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THE BLACK DIAMOND

by

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TO
M. COMPTON MACKENZIE
GRATEFULLY : AFFECTIONATELY

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The First Chapter

p. 1

ABNER FELLOWS was born in the front bedroom of Number Eleven Hackett's Cottages, a four-

roomed house of old brickwork that stood in the middle of a row of twenty-one, set diagonally across a patch of waste land on the outskirts of Halesby. The terrace was fifty years old, and looked older, for the smoke and coal dust of the neighbouring pits had corroded the surface of the bricks, while the 'crowning in' of the earth's crust above the gigantic burrowings of the Great Mawne Colliery had loosened the mortar between them and even produced a series of long cracks that clove the house-walls from top to bottom like conventional forked lightning. One of these lines of cleavage split the face of Number Eleven and ran through the middle of a plaster plaque on which the pious owner of the cottages had carved the words:—

ISAIAH HACKETT:
GLORY BE TO GOD, 1839.

This plaque, together with the metal medallion of a fire insurance corporation and two iron bosses connected with the system of stays by which Mr Hackett's descendants had tried to save their property from collapsing, made the Fellows's house the most decorative feature of the row, and gave Abner a feeling of enviable distinction in his childhood long before he knew what they meant.

His father, John Fellows, like the rest of the tenants, was a miner. He had chosen to live in Hackett's Cottages because they lay nearer to the colliery than any other buildings in Halesby and were within a reasonable distance of the cross-roads where stood his favourite public-house, the Lyttleton Arms. Hackett's Cottages, in fact, hung poised, as it were, between two magnetic poles: the pit where the money was earned and the pub where it was spent. To remain there contented would have implied a nice equilibrium, had it not been that eastward of the cross-roads p. 2
and the Lyttleton Arms ran the Stourton Road, with houses on both sides of it, and amongst them the Lord Nelson, the Greyhound, and the Royal Oak. Next to the Royal Oak came the entrance of the Mawne United football ground, and since John Fellows's passion for football was only exceeded by his devotion to 'four-penny,' the pull of the colliery was hopelessly overbalanced by these delights.

At the side of the Royal Oak, on Saturday afternoons, the entrance to the football ground swarmed with black coats; and the crowd of small boys, of whom Abner made one, peering through cracks in the match-board palings could see nothing but the backs of other black coats, or perhaps, above the tilted heads of the spectators, the sphere of a football leaping gaily into the dreary gray that passes for heaven in a black-country winter. It cost threepence (ladies and children half-price) to enter the football ground, and since John Fellows never wasted the price of a pint on any one but himself, Abner had to be content with an occasional sight of the football soaring above this or that quarter of the field of play and with the hoarse waves of encouragement or derision that went up from the crowd inside.

Later, in the happy days before his father's second marriage and the second family, John Fellows used to take the boy along with him to the football field on Saturday afternoons, or rather Abner would trail behind him as far as the gate and then pass through the turnstile in front of him, wedged between his father's trousers and those of the man in front, breathing perpetually the acrid smell of oily coal-dust which he accepted as the natural odour of humanity. Whenever he could get himself washed in time John Fellows made a point of going early to the ground so that he might place himself in his favourite position, immediately behind the nearer goal-posts, so close to the net that he could talk with George Harper, the Mawne United goalkeeper, who, before this translation, had been a collier working in the same shift as himself, or under-mine the p. 3
self-possession of the visiting 'custodian' with jeers and abuse.

Even at these close quarters, where Abner felt the pressure of his father's protecting legs and heard him spitting into the net over his head, there was no conversation between them. John Fellows kept his speech for his mates, for George Harper, or, on occasion, for the referee; but at half-time, when most of the players ran in to the pavilion and the ball was free, he would give Abner a poke in the back and his neighbours a wink, and the lad would slip under the wire roping and plunge into the *mêlée* of boys who were scrambling for its possession. Once Abner had dribbled the ball away from the others and sent a shot at the goal which George Harper, who had stayed behind talking, moved mechanically to stop, and missed; a ripple of laughter had spread round the field, and when Abner ran back under the ropes with his face flaming, his father pulled him in by the ear and said with his clay pipe between his teeth: 'Damn' little blood-worm yo' are! Bain't he, George?' And George Harper, staring down at him with his big, melancholy eyes, said, 'Ah . . .'

Next day, as a reward for his prowess, John Fellows took Abner with him on his afternoon walk, past the cherry orchard, past the stationary cages at the pithead and the silent engine-house of the Great Mawne Colliery, down between the smoking spoil-banks to the bridge over the Stour which separates the two counties of Worcester and Stafford, in either of which the police of the other are providentially powerless. Here, on a cinder pathway shaded by the sooty chestnuts of Mawne Hall, there was racing between the limber fawn-skinned whippets that the miners fancy: timid, quivering creatures, with their slim waists bound in flannel jackets like frail women in their stays. It was thrilling to watch them slip from the leash, race with their pointed heads converging, and roll over at the finish in a cloud of cinder-dust.

On that Sunday the police of Staffordshire were quiescent. George Harper was there, his massive thighs bulging striped cashmere trousers. There was joking between George and p. 4
Abner's father about the goal that the boy had kicked. John Fellows won five shillings on a dog called Daisy, and Abner trailed home behind him at six o'clock, when the steam in the engine-

house was beginning to hiss from its exhaust in preparation for Monday's work. John Fellows retired to the Lyttleton Arms with his five shillings and spent a dozen more, while Abner went home, too tired to play and clammed for his tea. It surprised him to find number eleven locked up, though he ought to have remembered that before they went out dog-racing his father had left the key with Mrs Moseley, who did the housework, and cooked their dinner; but when he walked round to Mrs Moseley's he found that she had gone to church and forgotten to take the key out of her pocket. He tramped back home again and fell asleep on the doorstep.

In later years, when the conflict with his father began, he always remembered these untroubled days with regrets: the Saturday football matches; the Sunday whippet-racing and terrier-fighting, together with certain afternoon walks along the tow-path of the canal, where the bodies of puppies that were old enough to be taxed floated into beds of loose-strife and willow-weed, and jack-bannocks hung swimming in shoals through the yellow water. In all these memories John Fellows was a benignant figure; and this one would hardly have guessed, for John Fellows was not prepossessing. He was a short man with a low-set head and an immense shoulder-girdle. His eyes were small and lost in deep orbits, so that when his face was ingrained with carbon the white of the sclerotics was intensified in a way that made them seem grudging and malignant. Walking home in his pit clothes, bow-legged and with the dazed and hampered gait which is the mark of men who labour underground, he always looked as if he had been drinking. Generally he *had* been drinking, but at his soberest he was an ugly customer, and the blue enamelled tin pot in which he carried his tea struck one as a dangerous weapon.

Poverty their household never knew. John Fellows could reckon on picking up his three pounds a week, and spent every penny of it. There was always meat in the house, and Mrs Moseley knew p. 5
better than to serve him with food that was not freshly cooked. In his way he was an epicure. Although the Lyttleton Arms was the nearest public-house, Abner would often be sent out with a jug to fetch his father's supper beer from the Greyhound, or even from the Royal Oak, next the football ground, where they kept Astill's Guaranteed Old Stingo. John Fellows had no use for bottled beer. Bottled belly-ache, he called it. He rarely smoked a pipe, for lights were forbidden in the pit, and the habit of chewing plug-tobacco had made him prefer his nicotine neat.

He was shaved once a week, on Saturday nights, and upon this function depended another of Abner's special joys: the privilege of going with him to the barber's shop, a low, boarded room heated by gas-jets and the breath of expectant, expectorant men. Here, wedged upon a bench at his father's side, he would read the comic papers that Mr Evans provided for his customers. Some were printed on pink paper and some on green; and while Abner absorbed the adventures of two alliterative tramps, he would hear the sing-song of Mr Evans, a Welshman from some remote Radnorshire village, as he talked to the victim of his razor and the other waiting customers. Mr Evans was a great authority on local football, and subscribed to a news-agency that sent him a sheet of half-time and final scores long before the evening edition of the *North Bromwich Argus* arrived. His knowledge of football politics and personalities was all the more remarkable because Saturday was his busiest day, and for that reason he could never see a game of football played. Abner envied him this abstract knowledge of the game; but more than Mr Evans he envied a small boy with pink face and plastered hair who, wearing a long white jacket, lathered the customers' chins, and when Mr Evans had scraped them, sprayed their faces with bay-rum. At last, with dramatic suddenness, this entertainment was withdrawn. John Fellows developed a rash on his chin which Mr Ingleby, the chemist, declared to be barber's itch, and Mr Evans became the object of his most particular hatred.

'That bloody Welshman!' said John Fellows. 'I reckon shaving's a dirty business.' p. 6

And so he grew a beard . . . but he wouldn't let that Evans trim it, not he!

All Abner's early pleasures were in some way or other related to his father. It was natural that John Fellows should take a pride in his only child. He didn't talk to him much—a man who chews tobacco has better work for his jaws than talking—but he was sometimes amused by his company and proud of his sturdiness and capacity for mischief. He rejoiced that his son was a 'bloodworm' much in the same way as his mates rejoiced that their terriers were good fighters. He liked him to be hard, and boasted that Abner could take the strap (as he called it) without yelling. Indeed there was something to boast about in this, for the miner chastened his son with a brown leather belt which, as the buckle witnessed, had once belonged to a member of the South Staffordshire Regiment. This belt, he sometimes affirmed, had been all round the world before it came into his possession; but Abner was too well acquainted with its other qualities to pursue the history of this.

In spite of his weekly lickings Abner's life was generally happy. He had no cares for the future. He knew that when his schooling was over he would be sent to work at the pit. He wouldn't be sorry for that, for it seemed to him quite natural to work underground, to earn big money and spend it freely. When that day came he felt that he and his father would be able to drink together on equal terms. By the time that he was fourteen he was already taller than John Fellows, and meant to grow a lot taller still. He was going to be strong and to learn boxing: perhaps, in a few years' time, he would be able to strip and fight in one of the boxing-booths at the wakes: perhaps, in stripes of chocolate and yellow, he might even play football for Mawne United and talk like a brother with the great George Harper.

In this manly, indefinite future, women had no place. He had never had a sister; as far as he remembered he had never had a mother; and so he followed the example of his father whose p. 7
domineering attitude towards the widow, Mrs Moseley, was beyond any doubt correct, while Mrs

Moseley, who had her living to make, accepted it without protest, as a woman should do. Towards girls themselves Abner felt no positive hostility, though he passed them in the street as a well-mannered dog passes cats, with a solid appreciation of their potential evil; but for members of his own sex who dallied with emasculating tendernesses he and the boys with whom he played were full of scorn and even of active malice. The worst libel that any of his companions could suffer was a chalk inscription on his own back door of the words: 'Tommy So-and-so goes with Cissy Something-else.'

Abner and his friends even went so far as to pester these votaries of passion in their own most sheltered haunts. Above the pithead of the Great Mawne Colliery runs a lane skirting the ancient cherry orchard of Old Mawne Hall. It is short: at the end of it the pit-mound stands up black, and over beyond the Stour valley a desert of blackness stretches westward, with smoke-stacks thronging thick as masts of shipping in a harbour. Over its hedges, in the dusk, light clouds of cherry-blossom may be seen, but even before the wind has tumbled the petals down they are blackened by smuts from the colliery chimney. This lane, indeed, was a decorous walking place where one might hear a patter of moving feet and low laughter on any evening in May; but lower down the slope, past the colliery, it turned into another, shadowed with hot-smelling elder, stunted hawthorns and oak-apple trees, which had a darker reputation. Dipping down over the hillside this lane climbs back upon itself and opens out again into the orchard road. This loop, which is called in Halesby the 'Dark Half-hour,' was the favourite hunting ground for Abner and his friends. Carrying the smelly dark-lanterns that are sold on Guy Fawkes' day, they would creep as quietly as possible under the shadows of the trees, selecting at a signalled moment some unfortunate couple locked in each other's arms whom they might shame with their lights. Often they got their heads smacked, but this only served to reinforce their opinion that lovemaking which shrank from publicity was discreditable. p. 8

One evening in summer when Abner was fourteen he took part in one of these expeditions. The day had been hot. His father had promised him that he would make him a kite in the evening. The split lath lay ready on the table with a roll of blue paper. Mrs Moseley had boiled some paste, and Abner had borrowed enough string and folded newspaper to make a tail. As the heat of the afternoon declined a gusty wind began to blow from the west, filling the street with dust and scraps of paper. At six o'clock John Fellows came back from the pit. The dust had blown into his eyes, that were never very strong. Tears and sweat together were tracking down through the grime on his cheeks. He seemed to have forgotten all about Abner's kite.

'What's that?' he cried, irritably. 'Can't yo' give us a moment's peace? Wait till I've swilled!'

He had his swill in the brewhouse, filling a tin bath with black soap-suds. The kite had become a grievance. 'Nattering away . . .' he muttered, with his head in a roller towel, 'werriting about kites on a day that would make a pig sweat blood!'

Abner, who knew his father, got away without any further discussion, leaving Mrs Moseley to soothe him. He went out and played cricket in the sloping field above the pit where the ponies that have worked so long underground that they are blind are put out to green grass and to a white mockery that they get to know as daylight. When the boys came down to play, these shaggy creatures stood huddled in a corner and edged against one another, rubbing the coal-dust out of their matted coats. If they strayed over the field of play Abner and his friends pelted them with pieces of slag from the cinder heap behind the wickets. They also threw slag at a group of little girls who dared to look at them over the broken hedge. When the light faded so much that they could no longer see to play, and the beam-engine in the power-house ceased to grunt, the boys all lay down talking in the hedgerow, and the ponies wandered back to pull at the grass on either side of the pitch. At last Abner, who was the leader of the set, because he was the strongest, said: 'Let's go down the Dark Half-hour and scare some of 'em.' p. 9

On such a clammy evening there were certain to be many lovers. One of the boys produced a halfpenny packet of red Bengal-lights. Abner snatched them from him, left him crying, and with three others ran down to the mouth of the lane. In the hedge-side couples stirred uneasily. The tunnel under the elders was full of a hot odour of dust and nettles and some kind of mint. They crept forward through the darkness in Indian file. 'Let's try this one, kid,' whispered a boy named Hodgetts, 'him over there up agen' the tree. 'Ere, where's the bloody box?'

'There's somebody coming,' whispered a woman's voice.

They struck three lights together. The tunnel glowed like a furnace. Against the trunk of a tree a short man was leaning with a pale young woman clutched in his arms. Abner saw that it was his father. He dropped his match and ran.

The boy Hodgetts came panting behind him. He was shouting: 'Kid . . . kid . . . did yo' see who he were? It were your gaffer!' Abner turned and swiped at him viciously as he ran. Joe Hodgetts crumpled up in the hedge howling. Abner went on blindly into the Cherry Orchard Road. His heart thudded in his throat like a water-hammer. He didn't know where he was. He only knew that he was crying and that he had broken his knuckles on Joe Hodgett's skull. He rubbed them in the black dust of the roadway, and that stopped the bleeding. But nothing, it seemed, could stop his tears.

The Second Chapter p. 10

WHEN he reached home, half an hour later, he was ashamed of himself. It didn't matter to him what his father did. He only hoped that John Fellows hadn't recognised him, for that would make him sure of a belting. Still, he was glad that he had given Joe Hodgetts what for. He wasn't going to have a fellow of his own age laughing at his father even if his father had let him down by making a fool of himself.

A year later John Fellows was married. In spite of Abner's scorn the proceeding was natural enough. The man was under forty, and had been a widower for more than fourteen years. The new wife, the woman of the tunnel, was a girl named Alice Higgins, the elder daughter of an old friend of Fellows, the timekeeper at the colliery, who had lost his left leg many years ago in a crushing fall of coal. She was tall, slight, with a fair complexion and honey-coloured hair: in every physical particular the opposite of her swart and stubby husband. If such a thing had to be, Abner would have preferred the maturer charms of Mrs Moseley, whom he knew so well and liked, to those of any stranger. Indeed, from the day of his father's marriage onward his life became more complicated.

The very presence in the house of this new inmate, a woman wielding authority, whom he remembered only a little time ago as a girl with a pigtail down her back, made him awkward. His father had never even mentioned their meeting in the lane—probably he had not recognised Abner, but the boy was certain that Alice had seen him and remembered. The consciousness of this mystery that they shared only aggravated the distrust and shyness that separated them: a shyness which Alice herself honestly tried to overcome by little overtures of affection. She was quite determined, in her quiet way, that she wasn't going to be like the stepmothers of tradition. She would try to be a real mother to Abner. But how did real mothers feel?

'Why don't you call me mother, like other boys would, Abner?' she said one day, coaxingly. Abner only laughed. She hated him for laughing at her. A boy of his age! p. 11

But the real trouble did not begin till a year later when the first baby of the new family was coming. It was a bad time for all of them. John Fellows, after fifteen years of a widower's life, had forgotten anything that he had ever learnt in the way of matrimonial tactics. He wasn't any longer a young man, and his nature had inevitably stiffened. Besides, the coming of this child was not like the adventure of Abner's birth, when he and his first wife had been two tender young people rather overwhelmed by the responsibilities of marriage. Alice became more conscious than ever of the gap of years that separated them, the distance which had always been implicit in her idea of her father's friend, 'Mr Fellows.' With her it could never be naturally 'John.' And now that she wanted somebody to take hold of her and share her fears she found herself face to face with an elderly stranger. She was frightened at the thought of being so utterly alone. Abner, a member of her own generation, and the son of her baby's father, was a symbol of the whole disastrous circumstance.

In spite of all her good resolutions she couldn't help letting off a little of her unhappiness on him. It was against her will that she did so. Sometimes she cried with vexation at her own irritability and resolved to overcome it. Then, as the months dragged on, she began to wonder if it were worth while tiring herself out with good resolutions or anything else in the world. She found herself becoming wilfully vixenish with her husband. That didn't matter, for she seldom saw him; but a little later a new emotion, stronger and more positively devastating than any that she had known before, seized her. It was a thing that she couldn't understand. She felt as if some strange, dark spirit had invaded and perverted her consciousness, making her think madly and not in the least as she wanted to think, filling her with a mixture of hate and jealousy towards Abner. This passion would not let her be. However tired and jaded she were the fiend was ready to tear her. She could not see the boy without hating him. She felt just like a cat with kittens, who spits at the kittens of another cat. p. 12

She had plenty of opportunities for showing her hatred. Abner was now fifteen. His schooling was finished, and he had begun to work at the colliery, leading the ponies that drag trollies of coal along the galleries of the pit. He found it quite good fun. The pony of which he had charge was very old and quite blind, for it had worked in Mawne pit since before Abner was born. He found it slower than a pony should be and spent the first Sunday after he had started work in searching Uffdown Wood for an ash-plant with which he might induce the pony to go faster. When he had found one he fitted a pin in the end of it.

A few minutes after six every evening the cage would come clanking up to the pit-head, and before it settled with a jerk, Abner, black with coal-grime, would shoot out like a hare and go whistling home to his tea. He whistled because there was always a curious lightening of his heart at the change from the murk of the pit to daylight. It was spring when he started work. Every evening as he passed the cherry orchard he heard the whistle of a blackbird poised on the topmost bough of one of the foamy trees. He wondered exuberantly if he could find its nest some day. He even collected a couple of pebbles to put in the place of eggs. But when he got home there was no Mrs Moseley, waiting with a 'piece' ready buttered and a cup of steaming tea—only Alice, dragging about the kitchen, greeting him with jealous eyes.

'Abner, you dirty little beast,' she would say, 'don't you dare soil that table now. Mind your filthy hands! It's summat to have your father, let alone yo'. Here, that's your father's towel. Loose it quick!'

None of this was very serious, but it made a great difference to Abner. He was continually being shocked to find that small details in the arrangement of the house, such as the position of a chair

which had always been his favourite, were being altered from day to day. Alice had a fever for making freakish variations in the kitchen furniture. She couldn't be happy to see things in the same place for two days running. She was never satisfied, making alterations, as it seemed, simply for the sake of finding fresh work to do, yet always working under protest. Her presence became dragged and unhappy, and the only results of her unnatural labours were untidiness and confusion.

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Even John Fellows could not help being irritated by these fruitless activities. His first wife, and later Mrs Moseley, had known that it was as much as their lives were worth not to have the house swept and speckless by evening ready to receive the pit dirt of the master. Now, when he came home to find Alice crouching over the fireplace in her bulged apron smearing red raddle on the hearth without as much as a kettle boiling, he would stand still in the doorway, a short, aggressive figure, and ask the wench what she thought she was doing croodled down there in the grate and him waiting for his tea. Then Alice, with her pale face averted, would snarl back at him and his dirt in the high-pitched voice in which she used to gossip with Mrs Hobbs, three doors down. All the women in Hackett's Cottages eventually developed the same sort of voice.

John Fellows really behaved rather well. He knew that it wasn't worth while grumbling, reflected that all women were more than usually unreasonable at these times, and so he would sometimes start his washing in the scullery with cold water, knowing well that in a moment the little vixen would be at his elbow with a boiling saucepan. Then he would catch hold of her in his grimy arms, and she would cry out shrilly that he was a great mucky beast and tell him to 'give over.' A little sparring of this kind often put him in a good humour, and Alice, quick to recognise the peculiar power which her physical presence still exercised on her husband, sometimes presumed on it so far that these passages of arms ended in tears. At such times it frightened her to see him suddenly revealed to her as a strange, hard man, nearly double her own age, with whom she was unaccountably living. Even maternity couldn't make her feel anything but a little girl in the face of his strange maturity. She felt that John Fellows knew, as well as she did, that she was only making believe to be a grown-up married woman; he had shown it more than once by his roughness to her; but that didn't really matter as long as the neighbours never guessed her secret—the neighbours, and more particularly Abner. For if Abner once knew the truth she could never again be mistress in her own house (that was how she put it) and she was so jealous of this imaginary dignity, and at the same time so conscious of its artificiality, that she could never cease trying to put Abner in his place.

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It was bad enough for Alice that her husband should laugh at her. Certainly, she determined, she wasn't going to stand anything of that kind from Abner; and though Abner himself had not yet shown her any signs of disrespect she took great pains to give him no opportunity of doing so by repressing him whenever she had the chance. Just as John Fellows had once approved in Abner the aggressive tendencies that went to the making of a 'bloodworm,' he now approved in Alice, so little and so desperately game, the temper that made things so uncomfortable for Abner. As long as she kept her temper for the boy and didn't try any of her tricks on him it didn't matter. And since it pleased John Fellows, who loved nothing better than a dog-fight, to see his little Alice bare her teeth, the girl played up to him, knowing that her husband would keep Abner from hitting back as long as the game pleased him.

Abner suffered her sullenly. He soon found out that it wasn't worth while disputing with her, and indeed, sometimes her violence, wasting itself against his unconcern, recoiled on her, so that he had the satisfaction of seeing her in tears. This vexed her, partly for shame and partly because she saw that crying, which she had always regarded as her last and most telling weapon, had no effect on him. They were both of them little more than children.

In the end it came to this: Abner, realising that Hackett's Cottages could never again be a real home to him, decided, with the philosophy which is learned early among people who have to fight for themselves, that he must cut his losses and strike out for himself as soon as he could manage to do so. He knew that for the present he could not afford to find another lodging, but already he was doing a man's work at the colliery and soon he would be earning a man's wages. When she realised this Alice was sorry that she had helped to drive him away, for she had dreamed pleasantly of all the money that she would soon be able to handle, and had decided to buy a piano for the parlour and a marble-topped washhand-stand, with a pink toilet set, for the front bedroom. It would be a pity, she reflected, to get rid of a full wage-earner in exchange for a little personal dignity.

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So, suddenly relenting, she became towards Abner the incarnation of sweetness. Abner, however, wasn't having any. Even though he didn't see through her, he felt that her attitude was rather too good to be true. For the present he went on his way, paying regularly his weekly 'lodge' and the subscription to an industrial death-policy that had been taken out in the year of his birth to provide for his burial. But with the fulfilment of these obligations, his dealings with Hackett's Cottages ceased. He became a lodger pure and simple, only appearing at night, when the others had gone to bed, tired, and ready to tumble into the nest of blankets which Alice had not disturbed since he left them in the morning.

She wasn't going to put herself out for him, she said. In those days she didn't feel inclined to put herself out for anybody. Unfortunately she couldn't have it both ways; for by frightening Abner away with her temper she had lost the use of his strength in the heavier work of the house. She knew that she couldn't ask her husband to help her. He hadn't married her for that. Her weary, and palpably interested attempts to coax Abner back to her were a failure. Without showing a

vestige of bitterness he went stolidly on his way, and so she resigned herself, with a sort of tired pride, to the heaviness of her lot.

In a way this desertion of Hackett's Cottages was a good thing for Abner, for it drove him out into the open air and rid his lungs of the coal-dust that he breathed in the galleries of the pit. Joe Hodgetts, now more than ever his friend and admirer, shared these joys. Together they roamed over all the sweet country-side that ponders above the smoke of Mawne. They did not know that it was beautiful. They only knew that there were banks of hazel under which one might play pitch and toss or nap without the fear of a policeman; that there were cool streams with bottoms of red sand in which it was good to bathe; that there were rabbits that came out timidly in the evening to be shot with catapults, and wood-pigeons that rustled the trees on the edge of Uffdown Wood and then emerged with clapping wings. p. 16

Both boys had the instincts of poachers, and in the spring another partner joined them: an equivocal terrier with a sandy coat, a long, thin tail and a guttersnipe's intelligence which Abner got for the asking from a miner at Mawne who didn't think the beast worth the cost of a licence. He couldn't house the animal in Hackett's Cottages, for Alice couldn't abear dogs . . . the dirty beasts! Abner's old friend, Mrs Moseley, came to his help. The dog, now christened Tiger, found a home in her washhouse, living among his hoarded bones on a strip of sacking in the ash-hole beneath the copper. Here he would lie in the evening waiting for his master, his thin snout pressed to the ground between extended paws, motionless, pretending to be asleep. When he heard Abner's step approaching he would lie still, with gleaming open eyes, and wait for his name to be called. Then he would leap out and lick the pit-dust from Abner's face with his tongue. Even Mrs Moseley, who fed him, was nothing to Tiger if Abner were there.

