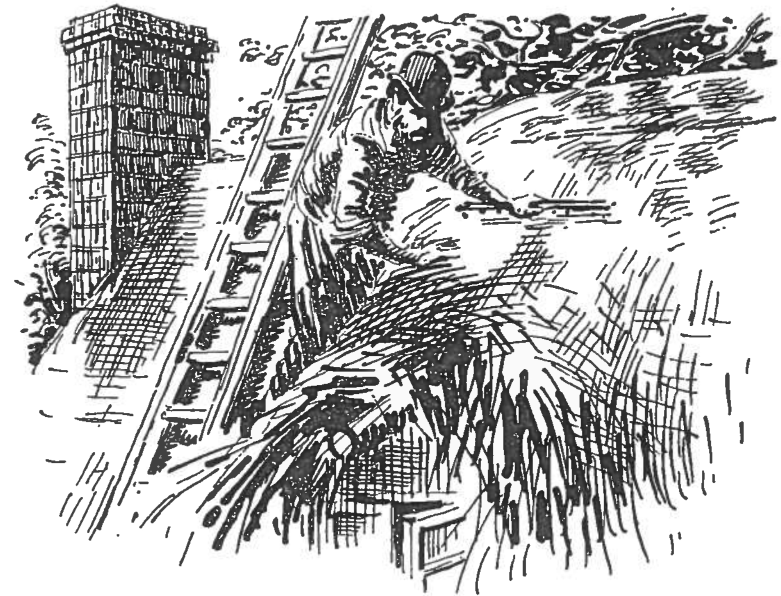
terms o' money, old woman?" he said with deep bitterness. "Me, who lays awake at nights, thinking and thinking of ways to meet all the bad luck we've had this four years and more? Wonderin' whatever will become o' Mother and me if all the childern goes? I don't blame 'em if they all goes! They'd be fules to stay here along wi' I! I thought I had summat worth-while to offer the eldest on 'em, but I don't think I have no more! Year in, year out, I've a-worked, worked, worked—but what have I got to show for it? Only the things as my own Father has left me! No wonder they won't stay! A pity I was ever wicked enough to bring childern into such a world as it is today, that's what I do think on't! A pity as we ever had ar childern at all!"

Away slammed my Father, leaving Grandmamma even whiter-faced than she usually was, and my Mother staring into the fire, very near to tears. . . .



CHAPTER SIX

THE period following Fred's departure was uneasy. It took some time for my Father to adjust himself to the change. He carried on steadily with his work, as indeed he had to; and Tom took the place of Fred as his right-hand man. But there was a notable difference in my Father's approach to his right-hand man. Fred had been regarded as a partner in the business; a junior partner, it is true, but one whose word did carry some weight on occasions, whose advice was sought, whose skill and interest were watched, guided and encouraged. There was no such approach towards Tom, however. My Father took everything into his own hands, and was the master-man; Tom was no more than his helper.

No mention was made of the incident of Fred for some weeks; we all knew better than to reopen the subject with my Father. It was not that he had any bitterness towards Fred; it was simply that Fred's action was distasteful to my Father's outlook on life. And the fact that his own son, whom he looked

to in order to carry on that way of life, had turned his back on it, and upon all my Father's experience and advice which he had deemed so valuable, had hurt him very deeply.

My Father remained firm in his belief that the "old ways" were the right and the best ways. He still thought that a return to a cycle of good harvest years would see everyone returning to the old ways. He had the old-time rural man's loyalty to the land, which had been the family tradition for centuries. Fred had broken it. This loyalty meant the strength of purpose to stand by the land in lean times; to be strong enough to wait stolidly until the land was in a better mood again. But Fred had deserted; he had shown weakness; he hadn't the courage to wait. This, too, had disappointed my Father, but at the same time he acknowledged that the land had no brief for what he called weak men, so Fred was best out of it.

But this left an unforeseen void which, for the time being, my Father was determined to fill himself. Who would carry on the trade when he had become too old to cover the area we had built up through generations? Could he turn to any of the others? They were too young to be taken seriously yet. And who knew whether they might be affected by all this dissatisfaction, as Fred had been? Would he live to see his area shrink as his powers grew less, and to see rivals encroaching on the business which he and his Father and Grandfather had held so securely in their hands? And what about the church work? Would the long line of Westons hanging in the vestry have outside names added to it as the years went by?

What was it the schoolmaster had said to my brother Tom, when he left to help my Father?

"Be good at your job, earn a reputation, and you'll not want for money. Be better than the others; there'll be no need for you to get mixed up in these working men's movements if you are. But if I were in your position, times being what they are, do you know what I would do? I'd go and join Her Majesty's Army, the same as all young men with a ha'porth of guts and commonsense are doing today. You take my advice, boy, and get off into the Army."

That exactly was happening. As my Father prophesied, only the married regulars were kept on the land during the following winter; single labourers were lucky if they could get two days' casual labour a week. They joined the Army in droves, never to return to the land again. It was a second great modern exodus from the land; first to the factories, then to the Army; and the land has never fully recovered its skilled agricultural manpower since those days.

No wonder the youngsters were attracted by the lure of the Military! Men came home in resplendent blue uniforms with red-edged lapels, tight-fitting trousers with a broad red stripe down the outsides, the boots polished as we had never seen them polished before. There were breast-pockets, and side flap-pockets secured by gleaming brass buttons; more resplendent buttons down the front of the close-fitting tunic with its high neckband, and caps with short, smart brims and sloping backs, making a man hold his head arrogantly high. And the swagger of them; the tales they came home with; the hint of impending trouble in far-away Africa; the voyages to India in great troopships; the bands; the parades—all so different from the drab penury of English village life which struggled manfully along behind the picturesque quaintness of misshapen walls, broken windows, and thatch.

"Money for nothing!" boasted one of the village lads. "Catch me ever slaving again for a —— farmer!" And he used boldly and pat out an epithet which would have brought a look of scorn for any but one who wore the Queen's uniform.

But other stories trickled through, of bad food, terrible hardships, brutal discipline, death, privation and disease on foreign service. . . .

. . . . .

I helped my Father more and more in his duties about the church. Often Tom was left in the outhouse to attend to the thatching tools or to split hazels when my Father had the church work to attend to, and since the duties about the

churchyard were light, he usually took me with him on a Saturday afternoon.

In this way I began to get closer to my Father than had been possible under his stern but kind discipline while I was but a schoolboy. Many a time he told me about the old shingle-covered church which stood before the new one; days when old Grandfather was Sexton; and my Father could just recollect as a boy my Great-Grandfather holding the office. He told me, meaningly as I see it now, although I was too young to see what he had in his mind then, that he hoped a son of his would carry on one day; that when he was too old, which wouldn't be all that long now, times would be better, and there would be a good thatching business already worked up through the district, which a good lad who had learned his job would do well to take over. I thought my Father was referring to Tom, and so in part, perhaps, he was; but he said that Tom seemed to be talking a good deal of gentleman's service, and my Father did not know whether that might be a good thing for him or not. Grandmamma wanted him to go into service; so did Minnie; for Tom was *such* a nice boy, just right, so Grandma thought, to make a butler one of these days.

However, nothing as yet developed in this direction. Tom made no effort to do anything about it; his thatching was good, and although he did not show the mastery Fred had done, or ever took any initiative, he worked well under my Father, and it seemed as if he was not going to bother with anything else. Tom was inclined to be mentally lazy; he needed a little pushing. And my Father, having reorientated himself, pushed him along with the same kind, though strong, discipline of yore.

While busy trimming the churchyard graves one day, I was first to notice a long crooked line which had appeared among the flints of the East wall, running from the base of one of the great windows to the ground. I thought perhaps I might be mistaken, as Tom took no notice when he was with me; but it seemed to lengthen week by week, so I drew my Father's attention to it. He squinted critically at the crack, and showed us where the stones were just beginning to part above the East

window. The Rev. Seaman was hastily informed, and before the workmen could busy themselves upon it, other cracks developed, and the wall fell into a very dangerous condition indeed.

The weeks that followed were full of absorbing interest to me. My Father paced out the length of the site of the old

church, which fell some fifteen feet short of the new one, and expressed the opinion that they would find the East wall was built across a row of old graves. He had the satisfaction of finding his words proved correct. I was full of admiration for my Father. It seemed to me that he was almost always right in anything he foretold.

The repairs to the wall were the signal for a spate of

great rivalry in holy charity among the local gentry: the Rev. Seaman, astute to seize opportunities, was so successful in raising funds that in addition to the wall repairs he was able to have the roof stripped and lined with patent felt, the floor covered with encaustic tiles, and a modern warming apparatus built beneath the central aisle, at the then enormous cost of £405. It was right and fitting that God's house should stand so nobly beautified above the humble dwellings of the Christians who lived round it.

The work at Manytunes continued throughout the year, for Colonel Cobb had fresh buildings to attend to as soon as my Father neared the end of any one he had in hand. He was almost the Estate thatcher, and the income from it was paid quarterly. It had to be left at the end of haymaking and harvest, as the local farmers' ricks were again in urgent need of covering; for, once more, with the end of August, the clouds began to mass and there came rain.

Fieldfares crossed the moor at the back of our cottages in flocks, scattered widely above the wet countryside, talking furtively as they flew. Dim white-and-grey kites of lumbering magpies struggled on their rocket-sticks past the hurrying clouds. The rooks perched dismally in quaint attitudes among the elms by the ditch, or moved off sluggishly in small family groups, grumbling as they went, through the sweeping rain and over the coppice. They did not go far—a sure sign of continued bad weather; and the skylarks rose, bravely singing until they touched the damp air, and then dropped like stones.

My Mother slowly became more and more helpless with her disease. Grandmamma was "breakin' up fast", as my Father had warned me. She took to her heavy Bible a great deal more, and was often seen in her chimney-seat, her sparse grey hair pulled down close to her head, her old, dear face slowly assuming the expressionless masculinity of age, muttering to herself as she read the huge print. It may seem surprising that so many people of Grandmamma's generation could read at all, since most of them had had but the scantiest education. But nevertheless many of them did, and Grandmamma could

also write, but, curiously enough, always signed her name with a cross.

I had all but left school, but was at home still considered a boy; a person of not enough consequence to worry over when my elders were at conversation in my hearing. But I remember well enough the morning when my Mother sat quietly by the fire, staring, as was her habit, into the flames, and the bewildering and frightening conversation which ensued between herself and Grandmamma. The old lady came in from washing up the breakfast things, and sat down slowly opposite her daughter.

"Well, Margaret," she said, meaning to be humorous, "we be a pair of old crocks, and no mistake."

My Mother looked strangely at her.

"Mother," she said. "I'm worried; I bain't gettin' no better. That there concoction the gipsy told us about don't seem to work no more."

"Never mind, gal," said my Grandmother reassuringly, "you'll pull up again after you've had a bit of a rest. 'Tis rest you wants, gal. Don't worry."

"Rest!" exclaimed my Mother impatiently. "I do nothing but rest! I can't do much else. When I gets up in the morning I be frit to look in the glass, my face being all swoll up so; and when I gets to bed at nights, 'tis my feet and legs. Besides, I gets giddy lately, and I can hear my own heart thumpin' betimes. It makes me wonder, that it do."

"You be under the Doctor, dear," said Grandmamma. "Maybe you wants your medicine changed."

"He keeps on a-changin' it. It don't do no good. It strikes me as he don't know what to give me. Strikes me . . . strikes me as there's nothing nobody can give me no more."

My Grandmother fell silent. Mother again looked into the fire.

"I bain't much good to Father, Mamma. I can't do much about the house. And nor can't you."

"Lor luv us!" exclaimed the old lady. "Yes, I can! What be you a-worritin' over now, gal? I'll do anything you wants. What is it, my dear?"

"Oh, it ain't nothing in particular. Besides, you can't do it no more, Mother, and 'tis no use sayin' you can. We'll have to ask Minnie to come home again, I suppose."

"I don't know as she'll do that now. She's gettin' on a lot better since they put her in the kitchens. I didn't think she'd like being a tweeny. She'll be gettin' a home of her own soon, I expect. But there, never you worry. I dessay Tom'll be looking round afore long, and then he might bring his gal home."

"Tom? Why, the boy's barely sixteen!"

"Well, I was married at seventeen. And you wasn't no more than eighteen when you was wed."

"Ah!" said my Mother sorrowfully. "I wish I was like I was when Father took me, Mother, that I do!"

"Oh, don't talk like that, my gel!"

"But I never shan't be no more. Do you know what I been thinkin'? I been thinkin' the best thing I could do now is to die out of Father's way!"

In the terrible silence which followed this outburst, I heard Grandmamma's horror-stricken exclamation, "Margaret!"

"So I ought! He could look round for someone as could look after him then. Poor man has to work like he does and then come home and do women's work. It's all wrong, Mother; it's all wrong!"

"But Tom and Frank gives a hand. And young Tom is a rare dabster about the house."

"Poor little chap! 'Tis nothing but work for 'em from the time they gets up until the time they goes to bed; and all because o' we, Mother, not bein' able to do our duty. We'd both be better out o' the way, I do reckon."

My Grandmother settled her Bible on her lap.

"Margaret," she said softly but earnestly, "if you died now, it wouldn't help Father nor Tom nor Frank. Poor Father would be broken-hearted. It'd be the end of him, too; not the makin' of him. Your husband pretty near worships the ground you walks on. There'll come a time when you'll be all he's got to live for. You got to be here when that time comes, my gel."

"I dunno as God wills that I should be," said my Mother.

"Oh, don't you take on so, my gel. I ain't going to tell you no nonsense about gettin' the better o' the dropsy, 'cause you knows better than that. But it don't bring thee to the end as soon as all that. You'll live many a long year yet, and if you suffers—and I knows what sufferin' is myself, my gel—if you suffers, you'll be doing more by sufferin' patient-like and cheering up Father than anyone else as walks on the face of the earth could. He don't want nobody else, nor wouldn't have nobody. And he'll want thee later on."

My Grandmother looked before her, down through the years.

"Men is such boys," she said. "I remembers my man after he'd had his leg off. Sat on our front lawn in a chair, he did, and never murmured while the surgeon took it off. He nearly died like most on 'em do with a thing like that, and never really got better afterwards. Every so often the fever'd come back to him again. If I hadn't been there, my dear, I don't know what would have happened to him. They needs 'e when they can't work no more," said my Grandmother quietly. "They needs 'e if 'tis only to talk to."

My Mother's eyes filled with tears.

"It ain't *you* that's a-going', my gel," went on Grandmother quietly. " 'Tis me."

She looked at my Mother with something of her old brightness. "Do you remember when my hair was black, Duckie, and I used to catch hold o' thee under the arms and swing you round and round?"

"Yes, Mother, I do," said my Mother with a smile.

"I'm still the same old me inside here, Margaret, me dear," went on Grandmamma. "But I'm gettin' tired like. I sits and sees things as happened when I was a little gel; sees 'em clear as if 'twas yesterday. 'Tis right what you says. I be beyond it. That's why I takes to my Bible a lot lately, and prays longer'n I used when I goes to bed at nights. I likes to feel I be *near* like. I don't want to go up there and find things all strange. Why," said the old lady with a smile, "I often thinks o' my man

there, waitin' for me. Ah, and I could swear when I be thinkin' here on my own sometimes as I can hear him sayin' my name; and I looks forward to it, gel, that I do! And sometimes I prays when I goes to sleep as I won't wake up to trouble thee all no more; but there, come next mornin' I do! I suppose the Lard ain't quite ready yet!"

"Oh, Mother!" said my Mother with a sob. "I don't want you to go!"

"There, there, gal!" said the old lady concernedly, as she hurried over to my Mother as fast as her age would let her. "You mustn't upset yourself so much over it! 'Tis only yourself as you'm really feeling sad about, my gel. There's no sense in feelin' sad for we. Cause *we* don't feel sad about it when it comes, my dear. The way you looks at things changes when you be my age. We still loves 'e all, o' course; but we gets a sort of hankerin' after the folks as is already passed over; them as is our own age. At least, them as *was* our own age, when we sits and thinks of times gone by. Come on now, cheer up! You ain't run your course yet, and there's plenty for 'e to do for Father yet, you'll see. There, there, then!"

Grandmamma stroked my Mother's hair out of her eyes with a gnarled hand, just as she did many years before, and pressed her aged, cold lips upon her forehead.

. . . . .

About a couple of months after this, Grandmamma was seated one evening, as usual, in her chimney-seat. It was after dark; my Mother rested with her legs up, and my Father sat back in his armchair, smoking. Tom had the newspaper spread on the tablecloth to be near the lamp, and I dozed in the other chimney-corner.

Suddenly, Grandmamma startled us all by looking up and saying in a loud, clear voice:

"All right, me dear. I be comin'!"

My Father took his pipe from his mouth and peered at her through the dim light.

"What's on, then, Grandmother?"

The old lady seemed very far away.

"Hey, Grandma!" said my Father as he rose to his feet. "What's up with thee?"

"Oh, nothing, Father. Where's Margaret?"

"Why, right beside thee!"

My Grandmother put out a fumbling hand, and Mother took it in hers.

"I can't seem to see very well, Father."

"Turn up the light, Tom; bring it over here."

Tom did as he was bidden, and my Father held the lamp close to the old lady's face, scrutinizing her. She stared unseeing before her, every line, every wrinkle, etched in a criss-cross maze.

"Tom! Frank! Be you boys here?"

"Aye, here we be, Grandma, right in front on 'e. Can't you see us?" asked Tom.

"No, boy, I can't see thee. I can see a light. A bright light."

Tom moved the lamp.

" 'Tis gone now."

We all watched in shocked silence. My Grandmother's hands were crossed in her lap. She still sat there for some minutes, staring ahead. Then she slowly looked round at us all; it seemed that she had come back to us again.

"Give us a kiss, my gel," she said to Mother.

"Oh, Mother!" said my Mother in a broken voice. She leaned over towards Grandma to put her arms about her shoulders.

"Not too 'eavy on her, gal," whispered my Father.

"It's all right, Father," said the old lady faintly. "Look, I wants 'e to promise me something."

"What's that, then, Grandma?"

"I wants you and Tom and young Frank here to dig my grave."

My Father swallowed hard, and I was conscious of an aching lump in my own throat.

"Aye," he said. "We'll . . . we'll do that for 'e, Grandma."

"And take me up to Ram's Valley, where my man is. And

you'll look after the grave for a year or two arter I'm gone, won't 'e?"

"Oh, Mother," said my Mother again. "We'll *allus* look after it!"

My Grandmother rose shakily to her feet.

"Whoa there!" exclaimed my Father as he held her. "Here you boys, give a hand. Where dost want to go, then, Grandma?"

"Up to bed. And I wants Margaret to come with me to-night. I wants 'e all to come."

My Father and Tom half carried her upstairs, and I helped Mother to struggle up behind. Father and Mother put her to bed. She did not make any fuss. She took our faces, one by one, in her shaking hands, and kissed us. For a few days, she brightened up a little, and busied herself reading her Bible, and disposing quite cheerfully of her few possessions. Then, one afternoon, she tired rapidly, and drifted off to sleep, her hand in my Mother's. She did not wake again.

. . . . .

For a few days after the funeral, Minnie, who had been granted leave by the Mistress of Ash House to help Mother over that troubling time, stayed on at home. Then one morning she mentioned that she would have to be getting back to Ash House or she might lose her job.

"Well," said my Father, "you'd better tell 'em as you'll be coming home again, hadn't ye, Minnie?"

Minnie was scrubbing the top of the kitchen table at the time, and, half glancing at my Father, but without stopping her work, she replied:

"But I don't want to come home, Father."

My Father was troubled. He leaned down to the fire to light his spill, and having got his pipe going, he said:

"It do seem a pity, my gal. Especially as you'm gettin' on so well, but I don't see how we can manage without ye."

My Father had no inkling of what was to come. He took it

quite for granted that it was Minnie's place to come home if she was told to do so, and thought Minnie would know that, too.

" 'Tis a bit of a disappointment, gal," he said kindly, "but we can't help these things. You'd better tell the Mistress, or whoever it is you'm under, how we'm situated here, and ask 'em to release you from your time."

