CHAPTER XXV

CARTING WITHIES

OCTOBER had melted into November, and still winter lingered on its way The sky was blue, and the sun shone with sufficient warmth to draw a wakeful lizard from its hiding-place, or start a butterfly upon a lonely pilgrimage above the still-flowering gorse.

Andrew had been cutting withies, the willow-wands of which the Cove fishermen made their crab-pots for the coming summer season. It was full early yet for withie cutting. Old Billie, however, owned a bit of "free" land in the neighbouring parish of S. Nunne. This land was too marshy to be of any value save for the withies that grew there. At this season of the year, when the thoughts of all Covers turned towards the construction of crab-pots, and some were even hazarding a journey by rail to bespeak the product of other parishes—standing withies near at home sometimes proved too much for neighbourly honesty. So, Andrew Thomas, instructed thereto by his father, cut early.

"It will be first load to Cove, I do think," he said, aloud to the companion that pattered briskly at his side—a little rumpled, greyish-white donkey, that drew the cart whereon the withies were piled and roped. The cart was of faded blue, the tyres of the wheels shone like silver in the afternoon sun, the brass on the donkey's harness glittered like gold. The withies shone, too, where the light caught their peel of grey-green and pinkish-brown.

Above his blue jersey Andrew's face glowed ruddily, as he strode briskly along the white road in his heavy sea-boots.

Withie cutting is wet work.

He whistled as he went, and now and again he laid a hand on the back of the little animal that needed neither whip nor rein, so closely did it keep to its master's familiar side.

The sound of the little hoofs rang out clearly on the quiet autumnal air, the withies kept up a gentle undertone, as the loaded cart swayed from side to side; the cries of the sea birds came faintly as they passed to and fro, high overhead.

"Too high for fair weather," remarked Andrew, tilting back his head and gazing upwards.

"It is some odd, though, the way them birds do see the weather coming. Is there truth in it, I wonder, what the old folks tells, about them being souls of drownded men what got no Christian burial? They do seem sad and unsettled, for sure; most of all when weather be coming up."

A wailing long-drawn cry now reached his ears. It was followed by an answering note.

"Curlews," said Andrew, gazing over the hedge, and across the marshland beyond. "There they goes, s'uthard. Then, like as not, it be from north weather be coming."

Still walking beside his steady little donkey, over his shoulder he watched the flight of the birds. When they were lost to sight he started to whistle again, turning back towards the road.

A figure was approaching. Before it advanced an ample shadow. The low sun made a halo round a bright-hued hat.

"She be grown a fine girl, Maggie Penrose." He narrowed his eyes to the vivid westward light. "A bit too gay and gadabout for me," he concluded.

Nevertheless, he answered Maggie's lusty greeting with a smiling "Day."

"Where be you going?" she asked, her big black eyes lingering approvingly on his slim, strongly-built frame.

"To home, for sure," he answered.

"Whoa, then!" to the donkey, which having become wound up to a going pace, seemed disinclined to stand still.

"My! them's proper withies!" said the girl, following her usual tactics of universal admiration for the opposite sex and its belongings.

"They's not bad," he answered.

Then they stood and looked at one another. The donkey shook itself and set its harness jingling.

"Whoa! then!" said Andrew.

The sun gleamed in his crisp short hair as he took off his cap and drew out a cigarette from the lining.

"I must be getting on," he said.

"I be coming your way," answered Maggie, readily.

Whereat Andrew laughed.

"It did look like it," he said.

"I was just turning back when I seed you," returned Maggie, glibly, "and I says to myself, 'If that isn't Andrew Thomas, it be Willie George.'"

"Willie be a deal smaller chap nor I."

"So he be, for sure. Like as not, I did know it was you, all the time, Andrew."

They were already walking side by side. An unexecuted errand on Maggie's part lay but lightly on her easy conscience. She was telling herself she wasn't going to lose such a chance, not she! They talked of the weather, of fish, and of the approaching Feast.

"There will be some fresh couples, then," remarked Maggie, referring to the old-established custom of choosing sweethearts on the day of the Church Feast—a yearly landmark of vast importance in all Cornish parishes.

"Like as not," was Andrew's careless rejoinder, returning to the quiet enjoyment of his cigarette and the soft evening silence.

Trudge, trudge.

"Who is Thomas Henry going with now?" asked Maggie.

"Nay, I don't know," the young man answered. He was marking a low bank of cloud just showing above the horizon to northward.

"What do you think of this Grainger?" was Maggie's next question.

"There's not much harm in him," was Andrew's quiet response.

"Anyhow, I've done with he," she stated, decidedly.

The remark fell flat.

"I don't really know nought about him," said Andrew.

The sun was dropping into the spreading cloud belt. Andrew watched it disappear bit by bit, cut off by a sharp straight line.

"It will be dark afore we're to home," he said.

"Not it. Parish lantern * will be up in no time now."

"Ay! It be full to-night for sure." He turned to look behind. Already, above the dark land to eastward a faint golden light suffused the sky.

"Her be coming now," he said.

"That be Lizard lights," she said, without turning.

"Lizard lights be more to s'uthard. 'Sides they do rise and fall. It be steady that light. 'Tis moon."

"Like as not," she replied, as one for whom the subject had little interest. Andrew was far too taken up with things in general to suit her taste. What was the sense of worriting his mind about moons, and lights, and things, when there was a girl handy, and dusk falling, and all so comfortable as you please!