Together they would go out into the golden evening hunting rabbits which Abner would sometimes bring home to Mrs Moseley, who had a way of cooking them with onions soused in milk. They were a great treat to her, for being a widow and no longer employed in John Fellows's house, she rarely tasted meat. Sharing the proceeds of their hunting Abner and Mrs Moseley would sit late over their tea next day, and Tiger, under the table, would crack the rabbit's head and lick out the brains with his pointed tongue. Later in the week Mrs Moseley would sell the rabbit-skin to a rag-and-bones man for twopence. She was really very fond of Abner, and even if he hadn't brought food to the house she would have been glad of his visits, 'for company' as she called it. p. 17

Because he kept the dog there, and because he was happy in Mrs Moseley's society, Abner made her cottage his real home. It stood last in one of a series of parallel streets that climbed desperately out of the dust of the Stourton Road towards a low crest facing Uffdown and the other hills of its chain. The lower story looked out on a wall of the local blue brick; but the windows of the bedroom, a stuffy chamber in which the widow spent the greater part of her day, and which the district nurse penetrated every morning in a whiff of iodoform for the purpose of dressing Mrs Moseley's bad leg, commanded, beyond a foreground of cinder-waste, blue distances from which the hill air could have blown in cleanly. The doctor had told Mrs Moseley that her leg would never heal unless she gave it rest, and since all her relatives were now married and too prosperous to give the old woman a thought, she was left to herself, hobbling from the bedroom to the kitchen whenever it was necessary to bank up the fire. On the hob stood a teapot, brewing a decoction of tannin which had long since ruined her digestion but was the thing for which she cared most in life. She called it her 'cup of tea.'

Abner rarely noticed what an effort she made to receive him cheerfully when he came for his dog. He didn't see how slow and painful her movements were becoming. She never seemed to him any different from the Mrs Moseley whom he had always known and taken for granted, until, one day, she was put to bed and forbidden to move at all. She had spent the whole morning crying to herself, for it seemed to her that the day was not distant when she would have to be moved to Stourton workhouse, to be carried downstairs and placed in the black van before a crowd of gaping neighbours, dirty women with babies in their arms. She had always been shy of the people who lived near her. A country woman, she felt out of place with these industrial folk. She wished very much that she might die. p. 18

When Abner came into the house that evening he found the grate cold and full of ashes. He ran into the washhouse to fetch Tiger, but the dog was not there. Then he heard the voice of Mrs Moseley, distressed and quavering, calling him from above, and a minute later Tiger came scampering downstairs, thoroughly ashamed of himself, from his nest on Mrs Moseley's bed. Abner, standing at the bottom of the stairs, listened to the story of her troubles. She wouldn't tell him much about them, and nothing at all about the deeper fears that haunted her. She told him to get a cup of tea for himself, but when he suggested bringing another upstairs to her she was scandalised. Even though she was old enough to be his grandmother she thought that this would be indelicate; besides, she couldn't be quite certain that the cleanliness of her bedroom was beyond reproach, and had determined that before any one visited her, leg or no leg, she must spend a day putting things straight. And of course the floor must be scrubbed with carbolic soap. She begged Abner to get her some from Mr Ingleby's shop.

Later, as the days of her imprisonment lengthened, she found that she couldn't be so independent after all. At an immense sacrifice she consented to the presence of Abner in her room, that narrow, ill-lighted chamber which the bulging four-poster nearly filled, where, in fact, it was the only piece of furniture. Here Abner would sit in the hot evenings of summer, staring through the closed windows at the distant hills, while Mrs Moseley, in a tired, unhurried voice,

talked of things that had happened in his childhood and other days, more remote, when his mother had been alive. The old woman had always been fond of Abner, always a little frightened of his father; and now that this tall youth was repaying her in some degree for the care that she had given him in his childhood, she became very tender toward him. At times his coming made her vaguely emotional, her tenderness helping her to realise how very lonely she was. Sometimes, when she heard his step in the room beneath her, she would very nearly cry, and the dog Tiger, lying on the patchwork quilt, would lick her outstretched arm. She began to count on his visits. Indeed, rather than lose him, she would even have consented to have the bedroom windows opened. p. 19

He never spoke of his own accord about Alice, but Mrs Moseley compelled him to do so, inquiring every day how she was getting on. She had promised John Fellows, to whom she was always grateful for her old employment, that she would be in the house during the confinement, and to lend the doctor a hand. John Fellows remembered well what a tower of strength she had been at the time when Abner was born. In those days she had possessed a comfortable figure and a jolly laugh.

'I don't want her there!' Alice had protested. 'I'd rather have *anyone* with me nor her!'

She didn't object to Mrs Moseley in herself, but she was suspicious of any one who had known the house before she came there, convinced that the old woman would sniff at her improvements and perhaps make mischief, poking her nose into all the drawers and cupboards while she, the mistress, was in bed. And perhaps John Fellows would compare Mrs Moseley's cooking with her own! But her husband wasn't having any nonsense of that kind. 'Silly wench, yo' don't know what's good for you!' he said, considering the matter settled. Alice cried; but he didn't take any notice of that sort of thing.

As the time drew nearer it distressed Mrs Moseley to think that she might still be in bed when she was wanted. She wished to be there not only for the sake of the husband but also because she couldn't afford to miss the ten shillings that her fortnight's work would bring her, to say nothing of the fortnight's keep. Abner was impatient with her questions.

'Oh, don't yo' worry about *her*,' he said. 'She's not worth it. Got a temper like a cat.'

'You shouldn't say that, dear,' said Mrs Moseley. 'She's the mother that the Lord's given you. And it's hard days for women when they're like that. I've been through it myself, so I know what they feels like. It'll be different when the baby comes along.' p. 20

But Abner was sure it wouldn't be different. It would take more than a baby to change Alice. 'Besides, she bain't my mother,' he said. 'A regular cat . . . that's what she bin! You'm the nearest I've ever had to a mother.'

Mrs Moseley smiled. Secretly, when he wasn't looking, she wiped her left eye on the patchwork counterpane.

The Third Chapter p. 21

In the middle of a summer night Abner's father came blundering into his son's bedroom. 'Come along, get a shift on you!' he said. 'Go and holler to Mrs Moseley, and then run on to the doctor's.'

In his hand he carried a candle which lit up his surly face and threw the folds on either side of the grimy wrinkles into relief. His eyes were bleared and angry, for he had been sleeping like a log and resented any disturbance at night.

'It bain't no good my going for her,' said Abner sleepily. 'She's got a bad leg.'

'Bad leg be bosted!' shouted John Fellows. 'She'll have to come if I send for her. Tak' your hook now!'

While Abner dressed, his father was prowling from room to room letting the tallow from the candle drip down the front of his trousers, and shouting at the boy to hurry up from time to time. In a few minutes Abner was ready and had crossed the patch of waste ground that lay between the terrace and the Stourton Road. This highway was more desolate than he had ever seen it before. In some of the upper windows subdued gas-jets were burning, but most of them took on the gray light of a moon that could not be seen. He was halfway into Halesby before he really woke. Then, in the cool night air, he forgot his grudge against his father for waking him. Even the foul dust of the Stourton Road smelt sweet. He had never felt fitter nor more awake in his life.

As he reached Mrs Moseley's door Tiger began to bark. He heard the voice of Mrs Moseley trying to soothe the beast. Then he picked up some pebbles and threw them against the window panes, and a moment later the old woman looked out, Tiger scrambling into the window beside her.

'Our father wants you,' he called. 'And I've got to go for the doctor.'

‘Dear, dear,’ said Mrs Moseley, ‘I knew it would happen like this. I wouldn’t disappoint your father for anything . . . that I wouldn’t!’ p. 22

‘Don’t you take no notice of it!’ Abner urged. ‘Don’t you come! I’ll tell ’em the doctor won’t let you.’

She shook her head solemnly and disappeared from the window.

Abner, exhilarated with the night air, ran on to the doctor’s house. This gentleman appeared to resent his call. Abner was told to wait below so that he might carry the bag. He stood there in a garden heavy with the perfume of stocks. In the meadows along the Stour a corncrake was calling. He wondered what kind of bird it was, and whether it was easy to kill. He didn’t mind how long the doctor kept him waiting.

On the way back to Hackett’s Cottages Dr Moorhouse spoke very little. He asked Abner the kind of questions he usually put to young people, and grunted in reply, as if he hadn’t heard what Abner said.

‘Are you John Fellows’s son?’ he asked. And then: ‘How old are you?’

When Abner said that he was going in seventeen, he grunted. It scarcely seemed possible that more than sixteen years had passed since, in the same small house of Hackett’s Cottages, he had ushered this tall youth into the world. It filled him with a kind of discontent to realise that for all these years he had been moving in the same groove, in a vicious circle that had brought him back once more to this identical point. Only it hadn’t been so hard to turn out at night sixteen years ago. A dog’s life! People didn’t realise it. There was Ingleby, the chemist, a sensible man in most things, fool enough to make his only son a doctor!

When they reached Hackett’s Cottages they found the door of number eleven open and a light shining in it. John Fellows came out to meet them and insisted on shaking hands with the doctor. It was obvious that he had been sampling the bottle of brandy that is always in evidence on these occasions.

‘She’s all right,’ he said. ‘She’s all right, doctor. A tough wench she is! Tougher than the other one.’

He turned on Abner. ‘Get the fire lit. Sharp, now! Else I’ll drap thee one. Fill the big kettle. Plenty of hot water. That’s it, isn’t it, doctor? I know . . . don’t I, doctor? . . . I know.’ p. 23

Somebody came limping downstairs. It was Mrs Moseley.

‘What . . .?’ shouted the doctor. ‘What’s the meaning of this? What do you mean by it, woman? Didn’t I tell you to stay in bed till I let you out? Of all the damned pig-headed foolishness . . ‘

Mrs Moseley smiled her tired, patient smile; but the doctor knew she was in pain. He couldn’t help admiring her.

‘You’ll forgive me all right, doctor,’ she said. ‘Now, what could I do with the poor young thing lying here like that . . . and after all I’d promised Mr Fellows here? Don’t you remember the last time?’

‘No, I’m hanged if I’ll forgive you,’ he smiled. ‘You’re an obstinate old fool. Now run along upstairs. If you lose your leg it’s not my fault.’

Abner was left alone in the kitchen with his father. While the boy raked out the ashes from the grate and lit the fire John Fellows took the brandy from the cupboard and had another swig, putting the neck of the bottle in his mouth. He said ‘Ah!’ and smacked his lips. Then he went out into the strip of garden at the back and walked violently up and down. It was almost light when he returned. He was sweating and quarrelsome. Abner had a bad time of it. Now that his poor mother was suffering like this John Fellows hoped he’d be sorry for the way he’d used her. If anything went wrong—he implied gloomily that something probably would—Abner would be to blame for it. To give his fuddled brain the chance for indignation that it wanted there entered the dog Tiger, fawning, ingratiating. He had escaped from Mrs Moseley’s house and followed the scent of her or of Abner. He jumped up at Abner, yelping with joy.

For a second John Fellow’s stared at him stupidly. Then he burst out with: ‘And here’s that bloody dog again! Your mother’s told you she can’t a-bear it, but she’s no sooner upstairs . . .’ He slipped the belt from his waist and lashed at the wretched Tiger’s quarters. The dog squealed piteously. For a moment Abner saw red. He didn’t see his father any longer, only a stubby man, shorter than himself, staring at him with bloodshot eyes, and sweat trickling down two grimy wrinkles. He would have knocked his father down if Mrs Moseley hadn’t suddenly appeared at the foot of the stairs asking what the noise was about. The sound of her voice steadied both of them as they stood staring hatred at one another, and Abner’s anger passed as quickly as it had come. Mrs Moseley, standing between them, brought with her a pungent odour of some antiseptic. The smell impressed Abner with the moment’s seriousness. He was suddenly sorry for Alice. He even wished that he had been more patient with her. Then the whole sky was shaken with the vibrations of the great bull at Mawne Colliery. Five-thirty. He slipped into his pit clothes, left his father staring, and hurried from the house. p. 24

When he came back from his turn at night the sense of stress that he had quite forgotten in the work of the day returned. On the doorstep of Number Eleven he felt intensely nervous.

Something was going to happen, perhaps something had happened already. The house was quiet. In the kitchen a fire was burning that made for cheerfulness in spite of the heat. All this was attributable to Mrs Moseley, who now appeared with an encouraging smile. She told him that Alice's baby had been born at ten o'clock. 'And when I got her clean and comfortable and washed the baby, I thought, "Well, now, while I'm on my legs I may as well have a bit of a tidy round." A lovely boy!' she said. 'Oh, what a beautiful babby—just like his father!'

Abner didn't want to hear about the baby. He stuck to his obstinate determination not to countenance the affair at all, and Mrs Moseley laughed at him for behaving like a baby himself. He asked her what had happened to his father.

'I haven't seen him, not since you went to work. But men's best out of the way at these times.'

Abner guessed that, once having started to drink, his father had probably been drinking all day and might well by this time be lying drunk in some hedge at the back of the Royal Oak. Mrs Moseley rebuked him. p. 25

'You're hard on your father, Abner,' she said. 'It's a bad time for a man when he feels he can't do nothing. You don't love and honour your father the way you ought.'

All through the fortnight of Alice's lying-in Mrs Moseley did her best to keep the peace of the house and to reconcile Abner to the new state of things. She made him feel almost as much at home as he had been in the old days, limping downstairs in the evening to talk to him. Alice was very jealous when she heard them talking below. On most evenings they sat alone in the kitchen together, but sometimes they went out into the strip of garden at the back of the house to a wooden bench screened by a straggling hedge of scarlet runners. They sat there, often in silence, till the sky darkened, reflecting above the western horizon all the furnaces of Mawne; and no one disturbed them, for John Fellows, having once yielded to the bottle, had continued his celebrations of the event. After all, such things didn't happen very often.

One evening Mrs Moseley brought down the baby for Abner to see. 'Look at him, Abner,' she said, 'bain't he a pretty dear? bain't he a little lovee?'

Whatever the baby may have been he certainly wasn't pretty; but there was something in his helplessness that appealed to Abner's generosity. In spite of his prejudices he couldn't see himself being vindictive toward this comical creature. He touched the baby's downy, wrinkled face with his hand. The creature made a sucking noise, seeking Abner's fingers with his lips, and at the same moment Tiger, with a snarl, took Abner's calf between his teeth, and, with the gentlest pressure, threatened to bite him.

'There you are,' said Mrs Moseley. 'Look at jealousy! You and Tiger are a pair, and that's the truth!'

He laughed, but for all that he didn't look forward happily to Mrs Moseley's departure. He felt that the baby would only serve to make Alice more intolerably important. When, on the thirteenth night, a dead-white, incredibly diminished Alice came down to sit for a couple of hours on the sofa, he decided to ask Mrs Moseley to take him into her house as a lodger. 'The money will come in handy,' he urged. 'I could sleep in the washhouse with old Tiger.' p. 26

But she wouldn't think of it. 'I couldn't do it,' she said. 'I wouldn't like to put your father out, not if it was ever so! John's been a good friend to me. I don't know how I could have lived all these years without him.'

'He's got a sight more out of yo' than ever yo' got out of him!' Abner grumbled.

But again she said 'No'—partly, it is true, because she felt that Alice might make it the occasion for a quarrel, and partly because, much as she loved Abner she knew that her strength would not allow her to look after him properly. On many days of late she hadn't really been fit to do her own housework, and so she fought shy, for Abner's sake as much as her own, of the arrangement that he suggested. The money, alas! was very tempting.

Abner, who didn't generally notice things particularly and had always taken people like Mrs Moseley for granted, had not appreciated the changes that were slowly overtaking her. He didn't see the slight contraction of her brows that had lately become a fixed expression of the pain that wouldn't let her be. Neither he nor Alice nor John Fellows were aware of Mrs Moseley's suffering; but the doctor, on his daily visits, saw how gamely she was fighting, and said nothing; for he knew that to abstain from obvious advice was the highest tribute that he could pay to her fortitude. He knew that there was trouble ahead, but he still joked with Mrs Moseley, and she, in answer, returned him a smile that struck him as particularly sweet in this plain old woman, making excuse for the reproach that remained unspoken. In the end, Abner, piqued at her refusal, quarrelled with her.

'Any one 'd think I was likely to be a nuisance,' he said.

Mrs Moseley shook her head. She nearly told him all her reasons against his plan, but when she came to speak of them her lips trembled. She knew that she couldn't keep up much longer. On the fifteenth day she left Hackett's Cottages. Alice, who paid her the agreed ten shillings from a leather purse that she kept wrapped up in a handkerchief under her pillow, thought it rather shabby of her not to offer to stay longer. 'You'd think it 'd be the least she could do after all your kindness,' she said to her husband. John Fellows, not to be buttered with flattery, merely p. 27

grunted.

It took Mrs Moseley more than an hour to walk the mile home. The doctor passing in his trap, saw her resting on a doorstep in the Stourton Road. He pretended not to recognise her, but scribbled a note on his list that she was to be visited in the afternoon. Toward evening he stumped up the crooked stairs and stood at the bottom of her bed looking at her with a curious smile on his lips. She knew it was no good making excuses.

'Let's have a look at it,' he said. And then: 'Well, my dear, this means six weeks in bed. You know that, don't you? Ten shillings' worth, eh?'

Mrs Moseley, conscious of the fact that it was worth a good deal more than ten shillings, said nothing. If he only realised what a blessed relief it was to her to be off her feet again!

When Alice 'came downstairs' again, butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. Abner had never known her so studiously charming. From the first it was as if she smiled: 'For goodness' sake let us forget what has happened and make a new start!' and he couldn't very well refuse to meet her. At the same time he found it difficult to conceal his suspicions that she was getting at him in some covert, female way. The situation would have been easier to handle if Alice hadn't been a trifle pale and interesting. She didn't pick up very quickly, and now, of course, in addition to the ordinary housework she had to look after the baby, who was already suffering from its mother's dietetic indiscretions. Like many thin young women Alice could never conquer her inclination for sweets and for vinegar, and as a consequence the child was noisy and irritable. Her housework went to the wall, and in despair she turned to Abner to help her out. Nothing could have been sweeter than her temper, and though he didn't believe in it he couldn't help being sorry for her, and did what she asked him. As a matter of fact, he was already a little interested in the baby. The smallness of its limbs and the timid uncertainty of its movements fascinated him. He regarded it with a certain benignant curiosity, much as he might have looked at a nestling taken from a hedge in April. p. 28

Of course Alice was feeding her child at the breast. If Abner came into the kitchen in the middle of this performance she would turn round quickly and take the baby upstairs or out into the washhouse, blushing. Abner wondered why she did this. Other women weren't so sensitive. Sometimes he would pass a couple of them standing at their garden gates gossiping and feeding their babies at the same time. He had never taken any notice of them. Nobody else took any notice of them. There was something in Alice's blushes that embarrassed him unreasonably. Afterward he asked himself why this should be; but when next he saw Alice hiding her white breast he blushed himself.

The new relation was very curious. If it hadn't been for Abner's profound distrust of her they might even have become intimate. It was no good for Alice to pretend that she wasn't lonely. In spite of all her pride in being a married woman and the mother of a family's beginning, she couldn't conceal the fact that since the baby's birth her husband took very little notice of her. It was as if he had said: 'Now that I've done my duty by the nation and given you something to play with you can just attend to my comforts without bothering me.' He had lately transferred his custom from the Greyhound to the Lyttleton Arms. A shorter walk at closing time. So far he had never maltreated Alice, but she knew very well that she couldn't now play him the tricks that had pleased him in their courting days.

So, from being with her husband like a little girl in school, with Abner she behaved like a schoolgirl released, chattering, eager and friendly. It puzzled him, for he had never had a sister and didn't understand the creature in the least. Her flatteries and sudden kindnesses surprised him every bit as much as her spurts of temper. In each case she seemed equally childish, particularly on days when she had been too busy to do her hair and wore it in a honey-coloured pigtail at the back. Then, there was another Alice who could assert with something very near to dignity the fact that she was mistress of the house; and another, blushing Alice, before whom he too had blushed. p. 29

On the whole, however, her most obvious feature was her kindness. In the evening, when Abner came home dirty from the pit, he would find the soap-suds waiting for him and tea laid ready on the kitchen table. Alice, as likely as not, would be bathing the baby, who already showed a native sturdiness in spite of his mother's indiscretions. While Abner ate his tea she would talk to the baby in a low, cooing voice, which she was evidently convinced would fetch him. From time to time in the middle of these whispers, she would look up sideways to where Abner sat munching bread and butter with the sunlight in his hair. Abner, who knew that he was good-looking, and was now a little conscious of his manly superiority, took no notice of her.

And yet, in the end, he couldn't help being dragged into the atmosphere of intimacy which her small attentions created. Grudgingly he was forced to admit that she had changed for the better. He was now old enough to be flattered too. They became almost good friends, and only Abner's native cautiousness prevented a complete reconciliation. Alice knew this. She knew the shy spirit with which she had to deal, but was happy to feel that she had accomplished so much already. Somewhere in the back of her mind she suspected that a time might come in which she would rely on Abner's strength to protect her and her baby. Some day she might need his help. It was of John Fellows, her husband, that she was afraid.

This new relation, Abner thought, was all very well. Still, just because they had patched up their old quarrel, they needn't necessarily be always together. He wasn't going to abandon his friend, p. 30

Joe Hodgetts, and Tiger for the sake of feminine small talk. Nor did he mean to forsake Mrs Moseley, at whose house the dog still slept. Those early autumn evenings were great times for Tiger. Abner knew of a dozen fields in which he could be certain of putting up a hare.

It annoyed Alice to see him so eager to get away just when she wanted him most. She knew that he went in to see Mrs Moseley. She told herself that she had always hated the old woman, even before she had been forced on her by her husband. One evening when Abner was hurrying away after tea she called him back.

'Where are you going, Abner?'

'Down town.'

'You'm going to Mrs Moseley's.'

'And why shouldn't I go to Mrs Moseley's? You can't stop me!'

'Stay with us to-night, Abner,' she coaxed.

Abner only laughed at her. Then she flew into a passion, standing up white and trembling at the side of the table.

'How can you go to Mrs Moseley's?' she cried. 'Who's Mrs Moseley, I should like to know? You're all cracked on your Mrs Moseley, you and your father! That fat old woman in her nasty smelly house! And you didn't ought to leave me when I want you. You didn't ought to! I'm your mother . . '

'Oh, you'm my mother, are you?' Abner burst into a laugh. 'That's bloody funny, that is!'

'Oh, you and your swearing . . .' she cried.

He didn't wait to hear any more. When he was gone she fell down on her knees beside the table and sobbed with her head in her hands: a frail, pathetic figure with her hair in curling rags. Her sobs woke the baby, whose cradle had been carefully placed in a draught between the open door and the fireplace.

'Oh, you now!' she cried, rocking the cradle roughly. She might easily have upset it. Then, suddenly repenting, she picked up her son tenderly, and hugging him to her breast, buried her sobs in his downy face.

The Fourth Chapter

p. 31

As the autumn hardened into an iron winter Abner had less time than ever to spend on these distractions. When the football season opened he began to play for the little club named Halesby Swifts, from which Mawne United usually drew its recruits. Technically it was a professional club, but the gate money that it drew from its adventures in pursuit of the local charity cups did no more than pay for the boots and clothes and footballs of the players. In the first round of the North Bromwich Hospital Cup competition the Swifts had the good luck to be drawn against their big neighbours, Mawne United, on the Mawne ground, and Abner, playing centre-half, repeated the exploit of his childhood by scoring a goal against the goalkeeper who had succeeded the celebrated Harper. It was an elevating moment. The captain and others of the Swifts came running up to Abner and wrung his hand. All Mawne and Halesby on the touchline waved black bowler hats under the flag of Mawne United languidly flying from its staff beside the Royal Oak. A great moment! Abner did not see his father standing in his old place behind the Mawne goal posts with his hands thrust into the pockets of his reefer coat and his eyes sparkling as he puffed away at his black clay pipe. That was how John Fellows showed his emotion. Later in the evening he showed it in another way.

This match, however, made a considerable difference in John Fellows's attitude. It gave Abner a standing with his father that had never been granted to him before. Nor was this the only result of his success; for on the following Monday Mr Hudson, the chief clerk in Mr Willis's works at Mawne, and secretary of the United, an irreproachable expert in a game that he had never played, sent up a message to the pit for Abner, and on Tuesday he had 'signed on' for the senior club.

'A lad like you, growing and that,' said Mr Hudson, 'didn't ought to be working in the pit. I'll speak to the manager, and if you'll come down to the Furnaces next Monday we'll see what sort of job we can find you.'

p. 32

On Monday morning Abner walked over to the Stour valley in which the great works lay angrily seething, and picked his way through the gigantic debris of the iron age: huge discarded boilers, brown with rust; scrap-heaps of tangled metal that had served its day; stacks of rails; purple mountains of iron ore standing ready for the blast-furnaces that snored like dragons in their sleep and made the air around them quiver with hot breath. Over a network of rails on which an officious shunting-engine that the head of the firm had christened Lilian, in honour of his daughter, ran to and fro, whistling shrill warnings; over many steam pipes, snaky tentacles of the central power-house, that hissed steam from their leaky joints, he passed to the office that Mr

Hudson inhabited. On the steps in the middle of his path stood a tall, pale young man who stared out over the works as though some vision entranced him. Abner, wondering what he was looking at, and following the direction of his eyes, saw nothing unusual. He knew that this was young Mr Willis, Mr Edward, as Hudson called him. He asked Abner what he wanted.