Minnie went on scrubbing, face down, without saying anything. My Father leaned down to the fire again with his spill, because his pipe had gone out, saying as he did so:

"We'll try and make it up to ye, Minnie. It won't be quite the same as it was before. You'm a grown woman now, and if you're Mother's right hand you'll have a lot bigger say in the house. You tell 'em you'm coming home again, gal."

Minnie still kept on scrubbing, and then she suddenly said:

"I shan't tell 'em anything o' the sort!"

My Father straightened up and looked at her. He was not used to being spoken to in that way.

"Well," he said, not fully comprehending Minnie's meaning, "you must put it how you like. But there's no harm in tellin' 'em the truth, is there?"

"I mean I shan't tell 'em that I'm leaving," said Minnie. "Because I'm not going to leave!"

"Oh!" said my Father. A stubborn note crept into his voice. "And why not?"

"Why *should* I?"

"You don't have to ask that, my gal. Your Mother can't do much, as you can see. There's nobody else."

"Isn't there? What's the matter with Tom and Frank?"

"Don't be daft. Tom's a man, and Frank'll soon leave school. You can't take men away from their work to do women's jobs. You talk like a jackdaw in a tin."

"Well, I don't think I do!" exclaimed Minnie furiously. " 'Tis just as bad for me to leave my job as 'tis for the boys to help at home. You hopes they'll both get on, one of these days. You don't think nothing at all about me though, Father. I've got a job, too. I wants to be a cook some day. I can do myself

a bit of good as a cook, and earn myself a bit o' money. More'n I shall ever get if I come home, I can tell thee!"

"Minnie!" broke in my Mother, scandalized. "Don't talk to your Father like that. He is your Father, you know!"

"What's that got to do with it? 'Tis true what I said."

"Yes!" cried my Father, his temper rising. "I'll tell thee what's it got to do with it! All the time you was a gal, I worked from dawn 'til dusk for 'e, gie'd thee everything I could afford, and had to go without meself to do it. So did your Mother when she could get about!"

Minnie wiped her hands on her apron, and turned to face my Father. We lads waited with bated breath. But Minnie wasn't afraid. It looked as if my Father was facing a chip off the old block.

"Perhaps so! But don't you think you did it all on your own, because you nor Mother never did that! Ever since I could hold a tea towel, I did my share. I did my share, and the share o' one or two others at home in my time, let me tell you, Father. Aye, and when things got bad, my reward for it was to be turned out to earn my own living at a time when I didn't want to go! *And* I've always managed to send 'e home a few shillings now and then. Now you wants me back! Well, I didn't want to go when you turned me out, and now I don't want to come back! And I'm not comin', so there!"

"You *be* comin', my gal," said my Father quietly. " 'Tis your duty to."

"It ain't nothing o' the sort! Women's been kept under long enough. There's nothing they can do except go into service or get married. You'm like all the men, Father: you thinks as you can do what you like with your women folk. You thinks as you only got to tell 'em what to do, and it's their duty to do it! Well, here's one that won't do it! You can go and tell 'em you wants me home if you like: I shall only get a job elsewhere!"

My Father was so astounded at Minnie's effrontery that he stood rooted, pipe in hand, bearded mouth hanging open. In the fearful silence that followed, my Mother exclaimed, almost in terror, "Minnie!"

"Well," she went on with reckless courage, " 'tis quite right, Mother. I wish to God I'd been a boy. D'you think I want to live like you've lived? I seen too much on it to want to do it myself. I ain't going to get married and slave away for nothing and beg a shillin' off some man when I wants it! I wants me job, and I wants me independence; and I be going to have it!"

My Father was on the verge of striking her.

"Now, now, Father," said my Mother, half rising from her chair. "Don't do that in front of me here. You go on out for a minute."

Without a word, my Father turned and went.

"Now, Minnie," said my Mother sharply. "I don't want you to come home if you feels like that. I'd sooner manage as we are. I expect we shall find some way out of it; p'raps one of the boys 'll bring his gal home here after I'm gone. Because I don't expect I shall last that long." Her voice softened as she went on: "But I don't want you to talk to my man like that, Minnie. Surely you loves us just a little bit?"

Minnie began to cry quietly as she answered:

"It ain't that I don't love 'e, Mother. It ain't that at all. But Father, he ups and he says as I'll have to come home, just as if what I thought didn't matter at all! He's always treated us like that. I'm fed up wi' it. If he'd asked me if I minded, I would have said 'yes'. But he a-telling me what to do, as if I wasn't of age, just made me wild, that's all."

"But you said some terrible wicked things to 'n, gal. You won't get the better of Father like that!"

"They was true, anyway. The trouble is, he's like all Fathers: they don't think. I *do* want to get married one day, o' course, but if I comes home to look after you and him, what chance shall I have? I'll not only be too old to earn good money when you two passes on, but I'll be too old to find a man. If I tries to find one afore, he'll have to marry you and Father, as well as me. And I'd be lucky to find a feller as 'd do that! Besides, I wouldn't tie a good man down to such a thing."

"Have you got somebody in mind then, Minnie, my dear?"

Minnie did not answer at once. Then she said:

"Yes, Mother, I have."

"Well, now, my dear," said Mother reprovingly, "you needn't 've said all them things to Father like you did. If he'd have known, he wouldn't 've asked 'e to come home, I'm sure

o' that! But you've never said nothing, not even to me, your own Mother. How did you expect Father to know?"

"He didn't ask me to come home. He told me!"

"Well, you'll never alter Father, my dear. He's pretty set in his ways, and he's head of the family, so there it is. I knows how you feels, my dear. I'll have a talk with Father when he cools down a bit. Never mind about coming home. I expect we shall manage."

Minnie mopped up the soapsuds, and wrung the cloth out in the bowl.

"I'd like to come home, then, until we gets married, Mother." She stood looking into the fire. "I . . . I hopes Father won't be too awkward if I do."

"He won't be aukurd if you're not. I'll tell 'im all about it. Don't go frettin' yerself."

There was an embarrassed silence between them.

"But," warned Mother, "before you makes up your mind about it, I wants you to know one thing. My man is the head of the house. That's the way it's always been run, and that's the way it always will be." Then she added gently: "I want it like that, too, Minnie. That's the way I looks at things."

Minnie knelt down by her Mother, and burying her head in Mother's lap, burst into a fit of sobbing. "There, there, then," said Mother soothingly. "There, there. . . ."

She nodded at us to go out of the room. We nearly ran into Father, who had returned, ready to resume the argument. My Mother waved him out again, nodding violently as she did so. My Father raised his eyebrows in query. Mother nodded more violently than ever, and waved him away again. So he came out behind us, muttering into his beard:

"Beggared if I knows what to make of 'em."

CHAPTER SEVEN

MY Father's attitude towards Minnie after this little upset was peculiar. He was kind enough to her, but did not enter into conversation with her too freely. He never asked her to do anything; that was left to Mother. There was no question of his giving way in his ideas about what Minnie's duties as a daughter were. She was carrying out those duties—there was no further need, therefore, to discuss the matter. But he knew that Minnie could, and would, be easily roused to resent his authority. Perhaps to show that authority was a very real thing, household affairs, when they crossed his sphere of action, were discussed by him with my Mother—never with Minnie. He never suggested that Minnie should do this or that task—he put it to Mother, " 'T'd be a good plan if you seen to it," leaving my Mother to tell Minnie what to do. To that extent, then, there was a certain "aukurdness" between my Father and Minnie; a kind of mutual restraining of dormant forces, which, given their lead, would conflict with each other severely enough to disrupt the family harmony.

So life carried on under the new arrangement fairly smoothly; but we all felt that my Father, quite determined to keep his status as head of the household, would brook not the slightest behaviour on the part of his children which might tend to undermine it. To that extent, then, the unspoken disagreements between my Father and his daughter caused a certain tension which had not been among us before, and which kept us pretty warily in our places.

A few months after Grandmamma died, Martha the letter-carrier called at my Father's house. She handed in a letter addressed to Tom; and when Tom had opened it, he carried it to the living-room window, that he might see it better, scratched the back of his head, and turning it this way and that, he said:

" 'Tis from Fred, Father."

"Oh," said my Father, "what do 'er say?"

"It do say, *I will meet thee at the Shirestream tomorrow, wansdi arternoon.*"

"Is that all he says, then?"

"Ah."

"Silly young fool," grumbled my Father. "He've never wrote us a letter afore, and when he does, he writes things like that now! Did he say what time, then?"

"No."

"Nothing at all? Did he say who he wanted to meet?"

"No."

"Well, there's a great looby! Tomorrow afternoon. I can't go, as he very well knows. I can let you go if you like, Tom, but it'll make the job hang out that extra time."

"No, I'd better not go," said Tom. "How far dost reckon it is, Father?"

"About ten or twelve mile, I'd reckon. Frank, 'oulds't thee like to go and meet thee brother?"

"Yes, I'd go, Father," I said eagerly.

"Well, you go, then," said my Father. "Mother'll give you summat to take to the lad. Tell him as I couldn't come, no more couldn't Tom, but I specs he do know that. Tell him to

come home whenever he do like, or whenever he can. You tell him I don't hold anything against him, and I'd be pleased to see him. Don't forget that 'ere."

"No, Father."

So away I went after an early dinner next day. I turned into the Aldertown-Stokingbase turnpike, along which, so it was said, a steam carriage had been driven some years before at the unbelievable speed of thirty miles an hour. I wore knickerbockers, long black stockings, tip-nailed boots, and a blouse and jacket which Tom had worn before me. My cap with its shiny peak, of which I was very proud, I set at an angle as I started off, but I put it straight as I passed the field where my Father and Tom were working, because my Father would have told me severely to "put the cap on as 'tis meant to be worn, Frank. Folk'll think you'm drunk else." The reason why I had to take the Aldertown turnpike was because the more direct route lay through the gipsy village of Rheuben's Close; and to get through that village safely in those days you needed at least six or eight grown men together.

It seemed a long, long time as I tramped all through that October afternoon before the green, copper-covered pinnacle of Shirestream St. Johnas Church tower greeted me from between the distant trees. I was hungry now, and more than once I thought of the good things my Mother had put in the rush basket for Fred, which I carried over my shoulder on a stick. But I did not yield to the temptation, feeling sure that Fred would share with me when we met.

At last I came to a few outlying houses of the village and, turning away from the turnpike, I took the crooked little gravelled path which led up by the back of the church into the village proper.

"At the Shirestream," I reflected. " 'Tis some time since I were this way. I hardly knows where 'tis."

But my anxiety was soon relieved, for as I turned a bend in the pathway, there lay the wide stretch of water, bordered on three sides by masses of tall rushes, and on the side nearest the path, by an old oak fence. There was no sign of Fred, so I was

glad enough to sit down on the fence, hang my rush basket on a post, and await my brother.

As I settled down, a sudden splash attracted my attention, quite near the bank. I saw a small, underwater shape speeding along there, until it merged with the darkness of overhanging rushes. But it did not quite merge. I stared at it for some moments, keeping as still as a mouse, and, as I watched, the shadow gradually rose to just under the surface of the water, and a little yellow beak protruded into the air. My foot slipped; the beak was at once withdrawn, and the shadow fled further along the bank until it disappeared completely into another underwater shade. I watched and watched this spot in fascination, and as I did so the moorhen broke water some twenty yards away and scuttled to the opposite bank, half running, half flying, leaving a troubled trail of circles behind it. From among the rushes its voice echoed clearly as it cackled its alarm: "Fulluck! Fulluck!"

At last, Fred turned up; and what a gentleman he had become to be sure! He wore a smart black jacket of rough tweed which reached almost to his knees, and which had high, tiny lapels, and one button almost to the neck, to display his imitation moleskin waistcoat underneath. He wore a narrow, rounded white collar, and a narrow black tie. His trousers fitted smartly to his legs, and his tip-nailed boots, highly polished, protruded beneath them. The rig-out was set off by a squarish-shaped bowler hat, and, subject for admiration!, there was something which looked remarkably like a moustache beginning to form on his upper lip! Oh, Fred was doing very well indeed, Fred was! He now earned eleven shillings a week and all his keep; and to prove how well off he was, he put a sixpence into my hand in the same grand manner my Father used when giving us our weekly halfpenny. His master was very well pleased with him, and had promised him a foreman's job at *fifteen shillings* per week if he kept up his good work for another twelve months, and who could tell how far Fred would go then? Why, he might one day be earning a clear sovereign! Then, perhaps, he *would* think about getting married.

"There's a young lady as I talks to," he said, "as lives down the village. They do say as she ain't bespoke. She do work as a seamstress for sixpence a week in Stokingbase. In fact, Frank," said Fred, "I've struck lucky, and no mistake! It ain't a bad little village, and my boss is a good 'un and looks arter I. I lives along with him; sleeps above the hosses with two other lads, and has me dinner in the kitchen along with the servants. My Master don't charge I nothink; not a penny."

"Ah," I said admiringly, "I specs they knows a good man when they got one."

"Might be summat in that," said Fred modestly.

Fred, never a great conversationalist, had covered the subject of himself fairly well, and we both looked at the water for want of something to say. Suddenly I said:

"Your steeple ain't such a great biggun as ours, Fred." Fred cocked his eye at the copper-covered pinnacle critically.

"No," he said with great wisdom, "I don't suppose it is. Still, there ain't many steeples as high as Marshwood round these here parts. The old church here is bein' done up, if you like to come and have a look."

I picked up the rush basket, and we went along the little footpath, into the churchyard gate. The double doors were open, and there was a sound of hammering inside the building. I paused to read the inscription on the ancient tiled porch. The oak frame was grey and hard with age.

"I can't quite make out what it do say on that there porch," said Fred in a low voice. "I specs you do, Frank. If our Tom was here, he could."

"I can tell 'e," I said, and read out the quaint inscription:

" 'Out of yor cherete pray for the sowles of James Spyre and Ione his wyfe which caused this porche to be mad at ther cost the yere of our Lord 1533.' "

"Fifteen-thirty-three," echoed Fred. "Let's see: fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—that'll be nigh on four hunderd years, I do reckon. It wants Tom here; he'd tell us."

" 'Tis about three hundred and fifty years old," I said, slightly aggrieved. Fred grinned at me.

"All right, Frankie boy," he said. "Then you be as good a scholard as young Tom, I can see. I'm beggared if thee ussn't be the Parish Clerk one o' these here fine days!"

I was too pleased to let Fred see it, so I whispered:

"Don't 'e go using that there language in God's House, Fred. Father never taught 'e to do that."

"Ah! Father never taught I a lot o' things I be doing of now," laughed Fred as we went inside.

The normal quietness of the dim interior was being rudely shattered by half a dozen or so burly workmen busy upon the scaffolding against the West wall. I was horrified to see that one of them had his hat on, and was puffing away at an old clay pipe, which he hastily slipped into the pocket of his apron as we two lads entered.

"By gum!" rumbled the big man down at us from the scaffolding. "I did think 'twere the Vicar! Whatever do 'e want to creep in like that 'ere for—makin' anybody jump?"

I did not say anything as the man resumed smoking and Fred only laughed.

The coats of arms on the old church walls, the still, stone statues, the busts in odd alcoves, and the pictures of the Last Supper above the altar, all gently tinted by the mingling lights from the stained-glass windows, engaged my awestruck attention. The voices of the workmen sounded eerie as the echo bounded and rebounded in the rafters. A calm, peaceful Virgin stared down at us from her pedestal, as if she were purposefully closing her holy ears to the ribald jests of the workmen. The pulpit, beautifully carved, bore the legend, "Mad by Henri Sly 1643 W.M. I.B".

"Two hunnerd years old," whispered Fred in my ear, "and they do say as they books chained on that there queer-lookin' reading-stand is old 'uns, too." I went over to study them. They were copies of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.

Having got over my first feelings about the place, I thought that, after all, it was not so very different from ours at home. It was older, certainly. Then a bright thought struck me.

"How many bells 'ave they got?" I whispered.

"Five, same as Marshwood," said Fred. "And a clock."

"Oh ah," said I with some disappointment.

I was thoughtful as we went out. I wondered where Henri Sly was lying now; what sort of a man he was, where he had worked, and what sort of a fuss they made of him when the pulpit was put up. It was new, then, that pulpit, and perhaps it did not make much of a stir in that age of craftsmen. Mark Vincent's work in our church—nobody took much notice of it, not even Mark himself, when the job was done. But perhaps they would in two or three hundred years' time. Mark wouldn't care by then, because he'd be paid his money, dead and gone; and perhaps somebody who wasn't born or thought of, nor wouldn't be for a couple of lifetimes, would look at Mark's work and then wonder what sort of a man *he* was. But however little Mark might think about it at the time, or however long he'd been dead, there, standing and living still, would be a piece of Mark; just as the carved pulpit was a piece of Henri Sly, and the porchway was a piece of James Spyre and Ione, his wife.

I wondered what sort of a man James Spyre was; and if Ione had been dark or fair, slim or fat; or if she could cook like Mother could, or if she had no need to cook at all. No one knew, nor knew where they lay in the churchyard; only the porch stood as mute testimony to the fact that they were both once warm, living beings, who were born, lived, loved, cried, laughed, slept, ate and died. Only the porch was testimony to the fact, standing there aloof, strange, indifferent, even reserved, as a man among strangers with the longing in his heart for those of his own time and place.

Strangers. . . . In my late years, I know too well what happens to the old, the past; the new knows nothing about them, and although they live in the same village, tread the same ground, see the same familiar scenes, the old folk still remain strangers. . . .

We went out of the churchyard gate, into the tiny village square with its walnut tree in the centre, and wooden seats about its gnarled roots.

The Post Office was directly opposite, and there were a few new cottages bordering the square. We sat under the arms of the walnut tree, in the fleeting warmth of the winter sun. I gave Fred the things Mother had sent him, and we shared a meal while I talked of home and gave him my Father's message. Suddenly Fred forgot his greatness, and asked me in a tone which made me think that he was, after all, a little homesick:

"Be they all right, Frank? Were Father very upset when I runned away? Is Mother's legs all right? How's young Tom? And Minnie?"

"They be all right, Fred," I said.

Fred cocked his hat over his eyes, leaned back against the tree with his hands in his trousers pockets, and stared hard at the Post Office. We sat there like that for a long time. Suddenly Fred said:

"Time you was on your way back agen, Frank. 'Tis a tidy step."

"Yes," I said as I rose to my feet. " 'Tis time I was on my way home. Like as not it'll be dark afore I gets there, unless I gets a ride off somebody. Well, good-bye, Fred. Pleased to 've seen 'e. I won't forget to tell 'em."

"No. Don't 'e forget to tell 'em."

I turned and went off down the pathway. When I looked back Fred stood up, watching me. As I got near the corner, he pushed his hat back, plunged his hands deeper into his trousers pockets, kicked a stone along the ground, and, whistling, hurried off to his lodgings.

So on I went, through the old village of Shirestream proper, and into the long, sweeping vales leading into Ram's Valley. Half-naked woods clustered on distant slopes, distant hedges criss-crossing, and country roads cutting across fields. Alone I trudged, between the quietness and dampness and loneliness of the fields, my boots sounding very clearly as the sun gathered speed in its downward flight, and the thin clouds became thicker, portent of yet another wet night.

I did not like it very much when Fred showed so much pride in the church of Shirestream St. Johnas. Their church was

much, much older than Marshwood's, which had been built but thirty years previously. Although their church had a clock tower, I felt sure that the clock would always be going wrong, and anyway, the steeple was nothing like as high as Marshwood's, with its iron cock on the top which, so my Father said, always crowed on the thirty-first of September. They might have five bells, but I was sure that their team could never be as good as the one my Father coached in Marshwood's tight, cold belfry—I doubted whether there was a better team in England than Brother Tom and Jim Ruse and the Cheriton brothers and my Father. I thought it would not be very long before I learned to swing the bells myself. I had once asked my Father if I could learn; but he was afraid lest one of the stays gave way and pulled me up to the ceiling, as had happened years before to old Carrier Ruse.

My Father said he could remember when the old church fell down, and knew some of the men who built the new one. Queer characters, some of these; roving masons and labourers of huge physical strength and enormous capacity for beer and quarrelling up at the Malt House Inn, but whose skill in delicately adjusting massive stones with old-fashioned, hand-worked tackle was something uncanny. My Father spoke regretfully of the old church, but agreed that it had been too small, and had been dangerous for many, many years. It was only due to God's good grace that no one was in it when it crashed to the ground.

