

YOUNG SAM AND SABINA

MIDDLENEY MOOR

SOMEWHERE upon the moors of Somerset, but at what exact spot must not be too accurately declared, is the Isle of Middeney.

In summer-time the eye can scarcely distinguish this slightly rising ground from the broad level of the moor ; but in winter, when water covers the greater part of the country, Middeney, with its half a score of houses and little church, never surrenders to the besieging flood. Thus it justifies its title and keeps its powder dry.

Now, Middeney was the pleasantest, most unsophisticated village that ever smelt of gilliflowers or heard the sound of three church bells. Its folk were old fashioned, neighbourly, and nice. Even with the disadvantage of a non-resident parson (for the living was a perpetual curacy annexed to a vicarage which needs not identification), it lived in a condition of perfect concord and unanimity. Everybody was baptized ; all were married (with here and there an exception) who wished to be ; and any duly qualified parishioner was buried without

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delay. Therefore, Middleney was a positive Arcadia, although sometimes a little damp.

Now, the perfect unanimity of Middleney consisted of seven adult opinions.

There was old Sam Grinter of the Church Farm for one, who, although gouty, was a wonderful judge of a bullock; and Mrs. Samuel Grinter for two—at least; and young Sam, their only remaining son.

And Sophia Sharman, widow.

Then there was Christopher Chiselett, who lived in the little low-set homestead in the home-field across the road; a very quaint little widow-man indeed, and the merriest mischief-maker in the whole parish.

And Sabina, his daughter.

Ah, Sabina ! with eyes the colour of a hazel wand, and brown hair parted in ripples beneath a sun-bonnet, at times as white as driven snow — you were just nineteen.

These were all of the *élite* : for nobody else in Middleney held sufficient land to support an opinion.

It was the 5th of January, the morning of Old Christmas Eve. There was little water on the moor, which was as green as grass and rushes. Only here and there a narrow strip or shallow sheet, shining beneath the sky like a mirror, sometimes white as silver and sometimes dull as lead.

Now was the time for snipe, which cannot feed upon a flood, but love the ditches leading into the rhines, and the wet places where the water just sops through the turf. Also there was talk in Middleney of wild duck in the withy beds.

In the early morning a two-wheeled pony-cart was driven briskly into the barton of the Church Farm, and

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a young man leapt out with all the brisk alacrity of a keen sportsman at the beginning of the day. Before the Grinters could run out to welcome him, he had put his powder-flask in his pocket, hung his shot-belt across his shoulder, and taken from the cart his double-barrelled gun.

'Good mornen', Mr. Ashford. Good mornen', zir. Come in. Come in,' shouted stout old Sam Grinter from the porch.

' Now, do 'ee please to walk in,' piped in chorus Mrs. Grinter's shrill voice.

'Yes. Walk in,' cried young Sam. 'While I just take out the pony.'

The visitor was slight in frame and somewhat below the middle height. Evidently town-bred, he appeared superior to the Grinters in social position, and the warmth of the invitation proved him no unwelcome guest. A look of eagerness and impatience flashed across his nervous, handsome face, but to refuse the hospitality of old Sam Grinter was to make a deadly enemy for life. There was nothing that admirable man resented so much, except being crossed in argument, or, as he expressed it, ' to be made out a fool.'

'But we won't waste time, Sam,' urged Ashford quickly.

' Come in ! Come in ! ' repeated the impatient old man, stumping into the farm kitchen in his slippered feet. ' Zit down ! Now, what 'll you take ? You'll vind the wind nippy 'pon the moor. Have a little drap o' gin to warm the heart o' 'ee, an' make your eye straight. Zit down ! Zit down ! '

The walls, the window, the tall kitchen clock, and the 'claveltack,' as they used to call the mantelshelf

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above the old-fashioned open fireplace, were decorated with glistening holly covered with red berries, and a 'mestletoe,' cut from the orchard hard by, hung from the middle of the oak beam across the ceiling.

'Zit down !' reiterated the farmer, pointing to the straight-backed settle on the opposite side of the fireplace.

Ashford obeyed ; but his attention was obviously directed to the great ashen faggot, bound around with numerous hazel bonds, lying on one side in readiness for the ceremonies of the evening.

'Ha ! ha !' laughed the old man. You zee, we've a-got a famous fakket to year.' Then suddenly becoming fiercely serious : 'Now, what'll you take ?'

'Cider for me, Mr. Grinter,' gaily responded the guest.

'Zo do 'ee then. Missus, bring on the cup.'

Farmer Grinter drew closer to the fire and laughed again. For him life consisted largely of laughter, cider, and a variation of gout ; and he hobbled to the corner cupboard for the gin. 'Just a drap do zoften the cider, I sim,' he explained in a confidential whisper, with a wink. Then he sat down with a hand upon each knee, and human eye never saw elsewhere so fine a series of double chins.

"Ees. We've a-got a famous fakket to year. An' you shall zee how he do burn, please God. You'll come back an' bide to wassail, won't 'ee ? 'T'es a moonlight night, an'-----Your good health !'

'Thank you, Mr. Grinter. I'm afraid I musn't stay to-night, thank you. I have to ----'

'I tell 'ee you'll bide. Don't you never come a-snipe-shooten' no more to Zammle Grinter's o' Church Varm to Middeney, if you don't bide. I tell 'ee, you've a-got

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to bide. Don't you never show your nose here no more, if you don't bide. So sure's the light, I'll order 'ee off. I'll ---'

The climax of the farmer's growing excitement must remain unrecorded. His threat was suddenly cut short by the hasty, unexpected entrance of Sabina, with lips as red as holly berries, glowing with youth and parted with anticipation in their eagerness to inquire the exact moment in the evening at which the guests were invited. She wore no hat, and her print frock was open at the throat ; yet in spite of winter her cheeks were warm as spring, and rosy with running across the road.

Seeing a stranger Sabina subsided and blushed.

Farmer Grinter's crispness of temper vanished at once.

' Come so soon as you be a-minded, my dear, an' bide so long as you like,' he cried heartily.

' Here, maid ! moisten your lips for Christmas,' he added, holding out the cup.

' No, thank 'ee, Mr. Grinter. Not in the mornen', thank 'ee.'

' I tell 'ee to wet one eye. Don't you show your Zunday vrock to Zammler Grinter's to Church Varm to-night, if you be so proud as all that. Take the cup, I tell 'ee, an' zup, an' han' un to the gen'leman.'

The girl obeyed, as she needs must. As she raised the cup to her lips, her bright eyes glancing over the brim encountered Ashford, and seemed to overflow with suppressed merriment. Just as suddenly the mirth vanished ; and she blushed again as she handed the cup to the stranger. Then she departed with the promptitude which had characterised her appearance.

Old Sam Grinter leaned back in his chair and laughed.

'Ay! Nice, quick - steppen' maid!

Idden she? 149

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Terrible a-feared to see a foreigner. Werden she? You should zee her a-Zunday wi' her head in curdles ! But, to be sure, you'll bide to-night and let off your gun under the girt apple-tree. That'll make you, an' our Zam, and Kester Chiselett wi' guns. Dash my wig an' buttons ! if cider didn' ought to be plenty to year, no fear.'

Further consideration of the proffered hospitality was happily prevented by the entrance of young Sam, gun in hand. Ashford rose at once, eager for sport and the open air. The farmer followed them into the porch, shouting after them his time-honoured jokes and offering to send the little waggon down to Ham Mead to haul back the game. After they had turned the corner and were upon the long, straight road between the rhines and leaning willow-trees they could still hear his lusty voice.

There had been a frost. Rime covered the moor like a tablecloth, and sparkling crystals adhered to every twig and mote lying on the high-road. The sun was peering through a white mist, glistening upon every leaf and blade of grass, and shining upon the sheets of thin 'cat's-ice' formed around the rushes in the ditches and rhines. On such a morning, when the air is bright and fresh and keen, the man of twenty knows how glad and warm is the heart of youth.

' It was a long time ago I saw you, Sam—until last week,' cried Ashford.

' Years,' agreed young Sam. ' Not since I used to go in to the Grammar School.'

Then they laughed aloud — perhaps at nothing ; perhaps in recollection of those absurd old days, and the Latinity which Sam did not then acquire.

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'Do you remember how we pulled down the-wall to get out the cutty's nest ?'

' Ah ! An' how you couldn't get your han' out of the woodpecker's hole ?'

' Yes. And when we cut down the hollow apple-tree with the young starlings inside ! Ha ! ha ! What a row there was !'

' Hush ! We must go along quiet now,' whispered young Sam, suddenly becoming serious.

They turned off from the road and walked along the wide ditch of stagnant water known as the 'Black Rhine,' deep and dark, a main artery of the moor in those parts.

' I say ! ' broke in Ashford, in that tone of respect in which a man touches on serious matters. ' What a fine girl that was who came into your house just now !'

' Sabina Chiselett ?'

' Unimpressonable youth ! Simply to mention her name in that commonplace manner. Why, she is superb. A sort of Ceres in her maidenhood, or Proserpine before she heard of hell,'

But young Sam had no ears for such nonsense. He was thinking of snipe, rhines, and withy beds. , Suddenly he stopped, and pointed at the strip of black, still water.

' Could you jump that ?'

The mere thought of it made Ashford shiver. ' I shouldn't like to try,' he said.

' You could do it right enough,' urged Sam. ' Tidden so much as do look. Look here. Take my gun and I'll go over first.'

He drew back a few paces, ran and jumped with the lightness and ease of an antelope. But young Sam was

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at home, and had breathed the spirit of the moor from his cradle.

'Now chuck over the guns muzzle up for me to catch, an' then come over ! ' he cried.

Ashford still hesitated. His imagination pictured all the dangers, and he already felt the icy water chilling his blood and making his very bones ache. He shook his head.

' Couldn't I go round ? ' he asked.

' You can jump it,' repeated young Sam. ' Tidden but twelve feet, and I'll be bound if you had heart you could jump twenty. Well, then, look here, go round the ditches and take the line of gates to the tow-path. Where there's a gate there's a bridge, an' when you come to the river walk down till you meet me. But tidden so good, mind. Tidden so good.'

So they parted. It is when they come to the big jump that the man of action always parts from the man of dreams.

It was dusk when they gave up shooting, with several miles to walk home across the moor. Sam's pockets were filled with snipe, and he had also killed two teal ; but Ashford had done little or nothing. The solitude of the moor on that grey winter day, with no variety and no incident, was favourable to his habit of fanciful reverie. The heartiness of the farmhouse had impressed him. Visions of Sabina, bright, rich, and glowing, constantly flitted before his brain. A pageant of absurdities, a procession of fantastic follies, occupied his imagination, passing before it in quick succession. He was talking to Sabina—he had kissed Sabina. He loved her—married her in spite of the indignant protests of his friends, and

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enjoyed ever afterwards a primitive but perfect happiness. Then a snipe rose before him, with its sharp 'scape, scape,' but the bird had darted and twisted out of shot before he could recall his erring senses. And yet he recognised the unreality of these thoughts ; for Ashford was as sane as any other man of twenty—as sane, for instance, as young Sam.

Dark night came quickly on. Stars shone brightly out of the deep sky, and were reflected upon the black, stagnant water, fading sometimes in the ripples when a moorhen moved, then again dancing on before to the rising and falling of the travellers' steps, as they journeyed homewards across the moor.

Now on the still air from every side came the soft sound of village bells, unintercepted and clearly audible for miles in that flat country. Everywhere was ringing and merriment ; everywhere an ashen faggot and double-handled cider-cup in readiness. And the little ding-dang-dong of Middeney added its song to the universal charm.

' We must step it out, or the folk '11 be there,' said young Sam, striding along at a great pace.

II

OLD CHRISTMAS EVE

FROM the frosty air to the bright firelight of the Church Farm kitchen was so delightful a change that Ashford needed no further invitation to remain.

The parish had already arrived.

There was little Christopher Chiselett in his blue coat with brass buttons, breeches, worsted hose, and silver-buckled shoes. The light illuminated his merry face, round and red like a cherry, and glistened like a halo round his shining head, which, in the vernacular of Somerset, was 'so bald as ever a bladder o' lard.'

Sabina, with her hair in curls and tied up with a red ribbon, looked as fresh as a daisy and as sweet as a field o' beans in flower. And Sophia Sharman was sitting in the corner smiling at Christmas beneath her weeds. Also, by good hap, cousin John Priddle had driven over from Curry about those pigs. A patient, ox-eyed man, 'wi' a head like a house-avire,' he afterwards solemnly averred that to say one word about going was 'so much as ever his life was wo'th.'

There they all were. Happy souls ! of the days before hospitality went away by rail.

'Come on ! Zit down ! Now then, Missus, where's 154

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thik bit o' supper ? ' cried the farmer, in a voice boisterous enough to raise the roof.

A singular angularity of elbows and knees, which marks the earliest period of a rural festivity, vanishes under the genial influence of good cheer. A roast turkey invites contemplation and affords food for thought. A ham, well cured, is an inspiration, particularly if there still linger in the mind a recollection of the pig to which it once belonged ; and cousin John Priddle had known that pig from its earliest infancy. It puts a man at his ease to sit down with an old acquaintance. Every tongue was loosened ; every heart was gay ; and when supper was finished they drew around for the great carousal.

' Come on ! All draw up ! Now then, Missus, make haste wi' the cup.'

' 'Tes a wonderful girt facket, sure enough,' chirped Christopher.

' Ay, ay ! Wi' a extra bind to please Widow Sharman.'

' He'll make the women-volk hop more 'an once, I'll warrant un ! ' cried cousin John Priddle, rubbing his hands.

' Zo he will. Now then, Missus, dap down the cup 'pon the settle close handy like. Put back the chimbley-crooks. Move out, Sabina. Now then, soce, let's heave un on ! '

So the great ashen faggot was lifted upon the hearth, and the eager flames leapt up around it, licking with their red tongues the hazel binds.

Now the glory of the ashen faggot was this. When a bind burst, sometimes with a mighty crack, casting bright sparks and splinters out into the room, and the

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women shrieked and pushed back their chairs, and the men threw back their heads and laughed,—then, and not until then, the cup was handed round, and everybody drank his best without loss of time, so that it might be drained and filled again before the next explosion.

' I never didn' zee a better fakket, not in all my life,' exulted Christopher.

' I think the vire have a-got hold o' un now,' shouted the farmer, taking up the cup, and resting it upon his knee in readiness.

' Look out ! Look out ! ' cried cousin John Priddle, and Widow Sharman nervously raised her apron to cover her face.

It was a false alarm. The faggot went on burning without any sense of responsibility, just as if the discomfort of thirst and the blessing of cider had ceased to exist.

' Put the cup down avore the vire, Zam. Else he'll get cold,' nervously suggested Mrs. Grinter.

' I never didn' zee a fakket hold together so long in all my life,' suggested cousin John Priddle, in considerable anxiety.

' I sim myself, 'tes a funny thing,' agreed Christopher, stroking his bald head to promote thought.

' 'Tes,' said the widow.

' Zo 'tes,' chimed in Mrs. Grinter, with an unusually anxious expression on her little sharp face. ' An' eet o' cou'se, it can't be another. Pick up the cup, Zam. He'll get so hot else we sha'n't be able to hold un to our lips.'

' I'll be dalled if I sha'n't want bastin' soon. I be so dry as chips,' moaned Christopher.

' Here. Push out maëster's little voot-stool, Sabina. 156

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Dap down the cup 'pon he. Little bit closer. No,
not too close. Zo.'

Farmer Grinter drew the back of his hand across his forehead. 'Do make I puff an' blow,' he said, and sighed at the delay.

'I'll be daazed,' whispered cousin John Priddle, 'if I don't think they binds be witched.'

A fearful solemnity fell upon that party, as if every one were afraid to speak ; and, although the flames were now rushing high up the chimney-back, all stared into the glowing mass and quite forgot their thirst. One by one the binds melted away like wax. As Christopher afterwards protested with suspicious emphasis, they were all 'to a mizmaze like,' and he broke out all over into a most terrible sweat.

The startled voice of Sabina first broke the silence.

'Massy 'pon us ! Why, there be chains in the vire.'

'What ?' yelled old Sam Grinter, leaping to his feet, making not only the women hop, but Christopher and cousin John Priddle as well. 'Then, so sure's the light, somebody have a-got at my fakket. Dash my wig and burn my feathers ! if they didn' chain thik there poor fakket up under they halsen withes so as he couldn' bust. An' we all a-zot round like jackaas-vools. That's gwaine beyon' a joke. I don't zee no joke in that.'

'I do call it ignorance,' said cousin John Priddle.

'Tes.' 'Zo 'tez.' 'An' that 'tes,' chorussed the ladies.

Just a glimmer of mischief, or was it only a fancy of the firelight, flickered upon Christopher's little round face, and then he said quite quickly, extending his hand for the cup—

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' **But** if they thought to keep Sophia from drinking, they'll be main-well a-sucked in.'

That was the way they always joked Sophia, but she only took the cup, and smiled, and sipped.

The moon was well up and joviality completely restored by the time they were ready to wassail the apple-trees.

' Come on, then ! Come on ! Have 'ee got your guns ? ' cried the farmer, as, still clutching the cup, he led the way across the mow-barton, weird with mysterious shadows from the stacks, and into the little dark orchard behind the homestead. The women-folk had thrown shawls over their heads, and on they all went, laughing, stumbling over the leaning trunks in the uncertain light, and sometimes running into the boughs, on their way to the old Jack Horner tree in the corner.

The ceremony was simple, but impressive. The farmer had brought the sodden toasts from the evening's carousals, and now placed them in the ' vork ' of the tree. Then the company repeated the ancient formula—

Apple-tree, apple-tree, I
do wassail thee
To blow an' to bear Cap-vulls an'
hat-vulls an' dree-bushel-bag-vulls
An' my pockets vull, too.

Then they cheered and fired their guns, with such infinite success that even Christopher's old flintlock went off—after a brief interval. And thus, please God, was an admirable apple crop ensured, and the proceedings came to an end,

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Yet not quite to an end. There is a peculiar witchery about the moonlight glancing between apple-trees. It seems to dance and sparkle upon the branches, and yet in the shadow the ground is black as night. It has a confusing effect upon the brain. A feeling of fantastic unreality as of a ubiquitous will-o'-the-wisp creeps over the imagination, and even Solomon in all his glory might easily lose his way.

They all lost their ways.

The unanimity of Middleney suffered a slight shock on the question of the situation of Church Farm, for Mrs. Grinter saw the orchard gate, distinctly and with considerable asperity, in two opposite directions.

Sabina knew she was right, and said so with a self-reliance which carried conviction — at least as far as Ashford was concerned.

So they found themselves apart.

' Look there, Mr. Ashford ! '

' What is it ? Where ? '

The girl's arm was raised, pointing to a branch overhanging their heads upon which grew a thick mass glistening in the moonlight.

He stood staring with all his might ; but, before he could recognise the mistletoe, with a burst of laughter she had flitted away among the trees.

III

SIX O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

SOME months had elapsed, and spring was come at last. The moor had forgotten the floods and frosts, and the grass in the meadows was growing long and lush. As to Ashford, Sabina had never bestowed upon him another thought ; and as he returned to Oxford a couple of days after his visit to Middeney, it is probable that his sentimental visions quickly evaporated.

It was six o'clock in the morning, and Sabina had been to Ham Mead to fetch in the cows. A white mist from the river hung over the moor, and dewdrops dripped from the willow-trees. Birds were busy mating, and the air alive with love ; and as Sabina slowly came alone across the moor, she must needs sing to herself for company's sake.

