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THE BOOK OF CRAFTS AND CHARACTER

BY

WALTER RAYMOND

AUTHOR OF "THE BOOK OF SIMPLE DELIGHTS," "JACOB AND JOHN,"
"TRYPHENA IN LOVE," "TWO MEN O' MENDIP," ETC.

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Essays and Sketches

These essays and sketches have appeared as detached papers in various periodicals, and I wish to thank the editors of The Spectator, The Westminster Gazette, The Tribune, The Daily Mail, *and* Country Life *for permission to offer them to the public in this volume.*

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AN OLD STONE-CRACKER

AN OLD STONE-CRACKER

CRACK! Crack! Crack!

Seated upon his heap on the sward beside the road, old Mark Lucas, the wayside stone-cracker, was at work.

Crack! Crack!

Then came a pause, whilst he rolled down an unbroken stone and arranged it conveniently between his feet; and soon, sharper and fiercer than before, the blows began again.

Suddenly, as I drew near, down came the pattering rain. He threw aside his hammer and hobbled into the ditch to shelter under the hedgerow until the cloud had passed.

"Come an' stan' dry under the holmen-bush," he shouted to me, with a merry, wheezy little chuckle. "Do happer down an' no mistake. But there, 'tis but a shower, an' 't'ull zoon be over."

I stepped over the old hurdles, set up to keep his chips and flakes from flying into the road, and over the heap of sharp-edged, newly-cracked stones to accept the hospitality of his glistening holly-tree.

The old man had many a time awakened my pity, as he hobbled, by the aid of two sticks, from his cottage with the ivy and the straggling rose-bushes to his square pile of flints. I looked upon him as the castaway of agricultural labour, abandoned in decrepitude to a precarious ignominy. His face was wrinkled and creased. Something like a tear hung hesitatingly in his watery eye. His coat, made for another man, was green with age and chequered with patches. He was bent, and his limbs were crooked with rheumatism. Yet for need of a shilling, unless the rain were heavy and incessant, day after day he might be found sitting on his heap.

His heap was not always in the same place.

Last autumn, when the maple-bushes in the hedge-rows were the colour of old gold, and the last full-blown honeysuckle, reluctant to be picked, shed its petals at a touch, he was in the lane. Before winter he had drawn down to the corner, where nettles grow rank amongst the crumbling stones of the disused village pound. And throughout the spring, mating finches and returning migrants saw him daily, near the finger-post at the four cross-roads, upon the waste between the highway and the ditch. It was here I interviewed him under his holly-bush.

A carpet thickly bestrewn with golden celandines lay beneath our feet. We sat upon a dry sandy bank cushioned with primroses and sprinkled here and there with purple violets. Sunlight lit up the distant hills in patches, and a rainbow arched the sky, spreading its many-coloured scarf to hide

the frowning storm. A robin came amongst the prickly leaves almost within arm's reach, cocked his head, peered at us inquisitively, and sang. Earth, heaven, blue sky and drifting cloud, fresh green leaf and slanting silver rain, smiled upon each other with unmixed delight. Even the passing wind laughed within itself, as it pelted heavy raindrops against the opening buds.

"Great God!" I said in my heart, "an earth so beautiful could never have been meant to be a home for poverty."

For quite a long time I had pitied that poor man.

"You are out in all sorts of weather," said I by way of making a beginning.

The old man chuckled once more. His head shook. His grey eye shed its fraudulent tear and industriously began to form another.

"I can't abear to be within walls. I never couldn'. Zo zoon as I be up, I do want to be out. Zo zoon as I be in, I do want to be abed. Must be terr'ble bad weather to pen I up. No mistake."

"But don't you take harm from getting wet?"

The chuckle grew into a laugh.

The old man drew himself up and began to be boastful.

"Why, I ha'n't never a-been bad in my life—or not since I wur a chile. An' now I be hard upon vower-score. Never zick nor zorry. An' I've a-had hard-ships too. We brought up ten o' 'em, zebem boys an' dree maids, but they all went away herevrom. Nothen' 'pon earth 'ud do but the town. They do

get there zo easy now. When I wur a boy, I did now an' again drive stock to a market or a fair; but that wur all. Bless thee! A man 'ud take no more thought now to go to the world's end."

"How did the boys get on?"

"Wonderful well. You zee, I wur a man did always take a pride in myzelf. I wur a carter too. Zo I taught 'em always to take a pride in theirzelves. An' they went young, to one place an' t'other, an' larned trades an' got on. They be all well off. Heart alive! Though you do zee I a-zot 'pon a stone-heap, I've a-got no call to work. They be willen enough to keep I. But I do take that pride in myzelf, I do zay zo long as I can crawl I'll earn my own victuals. An' I shall too. For I do know in my heart what 't'ull be. One week under the roof. Next week under the churchyard sod."

He got up, stepped from under his holmen-bush, and looked around at the sky.

Rain was still falling, though not so fast. But a heavy cloud and a grey slanting shower were coming up upon the wind, and he came back.

"My mind do harbour but one fear," said he doubtfully, shaking his head. "Things do move zo quick nowadays. I be most terr'ble afeard the time 'ull come when there wunt be no more stone-cracken. They do crack 'em by steam now, at the stone-quarr', an' haul 'em down wi' a traction-engine. I do think myzelf that things do go too fast o' late years. Change 'pon change, I do seem, do keep the world all 'pon edge an' in wonder. I do think myzelf did

ought to be stopped. Let 'em haul 'em down whole if they be a-minded, an' then let we crack 'em. That did ought to be made a law by Act o' Parliament. But lawk! They've a-got no time there vor nothen no sense. There's too much steam an' hurry now, master. What do you think?"

A sympathetic condemnation of the encroachments of steam upon the stone-cracking industry raised me in his estimation.

"Ah! There'ull be no road-zide cracken in years to come," lamented he with the earnestness of a true seer.

I tried to lead his mind away from this melancholy conclusion.

"I suppose the steam-cracker and the engine cost a good bit in labour both to make and work," I suggested. "And, as you say, your sons have done well elsewhere."

He only shook his head again.

"I do think stone-cracken ought to be kept up for the sake o' the vew that can't turn their han' to nothen else," said he. "'T'ull be a bad thing for the country when that do die out."

We let the matter drop.

"I suppose if you could be twenty again you would go to the town, too."

His face lit up with excitement.

"Bless thee, no, master. I do love the open air too well. Let I have the sky over my hat. 'Tis well enough, may be, wi' a trade in a town. But I could never ha' stood all day long in a workshop zix days

o' the wick. No, master. When I wur young I wur a man you couldn' put out o' place, in a manner o' speaken. I wur one o' the wold-fashioned sort. I could ploughy an' mowey an' reapy an' milky an' make a rick or lay a rope o' hedge wi' any man. You zee, I took that pride in myzelf. I always did. I do now. I always shall. An' that's why I do come out an' crack a vew stones, not to be beholden to any-beddy—not even my own boys. They'd keep I in ease—vree as a squire, if I did allow 'em. An' that's why I do think the stone-cracken ought to be kept up—zo that a wold man past other work can carr' home a shillen or zo to his wold ooman, an' take a pride in hiszelf. No, no, master. Gie I the open air, for all the rain. I do love the fields an' the beastes, an' the zun an' the rain, ay, an' theäs-here heap o' stones, all zo well."

The rain had ceased. He got up, his little round cushion in one hand, his hammer in the other, to hobble back to work. By the side of the hurdle he stopped for one word more.

"One o' my boys is in an office. Ah! He wur always a beautiful scholar, he wur. But, massy 'pon us, master, avore I'd zit hour a'ter hour, an bide an scratchy 'pon paper wi' a pen, I'd——"

Finding no word to express it, he laughed outright as he went merrily on with his cracking.

And I had pitied that poor man!

Toward dusk, when I got back to the village, the old stone-cracker was hobbling homewards down the

street, and in the open doorway of his creeper-covered cottage stood an equally wrinkled woman, expectant of his approach. They made quite a touching picture in the fading evening light.

My neighbour, Mrs. Simon Gallingham, a lady noted for her intelligence and a remarkable gift of conversation, was by her garden-gate pulling a bunch of lilac, and I stopped for a word.

"I had quite a long talk with that old chap to-day," said I. "He is a very independent old boy."

"Independent? Mark is very well off. He brought up his sons most respectable, and now they do help him—an' nothen but right," explained she in her sharp instructive manner.

"No. He told me they were willing enough; but it is his pride to earn his crust for himself. He won't take anything of them."

Mrs. Simon Gallingham laughed.

"His old woman will," said she.

ONE OF THE OLD SORT

II

ONE OF THE OLD SORT

SUSAN JANE SPRACKITER was a wonderful woman. Everybody round about Hazelgrove recognised in Susan Jane a merit so rare, that it placed her in comparison with commonplace humanity as one in ten thousand. She was said to be the last of "the old sort." That was praise enough in Hazelgrove. Irreligion had never yet found the hardihood to question the virtues of "the old sort." Therefore if any person in company ever managed to raise a laugh at the expense of Susan Jane, there was always another sitting by to look up and ask, "Ah! but where can you zet eyes 'pon another like she?"

Yet Susan Jane was not so altogether fair that it was a temptation to look upon her. Her nose was short and sharp as the projecting corner of the figure 4. Her upper lip was long, and the mouth underneath took the shape of a butter-boat. Susan Jane's cheeks bore freckles as big as parsnip-seeds, and they appeared to flourish better still on her high cheek-bones. Her hair was the colour of the mari-

gold, and her old sunbonnet as white as snow that has lain on the ground six weeks. Of a working day Susan Jane Sprackiter wore her skirt full short, and the boots below were but a humorous disguise for feet.

It was for moral beauty alone that Susan Jane Sprackiter was remarkable.

Left a widow with five small children she turned to, and farmed the little holding of thirty acres in a style that would have done credit to any man. Morning and night she was to be seen about the place, bringing her seven cows down the lane to be milked, a hayfork across her shoulder carrying fodder to the stalls, or a bucket in hand taking the skim to the calves in the barn. Nobody could get the better of her at a deal, and it was known by a hundred little significant signs, to be recognised only by rural neighbours, that Susan Jane was doing well and saving money. Yet during the years of her hardest struggle times were notoriously bad, and many a man who had been well-to-do went to the wall. To be sure, as everybody pointed out, Susan Jane had most wonderful luck. That she was industrious and careful none could deny. She could drench a bullock as well as any farrier, and did. Still there is such a thing as luck—and no man living can go against it. So all the others said when they did not get on.

But Susan Jane did not rely entirely on hard work. She neglected none of the little precautions and pious rights dear to the old sort. On her stable-

door she nailed a crescent horseshoe; and if any neighbour who chanced to come in were foolish enough to tempt death into the house by putting down the bellows on the kitchen-table, Susan Jane did not forget to speak.

When baking-day came round and she mixed up one-half of her flour overnight and put in the barm according to the best of her judgment—for Susan Jane had judgment—she never failed to draw two hearts and a criss-cross on the "sponge" with her two forefingers, to make it rise well and be ready in the morning.

And when she had a bushel or so of malt to brew and had swilled out the wash-tub, and poured out the boiling water, and waited till she could see her face in it, and steeped the malt, then before she covered it up with the sack-bag, she always drew the same sign on the mash.

And although Susan Jane, when she sowed a bed of onions or other garden seeds never failed to put down string and feathers to frighten off the birds, she always drew the same figure on the soil to preserve it from something worse.

For these reasons no woman who ever wore out shoeleather could bake a better batch; and the last loaf, when it was a fortnight to three weeks stale, did eat, as everybody knew, verily and truly as sweet as a filbert. As to the brew, although the beer might now and again have a funny smack to it, with ever so little a thought of a soapsud, where could you find a drink more wholesome? It was ever so much

better than so much tea. And if Susan Jane did set the children to weed the garden-plot as soon as ever their fingers were big enough to go round the neck of a groundsel, that did not account for all. What good can work do unless you have the forethought to keep off the evils that no living soul can work against?

So everything went well. The children grew up straight and strong, and Susan Jane was very particular to send them off in time for school. She would go down to the gate also, with a little stick tucked under her apron, to stand in out of sight until she found herself in a position to attack the rear of any loiterer on the way home. To instil a love of work and the habit of industry, the old sort set great reliance upon a little stick. And after admonition always followed encouragement. "Ah! you mid hollar now, but you'll grow up to thank your mother in years to come. You will," cried Susan Jane.

One after another the children grew up, left the nest, and went out into the world and did well, until at last only the youngest, Reuben, remained at home. He helped his mother on the little farm, and had a two-wheeled cart of his own and went pig-dealing. But the boys had brought new ideas home from school, but none of them more than Reuben. The nineteenth-century spirit of unbelief had invaded even the little remote homestead. Reuben openly scoffed at the bellows, and absolutely refused to allow two hearts and a criss-cross on the onion-bed. He argued that "Bellises be but wood and leather wi'

a iron nozzle. They can't do no harm 'pon table, wi'out some fool should try to swaller 'em an' they stick in his droat." Reuben declared there were no such things as pixies, and never had been; and more than that, he would give any witch leave to overlook him. And slowly Susan Jane allowed her ancient faiths to be shaken. The horseshoe dropped from the stable-door and the hearts and criss-cross were as often as not neglected. Yet the batch and the brew and the onion-bed continued to enjoy the unimpaired prosperity.

Susan Jane had almost forgotten what Reuben had once called her ignorant and idle superstitions, when suddenly a most respectable sow, of conduct hitherto above reproach, "wur a-tookt bad" of a most mysterious disorder. That sow was officially declared not to be suffering from swine-fever, but the symptoms proved altogether beyond the arts and experience of Susan Jane. The sow got poor when just the opposite was expected of her, and some thought she must be in a decline. Susan Jane only shook her head. She knew. What she knew, for fear of being laughed at, she kept to herself.

It was summer, but there had been rain and all the earth was fresh and sweet again after a drought. The doors of the homestead were open to let in the cool evening air, and Susan Jane was busy in the kitchen, for she had a few cold potatoes to fry up with a bit of bacon in time for Reuben. She was glad at heart. The rain had come just in time for the mangolds, and, as everybody said, would be the salvation of the

country. There was nothing in life to find fault with or call for a sigh, except the sow—the sow that was bewitched—Susan Jane knew she was.

"Ah! they mid talk," she muttered to herself as she bustled about, "but I do know what I do know, an' what I saw wi' my own eyes when I wur a little maid."

Suddenly she stopped. Her eye caught sight of something moving on the kitchen floor. Susan Jane advanced a step, and was aware of a large toad that had managed to cross the threshold and was slowly crawling by the wall under the shadow of the kitchen table. A look of horror came upon Susan Jane's face. The toad paused, and the two stared at each other.

"Ah! you be a witch, beänt 'ee? I do know what I did ought to do. I do know what poor mother done years agone."

Yet the age had changed and Susan Jane hesitated.

To her eye the toad put on a guilty look.

"You do know you be catched—don't 'ee? Ah! I can't abear to do it. Yet I *did* ought to."

Evidently perturbed, the toad moved again, but back towards the door. She saw his warty back, and there seemed to be a red gleam in his eyes.

"Tes a sin to forgive 'ee," cried Susan Jane. "An' I wunt—nor I wunt, you wicked wold spickèd an' sparkèd witch."

She ran to the hearth, took the tongs, picked up the toad by his fat sides, ran to the fire, clenched

her teeth, shut her eyes, and dropped him into the midst of the glowing embers.

"There then! I've a-doned it," she cried, and heaved a sigh of relief. "I knowed I did ought to an' I did. They don't believe nothen no sense nowadays. I've a-doned right, an' I don't care—zo long as nobody 'idden here to know."

"MY SHEEP"

III

"MY SHEEP"

THE neighbours always called him "Sheppey," and his old dog's name was "Ship." This was so universal that a stranger from the town now and again might fall into the error of addressing him as Mr. Sheppey; but, as the church register can bear witness, he was christened Jabez Quick.

They were a quaint pair—that old, blue, shaggy, bob-tailed dog and he—as they walked together down the village street. Neither in years was past his prime. But responsibility had conferred upon each a staid sobriety that was very impressive.

They did not stop to gossip.

Sheppey's way was to nod, make some oracular remark about the weather—a matter upon which he was a recognised authority—and pass on.

When they met a strange dog on the road, Ship just bristled up his back hair, took three deliberate steps to right or left, as the case might be, stopped, growled, and drew back his lips with a snarl vicious enough to make timid blood curdle. His threats

were quite terrific. Then, without haste, he walked back to his master's heel.

"Your dog has a nasty way of showing his teeth, shepherd," said I one day as I passed them on the village causeway.

"That's only his smile," replied Sheppey, and he looked up at the sky, and added that in his opinion it was working "up for rain."

But all the thoughts of Jabez Quick the shepherd, his cares, joys, aspirations, and pride, were summed up in two words often on his lips—

"My sheep."

He was tall and straight, a strong, wiry man, with fair hair, grey eyes, and an aquiline nose. His face possessed a character that marked him off from rusticity. There are many countenances of old-world country folk that seem to claim a native aristocracy. Amongst the younger generation they are growing scarce, for the quicker minds bent upon "a trade" drift away into the towns. When last I talked with Sheppey he told me he was over sixty. "I be a-past my dree-score," was the way he put it.

That was early in the year, and a bitter north wind came driving up the valley, bringing now and again a storm of very fine snow. The whirling flakes tossed and leapt upon the huffling gale as if unwilling to settle upon the earth. Yet some of them clung to the slanting furrows of the ploughed ground, and turned the rich brown arable to a cold grey. When the cloud had passed the sun shone.

Sheppey was busy with his lambs.

The lambing-fold was in a green field surrounded by tall, protecting hedgerows; and a sloping hill towards the north shielded it from the stroke of the gale. Studded about were shelters made with double hurdles well stuffed between with straw. White lambs, with woolly little bodies and preposterous legs, dotted the grass, and mingled their treble bleating with that of the ewes. Ship, fifty yards away from the fold, lay curled up, making the most of a gleam of January sun, with his back to the cold wind. He was of no use on that occasion. "Lie down, you silly old fool!" shouted Sheppey, when the dog got up and growled at the sound of a stranger's step in the field.

Sheppey was in good spirits, though perplexed, as may chance to any man, with a superfluity of twins. He talked about shepherding, and the conversation became a monologue.

"No, no! Not every man can be a shepherd. To be a good shepherd a man mus' be a born shepherd. When all is a-learned he mus' know more than can be a-told by word of mouth. He mus' have the watchful eye like, to take in the leastest little signs. An' he mus' feel a pride in his sheep. Now, I'd go wi' a leary belly any day sooner 'an harm should come to my sheep.

"What do I mean by a watchful eye? Well now, some be so foreright they mus' run at everything full-butt like any old ram. Now, say I had a flock o' sheep up on sleight, an' did walk up at daybreak to have a look at 'em, jus' as they did get up like.

Should I tumble in 'pon top o' 'em head first like, so to speak, out o' the clouds? No, no! I should look over hedge quiet as a mouse, or lean 'pon the gate first, all unbeknowed, an' eye my sheep.

"What should I look for? Now, sheep, when all is said an' done, be very like Christians. When they do feel bad in their inzides they do show restless in their ways. Only there is less deceit about a sheep. He don't never hide his feelin's, and he don't never put nothen on. I do like to zee 'em all a-chewen the quid contented when I do look at my sheep.

"Then, when I've a-had a peep at 'em like that, I do walk in round quiet, like you yourself mid stroll round your garden of a Sunday a'ternoon to look at your flowers, an' note the countenances o' my sheep. I do know 'em every one zo well or better 'an you do know your feller-creatures that do live in the same street. A sad sheep do hold his ears awry. He do show a downcast eye. I could soon read misfortune in the face o' any one o' my sheep."

All the while he was busy with a ewe and a dead lamb.

He drove two stakes into the ground and fastened her head between them so that she could not butt. He took away the lamb and skinned it. He looked around amongst the bleating mothers of twins for a young ewe with a small udder, took one of her lambs, clapped the skin on its back, and carried it to suck the bereaved ewe, which very soon accepted it for her own. He took a keen delight in showing me this time-honoured fraud.

"Verily an' truly, I do believe," said he, "that a shepherd have a-got to be the most artfulest man 'pon earth. I do. But he can take a pride in his work too. He mus' have headpiece, I tell 'ee, to carry so much through. For he's doctor an' surgeon an'—— But we be in for a cold night, I can zee that. I mus' run an' make a drop o' ginger gruel for thik weakly ewe."

So the conversation was brought abruptly to a close, and I turned back towards the village.

The elder lambkins pranced in the sunshine, then ran to their mothers, wiggled their tails, and sucked.

At the gate of a field I met with the owner of the flock, Farmer John Buck, a man so well known that you may already have heard his name.

"And how is shepherd getting on?" cried he in a voice more boisterous than the north wind.

"All well, and very busy," replied I.

"That's right then," he cried cheerfully.

"Does he call the sheep his when he talks to you?"

Farmer John Buck is a well-to-do yeoman of the old school. He threw back his head and laughed his best.

"Look here!" shouted he; "I wouldn't give a cobbler's cuss for any shepherd who doesn't say 'my sheep'l"

FARMER JOHN BUCK

IV

FARMER JOHN BUCK

FARMER JOHN BUCK is one of the old school, and we all say so with a relish that proves the old school to have been something exceptionally good.

"But where will you find another like him?" we ask each other every day of our lives.

They are getting very scarce, men of the good old sort, who, in the days of our fathers, were the backbone of this country. Thus we talk in our parish, and sagely wag our heads when we mention the name of Farmer John Buck.

Farmer John Buck is a character.

Not in a few lines such as these is he to be drawn as he deserves. A thick quarto volume, bound in sheep-skin, could do only scanty justice to this remarkable personage. The exterior, the outward lineaments of the man, you shall have. But they provide only the frontispiece, which can but inadequately suggest the mysterious workings of the mind within.

Farmer John Buck is both tall and stout, and still

as upright as our squat church-tower, although he owns to sixty-eight. His face is square, by reason of two fat jowls that hang almost as deep as his chin He bears what is called a fresh complexion, extending in a hue of delicate pink to the central baldness of his crown, a baldness doubtless brought about by wearing a hat from dawn to sunset. Farmer John Buck shaves himself square between chin and forehead, leaving a whisker down each cheek and a grizzly beard around his throat. This arrangement often confers upon a face a grave and dignified expression not to be found elsewhere, save upon the countenance of a British Lion in the Royal Standard. These advantages, crowned with an ancient beaver hat with its fur ruffled and enhanced by a white stock and fox's tooth set as a pin, make Farmer John Buck a striking figure as he jogs down the village street on a stout, iron-grey cob of the breed of the ancient pack-horse. Out of doors you never see Farmer John Buck on foot, except when he walks to church of a Sunday, and as only an orchard divides his barton stacks and homestead from the graveyard wall, he has not far to go.

He is the most good-natured man that ever trod shoe-leather—until you cross him.

But look at his healthy life.

Before the summer sun has time to drink the dew, he is up on the broad chalk down where the harebells grow, or below in the grassy valley where the gravelly trout-stream runs winding between the level meads. The air he breathes is fresh and pure, or just

sweetened with the wholesome scent of sheep and kine. And if in winter the north wind drives the cold sleet or the great snowflakes slanting across the fold, it only braces Farmer John Buck up to a ruddier colour.

I asked him once whether, with so much exposure, he did not catch cold.

"Wha-a-t? Catch cold?" cries he. "Not I. Why, I've never a-kept my bed a day in forty year."

All his thoughts and interests are wrapt up in the land and the parish.

He holds some sixty acres of his own, but lives as a tenant farmer on the farm that he and his forebears have held time out of mind. This antiquity of race has laid down a bed-rock of independence that sometimes peers through his good nature. Farmer John Buck is not the one to stand any tomfoolery or hanky-panky tricks from any man, gentle or simple. When the squire, who, by-the-by, is his landlord, contended in the parish council that there is no legal footpath across Broadleaze, and threatened to shut it up, Farmer John Buck got up and made a speech.

"That's a damn fine cock an' bull tale, I do call it!" cried Farmer John Buck at the top of his voice.

Then he sat down again.

He is such a Churchman too.

Every Sunday of his life—well, ever since he was knee-high—he has once attended his parish church. There is nothing immoderate in any of Farmer John Buck's habits, and he has found once enough.

But some forty years ago this steadfast constancy

was put to a severe test. The good, easy-going, old-fashioned rector had been taken to rest, and a young Oxford popinjay of a Puseyite (so the rumour ran) was presented in his place. So Farmer John Buck was on the alert. No man on earth ever had a keener eye for Popery. He could see it in the gait of that young parson as he walked down the village street. He could sniff it, as it were, in the doctrine of any sermon which he did not perfectly understand. Nobody ever hated it more. Farmer John Buck held the opinion that should the Pope ever come back to England, all true-born, outspoken Englishmen would be burnt alive. So when the young priest turned to the east, Farmer John Buck, seeing at once how the wind lay, turned to the west. He made no other protest. Having been churchwarden of the parish for many a year he was conversant with the law, and, as he afterwards pointed out with some pride, "When he do turn, I do turn. An' be guilty o' no brawling in church." Thus did Farmer John Buck observe his characteristic moderation.

But no sooner did he reach the porch than his tongue was loosened and he began to speak his mind.

All down the churchyard path, under the lich-gate, and along the causeway by the churchyard wall, he shouted with the force and rapidity of an auctioneer selling stock:—

"Now, I'll give any man dree half-crowns an' a gallon o' cider, that ull go an' turn thik man round again next time he do turn his back upon the people. Dree half-crowns an' a gallon o' cider. Dree half-

crowns, I do zay, an' a gallon o' cider, an' I'll take the consequences if there be any."

Opposite the inn, my neighbour, Mrs. Simon Gallingham, as staunch a Protestant as himself, but one who dislikes all noise and loud talking, except when she unconsciously does it for herself, induced by the consideration that somebody might really be led to think the farmer was "in drink," ventured on a soft remonstrance:—

"But it is sometimes done now, Mr. Buck."

"Not here," roared he. "We never had no Popery here. I tell 'ee no better Churchman 'an poor passon dead an' gone ever stepped into a desk. He never done it. No, no. I tell 'ee what 'tis. I be for a open Bible, I be. Always was an' always shall be, an' my father afore me. A open Bible, that's what I do say."

He appeared to address this argument particularly to myself, as if with a certainty of support.

"But there are millions in these days of print all open, Mr. Buck," said I.