The sides of the hill were now in deepest shade, but the tops of the tallest trees caught the reflected light of the departed sun as in a cage. All through the gathering night I trudged, passing Carter's Ley on the right, and on into the scattered village of Ram's Valley; on past the church, with its quaint little ornamental tower nestling among the rustling hollybanks and yews. My Father told me that Ram's Valley Church was built the year before Fred was born; before that, people had to walk from Ram's Valley either to Shirestream proper, Rheuben's Close, or far-away Wooltown. There seemed to be a good deal of church-building going on about ten years before

I was born. I remember Walter Nash once angered my Father by saying that the rich knew they were wicked, and were trying to buy their way into Heaven.

It was a very tired lad who at last opened the familiar gates at the top of Marshwood Church path, and who walked down through the churchyard with the gravestones staring at me as if I was an intruder; and on between the damp scent of yew and holly, out at the gate at the bottom, and along the garden hedge of home. And there was the dear, dim light behind the ivied windows, and when I pulled the leather thong which lifted the latch of the back door, and went inside, there was faithful brother Tom seated before the light from the open hearth, nearly asleep, but keeping an eye on the stock-pot so that I should have a hot meal before going to bed.

. . . . .

The uneasy truce between my Father and Minnie could not go on for ever. There was one thing which, in my Father's estimation, was too important, even for the sake of harmony in the family, to be overlooked. It was strange that he remained silent in the face of it for some few months; but it evidently rankled and, in the end, had to come out. It was this: that every Saturday and Sunday night, when Minnie went to meet her beau, he always left her at the gate when he brought her home. How incensed my Father was at this was shown when one evening Minnie stayed out until ten o'clock, instead of nine, which was her usual time. My Father, who usually went to bed before Tom and I, elected on this evening to stay up.

"Ah," he said, as Minnie slipped in by the back door. "Get's later, don't it, gal?"

Minnie did not answer as she hung her coat in the scullery, lit the candle, and made as if to pass through the living-room, where we were, on her way up the stairs.

"Wait a minute, Minnie," said my Father from his wooden armchair, "I wants to talk to you."

Minnie placed her candle on the table, and stood regarding my Father sullenly.

"What's this here feller o' yours like, my gal?"

She did not answer at once. Then she said, guardedly:

"Oh, he's all right."

"Oh, is he?"

My Father said nothing more, so Minnie said:

"Can I go now?"

"No, not for a minute. What's he do for a living, then?"

"He's a clerk."

"Oh, is he!"

My Father leaned forward to put a spill into the fire. Lighting his pipe, he sat back and resumed:

"Aimin' a bit high, ain't you, gal?"

"No, I don't think so. Clerks ain't so important as all that."

"They usually thinks as the sun shines out of their backsides, my gal. Is that why you don't bring him home, then?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Perhaps he's a little bit too good for our likes, eh, Minnie? Perhaps it wouldn't do to bring him into a poor labourer's home like your own, eh?"

Minnie flushed angrily.

"Look here, Father," she said, raising her voice. "You and me ain't had a go at each other since Grandma died. I knows well enough what you thinks of clerks, and I kept my Walter out of the way so's there wouldn't be no cause for a row. But you got to get at me, one way or another, ain't you? *I'm* not afraid of you, if everybody else is: I knows the way you looks at things the same as I knows the back of my hand. But if you wants to pick a quarrel, Father, I'll oblige ye any time you like!"

" 'Tis the back o' *my* 'and you'll be gettin' if you goes on talking like that!" said my Father grimly.

"And much good may it do you!" flashed Minnie, with hatred in her voice. "It won't alter what I *think* of you, will it?"

So saying, she took up her candle and, slamming the stairs door behind her, hurried off up to her room.

My Father was much distressed by her outburst. At first, his anger blinded him to any reason for it. He wondered what the younger generation were coming to these days. He never heard tell of anyone else's daughter speaking to her parents like that, and he wondered why he had not, as he had threatened, given Minnie the "back o' my 'and". He reckoned he knew what the trouble was. Young Minnie had been working up at Ash House and seen how the gentry carried on, and had got

ideas about herself over it. He felt that she despised her own people and her own home after being up at Ash House, and he reckoned she'd seen the gentry's women living pretty well as they pleased, and that was where she'd got the idea from that she could live as *she* pleased. That was why an ordinary decent village chap wasn't good enough for her, and why she'd got round to one of "these here juggerin' clerks!"

Clerks! My Father hated clerks. They never did any work that he could see; at any rate, they never did a man's work. Not as my Father knew the term "man".

"Slack-twisted workshies wi' dandified ways," he said, "and

clothes as makes 'em look summat like a cross between a Berkshire steeplejack and a Hampshire gravedigger. Wasting their lives pushing a pen across paper while the likes of us sweat and slave to keep them! And the airs and graces they put on! Why, they treat men like us, who put the food into their mouths and the clothes on their backs, worse than the gentry do!"

No wonder Minnie did not wish to bring her clerk home! He dared say that her clerk had been putting ideas into her head against her own family. "Anyway," he said, "what would a clerk be wanting, courting our Minnie? What if he is only out for his own ends, and would leave her as soon as he got what he wanted? I wouldn't put it past any clerk; no, I wouldn't put it past any clerk!"

My Father lapsed into silence after this tirade, and we two boys sat silent, too. After a while, he calmed himself down.

"I think," he said eventually, in a tone more anxious than angry, "as it's about time she *did* bring him home, Tom!"

And then Tom, with another of those surprising bursts of courage which he sometimes displayed, said:

"Well, Father, you'll have to be a lot different wi' Minnie afore she does anything like that!"

There was a silence while my Father surveyed his young son who had spoken up so bravely. I thought Tom was certain to be in for the rough edge of his tongue as well as Minnie, but my Father said, almost as if excusing himself:

"Well, I can't make top nor tail on't. It seems I only got to open my mouth and Minnie flies up in the air afore I can say anything. I don't want to have a row with her as I knows on. But I never knows what to expect from her these days, and I suppose I am a bit upset like afore I starts talking to her. Seems like we rubs each other up the wrong way."

He rose from his chair and went off out into the scullery. We heard him fumble for his hat in the dark, and heard him let himself out, his footfalls tramping heavily round the outside end of the cottage, and away down the garden path.

"Seems as Father's pretty upset," I said to Tom.

" 'Tis his own fault," said Tom shortly, and went off to bed.

I sat there, perplexed and miserable, because my Father was miserable. Young as I was, I could see how much it meant to my Father that he should bring us up in what he regarded as the proper way. I knew that his love and concern for his children were boundless. He was anxious above all things that we should be right and good men and women—and what had happened? Fred had turned his back upon all my Father's dreams of carrying on the family traditions. He did not defy my Father as Minnie had been doing—he did worse than that. He skulked away by stealth. And my Father kept his feelings to himself, forgave him, and wished him well.

Minnie was behaving in such a way that he did not know how he could help her. He could, as I very well knew, and no doubt as his inclination was, take a firm stand with her and bend her to his will; but he was wise enough to listen to the moderating advice of my Mother, and kind enough, despite his sternness, to hesitate to stand upon what he regarded as his rights with his daughter. And now Tom had on more than one occasion let slip the fact that he might not have the love for my Father which my Father bore towards his children.

Lad that I was, I knew something of what was going on inside my Father. I did not follow Tom to bed—I resolved that Father should not come in to find we had all deserted him. No, I would never do that; I would never desert my Father!

I waited for a very long time, listening to the footfalls coming slowly towards the cottage, pausing, slowly receding again, then back again as he walked up and down the garden path in the darkness. At last he came in, and I noticed as he bent his head to enter the low living-room doorway that there were many grey streaks in his fine black beard.

"Hallo, son," he said. "Tom gone on? How is it you haven't gone too, then? 'Tis gettin' late, you know."

"I was waiting for you, Father," I said.

My Father sat down heavily, and regarded me kindly for a moment or so.

"What did you wait for me for, then, boy?"

Red and embarrassed, fearful of his admonition, I replied:

"I thought you was a bit worried, Father."

I fully expected him to tell me to cut along and mind my own business. Instead, on that evening, one of my most thrilling but perhaps saddest moments of my life came to me—my Father confided in me.

"Well," he said, "and so I am, Frank. I ain't at all pertickler about Minnie and me carryin' on towards each other like we been doing lately. She thinks 'tis my fault, I thinks 'tis hers. I've never had none on ye stand up to yer Father like Minnie do, and I've always been taught as it ain't right as a gal should. I can't seem to see, Frank, as she's right in the way she looks at things, and I suppose she don't think I'm right in my way, either. I don't know what to make of it."

He undid his leather laces, and slipped his feet out of his tip-nailed boots.

"I'm going up to see her, I think," he said. "I'm going to tell her as I loves her same as I've always done. If us don't agree, I'll tell her as I don't want us to quarrel about it. I might be a rough old man, but I don't want her to lose her love for her Father."

He wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

"You cut along upstairs, son," he said.

A little while later, as I lay in my bed, my heart warmed towards him and my sorrow for him almost more than I could bear, I heard him blow out the lamps and creep up the stairs in the darkness. Quietly, he opened the door of Minnie's room. I heard Minnie's bed creak as my Father stood there without saying anything. The bed creaked again.

"Is that you, Father?" came Minnie's whispered voice.

"Ah."

There was a pause, and then, irritably, Minnie said:

"What d'ye want now, then?"

There was another pause, and then:

"I on'y looked in to say 'Good night'."

Receiving no answer, he softly closed the door and went to his own room. . . .

So Minnie never let her man meet my Father until the time for the wedding was fixed. This was about two years later, and when the young man was presented to him, there was a certain hostility about him which my Father knew no means to overcome. I knew that my Father felt like a stranger at the wedding, and he was almost treated as such by Minnie. He gave Walter a sovereign, which was all he could afford, and which the young man accepted with a certain diffidence. The couple went off to London to live, Minnie writing occasionally to Mother, but never once mentioning my Father. He thought about writing to her once or twice, but if it was difficult to speak his emotions, it was impossible for him to put them on paper.

Through the years, her letters became less and less frequent until they dropped off altogether, and except for one solitary occasion, we lost contact with Minnie. I remember, in his old age, my Father saying to Mother a few months before she died:

"I s'pose I drove her away, same as I drove the others, Mother."

"You two just didn't understand each other, my dear," she said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ONE June evening found me at work in Marshwood churchyard. I was sweeping up needles from under the ancient yew tree by the South doors. I yawned, paused for a moment, and leaned on the handle of my besom.

I was very happy. During the times when I went to work with my Father and Tom, I was of real use to them. The farmers had more than once praised me over the way I went about the work, and my Father was exceedingly proud because of this. He had even let me put a course or two of thatch on the side of the roof away from the road. It was not as good as Tom could do, but not as rough as the efforts of a lad who had never seen the job. I did not know whether my Father was joking or not when he said:

"Why, by the end of the year, boy, you'll be able to thatch as well as Fred ever could!" I was pleased and embarrassed to hear my Father say that, and when I ventured to look at him to see if he really meant it, there was certainly a twinkle in his eyes, but his greying whiskers hid any other sign by which I might read him.

I had also some familiarity with the Sexton's duties; and I worked in the churchyard now so often with my Father and Tom during the evenings and week-ends that the Rev. Seaman quite took my share of the work into consideration when he discussed with my Father the jobs he wanted doing in the churchyard and Rectory grounds.

I was receiving a little more deference at home; if we worked late, Minnie would hurry to get me a supper, just as she did the two men. As we entered the scullery, I would importantly hand my cap to my Father for him to place beside his own hat on the wooden pins too high in the wall for me to reach. Kicking off my boots, I would place them beside my Father's and Tom's below the coat-hangers, and mimick

my Father's relief when he took off his heavy tip-nails, quite convinced that my young feet suffered as much as his at the end of my long, tiring evening! I imagine my elders were all pretty well amused, but they played their part well enough for me never to find out.

I wonder my tunic did not burst its seams!

I looked up at the church I had grown to love so well. The heavy half-doors stood open to a wide, mysterious interior, cool, dim, and with vague metallic reflections in its depths from a dusty window. Above the square-topped belfry, the steeple towered into the evening sky. The rusty cock at its summit swung lazily in the breeze, and the low rays of the sun flashed occasionally as the weathervane moved. I noticed on the left-hand corner of the battlements a number of loose stones; I made a mental note to tell my Father about it, or the swinging of the tower as the bells were rung might one day work out these loose stones and send them crashing to the ground.

To the left of the wide porch, a little tower with a conical lead roof was wedged in the corner between the porch and the nave, containing the tight spiral of the belfry staircase. Then there was the body of the church itself with its ten diamond-leaded windows visible, two to the left of the porch, eight to the right. The eight had white designs on them, protected by a strong wire mesh. Inside the church, these designs revealed themselves in the familiar richness of reds and purples and golds.

The lych-gate clicked behind me with its old familiar rattle. Who should be leaning over it, regarding me intently, but old Shep. Shep was on the point of retiring from the hills; he was terribly crippled in his joints, and had become a little wandering in his talk. "A tile loose," as my Father said. "And the rot set in unnerneath so's you can't nail un tight agen."

"Ah," announced old Shep as he took his clay from his toothless gums. "Time takes 'em all, Frank; time takes 'em all."

"Oh, do it, Mr. Daubenay?"

"Ah, that it do. Time takes 'em all!"

He cast a cynical eye over the old tombs surrounded by rusted and broken railings; over the old graves with tottering stones, slabs, kerbs and china flowers in broken, globe-shaped glass cases, most with just the trace of a name or date still not quite weathered out, some with their messages as completely erased as the sorrowing relatives who had long ago caused them to be put there.

Beyond these stood a group of cypresses, and a wide patch of green with the tiniest of mounds on it which my Father called the "Cherubs' Choir", because all stillborn babies were buried there. Beyond these again, and down the slope of the yard, stood newer erections, keen-edged, white, garish against the older stones.

Just then, my Father came round the corner of the West wall, pushing his wheelbarrow over the mown grass. I well remember the gardener's shed beside the West wall, under the rhododendrons: a little hollow which smelt oddly of damp, oily leaves, leaf-mould, rotting grass and other indefinable smells generally associated with shady, decayed corners. There was one doorway in this shed upon which I always gazed with fascinated horror. I did not see it opened when I was a lad, but was to open it myself often enough later on. Inside, I was told, rested the bier; and in my imagination I saw it there with its yellow handles folded in horrid repose. There it stayed until those times when the passing-bell sent its voice endlessly, insistently over the village and over the fields, so that the labourers became silent with the solemnity of the moment, and then asked one another in subdued tones who it might be for; and later, my Father would bring the vehicle out into the sunlight, click the handles into position and grease the wheels, for the last journey must be silent and without a hitch. And from behind our curtained windows I would sometimes watch a little dark procession go by, of men in black and women in long black dresses and black bonnets, my Father leading the way in his tall black hat and cut-away

coat, the bier between them bearing its long, narrow varnished shape with the gleaming brass handles. I did not stay long in the vicinity of this corner: I passed it as quickly as I could to work in a part of the churchyard where the sun shone.

"What cheer, Shep!" said my Father. "How be gettin' on, then?"

"I be all right, Master Weston. Just gettin' on my way home. Beggared if I shan't have to give myself more time, comin' home, you know. 'Tis the screws in the j'ints as I've got, an' no mistake."

"Sett'n' up on them hills ain't done you no good, I'll be bound."

"No, I s'pose it ain't. But there, I've had a pretty long run. Seventy-five come Plough Monday, I be, s'know. Seventy-five. Cain't grumble at that really, s'know, Master Weston. Though my old Granfer worked on till past eighty. *And* I might do the same!"

"I don't think you will," said my Father in his matter-of-fact Hampshire way. "The sooner you comes down from they hills, the better."

"And what will Missus and me live on if I do?"

My Father considered for a moment.

"There's the Charity," he said. "There's like to be a vacancy soon, and I'm going to put 'e forr'ard."

"Well, that's kind on 'e!" said old Shep. "And who's to fall into the grave, then, so's I can get in the line?"

There was always a certain antipathy towards "The Charity". Only a limited number of poor persons could qualify, and these only when one of the holders no longer had need of such things. Acceptance of the Charity was tantamount to resigning oneself to the end. "Dying money", the less aged called it, but in old age and penury they were anxious enough to qualify, concealing their anxiety by disparaging references to the health of those who would not die quickly enough to let them in.

My Father realized that he had touched upon the old

shepherd's pride; for he liked to imagine himself as ageless, even if the rest of the village knew he was "breakin' up".

"Well, anyways," said my Father, "when you finishes, if ever you wants to give me a hand, I can always fit thee in."

"No, no thanks, Master Weston. Thanks all the same. I *ain't* finished yet and dunno as I'm thinkin' o' doin' so either. Anyways, I wouldn't be much use to thee drawin' straw. 'Tis the screws, you know; I cain't bend down like I used."

"Well, call in for a few vegetables or anything like that."

"Ah, thank'e, I 'ull." The old man turned away, but he had his thoughts on the Charity all the same; for, lest by his stand he might have prejudiced his chances, he turned back to say:

"O' course, there will come a time when I cain't do no more, Master Weston. But I hope God wills it won't be yet awhile. I'd like to call on thee then, Master Weston, if I can."

"Never you worry," said my Father. "You carry on 'til you can't go no further an' then come and see me. You'll be all right."

"Ah!" said Shep, much relieved. "Thank 'e, Master Weston. You'm a kind man. Tell 'e what, I '*ave* ben a bit worrited like, but I shan't fret myself now. Thank 'e. You'm a kind man."

"Well, Mr. Daubenay," said my Father. "You been kind to we when you could. I don't forget things like that."

Old Shep nodded, and hobbled off down the hill.

"Damned if the old chap didn't lay 'is ears back and no mistake," said my Father with a smile. "I didn't mean to upset 'un. Well, Frank boy, come on inside, then, an' I'll see if I can larn 'e to handle the bells!"

The bells! I wondered for a moment if I had heard aright! But it was right enough, for my father had removed his hat and entered the South porch, and was already turning left towards the spiral stairs. I followed him, both of us ducking as we went through the low belfry opening, the circular stone stair being so cramped that I had to be careful lest my Father kicked me with his heels as he climbed on ahead.

"Mind your head," he said, as we passed under the platform just outside the belfry chamber, and in we went to the little red-tiled chamber with the five bell ropes, fluffy grips coloured red and white and blue wound upon the pegs in the wall. My Father unwound the fourth bell.

"I went up and tied the clapper this afternoon. 'Tis what they calls a dummy clapper when you ties 'en. Now take your stand like this, boy."

I watched him plant his feet slightly apart.

"Don't stand right under the hole," he said, "or you won't pull straight when you leans forr'ard. Now you watch me."

He took a firm hold upon the grip and pulled evenly and smoothly, bending slightly forward as he did so. There was a rumble above the wooden ceiling as the wheel spun into motion, and the grip snaked down to the floor, my Father letting it go, but holding the end of the rope in his left hand. The rope swung upwards again, and he steadied it. At the same time there was a muffled "Clank!" above the ceiling, and he pulled down again.

"What you got to look out for, boy, is the loop when you pulls down. Don't get 'n tangled round your legs; that's why you stands a little away from 'n and bends forr'ards to keep your feet out of the way. Don't jerk the bell; a long, even pull and you'll feel when the clapper is goin' to strike, then steady, and pull down again."

He handed the bobbing grip to me.

"That's it," he said. "A bit further back. Wait until the rope swings up, then pull down strong and even, but not sudden. If the stay do go, you'll find the rope pulling out o' your hands. Let 'un go. Don't try to hang on to 'n, or you'll be pulled up to the ceiling, same as Carrier Ruse was years ago. 'Tis better to let go down here than up there, I can tell 'e, boy," he said with grim humour. "Don't 'e be frit. Watch the rope—up she goes—NOW!"