She drew a little closer. Experience had taught her the power that lies in proximity.

"Be you settled for the Feast?" she asked, harking back to the subject of sweetheartin' pairs.

"I don't know as I be." Andrew was looking down at his feet, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Neither be I." She pushed her plump shoulder gently against his arm.

"There's time and plenty, yet," he said.

"I dunno, all the likeliest girls do get picked up soonest." The suggestion and warning implied were quite subtle for Maggie.

Too subtle, doubtless, for Andrew's simple mind.

"Them as gets no pair will have to go without," he concluded, with philosophy.

"I won't be left," averred Maggie, with decision.

Andrew laughed.

"I wasn't thinking you would," he said.

Regarding his words in the light of her own desire, Maggie was encouraged to go on.

"I be willing, Andrew, if you be," she whispered.

"Willing? For what?" he asked. His thoughts had strayed elsewhere.

"To go with you, for Feast"—her voice dropped—"and afterwards."

The light was too dim for the fact to be visible, but Andrew felt his cheeks flush hotly.

* The moon.

The girl was making love to him it seemed.

Andrew was single minded and he did not like it. The tactics that might have been successful with a Lorry Grainger were a false move as regards Andrew Thomas.

But Maggie blundered on. To her type men are all alike.

"We would be a proper couple." She leant against him as she walked.

Andrew felt ashamed for Maggie. Words, always slow to obey his thoughts, failed him altogether.

Encouraged by his silence, she went on.

"Always, so long as I do remember, you was my fancy. I do love you, m' dear."

She twined an arm about him.

Andrew's anger began to rise. A devoted son, his life had hitherto centred in his little home; he was, besides, a reader of books, something of a dreamer. In the cleanly coarseness of his surroundings, he had remained pure as a wild animal is pure.

He shrank, therefore, from her touch. But she held fast by his jersey, and, without roughness, he could not loose himself from her.

"You might put your arm round me, Andrew. It be too dark for any one to see." Her voice was coaxing.

His face burnt. He tried to shake her off.

"No you don't!" she cried. Her primitive idea of courtship included some horse-play. "I've got you fast now and we be tokened proper."

Her tone was jesting, but her hold was firm.

Andrew stopped suddenly. The donkey stopped with him.

"We beant tokened, and we'm not like to be," the young man said, gruffly.

Maggie withdrew her arm.

"Go along wi' your nasty sweetheartin', then," she said, bitterly.

"'Tisn't me as is sweethearvin'." He threw the words over his shoulder. With a touch of the hand he had started the donkey

"You needn't be too high and mighty for a bit of a joke."

The girl was hurrying after him. Andrew, in his anger,

had swung off with long strides. The donkey had broken into a trot.

"Don't leave I behind. I be feart of the dark," so Maggie pleaded.

Andrew slackened his pace. His heart was tender for all weak and frightened things.

For a little while they walked in silence. Then Maggie said, bitterly:

"A year since, six months since, you would have been so pleased as me for us to go together."

With a clear memory of a bygone boyish admiration for Maggie's bold charms, Andrew was too truthful to deny the charge. So he said nothing.

"You be changed," affirmed Maggie.

"I don't know that I be," he rather sullenly protested.

"You be, though. And I can tell you since when you did change."

She paused.

The lights of St. Cleer church-town began to twinkle where the road was lost in darkness ahead.

Andrew was comforting himself with the thought that this enforced companionship was nearly over, for soon he would take the turning to the right, the girl that to the left.

"You did change," Maggie went on, slowly and emphatically, "since when my cousin, Cassin Morris, did come to us."

Andrew stopped with a jerk, and then strode forward at a rapid pace.

"Yes — you — did." Maggie was panting behind. "But I—tell—you. You—need—not—think—nothing of her. Her be finely—taken up wi'—a gentleman! You ask—this Grainger who—he be walking out—that's all!"

The last words were bawled after him, as Andrew precipitately took the sharp turning which led by way of the "green" to the Cove hill.

Cassin Morris was of no consequence to him, so he was telling himself—nor this Grainger, either, for the matter of that. Yet his breath came hard and fast. The even tenor of his pleasant, uneventful life, had been rudely disturbed., All the while his thoughts were so confused

and the state of his mind so little known to himself, that he had no idea why he felt so shaken, so angry.

Later on, to his mother's consternation, he pushed away the ample "tatie pasty" that greeted his return, with the odd plea that he felt sick at the sight of it.

"It do be too hard, this withie cutting," she said; "I am saying this withie cutting be too hard for a boy."

Old Billie did not take up the challenge she had thrown down. He had been a boy himself, and in his old mind he was revolving the question:

Who be the wummun?

CHAPTER XXVI

THE WISE WOMAN

It was dark night on the cliffs, and very still. So dark it was that the sea and sky hung together like a grey curtain, scarcely lighter than the misty darkness of the rocks and ground. So still that, above the murmur of the sea below, could be heard the noisy babbling of some small rocky stream.

Maggie's footsteps sounded loudly in her own ears; hollow over boggy ground—as though they were on a coffin, she thought, shudderingly. And when they clattered up a stony rise, it was like the rapping in of nails. An awesome sound in the dark and lonely night.

Possibly Maggie's thoughts would not have run in such unwholesome paths had it not been that her errand was dark as the night itself. She was on her way to consult a witch.

