



My Father Before Me

NORMAN GOODLAND

With illustrations by
FRANK V. MARTIN



HUTCHINSON
Stratford Place
London

*Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd.
London New York Toronto
Melbourne Sydney Cape Town*

First published 1953

*Set in 11 point Monotype Baskerville
two point leaded
Printed in Great Britain
by The Anchor Press, Ltd.,
Tiptree, Essex*



CHAPTER ONE

THE first notable thing my Father did for me I remember very well. I could not have been more than four at the time, but the event so impressed itself upon my mind that I recall it, even today, with perfect clarity.

I was standing at the foot of a ladder, watching my Father thatch the cottage roof. I think I wore a red petticoat, like a girl, with a white overall on the top. I know I was wearing my Mother's yellow sun-hat. The brim was so huge that I must have looked like a hat with a small boy underneath it.

Hands behind my back, I peered up from under the brim at the mysterious movements of my Father's broad backside and tip-nailed boots, and his great hairy arms shooting out now and then to do something with the straw. Right up at the top of that long, long ladder my Father was; right up at the top of all those bright wooden rungs, which seemed to become wider and wider and brighter and brighter as they reached down before me. I know that inside me I wanted very badly to climb all those bright wooden rungs, but I knew that my Father would never have allowed such a thing.

Presently, as I watched, the hairy arms disappeared. To the accompaniment of a steady Thump! thump! thump! the

backside and the tip-nailed boots seemed to be increasing in size. When my Father was almost on top of me, I realized that he was coming down.

He made some good-humoured remark in that deep voice of his, and smiled at me from behind his black beard. He patted me heavily on my sun-hat, and went off into the woodshed. And there was the long, long ladder with the bright wooden rungs, reaching up, up, up into the blue sky. And there was I, peering up at it from under the brim of my hat.

In two seconds I was on my way. I found I had to stretch my legs to their limit at each step, but up I went. I could not see where I was going because the brim of the hat was in the way; but I must have been a determined infant, for I kept at it. I reached the edge of the roof—I was half-way up the roof—I came to the top of the roof. But as the ladder still went on, I went on, too.

Of the love my Father bore me I might then have known no more; for when I came to the top of the ladder, I did not expect it. However, I maintained my balance; I was up as far as I could get, and in consequence was very proud of myself indeed.

Down there, directly beneath me, were the white frames of the open bedroom windows. Further down still, I could see the top of the front porch, smothered in ivy. Away in the corner, between the great chimney-stack—I had no idea that it was so huge when I looked up at it from the ground—and the end of the house, was the sloping tin roof of the little "lav". This was apparently a centre of great entertainment for me, for my Mother told me that if she had allowed it, I would sit and crow on my little enamel chamber for hours. I could even see the top of the shed, covered with dead twigs from the plum trees; and down, down, very far down again, was the pathway which led off past the front lawn, from whence the smoke of old Grandpapa's pipe came curling up behind the yew hedge. On down to the vegetable garden led the path, where Grandmamma and my Mother and my sister Minnie, with white aprons about their long black dresses and pegs in their mouths,

were hanging out the washing. And there, too, was Spot, my Father's fox terrier, running up and down in the sunshine behind them.

How funny Grandmamma and Mother and Minnie and Spot all looked! I had hitherto been used to viewing people from a position where I had to look up to them; but now, for the first time, I was beholding the tops of their heads, and thoroughly pleased with the novelty.

At that moment, Mother happened to glance my way. She threw down her washing and let out a scream which made me jump out of my skin. The other two looked at her and then, following the direction of her finger as she pointed at me, they sent their bundles of washing the same way as Mother's, and began to jump and holler and dart here and there in a manner which highly amused me, and made me feel sure that I was doing something which pleased them mightily. So I half stood up—clever boy!—and raising one of my small arms, commenced to wave it gleefully, like the antenna of a crazy red-and-white butterfly balanced upon the tip of a twig. I remember my thin, delighted voice floating away over the trees: "Mamma! Mamma!"

I understand that Mamma, fearing that these were the last words she would hear her adventurous offspring utter, nearly died on the spot; Grandmamma was clawing at her, trying to restrain her shrieks, for fear of frightening me off the ladder, and Minnie shot out of sight under the eaves, on her way to the back of the house. Spot looked up at me, adding his shrill voice to the turmoil. Even crooked, bent old Grandpapa came shuffling out on the lawn in his carpet slippers, to prop himself with his staff, and squint moistly upwards with his bearded mouth hanging open, but I am sure he could see nothing; he was practically blind.

It eventually dawned upon me that I was not being half as clever as I had thought. I gathered too, from my Mother's continued cries, that I was in some danger. I became horribly frightened and began to cry.

Just then, my Father returned with his load of spars. It

was not until he was on his ponderous way up the ladder that Minnie appeared at the foot of it to inform him of the cause of all the excitement in the garden below. He looked up at me, and said with deep, quiet firmness:

"All right, my son. Catch hold tight. Don't move."

I was reassured. My Father was not angry, and I could tell by the tone of his voice that there was nothing to be afraid of.

Up he came, the spars in a bundle on his back, not hurrying very much, being careful in case he shook the ladder. He lifted me from the top and sat me astride the roof.

"Sit still a minute," he said, and tossed his spars on the straw and secured them. Then down he went with myself tucked safely under his arm; down to Grandmamma, Mother, Minnie and Grandpapa and brother Fred, all in a staring group, and all completely silent as we reached the ground. Why were they all looking at *me*? Why did they not speak? Thoroughly frightened again, I turned back to my Father, only to find him seated upon the bottom of the ladder, just as white behind his black beard as the others, and shaking all over. This was the last straw; from under my yellow sun-hat came a bawl of pure fear.

That broke the spell. Mother went for Father, my Father went for Mother; Fred went for me, Minnie went for Fred; Grandmamma got hold of me and bundled me out of it so that my feet hardly touched the ground, back to the kitchen whence I had escaped, whilst Grandpapa, who always hated rows, shuffled off to the lawn to finish his smoke.

When I was tiny, wash-days in my Father's house I remember very well. I used to be seated, all alone, on the sacks covering the brick floor of the living-room, and Spot would sometimes come dancing in over the wooden guard by the doorway, to jump up and lick my face. I always thought he was going to bite me, and would lean back, frightened, until I fell on the floor. I would set up a yell until Mother came in

to pick me up tenderly and say, "Never mind, love, never mind!" over and over again until I was quiet. She would look at me, and I used to look at her; and she would smile slowly, and dance me up and down until we both laughed. Sometimes Minnie came in when I was in my Mother's arms, to pinch my nose with the corner of her apron, and say: "Blow! *There's* a good boy!" And then Grandmamma might come in too; and I always wanted to go to her because she spoilt me, and made funny noises with her warm, soft old face against my neck, so that I began to laugh and laugh until I could not stop.

Then they would leave me, and I would make it up with Spot. In and out of the legs of my Father's sparse furniture we would play, with the familiar smell of steam coming in from the wash-house, and the well-known sight of the long black dresses moving backwards and forwards past the open back door, with its small guard fixed securely in its place.

There was another guard too, of wire net, which my Father had made, across the open chimney front. The flames danced in and out of the logs my Father had cut in the Church Gully, and smoke rolled up into the black, black chimney and disappeared. From somewhere up in the chimney hung a long chain which a ploughman had given my Father, and upon which my Mother, later in the day, would hang the stock-pot. When it was not in use, it rested by the side of the fire on a brick firestep; and I remember how eagerly Spot used to dance about when he saw my Mother take it out to empty the bones.

There was Grandmamma's seat on one side of the chimney, and Grandpapa's in the other chimney corner. And on the left of the fireplace, with a cushion in its seat, stood, like a throne, my Father's wooden armchair.

I remember a peculiar thing about my Father. Sometimes he would be seated there, unsmiling, stern and terribly huge, his jet-black hair and side-whiskers reaching right down to his jawbones and his jet-black beard, making him appear as someone apart, someone who did not belong to us. No one spoke much when my Father was like that, but somehow I knew my Father was unhappy inside, and that he wanted something.

So, greatly daring, I used to clamber upon his knee, his knee so hard and broad, with the coarse whipcord rough against my legs. Without saying anything I used to put my face against his soft moleskin waistcoat to listen to the watch ticking inside his pocket. And then I would feel the weight of my Father's arm about me, and his hard, strong fingers would close about my hands in case I pulled his watch out of his pocket. He would look down at me from behind all that



blackness, and I could see then that he belonged to us after all. Bump! bump! bump! would go his knee as he rumbled some old rhyme at me which I now forget; and I would look round at my Mother, to see her watching and smiling in her quiet way. And then they would all begin to talk again and Grandmamma would say:

“Father, you do spoil that boy so. . . .”

One more picture, that of my Father's household at table, remains before me with fadeless clarity. The table was set end on towards the window, so that my Father, who sat opposite

me in his yellow wooden armchair, should be near the fire. Next to Father, and between him and Mamma, sat my brother Tom. His gentleness was not all hidden by his close-cropped hair, heavy boots and long black stockings, his home-made knickerbockers and rough jersey always in holes. I loved my brother Tom very much, because when I went to bed Tom would often creep up the stairs to look over the edge of the cot with his serious face and quiet brown eyes to tell me stories about the birds and the flowers and the animals, which he made up all out of his own head.

Then came my Mother, very like Tom in demeanour, with her dark hair done up in a bun on the top of her head, her apron now put aside to reveal her close-fitting, severely cut dark clothes; and I remember the rows of tiny buttons down the front, and her imitation waistcoat of fancy design, because it was so like my Father's. Grandmamma sat at the end of the table away from the window, dressed just like her daughter; but she had frilled black cuffs on her tight sleeves and a white edge to the top of her high collar and a huge, fascinating cameo brooch close under her chin. Her grey hair was done in the same way as my Mother's, but the bun was much smaller, and I remember the long wisps which hung over her collar at the back.

Grandpapa, my Father's father, sat at the same end of the table with Grandmamma; and he wore a long black jacket and a high waistcoat, a stiff collar with a very large knot in the tie, and a gold pin in the middle of it. There was a watch-chain across his waistcoat with dangling, jingling pendants, and I remember the black braid down the sides of his narrow trousers, like a soldier's. Grandpa Weston had no teeth; he never seemed to look at anything for very long, and his beard was white, his mouth often hanging open. I remember his eyes were always rheumy; I used to think he was crying. But I did not ask him why he was crying, because Grandpa Weston never seemed to hear me when I spoke to him.

Next to me sat my sister Minnie, so that she could keep an eye on me. She had left school, and was dark like my

Mother. It was to Minnie we always went if we could not find Mother—all except my Father, who would ask where Mother was, and if she could not be found, would wait until she came back. Minnie used to stop the quarrels between Tom and my oldest brother Fred; and she and Mother used to work a lot together.

On the end of the table between my Father and myself, with his back to the window, sat my brother Fred. He was very like my Father in appearance, but was of course clean-shaven. He helped my Father with the thatching and church work; but he was a morose, humourless fellow and I did not have much to do with him.

We were not really allowed to talk or laugh at the table, but it seems that even here I was the wag of the family. Despite Minnie's "shushings" I would always make a nuisance of myself. Fred would warn me about my behaviour in his threatening way, and then I would glance at my Father, usually to find him smiling a little, despite himself, behind his black beard. Then my Mother would grumble, but would have to smile too, until they all—except Fred, and Grandpa Weston, who stared blindly with his mouth open trying to hear what it was all about—smiled and chuckled and made a rare fuss of me; and I would be very well pleased because I was more than ever the centre of all the love my Father's household had for me. Only Fred would accuse my Father of making me his favourite; and then my Father would become suddenly stern and tell me in his deep voice to behave. And despite the love my Father bore me, I knew better than to disobey.

When I was six, the prominent men of my Father's village were of a type already dying out. Few of them had known what it was to work for anyone but themselves. They were mostly rural business men and craftsmen, independent, courteous and proud. The older members of this core of the village life remembered when such penury as was evident among the

patched, ill-fitted children swarming from the labourers' cottages was rarely seen in Marshwood. But that was in the days when the upper part of Marshwood belonged to the villagers; and it was upon the rump of this land that these old-fashioned countrymen had their crafts, the land belonging to their families.

They held a position somewhere between the labourers on the farms, towards whom they felt superior, and the country gentry, whom they treated with the respect due to their positions. When I look back upon them I see that they and their kind were responsible for much that is good in the English temperament of today. Certainly it seems odd, on reflection, that they continued to live their lives, unaware, despite the evidence of the changing times before them in their own village, that they were indeed the last of an older order of things to survive.

My Father was one of them. We lived in two cottages made into one, the property of Grandfather Weston; and my Father inherited from him a wide connection in the business of thatching. The Westons had been thatchers for Marshwood, and within twelve to fifteen miles of that area, for longer than any of us could remember; very likely quite as long as the Cheritons had been broom makers, and they had records of their craft for two hundred years, no one, not even themselves, being able to guess how long they had made their besoms previous to that.

I think it was only my Father's unmatched skill which enabled him to hold and extend this connection; for he was not always popular with the farmers. He showed his displeasure when they addressed him as plain "Weston". Grandfather had always been known as "Master" among any but the gentry, and my Father resented the title being left out, for he felt that to do so classed him with the poor farm labourers. Not that he was very much better off than they, but, as a craftsman, he strove to be his own Master as his father was before him, and was displeased indeed at any reminder that this was not quite the case.

Another office which has been in our family for many generations is that of Sexton and Parish Clerk. Although our craft was very dear to my Father's heart, he was certainly no less concerned with the family duties appertaining to the Church.

I had on one occasion been taken up to the belfry before the church service started, to see the men ringing the bells. I remember quite well the thrill of being carried up those narrow, cold stone steps spiralling up to the belfry, and my Father's gruff warning to mind my head as we passed under the platform outside the belfry chamber. I remember, too, seeing men there in their shirt-sleeves; their beards and moustaches impressed me most—why, with an effort, I can remember who they were. There was Master Mark Vincent, the bowl-turner; Walter Nash, a young farm labourer, of whom many folk in the village were contemptuous because of his odd views; the two eldest Cheriton brothers, aged twenty and twenty-one, named Mark and Matthew, and my Father.

They sat me down on a small stool under the belfry window, near the boards with the changes on, from which vantage point I watched the proceedings with absorbed interest. Up and down, up and down, one after the other, bent these great men, the ropes between their weatherworn hands snaking down in a coil to the floor, then shooting upwards to the ceiling again. The fluffy red-and-blue handgrips seemed on the point of entering the hole in the ceiling when they paused, to come snaking down again as the ringer bent and hauled.

Up and down, up and down they went, my Father bending up and down with the rest of them, the ropes hissing in a coil to the floor, the red-and-blue handgrips shooting up, pausing, and hurrying down again; and all the time a rumble in the walls about me, in the stool upon which I sat, even in my very stomach; so that I imagined iron spirits in the bellchamber above me, hurrying to weave the muffled song which clanged out overhead. It was all very thrilling, as well as a little frightening; but my Father was there, so I was quite safe; and here was I, right in the very heart of the great bells' song.

It is not surprising, therefore, that on one Sunday morning a few months after I had started school I was very much annoyed because my Father had gone off up to the church, leaving me on my own again. I knew he had slipped away because he did not very much care for children round him when he had to attend to his church duties, and I was uncertain as to what my reception might be if I followed him. I stood by the gate, clasping the iron rails in it with my two fists, and as the bells sang out I looked up past the school towards the steeple for what seemed a very long time. It was towards the end of the second peal that I could restrain myself no longer; so off I went.

Almost without thinking, I pushed through the gate. I wanted to be up there before they stopped ringing, so away up the church path I ran, as fast as my legs would carry me. Up between the high hedges I sped, the honeysuckle scenting the morning air, the late primroses here and there on the banks; up past the deep gully on my left, filled with bluebells and wood anemone; on under the leafy arch of the elm trees, where the robin's coal-black eye fell upon my fleeting form as the bird ticked its amazement, and a sparse charm of gold-winged tinkling finches chased away before me.

I would like to see them again, those men in shirt-sleeves and whiskers. I would like to sit on the cold stool and feel and hear the clanging bells ringing. But just at that moment the bells ceased, the tenor having his last word.

I slowed down a little. It was now too late to see them ringing the bells. I stopped for a moment to consider. If I went inside, surely my Father would not mind, and I would hear the singing, and Miss Weyenrighter playing on the organ. This was almost as great an attraction as the bells.

Mr. Jesse Symes would be there, who kept the sweet store at the back of the Malt House Inn. When my Father could spare Tom and myself a halfpenny each, we would often find Mr. Symes, a spare, middle-aged widower with a quiet voice and manner, sitting on a bench outside his back door, smoking his long-stemmed clay, and watching the odd assortment of

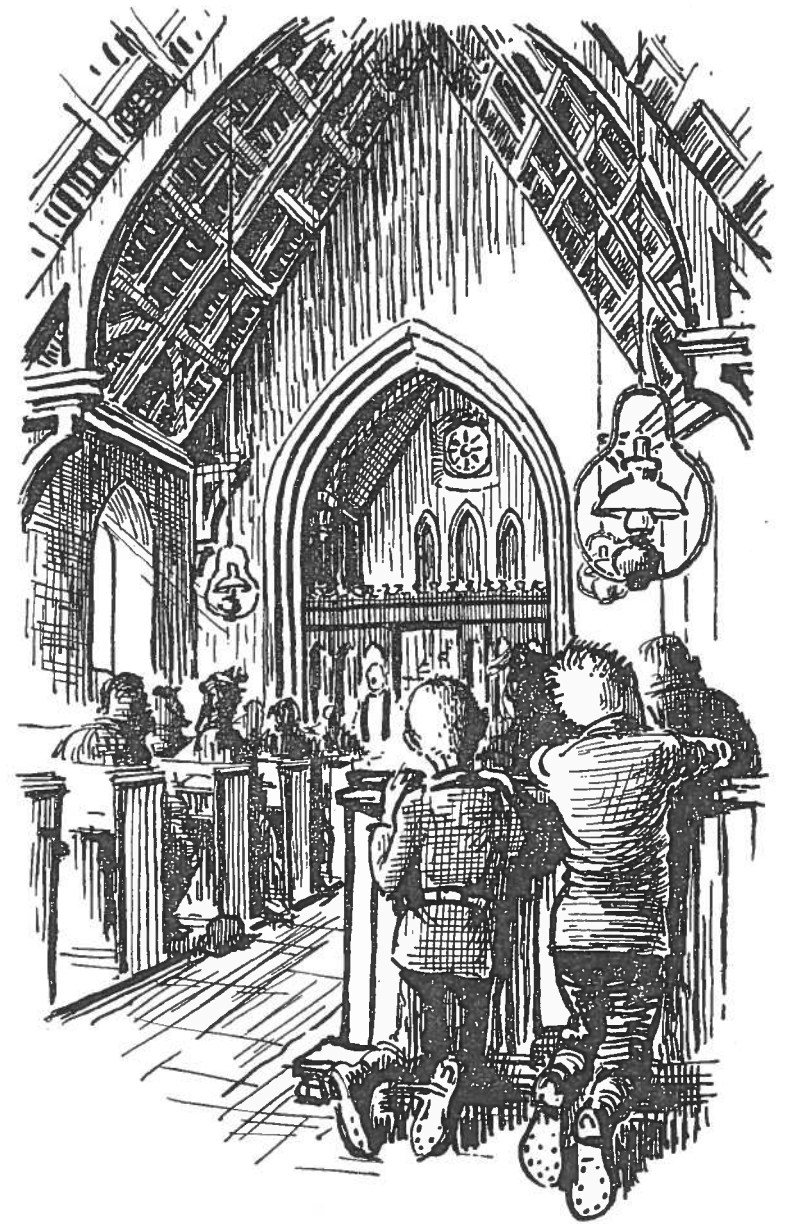
ducks, geese and fowls in his yard. His shaggy mongrel dog would be at his knee; I used to linger behind when I saw the dog, but Mr. Symes would say:

"Never mind Jock, young Frankie. He wun't hurt thee." And Jock would wag his dirty-coloured fluff of a tail as if in agreement with his master. However, I was never too sure. I kept on the side of Tom away from the dog, and as Mr. Symes opened the door of his sweetshop for us, I would scuttle in first.