I pulled as my Father had told me, and as I had watched others pull hundreds of times before. I was a little uncertain at first, but after a few tries I managed to swing the bell

rhythmically and with confidence. My Father coached me until he could see I had the knack of it, then sat on the little stool to watch. After I had had enough, he said:

"Well done, boy! You took to that like a duck takes to the water! Ah, I reckons the bellringin's in the fam'ly. But 'tis a long job yet. You got changes, first-call changes, and then the change ringin'. It ain't done in a day, nor a year neither; but I reckon you ought to be in the peal by next Christmas. And won't that make Fred look up when he hears on it!"

"He might hear us sometimes over at St. Johnas," I said. "He might do."

"Ah, he might. They have heard the knell as far as Aldertown on a wet day when the wind been that way. 'T'ould be a dalled funny thing if Fred heard the peal and every time the fourth bell struck he knew 'twas young Frank, 'ouldn't it?"

I went on ahead, and as I bent my head to go through the belfry chamber door, my Father whacked my backside with his huge open hand. I heard him chuckle behind me, and the knowledge of his pleasure with me sent me almost dancing down the stairs.

I was to learn later why my Father had suddenly decided to teach me to ring. Tom and myself were helping him in the churchyard, and Master Mark Vincent went down church path with a cheery "Good night, Master Weston!" My Father looked up and answered the greeting, then said to Tom:

"Old Mark Vincent keeps a-goin', don't he? You know, I've never heard the bowl-turner say aught bad about anybody. A good ringer, too. Pity he's goin' to give up."

"Oh?" said Tom. "Why's that, then?"

"His back," said my Father.

We went on working, the two men swish-swishing the soft grass with their hand-scythes, and myself raking up into heaps behind them.

"Don't go much on young Mose, though, Tom. He knows how to charge, and no mistake. And his work ain't like the old man's. Zeb's a good workman, but he's sort of slow. He don't

take the interest. I reckons 'tis Mose as'll get on. Them sart allus does."

"Jim Ruse is taking over the run to Stockingbase, I heard, Father," said Tom.

"Ah, I'm afraid old Master John's pretty near done for. 'Twas that fall from the belfry ceiling as finished he. The old lady still keeps on the run along wi' Jim, though. Frank, hand me that there bluestone, will 'e? My rip-hook's gettin' a bit of a shoulder on'n, and that won't do."

I watched my Father expertly flicking the stone along each side of the blade.

"That there Jim's a young beggar and no mistake," he grumbled. "There ain't much relyin' on he. I heard as the Postmaster in Stockingbase was fair upset on account of the mails not bein' on time. Young Jim told him to get someone else to do 'em if he warn't satisfied. You can't go talking to them sart o' folks like that, not if you wants to get on. That there Postmaster's only on the look-out for someone to start up agen Jim, and he'll lose his mails job like a shot; you see. And if the mails goes the carryin' goes, too."

"Nobody don't like him," said Tom. "Sight too independent, he is. Folk there on the roadside waitin' an hour or more for him to get out of bed when he feels like it! And if they says anything, he tells 'em to walk!"

"I'd like him to tell *me* that!" said my Father grimly. "I'd knock him off his seat!"

"Pity young Dick wasn't doing the run. Everybody likes he."

"Aye, but Jim's the old gal's favourite. Dick won't get a look-in yet awhiles."

"Dick did say as Mr. Ruse been talking about gettin' a horse and cart for him. He did say as he'd take the mails and the goods and leave Jim the passengers."

"Wants it t'other way about."

"That's what I told Dick. But Dick he did say as he wouldn't get in the way of his brother."

"No," said my Father. "I don't suppose Dick would. He's pretty straight."

My Father thumbed his blade, which was evidently sharpened to his satisfaction, for he resumed work and went on:

"All the village lads is taking to their Fathers' trades or else going into the Army, Tom. Time you made up your mind what you'm going to do, you know."

I noticed that Tom was uneasy at this remark, and that he coloured a little. I do not think his nervousness escaped the eye of my Father.

"Why, Father," he said, addressing the trimmed mound at his feet, "we be all right as we are, ain't we?"

My Father glanced shrewdly towards him.

"Ah," he said. "If you say so, Tom."

. . . . .

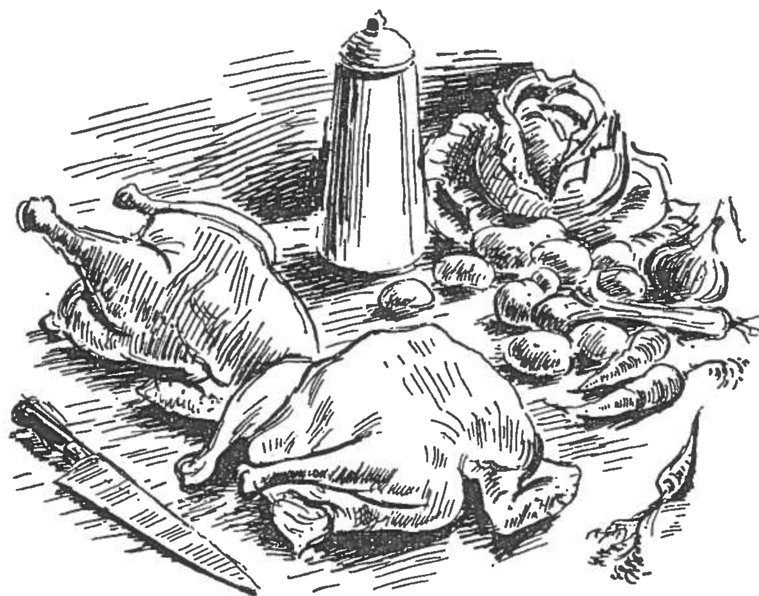
It was not until the following Christmas that we were to learn what was in Tom's mind. It was the first Christmas Fred came home.

The blackbird, active with the dawn and the sharp frost of the previous Christmas Eve, woke me with its fitful "Jink-jink-jink!" shortly before six in the morning. The whole family was a-bustle, except young Stanley; he had to stay in bed out of the way. When I went down, Mother was struggling round with her swollen legs, preparing the breakfast. My Father was shaving, Minnie busy cleaning the shoes, and Tom, already dressed except for his shoes, was watching the birds come for the scraps he had thrown out into our little backyard.

As soon as it was light enough, the blackbird, who had been jinking away under the hedge opposite the ditch, seemed to think that the feast was his monopoly. But the little blue-tits were too quick for him: they bobbed down with a whirr of wings, grabbed each a tiny piece of food, and sped back to the hedge. There they hung, pretty, perky little fellows, grasping the twigs with tiny legs astride. The blackbird, far too late to do anything about them, stood among the scraps glaring at them with his yellow eyes, and flicking his tail with each "Jink!"

But the blackbird would be too shy to stay long, and

would soon flutter back to the safety of the hedge; signal for the bluetits to emerge boldly, to be joined by a couple of greater tits with black polls and white faces, light waistcoats and brilliant blue backs. These flew off to give way to an invading host of house sparrows; there would be some furious skirmishes between these and the chaffinches. The little war was suddenly brought to a truce by the appearance of my Father on his way up to the church to light the fires.



My Father and Tom went off up to church that morning, but I stayed behind to wait for Fred. Mother and Minnie stayed at home to prepare the Christmas dinner: a couple of fowls turning on the spit, a hunk of salt pork sent down from Ash House, boiling in the stock-pot at the back, with carrots, swedes, turnips and cottage kale, all tied in their separate little cloths, all hung inside the lip of the pot and boiling together; for my Father reckoned that he never had a good hot dinner unless he could taste the pudding cloth in it. And in a smaller pot by the side of the fireplace was the Christmas pudding.

Fred came walking in from St. Johnas just before dinner, with a bunch of flowers his Master had given him from one of the hothouses. Mother did not expect him so early and was delighted to see him; she kissed him and cried when he gave her the flowers, and commented upon his splendid appearance and said how proud she was her son had got on so well. We had dinner when the menfolk arrived back from church; and with that over, everyone feeling rather well fed, while Minnie got on with the washing-up we put the table back and arranged ourselves before the open fire.

My Father settled himself in his chair, and lighting the pipe of shag which Minnie had bought him, he looked across at Fred. "Well," he said, "It looks as if the change didn't hurt ye, Fred."

"No, can't say it did, Father. Fifteen shillin' a week I do get now, and soon to be under-foreman. Everything found, and the Master he do say he be very pleased wi' I."

My Father shewed his pride in his face.

"Fifteen shillin' a week, Fred!" he said. "You be doin' better nor ever your Father done at your age. I was gettin' five shillin' a week and workin' along with your Grandfather then. You wouldn't have been earnin' that amount, I don't think, not even in your job, in them days. Times do change, and no mistake."

"Ah, that they do. The Master did say come another year and he would give me a guinea a week. Though he did say as I would have to help a bit with me keep then."

"Well, that's only right and fair. After all, most men is payin' the rent and keepin' a family on fourteen shillin' these days. I suppose you'll be thinkin' o 'gettin' married avore long then, Fred?"

Fred coloured slightly.

"I be goin' about wi' a young 'ooman as works at the Post Office," he said. "I ain't never asked her nothing like that, yet. There's plenty o' time. The Master he do say as there's room enough above the stables if we thinks o' makin' a match on it."

"You got an uncommon good Master, boy; don't 'e forget that."

My Mother turned her head to look into the fire. My Father puffed quietly, watching her. He knew "something was on", because Mother always looked into the fire or out of the window when she was about to say something my Father might not like.

"What's to become of our Tom, Father?" she asked.

My Father went on smoking, studying Mother's face.

"Tom?" he said at length. "Well, what's the matter wi' Tom? I suppose he's all right, ain't he? You did say as you would let me know if you wanted a change, didn't ye, Tom? You ain't said aught, so I suppose you don't want ar one, do 'e?"

Tom did not answer. Fred turned to look curiously at him. It was Tom's turn to blush.

"Oh, I see," grunted my Father. "Something on, then, Tom. You and your Mother been having things over together, then?"

"Well—I *was* a-goin' to tell 'e, Father," replied Tom in an unusually flustered way.

"H'm! More like you was going to do the same thing as Fred did!"

"Oh no, he wasn't going to do anything of the sort!" broke in Minnie as she came into the room. "Only you went on so when Fred left that the poor boy was afraid to tell you. If you was to hold your temper a bit, you'd know what he was going to say!"

"All right, *all right*!" said my Father nastily. "Don't 'e go tryin' to upset me all on a Christmas Day, too. Come on, then, boy, I ain't goin' to eat thee. What is it, then?"

"Well, I was a-thinkin' . . . I was a-thinkin' of tryin' to get into ginnleman's service, Father."

"Yes," interrupted Minnie again. "A well-set-up lad like him 'd be made a butler straight off!", and she went into a peal of laughter at the very idea.

"And so he *will* be a butler one day," said my Mother stoutly. "Though I might not live to see it."

"No, nor nobody else neither!" put in Fred nastily.

"Hold your tongue, Fred!" said my Father sharply. "There's no need for you to be jealous just acause you got start of the boy. You look out he don't catch thee up and shoot past thee. He's got a head on'n, has our Tom."

"He'll need it to catch *me* up!"

"Oh, for goodness' sake stop quarreling!" said my Mother. "The boy wants Minnie to go up and ask the butler so's he can start up in the pantry at Ash House."

"See the butler!" gasped Minnie. "Lor, Mother, you don't know much about butlers! You might as well ask to see the Queen!"

"Well, I sees him many a time when I be out and about," said my Father. "If you'm afraid of him, I ain't. I'll stop him next time I see him and ask him myself."

"My goodness, don't you do any such thing, Father!" exclaimed Minnie.

"I will," said my Father. "I done it for thee, and I'll do it for Tom."

And my Father did. It so happened that the butler needed another pantry boy; and within a fortnight Tom had left the family, and I had finally left school, and the evening before I started my first full day's work I found myself, after the others had gone to bed, sitting opposite my Father before the open hearth, listening to what he had to say.

"Now, Frank lad," he said. "And what will you want to do?'

"How d'ye mean, Father?"

"Are you going to leave, same as the others, or are you going to stay along of me?"

"I wants to stay along of you, Father," I said.

He looked at me keenly as he fumbled for his pipe.

"O' course, you'm sort of half bespoke to old Colonel Cobb, lad. 'Tis a fine opportunity to be with him. If you don't go I shall have to explain to him, that's all. We didn't know how things would turn out when he spoke about you to me. I don't want you to throw away a good chance, lad."

"I wants to stay along of you, Father," I said again. "I shan't go like the others did. I wants to be a thatcher."

My Father lit his pipe, and again regarded me keenly.

"Yes," he said, as if answering aloud the thought in his own mind, "I think you will." He puffed away once or twice, still watching me. "I think you will, Frank," he said. "I think you will."

I did not answer him; there was no need to. I knew I would stay with him, not only because I loved him with all my heart, but because the village, the Westons' cottages, the trade and especially the church work were as much a part of me then as I was to be of them.

My Father smoked away, thinking a great deal and wondering how to put it into words. I knew what was running through his mind as clearly as if he had been able to tell me. He was thinking that our thatching business was nothing he had done himself, or even that my Grandfather had done before him. It was the accumulated work of the Westons for as far back as made no difference. We had always been known as "the thatchers" for twenty miles about; anyone who wanted house or barn thatched came automatically to us. They did not even think of anyone else, because there was no one else; and they would and did wait a couple of years before they asked an outsider in. I knew what my Father felt; it was all so completely a part of us that it would not, could not, be right for our work to go to someone outside while there was a Weston to carry it on.

Besides, there was the church work. That also had been in the family too long to let it go now. My Father, I felt sure by his devotion to it and the hint he had dropped here and there, felt that God had put us Westons in the village on purpose to look after His House. And I still think that quite possibly my Father was right.

However, he said none of these things. He finished his pipe, eased his feet out of his boots, and busied himself with lighting the candle. He blew out the oil lamp, and I was left in momentary darkness while he went to bolt the scullery door. When he came back, he held the candle high above his head so

that he could see my face. The grease-smoke flicked the ceiling, and his bearded face was grave. I saw the grey hairs like silver wire shining at his temples and in his beard.

"Frank," he said, "when Fred left me, I thought 'twas the end on it."

He turned away from me to open the door, and held the candle so that I could see my way up the narrow stairs to my room.

CHAPTER NINE

AT the age of twelve, therefore, I proudly undertook my duties as apprentice thatcher to my Father. When it was fine, we worked from dawn until dusk, for which I received a shilling per week pocket money. During bad times I received nothing, and during the winter months, or when we could work only half a week or so, I received sixpence. Yet, bearing in mind my keep, I was a good deal better off than many young men twice my age. During the winter months the single farm hand who did not live in the farmhouse was lucky if he secured one or two days' casual work in a week. There was, of course, no unemployment pay at that time; Parish relief was something of a disgrace, and men did their utmost to avoid any claim upon it.

Our first morning was hectic. The work was not new to me, but there was, nevertheless, the novelty of being a full-time man. With her own hands my Mother packed my lunch in the rush basket Tom had always used. I had taken over Tom's prong, the handle of which was almost as long as myself. My Father was to carry the rest of the gear, and while I waited for

him just outside the scullery, with my prong on my shoulder and the rush basket slung at my back, I heard Mother say:

"Don't be too hard on him, Father. He's only a bit of a boy."

"Never you mind that, my dear," came my Father's quiet rumble. "I didn't hurt t'other lads and I wun't hurt Frankie, neither."

"No," said my Mother. "But I did think you kept Tom at it a bit, betimes."

"I don't overwork 'em no more'n I can help, Mother. But it's got to be done, and I expects 'em to do their share."

"Ah!" I heard my Mother say, and my face reddened at the thought of it. "But Frankie don't seem quite so strong as the others, Father."

My embarrassment was the greater as I heard my Father reply:

"All right, then, my dear; I won't hurt Mother's little darlin'."

" 'E's no more Mother's darlin' than the rest of 'em, and 'tis wrong o' you to say it!"

"All right, then. But you do seem a bit pertickler about un, doan't 'e?"

"Well, and so are you, then! So you do as I say, there's a good man!"

I drifted out of earshot before my Father came out; but I think he knew I had heard, for he said jocularly:

"We been thinkin' about buyin' a piece of velvet to put round that there prong handle, Frank. Mother's afraid you might hurt your hands!"

"No cause for to talk like that, Father," I said. "I'll do my share same as anyone else."

My Father patted me on the shoulder as he said:

"I'm sure ye will, boy; I'm sure ye will!"

The summer that year held fine, and we found the work almost more than we could handle. Little pleasant occurrences in my early thatching days remain still in my memory. We worked sometimes at Yew Park over in Ram's Valley for old Lord Ruse, a good-natured gentleman who carried shag

tobacco loose in his pockets, which he offered in handfuls to his workmen as he rode on his rounds. Another good call was Scure's Farm, at that time in the hands of a widow, who came out with a jug of home-brewed ale for the thatchers, and tea and cakes in the afternoons. I still remember the ancient old ox-waggons even then reputed to be a hundred and fifty years old and still to be seen in this year of 1953 over at Wase Farm, Aldertown. Very beautiful vehicles these, with decorated horns to the front and rear, and sides a foot and a half wide curving over the wheels like broad mudguards. Their peculiar and beautiful shape was for a purpose, however; for during harvest times they could be loaded indefinitely, until the loads were too high for the men to pitch the sheaves. There was at the time an argument and betting with regard to my Father's ability to load, with the result that he left his thatching for half an hour and loaded the waggon until the horses could not move it because of the weight, and another pair had to be traced on in order to bring the waggon into the rick. And what loads; what ricks! The field stooked with ten sheaves to the stook, six standing and two on each outside for binding, each stook so placed that the waggon could stand in the centre of a group of four and be loaded at the four corners. Long, beautiful thatching straw, unbroken by mechanical reapers, tough and hard because artificials had not as yet fully invaded the farming world, and fifteen two-and-a-half-hundredweight sacks to the acre considered in those days only a fair crop.

And what an entirely different atmosphere among the harvesters of those days! Speed, speed, speed, with a great pride in getting a particular field of so many acres in by sundown; beer and cider barrels in the shade, goodwill and jokes between master and man, and at the end of the season a harvest supper with parcels made up from the feast for those not able to be present, the poor in the village and friends, the contents of the parcels varying in delicacy according to the recipients' social position.

There was much behind all this which did not bear looking upon too closely. But one thing I do know. Whatever the men

lacked in material things, or whatever the master lacked in human understanding as we know it today, both master and man lived and worked by a code which had nothing whatever to do with material things, and both drew satisfaction from living as no man draws it today.

I believe that much of the reason why my Father clung to the old ways was not that he could not change, but that he knew instinctively that the modern ideas then creeping in amongst us, while right enough in themselves, were based not upon positive things like love and endeavour, but upon negative things like envy and unwillingness.

A small interlude which occurred in the early days of my life as a thatcher does much, I think, to reveal my Father's ways of thinking in the past. It was about sunset when my Father and I were putting the finishing touches to a rick we had thatched for Farmer Caplehorne across the road. I was packing up the gear down below, and my Father was up on the ladder trimming the eaves. The schoolmaster, out for his evening stroll, turned into the yard.

"Good evening, Weston. Good evening, Frank. Just finishing up, then?"

"Good evenin', sir," said my Father from the top of the ladder. "Aye, just about thinkin' o' packin' up."

"Nice job you've made there."

"Aye, we does our best, sir."

"I can see that. Very nice indeed. How's young Frank shaping up to it?"

"Oh, he gets on all right, sir. End o' the year and he'll be rick-thatching as well as what I can."

"Well done, Frank boy!" said the schoolmaster to me. "I always knew you'd do well!"

Praise indeed! I was no less embarrassed and thrilled than if I had been still under his tutorship.

"Aye," said my Father as he straddled one leg across the roof to jerk the ladder along, "we was over at Manytunes, sir, some time gone. The old Colonel said as Frank here had a bit of a heid on'n."

"Quite right," agreed the schoolmaster. "A pity we could not have had him at school a while longer. We might have made more of him."

My Father did not answer at once, and tramped down the ladder, shears in hand. He adjusted the butt a yard further along, then paused for a moment to fill his pipe. He leaned against the ladder as he lit up.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," he said, "but what might you be meanin', sir, as he could have been made more on? By the time I've finished with him, *I'll* make more on'n, sir. He'll be the finest thatcher in the district. Aye, and maybe in the South o' the country by the time he's finished, sir."