At the entrance to the village was a homestead known as Lower Farm, now unoccupied and falling into disrepair, for a year or two ago the land had been thrown into Church Farm. The lilac was bursting into flower, and as Sabina passed she sprang upon the low garden-wall and tore off a bough rich in bloom, with a dew-drop hanging to each clove-like flower.

On she came behind her cows into the village street—

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a creature of the early morning and the open air, rich in vitality, full-throated, rosy like an apple and straight as a willow wand. She possessed, too, that face of faultless symmetry not uncommon among the humble in the West of England, and affirmed to be a heritage from some early Celtic race.

Just then young Sam crossed the barton and stood leaning against the gate.

The cows went lazily by. Sabina half smothered her face in the flowers until, having smelt her fill, with extravagant waste of beauty she beat the red back of a loiterer with the lilac-bush, and laughed as the cow leisurely mounted the causeway beside the churchyard wall.

'Za-am !'

'Sabina!'

That was all. But there is a pleasant modulation about a west country voice which makes this simple salutation very friendly.

Sabina passed on.

For the first time Sam's eyes lighted on her with more than common meaning as he watched her easy erect figure softened in the morning mist. He smiled, stepped into the road, and from the wayside selected a small clod of earth, about as big as a little crab-apple or a bantam pullet's egg, and threw it, striking Sabina fairly between the shoulders on the curtain of her white sun-bonnet.

Without turning she looked back over her shoulder and laughed. It was an attention, and Sabina liked attentions dearly.

And so Sam fell in love.

IV

SIX O'CLOCK AT NIGHT

It was six o'clock at night.

Not that it was dark. March winds had blown themselves out ; April showers had laid the dust ; and the sun, shining through the humid atmosphere with a ruddy face, was still high above the horizon. The light glistened upon the wet thatch of Christopher Chiselett's homestead, which stood within a field some distance from the road ; and glowed upon the yellow stacks richly ranged round the mow-barton of the Church Farm.

It was six, because the clock in Middleney was striking—solemnly, meditatively striking, with not more than half a minute between each stroke.

A clock which gave such thoughtful attention to business was never fast. It did not hurry mankind into heart disease, nor fret the human race into fiddle strings, as does the modern American timepiece. It did not imperatively insist upon telling the time. For, unless possessed of superior power of concentration, the mind was apt to wander and get confused in the counting. However, it was six o'clock ; the cows were back in mead, and Christopher was sauntering down the village street. And it was night, because a fine spirit of philo-

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sophy pervades the west, and the natives, with intuitive perception of the truth of the Socratic doctrine of contraries, have determined that night is the opposite of morning, and so, since it was not six o'clock in morning it must be six o'clock at night.

Christopher walked in the middle of the road.

You do not know Christopher. You never knew a man so bow-legged. The breeches were tight, and the legs were the shape of a horse-collar. People who lived in Middleney all their lives confessed, even at the last, that they had never fathomed the depth of that twinkling, little, double-cunning man, who milked above a score of cows, and had occupied the office of parish clerk for twenty years always with self-respect and to the satisfaction of the parish. Besides, he had money, a goodish bit of money, mind me, and only one maid to leave it to. Imaginative people, like the Grinters, doubtless sometimes exaggerate ; but they did talk of 'a couple o' thousand poun'.'

Christopher was really a very worthy man — but frivolous. Every night since the year Twenty-four, and now they were well on in the Thirties, had he thus meandered down the road, sometimes glancing back to see if anybody was about, sometimes loitering as if to disguise his errand. But he always disappeared at last in the porch which sheltered Sophia's oaken door.

Every Saturday night in summer, for ten years, had he picked a posy for Sophia to carry to church on the Sunday, wrapt around ' wi' a white pocket-han'kercher, because wi' zitten still the hand do get that warm that flowers do drop off in no time.' At these did Sophia ostentatiously sniff whenever drowsiness attended a long sermon,

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Gillyflowers, warriors, bloomy - downs, and fully a hundredweight of boy's - love, a herb of pronounced opinions and considerable force of expression, had been sacrificed upon that shrine. Yet nothing came of it but dead leaves. And Sophia was fading too. That was what the parish pointed out. There could be no reason on earth, on Sophia's part, for delay. If Christopher meant anything he should look sharp about it. Sophia was 'no chicken.'

On the night in question his attention was suddenly arrested by the dull thudding sound of hoofs beating upon soft turf. With considerable nimbleness he toddled across the road and clambered into a gap in the hedge.

In the paddock young Sam was holding a roan colt by a halter. The colt had reared, and was striking the air with his fore hoofs ; and the man, glorying in the first flush of his fresh activity, was hanging back upon the rope. His hat was on the grass. He wore no coat, and the muscles stood out hard as iron upon the bare arms below his upturned sleeves. By the well at the back of the homestead stood Sabina, her hands upon her hips. The sun, sinking behind a grey haze gathered upon Westmoor, was large and red, and everything was ruddy and enriched—the girl's face, the colour of the roan's coat, and the man's bare arms. Even the water in the rhines and ditches, the veins and arteries of the cold, indifferent moor, seemed turned to blood.

Christopher chuckled. As he afterwards said, to watch young Sam was for all the world as good as a play.

Christopher was an excellent conversationalist. He constantly talked to himself. Comic creases puckered around his eyes and the corners of his mouth turned up and laughed—an internal secretive laugh, which shook

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his little frame like an earthquake. And the gist of the joke was to look on unobserved.

First he laughed at young Sam.

' Ha, ha, Zammy ! You've a-got all your work in, ha'n't 'ee ? Steady, bwoy ! Steady, Zammy ! '

And then he laughed at the colt.

' Ha, ha, my beauty ! You've a-got to come to it, ha'n't 'ee ! Tidden no good ! So sure as death, you've a-got to come to it. Now, Zam ! Quiet ! Pick up your hat ! Zo ! There, there ! Ah, you do both sweat, I'll warr'nt it ! '

Then young Sam led the colt across to Sabina by the well ; and she stood by his side and looked at the roan and patted his neck.

It seems scarcely natural, but Sam looked only at Sabina.

And that was the precise moment when Sabina first knew that young Sam had fallen in love.

Christopher, finding the door of Sophia Sharman's cottage open, walked in. She had just popped out for a moment, as widows will ; and he carefully took the posy, wrapt in a red handkerchief, from the pocket of his flop-tail coat, and placed it in one of the white egg-cups on the dresser shelf.

A hymn-book and the Book of Common Prayer, of fair size and bound in calf, lay upon the table side by side with a pile of clean linen in preparation for the devotions of the morrow. Mere idleness and wantonness of spirit, but not irreverence, prompted Christopher to exchange the prayers for a book of like appearance and dimensions lying on the little round oak table in the corner. Then he contentedly sat down on the settle.

Christopher's
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soul was never so restful as when he had perpetrated his little joke.

The relationship between Christopher and the widow was of the strangest. Middleney was surely the last place on earth in which to expect a Platonic attachment, and *yet*—here it was. There was no higgling when Christopher bought Sophia's litter of eleven little pigs. Everybody said he bid for them 'like a friend.' As cousin John Priddle pointed out, if such a spirit of fair-dealing could ever become universal, there would be an end to all business and the collapse of the British Constitution.

None but themselves knew the secret bond which held together these simple souls — the thread of sympathy entwined around their lives.

Sophia presently returned from her errand, and sat down in the kitchen in the corner furthest from Christopher.

'Sophia.'

'Mr. Chiselett.'

Then followed a pause, and Sophia, taking off her bonnet, smoothed her grey hair, pulled the little corkscrew curls on each side of her placid forehead, and settled herself to talk to her guest. She was dressed in black. Since her widowhood she had never discarded it. There are faces over which sorrow passes only to shed a sweetness, and such was Sophia's ; but no one guessed the anxious thought beneath that placid brow. For Sophia came to Middleney a widow, from away down the country somewhere ; and the curiosity of simple people, however keen, is easily satisfied.

'Have 'ee got un, Mr. Chiselett ? ' she presently whispered.

'I 've a-got un,' replied Christopher, and producing a

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crumpled bank-note from his breeches-pocket, he placed it upon the table. Sophia took it up, affectionately examined it, and smoothed out its creases with her plump hand.

It was getting dusk, and she rose, went outside, closed the shutters, and shut the cottage door. The act may appear natural, yet she performed it with a haste indicating a desire for secrecy ; besides, frugal people do not burn daylight, and the dusk is light enough to talk by.

She lit a candle, placed a sheet of paper, a small bottle of ink, and a quill upon the table. Sophia could read well enough, but she wrote with great difficulty.

'Will 'ee please to write now or by and by, Mr. Chiselett ? ' she asked eagerly.

' To once,' replied Christopher, drawing up his chair. He was a scholar, and tested the nib on his thumb-nail as if he would write with style. His blushing pride in his performance contrasted strangely with Sophia's pale anxiety.

' Is the pen to your liking, Mr. Chiselett ? '

' Terr'ble well.'

She leaned over the table. Illuminated by a single candle both faces anxiously watched the completion of each letter as he wrote.

My dear John—

Sophia burst into tears.

' What will 'ee please to say ? ' asked Christopher, nothing being beyond his power as a scribe, although, of course, signing his name was his most flourishing performance.

Sophia could not speak for sobs.

He proceeded with the never-varying formula—

/ take pen in hari — how admirably it described the 167

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process!—*to write a few lines, hoping this may find you in health as it leaves me at present.*

' Oh, Mr. Chiselett ! if anything should have a-happened ! ' was all she could say. Then she hid her face in her hands, and beneath her breath sobbed again and again. ' John ! John ! '

' No, no. I should a-zeed it in the paper. I do assure 'ee I do look every week.' As he spoke the twinkle vanished from Christopher's eyes, and his voice quavered with doubt or tenderness.

' The thought is always a-haunting o' me, day and night, outdoor an' in, that he mid be a-tookt and we never to know it. There's never a strange step down the street, nor a shadow across the path, but my heart do leap and my eyes turn to the door in fear. I'd gi'e my eyesight for one more look. An' eet one night last week when the win' did rattle the ivy agin the pointing-end, there corned a tapping 'pon the window-pane, an' then the thought that he were there. But when I ope'd the door there were nothing but the win' and rain. Some poor bird, mayhap, a-blowed from out o' his roost. But my heart '11 harbour the thought that 'twere he zo long as I do live, unless I should hear. I've a-heard tell o' sich things, Mr. Chiselett. Of volk a-comen' to make known they were a-gone. An' there's never a word do come back. Never. What do 'ee think, Mr. Chiselett ? Do 'ee think he can be dead ? '

With ill-concealed anxiety Christopher rose, fetched a long clay pipe from the top shelf of the dresser, and, having filled it, crossed to the hearth, and bent over the embers of a wood fire.

Sophia leaned across the table, took the quill, and in one corner of the note made a tiny, straggling cross. It

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relieved her heart, like the bestowal of a caress. Then, as if the action were too childish, or the love which prompted it too deep to be displayed, she resumed her former attitude and waited.

'I wouldn't rob myself to zend no more, Sophia,' replied Christopher, returning to his chair 'Perhaps he've a-left the place—or gone across the water. He talked o' gwaine to sea. I count he've a-gone across the water.'

His earnest manner rendered the advice unacceptable. He was thinking only of her, she thought.

'Yes. Zend it,' she cried despairingly. 'Perhaps it'll come to his han'. An' if not what is it to me? What have 'ee a-put down?'

They returned to the letter.

'Gie un my dear love. An' if he could zend so much as a word to ease my heart-----'

Christopher penned it in his own quaint phraseology, but did not sign Sophia's name, for fear it should fall into other hands, he said. Then they inserted the note, folded the letter, sealed it with Sophia's thimble, addressed it, and Christopher put it in his pocket.

'Then 't'ull go a-Tuesday next,' she said.

'Ay, Sophia. A-Tuesday next,' he echoed. 'An then I'll zell your little sparked cow that's gone a-sue the zame time to Langport market.'

The woman burst into tears. 'I shall never know how to thank 'ee. Never,' she said, taking Christopher by both hands.

Then by a tacit understanding the subject was dismissed. Sophia heroically dried her eyes with her apron; Christopher's little twinkle returned, and they fell a-talk-ing of other matters. How old Sam Grinter had a heart so big as a bucket—and Mrs. Grinter a wonderful head-

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piece that could really hold two thoughts to a time—**and** cousin John Priddle, for all his frightened look, could sell a pig so well as any man. For such was the heavenly condition of Middleney that all the folk were friends ; and instead of talking scandal, the neighbours were lavish of praise.

' An' I can't never think but what young Zam have a-caught a bit of a inklen' a'ter our Sabina.'

'Never !'cried Sophia, her face brightening with a woman's never-dying love of romance.

Then Christopher put on his hat, and she took up the candle to light him to the door.

IT was Sunday afternoon, and the parish came straggling out of church, waiting for each other, smiling and chatting under the grateful shadow of the lichgate and the churchyard yew.

There was really a great deal to talk about.

Young Sam was just about bucked-up then, and no mistake, in a fire-new suit of clothes from Taunton, blue, with brass buttons, and buckles on his shoes ; so that, although he looked a little sheepish, the parish might legitimately indulge in honest pride.

Mrs. Grinter said the coat was a beautiful fit, but turned Sam round to prove that the back was ' never in this world cut straight.' But Christopher thought it was nothing to speak of—not more than an inch at most —and he offered to run in and fetch the plumb-bob. Sabina expressed no opinion, but stood smiling in a spring print frock, causing Mr. Grinter to call to mind a spicketty poulet he had known in youth.

Then came Sophia, posy in hand, with her books tucked under her arm.

' Massy 'pon me, Mrs. Grinter ! Whatever do 'ee think ?
,

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' I don't know,' replied Mrs. Grinter, promptly and with perfect truth.

' Didn' 'ee notice nothen' in church ? '

' Nothen' at all. Why, what was it ? '

The parish gathered closely round Sophia.

' But didn' none o' 'ee notice nothen' ? '

' No, not no more than usual. Nothen' at all.'

Sophia drew a long breath and seemed relieved.

' Well, an' 'pon my word ? I've a-zot there all to a trem'le, for fear somebody should vind it out. An' in the Psalms, I were that maze-headed I couldn' hardly stan'—to think what I'd a-done. For I carr'd the " Johnson's Dictionary " to church in place o' the prayer-book. I really must get glasses if it do occur again. Didn' your eye notice nothen', Mr. Chiselett ? '

' Nothen' particular,' replied Christopher.

' N'eet you, Sabina ? '

' Nothen' at all.'

' Well, I be glad o' my life that nobody zaw. But there, things be come to such a hurry-push these days you can't really stop to look to zee what 'tes you've a-got in han'. Beautiful grownen' weather, isn't it ? '

' 'Tes. 'Tes zo,' they agreed in chorus.

Then as 'the crowd dispersed Sam and Sabina walked along the causeway side by side. There was nothing remarkable in that, for they had grown up together from childhood ; but the parish looked and smiled with the mystery which conveys more than words.

' Come down an' sit in the boat, Sabina,' suggested Sam.

' I don't mind,' laughed Sabina.

There is little shelter across the broad moor, on which a moving figure may be seen for miles. No woods, no

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lanes where romance may linger, and the withy beds, even in summer, are often in water ankle-deep. The river has high banks to keep back the winter floods, with a tow-path all the way to Bridgewater. In those days the trade was considerable, and lazy barges still pass to and fro. But on Sunday all was quiet. The boat, of light draught, and square both at bow and stern, lay in an inlet over which a wooden bridge carried on the tow-path. No lovers on earth could long for a seclusion sweeter or more secure than that afforded by the high banks, with pink cuckoo flowers reflected in the smooth water, which also caught the colours of Sam's blue coat and Sabina's speckety gown. Overhead a lark was singing—and on the topmost twig of an ash-tree hard by a thrush, as if his throat must burst.

Falling in love is no joke, particularly in the beginning; and Sunday clothes, especially when new, are a heavy responsibility ; and the boat being narrow, they sat opposite each other, for fear they should get creased. Young Sam looked at Sabina ; and Sabina looked at the bottom of the boat. For although no word had been spoken, everything was wonderfully changed. The frolicsome freedom of their former intercourse had vanished, and the solemnity of church was nothing to the seriousness of young Sam.

'Come across to the old cottage, Sabina, to-morrow night, when you do drave back the cows.'

'I don't mind,' laughed Sabina.

'I'll walk down an' wait for 'ee.'

'All right. I don't trouble.'

'An' we'll sit upon the step and talk.'

'What about ?'

Certainly, by nature young Sam ran more to strength

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than conversation, and the simplicity of Sabina's question quite dumbfounded him. Then she laughed. The thrush sang louder than ever, showing how such things may be done ; and from somewhere or other his passion found an unexpected voice.

' Sabina,' he said. ' We never haven't a-walked together, but we've been acquainted all our lives. I've thought a goodish bit about 'ee lately, an' I don't know any maid I'd sooner zee about my house, if I'd a-got one, an' I would you, Sabina. If we were to catch a mind to each other, I really don't think there's a soul in all Middleney could have one word to say. For father is terr'ble a-took up with 'ee. And mother said only yesterday that you've a-got the coldest hand for butter-making of any soul she ever clapped eyes upon. And I do really believe we should understand each other's minds like, an' be so happy as the day is long.'

Such eulogy delighted Sabina. She blushed and dimpled, smiling all over her face. But thus to plunge head-foremost into the consideration of matrimony, without any preliminary paddling to test the warmth of love, was enough to take a maiden's breath away. For a moment she did not answer, but swayed from side to side and rocked the boat in sheer wantonness.

' Ah ! You'd soon change your mind, Zam.'

'Never. I----'

'You'd zee somebody else to take your fancy and then—Good-bye.'

'Sabina, so sure as the light, there idden another maid ----'

' Not in Middleney, Zam. No. If do depend 'pon Middleney I shall be bound to take 'ee for pity's sake.'

Her mockery and laughter maddened him. Not in 174

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the sense of stirring his anger, but by breaking down both diffidence and self-control, in the necessity to express his love. His words come wildly, as if they did not belong to him. They broke forth like an unexpected flood, when some river, deep and silent, bursts its bank ; and beneath was a note of passion, dangerous and fierce, which startled Sabina with the intensity of its reality.

' Not in Middleney nor anywhere else. I've set my heart 'pon 'ee, Sabina, and now I do love 'ee better than life. I shall never be able to live 'ithout 'ee. If you did ever wed wi' another, I should hate un to the day o' my death. I should wish un dead, though it left 'ee a widow ----'

' Why Zam ! Zam ! How you do talk ! Enough to frighten anybody.'

The girl stared at him in astonishment, then stood up as if to go. But their eyes met, and in a moment he was the honest-hearted Sam of everyday life, whom she had known for years.

' No, no, Sabina. I do love 'ee wi' all my heart !'

' Don't, Zam. Don't. You'll uptip the boat. Hark ! Why if that idden zix o'clock. I mus' go on.'

She jumped up, pulled the boat to the bank by the chain with which it was moored, and leapt out. His kisses had brought a deeper colour to her cheek ; and her beauty in the sunlight became more brilliant—more exultant. Yet, although she was flattered, she felt afraid, and her first desire was to get away without more words.

' Good-bye, Zam. You go up the tow-path, and I'll go across the ground.'

