped off over the fields one night and helped herself to one. My Audrey's not so simple. Not but that if she could ha' named the muddy rascal I'd a seen him chased to church.")

Will moved into his new home with the corn harvest, the heavy great door shut behind him with a groan on a mid-August evening, and he was in the Cage. Away in Henley Street Joan sang as she carried her things back into her own chamber, father stretched his legs to the fire and said that his house was his castle again, and mother found enough meat left after supper to serve again to-morrow.

The Cage had two rooms which were almost halls, with stone floors and high-groined roofs. When Will's

mother had said it was not a palace she had used just the wrong word, thought Ham Sadler, for a palace was exactly what it put him in mind of—one of those boding antique decayed palaces in which Italian noblemen walled up their wives, strangled their mistresses and stabbed their rivals. . . . When he went through the place last thing o' nights with Will locking up behind him, he always expected to see a thin figure slipping ahead of them down the slype to the back entry. . . . The sun never entered the lower chambers until Will returned from work. Then he would find Jugge, Audrey and Anne, all seated in the kitchen, looking like three figures out of an old tragedy, shafts of light piercing the harebell-blue gloom, catching Anne's legend-gold hair, Jugge's hairy cheeks and Audrey's red forearms. Anne had found a scene to suit her, no doubt of that.

Her bedchamber window upstairs looked out over the High Cross, the chief centre of activity in the town, and from it she could watch the world on the move without having to stir a step herself. High Cross House was an erection of timber and plaster mounted on four stout wooden pillars. Its roof was topped by a turret which held a clock with a single hand of gilded bronze, and under the house in shelter from wind and rain, grouped around the Cross itself which had lost its head some time ago, vendors set up their booths and undid their packs. In fine weather their goods flowed over onto the projecting steps of the Cross, and then you could see baskets of country flowers, butter, cheeses, candles and ducks awaiting your pleasure. On market-days you could hardly hear yourself speak for the noise —prentices crying their wares, waggons rattling about, a minstrel or two playing, pedlars singing, dogs barking,

and all the time that sustained roar—Arr! Arr!—of a multitude of busy thronging people. The glovers' industry had the place of honour at the High Cross, and had Anne been quicker she might often have caught a glimpse of her young husband ordering the arrangement of those long jigging show lines hung with soft white leathers, dark furry pelts and stripped hides dyed all colours. But she seldom distinguished a figure. What she liked was the noise and continual movement. After the market was done for the day and the Cross deserted, only a few pieces of dirty paper blowing about, the last pack corded and the last wain rumbled away, she would fall to another occupation. Jugge had somehow come by a pack of greasy old cards and had taught her mistress how to read her fortune by them. Boy or girl, which was it to be this time? Anne, sitting in her grey stone window-bow, dealt, shuffled and dealt again, studied the result with chin sunk in palms. On the whole it seemed to come out one way as often as the other.

Will too found a thing to please him in the situation of the Cage. A very few steps down Middle Row from it ran the Chure, a long narrow passage which cut right through the stableyard of the Crown on its way to the High Street. The houses faced one another so close along the Chure that their eaves almost touched and anyone watering her window-box could oblige a neighbour opposite by doing hers at the same time. Even at midday the sun almost neglected it. Dusk was its hour, dusk when the bottle windows of the Crown tap-room glowed with a ruddy welcoming light, and through them floated bursts of laughter and songs with choruses. The Crown was not the first inn of the town, nor yet the second. It was much cheaper than those two big

houses down by Butts Lane and Bar Gates, and got a different sort of company. The greater local gentlemen, or London gallants travelling to Worcester or Warwick, would never trouble it, never even know of it. It served mostly country squires of the lesser kind—the Perkeses, the Mouseleys and the Skinners all had their standing reckoning there, let alone smaller fry. It had a corner in the sun, or by the fire, according to the season, for the old soldier who had brought nothing home from the wars with him save a timber leg, and then there was always to be found within its doors a sprinkling of those workless fellows who had never done a hand's turn since the monks had been driven out. By their names ye might know these vagabonds—Abbots, Priors, Clerks, Priests. Their fathers had served on Church lands for generations, and when Old Harry had turned Rome out of England and his new nobility had arrived, enclosing large tracts of their new property for deer parks and chases, Abbot's Tom, Prior's Dick, Clerk's Ned and Priest's Wat had lacked masters. A very few of them had found employment with Catholic families close to their old homes, but Catholic families were having to lie low and spend less themselves. For the most part they had drifted into the towns to live by chance scraps of work picked up, or onto the roads to terrify innocent persons by beggary. And since they were nearly all Papists, theirs was a problem with which few cared to meddle.