"Oh," said the schoolmaster, not at all put out by my Father's daring, "I wasn't trying to be offensive, Weston. What I meant was he could have been more educated."

My Father puffed a cloud or two into the dampening air.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," he said, "and I don't mean no offence like, but I ain't been eddicated, not even like young Frank here. But I can't help sort of thinkin', sir, as if a lad can't learn to read and write and do his sums by the time he's twelve, sir, he won't do it by the time he's twenty and twelve, sir."

"Oh, aye, that's true enough, Weston," said the schoolmaster. He sat down on a bushel measure. "But there's other things to learn besides readin', writin' and arithmetic."

"And what might they be, sir, then?" queried my Father; not with intent to argue so much as with desire to learn.

"Well, how to be a good citizen for a start."

My Father hitched his backside on one of the lower rungs, and I pretended to roll up the twine; but turning the corner of the rick as I did so, I stopped to listen, all ears.

"Well now, sir," said my Father, "there's young Frank here larnin' a trade as been in our family for hundreds of years. Now the old Colonel, sir, as I don't say is no more larned than what you be, 'cause he ain't; but he do say, sir, as the craftsmen is the backbone of our country. None of the craftsmen in Marshwood, to my knowledge, sir, stayed larnin'

until they was twelve, sir. If you don't mind I a-sayin' such a thing, sir, if we'd spent so long a time at book-larnin' we'd never have knowed our crafts like we do. There's one sure thing, sir—beggin' your pardon for saying so: the country couldn't carry on wi'out us. You wouldn't say as we ain't larned how to be good citizens, sir, would ye?"

"You mistake me, Weston," said the schoolmaster earnestly. "What I'm trying to explain is that we ought to learn more about the outside world. Here we all are in our tight little village and its surrounds, and what goes on outside never influences or interests us in any way at all. We know how to thatch, how to till the soil and to look after our own rural businesses and gardens. We come to church every Sunday, as we should; but it isn't enough, Weston, it isn't enough. I do believe we should look outside this small rural island of ours much more than we do. Why, people from Rheuben's Close or Ram's Valley are pretty near treated as foreigners; and people as far as Basingbury or Newstoke or even Aldertown are not only treated as foreigners, but they're *called* foreigners!"

"Well, sir," went on my Father, "I've no doubt about the rightness o' what you do say. But it do seem to me, sir, as I've found what I wanted and more inside our "tight little village" as you calls it, wi'out goin' gallivantin' about to foreign parts. I gets my share out o' life, sir, watching my boy here come as good a thatcher as me, and knowin' as he'll get married one o' these here days and teach one of his sons the same as I've taught he. Why, sir," said my Father, as earnestly as the schoolmaster, "I'd go anywheres to see a set of bells I didn't know of, and hear 'em rung. Beggin' your pardon, sir, but 'tis my belief as there ain't nothing better than the simple things as God give us for nothing. I can't see as how we *wants* to go lookin' outside our villages. My Father never did, nor his'n. It do seem to me we only gets ourselves dissatisfied and can't do our work proper when we goes pokin' our noses into other folks' lives outside."

"Ah, well," said the schoolmaster. "It's all a matter of a point of view, I suppose. I can see what you mean, well enough.

But, you know, Weston, from time to time there passes through my hands a boy with a very good brain who, with education, could, I feel sure, better himself."

My Father hitched himself a rung further up the ladder and relit his pipe.

"You know what I thinks, sir? I think that accordin' to the turn of a man's mind, so he'll make his way in life. If he stays in the village, 'tis because he's no liking for anything to take him away from home. If he wants summat different, he'll bide his chance and he'll be different. I seen that for myself in my two boys. But 'tis my opinion, sir, as there ain't many o' that sort at all. All most men wants is a house, a wife, children and a job as'll let 'em live the way they been brought up."

"Yes," said the schoolmaster, "but how many of them get jobs like that?"

"As many as deserves it, I do think," said my Father. The schoolmaster disagreed. My Father regarded him with the look of a man who had ideas from which he would not budge.

"If they bain't ready to do the jobs they'm in well, sir," he said, "they won't do no other job well. If a man's lazy he'll stay lazy, however much larnin' you puts into him, or whatever his master's like. A man as ain't lazy'll do a day's work whether he's feelin' a bit out o' sarts or not. I believes in a man having to fight his way. A good man can be spoiled if things is made too easy for him. I thinks 'tis up to every man to play his proper part in the order o' things, as God made it; not go tryin' to upset things wi' these here workin' men's movements, because they can't stand the test as God puts on 'em."

It was becoming dark, and as the schoolmaster rose to go, my Father and I collected our gear and joined him.

"Well," said the schoolmaster, "if we were all Bill Westons there wouldn't be any troubles."

"No, sir," said my Father. "I don't think there would."

The schoolmaster turned in at his gate. "But unfortunately," he said as he turned to latch it, "we're not all Bill Westons."

"Well, sir, I can't help that," said my Father doggedly. "Twelve year old is late enough, in my opinion, for strong lads to be shut up in four walls larnin' stuff they might never want to use. The sooner they'm let out into the rough and tumble o' life, where they *can* learn, the better."

The schoolmaster was too incensed to answer this, and went off to his house. As we walked across towards our own cottage lights, I ventured to say to my Father:

"Proper told the old schoolmaster off, didn't ye, Father?"

"Ah," said my Father. "Can't let 'em have their own way all the time, y'know, boy."

In these days when quickness of the mind rather than power

of thought seems to be the criterion of good education, such a dogged, typical West Countrymen's feelings on these matters are not, I know, at all popular. I see well enough that my Father's views were not altogether sound, but I cannot help wondering if the modern psychological system of the intelligence test, when applied to the slow West Country mind, might give us an altogether false picture of its worth.

. . . . .

At the end of that year, Fred was married. My Mother took out her black satin with frilled lace neckband, and donned her new lace cap; and my Father donned his cutaway coat, white shirt with winged collar and white cravat. He was still

heavily and darkly whiskered, and retained his fine head of hair, but his huge shoulders were just beginning to slope forward. Out came his best curved pipe with the silver band, and he carefully tucked a guinea into his waistcoat pocket, which was to be his son's wedding present.

The reception was held at the bride's house. Tom was unable to get away from Ash House to travel over to St. Johnas, and we went by Dick Ruse's carrier's cart, as he had now opened up the new run for mails and goods. Never had I seen such an array of leg-of-mutton sleeves, wide, decorative feminine collars with imitation flower-sprays at the neck; tremendous pancake hats sprouting fountains of feathers, and waists so slim and trim that it appeared the ladies must snap into halves at any moment. But the slimmest and trimmest waist, and the smartest dress and hat, belonged, in my estimation, to dark-haired Margaret Monger, whom I knew at school, but who had blossomed out so prettily that I hardly recognized that it was she. . . .

. . . . .

Tom came home to see us as often as possible. He soon changed his appearance and his habits: he no longer wore tip-nailed boots, but went in for lighter, more polished footgear, with metal "eyeholes" and hooks over them. He did not have his hair trimmed so severely, and affected smarter clothes and a bowler hat. He was also trying to grow a moustache. His talk had improved somewhat, and my Mother and Minnie were very pleased with him. Most of his clothes were, of course, obtained second-hand from his superiors (who had themselves obtained them second-hand from their masters), but the general effect was to put Tom a "cut above" the rest of the family.

Young Stanley hated the sight of such gentility and taunted his brother with: "Anyone can see you don't do no work, Tom, wi' nice white hands like that. Father says he specs later on you'll be too good for the likes o' we."

"I shall never be too good for Mother," replied Tom. "Or Minnie, or Frankie."

"Oh, and what about your old Father?" enquired the deep voice from the wooden armchair.

"Or you, Father."

"H'm. I bain't so sure. You'm gettin' a few airs about ye."

"And quite right, too," said my Mother. "Tom always was a cut above the other village lads. He can't help it if he ain't a girt broad labourer like you'd like him to be, Father."

"Oh, I likes to see him get on. So long as he don't get so's he's afraid o' work, I don't mind."

"Jim Ruse says he do get more and more like our Minnie every day!" said young Stanley.

"You hold your tongue, boy, will you? You'll feel the weight o' my hand if I hears another word!" said my Father.

I was much hurt by these unpleasant exchanges, and when we went out together for an hour or so, hoping we might find a rabbit along the hedge, I said:

"You take no notice on 'em, Tom."

We walked up through a wooded lane. It was early spring, and the tall hedges were alive with piping voices. There were long-tailed tits, magnificent cock chaffinches, and in the sandpits there were early martins. Half a dozen hares pounded behind one another across sprouting fields. Two rushed towards us, thumped along the other side of the hedge, and disappeared. One hopped out into the lane in front of us and sat up to stare. Stealthily, I felt for a stone; but before I could throw it the animal got wind of us and bobbed through the hedge again. Off it went, followed by the other, tearing up the hill in erratic sweeps until they disappeared under a tall group of elm trees.

"I dunno as Stanley'll ever be much use, Tom," I said. "He's always up to something or other. Schoolmaster says he can't do anything with him. You never knows whether he's gone to school or cleared off up the village in the mornings."

Which indeed was true. Young Stanley, he was a queer lad, not suited to anything in particular, and seemingly not

interested in anything. He was lively enough; the scrapes he got into were many. There was nothing he liked more than to be off across the fields with other village lads, perhaps turning up for dinner, perhaps not. He went on poaching and trespassing escapades, very serious offences in those days, and on one memorable occasion he was chased practically all the way home with his clothes on his arm because he had almost been caught by the keepers whilst bathing in a trout stream. Talks and larrupings by my Father produced no desired effect whatsoever. It was with some exasperation, therefore, that I once had my younger brother wished on me just as I was getting into my stride.

I was at the top of Farmer Caplethorne's barn, patiently waiting for the thatching sprays to come up, for which I had shouted young Stanley a few moments before. More and more angry I became as I waited there, for I had to get on. Then, furious, I tramped down the ladder, to find young Stanley seated in the straw, smoking a cigarette. I knocked the cigarette out of his mouth and cuffed his ear for him. Stanley struck back, and I gave him a hiding, and sending him home I swore I would never have him to work with me again. And neither did I. He nearly had another hiding when my Father got to hear about it.

"I'll take him along wi' me," said my Father. "And when he leaves school I'll find him a job outside o' thatching, because he won't never settle down to it, I can see."

. . . . .

One of the duties of the Parish Clerk was to see to Simson's Charity. About two hundred years previously, one Thomas Simson, of Inwood, had left means by which the poor of six villages, including Marshwood, would receive yearly fifteen pounds, the money to be laid out in the distribution of bread. The bread distribution had long since been given up, and money was paid instead. Fifty shillings was allowed out of the total for Marshwood, and this had to be found by the owner of Inwood,

whoever he might be. "Simson's Charity", as it is called, is still in existence.

The Rev. Seaman left it to my Father to list the chosen few and to distribute the money. Normally, it was divided between ten poor people, but two of the regular ten had died, and when old Shep finally gave up the hills, my Father contrived that he and his wife should each receive five shillings, so that the old couple had ten shillings instead of five. My Father took me on the rounds with him and let me handle the accounts.

Used as I was to poverty and penury, I was shocked beyond measure to find the conditions under which nine lonely, aged couples were eking out their last days. Some were lucky enough to have helpful neighbours, but others, like old Shep and his wife, who lived in remote cottages, were in a pitiable state indeed.

The cottages were usually in the tenancy of these old folk until death, as recognition for past services; but as the masters for whom they had worked had generally passed away long since, the sons saw no profit in repairing these dwellings or providing any amenities until they could again be used for able-bodied workmen. Some old folk had passed beyond keeping themselves clean; even old Shep Daubenay and his wife, living at the top of Heath End in a tumbledown shack, had become grimed and greased with dirt.

"You'd be better off in the Big House, Mr. Daubenay," I said as I entered in the amount. "Put yer cross here."

"No," said Shep as he struck his laborious mark. "Not until one on us dies."

"They separates 'e in the Big House, don't 'um?" queried his wife from the back of their one room.

"So they do say," I said.

"There's only One goin' to separate we," said Shep.

"Ain't there nobody to gie thee a hand, then?"

"No. No one round here. We be too far out for 'em. Sometimes a woman as my missus knows over in Rheuben's Close passes this way and puts things to rights, and when the gipsies comes here they be good to we. That ain't often, though."

" 'Tis a wicked shame to see thee livin' like it!" I said with feeling.

"Well, don't 'e go talking about us down in the village, there's a good lad," said old Shep anxiously, "or they'll come and take us away."

"All right, Mr. Daubenay," I said. "I won't say anything."

I strode importantly along with my Father, with the huge ledger tucked under my arm, well pleased with my position as assistant to the Parish Clerk.

"One thing, boy," said my Father. "You be a dabster at adding up and writing. Neither on 'em's my strong point. Why, you be better at it than young Tom used to be!"

"Ah!" I said modestly. "I knew I'd make thee look up one o' these here days, Father."

. . . . .

After Minnie had married and gone to London, I remember my Father advising me to look out for a part-time job. He had to call in a woman to help my Mother about the house, which cost money; and Stanley could not be expected to work full time, for he was as yet not old enough. My Father had heard privately that it might be as well to keep an eye on old Martha, the letter-carrier. She was falling into advanced age now, and it could not be long before she retired. Old Master Ruse had told my Father that there was talk of starting a postman in the district as soon as the old lady gave up.

However, she lived actively on and on. She shewed no signs of retiring, and my Father, fair man that he was, felt I was not getting my fair share of the profits of the business. So, after much heart-searching and fireside talks alone with my Mother, my Father passed the office of Sexton to me, allowing me to keep the money.

It was not a happy man who watched me make myself ready on the first day of my office as Sexton to Marshwood Church. That he was proud of me there was no doubt; but he was also resentful. He sat down heavily opposite my Mother

after he had come out into the scullery to give me my final briefing.

"Well, Father," she said, " 'tis no use being like that. You wanted him to take on the job, and that's what you trained the lad for."

"Oh, I bain't feelin' nothing about it!" said my Father irritably. "I didn't think he'd have to take on so early in life, though. It do come a bit hard like, after all these years, to give it up. Makes a man feel he's gettin' old."

"Well, Father," said my Mother, "we bain't none on us gettin' *younger*."

She looked at my Father's greying beard as she spoke, and I noticed once again that his great shoulders sloped forward a little; a habit of holding himself which he had slipped into during the past few years.

"We done a lot together, you and me, Father, when you comes to look at it," said my Mother quietly.

My Father jerked up his head, and there was an amused twinkle in his dark eyes.

"Ah, I suppose us have."

"And 'tis Frank's turn now, same as it was when you did start on it. After all, you taught him all he knows. You'll be here if any advice is needed. You ought to be pleased to see how well he gets on, Father. 'Cause you've pretty near come to the end of your share now, my dear."

"*That* I ain't!" exclaimed my Father in a shocked voice. "I got some years yet!"

"Oh aye, I don't say you haven't. But you'll find yourself doing less and less from now on, and Frank'll be doing more and more. You mustn't be bitter about it, Father. 'Tis the way things is carried on."

My Father got up and walked outside. He went round the end of the cottage, and came back again.

" 'Tis queer," he said, half to my Mother, half to himself. "We bain't young no more, Mother, be we? We wun't be middle-aged, neither, come another year or two. Time flies and no mistake!"

He stood watching the smoke vanishing up the chimney just as if his years had vanished in the same way.

"Oh, I ain't bitter about it, gal!" he said. "Nobody'd be more pleased to see 'n get ahead than me. No, nor nobody'll do more to help him do it!"

He seemed more contented after this, and, sitting down, got out his pipe and lit it. He regarded me pleasantly with his dark eyes.

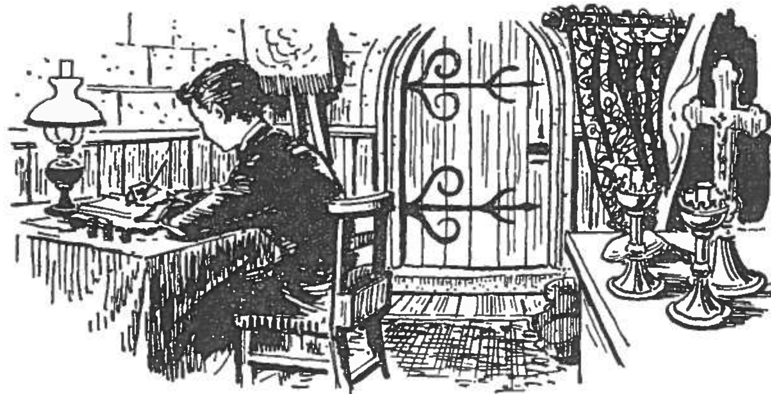
"Well," he said, "clutter off, boy. Grandad's going to sit and smoke while you gets on wi' the work!"

Even as he spoke, the pleasantness faded from his face, and he suddenly became angry. He rose from his chair as if possessed and, striding towards the door, almost pushed me on one side to go out.

"Grandad!" he exclaimed in a choke of fury as he went by.

I did not know quite what to make of him, or what to do.

"You go along, boy," came my Mother's voice sadly. "He'll get over it. Do your best. And when you'm sittin' in his place usin' his books, p'raps you'll remember to say a little prayer for us both, boy. He lets his years by the harder the older he gets."



CHAPTER TEN

THIS little change in our family life was but part of a gradual reorientation of the whole of the village industries. Old Mark Vincent still managed to retain the reins firmly in his hands, however, for his business had expanded beyond any of his youthful dreams, and while he stuck to bowl-turning, vase-making and the more ancient arts in the craft, Zeb took on furniture repairs, while young Mose forged ahead with pillboxes, having gained large and permanent orders from local practitioners, and from the makers of patent medicines. They were beginning to make doll's houses for the gentry, and doll's wooden tea-sets.

Old man Cheriton had died some years previously, but Widow Cheriton took an active part in the business still. Matt took over the brick kilns from his Grandmother near Aldertown, and a cut-wood industry, which was rapidly expanding under his able hand, while the three other brothers forged ahead with the brush-making, two in the shops, and young John taking to growing and cutting the witheys to keep them supplied. The demand of thousands of dozens per year from the Midlands and from Wales was higher still.

Carrier John Ruse was kept to his house a good deal these

days through the rheumatics in his ankles. His wife no longer felt able to go on the run with young Jim Ruse, so that the business fell into the young ne'er-do-well's hands. Jim worried his father grey over his talk of clearing off into the Army, and the general way in which he conducted himself and the business. There was no relying on him, but his younger brother, Dick, kept his goods service going regularly and to time, although he would not take passengers because, as he said, "It doan't seem sart o' right to poach on our Jim's ground."

"Is it right to keep folk waitin' an hour after the van's supposed to be along?" demanded an angry customer.

"Well, Jim do talk of going off into the Army. If 'er do, then I'll take 'e."

"All I hopes is as someone else starts up agin thee!" retorted the angry man. "Because, depend upon it, if anybody did, you wouldn't get no business at all."

"Hear, hear!" echoed the disgruntled bystanders.

"Well, I'm sorry," said Dick, embarrassed, "but it ain't no fault o' mine." So saying he clicked his tongue at his horse and the van lumbered away, leaving the annoyed passengers waiting for Jim in a very ill temper.

The time came round again to pay the Charity. I went on my own this time, my Father being elsewhere. As I approached Shep's cottage at the end of the heath I found the old man, as usual, wrapped in his many waistcoats and sitting on his doorstep. He was watching a chaffinch sitting with crest raised upon a bush, as it poured forth its reckless, rollicking melody. It flew off suddenly, bounding up and down, up and down through the air, the white bar of its wing flashing. A black-headed cock-sparrow perked up its head, swore cheekily, and then went whirring off, a ragged bundle of dirty white feathers, after the chaffinch.

"You'll catch your death o' cold there, Shep," I said as I approached. The old man looked up at me as I fumbled in my bag for the money.

"Reckon this might be the last time you'll pay me this," he said.

" 'Twill be, if you can't find something a bit warmer than that 'ere lump o' stone to sit on!"

"Ar, I can't feel nothin'. Ain't heard how they be gettin' on up on the hills?"

"Never goes up there, Shep," I said.