'Mr Hudson, gaffer.'

'You'll find him inside.'

He moved out of the way, still, apparently in the toils of his dream, and Abner was shown into Mr Hudson, whom he found sitting at a desk with a pencil behind either ear. 'Ah, here you are,' said Mr Hudson. 'There's a good chap!' and took him straightway to one of the foremen, an old butty of John Fellows, who gave him an indefinite labouring job that consisted of moving metallic rubbish from one part of the works to another as occasion demanded. At Mawne, it seemed, no fragment of iron was ever allowed to leave the works as long as there was a foot of space in which it could be stored. Abner also had to grease the wheels of a little line of trolley-trucks that blundered up and down the hill in front of the manager's house, between the furnaces and the high colliery of Timbertree.

'This is work for an old man, not for a strong lad like you,' the foreman grumbled. He knew that p. 33
there was always work above ground and good pay at Mawne for a promising footballer. 'They'll fause you up now! Wait till your footballing's over,' he said, 'wait till you've broke your leg, and then you ask your Mr Hudson for a job like this and see what he'll tell you!'

But Abner was seventeen and had no thoughts for age. The greatest delight of all was that he now breathed the air of the open sky all day instead of the darkness of the pit; and even if the ecstasy of his evening's relief was now blunted, there seemed to be no end to his capacity for physical enjoyment. Beneath the caresses of air and light his physique began to expand. He took a delight in the strict training that the Mawne United directors enforced on their players. With skipping and rubbing and sprinting his muscles became hard and supple and his whole body marvellously fit. Football became his whole life. In his work at Mawne, even in his dreams, he pondered on its tactics. All his friends were players absorbed in the same game. He gained confidence and skill, and by the end of the season he had become one of the crowd's idols, followed from the arena by a trail of small boys and patted on the back by strangers as he walked home after a match in his muddy clothes. The girls also used to turn and look at him with bold glances; but his life was far too full in those days for him to worry his head about women.

His relation with Alice had now passed its first emotional stage, and though she was more interested in him than she had ever been before, she had grown to understand him better, so that the storms which had made life at Hackett's Cottages so intense no longer occurred. She washed his football clothes with care and fed him regularly and well, as indeed she should have done, for he was now earning good money. She had discovered that it paid her best not to worry him. Sometimes a fit of restlessness would make him say that he must change his lodging; but although he often grumbled, he still stayed on in the room that he had occupied since he was a child. In her anxiety to please him she even offered of her own accord to have the dog Tiger in p. 34
the house; but Abner only stared at her, wondering what she was getting at, and laughed. 'Still jealous of the poor old woman?' he said.

Of course she was still jealous of Mrs Moseley. She couldn't help being jealous; but though she denied this indignantly, and even tried to prove her goodwill by paying several awkward visits with the baby to Mrs Moseley's bedroom, she knew very well that the old woman's attractions for Abner were the very least that she had to fear. She was really and deeply jealous of the young women who stared at him on the football field or in the Stourton Road. She knew how handsome he was growing; realised, with an agony that was not wholly maternal, that sooner or later he was bound to fall in love, and that was a calamity which somehow she felt she could not bear. Little by little John Fellows was becoming less important to her. All her life seemed more and more centred in her baby and in Abner. Thinking the matter over she decided that it was her best policy to encourage him in his friendship for the old woman, and she did so gradually, insidiously, so that Abner should not guess what she was doing or wonder why she was doing it.

Abner needed no encouragement. He had never wavered from his loyalty, and now more than ever he felt that he owed some attention to his old friend. Since the day when she had taken to her bed after the fortnight's work at Hackett's Cottages, she had never recovered sufficiently to resume her former activities. Sometimes, indeed, it had seemed that her leg was on the point of healing; but as soon as she crawled downstairs and tried to go about her business it broke down again, which was not surprising seeing how much her lying in bed had weakened her. The doctor could do nothing but preach patience and leave her in the hands of the district nurse.

For a whole year she struggled along on the pittance that the relieving officer gave her; but at last the disorder of the cottage became so overwhelming that the nurse took the law into her own hands and, in spite of all Mrs Moseley's protests, wrote a letter to the nearest of the old woman's p. 35
relatives, a younger sister, the wife of a North Bromwich brass-worker named Wade.

In answer to the letter Mrs Wade came over to see her sister, dressed as for a funeral in closely-fitting black sateen. Being rather afraid that she might find it awkward to get out of taking Mrs Moseley home with her, the sight of the old woman's helplessness gave her a distinct feeling of relief which showed itself in the warmth of her condolences.

'Well, Eliza, this is a shame, isn't it? And my! won't George be shocked when I tell him? To think

of your never 'aving let us know! Just to think of it!'

Mrs Moseley feebly protested that it wasn't her fault that the Wades had been told even now. 'I don't want to be a trouble to people,' she said. Mrs Wade assured her that she wasn't anything of the kind.

'George, he says to me: "Now, Florrie, you mind you bring Eliza hack with you." But, of course, any one could see with half a glance that that's impossible like you are. We could have made you that comfortable, too! We 'ave a lovely little 'ouse. What with the money George is picking up, and what we've saved.'

By the time of the evening train on which her sister had promised to return to North Bromwich, Mrs Moseley was heartily sick of George's name and achievements. She hadn't really ever known her sister Florrie, and now she felt that in spite of her suave manner and affectation of kindnesses that cost nothing she had really come to spy out the nakedness of the land, to check the value of her sister's scanty effects, to reckon just how much lay between her and the workhouse. And all the time Mrs Moseley was in a fever wondering what the house was like downstairs; whether, in her absence, dirt had accumulated; whether Tiger had made the washhouse in a mess. Indeed, when Mrs Wade departed, she crept downstairs to see for herself. 'Whatever they says'—this was always her cry—'they can't say I bain't clean!'

The upshot of this visit was revealed to Abner a week or two later, when he arrived one evening to find the faithless Tiger playing at the knee of a stranger, a girl with the city's matte complexion, hair that was almost black with a gleam of copper in it, and brown, long-lashed eyes. p. 36

'That your dog?' she said, smiling. Her voice was low. Abner was now used to the high-pitched voices of Alice and her neighbours. He had never heard a woman speak so quietly.

He said 'Yes,' and she, with the utmost self-possession, told him that Tiger was a beauty. It wasn't strictly true, but it gave Abner a flush of pleasure, for he loved Tiger. Then she said: 'I'm Susan Wade. Mother sent me here to look after Auntie Liza for a week or two.'

As a matter of fact mother, warned by a snuffy shilling-doctor in Lower Sparkdale that Susan was anæmic and needed country air, had suddenly felt more than usually generous toward her sister, and sent Susan to 'help,' with no more than the price of her keep.

'Afford it?' she said, when her husband questioned her about Mrs Moseley's ability to feed another mouth, 'Afford it? You don't know our Liza! She was always the quiet one of the family. And a saving kind, too. I know well enough she's got a stocking somewhere!'

Mr Wade was not in the habit of arguing with his wife, and Mrs Moseley, when Susan arrived at Halesby with a small wicker basket containing her best dress and a bag of apples with mother's love, was so deeply touched that when she kissed her her eyes filled with tears.

'You'll be lonely,' she said, 'with an old woman like me.'

'I shall go out into the lanes,' said Susan. 'Mother told me I must get all the fresh air I can. For the blood, you know.' That put the matter quite plainly.

Mrs Moseley assured Abner that Susan was a dear, sweet child, and such a little woman; but he never met her in Mrs Moseley's presence, for the old lady had decided against the impropriety of Susan and himself together beholding her in bed. Awkward, at first, he found in a little while that she wasn't as formidable as he imagined, though all his triumphs in the football field could not have given him one half of her staggering self-possession. What impressed him most about her was, without doubt, the sense of personal cleanliness that she carried with her. Susan was on a holiday, and had time for such refinements. She wore clean print dresses, while Alice and her shrill-voiced neighbours in Hackett's Cottages, by whose appearance Abner had regulated his ideas of feminine nicety, wore, as a rule, the livery of their toil. Susan, on the other hand, lived like a lady, having no better work for her fingers than the braiding of her dark hair. In the mornings she stayed with Mrs Moseley, listening, in a kind of dream, to her aunt's recitation of the virtues of people whom, in the days before her marriage, she had served. It seemed as if that were the time in her life toward which her thoughts now returned most happily, and the mere scraping together of its unimportant details filled her with a mild afterglow of enjoyment. p. 37

'I remember,' she would begin, in a weak, contented voice that was soothing in its tiredness, 'I remember one day Mrs Willis—the first Mrs Willis that is, old Mr Hackett's daughter down the Holloway and Mr Edward's mother—I remember her coming into the kitchen with a beautiful basketful of cherries. Fine, black fruit they was! And she says "Hannah"—that's the Hannah that's still there, but I expect she's forgotten *me*—"Hannah," she says, "look what the master's sent from the cherry-orchard." They always call it the cherry-orchard, you know, up above Mawne bank, and that was a wonderful year for cherries. "We'll make them into jam, Hannah," she says. "And Liza"—that's me—"will help you stone them." *Stone them*, she says! And how we laughed to be sure! I can see her standing there now, a bit red in the face, for she was new to housekeeping and never knew you don't stone cherries. She had a couple of black-hearts in her lips, like the game you play. A dear lady, she was! I can see her again in Mr Edward. Time passes, doesn't it? You'll know that some day, Susan.'

Susan tossed her head. Perhaps some day she would know, but sufficient unto this were its quiet languors and the breath of summer air drifting in at a chink in her aunt's window from the fields towards the hills. She herself had grown up in the cramped quarter of Sparkdale, where, in p. 38

summer-time the blue-brick pavements burn under a pale sky, where there is always a smell of dust and fire and rotting remnants of fruit dropped from the hawkers' barrows into the gutter. At the back of their house in Sparkdale lay a little garden plot; but her father had always given it over to fowls that made it an arid, gritty patch littered with shed feathers. All the parks lay miles away over the streets, and the only green that Susan knew was the grass that grew within the railings of an ugly Georgian church standing in a square that had once been fashionable but was now neglected and unkempt. For this reason the sloping fields beyond Halesby were wonderful to her, and things that would have seemed common to a country child, enchanting. In the afternoon she went out walking with Tiger. There was no need for Abner to be jealous, for these walks bore no comparison in Tiger's mind with his evening visits to rabbit-haunted banks.

Susan had come to Halesby thrilled by her first experience of romance. She had been initiated by a pale young clerk named Bagley who taught in the Sunday-school of the decayed Georgian church. It had happened at their annual 'outing' to Sutton Park. There, in a hot slade of larches, Mr Bagley had held her hand, a small and very sticky hand in a lace mitten. While he did so he had confided to her that his was an extremely passionate nature, and that nothing but his hold on the Anglican faith restrained him from exploiting it, and after this, immediately before tea, he had kissed her once. That had been all; for after tea Mr Bagley, weighed down no doubt by a sense of shame, had avoided her. All that remained to her of this adventure was the power of making Mr Bagley blush; and this was no very signal achievement, for Mr Bagley flushed easily and had already written privily to advertisers in the weekly papers who claimed to cure this weakness. It appeared indeed that there would never be any more between them than a bond of secret guilt; p. 39 and since Susan had liked being kissed, even by Mr Bagley, she decided to continue her experiments whenever the chance came.

From the first sight of him Abner had pleased her. He was eighteen, just a year older than herself. His handsome head, his excellent teeth, his contrasting fairness, the size and strength of his body, all attracted her. She thought she would like to be alone with him and see what would happen. Therefore she began by inviting herself to accompany him on one of his evening excursions with Tiger. Abner resented the proposal, partly because he had never quite shaken off the convention of his boyhood that girls were soft and any dealings with them shameful, and partly because he was jealous of any stranger invading a world that was so particularly his own and so specially guarded from the feminine influence hitherto represented by Alice. But Susan, by her quiet determination, made it impossible for him to refuse. She had always been—after the poultry—her father's principal pet, and when Abner put her off, she simply declined to believe that he meant it.

He grumbled and submitted. He supposed that he was doing a kindness to Mrs Moseley by taking her, and comforted himself with the thought that, after all, Susan wasn't like other girls: a conclusion at which he arrived without difficulty, seeing that he had known no other girl but Alice. On his side, indeed, the relationship was as natural as it might be. It was Susan who found it rather a failure in the absence of sentimental developments. Abner treated her, she found, very much as if she had been a boy; and though this was the pose with which she had started their acquaintance, she didn't want it to remain at that. Mrs Moseley's looking-glass, in which she could see herself when she sat in her favourite place at the foot of the bed in the morning, assured her that she was much nicer to look at now than when she first came to Halesby from the city. She was plumper, her cheeks and lips were more brightly coloured and her eyes clearer. Mr Bagley would have noticed the difference. Abner, apparently, didn't. She comforted herself with the reflection that he was too rough and rugged to realise her delicacy, p. 40 that he was only a common labourer and no fit associate for a foreman's daughter, but when she came to think of it, her social quality should really have made her more attractive to him.

She was a very direct young woman. One evening when they went out for their walk down the lane that leads to the woody basin known as Dovehouse Fields they came to a lonely stile at the end of a bridge over a tributary of the Stour, beyond which the red bank was tunnelled by many rabbits. Tiger ran forward eagerly over the bridge and began to sniff at the holes in the bank, and Abner would have followed him if Susan had not barred the way, sitting complacently on the top of the stile. She sat there in the low sunlight that warmed her cheeks, lighted gleams of copper in her hair, and made her brown eyes amber.

'I want to stay here, Abner,' she said.

'Well, let us pass then,' said Abner, thinking only of rabbits. 'Wait till I come back.'

But she wouldn't move from her perch. She sat there smiling and swinging her long legs. Tiger, who couldn't realise why any scentless human should hesitate on the verge of such excitements, ran back and looked at them, making little quick noises of encouragement. Susan called him, and rather reluctantly he scuttled back over the bridge and jumped up to her knees licking her hands. She said:

'Don't you think I look nice, Abner?'

'I don't see nothing wrong with you,' said Abner, without enthusiasm.

'Don't be soft!' she said. 'I mean, don't you want to kiss me?'

He didn't. He hadn't thought about such a thing. It was she who was being soft now. And yet he couldn't help wanting to try when he saw her smiling at him from the stile. He kissed her, very clumsily, on the cheek. He had never kissed any one before, and its softness and coolness

bewildered him. But she wasn't content with this. She took his face in both her hands and kissed his lips. He lost his head. He didn't know what he was doing. He took her in his arms in a way p. 41
that was very different from Mr Bagley's passionate embrace. It seemed as if he wanted to kiss the life out of her. She drew back, almost frightened of him, but he wouldn't let her go. They left Tiger to his rabbits and wandered off into the woods. When Susan returned in the darkness Mrs Moseley could not help remarking how well she looked.

This was no more than the beginning of the adventure. There was nothing lukewarm about the passion that Susan had thus precipitated. Her education, which had brought her very nearly to the level of middle-class prudishness, had not prepared her for Abner's love-making. Mr Bagley, she reflected, would have made her timid presents of sweets and, perhaps, occupied the pew behind hers in church. He would have taken her for walks in one of the decorous parks on the other side of the city. He would have held her hand on the tram and paid her spoony compliments. Abner paid her no compliments, gave her no presents. Nor did he hold her hand: he held her whole body till she felt that her will was failing and that her only duty was to obey him. She was terrified by his violence, ashamed of responding to its crudity. She was almost sorry that she had provoked him, for now it was she who fled from him and feared to be overtaken, and though the excitement of the chase thrilled her she could never escape from the vague threat of its inevitable end. Her mother, she knew, would have approved of Mr Bagley. What would she think of this handsome young labourer, this professional footballer? She knew that she was bound to resist him as long as she could.

This was no easy matter. Abner absorbed her, gave her no chance. Once having got her he would not let her go. Her calculations of the future didn't trouble him. Every evening when he had knocked off work he came along to Mrs Moseley's house and called for her, and in spite of any excuse that she might make, he took her off over the fields and into the woods. Mrs Moseley unconsciously abetted him.

'Your mother's anxious that you should get all the fresh air you can, dear,' she used to say, 'and it's a beautiful evening. I wish I could go with you!'

The old woman was sure that she could trust them together, and for three weeks of brilliant p. 42
summer weather they spent the evening and the twilight in each other's arms. Susan tried a series of tactics that she invented for her own protection. She pretended to shrink from his coarseness and from the dirt of the works in contrast with her own clean fragility. She adopted another, distant attitude, proprietary and maternal. Abner laughed at both of them. She even, in an extremity, played her last card: the attentions of the elegant Bagley. 'You give him five minutes alone with me, and I'll settle that!' said Abner. 'You're my wench, and don't you forget it!'

Providence, in the shape of a calamity, saved her. Her mother sprained an ankle in the fowl-pen, and wired for Susan to return to North Bromwich at once. The telegram came while Abner was at work, and when he reached Mrs Moseley's cottage in the evening, Susan was gone. She left a carefully written note behind her in which she addressed him as Mr Fellows and said that she hoped he would always think of her as kindly as she did of him. She said it would be nice to get back to North Bromwich after so long in the country, but carefully omitted to supply him with her address. At first Abner was stunned, then angry. He couldn't put up with Mrs Moseley's mild meanderings. He hadn't the heart to go out into the desecrated woods. When Tiger leapt at him, in anticipation of a walk, he kicked the dog in the ribs. The football season would not begin for another month, and since he had nothing to do he returned to Hackett's Cottages. Alice, who had kept an eye full of jealous suspicions on him for the last month, received him. She saw that something had bowled him over. It gave her a secret satisfaction.

'Early to-night, Abner,' she said.

He would not answer her.

'Whatever's up with you?' she said. 'You'm all moithered.' And then, with a laugh, she answered her own question by another: 'Too much sweethearting?' in a tone that pretended to be merely bantering but in reality carried a sting. He knew that faint touch of malice in her so well that it made him flare up at once with: 'I don't want no bloody girls.' It didn't strike him that her malice p. 43
might be taken as a compliment, and when she laughed at his reply he walked out of the house in a temper.

He didn't know where to go; but taking his father's example he wandered down to the Royal Oak, where he sat drinking pint after pint with one of his football friends and a couple of women. At closing time the whole party were turned out together and walked down into Halesby. It was nearly daybreak when he returned to Hackett's Cottages, still the worse for liquor, and blundered upstairs to bed. He slept so heavily that he did not hear the Mawne bull in the morning. At ten o'clock a feeling that some one was in the room aroused him. He opened his eyes to a blinding light and saw that Alice had placed a cup of hot tea at his bedside. He drank it so eagerly that he scalded his mouth.

The Fifth Chapter

p. 44

This sudden outburst was sufficiently violent to satisfy Abner that for the present he could do without liquor or women. It wasn't very difficult to forget Susan, for she had really been more trouble than she was worth. The affair would never have begun but for her provocation, and since she hadn't the pluck to go through with it, Abner satisfied himself by exaggerating her insipidity in his own mind.

After the first sting of malice with which she had sent him off on the drink, Alice showed her repentance, first symbolised by the waiting cup of tea, in a hundred attentions and kindnesses. He never told her about his affair with Susan, but she appeared to understand more or less what had happened and even to sympathise with him in his violent methods of getting over it. She made him so comfortable at Hackett's Cottages that there was no more talk of his finding other lodgings. In the early days of her married life the responsibilities of the house and its two male inhabitants had been too much for her inexperience, and the coming of the baby in the first year had made her abandon all attempts to keep pace with domestic demands. In the second year she regained her strength and a great deal of the physical charm that had originally attracted John Fellows. The baby, a normal, healthy child, had also prospered, and now that he was weaned slept away most of the day on his mother's bed upstairs or in his cradle in the kitchen. Nothing marred the smoothness of domestic life at Number Eleven but the uncertainty of John Fellows's temper and his periodical bouts of drinking; and even in these emergencies Alice's increasing knowledge of life and her absorption in the care of Abner and her baby sustained her.

The strangest part of the whole business was that Abner and his father never fell foul of one another. Since that one dangerous moment on the morning of the baby's birth there had never been any danger of this. It was as if they had agreed to go on their own ways. Abner kept clear p. 45
of his father because his natural love of peace and increasing concern for the convenience of Alice made him anxious to avoid a quarrel; and John Fellows condoned his son's unreasonable abstinence from liquor on the grounds of his success in the football field. Although he never said so he was proud of Abner's prowess, gathering indeed a little reflected glory from it among his mates at the pit and his boon companions at the pub.

It was fortunate for Alice that her family was so small; for it meant not only that she was unburdened with housework, but also that the question of money never troubled her. John Fellows never did anything by halves. He worked as hard as he drank, and since all colliers are paid by piecework, he earned enough to keep the house going and himself in liquor. Abner also was well paid for the work he did at Mawne, and in addition to this received a pound a week from the United Football Club during the season. Out of these earnings he paid Alice eighteen shillings for his board and keep, and this, together with her husband's weekly allowance, enabled her to make the house exactly what she wanted. There seemed to be no reason why this happy state of affairs should not go on for ever, or, at any rate, until Abner found some other wretched girl who took his fancy. This was the event that Alice dreaded most, and for the present Abner's life was too full of work and training to make it probable.

They spent most of their evenings together while John Fellows was down at the Royal Oak and the baby placidly sleeping in its cradle. They were the happiest of Alice's life, for they realised all her ideals of what domesticity should be. The little room was cheerful with firelight and always warm, for John Fellows had the privilege of buying coal for next to nothing at the pit. On the table she used to spread a cloth of bright red chequers. A lamp in the middle of it cast a mild and homely light. Alice would sit on one side of the fire, knitting woollen vests for the baby or mending the men's clothes. She sat in her rocking chair, enthroned with content, glancing from time to time at the sleeping baby, at the shining brass, on which she particularly prided herself, p. 46
at all the tokens of comfort with which she was surrounded. The door of Number Eleven was ill-made or warped with age so that a draught blew in beneath it towards the fire; but Abner had arranged a curtain of red rep on a running string above it, so that the draught was not felt and the swaying of the curtain only emphasised the contrast between the winter without and that glowing cosiness within. All these things that surrounded her were her own, her world. She would not have changed one of them. The glances that she gave to them were proprietary and richly satisfied.

Sometimes, in the same way, she would let her eyes fall on Abner: a big, loose-limbed fellow, over six feet high, with the closely cropped hair of the footballer and a yellow moustache. In the evenings at home he wore no collar and the firelight played on his powerful neck and lit the fair down on his arm when he sat in his shirtsleeves. Even with him her glance was proprietary. He also belonged to her, and she mended his clothes with the same delight and devotion that she experienced in making the ridiculous garments of her son. She rejoiced in his beauty and in his strength. Perhaps, sometimes, the physical comparison that he suggested with John Fellows made her admiration more poignant.

Usually these long evenings were lonely. At times, however, Alice's father, the timekeeper at Mawne, would come stumping up on his wooden leg and take a seat before the fire between them. He was very fond of Alice. He would pinch her cheek and hold her arm and make her blush by asking every time he came when she was going to give him another grandson. He was a poor old man. His pay, like most pensions, was inadequate, and the cottage on the edge of the works which the company allowed him rent-free was old and so damp that he suffered from rheumatism, particularly, as he always said with a chuckle, in the leg that he had lost. Here Alice's younger sister, Elsie, kept house for him. She had never been a favourite of his and was a bad manager. She and her sister, who had always quarrelled before Alice's marriage, were now, for reasons which Alice attributed to jealousy, no longer on speaking terms. Mr Higgins always p. 47

tried to gloss this unfortunate circumstance with one of his little jokes.

'When I come up here,' he said, 'Abner ought to go and keep our Elsie company.'

Abner would laugh, but Alice glanced sharply at him. She hated to hear any woman's name mentioned in connection with his, and most of all her sister's; but Mr Higgins, unaware of these fine shades of feeling, constantly pursued the project. 'Now if Abner here went and married our Elsie what a queer kettle of fish it would be to be sure! Which would you be, his mother or his sister-in-law? Both on 'em. Likewise Elsie'd be your daughter-in-law and your sister. And if our Elsie was Abner's aunt she'd be the great-aunt of her own babbies, surely!'

'Oh, don't go on so, dad!' said Alice, sharply. 'Do give over!'

'You can say what you like, Alice,' said Mr Higgins, 'but that's a knot it'd take more than a parson to get over.'

At half-past nine the old man would leave them with another of his little jokes. Abner would see him out, and then, yawning, stretch his legs and say that it was time he was turning in. He used to ask Alice, before he went upstairs, if there was anything he could do for her. It was only a formula, but the words always gave her a flush of pleasure. When he was gone upstairs she would busy herself with preparing his can of tea, and bacon sandwiches to take to the works next day. Then she would settle down again in her chair at the fireside and sit with her work in her lap dreaming and waiting for the unsteady, deliberate step of her husband on the path. This was the worst moment of her day.

John Fellows rarely returned home until half an hour after closing time, and for this reason it was seldom that he saw Abner off the football field. At home he never approached him except with the hope of extracting inside information as to the probable results of the league matches on which he proposed to bet, and in this he found Abner unsympathetic, for although league football p. 48
had not sunk in those days to its present depths of unabashed commercialism, Abner knew that the result of a match was sometimes decided in accordance with the bookmaker's instructions. John Fellows never backed horses, for he regarded the turf as a resort of crooks and sharks. He put his money on dogs and football teams, and even if he lost it he had at any rate the satisfaction of seeing it lost with his own eyes. He didn't mind losing money as long as he had a run for it. According to his lights he was a sportsman.