"Carry a parcel for ye, sir." "Guide your worship quickest way over the marsh to Clopton?" "By the Rood (by this light I'd say) I am an honest man, your honour, and one that would willingly undertake any labour howsoever humble, could he but discover some. . . ."

Will found that after two years there were changes to be noticed among his old faithfuls. All things were not the same as he had left them two harvestings ago. His friends, who were so glad to see the married man returned to them that they asked no awkward questions, had for instance given up their moonlight raids on Coughton and Hasely and were at work closer in. Will sucked his lips to a whistle when he heard where. Charlecote, not more than four miles across the fields and over the river, was now their prey, and its owner the villain of their piece. Will knew his name well. It was a name most honourable and powerful amongst the ancientry of the neighbourhood. Time and again Sir Thomas Lucy, High Sheriff of the County, had been feasted by the Borough Council in this town and gone away with his due gift of sack and sugar. Only now, falling in with the humour of his company, did Will remember how the great Sir Thomas had once pushed away his plate at one of these banquets, finding that he had helped himself to a dish he misliked. (Is our food dirt? Could he not have choked down a mouthful in courtesy, to save setting so many cheeks a'burning? Marry, I have heard that when the Queen's grace was late at Warwick she neglected not to praise the victuals offered to her like a simple housewife, nay, went so far as to command that one delicacy should be carried to her bedchamber, so that she might enjoy more of it when her time was not taken up speaking gracious words to the honest folk on either side o' her.)

The rascals at the Crown were pleased with Will's imitation of Sir Thomas at his dinner, and thumped with their cannikins on the board for more. Will, glad to hear laughter after a long while, was nothing loath to play the fool for them. "Doth he not hold up his

head and strut in his gait as it were—like this?" "You might say so!" Roars of joy from all the old bravos as they saw their very man brought lifelike before them. And what was this Lucy when they had picked him to pieces at the Crown? No more than a little red-faced stumping country knight of two and fifty, with a fuss of short dark curls growing so far back off his round brows that from side view it appeared his mightiness wore a halo. His ill-wishers would have liked to declare that he was grossly fat or unmercifully thin, but unluckily he was neither of these. Let be, he had given them enough food for mirth as 'twas. He had caught the two Skinners, Black George Barnes, Will Squele and some of the Priors in his free-warren the other day, and had them all rogues-marched up before him into his great house. (Ay, rebuilt with the monies he had got with his wife. Godamercy! to see her in church on a Sunday with her wooden features under her satin steeple hat full of ostrich tips, Madam, who must be obeyed, waiting to see the village children make their seemly bobs to her. Rather Tom than me o' nights.) Watch him now, though, seated in his chair of estate in his great hall with its plaster sculptured ceiling and painted glass windows coloured with his own coat of arms. He had been kind enough to acquaint the coney-catchers that his family had dwelt in this countryside four hundred years, and there was his ancient punning coat with three white luces in it. (Hoy! Yah! three white louses do become your old coat well!) Then with a fit of the face, as full of passion as franked-up boar: "Next time my keepers catch you I'll have ye all whipped d'ye hear? I am a busy man and my keepers are busy men, but we will spare time to flog you and hang your curs up. I know ye all for what ye are. Papists!"

Papists! That was the game my lord liked to hunt. He had not a deer-park at Charlecote (see him on a horse with his little short thighs), but let him get wind of a Papist on the run, and 'twas good as a play to watch his eyeballs rolling and his jaws working. He got letters of thanks from the Privy Council for his zeal in hunting down priests, white-faced, shaven-crowned men, in long tangling black gowns. (In London I hear they hold him an ass!)

"You've a score to set down against his name on that count," muttered Dick Skinner, giving Will an eye-biting sideways glance.

Will rose, called for his reckoning and sloped off, leaving the Crown to discuss a scandal that touched him too nearly.