"Lambin' just about started, I do reckon. Won't be much trouble this year. Winter's warm. Unless it do turn cold later on."

"Make yer mark here then, Shep."

Shep struck his mark and went on:

"Sometimes I do wish I'd had a son to take on up there. I don't know that young feller they got there now. A stranger, ain't he?"

"Ah: come over from Highcastle."

Shep cocked an eye towards a wren in the thicket before him. It flicked its tail, called "Tit-it-it!" fussily, and then flitted through the bottom of the hedge. A burst of sweet music, loud and clear as a chaffinch's, marked the spot where it travelled.

"Ah well, I shall see thee again, Frank, I s'pose, if you comes this way."

"Oh, I dare say I shall be up here sometime or other."

"Ah. Good day."

"Good day, Shep. Good day, Mrs. Daubenay."

But as I walked away, I heard the old lady's voice behind me, agitatedly:

"Frank! Frank!"

I paused and asked her what she wanted.

"Shep been tarr'ble poorly lately," she said as she peered up at me with watery eyes. " 'E do talk a great deal of God and of Heaven, and he be always a thinkin' o' they hills."

"You wants to keep him in off that step, Mother," I said.

"I can't keep him in! I keeps on tellin' him about it, but he don't take no notice. Says he likes to watch the sheep or summat. I'd like 'e to look in now and again, Frank, when you'm this way, 'cause I don't think poor old Shep's goin' to last very long, Master Frank. . . ."

The old lady's words proved all too true; for within a month Shep died on the doorstep where he loved so much to sit, and was laid to rest in the grave dug by my Father and myself up in the churchyard. A fortnight later, his widow found herself forced by circumstances to apply to the Parish Council to go into the hated and feared "Big 'Ouse".

At the age of eighteen I was accepted in the company of men of the village. I had proved my worth satisfactorily as a thatcher, and deputy to my Father in village affairs. Every Saturday and Sunday night, times being easier for us all, I took up my seat by the side of my Father at the Malt House Inn. My wages were increased to one and sixpence; usually, I fear, the innkeeper took a shilling, and the odd sixpence was left to me for the rest of the week.

One winter evening, Carrier John Ruse, now fast "breakin' up", as the villagers said, struggled to the inn with the aid of his two sticks, and stumbled to his accustomed place. He sat down opposite my Father and myself, called for his pint, and fell to staring into the flames. He seemed very worried.

"Well, John," greeted my Father with a smile, "you looks as if you'd jest lost a shillin' and found saxpence!"

" 'Tain't as bad as that," replied the carrier. " 'Tis young Jim. He won't go in with the mails."

"How's that, then?"

"Too slippery, so he do say. Wun't take the pony out tonight."

There was silence in the bar. Everyone knew that what Jim should have done was to take the mails to Stokingbase on his shoulder. Everyone knew, too, that when Carrier Ruse was younger, he had carried the mails himself on many a winter night, when the snow was beaten hard, and it was too dangerous for horse travel. Old Carrier Ruse knew what we all thought of his Jim, well enough. But we started to make excuses, for the old man's sake.

"I don't know as I blames him," said my Father. "It ain't no weather for a pony. He wouldn't get farther than the bottom o' Rectory Hill."

"No," agreed another voice. "You can't expect to take a pony out on roads like this."

There was another silence as old John Ruse muttered: "I s'pose not. I be worried about them mails, though. This might go on for days."

My Father sat looking ahead, as did the other older men; the younger ones shifted about uncomfortably, but there was still silence. The old carrier looked around appealingly, but it was not to be lightly undertaken, walking to Stokingbase on a slippery road, weighed down by mails. Then he looked across at me. At the same time I caught my Father's meaning glance.

"I'll take 'em in, Carrier," I said. "You don't want to worry about 'em."

The carrier showed his relief.

" 'Tis a longish ways, my son," said my Father.

"I ain't made o' putty, Father," I said. And glancing round at the others, making my necessity a virtue, I said nastily, "Not like some others!"

The "others" referred to grinned behind their hands.

"You'd better stop at your Aunt's for the night," said my Father.

"Well, it's good of you, my boy," said the carrier, and the "others" joyfully agreed with this sentiment. "You'll want to warm up yer innards, Frank, I reckon. Gie'n a drop o' rum, landlord!"

"You do want them mails to get there, I s'pose, Carrier?" said one of the "others" with a grin.

"They'll get there all right," I promised.

The potman brought me my rum, and thus fortified, I buttoned up my overcoat and followed the old carrier out on the way to the Post Office.

Outside, the familiar buildings had become strange under a heavy coating of snow, the contours of the land made smooth and featureless beneath the wind's piling up and sculpture of the drifts. The snow had fallen, begun to thaw, and then frozen again; and the roads were like stretches of crystallized

glass. Very, very carefully old John Ruse hobbled over to the Post Office, where the Misses Weyenrighter were still at work. Old man Weyenrighter peered from his living-room through the dim light of the paraffin lamp as we entered the office.

"Young Frank's a-goin' in wi' the mails, Postmaster," called the carrier. The ancient smiled and nodded. The Misses Weyenrighter praised me profusely, as if fearful lest I changed my mind, which pleased and embarrassed me; and having

finally packed the mailbag, I put it on my shoulder and set off.

Down through the village I went, not pausing to call in at the cottage as I passed by, and on past the school towards Ram's Valley. The road was hard, like steel, and white plates like metal cracked in the growing cold from the deep ruts with sharp, small explosions, echoing above the rattle of my tip-nailed boots. Iron ruts raised beneath my feet sometimes caused me to stumble. Up under the dark trees of Rectory Hill I went, the ivy like shaggy coats upon the elms, and the massed twigs raised in the starlit ice-cold sky.

My first lap was the four miles to Ram's Valley Post Office,

where I collected another mailbag, then on a mile and a half to Carter's Ley for another. Yet a further couple of miles, and two more awaited me at Shirestream: then there was a further jaunt of four good miles to St. Johnas, where I collected another two, making seven in all. Another two miles brought me to the Post Office at Stokingbase by a quarter past ten. I had taken about three and a quarter hours to do the journey. The Stokingbase Postmaster was very relieved, and was full of thanks and praise. I stayed the night with my Aunt, rose early in the morning, and walked back to Marshwood to start work. Some days later I received a letter from the Postal Authorities, thanking me in official language for my public-spirited action, and enclosing my reward for three hours' service: *nine penny stamps*.

However, I did gain in the end by my piece of service. At last old Martha retired, and out of a good number of applicants, I was chosen on account of my service that night, for the position of Marshwood's first village postman.

It was a great day indeed when I went to Stokingbase to collect my uniform. I have a photograph by me to this day taken after I had rigged myself out. I appear on it as a raw-enough-looking youth, but in common with photographs of all young men of those days, there is nothing to show on the face any discontent or unhappiness with my lot. I appear very transparent—necessarily so; I had little experience at the time. There is as yet no moustache, but I see I had faint side-whiskers. I wear a long blue jacket reaching to the middle of my thighs. The sleeves are rather too long, and cover half the backs of my hands, so that only my fingers protrude from them. There are very narrow, high lapels, two very deep patch-pockets, four regulation metal buttons which are highly polished, the coat being single-breasted. I have also very narrow trousers with red stripes down the outside legs, and a pair of heavy boots. In the collar of the coat are two regulation badges. The cap is something after the military style of the time, with a square, polished peak and sloping back, and in front of it is a plate bearing the number 27. A high-necked

waistcoat is provided, and I wear a stiff winged collar and silk cravat. A watch-chain sets off this apparel, and on the end of it, tucked safely away in my waistcoat pocket, was an enormous steel turnip watch provided by the authorities. Needless to say, I wore my hard headgear on the top of my cranium, and perfectly straight.

My beat took me from Marshwood Post Office to Red Hill, and on to West Common, collecting and delivering, at fourpence an hour. On my return, I walked on from the Post Office home to change and on to wherever Father was thatching, and worked with him until dusk. As I was now earning what was considered to be in those days a tidy sum, my Father retained my thatching one and sixpence for my keep, but over and above this, I managed to keep back a little money from my postman's wages for Mother. Later, I undertook the midday delivery over the same route, and when Jim Ruse took his holidays, I would drive the mail cart in to the Stokingbase Post Office. Again, upon completion of these duties, I snatched a hurried dinner, and went on to thatch with my Father for nothing.

By this means, I made two shillings and two pence per day. Out of this weekly wage I paid Mother 8*s*., thus leaving myself 5*s*. per week for personal expenses and recreation. I was considered to be extremely well off. A married farm labourer was along that time receiving ten or eleven shillings per week, provided it remained fine enough for him to work all the week. If a single man was lucky enough to be in regular employ, his wage hovered at about 8*s*. As my Father had prophesied, the Agricultural Unions had collapsed and gone out of existence; the farmers were practically free to do as they pleased.

So, on the whole, I was a man of substance, and a contented man. The villagers began to extend to me the same deference they had for my Father; certainly I was considered by my contemporaries as a man of the world, for was I not familiar with the sights of the town, and had I not myself seen the first passenger railway train to cross over the Station Bridge with carriages one could have one's meals in, and those one

could go to bed in? If there was trouble over money, they began to come to me; if they wanted news from the town, or messages delivered outside the village, I was their man. If they became old or infirm, or wished to apply for Parish help, they could always stop me on my rounds and I would promise to see what my Father could do for them. Why, I even put myself out at one time to call on one of the farmers on behalf of a young chap who wanted to start work; and the young chap got his job on the strength of his knowing me so well as a thatcher. And if they wanted the Parson, they told me first. I was now an equal with my Father in the bellringing team, and the loudest and most sonorous voice in the church every Sunday!

So did it begin to appear that I was to be a rising light in Marshwood village affairs. I was conscious of my Father's mixed feelings at my progress. At first, he encouraged me and helped me all he could. He still did so; but I felt that he took more pleasure in me when I was learning my work than now I had learned. He warned me constantly about getting a "sight too big for your boots, boy", and on occasions he sharply reminded me:

"Look here, you young sprig, your Father hasn't given up yet, nor likely to for a good long time." My Mother, now a very sad invalid indeed, tried to comfort him; but he would not hear her and told her also:

"I be ready to see Frank take charge on it when I hands it over to him, and not afore. I'm still the Clerk of Marshwood, and if folks hereabouts asks Frank about church affairs, bell-ringin' clubs or charities, 'tis up to Frank to see me fust, afore he do take anything on himself."

And my Mother would stare into the fire and say nothing more, for with age my Father seemed to be becoming more cantankerous every year. I did not try to fight him. Instead, I humoured him as best I could, did as I was told, and waited.

So life proceeded for me in a quick, busy tenor, and although there were some unpleasant exchanges with my Father, the following May saw me cantering to Stokingbase with the

mails, as Jim Ruse had decided to have a few days off to visit his friends in Newtown. Ram's Valley, Carter's Ley, Shirestream were soon left behind, and into the square of Shirestream St. Johnas I drove the mails, passing on the way the dandelions flaring in meadow and roadside bank, the white daisies shining, the yellow flag beginning to unfold her quiet riot of colour in the damp spaces and along the brooks. Alder and ash, oak and maple and elm were in young green leaf, and white elder flowers vied with the dogwood along the scented lanes. Even the sound of iron tyres upon grit, and the pony's hooves, could not drown the incessant piping of the warblers, some like grey ghosts flitting through the hedges, some hovering from shrub top to shrub top, singing, singing as I passed by. The pigeon and the dove added their homely voices; the jealous sparrow fought the graceful swallow as she sailed silently into the farmyard for wet dung to build her nest. The wild, carefree movement of the sand-martin flocks added to the gaiety, and swifts rushed back and forth, back and forth, in shrill excited conversation above the roofs of St. Johnas.

I pulled in at the square, where the walnut was red with new leaves, and as the van came to a standstill the monotonous call of the cuckoo filled my ears from somewhere over the other side of the church. I remembered, as I tethered the pony to the Post Office fence, that Fred had written a few days before to say that his wife was about to have a baby. I thought no more about it as I went inside.

I entered the Post Office cheerfully enough, and wondered at the quiet greeting the Postmistress gave me. However, the Postmistress's moods were her own affair, so I set about packing the mailbag into the van. It was then that I caught sight of an agitated man hurrying through the churchyard gate and across the square towards me. It was Fred.

"Hallo!" I said in surprise. "How is it you ain't at work, then, Fred?"

"I heard you was coming. I got summat to tell 'e." He glanced towards the Post Office window at the Postmistress's curious face.

"Come in here," he said, pointing towards the church. I could see he was ill and worried, and had not shaved. I hurried after him and we went inside.

"What is it, then?"

Fred sat down suddenly on one of the seats. "Don't want everybody to see me tellin' 'e, Frank," he said. " 'Tis Jenny. She died last night."

I was profoundly shocked. I sat down by my brother, not knowing what to say. He buried his head in his hands as I looked foolishly round at the coats of arms along the walls, searching for inspiration, finding nothing. There, aloof and disinterested, were the cold stone statues, the odd busts in gloomy alcoves, the curious triangular reading-lectern holding Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and the picture of the Last Supper over the altar, the Apostles in curious formal attitudes of listening rather than eating. Purple and red watercolour shadows from the stained-glass windows mellowed the scene. Then I said:

"Is the baby gone, too?"

Fred nodded, and began to cry. Once again I said nothing. What can be said, what can be done at times like these? I waited for Fred to overcome his grief and followed him out as he suddenly rose and hurried in the same agitated manner into the porch, the gift of James Spyre, and Ione his wyfe, where under the shadow of the ancient timbers Fred turned to me and said brokenly:

"What have we done to deserve this, Frank? We as have always been to church same as we always been taught: me as've always rung the bells in God's house, same as the Westons always does wherever they goes? Why, Jenny herself has spent hours up here cleanin' God's house and wouldn't give it up until she was too heavy to crawl up here! I tell thee what, Frank, there ain't no God or He wouldn't let such things happen to them as serve Him! Or, if there is, He don't think a half as much on us as the Parson do tell us!"

"You mustn't talk like that, Fred," I said, a good deal frightened by this blasphemy. "You don't know what you be saying! He done it for some purpose, there's no doubt."

Fred turned and walked off out into the sunlight. I caught up with him.

"Where you goin', Fred?"

"Oh, goin' back home." He seemed to be pulling himself together, and slowed down as he said more steadily, "Tell 'em the funeral's on Tuesday."

He paused and then he said:

"She's lyin' in our front room, Frank. The babby's wrapped up and they've put en in her arm. She do look that pretty, Frank. I don't want 'em to take her away. Would you like to come and see her?"

"I can't Fred," I said. "I be late wi' mails already."

Even in the midst of his tragedy, Fred knew the paramount importance of the mails.

"I'll come back afterwards if I can do any good."

"No. You go on home and tell 'em."

I laid my hand on my brother's shoulder. I knew not what to say. Fred regarded me gravely.

"All right, Frank," he said. "I knows. Thank 'e." And he hurried off down the road as I watched after him.

Down past Marshwood Church and Rectory, past Caplethorne's Farm I went, later in the day, bearer of tragic news to our family. There, right before me as I approached, lay our cottages with ivy right up to the bedroom windows, the nearest red-tiled, the furthest heavy with thatch. I drove my van off the road and up along by the pole fence of our cottage garden. I knew my Mother, chained to her kitchen chair by her illness, would know something was wrong, for I never stopped the mail van on my way up to the Post Office; I tried to keep strictly to time. Past the thatched woodshed and the two willow trees I hurried, in through the brick-floored scullery, hat in hand. I stood there, desperately searching for words.

"Fred's wife's dead, Mother," I said. "An' the babby, too."

"No, Frank!"

"Aye. He met me in the square."

We looked at each other, Mother and son, without words.

"I'd better go on," I said. "Funeral's on Tuesday. Are you going to be all right, Mother?"

"Yes," she said. "The poor lad! Whatever will Father say?"

Whatever Father said, here was a situation over which he had no voice; no control. I hurried out, for I was at least half an hour late. I unhitched the rein from the fence and mounted my van. The warbler, the pigeon, the dove and the cuckoo sang their songs of joy and praise to the wakening earth; and carried forward by the rising strength of the youthful year, the alder and the ash and the oak and elm spread their pale green lights among the copse as I made my way up the hill. But, for the Weston family, the wheels of the world had ground to stillness, and silence and sorrow.

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After the funeral, my brother Fred was glad to rely upon the strength of my Father's arm. For it was he who bade Fred come home until he felt fit enough to stand upon his own feet again. So he stayed for some time with us, using his old room, which had not changed much since the day he left us to go to Shirestream.

He was much altered from the Fred who left us to try his fortune outside the village. Never a great conversationalist, he now talked even less. He brooded a good deal, which was natural; but also he began to take less and less interest in his appearance. The alert, confident, rugged, perhaps a little overbearing, Fred had gone, and in its place was a morose, listless man, seemingly completely disinterested in anything going on around him. He made no attempt to assert himself as my oldest brother. He accepted my position as senior under my Father in our household, and was far too indifferent to want to interfere with it. Very unlike him, indeed!

My Father was not the man to let this state of affairs go on indefinitely. After the third week, when the family were seated at Sunday dinner, he said:

"Well, Fred, my boy, what are ye going to do?"

Fred toyed with his meal, but did not answer.

"I suppose your Master reckons on getting you back, don't he?"

"I suppose he do."

"Well, what are ye going to do? Be ye going back?"

"Do 'e want I to go back, then?"

"Not if you don't want. There's a-plenty to do here along of me, if you've a mind to it. Wi' three on us we could work further afield. But us can't keep your Master waiting for ever, you know, boy. He's been very good to thee. I expect he's wonderin' where he stands with thee, same as I be."

There was a short silence as Fred stared at his plate, still toying with his food. Then, without looking up:

"Dunno as I wants to go back, Father. Not wi' Jenny gone."

"All right. Get across to Shirestream after dinner and tell your Master as you ain't coming back no more. I dessay he'll release thee, knowing the circumstances. You'd better start along wi' me tomorrow. I don't know as I wants to drive 'e to work, my son, but you know how things be. Us got to work, or us can't live. And I wants to see thee living again, boy; you be young yet."

They ate in silence, and then my Father said more kindly:

"Don't think I'm a mind to be hard on thee, Fred. It ain't that at all. I wants to help 'e a bit if I can. Keep thee up together so's you can sart things out for yourself a bit more, boy."

"I knows that, Father."

"There's only one thing though, Fred," went on my Father. "I shan't last for ever. I've given up the church work to Frank as it is. We don't always see eye to eye, Frank and me, but he's learnin' my work as Clerk, and doing it very well, too. I reckons on *Frank* a-takin' my place. If anyone asks thee about the Parish work, you tell 'em to see Frank. I wants 'e to leave all that 'ere to Frank."

For the first time since the funeral, Fred broke into a smile. "I always said as Frank'd be the Parish Clerk one of these days, didn't I, Frank?"

"Ah," I said. "So you did. . . ."

And so, thanks to my Father, the wheels of the world were again set in motion, and life ran along its quiet, uneventful channels, with little to mar its smoothness. As I grew from adolescence to manhood, my uniform began to shew service. There was no replacement for it, and as is inevitable when a man's clothes grow shabby, I was, perhaps, not quite so meticulous in my appearance. When the uniform coat began to wear, I replaced it by an old-fashioned, semi-cutaway jacket, and relied upon my military cap to mark me out as one who held a more exalted position than the run of the village working society.

By means known only to the agricultural labourer of that or any other day, I contrived to save. And I was saving for a definite purpose. Very occasionally I had seen speeding along the Aldertown turnpike above the village a man riding upon a two-wheeled vehicle known as a velocipede or bicycle; but these were large words used only by educated men like the old schoolmaster, and the rest of us usually referred to this vehicle as a "penny-farthing".

However, these were modern days; the old velocipede had been improved upon by modern craftsmanship, and I had heard of a man in Stokingbase who, besides shoeing horses and making iron rollers for the land, made bicycles with wheels both the same size, according to the latest pattern. And it was upon a bicycle of this type that I pictured myself doing my rounds.