The football season had opened with a flourish as far as Mawne United were concerned. In the North Bromwich league they had beaten all their principal rivals, Wolverbury, Dulston, and even the Albion Reserves. Now, in the semi-final of the Midland Cup they were to meet the Albion again. The members of the team became more than ever popular heroes, and Abner, down at the works, was conscious of his share in the distinction. The winter had set in early with a November of black frost that made the scrap-iron with which he was still engaged under the same grumbling foreman harder and more icy to the touch, and congealed the grease in the running guide-wheels of the trolley railway. It was some compensation that the blast furnaces, which were surrounded in summer by a zone of air undulant with intolerable heat, now gave a sense of neighbourly warmth to the centre of the works.

Abner, who knew that his position was more secure than ever, managed to spend most of his day near these black towers, talking football to the men who were engaged in making the moulds of sand into which the molten metal would flow when the furnaces were tapped. It was an idle and a pleasant life; but he enjoyed it, knowing, as did every one else in the works, that it was no more than a preparation for the sterner business of Saturdays.

One Wednesday, in the middle of the afternoon, he was at work loading some pigs of iron into a truck that stood waiting on the siding near the furnace. It was good warm work for a winter's day, and Abner had thrown off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and unfastened the neck of his p. 49
shirt. He and his mate had just hoisted the last of the pigs into the truck when the furnace foreman gave the signal for the tapping of the nearest tower. Abner watched the proceeding as he put on his coat and wiped the sweat from his forehead. The men, stripped to the waist, approached the vent of the furnace carrying a heavy crowbar with which they loosened the plug of fireclay which kept the contents of the furnace from escaping. They leapt aside as the first stream of molten mineral gushed out. The foreman watched them, shading his eyes from the heat. The fluid that came first was the dross of the ore which had sunk to the bottom of the furnace, and this was diverted so that it flowed into a wide pan where it would cool into a cake of brittle, iridescent slag. A moment later pure iron began to flow. The puddlers closed the entrance to the pool of slag, and molten metal crept, with the slow persistence of a lava-flow, down the central channel and into the moulds of sand that were ready to receive it. The damp air above the beds first steamed, then swam with heat. Not molten gold could have seemed more beautiful than this harsh, intractable metal. It ran into the moulds sluggishly and with a soft, hissing sound.

Some one tapped Abner on the shoulder and drew him aside. It was Mr Hudson, who had walked down delicately from the office, so delicately that he had not even disturbed the two pencils wedged above his ears. He shivered slightly, for he had been shut up all day with a coke stove. Drawing Abner aside behind the line of trucks he began to talk to him about the cup-tie with the Albion. With the utmost friendliness he discussed the prospects of Mawne United in the match, which was now only ten days ahead. Abner answered him respectfully. Mr Hudson had not only given him his present comfortable job, but also carried in his pocket the future of every man

employed in the works, for Mr Willis, whose eager mind was always set on expansions of the monster that he had created out of the fortune which his father-in-law had made in the Franco-Prussian war, was far too busy to worry his head about such details. p. 50

'So you think we'll win?' said Mr Hudson, fingering the bronze cross on his watch-chain.

'It bain't no good playing any match if you don't think you'll win,' said Abner.

Mr Hudson stroked his red moustache. 'I may say that the Albion has offered us a hundred pounds to play the match at North Bromwich, on their ground. The club could do with the money.'

'Don't you take it,' Abner replied. 'Don't you take it. The Mawne ground's worth a couple of goals to our chaps in a match of that kind. That slope down by the Royal Oak puzzled the Albion last time. Our forwards know how to use it.'

'The Albion's particular anxious to win,' said Hudson. 'What's more, the bookmakers are giving three to one against Mawne. That shows you which way the wind's blowing.'

'Well, I hope to God it busts them!' said Abner. 'I'm no friend to football bookmakers.'

Mr Hudson blenched at this loose employment of the deity's name. He took Abner by the arm. 'Look here,' he said, 'speaking in the strictest confidence, I can tell you that the club will accept Albion's offer to play at North Bromwich. What's more, if Albion win, I can safely say it will be worth ten pounds to you personally.'

Abner shook himself free from Mr Hudson's friendly arm. If he had followed the inclination of the moment he would have laid Mr Hudson flat there and then on the cinders. His feelings had passed beyond the stage of words. But while he stood glaring at Mr Hudson's face, now weakly smiling and white with fear, he saw something else that stopped him: the figure of a woman running towards them as fast as she could over the cumbered ground of the works. She was hatless and had a shawl thrown round her shoulders. He knew, even at a distance, that it was Alice. She ran straight up to Abner, with her hair blown loose and with a flush of excitement that made her singularly beautiful.

Mr Hudson snatched at the opportunity for retreat. 'This lady wants you,' he said. p. 51

Abner, still under the influence of a divided emotion, took a step in his direction, but Alice pulled at his sleeve. The tears that she had been restraining as she ran overcame her and she could only cry 'Abner . . . Abner . .'

'What the hell's up with *you*?' he said roughly.

'Your father, Abner . . .' she sobbed. 'It's your father.'

'What's that? What's he done?'

'It's an accident at the pit. Father sent up Elsie with the message.'

'You mean he's dead?' said Abner, suddenly sobered.

'No . . . not dead. . . . I don't think so. It's an accident. Some kind of accident. Elsie was that moithered she couldn't say proper. So I left her there and ran off for you. I couldn't take him in myself. I couldn't think of nowt but running for you.'

'Nell, if he bain't dead what the hell's the matter?' said Abner practically.

They left the works together. Alice, still out of breath, could scarcely keep pace with Abner's long strides, but now her nervous sobbing had ceased and she even smiled. At the corner of Hackett's Cottages they met the procession from the colliery. For some obscure reason Alice's father had lost the key of the store in which the stretchers were kept, and so they carried John Fellows home on a door. In his progress from the pit they had fallen in with a stream of children suddenly disgorged from the Ragged Schools, and a train of these had swollen the *cortège*, curious to find out who, or what, lay under the brown blanket. All the women of Hackett's Cottages gathered at the gateway of Number Eleven to receive him, many of them carrying babies and offering haphazard advice in the intervals of giving them refreshment. The doorway of the house was too small to admit the improvised stretcher, so they laid it down at the side of the garden.

'Be careful of my bloody tomatters,' John Fellows growled. It was the first sign of life he had given. Abner and two others lifted him from the door and carried him through the kitchen and up p. 52
the twisting stairs. The boards creaked under their weight as though they were on the point of splintering. It was his right thigh that had been broken; and once, on the journey upstairs, they jolted him so much that he unclenched his teeth and roared like a bull. The crowd in the roadway shuddered. This was their first considerable sensation.

They laid him on the bed. Alice, now very pale and composed, followed them upstairs with a cup of tea.

'God! if I'm come to tea drinking it's a gonner,' said John Fellows. 'Send out for a spot of brandy!'

A small boy was sent running to the Lyttleton Arms. Elsie had already gone for the doctor. The

news had spread quickly in various forms, and all Halesby heard with sensation that John Fellows had had his skull smashed in Mawne pit. The brandy came. He wouldn't have it spoiled with water and swallowed it neat, but even the brandy could not alter the ashen pallor of his face beneath its coating of coal dust.

John Fellows was a hard case and could bear pain or any other human calamity with fortitude. He lay on his back, gritting his teeth and squirting the floor with tobacco-juice. Whenever he spoke it was with a curious dry humour that seldom appeared in his ordinary conversation. He never complained of his own sufferings, though he cursed the criminal economy of the Mawne management in the matter of pit-props. 'They might as well use match-sticks as this Norway stuff. They've put a stopper on my football!' he said. 'But I'll see that they pay for it. I will, and no fear!'

Indeed they owed him something. The collapse of coal that had buried him had taken place in a remote gallery on one of the lower levels of the mine; and though Mr Willis, proud of his electric lighting and American coal-cutting machinery, was in the habit of describing Mawne as a drawing-room pit, the arrangements for salvage were by no means elegant. John Fellows had lain for three hours beneath a ton or more of coal; and though the weight of it saved him from the pain of movement, acting as a kind of ponderous splint to the broken limb, the suspense of waiting till he was dug out would have broken the nerve of a more sensitive man. From this purgatory he had been hauled to one of the trolley-lines that traverse the galleries of the pit: his only moment of relative smoothness between the scene of the accident and his home being his upward journey in the hoisting cage. p. 53

They waited anxiously for the doctor. The boy made three more journeys to the Lyttleton Arms for brandy. 'It's the only thing that keeps the life in me,' John Fellows said.

In a couple of hours Dr Moorhouse arrived. 'Sorry to see you like this, Fellows,' he said.

'You'd be sorrier if you was me!' Fellows grunted.

With the help of Alice they split up his trouser leg, and the doctor manipulated the thigh until he felt the crepitus of the broken bone. Then he disturbed the patient no longer. 'It's a three months' job,' he said. 'You can't have it seen to properly here. You want X-rays. You'll have to go into hospital.'

'Hospital . . .' John Fellows cried.

Then, at last, he became fluent. The brandy had stimulated his imagination even if it had dulled the pain, and he launched into an uncompromising statement of the opinions with which poor people regard the institutions that are erected for their care. He made it plain that *he*, at any rate, wasn't going to die in any hospital, or be pulled about by any students, and not a spot of drink.

'I don't want you to die in any hospital,' the doctor said. He was painfully used to this kind of outburst. It was always a long and bitter controversy, and it always ended, as he knew well, in submission. While John Fellows was fuming he fixed him up on a temporary splint and then went home to telephone for the ambulance. At the foot of the stairs his eyes fell on the patient face of Mrs Moseley, who had driven up on the cart of a friendly baker as soon as she heard the news.

'You here again!' he cried. 'Upon my word a lunatic asylum's the place for you. Take your leg out of my sight. I never want to see it again. I wash my hands of you!' He went off grumbling, and Mrs Moseley climbed the stairs. p. 54

It pleased John Fellows to see her. Indeed, from the moment of her arrival, he would not let any one else touch him. In the old days Alice would have been jealous; but hardship and difficulty had so changed her nature that she even concerned herself with Mrs Moseley's comfort. The old woman moved about the room like a soothing influence, and when, an hour later, the ambulance arrived, she insisted on accompanying her old friend to the infirmary at North Bromwich. John Fellows went off cheerfully, with a quartern of brandy in his coat pocket. He was even bright enough to joke with Mr Higgins, who now arrived on the scene, having just discovered the key of the stretcher-store in his hip-pocket.

John Fellows's removal to hospital made no great difference to any one but Alice. To her the relief was enormous, for it not only saved her the trouble of irregular meals, allowing her to devote her days to her baby, but freed her nights from, at the best, uncertainty, and, at the worst, terror. Now, when Abner had said good-night to her, she need no longer sit with her nerves on edge, waiting for Fellows to come home, wondering what would be the humour of his entrance. Instead of this she now sat over the fire for half an hour of luxurious drowsiness, then picked up the baby and went off placidly to bed.

Of course she had to go easy with her housekeeping expenditure, for all John Fellows's club pay would be absorbed in paying for tobacco and other luxuries, such as butter, which the hospital did not provide for its patients, but Abner, as soon as he realised this, told her that she could count on the pound a week that he earned from the football club, and more, if necessary, for during the last year he had found it possible to put by a few sovereigns for himself. Alice did not find it necessary, however, to draw on his reserves. Her own tastes were simple and Abner was easily pleased. Indeed, John Fellows had always been the most expensive member of the household.

Abner was now in strict training for the cup-tie with the Albion and went to bed early every night. The Mawne directors, as Mr Hudson had foretold, jumped at the big club's offer to play the match at North Bromwich, tempted not only by the welcome hundred pounds but by the prospect of an even bigger share of gate-money. The team went through their training with the greatest earnestness. Every afternoon they turned out on the Mawne ground practising passing, shooting, and tactics, followed by the eyes of the trainer, an international long since retired, who walked about the field carrying always a black bag that contained lemons, elastic bandages, and a patent embrocation of his own that smelt like Elliman's. p. 55

Nobody who saw these men at practice could possibly have suspected that they thought of anything but winning their match, though each of them must have known that all the others had been offered ten pounds a head to lose it. In the dressing-room, where they stood rubbing each other down with flesh-gloves in the clouds of steam that the cold air condensed from half a dozen tin baths of hot water, they talked of plans and prospects just as if no shadow of corruption had ever approached them. Nobody had mentioned the subject to Abner since Hudson had tackled him at the works. That, no doubt, was the policy of those who had put up the money: to let the thought of it sink in over a period of ten days and trust to the frailty of human nature on the eleventh. They knew their business, for the mere presence of such a disturbing problem was enough to demoralise the team.

On the day before the match the Mawne goalkeeper sprained his ankle at practice, and neither the bandages nor the embrocation of the trainer could restore him. In this emergency the committee called upon George Harper, who had retired four or five years before and was now a man of substance and landlord of a public-house, to take his place. Abner, who had always been on good terms with this idol of his boyhood, went up to him after the last practice game and told him of Hudson's offer. Harper listened to him in silence, nodding his head, but when Abner asked him if he too had been approached by Hudson, he only laughed. 'Hudson?' he said, 'that red-whiskered b—? No fear of that! He dursen't come near me. He knows what he'd get, does Mr Hudson.' p. 56

In spite of this, when the team were assembled in the dressing-room of the Albion ground on the day of the cup-tie, Abner saw the trainer take George Harper aside. He talked excitedly in a low voice, but Harper only went red in the face and said nothing. As they left the dressing-room Abner winked at George, and George, solemnly, winked back at him. The captain kicked the ball into the middle of the field, and the Mawne team ran out after him, amid a spreading uproar of cheers.

The turf of the Albion ground was incredibly smooth and level after the rough field in which they were accustomed to play at Mawne. The place was, indeed, a vast oval amphitheatre, with high stands rising above the dressing-rooms on the west and on every other side a sloping embankment so packed with people that the ground on which they stood could nowhere be seen. The vastness of this white-faced multitude was imposing in its ugliness. Its pale, restless masses, represented on a horrible scale the grimy flatness of the city complexion. From the crowd a low murmur arose like the noise of the sea breaking on distant shingles, and over all its surface floated a fume of tobacco smoke. A moment later the Albion team emerged; the crowd swayed, and the murmur swelled to a roar of welcome. The chocolate and yellow jerseys of Mawne so nearly resembled the Albion's colours that the home team turned out in white shirts and knickers. It was partly the spotlessness of this attire that made them seem like a company of athletic giants, swifter, more flexible and stronger than their opponents. Even Abner's six feet were dwarfed by the diverse colours of his clothes. It seemed a ridiculous thing to match this shabby team of stunted pitmen with eleven picked athletes.

The game began. Almost at once the white line of the Albion forwards was in motion. It was a lovely sight, a lesson in fleetness, elasticity and precision. The Albion, taking no risks, had included a number of their first league players in the team, and it looked as if Mawne must be nowhere. Abner, at centre half, the pivotal position of the whole field, felt that he could do no more than play a spoiling game against this perfect machine. In the back of his mind he knew also that a certain number, probably the majority of the Mawne players, were not anxious to win. It is not easy, however, to play deliberately a losing game, or indeed to play football with any degree of deliberation. The heat of the game seemed to inspire the Mawne team to a stubborn, almost desperate, defence. As a last barrier to the Albion attacks he knew that George Harper, even if he were an old stager, was incorruptible; and George Harper, in his prime, had never played a more marvellous game. Perhaps the feeling that he belonged to an older and more gifted generation of footballers helped him. Time after time, when the Albion forwards came swinging down the field in a perfect crescent, he saved the Mawne goal. His play was inspired, and when half-time came, no goal had been scored. The players stood sweating in the dressing-room. The trainer handed round cut lemons. Once again Abner saw him approach George Harper and take him by the sleeve; but this time the goalkeeper pushed him away. Mr Willis came down into the dressing-room to congratulate the players. He was smoking a big cigar, and evidently immensely pleased with himself. He, at any rate, was above suspicion. The referee called the players out again. p. 57

In the second half Abner worked as he had never worked before. The Mawne team was tiring; play grew scrappy and spiteful; but though the Albion players could do what they liked with the ball in midfield, they did not seem able to score. Even if Mawne were equally ineffective it seemed probable that the match would end in a draw. The Albion crowd grew restless, and began to think that the referee was favouring their opponents. The Albion players, now a little

rattled, tried to effect by roughness what they could not achieve by skill. Several free-kicks were given against them for fouls, and the crowd began to boo the referee. It was like the hollow voice of some sullen ocean-monster. The Albion, encouraged by the support of the crowd, pursued these tactics. Two men were ordered off for fighting. A moment later the crowd regained its good humour stimulated by the sight of a shot from the Albion centre-forward that hit the cross-bar above George Harper's head. If the shot had been three inches lower he could not possibly have saved it. The kick that followed transferred the play to the other end of the field. It was close on time and everybody was nervous. A centre from the Mawne outside right came to Abner's feet in front of the Albion goal. One of the Albion backs tried to trip him, getting cleverly on the blind side of the referee. Abner stumbled free, and since the goal was now open, the player lashed out at his ear. Abner's temper was up. He left the ball and closed with his opponent. The Mawne team held up their hands and called on the referee like one man. A violent fight had begun when the referee arrived, shaking himself free from a gesticulating escort of Mawne players. The Albion men separated the fighters, and though the referee warned both of them that if anything more happened he would send them off, he gave a free kick to Mawne. The crowd howled. It seemed for a moment as if they would burst their barriers and swarm on to the field. Very grimly, his face streaming with blood, Abner took the kick. The Albion goalkeeper, making a high save, tipped the ball over the cross-bar. A corner. The players lined up, panting, in front of the Albion goal. The young outside right, whose centre had been the beginning of the trouble, took the kick. The ball sailed high and fell slowly into the *mêlée* of players. Abner, who had proved his dangerousness, was carefully marked and charged at as the ball fell, but he butted his opponent aside, and making full use of his superior height, managed to head it into the top left-hand corner of the net. A shout of 'goal' rose from the crowd, but there was no applause. The strange thing about the whole business was the attitude of the Mawne players. These men, who had been playing a half-hearted game all afternoon, appeared to be overwhelmed with joy. They ran up to Abner and shook both his hands as if there had been no matter of ten pounds depending on his achievement. Even George Harper came running down the field and patted him on the back. George had his work cut out, for in the last three minutes of the game the Albion made a desperate effort to equalise, and subjected him to an incessant bombardment. Luck aided his skill, and when the whistle went for time Mawne had won their match.

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Abner went home that night with a thick ear and a slowly closing right eye. He was tired and sore but elated. He wanted to do nothing but sit in front of the fire and think over again the progress of the match. Alice, on the other hand, was terribly concerned with his injuries. She dressed his face with some ointment that Mrs Moseley had recommended her for the baby, and sat opposite to him burning with pain and indignation.

'I wish you'd give it up, Abner,' she said. 'One of these days you'll get killed. It's downright brutal. It's worse than prize-fighting.'

'That's what it was,' Abner chuckled.

He pretended that he didn't want her to fuss over him; but all the same this devotion was very pleasant. As for Alice, the pain of seeing him so battered was almost equalled by her pleasure in tending him. And they were alone. She was thankful that they were alone. Time after time she returned to her pleading that he would give up football. 'You've never come home in a state like this,' she said.

'Give up football?' said Abner. 'And what would we live on then? You couldn't manage, and that's straight!'

'I'd do it,' she said. 'I'd manage somehow.'

He laughed at her intensity. 'Don't you fret yourself about me,' he said, 'I'm all right.' He went to bed and slept like a log. She brought him breakfast and clean dressings to his bedroom.

On Monday morning down at the works Mr Willis met him. 'Good lad!' he said. 'Good lad!' Later in the day Mr Hudson came down from the office to the place where he was working. He smiled to conceal his annoyance. 'Well, I suppose we've got to thank you and Harper for the win,' he said.

'I reckon we've not got to thank you!' Abner replied.

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'H'm, that's it, is it?' said Hudson. 'You'd better go up to the pay-office for your money.'

'Time enough when I've finished,' said Abner. Football always prevented him from collecting his pay on a Saturday morning with the other men. At the end of the day he went to the pay clerk. Instead of twenty-five shillings as usual he was given fifty.

'What's this for?' he asked.

'Lieu of a week's notice,' said the clerk. 'The gaffer says we have to cut down. Mr Hudson's orders.'

'B—r Hudson!' said Abner angrily.

The Sixth Chapter

p. 61

THAT night he went down to the public-house for the first time since the day of Susan's defection more than a year before. The crowd at the Royal Oak were glad to see him, for they were still talking about nothing else but the result of the cup-tie. Every one was anxious to treat him and to condole with him on his black eye, and he was prepared to drink as much as they would give him, standing his own share up to the limit of the fifty shillings in his pocket, as long as he could forget the anger with which he had left the works. If he didn't, somehow, get the idea of his injury out of his mind, he felt that he would probably go down to Hudson's private house and wring his neck.

In the Royal Oak, drinking nothing but hot whisky, he managed to lose himself and the troubles of the day. He was conscious of nothing but the warmth and comfort of the private bar, the dark varnished walls, the polished beer engine, the shining rows of bottles, the crackle of the bright fire. For a time the room was also full of jolly people who laughed and spoke with loud, buoyant voices, the happiest company imaginable. The spirituous air was exhilarating and endowed all the contents of the bar, from the postage stamps on the ceiling to the brass spittoons and sawdust of the floor, with a quality of unusual vividness. At last this curious clarity faded and the details that had seemed for some curious reason exciting, became blurred. Abner tucked up his feet on a settle covered with American leather and tried to go to sleep. When he awoke, his old friend Joe Hodgetts was piloting him home along the Stourton Road under a sky of dancing stars.

Alice was waiting up for him. Supper was laid on the table and she rose from her chair by the fire to welcome him as he entered. The new light dazzled him, and as he stood uncertainly at the door he took hold of the red curtain to steady himself, and, lurching, pulled it down from its p. 62 string. Alice gave a cry. Even though she knew the symptoms well enough in her husband she couldn't believe that Abner was drunk. She only saw him standing there with the great discoloured bruise on his flushed face. He held the curtain in his hand and looked at it stupidly, as if he didn't know what to do with it.

'Abner . . . what's up with you?' she said, running to take it from him.

'There's nowt up with me,' he said solemnly. 'I'm drunk. That's all. If any one's a right to be drunk it's me.'

The equanimity with which she had trained herself to receive John Fellows in such circumstances deserted her. She knew perfectly well that it was no use arguing with a drunken man, but the case of Abner was so exceptional that she began to do so. He took no notice of her, and then she rated him violently, so that overcome by a sudden flush of anger he took hold of her arms as if he were going to throw her down. He had never taken hold of her like that before. She faced him, panting for breath, and they stared into each other's eyes. He felt the warmth of her arms through the sleeve of her bodice and realised her for the first time as a living, warm-blooded creature. She trembled under his gaze, but did not try to free herself. He felt that something like this had happened before; remembered Susan. Suddenly sobered, almost frightened, he relaxed his grip on her arms. Still she did not move. She stood dazed, with her breath coming and going. 'I'm going to bed,' he said. He staggered to the foot of the stairs and left her standing there.

When he had gone she pulled herself together and put her hands to her eyes as though she wanted to shut out what she had seen. She had forgotten her first resentment and the emotion with which she trembled now was one that frightened her and put her to shame. She felt that she had just experienced the most thrilling moment of her life. After that she could never pretend to herself that she was not in love with Abner.

In the morning he woke early. Before Alice knew that he was astir he went downstairs in his stockinged feet and lit the kitchen fire. By the time that she herself appeared he had made p. 63 himself a cup of tea and laid the table for breakfast. Neither of them spoke of his violent homecoming the night before or of the stranger scene that followed it. She had half expected that he would ask her pardon for what had happened, but such a proceeding didn't seem to him important. He had been drunk, now he was sober, and that was the end of the matter. When breakfast was over he went out into the dank washhouse and shaved. She was puzzled to see that he was not going to work, for he had dressed in his Sunday clothes and wore his watch-chain, decorated with a couple of silver football medals. At last she plucked up courage to ask him if he was not going to Mawne.

'No,' he said. 'I bain't going there no more.'

'What's up then?'

'Got the sack,' he said laconically.

'But the money . . .' she said. 'We've got to live.'

'I picked up two weeks' pay last night. You can have what's left.'

He turned out his pockets and gave her a handful of small change. 'That's more than I reckoned there'd be,' he said.

She threw down the money on the table and stared at him. 'I owe more nor this!' she said. 'What about the football money?'

'Don't talk to me about football,' he said. 'I've done with football as long as that Hudson's on the

committee.'

The situation baffled her. Money they must have, and she was quick to rack her brains for some way in which it could be got. An inspiration came to her. 'You didn't ought to work with your eye in that state,' she said. 'Better go down to the doctor's and put yourself on the box. You've been paying into that club long enough and not had a penny out of it.'

'Club?' said Abner. 'I don't sponge on no clubs! I'm going down to the pit to see the doggy. I reckon he'll find me a job underground.' He lit his pipe and went out into the frosty morning. A delayed impulse made her want to give him his knitted neck-scarf, but it came too late. She p. 64 didn't know what to make of it. In a single night all the pleasant, ordered happiness of the life that they had been leading since John Fellows's accident had been overwhelmed. She felt it unreasonable, incredible, that this should have happened. She could not even solace herself with the care of her baby, who was now beginning to babble and to stagger with uncertain steps from chair to chair. She found herself wishing, for a moment, that there wasn't a kid to worry about, and was as quickly bitten with remorse, for she knew that the baby was her most precious possession on earth. She could settle down to nothing. The foundations of her routine life had been dissolved. She had not even money enough to meet the bills that she always paid on Mondays. But the thought of money was nothing to her compared with her anxiety as to Abner's attitude toward herself. She found a little comfort in thinking that he had not yet recovered from the effects of his debauch, and that when he returned in the evening they might take up their relation at the point where it had been so abruptly convulsed. On this her whole happiness depended.