Rapidly she walked homewards. She had never been in love with Sam, and perhaps was not even now ; but his words had raised a strange commotion in her heart

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which neither thinking nor physical activity could quell.

In the road Christopher, in his smock, was lazily driving back the cows.

Christopher and the boy always managed the milking a-Sunday.

VI

CHRISTOPHER S DEALINGS

THE boy drove on Sophia's sparked cow in the early morning ; and in due time Christopher mounted his cart and started for market.

The road to Langport passed before Sophia's cottage, and at the sound of wheels she came running down to the garden-hatch, and waited to have a word with him. Again the care was on her face—the anxiety in her eyes.

' Is it all right, Mr. Chiselett ? '

' Ay, sure. He's in my pocket right enough.' And having glanced around to assure himself that no one was near, Christopher mysteriously drew forth the letter.

' Thank 'ee ! Thank 'ee, Mr. Chiselett,' said the widow, in a voice soft and low with gratitude. ' You won't forget ? '

' I won't forget.'

Either to hide her emotion, or from an instinctive desire not to cause delay, she turned away hastily, and hurried indoors.

Christopher went jogging across the moor behind his old grey mare, an animal no longer young nor fast, but blind of one eye, ragged-coated, and wonderfully conscientious. Such a beast permits a driver leisure for

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thought, and that morning Christopher was deeply meditative. At last they came to the steep hill on the margin of the moor. Christopher having first secured the rein around the movable board which served for a seat, considerably alighted. The old mare crawled zigzag up the knap, and he, in his long drab coat, loitered behind out of range even of her observation. The road went winding through a narrow hollow with an abrupt high bank on either side, damp and crumbling, where the sun never fell, and overarching branches met and blotted out the sky. The bends were short and a traveller seemed quite shut in.

Then Christopher stopped, slowly drew forth the letter, and stood a moment as if in doubt, holding it in his hand. He read the superscription, looked at the seal, and the puckers around his mouth grew deeper than ever. He hesitated, like a man struggling against temptation, and argued the matter with himself. 'She'll never know—never in this world ! ' he muttered. ' 'Tis out of all reason that ever she should find it out-----'

Suddenly he opened the letter, tore it into bits, and returned the bank-note to his pocket.

This done his thoughtfulness vanished. The old mare, with wisdom worthy of her years, was waiting to take breath on the hill-top. Christopher clambered into the cart, whacked her bony old back, and, heedless of rolling stones, away they went down the opposite slope with the reckless safety of the driver who sees no fear.

Bent on business, Christopher admitted no more loitering until, arriving in capital style, he drew rein before 'The Rose in June,' a roadside inn of some pretensions, standing back from the highway.

Before it was an open space, in which stood a dog-cart

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laden with cases, and several nags and market carts abandoned by stress of thirst. Some were moored to the inn rails. Others, requiring no such precaution, might safely be trusted to stand alone.

The boy with Sophia's cow was waiting under the opposite hedgerow.

A native refinement, a natural delicacy of feeling, induced Christopher always to tie up the grey mare with her blind eye towards the rail. Thus she hid her infirmity, and was enabled to look about in moderation and enjoy herself. Such forethought never can come amiss, and, besides, you never know who may come by. These preliminaries concluded, Christopher entered the inn.

The kitchen of 'The Rose in June' was filled with company. Old Sam Grinter was there, so was cousin John Priddle, both full of business, with quart cups in their hands. Looking disconsolately out of the window was a sporting-looking bagman in Wellington boots with tassels, whose horse had fallen lame.

'Yes,' he was saying, in a loud voice. 'I shall have to get something or another to go on. I must get back to Bristol by the end of the week. Loss of time is loss of money. There's such a deal of competition in these days, it doesn't do to stand about, gentlemen.'

'No, no,' agreed cousin John Priddle and old Sam Grinter, in principle if not in practice.

As Christopher sidled up to the window his eye listlessly rested on a dejected-looking animal the ostler was leading from the shafts of the four-wheeled dog-cart.

'Do the gen'leman want a hoss?' he innocently asked, and not a pucker on his face betrayed the slightest suspicion of guile either in himself or other people.

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The bagman smiled. The contemplation of complete artlessness often begets a smile on a really wise man.

'Do you know for a good one, sir?'

Christopher's grey eye, gazing out of the window into the blue sky, appeared to be wandering through space in search of the recollection of a really good horse. At last he admitted that he couldn't call to mind that he did. The reflection seemed to sadden Christopher, and hesighed.

'There's nothing the matter with mine,' cried the bagman, 'but overwork. All he wants is rest or a quiet job.'

'I'll be daz!' chirped Christopher, 'if I could ever vind my mare work enough.'

'She's too good for you, Mr. Chiselett. I've a-zed so hundreds o' times,' put in cousin John Priddle.

'That's the horse I want,' laughed the bagman. 'My work's enough for two. Every day alike and always on the roads.'

'Ah!' said Christopher thoughtfully. 'I wouldn't take—not twenty poun' for thik grey mare, rough as she do look.'

'I don't suppose you would,' cried old Sam Grinter. 'I'll bid 'ee eighteen here-right.'

'Ay, where should I get another like she?'

'But she's too good for you, Mr. Chiselett,' repeated cousin John Priddle, shaking his head. 'Now, why don't you two gen'leman have a chop?'

It was a novel and brilliant idea, but Christopher did not readily embrace it. 'I don't want to part wi' her,' he said. 'She mid look a bit rough now, but you take that mare in, an' rub her down, an' corn her up a bit. She'd be a picture. Why, you'd get down 'pon the road to stop an' look at hei.'

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' Ay. **An'** spare time to do it too,' laughed old Sam Grinter. Doubtless the bagman was well acquainted with the frailties of his own animal, and argued that a horse going upon four legs must surpass any other, however admirable, going only upon three. But it was merely the conviviality of a sporting disposition which induced him to invite the company to drink. No one refused. Christopher confessed to a partiality to shrub, and the conversation became still more cordial.

' I tell you what it is, Mr.—Mr. Chiselett, I think I heard your name,' cried the bagman, extending an alluring hand across the bench. ' I don't mind if I do have a chop with you. You haven't seen my horse, and I haven't looked at your mare. I'll chop without looking. Both in the dark. Just for a fancy deal.'

Now, if the bagman's proposal was prompted by pure reason, Christopher regulated all his dealings by the perception of a first principle. He never chopped without drawing : to draw being the essential feature of a ' tidy chop.' He had recognised from early youth that if you always draw, and get another horse to chop with, you can never go far wrong.

' No, no. I should want all vive poun' to boot,' he said, rising as if to go.

The bagman laughed, but followed Christopher to his cart. Old Sam Grinter and cousin John Priddle also came out, from a commendable desire to pay close attention to business, even if it appertained to somebody else. But Christopher seemed in no hurry to depart. He did not hasten to release the blind eye of the old mare. She craned her neck, and squinted round at them, ostentatiously displaying the white of her one serviceable orb.

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She had her good points, that mare, although she was certainly amazingly poor. But then, a poor horse may improve, and add self-respect to the owner in proportion as she puts on flesh. That is an important feature to be considered in acquiring a horse.

'I'll give you three pound,' cried the bagman.

'Done !' returned Christopher, and seized the bagman's hand with an alacrity and warmth calculated to fill his heart with apprehension.

In a twinkling the horses were exchanged. Christopher pocketed the money, ordered glasses round, which the ostler brought out on a tray, mounted his cart, and from that eminence drank to the health of the bagman. Then he departed without delay, *hoppety-hick*, all the way to Langport market.

Christopher enjoyed a most successful day. After only a couple of hours' negotiation he sold Sophia's cow for 'ten poun' vive,' with the understanding that he should 'throw back dree half-crowns.' Then he hovered around two heifers of cousin John Priddle until evening, offering, refusing, lubricating the wheels of a difficult business transaction with frequent liquid refreshment. Five shillings divided buyer and seller like a gulf. Christopher would not 'spring,' and cousin John Priddle did not bridge the difficulty with an offer to 'split the difference.' With a depth of feeling which did honour to his heart, cousin John Priddle solemnly swore he should rob himself to take even a 'vardeen less.' The most indifferent moralist will admit this to be the worst form of robbery, and Christopher, his voice husky with emotion, replied that they should have to part.

Parting is always a painful matter. The market was over ; two-wheeled traps and horsemen were already

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jogging out of the town in all directions ; so they called for their carts with an ostentation of haste and a determination to forget the past which was truly heroic.

' Good - night, Mr. Chiselett ! ' cried cousin John Priddle, as he picked up his reins.

' Good-night ! ' shouted Christopher ; but with a new nag it was only natural that he should clamber down at the last moment to tighten the breeching.

John Priddle started in style, drove some five-and-twenty yards, and suddenly stopped.

' Hi ! Mr. Chiselett ! Have you a-spokt your last word ? '

John Priddle's voice was always boisterous, but Christopher was a little hard of hearing. Besides, he was intent upon the harness.

' Hi ! Mr. Chiselett ! I suppose you'd better take on them heifers.'

' I thought,' chuckled Christopher to himself, 'them there heifers 'ud come to Middleney.'

So in due time the heifers, the boy, and Christopher behind in his cart, passed in leisurely procession along the Middleney road. From motives of humanity he did not hurry, the horse's lameness being less apparent at a walk. Past ' The Rose in June ' and up the slanting hill they went until they reached the cross-roads, by the knap at the head of the hollow.

There an unexpected sight greeted Christopher's eyes.

As if in fulfilment of Christopher's prediction the bagman had alighted to look at the grey mare. With a laudable predilection for her old home in Middleney, she refused to proceed in any other direction, and the bagman was doing his best to administer encouragement and correction. But endearment could not soften, blows

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could not overcome the obduracy of that old grey mare. Whenever the bagman struck her she recoiled six inches. ' Good mare ; good mare,' coaxed the bagman. But that mare could swallow the coarsest flattery without winking, and she stood as solid as Lot's wife after her accident. The bagman's face looked red, as if heated by argument.

' Why, what's this ? What's all this, then ? Go on wi' the heifers, boy,' cried Christopher.

' This infernal mare I had of you. She isn't worth twopence. She's blind in one eye and going blind in the other. And it's my belief she means to keep me here all night.'

' Do look all likely,' murmured the sympathetic Christopher. ' But she's a fine upstanding mare.'

' And she's got the thrush—and the sweet-itch—
and ----- '

' But didn't you zee that ? '

' I wish to heaven I'd never seen her nor you either.'

' Oh, well ! If you ben't satisfied, I'll have another chop,' said Christopher, soothingly.

The bagman was infuriated, although of course that is no excuse, and replied that he would see Christopher ----- first ; but as Christopher did not mind in the least, why should anybody else ? It did not prevent his putting his shoulder to the wheel ; and thus propelled from behind, and coaxed from before, the mare was at last induced to move from her position of imminent peril.

Darkness was creeping up from the east, and the road was lonely to travel by night. The solitary hill was studded here and there with dark spinneys of pine-trees, and beyond lay the moor with no human habitation for miles.

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'Well,' said the bagman, 'I'll chop then. What'll you give back to boot?'

Christopher raised his hat with one hand, and thoughtfully stroked his bald crown with the other.

'I should have to draw,' he said, in a tone of conviction, which proved it a matter of principle.

Sophia ran down to the hatch, and called after the boy with the heifers.

'Where's Mr. Chiselett?'

'He's a-comen' on.'

At last Christopher came, just as he departed, behind the old grey mare; but in the hollow he had stopped a moment to put together Sophia's money, ready to hand her as he passed the cottage.

She was waiting, as he expected.

'Here's your money, Sophia. Ten pound vive. Two notes, wi' a crown-piece wrapt inside. You'll zee 'tis right.'

But Sophia thought nothing of the money at that time; and Christopher also must have been absent-minded, since he forgot to deduct the three half-crowns he had thrown back.

'Is he gone?'

'Ay, sure. Your letter's a-gone, Sophia,' he said.

'Thank'ee, thank'ee, Mr. Chiselett, for all you've a-done,' gratefully cried the widow, as she put the money in her pocket and hurried indoors.

VII

SOPHIA'S SORROW

WHEN Sophia left Christopher at the hatch her heart was too overburdened with emotion to allow her to think about her money. She placed the notes, just as he had given them, in a secret drawer, in the old oak bureau— one of those drawers all so cunningly devised and similarly constructed to satisfy the simplicity of the owner and offer no difficulty to the least experienced of thieves.

Had Sophia's sorrow lain in no safer hiding-place, it must have been published to the world long ago. No one knew it but Christopher ; but he knew more than he had ever told, even to Sophia. Twelve years ago, when he proposed to marry her, she confided to him the whole history. It was a relief to her solitude thus to unburden her soul, and the weight seemed less when it was borne by two. And ever since Christopher had proved a loyal friend—never attempting to alter her determination, but, once or twice, with characteristic craftiness, preventing her from committing some compromising folly.

Before coming to Middleney hers had been a hard and lonely life.

Her husband was dead. Two years a wife, and then 186

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she followed him to the grave in a little churchyard on a cliff in a country far away. But she continued to hold the barren farm on the hillside with the upper windows looking out upon the sea, and there bred up her only child, a son, to manhood. When the wind, sweeping across the moor, moaned in the Middleney elms by night, it brought a recollection sad as the sound of waves breaking upon a far-off beach. Then, if it were day, she closed her door ; or at night buried her head in the pillow. And always before her eyes arose the same sad vision of two gravestones standing side by side ; the one, slanting and lichen-covered, bearing her husband's name ; the other, twenty years later, fresh and new when she saw it, with a roughly hewn representation of waves and a little ship, and beneath that an inscription to the memory of a seaman of H.M. cutter *Kate*, killed in an affray with smugglers on the night of Jan. 6, 1823.

How clearly it all came back, haunting the lonely hours of night ! The hiding and the dread, the discovery and the suspense, and then the trial, the conviction, and the awful agony of those days of impending death. The sentence was commuted to transportation beyond the seas, but her son seemed as far removed as if he were dead. She had no hope of seeing him again. After that the place, with the sea before her eyes and the roar ever in her ears, became hateful to her. She could not even look at her husband's grave when beside it lay buried the man whom they said her son had killed.

Then she came to Middleney and took the cottage with the field or two and strip of orchard out of which she lived. For years she cherished a vague hope that her son might earn some limited freedom, and she would cross the water, carrying him means with which to

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start afresh. Afterwards, on the recommendation of Christopher, she bought the holding in Middleney, as it happened on the young lives of Sam Grinter and Sabina. And so she lived always, a placid resignation hiding the sorrow in her heart.

But a couple of years ago, late one afternoon, when a white mist hanging over the moor shortened the brief span of a winter day, she was sitting by the hearth. The dancing flame from the wood fire lit up the kitchen, glistening upon the floor and the plates ranged on the dresser shelves.

Then came a step, too quick for Christopher, upon the garden path, and a knock with the handle of the latch against one of the great nails which studded the oaken door.

Some neighbour, perhaps — more probably a tramp ; for times were bad, and mendicants not unfrequently passed through the parish.

She nervously rose to answer the door.

A reflected light from the fire fell upon her, but the stranger was not distinguishable in the gloom.

He stepped quickly into the house, and closed the door carefully, as if to make no noise.

' Is anybody about ? ' he whispered.

' John !'

At the first sound of his voice she knew him, and threw her arms around his neck. All the joys, robbed from those years of loneliness, seemed concentrated in that brief embrace. Then fears followed in their train. He had come back—but how ? The stealth of his appearance, the rapid utterance of his fear, filled her with alarm. Without asking, she knew that he had escaped, and realised the danger hanging over his head.

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' There's nobody in the house,' she answered.

His pilot jacket was wet with the mist. She secured the bolt, and led him into the kitchen to her chair, beside the fire. Then her heart melted. Affection overcame her courage, and she fell on her knees by his side— weeping—stroking his hands and kissing them. But her love, so demonstrative in tears and touches, lay too deep for words. It was he who broke the silence.

He raised her with rough tenderness, and, with a quick glance at the window, led her to the chimney-corner hidden by the high-backed oak settle.

' Will anybody come, mother ? '

' No. No. Unless Mr. Chiselett ----- '

' Who's Mr. Chiselett? '

The interruption was quick, and full of suspicion.

' He've a-bin a true friend in all my trouble, John,' she said. ' The only one 'pon earth. Sometimes he mid look in of a evening, but 'tis a-most past his time to-night. '

' I was bound to come, mother, but I daren't stay long. They might find out where you are, and look for me here. I've walked down from Bristol. '

With motherly anxiety she rose and bustled about the kitchen, getting him something to eat.

' I must go on to-morrow at dark at latest. It wouldn't be safe to stay about or be seen by anybody. I met nobody, and this was the first house I tried. Hark ! What's that ? '

The garden hatch had fallen to behind an approaching visitor, and at the sound he rose hastily, but paused—for danger had made him very wary and alert.

' It's only Christopher Chiselett ! He's a true friend,' she assured him.

YOUNG SAM AND SABINA

' Wait until he's at the door, mother ; then I'll slip into the other room. I should like to put eyes on him first.'

Christopher was full of conversation that evening. A strange-looking man had passed down the village at nightfall. Had Sophia seen him ? With inquisitive craftiness Christopher had nipped down to the bottom of the orchard and watched the other road. But no one went by. 'A terr'ble sight o' these here tramp fellows about to year,' lamented he. ' But the man never went out o' parish. I'd take my oath o' that. I should a-zeed un right enough. He've a-crope in somewhere for the night. That's what he've a-done, sure enough. Didn't he beg to door, Sophia ? Or wer' that why you put down the latch ? Why, what's the matter ? ' Sophia shivered, and stooped to make up the fire. ' Don't 'ee tell up such things, Mr. Chiselett,' she said. ' 'Tes lonely here. An' such thoughts do gi'e a body a turn.'

' I tell 'ee what, Sophia. I'll get a lantern an' the old dog, an' young Zam, an' carr' a pick in my han', an' just walk roun' bimeby. An' take a look into your linhay too.'

The offer was consolatory and kind, yet it was quite consistent with Sophia's kindly nature to refuse it.

'If there's any poor soul about, don't 'ee hunt un, Mr. Chiselett. Let un be. Let un bide in the dry till morning,' was all she said.

Perhaps from a fear of Christopher's gossiping tongue, or reassured by his kindness and evident goodwill towards Sophia, John Sharman, who at the partly open door had watched and listened to all that had occurred, stepped boldly into the kitchen.

SOPHIA'S SORROW

Christopher, sitting by the fire, a hand on each knee and his arms akimbo, glanced round at the noise.

'I should have a-told 'ee, Mr. Chiselett. Oh, Mr. Chiselett, 'tis John,' sobbed the widow.

Christopher remained late that night discussing the situation in all its aspects with a shrewdness and fertility of resource which was really wonderful. But the longer they talked, the more dangerous seemed the vicinity of Middeney for the fugitive. Perhaps they held in exaggerated esteem the intelligence and zeal of constables and tithing men ; but in those days human life dwelt darkly under the shadow of the gallows-tree.

Yet how wily and observant Christopher had been ! That was what Christopher pointed out. ' I should certainly a-fetched young Zam,' he explained, 'if I hadn'a-been made sensible.'

It was a terrible reflection that in every parish and hamlet some law-abiding subject would see and talk, and be ready to answer questions before they were asked. ' 'Tis wonderful how they can track anybody in these days,' meditated Christopher.