"Ah! I wunt listen to it. 'Tis the thin end o' the wedge. Don't you tell I."

We are excellent friends, and I thought he might derive benefit from a joke homœopathically administered.

"Well, I hope you read it, Mr. Buck."

The frowns cleared away at once. His voice became quite low and confidential.

"Now that's a very funny thing," said Farmer John Buck. "I can't read."

"Not read!"

"Well, if I do but zit myself down quiet I do fall asleep. There I mid take up a paper an' glance through the markets, but lawk! afore I do read six lines I do drop off."

Farmer John Buck cares for nothing outside of his parish. After his one visit to London he complained that he could not find any place to get a bit of fresh hay to put in his boots. He very much prefers a bit of sweet hay to a sock. There is no mending, no washing, and it fits, as he has often explained to me, "zo that your voot is as snug as a hare in her form."

It is more convenient, and much cleaner, too; because you can at any time sit down when you chance to be passing a rick and put in a fresh wisp.

He admired, however, what he calls "the London market."

"I saw a very fine show o' beef, an' mutton as good as any man could wish to stick fork into. But, lal 'Twas all a-zend up from the country," reflected Farmer John Buck.

Hearty, genial relic of the old school, now passed away! How often I have scorched my knees before his fire and assuaged my thirst out of his quart cup!

I told him once of a man in New Zealand who sheared two hundred sheep in an eight hours' day.

"Walter Raymond," said Farmer John Buck, shaking his head and speaking with respectful deliberation, "I do know no man that I do respec' more 'an I do you—but you be a liar."

TWO TRAMPS

V

TWO TRAMPS

IT was on the Fosse-Way.

Mile after mile the old Roman road stretches across the country from Lincoln into Devon as straight as the flight of an arrow.

Here and there at the foot of a hill the modern way may craftily skirt a difficulty too great for wheels; but the ancient road is still to be seen, a broad, grassy lane climbing the steep with a directness that nothing can turn aside. Its cool turf, soft and damp under the shade of unplashed hedgerows, is pleasant under foot. Wild-mint grows in the wet places. Honeysuckle, wild roses, with now and again a sweet-brier, refresh the air and delight the solitary traveller. He may peer over the brambles upon the head and brown wings of a blackbird, as she sits on the bank of the ditch half-hidden behind a wrinkled maple stump; or find the greenfinch's nest high up in a thorn-bush, and listen to the melancholy gladness of her mate. But these joys are brief. The truant Macadam awaiting his

descent is always ready to welcome him back upon the dust and stones.

Only when overrun by a city is the Fosse quite lost. On the plains it is a broad road, generally with a tract of waste upon each side. Slightly billowing with the unsuspected undulations of the ground, it keeps its undeviating course and melts out of sight upon the horizon.

It was early afternoon in summer-time and amidst the level pastures of Somerset that I met him. He got up from the wayside, stepped into the road, and stretched himself. The air was very close—the sky completely overcast with clouds. He took a long look at the heavens, as if deliberating upon the chances of a wet jacket, and then he took a long look at the road. At first his back was towards me; but he turned and gazed steadily in my direction. We were far apart, but the sight of another wayfarer decided him. He slowly sauntered to a stick of elm timber, a windfall in some equinoctial gale, since trimmed of its branches and dragged alongside the ditch out of the way, and sat down to await my approach.

He was a patient waiter.

It may have been half an hour before I drew near, but at last he stepped out on the road again and waited for me to come up.

There stood before me an unmistakable tramp, not over-tall, but sturdy and with an appearance of muscular strength. Over his forehead was a time-worn, weather-stained billycock hat. An old

blue spotted handkerchief was around his neck, and the knot, drawn very tight, had worked round to one side of his throat. His rusty green jacket was too short in the sleeves. His yellow cord trousers, tied around with string below the knee, tried to assume an appearance of readiness for a job. But it would not do. I judged him to be fifty years of age. It was impossible to suspect him of a stroke of work for the last quarter of a century.

He was far too experienced to beg.

"I say, gov'ner, which is the way to Ilchester?"

"Straight on."

"Straight on," he repeated, and, looking thoughtfully down upon the dust, he shook his head. "It fair did me. I'll be hanged if I could tell. There's no ups an' no downs an' no turns to the gallows road. It beat me—an' that's a fac'."

He gazed across a rich, level pasture at a herd of fat steers. As with the alluvial rich, the flat, and the fat everywhere, there was, to tell the truth, a lack of interest. Perhaps he thought so too, for he spat. Then he looked me in the face and became fraudulently confidential.

"I'll tell yer, gov'ner. I'll tell yer the truth, swelp me God. I'm getting down to where they're making the new road—the railroad—to look for a job. I 'aven' slept in a bed for five nights. I 'aven' 'ad the 'apence. I lef' a wife an' six kids where I come from. I'm getting on so fast as I can. I want to send a few bob to the missus. See? So I don't creep in anywhere o' nights. It 'ud waste my time, gov'ner, if the

bobby was to come on an' cop me without any visible means o' subsistence on my clothes. Visible means of subsistence! There, gov'ner! What yer think o' that? Is a bloke likely to sleep out wiv a fi'-pun-note in his pocket? Now, gov'ner, is it sense? You don't pick up blooming millionaires of a night, gov'ner, not in a wagon-house nor under a rick. They 'ave beds o' their own—as a rule. An' if yer ain't quite a millionaire, gov'ner, why, you can 'ave a lodging for fourpence. But the bloke that ain't got but three-'apence, gov'ner, 'as a 'ungry belly. Why, wif the price of half a pint in yer pocket, gov'ner, yer can't sleep for thirst. He can't keep that for a visible means o' subsistence. Not 'im."

He looked to me for support.

I readily gave acceptance to so credible a statement.

"So yer see, gov'ner, not to waste time, I keep on all the night. An' when the sun 'as jus' 'ad a hour or so to dry up the dew, why, I jus' lies down to tike me rest upon the d'isies. They can't meddle wiv yer by day. But, blow me, gov'ner, when I woke up an' cast me eye up an' down this bloomin' old gunbarrel of a road, if I could tell the way I come or had to go. So, when I see yer, I thought sooner an' waste time by tramping back maybe a mile or two by the way I come, I'd just sit down an' wait an' put the question to yer. For I ain't 'ad a mouthful since yesterday morning, an' then a bloke don't want to go a step too much."

There was about him something of the merry

beggar of the old ballad. A little twinkle in the eye, as if by an acknowledgment of the absurdity of his story to prove it true.

"Sit down on the tree," said I, "and I'll give you a bite to eat."

So I gave him a hunk from my satchel, and we lunched together under the hedge.

"Do you live near here, gov'ner?"

"Some distance away."

He looked at me curiously.

"What do yer do now, gov'ner, for your livin'? Or don't yer do nothin' at all, if I may make so free as to ask?"

"I'm a tramp."

He leaned back with his mouth full and chuckled.

"What lay are yer on?"

"I'm a gagger."

He laughed outright.

"Then, for Gawd's sake, pitch us a yarn, gov'ner, that they ain't never yeard afore," cried he.

"'Tis beyond me," said I. "I've been looking for one for years. They've heard 'em all hundreds of times. But I never heard yours before. Now, look here. You've never done a day's work in your life. You've gone wet. You've gone cold. You've gone footsore. You've gone hungry. You've been without a roof over your head most of the time, except when you've been in jail. Now tell me in confidence—if you know. Why haven't you worked and earned a wage like other men?"

He slowly masticated, swallowed his last morsel,

and glanced round at the satchel on the vain chance of more.

Seeing it as flat as a pancake, he looked up, and his eye caught mine.

We grinned a sort of understanding of each other.

The real touch of Nature that makes the whole world kin is a sense of humour.

After a moment of hesitation and silence, he leaned forward and confided in a fellow-humourist:

"There ain't no need."

A fortnight later I saw him loaf out from a hedge-row in another part of the county. But recognising an old acquaintance, he greeted me with a laugh,

"Well. You have not got far," said I.

But he was ready.

"No more ain't you," said he.

THE HURDLE-MAKER

VI

THE HURDLE-MAKER

IT is noticeable that men engaged in primitive crafts take an especial pride in their work. The reason is not far to seek. Nobody lends a hand from start to finish, and the art, though simple, is all the worker's own. Thus a ploughman can look with unmixed satisfaction upon his furrow turned straight and true; or a thatcher, at the old homestead roof fresh clad in a new yellow jacket from ridge to eaves. If you walk into the quiet woods of a winter day, when all the birds except the robin are dumb, and have a talk with a hurdle-maker, it is ten to one that in five minutes you find yourself in the company of of a man elated with a harmless vanity. So much the better for him.

The art of wattling is amongst the most ancient of those simple devices which have been handed down without change to the present day. It competes with thatch alone in its claim to be the more striking feature in the architecture of our remote forefathers; for early converts to Christianity in these islands were gathered into churches with walls

very like the wreathed hurdles with which the shepherd still folds his flock. The step from a shelter of bushes to an interweaving of branches must have been quite easy, and from that to wattling is no great stride. Amongst the remains of the lake village on the moors near Glastonbury, wreathing has been found that does not materially differ from the hurdle of to-day; and races far behind the lake-dwellers in civilisation still use it for their huts.

A hoar frost lay white on the red, decaying leaf, and on the mossy clumps of hazel, and other copse stuff, where the underwood had recently been cut. Yet sunlight was gleaming once more upon the trunks of oak and ash, that until a week or two ago had been in the shadow for many a year; and great beads of moisture were everywhere beginning to drop from the branches overhead. The cutting had commenced at the end of autumn, when the yellowing and fall of the leaf proved that the sap was gone; and the fallen copse-wood lay in long, straight lines—strings is the proper name of them—which by reason of the gentle undulation of the ground took curves that were pleasant to the eye. Where the sticks had been cut, each with one deft blow of the woodman's hook, the tops of the stumps glistened smooth and yellow in the light, and brightened the place in clumps almost as thick as the primroses that are certain to be there next spring now that the earth is open to the light and air. The glades were solitary and would have been silent but for the sharp strokes of a nuthatch somewhere near, which had still found

a slip-shell nut upon the ground and carried it to his chink in the bark of some tree near at hand. A cock-pheasant stalked slowly across the alley in front of me, and passed out of sight. And far away in the wood, where intermingling branches made a dark screen and hid the landscape beyond, a drifting film of blue smoke was rising amongst the trees.

I came to an open space where the strings had been cleared away and the stuff sorted to various uses. A stack of faggots stood close by. A lot of slender poles, grey ash and birch of a delicate silver with blotches of rich brown, were leaning against the fork of a sturdy oak. Near by the hurdle-maker was at work.

"You have made yourself a good fire," said I; "though as you work in shirt-sleeves, it would appear that you think little of the cold."

The remark seemed to amuse him, for he gave a loud guffaw, and took up the hurdle he had just finished to place it back upon his pile.

"Ho! ho! A man can zweat to hurdle-maken zo well as to any job I do know. I didden take the trouble to light up no vire not vor my own-zelf like. But when there's a vrost the rods be zo brickle as glass. You can't twist 'em not no farshin at all, vor the life o' ee. A bit o' vire of a marnen do sort o' melt the vrostes out o' the rods like, an' then you can turn to. Though, mind me, the zun 'ull drop into theäs carner pretty quick now. Let he jus' gie a bit of a squint down here like, an' you don't want no vire."

He was a fine stalwart man of about five-and-thirty. He had spoken the truth, for although his billycock hat was on the back of his crown, I could see beads of moisture standing upon his forehead. His sleeves were rolled up, but not so high as the elbow, and showed his arms muscular and hairy. He wore gaiters, and covering his right knee was a leather protection, which he presently called a "knee-knap."

He did not stop working whilst he talked, but having put aside the hurdle, turned towards his "rods." Sticks suitable for hurdle-making, when trimmed clean of side shoots and cut off to a suitable length and thickness, become "rods," and these were leaning against a frame made of three ashen poles, two standing upright in the ground with one across, in the shape of a country boy's "jumping-gallows." Some hurdle-makers set up a couple of hurdles behind them, but the support which holds the rods "all han'-pat" and ready for use, whatever it may be, is called the "back-hurdle."

"Every man have a-got his own fancy, I do suppose," laughed he, "an' mine is for theäs-here bit of a gallis made to suit my own height like."

He chose with care a rod exceptionally large and straight. He was evidently on his mettle and prepared to show how a really artistic hurdle should be made; for as he stooped to pick up his hook, he glanced at me to be sure that I was looking. He held up the rod so that the butt end came nicely at a striking distance, and with four blows cut off four clean chips and the rod was as sharp as a lead-pencil.

At his feet lay a block of timber bored with ten holes six inches apart. He thrust the rod into the outside hole, held it upright and drove it home with a tap or two of the flat of his hook.

"Thik do make a tidy outzide zail," said he.

"A what?"

"A zail," he chuckled. "I've a-heard tell that when the King gied our Sir John up here a tap 'pon the shoulder he made un a Sir. Wull, when I gied thik rod a tap I made un a zail. There, I do suppose, we do all act accordin' to our degree like. Once they be stuck up in the vlake there they be zails, all ten o' 'em. An' that's the most o' the difference in we menfolk too, I do 'llow, whe'er we do hap to be up or down: vor if I ca'ant make a Sir, I'll be dalled if I do think the King could make zo very much of a hurdle—zo there. His Majesty 'ud vall out wi' shepherd, I'll warrant it."

He gave silent consideration to this proposition whilst hastily conferring the accolade on the nine other rods. Then with ten sails fully set, though they were in fact only bare poles, we were ready to set out upon the wreathing.

Leaning against his back-hurdle were wands of many varieties—brown hazel, grey ash, green withy, dog's timber, and whip-top, to use his own names. He chose a likely hazel rod, placed it between two of the sails, then wreathed it in and out along the others until he reached the end. Then he twisted it so that it would turn round the outside sail without snapping, wreathed it back as far as it would go,

and took another. Sometimes with his spar-hook he cleverly split a rod that might be a trifle too large, and thus made two of it. And now and again as the wreathing gradually rose, he brought his knee-knap into requisition, and kneeling with all his weight on the interwoven rods, forced them down together close and tight. At last he came to the top rod, twisted it twice around the outside sail and made the end fast with care.

"An' thik we do call a finisher," said he, glancing round at me with pride.

So the hurdle was made and had now only to be trimmed up. With his hook, and the skill of a Chinese executioner, he snicked off the heads of the sails one after another all to one height. Then lifting the hurdle out of the flake he trimmed away the ends of the wreathing until all was neat.

"There!" cried he with simple vanity. "Catch hold o' un an' shake un. Thik 's a hurdle."

The statement was not to be gainsaid.

"How do you know when you have carried the wreathing high enough?"

"Ah! I do know. Take a dozen o' 'em, meäster, an' measure 'em. They be vower-voot-zix in length an' two-voot-ten in hei'th; an' you'll vind 'em zo like as peas in a pod. 'Tes all eye an' use, meäster. Wull, there, you zee, there's zome do do one thing an' some 'tother. But I can make a hurdle wi' an man, I can. Zo there."

The sun had risen high enough to look into his corner. The fire had dwindled to a heap of smoulder-

ing embers. As I walked homeward across the wood a squirrel ran along the branch of a beech-tree. Hunger and the warmth of the sun had aroused him for an hour to pay a visit to his hoard of nuts.

YOUNG BOB PATTIMORE

VII

YOUNG BOB PATTIMORE

YOUNG BOB PATTIMORE is a rum fellow—for ever up to some of his tricks. He is the life of our country-side, and no living soul can be ten minutes in his company without a laugh. And yet you cannot help liking the chap, too, even if the joke be against yourself. There is something so frank and engaging about his smiling countenance—something childlike in the curl of his black hair and boyish in the twinkle of his dark eyes. Innocence itself cannot look more pleasant than young Bob Pattimore's guile, and nothing can beat his good humour. Therefore a ripple of merriment follows in young Bob's wake as, in the tightest of gaiters, the baggiest of breeches, a check jacket, and a bowler hat pushed back from his forehead, he makes his way through the crowd at market and fair. For young Bob is a dressy man even for four-and-twenty. Only the week before last he went into Appleton's at Chilbury and took patterns to choose himself a new summer suit.

Now, everybody knows that old Mr. Appleton,

having made a fortune, resides in a new villa residence about a mile out of the town.

He is the vicar's churchwarden at Chilbury parish church, and a municipal councillor, next on the list to be promoted to alderman. If it should please Providence to spare his life he will some day be mayor.

He keeps a low pony-carriage; and a man, who does the garden, just slips on a livery coat over his garden clothes (because his yellow cord trousers do not show under the rug) and wears a top-hat (that once belonged to Mr. Appleton himself) whenever Mrs. Appleton has to be driven into the town.

He goes in to business only for an hour every other day to give advice and "keep his eye on the young people."

A well-regulated mind cannot imagine a respectability more sacred. Therefore it is impossible to understand, much less to defend, the behaviour of young Bob Pattimore, who on his homeward way stopped, dismounted, shouted to a boy to hold his horse, and knocked a sharp rat-tat on old Mr. Appleton's front door.

"Mr. Appleton at home?"

"Yes, sir."

Quick as thought old Mr. Appleton himself, short and round and grey, in a little frock-coat, so artistically perfect that it lent beauty even to his rotundity, with a beaming face, shining gold spectacles, and a glistening bald crown, popped out into the hall.

"Come in. Come in," chirruped he, covered with smiles and overflowing with enthusiasm. "Come into my own little room."

Then he winked at young Bob Pattimore, drew up a chair, and took the whisky out of his own little cupboard.

"You've done business for my family a good many years, Mr. Appleton," began young Bob after a thoughtful preliminary sip.

"Ah! We have," cried old Mr. Appleton with deep feeling. "I cut for your poor father and your grandfather before him."

"So I thought I'd just call in. The fact is, I'm not satisfied."

"Not satisfied?"

Old Mr. Appleton leaned forward and raised his hand to his ear.

"Not at all satisfied," repeated young Bob with slow precision, to prove there was no mistake about it. "So I said, before going elsewhere, I will go straight to the fountain-head."

Old Mr. Appleton was both surprised and gratified to meet with such unsuspected prudence and good sense in a young man concerning whose ways he had sometimes, in the privacy of the family circle, been very critical. Yet his face grew stern. If they could not satisfy so reasonable a customer the thing should be well looked into to-morrow.

"What is it, my dear Mr. Robert?" asked he in a coaxing tone.

"The truth is, your prices are a mighty deal too stiff."

"Quality—quality," smiled old Mr. Appleton, greatly relieved.

"That's all very well. But I can't see that the quality is better than where folk pay less. Now you just look at these patterns. You take them, Mr. Appleton, and decide for yourself."

Old Mr. Appleton took off his gold spectacles, carefully wiped, and put them on his nose again with the gravity of a judge. He walked to the window and held the little snippets to the light.

"Yes, yes," said he, complacently nodding his head. "It takes experience to distinguish the inferiority of this sort of cheap, showy thing. That's a difficulty we have to put up with nowadays. This cloth is not all wool, Mr. Robert. It's a very deceptive article. Not more than two-thirds wool. Just look at it. There isn't the sheen. Just feel it. There isn't the softness. No, no. A cheap price, it may be. But there's no wear to that."

"Then you wouldn't recommend it, Mr. Appleton?" said young Bob doubtfully.

"A false economy, Mr. Robert. Wait a minute, and you shall see for yourself. I'll just fetch Mrs. Appleton's magnifying glass, and you shall be convinced."

He fetched the circular glass from Mrs. Appleton's drawing-room table—a powerful magnifier, through which that good lady's guests were sometimes invited

to admire photographs of an evening—and they looked at those tweeds in turn.

Young Bob declared he could see no difference even then.

The old gentleman explained from his vast experience. "Two things of unequal elasticity, Mr. Robert, can never be mixed with success. There is no real wear about a thing like this, and in a fortnight the trouser-knees will be bags. 'Tis the fault of the age, my dear Mr. Robert. The fault of a shoddy age."

Old Mr. Appleton was so earnest and instructive that young Bob almost fancied himself at a Sunday school.

"But what do you take to be the fair price for a suit from those patterns?"

"The price—well—if you were bent on it—rather than lose an old customer—our people could do you a suit of that at fifty shillings."

Young Bob deliberated.

"I see the truth of all you say—yet I think I may as well give you the order at once for two of these," said he quietly, after reflection. "I felt myself there must be some mistake, when your young man showed me these patterns and told me four pound five."

Oh, yes. Young Bob will have his joke, there is no doubt about that. A ripple of laughter follows in his wake both at market and fair. There is no harm in him whatever—and not the least touch of malice in anything he does. And the absurdity of it was—

to crown all, he took the two suits at eight pound ten. That is to say, he said, "Put 'em down," which of course was quite as honest, and, in point of fact, just the same thing.

But truly, as Mrs. Simon Gallingham said to me a few days later, when young Bob rode through the village and she popped out to see who had gone by:

"What sense was there in such behaviour? What good could it do anybody? And the mystery to me is, how young Bob could ever have thought of, to say nothing of daring to carry out, such an outdacious prank upon so upright, so respectable an independent gentleman of private means as old Mr. Appleton, and one so universally looked up to."

NOAH PIKE, WHEELWRIGHT

VIII

NOAH PIKE, WHEELWRIGHT

"NOAH PIKE, Wheelwright, Hazelgrove." How often I have read the words, in large red letters set off with flourishes, on the tailboard of some heavy-laden wagon laboriously journeying along the road.

The old wagons mostly have a ground of yellow, but the more recent are often painted blue. With a fine sense of artistic proportion, the equally-divided date announces itself, two figures in each upper corner making due balance to right and left of the maker's name. Some of the dates have been so ancient—for a wagon lives long, with a new part here and there when wanted, until at last little or nothing of the original structure remains—that in my imagination Noah arose as a dim figure from the past, surviving only in his works. I cherished no hope of meeting him in the flesh. And yet when happy chance led the way to Hazelgrove, the words greeted me with a bolder frequency than ever:

"Noah Pike, Wheelwright."

From a board in a wagon-maker's yard they stared upon the village street.

Low hedges and an open gate hid none of the mysteries of wagon-making from the outside world. There was a forge, a saw-pit, a large workshop, piles of timber and a heap of old iron. A little crowd of delighted children, reinforced with a leisurely matron or so, had gathered before the entrance.

A cloud of blue smoke came drifting across the road, and hung like a grey mist around the square tower of the parish church. In the centre of the yard a sort of bonfire had been lighted. Fanned by a light breeze the flames leapt up, roaring their hunger as they licked the dry wood they were eager to devour. And still, from the heap of rubbish hard by, the old wheelwright and his journeymen piled on more fuel—now a spoke, then a felloe or a fragment of an old tail-board, wreckage from some worn-out voyager of the high road.

Presently the master wheelwright stood aside and watched the blaze. He glanced with curiosity at the stranger by his gate, and his eye seemed to convey to me an invitation to speak to him.

I pushed my way through the little crowd and stepped into the yard.

"May I watch you bond a wheel?"

"Do 'ee then, and welcome," he cheerfully replied. "Eight if you be a-minded. We do wait for a number when we can, and one fire do heat the lot!"

He was something of a patriarch with his grey beard. His face was broad and fresh-coloured with

the genial look of one who has done much work but suffered few cares. And such was the history of his life as told by himself.

"I have hundreds of times met with your name upon the road, Mr. Pike, so you seem like an old acquaintance," said I.

"You may well say that," laughed he, and his grey eyes lighted with pride. "For my father and my grandfather built here before me, and were both held to be the best wagon-makers in these parts. So I be Noah the third. Ha! ha! Why, there is some do take the liberty to call my little house there Noah's Ark. My son here do bear the same name, so there's hopes it may last a bit longer yet in Hazelgrove."

He paused a minute, shook his head, and added, "Unless the big works should take it all from us."

"Is there fear of that?"

"That's the way nowadays. The big do swallow up the little. 'Tis all for carrying everything away to the big places. But we do choose the best o' timber in our judgment and work as well as we do know. We've a-had a plenty to do so far, thank God. And I ben't ashamed to meet my work. I do oftentimes turn round a minute on the road to cast my eye 'pon it. For a man, mind me, can find a satisfaction in a thing that's his own from start to finish. And I an' my sons, wi' a journeyman or two, do do it all—every stroke—except the axle-boxes, and them we do get ready-made from Wednesbury. Would you like to look round?"

His invitation was most hearty. The bonds had

already been laid in the fire, so whilst they were heating red-hot we went into the workshops.

"There be four sorts o' timber to a wagon," said he. "Oak, ash, elm, and deal. All the frame is oak, but the sides and the rave-board"—he laid his hand on the projecting shelf that holds up the load from the wheel—"be elm; the hanging-pillar, that strong beam below which the fore-wheels do work, ash; and the floor deal."

As he spoke he pointed to each part of the body of an unfinished wagon before us.

"But the fashion of the thing is changed," said I, "since the days of my childhood, when, after harvest, we rode away to the nutting-picnic in the woods. The raves then were open frames like flat ladders. When we went to the hayfield we used to sit upon them all around. And the wagon was half as big again——"

The old boy could not wait.

"That's true," he cried. "Zo we did. We trimmed the wagon up wi' laurels and flowers, and the bells were music every mile o' the way. I tell 'ee what 'tis—'twas plain victuals them days, but more mirth. But all change, to my mind, is brought in from the outside. The railroads made small wagons. There be no great loads for a long journey nowadays. What is it now? Three mile and clap it on a train. But then, what was twenty or thirty mile to we? Heavy loads and big teams then. Ay, and if you had nothing to haul back, you must get half a load o' ashes to save the pikes."

He stopped and chuckled at the recollection of this old device.

"The pikes?"

"Ha! ha! Why, the turnpikes, to be sure. If you went empty you must pay toll. But the ashes ranked as manure, and passed free. But how 'tis changed! No pikes now! Yet, as I do say, all change is brought in from the outside. Lord bless thee! We should never change if we could help it, not here in Hazelgrove, till Kingdom-come."

As he explained all the intricacies of the under-carriage, and how the fore-carriage, turning upon the main-pin, allowed the wheels to "lock," he became quite animated; but the height of his enthusiasm was reserved for the wheel.

"Did you ever think in yourself like, what a beautiful thing a wheel is? How nice he mus' be put together in all his parts? How true he mus' be to run straight? Look here. I used to say to my bwoy, 'Noah, my son, a good wheel, mind, is a moral. You consider un an' larn from un.'"

He tapped with his knuckle upon the axle-box, the circular iron let into the stock to hold the axle upon which the wheel revolves, the only part he did not make.