Abner's visit to the pit was satisfactory in so far as it procured him without the least difficulty a job underground. He was a trained miner, and in those days, when the output of the mine had been diminished by a series of accidents and a growing tendency to work short time, any new hand was welcome at Mawne pit. When he came back in the evening he reassured Alice that even if they had to go easy in the matter of expenditure they need not starve in the interval before John Fellows returned to double their income. To meet the present emergency he handed her the sovereign that he had received from the football club. 'If that sod Hudson had had his way you'd have had ten,' he said enigmatically. 'You'd better send a nipper to the Oak with my boots and football gear,' he told her. 'I've done with Mawne United.'

She was thankful for his solution of her money difficulties, for pride would not have allowed her to face the butcher and the grocer without the money in her hand. In spite of the loss that it p. 65 implied, she couldn't reasonably refuse to be glad that he had abandoned football since she had so often begged him to do so. What troubled her far more than this was the fact that his attitude toward her was changed. It was clear that he had not been too drunk to realise the significance of the moment when he had held her in his arms and they had looked into each other's eyes. He had seen the emotional precipice on the edge of which they were standing. Well, so had she; but that seemed to her no reason why they should not pretend that things were as they had always been. She was content to play her part; even, for their common comfort, to forget what had happened. The only thing that she could not bear was that he should avoid her as though she were an evil thing to be feared and distrusted.

This, in effect, was what he did. To drink habitually was not in his nature. When he drank he did so simply as a means to escape from himself or from some harassing emotion; and so he did not seek a refuge, as she had feared he would, in a public house. None the less it soon became clear that the pleasant homely evenings at Hackett's Cottages were now at an end. The chair which Alice always arranged for him at the fireside was never occupied. When he came home from the pit at night and had washed himself in the scullery he now went out again to spend the evenings with his friends, with old Mr Higgins, with George Harper, or with Mrs Moseley. He hated his work at the colliery: the dark, cramped labour in remote subterranean stalls was a terrible change from his free and easy life at the furnaces. He hated the dirt no less than the darkness and it scarcely mended matters to realise that he was wanted at the pit.

Opportunities of escape soon presented themselves. The retirement of their most promising player from the United team created a sensation not only in Mawne but in the surrounding towns. Abner would give no explanation for it. When people asked him why he was not playing for Mawne he merely told them to go and ask Hudson. It was impossible for him to change his p. 66 team in the middle of the season without an official transfer. The secretary of the Albion made a special journey to Halesby to ask him to consent to this; but since this proceeding would have presented the Mawne club with a handsome transfer fee, he refused. The Albion offered him good and easy work in North Bromwich if he would sign on for them next season. 'You can have it for the asking,' they said—but he refused, for though he would have liked nothing better he felt that it would be wrong to desert Alice in her present emergency. Until his father returned it was his duty to stay with her.

The winter wore on, and John Fellows, whose alcoholic history made him a bad subject for a fractured thigh-bone, still lay in hospital. Abner stuck to his thankless labours at the pit. He worked longer underground than he need have done, simply for the reason that he did not want to spend his evenings in the dangerous company of Alice. After that night he knew that he could not wholly trust himself. His earnings were now sufficient to keep the household in comfort, and the money that he drew from his overtime he put aside for an emergency, concealing them in an old stocking underneath the mattress of his bed. He wanted to be sure of his liberty as soon as his father returned.

At Christmas, Alice made a heroic attempt to recover her lost happiness. A week before the festival she went down into the market at Halesby and bought a branch of berried holly which she hung above the middle of the table from a nail that had once supported a hanging lamp. She decorated the branch with cheap trifles, flags, lustred balls and candles of coloured wax in metal clips shaped like butterflies. Over the mantelpiece she pinned a scroll of varnished paper with 'God Bless Our Home' in gothic characters upon it, and in various inaccessible places she put sprigs of mistletoe. Although she said nothing to Abner it was evident that she was counting on him to celebrate the feast at home. A few days before the event she showed him a present that she had bought for the child, a wooden horse with red nostrils, a lambskin mane, and a ridiculous dab of a tail. Even this failed to move him, and up to the last moment she was in doubt as to whether he would forsake her. She schemed her very hardest to keep him, using as a bait the p. 67
child whose curious ways and stumbling attempts at speech amused him. This creature loved, above all things, to be caught up and perched on the dizzy height of Abner's shoulder, so high that he was able to examine the unexplored country of the ceiling. He also loved to play with Tiger, who now came and went in Hackett's Cottages of his own accord. Tiger liked children, and he and little John would roll over together on the kitchen floor. Alice always made the dog welcome, tempting him with such bones as never entered Mrs Moseley's house. He was a link with Abner, and therefore to be encouraged.

In the end Abner spent Christmas Day at Hackett's Cottages, or, to be exact, the morning and evening of it, for the afternoon he devoted to watching the league match between Mawne United and Dulston on the Royal Oak ground. He could not bring himself to forget football altogether even though he persisted in his determination not to play. In spite of all Alice's pathetic efforts, the day was not a success. In the evening, when they sat over the fire and Mr Higgins, who had brought in a basket of oranges, had left them alone together, she made a direct attempt to have the matter out with him.

'Why are you so funny with me, Abner?' she said. 'I don't know what I've done that you should treat me distant like this. You didn't use to do it.' But he would not answer. 'You've took a turn against me,' she said. 'I know you have. What is it I've done?'

'*You* ain't done nothing,' he said. 'And *I* ain't took a turn again' you neither. I'm all right if so be you'll leave me alone.'

'Yo'm different even with our John,' she said.

'Don't yo' bother,' he said at last. 'It'll be different time ourn comes back. He must be getting on a bit now.'

She had to leave it at that. It had been a difficult evening for Abner, for in spite of her troubles the firelight and the excitement that the baby's pleasure in his presents had given her made her look very attractive in her own fragile way. 'When ourn comes back . . .' She sighed, for she felt that John Fellows's return would put an end even to the small measure of happiness that she p. 68
managed to extract from the present. When John Fellows came back she would be faced with all the old desperate problems, the old terrible nights. As they sat over the fire she turned her face aside to hide the tears that came into her eyes. Abner puffed stolidly at his pipe. 'When he comes back,' he said, 'I reckon I'll have a look round for another job.'

'Where?' she asked, in alarm.

'Oh, anywhere out of this place,' he said. 'I'm sick of Halesby. I reckon I'll go to Coventry or Wales. There's good money in Wales.'

'Abner,' she cried. 'Oh, Abner, you'm not going to leave me? Not with him. . . . I couldn't abide it, Abner. Abner, if you leave me, I'll make a hole in the cut, God strike me if I won't!' She could contain herself no longer and went sobbing upstairs. Abner found it difficult to resist an impulse to follow her and comfort her. He was not used to a woman's tears. He got as far as the foot of the stairs, then slowly turned back and sat on, smoking till midnight amid the pathetic decorations of that poor room. His reflections determined him more than ever to cut himself free from the embarrassments of life at Halesby. Coventry was almost too near. Yes, he would go down into Wales. On his way upstairs he listened for a moment outside her bedroom door. He thought he heard her still sobbing under the sheets, but when he listened the sound of sobbing stopped.

Next day she had quite regained her self-possession. They went together, taking the baby with them, to visit John Fellows in the North Bromwich Infirmary. They found him lying in a long, clean ward festooned with Christmas decorations. The ominous erection of an apparatus of weights and pulleys at the foot of his bed emphasised his helplessness. He did not appear to be very pleased to see them, and his embraces so frightened the baby that he set up a howl. The baby need not have been frightened, for John Fellows was far less impressive than he had been in his former state. The whole man seemed to have shrunk. He was newly shaved; his rough hands p. 69
had become clean and almost transparent; but though he now looked as if he couldn't hurt any one, the presence of the visitors set him grumbling at once. From the first he appeared to be offended with Abner because he had not thought to smuggle in any liquor for him.

'You ain't brought a spot,' he said. 'Well, you're a b—y fine son!' Even three months of abstinence had not diminished his craving. He told them that he dreamed of liquor, but that there seemed to be no chance of him getting any nearer to it than in dreams, for, as far as he could see, his leg was exactly as it had been when he came into hospital. After this outburst of

discontent he softened a little, pinched Alice's cheek, played a little with the baby, who had by this time overcome his fears, and even talked to Abner about football. In this way he heard the story of the Albion match and Mawne committee's attempt to square the players. At first he was enthusiastic about George Harper's resistance to the corrupting influence; but on second thoughts he disapproved of it. 'I reckon you and George done your mates a bad turn. It ain't every day you can pick up ten pound for nothing.' The only thing that modified his opinion was the dislike that he shared with all the other men at Mawne of Hudson. 'Hudson . . .' he said. 'I wish you'd a' finished him!'

While Abner and his father were talking football Alice had approached the sister, a dark, capable-looking woman whose features and hair and eyes were as rigid and sharp and metallic as the scissors hanging from her starched belt, on the subject of John Fellows's progress. This woman stared at her for a moment. 'Are you Fellows's daughter?' she asked.

'No, sister, I'm his wife.'

'He's the worst grumbler we've ever had in this ward,' said the sister; 'but as a matter of fact he's getting on finely. The doctor says the bone is set nicely, and he should be out in a couple of weeks now. I expect they'll send him out on a Thomas's splint. You don't know what that is,' she added, with a rather scornful intonation, but then, noticing that Alice looked tired, she took her into her bunk and gave her a cup of tea.

'I couldn't imagine that you were Fellows's wife,' she said, 'and this his baby. I thought your husband was the young man who came with you.' p. 70

'He and baby's half-brothers,' Alice explained, blushing. 'By Mr Fellows's first wife, you know.'

'Well, I hope you'll be happy,' replied the sister doubtfully. 'It's time the visitors were going. Is Fellows a very heavy drinker?'

'I'm afraid he is,' said Alice mildly.

'I thought so,' said the sister. 'We ought to keep him in here for your sake. But there's always a rush on surgical beds at Christmas time. You'd better call your stepson.'

The Seventh Chapter p. 71

Abner was genuinely relieved when Alice told him the good report that the sister had given her on his father's condition, for it promised him a speedy release from the discomfort of the situation. Alice, who had accustomed herself to examine every shade of expression that he showed, knew that he was rejoicing at the prospect of leaving her. The thought piqued her, for she had forced herself always to behave toward him exactly as if there had never been a moment of embarrassment between them. Her pride would not let the matter rest.

'You'm glad he's coming back,' she said. 'I know you be.'

'I'm glad his leg's joined, if that's what you mean,' he replied. 'That's only human-like. Besides, it's best for everybody.'

'And what about me?' she asked, passionately.

He would not answer, and she flowed on with a stream of reproaches, telling him that she knew he hated her and couldn't bear the sight of her, in the hope that he would be driven to say that he did nothing of the sort. Abner remained passive. He knew very well that if he were to lose his temper with her the situation might easily become just as dangerous as if he were tender. The main thing to be avoided with her was emotion of any kind. Life had been made difficult enough for him already simply because he knew that their relation was capable of passionate developments. He knew what passion was, and in spite of himself he could not always banish the thought of Alice from his mind. Admitting this, he had mapped out a course of conduct for himself, and he meant to stick to it until the happy day of his relief.

It was not a fortnight but a month before John Fellows left the hospital. He came back, as the sister had anticipated, with a Thomas's splint on his thigh and instructions to attend the infirmary as an out-patient in another month's time. The splint was an embarrassment that he resented, for it compelled him to sit in an uncomfortable position with the right leg extended, but it did not prevent him walking or drinking, and as soon as he had mastered the first of these processes he lost no time in making up for his long abstinence from the second. The rules of the friendly society to which he belonged forbade its members to visit public-houses as long as they were receiving sick pay, so that the invalid was forced to enter the Lyttleton Arms by a back door which he reached by crossing the garden of a friend, and having once solved this problem Fellows managed to put in the day without any difficulty. p. 72

Every Friday morning he hobbled down on his crutches to the doctor's surgery and obtained a certificate by means of which he drew his weekly pay. It was only twelve shillings a week, and he never parted with a penny of it to Alice, so that the household now depended entirely on Abner's earnings. It puzzled both of them to imagine how he managed to live in a state of fuddled

alcoholism on this small sum. They supposed that his old friend the landlord, trusting him, put it on the slate in the hope of being paid when Fellows went back to work. He had always been free with his money, and no doubt his boon companions of the past were ready to treat him as often as they could afford it.

At the end of February he went in to North Bromwich in accordance with the hospital orders and returned without his splint. The doctors had told him that it would now be wise to use the leg as much as possible and suggested that the colliery authorities, who were partly responsible for the accident, should now give him a light job at the pit-head. John Fellows, however, didn't see the point of this. He had paid into the Loyal United Free Gardeners for more than thirty years and now that he had the chance he meant to get some of his money back by staying on the box as long as they would let him. He could get quite enough exercise for his leg in his clandestine approaches to the Lyttleton Arms. What was more, he would not do a stroke of work until his claim against the colliery was settled. He had consulted a solicitor, and a claim under the Workmen's Compensation Act was pending. p. 73

Abner meanwhile waited impatiently for his release. The presence of his father in the house had eased the awkwardness of his relation with Alice by abolishing the sense of lonely isolation that surrounded it. Alice herself was almost complacent. She did not mind how long John Fellows abstained from work as long as Abner was left to her. At the end of May the doctor refused to continue the farce of signing the miner's certificates. John Fellows grumbled, but had to admit that he had done fairly well out of the club. He pushed on his claim for compensation, which was settled for fifty pounds. Alice was overjoyed at this windfall, for the strain of her straitened housekeeping had forced her to run up a few small debts with tradesmen. She took the opportunity of asking her husband for money when Abner was in the room.

'Money . . .?' said John Fellows. 'Money . . .? What do yo' want with money? What's money to do with me when I've a son at work earning a man's wages? If yo' want money better ask our Abner. Didn't I keep him all through his schooling in food and clothes? working day and night? I reckon it's his turn now.'

'I bain't goin' to keep you in pub-crawling any longer,' said Abner. 'You'd best give her some, while you've got it. I'm going off to work in Wales.'

'Work in Wales!' cried John Fellows. 'I'll teach you to talk to your father like that,' he cried, coming over to him with his head low between his shoulders like an angry bull. When he reached his son he stopped, for Abner had thrown back his elbow. Alice ran to separate them. There was no need for her to have done so, for Fellows knew better than to appeal to force.

'You're a fine pair, the two on you!' he said. 'And don't you go thinking I can't see.'

He went out of the room with the limp that he now cultivated, and it was well that he did so, for by this time Abner was white with rage. He would have followed his father if Alice had not withheld him.

'Abner, don't!' she cried. 'What did he mean?'

'You know what he meant as well as I do,' said Abner with a laugh. 'Still, that don't matter. I'm off to-morrow.' p. 74

But he did not go. Thinking the matter over he could not bring himself to abandon Alice and her child to the desolation that he knew must follow his departure. It even seemed to him that his going might suggest to his father that he had hit the right nail on the head. The fact that, this time, Alice knew better than beg him to stay, also influenced him. By this token she accepted his independence and appealed only to his generosity. She never had a penny of her husband's fifty pounds. Some of it, no doubt, he owed to the landlord of the Lyttleton Arms: but in any case it became clear that as long as it lasted he could not be expected to return to work. In the meantime he took great pains to avoid crossing Abner, feeling less obligation towards the housekeeping expenses from the fact that his nourishment in these days was mainly liquid and taken elsewhere.

It was difficult to say how long the money would last him. For the present he was managing extraordinarily well and there seemed no reason why he should ever take up work again, although there was now no physical reason why he should not begin. The summer passed without any change in their arrangements. Abner still disliked his work. The prolonged strain of working in cramped positions was beginning to tell on his eyes; but in the lower levels of the pit he suffered little from the extremity of heat which made work above ground almost impossible in the July of that year, and made his father thirstier than ever. Under the new conditions he found it impossible to save money for the needs of the day when he should be free. All his earnings but a few shillings went to Alice every Saturday night, and it was with difficulty that he refrained from breaking into the small store that he had kept intact in his stocking.

On August bank-holiday the men at the pit stopped work. This was the day of Dulston Wake, the principal festival of the black-country year. Each of the small towns that lie like knots on the network of tramways that has its centre in North Bromwich has its own minor fair of swing-boats, roundabouts, and cocoa-nut shies, but none of these have half the significance of Dulston Wake, which is prominent not only by its magnitude but also by the weight of tradition that belongs to it and by the magnificence of its setting. In all his life Abner had never missed it, nor, for that matter, had his father; and when the day drew near it was taken as a matter of course that the p. 75

whole family should put on its Sunday clothes and go to the Wake together. They left soon after midday, John Fellows already mildly intoxicated, Abner in his blue suit with a white silk neckerchief, and Alice, carrying the baby breeched for the occasion, in her best black costume.

They had to walk more than a mile from Hackett's Cottages to the terminus of the electric tramway system that had not yet come to Mawne. John Fellows, who had forgotten his limp, led the way at a great pace down Mawne bank, so fast indeed that Alice grew tired by the weight of the child. The day was one of sweltering heat, of the kind in which the people of the black-country prefer to take their pleasures. John Fellows carried a bottle of draught beer in each pocket of his coat and a red pocket-handkerchief escaped from under the brim of his bowler hat. He turned to swear at Alice for delaying the progress of the party, and then, mumbling something under his breath, put on a spurt of ridiculous energy and left them behind.

Abner relieved the panting Alice of her burden, and carried the child on his shoulder. Soon they had crossed the Stour at the bridge by the gun-barrel works and had gained the relative coolness of shade under the chestnuts of Mr Willis's hanging gardens. They arrived at the tramway terminus ten minutes later than John Fellows to find that he had not profited by his exertions since the trams were overcrowded and a breakdown had disorganised the service. He had taken the opportunity of sitting down on the cinder path and emptying one of his beer bottles, and as fast as he drank beer sweat oozed from every pore of his body. When the tram appeared in the distance he pulled himself up with a grunt and prepared to fight for a seat in it. It was quite p. 76
impossible for Alice to compete in this kind of scrimmage. John Fellows pushed his way in first and sat fanning himself with his hat while Abner, Alice and the baby were left behind. They did not see him again during the day.

They waited for twenty minutes in the sun before they found a place in one of those reckless tramway-cars that go roaring like spent shells through all the wastes of the black country. They could not speak for the jolt and jangle of its progress, for the clanging of its bell and the alarming sputter of electric sparks when it swayed on its springs and threatened to jump the rails. In all their four miles of journey they could see no green. They passed through endless streets of grimy brick, baked culverts from which a blast of acrid and lifeless air rushed through the front of the car like a sirocco. Even though the fires of the furnaces and factories had been banked down for the holidays they could still smell the heat which had scorched and blackened this volcanic country on every side.

At last they were jolted through the narrow streets of Dulston, happily without catastrophe, and ejected at the foot of the hill on which its medieval castle stands. Here the crowd was at its thickest. Noisy hawkers sold ticklers and leaden water-squirts and programmes of the fête. Tram after tram disgorged its sweaty contents to mix with the cooler occupants of brakes and char-a-bancs. Through the dense foliage of the castle woods that hung limp in the heat like painted leafage in a theatre, the discordant music of competing roundabouts floated down, and beneath it one could hear the low, exciting rumour of the fair, toward which the steady stream of new arrivals was setting. It was a stiff pull up the slope of the castle hill and every one who climbed it seemed bitten with an infectious speed. At the top of it the crowd thickened beneath the constriction of a narrow Norman arch and then burst and scattered into the huge central courtyard where gray ruins looked down upon this modern substitute for the tourneys of the middle ages.

Abner and Alice were caught up in the excitements of the fair. He soon added to his burdens by p. 77
knocking down three cocoa-nuts. At a shooting-gallery to the admiration of Alice he smashed thin globes of glass spinning above a jet of water. For his prize he chose a brooch of imitation gold: a heart pierced by an arrow and surmounted by the word 'Alice.' She laughed and pinned it in the neck of her black bodice. She marvelled at the sureness of his hand and eye. There was no one in all that crowd whom she would have chosen for her escort rather than him. She rejoiced, for the first time in many months, to find him a happy and natural companion, only wishing that she could forget the fact that John Fellows also was there, drinking, no doubt, in one of the canvas marquees that the firm of Astill had erected in each corner of the courtyard. Once, and only once, she spoke her thoughts. 'I wonder where he is, Abner. . . .' she said. He only laughed at her.

'I'll find him if you like.'

'Oh, don't be soft, Abner,' she said. 'I was only wondering. . .'

They spent their coppers at a dozen booths, seeing the fattest lady and the smallest horse in the world, the riders of bucking bronchos with woolly trousers and slouch hats, who were even better shots than Abner; and the lady of mystery, who divined the name and age of Alice and the dates on Abner's football medals and told them that their married happiness was threatened by a dark woman. To this seeress Alice protested blushing Abner was not her husband. 'Well, my love,' said that lady, pointing to the baby, 'that bain't nothing to boast about.' The crowd in the tent laughed, and Alice was annoyed with Abner for laughing with them. 'You ought to have told 'er,' she said crossly as they emerged. 'It's enough to take my character for life!'

By this time the cause of the mystery lady's speculations was getting tired and peevish. Abner took him for a ride on one of the galloping roundabout horses, but the motion only made him sick, and so they left the courtyard and sat resting in the tepid air under the shadow of the castle beeches, undisturbed by any but casual lovers who had sought the same kind of privacy. p. 78

‘I think it’s awful the way they be’ave!’ said Alice, hugging the baby to her breast as though she thought he might be corrupted by the sight of so much unbridled passion. It came natural to her to adopt this pose of modesty in Abner’s company. She expected him to agree with her; but he only laughed, and this set her thinking of the dark episode of Susan Wade and wishing she knew what actually had happened. ‘You didn’t ought to laugh,’ she said, ‘it bain’t decent.’

But Abner was too contented to pursue the argument.

The child slept for an hour, and Abner sat smoking beside them. He went back to the fair-ground and brought her a cup of tea. Thus refreshed they returned to the castle courtyard. The sun was setting; the uppermost storeys of the ruins were tinged with warm and mellow light, but the crowded space beneath them had grown cooler. Hissing flares of naphtha were lighted. Swing-boats soared out of the pit of the ruins into the glowing sky. The crowd, released from the burden of heat under which it had laboured, began to pluck up spirits. There was a good deal of friendly horse-play, from which Alice shrank into the protection of Abner’s bulk. Little John did not seem much the better for his sleep. He was tired and irritable, and frightened by the squirts of water and the feathered teasers. It seemed as if they would have to take him home. ‘But I did want him to see the fireworks!’ Alice said regretfully. Already two monstrous fire-balloons had ascended and drifted away till they showed no bigger than the moon.

‘Come on then,’ said Abner. ‘I’ve had enough of it if yo’ have. Let’s get back before the trams is crowded.’

He took the baby from her arms and she, almost unwillingly, followed him.

At the end of the courtyard, near the Norman archway by which they had entered, stood a boxing-booth, inside which the show was just on the point of beginning. The proprietor, a heavy-jowled ruffian in a sweater, whose board proclaimed him to be an ex-welter-weight champion of Bermondsey, had collected a crowd round his platform by inveighing, in the intervals between ringing his bell, against the sporting reputation of the black-country. At the back of the platform two of his staff, a nigger and a Hebrew, were sparring gently like kittens at play. It seemed that the reason for his resentment was his failure to get the Dulston audience to do anything but watch him and his pets. What he wanted, he said, was sport . . . just to see what the local talent was made of. p. 79

‘Sport?’ he said, ‘you don’t know the meaning of the word in this gord-forsaken ’ole. When I puts up this tent in Durham or Middlesborough or Wales, they flock into it, flock in . . . ready to take a turn with the boys and give a little exhibition. Frightened to use your fists, that’s what you are here. What the hell’s England coming to? That’s what I want to know. It’s enough to make me sick, you people! It’s enough to make me want to take down the saloon and burn the whole bleedin’ bag of tricks, damme if it isn’t, an’ the boys waiting here for a bit of sport.’ The nigger had stopped sparring and was grinning insolently at the crowd, among the younger women of which his strangeness exercised an attraction. Nobody, however, seemed inclined to enter the booth.

‘Come along, Abner,’ Alice whispered, tugging at his arm.

The proprietor rang his bell again. ‘Now, for the last time,’ he said. ‘Just commencing! If you haven’t the spunk to put on the gloves yourselves, come and see a pretty exhibition of scientific boxing. And I give you my word this is the last time I ever bring my entertainment into the bleedin’ black-country!’

‘Good job, gaffer,’ said somebody.

The laughter of the crowd made the big man lose his temper. ‘Good job, is it?’ he cried. ‘I’d ask the gentleman that made that remark to come up here and say it to my face. Ever hear the name of Budge Garside? That’s mine! ’Ere, I’ll give five pounds’—he pulled out a leather bag of money and jingled it—‘I’ll give two pounds to any of you chaps that’ll stand up to me for six rounds. That’s what I think of the bloody lot of you. Men! There’s not one of you black-country chaps worth the name. All you’re fit for, as far as I can see, is to carry the babby about and ’old the missis’s ’and. Yes, sir, it’s you I’m talkin’ to!’ p. 80

Everybody looked at Abner. Alice again tried to pull him away. ‘That’s right, my dear,’ said Garside, encouraged, ‘take ’im ’ome before ’e gets ’is pretty face spoiled!’

Abner shook himself free from her hand and shoved the baby into her arms.