The wind sighed and murmured in the great open chimney ; and as they talked it would seem that eyes glistened through winter hedges as plentifully as haws.

' I could hide a man up in church tower, if 'twer' for years,' Christopher gloomily suggested.

By the time he straightened his little bow legs to depart he had undertaken to drive John Sharman within reach of Bristol on the following day. There was no place like the populous city, they agreed, where people take no notice, for being hid.

YOUNG SAM AND SABINA

Mother and son spent the whole night in the chimney-corner. How clearly she afterwards remembered every word that he had spoken !■ for in country places, where incidents are scarce, the exact turn of a phrase has its import, and will be remembered for years. They talked of the past, with its awful catastrophe. ' I don't deny that I was there,' said he ; ' but the man never died by my hand.' They thought of the future with its doubts and dangers, of his hopes of remaining undiscovered in England, or of starting afresh in some other land. And yet, in spite of their affection, and joy, and misery, and of all these subjects of vital importance, he would so often bring back the conversation to Christopher. Who was this Mr. Chiselett ? Why did he come there ? The son appeared to regard with jealous distrust this disinterested friend of his mother. And twice he made this remark, doubtfully, and shaking his head : ' I shouldn't have money dealings with him, mother, if I were you.' Sophia thought of it afterwards, many times, wondering at this strange prejudice.

Yet, if Christopher was cunning, he was certainly kind. He came at daybreak with the old grey mare and a handful of oat straw on the bottom of the two-wheeled cart, and John Sharman lay down out of sight, so that anybody 'pon earth, as Christopher pointed out, would take his Bible oath 'there wer' only one in the cart, an' not tell noo lie nother.' The subtlety of conceiving such a false oath possessed a singular fascination for Christopher. He pictured himself silently watching a judge and jury 'all proper a-sucked-in.' So they jogged on mile after mile, hour after hour, avoiding the towns, but resting in by-lanes and odd corners of grass, with here and there a black circular patch, the vestige of some

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gipsy fire. The contemplation of this masterpiece of management made Christopher happy for weeks.

But Sophia sat and wept until she understood that John was safe, and time dried her tears. And since then she had heard nothing, although Christopher had penned many a letter with consummate skill.

VIII

NOT YET

How sweet it was in Middleney of a summer evening when work was done, and love went wandering 'arm-and-crook ' between the pollard willows, or leaned against a five-barred gate to whisper the old story, punctuated with kisses—all colons, no commas, and never a full stop. Little maids came out a-skipping on the dusty roads, and the boys practised on Jews' harps sitting on the step of the battered old village cross.

Then old Sam Grinter used to carry his cup and long clay pipe into the porch and rest contented in the cool, smoking until twilight. And Mrs. Grinter would bring her knitting and a low, rush-bottomed chair, so as not to sit upon the stone ; and, lo ! how her tongue would go a-wagging, to be sure !

When it became clearly ascertained that young Sam did walk Sabina, Middleney people were delighted. They unanimously predicted a wedding, and weddings were popular, as indeed they deserved to be, in a place where the number is restricted to some half a dozen in a century.

Mrs. Grinter early began to form expectations as to what Christopher would do.

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' He'll have to marry Widow Sharman when Sabina do
go-----
' An' nothing but right, for Sophia must have money,
too-----
' But there, he'll never in this world let Sabina go -----
' He'll let the young folk manage the dairy, and gi'e his
whole mind to dealing.
' He ought to do well for Sabina, an' she his only chile.
' But there, Christopher Chiselett '11 never part wi'
money in this life. He idden that sort o' man.'

And her chin grew thinner and sharper as her brain
became the battlefield of these conflicting opinions.

Swallows darted to and fro ; bats came fluttering almost
to the porch ; and old Sam Grinter puffed his pipe, taking
no more notice of his wife's chattering than of the sparrows
chirping in the ivy. Then she used to walk to the barton gate
and scan the moor, holding a hand over her eyes, not as a
shade, but for minute and distant observation. She rarely
saw young Sam and Sabina. Along the raised tow-path
sometimes passed a horse straining against his chains and
ridden by a naked-footed boy, but the barge was hidden
below the river bank.

Not far from the Ham Mead, beside a willow-skirted
drove, stood an old, disused cottage, with the ruins of an
enclosure where once a garden had been. By whom built,
when, and for what purpose, were all forgotten. The
weather-beaten walls were crumbling, the foolish windows
vacant, and moss and grass grew upon the remaining
thatch. Of the roof stood little but the slanting rafters,
picked bare by wind and rain, and left to decay like ribs of
death upon the desert. Two steps of

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stone projected before the doorway, and within still remained the blackened hearth, a tottering staircase, and an upper floor ; but all the doors had been removed.

Here young Sam and Sabina used to sit side by side upon the threshold, qualifying for the porch. They came at evening when Sabina brought back the cows, and stayed until dark ; and the girl's head, leaning against the doorpost, as it sometimes did in the intervals devoted to general conversation, came exactly to the watermark of the last winter flood.

' How anybody could ever a-lived here, I can't think,' said she.

'The land must a-sunk, I reckon. An' 'eet they do go in boats down Langport Street a'most every flood,' explained Sam.

Certainly the courtship had not been long, yet it did not progress at a pace proportionate to Sam's impatience. Sabina had so many moods, and he but one. He made love with so much seriousness that Sabina laughed, and Sam did not like it. He could not see anything to laugh at ; and sometimes his heart was clouded by a dark misgiving that such frivolity was a danger to the domesticity for which he craved. His idea of happiness was to sit very close to Sabina while she reclined her head away from the doorpost ; and should she find the position a little cramped, Sam, feeling the want of occupation, was sometimes driven to devise other means of entertainment.

'Would 'ee think I could take up thik stone, Sabina, in both han's, an' heave un over wall wi'out touching ? '

He pointed at a rock of monumental proportions partly embedded in the soil of the old garden ; and Sabina thought not.

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But Sam clenched his teeth and held his breath ; then slowly raising the stone, carefully swaying it backwards and forwards, he heaved it over the wall.

It was a triumph of manly strength, calculated to win the heart of an impressionable girl, and Sabina's heart was touched.

' Why, Sam, how strong you be ! ' she cried, in admiration. Pleased by her praise, he brought larger stones and heaved until there was quite a cairn on the other side of the wall.

Then they sat down again upon the doorstep, and Sam kissed Sabina, and she felt that any maid who married such a man might have just reason to be proud.

He knew instinctively that Sabina was impressed. ' How do 'ee like Lower Farm,' he whispered.

It was the untenanted house where she had torn the bough from the lilac bush, three months ago in the early spring.

' I don't dislike it.'

' Sabina, if you'd say the word, we could have the place a-put straight, and marry to once. I've a-got enough to stock un well—what Gramfer Priddle left me when he died. We should sure to get on. You'd never regret it, Sabina—never in all your life. For I'd take care o' 'ee as I would o' my life. An' I'd----- '

' La ! Zam ! Why, you do squeeze the breath out o' me, you do. Why, I ha'n't a-got enough left to say "Yes" wi' !'

He relaxed his hold, and turned round to look in her face.

' Then you would ? ' he interrupted eagerly.

But the girl laughingly sprang away from him.

' I ha'n't a-said so, not 'eet,' she cried, and, stepping 197

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upon a gap, she mounted the wall and walked along, balancing herself upon the tottering stones with extended arms.

The evening breeze fluttered with her sun-bonnet. The gleam of sunset, often so brilliant on the moor, glanced at her bare arms below the short sleeves of her light frock, brightening her rich figure into bold relief against the clustered elms of Middleney, dark under the sombre grey of approaching night.

' Let's go across to the river. There's a barge coming up. When he've a-gone by, let's go out in the boat.'

She leapt down on the other side. Sam had no choice but to follow, and so they crossed the meadows to the tow-path.

Slowly down the river came the heavily laden barge, the water rippling gently from her broad bow. Rushes cold and green cast a mystery of shadow under the opposite bank, dark and abrupt against the silvery mirror upon which the evening sky reflected its clear face.

Sabina leaned back against a willow-tree that the horse might pass.

' Hullo ! Sam Grinter ! How are you getting on ? Good-evening, Miss Chiselett.'

The voice came from the barge.

' What, Mr. Ashford ? ' cried young Sam, in cordial surprise.

' Yes. Here I am, you see. Back again. Have you got any young rabbits, Sam ? '

' Not very many.'

' There's a lot to our place,' ventured Sabina.

' Might I bring over a gun of an evening, do you think ? '

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' For certain,' replied the girl, with glad hospitality. ' Father do want 'em killed.'

She had stepped to the river bank.

Ashford, sitting smoking in the bow of the barge, rose and looked back at her with something of his old admiration.

' How is the apple crop turning out ? ' he shouted, laughing.

' Very well. Come and see.'

' I shall. Good-night. Good-night, Miss Chiselett ; ' and the barge slowly disappeared around a bend of the river.

They got into the boat and cast off, for to-night Sabina was not content to sit quietly in the little inlet, but insisted on rowing up the stream. Her feet against the seat before her, she pulled with untiring energy, managing the cumbrous craft without difficulty. The dairy and the hayfield had given her strength : fresh air and sunlight had endowed her with laughter ; and her heart gloried at the sight of Sam sitting gloomily silent in the stern.

He would have been so much happier on the cottage steps.

'Why don't 'ee talk, Sam ? '

He could not tell ; and that made it doubly irritating to be asked.

And Sabina was very mischievous and teasing that night walking home across the moor. When they parted at the gate of Christopher's home-field, she hadn't a-promised to marry young Sam—not 'eet.

IX

CHRISTOPHER DETECTED

SOPHIA had a way of getting her work done out of hand, then she would water the flowers and sit down to read. Only simplicity of soul made this woman's life endurable. Sometimes she spelt out a new verse, but she liked best to repeat the Psalms she knew, with the open book upon her lap. They comforted her heart, and filled her with thankfulness which overcame her sorrow. Then she would pray for John, and thank God for Christopher's friendship.

One calm summer evening she was putting a nail to the jessamy by the porch, when, catching sight of John Priddle up in parish, she remembered that she owed him two half-crowns. The formality and circumstance of paying a debt possessed a certain fascination for Sophia. Possibly he might pass that way—so she went into the house to be ready with the money.

She took the little packet from the bureau and opened it on the table. She smoothed out the notes with her hand, and took them up one by one with respectful interest bordering on affection. Then crept over her senses a feeling that one of them was familiar ; just as sometimes in a strange place will come a consciousness of

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having been there before. Suddenly the recollection became complete. The thumb-mark, the smear of ink, even the ancient creases more persistent than the recent folds, asserted their identity. She turned it over quickly—there was the little cross.

With the thought of John returned his twice-repeated warning, clearly, almost as if it were still ringing in her ears.

'I shouldn't have money-dealings with him, mother, if I were you.' And Christopher brought back that note the very day he carried her letter to the post.

The suspicion, even then resisted by her innate honesty and singleness of mind, rapidly grew into conviction. It took possession of her, invaded all her thoughts, and flooded her being. Then a troop of doubts and recollections rushed to support the accusations. Christopher's greed for money, in the opinion of some as near a virtue as a vice, was the byword of the neighbours, and they used openly to rally him about it. 'Christopher 'd goo ten mile for zixpence,' they often said.

As the certainty of his perfidy thus forced itself upon her acceptance, the last glimmer of hope was extinguished in her heart. The letters were never sent, and therefore she received no reply. How often she had wondered at the silence ; and Christopher explained it away. 'To be sure it was not safe for John to write '—' Many a thing have a-been found out by a letter.' Thus he lulled her misgivings until they fell to sleep with a sigh. But now that suspicion was awake the most trifling incident assumed importance. Christopher had more than once hesitated—faltered—and seemed unready with these explanations.

She replaced the note in the bureau. 201

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These years of trouble had done so much to numb her spirit of self-defence that she felt no impulse to resist the fraud, or even to refer to it and 'have it out.' She accepted this with the resignation learnt of so many other sorrows. The money was nothing to her, and she gave it not a thought. But friendship, human sympathy, even the belief in mankind so natural to her simplicity, were all gone.

She would never be able to *talk* to Christopher again.

The fear that he would look in as usual aroused her from the broken-hearted stupor which followed this feeling of complete isolation. She could not see any one—speak to any one at that moment. Even freedom from debt lost its charm, and she quite forgot the claims of cousin John Priddle. Least of all could she have faced Christopher Chiselett.

With a heavy heart she crept upstairs, and seated herself on the carved oak coffer at the foot of the bed—not exactly to think, but to be alone with her grief.

It was later than usual when Christopher strolled down to the cottage that evening. In excellent spirits he walked in, and finding no one in the kitchen, tapped with his hob-nailed sole upon the stone floor to attract attention.

But Sophia made no response.

Feeling certain that she must be on the premises, he wandered out of the back door and around to the lincage. But she was not there. Returning, he loitered in the little back house to examine the half-bag of potatoes, a wonderfully fine sample, in the corner. On the little oak table by the window was a solitary dumpling on a blue willow-patterned plate. Sophia had picked an early

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stubbard apple that afternoon, meaning to bake it and revel in an unexceptionable supper.

Christopher deftly removed the apple and inserted a potato.

He had a remarkably light hand for pastry. And he walked on tip-toe down the garden path, taking care to close the latch behind him with gentle circumspection.

But Sophia heard him go.

At last she crept downstairs and locked up the house. She had no thought for supper that night. The dumpling remained untouched in the back kitchen for several days, and then she threw it to the ducks.

X

ASHFORD'S VISIT

VERY few days elapsed before Ashford availed himself of the general invitation given by Sabina on the night he passed up the river on the barge.

The cows were in the home-field now, and Christopher, Sabina, and the boy were busy a-milking when the two-wheeled pony-cart drove up to the low-thatched home-stead. Christopher came at once to welcome the unexpected guest, and take the pony to the stable. Sabina, sitting close by on a one-legged stool, her sun-bonnet pressed against a red cow, turned her face to watch proceedings and silently listen to their conversation.

Christopher was voluble in instructions. His voice sank to a mysterious whisper as he pointed out the best way to go, and the stealth necessary to the circumvention of rabbits.

'Goo along quiet atwixt the wheat an' the hedge, till you do come to a shard wi' a hurdle a-stuck in. If you do so much as crack a dry stick under your voot, 'tes good-bye, they'll all run in. Then look over so quiet's a mouse—an' then git drough, an' kip on to the little copse, an' over hedge in grass groun' ; there you'll see 'em —little and big.'

ASHFORD'S VISIT

At this moment Sabina rose, and moved slowly among the cows, the pail in one hand and the stool in the other.

' Here, Sabina '11 jus' show 'ee the way. And Sabina ! Up top o' ground goo in the wheat a little way an' bring back a half a han'ful o' ears.'

So the girl presently led Ashford across the fields towards the piece of yellow wheat, on the slightly rising ground behind the village. Between the hedgerow and the standing corn they were almost hidden. The scent of the honeysuckle was faint, and the drowsy poppies drooped their heads. A grey wood-pigeon arose, startled, from the El Dorado where the wind had sometime beaten down the golden grain.

Sabina stopped. But Ashford was not ready, and the bird flew away.

' Why didn' 'ee shoot ? ' asked the girl.

' I was thinking of something else, Sabina.'

She blushed. Not from shame or shyness, but because there was a pleasant raillery in the tone in which he spoke her name.

A sparrow came fluttering among the heads of corn as if he would whisper in their ears ; and when they stopped by the gap with the hurdle, and she went in to pick the wheat, quite a flock of small birds flew away with a pleasant whirring of wings.

Ashford sat down on the bank and watched her.

The ruddy yellow of the level crop came sharp against the blue sky, hiding all but the girl's head and bust. Her sun-bonnet gleamed quite white in contrast with the brilliant colours.

'You won't want me no mwore,' she said, coming back with her half-handful of ears. "Tes straight as ever you can go now up to the corner of the copse.'

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' Not want you, Sabina ! What a curious idea ! ' laughed Ashford. ' I pray you will do me no such injustice. Come and sit here and talk to me.'

' I ben't tired,' she replied.

She bound a long stalk around the tiny sheaf, which she placed like a bouquet in the bosom of her frock. Then she stood rubbing some ears between her hands and winnowing the grain with her breath.

' I have thought of you hundreds and thousands of times whilst I have been away, Sabina.'

' I should a-thought you'd had something different to think o'.'

' I had. But I thought of you instead.'

' Ah ! I don't listen to all everybody do tell up.'

' A very prudent determination, Sabina ; and one of which I entirely approve so long as you listen to me.'

' I ben't a-gwaine to. Not so terrible much.'

Yet she remained, her smiling inexperience trying in vain to hide the pleasure his flattery gave her.

' Yes. I've thought of you and the mistletoe—and what an ass I was not to kiss you under it.'

' I shouldn' never a-let 'ee done it,' reflected Sabina.

' Oh ! I don't know, Sabina. You musn't take such a despondent view of things.'

' Well. You do know the way now. So, good-bye ! ' she said, turning to depart.

' Stop. One moment, Sabina, I have always known the way --- —'

He sprang to his feet, and before the girl was aware of his intention had thrown his arm around her waist. But she fearlessly snatched a bunch of stinging nettles from the bank, and pushed them in his face. Then, as he shrank back, she freed herself from his embrace and

ASHFORD'S VISIT

ran off, laughing, between the wheat and the hedgerow.

Fully recognising the hopelessness of attempting to catch her, he did not follow. Presently she looked back, and finding herself not pursued, walked slowly to the end of the field and passed out of sight.

Then Sabina stopped. Rubbing her fingers with dock leaves to allay the smart from the nettles, she enjoyed leisure and peace of mind for a little quiet thought.

Certainly these attentions, in a most unprecedented manner, gladdened her heart. She distinctly wished, although she did not know why, that she had permitted him to kiss her. There would have been no harm in that. For kissing in Arcadia is merely an innocent amusement, and a part of the ritual of every feast, revel, and rural game. But he was not an Arcadian, and therein seemed to lie the difference. His speech, his manner and education, all clearly separated him from the people by whom she was surrounded, and in this distinction lay the reason of her exultation and her fear. The independent spirit of the peasant, too, who pays his way and wants nothing of anybody, was strong in her nature. It gave her an instinctive distrust of one whose phrases sounded so fine that he might be laughing in his sleeve. She fancied he might say one thing and mean another, for even in the tones of his voice she could discover a fleeting, intangible something which her mind could not catch.

So, although Sabina was a trifle tremulous, her heart was glad—glad as a young bird breaking into uncertain song in the early sunshine of his first spring. There was a romance about it—a danger and an audacity which

YOUNG SAM AND SABINA

had been wanting in the somewhat commonplace attentions of young Sam Grinter, whom she had known and liked from childhood, and fully intended to marry— ' a'ter a bit.'

She peeped over the hedgerow (doubtless originally designed for purposes of observation, with a secondary intention of keeping stock from wandering), and watched Ashford steal up to the corner of the copse.

He raised his gun—lowered it—raised it again, and fired.

Sabina smiled, as the country people say, ' all over her face.' She knew full well he had missed ; and for a moment he fell in her estimation.

He was not so very superior after all, she thought disdainfully. And to be afraid of a few nettles, too ! A quick reaction succeeded to her elation, a slight contempt for so ineffectual a man ; and Sabina determined without more ado to be ' upzides wi' un, an' that afore long.'