Superstition dies hard in country places. And in that wild region of the west, where the land stretches out like the tongue of a dragon into the sea—that land where legendary heroes made their last stand against the invading hordes—it dies hardest of all.

Even now, in Cornwall, though the word "witch" is seldom heard, a belief in the "evil eye" still lingers; and certain "wise women" know how to avert that "evil eye," to charm away warts, remove birth-marks, and, perhaps, do other work they would not so readily acknowledge.

One such "wise woman," or "white witch," dwelt within a mile of Land's End. Her tiny cottage was set in a snug hollow. So closely was it sheltered, that a stranger might pass and re-pass it, and still remain ignorant of its whereabouts.

Old Maria lived alone. No one quite knew how she lived. She knitted stockings, it is true, and had a net share in the "pilchards" and "mullets." But these resources

would hardly bring in enough to keep body and soul together. Certainly old Maria, though, if report might be believed, well over "her hundred," did not seem at all likely to disintegrate her spiritual from her corporal self. Bent she was, wrinkled and brown, more like an ancient bronze than a living woman; yet she still cultivated the stony intake that formed her potato patch, and could carry her "caul" of mullet from Genvah Sands as readily as she had done half a century before.

Be her resources what they might, Old Maria never lacked. For all she was a cheery soul and laid no open claim to any occult powers, no one would have dared to deny her anything she chose to ask.

It was to see Old Maria that Maggie, with hurrying steps and many a fearsome look over her shoulder, crossed the cliffs to-night. Her own words to Cassin had suggested the idea. She had brooded over it until it seemed to her, that, being by herself quite incapable of bringing order into her tangled affairs, the best, if not the only plan, was to get "Them" on her side. By "Them" Maggie signified those Powers of Darkness that vaguely to her mind inhabited a mid-space between earth and heaven, and who, if you only knew how to bespeak their aid, possessed an awesome power as regards mortal affairs.

Maggie had laid her plans in order. Three things she wanted. She had a vague notion that there was virtue in the number three. First, she desired, if possible, to recover the horseshoe. It seemed a terrible thing to her at night to think of it lying alone, uncared for, beneath the quiet sky, working silently, it might be, against her. Next, she wanted to bring down trouble on Lorry Grainger's head. She did not want him to die. Maggie was a good hater. She wanted him to suffer. Lastly, she wished in some way to part Andrew and Cassin.

Not much of a task, after all, for a "wise woman" to compass.

In return—for Maggie had listened not in vain to the tales of witches and charms, often repeated by the older generations gathered round a winter fire—she had brought three gifts. The beads Lorry had given her; a new half-crown she had once coaxed from Cassin, and a "sea-tree" Andrew Thomas had brought her years ago, before he

had left school. To one of Maggie's innately superstitious mind, it seemed fit that the gifts should have some connection with the people she wanted to be ill-wished.

So pitchy dark was it on the cliff that, in the first place, Maggie over-passed the "wise woman's" cottage. Perhaps she never would have found it, had it not chanced that as she paused undecided and looked back, two gleams of light, like the yellow eyes of some night-prowling beast, suddenly shot out into the darkness.

The cottage windows!

Maggie stuffed a corner of her shawl into her mouth lest she should scream out. Then she stole back and softly knocked at the door. It opened immediately, as though she had been expected.

"Come in, m' dear," said old Maria. The kitchen, within, looked inviting and cheery. Pot plants filled the tiny windows, a kettle sang on its hook above the turf fire, the cat, a well-fed tabby, dozed before the hearth, a coarse blue stocking, half knitted, lay on the well-scrubbed table.

"Come in," said old Maria, again. "Kettle's on the boil for a dish of tay. I knew you was coming, see!"

With such simple cunning, the old spider ushered into her homely parlour the foolish blundering fly.

Maggie felt her stout flesh creep at the disconcerting thought that the old woman, who had so uncannily foreseen her arrival, in all probability knew also the reason of her coming.

The old woman placed a chair for her tongue-tied visitor. Maggie was too frightened to speak a word.

Old Maria took a blackened teapot from the shelf, and filled it at the kettle.

"No need for you to tell of I, Maggie Penrose. It be all plain to me why for you come. I could give names an' all, so I could. But, bless you, m' dear, there is no need, no need, at all. 'Them' knows all, so 'Them' does, without no telling." She busied herself pouring out the tea.

Maggie dared not refuse the proffered cup, but her thick-wristed hand was all of a tremble, her teeth chatterèd against the thin old china.

The old woman, bent and shrivelled, sat close over the

fire, her saucerless cup held by the handle on her slanting knee, her bright old eyes, like those of some skinny old bird, fixed on the glowing turf. Now and again she slowly nodded her head.

It was still, very still in the kitchen, the thick walls of the cottage and the heavy door shut out even the murmur of the sea. Maggie's own silence seemed to be choking her. With an effort she put her cup down on the table. Her hands were cold and wet.

Without a glance in the girl's direction, and in solemn, silence, the old woman placed her own cup in a niche in the fireplace wall; then she shuffled across the kitchen to a lopsided chest of drawers, black with age. After some protesting groans and creaks on the part of the ancient piece of furniture, she pulled out one of the drawers.

Maggie watched her in fascinated silence. After sundry tuggings and rattlings, the small bent figure shuffled back again to the hearth-corner. There was something that gleamed dully in one claw-like hand.