‘Come on, gaffer,’ he said, ‘I’m game.’ He moved forward through the crowd. Alice, clinging to him desperately, tried to hold him back, but the people made way for him, and even helped him forward, swarming up on to the platform after him. Garside, pleased with the result of his stratagem, shook hands with him. ‘That’s the spirit I like,’ he said thickly. ‘Come on in and strip. Let’s have a drink to start with.’ They disappeared together into the tent. Sixpences rattled into the wooden bowl that the negro held to receive them. Men and women poured into the booth anxious to see what kind of battering the representative of the district would get. The little Jew pushed back the crowd and held up a piece of boarding with the words ‘House Full’ painted on it, while the negro fastened the strings of the tent door.

Alice was left alone in the crowd outside clutching the baby nervously in her arms. She could not have borne to see Abner fight. All she could do was to wait patiently outside and listen in agony for any sounds within. She could hear very little but the buzz of conversation. Even when she

crept round to the side of the tent and put her ear to the canvas the sounds that came to her were indistinct, unreal, and blurred by the nearer rumour of the multitude, the hiss of naphtha flares, the creaking of swing-boats, cracks of rifles, and above all the raucous blaring of the steam organs and the shriek of their whistles. If only she could have heard something she would have been happier. She could not bear to think of Abner's white flesh being bruised, and yet, curiously enough, she was thrilled and proud of him. Her distaste for violence couldn't get the better of her exultation in her man's virility. She stood at the side of the tent tensely listening. A p. 81
rocket screamed into the sky; there was a moment of relative silence from the crowd in which she thought she heard a sound of dull thuds mingled with another pattering noise. The rocket burst into a shower of gold amid a salvo of 'Oh's!' The crowd, noisily streaming towards the ramparts, from which they could see the fireworks against a blacker sky, jostled her, passing between the boxing-booth and the next tent. Six rounds! It could not last much longer. Why had he left her so roughly? Why hadn't he taken her with him? Of course you couldn't take a baby into a boxing-booth—not even a black-country baby—but there was no reason why he should have pushed her aside like that. She wouldn't forgive him that roughness in a hurry! But she knew that she would: she would forgive Abner anything as long as he did not disregard her. The crowd still streamed past her. Showers of starred rockets and tadpoles of fire were bursting above her in the velvet sky. A whole battery of maroons shook the ruins. He would be sorry to have missed the fireworks! If he were badly knocked about she still had some of Mrs Moseley's ointment left —a fine thing for bruises or broken skin. That was the night, she remembered, when he had come home drunk: the night when, for a moment they had gazed into each other's eyes. She knew how dangerous the emotion of pity was. A set-piece suddenly sputtered out of the darkness. Letters of fire began to form themselves. What would they say? GOD SAVE . . . 'The king,' of course. Little John began to cry, saying that he wanted to go to bed. 'Yes, my precious!' she crooned, 'mammy'll take you home.' Six rounds. . . . She suddenly remembered how a young pitman at Mawne had once been killed in a boxing-booth by a knock-out blow on the chin. A knock-out blow . . . she remembered old Mr Higgins talking of it. But Abner was strong. Nothing of that kind could possibly happen to him. Even so, she couldn't get the sinister picture of Budge Garside with his heavy jowl out of her head. He was such a deadly-looking customer! Suppose . . .

A sound of cheering came from inside the tent. She ran round to the front, wishing to goodness p. 82
that John would hold his noise. The curtains opened. The negro came out with another signboard: 'Just Commencing.' People surged out of the tent laughing and talking together. A bold girl burst out laughing in the nigger's face. Alice took hold of the sleeve of one of the men who came out alone and looked as if he were sober. 'Tell us what's happened?' she gasped; but he only stared at her and shook his head and went on straight forward as if he had mistaken her motive for accosting him. The tent emptied. After a moment she saw Abner shaking hands with the giant in the door. He didn't seem to notice her, and when he came down the wooden steps and she called his name he did not look pleased to see her. His lip was cut and his forehead still damp from a vigorous sponging. She took his arm; she wanted to show him how glad she was. He was too dazed to resent this familiarity, simply saying: 'Come on out of this!' In the gate of the courtyard he stopped. 'Wait a jiff,' he said, 'You'd better take the two quid.' He gave her the coins and then, suddenly realising the tiredness of her face in the lamplight, asked her to give him the kid. 'I reckon this is a man's job,' he said with a deep laugh.

This time they caught their tram without difficulty. They spoke very little, and in whispers, for John had fallen asleep in his mother's arms, and even if he had wanted to talk, Abner would have known better than to risk waking him. As a matter of fact he had taken a good deal of punishment from Garside's left. On points he would have been thoroughly outmatched and nothing but his stubborn will had kept him on his feet until the end of the sixth round. The mild elation that had sustained him when he left the booth had now faded, and in its place he began to feel the effects of the terrific hammering that he had undergone. His lip was beginning to swell and his body felt cold in spite of the sultry weather. He dozed in the corner of the tram-car, and when they came to the terminus and Alice roused him by a touch on his sleeve, he felt it an unreasonable effort to pull himself together and carry the child up Mawne bank. The creature p. 83
was still asleep and hung a dead weight on his shoulder. Rather than wake him when they reached Hackett's Cottages Alice carried him upstairs and laid him still asleep in his cot.

When she came downstairs again she found Abner in the washhouse bathing his face in cold water. 'Don't do that, Abner,' she said, 'let me see to it proper.' She took Mrs Moseley's ointment and some strips of linen from the cupboard, but he wouldn't let her touch him, saying that he was tired as a dog and would rather turn in. She gazed at him sorrowfully, knowing that she could not drive him and fearing to persuade. He rallied her weakly: 'If you stand lookin' at me like that yo'll be late for the funeral,' he said, and then, softening, 'You look dead tired yourself. Put the light out and leave the door open.'

'No,' she said. 'I've never done that. I shall wait up for him.'

'Well, you women takes the biscuit!' said Abner.

He left her there, and rolling up in his blankets soon fell asleep. It was not often that he dreamed, but on that night his dreams would not let him be. From the very moment that he first slept he seemed to be fighting, fighting with Budge Garside on a platform of creaking boards with a rope barrier round it, lit by hissing naphtha flares. Every moment he grew more exhausted; but he had to go on fighting in spite of the violent jabs of Garside's fist over his heart. The crowd in the booth, whose faces could not be seen for tobacco smoke, were laughing at him, and this filled

him with an angry determination to go through with it. The round seemed endless. He waited for the umpire's bell to save him, but the umpire had vanished. And now he was fighting all three: Garside with his broad, shaggy chest, the small-headed negro, and the little Jew who skipped about like a flea. He hadn't bargained to take on all three at once, but there was nobody to whom he could appeal, and so he had to go on boxing as well as he could in this hurricane of six fists. He thought of Alice and the baby whom he had left outside. If he were knocked out, as he surely must be in a moment, she would have to look to herself. That couldn't be helped. p. 84
Suddenly he heard her calling from outside the tent: 'Abner . . . Abner!' He tried to call back to her, just to show her that he was still keeping up, but no voice would come through his cut lips. Garside landed a terrific blow on the point of his chin. He woke. . . . He supposed he was awake. But the voice that he had heard in his dream still followed him. She was calling 'Abner . . Abner!' He tumbled out of bed, pulled on his trousers, and ran downstairs. The mild light of the kitchen dazzled him.

In the corner, beyond a pile of overturned furniture, he saw Alice cowering, and above her John Fellows. In the struggle which he had not heard his father had ripped her bodice and torn away the gilt brooch that Abner had given her. Now he had her at his mercy, holding her by the hair, shaking her from time to time like a terrier with a rat and making her scream with pain. Abner had never seen such terror in a human creature's eyes. When she saw him she cried for his help. 'Abner . . . Abner . . . make him give over. Tell him I done nothing!'

'Abner,' said John Fellows savagely. 'Abner . . . there's a bleedin' side too much Abner in this 'ouse! You'll get out of it quick, the pair of you.'

'Loose her!' Abner shouted.

'Loose her?' John Fellows laughed. 'I reckon I've let her go too much as it is. Give me the slip, the two of you. Took her off into the woods, tickin' and tannin', you dirty devil! Give her joolry! Give your own mother joolry! An' what happened when I was on my back in the hospital?'

'Leave go of her!' said Abner, coming nearer.

'In the very bed you was born in,' cried John Fellows. 'Yo're a fine bloody fossack! Out you go, the both of you! Joolry! Give me the slip, would you? No — fear! Gerrup, I say!'

He pulled Alice up from her knees. Her sobs rose to a scream. 'John, you'm killing me!'

Abner took him by the arm.

'Lay hands on your own father, would you? Take that, you . . . !' He hit Abner full on his bruised mouth with all his strength. Alice, released, ran to the other side of the room and stood panting, p. 85
her hands clutching at her torn bodice. The baby started crying upstairs.

Abner put his hand to his mouth. His lip was bleeding again. He pulled himself together. 'You're boozed,' he said. 'Get on upstairs!' He tried to lead his father to the door, but John Fellows was not to be put off. 'Boozed!' he said, 'and what would drive a man to booze worse nor a bad wife? No, yo' don't get out of it like that. What've you done to 'er?'

'I never touched her,' said Abner.

'Never touch 'er, an' give her joolry!' Fellows scoffed. 'Maybe I'm boozed, but I'm not too boozed to put you to rights.' He launched a savage blow at Abner's face, and encouraged by the fact that Abner did not return it, followed it up with another. Alice, crying 'Oh!' ran to the door. 'Stay where yo' are!' Abner shouted. John Fellows closed with him, lashing out viciously. He had been something of a boxer in his day, and his attack was so violent that Abner found it difficult to defend himself. Fellows fought like a tiger cat, with boots and finger-nails and teeth. His bloodshot eyes were fixed on Abner's throat. It was as if all the suppressed malice of seven years had been suddenly released. Then, suddenly, he dropped Abner and flew at the frightened Alice. Abner stopped him with a blow under the right ear. He crumpled up and fell on the floor like a sack.

'Abner . . . you've done him in!' Alice cried.

He fell to his knees and listened for his father's heart. The impulse still fluttered there. 'No . . . he's only stunned. I reckon he'll wake up sober,' he said. Alice stood trembling and sobbing in short gasps: a strange, mechanical noise. Abner remained bent over his father's body in silence.

'Johnnie's crying . . . bless his little 'eart!' she said. He took no notice of her. 'Put the rug over 'im. Leave him here till 'e comes to.'

'Abner, 'e spoke something awful! 'E said you'n me had been going together while he was away. 'E took up this brooch. . . . A thing like that!'

'I don't want to 'ear what he said.' p. 86

''E said our John wasn't his child . . . said I'd always been rotten bad. . .'

John Fellows gave a groan.

'Hark, 'e's coming round,' said Abner.

'An' I never done nothing! . . . nothing!'

‘You’d better look to the babby.’

‘Poor lamb! Nothing, I never done, Abner . . .’

‘I know you done nothing. You don’t take no notice what a man says when ’e’s boozed. You look to the kid, while I get my clothes on.’

‘Yo’ bain’t goin’ to dress?’ She picked up the alarm clock that Fellows had knocked down from the mantelpiece. It was still going, with a harsh metallic click. ‘It’s not two o’clock yet.’

But he had gone. Left alone she glanced fearfully at the form of her husband. For a moment he lay quite still. Then he shuddered, rolled over and began to snore. The baby was still wailing upstairs. If only John Fellows had been dead! But that would have been murder. What was Abner doing? She could not live without Abner. She went upstairs to his room and tapped at the door. Candlelight glinted through cracks in the boards. He answered angrily, she thought, but she came in.

‘What are you doing now?’ she whispered.

‘Putting two-three things together.’

‘What’s up now?’

‘I’m off out of this.’

‘Going?’ she cried. ‘Abner . . . you can’t go and leave me like this. Not with him!’

He laughed. ‘I can’t take you along with me. Not likely!’ He went on pulling out clothes from his wooden box. She broke down altogether.

‘Abner . . . Abner, don’t go and leave me. I can’t . . . I can’t . . .’ He put on his scarf. ‘Abner, only stay along with us for a bit. . .’

‘I’ve stayed too long as it is.’

She tried to put her arms round his neck, but he pushed her away. ‘It’s lucky I’ve got a bit of money put by for a start,’ he said, fumbling in the mattress for his stocking. ‘I’ll give you what I can spare.’

Then suddenly he swore violently. He had found the stocking, but it was empty. He turned furiously on Alice: ‘You devil, you took it!’ p. 87

She fell at his feet, imploring him to believe that she knew nothing about it. ‘I’ve never told you a lie, Abner,’ she said.

His rage made him unreasonable. ‘You’re like the rest on ’em! Twenty pounds! What have you done with it?’

‘I swear I never seen a penny of it, Abner. It must be there. Look again.’

He had ripped the bed to pieces, but there was no money. Suddenly light dawned on them both. They had found the explanation of John Fellows’ continued affluence. Thinking of this, they could not doubt where the money had gone.

‘That’s the worst turn he ever done me,’ he said, pulling on his cap.

Even now she could not believe that he was going. ‘Not till the morning,’ she said. ‘Don’t leave me with him like that in the dark.’

In the kitchen Abner again examined his father, who now appeared to be sleeping peacefully. ‘He won’t remember a word of it when he wakes,’ he said.

Again she implored him not to leave her, but now she could see that entreaties were useless and that his mind was made up. It was the most awful parting in her life: as final and annihilating as death. For more than three years she had lived for him and very little else. He opened the door. It was a bland summer night, the sky full of soft stars and the country of a breathing sweetness.

‘So long, then, Alice,’ he said.

She could not speak. She put up her arms and kissed him for the first time in her life. He did not then push her away; but she felt that he was only compelling himself to tolerate her embrace. ‘I never touched that money,’ she said hastily.

‘I know you never did,’ he replied. ‘So long . . .’

His shadow disappeared into the darkness. She shut the door of the kitchen. John Fellows lay on the floor snoring, and upstairs the baby still cried.

The Eighth Chapter p. 88

There was no moon, but the sky, even at this early hour of the morning, was full of a curious

shimmer of light reflected mirage-like from the upper air clothing Europe to eastward of the English lands. At that season of the year sunlight was never distant. Now, every moment the stars shone fainter, and the slate roofs of the houses seemed to gather light. Abner stood looking up and down the Stourton Road. He did not know which way to turn; he was dazed by the suddenness with which the freedom so long and so patiently awaited had come to him. In the bewilderment of the moment he could scarcely even realise that it was sweet. He had planned it differently and anticipated the day so often that its violent arrival took him off his feet. He had expected to leave Mawne deliberately in his own time and carrying his savings in his pocket. Events had cast him out violently and penniless . . . not quite penniless, for he still had a little change left from the money he had taken to the Wakes. He remembered with regret that he had been fool enough to give Alice the two sovereigns he had won in the boxing-booth. They would have come in handy; but reflection told him that Alice would need them a great deal more than he.

A man began to cough in the front bedroom of the house before which he was standing. People upstairs were beginning to wake. A cock crowed dismally. He had better make up his mind, for day was beginning. Eastward the Stourton Road led to Coventry, westward to Wales. Whichever way he went his lack of money would compel him to walk. He wasn't afraid of walking or, for that matter, of sleeping rough; and yet he felt that he was at sea and incapable in his present condition of making up his mind. His head and body ached with Garside's blows, for the bruised muscles were beginning to stiffen. He was sleepy, as well as tired, and couldn't remember one thing that seemed to be calling for recognition in the back of his mind. He went on walking p. 89
aimlessly towards Halesby; the motion set his mind working once more and he remembered the thing that had baffled and escaped him. Tiger. . . . He couldn't very well leave the dog on Mrs Moseley's hands. At the same time he didn't want to frighten the old woman by disturbing her before daylight. To do so would entail explanations, possibly arguments on the subject of his filial duties. It would mean another good-bye, and he wanted to get away quietly without anything of that kind. Still, he meant to have Tiger as much for his own comfort as for Mrs Moseley's. He determined to see what could be done.

The old woman's house was the last on the right of a steep, cobble-paved street climbing at right angles to the Stourton Road. He turned up it, his hob-nails raising stinging echoes on the stones. He felt as if he must surely wake every one that slept there. Mrs Moseley's house was as quiet as the rest. He surveyed it strategically. At the back of it lay a little yard that in happier days had been used as a fowl-run. To advertise the presence of these treasures within, her husband had prevailed upon the landlord to top the wall with fragments of broken bottles. This barrier now confronted Abner. Luckily he was tall enough to reach the top of the wall with his hands, and he soon discovered that time and weather had taken the nature out of Mr Moseley's mortar so that it crumbled easily and allowed him to remove the glass from a foot of the coping. In two minutes he had done this, straddled the wall, and dropped down softly on the other side. Tiger, bad watchdog that he was, still slept. Abner came softly to the door of the washhouse and tried it. There was no fear that Mrs Moseley would leave a door unlocked at night even behind a glass-topped wall. The only other aperture in the scullery was a window that was too small for him to get through and set very high in the wall. With his pocket-knife thrust through a broken pane he lifted the hasp and opened it. Tiger gave a sharp bark.

'Ss . . .' Abner whispered. 'Tiger. . . . Good dog. . . Come on then.' p. 90

Tiger, with a snuffle of recognition, came out of his hole and yawned. The next moment he was jumping up towards the window, anxious to get at his master and whining like a baby because the window was too high for him. Time after time he leapt and failed to reach the sill. The wall was too smooth, and the space of the washhouse too cramped to give him a run for his jump. He grew excited and inclined to be noisy, and at last Abner, seeing no other way out of the difficulty, put his arm as far as he could through the window, and when the dog jumped caught blindly at the loose skin of his back and hauled him through. Tiger trembled with gratitude and the anticipation of new joys. He licked Abner's face as he lifted him up and put him on the top of the coping. He jumped over into the road and Abner followed him. A policeman, attracted by the strange phenomenon of Tiger's egress, watched him as he dropped over. He was a young man, a football player, who knew Abner, and when he saw Tiger's master emerge he grinned.

'Got him out without waking the old woman,' said Abner.

'Rabbits?' said the other, with a wink. Abner laughed. Both of them knew that the game-laws do not run in colliery districts. 'Looks as if 'e knows all about it,' said the constable at parting. Tiger was already nearly out of sight, sniffing the grass as he went. Since Abner went back to work at the pit he had been deprived of hunting at this ideal hour.

It was extraordinary how Tiger's company restored Abner's confidence. He felt no longer alone and worried by indecision. Tiger had gone so far that it was useless to call him back. He had chosen his own direction, and Abner was content to follow him. What he wanted most of all, he decided, was a sleep.

Beyond the level of Mrs Moseley's cottage the houses thinned away and the ground fell steeply to the fields above the Stour, the scene of Abner's walks with Susan more than a year before. Dawn came, heralded by no fierce splendours, white light stealing from the east over a cloudless sky. p. 91
The birds were already awake, but the hush of August held them, so that the warblers were silent. Larks there were, lost in the sunlit levels above the whiteness; thrushes made subdued domestic noises in the hedgerows; linnets already flocking for the early harvest of seed, rustled

the hawthorn thickets, chaffinches sang boldly in a more vulgar strain. A soft air bloomed the drowsy hedges. Elder blossoms and slender umbels of parsley flower gleamed like dull ivory. Light, and more light came welling over the world. When Abner had reached the plank bridge over the Stour where Susan first had kissed him, the edge of the woodland rose up black beyond the stream, the water gleamed beneath the alders, and the hills, that had lain folded in night, lifted their heads. Now the birds were silent. Only the larks still sang. Walking behind the ecstatic Tiger through a green lane in Uffdown Wood, Abner saw the peak of Pen Beacon before him smitten with fire. The sun was up. Gigantic shadows dappled and barred the grass. Tiger, dancing from side to side, pursued a phantom hound. They left the woods and dropped over a stile into a winding road. As yet the sun had no real heat: colour it warmed, but the air was cool, cool and clean as the surface of this rocky road so often scoured by torrents. The heavy odours of the woods belonged to night, but the smell of the road was one of morning. Gradually the banks released the peculiar perfume of a hill-country in sunshine, a lovely, healthy savour of thyme and bracken and dry heather. A breeze swept the harebells. Still they climbed the path towards the top of Uffdown where the sun came first. Even at this hour pods were snapping amid the almond scent of late gorse blossom. In the shadow of a hedge where prickles were few Abner threw himself down propping his head on a tussock of thin grass. He closed his eyes, and was soon asleep, and Tiger, having smelt and scared innumerable rabbits, came at last to lie beside him, propping his slender lower jaw upon the smooth of Abner's thigh.

He did not sleep for long. His watch had stopped, and he could not tell the time, but from the height of the sun he judged it to be between eight and nine o'clock. The grass of that southern p. 92
hedge-side was already warm and fragrant, and the mistiness of the Severn plain beneath him promised another day of broiling heat. He was horribly stiff and lay on with a sense of lazy luxury, letting the sun warm his bones. Sprawling there with his eyes closed he now began to consider where he should go.

The obvious goal of an out-of-work in the midlands at that time was Coventry, an ancient city then rising on the third of its great industrial booms, the manufacture of motor-cars. There was always work, and well-paid work, to be had in Coventry. The journey was short, and Abner had no money to waste on railway fares. Even so, the idea of merely moving from one side of the black-country to another did not seem to represent the kind of radical change that he had intended. He wanted to make a clean start in a new country. It suddenly struck him that, after all, there was no real reason why a man should spend the whole of his life in the dust of coal and metal or the smell of fire. This joy of sunlight and fresh air seemed too good to lose.

He knew nothing of the conditions of labour in the country beyond the fact that many black-country families migrated every autumn into the fields of Worcestershire for the gathering of hops. He remembered how he had seen these sun-browned companies returning, men, women, and children together, carrying their household goods in old perambulators, looking happier and more healthy than the majority of Halesby people. He had no very definite idea when the 'hopping' season began; but whether he were too late for it or too early he knew, at any rate, that he had a store of strength and health to sell. He wasn't afraid of work. Why shouldn't he work in the open air? For the summer at least . . . after that he might go down with the money he had earned into the Welsh valleys and take to the pit again. He knew that between him and Wales lay a vast green country in which a man might live as well as anywhere else. Even now the sun was drinking up the mists that concealed it, revealing sombre woodlands heavy in leaf, yellow p. 93
cornfields, the smoke of hidden towns or villages, and, here and there, a shining bend of river. From that high post, indeed, he gazed upon the pastoral heart of England, the most placid and homely of all her shires; but the national schools had taught him nothing of these things, and, as the mists ascended, showing the cliffs of Cotswold long and level, Bredon an island dome, May Hill and Malvern, Abberley, Clee, and all the nearer hills of Wales, he only knew that it was green and big and that it promised freedom.

He decided on Wales, and began to take stock of his possessions, counting the change that remained in his trouser pocket—seven and ninepence ha'penny in all—and untying the bundle into which he had put a change of socks and underwear. He wished, now that he came to think of it, that he had changed into his working clothes, for it did not seem right to him to look for work in his Sunday best. He turned out the pockets of the coat, wondering what tokens of his past life it would disclose. In the breast pocket, to his great surprise, he found a small packet of paper that he couldn't account for. He opened it, and found that it contained two sovereigns. He stared at them incredulously and laughed aloud. Alice must have slipped them in when she said good-bye to him. He felt suddenly tender toward her, and immensely pleased at this striking turn in his fortunes. He scraped out of his side pocket some dry remnants of tobacco, filled his pipe, tied up his bundle, whistled to Tiger and set off down hill leaving the brow of the Uffdown between him and the blackness of Mawne.

It was all new ground to him. The hills that he was leaving behind formed a lip of the saucer in which the midland coal measures lay, and their line had always marked the limit of Abner's curiosity as boldly as they defined his physical horizon. Now he was passing quickly to the unknown plain. The path grew rough and precipitous. For a hundred yards it cut into a plantation of larches fully grown. His feet and Tiger's made no sound on the drift of needles. The wood was dry, warm, fragrant, and as quiet as a church. One would have thought that no living creature was there, till Tiger scented a squirrel, and Abner heard above him the thin alarm p. 94
note of the wood-wren. From the wood they crossed a stone stile into a sunless lane, steeper even than the path across the hill, grass-grown for want of traffic and now possessed by a

company of solemn foxgloves. This lane, though unfrequented, was the favourite picnic-place of Mr Willis of Mawne Hall, who always called it ‘our little Switzerland.’ The only thing that struck Abner about it was its steepness. A stone that he dislodged in his walking bounded on as though it were falling over the roof of a house, and Tiger scuttled after it full-pelt. Abner also found that it was easier to run than to walk.

At the bottom of the hill they came to a deserted watermill, fed by a stream that here issued from the hills. Near it stood a large farm-house that had fallen from its state of ease and comfort, and was now partly inhabited by a labouring family. A small boy was sitting playing with stones and eating a crust on the green in front of the house. Tiger ran up and sniffed at him, and he dropped his crust and ran screaming up the garden path. A pale woman with red hair rushed out to see what was the matter and comforted him with her apron. Abner said good-day to her, but she pulled the child inside the door as if she were frightened. He heard her bolting herself in, and laughed, for he didn’t realise what a ruffian he looked with his bruised, unshaven face and his swollen lip. Tiger, however, had the crust of bread and was thankful. He was no less hungry than his master.

Down the valley they passed. A hundred yards below the mill the trees receded and the stream widened into a neglected fishpond half-covered with water-lily leaves. The air was full of glittering blue dragon-flies, and the roadside littered and scorched by the signs of an abandoned gipsy encampment. The fishpond ended in a patch where the stream gushed through narrow sluices into a pool of brown, clear water. Sunlight, beating through the leaves above, lit the bottom with floating patches of golden brown, showing the shadows of trout that lay there gently swaying with their heads toward the sweet water. The coolness of this bathing-place was so p. 95 alluring that Abner stripped and washed the slippery sweat from his body. Tiger, who was used to this kind of performance but hated water, watched him from the bank. When Abner had dried himself with his spare shirt they set off again down the sunny road.