Old Mr. Weyenrighter would be there, the village Postmaster, who on weekdays could be seen busy in his small office, together with his two daughters, the Miss Weyenrighter who played the church organ, and who was also schoolmistress, and her elder and more kindly sister, Miss Martha, the letter-carrier, in the choir.

The master of Ash House and his family, right down to the toddlers like myself, would be in the box pew in the front, and all those servants who could be spared at the back of the church with the farm labourers. The old wheelright would be there, whose shop was further up the village past Ash House, on the corner of the road leading off right to Rheuben's Close. So would the blacksmith and his sons, whose shop was further up still, on the left of the road. The blacksmith was to me a leather-aproned wizard who worked with his sons among ringing anvils, bouncing and clattering hammers and showers of fiery sparks; who seemed to take no heed of the steam and the stench arising from the hooves of the huge carthorses as they were being shod. We lads were fascinated by the red metal and the white blowholes of the furnaces, but we could never stay by the smithy for long, for the stench got into our stomachs and made us feel sick.

Perhaps Mr. John Ruse, the carrier, whose stable was opposite the smithy, would be at home; he had an accident while ringing the bells, being carried up by the rope and, having the presence of mind to let go before he was taken high enough to be killed by his fall, he had, nevertheless, injured both ankles. He suffered a great deal with rheumatics ever since. The owner of the village store would also be present, and there



would be a strong contingent from the labourers' cots, which were further up still, and noted for the host of barefoot children who swarmed about them.

But the most notable members of the congregation, apart from the gentry, would be the Cheriton family. Their shops were at the top of the village on Marshwood Square, on the V of the green between the Stokingbase and Rheuben's Close roads. The head of the industry was at that time Widow Cheriton; an energetic, hard-working woman of about forty-eight, with a wizened face making her appear much older, alert brown eyes and grey hair. Her four sons, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, with Matthew just of age, and John barely eighteen, now undertook the more active part of the business while the old lady kept a firm hand upon the accounts. Old Mr. Cheriton, Widow Cheriton's father-in-law, still worked in the sheds at the age of ninety-eight. He had retired from ownership for many years, having taken it over from his father seventy-eight years previously. One of his sons ran a brick kiln over in Aldertown, the other supplying witheys to the sheds from the various coppices round about. Twenty skilled men were employed in the besom-making, the besoms finding ready markets in Wales, where thousands of dozens were sent each year, and hundreds more to the Midlands where, it was said, the factories were expanding at an incredible rate.

Widow Cheriton loved children, so she did not discourage us when we came to watch the workmen, and to smell the heavy, damp, sour-sweet smell of cut withey.

And down from the Rheuben's Close road would come Master Mark Vincent and his two sons, Zebediah and Moses, the bowl-turners. Tom and I enjoyed standing in Master Vincent's shop, to smell the sweet smell of planed woods, to play with the shavings and chips on the earth floor, to watch the brothers planing and chiselling and hammering, and Master Vincent at his rickety lathe, his foot going up and down, up and down on the treadle, the contraption going Bump! bump! bump! as the bowl-turner worked.

The chance of hearing the choir, and Miss Weyenrighter

performing on the church organ, and of watching my Father serve these illustrious craftsmen with their hymn books, made up my mind for me. So off I went again and came out into the churchyard. I reached the ancient yew by the belfry, and with difficulty negotiated the three, tall white-stoned steps leading into the south doors. Into the main porch I hurried, eyes fixed on the massive half-doors closed before me. Pit-pat, pit-pat, across the tiles I ran and then—woeful disappointment!—I found, however hard I tried, that I could not turn the iron ring which unfastened the doors!

I had missed the bells, and now I would not be able to hear the organ! My Father was inside, but I could not shout for him because no one was allowed to make those sort of noises in God's House—my Father had always taught me that. It was a long, long way home, all for nothing; and I would not have seen the ringing, nor even heard the organ . . . and the iron handle remained stubborn, despite my utmost efforts, between my hands. It was altogether too much; I leaned my forehead on the door, poked my fists into my eyes, and sobbed as if my heart was breaking.

Suddenly I stopped as I caught the sound of someone coming towards the doors on the other side. I knew those slow, sure footfalls! I gazed at the iron handle. The footfalls stopped. Suddenly, the handle turned with a Bang!, the door swung open a little way, and the black-bearded face of my Father gazed down at me, with a twinkle in his eye. The strong hand came down to my small one, and with the tears still wet on my face, but now thoroughly pleased and happy, I was led into the church and sat on the seat by the font at my Father's side.

And there was the master of Ash House and his family in the box pew; Mr. Jesse Symes; the wheelright; the blacksmith and his sons; Mr. Ruse the carrier; the owner of the stores; Widow Cheriton and her four sons; Mark Vincent and Zebediah and Moses; Mr. Weyenrighter and Miss Martha, the letter-carrier, standing with the others in the choir, and Miss Weyenrighter, the schoolmistress, just at that very moment about to play the organ for the opening hymn.



CHAPTER TWO

I WONDER if anyone connected with the famous bus service running through Marshwood today knows how much the Company owes to the village carrier, John Ruse, seventy-five years ago. For John Ruse was the first man to connect Newstoke and Basingbury with a regular road transport service; and it was upon his original enterprise that the present passenger transport system grew.

On one of the rare Saturday mornings when my Father decided to visit Basingbury, our nearest town, he suddenly thought he would take me with him. I do not think Fred, who usually accompanied him, was very keen on the idea; but despite him my Father told Mother to get me into my best clothes. My best clothes! I had trousers which covered my knees, long black stockings and tipnailed boots, one of brother Tom's jackets which he had grown out of, and which I had hardly as yet grown into, and a cloth cap with a tassel on it.

Up we went to the Post Office by seven o'clock, the time when Master John Ruse would be loading in the mails. There

was plump Mrs. Ruse busy writing down in her black book the requirements of those who were not going with the party, and who depended upon her to shop for them. Dickie Ruse, a lad a year older than myself, was holding quiet old Bessy's reins, the animal appearing quite odd because she was a sturdy carthorse, rather too large for the van of such slender proportions. Everyone was dressed in Sunday best.

Master John Ruse was of about the same age as my Father, and as my Father was considered to have an equal social status to himself, he was quick to greet him as he came up. Fred had to sit inside; my Father was to be next to the driver's seat, with Mrs. Ruse on the side nearest the verge. The mail up, the other passengers crammed into the van, where they stood or sat along the sides as best they could; Master John Ruse swung me up to sit beside Fred, hoisted his wife into place, and then went round to be hauled up into his driving-seat by my Father. A crack of the whip, and the whole contraption creaked slowly forward.

It was a brilliant day, but there had been showers in the night which, it seemed, had transformed the whole world. It was rather like one of those magic paintings which I remember my Grandmother once brought home to me from Basingbury: a pale weak picture on a piece of tissue paper which, at the touch of a damp cloth, became suddenly living and real. The greens were greener; the yellow gravel of the road had been transformed to a nutty brown. There were daisies and dandelions on the roadbanks, brilliant in the sun, mauve violet clumps, and between the criss-crossed stems of hazel coppices the wild hyacinth gently carpeted the undergrowth with elusive blues, the white stars of wood anemone sprinkled among them.

We passed a field, yellow with cowslips, opposite our cottages. My Mother was out at the gate, ready to wave to us, and to shout to me to be a good boy. Mrs. Ruse called back, "He'll be all right with me, Mrs. Weston; have no fear of that!" And on we went, to turn the corner of the Rectory grounds, under the great horse-chestnut tree, which held huge white flower candles at its fingers' ends.

The hedges had grown thick, smothered with white hawthorn blooms, white all along the sides of the fields, with the verge grass tall beneath them giving way here and there to masses of long-stemmed buttercups. Overhead, giant oaks offered in gnarled arms their burdens of sprouting leaves to their opposite neighbours. The bends were softened by the hedges striving to greet one another across the narrow twisty way to Ram's Valley; and here there were old twigs and leaves left over from last year, which had been scattered by the winter gales among the stones and brown grit.

And above the rumbling and crunching of the van wheels, the friendly chattering and laughing of the passengers, the steady plod and creak of the great, tireless horse, came the birds' voices: "Little bit of bread and NO cheese!" of the yellow-hammer; "Tchizzick—tchizzick!" of the willy wagtail as he whirred and glided up and down, up and down from the roadside into the fields; the whistling, tinkling, chattering calls of many finches; the cuckoos; the rasp of the magpies and the jays, all intermingled with the noisy cackle of startled pheasants, one gliding away like a great brown kite, to settle softly behind the bushes. And then, as we passed under the pines just before entering Ram's Valley, quite a bustle and laughing arose among the party as the brown squirrels scolded overhead and threw the nibbled remains of fir-apples upon us.

Into the damp village of Ram's Valley we trundled, past the holly trees and yews and the frequent alders in the old worked-out gravel pits; past the seven-hundred-years-old Scures Farm, which has been in the family since the reign of Henry I, and on into the grounds of the lovely old Manor of Manytunes. We stopped for a few moments on the crossroads where stands the tiny church with its quaint ornamental bell tower and pretty flint facings. More mails were loaded in and also one or two passengers; and now we had reached the limit of my known world, and set course for Carter's Ley, a place I knew of only by hearsay, and imagined in my mind as at least a very large town.

Judge my disappointment, then, when I found Carter's Ley

to be just a huddle of odd-shaped thatched cottages jumbled about a single crossroad, with even more oddly shaped out-houses in scanty backyards. There was one shop with a tiny crooked window, which had a bakery at the back of the building; and in the yard stood a rick of bafpins for use in the brick oven, and also a small delivery van. A few fowls and a crazy terrier, dancing up and down on the end of its chain as it loudly defied our whole party, completed the accoutrements of the bakery yard.

Ahead of us were the wide fields and low hedges of this open countryside, with, wonder of wonders! an enormous black steamroller by the side of the road, tilted sideways where it had been rolled upon the verge; and I remember I was much intrigued by the funnel with long ornamental spikes at its mouth, curving out from the firebox in front.

Coming into Shirestream, we passed Court Corner, still at that time called by the old folk Lady Mede, where in ancient days the old Court Leet was held in the open air. By the woods of Shirestream we passed the oak trunks of massive thickness discoloured blue and grey and green, with dark mossy patches running down the deep scars of the barks, marking out the rain-channels to the roots.

The stop at Shirestream Post Office was a great event; for the Postmistress came out to chat with Master Ruse and my Father, and seeing young Dickie and me, went inside for a piece of cake and a jug of ginger wine.

Soon we passed the stone on one side of the road and the oak tree on the other which marks the boundary between Shirestream and Shirestream St. Johnas. We stopped again in the tiny village square with the walnut tree in the centre, some old folks sitting in a row on the bench beneath it. One old man I remember very clearly, for he was dressed in a smock and wore a flat hat with a wide brim, his white beard below the chin so that his lips were shaven, and joined with his white side-whiskers.

And so, by Popley Fields, Twittles, we went, into the Stokingbase to Aldertown turnpike, thus turning towards the

town. Down the long hill we rumbled, into the town and under the new railway arch upon which stood a magnificent railway engine. How eagerly I took in the details of this shining, hissing monster, the great single driving-wheel with its enormous piston, the tall black funnel with a brass contraption something like a tea-urn close behind, and another long brass funnel close to the roofless footplate, upon which were two grimy heroes awaiting the signal for the all-clear!

Into the crowded market-town we plunged, working between slow-moving horse vehicles of every description; with pigs, sheep, cattle being driven along the streets and adding to the confusion. Children played at perilous risk to their young lives between crunching wheels and plodding hooves; gipsies and pedlars with wares in trays or upon their arms, crossed and recrossed, entreating the incoming country folk to buy. There were farmers' vans and waggons laden with poultry and squealing, lowing, grunting livestock. There were open-fronted shops displaying upon shutter-counters every gadget under the sun, most beyond the pockets of anyone in our party except perhaps Master Ruse; and so, on to the back of the Cross Keys, where more vehicles were parked, the horses in a stamping, sweating row, attached to the iron rings along the inn wall over near the drinking-troughs.

It was a truly wonderful day. I could hardly believe that there were so many horses and vehicles in the world; that there were so many people, so many things to buy.

I followed my Father into a coffee-house, and there we saw Uncle Tobias. Uncle Tobias was my Father's brother-in-law; a man to whom my Father was, oddly enough, much attached, for he did not usually hold much brief for dandified ways. For Uncle Tobias was one of the chief assistants in a high-class ladies' and gentlemen's outfitters; and after he and my Father had talked for a while, we followed Uncle Tobias almost to his place of employment. Deference to our betters forbad that we should be seen with him too near his shop.

How odd it seems, on reflection, with the spirit of outward assertiveness abroad as it is in these modern times, that no one

seemed to mind keeping to their proper stations in life in those days; indeed, it was a presumptuous person who affected to be above it. So we took it as quite in order that we should not accompany Uncle Tobias all the way, although we left him at least close enough for me to stand, with mouth agape, watching the gentry come and go through the gilded doors. I remember in particular a lady leaving her carriage, dressed in a lavender-and-blue gown of shining silk, and long white lace gloves and an enormous lavender-grey bonnet to which was attached two flowing ostrich-feathers and a delicate veil. Four small girls were with her, all dressed in exactly the same manner, all carrying parasols; and they all minced primly into the store with never a word or glance towards the common people who made way on the pavement for them to pass by.

Yes, I remember the gentry of those times very well indeed. Aloof they may have been, and humble they expected us to be, but there was many a family in our village put upon its feet by their help and sympathy in bad times. And although our material lot today is immensely improved, I miss a certain solidness, a security in our souls, a feeling of knowing our place and function, not only in the countryside social structure, but in the world. And I think the men who taught us, and kept us to our courses, were the old-fashioned although sometimes stern heads of old English families, like my Father.

In common with all country craftsmen of his kind, my Father, within the limits which we accepted, had the fortunes of his family in the hollow of his hand. His living was good, his connections secure. There was no hint of troubled waters ahead of us, and Fred, the eldest and most dependable of his children, was at his side learning the trade, ready to take on the family offices when the time came, just as my Father had done from Grandfather Weston.

And then, for a long period during my early school days, I remember a peculiar thing; peculiar, because most people's

childhood recollections are pictures of sunshine. Mine are pictures of rain.

I remember the wind's wild organ in the elm tops at the back of our cottages, and water rushing down the tree-trunks in a glimmering sheet. Twin rivers of yellow water hurrying along the deep cart-ruts in the road, I remember also; and a hundred hoof-prints cast like glass of varying levels in the mud.

During wet periods, my Father and brother Fred stayed at home to make hurdles in the shed at the back of our cottages.



The shed was long, built of hurdles and dung, and thatched. Inside was the confusion of our family industry: spades for gravedigging, scythes, measuring-irons for the land, tar-twine, harness, truss-weighers, lanterns, gins and thatching implements. Among these latter was my Father's proudest possession: a set of bill-hooks, razor-sharp, made by the blacksmith for my Grandfather before he had retired, from an old file used for trimming the horses' hooves. There was an assortment of forks, rakes, an eaves-hook like a very large hand-scythe which was used for trimming the eaves in house thatching, bats for knocking in sprays and spars, and an old-fashioned thatching needle. A bottomless wicker chair which the jackdaw had limed white

stood by a pile of triangular chips where brother Fred cut the spars for thatching the ricks.

Rain . . . rain . . . rain . . .

My Father and Fred worked stolidly away in the dim interior of the shed, sometimes by candlelight on a very dull day, while Tom and I did what we could to help them when we were at home. The rain thudded steadily into the thatched roof. I heard the Tick—tick—tick of water dripping in at one end with the monotonous regularity of a clock. The pigs in my Father's sties stood in the open doorway but did not venture out. Water rushed continuously from the cottage roof across the backyard in a criss-cross sheet, and sometimes there were storms when the noise of chopping and splitting was blotted out by the roar of raindrops on the roof, and a million tiny brown beings with round heads appeared in the water-sheet outside, to run endlessly across it, rank on rank. All the world would be blotted from our ears in a sea of sound. And then, as the storm passed, magnified loud and clear by the purified air would come the defiant call of the storm-thrush; and my Father's voice might boom out:

"Nice weather for ducks!"

"Aye," Fred would grumble. "We ain't earning much in 'ere."

"Oh, it can't last much longer," my Father might say. "Think yourself lucky you'm losing no wet time, like them poor bloods of labourers up the road yon."

But it did last, and although my Father stolidly piled up his hurdles, for which he could get no money until he sold them, he began to lose patience.

One day we all looked up from our work and were pleased to see Shep Daubenay standing in the doorway. Shep was a wiry, bent old man, with weather-scarred face fringed by dirty grey whiskers, his corduroys tied in "yorks" under his knees. He wore no shirt, but instead, a number of waistcoats beneath a very ragged jacket. On his head perched a shapeless hat, and his feet were clad in boots with soles half an inch thick, plastered all over the bottoms with steel studs.

He leaned on his staff, screwed up his long-sighted eyes into numberless wrinkles as he peered inside, and without taking his clay from his mouth, he said:

"How many hurdles ye got, Master Weston?"

"Tidy few," said my Father. "Come on in."

Shep removed his clay, spat on the earth floor, and entered.

"What some juggerin' weather," he said.

"Ah! Mind the boys. It is that."

"Oh, I didn't see 'em," said Shep. He was well known for his fulsome figures of speech, but, like all countrymen of those days, he was careful when children were about.

He scrutinized our hurdles.

"Anything wrong wi' 'em?" asked my Father jokingly.

"No need to ask that," said Shep. "What have ye got outside?"

"Is it a big order then?"

"Fairish," said Shep non-committally. My Father threw a sack over his shoulders, and the two men went to inspect the stacks.

When they returned, my Father was a good deal more cheerful. He sat down to resume his work with the air of a man whose goods had fetched their proper price. Shep seated himself on the chopping-block and regarded us two lads. I was too tongue-tied to speak, but Tom ventured:

"Nice peaceful job you got, Mr. Daubenay."