"We used to hammer out he too, but not o' late years," said he with regret, but then suddenly became cheerful again as he spoke of the difficulty of setting it. "He must be let in wonderful firm and true or the wagon will swerve from right to left, and 'look into everybody's windows all down-

street,' as the saying is. But those little iron nut-bonds hold the elm stock from splitting, and we do drive in wedges of harder oak till 'tis so firm you couldn't get in so much as a pin's point more if you tried. The spokes, you see, be of oak, but the felloes, those pieces that make up the outside wooden ring of the wheel, be of elm. And this one is all put together ready for the bond or tire."

It so happened that at this moment Noah the younger came hurrying to say that the bonds were red-hot.

We went into the yard again and stood beside the fire.

The tires to be used had been piled one above another, making a low round tower. In the palpitation of an intenser heat, from which the coarser flame had departed, they appeared to quiver with a white glow. The journeymen came with rods, lifted off the uppermost bond and carried it quickly to the "platform," that circular level a little larger than a cart-wheel, which may always be found somewhere on the ground in a wheelwright's yard.

Into the centre of the platform they fixed an upright bar, and threaded the wheel upon it so that it ran like an axle through the axle-box. With a deft tap or two of the hammer the red-hot tire was brought accurately into position, and at once the wheel was fitted into it and screwed tightly into place. The felloes smoked and even burst into

flame. But the adjustment once true, water was quickly poured upon the metal bond. It hissed resentfully and steamed. When that ceased all was complete.

"There!" cried Noah Pike. "That tire was forged an inch and a quarter less than the outside wooden rim o' the wheel. He loosened out in the fire and now he's gone back to his own rightful size. They felloes be squeezed up so tight that they do hold the tongues o' the spokes firmer than any vice. An' if that tire don't hold sound for ten year I'll eat the wheel, bond, an' all, wi'out so much as a mossel o' butter or a pinch o' salt."

THE "STRAPPER"

IX

THE "STRAPPER"

HE came into the village late in the summer afternoon when the sun was shining through the five ashes that stand at the cross-roads at the place called "Forches"—an ominous name suggesting that there in olden time a gallows stood, a warning to any with a talent for knavery.

He had traipsed some distance, as it seemed from the white dust on his heavy boots, and the sweat that trickled from his forehead and stood in beads upon his high cheek-bones. A tall, strapping fellow in yellow cord trousers, he looked as much like doing a day's work as any man could. He carried nothing but a hoe resting on his shoulder. He came from down the country—down West—and a long shadow stretched before him upon the village street.

He stopped by the forge where the smith was busy paring a horse's hoof.

"Any chance of a job hereabout, do 'ee think?"

The smith looked him over, stopped and thought.

"Well now, I beänt zo wonderful sure but what there

mid be. Try down below to the old house, Farmer John Buck's. He've a-got up twenty acres o' turmets, must be growing fast after last week's rain. They mus' sure! Now I wouldn' swear, mind, but what you won't find a job."

With this encouragement the "strapper" put on a very business-like hard-working air, and walked down the village at a brisk pace.

Farmer John Buck was in the house, and sent out to say that if the man would wait a few minutes he would come out to take a look at him.

Farmer John Buck did not like "strappers." He had a prejudice against all such wandering, run-about fellows, who came nobody knew whence and went nobody knew where. A farmer may be sharp as a needle, and yet never "get upsides" with these birds of passage. However, he prided himself that he knew their ways. To be sure, whenever it was possible, he liked to manage with his own folk. Yet—when the ears of barley are hanging all goose-necked, when wheat is turning ruddy, and weeds grow fast enough to cover up the turnip-drills—what is a man to do? He eyed the strapper up and down. A great, strong chap! A useful fellow, no doubt—or could be if he would, thought Farmer John Buck. His questions, however, were rather magisterial than conciliatory, and he received every statement of the "strapper" with an explosive "Ho!"

"Where be from?"

"Down the country. Creel is my parish. Down below Exeter."

"Ho! Well, how is it you haven't got work at home?"

"I be a drainer by trade. I shall be on again, come winter."

"Ho! What have you been about then the last few months?"

"I hoed some wheat for a farmer down t'other zide o' Tanton, an' stayed on haymaking. When that were over I had to come on."

"A single man?"

"A missus and four childern. I do want a good long job to send 'em back something."

"Ho! You do. Can 'ee drink a cup o' cider?"

"I can do that," grinned the strapper, "so well or better 'an any other job you can put me to."

"I don't doubt that," said Farmer John Buck. After all, the replies seemed satisfactory, and there was even something candid in the manner of the man. He hesitated. "Well, I'll be out in a minute. We'll go up round and see if we can agree."

The strapper had a crust of bread and cheese to his cider. Farmer John Buck mounted his cob, and they went together to the turnip field. They looked at the weeds and higgled about the price in a half-bantering sort of way. Certainly those "turmets" did want hoeing as bad as any "turmets" the strapper could "call to mind." At last they agreed, and the strapper was put on the job by the piece.

That man had evidently a hunger for work. "'Tis more than likely, I dare say, when this is done

there'll be something or another else turn up," said he hopefully.

"We shall see—we shall see," replied Farmer John Buck warily. "Mind, I don't tell you there won't."

"I can lie in the barn, I suppose?"

"Ay. Don't smoke and set the place afire."

"Bless thee heart, master! When I be there I be asleep," laughed the strapper.

When Farmer John Buck got home he expressed the opinion that this time, although it might be early to boast, he really and truly had picked up "a very likely feller."

The strapper slept in the barn, and the next morning soon after daybreak was out and at work in the turnip-field. Farmer John Buck cast his eye upon him when he rode up to start the reapers in the piece of barley. He had got his back bent over the drill as if his only longing in life was expressed in the old refrain, "Gie I the turmet-hoen." And all day long he went on just the same, except when he sat down under the hedge for a bit of bread and cheese in the morning and a bit more with a nap in the shade at noon. The creeping field convolvulus with its lilac bell and the pimpernel with its little red flower open to the sun, the heart's-ease, the chick-weed, and all the rest of them were dragged up by the roots. Stiff, prickly thistles and the softer milk-thistles that stood so tall fell down before his hoe. The turnip drills stood out in even rank as straight as files of soldiers, and where he had singled them

the roots stood equidistant and regular as troops in open order. When towards the latter part of the day Farmer John Buck rode across to take a look at the strapper, he found that an amazing day's work had been accomplished. He had never seen turnip-hoeing better done. The weeds were lying flat upon the ground, withered by the sun and dead as hay.

"You've stuck to it pretty close, my man," cried he in a tone of approval.

"Ha! I tell 'ee, master, I be hard up for the ha'pence," laughed the strapper.

"Well, keep on like that and you'll make a tidy job of it. You can go in and ask for a cup of cider when you come down."

"Thank 'ee, sir."

"Maybe that will keep the man from going down to the public-house," thought Farmer John Buck, "and he is a capital chap to work." And as he jogged along he indulged in a little day-dream of putting that strapper on regularly if he should turn out really well and sending for the missus and four children to help up the population of a dwindling parish.

And the strapper proved even better than his hopes. He never wasted an hour from the moment he knocked down the first thistle to Saturday evening, when he came in to draw.

"Well, how much do you want, then?"

Farmer John Buck had cast his eye over the work that afternoon and knew pretty well what had been earned.

"I thought o' asken eighteen shillens," said the strapper.

"But you haven't done it."

"No," admitted the strapper with candour. "Not by a couple o' shillens or half-a-crown. But I should be glad wi' it. I do want to send some back home."

Farmer John Buck was shrewd and loath to part. However, he was good-natured also, and the chap was certainly useful.

"Very well," said he, and paid the money. "Get on with it o' Monday."

"I will," promised the strapper with fervour. "For I do hope you'll find me something on to winter."

"Well. We'll see."

"Or maybe a reg'lar job."

"Keep on to it sprack. Mind, I don't tell you I won't," replied Farmer John Buck in a tone of cheerful encouragement.

. . . . .

Farmer John Buck declares he shall know that strapper if ever he should fall in with him again. "But how a fellow wi' a plenty of work in front of him can run away and leave it for the sake of a couple of shillings an' have to tramp maybe a score o' miles in dust and sun to find a wo'se job is what do cap I," says Farmer John Buck. "Though, mind me, 'tis a lesson never to do a thing, however much you may be tempted, when you do know better. Zo 'tis."

THE DROVER

7

X

THE DROVER

HE had long been a familiar figure. The strangeness of his attire, "picked up" a garment at a time in odd corners of the neighbourhood, could not fail to catch and hold the attention. There was something picturesque about his rags that impressed itself upon the memory. He might have robbed a scarecrow. Yet he took no shame in his tatters, but looked the world in the face with a sort of cunning audacity and half an eye to the offchance of a pot of beer.

He answered to the name of Jack.

The surname of "Never-sweat" had been conferred upon him years before in better circumstances, from which he dropped through an incapacity for steady work. Yet he was active, too. Miles he tramped to market and fair, to the sale, or to fetch cattle bought by a dealer at some out-of-the-way homestead. Leagues he sauntered behind flocks and herds. The leisurely habit that earned him the nickname was no drawback in his profession. He could be trusted not to overdrive the lazy beasts. For Jack was a drover. His occupation stands upon the lowest rung of the

ladder amongst those men who really seek for work and earn their bread.

Of an autumn day I came in sight of him before me on the road.

A soft, blue sky hung over the heads of yellowing elms. It wanted but an hour to noon, and the sun was high and shone over the top of a berry-laden hedgerow upon the red backs of a herd of dairy cows. A little flock of sheep went straggling along the way-side, pulling the ivy that climbed over the bank of a dry ditch.

This was a Michaelmas flitting, and the stock was journeying to another farm. One of the farmer's boys had been sent to help Jack, and a couple of paces from his heel followed a mongrel sheep-dog, lean, long-legged, and with a rough dark coat that looked as ragged as his own. And wherever along the hedgerow they came to hazel bushes he and the boy stopped, pulled down the boughs, and filled their pockets with nuts.

A few minutes sufficed to overtake him.

Because the weather was hot he carried his coat upon his arm. It was green and threadbare, and the sleeves were torn into a fringe. His elbow peered through a hole in an old flannel shirt from which the pattern had long ago faded. He was open at the throat between his red neckerchief and the neckband. He wore an old sporting waistcoat, once gay, but now discoloured with filth and grease, and the odd buttons which had replaced the brass were all undone. His trousers were tied around with string below the

knee. He was without socks, but a wisp of hay supplied every want, as might be seen where his boots were in holes. And yet this tatterdemalion was but forty, with a physique that many a well-clad man might envy.

"Well, Jack, are the nuts ripe?"

For answer he cracked one with teeth that had never ached and held out the full kernel for me to see.

"A'most slip-shell," said he.

"I see you've got a good crook."

"They do pick along the way, an' why not I?" he argued, pointing to the cattle and the sheep, and grinning all over a broad face that had not been shaved for a week.

Suddenly he turned excitedly to the boy.

"There's thik white-faced bullock—off down the lane. Nip across the ground, my lad, an' turn her back. Then let 'em all bide, there by the bit o' grass, and rest a bit."

Nothing could be more inspiriting than the enthusiasm of Jack Never-sweat when he recommended activity to another.

He strolled on some twenty yards or so and sat down on a low wall where a stone bridge carried the road over a small stream. The dog understood, turned twice round and lay down in the sun. The flowing water made a pleasant sound. The light breeze that followed it shook his tatters, giving glimpses of the man beneath. What chance might there be of getting at the real man within that inner tenement?

I sat down at the other end of the wall.

"Have you got far to go?" I asked.

"You do know the 'Hare and Hounds' may be?"

"Yes."

"Well; three mile past that."

"How far have you come?"

"'Tis likely enough you do know the 'Royal Oak' at Hatch."

"Yes."

"Well, three mile t'other side o' that."

"'Tis pleasant on the road at this time of the year," said I.

"If you do walk it for pleasure," he answered, and thoughtfully cracked a nut. "But to walk all day with your eyes on the rumps of another man's bullocks is a dry job. The drovering is a poor trade now. They do mostly truck the beasts an' send 'em by rail. Why, a drover can't find the price of a pint to moisten his clay on the road these days—except he do chance to fall in wi' a real gentleman to give un a few ha'pence."

He cracked another nut.

"An' they be scarce," he went on with a shake of the head. "I tell 'ee what 'tis, the money is in the wrong hands. That's the curse o' this country. There is but so much money—there can't be. An' do fall more an' more into a few hands. I heard 'em a-telling only last week into the 'King William' back there to the four cross-roads. There's a man down there do rent the shooting, an' he've a-got a pound every ten minutes o' the day, a golden sovern

a-paid in to a office in some town somewhere or nother. Now do stand to reason if he have a-got it another can't. That's how 'tis there's poor and rich, I count. Look at thik ewe there. If another do belong to she, you don't. Eh?"

"I should think that's clear."

Thus encouraged he cracked more nuts and went on.

"'Tis pride is the roonayshun o' this country, an' that time'll show. They do all want to get high, an' if some do some must be low. If some be 'pon top there mus' be some down under. That's so clear as the light. Why I heard it said a week back by the fellers that do drive the traction-engine—an' I don't tell you no lie, mind, for they was a-stood round the door o' the 'Four Alls,' away there under the hill—that there's a lord up the country can't stomach his victuals without 'tis served to un on a gold plate. Different to a thumb-bit under a hedge, that. Eh?"

The ground around by this time was strewed with nutshells, though he had thrown many over his shoulder into the brook.

"They be all so covetous these times," he went on. "I had a bit o' ground o' my own once, but they had it away from me. I took up a few pounds 'pon it. That went on a year or two an' my ground were somebody else's. The old rogue of a lawyer What's-his-name that have got his office there in to town, same street as the 'Britannia,' he worked that. I be a bit of a scholar myself, but he's too sharp for any man. There were a young chap in to the tap-room o' the 'Ball,' there handy to the market-place, you do

know, he said this lawyer What's-his-name is certain to outwit the devil. Thik young chap have a-seed a tidy bit. He used to go out waiting, till he took to drink an' couldn't carry a plate o' soup steady. He says thik lawyer What's-his-name is so cunning he's certain to do the devil out o' hell, afore he've a-bin wi' un a twelvemonth. But I don't believe no such thing—there'll be no cow-kicking then. Things'll be squared off a bit in the next world. Ay, an' the poor man that do go barefoot here will get his due."

He stopped. His nuts were gone and he got lazily up from the wall.

Seeing him move, the old dog blinked and rose stiffly and without enthusiasm.

Jack Never-sweat stood thoughtfully scraping with his stick on the dust of the road.

Suddenly he looked up.

"You hain't a-got an odd copper or so about 'ee to spare, I suppose?" he said, in the tone of one unexpectedly illumined with a bright idea. "Thank you, sir. You're a real gen'leman."

A sudden briskness seemed to have overtaken him. "Hi, Towzer."

The dog gave a bark.

The sheep ran together into a flock, and the cows became a herd.

I watched him slowly pass out of sight behind the hedgerows—this first cousin to the tramp, whose only landmark was a signboard, and whose wisdom and philosophy were but the gleanings of the wayside alehouses.

TRANTER LUCKSTONE

XI

TRANTER LUCKSTONE

"CLACK—clack—clack—clack."

From a mile behind my back came the sound of hoofs, beating on the highway, with the even, slow monotony characteristic of a steady old roadster, whose frivolities have long ago been left behind.

"Get on then, will 'ee? Captain—ah!"

The voice of Tranter Luckstone might clearly be heard across the solitary landscape, at intervals of a minute and a half. Yet admonition did not hasten that way-wise steed. Occasional friendly encouragement with the whip made no difference. Tranter and his nag had done the self-same journey to and fro hundreds of times, and the pace varied no more than the ticking of a kitchen-clock.

"Get on then, will 'ee? Captain—ah!"

The rumbling wheels drew nearer. "Slish—slush," and always louder beat the hoofs on the February pools and mud, until at last the voice spoke close behind my back and in another tone.

"Will 'ee please to take a lift?" shouted the tranter, pulling up as he spoke.

So I mounted the carrier's four-wheeled van, and sat up by side of Tranter Luckstone in front under the shelter of the square black tilt of tarpaulin.

"Get on then, will 'ee? Captain—ah!"

Not everywhere can you ride with a tranter nowadays. Railways have almost made an end to the village carrier, and the parcel-post has taken away more of his work. Only in remote districts he lingers on, making his weekly journeys from isolated parishes to distant market towns.

In both places he enjoys a small celebrity.

In the town he is so bucolic; whilst to his home he brings something of the urban briskness it may be of a place of full five thousand inhabitants. One remarkable characteristic of Tranter Luckstone is admired wherever he goes. No matter whom he may chance to meet, he has always a word to say.

He is none of your slow, burly countrymen making up with brawn for a dulness of apprehension. A dapper bright-eyed man is Tranter Luckstone, of about middle height. His beard, greyer than his hair, is clipped short. His moustache is stiff as the bristles of a scrubbing-brush. He wears a long sleeve-waistcoat reaching to his hips, and the corner of a red handkerchief hangs out of one of the pockets. Only when the rain beats in his face does he put on an overall reaching down to the black gaiters, each fastened by a row of half-a-dozen little buckles and straps. He can move about a heavy weight "so handy" as any man. "But that do come o' use," says Tranter Luckstone.

A passenger need not talk much in such good company. Once set him off and Tranter Luckstone will run on for an hour, starting always with the intricacies of the tranter's occupation.

"You have a pretty good load," said I, peering back into the strange medley of articles piled one upon the other in the gloom under the tilt.

A cross-handled basket of eggs lay snug as a nest on the inside of an old saddle, on the head of an empty cask. The face and weights of a kitchen clock reposed on a bundle of empty sacks. There were boxes and bags and parcels of all sizes and shapes that village ingenuity, or the want of it, could devise.

"Nothen out o' the way," replied Tranter Luckstone, thoughtfully scratching his poll with the butt of his whip. "Why, bless your heart an' soul, now an' again, 'tes really more 'an the mind o' man can really an' truly hold. Zo 'tes. Sure 'tes."

"I suppose you write it down?"

"No, no. Not but what I be a tidy scholar too, though maybe a bit out o' use. But what I do say is, if you do trust to a scrap o' paper an' lost it—where be? Now so long as I can hold it in mind—I do know where I be. I tell 'ee what 'tes. There idden so much in book-larnen as folk do tell up. Now my maid is a beautiful scholar. She do read out so well or better 'an passon, and write fit to hang up in a frame. If you do but mention a place, she can tell 'ee where 'tes, for zixpence. But if you do send she two errants to once she do forget one or

t'other. I really do think the head these days is too full for thought. Folk can't hold a thing or two in mind, same as the good old sort. Why, I don't overlook a errant year's-end to year's-end. Lauk-a-massy! If I did I should never hear the end o' it—not this side o' the grave. La! I can jus' think how 't'ud be. 'Now don't 'ee forget my brass-headed nails same as you did Elizabeth Ann's pills.' Very gallen to a man to hear—that. You know."

The mere thought was depressing.

"Most humiliating," agreed I, in a tone of comfort.

"But the money do keep a man safe," explained Tranter Luckstone, suddenly cheering up. "So long as there's a few ha'pence there mus' be somethen to buy. Every penny I do bring to lay out do stand for somethen, so clear as print. Why, if 'twere but a varden over I should know 'twere a paper o' pins. Get on, then, will 'ee? Captain—ah!"

So we jogged on, mile after mile, up hill and down through the hollow and over the plain, until we came to a sleepy old town, and the van drew up before an ancient hostelry in a square market place. Tradesmen who were expecting parcels advised by post came buzzing around.

"Well, Tranter Luckstone. And how is Tranter Luckstone?"

"All the better for the sight o' you, Sadler Billing. An' here's a saddle all in holes, thank God!"

"Got my eggs, Tranter Luckstone?"

"Here they be, Grocer Jennings."

"An' how do the fowls lay up to Upton now?"

"The same way as God made 'em to the first going off, Grocer Jennings. I ha'nt a-heard tell o' no change. Not up our way."

"Got my cask?"

"He's no good. I really feeled ashamed to ride in his company."

"No good? Why, 'tes a new cask, all but."

"Pack o' stuff. I wouldn' own un. Why, he's so hollow as a drum."

A couple of parcels under each arm, he hurried off across the square.

The tradesmen looked after him in admiration and winked at each other.

"A wonderful man, Tranter Luckstone, take him how you will. Never at a loss for a word."

THE OLD POACHER

XII

THE OLD POACHER

HE was sitting in the corner-place by the fire of the ancient village almshouse, warmly clad in a long grey frieze coat with a red cross on the left breast.

A life of crime had brought him to this comfortable indigence, which he shared in common with five other inmates, whom half a century of respectable toil had led to the same haven.

None felt the slightest humiliation at becoming the recipient of charity. Charity is more respectable than rates, and it saved them from "the house." So they were glad to be there—these six happy, cantankerous old men, who quarrelled merrily from morning to night. They went proudly in their strange clothes, and were envious of each other. For each had a sound roof over his head, firing and bedding free, and a crown paid down every Saturday morning.

If they could only have agreed, upon thirty shillings a week they might have fared like princes. But each would toast an independent herring and hold the fee-

simple of a separate half-loaf. They were agreed only upon one thing. When the pious founder hundreds of years ago started that almshouse, he ought to have done the thing properly, and made the money a shilling a week more. It would have just made all the difference—one shilling a week more. Under the circumstances they fulfilled without joy the only condition laid upon them, and walked to church once a Sunday without zeal.

Dan Ibbett, the old poacher, was the master-mind amongst them, and sat in the corner as if by right.

Although they murmured in his absence, not one of them but cleared out of it when Dan came in. "What business had he more than another to sit in that nook always with his knees in the warm?" They asked the question of each other, but never of Dan. He was more human than these ordinary men who had lived by honest work. They gave way, as the mere herd must before the master-bullock. But they never tired of listening to his exploits, and they secretly felt the sadness of a lack of anything heroic in their patient lives.

He told the same stories over and over again, always with an inquiry whether they had heard that one before. What did it matter? They were dull, and liked a tale the better for knowing every word to come. Besides, he told them in vivid colour, and that counts. He would narrate to any stranger for an hour for an ounce of "Black Jack," but no less potent tobacco brought as much as a tickle upon

Dan's palate. Two ounces made the price of these reminiscences.

Dan was a striking personality when he talked.

On a dull winter day the firelight played upon the white-washed walls decorated with pictorial almanacs and on the blue stone floor. It lit up his face and his grey, stubbly beard of a week's growth, with a yellow tobacco-stain under the lips. It glistened on his sweating clay pipe smoked bowl downwards with not more than two inches of stem. A short, wiry man, he had kept a wonderful head of hair to his old age, but it gave to his countenance a wild rather than a venerable aspect. A love of beer, together with the parsimony of the pious founder, reduced Dan to the necessity of cutting it himself. Any unduly obtrusive lock he doubled back on the blade and sawed through with his pocket-knife. This admirable method gave to his *coiffure* the appearance of having been eaten in places by rats.

His exultation was merrier than the firelight.

"Ho! ho! ho! The things I have a-picked up in my time. An' never once in gaol or I shouldn't be here. Fined times out o' number, but la! the more need to turn to the next night. That never daunted I. I had a love for it, so there! I couldn't keep away from it no ways at all. I do hold 'tis God A'mighty's hare first, an' then his that can catch her. Gentlefolk don't want her so bad as a poor man. An' there, if you be sharp you don't run for it once in a winter. I didn't very often lay down no wires. You got to go an' pick 'em up. I did love the night.

Take a soft, mild night just after har'est, when the crops be hauled in. As you do stand against the hedge an' listen, what wi' the late honeysucks the air's so sweet as a bottle o' scent. Then, if 'tis all quiet an' nobody moving, down wi' your wire or your net under the gate or you do know where. 'Get on, old chap!' 'Tis wonderful what you can hear by night. I could use to hear the old dog rattle, as he did gallop on the long stubble, years agone, afore the machine did cut it so close. He did know what he had to do better than many a fool do. He did do it too, an' that's more 'an many a man will. Whack! bang into net so hard as a bullet. I did drop upon her an' pull her neck out afore she had time to cry. But la! Hares have a-got terr'ble scarce since the ground-game law. I never didn't hold wi' thik ground-game law. But there, most laws do take something or nother from a poor labouren-man."

His fellow-pensioners chuckled assent to this well-established truth, and he went on:

"Or take a dark night in September early, or the end o' the last week in August afore the shooters do begin. You do know where the coveys be. You can hear the old cock leading the young birds home towards twilight, or if they have a-been separated like, he'll call to 'em fit to bust his droat. You can find out on the ground where they have a-roosted, all close together as a cluster of nuts. You can guess a'most to the yard where they be. Then you an' a good neighbour mus' walk across so quiet as mice

on the soft grass an' draw a net over 'em. I've a-clapped fifteen in one pocket, ay, an' heard the shooters wonder next day where the birds could ha' got to. I did laugh to myself. There's nothen can stop it unless the keeper do bush the ground. I've a-been out hunderds o' times an' not a soul 'pon earth the wiser. But ho! ho! did make a man cuss to see they little thorn bushes a-stuckt up in a likely grass-ground though."

"I'll warr'nt did," said each of the other five with warm approval.

"'Pon my life, so did," said Dan.

Conscious of greatness, and that all of us were waiting on his words, with slow deliberation he knocked out the ashes and refilled his pipe.

"Or take a wild, windy night, when the heads o' the high elms do sway and his limbs do creak an' crack—ay—an' break off and fall too. No bird can roost high such a night. He'd be carried off his perch. The pheasants in wood do go up no higher 'an this ceiling. How many a time I've a-laid for hours in wait—maybe in a bit o' furze—to listen to 'em just in the dimmet an' mark 'em up. Then at midnight I did creep into the wood—you can see well enough if your eyes be used to the dark. I did carr' the gun-stock in my pocket an' a short barrel down my trouser-lag. Did take but a thimble-ful o' powder an' half this baccy-bowl o' shot. There he'd be, close in against the trunk, on a low branch. If you did but put up the muzzle and whisper in his ear down he'd come. There's nothing like a wind

to drown sound. Do blow it away. Do choke up a man's hearing too. I've a-had 'em close up to keeper's house. I've a-had a wagon-load in my time. But if I could but be young again, I'd—I'd——"

He paused, and looked around upon that little circle of wooden countenances, open-eyed with wonder as to what was to come next.