He hoped that they would soon come to a village, for the bathe had only served to sharpen his appetite. As yet there were no signs of human habitation, but from the fields that chequered the hills on either side of the road came many country sounds: the creaking of invisible cart-wheels, the crack of a whip, the lowing of cattle and voices of men that echoed in the closed valley. A little lower down they met a man riding bareback on a pony, driving a flock of sheep before him. His legs hung straight down so that they nearly touched the ground. Tiger and the sheep-dog exchanged inquiries, but the horseman took no notice of Abner, who stood against the hedge while the flock stampeded past him with frightened brown eyes, raising a dust that was laden with a hot smell of wool and sheep-dip. The farmer’s man appeared to be riding in a dream, mechanically switching the pony’s flanks with a branch of hazel. Abner woke him by saying good-morning. He stopped the pony with a kick and turned to look.

‘Any pub handy hereabout?’ Abner asked him.

‘Pub? . . . Ay, you’m close on it. Ten minute’ll bring you to the Barley Mow.’ Abner had some difficulty in understanding him, for the language that he spoke was not that of Mawne. He thanked him. Then, after a long scrutiny, the horseman informed him that the nearest workhouses were at Bromsgrove and Kiddy, five miles to the right or left of the inn, said good-bye and kicked his pony into an amble again.

By that time the sheep had long since pattered out of sight; but this was an easy country in which hurry had no place. It amused Abner, and did not in the least offend him, to be taken for a tramp. In a few days, but for Alice’s final bounty, he might easily have become one. The labourer had made an estimate of the distance of the pub in accordance with his own leisurely way of progress. In less than half the time that he had predicted Abner found himself in front of an old p. 96 red-brick inn shadowed by an immense horse-chestnut whose leaves already drooped with heat. As Abner reached the door, a man whom he took to be the landlord was starting to drive off in a yellow dog-cart, probably to some market, for a small pig was netted in the back of the trap. A big, blowsy woman whom he called ‘mother,’ but who appeared to be of his own age and was no doubt his wife, saw him off. ‘Don’t forget Emily’s stays, dad,’ she called. He waved his whip in answer and went bowling down the road into the sun. The woman returned with a sigh that sounded as if it betokened relief, to the wide, semi-circular steps where Abner was standing waiting for her. She had not seen him arrive, and appeared not to be pleased at the prospect. When he began to speak she cut him short with: ‘No, the master never gives anything. We have to make it a rule on this road.’

He had to explain that he wasn’t begging. ‘Can you give us a bit of breakfast, missis,’ he said, ‘I can pay for it.’ He showed her one of his sovereigns.

She looked him up and down incredulously, and then said: ‘Come on in and set yourself in the tap. Better leave the dog outside, or my Betsy’ll have his eyes out.’ Her Betsy, a big, black tom-cat, too rashly christened in his first days of innocence, was already arching a back more like that of a geometer caterpillar than a cat. ‘She can’t abear them if she don’t know them,’ said the landlady. ‘Once she knows them she’ll lie in their arms like a child.’

Abner left Tiger whining outside the door, and the landlady, now satisfied that he wasn’t as rough as he looked, was heard shouting orders to Emily in the kitchen. A smell of frizzling bacon came down the passage.

Abner settled himself on an oak bench. This taproom was very different from that of the Royal

Oak. The floor was of big, uneven stone flags and all the furniture was black and shiny with centuries of use. The place did not smell, as did the Halesby pubs, of stale spirits and tobacco. It was as sweet as they were sour. Agricultural almanacs and signed photographs of memorable meets hung on the walls, and over the mantelpiece a number of cards recorded the fees and procreative achievements of shire stallions. Abner was nearly asleep when the landlady herself appeared with a plate of bacon and eggs and a pot of tea. p. 97

'There now, how will that do you?' she said.

Abner started to eat and she sat and watched him, apologising once more for her first reception. 'We have to be careful, you see. What with all this unemployment there seems to be more tramps on the road summer-time than ever there was. In winter they dies off like the flies. Dad says they come and go with the swallers. That's a lovely bit of bacon.'

It became evident from her conversation that she was curious to know what Abner was doing. She could see that his clothes were decent and that he wore a silver watch-chain, but hinted that she couldn't understand the battered state of his face. He told her that he had had an accident.

'There now!' she said. 'They always go in threes, and bless me if yours ain't the third I've come across this week. Have a drop more tea?'—she poured it—'Which way are you going, then? If you'd been a bit earlier dad could have give you a lift.'

Abner told her that he was looking for work, asked her if she could help him to find it.

'You're not a farming man,' she said, 'and it's all farmering hereabouts.'

He told her that he was ready to turn his hand to anything, and she confessed, a little dubiously, that he might possibly get some casual employment with one of the farmers. 'If I was you,' she said, 'I should go on through Chaddesbourne and ask at Mr Cookson's—he's the biggest employer round here—but you're a bit too early for the harvest. Everything's backward in these parts after the bad spring.'

He thanked her, and while she went out to change his sovereign, put aside a hunk of bread and a slice of bacon that he had not eaten for Tiger. They parted cheerfully and Abner set his face towards Chaddesbourne.

The heat of midday now lay heavy on the land, but in this wooded country-side one might always be certain of shade. In half an hour he came to Chaddesbourne, a village of black and white half timber that was already engaged in the midday coma with which it supplements its normal sleep of centuries. In all the length of the street Abner saw no human person stirring, nor any sign of life more violent than that of lazy butterflies sunning their wings upon the yellow flowers in cottage gardens. All the half-timbered houses had long strips in front of them behind which it seemed to be intended that they should sleep for ever in security. In a sandstone church some one was playing the organ. Abner had no ear for music and so he did not stop to listen. p. 98

At the end of the village he heard a more welcome sound: the clinking of a blacksmith's hammer on his anvil and the hoarse wheezing of bellows. It was very different from Mawne with its vast hydraulic presses, but it showed the same process on a small scale, and the smith in his leather apron, working through the heat of the day, with the sweat tracking through his coal-dust, was more like a man of Abner's own race than the labourer in the lane. He seemed glad of an excuse to stop work and talk to Abner. He offered him a drink of beer from a bottle, drank himself, and wiped the froth from his red lips with the back of his hand.

'Looking for work!' he said. 'Well, I can tell you straight Chaddesbourne's the wrong place for that. Not even at harvest time. You see, this is a dairy country, properly speaking. All the milk's drove to the station and sent into Brum by train. Mr Cookson? Yes, Mr Cookson's a very nice gentleman as every one knows; but I reckon he won't be harvesting for another fortnight, being late-like. Still, there's no harm in trying.' He pulled on his coat and put a padlock on the door of the forge, for his home was a couple of hundred yards away in one of the long-gardened cottages. He said good-bye to Abner cheerily, and gave him directions for finding Mr Cookson. 'If I was you,' he said, 'I should cut across the fields behind the house. It'll save you some sweating on a day like this. Third gate on the right and follow along the hedge on your left hand.'

Abner took his advice, and calling Tiger to follow him entered the field. A quarter of a mile away on the hill-side he could see the red roof of the building that the smith had pointed out to him as Cookson's farm. Tiger was in his element. He had never been in a field more rich in rabbit smell. Abner, following the smith's directions, kept to the hedge on the left. It ran along the margin of a little wood that sheltered him from the sun and intrigued Tiger with prospects of infinite sport. It was impossible to keep the brute to heel, and though Abner cursed him till he came out of the wood he could not resist the temptation of running ahead of his master, sniffing the enchanted air. Suddenly, at the corner where the spinney ended, he stood stock still. Abner also stopped and watched him, for he too scented sport. There was a slight rustle in the hedgerow and a white creature, a little bigger than a stoat, put out its head. In a second Tiger had it by the neck and silenced its squealing with a shake. The next moment the owner of the ferret appeared round the corner of the hedge, a florid man of forty dressed in a prosperous greenish cord, carrying a gun. He fired at Tiger, who stood looking curiously at the ferret as though he still expected it to get up and run away. Tiger rolled over without a yelp, and Abner ran straight at the man who had shot him. p. 99

‘What you done to my dog?’ he cried.

‘And what the hell are you doing here, you poaching blackguard?’ He saw how ugly Abner looked. ‘Keep clear, or I’ll put the other barrel in you!’ A stupid-looking labourer slouched round the hedgeside and picked up the ferret, pinching it as if he were appraising its value as an article of food. Then, mumbling something, he thrust it into a sack that he carried and gave the dead body of Tiger a vicious kick. Abner would have flown at him for he needed something on which to vent his rage, but Mr Cookson again threatened to shoot. He had to content himself with cursing the farmer for his brutality. ‘The dog didn’t mean no harm,’ he said. ‘You’m a coward to shoot a dog like that.’

‘Not so fast, my friend,’ said the farmer. ‘I’ve not finished with you yet. I want to know what the devil you were doing skulking along my hedge. Thought you’d pick up a rabbit, eh? I know that game . . . taking the dog a walk. What were you doing on my land, eh?’ p. 100

‘I’m lookin’ for work,’ said Abner.

‘And you look like getting it. I don’t suppose it’s the first time you’ll have picked oakum.’

Abner did not hear these words. He thought only of the shattered heap of flesh that had once been Tiger. He would have gone blindly for the dog’s murderer if he had not suddenly realised that his own case was hopeless. The owner of the gun looked like business, and the labourer was now ready to tackle him from behind. He could do nothing. Mr Cookson, however, having caught a poacher red-handed, didn’t mean to let him go.

‘I’ve had enough of this game,’ he said. ‘You black-country chaps think you can slip over the hills and do what you like . . . you and your dogs. It’s no use turning ugly now. You’ll come along with me to the police station, and that’s all about it. That’s the best ferret I’ve got, worth a dozen of your damned dogs.’

Abner, who saw that it was not worth while arguing and whose anger had now become more subject to his reason, tried to explain once more that he was coming to the house to ask for work.

‘That’s an old tale,’ said Cookson. ‘We’ve had enough talk. Come along! That don’t explain what you were doing in this field.’

The farmer also was now becoming more reasonable. Abner explained that he had taken the field-path on the smith’s advice. ‘If you can’t credit it, you ask him,’ he said. ‘It was the lady at the Barley Mow sent me here and give me your name. That is if your name’s Cookson.’

‘That’s my name right enough,’ said the farmer, ‘and you won’t forget it!’ He began to grumble at the landlady as the prime cause of his losing the ferret. None the less, he now appeared to believe Abner. At the root he was a good-natured man, celebrated for the sudden violence and quick subsidence of his temper.

‘Want work, do you?’ he said. ‘Well, I’ve got no work for you nor no one else, and if you see Mrs Potter again you can tell her so. What that woman wants to do using my name I don’t know. I reckon I’m feeding half Chaddesbourne as it is. Still, I’m ready to believe you. If you take my advice you’ll clear quick before I change my mind. Go on, hook it!’ He put his hand in his pocket and jingled some money as if he were debating whether he should give Abner half a crown. p. 101

‘What about my dog?’ said Abner.

Mr Cookson took his hand out of his pocket and his neck flushed. ‘I’ve told you you’d best clear,’ he said. ‘George’ll bury the dog.’ He turned to the labourer. ‘George, you go up to the yard and get a spade.’ He ejected the unused cartridge from his gun and turned his back on Abner, and Abner, still sore with resentment, took his advice and returned to the road.

The Ninth Chapter

p. 102

In the first moment of his loss he did not feel like retracing his steps. When he reached the main road he turned his face westward once more and set off walking as hard as the heat would allow him. He passed through a land of almost monotonous green, stopping once or twice to drink a pint of beer at a pub in one of the many half-timbered villages that straggled along the road. In the afternoon he reached a crest crowned with a plantation of smooth trunked beeches from which he could see the chimneys of an industrial town. This, he decided, must be Kidderminster, or, as the farmer’s man had called it, Kiddy. Once or twice in his life he had played football there for Mawne United, but in these excursions he had never noticed anything but the squalid streets between the station and the football ground. There was a workhouse in Kidderminster, as he had been told, but he was not yet in need of workhouses. The landlord of the last inn had found out that he was going into Wales, and had pointed out to him the rampart of the Malverns, dim-blue in the heat, as marking the course of his road. The idea of finding employment in the country now pleased him little. The sooner he reached the coal valleys, with the remains of his money, the better. From his new point of vantage the hills were still visible, floating like cragged islands in the haze. He left the smoke of Kidderminster on his right hand and forsook the road for a narrower lane that seemed to run in the direction that he wanted to follow. When evening came

he was still walking south-west. Now the Malverns, whenever he saw them were etched black against a background of flame. The air was cool and sweeter. It was such an evening as Tiger would have loved, and his loneliness, which had been numbed by the heat, returned to him.

He must by this time have walked more than twenty miles since daybreak, and he was tired and hungry. Soon after sunset he turned in to an inviting public-house that stood alone on a straight length of road running between meagre oak-trees. The landlord was an aged man crippled with rheumatism who sat grasping two sticks in a chair beside the hearth of the taproom. He looked suspiciously at Abner and told his daughter, an angular woman of forty who did all the housework, to attend to him. This woman gave him clearly to understand that they didn't like strangers and said that they could give him nothing to eat but bread and cheese. He accepted this gratefully and settled down to his supper under the grudging eyes of the old man. p. 103

The inn seemed a lonely and neglected place, for the road on which it was situate had fallen into disuse. Abner, however, was glad of a rest, and sat on smoking and drinking beer for the good of the house when he had finished his supper. The ale was good and put him in a happier frame of mind, so that he no longer found the silence of the old man uncomfortable. A little later a number of farm-labourers drifted in and ordered their quarts: a solemn and gloomy company who spoke little and in a language that Abner did not understand. He tried to put some life into them by standing treat, but even this order did not arouse the least enthusiasm in the landlord's daughter, who might reasonably have felt that things were looking up, or in the company. These people were silent drinkers who sat in pairs, taking alternate swigs from the quart pot that stood between them. They looked upon Abner, this stranger from beyond the hills, as peaceful border farmers might have regarded a northern marauder. They drank his beer; but that was all that they could do for him. The light failed, but no lamp was lit in the taproom, and one by one the customers bade the landlord good-night and stole away like shadows. The woman put her head into the room from time to time as if she hoped to find that he was gone, and the old man sat by the fireplace saying nothing. Abner was sleepy and when she next appeared asked her if she could find him a bed. 'Anything'll do for me,' he said. 'I can shake down anywhere you like.'

For the first time since Abner had seen her she was really positive. 'We never do such a thing, do we, father?' she cried. The old man did not appear to have heard her. p. 104

'I bain't one to make trouble,' Abner said.

She wagged her head violently. 'We never do such a thing,' she repeated. She shook the old man's shoulder. 'Father, 'e says 'e wants to sleep 'ere!'

'We don't sleep no strangers,' said he. 'We don't sleep no one. Not in a solitary place like this. You'd best be goin', young man. Time to lock up . . . time to lock up.'

Abner asked him where he could go, but neither of them seemed inclined to help him. They knew of no house that would take strangers, and the nearest village, Harverton Priors, was more than three miles away. Even if he went there, they said, it was unlikely that he would be taken in. 'We'm not accustomed to strangers, these parts,' the woman kept on saying. She followed him like an anxious but impotent dog, edging him away from the counter as if she thought he had designs on the till. He bought an ounce of tobacco and departed. When she had got him out of the door he heard a key turn in the lock and this taciturn person beginning to talk fast in an excited whisper to the old man in the corner. Abner laughed. Thanks to the excellence of their beer he was at peace with the world.

By this time he was getting used to finding himself an object of suspicion. He determined to give Harverton Priors a miss, for at this time of night it was probable that the whole village would be asleep, and to turn in for the night in the first isolated barn that he found. Failing that there was no reason why he shouldn't sleep in a dry ditch. His father had often done so unintentionally and so far seemed none the worse for it.

A mile or more from that inhospitable inn he saw the kind of building for which he was looking standing in a field on the left of the road. It was a red-brick barn, half-timbered like the houses of the neighbourhood. A group of cows lay ruminating in their sleep on the far side of it and Abner picked his way between their shadowy shapes to a doorway with an oak beam for lintel. A rough door closed the aperture. At first he thought that it was locked or bolted but it yielded to his pressure. He half expected to find some animal inside, for when he first came to the door he had heard a noise like a calf turning in straw. He struck a match carefully. The place was clean and dry, half filled with hay of the last season's harvest that had evidently been placed there for winter fodder. He decided that the rustling that he had heard must have been made by rats. Well, rats wouldn't worry him in his present degree of tiredness. He closed the door and sank down easily into a soft, sweet-smelling bed. p. 105

He lay still on his back with his eyes wide open staring into the darkness above him, thinking of the extraordinary variety of adventures that had filled the last twenty-four hours. This time last night, he reflected, he must have been dozing in the corner of the tram-car between Dulston and Mawne. Now he had nothing left to remind him of his old life except the clothes he was wearing . . . not even Tiger. He wondered what his father was feeling like now; wondered what had happened to Alice. He had never before thought so tenderly of her. She had shown what she was made of when she slipped the two sovereigns into his pocket. When he got work in Wales, he decided, he would send her money . . . not that she would really need it, for now sheer necessity would compel John Fellows to go back to the pit, unless indeed he had any of the money

left that he had stolen from Abner. The thought of his savings suddenly reminded him what a fool he had been not to search his father's pockets before he left the house. On the whole he wasn't sorry that he had left him undisturbed. He didn't feel unkindly toward him, for he recognised that no man is responsible for what he says or does when he is drunk. In the black-country people who know the rougher side of life are always ready to condone crimes of passion or liquor. 'The old chap's welcome to the money,' Abner thought, 'leastwise if any of it comes our Alice's way.'

His mind was still too crowded for sleep. He thought he would have a smoke and began to fill his pipe with the tobacco he had bought earlier in the evening. Again he heard a rustling noise in the hay. When he lit his pipe he would try to see what caused it. He waited, listening, and when next he heard it struck a match and peered in the direction from which it came. p. 106

'Douse that light, mate,' said a voice, almost at his elbow, 'and take your bloody feet off my chest. You'll be afther settin' the place alight and sending the both of us to hell before our time!'

Abner dropped his match with astonishment. The other, suddenly materialising, put his foot on the glowing fragment.

'I reckon you give me a bit of a start,' said Abner, laughing.

'Start, is it? It's finished we'll be if you go throwing match-sticks that way into a heap of tinder.' The turn of speech amused Abner.

'It's easy to see that you don't know the way to travel, or you wouldn't be doing the like of that,' said his unseen companion. 'I may well be stranded to the world, but it's not burning I want this night of our lord, I'm tellin' you.'

He settled down into the hay again, this time at some distance from Abner. Abner had never yet caught a glimpse of him. He could not tell whether he was old or young, pleasant-looking or villainous, but he knew that the stranger was the first person who had accepted him without question since his wanderings began. He no longer felt sleepy and was indeed glad of a chance to talk with another human being. In this at any rate his shadowy companion was ready to oblige him, taking the conversation into his own hands without the least hesitation. He asked Abner where he had come from and how long he had been on the road.

'God help me!' he said, 'you're not born yet!' Then he asked Abner if he could spare him a gorm. Abner had not the least idea what a gorm was, but the voice explained that it meant a little weeny dooney bit of tobacco—'for to chew,' he explained, 'we don't want anny more fireworks. "Anny more for Annimore," as the guard says.' p. 107

Abner gave him his gorm, deciding that the owner of the voice, whatever he looked like, was a cough-drop. They drifted into a discussion of Abner's adventures during the day.

The owner of the voice, who in the course of conversation proclaimed himself to be a certain Mick Connor, usually known as Kerry Mick, had apparently followed much the same track as Abner. He had been refused refreshment at the Barley Mow and taken a dismal pint from the hands of the landlord's daughter at the second inn, whose nose, he said, would poke a ragman over a double ditch. He listened more seriously to Abner's account of Tiger's death. 'You're after losin' a good friend,' he said, and after a moment of silence in which his jaws could be heard masticating his gorm, embarked on a long story of his own youth. 'I'll tell you something quare,' he said.

It had happened more than twenty years ago in the county of Kerry—Abner was none the wiser—in the very first situation that Mick Connor had ever taken. 'There was money in Ireland them days,' he said. 'The country's gone to the dogs ever sence the Boer War.' He was engaged as pantry-boy, at six pounds a year and a suit of clothes, and he earned it by cleaning thirty lamps and a dozen pair of shoes every morning before breakfast and waiting at meal-times in the servants' hall. The rest of the day he spent in dodging the butler, an ould devil with a lip would trip a duck, who liked his pint more than most and used to threaten to take the skin off of him with a twig whenever he saw him.

The story seemed to lead nowhere, but Mick Connor's voice was low and persuasive and he evidently liked talking. Abner lay and listened.

Even in those early days Mick Connor had been used to the open air. He hated house-work, he said, and would often go off and hide himself under the dining-room table, a place of concealment which the butler at last discovered, to cry. He would stand at the pantry windows looking out over the fields to the river where the third footman was already enjoying himself catching eels and perch in the holes. The house was a prison to him. The only friend that ever came to him from outside it was a wolfhound who slept in the stables, but with whom he had made great friends ever since he had been in the house by feeding it with scraps from the pantry. The butler hated dogs, and this dog above all others because it had once stolen a ham. Mick loved it and fed it regularly. It used to jump up to the pantry window and lick his face through the bars. p. 108

When he had been in this place for a year or more the family moved for the summer to another house on the coast some thirty miles away. For Mick it was a happy change. He and his friend the third footman were chosen to go there and the savage butler was left behind. There were no railways in that part of Ireland, and so they went to Coulagh by road. The children were to follow with their nurse the next day, so the footman and the cook preceded them in a wagonette loaded

with luggage. They went slowly, and behind them walked Mick, leading two pannier asses named Haidee and Mokie, on which the children would go for rides by the shore. They started late and the last part of their journey was made in the dark. The cook, who had a drop taken, was telling ghost stories fitting to that wild hour and place. There was one tale in particular of how she had met the devil in the flesh sitting by a milestone near Coulagh three years before that made Mick afraid to look on either side of him. He walked with Haidee on his right and Mokie on his left and the tail of the wagonette in front of him, and even then he didn't feel safe.

When they came to Coulagh in the darkness they had a grand supper, but even in the cheerful firelight Mick couldn't forget the details of the cook's encounter with the devil. The house was small, and it had been settled that he, as the least important member of the party, should sleep in a little room above the stable in which the asses were housed. He was thankful that the animals were there, for otherwise he would have gone mad with the loneliness. When he reached the stable he went into the stall and talked to them and got on the two of their backs, sitting first on p. 109
one and then on the other the way they wouldn't be jealous. Then he patted their necks, rubbed their noses, and went up the wooden stairs to bed. He undressed, got into bed and put out his candle. But he couldn't sleep, partly because the room was so strange after the cook's stories and partly because a wind was blowing fit to bring the house down. All of a sudden the wind fell, and in the quiet he could hear another sound like a door banging and the rattle of chains. He supposed he had not fastened the stable latch, but even if the asses got their ends of cold, he didn't dare to put his nose out of bed. But the noise of bumping and chains continued. Even when he put his head under the clothes he could still hear it. 'I can hear it the way I am now,' he told Abner, 'a great, rattlin', t'udding noise. I commenced to get terrible afraid. "Something's surely coming now," I thought. "God help me!" And it came on bumping and rattling up the stairs. "This is the devil," says I, "let loose on me!" an' when I put my head under the clothes what should I see but all the things I'd ever done in this life; all the birds I'd took the heads of off with a catapult, flittin' about with no heads and the wings broke on them, and all the bottles of whisky I'd ever stolen on the butler. An' the noise come bumping upstairs. "God, I'm gone!" I says, getting down middleways in the bed, and with the same there was a great t'ud and the door flew open on me and it come into the room. Bump, bump, bump it went, an' the chairs went over and the basin of water I'd never washed in come down with a crash—and I lying there with the pespiration running down me on to the sheets like a spout. "God, I'm gone!" I says again, and that was the last word I spoke that night, for the sheets was stuck to me back. Then it comes over to the bed, and I tries to get under the mattress, but before I knew where I was I felt two great hands on the both of my thighs. "Now I'm destroyed altogether," says I, but before I'd finished thinking it come on the top of me in a lump with the chain draggin' along the floor, and me lyin' there not as thick as a match. Then I commenced to feel the sheet being drew down p. 110
over my face and two hairy arms round my neck, and with that a great, big, hot tongue licking me. "Ah, my beautiful," says I, "I have you at last." That dog was so fond on me he'd smelt me out over thirty miles and pulled the log he was tied to in the stable after him and broke down the door and come upstairs into bed with me. I loved that dog. And that's why I say you're after losin' a good friend in yours. Give me the lend of another gorm to go to sleep on.'

Abner gave him the tobacco, and after that the story-teller was silent. Falling asleep, Abner heard only the regular noise of his companion's jaws as they chewed. In half an hour they were both asleep.

Early next morning Mick Connor woke him, telling him that unless they cleared out the farmer's men would find them. Abner was far too comfortable for the moment to want to move, but as soon as he regained full consciousness he realised that his skin was itching all over.

'This place is alive with fleas,' he said.

His companion only laughed. 'That's all you know about it,' he said, 'and the both of us eat with hayseeds. I'm after telling you somethin'. Never choose hay to sleep in if you can fin' straw. It's worse than a houseful of bugs.'