"Now, m'dear, maybe you think old Maria she be a 'wise woman,' but that be all tellings. Her do be wise to know this, when a young wummun wants help, there do be a 'him' in the matter and, like as not, a 'her' besides. Old Maria can't help, not she; but there be 'Them' as can."

She was silent again. She was smoothing, caressing the thing that she was holding in both her hands. Suddenly she turned her eyes full on Maggie.

They glowed red.

"You brought summut for 'They'?" she questioned.

Maggie opened her left hand disclosing her treasures. The old woman's skinny arm seemed to shoot out, telescope-fashion, as she pounced upon the coin. It disappeared immediately. She tossed the sea-tree (a seaweed of the nature of coral) contemptuously aside. The blue beads she dangled from her old brown hand. They sparkled in the firelight. Had Maggie not been in such abject terror she would have been sorry to let them go.

"Be that all?" asked old Maria.

Tremblingly Maggie assented.

"Little enough. Haven't you a handkercher"

Maggie's hand went instinctively to her pocket.

"There be a hole in that there," said the old woman, quietly, "and you did tuck handkercher into front of your shift."

In all probability her sharp old eyes had noted the presence of the handkerchief in the girl's blouse. But to Maggie, herself, this amount of prescience told of depths of knowledge too awful to contemplate.

The old woman, taking the handkerchief, pushed it under herself on to the seat of her chair.

Again she waited in silence.

Again she shook her head.

"They wants more'n that," she stated.

Maggie was powerless in face of the voracity of "They" as interpreted by their earthly agent, old Maria. She unpinned her brooch. It was a tawdry little thing, but dear by familiarity; besides, Aunt Susie would in all probability miss it, and ask awkward questions. But there was no help for it. "They" had asked and "They" must have.

"Be that all?" The old woman's fingers had closed readily over the trinket.

At last Maggie's love of possession mastered her fear.

"I did bring three things, and now 'Them's' had two more. That must serve," she said.

"Then tell to me all you wants. Words be nothing; but there's strength in the asking."

With this somewhat involved utterance she reconciled her reputed power of reading thoughts with her real desire to hear the girl's story. Doubtless, on a knowledge acquired from such secret confidences, much of her supposed wisdom was built.

In hurried, uneven tones, now twisting the corner of her shawl, now staring blankly at the fire, Maggie jerked out her troubles and the remedies she desired. When she had finished her recital, old Maria disclosed the object she had so far concealed in her hand.

Maggie's heart beat quickly as she gazed with wondering eyes. It was a bluish-white globular crystal, pierced with a hole, through which was threaded a boot-lace. It was horny of substance, and where the fire shone through it there was a dull red gleam.

The old woman looked at it for a while intently. Then she began to mutter.

"*Jehovah, Jah, Elvin, Shadduy, Adonay.*"

Maggie was by now shaking as with the ague.

Still bending over the crystal, old Maria began to speak in a far-away voice, like one in a dream.

"*Thrice of the moon, by hand of men*
The horseshoe will come back agen."

She waited a moment and then went on. Maggie by now could hardly breathe.

"*Thrice of the moon, and a 'looe 'shore*
No hand of man will bring it more."

Again she waited. These silent pauses were terrible to Maggie.

"*Not from the land and not from the sea*
Yet trouble and woe shall fall on he."

"Lorry," gasped Maggie. Her heart was thumping in her breast. It seemed to her excited imagination that, momentarily, the kitchen grew darker, whilst the old woman's form waxed larger and larger, till almost it blotted out the light of the fire.

Suddenly, old Maria turned glittering eyes upon the girl. The latter would have screamed aloud had not terror held her voiceless.

"Have ye any mercy?" asked the old woman.

The blood ran back to Maggie's heart.

"Not for them I hate," she blurted out.

Once more the "wise woman" looked into the crystal. Then, holding it in one hand, from the other she pointed a cramped finger. Even in that moment of horror, Maggie noted the long nail, projecting like a claw.

"Death," wailed the wicked old crone, "violent death it is, as is like to part him and her."

Maggie swallowed painfully. Cassin was so young to die. Surely there must be some other way?

Then she set her teeth hard.

Cassin had taken away Lorry Grainger. Andrew she should not have. Maggie had made up her mind about that. All of a sudden she felt no further fear of old Maria and her spells.

So when the latter asked :

" You brave, young wummun ? "

Maggie answered readily.

" I be."

" Not feart ? "

" No."

" Not of graves and darkness ? "

Maggie shuddered, but staunchly shook her head.

" Then at twelve of midnight you must go——"

The old voice sounded in a kind of monotonous chant.

" —one, two, 'free, you be to go backwards, all around St. Cleer, the church. No word to pass your lips, no sound to reach your ears, no sight to greet your eyes. Then shall ' They ' be with you, and all things to your desire."

Then, after a momentary pause, she briskly resumed her ordinary voice, to remark :

" Now us best take and have another dish of tay."

To save her life Maggie could not have swallowed anything at the moment. She left hastily, forgetting even to wish old Maria good-night. Wide-eyed and breathless, she hurried home through the solemn darkness that slept about the cliffs.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WHITE COW

WINTER was now drawing on; work was slack on the farm; time hung heavily on hand.