"Think so, you young tinker?" replied Shep, amused. "I s'pose it ain't bad for an old 'un."

"Bit on the lonely side, ain't it?" asked Fred.

"Not to them as ain't afeerd of being on their own."

"Dunno as I'd go much on it, though," grunted Fred.

Old Shep spat.

"No. 'Tis a sight too quiet for the young 'uns, I s'pose. There ain't much peace about it, come lambing-time. When you'm snug indoors, lads, snoring your heads off, I'll be out on the hills in the wind, the ground that hard you can hear it cracking sometimes across the fields, and the snow coming down and settling in a ring all round my lantern. There'll be the fox half-

crazed and leer wi' cold, or a dog turned to sheep-worritin' perhaps. Ah," he went on, "the fox by night, the raven by day. D'you know, lads, them ravens can smell death afore the sheep as is going to die knows anything about it. I've seed 'em come flapping along, black as hearses. 'Trouble,' I thinks to myself, and trouble it is, for sure. Maybe I can't get near an ailing lamb afore them beggars has its eyes out. They and the crows is the pest o' your life, as if anyone hadn't got enough to get on wi', with the lambing and the sickness there is now among 'em."

"Is there much sickness about?" asked my Father.

"Bound to be, all this wet weather."

"Well, I s'pose we all has our good and bad times," said Tom.

Old Shep was more amused than ever. "You ain't started your bad times yet, boy," he said, and went on to tell of the good times on the land of twenty years before, and the trouble there was brewing among the farm labourers up-country. At that, my Father became very excited.

"What's up wi' 'em?" he demanded angrily. "I can't understand it. It never used to be. *I've* never known a good man as his Master didn't look after."

"Nor me either," agreed old Shep. "I ain't got much to grumble at. I does my work and I gets my pay and extrys. *I'm* all right. So would *they* be if they behaved theirselves instead o' listenin' to these here troublemakers as wants to turn things all upside-down."

"I reckon we got one o' them troublemakers in the village," said my Father. He was unwilling to mention names. But Shep was not so chary.

"You means young Walter Nash," he said. "'Pend upon it, he'll come to no good. He with a wife and family, too. How many children 'ave 'er got? Seven?"

"Tidy few," said my Father, "and by the looks on 'em he ought to spend the time he's about up to no good working a bit harder to keep 'em up together."

"They do say," said Fred, "as Walter Nash's people is sending men out o' the country."

"And what good will that do 'em?" demanded my Father. "They'll have to work wherever they are."

"Ah," ventured Fred, "but a man might get on better across the water than he do here."

My Father answered sharply:

"I don't want to hear no more o' *that* sort o' talk!"

And forthwith, Fred and Tom and myself were no longer included in the conversation.

All the year through, there was never a week without the rain. Often I came downstairs to see my Father, dressed and ready for work, staring out of the window at the sky, not knowing whether to go or not. My Father did not wear any old thing for work. He was always neat, though perhaps patched, washed and his boots greased. Fred was becoming dispirited and untidy.

"Best get the razor round your chin, boy," he once said to Fred, "or else grow a beard."

"What's the use?" grumbled Fred. "We shan't go no-where."

"No need to rust," said my Father. "This'll pass."

But it did not. Morning after morning, all through the summer, the clouds heavy with rain and night, hung across the hills like long rows of battlements and towers, with the rising sun glaring red behind them.

"Shep hasn't been round lately," said my Father one morning to Mother, a hint of anxiety in his voice.

"Never mind, Father," said my Mother in her quiet way. "The longer he is away, the more he'll want when he gets here."

But Shep's orders were not so large as in other years.

"The Master's going steady," he said. "I have to make do. He thinks it might be a bad year. Still, get harvest over and he'll loosen his money-bags a bit."

The harvest was what the men called "catchy". My Father and Fred thatched when they could. At first the corn was only reaped when it was fine, but in the end they had to reap in the rain. At last it was all stooked in rows, and underneath the

stubble we saw once more the familiar pictures: pimperl stars, brick-red and homely, reminding me of the brick fire-place at home and of warmth; the little convolvulus and dwarf poppies, ragged red, and scentless mayweed.

But the harvest stood where it was, and was still there when the ploughing started, and the pale purple fallow faced the sunset on the hill with rows of cardboard trees behind it, set one behind the other into the rising mists. It stood there until it went black, and they began to cart it in wet for dung.

But there were compensations. We had a bumper crop of plums, and so did everyone in the village; so we did not know what to do with those we could not use.

"I'll tell you what," said my Father, "take a basket round to the schoolmaster. He hasn't got any plum trees."

My Mother demurred, saying that he might be insulted.

"Insulted wi' good egg plums?" asked my Father. "Well, if he's too proud to take 'em he can send 'em back."

It fell to me to take them. I well remember that day. The schoolmaster was to me an enormous man, tall, stout, dressed in an ill-fitting black jacket of heavy material with high, small lapels, and a waistcoat buttoned almost to his chin. He always wore a small rounded collar and a narrow woollen tie; his trousers fitted tightly to the leg, and his boots shone like silk. I was more than frightened when he came to the door, and the broad, fleshy, moustached face and piercing black eyes which I knew so well stared down at me and my basket of plums.

"Please, sir," I faltered, "Father said would you care for a few plums?"

"How much are they?" asked the schoolmaster.

I was too frightened to reply.

"Come, come, boy! How much?"

"Please, sir," I said, "please, sir, Father said . . . Father said if he wants to pay for them I was to take them back."

I dared not look up at him. Childlike, I was quick to sense a certain kindness in his reply.

"Oh, he did, did he? Yes, I dare say he *would* say something like that. I'll take them. It's very kind of your Father."

He took the basket into his house.

"Wait a minute, boy," he said. He came back and fumbled in his waistcoat pocket. He gave me a penny.

"Please, sir . . ." I began.

"Here," said the schoolmaster. "Take it. Tell your Father not to say anything about the plums in the village. And don't you say anything, either."

"Thank you, sir. No, sir, I won't, sir. Thank you very much, sir."

"And tell him I won't forget," he said, as he turned away. He stuck his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets, watched to make sure that I closed his gate, and went inside.

I was not too young, even then, to realize that things were not as they should be. After this disastrous harvest, my Father and Fred found themselves not only short of work, but obliged to cut their usual charges for what work they could get. They found themselves in competition with labourers who had been stood off through the winter because of the bad year; "straw-hangers", as Fred contemptuously termed them, who could not do the work as my Father and Fred, and who undercut the regular thatchers' prices.

We kept two pigs. Everyone, even the poor farm labourers, kept at least one pig, upon which they depended for their meat supply. But my Father could afford to have a joint brought in from Basingbury on Saturday nights. This practice was missed every other week for a time, and then became less and less frequent, and finally dropped off altogether.

About that time, Mother had to confess to my Father that she was in debt with the grocer. I would not have known this, but I was in the scullery when the grocer called and asked Mother how much she could pay that week. My Father was also present. He was very angry, but did not say much. He asked the tradesman abruptly how much we owed, and paid the amount out of his own pocket on the spot. Debts were a

deep disgrace in our family, but when my Mother tearfully apologized, his anger turned to kindness.

"Never mind, Mother," he said. "I was cross because I paid the grocer the pigs' barley-meal money."

"A pity we hadn't got a bit o' leasings," said Mother.

"Ah, perhaps it is. But 'tis too late to think o' that now. I didn't want to see none o' mine out there scrabbling in them fields. What would the Cheritons and the Vincents and old John Ruse think we had come to?"

"P'raps some of them wish they had a bit o' leasings themselves by now."

My father laughed.

"P'raps they do," he said.

"What are you going to do about the pigs?" asked Mother anxiously.

"I've made up my mind what to do about them," said my Father. "I'll make some arrangements with the miller."

We knew that Father would hate "making arrangements" with the miller. As with other tradesmen, he had in other years always paid cash down for his meal. But this time he had to follow the usual custom among the labourers: he let the miller have one pig in return for barley-meal to fatten the two.

Next, butter disappeared from our table, to be replaced by lard. A neighbouring farmer kept us supplied with skimmed milk. There were no new boots that Christmas; our old ones had to last a while longer, as did our clothes, and Mother and Grandmamma set to lengthening our sleeves and trouser legs, and letting in "v" pieces under the arms and at the back. My Mother was much worried because of Minnie's clothes and her own; fashions changed, but they had to stick to last year's dresses.

But one thing my Father insisted should not be curtailed. That was the weekly halfpenny which he gave Tom and myself. I remember Fred, morose and rebellious because his allowance had to be cut, saying as he saw us paid one Saturday:

"That's something we *could* save on, Father."

"Fred, you look after your own affairs," flashed my Father. "Times is hard, but not as hard as all that."

Fred, seething with resentment and frustration, dared perhaps for the first time to cross my Father.

"Father," he said, "I bain't going to go on like this much longer, wi' hard work and no money. I hears tell as they makes good money on the railroads being laid down through Alder-town. I been thinking I might go and work there."

My father showed forbearance.

"Now, Fred," he said, placing his hand on my brother's shoulder. "You don't mean that, boy. No son of mine would leave us all to face a hard time on our own, 'specially when he's most needed. Next year will put all this right, you'll see. The land will be there, boy, long after the railroads is gone the way they come."

By means of the economies forced upon us by the seasons, we managed to get through the year without much harm being done. The new year greeted us with savage storms which tore up trees and kept the labourers in the outhouses round about the farms. My Father and Fred went on steadily piling up hurdles, ready for the lambing. Fred was becoming uneasy because Shep did not seem to visit us.

"He'll come in his own time," said my Father. "Let 'un blow. 'T'll blow itself out afore long, and then we'll see the change. Please God, we'll get a better year. Us don't usually get two bad years running."

But although the storms passed, the weather did not settle down as the lambing season began. I remember the long ribbons of rooks undulating past the elm trees at the back of our cottages; the hazels massed darkly against the sun's burning eye, with the catkins swinging madly in the wind. I remember, too, the never-ceasing clouds like hands hurrying down from the sun to grasp the wild countryside for their very own. There was nothing now for my Father and Fred to do but to wait; there seemed no point in making more hurdles, for more than Shep would require had been stacked already.

My Father sat in his kitchen, smoking and staring into the

flames. Fred was in the workshed, tidying up. Mother came in to put the pot on the fire, with its nets of vegetables hanging from the rim inside; and as she stood upright, she happened to glance out of the window.

"Here's old Shep," she said. She pushed the curtain to one side while my Father sat there, still smoking, betraying none of the anxiety which we knew he felt.

"He's coming up along by the hedge," said my Mother. "I think he's coming in." She stood by the window, then let the curtain drop and turned round.

"He's gone by," she said. "He looked across here as he passed the gate, but he's gone on."

"P'raps he'll look in on his way back," said my Father.

But old Shep did not look in on his way back. Fred came in to ask if it might not be best to go up to the hills and see Shep.

"No need to go running up there," said my Father. "The hurdles is down here. Shep knows where they be."

A week later, Shep passed our cottages again. Again he did not call in.

"He never looked this time," said my Mother. "He seemed to be hurrying by a bit quick." My Father just sat there, smoking. And then finally Shep did come in.

"He's coming in this time," said my Mother. "He's just unlatched the gate."

My Father rose quickly to his feet, and hurried to open the back door. He stood there, waiting, before Shep got to the back of the house.

"Ha," said the old man. "Marnin' to 'e, Master Weston. What some juggerin' weather. It don't get no better, do it?"

"Don't seem to," said my Father. "Over a twelvemonth we've had of it, off and on."

"Yes, I s'pose it is about that," said Shep. "I come round about some hurdles. Let's go and have a look at 'em."

We waited while the two men went down to the hurdle stacks. Shep did not stay long, and went out by the orchard gate. When my Father came in, he looked serious.

"Not much of an order, Mother," he said. "Shepherd says

the flocks is in a bad way. The Old Man has been talking about giving up sheep farming. He says it don't pay. Shep says as he won't fork out; Shep got to patch and make do."

"Oh well," said my Mother, "half a loaf's better'n none."

My Father was worried.

"I don't know if they want any hurdles over at Manytunes," he said. "Bosher Broomfield makes for they. I dare say he's in the same boat. I didn't pertickler want to go on another man's ground. Anyways, I'd have to wait for the money."

One evening, Fred came in just as we were thinking of going to bed, and said that he had been to a meeting.

"A meeting?" queried my Father. "What sort of a meeting? I didn't hear nothing of it."

"No more didn't I," said Fred. "But I was just coming past Walt Nash's place, and I seed two or three chaps go in, and then one on 'em seed me and asked me, so in I went."

"Oh ah," said my Father. "How many on 'em there then?"

"There was about eight all told," said Fred. "They was all farm labourers as had been stood off until the busy times come round agen; and there was a feller as I'd never seed round these here parts a-tellin' on 'em all manners o' things. It seems as they'm tryin' to get the farm labourers to make up a sort of a Union; this here chap as come down wants 'em to get all together to beat the farmers. They been and formed a part of it here in Marshwood, wi' Walter Nash summat to do wi' it, and they wanted me to be in it."

"They did, did they?" asked my Father quietly.

"But I didn't want nothing to do wi' that 'ere," went on Fred hastily. "I got more sense than that. I can't see what they'm a-drivin' at myself; it don't seem no sense in going against the men as is giving us our jobs. I told 'em it'd be more'n my job's worth to go getting mixed up in anything like that. Why, no farmer for miles round 'd have anything to do with us if 'twas known as I was mixed up in that 'ere."

"You're a good sensible lad, Fred," said my Father with pride. "And if you wants my 'pinion of Walter Nash and his Union, I'd say if there's eight men joined it, then they're eight fools. Them sort o' folk is out o' work because they're no good; that's what I think. You go round to the farms now, and you won't see the men as suits is stood off. The farmers knows better'n that. 'Course, their money ain't so much now, but that 'ere ain't much to go making an upset over as I can see. 'Tis an act of God as the year's been bad. Who's Walt Nash and his like to go agen that?"

"Well, they did say as it wasn't all to do with the weather," said Fred. "They did say as 'twas the Big Pots as was the cause o' some on it."

"Good-for-nothing troublemakers and idlers!" repeated my Father with the air of a man who had the last word on the matter. And then, to clinch his opinions, he said fiercely, "It's the Big Pots that give us our jobs, ain't it?"

We had, during this period, a visit from a much more exalted personage than old Shep Daubenay; from none other than the schoolmaster himself. It was with some consternation that my Mother, in the middle of getting Tom and myself ready for school, happened to spot his ponderous figure coming in through our gate.

"Bless my heart and soul, Father!" she exclaimed. "Here comes the schoolmaster!"

"Oh, you go to the door," said my Father hurriedly. "I'm not properly dressed yet."

"What about me?" demanded Mother irritably. "Oh dear!" But Father had by this time disappeared through the scullery door with totally unaccustomed speed.

My Mother tossed her head at this desertion, and went to the mirror to hurriedly pile her long hair, answering the schoolmaster's knock with pins between her lips, "Just one moment, please, sir," as she hastily made her toilet. A couple

of smoothings of her white apron, another anxious glance in the mirror, and she thought herself presentable.

"I wonder whatever he wants," she muttered to herself as she hurried to open the front door. The schoolmaster was shewn into our parlour, which was a great pride to us, for its furniture was all hand-made, bought many years ago when my Grandfather set up house. Neither my Father nor my Mother thought anything of the new furniture made in imitation of the interior of the gentry's houses. There was a long settee there, covered in pigskin, with one tall backrest to it and an arm along the wall, the pigskin upholstery surmounted by carved oak wood; a walnut table, oval in shape, with one central pedestal spread out into three feet, each carved in the shape of a dolphin; four beautifully balanced small black chairs with rush bottoms; a sideboard with a complete set of pewter displayed upon it, and a grandfather clock bought by my Great-Uncle for Grandfather's wedding. It still keeps perfect time.

Tom and I could not imagine what the business of the schoolmaster might be, and we both spent an anxious twenty minutes turning over our misdemeanours in our minds and trying to convince ourselves that we had done nothing serious enough to warrant a visit from so awful a person as our village schoolmaster. We could hear the deep rumble of his voice through the wall, and presently my Mother sent our hearts into our mouths by opening the door and saying to Tom:

"Go and fetch your Father, Tom. Schoolmaster wants to speak to him."

By this time my Father was dressed, and in he went, and the two deep voices rumbled on for a further ten minutes or more; then back went the schoolmaster the way he had come, and my Father and Mother came out. Father stood before the fireplace and regarded us without any inkling upon his face as to what we might expect. We both sat watching him, like a couple of rabbits mesmerized by a stoat.

"Stop teasing the boys!" said my Mother suddenly, and to our intense relief. "Schoolmaster didn't come in about you two," she said kindly to us.

"Well," rumbled my Father with a very serious face, "they must've been up to summat, Mother! Look at them guilty faces!"

"Go on, off to school, my sons," said Mother. "Father's only teasing you. He didn't come in about you two. Father, stop it, I said!"

My Father smiled and away we both went, hooting with relief and glee. But we were not told exactly why the schoolmaster had visited; it was none of our business.

However, we heard eventually, for my Father brought the matter up to Fred in the workshed on the following Saturday morning.

"Schoolmaster been in, Fred," he said. "I dare say you seen him."

"Ah."

"Old Martha, the letter-carrier, been and give up cleaning the school," went on my Father. "Your Mother's took it on."

We waited for what was to follow. Presently, my Father said:

"Suppose *you* wouldn't like to earn a extry shillin' a week, Fred?"

"I could do wi' it."

"Well, it ain't much of a job. I didn't say we'd do it for good. But I thought it'd help ye out until times got back again, lad. In fact, the job was put our way more as a favour than anything; there's plenty others 'd take it, but schoolmaster said he hadn't forgot our kindness over the plums."

My Father paused again. He did not seem to know quite how to put things.

"Well, Martha used to empt the buckets, as you know," he went on. "I didn't want your Mother to do it, so schoolmaster he asked if I would. I said as I didn't think I needed to; times 'd change, and I had my work to look after. But I said I'd ask you."

Fred did not answer. Tom said:

"I wouldn't mind doing it, Father."

"Be quiet, boy! Speak when you're spoke to!" And then to

Fred: "You bain't obliged, you know. But it'll only be until things is a bit better."

"How much would you want me to give Mother?" asked Fred.

"Oh, you can keep the shilling," replied my Father, with ominous quietness.

"All right," said Fred. "I'll do it."

I saw my Father's face light with anger at Fred's grudging reply. But he thought better of it and went on to another subject.

"I told schoolmaster as I'd oblige him until things got back to the usual," he said. "And we got on talking about how things seemed to be all arse-over-head these days. I said as I never seed so many tramps in the village; and what I couldn't understand about 'em was the head men you finds among 'em, shepherds, carters, drowners and such, and as I thought men like that might have got theirselves mixed up wi' these here troublemakers there is about today. I told him as I didn't know what had got into folk; they all on a sudden seems dissatisfied and a-lookin' for trouble."

My Father went on quietly with his work for a while, as if to let this observation sink in. But Fred was quite a chip from the old block; no one could tell by his face what he was thinking.