"I'd have two."

Five wrinkled faces grinned with delight upon this unrepentant sinner. He still had the best of it.

"You hardened old law-breaker," said I; "the devil will have you as sure as the light."

"That isn't one-half I've a-done in my time," laughed he. "I've a-baited fish-hooks wi' raisins—but not to catch eels. I've a-put down boiled peas wi' hog's-bristles in 'em alongside a stack. The peas be soft an' the bristles do stick in a bird's droat an' choke worse 'an a fishbone. I could tell a score o' ways if I was a-minded and 'twur worth while. But what good is it? 'Tis all gone—all gone an' past."

He gave a sigh, then tossed his head and sneered upon the five.

"But for all that, master, if the devil is the man I do take un for, he'll find the wit to poach one or two o' these here sleek fatheads, what was warm a-bed whilst I was out in the wind to work."

A GAMEKEEPER

XIII

A GAMEKEEPER

A TALL, upright man, and as tough as the ground-ash stick he carries in his hand. The light activity of early manhood he has lost. He no longer vaults the gate into the wood, but no youth of twenty could walk down the ride with a springier step.

I have never seen him indoors.

I picture him only in the open air, with the sky above his head and the turf on the mossy woodland glade beneath his feet. Even within the walls of his thatched cottage, close by the larch plantation, he would seem like a bird in a cage. And to be sure, from sunrise to evening he is rarely there, and sometimes not at night.

He is a head-keeper, but not on one of the great estates.

He was born in that cottage, and played in infancy on the plot where the spaniels and the great wavy-coated retriever are chained and set up such a chorus of barking when a stranger comes to the door. His father lived there and was keeper before him; and

Jack, the youngest of a long family of sons, stayed at home, and in the end took his place.

So from boyhood every nook of every field and spinney of the domain has been familiar to him. He knows them all by heart, and the ways of every living thing that inhabits them. Like them, also, he has grown into harmony with his environment; and as, in his grey-green jacket with the dull metal buttons, he passes along the hedgerows or through the wood, whether the hazel be in leaf or bare, he imperceptibly melts into the landscape.

I have been many a walk with John Beale.

I have strolled with him in summer where the coops, on some healthy slope beside the wood, stand together yet apart, like villa residences at a health resort; and tramped around the boundary late in fall, when pheasants steal away after the ripe blackberries and falling acorns; and along the winter gutters of an early morning when snipe are in the meadows.

I have heard him marshalling his beaters into line with a peremptory, "Hold back here," "Keep up there on the left," amongst the rabbit-bitten dog-wood and foot-ensnaring briars of the coppice.

My heart has gladdened at his shout away over the broad stubble, "Mark!" before the driven coveys came like a whirlwind over the hedge.

But best of all I like to go upon his beat about nesting time, when full-blown primroses are fading and bluebells grow in strips and patches under the trees; when but for the stoat, the egg-stealing hedge-hog and rat, with now and then a jay or a sparrow-

hawk, young life is to be fostered and slaughter has ceased.

John Beale, either by habit or nature, is reserved; but then he will talk. Then it is easy to recognise that, if born at the Hall instead of the cottage, he might have been as brave a soldier or as subtle a diplomatist as any squire's son.

He speaks in a low voice, and all his utterances sound confidential. But, indeed, some of them are not to be repeated with time and place.

The keynote of his character is a respect for "rights" and a determination to defend them. As he talks of trespassers or other lawbreakers and offenders, his brows contract into a frown, begotten partly from a habit of constant observation in the open air. When he has had his say, his mouth shuts like a steel trap, with an air of "That's my opinion and I hold to it."

Of one thing he is quite certain. He is not an arbitrary man.

"No," said he one day, "I see no need to tell all. 'Tis wiser much to use your judgment and sometimes to keep a still tongue. You see the little homestead away there on the hill. I stood on this very spot one afternoon, and the farmer's son, a sort of hobble-de-hoy fellar, took a pop over the hedge and knocked down two birds. He picked 'em up, clapped 'em in his pocket, and was back out o' sight again in half a minute. He could get home before I could meet with him. But I had a glass in my pocket. So I stopped where I was and

watched the house. My gentleman went through the gate, climbed up on the wagon-shaft, and hid the birds on the rafter of the shed. Then I knew all about it."

He stood in the ride and smiled.

"You knew he would leave them there until evening?" I asked.

"I knew he was acting on his own. If the old people had known his game he would have gone straight indoors as proud as a turkey-cock. So I walked straight down. He and his father stood there talking together, jus' by the poundhouse door. So I taxed the boy with the shooting, straight out. He swore I must ha' made a mistake, and his father took his part, too. But he didn't know how much I had seen, till I catched un hold by the elbow an' led un round an' pulled the birds off o' the beam. His father was in a terrible way. I said, 'What right have you got to kill birds?' I said, 'What right would you have anywhere without a certificate?' That lad turned so white as a ghost. He saw himself. There, his father was really a'most in tears. Now I'm paid to catch poachers. What did I ought to ha' do::e?"

He asked the question with deep seriousness, and a perception that he was propounding a very difficult ethical problem.

I also perceived the whole matter as between Justice and Mercy to be involved in it.

"Well, now, I don't mind telling you, I held my tongue. Many a man would have told to prove his sharpness. But the lad got rid o' the gun and

promised, and I let it pass. He's grown up now, and got the farm, and a very hard-working man. You see that was no real poacher. You don't want ill-will on a place. I tell you a wise keeper doesn t quarrel with good tenants. Give a young chap o' that class one chance, I say. I'm not a arbitrary man. I never was. But if a man won't heed, drop on him stiff. Drop on him all you can. That's what I say."

We strolled onwards down the slope and through the cover. Sometimes he turned to glance at a vermin trap. Now and again, where the coppice had been cut, we looked at a pheasant's nest beneath the sprawling brambles or under the shelter of a fallen limb and counted the olive-brown eggs. Then we got back into the ride.

"It isn't every man can keep game," said he. "He must have an eye for every little thing. You see that track? That's new to me. I know the footprint of everybody with a right in this wood. Any hurdle-maker or woodman that comes here I note. There's some men below stripping bark. They are right enough, and we pay for every nest they find and show. But that track now. Whose is it? Now I can tell you. That was the missus of the under-keeper up here, walked to church o' Sunday in a new pair of boots. She've a-got a goodish size hoof of her own, mind. And that's the way she turns out her feet."

We came to the edge of the wood, and he stood back out of sight and looked across the landscape.

"A man to be a keeper must have it in him to observe. Did you see that pigeon come out of the clump of firs beyond the lake? She came out in a hurry off her nest. 'Tis near a road, and the children creep in to pick flowers or to search for nests. The man that side must look round an' hunt 'em out. No; they can't do much harm, but they've got no right there. In winter the pigeons drop in to roost in those trees. They come in twos and threes and circle round and then settle in. I was standing here last December, and I saw one after another take a couple of turns and then make off. Somehow or other I guessed what was up. I nipped down, and came upon a couple of fellars a-ferreting. They bunked off. But I knew who they were. Cost 'em two pound a-piece. But la! they'll be here again next winter. There's no cure for a drunkard or a poacher—that's my opinion. And I'm not a arbitrary man."

"I suppose if they know a place to be well watched they go elsewhere."

"I'll tell you a tale about being frightened," laughed John Beale. "A funny thing happened down to that lake, years ago. I caught a young carter putting down a rat-gin for an eel. I had my doubts about that chap before. I could scarce keep a sober face, but I did. He had got the trap under water, tiled with a dead gudgeon, and made fast with a bit o' cord. I put on a fiercish look and I said, 'What right have you got at this?' I said, 'You'll hear more o' this matter.' That was

true enough, though I only meant a lesson, and no harm to the chap. For, though I say it myself, I'm not a arbitrary man. But he served seven years for that."

"Seven years! For putting down a rat-trap to catch an eel? Why he ought to have had a medal for the originality of the idea."

"Well, I suppose I did speak a bit sharp. But it frightened him and no mistake. In the night he ran off and enlisted. So I always said he served seven year for that. However, no harm was done. He stayed on, and he's a full sergeant now on the road for a pension."

"And what about these thorough incurable poachers? They are a crafty lot, are they not?" said I.

John Beale tucked the ground-ash stick firmly under his arm and looked up at the sky.

"What I do know about poachers and their tricks and ways I tell no man," replied he with a laugh. "But least of all one who might set it down in print."

THE CARTER

XIV

THE CARTER

I COULD hear the jingling of bells in the lane and see the top of the load slowly moving above the hedgerows, for he had been to the wood to fetch hurdles.

When they presently came into view he was on the near side of the shaft-horse, with one hand on the rein. He and his team had a journey before them. The name on the wagon announced them from the large sheep-farm ten miles away, with the fine old homestead under the down. He looked back at the wheel, shouted "Wug off" to the wise old mare between the shafts, and as soon as the gate-post was safely cleared, "Mither-way." Then he cracked his whip, so that they turned up into the high-road in proud style.

"Whoa!"

They stopped.

The travelling through copse and lane had been rough and bad, and in the fresh clear air the sweating horses were soon wrapt in a cloud of breath and steam. They were both bright bays, and each had

a white stocking on the off hind leg, for the young one was bred out of the old mare and matched her to a hair.

Then the carter hung his brass-ringed whip on to one of the "hameses," and took out his box to load another "bit o' baccy" into his black clay pipe. He struck a match, sheltered it with his two hands, and blew out volumes of grey smoke.

Altogether they made an old-world picture; for the large yellow wagon, built on graceful lines by some old village wheelwright, who took a pride in his craft, had seen out more than one generation. Having a thought to the villages through which they must pass, the carter had spent an extra half-hour that morning on horses and gear, so that everything, in the eyes of all who saw, might be a credit to himself and the place whence he came. The brass ornaments on the harness shone like gold. The old-fashioned board of bells towering above the collar of the fore-horse was curtained by a row of woollen tassels of crimson and yellow. The long leading-rein hung along the side of the fore-horse, ready to his hand. Everything bore an appearance of simple but substantial prosperity, and the carter was a good match for the rest. He was an elderly man with a thin, weather-wrinkled, respectable face and he wore a short linen smock, now rarely to be seen, that reached scarcely to the huckle-bones.

"Good morning, carter. You have a good team."

"Ah! You show me a better. Why, they be

pretty as a picture, an' both so soun' as a bell o' brass, I'll warrant 'em."

"You must take good care of them, or they wouldn't look so well."

The word of praise went straight to his heart and loosened his tongue at once.

"'Tes my delight. There's a plenty o' Kirstians not so sensible as what they be. They do know my voice. They do know my step, an' whicker o' marnens afore I do get to stable door. But la! I do look to they first. Always did. I'd sooner go to bed wi' a empty belly any night o' the wick than they should hurt. Now, what sort o' life mus' a carter lead wi' a poor half-starved team? Why, 'tes double the work. Mus' be. An' what pride can the man take to walk on by the side o' 'em? But they don't gie I no trouble, an' they be so gentle as lambs. You see, they be always up in heart. Why, thik old mare, her's so staunch, if you did hitch she on to a mountain her'd haul and strive till her did drop. No hill have ever a-stopped they, though mid be so stickle as a roof. An' never won't. 'Ithout somebody or another should witch 'em."

He stopped and laughed.

Clearly, he did not go in fear of any such mishap. Yet the remark was natural enough, since in olden time the horse was ever the easy victim of secret malicious spells. The little brass ornaments, the crescent on the forehead and the swinging disc about the head, that still adorn many a set of wagon harness, were in the first place protective

charms; and the row of bells, commonly believed to sound a warning of approach when ways were narrow, served, indeed, to frighten off the pixies, who had a way of meddling with horses both in the stable at night or after dark upon the road.

"I have not heard of anything of that sort for a long time."

"'Tes gone out," said he, with a wise shake of the head. "There, I don't believe in it myself. Though, for all that, my brother, he did—an' do, for all I do know."

He paused, and pushed the rising tobacco deeper into the bowl with his finger.

"An' 'tes a funny thing too, look at it how you will. But my brother, he wur carter to a miller, an' one time, broad daylight too, he passed a woman 'pon the way. Well, they did say her did do a little to it, but whe'er her did or no, tidden for I to say. An' he thought her looked at un a bit straight like. Well, as a body will then, now an' again 'pon the road, that do want a lift an' ha'n't got face to up an' ask. But he never ope'd his lips. An' then he wished, like, that he had. For he verily thought that her had the power to do harm, an' partic'lar if her wur affronted. Well, he hadn't a-got on more than a mile—an' a road, mind me, so level as a gun-barrel—when his hosses stopped short. There, they did quivery an' did tremmley all over, like a poplar tree in a thunder-storm, an' the sweat did run off o' 'em in rivers. But he [illegible] 'wur. He never touched o' 'em wi [illegible] ought the old witch did mean to

catch un up an' ride. But her never comed by. Or if her did, he said mus' be in some shape he couldn't reco'nise she. An' he had to bide there a hour, an' then they hosses went off o' their own selves, ay, so well as ever man could wish. Now I do know that's gospel. Mind, I don't believe in none o' it my own zelf. But 'twur a very funny thing, as you must own—a very funny thing. Do'ee happen to have such a thing as a lucifer about 'ee?—if mid make so bold."

I provided him with a match; and there was silence, but for his puffing, as he lighted his pipe once more and drew it into a glow.

"Now I'll tell 'ee a bit more. My brother's fust missus—an' he've a-had three—were a-tookt most terrible bad wi' a hesitation in her inzide. Her victuals couldn't do she no good, an' her fell away an' wur like to die. So my brother, he went up ten mile to the conjurer. He rode on wi' one Tranter Luckstone, if you should hap to know the name. An' the conjurer comed out to door, an' he said, 'You needn't to tell me what you be a-comed about, for I do know. Your missus is most terrible bad. But you've a-left it too long. 'Tes a wonderful strong spell a-put 'pon the poor soul, but I shall do my best for her. Now, if you should ride along in safety, as I do hope you mid, look well about, an' listen for a girt black crow. An' if you should hear one croak three times, zend for passon to once, for the time is not long. But if than three more or less, I've a-got hopes.'

"Well, my brother an' Tranter wur a-riding on together a-thinking o' nothing at all, when wi'out so much as a lumper or a stumble, down dropped Tranter's old hoss. They nipped down so quick as they could, an' got un up 'pon his lags. But, mind me, when they comed to eye un over, he hadn' a-got so much as a scratch, an' not a thing a-brokt, not buckle nor strap. So I do think—leastways, my brother do believe—that conjurer's spell wur scarce strong enough to overcome t'other like, but only to stop harm. But just as they stood a-looken the wold hoss over like, there comed a crow so big as a raven an' perched in a elem-tree not zo very fur away. An' he croaked twice. Then Tranter he chucked up his hat to fright un off. But Tranter wur wrong. Thik crow gi'ed one more croak an' fled. Now if he had a-been let alone he mid ha' croaked a dozen. But zo 'twur. An' his missus, her lived six year an' then wur carr'd off wi' a squinzy. Now I could take my Bible a'terdavy o' the fac's. Mind, I don't believe in no such things. But 'twur a very funny thing about thik hoss, an' a very funny thing about thik crow—as you must own, a very funny thing."

He gravely shook his head as he took his whip off the "hameses."

"Well, 'tes time to wag, I do suppose. I do wish 'ee a good day. Come-up. Gee-off-ah!"

Again he cracked his whip.

The chains clinked, the wheels creaked. The bells rang merrily even after he was out of sight.

In the literature of the sixteenth century the carter

is often spoken of as rude; and "carterly" and "carterlike" are used as terms of reproach. Yet he must always have undertaken responsibility and occupied a position of trust. Amongst the humble folk of the village he took, no doubt, a leading place. But he alone was taken by his occupation into the towns and cities, when he hauled corn, hay, straw, and firing to markets and fairs. And so, with his rough country manners, and being the only rural figure commonly seen, he was perhaps too hastily chosen as the type of the most uncouth.

THE SNAIL-MERCHANT

XV

THE SNAIL-MERCHANT

IT was in a Somerset lane that I saw him, of a morning in early winter, after the leaf had fallen from the tall hedgerows and lay red and sodden in the ditch and among the scanty grass of the strip of wayside waste. He was a strange figure, this grey-haired man; something past middle age, yet still hale and active, and he looked older than his years as he stooped and closely scanned the bank.

His costume, or equipment rather, was also such as to attract attention.

His coat was ancient, weather-stained, of the dull green that a dark cloth assumes after years of exposure to alternate rain and sun, and patched with a daring that was beyond praise. But patching clothes is a lost art everywhere, except in places most remote. Over his shoulder he carried a sack secured by a piece of window-cord. Slung from his neck in front was a sort of pocket or satchel, also made of sacking. In his hand was an iron rod slightly bent into a crook, with which he kept

thrusting and probing among the ivy and under the hedgerow roots. Then he would pick something up and drop it into his satchel.

What could it be?

Nuts were gone, and the few purple sloes that still clung to the leafless twigs, high and out of reach, had been spoilt and shrivelled by the early frosts. Besides, these are not to be found down on the bank.

Curiosity triumphed, and so I asked:—

"What are you looking for?"

"Snails," was the rather short reply.

"What do you want them for?"

"Zell 'em."

But almost at the same moment he softened a little, and added, I thought with a touch of pride, "That's my trade."

Now every established trade must have a name to know itself by, and what might this industry be most appropriately called? To talk of catching even a summer snail when he is on urgent business after a thunder shower, with his horns out and his house on the middle of his back, doing his best on the cinder-track of a kitchen-garden path, was absurd. To speak of gathering snails on a bank that in earliest spring will be covered thick with sweetest primroses would be sheer profanity.

"Then what do you call yourself?" I ventured to ask.

"On the census I put snail-merchant," he answered with dignity.

And so a snail-merchant let him be.

His first diffidence overcome, he had no objection to talk about his trade. He felt proud of the vast and increasing magnitude to which commerce in snails was attaining. All that he could pick up and more would be taken by one house of business in Bristol. In fact, at this time of the year he could never get enough.

"But to what sort of shop do they go?"

"To an oyster-bar."

At once, in response to a smile, he hastened to explain.

"Oh, but they don't zell 'em for oysters. 'Tis all fair and open as the day. They do zell 'em in the shell, boiled, and just as they be. You zee"—and he waved the snailing-iron instructively—"'tis the like o' this. The glass-blowers have always a-made use o' 'em because they be so good for the chest. And folk wi' weak lungs do eat 'em too. And others have a-learnt from they, like, and do eat 'em for a relish. Oh, there's a goodish trade. I've lived at it summer and winter alike for ten year. 'Tis a growing trade, too. To be sure gentry don't eat 'em in this country, but 'tis to be hoped that they will. For I've a-bin told, and told by one that have a-bin there, too, that in furrin parts quality folk do eat 'em to their meals. And why not? They be wonderful good, and strengthening too."

"What do they taste like, winkles?"

"Winkles!"

The mere word filled him with scorn.

"They be better than best mutton."

"And are there other men in the trade?"

"Plenty. But not about here. No. If a man should chance to come here, zo zoon as he knew I was working this district he'd go away again."

"Professional etiquette, I suppose?"

He looked puzzled.

Then he said, "Yes, yes."

But presently he added doubtfully, "You zee, he wouldn't find so wonderful many where I'd a-been."

But this was wasting time, and he turned back to his work; though now that his tongue was loosened he kept talking all the while. Into the dark caverns under the wrinkled roots of a maple bush he thrust his snailing-iron and tapped in all directions.

"There's a lot here," he said.

"How do you know?"

"By the sound."

He pulled away the sandy earth and put in his hand.

"The only risk in this trade," he told me with a shake of the head, "is from adders. Now an' again, earlier in the season, you do put your hand in an' feel somethin' move. Mid be a adder, mid be only a grass snake. Yet do make 'ee creep like. But they be all in their winter sleep by now."

He drew out a cluster of snails half as big again as a cricket ball.

"There! That's how they do cling together in winter—to keep warm, I suppose. Now you wouldn' suppose a snail to have much sense, but a snail, I tell

'ee, is a very cunning thing. A very intellectual creature, I do call 'un, zo there. He do know what he do like and where he's safe from the thrushes. He do like maple and sycamore and nut and ash. But elder he can't abear, and so he won't go there—think o' that! He do know his own mind, you zee. And that better 'an most men and all women—eh? And they'll crawl through a crack in a old stone wall, one to a time, and then pack inside a hunderd o' 'em, where I can't hook 'em out. And a snail do know limestone from other stone, too. He's partial to limestone."

All this while the snail-merchant kept picking snails from among the ivy, from crevices between stones, and from the thick grass that fringed the bottom of the rough wall by the meadow gate. All the little ones he religiously put back. There is no close time for snails, so it behoved to be careful. On the bank lay an old black relic of a boot.

"A snail do dearly love an old boot," quoth the snail-merchant as he picked out two dozen.

His satchel being full, he stopped to pour the contents into his sack.

"How do you send them?"

"Train. They pays carriage and returns the bag," was the business-like reply.

"Don't the shells get broken?"

"They be too strong. Why, see how a thrush must keep knock-knocking on a stone. Now, I'll tell you a pretty thing. When the frostes do come and the ground is so hard as iron, the thrushes do follow

on behind and pick up any I do chance to drop and the small that I do throw back. You see, a thing half-starved do lose his fear, for I do never see 'em another time. The robins will come close up where I do move the earth, but they be more curious than shy. But talking o' snail-shells, you can tell a snail's age by his shell up to five, and then he do stop growing and go out o' mark like a hoss at eight. Looky, see here"—he held up a snail and pointed to the bars upon its shell—" from bar to bar that's a year's growth, but at five he do stop a-growing and turn back the edge of his shell. Oh, a snail-shell is a strong thing."

I had never before thought of it in that light.

Yet, after all, even an elegant weight like my own —say twelve stone formerly—is scarcely fair on the snail.

AN OLD "PROJICKER"

XVI

AN OLD "PROJICKER"

A CLEAR blue sky canopied a June garden, a square plot of good size extending from a village street to the steep bank of a little stream shaded by pollard willows, with here and there an old apple-tree.

A low, thatched cottage stood a few yards from the front hedge. The roof was thin in places, but newly patched in others with clean, yellow straw, that put the older parts more out of countenance than ever. Yet the recent thatching was but a makeshift after all. Just enough had been done to keep the place habitable, but not a stroke more. Dark weather-stains running from the eaves to the window gave unheeded warnings of decay. Some of the little diamond-shaped panes were missing, but sheets of paper had been pasted over the gaps; some were cracked and the pieces of broken glass held from falling by pats of putty. Evidently this was a house which the owner had determined to "let down."

Yet something pleasant in the aspect of this old-world habitation invited a closer attention.

It seemed to smile upon the passer-by.

Strange flowering creepers, old-fashioned and no longer planted in these days, half-covered the mud walls. A well, with bucket and windlass, was on one side of the paved pathway near to the open door, and some three or four bee-butts stood in rank at a safe distance among the flowers. In the flower-knot were "warriors" fast going to seed, purple gillaw-fers, tall and straggling, and tufts of white pinks. So the air was full of scent and humming. And one ancient leaning apple-tree, buttressed into security by means of a forked pole, late in flower, held its gigantic nosegay of delicate pink blossom to the blue sky.

"Wonderful pleasant weather," piped the voice of an old labourer, who, hook in hand, stopped trimming his garden hedge when he saw me loiter.

"Could you give me a drink of water?"

He hobbled towards the little gate and held it open for me to enter.

He was a very old labourer, lean and bent, and his shirt was unbuttoned and open at the throat. For the sake of good manners he put on a rusty old green jacket when he went indoors for the cup. He dipped the fresh-drawn water from the bucket and handed it to me.

"'Tis a beautiful spring," said he.

His face must have been handsome in youth, and a life of labour in the open air had not blunted the well-formed features, not uncommon among the very

humble in the West Country. He had an air of refinement, inherited, it may be, from some long-forgotten aristocracy, and a finer head to look at than four-fifths of our legislators who are wondering what to do with him.

"You have a useful bit of garden and some nice flowers also," I suggested.

"Then do 'ee please to step round, if you will."

Pleased at this admiration for his flowers, he led the way down the garden path.

"There, I bain't no gardener," he said in a tone of apology. "But 'tis my delight to watch things grow. An' my liven, too, for the most part—so fur as that do go. I be too wold in the bone an' too stiff in the jints to get out to work very much. So I do bide here hours an' projicky. I bain't no scholar, but I be a terr'ble one to projicky—always was."

As he spoke he looked over his shoulder and laughed with a twinkle in his grey eye. It seemed to find a humour even in the limitations of old age, when relieved by the ingenious scheming expressed by the word "projickey."

The garden was a wonder of healthy growth.

Potatoes were already neatly "round-hoed" and green peas breaking into flower. There was no serried rank of broad beans, but individual plants seemed to be skirmishing all over the garden, and the scent of their blossom everywhere filled the air. Lettuce also were sprinkled in all directions. But there were two good beds of onions and one each of carrots and "pasmuts."

"'Tis a tidy lot o' early teddies; an' they be safe from the frost now," said the old man with pride. "I did stick a few hurdles around 'em at night to sort o' shelter 'em like. That wur my projick. My missus did laugh, an' say, 'What, be gwaine out to fold your sheep then?' But I don't see but what it did act very well. I don't worrit myself about no early peas. They don't pay for the trouble to a poor man. I do wait till they can grow up comfortable like. Why, the room they do take up is worth more 'an one little picken the size o' gunshot. An' I don't put in my broad beans in rank. They do come all to one time, an' get old an' tough afore you can eat 'em. I do want a thing soft an' young for my wold gums. I do carry round a few beans in my pocket like, an' now an' then I do make a little hole wi' my walken-stick in a likely place an' drop one in. They do do better single than when they be so thick. They've a-got more room, an' they do like the air. A'most everything do like the air. I do myself. Things that be crowded bain't never so strong. Look at folk in towns. I do act the same way wi' the lettuces. I do prick out one or two here and there where I do take the fancy."

His eye caught sight of a slug on the outside leaf of one of the lettuces. He stooped to pick it off. Pinched it between his fingers and thumb, and then rubbed them with a piece of groundsel in a very exemplary and cleanly manner.

"You bain't never dull if you be one to projicky. There's always somethen to do. I've a-made a

dippen-place down here to the brook to water my garden. Do 'ee zee? I've a-cut two or dree steps down the bank an' digged a hole, an' let in a old tub. He is bound to be full so long as water do run in the stream. An' I tell 'ee another thing. He do catch a very fine sand. I've a-got one or two renuncluses up there to the front, an' a renunclus is a thing do dearly love a bit o' fine sharp sand. They do wonder why mine be so big. But I don't tell all I do do. I do bide mute. When I've a-heard what one an' another do zay I do only go back and projicky the more."