Almost a twelvemonth ago, in the darkest days of last autumn, the town had rung to a shameful piece of news. Arden of Park Hall, head of that family so little heard of for so many years, had been arrested by Sir Thomas Lucy, was being carried together with his wife and a young kinsman of hers, to stand their trial on a charge of high treason in London! The young kinsman (he was the squire of Edstone and a graduate of Oxford) had been caught as long as a week ago at a desolate water-logged spot on the road between Banbury and Bicester. He had on his person a loaded dag with which, he announced, he meant to shoot the Queen! Had he not avowed this? 'Twas his known intention anyway, and he had been set on to the unnameable deed by the priest at Park Hall. Sir Thomas Lucy advised London as fast as horse and man could travel, and London thought the matter of so great importance that the Clerk of the Privy Council arrived puffing at Charlecote. The very next day,

which was a Sunday, they set off in awful force for Park Hall. The owner was an Edward, and plain "esquire"; the family boasted knights no longer, having fallen on evil days, together with their Faith, yet they still had their pride. When the Queen had come to Warwick her favourite, the Earl of Leicester, wanting to display as many strapping tenants as possible, had sent armlets with the bear and the ragged staff upon them for all the servants of Park Hall to assume. Edward Arden had refused to let his household wear Dudley livery. He had written from his damp-swollen, ill-furnished great chamber, with moth-bitten tapestries hanging in tatters on its walls, that the name of Dudley was new and unknown to him.

He had not fled at the news that his house was to be searched. Catholics did not always flee, though they generally tried to get their priest away. At Hindlip, a place honeycombed with secret passages and chambers, it had taken Sir Thomas's man a week to find their hare —crouched in a hay-stack at last and starving. Park Hall yielded no priest, but Sir Thomas knew more than these close-mouths thought. He turned his avenging troop on towards Idlicote, the seat of another stubborn recusant, and there sure enough was their quarry. No haystack for this one. He came forward and gave his blessing to his naughty confederates as cool as if he was in his own chapel of idolatries, asked "these gentlemen" in a feigned forthright manner what they required of him. They required, truth to tell, some direct proofs of his villainy, for though Park Hall had been picked through from roof to cellar, nothing in the way of papers or letters that would hang a cat had come to light. Papists always cleared their houses and burnt suspicious matter on the hint of a raid. Back to Charlecote

came Sir Thomas, having caged his birds, but failed to make them sing, but Master Wilkes of the Privy Council filled him with hope. Walsingham's men, who were skilled in making guilty folk talk, would get the families from Park Hall and Edstone to give tongue in London. And they must have done so, for the next news that woke the winter landscape of their birth a few days before Yule, was that the owner of Park Hall had been executed at Smithfield and the young squire of Edstone found strangled in his cell at Newgate.

As if the family in Henley Street were not already deep sunk enough in mire, poor souls! No more talk of my wife's gentle kin, no more to be hoped for from Park Hall. Its very name stank in the town. Did my master suffer? He went abroad less than ever, scarcely ventured out of doors by daylight, but for some time he had nourished a foolish fear of being publicly arrested for debt. Did my mistress suffer? She had never hoped for aught, so belike had lost naught. She went about her shopping as before during those weeks, yet it was notable that she never let her daughter out alone, and when they met a neighbour they were in too great haste to stop and pass the time of day.

On an afternoon well before Michaelmas, but reminding one of that season's approach, Will took himself out to see the school that would be needing an usher. Five miles on foot through narrowing ways brought him to the end of the world by the look of it, a starveling thorp cocked up upon a naked heath, its few mean buildings huddled together as if to shield one another from winds that seemed like blowing straight from Muscovy. His first sight of the place blasted in the bud hopes that here was a leaping-off stone to better things. The master under whom he would have to serve