"I told him," continued my Father, "as I reckoned things wouldn't settle down until folks stopped going agen the Master, and did their jobs like proper men should. And do you know what he said?"

"He said: 'Weston,' he says, 'you may as well make up your mind that the "old days" have gone. It isn't all to do with the weather,' he says, 'it's to do with this new-fangled business of keeping food fresh in the cold on ships,' he says. He says all these here folks as lives in the town these days can get their food cheaper from abroad than they can at home. Seems queer, don't it, Fred? You'd think things would be *dearer* from abroad, not cheaper."

Again there was silence as the two went on working.

"'Weston,' he says," went on my Father, "'you'd do better to make plans to meet things as you find them today,' he says. 'Not sit here waiting for the old days to come back. Because,' he says, 'I don't think you'll see them back.'"

My Father put aside his bill-hook for the moment, and stared out of the window across the fields.

"I can't believe," he said, "as good meat and good corn as we can get in this country in better times won't pay. Bound to pay," he said, half to himself. "Folk ain't so daft as to want foreign rubbish afore the things as *we* can grow."

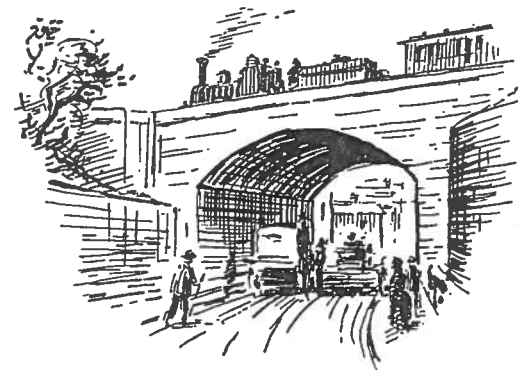
He picked up his bill-hook and looked at Fred.

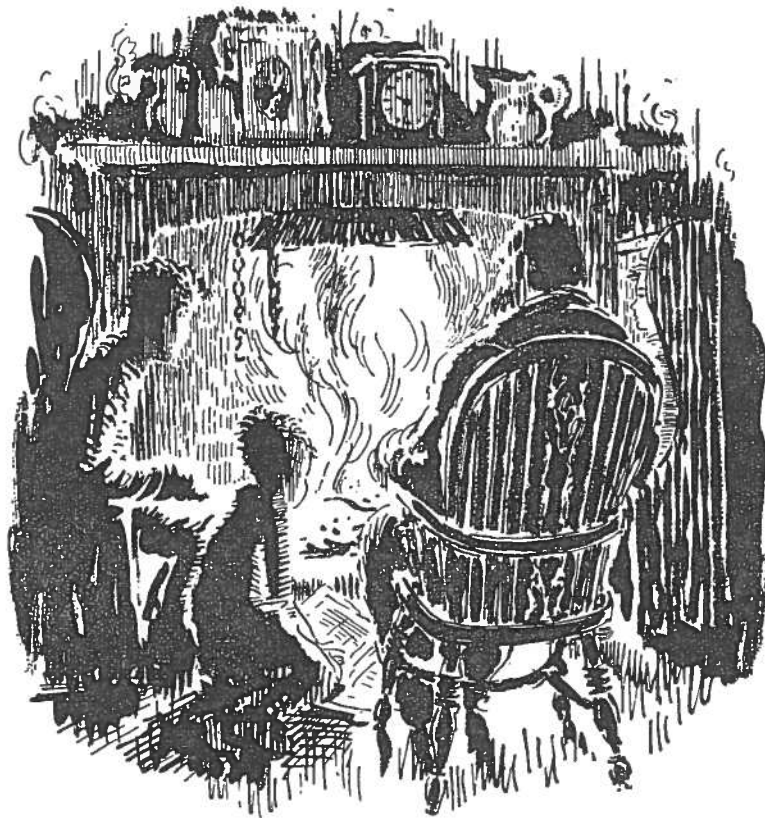
"Bound to, ain't they, Fred?"

"Ah!"

"Ah," said my Father, as he took to splitting the wood again.

"This'll be a good year, please God. If there's a good harvest we'll pull up. Schoolmaster don't know it all. We'll be all right, you see."





CHAPTER THREE

IN recalling the way of life in my Father's family during those far-off days, a curious incident comes to my mind. My brother Tom found himself in hot water with my Father, because he took part in the ancient cruel custom of playing "rough musick"—now happily died completely away.

There had been an unfortunate incident up at Carter's Ley, involving a middle-aged married farm labourer and one of the hamlet girls, and the girl was going to have a baby.

"So they be a-going to old Bill's place to play rough musick tonight," said Tom, "and then they'll be going on to the lass's place, to gie her a turn on it, too."

"Thees'll keep clear on it, young Tom," said my Father. "Or I'll give thee a hiding you won't forget in a hurry. Them two got enough troubles as it is."

"They shouldn't ha' carried on in such a way then."

"I don't think you know what you'm a-talking about, boy," said my Father. "I don't hold wi' such carryings-on meself, but God'll punish the two on 'em in His own good time, without interference from you. It ain't old Bill you wants to worry about—he'll come out with the poker at thee, but 'tis the wench, poor fool that she be. She'll bear the shame on it her whole life through. You keep away, young Tom, or I'll tan your backside as sure as I'm yer Father."

But, nevertheless, Tom did go, and together with a number of other young village hooligans, they marched round and round old Bill's cottage banging tins and shouting insults for a full hour. Once, he appeared at the doorway to remonstrate with them, but they pelted him with clods and rubbish so that he had to go inside again. No one knew the humiliation he suffered while the cruel custom was being played out; whether his family forgave and supported him, or whether they, too, were against him.

At length they tired of baiting old Bill and went on to the girl's house. She, poor creature, could expect no sympathy from her people while the turmoil went on outside. She did not show herself at doorway or window, nor indeed in daylight again, until long after her child was born. Of course, my Father did eventually find out that Tom had joined in the fracas, and, just as he promised, he gave Tom a hiding which he never afterwards forgot.

Another little incident I recall, showing how the far-off outside world crept in among us, to startle our rural minds into wonderment and awe. Grandfather Weston had gone off to bed, and so had the women of my Father's household, because the light was failing. My Father was enthroned in his wooden

armchair, enjoying his last pipe of the day, his tip-nailed boots unlaced but still on his feet. Fred and I were seated with hands clasped about our knees, before the dying embers; Fred on Grandmother's chimney-seat, myself on the other. Tom sat upon the sack before the open fire, laboriously reading an old newspaper he had picked up, turning it towards the glow, his close-cropped black head bent studiously over its contents.

"There you be!" he exclaimed suddenly. "It *were* right what I did tell 'e!"

"What's that, young 'un?" said Fred drowsily.

"It do say here as how a Frenchman made a ship as flies in the air wi' a 'lectric engine in 'un. It do say as it will fly along in the air at fourteen mile to the hour!"

My Father was impressed.

"Fourteen mile to the hour?" he asked. "That's a pretty fair pace. It'd take just about half an hour to get to Stokingbase then."

"Ah, if her followed the road. But her wouldn't do that. I don't reckon 'tis more than five mile as the crow do fly."

"How long would it take then?"

"Let's see: fourteen mile to the hour, that'd be seven in half an hour—that'd be twenty minutes or a bit under, I do reckon."

There was a profound and awed silence.

"Stokingbase in twenty minutes!" exclaimed Fred. "Get away! I don't believe it!"

"Well, that's what it do say here then. You have a look for yourself."

"You knows I was never no good at readin'."

"Well, that's what it do say, anyhow."

My Father leaned forward, brows knit into a puzzled frown.

"Here," he said. "How do they get a heavy girt thing like a ship to float in the air then? You can't float a heavy girt thing like a ship in the air!"

"Well, that's what it do say. Wait a minute, Father, perhaps it do tell thee."

Tom bent his head to the print again, while we all watched

him with admiration, for Tom was the acknowledged "scholard" of the family. A proper gentleman was Tom, with a "long head on'n". He'd do well, would Tom.

"It ain't much like a ship as floats on the water," he said at length. "It do say here as 'tis shaped something like a blue-stone; a sort of balloon it is. There's a basket hung on the bottom o' this yer thing, with a girt steerin' rudder at the back on'n. The ingine's in the front o' the basket with a girt 'perpeller', so it says, on the front on'n, as spins round and round and makes 'n go along."

"What's this here 'perpeller' then?" asked my Father. "How do he go?"

"It do say," went on Tom, peering by the firelight until his eyes watered, "as this here 'perpeller' is shaped something like a flat screw, and when the ingine's a drivin' on'n, he do go round and round and screw his way into the air. The airship is drug along behind him."

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed Fred. "Whoever heard o' screwin' summat into the air? Here, Frank, run on out into the shed and get I a screwdriver! I'm beggared if I don't put a screw into the middle o' this here kitchen and hang me hat on'n!"

"It *do* take a bit of figgerin', don't it, Father?" said Tom.

"What goes up must come down," intoned my Father grimly. "And I reckon it might come down wi' a mighty hard bump. If we was meant to fly we'd ha' growed wings." And he puffed away at his pipe.

"Ah," said Fred mischievously. "And if we was meant to smoke there'd be chimley-pots growin' out o' the tops of our heads!"

We could not see whether my Father was smiling or not; it was too dark. But Fred's remark was dangerously near what my Father called "sauce". There was a short silence, relieved by my Father's voice saying pleasantly:

"Come on, boys! Get thee off to bed. We've got to be up sharp in the mornin'."

When I was round about nine years old I noticed a gradual change in the household routine. My Mother was usually second to come downstairs, because my sister Minnie used to get up and light the fires; but Grandmamma took to getting up in my Mother's place, leaving her in bed.

Once, when my Mother was bringing in an armful of logs, Grandmamma said to her:

"Margaret, my dear, I don't want to interfere, but don't you think you're carrying too much about? There's Minnie and myself, you know."

My Mother answered in a weary voice, "Yes, I suppose you're right, Ma."

I had not cottoned on as yet, so I said to Grandmamma, "Why did you say that, Grandmamma?"

She did not answer, but bustled off into the scullery with a trace of a smile about her wrinkled face, to get our breakfasts. I asked my Mother what the matter was, but she smiled also and would not tell. I did not ask my Father. If Grandmamma and Mother did not wish me to know, I knew it was of no use to ask my Father. But Tom told me later on, when I asked him about it.

"Mother's going to have another baby," he whispered, lest he be overheard.

"Who told you?"

"Nobody. But that's what it is—you see."

My Mother took it badly. I found out from Tom that she had an affliction about the legs which sometimes made them swell up to an enormous size. I had wondered why it was Mother sat with her legs up in a chair at times, but it was a habit to which I had become accustomed, and it did not occur to me that she was ill at all. During this time when the new baby was on its way, she spent more and more hours seated thus, while Minnie, good girl that she was, bustled about the scullery, singing quietly, doing her Mother's work as well as her own, with Grandmamma helping as much as she could. Old Grandpa Weston seemed very put out by it all. He shuffled in and out, in and out, his mouth hanging open and

that absent look in his watery eyes; but sometimes he would seem to pull himself together for just a minute and go up to Mother to look her in the face as she sat there, and pat her on the shoulder. My Mother would seize these rational moments to clasp his aged hand and smile back at him; but the next instant he would be off again, shuffling vaguely in and out, not quite clear exactly what was worrying him, I am sure.

I loved my Mother with all my heart. She was the kindest and most understanding woman I ever knew, except my dear wife; she was the steadying influence in our family, the only person, apart from myself, who really understood my Father. No thought had ever crossed my mind as to what we should all be like if she were not with us; and with a great chill of fear I suddenly realized how much in the balance it might be as to whether she would be with us much longer or not.

One Saturday morning, when Tom and I were home from school, Mother sat there before the fire, her feet up, her sewing in her lap, staring quietly into the flames. Poor old Grandpapa had been ordered to sit in his seat and stay there; his wanderings had upset my Mother's nerves. He was very put out, and I believe wanted to explain that he meant no harm; but he was either too frightened to say anything lest he further upset my Mother or more likely had forgotten what he did want to say. We were all quiet, for Mother was so silent, and so grave; never had I seen her like this before.

Presently my Father came in, trying not very successfully to make a little less noise than usual with his tip-nailed boots on the brick floor. Seating himself on the edge of the table, he said:

"How d'ye feel, gal?"

"Oh, I'm all right, Father." My Mother smiled up at his black-whiskered face and reached for his huge hand. "We been through all this a time or two afore. Anybody'd think *you* was going to have it, Father."

"Oh, I ain't worried, gal!" he said in a voice which betrayed all too plainly that he was. "It'll be all right. But . . . but . . ."

"But what, Father?"

My Father wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

"'Tis thy legs!" he blurted out suddenly. "How be they this mornin'?"

"Oh, they're better this morning," said Mother. She spoke as if trying to comfort a child. "Don't 'e take on now, Father. They be all right."

"Well, why ever do you get up?" said my Father. "Why ever don't 'e stay in bed and rest 'em?"

"Oh, I *can't*, Father; I *can't*."

My Father jumped up suddenly and strode towards the door.

"Where ye going, Father?"

"I be going to get the Doctor," he said as he went out.

"There's no need for that, Father!" my Mother called after him with tears in her voice; but my Father had gone.

"What's he want to go and do that for?" she said, appealing to Grandmamma. "We'll never be able to pay no Doctor. Go and call him back."

"Let him go on, my dear," said Grandmamma. "You'll have to have the Doctor sooner or later. I reckons Father is quite right, with your legs swoll up like that."

"Anybody's legs swell up at a time like this."

"Aye . . . but just in case 'tis summat else making thee legs swell. Let Father go on. He knows what he's about."

My Mother said nothing. I heard a strange voice—my own—asking fearfully:

"What's the matter, Mother? Ain't you well?"

"I'm all right," she said, and turned her head away. Grandmamma beckoned me into the scullery, and I hurried out after her. She quietly closed the door behind me.

"Ain't Mother well then, Grandmamma?" I whispered. "Ain't she well?"

"No, she an't," said Grandmamma. "But don't go asking questions and worrying her more than she is. She'll be all right later, please God."

I tried, as I stood there, to picture my Father's house without Mother in it. No—it could not be; God would not do that to us.

"Please God she will be," said Grandmother, half to herself.

"Oh, dear boy, things ain't going as well as they should. Your Father's got eight miles to walk to Aldertown, and then Doctor Thomas might be out. 'Tis high time he *was* called."

Doctor Thomas did not come that day, and on the Sunday my Mother stayed in bed. She only got out while Grandmamma and Minnie changed the sheets and pillowcases; afterwards, Grandmamma said with affectionate pride that Mother even then had made one or two feeble attempts to help, but had been banished, with a shawl about her shoulders, to the little chair with the rush bottom. Then she got into bed again and sat up, while Minnie came down to prepare breakfast.

My father sent Fred up to take his place as Sexton at church. It was near midday when we saw Doctor Thomas ride up to our gate on his tall black mare. We watched him dismount, and watched Father hurrying up the garden path to meet him. We saw them talking as my Father tethered the mare to the gatepost; and then the Doctor came stalking down the garden path in his black clothes and gaiters, and his big black hat, looking more like a bishop than a doctor, whilst my Father followed, carrying the bag.

"Now don't worry so much, Weston," we heard the Doctor say, as the two men entered the scullery. "Dammit, man, we've had all this before. You fathers are a damned nuisance; much more nuisance than the mothers."

"'Tain't *that* I be worried about, sir," growled my Father. "'Tis the legs as I don't like to see."

"I think you'll find the legs will be all right. They'll go down again soon after it's all over. Hallo, my lads!" he exclaimed in a hearty voice as he took off his black hat inside the kitchen door.

"Fine pair of lads *they've* turned out to be, Weston."

We were both tongue-tied before this stout, red-faced, white-whiskered old gentleman with the loud voice and brusque manners. The Doctor pinched Minnie's cheek. "How are you, my dear?" he said, and turning to my Father asked: "Upstairs, I suppose? Is Grandma about? Ah, there you are,

Grandma! Here's Bill a-worrying his inside out as if 'twas her first. What do you think of her?"

"Well, sir," said Grandmamma, wiping her hands in her apron, "she's all *right*"—with a wink at the Doctor and a slight nod towards us. "She's all right, but 'tis the legs, Doctor." She paused, glanced at us and went on, "Still, you come up and see."

She led the way; Doctor Thomas followed her laboriously up the steep, narrow stairs, and we heard them talking as they went until their voices were muffled to silence by the walls. All we could now hear was a thump or two above our heads, and the scrape of a chair across the floor.

"Is Mother's legs very bad?" I asked my Father, who, as was his habit, sat himself upon the corner of the table. My Father did not answer at the moment.

"Father! Is Mother's legs very bad?"

"Eh? No, no; they're all right, my boy. Leastways, they will be when the Doctor's seen to 'em."

Minnie came in again from the scullery to whisper:

"Is he upstairs, Father?"

My Father nodded wearily.

"Don't 'e worry, Father," she said softly.

"Can't 'elp it, gal."

Minnie sat down to wait, too. People passed along the hedge on their way down from church, and presently in came Fred, who glanced at Father, said nothing, but sat in a chair against the wall with his habitual surliness.

Silence. The clock on the mantelshelf ticked away at the same set old pace, but its voice seemed to grow louder and more insistent with each minute we waited. My Father lit his pipe. Fred, who did not then smoke, stared at the tablecloth. Minnie whispered something to Tom, then to me, but we hardly noticed her, for we were listening too, although we did not know why.

"Wonder how long he'll be?" said my Father suddenly. Minnie and Fred glanced at him but made no answer. The old clock ticked slowly away for another few minutes, then, at last,

there was a sound of movement above our heads. The bedroom door-latch rattled, and we heard the Doctor's heavy tread upon the stairs as he came down. My Father stood up as he entered the room; so did Fred. Minnie watched the Doctor's face as if she would read his thoughts. Grandmamma stayed upstairs to "put things to rights" again.

"Well, Weston," said the Doctor. "I don't think you need be unduly worried. Everything seems to be all right as far as the baby's concerned. I'll make up something for the legs," he went on as he folded his stethoscope, something like a speaking tube with a horn on the end of it, into his bag. "You start walking to Aldertown now, and I'll be there as soon as you are. I may as well make one or two more calls now I'm this way."

At that moment, Grandmamma came down.

"Who will you be having in, Grandma? Or shall I be having your services?"

"Me, sir? Oh no, sir! I can't do it, sir!"

"Can't do it? Well, you've done it for almost everyone else in Marshwood!"

"Ah, but not for me own daughter, sir. Nor wouldn't. I was going up to Ram's Valley to see Mrs. Bowles, if that suits you, sir."

"Oh yes, that suits me well. Mrs. Bowles and I know each other as well as you and I do. Don't have Mrs. Armstrong though, will you?"

"Oh no, sir," said Grandmamma. "I will do it myself if Mrs. Bowles can't come rather than have her. I don't think she's none too clean."

"I know dam' well she's not," said Doctor Thomas. "Remember what I told you, and . . . I *think* things will be all right. About a fortnight. You ready, Weston?"