He looked around with pride and surveyed his various crops. Then he pointed them out one after another.

"I do live out o' these here garden. We can't eat all the teddies, so we've a-got a few to sell. There's onions there to last to next summer, an' carrots an' pasmuts, too, more 'an ever we shall use. I shall have a few turmuts there between the hedge and the scarlet-runners, and a girt vegable-marrer on the heap in the corner. An' I do set a hook an' line down there under the withy-tree an' catch a eel so sure as the light every time there do come a drop o' rain.

"I catched one a poun' weight, once.

"I sold my apples last year for a poun' and three half-crowns, and there were more blooth to year. I picked ten quart o' gooseberries off they bushes this week an' last. 'Tis no good to try to keep 'em. The blackbirds do eat every one. They do all laugh

at I. They do say I be so well off. An' I don't never complain. I'd sooner turn up these here bit o' ground an' walk up an' down thik path an' stud an' projicky."

"I suppose you do not go out to work at all now?"

"Now an' again I do crack a few stones. An' one an' another do find me some little job to earn a shillen. But I can't go so very far now. I be only fit to spuddley an' projicky. I be in my fourscore. But, there, I can just manage to get the little I do want. You'll vind you don't want zo terr'ble much when you do get up in years. They do let me have the cottage free now. There's nobody but I would live in un, an' when I do go they do mean to pull un down."

"What do you think of this talk about old-age pensions?"

"I don't spend much thought 'pon things that be so far off. I'd sooner set my mind 'pon this here yard or two o' ground and the one or two apple trees. I did hear the question asked as to who is going to pay these here pensions. I don't meddle wi' no such matters myself. They don't never bear no crops that I can see. If you do plant a peck o' teddies an' dig ten, you can see the increase. If you do drop in one bean an' pick half a pint, they don't eat so very bad hot or cold wi' a bit o' bacon an' a pinch o' pepper an' salt. But you can't fill a hungry belly wi' words. I never could. I don't put no trust in it. To see that, I do reckon I should have to live

more years 'an the oldest man in the Scripture, an' mankind don't do it nowadays. Who would pay it, master? An' how much would it be?"

"They talked of five shillings," said I. "Out of the taxes."

"Ay, they talked. But I don't know who'd pay it in our parish. There's squire have a-got nothin' left. He don't know where to look for a fi'pound-note, so the tale is. An' passon is so poor as a crow by all accounts, an' his own too. An' my old master down to farm, why he've a-lost money to my knowledge for five-an'-thirty years, an' as his old father never left so very much, he mus' be drawing very near the end o' it now."

He shook his head, and the merry twinkle came again into his eye.

"They've all a-lost money but I, master. But money didden never trouble I much, for I never had none to lose. So I do suppose I'd better to bide content so long as I can knock on an' projicky."

THE OLD MOLE CATCHER

XVII

THE OLD MOLE CATCHER

AN old man, crooked with rheumatism, and past work, he lived with his old woman in the little cottage by the corner opposite the disused village pound.

What with his pension from the society, which, to be sure, was not much, but might be relied upon to "come in reg'lar," and the help of one or two "wonderful good sons," the neighbours accounted Peter Sims, the old mole catcher, well off.

He was always to be seen out of doors.

Of a fine day he would stroll down the road and across the footpath, to choose some convenient gate or stile to lean against by the hour. He liked to bask in the sun and gaze upon the broad meadows. His clothes were of that ancient russet hue which is neither red nor brown nor green, and in the landscape he was scarcely distinguishable. Against a green hedge, a hazel copse, or an arable field he was as little suspected as a hare in her form. If you came upon him he showed no inclination to talk He

would civilly pass the time of day. Then, in a querulous voice of mournful remonstrance, he always added, "There's a terr'ble sight o' wants about," and moved regretfully to another basking-place.

But one autumn morning Peter came out from his cottage door newly arrayed.

The village was waiting for him. The news had already been carried around; for a parcel, brought by post, had been opened in the presence of the post-man. He wore a beautiful moleskin waistcoat, and crowning his grey locks was an old-fashioned mole-skin cap. Nothing so complete had been seen in the parish for years, and the neighbours all crowded around.

"Though to be sure 'tis what you wore all your life, Mr. Sims, as mid say," said they.

"Zo I did. Zo I did."

"An' where did it come vrom, Mr. Sims?"

"Our Bob sent it. He's a want catcher up the country, you know."

With both hands the old man stroked the glossy fur.

He was as delighted as a child.

In the livery of his ancient occupation Peter Sims was another man. The moleskin waistcoat, like a magician's robe, brought his mind once more in touch with his art. He smiled on the failings of the present age. A half-indulgent note could be detected in his "A terr'ble sight o' wants about" when I found him that day gazing at the rows of brown hillocks in a piece of after-grass.

"They seem to catch them elsewhere," said I, with a congratulatory tap on the third button.

"Our Bob, he do know the way," crowed old Peter, in his pride, "for I larned the boy my ownself."

The old chap straightened himself, and cleared his throat.

"Moles you do call 'em, don't 'ee? They used to be called wants in my day. Now I can tell 'ee all about moles," said he. "I've a-catched hunderds and thousands, for 'tis the one thing in life I've a-gied thought to. If you do want to be a mole catcher you mus' gie up your mind to it. You mus' learn their ways an' their nature, so as to get round 'em all ways. Tidden a bit o' good to catch half-a-dozen, an' then zit down. That's what they do do now. There idden no real old-fashioned want catchers nowadays. Not one in twenty mile round here. A labouren-man mid put down a few traps and pick up a score or two to perk up in hedge for squire to look at as he do ride by. But if you do want to keep wants—I do mean moles—down, you must volley it—I tell 'ee, volley it."

He was so emphatic in the opinion that mole-catching must be followed, and shook his head so long, that I thought the tale was done. But not at all. He started afresh. A glow of colour brightened each word; for a sunset illumines that old-world speech for which the day is almost gone. Moreover, he spoke with the wise simplicity of the unlearned.

"Ay, you mus' volley 'em all manners and ways.

Now, like all liven things but man, they must be busiest in spring. They do work a goodish bit in the night. But so true as the light they do always work upon the very touch o' daybreak. Now say, you've a-got nice open weather an' a light fine soil in a pasture field, an' jus' avore the glimmer o' marnen you be there. What'll you zee? The dew maybe do lie around, 'pon everything, blade an' leaf, but the foot tracks you've just a-made, a'most so white as a sheet o' frost. First a blade do quivery, an' then the brown earth do heave up an' half cover the young grass in no time. 'Tis a wonder how so small a critter can work so fast. But he mus' always work away from home, mind that. So clap the spade in behind un like, in his own hole. Then you can dig un out like a tatie an' gie un a knock wi' the spade. A little thing do kill a want, master. Why, a tap 'pon the snout, that would little more 'an crack a dunnock's egg, an' he's dead. Oh! you can destroy a sight o' wants if you be up avore light in the marnen."

"But what about the traps that you set with——?"

"Eh? Traps did 'ee zay? I be a bit hard o' hearen." He raised his hand to ear. "You do mean they little boughten snaps, don't 'ee?"

"No. The old-fashioned sort with the bent stick stuck into the ground."

"When I was young we did zit round fire of a night an' make our own traps. I tell 'ee volk to-day do buy half the things they used to make. Why, we

didden even use wire when I was a boy. Ah! You go an' bag a few stout hairs out o' the stallions' tails when they do travel roun', an' you don't want no wire. I wouldn' gie a thankee for hairs out of a mare's tail. There idden no strength in it. Not if 'tis the biggest mare ever hitched into a plough. Then you cut out a likely bit o' smooth wood, about two fingers wide an' so long as your palm; an' bore the holes wi' a red-hot iron, when you do sit down wi' a drop o' ale or cider if you've a-got it, an' fit in your two little withy bows; an' cut out your peg to hang down in the way whilst he do hold the nooses slack. Then you lay he in the run, wi' a bit o' string from the nooses on to the green hazel stick you do tell o', a-stuckt into the ground for a spring. Ah! Let but a snout touch thik peg. That wur 'Good-night' to my little velvet-coated gen'leman. Ah! Wire never did so well. They did smell wire. An' mind me, wants be that terr'ble cunnen, if they've a-got but a inklen o' it, they'll shove on a bit o' earth an' knock out thik peg all for nothen."

"Do you think they know what they are doing?"

"I do know they do. They've a-done it to I too many times for chance-work."

When I smiled he grew more determined.

"Ah! They little wants, small as they be, have a-got wisdom beyond their size. They do build a fine home, mind, to rear their young. They've a-got a upstairs an' a downstairs to un, in a manner o' speaken, an' a girt heap o' leaves in the middle a'most so soft as a feather-bed. They've a-got main

roads an' by-ways, an' a man mus' know where to put his trap. But clever as th' Almighty made 'em, I myself have a catched hunderds an' thousands o' 'em—hunderds an' thousands——"

He paused.

Though he still kept stroking the waistcoat, there was no more to tell.

Once more he gazed out upon the landscape.

"'Tes a terr'ble sight o' wants about," said he.

THE TRUFFLE HUNTER

XVIII

THE TRUFFLE HUNTER

WHEN the leaf has fallen, about the time that game-pie and boar's head first begin to loom upon a still distant Christmas horizon, the English truffle hunter takes to the field.

The locality in which the truffle may be found in this country, in a quantity sufficient to make it worth the hunting, is not extensive. Unsuspected, and therefore unsought for, this remarkable fungus may no doubt exist elsewhere; but in parts of Dorset and of Wilts it is regularly gathered, and, although the market is chiefly supplied from the Continent, some few persons are able to earn a livelihood during the early winter months by the search for it.

The truffle hunter is a man by himself. He knows no competition in his quaint and brief avocation. For the truffle grows most plentifully on a chalk soil and only under trees. The stately beech, with spreading, drooping branches—in early summer thickly clad in glossy leaves, and falling like a skirt lightly to touch the ground—is its favourite tree, although it is also to be found in less abundance

under the oak and the chestnut. The finely-timbered park, therefore, affords the happiest hunting-ground, and to enter this permission must be obtained.

In the South of France, where truffles are very abundant, the pig is chiefly used to discover them; and thus, instead of enjoying a life of ease and elegant gentility, as he does with us in England, the hog is made to work and earn his living like a man. But here, where the game is scarce, the pig could make no show at all at the business. Even the most exemplary sow, experienced, intelligent, willing, motherly, and endowed with all the many virtues and excellences of her sex and race, is at best but a poor ranger. Thoughtful deliberation characterises all her movements, but there is a certain lack of dash. When there is ground to be covered she cannot be relied upon to rise to the occasion. With us it is necessary to use dogs, and therefore a truffle hunter must be of a transparent respectability that can win and retain the confidence even of a head-keeper.

The privilege to walk over the estate may very likely have descended to him from his father, and from childhood he has understood the value of it. His sons and daughters, undisturbed by the prevailing desire to run away from the locality in which they were brought up, go into service at the great house. He belongs to the countryside, and is known to everybody around. His truffle hunting holds him to the place of his birth. Scarcely anywhere else can it be carried on, and, like most men who follow an odd occupation, he has more of the old-world spirit

than many of his neighbours. So the squire stops to have a word with him whenever they meet, listening all the while with a smile to his quaint phrases. Well aware that he is in favour, the truffle hunter is free of speech. He has nobody else to think of, no employer to please, and he freely enjoys a broad hunting-ground from which every intruder is severely excluded.

It was a dull morning very early in winter, and our trysting-place was by an old disused chalk-pit, now overshadowed and almost hidden under trees of half a century.

Underfoot the turf was soft and springy and the grass wet, for it is no time to hunt for truffles when the ground is bound by frost. Upon every side the well-wooded landscape melted away into a grey mist. From every twig and bud hung a drop of shining moisture, imperceptibly increasing, to fall at last upon the sodden leaves, so bright in the early stages of their decay that they could give a gleam of ruddy warmth even to the bare cheerlessness of a winter day.

The air was soft and mild in its humidity. A squirrel, awakening to an hour of activity between his winter naps, ran out upon a branch, stopped, and stood at attention with his tail curled over his back. Suddenly he turned, leaped to another limb, and ran shyly back to hide himself behind the trunk. Yet presently he was on the ground, moving to and fro in graceful leaps in his search for some odd beech-nut, if by chance the birds might have left one here

and there so late in the year. The squirrel also is not above regaling himself with a truffle should he happen upon one during his excursion to the earth. But disturbed by the sound of a footstep, he again raised himself to watch and listen. Then, his tail undulating as he went, he was off and out of sight behind a branch of the tree once more, as the truffle hunter came in view with three white poodles close to his heel.

A quaint group they were as they quickly advanced down the grove.

The man, in a fustian coat and gaiters, and with a stout ground-ash stick in his hand, looked like an under-keeper. And the coat had large game-pockets too, which were full and bulging upon each side.

The little poodles—for they are much smaller than their carefully-trimmed aristocratic cousins who move in the best circles—looked like a small troupe of performing dogs. They appeared to take a subdued and serious view of life. They looked more thoughtful even than comic artists waiting for their turns.

"I don't hardly believe I can be behind time," said he.

"Oh no; I am early. Did you find many on the way here?"

"I ha'n't a-hunted. I comed straight on, zo vast as I could." But in a moment, divining the meaning of the question, he drew from his pocket a handful of little blocks of dry bread, and held them out to show me.

"'Tes to hearten up the dogs," he explained.

We had a long day's tramp before us, and we started at once.

We were almost strangers, but his simplicity was so direct that he was quite ready to talk to me from the first, and his one subject was the mysterious behaviour of the truffle.

"Now, to my mind a truffle is a very funny thing," said he. "You mid find 'em in one place thick an' plenty; an' hard by, where the eye can find no difference and in reason you would look to see just so many, there idden a single one to be had not for love nor money."

"Perhaps they would stand transplanting."

"But I've a-tried that. I've a-tookt up little 'uns an' set 'em in a likely spot, but come next time there were no truffles there never the more."

"Then why do you hunt for them over new ground since you know where they are?"

"Because, for all that, they do die out an' start fresh o' theirselves like. My father found 'em where there's none now, an' yet they be where no dog of his ever stopped to scrape in his life. So I do allow there is somethen in the nature of a truffle more than the mind o' man have ever a-wormed out or ever will. An' that's easy to think, when all their growth is out o' sight underground."

All the while we were trudging to and fro across turf as fine as a lawn, now to a single tree and then to a group clustered together on the sward like a constellation in the heavens.

Now and again a rabbit ran across in front of us.

Once, in a little hollow where the grass was rough and long, a hare jumped up at our feet.

These wise poodles took no notice of the one or the other. Only under the trees, when the truffle hunter waved his hand for them to range, did they show any excitement. Then they galloped about with eager jealousy, each anxious to be the first to find. But for more than an hour nothing came of it.

We went into the corner of a beech-wood, where there was no copse, and the ground, thickly covered with the brown waste from a wildly extravagant shower of mast, was bare of vegetation as a floor. We passed down a narrow glade between two covers. The poodles ranged like spaniels upon each side of us as we walked on, and now and again when they loitered we stopped to watch them.

Presently one of them raised his nose and sniffed the wind, then cantered forward in doubt, then galloped some twenty yards and began to scrape a hole in the ground. The truffle hunter ran as hard as he could; for not only may a dog injure the precious fungus by inordinate scraping, but he is apt in time to acquire a taste for it, and will then swallow it himself. In this instance there was no lamentable waste of this sort; and, to the envy of his companions, the fortunate poodle was rewarded with a cube of bread.

It was a most interesting exhibition of keenness of nose, for the truffle was quite three inches under the

ground, and this one, as it happened, was scarcely larger than a hazel-nut.

The truffle hunter handed it to me for examination.

There is nothing attractive in the personal appearance of a truffle, nothing impressive to support a title to the respect in which it has been held. A fine truffle closely resembles a moderate-sized potato of infirm constitution and with a ruined complexion. It is like a walnut blackened by storage in a damp cellar and afflicted with warts. From its exterior the animating soul, that can impart a subtle spirituality even to brawn, could never be divined. But it is good fun searching for the truffle.

The morning cleared, and by noon a gentle sunlight fell upon the glistening trees and dewy grass. We went into the valley by the bank of a broad clear river, and there we found them thick and fast. We ran for our lives, both of us—or for the lives of the truffles—until the bread was all distributed, and the fustian pockets bulged more than ever.

And when the winter sun dropped like a red disc through the level cloud of grey mist that hung along the western sky, and passed quickly out of sight below the horizon, the truffle man, followed by his poodles, trudged home well laden from his bloodless hunt.

SOL PRIDDLE, THE DEALER

12

XIX

SOL PRIDDLE, THE DEALER

I WAS tramping upon a high road some miles from home, when good fortune first made me personally acquainted with Mr. Solomon Priddle, the dealer.

I had often seen him before. He is a very busy man and ubiquitous in our part of the country, being celebrated as the possessor of "the most wonderful trapper ever man sat behind."

On that day he came spinning along a stretch of straight level road, and, when he overtook me, he drew up.

"Will you take a lift?"

The invitation was attractive. I was as free as a knight-errant in search of adventure.

"How far are you going?" I asked.

"Oh! farther than you, I'll bet a guinea. All the way up to Farmer John Buck's."

"I know Farmer John Buck."

"What? You do know John Buck? Then you do know the best heart that ever thumped a waistcoat. The world don't breed that sort now.

Why, I'm just off to his place. Jump up an' come along. Eh? Not expected? That's a fool-tale, I do call it. A friend unlooked-for is so much the greater joy. You can't come a wrong day to John Buck's—unless he's out. An' I'm there by appointment. Jump up, I tell 'ee. Don't bide there a-hamchamming—wasting my time."

The "wonderful trapper," lean from work yet restless to be at it again, tossed his head and struck his hoof upon the road. The yellow wheels of the high, small-bodied gig moved backward and forward as I put my foot upon the step and sprang to the empty seat beside the man, who, as Farmer John Buck himself once told me, had "bought more beef than any man in this country"—meaning, of course, in that neighbourhood.

Mr. Sol Priddle moved over to give me more room and shook the reins. For one second the wing on the off side just scraped upon the wheel. Then we bowled away at a good sling trot.

Mr. Sol Priddle is a man of weight and substance. He is tall enough to be a grenadier, but old and stout enough to turn the scale at twenty stone. He has light hair that turns in a curl beneath the brim of a high white hat, worn at a rakish angle which gives an air of meaning prompt business and nothing else. He bears what is called a "fresh-coloured" complexion, and is rosy from his forehead to his poll. A mutton-chop whisker adorns each cheek.

Mr. Sol Priddle is a dressy man.

He wears a thin Chesterfield overcoat of light

colour, and long enough, when he alights, to reach half way down his brown gaiters. The less fortunate world, which neither buys bullocks nor has them to sell, catches only glimpses of Mr. Sol Priddle as he whisks by on the road to some distant deal. It is universally established that he is a wonderful business man.

His conversation that morning was of fat stock and the degeneracy of the age.

"So you know John Buck. What a man, sir! What a Churchman! What a judge of a fat beast! Dear, dear, dear!"

I gathered from his manner that this lament was over the falling off of sound judgment so characteristic of modern times. Later conversation proved that in the opinion of Mr. Sol Priddle mankind no longer displays that nice discrimination in the estimation of the weight of a fat bullock which distinguished our forefathers. The subject touched him deeply. After a pause he went on, with feeling so deep that it made his voice quaver.

In moments of sober emotion Mr. Sol Priddle is wont to clothe a serious thought or fine sentiment in language of great refinement elegantly pronounced, until in impatience in the last sentence he sometimes forgets himself and relapses into broadest dialect.

"No, no, sir," said he impressively. "The repository and the auction mart have sounded the death-knell, if you take my meaning, of individual judgment. Understand me, I do not intimate to you

that men cannot make beef. Better beef has never been made at any time in the history of this country. Yet here are men to-day, sir, who shall estimate twenty beasts one with another and never come within three score. There are men, sir, with only ability enough to bid after a good judge. 'I can't be wrong to advance a crown after Farmer John Buck.' That's their tale. And such an one do think he've a-bought cheap on his own judgment, when thik beast do come a-bundlen into barton wi' a trumpery little ticket a-stuckt on 'pon the rump o' un."

Mile after mile the "wonderful trapper" went on, never varying his pace unless the hill were steep, never swerving or even pricking up his ears at anything he might pass upon the road.

Before mid-day we reached the homestead, and again the wing scraped upon the wheel as we turned into the open gate in fine style.

Farmer John Buck was busily occupied watching the blacksmith "pomstering up" the old drill against the barley-sowing.

He left his work at once and came to welcome us.

"Here, boy! Take Mr. Solomon Priddle's horse. Come in both o' 'ee—come in."

Talking all the time, he led the way to the open door.

"Walk in. Sit down. Have a thimbleful after your ride."

We took the thimbleful in a whisky-and-soda glass, and then it was, "Come, Solomon Priddle.

You must just wet t'other eye or you won't see they bullocks straight."

Visual equilibrium after many thimblefuls having been at length satisfactorily established, Sol Priddle fetched from his gig a heavy yellow walking-stick of oak, and we strolled with comfortable leisure across the fields.

We did not go direct. We stopped to look at everything as we went—at the young stock in the rough ground with the gorse in the corner, and the colts running on the hill-side. Larks sang overhead. Rooks rose from the spring wheat and perched on the hedgerow trees as we passed. Nothing could be further from our minds than the bullocks, but at last we came round to "eight acres," a small meadow sheltered by high hedgerows and near to the homestead.

Three red oxen and two barreners lying in the sunlight on the fresh spring grass blinked at us as they ruminated in solemn contentment.

Farmer John Buck, slowly approaching, gently tapped the nearest with his stick.

The beast lazily rose.

"There, Solomon Priddle," cried he with enthusiasm, "is as tidy a bullock as you ever clapped eyes on. That is, if I do know anything about it."

We slowly walked round, gazing upon each ox with the silent gravity of owls in the daylight. Now and again Sol Priddle advanced, and with inexcusable familiarity indelicately pinched the fat in strange places.

At last he spoke with quiet decision :

" I've seen better."

The question came short and sharp as a collie's bark :

" Where ? "

Mr. Sol Priddle pondered awhile.

" At Farmer John Buck's," replied he with determination.

Farmer John Buck stroked his shaven chin and let that pass.

" That white-faced steer will turn forty-five score," said he in a casual sort of way.

When Farmer John Buck uses his judgment he holds his head on one side, half closes his eyes, and moves only his lips.

" Say forty-three," snapped Sol Priddle.

Farmer John Buck walked away in disgust from such frivolous conversation.

However, after three steps he came back and changed the subject.

" Stock went high at Hungerton Fair—so they do tell me," said he, with smiling optimism.

" But look at Hinton Monday last."

Noting Solomon's depression, Farmer John Buck drew out his watch. " Bless my heart ! well, we can't deal, I see. Come in and have a bit o' dinner," cried he hastily.

We dined. Mr. Sol Priddle having come by appointment, we had a spare rib of small pork and a big plum-pudding left over from Christmas. Afterwards we sat by a wood fire and smoked, and wetted

the other eye until both felt watery and no man could have declared with certainty which had been moistened last.

Nothing was further from our minds than business, and we might have been there still, only by lucky chance Farmer John Buck became afflicted with a terrible desire to "stretch his lags."

"Would 'ee like to take a little bit of a turn out round again?" suggested he, with an air of offering a very novel and unexpected idea.

Sol Priddle thought there could be no harm in that whatever. So we circumnavigated the farm, and after some tacking brought up in "eight acres" in the most accidental way in the world.

"Well, well. They be tidy beasts, I don't say no otherwise," conceded Sol Priddle. As a matter of form he added, "What do you ask?"

"Hunderd an' twenty to Sol Priddle," cried Farmer John Buck, with sudden generosity, after a long pause.

"I should rob my family at a hundred, John Buck."

A deal being clearly out of the question, we went home to tea. During a three-cornered game of cribbage which followed, we came to a hundred and fifteen and a hundred and five between the deals, and finally sat down to supper with only five pounds between us. But at that business came to an end. Under the mellowing influences of hot grog we talked only of the sad condition of the country.

Sol Priddle at last determined to go. We put the

"wonderful trapper" to the yellow-wheeled gig by the light of a stable lantern and the full moon. We said "Good-night" and started; but by the gate we pulled up.

"John Buck! Is that your last word?" asked Sol Priddle, with feeling.

"Well, a hunderd an' 'leben then."

"Here a minute."

Farmer John Buck ran up to the back of the gig.

"A pound to luck?" whispered Sol Priddle.

I heard their palms slap as they shook hands over the deal. "I'll send to fetch 'em to-morrow," cried Sol Priddle, and we went off in earnest.

"Are they cheap?" I ventured to inquire.

"'Tis a fair price," replied Sol Priddle, "but John Buck is a wonderful judge."

Thus a hard day's work was finished. As we whirled down the village street in the moonlight the clock in the church tower was striking twelve.

LORD HAMMERDOWN

XX

LORD HAMMERDOWN

NEAR to the junction of two railways, but quite in the fields, with a background of tall trees and dark hedgerows, I came upon a sort of temple, enclosed by stout rails of timber, more than breast high and whitewashed to a dazzling purity, that challenged the eye boldly even in a distant landscape.

Rising high in the centre stood a dome or Byzantine cupola of fair size and unbroken symmetry. And from all points of the compass, slowly wending towards it, passed straggling processions of small herds and patient, solitary beasts.

There were calves that ran all ways with ingenious perversity and maiden heifers that frisked like the sportive young girls they were; and, now and then, fat, sacrificial oxen that lowered their horns as if to invite a garland, and often paused to gaze reverently at each other and consider the advisability of lying down.

Their bright red colour enriched the grassy lanes and added a warmth to the pale, dusty roads as they

all converged upon this sacred edifice to be placed within square pens, built one beside the other after the manner of old-fashioned pews in the parish church.

I watched them all go by with lazy drovers sauntering behind. And later came a stream of vehicles, gigs, and two-wheeled traps, then Farmer John Buck, jogging comfortably on his stout cob, and at last Mr. Sol Priddle in haste with his yellow wheels.

"Hullo!" shouted he.

"Where are you going?" cried I. "To church?"