had to be fetched from the alehouse. He had taken to tippling some time since to help him to forget his ague, to help him to forget that once he had been a bright Welsh lad run away from being prenticed to so gross a trade as candle-making. Ten years ago he had still been scraping and saving, striving by hook or crook to get enough together to aid a man of parts to Oxford or Cambridge. Now he was five and fifty, pink-nosed, trembling of hand and voice, with the best reason in the world for persuading a newcomer that this cake would prove dough. He came with his shoulders huddled in a shepherd's cloak, grumbling at being brought out of doors in this weather, grumbling at having to re-open the school-house when he had just locked up. Will guessed that there could not be above a score of souls in this village needing instruction. Sometimes there were more, he was told, other times less. The lads who were all disnatured, wicked, wanton, lying, sons of clodhoppers, came from farms in every direction out of sight and out of grasp. They were without exception flabbikin-faced, foggy-headed, tale-bearing Tartarians, adamantine in their desire to learn nothing and driven to bench only by the rod. Many of them who had been to school two seasons still could not cipher, and most of them could not tell you what age they were supposed to be. The school-house roof let in water, and some of the foot-boards needed renewing, but that was an active man's work. Had Will a weak stomach? Bag pudding and bloat herring was the dinner six days of the week here, and if they got snowed up as they had last Yule, he could always hire a bed with plenty companions in it, at the Footman's Inn across the road. The school-house was a cottage ill-built in brick and timber, its chief room less than the size of the hall at

Henley Street, smelling like a vault and vault dim, since its windows were filled with horn. Will, who had dreamt of at least one Ralf Cawdrey or Tom Sadler to instruct, remembered that they had been burghers' sons coming from good homes in a town of repute. When the master said further with no counterfeit passion that he would not be needing an usher before Mary mass, Will offered no resistance. The wage he would begin at was less than his present gain as comings-in from the shop.

On his road home he met Ham Sadler trudging up from visiting his cousin at the Bear, with a face somewhat dumpish. He asked after Anne, and Will told him that at Valentine's they hoped to invite him to stand sponsor to another child. "Why, that's good news," said Ham stoutly. "And how do you yourself, my old gaffer?"

"So, so," answered Will.

"What? Have you been sick?"

"Yea, and of an evil sickness."

"What sickness hath taken you?"

"Lacking of money. God ye good den." Will hurried off from the doorstep before Ham could ask him in. A stoup of single beer at the Crown would help him to face a supper cooked by Jugge better than half a glass of Judith's sweet Canary. At the entrance to the Chure he remembered that schoolmaster and went straight home.

He was rewarded, for haloed by the light of a bright chimney he found old Whittington the shepherd in from Hewlands for the day, lovingly turning upon the spit a fine rack of mutton which he had brought with him as a fairing to his old mistress. The aged shepherd sat well hunched forward on a joint stool gazing into

the fire with vivid little eyes the colour of turquoises, set in a face withered as an apple-jack, that homely fruit which comes to its best flavour two years after plucking. His tussocky white head was bare, against his russet-smocked shoulder slanted his crook and round his neck in company with a worn neckercher of stammel scarlet with white spots all pulled askew, hung his pipes for calling his flocks together. Propped against him leant his thin wild-coated dog, its chin resting on his narrow knees across which lay his dinted pewter box of tar for salving sheep's sores. Whittington was alone, as he explained, because he had sent Audrey out to the thickets on the edge of the town "wooding," as he called it, to fetch him some more clean-burning stuff to feed his fire, and Jugge had gone with her daughter in voiceful fear lest her pains might overtake her at any hour now.

"Pishery, pashery," said the old fellow, pottering round inside the large open fireplace, tending his sizzling gift with a cunning fork. "That one'll lay down when her time comes with less trouble to herself than the most of my ewes. I knaw her maggotty-headed roomy-hipped sort. Those with least in the attics," tapping his forehead, "brings forth their trash the most yarely. But how does my fair mistress your dear rib, my young master and that little getting of yours?"

Will sped upstairs to summon Anne attend their guest while he ran round to the Crown after all to get them something to drink. She was dressing as fast as she honestly might, she complained when he burst in upon her. There was only old Whittington, she knew, down below. Will picked up his child, who was dolefully at work with smutched cheeks and black finger nails searching through the rushes under Anne's chair,

and carried her down to the kitchen. The point-nosed dog whirled round on its haunches on their entry, but at a word from its master came fawning forwards with tail waving and tongue lolling. When Will returned from the Churc with a bottle in either elbow, the child was seated with her arm round the shepherd's neck listening to cracked and mumbled tales about Queen Mab and Lob-lie-by-the-fire.