One still afternoon Aunt Susie bade the two girls go down to the Cove and ask whether any mullet had been sighted.

"It would set we up proper, a bit of fresh fish," she stated. "It be mutton and potatoes, and potatoes and mutton, till the boys do call Granma and me for never giving no change to they."

Glad of the excuse, the girls set off. They were close friends once more. Since Maggie's visit to the "wise woman," she had, outwardly at all events, been devoted to her cousin. Her poignant jealousy seemed, for the time being, to have given place to an almost protective pity, that made her gentle, almost motherly, towards Cassin; with something, possibly, of that chivalrous spirit that in the days of old led the conqueror to wait upon his vanquished foe.

She never for a moment doubted that Cassin was destined to be wiped out of her way; that, of course, was necessary. This necessity did not prevent Maggie from being, to a certain extent, sorry for Cassin. It seemed so hard, when one was young and full of life, to be struck down, if not altogether, at any rate, to some devastating extent that was to preclude all hope of love and marriage. For so Maggie had read old Maria's prediction of that which was to come between Cassin and Andrew Thomas.

Since that awful night in the "wise woman's" kitchen, Maggie had had no doubts concerning the intentions of the Powers of Evil. The horseshoe was to return, Lorry Grainger was to be made to suffer, Cassin and Andrew were to be parted. These things were a certainty. Only one thing was as yet uncertain—the time of the fulfilment.

That, so Maggie understood, depended on herself. There was nothing presumptuous to her in the thought. To her mind the world had, of course, been created pre-eminently for herself. This being so, if things did not go quite as she wished, there were two expedients. Firstly, prayer. This had the great disadvantage that one needed to be "good" to ensure its efficacy. Secondly, certain as it was terrifying, was the invoking of the aid of those Powers that hovered between earth and heaven—in other words, of "Them." A childish doctrine, truly, taking into consideration the means by which such aid could be bought—a string of beads, a handkerchief, a tarnished brooch! Yet, after all, a doctrine not more innately foolish than other doctrines held by thousands with wider knowledge and more intelligence than Maggie Penrose.

The time of fulfilment, then, was in Maggie's own hands. The completion of the spell could only be wrought by that midnight mystery round the old church on the hill. Maggie knew this; and, though her flesh shrank from the darksome test, she never doubted that she would carry it out.

Yet she delayed to strike.

Why, she could hardly tell.

Perhaps the sense of intimate power, the knowledge that the fate of others was in her hands, may have been altogether too rich a possession to be lightly parted with by one of Maggie's grasping nature. Perhaps, to regard the matter from a more charitable point of view, some real pity for her young cousin did for a while hold her in check. Whatever else there may have been, it is very certain no compunction as regards Lorry Grainger stayed Maggie's hand. His arms had been about her, she had fed hungrily upon his kisses, according to her nature she had loved him. Now she hated him. And with Maggie hatred went far deeper than love.

Love?

As to that, she loved Andrew Thomas.

Hate?

She would never hate any one quite as she hated Lorry Grainger. A gentleman to Maggie's mind had been as a god. Lorry had with his own hands broken the feet of her god.

To reveal the feet of clay to the worshipper—is it not the unpardonable sin ?

Maggie did not hate Cassin. One does not hate the barrier in one's path, the barrier that is about to be removed. So Maggie was kind to her cousin, and Cassin's nature in response unfolded as does a delicate beech leaf to the sun.

As they crossed the field-path they talked and laughed merrily. Maggie was apparently the merrier, the more light-hearted of the two ; and this, although she believed that the steps of her blithe young companion were dogged already by the shadow of a coming doom.

Presently they came in sight of the sea. Under the grey sky it stretched its vivid green, with here and there gleams of metallic blue and bands of purple. The rocks looked dark, and round them drifted and wreathed a never-fading line of foam. The glass-like waves broke upon the sand with a long, low roar.

" It looks too rough for fishing, surely ? " said Cassin.

" Not for mullet. It be only a bit of a swell. See there. Them on Carn Morvah be the watchers." Maggie pointed to a cluster of men looking like flies on the crest of the cliff.

" How can they know when the fish are coming ? "

" By the colour of the water, when it looks violet that's the fish." Maggie was pleased to air her superior knowledge.

" All those streaks ? " Cassin pointed to the purple smears.

" They be cloud shadows, it's nearer in-shore for fish."

" Look ! there are some quite close to the edge."

" Those will likely be rocks with sea-weed on them. Though the fish does look 'most like that."

" How do they know which is fish, then ? "

" There you has me. See ! there's old Billie Thomas down along. Let's go and ask of he."

Besides the old man Maggie's ready eyes had espied his son, Andrew. A wave of heat seemed to pass over her body and up into her brain.

" I will see him and her together," she thought.

She put her arm round her cousin's waist, and raced her down the rough path to the Cove.

"Hullo, Billie Thomas," she cried, "Cassin, here, wants to know how the watchers tells the fish."

Old Billie, his hat pulled down over his beard-covered face, his hands in his pockets, one foot resting on the log, his stump of a pipe in his mouth, was looking out to sea. He turned at Maggie's voice.

"They do be red in water," he said.

"Maggie told me purple."

"Iss. Purple." To the old man it was evidently all the same.

"But the cloud shadows look purple, too, and so do the sea-weed and the rocks."

"So they does, m'dear."

"Then how *do* the watchers know the fish?"