"Yes, sir," said my Father, putting on his hat. He and the Doctor went off out together.

There followed a fortnight or more during which the household routine was completely upset. Everyone seemed to be on edge, and continually warning one another not to make a noise. There was much running up and down stairs, and

sometimes my Father came in smelling strongly of beer. I was allowed to go in and see Mother occasionally, which did little to alleviate my fears, for she seemed so sleepy and tired, and her voice seemed different, softer, somehow, and I sensed that she would be glad when I was gone again.

Then, one night, after we had gone to bed, I awoke suddenly to hear people creaking up and down the stairs. I heard Mother's bedroom door rattle slightly several times, and a woman's voice which I did not recognize. Then I heard Doctor Thomas's voice; chairs scraping, bumps on the floor; then, most terrible thing of all, I heard through the darkness of our room, above Tom's regular breathing, a groan, with the Doctor encouraging my Mother in low tones. Too terrified to move, I lay in the dark with my eyes staring open, listening, so that the beating of my heart seemed to shake the bed. Presently, Minnie came in to whisper:

"Are you boys asleep?"

I did not answer.

"Frankie, Tom, are you asleep?"

Again I did not answer, and Minnie said to someone behind her, "It's all right, they're asleep!" and went off out again.

I was awake early in the morning, before Tom, and hurriedly dressed myself. The house was completely silent. I looked at my Mother's bedroom door. It was closed. Everything behind it was silent.

I hurried downstairs, and went into the living-room. There was my Father, kneeling before the fireplace in an attitude of prayer. That, surely, and the silent house, could mean only one thing.

"Father!" I said. I felt ill, faint, sick. My Father looked round, startled.

"What's up, lad?" he said, and as he rose to his feet I saw a bundle of dried sticks before him on the hearth. My Father did not expect his sons to cry, but I could not help myself. But instead of telling me sternly to pull myself together, as he had done many times before, he showed me wondrous kindness.

"There, there my son," he said, as I felt the weight of his arm about my shoulders, "don't 'e take on like that, boy! There's nothing to worry about. 'Tis all over now, and everything's all right."

I told him between my sobs that the silent house and seeing him saying his prayers before the fireplace had made me think that Mother was dead.

"Saying my prayers?" said my Father. "No, no, boy. I wasn't saying my prayers! I was laying the fire. I thought Grandmamma and Minnie'd be best in bed for a while, seeing as they been up best part of the night. Come on, now, we'll gie 'em a surprise. You lay table and clear up a bit, and I'll get the fire a-goin'."

I shall never forget that morning. I saw my Father as I have never seen him before. I saw that behind his fearsome whiskers and his stern glance there lived a human being whose love for us all was greater than any of us, except my Mother, ever suspected. We were both relieved of a great anxiety; elated out of our habitual country slowness, although, I fear, our efforts at housework were not very good; the task came so awkwardly to us. But we did manage to make a reasonable cup of tea—a great luxury with tea the price it was in those days—and it was not until I was on my way up to Grandmamma's and Minnie's room with a cup in each hand, that I suddenly turned to ask my Father a question. He was watching me as he stood there contentedly before the blaze, his legs astride, hands clasped behind him. His dark face lit with a smile, and I suddenly saw how handsome he was. He answered my unspoken question.

"It's a boy," he said. . . .

Relieved though we might be at the passing of the danger which we had all feared, my Father was faced with the stern reality of another mouth to feed. It could hardly have occurred at a worse time. The average wage of a farm labourer, if he got

a full week in, was twelve to thirteen shillings a week. But four years had passed by with cold springs and rainy harvests; this, coupled with the new system of preserving foods imported from abroad, forced the farmers to stand off some of their men, and not all of them could afford to pay those who were kept on during wet times. Crops were left standing on the fields until they were well-nigh ruined; by the time they were ready to be thatched, bad weather had again set in, and because the crops were all but useless the farmers knocked my Father down from his usual prices, not caring very much whether the stacks were thatched or not.

Sometimes the farmers paid; sometimes they had to keep my Father waiting for months while they tried to raise money on other crops; sometimes they did not pay at all. Everything seemed to be in a state of upheaval. Whole families who had lived in our village for generations suddenly took themselves elsewhere in search of regular work; many left the land to go on the new railroads running down through Aldertown, for huge numbers of labourers were being employed there. However, the number of men who could be taken on for railway work was limited; they had to be of a particularly fine physique, for the work was gruelling, and those not likely to be suited for it would not be allowed in the gangs for fear of losses in the piece-rates. Those fortunates who could be taken on found themselves, as far as food was concerned, suddenly in a land of plenty; for the railways had high priority, and many of the workmen could eat fifteen pounds of beef in a week. They had no brief for mutton, and the bacon for which the countryman almost starved his family to bring up to weight during the later stages of fattening, these railway workers regarded as material merely to "fill up the cracks"!

Even my Father gave some consideration to Fred's suggestion that they should go on the Aldertown stretch until times were better; but it was only a passing thought, for he could not imagine himself doing anything much other than thatching and the trades allied thereto, as his Father and Grandfather had done before him. The hurdle-making industry

declined still further, not only in price but in quantity; for the farmers were curtailing the numbers in their flocks, and owing to the continued wet weather, the care of those they had was an endless fight against disease. There were dozens of village couples waiting to be married, but unable to do so because of the dearth of vacant cottages; and what there were—many were in a state of disrepair—had increased in rentage beyond the younger farm labourers' pockets.

Help came to us from an unexpected quarter. My Father, while Sexton, had not as yet taken over officially from Grandfather Weston the office of the Parish Clerk, although he did the work for the old man, making no claims on the few shillings a week which was the Parish Clerk's fee. In one of his bursts of rationalism, Grandpapa became aware of the situation, and handed over to my Father the savings he had made out of his fee; and after an interview with the Parish Council it was agreed that my Father should officially take over office from Grandpapa. So things were a tiny bit better, and we still managed. I may say that it was only the direst necessity which forced my Father to take over the old man's savings and office at all.

It was shortly after this that Grandfather Weston rounded off his magnanimous gesture by relieving my Father of any responsibilities towards him whatsoever. He had been increasingly vague for some weeks. He was quite harmless, but seemed to find the very effort of living beyond him. He would open his mouth to start a conversation and forget at once what he wanted to say; he seemed embarrassed by the chase after his truant thoughts, and as we did not know how to help him out, he would sit with an expression upon his face which Grandmamma called in her forthright way, "puggled". Then he would shuffle off out for fear of making a fool of himself before us, but would be back again a few moments later, a little more confident, only to be tormented by his own confusion all over again. In the end he hurried off outside as soon as he could, to sit on the seat under the yew hedge and to smoke his old clay. Sometimes Grandmamma went out after him

with the tobacco he may have left behind; sometimes when he came in she had to go out to fetch his tobacco tin and pipe, which she might find lying on the grass just where it had slipped from his grasp.

Poor old Grandpapa! We all had to smile about him, although we all felt so very sorry for him—all except Fred,



who thought he was a dotard. And then one morning Grandmamma went out to find him with his pipe and tobacco tin on his lap, his hands loosely clasped, leaning back in the corner of the seat as if asleep. Indeed, the old man was asleep—a sleep from which he would never wake.

My Father was torn between losing his aged Father—Grandpapa was ninety-seven—and relief at the removal of the burden of keeping him. I have never forgotten the death of my Grandfather. After he was taken in and composed in his

coffin in the best room, I went in to see him. I was struck with terror and awe at the lifeless, cold, suddenly youthful, yet still familiar appearance of the old man. But I was struck most of all by the fact that in death he seemed to have shrunk to incredible smallness.

Grandmamma, staunch old woman that she was, took the matter with calmness, although she must have known her own time could not be long delayed. One day, she said to my Father:

“Well, well, Bill. ’Tis a good thing to pass on if you can’t help about the place nowadays. ’Tis no use hanging on if you becomes a burden.”

My Father answered gruffly, “Don’t ’e talk like that, Grandma.”

“Ah,” she went on. “I knows how ’tis. I’ll help as much as I can while I got the strength to do it. I ain’t got nowheres else to go, Bill,” she said sorrowfully, “or I wouldn’t be such a plague to ’e.”

“I don’t want to hear nothing like that, Grandma,” said my Father firmly. “’Tis your home. You can’t help the times being bad. I might be like thee myself one o’ these here days, depend upon it. If we looks after you, somebody’ll look after we some day, please God. There’s no cause for you to talk like that, my old dear. If I could wish the old ’un back agen, I would.”

“I knows you would, boy,” she said. “But I wouldn’t.”

Poor old lady! She had meant to shew, in her way, that she was grateful to my Father for keeping her instead of sending her on to the dreaded “Big House”. But I believe that instead she had made my Father ashamed of himself for his sense of relief. So, to turn the subject, she asked:

“Did ye see the white owl, Father?”

“White owl? No, I never seed no white owl.”

“On the night as he died. I seen it. It flew off from the chimney-pot, across the best-room window and on out over the moor. I seen it go.”

“No, I never seen it,” said my Father. And then Grand-

mamma told the old tale which I never afterwards forgot, and believed until I was quite a young man.

"'Tis said as when an old countryman dies, his ghost stays about the house until nightfall, and a white owl picks it up and bears it away to wherever it's got to go. 'Course, I don't exactly believe in such tales, but there, it were funny as I seen the owl on the very night, wasn't it?"

"I never seen no white owl," said my Father. . . .

The months rolled by after my youngest brother Stanley's birth, but Mother's legs did not improve. She could drag herself no further than the back door, and had to be pushed up the narrow stairs to bed at nights by Grandmamma and Minnie, if the men were not there to help her. Doctor Thomas did all he could, but when my Father growled impatiently at him that his medicine didn't seem to be doing much good, the sharp-tempered old Doctor replied, equally impatiently:

"Look here, Weston, I'm not a magician. You may as well know that there are some things a Doctor can't get the handle of. We can alleviate a lot of suffering, but we can't always cure. You may as well know that your wife is going to be a sufferer from her complaint to the end of her days. Don't you tell me that my medicine isn't doing any good! If she hadn't taken it she would have been a damned sight worse than she is!"

So saying, the old man, muttering something about "impertinence", stumped off up the garden path, slammed the gate, and mounting his black mare rode off with never a glance behind him.

But neither Mother nor my Father were satisfied with Doctor Thomas's treatment, despite the fact that he had arranged with my Father to pay off the sick debts by thatching his house, and then insisted that my Father should accept his full fee on completion of the job. So my Father sometimes forgot to walk to Aldertown for the medicine, because when he

did so, my Mother seldom bothered to take it; and the natural result was that her legs became even worse.

Then an odd thing happened. A queer old lady came to our back door one morning, dressed in brightly coloured clothes, bonnetless, with tousled head, large gold ear-rings, and music in her voice. Over her arm she carried a wickerwork basket, filled with all sorts of brightly coloured articles which fascinated: combs, bits of glass jewellery, squares of pretty material with pictures on them, buttons, coloured skeins of cotton, bright new pegs, and a host of other things. It was Mother who answered the door, and who told the gipsy in that tired voice of hers that she wanted for nothing; though her eyes were alight with interest as the gipsy temptingly displayed her wares and persuaded to buy. Finally, the gipsy said:

"Ah well, 'tis bad times for us all, my love, and I knows how it is. Sure ye won't have just a few pegs? No? Only a penny a dozen! Here, I'll gie thee nine for a halfpenny . . . excuse me, my dear, but are ye weak on your legs? I only ask to help ye, my dear; I might be able to tell you of something that'll do it some good."

"I don't think much can be done, thank you," said my Mother. "I been under the Doctor some time now."

"And the Doctor is a very wise man, my dear, and all respects to him. But he don't know everything. *We* don't have no doctors, my dear, and there's little amiss wi' us folk. What is it then, is it the dropsy?"

"I don't know. I suppose it is. It don't get any better."

"Here," said the old woman, diving into the bottom of her basket and producing a bunch of dried withered roots tied with a string. "Take this. I'll give it to you. I won't take your penny. Put your kittle on and bile it, put this in the biggest jug you've got, and when the kittle biles, pour the water on the roots. Put a cloth on the top of the jug to keep the steam in until it's cold. Then you take a wineglassful three times a day."

"Wull it cure me?" asked my Mother as she took the roots.

"'Twon't cure thee, love," said the gipsy kindly, "but every time the swelling comes up it'll send it down again."

"Thank ye," said my Mother. "I'll pay the penny."

"No, no, don't worry about that," said the old gipsy, but at the sight of the penny she took it just the same. "God bless thee. I may not pass this way for some time, so I'll tell thee what the herb is. 'Tis the yarrow."

So, all unknown to my Father who would have violently opposed the idea for fear of Mother poisoning herself, the three women brewed the concoction, and after a few days my Mother's legs went down. Within a month they were back to their normal size, and old Doctor Thomas congratulated himself upon the success of his treatment.



CHAPTER FOUR

STILL there was no improvement in the way of life on the countryside. The rainy harvests continued, and the following winter was one of the coldest and bitterest we had ever known. My Father and Fred kept at it, like other workers on the land, through all but the rainiest of days. The harvest was the poorest within my Father's memory; many of the farmers dispensed with all the hands they could, and poverty, near starvation, became commonplace, even in our village. Those fortunate enough to keep their jobs had to work any hours demanded, although the wages were down to ten shillings per week. It seems a fantastic sum when it is compared with agricultural wages of today, but it was not entirely impossible; a man and his family could, with scrupulous management, live, and even enjoy life on these wages.

I cannot but comment upon the great difference between the way in which we enjoyed ourselves in those days and the way we do so today. We had time-honoured customs, into which we threw everything we had, just as we gave everything to our work, no matter what the reward may be. Everyone had some contribution to make to the festivities; sometimes we were weeks, perhaps months, preparing and rehearsing for the great day.

The bellringers, however, had an immemorial custom, now, alas, gone the way of so much that was good and English in our Fathers' and Grandfathers' time, which was peculiarly their own. My Father, being bellmaster, was the organizer of the Christmas ring, which always took place on Christmas Eve; and for six weeks before this great event it was the custom for the team to practise on Wednesday nights. After the men had got home from their work, had their dinners, washed and made themselves presentable—for the Rev. Seaman would quite likely be in attendance—the bells sent out their song from the darkened hilltop, so that the roosting rooks cawed and fluttered again in the elms, and the pheasants cackled in panic in the copses. Those who knew the bells would listen behind the curtained windows through which the dim lights from the oil lamps shone, and would know at once and comment upon the mistakes made, and the improvements in the changes as the great day drew near. The practice over, the ringers would troop down to my Father's house, and there might be further practice on the handbells, or the whole evening's work would be done again by word of mouth far into the night.

On Christmas Eve, as soon as they could do so, the bellringers and a few privileged friends assembled at the gates of Marshwood Church. All were men, most of them dressed in dark clothes as if going to a funeral, wearing winged collars with enormous knots in their cravats, and the inevitable highly polished tip-nailed boots which they wore on Sundays. The elder men, heavily moustached, used bowler hats of a squarish design, but the boys and youths went in for cloth caps.

We reckoned to reach the Priory at Shirestream proper shortly before sunset; a six-mile journey on what was, fortunately, on this my first time with the team as a guest, a cold clear evening. My Father, grave and dignified, conscious of his position, walked ahead with Fred and the older men; Carrier John Ruse, broad and burly, but a little unsure on his feet because of his rheumatically ankles; Mark Vincent, tall, bearded and powerful; his two sons and the four Cheriton brothers following behind. Tom and myself, being juniors, kept to the rear.

The older men carried on the conversation, the younger ones only joining in when they were addressed; and Tom and I kept close to hear about the Christmas before, and the Christmases before that; what fun my Father and his colleagues had had donkey's years ago, but we did not like their reference to the modern generation which, they agreed, did not seem to have the "guts about 'em" to do the things *they* did as young men. I could not but reflect that had we done half of the things the older men had done, we would have felt the weight of my Father's belt about our backsides, and sharp about it, too! Then there was talk of what old Master Cheriton could tell of the old days, and what Mark Vincent, a grey sixty-five, could remember of them; then on to the various employers about the district, the good ones and the bad ones, and finally, the inevitable topic—work: thatching from my Father, carpentering from Mark Vincent, the carrier's business from John Ruse, and broom- and brick-making from the Cheriton brothers.

By the time we reached the old Priory, the fields were red in the light from the setting sun. Above us towered the dome, and all along the grounds were the broken ruins of massive walls which at one time, surely, must have enclosed vineyards. A hollow yew tree of fantastic girth stood near to the entrance gate, and about the grounds were dotted other yews, grotesque and gnarled, reminding me of the pictures I had once seen of the great stones of Stonehenge.

We all waited as my Father went inside with Carrier Ruse

and old Master Vincent to light the oil lamps. Presently my Father looked out again to tell us to go in, warning Tom and myself to behave ourselves and not to get in the way. The party of ringers seemed dwarfed by the loftiness of the belfry; we had no light in those days strong enough to reach into those heights, so that the ceiling was lost in darkness, and the long bellropes seemed to be suspended from nothing at all. Five of the ringers were already steadying the ropes, waiting for my Father's signal; then, as he gave it, the red-and-white hand-grips bobbed between the men's hands, the rope ends snaking for a moment upon the stone floor; and to the accompaniment of a creaking and rumbling away up there in the darkness, the Christmas peal of old Shirestream Priory rang out over the dusky countryside.

From here, we walked in the gathering darkness right through Ram's Valley, pausing at the George and Dragon, where we were somewhat surlily greeted; for being from another village we were not freely accepted as we would be at our own inn. Then, as we left the inn, on our way to Woolvertown Church, we met the five Woolvertown ringers, led by Master Pearce, another thatcher and Sexton. We passed the ancient smithy which served Woolvertown Estate, and I remember how fascinated Tom and I were by the cartwheels, wagon parts, iron rods, anvils, iron tyres and the huge heap of cast-off horseshoes almost obtruding upon the road. Huddled like lowly beggars at the wrought-iron gates of the Estate were groups of low thatched cottages, doors open to the lamplit interiors, and men and women in their porches to watch us go by and wish the ringers a happy Xmas. But no one came to the door of the lodge, for the lodge-keeper kept himself apart from the rest of the hamlet, as befitted his position.

We turned left towards Highcastle, our eventual goal, where several teams met to ring on Christmas Eve. Under the dark oak avenue we walked, we lads becoming a little weary now, but the rest of the company marching cheerfully along with good ale inside them to help them on their way. Another entrance to the Estate was passed, with oaks and elms and

beeches leading up to rows of brilliant windows of the Hall at the top; and then we climbed the hill close by the Hall, upon which stands the red-bricked Woolvertown Church with its lofty square tower and ornamented corners.

While the men stooped to file into the small belfry door, Tom and I were curious to see inside the church. Quite a number of villagers were in attendance at a Christmas Eve service. I remember so clearly the subdued quietness and holy peace of this little scene, with the light from the altar candles shining into the brass Communion rails, and upon the priest's surplice; and how the quiet candlelight poured deep bottomless blues into the stained-glass windows, so that the red contrasted like coagulated blood. We had intruded: we slipped away again as Woolvertown's bells began to ring, so that the rooks set up a swearing and quarrelling in the nearby elms.