My Father soon got to hear of my heart's desire, and we had a very grave talk about it. He pointed out to me that by using a bicycle instead of walking, I should be cutting down my hours, and the Post Office would not pay me so much money. However, Fred and my Father had extended our thatching area mightily, and we came to the conclusion that I would earn in the long run more money for myself and for the family if I took the thatching jobs furthest away, and perhaps might be able to go further than we had ever done before on our two feet. My Father thought it would be best if we each

worked our own separate districts, except where large jobs needed our combined efforts, and to leave each one to what casual help he might need and feel he could employ. Then, he thought, there would be no quarrels or feeling by one of us that the other was having more than his fair share in the thatching profits. As I was to take the outlying areas, Fred was agreeable; and so he should have been, for the arrangement was made more for his sake than anyone else's, for my Father, being most akin in temperament to Fred, knew him well.

So I saved, and in due course the great day came when, with my twenty-five shillings secured in my waistcoat pocket, I walked to Stokingbase to make my purchase.

The model shewn me was indeed as handsome a structure as ever squashed a village cat. It had straight handlebars, a large bell with two notes in it, and brake consisting of a large lever hinged to the shaft of the handlebars, attached to a pillar leading down to the front wheel, this terminating above the solid tyre in a flat wooden plate. The plate was held clear of the tyre by means of a large spring. There were no mudguards, and the tyres were after the most recent invention: solid rubber.

The blacksmith shewed me how to work the lever: upon pulling it upwards, it pressed the pillar down, stretched the spring and clamped the plate firmly upon the upper surface of the front tyre. It was quite obvious that after the brake had been put into operation there could be no further forward movement of the bicycle. All the latest conveniences were incorporated: there were two foot-rests on the frame, for the advent of the free wheel had not yet come to pass, and the foot rests were for the greater comfort in proceeding downhill. There was also a tallow-candle lamp, specially built to keep alight in the draught, and an iron carrier at the back. Laugh if you will: my bicycle, except for a few changes of wheels and brake mechanism as the time passed by, is still in my garage and usable. I still have the original chain and cogs on it, and the original ratchet pedals—and, of course, the bell. And although I am a little high in the world when I ride it, since the saddle

and handlebars are much closer together than in the modern cycle, owing to its extremely high gear, I am not easily overtaken by people half my age when I use it.

I was thrilled by my purchase as I had never been before or since, and proudly wheeled the machine well outside the town before I ventured to try it. It was painted a brilliant red, and drew many a glance as I walked through the streets. Then, on a deserted stretch of road, and at the top of the hill near Prewitt's Park, I mounted my machine at the side of the road, and kicked off.

By the time I had captured my pedals, I found myself lying in the gravel with the machine on top of me. Nothing daunted, I picked myself up and went back to my starting-point. The pedals persisted in escaping my feet and rapping the backs of my calves and ankles. The bicycle persisted in falling over; but I got into the way of kicking myself into an upright position every time I leaned, and after half an hour or so I managed to cover ten yards without having put foot to the ground. At last, like a revelation, it came to me that the technique of balance was to turn the handlebars *towards* the way I was falling instead of away from it every time, and now, fully confident, I went back to my starting-point with the firm resolve to ride the whole distance down the hill.

The first ten yards were covered with a fair degree of success; I meandered from one side of the road to the other, but at least I stayed on. The second ten yards were much better, the increase in speed gave me more control. The next few yards were perfect, but after that I felt that the pedals were not so much being pressed round by my own efforts, as my feet being thrown round by the pedals; and this procedure being intensified by the gathering speed of the machine, I lifted my feet right off and placed them on the rests. I knew that whatever happened, I must not fall off, for to do so at this speed would mean a very nasty fall on the gravelled road. By what desperate miracle of determination I contrived to steer without falling, I cannot tell; but I was suddenly conscious of the breeze upon my face, the hedges racing past me on either side much

faster than I had ever known them to do in the mail van, and the blackthorn hedge at the bottom of the hill rose up to meet me at a crazier and crazier pace. However could I get round that corner at the bottom without a terrible spill? Suddenly I was saved. The brake! the brake!

I lurched dangerously as I felt with one hand for the lever, only to discover that it was on the other side of the handlebar. More lurching and fumbling, a hectic run on and off the grass verge with the ditch coming up to kiss my spinning pedals and to recede again, and at last I grasped it. The lever came up, the spring stretched, the pillar went down, and the wooden plate on the end of it clamped itself down upon the surface of the tyre with a grip like a vice. At the same time my bicycle became a live thing; I lurched forward across the handlebar as the rear wheel "arsed up", as we country people say, as beautifully as any mail-van pony, and I found myself on my back in the blackthorn hedge, a flash of red passing over me as the bicycle and I parted company and it disappeared I knew not where. For a few moments I remained there.

Mercifully I was only scratched, and wondering how I could get out without more damage to myself, I suddenly felt a firm grip on both ankles, more painful scratches, and a few heavy grunts and out I came. I rose, ruefully, picking out thorns from my torn flesh and clothing, to face a grinning, red-faced carter, who said:

"You shouldn't 'a' let that there thing get the bit between its teeth, young feller!"

I did not answer. I was far too concerned to see what damage my precious machine had suffered. But I need not have worried; there was some ploughing up of the ground where it had landed, but apart from a few scratches to the new paint, not even a wheel was buckled. I picked it up and walked home for the rest of the way.

My Father and Fred were waiting at the cottage gate. They roared with laughter when they saw my tattered appearance. "Two hours to get from Stokingbase to Marshwood on a bicycle!" laughed Fred. "I could 'a' rolled it back'ards!"

"Aye," agreed my Father, "and wouldn't have got into that 'ere pickle not even on a wet day!"

But I took it in good part, and swore I'd master it yet. Which, of course, I did. There were, at that time, few other young men able to afford a bicycle, and I enjoyed with those who had them the reputation of being a "go-ahead young sprig". Though some of the older folk shook their heads at me and said it was "a sight too dangerous, tearin' along at fifteen miles to the hour; aye, and I reckon you touched twenty down Rectory Hill and come round that carner at the bottom leanin' all over to one side like I thought you'd break your neck!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MY Father took on what he called Grandpa Weston's round. Fred took Ram's Valley, Carter's Ley and Rheuben's Close, and I had to content myself with Red Moor, Ashdown, Aldertown and Highcastle. All went very smoothly and well, with my Father handling the business end of all three districts.

But when young Stanley finally left school, my Father took him with him, being a bit dubious of our youngest; and very soon it was seen that his particular district was not faring as well as it should.

"That young Stanley," he said to my Mother when the lad was out of earshot one evening, "I can't make him out, Mother. I never thought I'd have to call a son of mine idle, but idle he is and there's no other word for it. I might as well not have him with me. He do hinder me instead of helping. He's no b—— good at all!"

"You must be patient, Father," said Mother in her quiet way. "He's only a bit of a boy. Give him time; he'll settle down for sure."

"I only wish I could believe he will," said my Father irritably. "He dun't show much signs on it at present."

Stanley did not settle down. He made no secret of the fact that he hated thatching; although he dared not say so, his morose and rebellious behaviour and his slipshod ways at work were evidence enough that he was not cut out for thatching.

"All he's fit for is catching damned rabbits!" grumbled my Father. "He moves fast enough for that!"

"Well, we can do with 'em," said Mother. "And you don't say no to a nice bit o' stew, now do you, Father?"

"As long as he don't get caught," grunted my Father.

But once Stanley overstepped the bounds. He slipped in one evening, just after dark, and slyly pulled out from his bag something very different from a rabbit; something with long black tail and a multi-coloured head. He was not sure of the reception he would get, that was obvious; and well he might not be, for my Father snatched the bird from him and clouted him good and hard.

"You young fool!" he stormed. "You'll have yerself in gaol, and your Father as well. If you ever do anything like that again I'll take the hide off ye!" For poaching was a very serious offence in those days and might entail a month's hard labour without any option if a man was caught at it.

. . . . .

However, Stanley did not give up his bad habits. He kept them pretty well under cover for a long time; but he began to be later and later in the evenings, and one night I remember he came home in a very unsteady condition.

"Where ye been?" demanded my Father.

"Out," said the lad.

"I knows that," said my Father. "You been drinking. Where did ye get the money from?"

There was no reply to this.

My Father rose from his chair and unbuckled his belt, meaningly.

Stanley only glowered at him, rebelliously.

"Where did ye get the money?" repeated my Father.

There was still no answer. My Father slipped off his belt and held it in a loop in his right hand.

"I'll tell ye where ye got the money," said my Father. "You been poachin' agen, ain't you, Stanley?"

Still Stanley glowered; and my Father, suddenly seizing him by the scruff of the neck, hauled him off out into the scullery and thrashed him. He made no sound during the whole time, but passed through the living-room afterwards, white of face, to his room. My Father came in behind him, fixing his belt again. He did not appear to have had any satisfaction from punishing young Stanley. His hands trembled as he lit his pipe, and soon, as was his habit when worried, he took his hat down from the peg and we heard him walking up and down in the dark outside.

Shortly afterwards, Fred, with a grunted "Good night," went to bed, and I was just about to follow him when my Father came in.

"Well, Frank," he said, "what are we going to do with him?"

And then I had a flash of inspiration.

"Make him a gamekeeper," says I. My Father looked at me, and his black eyes began to twinkle.

"Hemmed if that ain't worth thinkin' about," he said. "Hemmed if it ain't, Frank!"

So a gamekeeper Stanley became, though he was not destined to hold that office for long. He went from job to job, settling in nothing for any length of time, and I remember his taking the job of coachman to the Wooltown Vicar. The bell-tuners came to the village, and they took him to the nearest inn and gave him rather more than he could stand. He was missing that afternoon when his Master wanted him, so his Master went out and harnessed the mare himself, and it was only when he went to hand his wife into the carriage that she stumbled upon my errant brother fast asleep in the back seat.

Both my Mother and Father worried about him a great deal. But he seldom came home, and when he did, it was usually in between jobs. Eventually he drifted further and

further away from us, and we heard after many months' silence that he had landed up in Australia. There he made his fortune two or three times and lost it again; his letters became less and less frequent, finally dropping off altogether, and today I have no knowledge of whether my brother is alive or dead, or what part of the world he might be in.

. . . . .

Not very long after the purchase of my bicycle, my family could not but become aware that I was taking an unusual amount of pains to make myself neat and tidy again. My Father's black eyes twinkled at me every so often as he saw me set off on my rounds, and he thoughtfully stroked his beard. Fred said nothing, but I caught him once or twice, I thought, grinning behind his hand, and my Mother, I knew by the curtain moving, sometimes peered out at me as I set off.

At the village of Ram's Valley, close to the little church with its quaint ornamental bell-tower and pretty flint facings, and behind the holly trees and yews, there stood a cottage, perched upon a slope. The way to the cottage was up a number of wooden steps to the higher ground, along a pathway made of brick paving, and so to the small thatched porch. Whenever I had a letter to deliver there, I was usually seen climbing the steps, and met by Miss Margaret Monger, the young lady whom I knew at school as a girl, and who so took my eye at Fred's wedding.

Margaret had grown into a fine-looking young woman, indeed. She was the youngest of four sisters. She was taller than I, and rather more robustly built. Her face was one of character, that of a young woman of great strength of will and firmness of purpose. Although the youngest she was certainly the most level-headed of her family; she might listen to the advice of her invalid mother—her father had died four or five years previously—but whether she listened or not, she knew beforehand what she had determined to do, and went straight on to do it. Old Mrs. Monger did not mind this particularly,

for Margaret had a way of getting about things which was all her own, and which usually gave her what she was after.

At first I was too shy, perhaps too overawed, to say much to her. She called me Frank, on the strength of our schooldays together, but I called her Miss Monger. I did not dare shew too much interest in her, but as I cycled on my way I carried in my mind a picture of the tall, handsome girl who always smiled at me and mentioned the weather; the girl in the practical white blouse and long black skirt, and the strong hand which took the mail I handed in.

All the same, love in those days had to be a very material affair. It was quite important to get my mails collected and delivered on time, and to put in as many hours thatching as I could. But this did not prevent me from "sprucing myself up a bit" when I went Ram's Valley way, or from lingering a few moments longer on Margaret's doorstep than I normally would have done at any one else's house. She did not encourage me too much. I still stolidly came and went, and never got any further with her, and hardly dared to hope that I might. My lack of courage perhaps annoyed her a little, or perhaps she was not quite aware of my feelings for her and was determined that she would not let me get away without making *some* sort of impression on me. So she did allow me to meet her once or twice, and once had me home to tea.

She learned of my position as the Parish Sexton, and that I would before long become the Parish Clerk; she learned, also from other tongues, that local farmers thought I was good at my trade, and that down in Marshwood I was becoming a young man of some standing.

With all this I think she was duly impressed, and although she could discern a certain security in my way of life which she thought valuable, I had, at that time, some serious competition. Her thoughts were, I subsequently discovered, divided between a clerk, who was seeking to pay attentions to her, and myself. Her other flame's social standing was much better than my own, but he had a reputation for being a philanderer; and

although her mother told her she was behaving foolishly, she had not finished with her philanderer yet.

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The quiet years slipped by, and old Mark Vincent aged as he sat at his wooden lathes and continued to turn out his bowls and his wooden ornaments, although by now, so the villagers said, he had no need of it. The youngest son, Zebediah, stayed on with his father, but he was not a lad of much initiative, and had no ambition further than his father's rude workshops. Moses, however, left to start up on his own in the nearby village of Rheuben's Close. He deserted the old craft and went in for furniture-making; very good stuff, too, it was at first, but folk were beginning to say that his prices were creeping up and that his work was not likely to last as long as when he first started off. Master John Ruse and his wife declined, too, into querulous old age. The unruly Jim joined the Army, so that at last his brother Dick took over the carrier's business, very much to the satisfaction of everyone concerned.

In time, Fred became less morose, mostly because he had found solace in a robust, cheerful young woman who helped with the milking and dairy work on her father's farm at Red Moor. As is the custom in the country, he brought her home to tea as soon as they were fairly well acquainted. I was there, too, and as usual, when "company" called to tea, it was a Sunday afternoon. A hot August afternoon.

The windows and doors were open, the conversation small. Fred was embarrassed and so was his young lady. I kept myself to myself, being a little awkward in front of young ladies still, and my Father and Mother thought it unwise to force the hand of either party, so they talked quietly to each other.

Outside, a green butterfly crossed the sunlit lawn. The shortened shadow of the greengage tree burned itself into the wilting grass, and the elms across the dusty way lifted veined leaves to the tiniest of breezes. A robin twittered inconsequentially from the lower branches of the apple trees, and a

sparse shower of gold-winged, tinkling finches chased across the lawn until they became faintly green and blended with the periwinkle strands in the hedge.

Suddenly, the voices of my Father and Mother were stilled by a strange sound which thrust itself among us. It came from the direction of the Malt House, seeming very far away, but it was becoming louder and more insistent every moment. Strangely, it did not stop. There seemed a certain odd rhythm about it, a rhythm of chugging, clattering shapelessness, an ugly mass of sound which left us all bewildered; and mingled with it was the unmistakable noise of wheels crunching the gravelled road.

"What in the name of fortune's that?" asked my Father. No one answered. The sound approached, inexorably.

"Well, whatever 'tis, 'tis coming this way," said my Father. "Let's go out and see."

So we rose from the table and went out, while my Mother struggled apprehensively to the window.

We waited in a little group by the gate. No one ventured to go out into the road, but we saw the schoolmaster out by his white gate, gazing, as we did, fascinated, towards the top of the rise.

"Here it comes!" said Fred excitedly, his voice all but drowned in the approaching clatter. Round the bend at the top of the rise appeared a strange vehicle, painted brilliant red, with what looked like a cloud of white smoke boiling out of the front of it, and a grey cloud of smoke and dust rising at its tail. A queer, box-like vehicle with an even queerer-looking man seated atop of it, holding a wheel in his hands. The man had his hat on backwards, and his face was covered by an enormous pair of goggles. He wore a leather jacket and held the vibrating steering-wheel in gloved hands.

"There's no hosses to it!" exclaimed my Father in astonishment. "And I'm hemmed if he ain't doing fifteen miles to the hour. Faster'n Frank's bicycle, I'll be bound! Whatever will they think of next?"

"'Tis one o' they there motor-cars!" I shouted, in high excitement.

"So 'tis!" hollered Fred.

"Blessed if I'd ride in the thing!" yelled my Father at the top of his voice. "Look at 'un! He jumps four or five yards and then pretty near stops, and then goes on agen. Look how 'tis knockin' that 'ere chap about on the top of it!"

"BANG!" went the motor-car, and we all nearly jumped out of our skins. Fred's young woman retreated a step or two, but we three men remained rooted to the spot. So astonished were

we that we did not notice the driver to be one of the young masters of Ash House, thus forgetting our usual obeisances to him completely. He waved as he chugged by, and I took off my postman's hat and sent it sailing into the air.

But at that moment, tragedy nearly descended upon Marshwood. For round the bend of Rectory Hill appeared Dick Ruse in the carrier's van. Try as he might, he could not pull old Bessy round to face the oncoming monster; she tossed her head, reared up on end and jerked the van round in the opposite direction so that it all but toppled over. Then, holding the bit firmly between her teeth, she bolted off down the Ram's Valley road in a cloud of dust.

"By gum!" roared my Father. "If that 'ere thing be doin' fifteen mile to the hour, old Bessy must be doin' five 'underd!"

The driver stopped his car and we all waited for Dick to come back. This he did eventually, with Bessy plunging from one side of the road to the other; but no power on earth would persuade her past the red Devil, now motionless and boiling quietly by the side of the road. So Dick had to get down from his seat and lead her by. And what he said to the driver, be he from Ash House or not, and what the driver said to Dick, is still remembered and chuckled over by the old folk of Marshwood to this day.

. . . . .

Up in Ram's Valley, all unknown to my Father—or to me for that matter—things were shaping in such a way that the time was not far off before he was to find that he could not indefinitely conduct our destinies by the strength of his own arm—or even his own destiny. Margaret felt eventually that the security I had to offer her was a good deal more attractive than the glamour of my rival; and I think she not only felt safe with me, but she saw also a means through my village activities whereby she might one day express her own forceful personality. There are those who must be near the head of things; who must accept responsibility in order to satisfy their being. My dear wife was such a person. She was by some quite unjustly disliked, and it came to my ears more than once that she was accused of "running after the gentry's coat-tails", and "trying to be a sight too bossy".

It was a foolish attitude, and I put it to one side as the jealousy of those who cannot bear to see others rising from among them and taking hold upon affairs. My wife was forceful, I admit; but my admiration for her never wavered—she was of those kind of people who get things done. I owe her more than I was ever able to repay.

I was then a young man inarticulate in speech and manner when it came to expressing my emotions. But Margaret got to

know my ways, and to learn by degrees how deep was my love for her. As our acquaintance developed, it did not enter my head that Margaret might not love as I. I had no glance or thought for anyone else; no wonderings and anxieties for me. Margaret was mine as completely as I was Margaret's; I trusted her as completely as she knew she could trust me.

So, one June evening, when from the centre of the night-laden woods the nightjar spun his endless tale, and the last dull glow of sunset purpled the red poppies in the fields, and turned the mauve-specked cushions of fumitory into blue smudges; there, by the bleached serpent-heads of mignonette, which leaned inquisitively over so as not to miss a single word, with my heart beating high I proposed, and Margaret accepted.

. . . . .

In the agricultural world of those days, proposal and marriage were usually divided by many years of courtship. It meant both parties saving, and saving hard. The housing shortage for farm labourers was perhaps even more acute than it is now, for then there were many more men on the land; and those houses available, except for gentlemen's estate cottages, had not been much improved from the time Walter Nash left the country to go to America. But Margaret and I were lucky. My Father badly wanted help at home, and talked over our forthcoming marriage with enthusiasm.

He decided that my Mother and Fred and he would live in one half of the cottages. That would be easy to arrange, for originally the cottage had been two, and was still known in the plural as "Weston's Cottages" by the village. Both sides had two separate entrances, front and back, with separate gardens to each. The family had now dispersed, with the exception of Fred and myself, and, truth to tell, those rooms not much in use were becoming out of hand. So, together with my Mother and brother Fred, my Father retired to the older half of the house, while Margaret and I set about furnishing the other half.