The old man scratched his head. His hat now covered the last vestige of hairless face.

"Fish moves," he stated.

"So do the shadows."

With a nod of his head he acknowledged the truth of this point of view.

"Iss. They both moves, fish and shadders. But they doesn't move same way."

With this solution Cassin had to be content.

Still bent on distinguishing the fish for herself, she looked out over the heaving surface of the water. Something unusual on the dark Cowloe rocks caught her eye. A wraith-like appearance she had never seen before.

"Whatever is that?" she asked excitedly. "Why, it is just like a cow."

The old man turned his head.

"The White Cow, sure enough," he said. "There be dirty weather cummun, then. Sky be locked, too." This last, with a quick gaze overhead.

"But what is it?" Cassin's eyes were wide with wonder, her voice low with awe.

"There be some as says it is the foam what settles on rocks in that fashion." He removed his pipe and spat out. "It do come afore a storm, though, and never after. He knows the weather better nor we, the White Cow."

"Is there a storm coming now, then?"

"So he do say, m'dear."

"When you see the White Cow?"

"It belongs to come a storm. Us won't care," he went on with a chuckle, "so long as us gets fish first. Andrew, m'son," he called out.

On the approach of the girls Andrew had moved away. He had not seen Maggie since they had parted so abruptly on the day of the withie cutting, and he did not want to speak to her now. Besides, there was Cassin Morris.

Since Maggie's ill-conditioned remarks concerning the other girl, Andrew had felt shy of Cassin. Though he had once stated that there was "no harm" in Grainger, yet a girl who "walked out" with a gentleman was not at all to the rather austere taste of the young fisherman. In his mind there was an end to their pleasant companionship.

So when his eyes, keen as a bird's, saw the two girls coming down the cliff path, he promptly moved away from his father's side and joined a group of men who were busy tarring rope in a cauldron above a drift-wood fire. Though he could not hear their voices above the long roar of the sea, yet he knew the girls had stopped to talk to his father. He kept his back turned.

He wasn't going near them, not he, he didn't care nothing for girls.

One of the men looked up and, after the fashion of his kind, made some primitive jest about the pair. Andrew turned and left the group. His abrupt departure gave rise to another rough witticism at his expense, followed by a roar of laughter. It was just then Andrew heard his father calling.

His face was set, almost stern, as he came near.

"Did 'ur see White Cow, m'dear?" asked the old man.

Andrew had not, but he glanced over his shoulder, then answered, shortly.

"Ay!"

He stood arranging small stones in a line with the toe of his boot. His eyes were on the ground. He had taken no notice of the girls.

"One of they two be the wummun," said old Billie to himself. Then aloud:

"Cassin Morris, here, she have never seen Cow. 'fore."

At the mention of her name, Andrew glanced up at the girl in a silent greeting. His usual smile of comradeship was missing.

Cassin wondered why. As she looked away seawards her grey eyes misted with tears.

Maggie had carefully noted the two and their manner of meeting, and her spirits rose.

"He isn't going to take no gentleman's leavings, Andrew," she told herself. It was possible without any intervention of "Them," just by the cleverness of her own tongue, Maggie might succeed in parting these two. She felt rather contemptuous towards Cassin.

To Andrew she turned a bold gaze, greeting him as though their last meeting had ended in perfect good-fellowship.

"Bin cutting any more withies, Andrew?"

"No," he answered, shortly.

"He dursn't leave Cove since fish be sighted," put in the old man over his pipe.

"He be glad enough, like as not," said Maggie. "He don't want no more withies." She laughed, all the louder because her jest was one only to herself.

Then, with a flash of her dark eyes towards Andrew, she went on.

"When be you coming 'up to'? There ain't no fish to be had after dark."

Her eyes were sly now, inviting, under their long lashes.

Andrew began to whistle carelessly. Almost without intention his eyes turned towards Cassin. She was still looking out to sea, her face was childlike and rather sad.

"It be a pity she should go along with this Grainger," thought Andrew. "It don't do a girl no good walking out with a chap like he. And she as haven't got no mother either."

It occurred to him that his own mother might give Cassin a warning word. But there! It wasn't no business of his!

Meanwhile, Maggie's tongue was still running on, talking to old Billie, but all the time at Andrew.

"He do pretend he knows nothing of 'up to,' evenings. And I isn't going to tell no tales. He didn't let on to you why he was so late the night he brought back them withies, that I'll swear."

She laughed consciously. "Well, don't 'ee blame him, m'dear, you was young once, so you was. And what if us did dawdle a bit? Time's never long enough for sweetheartin', be it, now?"

At this old Billie shook a knowing head, saying he was too old "to remember them days."

"You go on." Maggie's graceful rally was accompanied by an equally elegant dig with her plump elbow. "You aren't too old now, not by half. Not so as your missus was out of way."

At this accusation, old Billie—a most devoted husband, as was well known in the Cove—chuckled wickedly, as much as to say there was no telling what such an old scamp as he might be doing yet.

Andrew listened in hot anger. He couldn't decently give a girl the lie to her face. Yet, what would Cassin Morris be thinking? Not, rather bitterly, that she would care one way or the other!

And what was Cassin thinking? Maggie had taken up with Andrew, then! Andrew and Maggie? Was that any reason, though, why he should be unkind to his friends?

After a little further badinage between Maggie and old Billie, the girls took their departure.