This was the last ring before we came to Highcastle. After having crossed the moonlit downs, we entered upon the long slopes leading down to Highcastle, with its narrow twisting street and its tall gaunt cottages hugging the broken strips of pavement. There stood the hundreds of years old village stores on the right, the last-minute shoppers still busy in its dimly lit interior. There were other quaint little shops wedged like large boxes under overhanging lintels, tucked between living-rooms and the next alleyway. The school was half-hidden away on the right behind an inn, and before us, on the opposite side of the square, with its old fountain in the centre then used for the horses, was the great, squat ugliness of Highcastle Church, with a bed-bug for a weathervane upon its bulky tower.

The last ring was a long one: Marshwood ringers took their turn, and with a notable display of unbiased wisdom my Father adjudged that they were the best of the lot! And then came the moment we were all waiting for: the meeting of the ringers from all the neighbouring villages at the famous Goose Inn.

Never were there such celebrations throughout the year as occurred at the Goose Inn at Christmas time. Never were there such arguments, oft-times near to blows, about bells: their

types, weights, mechanism, changes; and I remember how astounded we were to find that there were indeed ringers not known to us who would dare to dispute my Father's word upon these matters—a course of behaviour which, I fear, my Father took very ill indeed! Never were there such bettings and braggings as each team ridiculed the other; and there were games of skittles for the young, dominoes for the old, and folk and countryside songs of which no one knew the origins and in which everyone joined, bellowing out the choruses like a herd of excited bulls.

Almost every married man had intended to be home early so that he could be with his family during Christmas Eve; but not one of them departed until the inn closed just after midnight. So it was a tired, perhaps slightly tipsy pair of lads who trudged happily the five miles back to Marshwood with the team, arriving at my Father's house at a quarter past one, instead of the half past ten originally intended. Naturally enough my Mother, who was used to it by this time and knew what to expect, had gone on to bed; so had Grandmamma and Minnie, but they had left the lamp low, and had left on the table a bottle of alderberry wine and glasses. Mark Vincent and his two sons went on to their homes; but the rest of the company settled themselves about the fireplace upon the available chairs and upon the floor, and then began the stories which made my flesh creep, which the ringers told in my Father's living-room year after year; tales of the haunted house at Rheuben's Close, the Witch who lived there not so very long ago, and the night when the tenor bell began to speak up at the church, and when my Grandfather went to investigate he found the rope swinging up and down, up and down, the bell still tolling, *but nobody there. . . .*

According to my Father, my brother Fred was getting a "sight too big for his boots".

"I don't know what I'm going to do with him," he growled

to Mother. "How can you teach anybody anything when they thinks they knows it afore they starts?"

"'Tis his age," said my Mother soothingly. "He'll get the better of it."

"Ah," said my Father, as he lit a spill for his pipe from the fire, "I dare say he will. Though he do anger I betimes, I can tell thee, Mother. Never seems satisfied."

He eased himself into his wooden armchair and looked through a cloud of tobacco smoke towards my Mother, busy with her eternal mending and patching.

"He talks too much to that there Walter Nash and his lot. I seen him up the road a-listenin' to 'em, stirring up trouble outside the Malt House. He'll be getting us all into trouble afore he's finished."

"Oh, I don't think Fred would do that," said my Mother without looking up. My Father watched her for a while, and then broke into one of his rare smiles.

"No, I don't think he would, either," he said.

But my Father did not know just how much Fred was being influenced by the Unionists in our village. Fred was indeed a dissatisfied sort of person by nature; always, it seemed, ready to listen to the bad about people. He was secretive and surly, characteristics which irked my Father almost beyond bearing. My Father did not know that Tom and I had seen Fred leave Walter Nash's house on more than one occasion; leaving with the guilty air of a conspirator, as did the half-dozen or so other men who came singly, or in twos, afraid of being spied upon lest it cost them their means of earning a living. I imagine their discomfort would have been great indeed had they known their movements were observed by two bright-eyed, spying lads, who missed nothing as they watched from behind the opposite hedge; but neither of us dared to tell of what we had seen, so wrapped up were early Union days with mystery and hasty words. Let the grown-ups anger themselves as much as they liked; while we verily believed that Walter Nash and his like were, as our Rector had said, "devil's agents working against the established order of things as ordained by

God"—which accounted for the curious awe with which we regarded the comings and goings to his house—we knew better than to be drawn into anything which might haul us up as witnesses before the magistrates.

But while on one occasion we were seated upon the thatch-bundles for lunch—for Tom and I had sometimes to work on Saturdays, although we did not as yet, like so many other lads, go to work on the land during busy seasons instead of going to school—Fred got into an argument with my Father. He was saying that agricultural wages were not enough.

"If you pays 'em more wages," said my Father, "they won't work so hard. They'd only spend the extry up at the Malt. A good man don't lose his job in bad times."

"They ain't all bad as got no jobs," said Fred. "'Tis my belief that there's too many people in the country. The Unions is helping them as wants to leave. And it ain't all the men as is doing it, Father. Some o' the gentry is helping the Unions, so they says."

"Well, they'll have to work wherever they go."

"Yes, but there will be work there for 'em; that's more than there is here."

"Good men don't lose their jobs," said my Father again, and he said it as if that was the end of the matter. He had finished his lunch, and was filling his pipe preparatory to enjoying his ten minutes' "baccy-time". He looked annoyed as Fred continued to pursue the subject.

"Do you know what I heard, Father?" said Fred. "I heard as there was a time when every man in the country had his own bit o' land, and no one else had no rights over it. They could get all they wanted off their bit o' land in them days, but it was took away from 'em and give over to such folks as lives up at Woolvertown Hall; and the folk as had been free until then had to go and work for masters. But the masters didn't want 'em all, so there was tramps and vagabonds all over the country, just like there is today; and it ben like it ever since. I heard tell, Father, as it ain't all the fault of the

labourers; some on it is the fault o' the Big Pots. Fact, I heard tell as 'tis *all* the fault o' the Big Pots."

"Where did ye hear all this then?" said my Father.

Fred remained silent.

"Well," said my Father angrily, "I've no need to ask that, I suppose. Now you listen to me, Fred. Them Unions won't do you nor me no good. We've got to work, and there's nobody to tell us to go, unless we tell ourselves. We got to stick to it, and say nothing. It ain't for the likes of us to go gettin' ourselves mixed up wi' folk as is making a bad thing worse. You cain't *make* the masters do things as they ain't a mind to. You keep away from that Union lot, Fred, or else you will be out o' work; and not only you, but your Father and the whole family; thatching, church work and all the lot. Do your job like a good man and be thankful you've got one; not go gettin' yourself upset over them as ain't."

My Father rose to his feet and walked slowly round the rick, studying the roof to see where it had to be made up, and calculating out his courses. When he came back, he stood before Fred in a different mood. It seemed that he wanted to explain something, but could not find the words.

"Fred," he said at length, "I ain't what you calls a scholar, and no more ain't you. That what you was talking about must have happened a long time ago. But things ain't been bad, boy, not all the time, ever since. When I was a young man, pretty near everybody in the village used to keep a cow, or if they hadn't got a cow they'd keep goats. They'd have geese and more pigs than we can keep now, and fowls and that. We had the right to graze up on the moor there; but that was afore the moor was taken over by Church Farm. A man didn't have to work reg'lar for a master in them days, nor didn't want to, neither; leastways, not round these parts. He'd sell his own stuff over at Highcastle Market; and your Grandmother used to make baskets for the Cheritons. There was always a bit o' money to be had, one way and another.

"Aye," said my Father reflectively, "so there was. You can see that by what's in our best room as your Grandfather has

left us. But I don't know, folk seemed to be happier then, you know. There wasn't all this yer upset and people walking about as don't want to work. Why, a man didn't have to work at all for a master if he'd work hard enough for hisself. I can't see why some on 'em as is out of work can't help themselves a bit more than they do."

"Well, you said yourself, Father, as they took the moor away from the village. Folk had to work for a master then!"

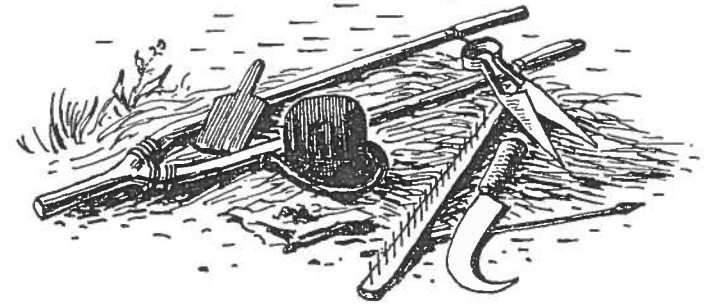
"Supposin' they did!" exclaimed my Father impatiently. "If they worked well, they got paid well! Times been bad a year or two now, but the farmers don't sack their good men, boy, 'pend upon it, they don't!"

He walked away again, puffing his pipe, and then came back.

"Look here, boy," he said. "I don't know the ins and outs of all this here upset and no more do thee. Times is bad betimes on the land, then they comes good again, then they'm bad again. That's how things are on the land, boy. When you been at it as long as me you'll do the same as me; that is, when times is bad, hold on to everything until the good times comes round again. You know, son, I ain't doing it all for myself. *You're* the next Weston. You'll take over the round on your own one day, and then *you'll* be Sexton and Parish Clerk. They're good enough jobs when times are better, and a man's his own master at it, too. I wants you to stop grumblin', Fred, and stick it out wi' me while times is like they are. You'll be glad you did, one day, 'pend upon it."

Young as I was, I knew at once what was at the back of my Father's mind. He was proud, tremendously proud, of his craft, this craft which has been practised by the Westons for so long that even today no male Weston is unable to thatch house or rick. That it was a humble craft made no difference; my Father was one of those whose pride was in humble things. He had a similar loyalty to the Church and Parish offices. He believed it to be his duty to train the next Weston in the ways of our family traditions, just as countless Weston

sons had been trained by their fathers before him. He was a man of character, and he was trying to infuse something of what he felt into his eldest son who, by our tradition, was the one to carry on the work. But I fear that he did not realize what sort of initiate he had for such sentiments in my brother Fred.





CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN I was about ten, I remember one autumn morning when my Father said to me:

"I wants you to come and turn the grindstone for me, boy."

The grindstone, a huge yellow sandstone half as large as a cartwheel, stood in our tiny pebbled backyard close to the ditch and under the witheys. It was used far more often than any of us lads liked; my Father kept his tools razor-sharp; indeed, he was not satisfied until he could shave the hair off his forearm with the keen blade. When he wanted to "polish 'em up a bit", as he said, he always chose Tom or myself; for then he put no more weight upon them than he could with his thumb, although this seemed an intolerable brake for a small lad turning the great stone; but when he thought there was a "bit of a shoulder on 'em"—that is when the grinding edge had been worn back—he had to ask Fred. For then he put his whole weight and strength into the grinding to make a new edge; and I have seen Fred in his shirt-sleeves, the sweat pouring from him as he turned, although the fields might be white with frost.

However, there were compensations. Water had to be

poured on while the stone was in motion, and it collected the grit into long wet lines, making moving patterns on the stone which always fascinated me; some in long, thin grey lines, some in quivering diamonds where the water sought to run down the stone but was arrested by its upward motion. One unpleasant little illusion always set my teeth on edge. His blades were so thin that when he pressed them with his thumb upon the moving stone I always felt that perhaps a piece of his flesh might be over the edge and the stone grinding his skin away. But he would carry on, his thumb growing whiter and whiter with the pressure until it ached, and then he would say, "Ah, pipe o' baccy time, boy," which I was always very glad to hear, because by then my arms were aching, too. There was no stopping until my Father said the word. That would have been dangerous; the blade might slip off and he might cut his hand. And to cut Father's hand through carelessness would bring retribution too fearful to contemplate!

It was during one of these pauses, after my Father had filled his pipe and lit it, that he said, half to me, half to himself:

"Well, boy, you'll be going to school by yourself after next week. Tom's a-coming thatching 'long with us."

He looked at me and went on:

"And if things don't get no better next year, you'll 'ave to come, too."

"Can't I come now, Father?" I said eagerly. "I can draw straw better'n Tom."

"Best not let him hear y' say that," said my Father with a smile. "He'll punch your earhole for thee! Your sister's goin' in service next week, too."

"I didn't think you wanted Minnie to leave home, Father." My Father looked serious.

"Can't say as I do much, boy," he said. "But there 'tis. Your Mother's a lot better now and she got Grandma. 'T'll be one less mouth to feed, and we shan't have the expense o' clothes for her. She bain't goin' far though. On'y up to Ash House. I don't want her to go too far in case your Mother gets took bad again."

"Ain't she goin' to no 'petty-place', then?" I asked.

"No. I took the bull by the horns, lad, and I stopped the butler as he come down in his trap. I spoke a bit respectful to 'n like, and asked him. He wanted to know if she'd been anywheres else, and I told him 'no', but I said what a good lass she were at home and how she helped with everything. He didn't seem to like it much at first; he said as he usually took 'em on as had had a bit o' training, but he'd ask the mistress. And the mistress said she wanted a tweeny or summat, and the Rector spoke for her, so she's took on."

"She'm lucky then, Father, to go straight to Ash House."

"Ah," said my Father. "I don't zackly like doin' it to her, but she'll be better looked arter than we can afford. She'll get good food and clothes; maybe send some clothes home to your Mother. I tried Ash House first so's not to mess the poor girl about wi' a petty-place: she ought to get on well, goin' straight in wi' the gentry. I don't think I done 'er a bad turn at all, dost thee?"

"No, I don't, Father," I said. Our Minnie being taken straight on in a big house! It showed she was something out of the ordinary. My Father showed his pride.

"Ah, she's a damn' good girl and they knows it," he said.

He looked keenly along the edge of one of his blades. Something amused him as he did so, for he began to smile.

"'Course," he said, "your Grandma didn't want to be put out like when Minnie got took on. She ben and got *herself* a job."

"Oh!" I said in wonderment. "Whatever can that be, Father?"

"She went off up to see the Rector and the committee be goin' to pay 'er a shillin' a month to dust the pews!" said my Father. We both had a quiet chuckle over this.

"And what about Fred?" I asked.

"What about 'n, boy?"

"Is he gettin' a spare-time job, too?"

"There's no spare time for Fred, lad," said my Father, more amused than ever. "He's learnin' a trade. I reckon 'e's

the luckiest o' the lot on us. More's the pity as he caint seem to see it, though."

He poured some more water over the stone while I started turning. In the act of placing his blade at the correct angle, he lifted it off suddenly so that the crank-handle whirled in my hands. I glanced up, half fearful I had done something wrong, but saw him in an attitude of listening. He signalled me to stop.

A weird, shapeless sound echoed in the yellow sky, behind the spears and points of the trees along the top of the moor. It was repeated as we listened, and then came the unmistakable noise of hounds.

"'Tis the Hunt," said my Father with a proprietary air. He called in at the door:

"Mother, Grandma, come and see the 'ounds. They'll be over the moor in a minute if the fox comes this way."

I had heard from my Father all about the famous pack of foxhounds kept over at Shirestream St. Johnas by the Master of Grape House. Grape House was about eight miles away as the crow flies, straight over the topmost knoll of the moor from where we stood. My Father told me that many years ago, a great King of England, whose amiable pastime was to chop off the heads of his wives, visited Grape House, together with one of the wives whose head was removed. I was not sure at the time if the King's wife came there without her head, or had it chopped off at Grape House, or had it chopped off afterwards.

He told me, too, of an English Queen who met the Knights and Lords of France at Grape House, and how all the surrounding villagers, including those of Marshwood, had to help accommodate the visitors with their beds, and the services in the house of those who were required. But that, of course, was before Great-Grandfather Weston's time even, for no knight or lord would deign to sleep on the narrow sparse beds the country people generally used when I was a lad!

The hounds suddenly poured along the crest of the moor and down upon our side. There was Reynard, full gallop and apparently fresh, making for Marsh Wood three or four

hundred yards ahead of them. Presently, a magnificent figure on horseback came over the crest, dressed in the distinctive green of the Grape House Hunt; black cap and white breeches. Soon, other gentlemen similarly attired crossed the crest, and not long afterwards three or four gentlemen in black, with white breeches and top hats. Then, bit by bit came the whole field: ladies in skirts down to their ankles, sitting side-saddle and wearing bowler-shaped hats, and then again other gentlemen in more colourful array, one of whom pushed ahead of the others and, raising a horn to his lips, again sent that thrilling sound echoing weirdly over our valley.

We all watched, spellbound, as the hunt stretched away over the moor and disappeared behind the copse. We watched for it to come out the other side, but it did not do so. The hounds had become silent; the horn sounded occasionally, while a few stragglers rode the crest and galloped behind the copse, seeming also to stay there. Later, two men in the hunt colours rode round each end of the wood, and a couple of hounds broke through, then went back in again.

"Lucky if they finds him now," said my Father. "They always loses him in Marsh Wood."

It was at that moment that we saw a slim shape speeding silently along by our hedge. My Father threw his hat into the air and shouted "Halloo! Halloo!", my Mother joining in and even Grandma adding her shrill cracked voice. Mr. Reynard did not seem at all put out; he continued confidently upon his way, his coat glowing red in the winter sunshine, his black limbs and ears showing up plainly, and his bushy tail held clear of the ground behind him, with a beautiful white wedge in the tip of it. Away he went, down the hill, and away from the hunt, while the hunters still stayed behind the copse looking for him; and I hoped, how I hoped, he would get away!

It was some few moments before anyone heard the clamour my Father was making. Then we heard the sound of hooves galloping down the church path, the sound becoming a muffled drum-roll as the rider came into the field and up along our

hedge. A gentleman wearing a small black cap and side-whiskers about a flushed, arrogant countenance, drew in his horse by our little gate which led onto the moor.

My heart beat fast. Here, face to face with us, was a Gentleman; one of those splendidly great and mysterious people who lived at the end of long drives away from our village, in wonderful houses with dozens of rooms, and who did nothing, so I thought, but eat rich foods and drink wines and hold fairy-tale balls all through the night; whose ladies were all beautiful, gracious and religious; whose gentlemen were beings of another world, admirable, learned, but to be feared. People who would, if you gave them their proper respects, reward you with a sixpenny piece or perhaps a whole shining shilling; who gave blankets to the destitute or some other good thing they would never have been able to afford in their homes themselves. People who gave us our jobs, and who could always be relied upon to help with village functions; who paid for the upkeep of God's House as the brass plates on the walls told all who read; who gave prizes for religious knowledge at school, and helped with the village charities.

"Which way? Which way?" shouted the magnificent one.

"Down towards Heath End, I'll be bound, Colonel Cobb, sir!" said my Father excitedly.

"Good!" said the colonel; and as he rode off: "Be over at Manytunes about half past ten Saturday morning, Weston. I want some of your hurdles and some thatching done to the barns!"

"Thank 'e, sir, yes, sir, Colonel, sir, I'll be there!" shouted my Father, but his voice was drowned by the clamour of approaching hounds, and the tall horsemen and horsewomen who thundered by one after another, so that the very ground trembled with the noise of them, like a ragged roll of thunder.