Under cover of the hedgerow she crept back to the hurdle. There, where the grass was rank from the moisture of the shade, and long from reaching towards the sunshine, and brambles sprawled across the narrow path into the wheat, she knelt and deftly twisted some half-a-dozen stalks of corn round a brier from the hedge and hid it among the herbage, as a poacher hides a snare. It was the old joke of the field laid up for hay, where maidens from time immemorial seek to catch the feet of unwary swains by tying bennets across the path. Then they stand in the distance, well in view, knowing that under such circumstances a youth, with all the wisdom-of the seven ages, cannot look where he is going.

Sabina did not wait to witness the
effect of her 208

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ingenuity. She hurried home ; but the hour at which she usually met Sam was past, and a visitor often entails domestic duties, so she determined to bide about house that evening, and water the little knot of flowers in the garden before the door.

Christopher also did not go far away, but listened to count the reports of Ashford's gun and estimate the prospective bag. He regretted not having sent up the boy to bring back the game. Under any circumstances, that would have been a friendly attention, and it might have been ironical.

It was getting dark when Ashford returned, his hand cramped by carrying a doe-rabbit of great weight and experience, and the mother-in-law at least of half the colony in the copse. By a life of industry such a rabbit develops untold virtues, but tenderness is not among their number. Christopher's observant eye judged her true character at a glance.

'I've managed to bring along one for you, Mr. Chiselett,' cried Ashford, airily.

'Not for me, zir—not for me, thankee. You carr' un home to your friends, Mr. Ashford, zir,' replied Christopher, in his most hospitable and insinuating manner.

'Certainly not ; I-----'

'No, no. I wouldn't think o' it. You come over another night, any time you like, an' you shall gi'e I the next,' conceded Christopher.

'Very well, I accept those terms,' laughed Ashford, putting the rabbit in his cart.

'You'll please to take something, Mr. Ashford. Will 'ee please to walk in ? No ? Then quick, Sabina, bring on a cup o' cider.'

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Whilst the girl was gone Christopher fetched the pony and harnessed him ' there-right.' Ashford walked quickly around, inspecting buckles and bands, whilst Sabina stood waiting with the cup. The pony stamped and pawed with his hoof, nearly pushing Christopher off his little legs.

' Here's luck ! ' said Ashford.

' My respects ! ' drank Christopher.

' I'm afraid the pony won't stand.'

' Get up, zir. An' there's the home-field gate, too. You run on, Sabina, an' ope' the gate.'

' Oh, no, Miss Chiselett. Or, if you will be good enough, ride down to the gate.'

' Ay, that's the way. Then you won't have to wait. Hop up, Sabina. Hop up, maid,' urged her father.

So Sabina had no option but to get up by his side, and away they went into the dark, the pony pulling, the cart jolting on the uneven ruts.

She could not evade him now, and was unprovided with nettles.

' I have a great mind to drive away with you, Sabina, and never bring you back any more.'

His low whisper, so close to her ear, the secrecy of the overshadowing darkness, and the intensity of his manner, all affected her imagination. So real sounded his passion that the foolish words might have expressed a future possibility, but for the home-field gate. This reality startled Sabina. When the thing ceased to be rollicking her heart failed—she instinctively withdrew and became faithful to young Sam.

The pony quieted into his pace, and Ashford put his arm around her.

' You good-for-nothing ! You laid a trap for me and 210

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I fell. That makes twice in one evening, Sabina. You might have contented yourself with once.'

'Don't! Bide quiet----'

'I fell in love. Over head and ears in love, Sabina.

I----'

The pony suddenly shied. Some one had stepped forward and was pushing open the gate. Sabina leapt quickly from the cart.

'Hullo, Sam Grinter! Is that you?'

'I just waited when I saw the trap coming.'

'Miss Chiselett very kindly came to open the gate for me.'

'Aren't you coming into Church Farm?' asked Sam.

'I mustn't stay to-night, thanks. Good - night ! Good-night, Miss Chiselett. Much obliged.'

Young Sam walked home across the field with Sabina, but he was gloomy, and their conversation too scanty and disconnected to overpower the distant sound of the pony's pattering hoofs.

'You didn't come out to-night, Sabina,' said he, in reproach, as they drew nigh to the homestead.

'I couldn', Sam. There were so many little things to do.'

'Have 'ee thought about what I said, Sabina?'

'What's that?'

'Why, about the Lower Farm.'

Sabina was silent a moment. Had Sam been very agreeable in that moment of fear and agitation, she must have promised ; but his tone offended her.

'No. I ha'n't a-thought about that since.'

XI

'WHEN A PIQUE BEGAN'

SUDDENLY the perfect unanimity of Middleney became ruffled in the most unexpected manner. Everything was as calm as summer, and the meadow-sweet by the ditches filled the air with fragrance as sweet as the breath of love ; when, lo ! the seven adult opinions became at variance, and the tongues of Middleney began to wag and agitate themselves, like willow-leaves when the first foreboding sigh of tempest sweeps over the moor.

It began about the little donkey and cart.

Old Sam Grinter possessed a donkey and cart, a quite ubiquitous object in the landscape around Middleney, always blocking the middle of any road by which a traveller sought to enter or leave the village. The anathemas consumed by that patient animal would have satisfied the soul of Satan. But she thrived on them and a few thistles, and was held by the neighbours in high repute. It was no uncommon incident, therefore, when Christopher's yellow-headed boy, in billy-cock hat and smock, came whistling down the road that morning.

They were looking at a ' wonderful nice bullock,' old Sam Grinter and cousin John Priddle. John Priddle was

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pinching the dewlap, and old Sam Grinter with his thumb was probing the rump ; and then they slowly revolved around the object of their devotion in elliptical orbits, like planets around their sun. Old Sam Grinter therefore, although not quite free from gout, was in excellent spirits.

'Please, zir, meáster don't know where or no you could lend the little dunkey an' cart for a bit.'

Too deeply engrossed to answer, the farmer stooped and squinted, absorbed in an astronomical observation.

' Please, zir, m----- '

' That's a lie, bwoy ! Your master do well know I can len' my own as I like.'

' Please, zir, meáster zed, he—he won't do un noo harm.'

' An' that's a lie, bwoy ! If he do use un he mus' help to wear un out.'

The boy grinned from ear to ear, and turned to depart.

' Stop ! ' thundered old Sam Grinter. ' Tell your master, wi' all my heart. To be sure he can have the little dunkey an' cart, an' welcome.'

' An' please, zir,' continued the elated boy, ' meáster zes he don't want un for long, an' zo zoon as ever he've a-done wi' un he'll zend un back -----'

' Zend un back ! ' roared the farmer in affected alarm. ' Dash my wigs an' veathers ! don't you never zend back thik dunkey and cart to Zam Grinter o' Church Varm. Zay I'll zend for the little dunkey an' cart. Borrowers don't never zend back, tell thee meáster. An' for God's sake, don't 'ee never have thik rule a-brokt.'

Thus Mr. Grinter playfully criticised the frailty of borrowing humanity, and again became absorbed with the bullock.

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All would have been well but for Christopher's conscience.

But when the boy with literal fidelity delivered his message, recollection of a horse-collar and a pair o' hamses crowded into Christopher's mind. He discovered a hidden meaning in old Sam Grinter's humour, and his soul sank rebuked. 'There's a bushel bastick, too, bin here theás twelvemonth ; don't 'ee forget un,' he urged.

So when Middleney elms cast long shadows across the roadway, and all the gnats and flies of even were darting zig-zag in the air, seeking whom they might devour, Christopher's boy, with alternate punishment and persuasion, propelled and dragged a reluctant animal past the church wall and village pound, up to the porch of the Church Farm.

The boy had worked harder than the donkey, and beads of perspiration hung upon his freckled brow, like evening dew on a cowslip, as he pointed triumphantly to the basket containing the collar and the hamses.

Old Sam Grinter put down his pipe and sprang to his gouty feet. The return of the forgotten loans recalled his half-forgotten morning joke.

' Bless my heart ! Why, didn't I tell you to tell Mr. Chiselett I'd send for the dunkey an' cart ? '

'Zo I did, zir. Zo I did.' The boy quailed. For old Sam Grinter waved his walking-stick, and being excited appeared to swell with anger as many substances expand with heat.

' Then what do he take Zam Grinter o' Church Farm vor ? '

' I don't know, zir. I don't know.'

' Do he take Zammle Grinter for a nonsense-talker, I wonder ? '

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'I ca'an tell, zir. I ca'an tell.'

'Then take, I tell 'ee, an' drave back for the life o' 'ee. An' Mr. Grinter's compl'ments to Mr. Chiselett an' he'll zend for the little dunkey an' cart, zame as he zaid. You mid lef the tothermy. Dash my buttons ! Why, somebody '11 be taking Zam Grinter for a vool next, I suppose.'

As this awful supposition flashed across the farmer's mind he turned back into the porch and refreshed himself with a drink. Then he sat down and chuckled, wondering, what masterpiece of humour Christopher would invent to parry this fine stroke of wit.

The boy did his best, sparing neither himself nor the little donkey, and eventually arrived before Christopher's gate just as that worthy was departing for his evening stroll.

Christopher stood dumbfounded, with his hand on the 'hapse.' It took him full a minute to find appropriate words.

'Why, you lazy young toad ! Didn't I tell you to take ---- '

'Zo I did, zir. Zo I did.'

Christopher's twinkles and puckers became truly wonderful as the boy stammered out his story. Then he said with great suavity—

' Drive back, there's a good bwoy, as if the very wold Nick wer' 'pon your tail, and zay to Mr. Zammle Grinter o' Church Farm you ha'n't a-brought back the little dunkey and cart, but be only a-comed to ask at what time 't 'ull suit his conveniency to zen' for un.'

Then Christopher continued his errand to Sophia's cottage.

He had not once clapped eyes on the widow since the

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evening when he removed the apple from the dumpling. Sometimes the house appeared to be empty ; once the door was locked ; yet although Christopher, wondering where she might have gone, loitered and watched until dark, his inquisitiveness was unrewarded, for he did not see her return that night. But just now cousin John Priddle's cart had been standing by the hatch, and so he felt assured she must be at home. He entered with great uneasiness, and an instinctive dread that something was amiss. Perhaps the dumpling had disagreed with Sophia.

She appeared to be expecting him as formerly. For days she had wept in secrecy, and her cheeks were thin and pale ; but at last the spirit of resignation, the only reward of so many years of patient suffering, dried her eyes. It gave her strength to meet Christopher.

' Sophia ! ' he said.

' Mr. Chiselett ! '

' Have anything a-bin the matter, Sophia ? '

She paused, in doubt whether the reply which rose to her lips might in reality be the truth, and bent her head over her lap.

' I ha'n't a-bin feeling so terrible well, Mr. Chiselett.'

' There's nothen' like herbs, Sophia. ' Tes better'n all the physic,' said Christopher, pensively. ' There's broom-tay now for a cold chill-----'

She only shook her head.

A great fear crept into Christopher's heart, and his voice quavered with emotion as he asked : ' You ha'n't a-heard anything, Sophia ? '

' You do know I ha'n't a-heard nothen', Mr. Chiselett ! ' she burst out, with something of a long-forgotten asperity in her tone ; then sinking again into her despair, ' Ah ! I sha'n't never hear nothen' noo mwore,' she sobbed, and

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the rich redundancy of her negatives only gave deeper expression to her poverty of hope.

' I've a-made up my mind, Mr. Chiselett,' she presently continued, ' to go away here-vrom to where he last wrote from. Then I shall zee if I can hear anything. I wer' talking to Mr. Priddle by now. God forgi'e me, I told un I had friends there, and he's a-gwain to find out the best way. I shall zell out an' leave Middleney. I've a-told Mr. Priddle to zee to it for me, an' he thought this mid be a goodish time as kip's so plenty and things be dear. I've a-settled it in my mind. I can't zit contented here no longer, but mus' go to once. I've a-got noo heart in the place now.'

' But you can never do it, Sophia,' cried Christopher, in alarm. ' It 'ud never in the world do. Why, you'd bring ruin by only asking for his name. An' if he should write a'ter you'd a-gone here-vrom—or zend from abroad —where 'ud the letter be ? An' you a-lost sight o', mayhap ! No, Sophia. You can't never do it. I tell 'ee, you can't.'

There was fear in his voice, in the urgency of his appeal ; and in the quick, never-resting glance of apprehension, so eager to ascertain the effect of his words, so unable boldly to meet the widow's tearful eyes. Her confidence in Christopher had been of long growth and deeply rooted, even in its fall still retaining some hold upon her heart. He had been kind. Her lingering gratitude, not forgetting that, in tender moments became his advocate, advancing strange inconsistent pleas which her reason presently dismissed as impossible. It could not be the same note. Somebody else must have made a cross.

Now his obvious alarm brought all the certainty of a confession. She rose from her chair.

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' We won't have no words,' she said abruptly. ' 'Tis a woful thing to talk o' breaking off old ties. I've a-had a heartvull o' trouble the better part o' my life, an' now the last straw is a-come to break un. I've a-asked John Priddle to carr' it all out vor me. For I do know more, Christopher Chiselett, than I do tell. I do know—but there, I won't bide to let out more than I do mean to. But I thank 'ee for what you've a-done—afore now. An' so there's a end.'

She had moved towards the door, and with this went out, leaving Christopher alone.

Could she have found it out ? Christopher stood there, staring at the kitchen dresser, and asked himself this question. Her utterances were enigmatical. Sophia must have found it out ! That seemed clear enough, and yet the thing perplexed him greatly. By what channel could she have received testimony of a deception which his subtlety believed beyond the power of discovery ? If any other knew as well as she it must be over the parish long ago. Yet certainly pity had overcome Christopher's fear, for, as he hobbled away on the irregular broken flagstones of the garden path, his little bow-knees looked more rickety than usual.

Besides, he kept muttering as he went—

' Poor mortal ! '

' Poor 'ooman ! '

' Poor soul ! '

As it happened, Christopher's reflections were quickly cut short. From the top of the village came the sound of voices, raised so high and in such a variety of tone that he instantly divined a crowd.

I will say this for Christopher—if the very Old Nick himself came to take in his harvest Christopher would

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wish to be in it. At least he would like to see the reaping as well as the rest. The spectacle of Sabina running, followed by old Sam Grinter in shirt-sleeves trying to run, and Mrs. Grinter, her hand pressed to her side to allay a stitch incurred by having run—all passing beneath the ash-trees at the four cross-roads, one after another, like the movable figures on a magic-lantern slide, proved the occasion to be one of interest and demanding haste.

Christopher, as he afterwards explained, put his 'best lag avore.' But he was late.

The 'little dunkey' had already breathed his last, and was lying across the road blocking the way with a stubborn insensibility to argument never attained during life.

All of the parish were there but Sophia. Everybody we know, and others whose names have never risen into fame. Ashford's pony and cart waited on the other side, unable for the present to reach the gate of Christopher's home-field.

Young Sam was bending over the prostrate body to unfasten the harness. Old Sam Grinter was standing as erect and red in the wattle as a turkey-cock incensed by recent insult. And the boy was so tearful and explanatory that Christopher promptly administered a clout in the head, accompanied with an admonishment not to bide there a-kick-hammeren'. Certainly, in moments of excitement the boy did stammer.

In the humble opinion of the parish the 'little dunkey' must have picked up something—yew leaf for choice; but surely nothing but the inherent baseness of the animal could have induced him to drop at so critical a moment.

'Must a-comed from the churchyard yew by Church 219

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Farm barton gate. He was so right as a trivet when I zend un back the first time,' said Christopher, regretfully shaking his head.

' He couldn' a-bin,' retorted old Sam Grinter. ' He must a-had it in the belly o' un avore that. There's a tree in your garden-----'

' I tell 'ee he didn' have nothen' to our place but a bit o' sweet hay.'

' How do you know what he had ? You did feed un wi' your vinger an' thumb like lollipops, a mote to a time, I spwose ?'

The derision of this suggestion was too much for Christopher, already disquieted by his interview with Sophia.

' Why, you must be a gallis fool, Zam Grinter -----'

' You call Zammler Grinter o' Church Farm a gallis vool, Christopher Chiselett ? Why, I'll crack the little bald crown o' 'ee for tuppence.'

'You crack un. You crack un,' cried the gallant Christopher, taking off his hat, and laying bare that glistening orb in a most enticing manner.

The threat was probably a mere figure of speech, for Mr. Grinter refused with scorn the cordial invitation. ' What—' as he pertinently inquired of the assembled multitude—'should I want a-broken'the girt timbern head o' the man ?'

Nobody could answer, and the argument seemed to tell against Christopher. The parish, with that nimble-ness of brain which is the leading characteristic of the inhabitants of those parts, had already seized the point ; and opinion, although not expressed, was divided upon whether the ' little dunkey ' had died as a consequence of Mr. Chiselett's work or Mr. Grinter's fooling. As a

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rule, the parish fell back upon one incontrovertible position, that the "little dunkey" was so dead as a hammer—sure enough.'

They dragged the carcase beneath the willow-trees between the road and the rhine. They took home the cart. Then they returned to stand mournfully around until dark, enumerating the many virtues of the deceased.

On the following day, not wishing to miss the opportunity, people drove considerable distances to Middeney, for it is well known that the rarest sight in nature is a dead ass. They stopped also to discuss the comparative probability of the yew-tree in Christopher's garden and the yew-tree by the Church Farm gate. Some held with Sam Grinter ; others gave their support to Christopher ; but it was freely admitted by both parties that the "little dunkey" might have had a bit o' both.'

Yet the deep importance of the contention was not fully recognised until it was understood that old Sam Grinter was 'looking to Christopher Chiselett to make the " little dunkey " good.'

And that Christopher had said that old Sam Grinter misht look.

XII

THE QUARREL

BY this storm the milk of human kindness in Middleney was turned completely sour. For such was the complexity of social life in those days, even in that isolated place, that neutrality was quite impossible. To be friendly with Christopher was to give offence at the Church Farm ; and even Sabina's virtues went into mourning after the death of the little donkey.

That Sabina might have a cold hand for making butter Mrs. Grinter did not deny. ' But, massy upon us ! other maids mid have a cold han' I do suppose.' That Sabina was hardworking could not be gainsaid. ' But lauk ! other folk have a-got to work hard enough I should think.'

Mrs. Grinter spent hours in her rush-bottomed chair, reflecting, philosophising, moralising, and regarding everybody and everything with a breadth and variety of vision which were quite remarkable. Every day brought to light some new enormity, upon which in the evening Mrs. Grinter sat in judgment.

'There's that young Ashford a-gone on again to-night. I should think his pony could find the way to Middleney blindfold by this time. One would

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a-supposed that he'd ha' stopped to Church Farm if only to pass the time o' day. But o' cou'se, 'tes only for snipe shooten' he do want to zee Zam-----'

' Don't let un come here. We don't want un to Church Varm,' interposed the farmer.

' An' really, the way he do hang about Christopher's house is downright ondacent, wi' no staid body about, and Christopher wi' all the ferret ways o' un, sim'ly so blind as a bat. But you can't reason wi' love, nor zay so much as a word to Zam. Though Sabina do giggle too much for my mind, an' always did. Where there's nothen' but smiles there can't be sense. Though that's what's most a-wanted in a 'ooman a'ter all-----'

' Don't let's hear no more about Sabina. I won't have Zam to think no more about Sabina. Where is Zam to-night ? ' roared old Grinter.