Old Billie drew out his screw of twist and set to work to fill his pipe.

"She ain't the wummun," he muttered, with a glance after Maggie. "A very purty bit of flesh, too, she be. But Andrew, he were always queer-like. I haven't never heard a rough word from he, not since he were in cradle, so I haven't."

He mumbled at his pipe-stem, then he broke out again.

"Missus, she knows as much as most, and she be terrible set on that other one, so she be. Not lively enough to my

taste," he concluded, as once more he turned his gaze seaward, his thoughts upon a possible "piece" of mullet.

Meanwhile, Andrew had gone to chop wood for his mother. He chose all the hardest, knottiest bits in the pile. He chopped for two hours, smoking all the time. And he ate a whole pasty for supper.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MULLETS

It was still early next morning when Aunt Susie thrust her head into the wash-house where the two girls were busy.

"There was a Heva! half an hour since," she cried, "and Joe Trenary he called out as he went past that they have shot."

Maggie began clearing her arms of soap-suds.

"Us must go and see fun," said she.

"With all them things in soak?"

Aunt Susie surveyed the wash-tub with doubtful eyes.

"Cassin hasn't never seen a mullet take," protested Maggie. She was drying her red arms on a rough towel.

"I suppose you do want to go, Cassin?" asked her aunt.

"Yes, indeed!" Cassin's eyes shone.

That decided it.

"Well, run along, the pair of you. But don't come back without a fish, lest I won't let you off washing-day no more."

The girls ran to the house for their hats. Aunt Susie, with a cheerful smile, set to work on their abandoned task. She was never so completely herself as when giving pleasure to others.

Cassin and Maggie ran quickly across the familiar fields. The prophecy of the White Cow had not, so far, been fulfilled; the sky was, in Cornish parlance, still "locked," the grey clouds were closely banded high overhead; the sea moaned now and again about the ocks; but there was no wind.

The girls took the shortest way to the shore, straight down the cliff amongst the dead bracken and bleached grass, intermixed with rattling seed-vessels, the dead husks of last summer's flowers; across the steep hill-road they went and over the sandy bank to the shore.

Here, in a dark mass, nearly all the inhabitants of the Cove were gathered. As the girls came down the hill, they could hear the long-drawn cry, to the rhythm of which the great net was being hauled. Their feet had, however, hardly touched the shore before the crescent-shaped group broke and folded upon itself. The fish were landed, then, and every one was eager to estimate the catch. There was a good deal of pressing and pushing, and eager shouting and good-natured disputing.

"Iss, Iss!"

"Six t'ousand!"

"Seven t'ousand!"

"Not more'n five!"

"Good-looking fish!"

"Them should bring a shillun apiece."

"To be sure, they should."

There was a strong, almost rank, odour in the air; and an odd rustling, grinding sound fell on the ear—the multitudinous movement of the rough-scaled fish, squirming and sliding over and under each other in the great sand-smothered pile that represented the "take."

One old man, bent nearly double with age, still held the far end of the "thwart" or hauling rope, in a trembling grasp. It was proof that he had lent a hand and so could claim his "body" share.

One or two small boys were darting in and out amongst the legs of the men and pouncing upon such fish as had squirmed or leapt free from the living mass. Dogs were barking and snapping, half afraid, at the jerking fish. The air above was thick with the swooping and flapping of noisy gulls; their sharp eyes were alert for sundry small fry the net might have enclosed, and for the coming chance of offal.

Women were already advancing along the shore in a broken line, their willow baskets, or "cauls," supported on their shoulders by a strap running across the forehead.

"What a heap of fish!" exclaimed Cassin.

"But a many to divide it among," replied Maggie, with the air of one who knows.

"Does every one here get a share?"

"Them as is Cove-born, all above eighteen—men, that

is—they get 'body' shares. That's so long as them is here to lend a hand at hauling. Boys atween sixteen and eighteen, them has a half-share. Then there is 'net' shares too. I dunno' quite why they has them, but lots does; some of the farm people, and some old widders, too."

"Perhaps it's the people who paid for the net?" suggested Cassin, sensibly.

"Like as not. Here's Andrew!"

Andrew had pushed his way out of the busy group, his jersey and trousers were shining with wet. He had been breast-deep in the water stopping the fish as they tried to leap over the top of the net.

He spoke cheerfully to the girls in passing.

"I be going to change 'fore they begins to share," he said. In the excitement of the battle with fish and waves he had shaken off the ill-humour of the previous day. He felt friendly with all the world. He smiled at Cassin. She smiled back, then blushed rosily.

Maggie marked both smile and blush and her dark brows lowered. She flung up her head and began chaffing with some of the men. In the lull between the "take" and the "sharing" they were quite ready to answer her back. Every one was in the highest good-humour. The "take" was estimated as numbering from seven to eight thousand, the best "take" for several seasons.

As there had been but one haul of pilchards during the previous summer, and "the herring" had proved a failure, there were many families for whom that slithering, sandy pile of strong-smelling fish meant all the difference between a winter short of warmth and food and a winter of comparative affluence. It was no wonder, therefore, that spirits were high and laughter and jokes passed freely.

"Hullo," cried one of the men. "Here be old Maria! Her's left broomstick to home."

"It were well she didn't come a bit sooner. She might have ill-wished the net."

"And lost her share? Not she."