"To John Clack's Repository. Hop up."

In five minutes we were there.

He consigned his horse to the care of our old friend, Jack Never-sweat, who was waiting for him, and we strode into the sacred precincts.

The rails no longer looked so white. The dome was found to shelter a sale-ring, with tiers of seats all round as in a circus. The auction had already begun. Between men and cattle Mr. Sol Priddle sturdily elbowed and pushed his way, and I followed in his broad wake with ease. He stood in the pit close to the cattle, but I went up the steps and found a seat in what we will call the front row of the dress circle.

In the centre stood a man of what is sometimes called "a remarkable presence." By his side the clerk, with book and pencil, who was only the average human being, became reduced to insignificance.

He wore the tightest leathern gaiters and th

baggiest of knickerbockers. His suit was of a handsome broad check-pattern, but the delicate fancy of the man found expression in a blue-spotted waistcoat with brass buttons. As the weather was warm, his hat was a broad Panama, with the brim turned down on one side. But he had pushed it on the back of his head, and his black hair could be seen about his forehead. As becomes an orator, his face was clean-shaven. As will happen sometimes even to a man of forty, his figure inclined to roundness, and his cheeks were fat. But only just to that degree which adds dignity and weight to a man's utterances. He scarcely turned his head, but his eye kept roving around the company. His lips moved as it were automatically and without ceasing. His voice was loud and high, and he kept upon one rasping note without so much as a comma or a pause for breath.

"Lot 16. A Capital Shorthorn Yearling Bull, will you do me the favour, gentlemen, to honour me with a start for this Capital Shorthorn Yearling Bull it is of no consequence to me where you begin gentlemen the only thing requisite is that you should continue to an adequate figure what shall I say gentlemen? Who will volunteer the first bidding for this Capital Shorthorn Yearling Bull? No matter how small gentlemen it will give me a start and many a lowly start in life has led to affluence and the Woolsack what shall I say gentlemen? I repeat what shall I say? There is no necessity to be so backward and coy we are acquainted gentlemen and have met on previous

occasions although Mr. Solomon Priddle appears to avoid my eye and stands there blushing like a young maiden of sixteen for a Capital Shorthorn Yearling Bull what shall I say? Thank you, sir. Ten pounds, ten pounds is bid by the only gentleman present possessed of a tongue. Ten pounds I am bid ten pound five is the next bidding thank you sir ten pound and a crown ten pound and a crown is ten pound ten thank you sir ten pound ten is ten pound fifteen ten pound fifteen I have ten pound fifteen is eleven pound eleven I have eleven is eleven pound and a crown——"

Suddenly the voice stopped. A pained expression upon his broad face, the auctioneer gazed solemnly upon the little crowd. Having regard to the moral aspect of the case, he expostulated with kindness, but with deep feeling.

"Gentlemen this is not right. This cannot be right. This is discreditable to yourselves and humiliating to me—eleven pounds and a crown for a capital Shorthorn—thank you sir eleven ten eleven fifteen——"

Thus encouraged, again he raised his voice. The bidding continued with increasing briskness until at last it lagged and ceased. Disdaining the use of a hammer, he slapped the Capital Shorthorn Bull on the rump and cried:

"Next lot."

The shorthorn bull vanished as by magic. Three heifers came charging into the arena, but a drover or two kept them in place with a tap or so upon the

muzzle, and with the same phrases the oratory recommenced.

"Ten pound is ten pound and a crown ten pound five thank you sir is ten pound ten——"

So it went on for a couple of hours, and by that time the cattle had all changed hands, and some of the herds were slowly journeying away upon the roads again.

"Come along," cried Mr. Sol Priddle.

He debated with the drover about the price for driving some stock he had bought, but very quickly the yellow wheels were spinning along at ten miles an hour.

"Who was the auctioneer?" asked I.

"Lord Hammerdown," laughed he.

"Who?"

"John Clack himself," he explained respectfully. "Folk call him that because—well, because he is a little large in his ways. But la! We must expect that of a great public man!"

"He does it well, I suppose?"

"Capital!" cried Mr. Sol Priddle, with enthusiasm. "Keeps it lively and no waste of time. But that's nothing to-day. Stock gives a man no opening to show himself off. You should hear John Clack put up household furniture. It's a treat! Such language! Such a flow! You should just hear John Clack put up a couple o' Chippendale chairs. My God!"

HEDGING AND DITCHING

XXI

HEDGING AND DITCHING

IN the minds of most of us there is probably a tacit assumption that the toil of the agricultural labourer makes a less demand upon intelligence and skill than the performances of his brisker fellow-worker who spends his days within the four walls of a factory or workshop. Closer observation, however, must convince us that this is not the case.

The short process which the factory hand repeats time after time, at last acquiring a dexterity little less than magical, is frequently so ingenious that it strikes the imagination of the beholder. Yet practice has made it nearly automatical. The simple rural crafts, however, carried on for centuries without change and without secrecy in the open fields, have become so familiar that they fail to attract attention. Yet some of them are full of variety and call for deliberation and the exercise of judgment at every step. The art of hedging and ditching is one of these, as any one may prove who will take the trouble to watch the hedger and ditcher at his work.

When gales and early frosts have swept the last gleam of gold from the maple, and the glory of autumn has departed from the tall hedgerow; when the fall of the leaf has discovered a hundred unsuspected nests, from which the summer broods have flown in safety long ago; when you can see on the under-side of every hazel twig the little catkins that will grow and open into a yellow-tasselled fringe to quiver in the breeze of early spring; when hips are crimson, sloes purple-black under their grey bloom, and the deep red haws have as yet been left untouched by the flocks of newly-arrived field-fares in the meadows; when you can first watch the wren, creeping with the shy quickness of a mouse among the bare sticks along the bank—then the hedger can see to get at his work.

The high, overgrown hedgerow alone demands his attention.

Neglected for years, it may be, it has grown up out of all reason. It has passed beyond the advantage of affording to cattle shelter from wind and rain, and on one side at least now keeps away too much sun.

Moreover, there are gaps where the hounds have come through—"shards," as the hedger calls them—temporarily stopped with bundles of thorns; and thin places where the strength has run to the top and sheep can easily push their way through between the stems below.

And, lastly, the water lies stagnant in the ditch, which no longer is of any service as a drain, under

the tangle of brambles and briars that close it in and sprawl out into the field.

Sometimes the regular labourer on the farm is set to the hedging and ditching, but even then the job is frequently taken "by the rope"—that is, piecework, a rope being a measure of twenty feet. Then the farmer and the hedger meet by the hedgerow and all the aforesaid faults they critically survey.

For a time there is silence—the silence of deep thought.

"Now, then," says the farmer, with sudden briskness, "speak up. What do you want 'to make and lay'?"

"'Tis well wo'th," says the hedger deliberately, "ninepence a rope."

The farmer gives a sniff and turns his back.

"Ought to ha' been done years agone, master. 'Tis most terrible overgrowed. But now—but now—what did you think?"

"I thought sevenpence. There, I'll say eightpence. I never did'n give no more, and I never shan't," cries the farmer with emphatic redundancy of negatives.

Then the hedger, with feigned reluctance, supposes he must.

"Then go on to once," says the farmer.

Each of them had intended eightpence from the first, but this is a little old-world ceremony without which hedging cannot be commenced.

The hedger comes with high leggings and thick leather gloves to save him from the thorns. He brings no tools but a bill-hook, a hatchet when the

wood has grown big, and a spade to dig the ditch.

The first thing to be done is to clear away the rubbish—trumpery he calls it—until the bank is quite clean. Yet this apparently useless trash is not to be wasted. By-and-by all the briars and brambles, upon which wild roses grew and blackberries hung so thick a short time ago, will be tied into small faggots or bundles—*nicky-wads*, they are sometimes called—and hauled to the mow-barton or stackyard, close beside the homestead. They are excellent to light a wood fire, or may be kept for use as staddling to go under next year's ricks and keep them from the damp ground.

This done, the hedger can begin in earnest.

He takes great pride in his work, and like most labourers is very sensitive to the criticisms of his fellow-men. But he is quite willing to talk.

"A hedger," he explains, "can't go on blind-like. He must see his work afore un. He must know what to cut out and what to lay. And he must leave a likely young sapling here and there to grow into a tree. 'Tis no good to cut it off to want it after. No, no. That won't do. Choose out your likely plashers first, and twice so many as you do want, then cut out the rest, and go back and lay what you've a-left standing."

Whilst he speaks his eye is glancing at the hedge-row, and he scans the grey ash that silvers towards the light, the rich brown hazel, the purple rind of the blackthorn, and the maple with its ribbed bark.

"And mind this, you must keep good stuff," he says. "None o' your elder. That's no good. The birds do bring it. Get rid o' all that. That's no good at all—not even to burn."

And he laughs outright at the mere thought of such pithy stuff in a good hedgerow.

"Which bush makes the best hedge?" you ask.

He is dogmatic at once.

"Gie I whitethorn," he says, and looks determined enough to shed his blood for the opinion. "Ay. Gie I whitethorn."

But in "laying" is where he shows his skill.

Wherever the hedge is thick and good he merely cuts it down close to the bank; but where it is thin, and across every "shard," he must lay a "plasher." In the old days an upward stroke was insisted upon for cutting a "plasher," so that the split might be protected from wet after the stick was laid. Now, the hedger cuts the chosen stick half through on the side away from the gap, then he drags it down and secures it in its place. Sometimes he drives a wooden wedge into the split to prevent the "plasher" from springing back, and cuts a crook to peg it horizontal to the bank. Sometimes he binds it down, but what he likes best is to see it neatly wattled between stumps on the other side of the gap.

When this is done he turns to making the ditch.

He digs it out, throws the mud up into the hedge, and with the firmer sods cut into shape he builds up the bank as if it were a wall.

When this is finished the hedge is "made and laid."

People often wonder how a stem cut through nearly to the rind can live. But next spring the sap runs up, the plasher throws out strong shoots and is a good fence for years.

But the hedger has also to "make up the wood," a duty not included in his contract, but paid for extra at the invariable rate of "sixpence a score."

As he goes on he picks out the straight sticks of the hazel, the ash, and the best of the maple, and afterwards sorts them into various lengths and binds them into bundles to be sold for garden-sticking for peas and beans. And he must trim up and lay aside all serviceable poles to be saved for rails, of which so many are wanted on a farm. And some of the straight hazel and willow wands may be in demand to be split and sharpened into thatchers' spars, to hold fast the golden reed upon next year's stacks. All the rest he must bind up into faggots to find their way to the baker's oven or the homestead hearth; though the thorns he may often lay in the ditch to keep cattle from getting in and trampling down the new-made bank.

And every evening towards dusk the hedger makes up a faggot for himself.

He is entitled to the dead wood, and he does not mean to want for firing, you may be sure. He chooses a good stout pole that will afterwards cut into a log or two, on which to carry his faggot over his shoulder. Thus with his "nitch" on his back, when the last gleam of day is fading in the west, and a flock of linnets is singing a winter chorus from the

head of an old hedgerow elm, he plods homeward to the village in the combe.

It is a custom as old as the hills that the hedger may carry home a "nitch" of firing for his own use.

"I hope you've left a bit," jokes the farmer, if they meet at dusk in the village street.

They laugh "Good-night!" and pass on, one to the homestead and the other to the cottage.

THRESHING

XXII

THRESHING

SHE rumbles heavily down the village street, making the floors and windows of the new jerry-built cottages tremble and shake. The handsome stone house at the corner (once the homestead of a substantial yeoman, but now cut up into poor tenements), with walls three feet thick and a moss-sodden roof of ancient thatch, upon which groundsel and some tall stalks of wild oats are growing, watches her pass by unmoved. Is the old place too experienced and too wise any longer to vibrate with emotion? Or do those mullioned windows, with a board bearing the legend "Milk House" under one of them, look down with cold contempt upon this oily, panting engine with a shackling threshing-machine hitched on to her tail? This new-fangled thing of less than a century, which drove the merry thumping of the flail from the barn's floor, and has been the enemy of good thatch—which swallows stacks of straight, unbroken wheaten reed to cast forth a heap of crumpled straw, unfit to set upon the head of any self-respecting dwelling-house! But it

may be that this dignified attitude marks moral disapproval. For that engine is a most inveterate smoker, and, worse than that, avails herself of every opportunity to stop for a drink. She will stop now at the corner where the silvery mill stream takes a sudden bend, and for a short distance prattles along upon its way in company with the high road. There she will extend a long proboscis, hitherto concealed, drop it where the running brook pours foaming and bubbling into its gravel pool to sparkle in the sunlight brighter than the finest vintages of Epernay and Rheims—and drink.

If this were all no reasonable being need say a word. But at the foot of the hill the dissolute huzzy will stop again and absolutely beg for liquor. A grimy underling (or it may be the head chauffeur himself if the farm is good for cider) will run up to the house and ask permission to fill up. Then that shameless creature will set her hose, knee-deep, into the barton pond where pigs wallow and ducks for ever stir up the mud—and drink. Still, if you determine to engage her, I must say she is willing and industrious, and a good girl at her work. A little closer attention to personal cleanliness might perhaps be for the best. But, between ourselves, though I would not for the world have it repeated, it is hopeless to try to reclaim a confirmed dipsomaniac like that.

After the frosts have come to stay, when the last yellow leaves are drifting as softly as snowflakes from the woods and hedgerow trees, and the grey

haze of Indian summer is melting into the colder mist of winter, from the hill-top that overlooks the broad valley you may see the country-side dotted with jets of puffing steam. The first thought is of a railway across the plain, blessed with an inconceivable wealth of traffic or running a superfluity of excursion trains. Closer observation proves each white rising cloud, though it may drift upon the breeze, to be otherwise stationary. Sometimes it is at the homestead, sometimes beside the stacks in the stubble-field, but in any case it marks the threshing-machine at work. The modern business spirit has found its way even into the arable ground. Agriculture has caught on to the idea of quick returns. A hum, louder and more musical than that of the mill-wheel, fills the autumn air. Here to-day, there to-morrow, the thresher passes from wheat-stack to barlow-mow, like some gigantic honey-seeking working-bee sent out from the distant hive of commerce. It is no good to hold corn for a famine price now; the days of dearth are gone. Thresh at once and turn into money. That is the wisest plan. So a walk across the stubble-field is often the way to where the engine is at work. In the distance the plough is slowly plodding to and fro, with rooks circling overhead and wagtails running on the newly-turned furrow. The stubble is no longer crisp, as it was in September, and your steps are almost noiseless. Yet scarcely do you set foot upon it before a covey of partridges rises at the far end of the ground and goes skimming over the

hedge. The birds have learnt not to fear the plough. They did not pay great heed to the threshing away in the corner; but at the distant clink of hobnail upon flint the whole lot of them raised their heads, ran a yard or so, and then took wing at once. Presently a flock of larks rises up in front, to swerve and settle again upon one side of your track. The scattered corn of harvest has been eaten some time ago, but still there are worms and insects, to say nothing of the millions of seeds that weeds have thrown broadcast everywhere. Then a party of linnets gets up with undulating flight; then a hare, that sat close until your foot was almost upon her. And so you come to the stacks on the stubble.

Here everything is haste and business—the pitching in of sheaves, the carrying away of straw, the raking back of the husks—"dowst" they call it in the West Country, for there chopped fodder only is called chaff. The whirring of the fly-wheel never ceases, and the grain flows in tiny cascades into the open mouths of a row of sacks. The whole picture, although bright in the autumn sun, is softened in a cloud of dust—real, choking dust. And old Abe, a labourer who has worked all his life upon the farm, is all the while going to and fro hauling water for the engine from the nearest pit.

Now and again between whiles you may find politics on the engine, and the engineer is apt to chaff old Abe. The engineer has been about a bit. He has seen different sorts of men, read papers, and heard speeches. It may be he is not better

informed than the rest, but he is certainly more cocksure. In a life of nearly fourscore years Abe has scarcely been out of the village except to a fair or a market in the nearest town. He has seen many changes in his time, and in youth beat out many a sheaf with his "drashle" on the barn's floor. He is slow to accept new ideas, and his mental attitude all through life has been one of speechless wonder. Two firm convictions Abe has held in spite of all. The land did ought to be kept up. We don't want so much caddle wi' all they foreigners.

"Come on, Abe, you slack-twisted old slug, you." They all make a butt of the old man, but the chaff is quite good-humoured. "Come on, you old Methusalum—you old Tory, you. You do want bread a shillen a loaf, you do know you do."

"Ah! I've a-heard a many tales in my time. An' nothen no sense—both zides. On'y catch-penny cries to catch a vote or two. I do think everything nowadays do want to be real proper a-drashed out."

But at last the sheaves come slower, for the pitchers have cast the goodly stack by morsels into the thresher, and are almost down upon the staddling—that foundation of thorns and hedge-row rubbish that raises the stack from the damp ground. A rat jumps out. The terrier that follows the engine darts out and has him in a trice. Another, but the old sheepdog gets that. Then the dusty men begin to draw round, every one with a stick in his hand. The last sheaf is gone, and the engine ceases

to pant. The pitchers are at leisure, and so the staddling is quietly lifted a faggot at a time. But the frightened rats cannot stand that movement of the shelter over their heads. Old and young, big and little, that have harboured under the stack, or were bred there if it be an old one, run out upon all sides. Then follow a great thumping of sticks, and rapid dashes of the terrier, who never shakes a rat twice, and a "Here, Boxer, Boxer," to hurry the sheepdog, who never shakes one less than twenty times. When all the faggots are moved the dogs still scent rats hidden in their burrows under the ground; but these are soon dug up and killed. Solemnly the rats are laid out in a row and counted, and so the ceremony ends.

"Come along, my lads. Waste no time."

"Come, Abe. Pick up your game. You'll want em wi' bread a shillen a loaf."

"Don't you talk to I," says Abe. "I've a-heard thik tale avore. What I do zay is, there idden no wisdom in too many thoughtless words. Do want to be all a-drashed out proper like—I do call. Zo do."

BIRD-CHARMING

XXIII

BIRD-CHARMING

ONE winter night we were sitting, John Spracklin and I, before a blazing fire in "the house," as the great farm kitchen is usually called in remote country places.

Like so many of the forms and quaint phrases that linger in dialect, this use of the word possesses an unsuspected significance.

In the evolution of the dwelling-house, from the simple enclosure surrounding the primitive hearth to the complex structure of a modern habitation, all other apartments have been additions to fulfil the requirements of an advancing civilisation. The "chimmer," the upper room above the ground floor, came later than "the house." The parlour, a place for familiar conversation, is a modern refinement, even now in remote farmhouses kept religiously shut up, except upon occasions of social importance. Everything has grown upon and around this main room, the dwelling-room, which once absolutely was and still in name remains "the house."

A jolly place when there is frost in the air is "the

house," with its great open hearth and pile of blazing logs, which the old iron brass-headed dogs only hold up, but do not seek to restrain. And on that night the wood piled high was roaring its merriest in the broad chimney. Dancing firelight played upon the stone floor, and the heavy oaken beam across the ceiling, from which hung good store of smoked hams and bundles of dried herbs. It made the lamp upon the table dim. But it lit up the hearty countenance of John Spracklin, and glistened upon his bald crown as he leaned forward to talk.

We had been friends for many a year.

He was merry that night. We had tramped since morning over hill and moor, and met with sport. The keen air of the uplands had reddened his shaven cheek. His round face rippled with smiles, and the fringe of silver hair above his ears appeared to have a crisper curl than ever. We were so happy with our cup and pipes that we had never a thought of moving from that fire until it was time to roost.

But John Spracklin has lived through many social changes, and is full to the lips with old-world lore.

There is nothing he loves so much to talk about as the almost-forgotten customs and pastimes of his youth, and if he should live to fourscore he will still be a boy.

That evening the conversation had been of bird-catching and its many arts and devices. Of bird-lime, made by boiling holly-rind, smeared on the outside twigs of bushes, with a stuffed owl perched in the middle to tempt the small birds to flock

around and tease the half-blind wanderer into the daylight; of tole-calls made of sycamore bark, and of vocal imitations so artistic that they were not to be resisted; of limed straw-motes laid down for fieldfares to walk upon, which would stick first to a claw, then to a wing, and finally wear the poor victim out with his agitated struggles to get free.

At the recollection of each of these quaint ingenuities John Spracklin threw back his head and laughed.

"But look here!" cried he. "Did 'ee ever hear o' charmen birds of a dark night when they be 'pon the boughs to roost?"

I shook my head.

"'Tes the easiest thing in life, zo 'tes. All you do want is a night as black as pitch, a lantern an' a bell. Then you can pick 'em off like apples off a 'spalier tree. They be that pleased wi' the music, an' dazed wi' the light, they'll let a man put his han' 'pon 'em wi'out so much as a flutter. But you can't do it secret, you know. You must ring the bell all the time. Ting-a-ting, ting-a-ting, for all the world to hear. Never let thik little clapper stop. La, when I was a boy I've a-catched blackbirds an' thrushes of a night—a string o' em—dozens. But 'tes all forgotten an' passed away now. 'Twould make folks in this parish wonder to hear a bell go on by the hour in the still o' night. I'll warr'nt 'twould."

He stopped and sat chuckling as he imagined the surprise of the neighbours.

"In what sort of places did you catch them?" I asked him.

"In any thick bush or in a hedgerow. Or in a nice laurel shrubbery, now, where the leaves do gi'e a lewth against the wind. I'd bet a guinea anybeddy could take a pocketful this very night in the old yew hedges along the path between the bit o' lawn an' the kitchen garden."

"But what sort of bell did you use?"

"Oh, any bell short o' one out o' church tower," laughed he. "I used to have a little dinner-bell an' a stable lantern."

"I suppose," suggested I thoughtfully—"I suppose you have not got that little dinner-bell now?"

"What?" cried the old boy, jumping up from his chair. "Would you like to go an' try your han' at it? So should I, too; be hanged if I shouldn't. But be dashed if I do think there is a bell. There be a plenty o' lanterns, for what could be better 'an a bicycle lamp? But 'tes not one mossel-bit o' good wi'out a bell. No, you can't catch 'em wi'out a bell."

He sat down depressed and gazed into the fire. He was really disappointed, even to postpone until to-morrow this reminiscence of his boyhood. For a short time he did not speak; but presently he got up again, and I caught sight of that familiar, humorous twinkle in his eye which I have found to mark the inception of a practical joke.

"Come along," said he. "Let us just see what can be done."

We did not go into the garden. It was a dark night, and the bicycle lamp served to show us the way into the village street.

Nobody was moving, the alehouse was closed, and only here and there did a light shine in some upstairs cottage window.

"How are you going to manage it?"

But to my questions he would make no reply, and we walked on in silence until we reached the village shop. It was closed and shuttered. The house was as still as a midnight sleep.

John Spracklin rapped sharply upon the door.

The window above our heads partly opened, and a voice cried out in alarm:

"Who is there? Is anything the matter? What do you want?"

"'Tes I, John Spracklin. 'Tes troublen you, Miss Brooke, I do know. But could you be so kind as to oblige me wi' a pint o' linseed oil?" he begged, in a voice full of anxiety.

"La! Mr. Spracklin, to be sure I can, an' no trouble at all. I'll jus' come down. What? Is some o' your stock a-tookt bad?"

"Well, well. I want it by me for a precaution," explained John Spracklin.

"Dear, dear! There, I'll jus' strike a light—an' slip on my skirt—an' then wi' my shawl over my shoulders——"

The good soul who kept the shop thus robed herself in haste and came down solicitous to oblige. She even found a bottle for the oil and went into

her parlour to search for last week's newspaper to wrap it in.

John Spracklin was profuse in gratitude.

"'Tis giving you a lot o' trouble, I'm sure, but there——"

"Not at all, Mr. Spracklin. La! If a body couldn' jus' run down to oblige a neighbour—there—that would be somethen—dear I!"

She shivered as she re-locked the door behind us.

"I've a-bagged the bell, that do gi'e warnen of a customer, from the back of the old lady's half-hatch," whispered John Spracklin, covering his mouth with his hand to restrain his mirth and keep it inaudible.

So we were provided.

We went into a field, and walked along an old hedgerow.

The autumn leaf was gone, all but here and there a spot of bright yellow when the light flashed upon a hazel-bush. But the privet was still green, and its clusters of shining berries glistened in the flash of the lantern.

I rang that shop-bell, poised on its semicircular spring, more persistently than the most industrious muffin-man who ever wandered down a street; and now and again, perched on the limb of some thorn or maple, John Spracklin found a bird.

Then we stood and looked at it.

Sometimes the light fell on the yellow-spotted breast of a song-thrush, and then perhaps on the rusty brown of a hen blackbird. But none

attempted to get away so long as the bell rang. The bird had the appearance of being alert, yet allowed itself to be quite easily taken by the hand. Yet when the bell was silent, not a single one would stay. Blackbirds, thrushes, robins, chaffinches, hedge-sparrows, and greenfinches, we found them all, and frequently they were not far apart. We took some of each, looked at them, and let them fly into the night. What sort of roosting-place they could select for themselves in the darkness I cannot tell, but most likely they remained upon the ground until morning.

We went into a wood to explore an old laurel shrubbery, underneath the foliage of which we could get about and look up amongst the branches. On the way we crossed an open place where the copse had been cut, and the more we stumbled over the stumps the louder the old boy laughed.

Starlings had taken the laurels for a roosting-place. Thousands of them must have been there, for they were packed close together on every possible bough; and where there was a good level stick they covered it in an even row, like seamen on an old sailing-ship when the yards were manned.

We could have taken a sackful if it had been any good to do so; for those upon which the light fell remained still and listened to the bell. Others out of sight in the darkness we could hear taking alarm and fluttering away.

It was clear that the bell alone did not fascinate them.

You must have both bell and candle if you would work this spell upon roosting birds.

"So that's the old sport o' bird-charmen," exclaimed John Spracklin. "And now let's get back to house an' have another pipe by the fire. The wind, I seem, is most terr'ble nippy."

THE OLDEST INHABITANT

XXIV

THE OLDEST INHABITANT

A STRANGE thing happened to a village a few miles from us called Little Abington.

For centuries it lay almost unnoticed in the quiet vale below the moor. Far away from the outside world, it lived self-contained and contented. The church, the inn, the forge with the wheelwright's yard close by and the little shop supplied all its various wants. And though the well-to-do might ride away of a Tuesday and a Friday to the nearest markets and return merry from the wilder dissipations of a country town, the masses (that is to say, the adult menfolk of a population of 203) had never wandered over the hill or got drunk on any fiercer beverage than their own good homely cider.