' He can't be to Christopher's, for certain, for Christopher do bide at home of a night now ----- '

' To Christopher's ! Don't let Zam ever so much as put voot into Christopher's----- '

'For he've a-quarrelled, so 'tes thought, wi' Sophia Sharman. Though nobody don't know the rights o' it. An' I did just look in 'pon Sophia this a'ternoon, but never a word 'ud she let out. But where there's so much secrecy there must be a somethen', for you can't be so silent as all that about nothen'. An' she've a-asked cousin John Priddle to do her business for ----- '

' What ? Asked cousin John Priddle ! Idden there anybody in her own parish then ? She must think herself poor in neighbours to run off to once to cousin John Priddle. I suppose Christopher have a-robbed her an' now she've a-found it out. But there, don't go near her no more, if she do include we wi' Christopher. Don't

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have no more to do wi' Sophia, if that' her thought about Zam Grinter o' Church Varm.'

' An' I've always a -spared her anything she've a-needed, too. But I sha'n't feel the same, nor stop to chatty now when we do meet. An' I won't never zend to beg o' her for no more herb-tay, not ef I be so drawed-up as a dog's hind-lag with pain. For actions do speak louder than words, an' she might ha' passed the compliment, for neighbours be neighbours a'ter all, though do really sim that they do quarrel nowadays more than folk that don't zee each other from year's-end to year's-end. An' I shall never think so much o' cousin John Priddle nother—but there, let's have our bit o' burd and cheese, for Zam '11 be here in a minute no doubt.' And so Mrs. Grinter bustled from the porch into the house to see to the supper.

It was getting dark, and presently the farmer knocked the ashes from his long clay pipe and followed.

They had finished their frugal meal and were ready to go upstairs when, at last, young Sam came in.

The unhappy complications of the last few days had produced a change in his demeanour, just as a cloud will alter the aspect of a landscape. The open-air frankness of his disposition was hidden beneath a heavy gloom, and he took his seat upon the settle without a word of explanation.

' Did 'ee zee young Ashford, Zam ? ' sharply asked his mother.

' No,' was the short reply.

' Tidden much odds about he,' interposed the farmer.

' I ha'n't a-heard his wheels go on,' said Mrs. Grinter.

' Don't 'ee wait,' said Sam. ' I'll **put** everything away an' dout the candle in a minute.'

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Left alone, he sat listening awhile, and then went to the front door. It was one of those summer nights in which the stars look pale and darkness only lurks in corners where even the day is dull. He walked to the barton gate. Upon the moor he could dimly distinguish the white road between the gloom of the pollard willows on either side. He was sure that Ashford had not returned, and the certainty that he must be with Sabina filled his heart with angry passion such as it had never before experienced. He went slowly along the causeway by the church wall, crossed the road, and stood by the entrance to the home-field. There was still a light in the lower window of Christopher's homestead, proving clearly to Sam's mind the presence of a lingering guest. He had not seen Sabina that evening, and it was probable that Christopher had told his daughter that he was not to come to the house. That was the natural consequence of this all-embracing quarrel. But she might have come out had she wished. Had her love, he told himself, possessed but half the impulse of his own, she must have gone to the old cottage, with the certainty that he would have come. There is an intuition about true love too keen to need the formality of invitation and previous arrangement ; and Sabina must know well enough that she had only to show herself in the village, on the moor, or anywhere, and he would be by her side. An unutterable despondency clung around his heart, telling him that Sabina did not love him. There was no procrastination, no evasion, no ' not yet ' about love as he felt it. But although Sabina was often compliant enough, passion had never carried her into any admission. Everything ended in levity and laughter with her.

He entered the home-field and walked across the grass

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towards that corner of the house where shone the window. He stood there by the wall, where the gloomy yew-tree towers high and dark, but from no definite intention of prying ; only because his passion for Sabina impelled him to the place, with all the restless longing of love-sickness.

Presently Christopher came out, swinging a lantern as he hurried across the yard to the stable, doubtless on his way to fetch his visitor's pony.

Never before had Sam harboured malice against any human creature ; and now, whence it came, or why, he knew not, but within his heart surged a tempestuous anger as the thought flashed across him that Sabina was alone with Ashford. The idea was unbearable to him. The admiration openly expressed on the moor and manifested unconsciously that evening by the river came vividly to his recollection. It stood out in exaggerated colour, for, to Sam's straightforward simplicity, to be aware of a girl's presence was a great step towards being in love with her. He could scarcely stand there in silence. He clenched his teeth in a fever of excitement and jealousy.

Then suddenly Sabina ran out from the door with interjected utterances of refusal intermixed with laughter. He could distinguish her white frock, and that Ashford, laughing also, was holding her.

'You sha'n't. I'll holler.'

'I am quite sure you will not,' softly whispered Ashford.

A whirl of frenzied thoughts chased each other through Sam's brain. He would intercept Ashford in the road, and shake the life out of him. There was no depth of indignation in Sabina's refusal, and he would cast her

THE QUARREL

from his heart for ever. He would leap the wall, and pour his wrath and scorn upon them both -----

'No! Steady, little ho'se. Woa, ho'se.'

At the approaching sound of Christopher's voice, Ashford released Sabina, and Sam drew closer into the shadow.

'Ride down to the gate with me,' pleaded Ashford.

'I won't.'

The refusal was decisive, and there was no time for repetition of the request. It allayed Sam's anger, even though he recognised the spirit of waywardness which had so often destroyed his own peace of mind. But now her father had come, and Ashford was forced to depart.

'Good-night,' she said, and shook hands with ceremonious politeness. Then she turned back towards the house.

In reality she waited in the garden, behind a little iron entrance gate, where, as a masterpiece of ornamentation, honeysuckles and clematis had been trained on a rough trellis, to form an arch over the path. Beneath the mass of foliage and fragrant flowers Sabina was quite hidden.

'Here! Sabina '11 ride down wi' 'ee again. Why, where's the maid to? Here, Sabina! S'bina!'

She did not answer her father's call. No doubt it amused Sabina to stand within arm's-length, and hear him raise his voice.

'The maid's a-gone, I reckon,' he reflected, laying his lantern on the grass. 'There, I'll just hop up myself.' Then as the cart disappeared in the gloom Sabina came to the gate and laughed.

'La! Sam, how you do gaily anybody!'

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In finding her thus unexpectedly alone Sam had sprung forward with startling suddenness.

The girl's refusal to drive down to the gate softened his jealousy, and love regained its ascendancy.

'Why, Sabina, you ha'n't a-bin out to see me once.'

She accepted the reproof, and in her reply was quite an unexpected note of tender remonstrance and affection.

'How could I, Sam ? Why, ever since the bother, father have a-bin so crabbed and surly as anything. He've a-dared me ever to speak to 'ee again. An' he's always at home now. If he knew you were here, there'd be a fine row. Go roun' to the milk-house door afore he do come back, an' I'll come out.'

Sam hurried round to the north side of the house, and found Sabina where the roof slants down so low that an upraised hand can easily touch the eaves.

'I can't never think,' said the girl lightly, 'whatever's a-come to the parish. Why, one 'ud really suppose that folk mus' be all a-witched or something. Here's father have a-falled out wi' Sophia Sharman, zim-zo. An' we mus'n't speak to nobody at Church Farm. Why, we sha'n't be able to ope' our mouths to a single soul by this time next week, if things don't alter. Really if Mr. Ashford didn' come-----'

'I can't think why you be so much a-tookt up wi' he !' interrupted Sam, and the old anger crept back into his heart, making his manner sound harsh and aggressive.

'I don't dislike un so very much,' replied Sabina sharply ; and that with the good folk of Somerset is oftentimes a form of highest praise.

'Zo do look ! To zee how you do go on wi' un.'

'I go on wi' un ! Sure, then, that is something !' 228

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' You were up in the piece o' wheat together ; an' you bide an' watched un wi' all your eyes.'

' I looked over hedge to see un let off his gun.'

' Well, then, I won't have 'ee look over the hedge at un.'

' Heart alive ! That is something, then ! Well, 'pon my word, then, Sam, if I've a-walked wi' 'ee, I ha'n't a-promised 'ee, nor said I 'ood—not 'eet. I can do as I be a-minded for a bit, I suppose.'

' If you do talk to he so much you won't walk wi' I, then.'

' Sure ! I can walk wi' myself—and much pleasanter, too, when volk be so bad tempered.'

' Ah ! he've a-turned your head wi' his fine talk an' that. He've a-made 'ee so stuck-up as hiszelf -----'

' I'll never speak to 'ee again, Zam ! Never ! ' passionately interrupted the girl, and she turned with her hand upon the latch of the milk-house door.

' Then, if that's your mind—so 'tes ! ' cried Sam.

Was this the expression of Sabina's determination ? She hesitated. It is the deadliest insult to accuse a person of the Somerset yeoman blood of social aspiration. There is pride enough, God knows, in every heart ; but no snobbery in that sturdy race. The words ' stuck up ' had pierced Sabina to the inmost soul, and rankled there, perhaps from her consciousness that Ashford's admiration had warmed her heart with an unholy pleasure. Yet she lingered a moment, and did not lift the latch.

' An' when he've a-made a fool o' 'ee, an' got tired o' your company, an' you do come to zee what his pride do really think o' 'ee, in the heart o' un—then, mayhap

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' Sabina ! S'bina ! ' piped Christopher's shrill voice from within.

She softly and noiselessly opened the door, fearful of the slightest sound, and without a word carefully closed it behind her.

She was in a tumult of conflicting feelings, but had no time to think ; and quickly slipping off her shoes, she ascended the warped elm staircase into the cheese-room, and by a passage reached the front of the house.

' I be gone on, vather,' she cried. ' Did you call ? '

' All right, maid,' returned Christopher.

She hastened to her room and peered from the little square window close under the thatch, looking out upon the home-field and away across the moor.

Loath to leave, and in his heart hoping that she might return, Sam had loitered, and she could distinguish him now standing beyond the garden wall. She knew he was waiting to see the light in her window, but that night, by the chance of circumstances, she was in darkness. The reality of his love, the fidelity which was above all doubt, even the habit of regarding him as a lover, all filled her with a longing to open the window and speak to him. In comparison with these, the other man was but a phantasy and a dream, and her trifling no deeper than caprice. But she did not. Her native pride, forbidding any such concession, overcame the impulse, and presently she saw Sam turn away and fade into the gloom.

Then her resentment returned with tenfold force. Why had he gone so soon ? In another minute she would have spoken—at least, she thought so—and his departure magnified itself into a desertion. And it was final. No ; he would never come back, and she-----

THE QUARREL

How could Sam dare to say that Ashford was fooling her ? He could have no knowledge whether Ashford loved her. The mere suggestion that love so passionately uttered was not serious seemed an insult to her sex. Not that she wanted this stranger's love, or had ever thought of it until he spoke to her the other night in the wheat-field and in the pony-cart. And Sam was gone.

Carried away by a whirl of conflicting emotions, she threw herself upon the bed and sobbed as if her heart would break.

XIII

CHRISTOPHER'S CONFUSION

So the unanimity of Middleney was shivered to atoms, and when the people came out of church they no longer stood by the yew-tree or the lichgate to exchange their simple confidences, nor walked along the causeway in friendly conversation, but dispersed with an independence and personal dignity worthy of a loftier civilisation. They affected not to notice each other, yet it was universally observed that young Sam passed Sabina, and Christopher bestowed upon the widow only a hesitating nod. But when the others had passed on, he stood in the road and watched her. She went so slowly and did not once turn her head. It was the first Sunday in all these years (except when the earth was frost-bound and the flowers dead) that she had appeared in church without a posy. Christopher was not sentimental, but he thought of that also.

He raised his hat with his right hand and stroked his bald crown with his left. Christopher was in a terrible quondorum, sure enough, and did not know what to decide. With all his cleverness and fertility of resource he began to find himself as thick-headed as a dumbledary.

'You zee,' he reflected aloud to himself, 'I've a-232

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desaived the poor soul; an' I've a-tookt her money.
An' now that she've a-found it all out, perhaps I ought
to zend back the money. I don't know but what I did.
An' 'eet there's the dree half-crowns I drowed back upon
thik cow. I didn' ought to lost dree half-crowns----- '

And so, like a true moralist, he fairly weighed the matter as between himself and Sophia, and thought of sending her a letter. Yet an explanation concerning three half-crowns must of necessity be long. It was conceivable that cousin John Priddle might be called in to help decipher it, and there would be a pretty kettle of fish. He was confident that Sophia would never breathe a word to any human being. She had learnt reticence in the school of adversity. But years of close observation of men and manners had taught Christopher that you must not expect discretion of a ginger-headed man ; and although cousin John Priddle was not by nature talkative, he never failed to tell all he knew.

After much meditation, therefore, Christopher went home to fetch the money, and then proceeded towards the cottage.

It had been lately whitewashed, and glared in the afternoon sun. But the jessamine beside the porch looked cool, and scented honey sweet ; and the red rose between the lower windows was covered with full-blown flowers. There are days towards the end of summer when Nature seems to sleep in the sun—when leaves are still and birds are silent, and the only sound is the drowsy humming of the drone. So it was that Sunday afternoon.

Christopher did not, as formerly, enter uninvited, and his knock sounded unnatural in a place where the most unexpected neighbour was wont to walk in and announce himself by asking, ' Is anybody in house ? '

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Sophia had taken off her bonnet and was sitting down to rest. She rose and hastened to the door. The eager look in her eyes vanished when she saw Christopher, but his quick glance had detected it. He knew its meaning and the long-deferred hope which summoned it. The old spirit of expectation still lived, but to-day it raised a doubt in his mind, and made him wary.

' Sophia.'

' Will you please to walk in, Mr. Chiselett ? '

Her homely breeding admitted of no less, but the tone was not cordial. He followed her into the kitchen, and she sat nursing the bonnet on her lap, holding it by the string. She was waiting for him to speak.

' I wer' fo'ced to come down, Sophia. For I've a-got something to tell 'ee—something I ought to make right. You'll call to mind how I tried to persuade 'ee not to zend the money. But you wer' bent upon it, an' nothen' 'ud turn 'ee vrom it. But I couldn' a-bear to zee 'ee a-robbing o' yourself, an' zo I never zend the letters, but I paid 'ee back the money 'pon the deals. I could make it all clear to your memory for every penny, Sophia. First there wer' the little sparked heifer: I gi'ed a sovereign an' a crown piece more'n I told 'ee—an' well wo'th the money too — an' the two calves last May twelvemonth ; an' next there come the zeven little pigs, I -----'

' Then you never zend none o' the letters ! nor never a word from that day to this ? ' she cried. ' Why, if you've a-paid me back, you've a-robbed another; an' what good can it ever do to a lone body like myself, wi'out so much as a friend in the world ? I can never forgi'e 'ee, Christopher Chiselett ; an' he mid be in want an' in wonder why there wer' never a word. An' if I

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hadn' a-vound 'ee out, though how I sha'n't-tell 'ee, belike you'd a-gone on to Doomsday an' I none the wiser an' he none the better off'

Christopher, his eyes fixed upon the stone floor, listened in silence until the end. Then he glanced narrowly at the widow. She was not looking at him, but her cheeks were flushed with indignation, although her eyes were dry. Her words had been a revelation to him, for he had never dreamt that she had discovered about the money. Even now that seemed almost impossible, as his mind pictured the lonely hollow and the fluttering fragments of paper by the roadside. Perhaps some one* had pieced them together, or read and repeated some detached words.

For Christopher had practised a deeper subtlety upon the widow, which in the ambiguity of her lamentation he had believed discovered.

' Perhaps I wer' wrong, Sophia,' he said ; ' but I acted for the best.'

' You do think so much of money, Christopher Chiselett, that you must needs take care o' other people's,' she retorted, angrily. ' I be'n't a chile at my years, that you should take things out o' my own hands, an' put me off wi' falsehoods. If you be stingy wi' your own, you needn't be stingy wi' other people's. I shall never forget it to my dying day—that you've a-said one thing an' done another. You've a-bin a false friend, an' words '11 never alter that. An' now there's never a soul to speak to, for I shall never tell another. I shall never trust to words no more.'

He struggled against a rising inclination to tell her all. Then, although she might still blame him, she would understand. But he could not. His courage

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faltered, and the words would not come. As a last resource, he took the coins from his pocket and began to slowly count them, although their correctness was evident at a glance.

'There were dree half-crowns I drowed back 'pon the old cow that I never tookt out. An' there's the rest, four poun' an' the oddses. You'll vind it right, an' that do square it up,' he explained sadly, rising and placing the money with respectful neatness on the dresser.

She took no notice, and indeed, the little pile remained there many a day.

Christopher turned to depart, and when halfway across the kitchen he stopped.

The business aspect of things was never far remote from his mind.

'I shouldn' make no change, Sophia, if I were you,' he said anxiously ; 'but if you did make up your mind to zell the little place, I'd gi'e 'ee a better price than anybody. I could, you zee, for do lie close-handy for me '—he waited, as if hoping that she might promise this, but she remained silent. 'But you'd be no better elsewhere, an' you'd never find un—never in this world ! He's gone -----'

Again Christopher paused a moment.

'I've a-made inquiries, Sophia—an' he's gone to sea.'

But Sophia only shook her head. She did not believe in Christopher any longer.

XIV

THE DUSK O NIGHT

THE quarrel between young Sam and Sabina, which might easily have passed as a mere lovers' tiff, was destined to assume greater proportions and a deeper intensity. A few evenings later Sabina stood by the gate, after the custom of villagers in times of peace, when, work being done, they cluster in the shade to chat or exchange confidences across the road. Occasionally a traveller from some adjacent parish may drive past, and that gives excitement, and lends the charm of uncertainty to the pastime. But to-night the population did not pour into the street, and Sabina stood in solitude.

In her heart was a panting anxiety that Sam might come.

In the extreme simplicity of their love she had not learned until this separation how necessary his presence had become to her. Perhaps she did not know it even now, for beneath her solitude still burned an angry resentment whenever she recalled his insult of the other night ; only she thought of that at rare intervals, while she stood looking towards the Church Farm all the time. Once Mrs. Grinter popped down to the barton gate, but popped back again with all the alacrity of a frightened rabbit.

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Farmer Grinter had begun harvest, so her father said, and perhaps Sam was working later than usual that night. But she heard the reapers pass singing down the village, and knew that he must be free.

Then she walked down to the river and slowly along the tow-path high above the moor and well in view. He could not fail to see her, she was sure, and this was her offer of reconciliation. She waited by the inlet, where the fishing - boat was still moored, and looked back towards the village. She felt certain he must come. Or if he would only walk down to the old cottage she would meet him there. And so she watched with a full confidence in the irresistible attraction of their love.

But no one came in sight. Middleney clock was striking—an hour later than the time at which they used to meet, and Sam had made no sign. She no longer expected him. And her first feeling of disappointment was followed by a pang of wounded pride that Sam should have been able thus to reject her advances. Not that she wanted him, sure ! He was welcome to be as surly as he liked for all her. An' really, if he were so masterful now, when she hadn't even a-promised him, what he'd be like in years to come was more than Sabina could tell. Thus she comforted her heart with scorn, but at the same time wished she had not come.

The perceptions of Middleney are so remarkably acute, its deductions so rapid and unassailable, that Sabina knew the parish would watch and interpret her every movement. Her imagination pictured Mrs. Grinter peeping over the barton gate. She even fancied that Sam might see her and grimly laugh.

She took the chain and dragged the boat through the rushes to the bank. She had no desire to row, but only

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to be out of sight ; and she clambered down, stepped on board, and seated herself looking towards the river.