She had, announced Whittington, her father's wit, and in looks was the very memory of her grandsire, his old master, a kindlier gentleman never came indoors. The old fellow had just had one of his quarterly battles with the sharp-tongued step-dame at Hewlands, and Will who had hoped to find balm for a bruised mind in slow country gossip had instead to display a measure of interest in a rambling recital of poignant wrongs and scoring answers. "And is 'old dog' my reward then said I? Most true I have lost the best of my teeth in your house's service. God be with my old master, he would never have spoken such a word."

Will, laying the table for supper (a business at which he was getting adept), flung over his shoulder in the same dialect that he wondered Whittington did not retire from such ungrateful servitude. Whittington had money saved, everyone knew it. "Ay, fifty crowns stored away to be my foster nurse when these old limbs lie lank. But though I may look old, yet am I gustfull yet. My age is as a lusty winter" (chuckling) "frosty but kindly." He turned to admire the house in which he sat and when two boys with torches ran by outside shouting directions to a late come waggon, exclaimed Godamussy what a traffic they kept in these great towns. Presently he doubted that a house of this size in such a fair position must be a heavy charge to

so young a couple. He had shambled out of the fireplace and was touching Will on the elbow and tapping his own pouch with look of a dog that fears a rebuff, when Anne descending the stairs made one of her rare short speeches.

"Jugge says Will ought to go to London to make money for us. In London he would make more money than here, Jugge says."

"Ho! ho! ho!" cried the old shepherd making back in haste to his work, leaving haggard young husband standing drawn up transfixed staring at faintly-smiling wife. "Your Jugge'll find herself in the ducking pond one of these days, and she won't sink neither."

"Your comings-in from the shop are so small we never can buy meat worth the cooking," continued Anne in her far-away trailing voice. "And Jugge says you will never make a schoolmaster. . . ."

Her husband must have marked her words, for two days later he came back so long after his usual hour that another household must have been anxious, came back with torn hose and a heated brow to cast on the table a bundle tied up in a stained cloak. "Cook these for your mistress, ye old witch." Jugge bosomed up the insult and the prize without a word, hurried to the larder and unpacked two plump young leverets. Next day at breakfast Will's cloak was hanging to dry in front of the fire and when he rose to put on his jacket his fingers found a large new pocket sewn in its lining. His eyes travelled across the kitchen to Jugge. "Harepouch," muttered she without raising her head. "Can't be up till dawn washing and wringing out your cloak every morning. . . ."

Late homecomings and rich fare became the order of the day at the Cage. Anne's larder no longer lacked

meat worth the cooking. One day the three women would sit down to a coney pie, the next to a roast pheasant. . . . Some nights Will was so late home that Jugge began to wonder. . . . Backwards and forwards between window and fireplace she would waddle, lifting a corner of the blind and peering out into the dark street, ticking her tongue in her teeth as she returned to keel her pot, with ears cocked for a step. . . .

She had given up pretending to call her master anything but "Will," and he for his part had given up coming home for his supper. The Crown got him most evenings. He was in the Crown on a foggy February night when Audrey came searching for him with her brat tied in a bundle on her back and her wide mouth aburst with news. She pressed her nose to the taproom lattice, and seeing what she wanted inside came to the threshold and blew a cat call. "What's your will? What's your will, madam?" asked one of the drawers hurrying up. "Marry! that one's my Will," answered Audrey pointing him out, and raising a roar of laughter that changed her frown to a grin. As Whittington had foreseen, Audrey had come by her child easily. Will had left her cursing into her bowl as she stoned raisins one morning, the same evening when he came back from work Jugge was swaddling a new-born male child in front of the kitchen fire while Audrey's voice from a back-chamber clamoured to be given back her mammet.

The topers at the Crown leant and wept for joy on one another's shoulders when Will's half wit wench arrived whistling for him.

"A sail! a sail!" they halooed. "Two! two! a smock and a shirt! She bears his misdeed on her back. She is forced to dig the old fox out. Draw near, draw near,

sweet mutton, be not afraid. Peace! she will indite him to some supper. . . ."

"Sneck up," said Will struggling to his legs. He knew his wife had been in labour all day. "Go home Audrey," he counselled, "get outside and I will follow you."

"Fie-for-shame," piped young Skinner in a high falsetto, "he will go along with her to a place she wots of. He will take her from ill company."