At last the wonder came.

A novelist of distinction discovered Little Abington. He did not find it in its pleasant sheltered combe. As a matter of fact, he went searching for a name—well, a name with an easy, simple sound, pleasant to the ear, but not significant—

that is to say, not a mere label—but a name, well, a name——

He found it under A.—Abington (Little), in the Gazetteer.

This is, perhaps, not remarkable. The wonder came some years later, when the cobbler of Little Abington discovered the celebrated novelist. But the cobbler of Little Abington was always a terrible man for print. He read the local paper every week. Moreover, he possessed an odd volume of *Sharpe's Magazine*, "The Pilgrim's Progress," and an old book entitled "The Travels of Cyrus." He read his library through each year within the twelvemonth, and spent the odd time in thought.

Thus the cobbler already possessed literary experience when he fell across "The Chronicles of Little Abington." He found everything there and all correct. The church, the inn, the forge and wheelwright's yard were "the very moral o' what they really an' truly be." And so were the folks, too. The cobbler recognised them all in spite of errors—for there were one or two little things wrong. To be sure the writer did not give anybody his right name. And the sexton of Little Abington was no cripple. Though the sexton before the last did once stump about for up a month with a "game-lag," that was only through falling over a gravestone when hunting Peter Toop's fowls out of the churchyard. No; the sexton of that day was a "cross-eyed man," with the advantage of being "able to squint down both aisles to once"; but his legs were as straight as

the church pillars. Still, to be sure, anybody could see how that mistake was brought about.

There was talk in the village after the cobbler's discovery, and the news spread that Little Abington had been put in a book.

The villagers could remember "a bunchy little feller wi' gold sparticles" and "a head so bald as a bladder o' lard," who stayed about the place "a goodish time." He did "for certain sure." The theory was accepted in the neighbourhood and supported in the county paper. Later on it hardened into ascertained fact. To-day the church, the inn, the forge with the wheelwright's yard may be bought on picture post-cards, and pilgrims come to Little Abington even from across the seas.

These things happened when Cobbler Trip was young. Now he is Mr. Trip and the oldest inhabitant of Little Abington, for his name has been mentioned in a topographical volume of the district, and since then he shows the strangers round.

"The oldest inhabitant of Little Abington," says this authority, "is Cobbler Trip, and he lives in a whitewashed cottage half covered with roses. The veteran of Little Abington is of medium stature, but bent with age. His scanty locks are long and silvery, but he wears a grizzly beard clipped short. Although nearly fourscore years of age, his grey eye is still clear and alert. He takes off and waves, as it were for the punctuation of his conversation, the tortoise-shell spectacles which he finds necessary only when reading or at work. He well remembers the visit

of the novelist to Little Abington, and is proud to have tapped and heeled a pair of shoes worn sadly in need of repair by constant walking. It was interesting to learn that the great romancer wore round holes in the very centre of his soles, a sure sign of distinction and fortune. Mr. Trip accompanied me around the village, pointed out the garden gate where Aurora first met Thomas, and the chink in the shutter through which Uncle Jeremy witnessed the theft of the family Bible from the three-cornered cupboard. The precipice from which Thomas fell, must, however, be an invention. There is no deep quarry within several miles of Little Abington, as serviceable stone is not to be found in the neighbourhood."

Conscious of scholarship, and raised upon this pinnacle of fame, little wonder if Cobbler Trip has become a proud man. To-day he does little tapping and heeling. From early spring to the end of October visitors pour into Little Abington on foot, on bicycles, and on motor-cars. Most of them inquire for Mr. Trip. But his position as cicerone has become so well established that a village urchin asked to point out the home of Aurora would merely point to the rose-covered cottage and say, "Cobbler Trip, he do know most about that."

When I stayed in Little Abington this summer he was out to meet me in the garden before I had time to rap upon the cottage door. He is a thin, spare man in a "kittle-smock," with a shrewd countenance and legs the shape of a horse-collar.

"I read about you in a book, Mr. Trip," said I gaily.

"Ay, to be sure that wur I."

He stopped and scanned me with attention. Then his voice dropped into a mysterious confidential whisper. He appeared to fear lest the sparrows on his thatch should overhear his question.

"Baint you a author o' books yourzelf? Because, looky zee, if you be you do know. Don't he owe I zumthen vor what I told un to write down? I did dictate to un, an' he did zuck his pencil an' then put it all down in a little book. They do tell I down to 'The Acorn' that a book is wo'th dree thousand poun'. I ciphered it out one aivlen quiet like, an' I do call he do owe I ten poun'. I tell 'ee, there's millions have a-read thik book. Why, there's never a Easter Monday or a August Bank Holiday but what dree or vower, or may be up vive or zix, do come to Little Abington, an' they've all a-read what I told he to put in thik book. Thik feller do owe I money in good right. I do know he do."

I hastened to explain that the market value of Mr. Trip's contribution was not so high, and that perhaps a shilling, or two at the most——

The old man's face brightened at once.

At mention of the word shilling he appeared to see a probability of coming to business at once.

"Hearky here. Let that pass. 'Twur but a page" —he made the word rhyme to badge—"I do know. But mind me, if I could vall across zome other author chap, zome gennelman, I do mean, that did want to

write another book about Little Abington an' about I, I could tell he a plenty vor two. Stop a minute. Hearky to this now. Here's a little bit:

"Years agone there wur a cobbler lived to Abington, a most terr'ble graspen nip-cheese feller. He werden content wi' zix wicked days, but mus' needs work o' Zunday too. He wur a-zot busy to work a zummer Zunday an' the bells a-chimen vor church most beaudiful, when a gennelman in black walked into house.

"'Could 'ee make me a pair o' stout boots?' he axed.

"'I could zo,' the cobbler made reply.

"'Wi' good thick soles but no hobs.'

"'Jus' zo—but waterproof, I spwose,' said the cobbler.

"''Tes no matter vor that,' zed the foreigner, very civil like.

"'Then let's measure your voot,' zed the cobbler, an' dropped 'pon one knee like to pull off the customer's shoe. But Lauk-a-massy! The wold gennelman mus' ha' had his tail a-winded roun' the middle o' un, or hid away in the bag o' his burches like; but no hose 'pon earth could hide the shape o' thik cloven voot.

"'What'll 'em come to?' zes the devil.

"'Dree crowns,' zes the cobbler, all to a trem'le like.

"'Then bring 'em to Abington burge this day wick, ten at night, an' you shall ha' the money.' An' the devil walked out zo quiet an' well behaved as you or I.

"Well, the cobbler wur to sich a flowsterment, he couldn't think nor speak. He wur a-feared to make 'em, an' eet he wur a-feared to break word or time. Zo he went an' told passon an' axed what he had better to do.

"'You mus' make 'em,' zaid passon. 'Vor the wold gennelman 'ull never lef 'ee in peace till you do. But don't 'ee touch o' the money, if you do fear hell-vire. I'll tell 'ee what. Cut a hole in the crown o' your hat, an' hold un out for the wold gennelman to drop the crowns into. But zee you do hold un over the zide o' the burge zo as the money mid drop into river.'

"Zo the cobbler he done it, an' zo zoon as the crowns vell splash 'pon the water there comed a clap o' thunder like out of a clear sky, an' the devil wur a-snatched up in a ball o' vire, boots and all. An' that's how the cobbler o' Abington lost by a-worken 'pon a Zunday. Now idden that a little bit?"

I hastened to explain that my work did not concern itself with the ancient mythology of Abington, but with people of to-day.

I moved towards the gate.

He went nimbly upon his semicircular legs and stood in front of me.

"Stop a minute. I'll tell 'ee another little bit. John Higgins over here to Littlecrop Farm, he's a-liven an' well now. Years agone he wur a-walken home close 'pon midnight vrom a little randy up to neighbour Toop's, an' he zeed afore un two little pixies a-stood a-grinnen one 'pon each zide of the road. Zo he sort o' keeped a eye 'pon 'em like to zee what they

mid do. An' they runned out an' catched un hold by the ankle, a lag apiece, an' John he valled down 'pon the face o' un zo vlat's a pancake. He wur a-feared to move like. He bid still till daylight, an' then he got up all to a mizmaze like. But he couldn't zee nothen at all o' no pixies. Zo so sprack as he could he walked off home. Now idden that a little bit?"

I assured Cobbler Trip that it was impossible to record true stories of living people without fear of incurring damages for libel. I stepped past him towards the high road.

"Stop a minute," cried he, and ran and hooked the tortoise-shell spectacles between my two central waistcoat buttons. "Here's another little bit."

"But, my dear Mr. Trip, it is not my habit to collaborate, and I shall never do so."

I have never done so—until to-day.

ANOTHER MILLER'S DAUGHTER

XXV

ANOTHER MILLER'S DAUGHTER

THE village called him a strange and cantankerous man; yet he was kind enough to me.

"Fish? To be sure you mid," had been his reply to my request. "But when you do come along, don't you pass by the mill, mind. If you do you shan't never come no more. You needn't to knock to door. Walk in. My daughter'll put 'ee out a crust o' bread an' cheese an' welcome."

It was summer, but the stream was running merrily after rain, and the distant mill-wheel kept humming like a swarm of bees. Between the trees above the winding brook peered the brown ridge and little red-brick chimney of the old grist mill, breathing forth a film of blue smoke that melted into a grey sky. Smaller mill surely never was built, standing with the dwelling under one low roof of thatch. Where the back-stream joins the mill-course is a broad, gravelly ford, and near the wheel a narrow wooden footbridge to a small island planted around with pollard willows. On that afternoon the front door

of the house was open. But Miller Toop, aware of the approach of a stranger, stood looking out of the half-hatch—that smaller door which, amongst other uses, is so convenient to lean upon.

He was years past middle age, clean-shaven, and with hair long and grey. Like his old mill, he had seen the best of his days, but was serviceable yet for more than he could get to do. He lifted the latch and came out to welcome me with hospitable warmth.

"Well done! You've soon a-found your way down."

"But perhaps you are busy?"

"Busy!" cried he, with a shake of the head. "There's no such luck theäs days."

He was for leading the way into the house, but as he turned to speak, he saw my eyes dwell longingly upon the mill.

"'Tes a ramshackle old place," he laughed, and pushed the half-hatch wide open for me to go in.

Upon the wall in full light of the doorway an ancient table of customary tolls was still hanging. The paint was worn and the letters were often illegible, yet here and there a line might still be read:

Of every bushel of wheat, one quart.
Of every bushel of meslin, one quart.
Of every bushel of malt, one pint.

We were back into the days of good housewifery, when the loaf was baked and the ale was brewed at home. The meslin was an economy. An equal quantity of rye being ground together with wheat

served for an intermediate quality between the white and the black.

"Ah! 'Tis all gone out," sighed the miller. "There's no gristing nowadays. We can't grind flour. We can't make nothing here but pig's-meat now."

"Pig's-meat?"

"Well, barley-meal," laughed he.

But the old toll-board called up reminiscences of old-world rural life and set him talking of the days when he was young.

"Ay, everything is changed. When I wur a boy, why the water wur held to be gold. Now for want o' work 'tis half the time running to waste through the open hatch. I wur a miller young. I shall never forget if I do live to fourscore. 'Twur summer-time, much later in the year than this, an' half a drought, an' father had a-went away. An' then comed a thunder-storm, wi' first big drops an' then a sheet o' rain, an' pretty soon a head o' water in the pond. I wur but lebem years o' age, but I can see it now clearer 'an yesterday. The water, dark under the cloud, just on the flow over the brim o' the weir. An' there wur two moor-hens too by the rushes up there by the bend below the alder-bush.

"I wur brought up one boy alone. I wur the child o' theäs wold mill. He wur vather, mother, sister, an' brother to me—ay, an' playmate too. I had a-heard so much about the water, an' of a sudden it struck into my boy-head like to grind a sack to save waste an' help my vather.

"I had the sense to gie the screw a turn an' raise

the stone, an' I cast my eye to see that there were corn a-plenty in the hopper. An' then I raised the hatch an' let the water on. I wur so deep in earnest I had no fear, an' I runned an' watched an' brought the stone down closer like to its proper feed. An' then the wold wheel, he went on, easy like at the first, an' then faster an' spracker till he wur a-singing his best.

"'God A'mighty! what hast a-bin about, bwoy?'

"There wur my vather wi' eyes like a cod-fish an' cheeks so red as a turkey-cock. He gi'ed me jus' one look. But he wur too frightened like to so much as catch me a clout. He runned to the spout to test the flour atween finger and thumb. He runned up; he runned down; he runned out to hatch. I stood there all to a trem'le, whilst he did run to an' vro. He wur a staid heavy man, an' did blowy an' panky like a pair o' bellows. But he comed back wi' his face a-beaming like a zun-vlower vull-blowed. 'Hang thee, Miller Toop the younger, I couldn' a-done better my own zelf,' cried he. An' I've a-bin Miller Toop ever since. Farewell childhood, that wur. For he put me to work the very next day."

He paused. And, although he laughed, his head nodded in serious recollection of a boyhood lived in those good old days.

"An' there wur work then. The humblest cottage did bring a bit o' corn. For little sooner wur the last load a-hauled than all the women-folk and maidens, from the wold grammer to the youngest cheel, did traipse in 'pon the crackling stubble to pick up every

mote an' ear. Pigs do run now where the leasers—gleaners, maybe, you do call 'em—did step an' stoop. Lawk! A-body now would never learn there have a-bin leasers if twerden for the Book o' Ruth."

We went out of doors once more and loitered beside a hatch to watch the water spinning away from the wheel. A grindstone stood near to the wall. Some duck were sporting and dipping in a shallow below the mill-tail.

"There's little to do here now," said he. "I do often sit down for an hour an' smoke a pipe, an' watch the water run—an' ponder. I do allow the wold mill 'll last just so long as myzelf. Then while I do go to bare bones he'll tumble to a heap of loose stones. But here I've a-lived, an' here I do mean to die. I shall buy un a bit o' barley to keep the life in his creaking old joints, so long as he do earn me a crust. I do owe un that. 'Pon my life, I do. But please to step into house."

He led me into the quaintest parlour I have ever seen, small and low, with a dark open beam across the ceiling. The embers of a wood fire lay on the hearth. All the old-world furniture was shining clean and the stone floor was festooned around with white freestone.

"Nance!"

"What is it now?" replied a shrill voice from the kitchen.

"Just put out a bit o' bread an' cheese. An' draw a cup o' cider. Will 'ee now?"

"In a minute."

There was no sweetness, no promise of romance in the abrupt replies of the miller's daughter.

After a brief delay she came, bringing a strangely shapen loaf of her own baking and a wedge of cheese. She laid the cloth and set the table in haste. The knives were buck-horn handled, the plates of blue willow-pattern, and the cider cup was ornamented with sheaves and verses and a legend, "God speed the plough." She was tall, gaunt, and nearly forty years of age. Her fair hair, brushed tightly back from a broad forehead, was knotted at the back of her head into a knob half the size of a man's fist. A high blue apron almost covered her faded brown woollen frock. I could find no grace, no romance or feminine charm, in this miller's daughter. Perhaps these departed with the gristings.

The miller gave me a secret wink.

"Here's a gentleman, Nancy, my maid, half a-minded to take the wold mill."

She just glanced at me.

"He'd better to burn un," she said without a smile.

I felt intuitively that life was full of bickering for the two people in this little mill.

I sat with the miller until dark, and for the most part he talked and I listened. Doubtless it was a pleasure to him to repeat aloud his solitary meditations by the hatch. He did not wait for comment or answer, but smoked a long clay pipe, and puffed off wisdom between the whiffs.

"Do 'ee think the world is better now, master? Because I don't. There's whiter bread—but not so

wholesome. There's finer clothes—but they don't wear so long. There's more newspapers, an' more loud talk, an' more lunatics—or so they do tell I. There's better housen—an' eet I do read o' slums in towns packed wi' folk so thick as calves in a pen. If there's better victuals—there's no better appetites. There's no better feeling atween neighbours. There idden no more happiness. An' there idden no gristing.

"As to poverty, master, by all accounts they have but shifted it from country to town.

"Do 'ee think now that mankind in the working an' turmoil o' life must shed so much poverty? Zame as a grist o' wheat, take one wi' another, must throw so much bran?

"Do 'ee think, master, that if there was true wisdom there could be want?"

Miller Toop thoughtfully shook his head.

"I'm dalled if I do know," he said, and scratched his shaggy eyebrow with the red-tipped stem of his pipe.

I felt sorry for Miller Toop, his brain being so plentifully provided with disturbing thoughts. His daughter could have no sympathetic understanding of his mind, for certain. He was glad to talk with a stranger, and would not hear of my going until quite late.

The full moon had just risen when he came out to set me on my way. It shone on the side of the mill and silvered the running water and the straight wands of the pollard willow trees.

"'Tis a short cut by the footbridge," said he at the door.

Beyond the island formed by the back-stream stands a small wicket-gate, sheltered and darkened by overhanging trees. A man and woman were leaning against it. His arm was around her waist and her head upon his shoulder, but at my step they quickly stood apart, and he opened the gate for me to pass.

I recognised the miller's daughter, and bade her "Good-night."

"Good-night," said she as the gate closed behind me, but there was no cordiality in the wish.

Great heavens! How these poets idealise! Until to-day the mere words "the miller's daughter" were almost a poem.

My neighbour, Mrs. Simon Gallingham, as you will understand when you know her better, is a shrewd woman, who tells me many things.

She was in her garden the next morning picking the first of the kidney beans.

"I had a talk to Miller Toop yesterday."

"Silly old fool!" said she.

"On the contrary. He appears to be a very thoughtful old man."

"Thoughtful!" cried she with impatience. "There's a well-to-do smith has courted Nancy years and years. Miller wouldn't hear of it then. Now Nance won't marry to leave him alone. They offered him a home, but the pig-headed donkey will stay at the mill."

I have replaced Nance Toop amongst the maids of poetry.

CIDER-MAKING

XXVI

CIDER-MAKING

THERE is an old West Country song of a prodigious number of verses covering a variety of topics, but always ending with the same refrain. The repetition is as irrelevant as the constant reiteration of the "golden rule" with which Confucius interspersed his writings, and insists upon a truth equally unassailable. That truth is dear to the rustic mind in all places where the apple blooms :—

"Zo a drop o' good cider won't do us no harm."

From time immemorial the stalwart sons of this land of orchards have lived up to their belief. They have put it to the severest proof of daily experience, and it has nobly stood the test. The ever-varying occupations of open-air life, like the verses of the old song, have been interspersed with practical illustrations of this chorus.

From the turning of the first autumn furrow in

readiness for winter wheat on to the creaking of the last load of golden sheaves, there has always been a "vlagon" hidden among the cool grasses of the ditch, or a little oaken "virkin" hung on the collar of one of the horses as the team goes to the field, or an "owl" out of sight and sheltered from the sun under the leafy hedgerow.

An "owl" was an earthenware vessel of primitive shape, having two little ridges like epaulets upon its shoulders, with holes through which to thread a leathern thong—a good stout bootlace might sometimes serve the turn—whereby it might be hung up or carried.

It may be this was the origin of the saying "as drunk as an owl," for the blinking "bird of wisdom" can surely never have been addicted to any serious inebriation. But, alas! the "owl" is now a thing of the past.

"The last owl I ever had," lamented an old carter as, one day at noon, he sat on the hedgerow bank and sliced a large onion with his pocket-knife, whilst the plough rested at the end of a furrow, "got broke up twenty year agone. And he were a odd-sized owl, for he did hold vive quart."

His regret was pathetic.

One can think only with tenderness of an ancient friend of such unobtrusive modesty that it was capable of looking like a gallon while containing five quarts.

Then the carter shook his head and drank out of a fraudulent glass bottle with a small mountain con-

cealed at the base. It made only a false pretence to hold one quart.

"Zo a drop o' good cider won't do us no harm."

But this pleasant beverage, of which the wholesomeness has always been recognised, has of late years been the subject of careful scientific investigation, with the result that there has been a new departure in the making of cider. The change so apparent in other matters has extended also to this. A quarter of a century ago in every house beyond the towns home-baked bread and home-brewed ale were to be found. Now ovens and brewing plants are gone, and the baker's cart and brewer's dray penetrate to the most remote farm. True, the old cider mills and presses are still at work at most of the homesteads, but factories have sprung up provided with every modern appliance, and many farmers find it more convenient to sell their apples than to grind them.

The question of distribution also has not been overlooked. Instead of troubling to procure his own barrel—always remembering to blow into the bung to make sure that all is clean and sweet—the customer now sends an order on a postcard, and eventually returns the factory cask. Nothing can be simpler than to do that—if he does not forget it.

"Zo a drop o' good cider won't do us no harm."

If only for the beauty of the orchards, the lover of

Nature will rejoice that the future is more likely to see new planting than decay. One must live among them to know the sweetness and charm of those mysterious glades. Even in leafless winter their moss-clad branches, with the sunlight from a clear, frosty sky glinting between the twigs to melt the dripping rime, are full of colour. Sometimes high up there grows a bough of mistletoe, green as a bush in summer and spangled with berries that look like pearls. Then comes the missel-thrush and sings his wild song, even in the roughest wind and rain. In the first gleam of spring he builds there in the fork of the tree. A little later the chaffinch contrives that nest of lichen and moss scarcely to be distinguished from the limb on which it rests, and blue tits creep about like mice and cling back-downwards to the branches, and at last rear ridiculously large families in holes of hollow trunks. Then the blossoms spread over everything, covering the naked trees with a mantle of loveliest pink and white, to be soon followed by the cool shade of the green leaf. Slowly the young fruit grows and yellows and reddens, until in autumn the whole orchard is aglow with gold and blushes. And how splendid are the ripe apples when they lie in heaps ready to be hauled to the crusher!

"Zo a drop o' good cider won't do us no harm."

My friend Farmer John Buck prefers the good old way.

Cider-making in the old way has little science, but

abounds with picture-making subjects. Wagon-loads of fruit of all colours from pale yellow to deep purple are hauled into the farmyard and up to the "pound-house" door. Within is the mill to grind the apples, and outside an old horse plods round and round unceasingly to turn the mill. The ground apples are called "pummy."

This pomace after standing a few hours is taken to the press—a quaint old machine, with a screw and sockets to take a bar, like a capstan. There it is put up between layers of straw, and as much as the press can take at one time is called a "cheese." The bar is turned until the press creaks. The sweet juice drips into the trough below, and the heavy, acid, yet sugary smell of it fills the air. As, under pressure, the cheese protrudes, the sides are sliced off and piled upon the top, until at last, when squeezed dry, it has diminished to one-quarter the bulk of the original "pummy."

The new cider is put in butts; and then follows always a doubtful time, for fermentation must not be too rapid. "There's nothen like a vrost at the right moment" is a maxim with Farmer John Buck. And a lucky frost is certainly a wonderfully fine cider-maker. Without it a good cider-maker must be for ever putting his ear against the stave to listen.

Is the ferment humming?—or singing?—or roaring?

When there is too much mirth in the barrel the cider must be racked—that is, drawn off at once. Thus fermentation is stopped and has to start again.

Oceans of excellent cider have been made in this good old way.

"Zo a drop o' good cider won't do us no harm."

But in the new way a great deal more care is taken. The apples are selected with care and scientifically blended, the juice of all the best varieties having been analysed. The fruit is never allowed to lie on the ground, is crushed by steam between bell-metal crushers, and horse-hair cloths have replaced the old layers of straw. The pomace never stands, but passes straight out of the mill into an hydraulic press which drains it at once to the last drop. The juice runs away into keeving barrels, in which fermentation can be scientifically regulated. Then it is racked into pipes of large dimensions. Last of all it is filtered through sterilised cotton pulp, from which it runs out fine in colour and uniform in character. There are brands fruity or dry, according to the apples used, and the manufacture is so exact that their qualities scarcely vary at all. Some are used for bottling, and the sparkle is quite natural.

This filtered cider is said to be most useful to persons with a tendency to gout or rheumatism. Farmer John Buck declares that it has not the strength of the old-fashioned make. He says a bucketful could never get up into any man's head.

But what of that? Very soon, like the rest of us, the total abstainers will be hilariously singing:

"Zo a drop o' good cider won't do us no harm."

AUTOLYCUS, 1900 A.D.

XXVII

AUTOLYCUS, 1900 A.D.

"COME out, then, all you lazy wimmin-folk. Come out ye wold maids an' show your pinched-up cherry-toppèd noses. Come out you buxom mothers o' twenty. An' all you pretty maidens in your bloom, come out, me sweet little dears. Here we be again. Here he comes, the very masterpiece of a young man."

They all ran out.

At every lilac-sheltered garden-hatch and at every open doorway down the village street stood one, or two, or it may be a little group. They popped out as they were, in aprons and with sleeves rolled up. They would have come for less. But there was always an excitement when Silas Pickford passed on his rounds through the parish of Hazelgrove.

An outlandish place of dwindling population, it is the general impression that nothing ever happens at Hazelgrove. So people were glad of any diversion. And although the elder folk when they heard Silas halloo might tap on their own spacious foreheads and declare with mystery that there was "something not

quite right for certain sure, there—there"—an imputation often thrown at people of genius—every woman supported Silas, and would pour awry out of a chipped spout and grumble for weeks rather than lay out sixpence for a teapot at the shop in the market-town. Besides, Silas was always a penny more reasonable than the shop, and more than that might be beaten down. For Silas, mind, was to be trusted to sell if he anyways could.

"Come out, come out, come out! Here he is again."

Never, surely, was another such a loud, raucous voice, and it had none of the leisurely, undulating drawl of our dialect. It could be heard far away in the landscape; and Silas always began to shout from the hill, as soon as he had turned the bend and alighted to lead his pony safely over the rolling stones down the steep knap.

There were some who called Silas a gipsy, but that was a mistake. He was born in a little old-world seaport some fifteen miles from Hazelgrove, the son of that most versatile of all merchants, a marine-store dealer. Yet his appearance somewhat favoured the inference. When at last he reached the village street we saw a sharp-featured, clean-faced little man, with black hair, and rings in his ears. Around his throat was a blue neckerchief with white spots, in a knot as tight as a hangman's. He wore a long-sleeve-waistcoat, with flapped pockets and a slit over each hip. It had more than a score of buttons, of which about a

dozen at the bottom had never made acquaintance with a button-hole. His little bow-legs gave him a horsey appearance, for his breeches were tight, and so were his gaiters also. His two-wheeled cart was piled high with pots, pans, brushes, crockery, and all sorts of wares. The harness glistened with brass fittings. The shafts rose in the air, and the bellyband threatened to lift the little pony off his legs. And sometimes along the roadside, but more often over the hedge, ran a brindled lurcher dog that came and laid down under the cart whenever Silas stopped in the village.