At the sound of the wise woman's name, Maggie had stopped in the middle of a laugh, turning her head. Old Maria was not at all fearsome by day. Her figure was more bent than usual beneath the weight of her "caul";

but from the circle of her cap-frills her brown face, with its thousand wrinkles, looked out cheerfully; her short petticoat displayed her grey hand-knit stockings and unblacked, brass-buckled shoes. There was nothing at all terrifying in the appearance of old Maria, yet, at sight of her, Maggie felt the blood drain from her cheeks and all her plump warm skin prickle and grow cold.

For a moment the crowded shore, the voices and laughter, barking of dogs and screaming of gulls, seemed to fade and become far and dim.

It is all in mercy the future is hid from mortal eyes. It is a thing of terror even to fancy one can read that which is to come.

For a moment, then, Maggie grew cold as death. To her excited fancy, Death, itself, stalked through the group. The fish were dying. It was only a matter of time and these men, every one, would be dead. Cassin would die—perhaps very soon. Maggie, herself! No, not herself! The end of the world might come before then. Some there were that would be caught up, alive!

"Well, m'dear——" the voice sounded loudly in her ear, old Maria had shuffled up close to her side. "Here us be, outside of fish and them alive; soon them'll be dead and inside o' we."

It was a horrid suggestion, but the sound of human speech addressed to her served to bring Maggie back to a sense of reality. The men were still laughing and talking; but they were beginning to gather up the fish and carry them to the grass at the foot of the cliff, where some of the sand would be rubbed off and they would be divided into "shares."

Old Maria, beneath her cap-frill, was looking up quizzingly into the girl's face.

"Nowt ain't happened yet?" she questioned.

Maggie shook her head.

"Them's willing," the old woman whispered, "it is you as hasn't done your part. You'm feart."

"That I ain't."

"Then, why hasn't you done that you was told?"

"I be just waiting, that's all."

"What you waiting for?"

Why was she waiting? Maggie did not, herself, know.

"See of him and her, now," the old wretch went on, slily.

Maggie turned sharply. Andrew had come back dressed in a smart new jersey. He was bending over Cassin, displaying for her benefit a specially fine mullet; it turned and twisted but could not escape his strong grasp. Cassin smiled up at him. He laughed in a low satisfied way.

"It be no good going to 'Them' if you dursn't do your part," said the old woman.

She must have had some sort of belief in her own uncanny powers or she was quite cunning enough to have encouraged the girl to shrink from her part of the bargain. Perhaps old Maria loved the sense of power, and, thinking Maggie was afraid, delighted in an unholy way to play upon her fears.

"What you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to do that you tell't me of," returned Maggie, defiantly.

"Iss? Sooner the better," said the old woman with a chuckle.

Maggie left her abruptly, pushing her way among the crowd.

All feet were now turned towards the cliff foot, where the fish, still jerking spasmodically now and again in a last effort for life, were being laid in heaps, to every "body" share a heap and the "net" shares in a separate range of heaps. In the midst stood the ruddy-faced cox'n of the life-boat. He had assumed his most official air. Before him was a basket, into it the men were throwing their "lots"—to every man a "lot"—a knife, a baccy-pouch, a key, a bit of drift-wood, anything that came handy.

Andrew, tall and square-shouldered, was easily distinguishable in the continually shifting crowd. Maggie pressed up behind him.

"Here be a 'lot' for you, Andrew, it will bring you luck." She proffered the dry claw of a crab she had picked up on the sand.

"Thank you for the luck," said Andrew over his shoulder; "I have thrown in my 'lot' already."

Maggie drew back.

"She have given one to he," she thought, bitterly. And when Cassin, who had been parted from her cousin by the press, came up full of eager interest, Maggie turned a sullen shoulder.

When the correct number of "shares" had been arranged, the cox'n lifted his basket and, running quickly from share to share, dropped a "lot" on each in succession. Following hard on his heels, each man gathered up the share on which his "lot" had fallen. There was thus no disputing as to who should have the finer fish. Fate had decided. Every one was content. In haste they gathered up their shares, piling them in cauls and sacks and baskets. The buyers had already arrived and were waiting at the foot of the hill; barrels for packing were in readiness. The fish would scarcely be granted decent time to die.

In the general movement now sweeping back from the shore, Andrew made his way towards the two girls, holding a fine mullet by a string through the gills.

"For Mrs. Penrose," he said, as he offered it to Maggie. She put her hands behind her back.

"I don't want none of your mullets," she said rudely; "give him to she." With a rough movement she pushed Cassin forward.

Colouring for Maggie's want of courtesy, Cassin held out her hand for the fish.

Andrew's face had clouded.

Cassin thanked him prettily.

"It be too heavy for you," he said.

"No, indeed," she answered, with a smile.

Andrew did not smile in answer. Almost before his back was turned, Maggie broke into a harsh laugh.

"A pretty conquest you've made, m' dear, the ugliest tempered man in the Cove. I wish you joy of him, so I do!"

"Maggie, how can you say such things?" Cassin's eyes flashed.

"I says what I thinks. I ain't afraid what people 'll say. Not I." Maggie thrust her hands into her coat pockets and began to whistle.

A hearty, good-tempered girl, any one might have

thought. Yet black hatred held possession of Maggie's heart.

Hatred of Cassin.

In spi e of what she had said, she loved Andrew as never before.

She meant to have him, too.