But Audrey, having found an audience full of admiration, had no intention of going home without making her hit.

"Tell your saucy merchants to stint their ropery. Sitting by foxing thyself with ale while every man uses me at his pleasure!" She sidled up to the table with a smile for all.

"I saw no man use you at his pleasure, fair quail," cried Dick Cowper stretching an arm, "if I had, my weapon had been out, I warrant ye."

"Now afore God," bridled Audrey shaking him off, "I am so vexed that every part about me quivers. Will, I was bidden seek you out, but what I was bidden to give in your ear I shall now keep to myself. Scurvy knave! landing your lady in such a peck of trouble, dealing double with her like that! Nay she has done well enough, but yours was a very ill piece of behaviour."

"An heir! An heir to the Crown," cried the old soldier hopping round on his wooden leg and casting up his cap. "Call a cup of sack all round, sir, for an heir to the Crown as yours may well be named."

"What is 'heir'?" sniffed Audrey. "This is not an heir. They are very pretty children, but as I have told, he has dealt double by my mistress this time."

"Gemini!" yelled Tom Perkes catching Will a buffet on the back that sent him back into his seat again. "Gemini! by Gar!"

"Am I then," asked Will, "the sire of two more heiresses?" But it was not that neither. Twins, male and female had been added to his family. Will, without enough in his pocket to pay the reckoning called for drinks all round like a Trojan. Not yet one and twenty, he was the father of three children under two years of age.

Anne had no fancies about names this time, so both the Sadlers were asked to be sponsors and Hamnet and Judith the children were christened.

Ham Sadler had begun to be very unhappy about his old friend. He knew that Will spent too much time in the Crown, he knew that he was going with the Skinners and their familiars nowadays. One night he had met a rag tail procession of them walking quite openly on the elm-shaded road towards Charlecote, Roger Skinner being tugged along by a leash of those greyhounds he raced on Cotswold, Tom Prior swinging aloft a bag which wriggled and Will with two buttons of his doubtlet undone and a little ermine-headed beast with ruby eyes perking out. When Will recognized Ham he called out "What ho! old quake-breech," and waved at him a handful of pipe cords, those snares set by poachers to catch hares and coneys. From the sound of them and the gait of them, the whole company had been merry as Greeks, half fap in fact.

A week or so later matters became serious. Two of Sir Thomas Lucy's keepers on their road from Tenbury to Charlecote bringing home a deer slung across the back of a horse, were set upon by a band of masked men. The fat buck was cleanly carried off from under

the keepers' noses and both fellows got broken heads. Stark robbery with violence.

Ham Sadler who had been three times in vain to the shop in Henley Street (where young Gib was making a smart apprentice, but his elder brother was not to be heard of) told his wife that she must go round to the Cage and appoint an evening for the couple there to come to supper. He thought he would catch Will this way, for the wife would be eager to come and could hardly present herself without her husband. Judith was not to say that there would be no other guests, she was to wear her best gown, making the visit one of ceremony, and might buy a knack for each of the children on her road there.

Judith accepted her instructions with an obedient countenance. She did not care for Will's wife or his house or his servants or the company he kept, and the sight of his three smutch-faced infants was never calculated to raise her spirits, but she did still care for the lanky pleasant-spoken, hazel-eyed wastrel himself with his flop fore-lock of oak-brown hair, his beguiling tongue and too compassionate impulses.

So when she had trimmed the house for the day, ordered the food, given out the stores, had her dinner alone since Ham was away at the mills, and afterwards mended the washing brought in from the orchard, she went up to her chilly bedroom and changed to her shift at three o'clock in the afternoon. She dressed in her best without pleasure, for she would far rather have stayed in her own neat home. She knew what awaited her at the Cage—a long pause on the doorstep while nobody answered your knock, admittance at length to a gloomy hall full of dirty plates and wailing children, an awkward quarter hour with one of those monstrous ser-