We knew that Silas was a bit of a rogue, but we liked him none the worse for that. He did not take us in. We only winked at each other in proof that his oddities did not pass unnoticed and said he was "a funny customer."

We agreed that "a man mus' get up pretty early in the mornen to get upzides wi' Silas." But as all Hazelgrove jumped out of bed at the first streak of dawn, we were not disqualified on the ground of late rising.

When it was sometimes whispered with a wise shake of the head, "Ah! Silas do know what to do wi' a hare or a pheasant, an' where to place a nest or two of aggs in the spring," we only laughed. What business was that of simple cottagers like ourselves? No! Gentry must look after their own game. Such things did not come our way except by chance, and no doubt they deal

in a great many different sorts of articles at a marine store. And then his manners were so easy. He knew everybody by name and had a word for young and old. He said nothing in recommendation of his wares, but shouted nonsense at the top of his voice to show he was there.

"Here he is once more. The young crown-prince of licensed hawkers, the wonder of the age, with his remarkable performing pony, once a race'orse, but now brought into the true fold, 'aving seen the error of his ways and taken to the paths of industry. Look at 'im, ladies and gentlemen. Look at 'im. A 'orse that an archbishop could warrant sound. A 'orse that has said his prayers on the 'igh road with nobody nigh to see him but his master. A remarkable 'orse, ladies and gentlemen, that will eat oats out of a nose-bag as often as the oats are there, but not otherwise. And more than that, a 'orse that goes in a cart that runs on wheels—Good morning, Mrs. John Brooke. How is Mrs. John Brooke? I hope I see you well, ma'am, with both hands out of sight under your apron, because you hold coppers between your finger and thumb, but do not wish to look proud. What is it for you, ma'am? A small bucket to carry the kitchen-stuff to the pig's-meat barrel? What, you don't keep a pig? Don't mention it, ma'am. I would sell you the bucket all the same. Eh! A 'namel wash-up basin sevenpenny size? A 'namel wash-up basin sevenpenny size for Mrs. John Brooke. I

commend the choice, but make it ninepenny, ma'am. No? Sold again. Sold again and got the money."

There was no secrecy in our dealings with Silas Pickford. To hasten and stimulate loitering customers he announced the nature of every purchase and the price in his loudest voice. We gathered round to carefully examine Mrs. John Brooke's wash-up basin and to look for flaws in the enamel. The verdict was favourable. Each one pronounced it "a very tidy wash-up basin, I do call."

For the larger wares which Silas did not habitually carry in his cart it was only necessary to give the order and wait until the next journey. He was the universal provider for Hazelgrove, but then our wants were few and simple in the extreme.

"Mother send I out to tell 'ee to bring on a bread-pan, for ours is a-brokt."

Priscilla Courtney brought the message, the prettiest maid in our parish, with her black head in a crimson Tam o'Shanter, her sleeves tucked up to her elbows, and a red pinny straight from her neck to her skirt.

Priscilla had reached the merry, giggling age, was "sweetheart high" and yet "heart-whole," for she walked up and down the street of an evening arm in arm with another girl, and they laughed and talked to the youths in company, with one eye on the miller's lad, and another on the cottage door to see if her mother should chance to pop out.

"Sold again! This day three weeks at the same

hour of the clock. A glazed bread-pan for Mrs. Courtney. And what for you, my tulip? What do you want for yourself? Here's a brooch of gold in a true-love knot eighteen pence, or say one an' four, to wear when you walk out with your sweetheart; and a maid with such a brooch under her chin is as sure of kissing as——"

"Get out wi' your stuff," giggled Priscilla. "I ha'n't a-got na'ar a sweetheart—not eet."

"Sold again!" shouted Silas. "Sold again—this day three weeks a sweetheart for Priscilla Courtney. I'll bring him with the bread-pan. A fine young man—a young man of quality, equal to myself, who drives his carriage and——"

"I shan't have 'un if I don't choose," interrupted Priscilla, with a toss of the head.

"Leave the choice to me, Priscilla. What I bring I guarantee. As sure as the light, this day three weeks, a sweetheart you shall have. One that'll wear, Priscilla. A fine young man—a masterpiece, such as myself."

"Oh, to be sure, there can't be no harm to bring 'un on," giggled Priscilla. "Zo as we can all zee what he's like."

"Sold again. A young man for Priscilla Courtney. Three weeks this day at the same hour of the clock." And these were the last words he shouted before he passed out of the village to climb in silence the hill on the other side.

There was a deal of talk about this, for everybody must have a joke with Priscilla. Besides, the fellow

would give some good turn to it, Hazelgrove could warrant he would. One thought he might bring the maid "a chainey image like, or zomethen o' that." But they all declared to Priscilla for certain sure the man must mean himself. So the public curiosity increased until the hawker's day came round again, and half the parish had one ear pricked, as the saying is, to listen for his approach.

But the morning passed.

What could have happened? Not once in a twelvemonth was Silas even ten minutes late.

The afternoon faded into dusk. Not for ten years had he been known to miss a journey. And not a sound of Silas had been heard.

In the course of a fortnight the news was brought from market that Silas had been caught appropriating coal from the heap set on the way-side in readiness for the rolling-machine.

Next we heard that Silas was in gaol.

He was a "funny customer," we all saw that, and sly enough to pick up anything that lay handy as he passed along the road, you may depend upon it. Yet the thought that Silas would now lose his licence and come no more cast a gloom upon Hazelgrove whenever it was mentioned. We mournfully agreed "Silas always zold fair enough to we. And, zay what anybeddy mid about the feller, he did carr' a tongue in the head o'un, an' no mistake."

Six months passed. Harvest came, and he was almost forgotten.

"Come out, come out! Here he is again—the very masterpiece of a young man."

We popped out like rabbits. We were excited, for there creeping down the hillside was the pony and cart once more.

We all talked at once:

"Then they can't ha' stopped his licence."

"We shall see whe'er or no his hair is a-cropped short."

"Where's Priscilla?"

"I wonder if he have a-brought Priscilla the sweetheart."

"What good is it to talk like that? Why, Priscilla was a-walkin' in the lane, just in the dimmet last night, arm-in-crook wi' the miller's young man."

OVER A PAIR OF BELLOWS

XXVIII

OVER A PAIR OF BELLOWS

"NO. He is not in to house at this moment. He's up to wood about the faggotting. He can't be so very long now, for certain sure. The a'ternoons be zo short, an' 'tes most terr'ble muggy to-day, I do sim. Will 'ee please to walk in an' wait?"

My ear detected in the tone of her voice an habitual melancholy, intangible as the sadness of the wind blowing through the pine-trees on the hill, or the loneliness of a river winding through a deep coombe. Yet she did not appear to be in trouble. She might, perhaps, be one of those very serious persons to whom duty becomes a nightmare and who always fear the worst. As she spoke she stepped back from the doorway to allow me to pass, and I went into the cottage.

It was one of the old-fashioned sort, with a window looking out upon the front and another at the back. Both were darkened by trees, lofty beech and oak, that hid the sky. She was right. The afternoon was even more than "muggy," for

the winter mist was changing into a fine, drizzling rain.

She drew an arm-chair closer to one side of the hearth, and punched up the flattened cushion with her brown fist.

"Now, do 'ee pleäse to pitch," said she, with the pleasant undulation of her dialect.

I seated myself in that comfortable resting-place.

The fire of wood had fallen very low, and was little more than a red glow trying to peer out of a mountain of grey-white ashes. But she brought a handful of sticks, piled the charred logs anew, and put on more. She drew up a low, rush-bottomed chair, took a pair of bellows from their nail upon the wall, and sat down to blow. At once the flames leapt up, and in the glowing light I could see her face more clearly than in the obscurity of the doorway.

Although she was up in years, and had spent the best part of her life in this outlying woodman's cottage, there was nothing bucolic about her. Jane Trent was still a comely woman. She was neither tall nor short, stout nor lean; but easy and active in her movements and soft of speech. Her features were both even and refined. She must have been quite beautiful when a girl. Now she wore a faded brown knitted shawl over her shoulders. Her scanty grey hair was twisted into a knob at the back of her head, skewered with a hairpin, and confined within a tight net of chenille. She sat looking into the fire with the bellows resting upon

her knee, and blew with slow, regular blasts. Now and then a drop of rain found its way down the broad, open chimney, and fell hissing upon the flames and heap of red embers.

"You must find it very quiet here, with no other house near."

"'Tes a out-o'-the-way sort o' place, sure 'nough," she reflected, still looking into the fire. "But lauk! I be so well used to the wood as a stoat or a pheasant. I were born an' bred handy to a wood, an' wed to come to live here. There were a plenty o' little veet an' a plenty o' voices about house then vor the next vew years. But little veet, mind, do wear out shoeleather. An' a little voice, mind, in a manner o' speakin', have about so many words as a vinger-post 'pon the road to a belly. An' where there's a belly, mind, there's a call vor victuals. Zo I did zay, manies o' times, there were too many. But massy 'pon us! the 'ooman is no better 'an a fool that don't zay no more 'an she do mean now an' again. An' I do vind it a bit lonesome now they be gone."

She did not smile, she did not look up, but might have been speaking to the crackling logs. The wood was a little damp, and the flames fell when she ceased, so she went on blowing in the same steady way.

"How many of them were there?"

"There be but thirteen," she answered with becoming modesty, and paused. Then her manner brightened almost into boasting. "But we never

lost narn. We reared 'em all up straight an' tal An' eet na'ar a one o' 'em wouldn' bide in th country."

She only meant the neighbourhood, for none had gone into foreign parts. And although she felt the loss of this baker's dozen in her heart, she was proud of their enterprise.

"You zee, they all turned out sich scholars, every one o' 'em. Not but what I wur a scholar myself when I wur a little maid. Ay, they learned I to read an' to write an' to zummy too, but lauk! I had no use for it all, an' pretty quick forgot it again. You zee, zay there wur a murder in the Vriday paper, or the like o' that, here by the vire a'der dark, or out in garden of a zummer evenen', when John wur a-zot 'pon top o' wall wi' his pipe, one o' the childern 'u'd read it out. You zee, did amuse he, an' wonderful improven for they too. Oh! they really an' truly was beautiful scholars. That's why they was zo restless, I do suppose, an' mus' needs go off herevrom. Still, for all that they've all a-got on—most wonderful.

"There's our John, he's handy 'pon fifty now; he do drive out the van to a grocery stores. He do get his vower-an'-twenty. 'Tes different to sixteen, idden it? Mind, he's out all hours when he do go 'pon a long round. He is that. But still, vower-an'-twenty is wages, you zee. Zo 'tes. An' eet I do bide here an' stud when I be a bit lonesome like. He've a-got to pay zeben shillens a wick vor a little bit of a house in a street, an' he can't rent narn

handy 'nough to his work not vor less. Lauk! 'Tes scand'lous, I do call it. An' he hant a-got no garden —or there, I wunt tell you no lie 'nother—only a bit of a back-plot about the size of a handkercher, where nothen' couldn' expec' to grow no sense. Wull! his missus couldn' put up a clothes-line, no, not to save her life. There idden room, an' more an' that, there's nothen but coal a-burned, an' come a dill day the air is a smeech o' smuts. An' they hant a-got no viren, not zo much as a han'ful o' sticks to light up wi', 'ithout 'tes what they do buy, in cou'se. But there, I couldn' abear to be wi'out a garden. I do sim I couldn' live wi'out a garden. Things be zo much better vresh a-picked. An' la! mus' be money out o' pocket if you do but want a chibbole. There, our John, he do look down 'pon his vather's sixteen. But, 'pon my life, zometimes when I do zit an' stud —I beänt zo sure."

She got up and looked out of the door, then lowered the kettle upon the chimney-crook, and sat down again with the bellows.

"Now there's my son Urchett, he what went away into Wales to work in the mines there, I don't rightly know what he do earn. 'Tes a lot o' money, by all account. But he don't put nothen by, I don't believe. He hant a-bin home to zee us up ten year. He do zend a letter, mid be once in a twelvemonth, an' I do spell it out a bit to a time, for as I zaid, I beänt no scholar now, an' then zomebody or another do come on an' read un drough to me. Now Urchett do always mind what I told un when he went. 'Urchett,'

I told un, 'I'd zo zoon be a rabbut to once if I mus' live half my life underground.' He do always have a word 'bout that. 'Mother,' he wrote, 'if I ever should turn to a rabbut I'll live under a fakket-pile.' I can't a-bear to think o' no man under groun' avore his time like. I don't zee what they do want zo much coal vor, wi' so much wood about a-rotten. Lauk! I'd zooner be out at night in the wo'stest thunderstarm ever wur 'an down zo deep down. But there, Urchett is better off—that we do know. An' eet, zometimes, when I do blow the vire an' stud, I—I beänt zo sure."

"Did you have any daughters, Mrs. Trent?" I asked her, by way of a change.

"Vive maidens. They all went away out to sarvice. Jinny, the oldest, she did wonderful well vor herzelf. She went to Lunnon, and wed wi' a cabinet that do work at the wood-carven. She've a-got a parlour, an' wax vlowers under a glass case, oh! beautiful; an' he made the things his own zelf in his own time. Still, for all that, he is but a little bit of a feller, about zo big as a gate-post, wi' a face zo thin as a hatchet and zo white as a ghost. An' the childern do all enjoy bad health. Poor whindlen little smock-faced atomies, they do take a'der he, I count. One o' 'em is a-growed up a school-ticher now; very genteel. The littlest comed down here to bide one time for the country air. She picked up wonderful. 'Twur the wheaten bread, for certain sure, for the bread in Lunnon is all alum an' starch, so I've a-heard tell. But they didn' let her

come no more. Her zister zaid we larned her to talk zo bad. But la! health's a blessen, vor growen childern in partic'lar. What is life wi'out health whatever you've a-got or wherever you be? Oh, Jinny done wonderful well for herzelf. She did zo. An' eet if you be fo'ced to eat alum an' starch—there, I can't tell. When I do zit down wi' my bellis to blow the vire an' stud—I beänt zo sure."

A SMALL HOLDER

XXIX

A SMALL HOLDER

NO artificial production, no deserter from the land to be coaxed back by philanthropy or legislation after he has been spoiled by the town, was this quaint relic of a bygone world, so often to be met in the lane and on the hill.

Old Peter Barrow never ventured twenty miles from the village in his life. He gave me his word for it he had never wished to go.

"No, no!" chuckled he. "Ha, ha! Let I bide where I do know where I be."

A kind of wisdom winked at me from behind Peter's grinning stolidity, claiming to know but one thing in life—when he was well off. His praiseworthy aspiration, though perhaps lacking in enterprise, would have saved many a dull man from losing his way.

Peter will never wander now. The last obsolete specimen of an expiring type, even his memory will soon be forgotten.

Peter was not born to fortune. Peter's father put Peter's life on the property when he was but an

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barked at every passer-by. Fowls clustered around the porch and sat undisturbed on the stone seats within, for the front door was never opened. Ducks waddled in the little orchard. Along a narrow garden, once filched from the wayside, a clothes-line, stretching from the old apple-tree nearly down to the sentry-b——

But why laboriously accumulate this wealth of detail? A sketch should but suggest, and tickle the imagination into lively appreciation of things untold.

And from daybreak to sundown, at any hour of the day, you might have seen Peter about the place, a short, square figure in a long milking-apron that reached from his double chin almost down to his ankles. His face also was square. Peter shaved it always of a Sunday, and now and then in the week should occasion require. You might have watched him to and fro; now with a truss of hay on his back —then with a bucket of pig's meat in one hand and the other arm extended. And he was for ever merry, singing some old tune.

To find a hard-working man so glad could lead to only one conclusion—Peter must be "putting-by." In the public belief nothing but a growing hoard could make the heart so merry. The village was of one mind. "Ah! there's a few pounds a-laid away in some old stocking, somewhere or other. No fear." We respected Peter more for his suspected savings than for his industry; because, after all, a man may work ever so hard all his life and die worth nothing.

If I had to paint a portrait of Peter I should choose to take him of a summer Sunday afternoon, with the village bells ringing for church and the still, hot air of mid-day clinging around every leaf of the hedgerows along the lane down the hillside.

Let us have him in his Sunday suit, cut long ago. Fashion had changed, even as Peter had grown old and out of date himself, so the fit was of the strangest. How the sun beat down upon that solemn black, which first mourned at the funeral when Peter came into the land! The lower buttons of the waistcoat would no longer meet; yet, when he turned, every eye was riveted with admiration upon the neat gore in the back. This masterpiece of sartorial economy was open to the world, for of a warm day Peter perspired in shirt-sleeves and carried his Sunday coat upon his arm. Under the trees he would take off his hat also, though a large Prayer-book with a brass clasp was tucked under his elbow, and the flies were most wonderfully meddlesome upon his crown. There were never fewer than two cuts on Peter's chin of a Sunday afternoon. In the graveyard Peter resumed his funeral garment before entering the porch, and he went on tiptoe to his seat behind the door, near to the sexton. There he passed an hour of placid rest. No spiritual nightmare ever disturbed Peter's life-dream. No doctrinal indigestion ever kept him awake during a long sermon. He merely nodded an unconscious assent to all the parson said.

Thus every day of the seven was fully occupied,

and Peter desired nothing more than his lot afforded except a little better weather now and then.

Yet once he was in the greatest danger of being caught in the whirl of politics. On post and hoarding, and here and there on the trunk of some tall elm-tree, as he jogged to a distant market, Peter saw bills. He drew rein before one of them, put on his spectacles, and laboriously spelt out the words:

"Vote for Huffington. The Friend of the Poor."

"By Gar, then! An' so I will!" cried Peter, as he whipped up his old mare. "For the old Squire Huffington topped the brief wi' a guinea when Gramfer's hoss died of the glanders."

For a week or two he was full of this intention, and announced it everywhere.

"But you can't do it, Peter," his friends all told him.

"But I shall," replied Peter, warming into a bit of a huff.

"But he's not for your division, Peter," they all said.

"He's for our county."

"But not this part, Peter."

"Very well, then," cried Peter, turning away in a sulk, "if I can't vote for he, I sha'n't vote for nobody; for all the Parliament put together wouldn' never do I twopenn'orth o' good."

"Now, don't you say that, Peter; they do consider the affairs o' the land, an' your bit o' ground do stand in wi' the rest."

But Peter remained obdurate.

"Zo do the rooks up in Farmer Pike's home-trees, but 'tis their own bellies they've a-got in mind avore all," said he.

I came back to the village a day or two ago after a fortnight's absence, and my friend Mrs. Simon Gallingham was standing out on the causeway gazing in the direction of the village churchyard.

Then under the shadow of the ancient yew I saw six dark figures, each one of whom appeared to be wearing Peter's Sunday suit.

"Who is dead?" I asked.

"Old Peter Barrow," replied she in a whisper. "So the bit of land on the hill will go to Pike's farm now, and a good thing too."

She seemed to regret Peter, and shook her head in doubt; but was very hopeful as to the future of the property.

"I am sorry. Both for the old man and the land."

"What for?"

"His simple life was happy. Every day of it. What more would you have?"

Mrs. Simon Gallingham smiled.

"I do laugh to myself in the middle o' the night sometimes when I remember the things you say. The old man slaved all his life and left nothing but an old cow or two. The ne'er-do-well, run-about son has come down to the funeral. He swears young Peter, the smith, as honest a man as ever stepped, must have fingered the money."

MY NEIGHBOUR,
MRS. SIMON GALLINGHAM

XXX

MY NEIGHBOUR, MRS. SIMON GALLINGHAM

YOU have many times heard me refer to my neighbour, Mrs. Simon Gallingham, but I have hesitated until this last moment to attempt any description of so gifted and fortunate a personage.

From childhood all the events of her life have conspired to render her latter days "comfortable"; but the many advantages conveyed in that most respectable term no pen can hope to enumerate.

At the age of eighteen Dorcas Patch, for that was her maiden name, married Mr. Simon Gallingham, a well-to-do farmer of our neighbourhood; and some ten years ago, at the age of forty-five, Mrs. Simon Gallingham was left a childless widow, sole legatee, sole executrix, and with absolute possession of Simon's estate.

There was a deal of talk in the parish about Simon's will. It would be mere affectation to deny it—there was criticism. But the ultimate destination of property is a serious matter, arousing even livelier interest than the hereafter of the deceased. It must never be forgotten that Simon had a brother

John with sons. Although, by reason of a quarrel between their wives, Simon and John had done no more than nod to each other for twenty years, it could never be right and proper to set aside the boys. A man must provide for his wife—certainly. But property, which may now and then quite justifiably make a little excursion, ought always to be tied up, and in the end come home to the name. It was not pleasant to contemplate that Gallingham money and fields might, after some two score years or so, find their way to a Patch. The more so as the Gallinghams had always had money and the Patches scarcely a shilling to their name. "I do not like to see the land in parish change hands," said Farmer John Buck.

However, at the time they were made, Mrs. Simon Gallingham heard none of these comments.

Seeing how John had treated poor Simon in this world, she perceived something incongruous in the brothers lying side by side in years to come. It had pleased God to call poor Simon, and in His own good time no doubt He would cut off John. She could not fancy them resting in peace—Simon so quiet and good a man as ever walked, and John altogether so quarrelsome. So she selected a grave for Simon, dry and sunny and far away from the Gallingham head-stones, in the corner near to where the Patches were lying at rest. She said, seeing how intimate Simon had been with the Patches of late years, she felt poor Simon would wish it if he could but speak. Thus, you see, Mrs. Simon Gallingham is a woman of fine

feelings. When you hear that the knuckle-bone of the ham that graced Mr. Simon Gallingham's funeral feast, instead of being decorated with the usual frivolous trimmings of white paper, was neatly and decently enwrapped in black crape, you will realise the thoughtful delicacy of mind which characterises my neighbour, Mrs. Simon Gallingham.

She lives just at the entrance to the village, in her own house, a low, thatched dwelling, with a stone porch and windows of odd shapes and sizes sprinkled in unexpected places on the front. Yet it has a pleasant look. The creepers and roses on the wall are neatly trimmed and nailed. It faces the south and has a cheerful aspect, like many another plain countenance, in which the want of symmetry is redeemed by smiles.

Before it lies a sloping garden divided by a low wall and a well-trimmed hedge of laurel. There are four cypress-trees, stripped into faultless shape and smooth as sugar-cones, one at each corner, and one on each side of the gate. There are bushes of lilac both purple and white, an old laburnum, a mulberry-tree, a quince, a medlar, and quite a sprinkling of apple-trees behind the flower-borders and amongst the vegetables. And the greater part of the year Mrs. Simon Gallingham herself is daily to be seen amongst her culinary and floral riches. A tall, stout figure in a false front, a widow's cap, a high apron over her black gown, and a pair of gardening gloves, she is eternally clipping, or snipping, or thinning, or cutting back, or rooting up, or

dividing, or squirting, or watering with something offensive some unfortunate plant.

She is fond of talking, and in moments of solitude talks to herself. "Here, you do push yourself out o' place," says she when the strawberry runners invade the path. "You've got no business here," says she to the wild briar that springs from the root of the standard rose. But a slug under a shady leaf is the object of her finest irony. "So you had it in mind to walk out, bimeby night, an' pay attentions to my young lettuces, didden 'ee? Then you wunt."

But if her garden is a very pattern of order, the house is neatness itself. The stone floor of the small entrance-hall has a border of freestone; and so has the narrow stone staircase, of which the steps down the middle are almost worn one into another. The furniture is mostly of plain oak; but it is all ancient, and there is a bench and forms from some old-world farm. Only the parlour has mahogany, and there the chairs and the sofa all have shining horsehair seats. Two samplers hang upon the parlour walls, one on each side of a portrait in wool-work of Lot's wife, after she had turned into a pillar of salt, with two cities in flames in the distance. It was worked by poor Simon's aunt, a maiden lady, and poor Simon was never tired of looking at it. On the mantelpiece and on the card-table are pieces of old china, jugs bearing the name of Gallingham, and quaint little figures of men and women in long-forgotten costumes, of curly white dogs with chains, of stags being dragged down by hounds, to say

nothing of several items of house property, eligibly situated on the level top of a handsome bureau. Mrs. Simon Gallingham has also a service of pewter on her kitchen dresser, and in the spare room a four-poster with a very handsome clothes-chest at the foot of it, both of carved oak. These possessions she always speaks of as "her things." No person of sufficient social distinction in the village ever entertains a visitor from town without asking to be shown Mrs. Simon Gallingham's things.

"But la!" says she, not wishing to be proud, "They be more thought an' work than anybody could ever believe. But there, poor Simon would never wish me to part wi' one of 'em, and we must respect the wishes of the dead."

To this refinement of feeling Mrs. Simon Gallingham is a constant martyr. A cottage of two rooms is all that she could ever require if she might do as she would, and yet she must be dusting and rubbing and polishing or running after the little maid every day of her life from morn to night.

The little maid is a fortunate village child of fourteen with her hair in a knob and a cap on her head. She does the rough work and answers the door on those rare occasions when Mrs. Simon Gallingham fails to intercept the approaching caller on the garden path. But to be sure she is more plague than profit and the worry of her mistress's life. There is no respect and no gratitude about girls of the present day. It all comes of so much schooling, for not one in a score will listen and

remember and take any pains to learn. Yet the little maid is a necessary evil. For what would poor Simon think if he should look down from where he is and see his widow wanting in thought to keep up his name? So Mrs. Simon Gallingham endures her responsibilities as best she may.

But her keen sense of duty also inflicts restrictions.

She feels unable to assist at the children's treat because poor Simon always held the opinion that the lower orders were being cossetted up too much to the ruination of the country. She really could not subscribe to the Jubilee fountain because poor Simon used to say that the cottagers were so ignorant that they would rather drink water out of a dirty well than carry a pitcher across the street. She could not approve of the improvement in the organ in the parish church, because the alteration would remove the corner seat upon which poor Simon used to sit and worship. She was certain he would never have held up his hand for any such change, and the thought of this moved her to tears.

"Drat the 'ooman!" cried Farmer John Buck on that occasion, "What! Can't she remember, that poor Simon never had an opinion to call his own after he married she, an' never more an' one sixpence in his pocket to any one time to buy hiszelf a glass o' grog!"

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