The evening was extremely still. There was no wind, and the summer river, in places paved with the flat leaves of the water-lily, had neither a ripple nor a sigh. The only sound to break the silence was the occasional rising of a dace, or when a swallow, darting by, dipped the water in his flight.

By contrast, or because it afforded no distraction, this serenity only intensified her unrest. It was all Sam's fault. She would have promised him long ago if he had only had sense enough not to be so serious. Yet he loved her. Nobody would ever love her like Sam. Then Sabina knew that a terrible calamity had fallen upon her life.

A sound very slight and regular fell upon her ear, and presently she detected the plash of oars in the distance. Parties sometimes rowed from Langport in the cool of the day ; but Sabina could hear no voices, although she listened attentively. Hoping to escape observation, she caught hold of the rushes and dragged her boat further into the creek.

Quite close to her the rowing ceased.

Sabina was inquisitively craning her neck to peep, when suddenly a light skiff was thrust swiftly into the nook. It bumped against the fishing-boat, and scraped the side with a grating sound. The single occupant turned his head and laughed as he ran alongside Sabina.

Their meeting was the merest accident in the world, but instantly there flashed across the girl's mind a fear lest any one of Middleney might find her thus alone with Ashford. If Sam, hindered by the harvesting, should come after all ! It must appear too apt and too secret to

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have fallen thus by chance. Neither denial nor explanation could serve her turn, and reconciliation would be for ever impossible.

Ashford gaily held out his hand. 'You observe, Sabina,' he laughed, 'the unerring instinct which has brought me to you as straight—as this winding river.'

'I was just going on.'

'But now you will change your mind. Come in with me. I'll fit up the rudder, and you shall steer. You shall direct our destiny, Sabina.'

'No!'

She flatly refused. That unreality of manner always seemed to mark a social difference, and awakened her distrust.

Perhaps he recognised this, for his repetition of the invitation was quite natural and unaffected.

'You will not be losing time, Sabina. I'll row you up to the wooden bridge and there you will be nearer home.'

It occurred to her that by accepting his suggestion she might avoid walking back by the tow-path, and, escaping observation, should enter the village from the other side.

But still she hesitated.

'Ah! I do know you too well, Mr. Ashford.'

'You may bind me with oaths, Sabina. I give you my word I will not interfere with you in any way.'

She glanced longingly at the elegant little pleasure-boat, so light and painted blue, with a crimson cushion on the seat. Such luxury certainly possessed the fascination of novelty, and it was unlikely that any one would see.

'An' you'll let me out so soon as I be a-minded.' 240

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'Upon the expression of the slightest wish, Sabina, you shall disembark.'

After all there was a sort of drollery about the man, and when their eyes met they could not keep from laughing.

'Pon your word?'

'Upon my word and honour! One moment; I'll bring her against the bank by the corner. That'll be easier. That's it.'

A minute later they were mid-river, and he was pulling very leisurely against the stream. He took a couple of strokes and rested on his oars. The little cockle-shell went gliding on under the soft shadow of the willow-trees, and Sabina's agitation was left behind. Perhaps company had driven away her gloomy thoughts; perhaps she drank unconsciously the poetic beauty of the surroundings, or was lulled into forgetfulness by the smooth movement of the boat; but now she felt no insecurity. Her face glowed with animation and sparkled with delight. She paddled with her hand in the clear, cool water, with the simplicity of a child.

'This is an unexpected piece of fortune, Sabina,' he said. 'I hoped to see you, of course. I meant to walk across to the farm to inquire about the reaping.'

'If do hold fine they'll go into the wheat to-morrow, an' father do lot to get it all down a-Thursday.'

'I am coming then. But how strange to find you like this, Sabina! Just where I meant to tie the boat. I did not see a soul all the way from Langport. I believe we might row up and down here until Doomsday without meeting anything but the barges. Do you sit there always of an evening?'

'Not very likely.'

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' But you might come down earlier, and we could spend hours together. I shall row down the river every night. I believe you have bewitched me, Sabina. I can think of nothing but you.'

' But you've a-stopped rowing. We shall never get up to bridge by dark.'

He gave one vigorous pull, and resumed in a low voice scarcely above a whisper.

' I am going back in about a month, so you must not be cruel. You would neither give me a kiss the other night nor say good-bye. But I shall commit no more robbery. I shall wait for a free gift next time.'

' Next-never-come time.'

' It will soon come. You will be softened, Sabina, by my self-restraint. Then you will have complete confidence in me ; then you will recognise that such patient fidelity must not be allowed to pass without reward, and then ----- '

' I don't listen to it all.'

It would have been more truthful to say that she thought it all great nonsense.

'You cannot help listening to every word on a beautiful still night like this. There is nothing else to hear. Not a breath of wind ; not a sound, except the gurgle of water under the boat ; and that keeps on saying, " He came miles to see Sabina, and will row back in the dark, thinking of her all the way."'

'Why, the moon's up a'ready, afore the daylight is gone,' laughed the girl, pointing before her ; ' I can see his face there in the water. 'T'ull be so light as day.'

He looked up into the darkening sky, at the pale moon, and peeping beside it one bright star. A solitary heron, on its broad wings, was flying steadily to its home

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in some dim wood beyond the hills. The charm, the beauty, the mystery of it all fell upon him like a fascination. The romance mounted into his brain, and loosened his tongue like wine.

' I shall come every evening. There is a nook below the withy bed quite out of sight -----'

' So as nobody should see 'ee ? ' she interposed quickly. The taunt stung him into protestation.

' No. Only because I want you quite to myself.

Why should I care about being seen ? I only care about being loved. If I were sure of you, Sabina, I would snap my fingers at everybody else in the world. I would not listen to anybody. Come down the path to-morrow and you will find me there, for I cannot stay away from you. I love you better than anything—better than -----'

' Hush !'

Through the deepening twilight the girl perceived before them on the river-bank a stooping figure. It stood beneath the level of the tow-path and appeared to be bending low as if to keep out of sight. Her first feeling was fear that Sam might be watching them ; then indignation at the idea of such a thing. In anger he left her, of his own accord, and had taken no steps to make up the quarrel. A glow of exultation quickly replaced her doubts. If there were but one man and one maid in Middeney, he would see that she was not entirely dependent on her native parish for attentions. Besides, Sam could not now suppose she had come out to meet him and been left to disappointment. It would appear that she walked to the river, expecting Ashford.

Ashford glanced over his shoulder and continued to row.

At the sound of oars the figure slowly rose.

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woman's head and shoulders appeared above the dark line of the tow-path. Then she raised a hand to her brow as if to concentrate attention upon a difficult observation. But not until the boat came quite close was mutual recognition possible. 'Sabina!' 'Mrs. Sharman !'

The widow remained narrowly watching them out of sight, and then bent down again. She was picking tansy, for Sophia held the opinion that herbs yielded a richer virtue when gathered under a growing moon, just at the dumps o' night, in the fresh fragrance of the falling dew. A few minutes later the boat reached the bridge. A white mist was rising from the river, and the air suddenly grew cold. The scrutiny of Sophia, and a touch of surprise in the tone of her recognition, had also chilled the conversation. Ashford held the boat while Sabina stepped upon the bank.

' And you'll come to-morrow evening ? ' Sabina was not so sure of that. She would not promise, and with a brief ' Good-night,' hastened towards the village.

He watched her fade into the darkness, and then pushed out into stream. Everything was becoming indistinct, and the boat struck one of the piles as he passed beneath the bridge. The bubble of his romance was broken ; his sentimental visions vanished ; and in a moment he came back to sane reality.

He had really made love to the girl ! What a fool he was !

Then he rowed back to Langport.

SOPHIA must be exonerated ; she did not breathe a word. Yet in a short time it was widely known that Sabina was meeting Young Ashford every night, and that they sat together for hours in a bit of ditch-place below the withy bed. Cousin John Priddle heard it mentioned in Langport Street, and ^carried the news to Sutton without delay. It travelled down to Bridgewater on one of the barges : but old Sam Grinter first heard a bit of a whisper to Glastonbury market, where the interest of the matter chiefly centred around old lawyer Ashford, a terrible starchy old gentleman, well known and feared in that part of the country for years. What *he* would think appeared more worthy of prediction than what Ashford and Sabina might do.

Nothing but pride prevented the re-welding of the unanimity of Middleney in one vast moral movement. Everybody considered that Christopher ought to be told, but that the duty to tell him devolved on somebody else. This, however, is the view of duty universally accepted by the best people beyond Middleney.

A sullen moroseness settled upon young Sam, now that he ceased to see Sabina. He worked at the harvest-

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ing with a fierce industry which seemed superior to fatigue ; but there was no merriment in his heart, and he did not jest with the reapers when they gathered at noon under the shade of the hedgerow to snatch their bits o' nuncheon. The weather was threatening, and he worked late, and then went to bed without a word. This change in his disposition was the subject of much comment.

He had been home to farm one afternoon to draw cider, and was riding out with the flagons strung together on either side of the saddle, when the sound of voices fell upon his ear. The women folks, whose work it was to ' bindy and stichy,' were sitting on the stubble leaning back against the sheaves. And when women are in full enjoyment of perfect rest how their tongues will wag, to be sure !

'Why, 't have a-made un a proper mumchance,
zim-zo-----'

' An' zo 't have-
' An' 't'other do come up the river
a'most every
night-----'

' An' she do goo down to meet un, an' bide by the
hour. I do call it scand'lous ----'

' There ! She always were a proper
giglet—a-brought
up wi' noobody about, I s'pose -----'

' But 'tes such a pittice little town feller, I zim, to
catch a mind to -----'

'Why, if I were young Zam, I'd chuck un
into
river, zo I 'ood -----'

' An' sar un right, for he do only want to make a
vool o' her -----'

' Not but what she's to blame most, to listen to -----'

' There, hold thee tongue ! She an' young Zam 'll
be arm-an'-crook now afore next gookoo-----'

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' Hush, will 'ee ! Here he is.'

Thus they shouted from group to group amongst the stitches, and their shrill voices travelled far in the still air. He could not help hearing, and when the chatter suddenly ceased, the silence only emphasised the injuries he had suffered. The idea that Ashford was clandestinely meeting Sabina was new to him. He had thought their intercourse restricted to those visits to the homestead for the evening rabbit-shooting. He did not doubt for one moment that these people had spoken the truth, and yet a verification became necessary. He must know. He had hardened his heart against Sabina with the pride of his stubborn race. He would never ask her again. But if any man should trifle with the girl, or suppose he could play with her to gratify a moment's vanity, let him reckon with Sam Grinter.

When Sam got back among the sheaves everybody was busy enough. He laid the cider in the cool beneath the elm-tree in the hedgerow, but did not resume work. Remounting the pony he rode back to the farm, and thence down the drove to the river, near the place where he used to meet Sabina. If Ashford were coming he should thus intercept and speak his mind to him. He tied his pony to a pollard willow, by the corner of a withy bed, and stood upon the tow-path looking up the stream.

His arrival was opportune.

The river does not greatly wind at that part of the moor, and within a minute Ashford came in sight at the end of a long reach stretching away as straight as a canal. He was rowing rapidly, and did not once turn his head ; so that the boat was close to the little creek before he was aware of Sam's presence. A slight expression of

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annoyance flitted across his face as he pulled to the bank and sprang ashore.

He had not spoken to Sam since the snipe-shooting, with the exception of the casual greetings on the barge and at the gate. Now, with a hasty glance across the moor, he approached, holding out his hand.

'How are you, Sam? I have not seen you for a long time.'

The easy cordiality of the salutation sounded like derision. It seemed to Sam unconsciously to affect a superiority, and its apparent falseness fell like oil upon the flame of his wrath.

'No!' he cried fiercely, clenching his fists. 'An' you didn' come to zee me now. But I knew for certain I should find 'ee here, an' so I came down. I've got a word of a sort for you, John Ashford.'

The place was lonely, and, under the circumstances, a bolder man might easily have suffered a sinking of the heart. But Ashford's gaiety of disposition did not desert him.

'Of an unpleasant sort, it seems,' he laughed.

A brief silence followed. Words are the natural weapons of a weak man, but to Sam in moments of excitement they came with difficulty. It would have been easier to adopt the suggestions of the harvesters once for all than to explain what he had come to say. And this inability to express his indignation chafed and inflamed his wath.

'There is no secret at all about it. 'Tis in everybody's mouth an' hollered to the win's what you do come up here for!' he cried. 'Besides, I saw 'ee in the garden t'other night. She'd ha' none o' 'ee then, an' I wer' like to shake the life out o' 'ee—but there, you've

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a-got roun' her wi' a soft tongue by all accounts. She's nothen' to me now—more than the memory o' what I thought she would be. But I tell 'ee this : in my heart I shall always love Sabina Chiselett. Not that I'd have her now. There's no two ways about love. If she'd a-cared for me she'd a-knowed it beyon' all doubt, and I wouldn' wed to go in wonder an' doubt where her eye mid light upon another man. So I've a-got no more thought o' her but only this—that if any were to do Sabina wrong I'd—I'd twist his neck !'

It was all so real — the love, the scorn, and that ridiculous threat uttered with too deep a resolution and force to be considered a mere figure of speech.

' A very admirable resolution, Sam,' answered Ashford, lightly. ' And one which has my cordial sympathy.' There was a slight trembling in his voice which sounded like fear, but in reality was the consciousness of the meanness of his words in comparison with the manliness of young Sam.

' Stop ! ' interposed Sam, angrily. ' I know you can talk. It's nigh upon zix weeks ago you went up on the barge. A'ter that you used to come up to the farm wi' your gun. There's just so many rabbits there now, but you don't come. An' every night o' your life, you do pull your boat up here, an' wait out o' sight till she do slip out and run down. Why don't 'ee go up to farm now ? Why don't 'ee go up to see Christopher Chiselett ? You do creep up here between the high banks like a thief, an' daren't step out an' show yourself like a man ! You wouldn't so much as speak to the maid in Langport Street. You'd look t'other way for fear you should see her, for all you mid turn her head here wi' fine words. Come up now. Come up to Christopher

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Chiselett here-right, and say out, you be come to court Sabina.'

Either from regret or shame, for a moment Ashford remained silent. Then he spoke quite seriously.

'What a good fellow you are, Sam ! But tell me this. Have you told Sabina that you love her ?'

'What has that to do with it ? Yes, I have, but-----'

'You've never quarrelled about me ?'

But Sam only scowled, and did not answer.

'Sam,' continued Ashford, eagerly, 'I am sorry. I did not know there was anything between you. But now I can tell you this—she is in love with you. I am certain of it. Go back to the village and make it up with her at once ; for all the folly has been on my side. She has never listened to me a moment—never any more than on the night of which you spoke. It is my head that has been turned — not Sabina's. But I'm going back. Make haste and get married, and ask me to the wedding. Good-bye.'

He held out his hand. More from habitual honesty than conviction, Sam took it ; and Ashford's equanimity was partly restored. Perhaps he had made too much of a small matter.

'Why, Sam,' he said, in his old careless way. 'Last winter you were as unromantic as a rate-collector. It was painful to see a heart so young and obdurate. Now you have developed the fever in the most violent stage. And Sabina has it too—in a suppressed form. She's over head and ears in love with you. She has never let me kiss her, and that, on any other assumption, is inexplicable. I tell you—get in the little creek there, out of sight. She will come by and by ; for I promised to lend

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her the boat. Good-bye ! ' And before Sam had time to collect his ideas the little blue skiff with the red cushion was darting up the river like a kingfisher.

Sam stood in-uncertainty. A vague fear that he had been outwitted crept into his mind. And yet he was not sure. His honesty was so complete that it scarcely left room for a perception of perfidy ; and Ashford had spoken with an airy frankness which looked like truth. The little nook was close by, only a few yards away, and Sam's heart prompted him to adopt the suggestion and wait in the fishing-boat. He felt that he could speak to Sabina to-day as he had never done before, so that she must realise his love and answer definitely with a ' Yes ' or ' No.'

Perhaps she might not come.

Then the gloom of his jealousy again overshadowed him, and he knew that her coming must be bitter to him. What right had she there on any such errand ? To his simplicity it did not seem compatible with love, nor, indeed, with the strict decorum expected of Middleney womanhood. No ! everything from the beginning of their courtship proved that Sabina did not care. It was impossible. She would only laugh and evade him as she had always done. Besides, she would be there to see Ashford and not him.

This thought became unbearable, and the impulse to remain vanished in the darkness of his pride.

He mounted the pony, cantered across the moor and through the village, back to the field of wheat.

Some time elapsed, and he had long been out of sight, when from below the bank of the little creek appeared Sabina. She had heard it all. Her face was very pale. Her eyes glanced eagerly in the direction Sam had taken.

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Then she looked up the river. She had been crying, and her hair was slightly dishevelled—her sun-bonnet askew. On one part of the moor already lay a sheet of shallow water from the early rains ; and a flock of seagulls circled over it, their wings flashing white against a leaden mass of rising cloud.

Nothing could exceed the solitude but the loneliness in Sabina's heart. She had been getting to like Ashford ; but now she knew that she loved young Sam.

And he was gone. She was nothing to him any more.

XVI

CHRISTOPHER S CONFSSION

THE leaves on Middleney elms were yellow. Some had fallen upon the causeway, others were trampled beneath the hoofs of cattle or buried in the wheel-ruts on the muddy road. The flood was on the moors, and flights of plovers pitched on Christopher's arable grounds : a sign, so people thought, of the approach of rough weather. Everything indicated a hard winter. The crop of hips and haws was phenomenal, and robins came right up to Sophia's back door.

Her wish to leave the village remained unchanged.

John Priddle had spoken several times of bringing some one to see the cottage, but the personality of this possible purchaser was a mystery, as yet only vaguely referred to as 'one o' Wells.'

In November, an abominable month, with no right to a festivity, Mrs. Grinter gave an evening party. The thing was done on a scale commensurate with her great talents, and calculated to arouse the envy of any parish. But no one of Middleney was invited, and cousin John Priddle was not asked. Mrs. Grinter, as she afterwards admitted, had two minds about leaving him out, but it proved really quite a providential mercy that she did not

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give way to a weak magnanimity, but acted on her better judgment after all. For at that party people could tell of probable changes in Middleney. They openly appraised Sophia's property and spoke of 'one o' Wells.' Then Mrs. Grinter, suffering the deep humiliation of ignorance, explained with dignity : 'O' cou'se, *our* advice wouldn't be asked, an' we don't never want to push ourselves where we be'nt wanted.'

These disclosures would certainly have brought about a reconciliation with Christopher if his social disposition, piqued by the evening party, had not on the following morning incarcerated old Sam Grinter's heifers in the village pound. It was the nearest approach to a joke that he had perpetrated for months, but it afforded him no pleasure, for he had heard some time before of the expected visit of 'one o' Wells.'

He watched the high road narrowly day by day ; but no one came. Then he began to grow suspicious, for Christopher possessed the gift of intuition, and divined without difficulty that cousin John Priddle meant to stand in for the bargain. They would wait until the water on the road was four feet deep and then declare that Middleney was damp. 'One o' Wells,' affecting to regard this as an unexpected discovery, would swear that he wouldn't pick up the place at a gift—not to live in himself. Nothing should tempt him even to name a figure. Then cousin John Priddle, with a fine spirit of concession, would be forced to admit that the place was a bit dampish-like upon times. But even 'one o' Wells ' may be weak and human, and touched by integrity like the rest of the world. Carried away by the admission, he would gaze at the miles of flood, and consent, against his interest, to name a figure—a low one, of course.