"There!" said my Father as the tumult subsided. "Did ye hear that, boy? We got to see the Colonel over at Manytunes on Sat'day morning!"

"Can I come, Father?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know," he said, as he took up his blade again

and I began turning. "It all depends on the way you works this morning!"

With the thought of a visit to the old Manor of Manytunes before me, I turned with such will that my Father smilingly told me to "Steady it up a bit, boy; steady it up a bit! Hemmed if I'll have any hook left!"

Before our call at Manytunes, a diversion occurred in Marshwood involving Walter Nash. Nash worked for a Farmer Bright over in Ram's Valley, and was one of the pioneers of rural Trade Unionism in our area. I find it incredible, even as I write, that Nash could thus have made his mark upon the community of those days. I remember him as a tragically spineless creature, dissatisfied, with a grudge against authority, who for a long time practised his new cult subversively, even when taxed, disclaiming his association with it. He was regarded as a "slack twisted sort of a chap" by practically everyone; distrusted because he was suspected of being mixed up with the "troublemakers" as they were called in those days, and regarded with contempt because he would never stand by his convictions when tackled about them by his more sturdy colleagues. Knowing him as they all did, it was with some astonishment, not to say anger, that the askanced workmen of Marshwood heard that there was to be a public meeting for all working men at the stile by Ash House, leading towards Rheuben's Close, and that it was to be addressed by a Union organizer, the speaker in support being—Walter Nash. Everyone said that Nash had "gone too far by half" this time, and there were gloomy prophecies regarding his possible fate before the magistrates, and that he would lose his job, that was certain. It was said, too, that the Unionists were going to ask for another shilling a week, and Saturday afternoons off.

"Silly girt fool!" growled my Father. "You think of the likes of Walt Nash trying to beat the farmers! It won't hurt they if *all* the Union men stops work; why, there ain't no more'n upp'ards of a couple o' dozen on 'em all told in the whole

parish! 'Sides, I can see the farmers givin' on 'en a hextry shilling a week for knocking off at one o'clock on a Saturday afternoon! It don't make sense!"

My father asserted his intention of keeping away from the meeting.

"I got no time for the feller," he said. "Even if he is in the ringing team. But I don't want to stand there and see 'un make a hemmed fool of hisself as I knows on. 'Sides, it won't do for we to go gettin' mixed up wi' it."

However, many others were not of like mind. I was as curious as any to see what sort of a figure he would cut, and, after I had come home from school and had my tea, I decided to risk my Father's displeasure, and made my way up to the stile to see the fun.

I recall the scene very clearly. The collection of farming men were silent before the Union speaker, and what he said I do not remember. But I saw Nash, timid supporter as we all expected he would be, pale, and nervously waiting his cue to take his place on the step of the stile after the speaker had finished. It was almost as if he was trying to hide himself. Constantly he stroked his straggling moustache with his thin hands, his eyes unable to meet the stolid barrier of scornful rural faces. There was many a smirk and a covert wink as Nash mounted the stile when the speaker had done.

The poor fellow started his speech with desperate energy. So rapidly did he talk, that we could not clearly hear what he was saying; and he was soon interrupted by ribald shouts of:

"Steady it up a bit then, Walt. You got all the rest o' the evenin'!"

"Get down for Lord A'mighty's sake, Walt! You knows as much about it as I do—and that's nutthen at all!"

"Git off home, man, afore you gets yourself into more trouble!"

He stood there, trembling and irresolute, waiting for the tumult to subside. Suddenly I heard the deep tones of someone I knew, from the outside of the little crowd. It was my Father, who had come after all.

"Now then, my lads, now then! Fair play there! Give 'un a chance; I ain't got much time for 'un, but if he wants to say summat to us, let 'un speak: that's what I say."

"'Er don't look to me as if her *wants* to say anything now, Master Weston!"

Walter steadied himself by stepping down to the lower rung and placing his hand on the post of the stile. I thought for a moment he was going to cry. A wave of sympathy for the poor fellow ran through the bystanders, and there was silence.

"Now," said my Father, not unkindly, "get it off yer chest, Walt."

And then began one of the most astonishing transformations I have ever seen. It was as if some Spirit, impatient of this wretched man's attempts to compose himself, seized and held him and spoke through his mouth; for the voice was not the whining, complaining voice of the Walter Nash we all knew so well. It was clear, earnest, high-pitched, like a child's. Its effect was electric; everyone was at once all attention.

"Friends," he said, "it do say in the Good Book somewheres or other as all men is equal in the sight o' the Lord. But they ain't all equal in the sight of each other, my friends. When you goes up to church there of a Sunday mornin', you'll see whether they be equal in the sight o' God or not!"

He gripped the post with a firmness which made his whole frame tremble, and with a passion which none would ever have associated with him, he said:

"The gentry be all up in the pews wi' the doors on 'em, wi' cushions for their backsides and cushions so's they won't hurt their precious knees! Pews as they've a-paid the parson for! Mark my words, friends, there ain't no pews as you can pay for in Heaven! If Jesus Christ was to come to our church next Sunday mornin', Bill Weston there'd have to show him to the back seats, on account of Him not bein' dressed smart enough to sit wi' they as can afford to be religious in the front! Anyways, He could not get up to the front because he wouldn't ha' paid for his pew!"

Like some others, I glanced round at my Father, to see

him staring at Walter with angry astonishment. Then again Walter spoke, but more quietly:

"I do think as all men *is* equal, friends. Jesus Christ said so, and so I do believe. If they be good enough to be treated as equals by Jesus Christ, and if God who makes 'em thinks they're equal, what right"—again raising his voice—"what right has any man, partic'lar a man as calls himself religious, to treat his fellows as if they ain't? Answer me that!"

No one, not even my Father, ventured to answer that, but there was a mumbled remark among the crowd:

"By gum, Walter, you ought t'a ben a parson theeself!"

"Now," went on Walter, "you all knows what we gets a week—ten shillings. It ain't so bad for some on us, wi' the gals out in service and the boys still at home and working too. But have you ever thought o' what's goin' to become of us when the childern grows up and has their own places to look to? Wi' ourselves growin' old, earnin' less, never able to save ar ha'pence, until we be too old to work any more? Well, I'll tell thee!

"You'll go," he said bitterly, "to a place where all men and women *is* equal, and no mistake—the Big House! You won't be lonely there, friends. Three-quarters of your mates as has worked in the village 'll be there to cheer thee up. An' you'll need cheerin' up, because they'll put your wives on the wimmins' side; and I dessay you'll enjoy that after living as man and wife forty or fifty years! But there," he went on, more bitterly than before, "it won't matter! *You* don't count! Jesus said as all men was equals in the sight o' the Lord. But we ain't men, friends! Only the masters and the gentry is men; that's why they treats each other as equals and you and me as nothing!

"They do say, friends, as England is the greatest country in the world. Great for who? The likes o' you and me? A starving man in a great country is just as hungry as a starving man in a poor one! It makes no odds, friends. It might be great to they as can afford it, but to you and me and all the working folks in it, from the factories to the men and women on the land, England is just one thing: a great big Hell!"

"I bain't goin' to 'ave that 'ere!" came an outraged roar from one of the bystanders.

"You — you!" came another roar. You allus been a slack-twisted troublemaker, afraid of a good day's work!"

"Chuck un in the pond, lads!" said another. "Aye, and that there furriner along wid 'un!"

"Nobody ain't going to chuck 'e in the pond!" came another voice.

"You listen to what he says!" said another. "Shoutin' and hollerin' wun't help. Listen to what he says!"

"Aye!" came the stentorian voice of my Father grimly. "Listen to what he says!" And as order was restored: "Well, Walter, supposin' as all you says is right—and I ain't sayin' as 'tis—but *supposin'* it is? What is there *we* can do about it? Noth'n!"

"Noth'n!" said Walter intensely. "There *is* summat as we can do about it, if only we had sense enough to see it! Look, where do the masters get all their money from? Why, from the labour o' the likes o' you and me! So what can we do? Why, stop workin' for 'em; not just a few here and there, but *all* on us; *all* on us at once!"

"And what do we live on when we'm stopped work then, fool?" asked another voice.

"Jine the Union, lads!" urged Walter. "They pays you for the time you stops work!"

"Pays you for stoppin' workin'?" yelled another. "No wonder *you* belong to it then, you lazy good-for-nothing —!"

"Get down off that stile afore you gets knocked down!"

"Get down, Walter! You'll be in trouble enough over this as 'tis, wi'out draggin' us all into it!"

"Chuck 'un in the pond—'e and that there feller along wid 'un!" came the voice again, and a few others took up the cry—"Duck 'em in the pond!"

My Father and Fred and one or two others barred the way to those who would lay violent hands on Walter Nash. Delivered of his message, he had become once again the spineless creature which we all knew; he shrank back from the tumult in terror.

His companion, used to this stuff, made as if to mount the stile again; but my Father pushed him down.

"Get away down that track out of it!" said my Father. "And look sharp! These here fellers means business!"

The organizer looked at the huge form of my Father, and the restive agricultural men pressing closer.

"What about Nash?" said the stranger.

"I'll see no harm comes to him," said my Father. "You get off."

And who could blame him that he went?

My Father held up his hand for silence. This he got, and said:

"No one's going to put Walt Nash in the pond. We don't want that sort o' carryin's-on in Marshwood." Meaningly he said this to those who proposed the ducking, for they were not Marshwood men. "He've a said what he had to say, and I cain't say as how he didn't speak surprisin' well, knowin' him as we all do. But he'll have enough punishment for tonight's work, wi'out we a-chuckin' of him in the pond. Go on, Walter—get off home while you'm safe!"

So came the inglorious end of Walter Nash's hour. He hurried away from the group with their jeers in his ears, and then broke into a run as if to get out of range of their mocking voices. One or two others who were known to be associated with the Union went their ways also; and a great hulking fellow who came over from Carter's *Ley* said:

"I'm juggered! Wait till old Bright hears this lot! That there loon 'll be in the Big House long afore he's too old to work, and so will all his family. How many kids have 'un got?"

"I dunno," said another. "Six or seven, ain't it? Sarve 'n right if he do lose his job!"

"I 'opes 'e do!" came another voice.

My Father turned on the last speaker sternly.

"Young feller," he said, "what good would that do him or you? It ain't worthy of a man to be cocky over another man's downfall. Leastways, that was what I was taught when I was a lad."

I watched Walter Nash as he trudged wearily up the church path. My brother Fred was watching him, too; and I saw in his glance a certain contempt, and yet pity, and perhaps a certain admiration. But of this I could not be sure.

The following Saturday morning saw my Father and myself, both dressed in our best clothes, waiting for the carrier's van to pass our gate. We were also waiting for Grandmamma, who at the last minute decided to accompany us to Stokingbase to see her sister. My Father was impatient; like all countrymen, he liked to be in good time, because he hated hurrying.

"Come on, Grandmother, do!" he called in at the scullery door. "I can hear carrier coming down the turnpike!"

"Then he'll have to wait a minute!" snapped the old lady. "I can't come wi' me bonnet all over the place like this!"

"Well, we're a-going on then. Come on, Frank boy. Off we go then!"

We hurried off round the end of the house and out to the carrier.

"Mornin' to 'e, Master Weston," said old John Ruse, and catching sight of me:

"Hallo! You got a new mate, then?"

"Ah. Will you wait a minute, John? The old lady's a-coming and is fixing her bonnet."

As he made this request, Grandmamma came bustling round the corner of the cottage with her best cloak over her arm. She was dressed in her severely cut black gown with dozens of buttons down the front, and high corded collar, tightly fitting sleeves with black frills, and black bonnet, the wide satin bows under her chin. Two white ribbons hung from the bonnet behind her ear, and an ostrich feather attached to the back of it nodded above her head as she hurried along.

"I'm sorry to keep thee waitin', Master Ruse," she gasped. "Here, Father, you could have waited to help me. You knows

Mother can't lift my cloak. I'm sorry, Master Ruse, but 'twas me dratted bonnet!"

"Oh, that's all right, ma'm. It looks very well, I must say."

"Do you think it do?" said the old lady, much pleased, as my Father helped her into her cloak.

"Aye, that I do!" said Master Ruse. "And if it wadn't for the fact as I'm so well suited already, I'd be makin' it up to thee, danged if I 'ouldn't!"

"Get away!" said Grandmamma with a laugh. And after she had been safely hoisted in all her finery, "Fine thing for a married man to say, I'm beggared if it ain't!"

Father and I climbed into the van and took our places where other travellers had moved up on the board seat for us. I looked back to wave to my Mother, who had come out to the gate to see us off. She had not been too well again lately, and my Father shouted:

"Get thee in, Mother! You'll catch your death o' cold!"

"Yes, you get inside, my dear!" called Grandmamma. "Drat her! She'll pretend she can't hear us, so 'tis no use to shout!"

And nor was it; for my Mother stayed to watch the van until it turned the corner under the horse-chestnut tree at the bottom of the Rectory gardens.

An hour and a half later, we left the carrier and made our way through Wooltown, a village on the outskirts of Stokingbase, somewhat oddly situated at the end of a long narrow road running through these agricultural downlands, and sparsely sheltered by low thickset hedges and stunted trees. The village nestled in a hollow in the hills; the thatched houses old, mostly with latticed windows, but in a far better condition than were most other labourers' houses outside the Estate. We passed the old Church of St. Lawrence on the left, squat, gloomy and prominent above the walled roadbank; it reminded me of Highcastle's forbidding pile with the quaint bed-bug symbol on the tower, although it was not as large. We skirted a wide pond which stretched almost into the road, and then took the sharp left-hand turn leading to Manytunes. We

entered upon another narrow road, passing between wide, bare stubble fields, and groups of corn ricks thatched in the old-fashioned way, with the top line of sheaves jutting out a third of their length to run the rain off. My Father eyed these ricks critically, and grunted his approval of both stacker and thatcher, mentioning the men by name.

I lengthened my stride to keep in step with my Father; for I fancied myself as a man, being out with him on my own; but I soon gave it up and had to content myself with my own quick walk. We moved up through a belt of trees, and then turned left at some crossroads.

"Dunno as I recollects the way, boy," said my Father; and at that moment we rounded a sharp bend and came to a group of cottages similarly designed to those in the village. A pause while my Father asked the way, and then we began to pass groups of more carefully planned and tended hedges and trees, set among tall banks of firs. The gate to Manytunes Manor House was well back so that we almost missed it; but the wide drive sweeping towards it attracted our attention, and we turned into the grounds.

We turned into the grounds, yes; but to me, who still had fairy-tale visions of the gentry in my head, it seemed that we had turned into Fairyland itself. Huge, dark yews and spreading beeches stood upon leaf-carpeted parklands and spacious lawns; the air was filled with raucous rook-voices from the black mass in the beech branches, and probing in the fields. The Manor House itself was set back among trees: white-fronted, with enormous pillars, and with windows so large that I could see the rooms stretching back into what I thought was illimitable spaciousness. I walked closer to my Father, who seemed very ill-at-ease, so that he almost whispered to me:

"We be come the wrong way round, boy."

We stood there, irresolute; my Father took his great turnip watch from his pocket and said anxiously:

"Here, 'tis half past ten a'ready. And we got to see the old Colonel by then. I thinks we'd better go to the front door. I don't recollect the way round to the back."

As if to implement this bold decision, there was a sudden furious rattling on one of the ground-floor windows. It was the colonel, who, seeing our perplexity, was attracting our attention, and signalling us to the front porchway. My Father touched his hat by way of reply, and we clattered into the pillared porch and pulled at the bell-handle.

"I don't expect Colonel'll come to the door hisself," said my Father, and in this supposition he was correct, for after a moment or so there was a slight shuffle inside, and the door swung a little way open to reveal an impressive individual in the male domestic uniform of the time. He seemed greatly affronted by the apparition of two working folk on the front steps of the house, and looking down his nose at my Father, he said grandly:

"Will you be good enough to take your business to the *back* of the house?"

My Father put his foot against the door which the footman was in the act of closing again and said:

"The Colonel's just told I to come to the front. So you'd best let us in."

The footman was inclined to be argumentative about it, when the colonel's appearance settled all doubts. He was a tall, homely gentleman of about fifty or sixty, spectacled, upright, and his sidewhiskers made him appear benign rather than fierce, as was the fashion for the military to strive to appear at the time.

"That's quite all right—come inside, Weston," said the colonel, as the footman vanished into the interior of the building. "Come inside."

"Thank'e, sir," said my Father as he removed his hat. "I thinks your man there was afeard we'd come to steal the spoons!"

The colonel was highly amused at this; and I was so overcome by the near presence of "one o' the gentry" that I forgot to remove my hat and had to be sternly reminded by my Father.

We followed Colonel Cobb through the main entrance hall,

where I caught a glimpse of wonderful workmanship in wood on the walls, a huge, solid oak table at least half as large as our scullery at home, and mighty ornamental vases, the like of which I had never seen before.

We turned right, along a comfortably carpeted passage, with windows looking out at the old courtyard and the older wing of the house opposite. The colonel and my father walked on ahead, talking over their business, while I dawdled, to gaze half unbelieving at the stuffed tigers, lions, bears and deer which stood in glass cases all along each side of the passage, and the strange and beautiful birds which stared down at me with glass eyes from their cases on the walls. Here and there I looked and wondered at the articles of heavy furniture bearing craftsmanship which, even at that age, I realized was something with which not even the genius of Mark Vincent could compare. Thus engrossed, I was soon left behind; but was recalled to my senses by the colonel's voice in the distance:

"Where's that boy of yours, Weston?"

I hurried along as the colonel came back to look for me.

"Hallo," said the colonel kindly, "having a look at my 'zoo'?"

"Yessir."

The colonel preceded us again, this time stopping to tell us the names of the stuffed creatures and the countries in which he had shot them, and the near escapes he had had in securing some of them. I was filled with wonderment that the colonel could have travelled so far and seen so much. But my attention was now drawn to a fine old oak chest with a mass of fruit and flowers carved on the lid, and I said, forgetting in my rapt interest the majesty of the presence before me:

"Mark Vincent could never do nothing like that, sir, I'll be bound!"

"Oh?" said the colonel. "Who is Mark Vincent?"

"The wood-turner at Marshwood, sir," said my Father, half afraid lest I forgot myself and my station in my amazement at this fairyland about me, half pleased and proud of the interest the colonel was taking in his son.

"You like that then, do you, boy?"

"Oh yes, sir, I do very much. 'Tis the most wonderful piece of work as I ever seed." I went on excitedly: "'Tis the most wonderful place as I ever seed, too, sir. I've heard tell o' these here places, but I never knew they was nothing like this inside, sir!"

"Well, well!" said the colonel. "Weston, you've got an intelligent lad here. When he gets a bit older I'd like to do something for him. Unless you have something of your own in mind?"

"No, Colonel, sir, I haven't. If you've took a liking to the lad, you have him, sir. I couldn't do no better, nor anyone else either. Thankye very much, sir."

The two men passed into the colonel's study while I waited outside. So it looked as if I was pledged to the colonel's service.