vants while the mistress was summoned, and at the end of all a woman to whom one could not talk of sewing or music or books or common friends or the garden, since she had none. . . . Judith came downstairs slowly, took her shopping basket from the perch in the hall, looked into the parlour and clapped her hands at the cat sitting on the settle cushions, shut the cat out of the parlour, opened the front door and stepped into the street. She was met by a breath of sweet smelling air so much warmer than that inside the house that she stood for a moment on the doorstep blinking her eyes. Sunshine of a strength that she had almost forgotten was bearing down on crooked-tiled roofs and oak and plaster walls, enveloping the little town as it were in a soft mantle of warmth and light. It was an early April afternoon, and the better weather had come at last as it often does, in a night, raising scents and sounds that reminded her that summer was coming again, bringing roses and haymaking and suppers of strawberries and cream in the garden, and Saturday afternoons when Ham would row her in a boat on the river under muffled green trees. . . . She had several shops to visit, and the old gaffer who served her with striped sweets had something to tell her which was, considering her errand to-day, disturbing. There had been a hot affray up at Charlecote night before last, three keepers wounded and a whole parcel of the young swashers of this town laid by the heels. Sir Thomas himself, who had been waiting up for them a long while with a stoutly armed company, had watched them untappice and caught them red-handed. Half a dozen of them had been arrested and were to be brought to justice, good names amongst them, and young Master Skinner had been roaring round

these streets like the town bull ever since, mortal tears standing in his eyes, because though he had got away, Sir Thomas had got hold of what he prized more than his own brother—a couple of those greyhounds with which he won races all over the country. Ay, his Blanche and his Sweetheart, those silken-coated dogs that he kept in his own bedchamber, rose at nights to tend when they were sick and fed from his own dish, had fallen into the enemy's hands. They had been led away upon cords by some of Sir Tom's men, and the knight had sworn he would get an order for them to be destroyed. Judith knew and disliked young Skinner, a coarse-mouthed mutton-fisted fellow whose stare made her blush and want to stamp her foot, but when she heard of his loss her heart began to thump and she cried out that the poor hounds had done no harm.

"They have acted according to their nature and enraged the nobility," said the old shopkeeper shaking his head as he did up her poke of sweets, "and that is a harmful thing for humble folk to commit. For the master's misdeeds the hounds must suffer. Sir Tom is a man of his words and let Master Skinner weep his eyes out his dogs will hang this time. It cannot be remedied."

As she left the shop he told her that Skinner, making matters worse, had gone off this morning to pin on Charlecote gates a lewd rhyme libelling Sir Thomas and his dame, cast together by the Ephesians at the Crown last night—a number of Papists there, "that's another matter at the base of all."

Judith took her parcel and turned down the street towards the riverside. The further bank showed startlingly clear this afternoon, the willows were bud-

ding coral pink, and down by the church against a sky so deep in colour that it seemed to be tinted with violet, a streak of light told of the lime avenue bursting into leaf. On the town side of the grey stone bridge was the Bancroft, a common for cattle and sheep, and she put down her basket and waited a space by a post and rail to see if any of the young lambs would do what she liked best to watch, stand up on their hind legs and dance at one another with flapping fore-paws and whisking tails, like lords and ladies setting to partners. None of them would to-day, it seemed, and the sight of them running to their mothers—the old ewes turning round with so kindly a bend of the neck to aid the impatient creatures—made the scene swim in her gaze, so she took up her basket and went on her way, wishing her day's business done and herself running into Ham's arms to sob out all. Half-way up Middle Row she stepped into the purplish triangular shadow cast by the entrance to a yard, and took out her handkercher. Over her head wide weathered oak beams held up the arch that led to the stables of the Swan and through it she could see a scatter of red hens picking grain, and an apple tree in flower. By the time that she had got into High Street her eyes were bright as the little panes winking under the buttonholed eaves of the tall houses there, and she passed several greetings and noticed how this strong spring sunlight showed up shabby furs and shiny patches on thick winter materials. Some of her friends looked an odd enough shape, but this was not London.

The front door of the Cage was standing open, and slouching across the deathly cold stone passage leading to the old justice hall which Will's family used as kitchen, she saw the figure of the serving wench, the old

witch's daughter as she always called her to herself, bearing in her arms something that in this house would almost certainly prove a child. She called out "Good day," and "Is your mistress in?" "Ay," gaped the wench turning. "I'll e'en follow you then. Lead on," said Judith choosing short words easily understood. "Is that my namesake you have in arms?"