We had two bedrooms, a drawing-room, living and kitchen room combined, a scullery, two outhouses, one fitted with a copper for washing clothes. One blessing was that the earth closet was fairly near the back door and not twenty yards down the garden path as it so often is in country houses even today. We could afford little new furniture, and my Father and Mother made us a present, which we valued greatly, knowing how much it meant to them, of the drawing-room furnishings left to them by my Grandfather. We bought a carpet, and my fiancée had her harmonium brought down from Ram's Valley by carrier. Photographs of relatives there were galore. The room looked very pretty when Margaret had finished arranging it, and from Moses Vincent I bought a suite of kitchen furniture, Windsor pattern, the main item being, as far as I was concerned, a yellow wooden armchair. For the rest, we relied upon our wedding presents.

I am, of course, a very old man now, and my memory of my wedding is not, oddly enough, as clear as those other things I reçall and have told you of. But I remember Margaret gowned in pale blue gaberdine, with a small, white lace collar, cuffs and gloves, and a very lovely large flat hat surmounted by white satin bows and a small feather at the back. She carried red and white carnations, tied with a white satin ribbon. Her waist was the trimmest and the neatest I had ever beheld. And she was very happy, very handsome, and very confident.

I had to grow a moustache for the occasion. I had also to buy myself a new suit. Margaret had as much say in the choice of it as my Mother, and I found myself bedecked in a morning coat and striped trousers, a stiff shirt with winged collar and white silk cravat, and stiff cuffs which shewed well below my sleeves. A bowler and patent-leather shoes completed my outfit.

It was a very happy young man who posed behind his seated bride, his hands upon her shoulders, for the photographer. My brother Tom was there as well, with his young lady, and Fred with his. Young Stanley could not be present, as he was at the time on some special job for the Vicar of Wool-

town, to whom he was groom. The Rev. Seaman, a very old man now, stood white-haired and bowed beside an honoured guest, the schoolmaster. He was a heavy, ponderous figure with huge face and high forehead, huge moustache and slight goatee beard and heavy brows.

I remember sitting with my bride in the ivied porch outside this very window, for a special photograph of our two selves alone; and here I am beside her with my new bowler hat on, my hands clasped in my lap in exactly the same way as I, and oddly enough my own son, clasp our hands in repose today.

And I remember, too, the photograph taken under the greengage tree there, not so spreading then as it is now, with Margaret's Mother beside me, and my Mother dressed in her smart black satin with frilled lace neckband and lace cap; still upright, despite her affliction, still confident in her role as the senior woman member of the family.

My Father stood behind her, also very smart in his cutaway coat, white shirt, winged collar and silk cravat. He is heavily whiskered in the photograph, still retaining plenty of hair, his moustache and beard now quite grey. He stoops forward, yet is still a head above the rest, and is careful to display his treasured pipe with the silver band, which rests upon the mantelpiece behind me as I write.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MY wedding seemed to be the signal for the Marshwood village, which my Father knew, to take upon itself sudden changes. Changes which would bring home to my Father that his generation was no longer the most important in the village community.

Fred soon followed my example, and married again. He had heard from Minnie, whose husband's employer had taken up botanic gardening as it was then called, and who was in immediate need of an experienced man. He had good accommodation, and room, too, for a wife in the service of his household.

"Well, Father," said Fred, on receipt of Minnie's letter, " 'tis my chance agen. I be goin'."

My Father eyed him thoughtfully. I could see that, for the moment, he resented Fred's bald statement. Perhaps he was thinking that Fred might have asked first. But if he thought that, it must also have crossed his mind that Fred was no longer a lad.

He was thirty-three, tall, powerful, moustached, but as yet not bearded like my Father; otherwise, he had grown from the weedy youth of his teens into the image of my Father at a similar

age, and now he had regained his confidence, similar, too, in temperament.

"Ah, well," said my Father eventually, with some resignation in his voice, "you don't have to ask me no more, my lad. Go and take your chance. I think you'll do well, same as you done at St. Johnas and along of me."

My Father walked indoors, for this little passage had taken place in the garden, with Fred leaning one hand on the porchway post, his legs crossed, hand on hip, cap on the back of his head and cigarette in one corner of his mouth, ready for whatever reaction the old man might have towards him.

"Thought there was going to be a row over that, Frank," he said to me quietly. "Took it like a lamb, didn't her?"

As he tossed his cap over his eyes against the glare of the sun and gazed out across the lawn, my Father came out again.

"Did Minnie send any message to me?" he asked.

"No," said Fred slowly. "But I shouldn't think nothing on it, Father. Her letter was full o' the job she'd got for me. Dare say she was too tired to write much more. 'Twas a pretty long letter. You can look at'n if you've a mind."

"I don't want to see it," said my Father. He half turned to go in again.

"When you goes up to Lunnon," he said, "you might tell her . . . ask her . . ." He paused. "Ah, well," he said with a sigh, "I specs she'll write when you'm gone." He turned and went off inside again.

Away to London went Fred and his wife. My Father had intended to send Minnie a message until the last moment, but something in his perverse nature prevented him from doing so. He could not get over the humiliation he had suffered from Minnie's husband at their wedding. The last chance thus slipped through the old man's hands. Minnie never received any further communication from him, neither did she ever write to her Father.

Except for big jobs, we did not team up again together after this. My Father thought it best to carry on alone, and leave me to make my own way. I think he sensed that my wife

would prefer it. He saw the Parish Council, and the whole work of church and parish was placed in my hands, and he put the best thatching jobs my way as well. He showed no emotion at the resigning ceremony, where he was handed an illuminated address for his services to the parish, and when the Rev. Seaman, as chairman of the Council, told him that they still regarded him as part of the team because his office was still in his family, he was not comforted much. He tramped home with me from the Rectory without a word and walked round the garden while I hung his address in position over his mantelshelf. But he hung on to his bellringing team, for, apart from my Mother, that was his love.

Thus the old couple lived quietly together in their half of the cottage. My Father did less work, did not get up so early, and earned just enough to live comfortably, smoke his pipe, and sit in the company of my Mother, who was now completely bedridden and dependent upon Margaret, and spent her time on the sofa downstairs. Margaret did not grudge her services to them, for which they were more than grateful; for Margaret was very thorough, very thoughtful, although she made it clear that she preferred to keep apart with me. Which was natural enough, and gave rise to no complaints from my Father and Mother.

And a great solace did my Father find in Mother, although little enough conversation passed between them. And my Mother, despite her worsening affliction, was happy and serene in her last days, perhaps remembering Grandmother's words of long ago: "They needs 'e when they can't work no more. They needs 'e if 'tis only to talk to." I think she was very glad that she had lived, and glad to live for my Father.

Then one day old Mark Vincent had a stroke whilst in his workshops, but lived long enough to express the wish that he should be buried with his wife at the far-away village down in the New Forest where the Vincents had come from. To all intents and purposes his craft died with him, as, for some unaccountable reason, and much to everyone's astonishment, Zebediah gave up the business to go farm labouring.

"Can't understand the fool," grumbled my Father. "Here he can be his own master and live in his own house, and then goes to work for a varmer! All his father's work gone down the drain! 'Tis a hemmed shame, boy, and ought never to be allowed. One thing, I knows you won't let *my* work go like that, and that was why I got you to take on instead of Fred, even though he did come back for a spell, for you never knows which way Fred'll turn."

I felt the same glow of pride as I did when my Father praised me as a lad, and Margaret, who was with me at the time, softened towards them as my Mother said:

"He's a good lad, our Frank."

"Aye," agreed my Father with warmth, "as good as any on 'em."

If only for this, I knew that my vocation had been worth while.

And young Moses Vincent, whose new shop in Rheuben's Close was doing so well, deserted his village customers for the more attractive gains to be had in contracting for the London toymaking firms. My Father had harsh words to say of him as well. There was no longer any important woodcraftsmen in Marshwood, and soon the good old solid hand-made stuff of the Vincents was to be replaced by cheap, brightly varnished factory furniture. "Like soap-boxes done up wi' rags and stuck together wi' glue," as my Father put it.

Next to go was Widow Cheriton, who passed away at the ripe old age of ninety-three.

"Sure to be a third," said my Father, and there was. John Ruse died, to be buried at Marshwood churchyard. My Father returned from the funeral thoughtful and sad.

"There weren't so many at the funeral as I thought there'd be," he told us. "Come to think on it, they be most all goin' off, the old uns like we. Them as ain't died is moved away."

He stood staring out of the window, for he had come into our living-room to give an account of the funeral, his thumbs hitched in his waistcoat armholes, slightly bowed, but a still powerful man.

He peered through the latticed windows towards the elm trees on the opposite side of the road. To all appearances, he was intently studying them, as they stood with their leaves gently rippling in the sun. But I believe the eye of his mind was seeing the square-topped belfry, with the steeple towering into the sky; the diamond-leaded windows of the great church, with the white designs on them, which inside turned themselves into rich colours of red and purple and gold. Perhaps he saw the Rectory nestling in the trees, with its quaint thin chimney stacks rising, richly red; the pond by Caplethorne's Farm, and the long building of the school, with black windows, pointed gables and tall chimney pots. Perhaps he saw, too, his own long cottage by the ditch and willow trees, with half the roof thatched, the ivy right up to the eaves; the plum trees in our small orchard down the garden, and the tiny lawn with the wicker-work seat under the hedge. Or the inn at the top of the hill just beyond the copse; the Post Office close by; Ash House, with the wheelwright's next to it; Ruse's stables opposite the village store; then the blacksmith's, with clouds of acrid smoke rising from the hoof held firmly between the younger blacksmith's thighs, and, right at the top where the five roads meet, Cheriton's broom-making sheds.

The Rev. Seaman was really too old to carry on. So, too, was the schoolmaster. Old Martha, who used to carry the letters for so many years, was scarcely seen outside the Post Office House; the old Master of Ash House was rarely seen out of doors either, and John Ruse, Mark Vincent, Grandfather and Widow Cheriton were no longer to be found in their accustomed places. Farms and cottages he knew well and into which he had been invited many and many a time had fallen into the hands of people from outside; and although many of them knew me well enough, they had no knowledge, when they met him in the roads, that he was my Father. The young sprigs like myself who ran everything now had no time to stand chatting, which he loved, and scarcely took the trouble to greet him on the roads. Buildings, trees, hedges, gates and roads were as familiar to him as they were when he was a boy, but the

people had changed. My Father had the feeling, which I in these days know well enough, of being a stranger in his own village—perhaps he felt like that even in his own house.

He turned, and ponderously crossed the room to go to his own part of the house.

"Times is changing, Frank, my boy. They be all goin' off and leavin' your Mother and me all on our own. It don't seem possible, do it?"

He stared round the room from beneath his lowered brows. "Well," he said, "we shan't see John coming round to ring wi' us at Christmas no more, shall we?"

"He'll be listenin' to the bells, I'll be bound," comforted Margaret.

My Father smiled at her, and despite subsequent differences between them, I knew there was some warmth for my parents in my wife's heart. But my Father was rather too careful of her to display too much of what he was feeling.

"I suppose young Dick'll take over now," he said. "They do say as he be thinkin' o' takin' on another man to go to Newtown whiles he and the other feller does the Aldertown and Ram's Valley run atwixt 'em. Suppose it still ain't all that safe to go Rheuben's Close way, but them gippos is quieter now than they was when I was younger. . . ."

. . . . .

Not to the end of his days did my Father give up his belief that things ought to and would go back to the way of life he knew as a young man. In the evening, as we leaned on our spades in the garden and paused for a smoke, the problems of the fast-moving, modern world were fought out between us.

"Things ain't what they used to be," he would grumble.

"No," I agreed. "They ain't."

"Look at these here new-fangled machines they'm getting on the farms," he would say. "You'm never goin' to tell me as these ways o' goin' about the job is as good as the old. We used to do it proper in the old days. Now they just gets in, mucks

it about and comes away and leaves it. 'Twould never do, days gone by. We done it proper when we was young."

It was of no use to tell him that things were different, that there were more of us than when he was young, and that the old ways of getting about things were too leisurely to produce the amount of food we needed under the new age of industry.

" 'Tis the seasons as sets the pace on the land, boy," he

used to say, "no matter how many folk there is today! We had to get done, just the same. The only difference is there was more to do it. And that's why I hates the sight o' these here machines. All you sees now is railway trains and these here stinky moty-cars; and for every machine you sees clatterin' about, there's ten men as should be on the land sweatin' their hearts out in them blasted factories!"

No use to tell him we were competing with imports kept fresh by the new system of refrigeration.

"Freeze the goodness out of it!" he'd say. "And besides, you never knows where it been growed or what them black men's been mucking about with afore they handles the meat as is sent in. Give me a good bit of English beef as you can taste, and dang the cheap foreign muck!

"And these here danged chemicals or whatever you calls 'em!" he said in disgust. "You'm never goin' to tell me as that 'ere powder they puts on is going to do the land any good. You can't beat a good bit o' muck from the stables, my boy, and they'll come back to it yet! Besides," he'd say, "look at the stuff as is growed from it! It don't keep and don't taste; the straw's too brittle to thatch wi' and gets beat about wi' they reapers so's a coat won't last no more'n eight or nine year instead o' fifteen and twenty like it used! All the vegetables as is sent to the town is growed on it. 'Tis my belief that all that 'ere fever and such like as they 'as in the towns ain't *all* bad houses and bad places to work in. 'Tis bad food!"

I wonder what my Father would have said if he could then foresee the modern tractor ploughing with five turnfurrows at a time; the modern combine harvesting with a staff of three men where in the old days twenty men was not too many! I wonder what he would say if he could have foreseen the herds of cattle wandering where the corn used to be and the sheep folded; if he could see the weeds and the unkempt hedges and the drains, which men of his time were so careful to keep open, now obliterated by the plough! I wonder what his reaction would have been if he had been told that the result of all this was somewhere in the region of nine sacks of wheat to the acre where the farmer of his day counted it as only a fair crop if he grew under fifteen!

And then there were other pleasant times in reminiscence which kept us close together and made my wife drop much of her reserve. The "do you remembers"—the Xmas Eve of years past when, after bellringing, Master Vincent leaned his great hulk against the table and spun the tale of Kate Hunt, the Witch of Round Ridge.

"You wasn't no more'n a babby, then," my Father said.

"And now, you be a married man and took my place altogether in the village. Well, 'twas me as done it, boy, and done it proper. Remember the day I taught you the bells, and the fust time you come thatchin', when you stood waitin' in the backyard wi' Tom's prong pretty near as long as yourself over your shoulder, and the rush basket slung at yer back? And how Mother worried in case I worked 'e too hard?"

And then again, we remembered old Shep: that wiry, bent ancient with his crinkled face and dirty whiskers, his half-dozen waistcoats under his ragged jacket, his clay, his battered hat and his expert spit. What was it old Shep used to say? "Time takes 'em all. . . ."

"Aye," reflected my Father solemnly, "and it took Shep, too. And all the others."

Another picture came to him, that of me again, standing on the pathway, waiting for Tom to take me to school.

"Them knickers and jacket as was too large for 'e," said my Father with a smile, "and they long black stockings and a cap wi' a tossle on it! I was a bit consarned about 'e then, boy, in case they was too rough for 'e down at school. But there ain't much o' that left in thee now. . . ."

And then he remembered with a smile a comical little chap in a red petticoat with a white overall on the top, his Mother's sun-hat tilted over his eyes, gripping the rungs of the ladder while he waited for Father to come and take him down from the danger he was in. How they all rowed with each other, and how old Grandfather Weston tottered off back to the lawn—my Father's Father, a thatcher like himself, who had told him tales of *his* adventures; tales which my Father remembered yet. . . .

. . . . .

Six months later, my Mother died.

She left behind her a man who gave no outward sign, not even to his own children, as to how he felt. Minnie, who came down from London for the funeral, believed that my Mother's death had made no impression upon him, but we four boys

knew differently. But whatever Minnie thought, or whatever any other person thought, my Father did not seem to heed. He slammed the door upon us all, and upon the world.

He made one last defiant gesture against Time, and the risen generation with whom she had supplanted him and his old colleagues. Oddly enough, or perhaps not so oddly, seeing that I was the main supplanter, he struck at me. He accepted my wife's invitation to live with us, and then demanded that we should pay rent for the half of the cottage we lived in! The half he had just vacated, he let. Margaret, not unnaturally, retaliated against the cantankerous old man by making him pay for his keep. My Father raised no objection to this arrangement; he was hardly in any position to, and it suited his pride.

My wife could not find it in her heart to wholly forgive him for this. She felt, and had expected, that when we took him in, in return for our care for him he might let the other half of the cottages and contribute his share towards the running of the new Weston family. We had thought to rouse his interest in it; to give him a further purpose in life by allowing him to help us build, as far as he could, as he had done. But no, he lived with us, yet was no longer a part of us; his world was inward, resenting intrusion, and jealous, and the more bitter the longer he lived.

We based our hopes of the future upon the assumption that he would leave us the cottages. He gave us no such assurance when, perturbed by his mood, we ventured to sound him upon the matter. After consultation with my wife, I offered to buy the cottages over a period of years; and this offer my Father accepted!

It seemed that my Father's love for his children, and for his fellow-men, died with the passing of his wife. And when the old schoolmaster heard of it from Margaret, he did his best to help her feel more kindly disposed towards my Father; but he shook his head and said that he thought, as far as his family was concerned, my Father was a fool to the last.

When the end came, he died complaining against me. His behaviour towards Margaret and myself was well known to the

rest of his children, and there were only two of his family to follow him—Tom and myself. The Cheriton brothers, Zebediah Vincent, the Misses Weyenrighter, the schoolmaster and a few others were all there were to see off this bitter old man, once such a pillar and so much loved and respected in the village of Marshwood.

I dug my Father's grave myself, as is the custom in our family. After the funeral, my wife went on down to our home ahead of me, and I stayed behind, after the Rev. Seaman had tottered along to the Rectory, to see to my duties. I filled in alone. Around me stood the mute, brief testimonies to the old men of Marshwood.

Sacred to the Memory of
MARK VINCENT
BOWL TURNER . . .

SILAS WEYENRIGHTER
POSTMASTER OF THIS VILLAGE FOR . . .

JOHN JAMES RUSE
CARRIER OF THIS VILLAGE FOR . . .

And propped to one side, so that my Father could lie beside the wife who was all the better part of his life to him:

MARGARET MAY WESTON
Died June 24th, 1899
aged sixty-two
and
WILLIAM JOHN WESTON . . .

Over in an odd corner, from which one could obtain a clear view of the downs, stood a little oak cross above a muddle of weeds and ant heaps, bearing on its triangular metal plate the words:

In Memory of
SHEP DAUBENAY, *aged* 92
Died Dec. 26th, 1877
"TIME TAKES THEM ALL."

. . . . .

My last service to my Father done, I left the stone for the mason to put into position, and put the tools away. I drew the great doors of the church together with their familiar clash. The sound of them echoed in the empty building, and up the narrow belfry stair, into the ringing chamber, up, up to set the bells

whispering, very slightly and musically. I made my way carefully along the polished path, slippery with footworn pebbles, and the dried needles of the yew tree rustled softly to the ground with the very tiniest of noises.

Past the diamond-leaded windows I went, with their white designs upon them, protected by a close wire mesh; past the leaning rows of tombstones, into the autumn sunshine which glimmered in the sheen of blue ivy leaves, touched the sunward

side of the mounds, tinted the yews and cypresses, and marked out eccentric weather scars on the tall steeple.

And now, I felt, the new Weston family was free to spread its sails and set course for the future. My wife had already acquainted me with the knowledge that she believed herself to be in a certain condition. A son, perhaps, to carry on where I would leave off . . . ?

My heart was heavy. I had no bitterness against my Father because of the strange way in which he had turned against me in latter years. I believed his soul had been afflicted with a sickness which none of us could cure while he yet lived upon this earth. I alone had to take the brunt of that, and I, and my Mother, who was, I felt sure, even now at his side, understood it.

Here was I, Frank Weston: Parish Clerk, Sexton, bell-master, thatcher in straw, reed or heather, haytier, land measurer, water-diviner, gravedigger, hurdle-maker, with sound connections and a secure income. I felt my few years' burden with him towards the end was little enough for me to suffer for these good things which had been given me through the love my Father bore me.

THE END