While the business was being transacted—it seemed like a very big contract, and we needed it at the time!—I was enabled to see inside the door. I think a glance into the working heart of a country private estate would do much to remove the sourness from the hearts of those who are glad when these estates fall upon evil times, for no other reason than envy. There can be no denying that those estates which still survive privately compare in their condition very favourably with the average large farm, particularly with regard to the obligations of the master to those who live on them; and the upkeep and repair of tenants' cottages, forestry, livestock, arable land, to say nothing of the complexities of drainage, erosion, fencing, highways and other maintenance repairs, are not pastimes the surveillance of which an "idle rich" man would willingly undertake.

"And here," said the colonel, as we passed into the oldest part of the building, down a long, brick passageway on our way out to inspect the barns and outhouses, "are the cells of the thirteenth-century monks. You see that the windows are barred. We use them now to store coals and vegetables and suchlike, and if you care to follow me up the stairway I'll shew you the original well-head they used."

This machinery was turned by the monks as they drew up the water, to flow over that part of the house through wooden pipes and troughs. There were alcoves here, with the original vessels used by the monks.

"There you are, young man," said the colonel. "What do you think of that?"

"It do seem a queer thing, sir," I said, "as you can see and handle the same things as they monks as been dead and gone all that long time. It's a wonder somebody ain't done away with it, sir, ain't it?"

"Yes," said the colonel with a smile, "I suppose it is. . . ."

And as we trudged homewards, for there was no return on the carrier's van until the evening now, my Father said to me:

"Well, lad, you seen for yourself as they ain't as bad as they'm painted."

"No, Father," I said, "that's a fact they ain't!"

I was burning for the moment when I could get home and tell my Mother and Grandmamma and Tom about all the wonderful things I had seen; and when we did arrive home, my Father related more than once, with no little pleasure, the interest old Colonel Cobb had shown in his son.

The Manytunes job had hardly started when Farmer Smithers of Ram's Valley called upon us to thatch six of his corn ricks. The colonel was quite understanding about it, for it was accepted throughout the countryside that building thatching had to wait when there were ricks to cover. It was good to know that we had the Manytunes job to see us through the winter, and perhaps for some months following as well.

I was approaching ten years of age at the time, and my absences from school to help my Father were, as with all the older boys, becoming more and more frequent. Indeed, Dickie Ruse, the carrier's younger son, left school for the sowing when he was but seven years old, and worked a seven-day week bird-scaring for sixpence. He returned again during the slack

months, but left as soon as the harvest started. He did not return again that year, and spent the cruel winter, together with other lads, in cleaning the turnips which the men had pulled for market. On the same farm was his brother, Jim Ruse, at the time quite a good ploughman at ten years old, for which he received two shillings and sixpence per week. Old Carrier John Ruse had no such pretensions of class to keep up as had my Father, and thanked his lucky stars that he now had two strong boys able to bring grist to the mill, as well as the money he earned in his carrier's business. Like all working men in the village with families of any size, Carrier Ruse believed in "keeping his nose clean" with the masters, and in keeping clear of anything which might make life even more difficult for him than it was.

The four of us, my Father, Fred, Tom and myself, set out to make a grand start on Farmer Smithers' six ricks. My Father carried a couple of wooden thatching forks—implements used only by the elderly in our district these days. Fred, now a loose-limbed, thin, rather round-shouldered lad of nineteen, and still as morose in temperament as he had always been, walked with my Father, carrying bundles of pegs and a bond-twist. Tom, four years older than myself, was more upright, but of the same light build; still a certain gentleness in his appearance, and that in spite of our rural working clothes. He carried the shears and the hooks; he was too young to be accepted in the company of the "men", so condescended to walk with me. I carried the dinners in a rush basket.

Already the chill of approaching autumn struck upon our hands and faces. The summer that year had virtually gone, although according to the calendar we had another three weeks of it to pass. The breezes had become stronger and a good deal colder. My Father very much doubted the chances of another warm spell before the rough weather set in hard.

We turned into a rickety cuckoo-gate leading into a short drove. There were tall bramble hedges on each side of us, with berries red, green, and some ripe, mingled with the pink-and-white blooms. Across the long grass, damp with dew,



lay the shadows of the hedges; and among the grasses were yellow-eyed horse daisies.

The thousand and one shoots from the root of a massive elm caught my eye. Leaved twigs crowded all up the gnarled trunk and clustered in dense, dusty gatherings round about the huge warts and carbuncles where limbs had fallen away years ago, and the woody flesh had tried to close the wounds. Ivy vied with the shoots, clinging tenaciously about a hole in which an owl might be nested, sending its thieving fingers up into the greeny caverns of massive branches higher still.

Down across the stubble was a little green patch upon which two household cows were ruminating. There they lay, a comfortable heap of haunch-bones, hooves and horns, their lower jaws moving steadily round and round, as if driven by some machine within themselves, reminding me, as chewing cows always did, of the words "The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small!"

This movement, coupled with the completely contented expression of the two huge, liquid eyes above, always made me want to double up with laughter. Beyond them lay a field, still unreaped, of tall white wheat; and beyond that, a cottage half buried in a mass of trees. Hills, blue with mist, swept away, their tree-covered outlines delicate and fresh against the pale blue sky. There were martins and swallows circling in this pale beauty, against a smudge of small white cloud. I supposed they would soon be leaving us again.

A ring-dove talked excitedly from behind a corn stack. Yes, I thought, the swallows would soon be leaving us for their long journey across the seas.

"I have heard tell as how Walter Nash be going away to America," said Fred, half to my Father and half over his shoulder to Tom. My Father did not answer, but Tom said:

"Oh? How's he going to get there, then?"

"By the boat of course, fool!"

"Well, I didn't think he was going to walk nor swim!" said Tom, offended. "But boats don't take 'e to America for nothing."

"They do say 'tis the Union as he belongs to as is a-doing of it. They say as some of the Gentry and the parsons is making a bit of a row in Lunnon about the way we'm all living on the land, and that they be disgusted with our masters so much that they'm helping the Unions to send men abroad where they can get a fresh start."

"Well," growled my Father, "it ain't a bad plan to get rid o' some of the beggars. They only clutters up honest working folk with their tramping from door to door. Though 'tis out of the frying-pan and into the vire, I do reckon."

Fred did not answer at once. Then he said surlily:

"I don't know as a working man'd be any the worse off, wherever he went, than he is working on the land."

There was an ominous silence as my Father sought for words with which to reply.

"Fred," he said, "I don't know what's tooken hold on thee. You ought to thank your lucky stars as you've got a trade, not go looking for trouble all the time like you do. You ain't like the main of land workers, having to keep a family on ten and twelve shillings a week, and you don't lose nothing wet times, even if I do. You can earn a few more pence p'raps in the towns, but no country-bred man 'd ever put up wi' living three or four families to a room, with never a sight o' the fields to cheer him up and mind him of where he belongs. I'd die sooner than do that."

"Ah, that might be so, Father. But there's plenty on 'em as *does* go to the factories, dyin' or not. Them and their wives and their childern. An' if they'm a-dyin', as they says the women and childern do betimes, 'tis because they be drove to death."

"Well, a thatching man ain't drove, you knows that."

"We don't work any the less hard than anybody else on the land, Father. Us'd go hungry soon enough if we did. Besides, what *do* we get out of it? You gets a bit o' baccy—I don't even get that. Tom here gets noth'n, and young Frank here don't get noth'n neither. I don't see as we'm any better off than them beggars as is reapin' the wheat over yon!"

"You got food for yer belly and clothes for yer back!" retorted my Father angrily. "You got a good bed, a clean home and a roof over yer head! There's families walking the roads now as'd do as much work as you, and more willin', for half of it! You wants to think yourself fortunate, my boy, as you ain't one o' they! I knows you ain't got ar ha'pence to put in thee pocket. No more ain't I! I could have if I wanted, but I don't! I gie's every penny I earns to your Mother to spend on ungrateful young — like yourself!"

"I don't mean no harm, Father," said Fred lamely; but my Father was too offended to answer.

We walked on, the tension unbroken, until I plucked up enough courage to ask Tom:

"Be they very big boats as goes across the seas, then, Tom?"

"Aye, that they be!" said Tom. "Girt ships, so they says, wi' hunnerds o' people on 'em! Wi' great sails on poles as tall as they trees; and paddle-wheels on 'em, and screws on behind, and smoke coming out the chimley-pots that thick you'd think they was afire unless you knew! I heard tell of a girt ship called the *Great Eastern* as was built twenty-odd year ago. Didn't you ever hear tell on it, Father?"

"Ah," said my Father shortly, "I heard summat about it when I was a young man."

"They do say," went on Tom, warming to his subject, "as her'd stretch from our gate right up to church path end—I heard tell as it would, anyhow. And they do say as her 'ad girt paddle-wheels on, pretty near as high as Marshwood Church steeple, and a screw behind in the water as high as the church doors. Her never had no sails, but carried 'em along with her in case the steam engine give out. Didn't they say as the bottom on'n was tore out just outside New York, Father, and she were that big the people on her never knew nothing about it, and she never sunk?"

"P'raps it were that tall it rested on the bottom of the sea," said Fred sarcastically, "and that was why it kept up!"

"She had two bottoms," said my Father. "'Twas the

bottom one as was tore off. They bain't safe though, I don't reckon."

"I reckon they be," said Fred. "I wouldn't mind going in one to America, I'll tell thee."

"Thee best get and jine the Union and go!" retorted my Father, still very irritable.

"I been thinking on it!"

We all stopped dead in our tracks. My Father stood, looking in the direction he was walking, as if he had received an unexpected slap from behind. Fred faltered, but braced himself for what was coming. Tom and I hung back in fear.

My Father turned to face his eldest son. His black face was grim.

"I see," he said intensely. "I didn't know it'd got like that, Fred. Well, you're a growed man, and I suppose you'm bound to feel your feet a bit. But afore you thinks o' doin' anything as crosses your Father's will, you'd better know this, my son! If you has anything at all to do with the Union—mind what I do say, Fred, *anything at all*—then you'll go out of my house, and you'll never come back!"

So saying, my Father turned and walked on.

It was some time before Fred ventured to ask him, with some unconvincing shew of defiance:

"Whyever should you feel all that strong about things, Father?"

My Father stopped and turned again.

"What do you think, you young fool, is going to become of us Westons if it goes round as you'm mixed up wi' that there cussed Union? No farmer nor master'd have anything to do wi' us; us as been thatching here hunnerds o' years avore anything like a bloody Union was ever thought of! I'd lose my job as Sexton and Parish Clerk, and you knows what I thinks o' that 'ere! The schoolmaster wouldn't dare have Mother in to clean the school—let alone you to empt the buckets!—and even poor old Grandmother'd lose her shillin' a month up at church. *That's* why I'd turn you out at once if you got mixed up with it!" My Father looked at Fred long and hard. "It'd

be my duty to turn you out!" he said; and we all knew that in such a crisis my Father wouldn't think twice about it."

I think Fred was appalled at my Father's earnestness.

"Oh, all right, all right, Father!" he said hastily. "Perhaps I never thought that far about it! I'll keep out o' the way of 'em, then, if that's the case. Not because I be afeard o' bein' turned out, mind," he said daringly, for that alone would be enough to turn my Father against his son, "but for the sake of the family. I never thought that far, fool that I was! I never did you, Father!" There was genuine concern in his voice.

"Well, that's all right then," said my Father. "Mind you keeps clear on it then! We got a good round hereabouts if we keeps out of trouble. 'Tis all these bad winters and harvests," he went on more affably. "Things'll get better when the weather changes. Then p'raps we'll have years of good harvests—I have known it run like that—and look at the money we'll make! You be a good lad and stick it out 'long of your Father—it takes some guts to stick it, you knows, Fred—and I'll gie thee thee half a crown back agen the minute I can. And when you comes of age, we'll see if we can't do summat a bit different for 'e. 'Fact, I shall be lettin' you have a bigger say in things altogether."

"Summat a bit different" was going to happen with Fred long before then, but my Father did not suspect anything like that. . . .

My Father had therefore effectively closed brother Fred's only outlet for his restiveness. It seemed that he had decided, after all, to settle himself to the future my Father had mapped out for him; but when we ran into a spell of really wintry weather, all his feelings of rebellion began to stir again.

It was one of those bitterly cold, wet days, with a biting east wind which chilled the side of one's face exposed to it to the bone. Being Saturday morning, I was accompanying the three; the part of the roof we were to work on would be in the lee, so my Father thought we should be able to get on.

"They do say as young Tom Pratt is a-going to take Ham Farm," said Fred out of the corner of his mouth to Tom, for we all had our heads bent towards the wind.

"I reckons he'll be a good master, young Tom, then."

"He won't pay no more'n the rest on 'em hereabouts, I don't reckon," said Fred shortly. We all trudged on in silence, pondering this truism.

"What's the matter, Fred?" asked my Father suddenly. "Getting dissatisfied again?"

Fred knew better than to tell the truth. "I never said as I was," he mumbled.

We passed through the churchyard where tall trees shuddered in the wind and the yews swung their flat shelves back and forth, back and forth, as the hail cut across them. Shafts of fitful sunlight chased one another across the mosses, yellow and green, thick upon the church roof. A sparrow-hawk flashed across the pathway and skimmed low over the fields and the further hedge, into the rain mists.

There were green plovers in their cocked hats and green-and-purple coats busily working the fields. The brown on their vests could clearly be seen on those nearest, and they watched warily with their dark brown eyes. The flock became silent as we drew nigh, with every cocked hat raised, every bird picking here and there, but watching from every corner of the field. The nearest birds rose slowly with a wheezy "Phee-ew!", spreading their white wings and sooty black wingtips as they moved inwards towards the flock. The others went on feeding fitfully, becoming really busy only after we had passed by.

Tom and I lagged behind, and presently Fred dropped back with us.

"Fred," said Tom in an undertone, "bain't you satisfied?"

"'Course I bain't!" said Fred under cover of the wind. "Nor'd anybody else be as had a hounce of guts in 'im! I be going away from home!"

We were struck dumb by this piece of information.

"Oh, Fred!" Tom said at length. "I be sorry to hear that

then. How be we going to get on then? I suppose Frank'll have to leave school altogether?"

"It won't do Frank no harm. Book larnin' ain't no good to 'e these days. Look at yerself. You was always a bit of a scholard at school, but what good did it do thee? Why, you be doing the same work as myself, as can't hardly write me own name!"

"Still, you *could* 'a' learned a bit at school, Fred, same as I did."

"Ah! Could 'a'! But I never didn't want to!"

"Where be ye goin', then, Fred?"

"There's a gentleman as has been talking to I as got what he calls a 'botanic garden' over in St. Johnas. He do say as he'll give me ten shillin' a week and all found. I'll be able to send a bit home, then."

"Thees'll be gettin' married, then, I can see."

"Not on ten shillin' a week. I seen enough o' that. My wife ain't going to empt school buckets to make up the wages. I'll stay as I be."

"Mother don't empt buckets, do she? That's your job!"

"She do the girls'. I told her on it, but she won't let me do it."

"You kept it pretty close then, Fred."

"Ah!"

"I'll bet Father won't let thee go."

"Then I'll have to go without askin' of him!" said Fred.

And that was just what Fred did. A few days later, we all rose as usual with the dawn, except for young Stanley. I was awake to see Tom dressing himself in our small, night-shaded bedroom. I did not see Fred dressing, however, but took no especial notice of that as I thought he had gone downstairs.

A fire was lit in the open hearth by the time I arrived down; the men were at breakfast, with the exception of Fred, and my Mother, her long black hair still hanging down her back, was packing lunches into the rush basket. My Father glanced impatiently towards the stairs door as I came through.

"Where's Fred got to?" he grumbled. "Ain't he up yet?"

"Ah," said Tom. "He's up all right."

"Well, why don't he come on then? We got to get started. Fred! Fred!" he called. "Come on, lad, we be late enough as 'tis."

"'Tain't much use you a-shoutin', Father," said Tom. "Fred ain't there!"

My Father looked perplexed.

"Where is he then? Outside?"

"Ah, her be outside all right! Half-way to Shirestream now, I do reckon!"

"Half-way to Shirestream? What's he gone there for then, silly young fool? Just as I wants to get a start up at Manytunes again and he goes juggerin' off to Shirestream! Whatever 's he gone there for, then?"

"Well, you may as well know it, Father. He's gone to get a job. He ain't coming back!"

My Father said not a word. He rose from the table, fumbled for his pipe on the mantelshelf, and having lit it, leaned his elbow against the brickwork as he stared into the flames. My Mother watched him, anxiously.

"So Fred's left us!" he said, half to himself. "What a fool I been not to see it all along!" He paused, seeming unable to credit it; and still staring into the flames, he went on:

"Well, I reckon he's old enough to look after himself. What sort of a job is it: thatching?"

"He do say as some gentleman has gie'd him a job in some botanical gardens or something. He do get ten shillin' a week and all found."

"H'm. That's a very good job for a young 'un, I must say. P'raps a little too much money to give a young feller his age, though. What's the gentleman's name?"

"I couldn't tell thee, Father. Fred never told me."

"Well . . . good luck to the boy! I hopes he'll come back and see us sometimes, but Shirestream is a powerful ways from here. Ten or twelve mile I do reckon."

My Father was fighting a losing battle to restrain his temper.

"How was it neither on 'e said anything to me about it before?" he burst out accusingly to Mother and Tom. "It

ain't exactly the way the head of the house should be treated, is it?"

My Mother was too nervous to answer. Tom saw that it was his place to face the crisis, and he said, with surprising calm:

"He was afraid in case you'd stop him."

I could see my Father was floundering a little. His position as head of the family, he felt, was being undermined. He was determined at almost all costs to hold that—but not by fear.

"Oh, I don't suppose I would have," he said. "But there, I might 've. Times being what they are, we can't really afford to lose him."

"He do say he's going to send some money."

"There's no need!" But my Father seemed deeply worried, nevertheless.

"We'll manage somehow, Father," said my Mother.

"Oh aye!" said my Father sarcastically. "We'll manage!" He reached for his jacket and hat and put them on. "Well, Tom," he said, "'tis up to thee and me now. There's plenty to be done! One thing, if Fred ain't here we ain't got Fred to feed. And he did have a put-away for a thin 'un, didn't he, Tom?"

"Aye, he did that all right!" said Tom with a smile.

"There's only one thing as I wants you to promise me, young Tom. When you feels you wants to go away from home, don't slip off in the dark like Fred did. If you gets a job as'll take you away, I wants you to let me know in good time. I dessay I shan't stand in your way if that's how it's to be."

"Oh, I'll let you know all right, Father."

"Well, mind you do." And then, more cheerfully: "A little bit of extry work atwixt me and thee and we won't lose overmuch over Fred's going. We might even be better off!"

"Money!" ejaculated Grandmother as she came in to overhear this remark. "That's all you be thinking of, Father!"

She meant it more as a joke than anything, but she had chosen a very unfortunate moment. My Father did not answer her until he turned at the door before letting himself out.

"Do ye think I enjoys weighing up my own childern in