"Nay," snapped the wench, "'tis mine." She clutched it to her with an ungracious gesture. Somebody had said in Audrey's hearing that her brat was unlawful, therefore whenever a stranger asked to look at it she was suspicious of their intentions. "You can't hev it. 'Tis mine," she repeated fiercely, then gradually remembering Judith, "Marry, since you're Will's friend I'll give you a peep. Just had his dinner sweet la'kin and sleeps—blessum! Will's gone," she added with another of her twitching changes of face.

"Gone—where?" asked Judith, her voice echoing sharply in the groined entry of the hall. "Ask within," said Audrey, a familiar phrase, and pushed open the door.

If Judith had thought Will's home amiss before, to-day it beggared description. The first object that met her troubled gaze was a haunch of uncooked venison lying naked on the centre table, garishly lit by some rays of the setting sun, and dripping gore into a puddle on the dusty rushes beneath. Whining as it made a mud pie of this mixture, squatted the one of Will's children that could now go upon its feet. His wife was up to-day, sitting in a chair with an infant on her knee and poking with her toe at the contents of a coffer that had been tipped out on to the floor within reach of her—all men's clothing Judith noticed with a start—faded slops, patched shirts and starchless ruffs. The

old woman was crouched in front of her mistress looking more like a witch than ever, both her hands blood-stained to the wrists. She carried an unswaddled infant upside down under her left arm, its bare legs kicking dangerously near the fleshing knife with which she was picking her way through the cast clothes. When she caught sight of a stranger she slammed the child into her mistress' lap and leapt for the table.

Anne looked up, unable to rise, her beautiful lips parted in a smile of such vacancy that Judith wondered afresh if this creature was in her five senses, and in a faint mincing voice she announced without greeting "Nothing here will fetch tuppence, Jugge says."

The sound of a cracking box on the ear, followed by a screech from under the table, cut short anything more that she might have said. Averting her eyes from the picture of the old woman lugging that child out by the arm, Judith curtsied primly and spoke her piece. "Mistress, I am come here with my husband's duty to beg that you and your husband sup with us one night."

"Nay, Will can't," murmured Anne, "he's gone." Patting her hair and drawing herself up she uttered in the accent of a child repeating a lesson, "Will's gone to London to make money for us. They won't catch him, Jugge says."

There was a flat pause, then the old tartar hurried forward.

"Marry, since 'tis Mistress Sadler she may hear the truth as well soon as late. Your young friend's gone, my mistress, made off, taken the primrose path as they say. 'Sway away! Go and be damned, say I, when did you ever bring us aught of fortune, you with your pestering popinjay talk of your manors and moneys? Who had

to take his wife at the point of Master Sandell's dagger?'

" 'You lie,' sighs he, 'but that's all one now. . . .'

"Comes rolling in here looking as if he had seen a wolf, and steadies himself holding on to my table. 'What's for the pot?' cry I, shaking him by the elbow. 'The spirit of my ancestors which I think is in me, is calling to me,' says he, drawing himself up bewitched, with the moonlight shining in on's face. 'The spirit that is in you came out of a bottle, and you'll end like your ancestor dancing in a rope,' say I. 'Wake up! Shake down that liquor, you foppitty. What a plague have you and your kennel-raker companions landed us in now? You've seen mischief this night, don't deny it.'

"I'd smelt man's blood which differs from beast's.

" 'Sir Thomas has asked me my name,' says he, drawling and affected, 'and whose son am I?' 'Sir,' I gave him gentlemanly answer, "I am my mother's son." "And what was her name?" Ha! I warrant you he got that with a buffet ere his keepers fleshed me. "Arden! Arden of Park Hall!" '

"At that I screeched out that by my halidom if Sir Tom knew so much our goose was cooked. 'You may swear so on the Book,' he groans suddenly. 'Here dress this. Jump about.'

"Has a slit in his arm as long as my placket. While I mop it out and bind around he goes silent, drawing himself up like a body on the rack. I watched his shadow as I worked, and as I am an honest woman, that grew taller.

"When I had accomplished, 'God ye good den,' says he, treading out like a ghost, smiling that lunatic smile of his. 'Tell my wife I will set her up in style when I come home.'

THE PRIMROSE PATH

"I ran after him, screaming to know where the dickens he was off to now, and as he voided himself round the corner of the slype I heard a voice answer between two owl's hoots, 'London. . . .'"