CHRISTOPHER'S CONFESSION

And then cousin John Priddle, impressed by the arguments of 'one o' Wells,' would advise----- Oh, yes !

Christopher had his intuitions.

Under the circumstances, he pitied Sophia more deeply than ever ; for there is a pathos about the non-realisation of the uttermost farthing, and Christopher was very susceptible. It took him time, however, to make up his mind to call at the cottage. The visit was an ordeal difficult to face, and he put it off from day to day. But it must be done. He must tell Sophia. And so one afternoon he walked slowly down the village street, a thoughtful and miserable man.

A 'misky' rain made the day almost as dark as dusk ; but Christopher observed that Sophia had neglected that year to pick the money-in-both-pockets by the garden-hatch, and now it was spoilt by the wet.

Sophia was sitting over the fire, for the cold crept into her bones and the old thought into her heart whenever she heard the drops dripping from the eaves. At the sound of the knock she hastily put the bellows from her lap and rose to open the door. Always the same hope— ever the same expectation.

They did not know what to say. She stood aside for Christopher to pass, and he took his old place on the settle.

As if to hide their disquietude, Sophia blew up the fire, and the flames went roaring up the chimney-back.

"Tes a sight o' wet," she said presently, without raising her eyes.

'Ay. An' the sky full o' it.'

'The ducks did squacketty, an' that's a sure sign.'

'So your mind's a-made up, Sophia, as I've a-heard tell,' said Christopher, slowly. 'I've a-thought about 'ee

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many a time. Don't 'ee goo, Sophia. Don't 'ee goo.
You'll never find un—never in this world.'

"T'es too late to alter now. But I be glad you be a-comed in, Mr. Chiselett. I've a-thought since that you meant it for kindness. An' the meaning do lie close in the heart when the act's in the open hand. 'T'es better to part friends. I'd zooner zo.'

' But the money couldn' never a-voun' un, Sophia, if't had a-been zend.'

She shook her head. 'Let that be, Mr. Chiselett. Let that be.'

It might have been resignation or forgiveness, but she had not caught his meaning.

' You don't know where you be gwain. Nor what you be a-gwain to. I kep' it from 'ee by his wish, Sophia. For I thought you need never to know. But nothin' can keep it from 'ee when you do go herevrom. You'll never zee un no more in this life, Sophia. He's a-gone beyond the reach of eyes----- '

She looked up quickly. She uttered no sound ; but her face grew very pale. She did not even weep ; but trembled—and stared at Christopher—and understood.

'When?'

' He wer' a-tookt to Bristol avore many days. He knew the risk when he corned here ; but he made me promise, if the worst should come, never to tell. I wer' at my wits' ends what to do or zay ; but he never zend word nor showed sign, for his only hope wer' that you mid never know, an' bide here to live an' die in peace.'

She sat as if dazed, looking into the fire. Then one eager gleam of questioning hope flashed across her face—

' An' they showed noo mercy ? '

' Noo mercy ! '

XVII

FLOOD

CERTAINLY it had never so rained since the Deluge, and the yellow water came lapping the precincts of the parish. It covered the high roads on the moor, and lay in pools many inches deep upon the village street. It rose to the heads of the pollard willows, and the tow-path was but a mere strip of slippery mud. The fishing-boat had been brought home to the farm, and lay harboured in the ditch of Christopher's home-field, for Middleney was an island now to all intents and purposes.

Sam had not spoken to Sabina since their quarrel. They did not even pass each other on the road, for Christopher's cows were all in the stalls, and Sabina mostly stayed about the house. But Sam was always in her thoughts. She waited for hours to catch sight of him passing down the street ; or of a morning, when he went off in his boat, she peered from the dormer window in the thatch, and watched him with an intensity of passion unknown in those days of spring, when love was without variety or cessation.

Sam was changed. People of observation thought his behaviour strange, if not a little uncanny. In winter time, when there are ducks upon the moor, Middleney

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people decorate their boats with boughs of evergreen, and thus drift down upon the unsuspecting birds. But Sam went off alone without troubling to trim his boat, and yet brought home more game than any of the others. Oftentimes he stayed from daylight to dark night, caring nothing for the cold, wind, or rain. He went on days which kept the hardiest at home—when people said the birds were not worth it ; and old Sam Grinter swore the boy must be a fool. But no one, except Sabina, guessed his destination, and people wondered because they never saw his boat upon the moor.

One afternoon towards the middle of December she saw him go away between the willow - trees, along the drove and out of sight behind the withy bed. Then life became a blank until his return. Sabina lived for these brief moments now.

Sam rowed to the old cottage on the steps of which he used to court Sabina. The four walls made a wonderful hiding-place, so high that he could look down upon the water and count the birds a mile away. Lest some other sportsman might notice him and find out the place, he always put the boat in out of sight, but to-day the flood was half-way up the doorway, and he had to stoop low to push her into the house. Then he made her fast and went up the rickety old stairs. Rain was driving through the gaps of windows, dripping from the broken thatch, and sapping through crevices in the ruined walls. For shelter he stood beneath the remaining portion of the roof, lit his pipe, and waited.

He had spent hours thus that winter.

The rising wind, sweeping without hindrance across the expanse of water, whistled in the old chimney, and raised quick curling waves which struck smartly against

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the cottage walls. It was futile to listen for the voices of birds in such weather, and Sam waited grimly, patiently, and long, sometimes stepping out into the rain to scan the flood, and then quickly back under the shelter. But there is a fierce delight in the strength of youth which glories in discomfort, and that was the only gladness in Sam's heart.

Sabina never cared for him, he felt sure. He had thought it all out many a time—with little wit, perhaps, but with quite conclusive clearness. He had been slow to love ; but once was for ever ; and he felt that life would never again be complete without her. He no longer harboured angry thoughts against Sabina. He was too strong to be wounded by so slight a thing as her laughter ; and besides, if she did not love, she could not help it. He did not love last winter, and then with the spring it came—without effort and beyond control, like the sunshine or the showers or the singing of the birds. Such, indeed, was Sam's philosophy, even though he had few words. Such his experience, with no imagination to eke it out. And so, like a youth on the threshold of a new language, he conjugated his verb ' to love ' backward and forward in its various moods and tenses, quite unaware of other forms for other tongues. God ! how he loved ! And that was all he knew.

Sometimes the desire to possess Sabina became so strong that he determined to speak to her, and restore everything as formerly when they used to walk together. Perhaps she would marry him, as she once said in jest, because there was nobody else. Then a demon of pride or jealousy reasserted itself in his heart. She would walk and talk, and mean nothing, as she had done before—as she had done also with Ashford. He would accept none

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of that, any more than he would succumb to the cold, or creep indoors out of the wet.

The time was long, dusk was closing in, and he was thinking of returning home, when a whirring of wings low down and louder than the wind rushed over his head. He sprang forward, alert and intent, like one suddenly awakened by wild music. In the keen excitement of the sportsman, as he watched a flight of ducks settle down wind not far from the cottage, he forgot his troubles. They were certain to beat that way. He seized his gun, stood in readiness by a gap in the broken wall, and waited.

He watched so intently that he did not notice a dead bough slowly drifting by not altogether driven by the wind ; nor that the water had crept up to the tips of the withy bed.

The birds drew nearer—so close together you could have covered them with a tablecloth. He aimed long and carefully where they were thickest—and fired.

The birds rose—all that were able ; but some were left wounded flapping on the surface of the water, and others might have dived. There was no time to lose. He ran downstairs and jumped into the boat.

Something had happened which at the first glance seemed incredible.

The stealthy flood had risen rapidly. It was half-way up the stairs, and the bow of the heavy boat was already above the beam of the door. It was impossible to get her out. The beam was built in, and it would take hours to pull down the wall. He was imprisoned beyond hope of escape ; and still he could see the water, like a rising tide, gently eddying around the door-posts. It was more than two feet above the old water-mark. He

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had never seen anything like this ; but at once he knew that the river-bank had broken.

When last it broke the water touched the causeway by the wall of the parish church. Middleney folk did not tire of talking of this, and he had often heard the tale, never varying in minutest detail, over the cider-cup and wood fire. The flood must rise for hours, and might remain unchanged for weeks. He could picture the consternation in the village. They would not miss him until night, and in the dark how could they tell where to search ?

He returned upstairs and looked across the dreary waste. He fully realised his position—that there were sixteen hours to sunrise, and even then he might not be found. The excitement of expectation was gone, and the cold became intense. The waves were beating more fiercely than ever—the driving sleet and rain brought on the night, and Middleney was already blotted out.

When Sam's boat passed out of sight Sabina did not at once leave the window, but remained looking out upon the moor. At the rick, surrounded by rough rails in one corner of the home-field, her father was mounted on a short ladder, cutting hay ; but Sabina watched without observing him. She, also, had her hours of reverie and loneliness.

Suddenly she heard voices in the road, and then a man came running across the field to Christopher. By their eager conversation she knew that something must be amiss. And then she saw her father lay down his knife upon the half-cut truss, tuck his smock around his waist, and hurry across the field.

People were also rushing breathlessly down the street.

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Old Sam Grinter, rosy from his fireside—hatless, regardless of his gouty foot—met her father at the gate. She saw them speak to each other, and they ran along side by side, forgetful of their feud. The women were as eager as the men. Mrs. Grinter's sharp features had lost their usual aggressive expression, and she looked cowed and awe-stricken as she hastened by, followed by the labouring folk from the cottages beyond Church Farm.

Her curiosity excited, Sabina ran downstairs, across the field, and through the now deserted village.

Sophia's door was open, and the cottage empty ; but from the porch, which stands above the level of the road, Sabina caught sight of a little crowd of villagers, gathered at the brink of the flood where the highway to Langport runs out of Middleney. In the distance, by some pollard willows, was a boat with several men, and Sabina could recognise John Priddle standing in the bow, dripping wet, groping with a pole in the water. Then they gently pushed the boat forward, peered into the yellow flood, and leant over the side like fishermen lifting in a net.

A terror seized Sabina's heart—a cry escaped her lips.

She knew what had happened—that some traveller, mistaking his way, had driven into a rhine ; and, trembling with fear, she ran down the road and joined the little group.

Mrs. Grinter was in tears, and no one spoke above a whisper.

"Tes a poor man a-drownded, Sabina," said Sophia softly.

'Who?'

' 'Twer somebody in the trap wi' John Priddle.'

' But who ? '

' They do zay 'tes one o' Wells.' 262

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That the poor man was a stranger seemed by some incomprehensible process to add to the pathos and mystery of death : perhaps because consolation was impossible when there was no one to console.

' And zome belongen' to un noo doubt a-left,' sighed Sophia.

' Hush ! ' said Christopher. ' They be a-bringing o' un on.'

The men in the boat did not sit down to row, but continued to push her slowly forward with the pole. And so, when the water became too shallow on the road, she drifted with her sad burden into the wayside ditch. The villagers, with pale faces, drew around to look, and all the bickerings, the misapprehensions and paltry jealousies of life, fled affrighted before that awful presence. Then Mrs. Grinter caught Sophia's arm for support, and Christopher and old Sam Grinter went together without a word to unhang Sophia's orchard-gate.

' Run and get the church kay, Sabina,' whispered Christopher.

It was Sophia's decent thought to fetch a sheet from the cottage. And presently the pageant of sudden death—the saddest but oft-repeated tragedy of village life—passed up the street. They laid the lifeless thing beneath the church tower, between the font and the ropes from the three church bells. And overhead the clock, for ever solemnly ticking, echoed the footsteps of Time upon its never-resting journey into eternity.

' But for certain the water is higher up the road—an' 'eet it can't be nother,' said Mrs. Grinter.

' Why, 'tis right up to our gate,' cried Sabina. They were standing for shelter under the yew-tree, 263

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just as when they came out of church in the summer and stood there out of the sun. Then somebody came running to tell Sophia that the flood was in her linhay. They called Christopher from the church, and old Sam Grinter. Everybody ran to look, and the parish became unanimous that the river-bank had broken.

Old Sam Grinter could accurately predict what would happen ; and there was no time to lose. ' 'Tull come into Mrs. Sharman's house virst ! ' he cried. ' Get the little waggon to once, an' move everything out o' the ground-floor. She'll come an' bide to Church Farm. I tell 'ee, Sophia 'll bide to Church Farm. Where's Zam ? '

The question was only prompted by the desire for his help, for every pair of hands was useful now ; but nobody knew, and Sabina did not answer. She went with the others, helping to carry the furniture down Sophia's garden-path ; but towards the close of the afternoon she slipped away unobserved, and returned home to watch.

The trembling agitation from the dread spectacle of death, and perhaps the tacit reconciliation of the parish, had wrought an effect upon her mind none the less deep because the process was unconscious. She must speak to Sam. Not by way of explanation of the past, or in anticipation of the future, but merely to cast off the burden upon her heart. He did not love her now—his behaviour since the interview with Ashford left no doubt of that. He would never marry her. That was all over. She felt that this was certain ; and it was a feeling of despair. Yet she *must* speak to him. She would wait by the water's edge, tell him what had happened, and that he was wanted at Sophia's—then it would appear as if she had come with a message.

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But time passed, and Sam did not come. He had never before stayed so late. From the window she could always see his boat in the distance as soon as the dusk became too dark for him to shoot. Now she could distinguish nothing. The aspect of the place was changed. So many familiar objects were submerged that, with no landmarks upon which to rest, her eyes could not penetrate the gloom. A host of wild thoughts chased each other through her brain. Perhaps he was lost upon the moor ; perhaps his boat, striking some hidden object, had been overturned ; perhaps he was drowned.

She walked to and fro in agitation and distress, sometimes calling his name beneath her breath. It seemed to be her fault that Sam did not come.

The rain had ceased, and a faint glimmer of moonlight, filtering through cloud, fell shimmering on the water. But that brought no comfort. Hitherto she could discern nothing — now she could determine that nothing was there. The suspense had become unendurable. She knew it to be useless. She had watched, and it was impossible for him to have returned unseen ; yet she could not resist an impulse to run to Church Farm to ask if Sam were there.

She had scarcely reached the causeway when her attention was arrested by the sound of a distant gun-shot.

She stopped and listened.

Perhaps, after all, he had only stayed to get a shot in the moonlight. Sabina had heard of such a thing, although she had never known young Sam remain later than a half-hour after sunset. Yet Sam's methods latterly had been admittedly strange. And how Middeney would laugh at such needless anxiety ! She stood a moment in

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uncertainty, half reassured, and not knowing what to do.

Then again she heard the report of a gun, carried faintly on the wind, but unmistakable.

No one ever got the chance to shoot twice upon the winter moor, where even so much as a word sometimes made the flood a solitude. That also Sabina had heard with endless reiteration. The belief that Sam went to the cottage amounted almost to certainty, and now, without attempting to account for his absence, but only surmising that 'something had happened,' Sabina felt sure he was there. Without reflection and without fear she hurried to the fishing-boat in which they used to sit, and pushed out upon the waste.

The wind was still strong in gusts, and waves dashed viciously against the ungainly little craft. Sometimes Sabina struck her oar against the branches or was driven into the head of a willow-tree and with difficulty extricated herself. The lithe withies scraped against the flat bottom of the boat as she passed what she believed to be the drove.

For some time the girl rowed and rowed, and at last she stopped to peer over her shoulder into the night. She could not see the cottage—nothing but water everywhere. She rested upon her oars and looked, and listened. Between the gusts the wind was almost still, but bitter cold, and rain had half-filled the boat before she started.

As her eyes became accustomed to the night she could dimly distinguish the isle of Middeney like a deeper blot upon the darkness, and the distant hills which shut in the moor looked black behind the strip of light falling across the water.

All was so desolate that Sabina's courage failed.

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She could not tell where she was nor whither she was going.

Again, in despair, she turned to stare into the gloom. She must have gone out of her way, for she could not see the withy bed ; and then, in quite an unexpected direction, she fancied she could discover a darker line upon the surface of the flood. With hope renewed she turned and pulled with all her might.

It was the tow-path, but the water was almost bank-high. She could hear the river on the other side, wild and threatening, rushing eagerly to the gap by which it was to be free.

But the place, however changed, was familiar, for close by were the willow-trees under which she had stood with Sam to talk to Ashford.

'Zam ! Zam !'

The cry was not of fear either for herself or him. It came without premeditation—the pent-up longing of all those weeks of misunderstanding and estrangement.

His voice called back across the water. She could not hear what he said—she did not wait to listen. No longer conscious of cold or fatigue, but with her destination certain, and the satisfaction in her heart that reconciliation was assured, she soon reached the old cottage.

'Za-am !'

'Sabina!'

The salutation had not the lilt of that morning sweet with lilac in the spring, but there was in it a depth of meaning and of love which demanded no further words.

It is humiliating to have to confess that neither Sam nor Sabina had been seriously missed. Tradition was

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not belied, and the water had risen to the causeway by the churchyard wall. As proving the reliability and precision of Middeney science, this was indeed matter for congratulation, softened, however, by the overshadowing sadness and the consideration that now 'twere there, sure enough, there it might bide for weeks.

As Sam rowed in, his father and Christopher were standing by the barton gate 'engaged in lively altercation.

'Come on. Come on, I tell 'ee,' insisted old Sam Grinter.

'Not to-night, Mr. Grinter ; some other night.'

'Come on, I tell 'ee. Don't you never put your voot in Church Varm, no more, if you don't come on to-night. We'll zend Zam round for Sabina. Cousin John Priddle have a-put on my Zunday clothes. 'Tes noo night to mope about in ones an' twos wi' your own thoughts. Come on ; 'tes terrible cold.'

And so they disappeared into the farmhouse.

'Come along, Sabina. Keep close to the wall,' whispered Sam, with his arm around the girl as they got upon the causeway.

'But I be so wet,' she replied, clinging closer to him.

'Never mind. Mother '11 take care o' that. Come along.'

Yet for all Sam's urgency, they presently loitered some minutes in the porch. With such a kissing and a cooing, it seemed that spring was come again ; that wood-culvers were mating in the elms and sparrows chirping and nesting in the ivy.

Then all sat round the hearth, and the fire went blazing up the chimney just as formerly.

'Christopher,' cried old Sam Grinter, 'we wuz both 268

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right about thik little donkey. He dropped o' the staggers. He never didn't eat yew-leaf a'ter all.'

' Ah ! I knowed we were right,' agreed Christopher.

The cider-cup circulated without restraint, and conversation never flagged, but it was too soon to forget the sadness of that day. Yet if there was no laughter there was love, for Sam and Sabina sat close together in the courting-corner. Nor did the seriousness of that evening equal the solemnity of the occasion when the hazel-binds burnt out without bursting. For life and death and floods are in the hand of God, but the other catastrophe might have been the finger of the devil, if they had not afterwards discovered the chain. Sometimes, in the joy of life, and the warm delight of new-found unanimity, the conversation quickened, faces brightened in the firelight, and a ripple of gaiety eddied around this little circle of good friends.

' An' 'eet we mustn't forget,' interposed Mrs. Grinter. ' Though 'tis well to be merry in reason while we mid.'

' Ay. An' live in all charity,' softly agreed Sophia.

' An' love while we be young,' twinkled Christopher, pointing at Sabina and young Sam.

' An' help one another when we be wold ! ' shouted old Sam Grinter. ' Come, come ! Cousin John Priddle. Han' Christopher on the cup.'