Abner was curious to see the owner of last night's voice and the teller of stories. He found it difficult to fit in the man with his narration. It was impossible to guess his age, but his hair was slightly touched with gray and stood up in a frizzy mass that made him look wilder than he was. He was of middle height, thin and very wiry, with a small head, bright eyes like a bird and a bony face in which the skin over the cheekbones was netted with red veins. His eyes were blue, and humorous or savage as the occasion took him. At this hour of the morning he did not appear anxious to talk and his voice that had been soft and persuasive in the darkness, was rough and short. They left the barn together. The cows were still sleeping outside and a dew was on the grass, but the moisture had not fallen on the road, which seemed as baked and dusty as ever.

'Which ways are you going?' the Irishman asked. p. 111

'Going to Wales,' said Abner.

'Then the two of us had better travel together,' he said, and Abner consented.

They walked for some miles in silence. Mick, at this hour of the morning was not disposed to talk. He went on ahead with a long, loping gait, very different from the tramp's habitual shuffle. They came to a brick bridge that proclaimed itself unsuitable for traction engines, and here he suddenly climbed the hedge and started to wash himself in a bed of cresses. He took out the broken end of a comb and smoothed his wet hair close to his head like a picture of the Madonna.

The water took the gray out of it so that he looked almost young. Abner also washed, and when he had picked the irritating hayseeds out of his shirt, he offered his companion half of a piece of bread that remained in his pocket. Mick took it without a word and dipped it in the water. Without this soaking he could not have tackled it, for though his bristling moustache concealed the fact, he had scarcely any teeth.

Eating this breakfast together they sprawled on the bank of the stream among rushes, with which Abner amused himself by stripping the pith with his nails. His silent and melancholy companion broke the silence by asking him if he had any money. Immediately Abner was suspicious. His second sovereign and all his silver were secreted in his waistcoat pocket. He had placed them there in the night as soon as he realised that he was not sleeping alone. In answer to his friend's question he produced a handful of coppers. 'Tenpence ha'penny,' he said. 'That won't go far.'

'Houly sufferings!' said the other, 'is it carry ten-pence halfpenny three miles?'

He spoke no more, and they set off again. During the rest of the day Mick Connor maintained his attitude of detachment, striding on ahead of Abner as though he had nothing to do with him. They bought a stale loaf in a small market town and the Irishman produced from the treacle tin that he carried three eggs and some rashers of bacon. They lit a fire on the edge of a wood and p. 112
made a good meal. Toward evening they crossed a wide river flowing silently between high banks. Mick, who appeared to know the country, told Abner that this was the last bridge for twenty miles. Beyond the stream a little town lay smoking under the hill-side. They drank a pint of beer together and pushed on. The evening light seemed to awaken Mick. He became talkative and profane at once, disclosing to Abner the fact that he knew where good work was to be had. He scoffed at the idea of Abner's working underground while there was a chance of earning his living in the open air. 'I can put you in the way of a job will make your teeth water,' he said. At first he kept up an atmosphere of mystery of the kind that particularly pleased him, but when Abner pressed him he disclosed the fact that he had learned from a tramp near Bromsgrove how the corporation of North Bromwich were engaged in relaying a defective piece of piping ten miles long in their Welsh water scheme, and that casual labour was hard to get in those parts. With the combination of his own wit and Abner's strength they should find a comfortable job to last them for six months. He reckoned that three days' walking would bring them easily to the site of the work, and gave Abner to understand that he was lucky to have met him. Abner was ready to acknowledge this. 'That's all right then,' said Mick, 'and now about that tenpence halfpenny. Do you think I'd be after sleeping wud you and not know of the gold sovereign that's in your waistcoat pocket this moment? It's on the table the cards should be if we're travelling together.'

At this Abner was really angry. He didn't like the idea of any one, friend or no, rummaging in his pockets at night. They stopped in the road quarrelling, and Abner took off his coat, preparing to settle the matter with blows before parting company. The Irishman seemed surprised that he took it so roughly; pointed out that when he had the chance of stealing Abner's money he hadn't taken it, said that he didn't want a penny of it. Little by little, with soft and humorous words he cooled Abner's anger. At the next inn they split the sovereign over two quarts of beer, and by the p. 113
time he had finished drinking Abner was ready to go shares with the change, an offer that Mick was too generous to accept. 'What for would I want money?' he said, 'as long as I'd have the price of a naggin in my pockut?' A man must be a fool, he added, if he couldn't travel in a fat country the likes of England without money. In Ireland, it was true, one had to use one's wits, for every one else was doing the same thing. He searched in his pockets and laid out a yellow piece of paper among the beer-spills on the inn table. An Irishman's passport, he called it. Actually it was an eviction order, which seemed to Abner an unusual type of letter of credit. Not a bit of it, said Mick. In Ireland all you had to do was to carry this along with you and tell a tale about the little children was starving on you, and you could kick a shillun out of every priest you come across. In the old days there was many a toff that'd give you half a crown to be rid of you. They had another drink, and Mick became rhapsodical on the subject of money. What good had money ever done him? Money . . . in his day he'd had the money would buy the two sides of Grafton Street. He recalled his great double on Winkfield's Pride and Manifesto for the Lincoln and National. Three hundred pounds in his pocket . . . but it went away like wather. Porther would have supplied a better simile. When once he began to talk about horses there was no stopping him. The lust of the born gambler shone in his small blue eyes. 'Take away racing and I'm gone,' he said. 'It's the only thing that keeps the life in me!' He went on talking until he saw that Abner was nearly asleep over the table, then he plucked at his arm. 'Come along,' he said, 'let's be getting a move on before we're threw out.'

That night, in a condition of sublime charity toward the world and each other, they could find no barn to sleep in and rolled themselves up on a bank of dry bracken under the misty moon. Counting his money next morning Abner found that most of it had gone. He knew better than to grumble about it, but suggested to Mick that they had better go easy.

'Go aisy, is it? Not at all!' said the Irishman. p. 114

At midday, leaving Abner in a small spinney of firs, he went off to the nearest village with the price of a quart, and returned a couple of hours later laden not only with the beer but with a good-sized fowl and pockets full of potatoes. Displaying these spoils he winked, and Abner asked no questions. They boiled water in Mick's treacle tin, and having poured this over the bird to make the plucking easy, roasted it with the potatoes in the embers of their fire. It was a splendid meal. Beneath its charred covering the flesh was sweet and juicy. Abner had never felt fitter in his life or freer from every vestige of care. When the meal was over Mick slept like a gorged boa-

constrictor and woke in an ill-temper, but by this time Abner was getting used to his alternations of enthusiasm and melancholy and left him alone. It was a good life: there was no denying that, and in another day or so they would arrive at the scene of their new work.

That misty moon was no negligible portent, for at sunset great clouds began to gather from the south, and, before night, fell a thunder shower that drenched them. The dusty road drank up the rain and all the earth smelt sweet, but the August weather had broken and the country of wooded hills into which they had now come seemed to breed rain. They decided that it would be impossible to dry their clothes, and pushed on through the night, Mick loping ahead like some drowned bird and Abner stolidly following. They passed through the wet streets of a country town at midnight. Not a light could be seen in the solemn Georgian houses, but from a belfry, almost lost in cloud, the sound of a plaintive carillon floated down.

'Ludlow,' said Mick. 'There do be races here.'

They crossed another noisy river. The road climbed endlessly, winding over a steep hill-side. They entered a forest where the rain troubled them no more, so tired that they decided to rest for a while. Here they had the luck to find a hut thatched with heather that had been used by woodcutters. At the risk of burning it over their heads they lit a fire with some dry branches that they found inside it. Here they lay half-blinded with wood-smoke stolidly chewing tobacco, for p. 115
Abner, unused to the road, had allowed his store to become soaked. Mick soon fell asleep, but Abner could not do so. He lay there till dawn in his steaming clothes, listening to the incessant dripping of the rain from millions of leaves, a sound that was soothing in spite of its desolation. Sometimes a wind that could not be felt would stir the tops of the trees to a commotion and then the drops would fall like hail on the soaked leaves of the forest. The fire died down; there was no more wood in the hut, and drops of water began to fall from the roof into the hissing embers. It was hellishly cold, but Mick still slept like a dog, though his left leg twitched in his sleep. At dawn Abner woke him. He grumbled because Abner in his vigil had finished the tobacco. It looked once more as if they were going to fall out, but the sense of common misery was too great to allow them to do so.

They tramped on through the woods in the rain. They could see nothing ahead of them but misty trees and no sound came to them but that of dripping moisture and sometimes the harsh call of a jay. The sun was so completely veiled that dawn passed into day almost without their knowing it. Only a whiter, colder light gleamed from the wet leaves. 'We'll never get shut on these bleedin' trees,' said Abner; but his companion did not answer. Suddenly Mick began to sing in a hoarse, unnatural voice:—

> Macarthy took the floor in Enniscorthy;
> Macarthy took the floor in Enniscorthy;
> For his eyes and ears and nose
> Were like marbles on the floor
> Of the fragments of the man they called Macarthy.

He sang the same verse over and over again, and at the end of the third repetition, he stood stock still, for they had come to the edge of the wood. 'By the houly, we're through wud it!' he said.

The huge confusion of the Radnor march lay before them, vast and sombre and wild with cloud. To north and south of the spot where they were standing the woods rolled backward into England, upward to the sky. It was difficult to believe that they had emerged a little below the p. 116
crest of the hills, for the precipitous wall behind them rose magnificently black into the mist with fleeces of cloud entangled in its surface like wisps of wool in a winter hedge. Beneath their feet a lake of white vapour hid the trough of the Teme valley lapping the bases of other wooded hills. Nothing could they see but dark masses of trees thrown into fantastic folds and pinnacles by the shapes of the hills that carried them: an amphitheatre of savage stone fleeced with unending woods. 'That's Wales,' said Mick. 'God! I could do with a drop!'

In spite of the melancholy grandeur of the scene Abner felt that an end was in sight. They scrambled down a steep bank, and Mick, still singing, stampeded a flock of horned black-faced sheep that crowded with glistening wool under the lee of a hedge. They crossed a zone of huge, wind-writhen hawthorns and came to a road, or rather a rutted track of wheels that cut the hill-side diagonally. In the middle of this track stood a wooden sled with iron chains for carting timber and a pile of tree-trunks that had been dumped at this stage of their descent from the woods.

'Plenty of work here,' said Mick, 'time they've finished clearing these.'

They followed the track to a gate that gave on to a metalled road. Even this was heavily scarred with the cartage of timber. On every side the vast debris of forestry was seen. Birds began to sing in the wet hedgerows. The road was alive with yellow-hammers and linnets. The rain ceased.

The scramble down the hill-side had warmed them and they now walked at a good pace. Villages were few, the greatest of them no more than hamlets clustered about red-brick farms, and as yet no labourers were seen in the fields. For miles and miles they passed no public-house.

'Ne'er a drop stirrin',' said Mick. 'This is a grand country, right enough!'

By eight o'clock the sun was through and the folding mist, sucked upwards, revealed great

stretches of arable land that would have been melancholy in dull weather but now began to gleam in patches of warm colour. Moisture clarified all the air; oat-fields ripening for harvest were full of tawny lights, and the breasts of the linnets rosy. A signpost told them that they were less than a mile from Aston by Lesswardine, and in a few moments they saw a little church hedged in with pagan yews and a dilapidated parsonage still dead asleep. Mick thanked God for the sight of an inn, even though it were closed. A swinging sign with a heraldic device battered by long conflict with rain and wind proclaimed it the Delahay Arms. Tall hollyhocks stood sentinel on either side of the door. p. 117

At the end of the village they took a cross-road to Lesswardine, moving through water-meadows of brilliant emerald with placid dykes on either side. Somewhere near them ran a river, its course marked by a black line of brushwood. Sunlight becoming more generous warmed them through and through. The road drew near to the river and to a spur of hills nursing the valley of a tributary. In a sheltered coomb they saw an encampment of white tents bleaching in the sun. A wood fire was lighted among them. The smoke went straight upward. Round the fire they saw men lounging in their shirt-sleeves among great stacks of alder-wood. There was a tempting smell of bacon in the air which made their mouths water.

‘What are these chaps about, Mick?’ Abner asked.

‘Cloggers,’ Mick shouted back to him.

The Tenth Chapter

p. 118

Abner and Mick advanced to the edge of the bivouac. Its inhabitants did not seem to be disturbed by their presence. Mick, who was never at a loss for words, gave them good-morning. A tall man, with a large, unshaven face and a check handkerchief knotted round his neck, who was sitting on a log by the fire, turned and stared at him. He had wide, humorous eyes and when he spoke he gave the impression, by winking, that his words concealed some subtle joke. Meanwhile with each of his hands he sat fondling an immense and hairy forearm.

‘Well, lad, what is it?’ he asked, in a strong Lancashire accent.

Mick explained that Abner and he were looking for work on the Welsh water and asked if it were anywhere near by.

‘Eh, you’ve a good step yet,’ said the other. ‘They’re working up beyond Chapel Green, two miles from Lesswardine. Been long on the road?’

‘Four days,’ said Mick. ‘I hear there do be a good job goin’ there.’

‘Ay,’ said the north-countryman sardonically. ‘Work for them that likes it.’ His wink seemed to imply that Mick obviously didn’t.

Three other men lounged up to them. Another, who was holding a shovel over the fire, sang out: ‘Come on, Joe, the rasher’s done.’

The big man raised himself from his log. Before this it had been impossible to realise his hugeness. ‘Better have summat t’eat wi’ uz,’ he said.

His sudden hospitality, so little in keeping with his appearance, surprised Abner. In a few minutes they had settled down with the rest to the enjoyment of the frizzled bacon and large cans of tea. Mick was soon at home, contriving at the same time to eat enormously and to keep the conversation going.

The encampment, as he had first explained to Abner, was one of many such that may be found scattered up and down the length of the Radnor march in summertime. The men who inhabit them are known as cloggers. They come from the black industrial towns of Lancashire, and their business is the making of wooden clogs. All are skilled labourers, and in each of their communities there is a foreman on whom the commercial responsibilities of the venture falls. Early in spring he makes a visit to the border country and bargains with farmers and landowners for the right to cut the thickets of black alder that choke the bottom of every valley in this western brookland. In May the rest of the gang follow and there begins a nomadic life in which they wander from valley to valley, felling the thickets, stripping the black bark from wood of a milky whiteness and cutting billets of a size suitable for clog-making. On rainy days when their harvest is well in hand, they carry the process further, and set to making the clogs themselves. Sometimes they live under canvas on the site of their labours; sometimes they find lodgings in the nearest village; always, as strangers—or rather as migrants—they carry with them a reputation for boldness and extravagance in speech and behaviour; but, for all that, the border people make much of them, knowing that they earn plenty of money and spend it freely. p. 119

The valley on which Abner and his friend had lighted was by this time nearly stripped of its alders. Piles of clean white billets stood bleaching in the morning sun ready to be carted to the nearest point on the railway.

‘You’re not afther wanting a hand with the wood?’ Mick asked.

‘No, lad,’ said the big man, ‘this is a tradesman’s job. You’ll get work right enough up by Chapel Green. You tell the foreman that Wigan Joe sent you along. But happen you’ll find it hard to get a lodge there. Come Tuesday we’re makin’ a shift to Mainstone Bottom, and me and my mates are going to take a lodging in the Buffalo. Old Mr Malpas or his son George’ll see you right. Happen we’ll have a quart together then. Come on, lads. . .’

Abner and Mick took their dismissal and moved off together. The sun was now high and not a shred of mist remained in all the river basin. Before this it had seemed confined on every side by high hills thickly wooded. Now, to westward, far greater hills arose, huge, bare, and dappled with shadows of the last retreating clouds. While they breakfasted Abner had laid out his tobacco to dry in the sun. They lighted their pipes and walked on cheerily, Mick singing fragments of a song about the Sultan of the Turks and the Irish Board of Works. They crossed the river Teme by a stone bridge above a glassy pool. ‘I’m telling you there’s a fine lot of salmon in there,’ said Mick. p. 120

‘Salmon?’ asked Abner, who had only been acquainted with the tinned variety of this fish.

‘Salmon right enough!’ said Mick, leaning on the parapet. ‘The times I’ve watched them coming up the river Barrow, before you was the height of a match!’

They left the roofs of Lesswardine on their right, turning in towards the bare hills. The river swept away from them to cut the village in two. From a perpendicular tower of reddish stone they heard a lazy peal of bells.

‘Sunday morning,’ said Mick. ‘God help us!’

From all that sun-drenched, silent countryside, from the towers of many hidden villages other bells were heard, melancholy, mellow voices, floating luxuriously in an air lightened by rain.

‘By the houly!’ Mick continued, ‘and the pubs shut on me! If it isn’t enough to make a man make dead childer!’

They passed three villages in which closed doors confirmed this gloomy reflection. The villages themselves were not gloomy. Leisure, prosperity and content radiated from their flowery gardens, from the clean pinafores and collars of the children loitering to church, from the faces of the men who gossiped at the gates of sunny gardens in their shirt-sleeves. In no part of England could villages more trimly English have been found than in this ultimate border of the Marches. It was as though the nearness of another and an alien civilisation compelled them to insist on their national character.

‘In Wales,’ said Mick, sourly, ‘there’s divil a one open Sunda’.’ p. 121

They crossed another river, the noisy Barbel, a torrent of mountain water wherein no weeds could grow, swirling clear into black pools. A stone set in the middle of the bridge told them that they were now in Wales, and as though to emphasise the change of country the barren hill-sides rose abruptly to receive them; on their right a tremendous crag of gray stone crowned with a pointed earthwork, and in front of them fold on fold of softer contours pale in the sunlight from the intricate convolutions of which the brawling river issued.

A village of stone awaited them, blank house-walls fronting on the roadway with small windows and roofs of clumsy slate. In the midst an ugly chapel, with the word ‘Ebenezer’ carved above its doorway, from which the sound of a drawling hymn emerged, and at the end of the village a public-house with the painted head of a bison for sign and, as Mick had anticipated, closed doors. Even the windows were shuttered.

‘We’ll see if there’s annything stirrin’, said Mick, beating at the door.

For a time they could get no answer, but at last the door was cautiously opened and the head of an old man appeared. How old he was it would have been difficult to say, for though his eyes were rheumy and the irises ringed with the white circles of age, his hair was plentiful and scarcely streaked with gray. He leaned on a stick and did not seem pleased to see them, speaking in a tongue that Abner could scarcely understand. When they told him that Wigan Joe had sent them he became a little more hospitable, but the consciousness of a Wesleyan policeman in the village still prevented him from opening the door to them. The foreman of the water-works job, he said, whose name was Eve, could certainly be found at the Pound House at Mainstone, three miles away over the river. ‘That’s in England,’ he mumbled, as though he were speaking of a barbarous foreign country. As to lodgings he could not help them. On Tuesday the cloggers were coming over from Lesswardine and had arranged to take his two rooms. Mick pressed him, and he admitted that, at a pinch, his wife might be able to put them up until then, provided that they were in a position to pay for a room and food. Abner assured him that that was all right, but he still refused to commit himself till Mrs Malpas returned from chapel. As a favour he allowed them at last to leave their bundles with him while they set off again to find the foreman. They promised to return to Chapel Green in the evening, and before they turned their backs he had closed the door again with evident relief. p. 122

They reached Mainstone just before the opening of the Pound House. The foreman Eve, whom his associates called Gunner, a little man who wore a shield over the socket from which one of his eyes was missing, told them that they need not want for a job if they meant business and told them to apply to the clerk of the works early on Monday morning. ‘You say Mr Eve sent you and it’ll be all right.’ At the end of this sentence he was snatched away by a power beyond his

control, for the doors of the ale-house opened and the twenty or thirty men who had been lounging outside flowed into the bar like metal into a mould.

It was a clean and pleasant place surrounded by settles of black Welsh oak. The presence of the navvies from the waterworks had made it into a kind of recognised canteen, and behind the bar were ranged three great barrels of Astill's ales. Even at a distance of eighty miles from North Bromwich the power of Astill's influence was felt. Mick, without any difficulty, had already enrolled himself as a member of the company. He had paired off with a big lumbering fellow in corduroys with a red, stupid face and curly hair.

'Who's going to give the ball a kick?' Abner heard him saying, and a moment later he was taking a quart pot of beer from a dark, strapping girl who served behind the counter. A medley of voices arose: the high-pitched accents of the Welsh, the soft Hereford burr, a smattering of audacious cockney, and then the harsher northern speech of a number of cloggers who had wandered in. The room was crowded to suffocation, and Abner found himself lucky to get a seat alongside the one-eyed foreman, Eve, on a bench near to the window. Abner began to talk to p. 123
him, but the Gunner was not inclined to keep it up. He was a little man with firm-set jaws from which speech seemed to escape with difficulty. His whole body was spare and dessicated and his skin so tanned with exposure to weather that the blue-black patterns tattooed on his forearms were scarcely distinguishable from his skin. He drank rum and water stolidly with a little cough between each gulp and scrutinised all the company with his one eye that was dark and keen like that of a bird of prey. He drank three or four rums, one after the other, but the process had no loosening effect on his taciturnity, nor did it dim the brightness of his eye. Abner asked him how long he had been on the waterworks job.

'Fourteen year,' he said.

'Is it like to last long?'

'It's like to last as long as I do. I'm what you might call on the establishment, as they say in the service. Been with it since they made the resservoyer in the Dulas valley. They say it's an unlucky job this here water. I was there when the dam was broke nine year ago. Always something up with it. . .'

Then, warming a little, he began to ask Abner if he were used to navvying work, snorted when he told him he was a miner, and told him that he'd have a job to get a bed to sleep in. 'The cloggers is coming into the Buffalo Tuesday,' he said, 'and the folk round here is scared of us. They're like children with strangers. They're a lot of damned Welshmen, only don't you tell 'em so or they'll let you know about it.' He waved to the dark girl behind the counter, who brought him another tot of spirit as though she understood his signal.

'You're looking up fine to-day, Susie,' he said.

'Get away with you, Mr Eve,' she replied. She may have blushed, but the blood ran so richly under her brown cheeks that no blush could have been seen. Eve took hold of her arm and pulled her gently towards him. Evidently she was used to being handled, for she did not seem to resent it. With her dark hair almost brushing the foreman's cheek she winked at Abner.

'Mr Badger been down to-day,' said Eve in a whisper.

'Oh, you *are* a tease,' she said, with a movement of petulance. 'Now, do let me go! You're not p. 124
the only gentleman that wants serving.'

Eve gently pinched her arm. 'Well, then,' he said, 'just you ask George Malpas to come and have a word with me, there's a good girl!'

She left them, pushing her way familiarly through the crowd of men with a refined 'Excuse me!' and crossed the room towards a tall, dark young man, better dressed than most of the company, who stood holding a pot of ale in the opposite corner, and talking to Wigan Joe, who had just arrived. When the girl spoke to him he nodded, and a moment later came over to the bench on which Abner and the foreman were sitting. From the very first Abner liked his face, and indeed he was a handsome specimen of the border type, with an olive skin and dark eyes set rather wide apart under level brows. At the moment his cheeks were a little flushed with the liquor that he had been drinking.

He and the Gunner were evidently old friends.

'Well, George,' said Eve, 'how goes it?'

'Middling, Gunner, middling.'

'Now, my son, hark to me. This young chap here is coming on to our job to-morrow . . . a mining chap from North Bromwich way . . . and he wants to find a lodge. Think you can do something for him?'

'Well, now you'm asking!' said George Malpas. 'The cloggers are coming into the Buffalo Tuesday; but I reckon mother might find him a bed time they come. 'T'is all accarding. . . . Not that her won't be glad to oblige you, Gunner.'

'I've a mate along of me,' said Abner.

'Your mate looks more like sleeping in a ditch,' said the Gunner with a dour glance at Mick.

‘Irishmen are all alike. God, don’t I know ’em! I’ve been shipmates with one or two of them chaps in my time. Well, George?’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ said George Malpas.

‘Your mother ought to be glad of a decent chap.’

‘All right, I’ll take him along with me when they close, don’t you fear.’

He moved off again towards the bar. At the same moment there appeared in the doorway a man p. 125
of middle height and sturdy build. He was dressed in a cord shooting coat and breeches. His face was swarthy and sanguine and he surveyed the company as though he had a grudge against every one of them. Indeed he had reason to be suspicious, for if black glances could have killed he would have been a dead man within a minute of entering the room. He stood there as if he were waiting for the hostility of the bar to take some more tangible form, and at last a young man emerging from a pint pot with an accession of Dutch courage, said mildly: ‘Well, Mr Badger, how be the young pheasants going?’

‘Don’t you ask him,’ said another. ‘This be a terrible place for foxes.’

The keeper took no notice of these remarks nor yet of the laughter that followed; he went straight up to the counter where Susie stood polishing glasses and shook hands with her formally.

‘Who’s he?’ asked Mick Connor, already considerably nourished, ‘A keeper? You leave go of him, darlin’. You’d as well be shaking hands with the divil!’

‘You’d best hold your tongue,’ said another. ‘He’m our Susie’s fancy.’

‘Gard be good to her then!’ said Mick with a sigh.

Neither Badger nor the girl seemed to be conscious of these reflections on their intimacy. Badger was leaning over the bar with his face close to hers and whispering. She still went on polishing her glasses mechanically, nodding with pursed lips, in response to whatever he was saying and glancing from time to time in a mirror, advertising Astill’s Bottled Ales, that hung on the wall at her right hand. Evidently all was not well, for she hurriedly rearranged a curl of dark hair that hung in front of her right ear and had become entangled in a garnet ear-ring. This process of preening attracted Abner’s attention to her sex. Suddenly he found himself comparing her rather maturer charms with those of Susan Wade. Perhaps her name had something to do with it. Both were of the dark beauty which had always attracted him, though Susan the first had been a pale city-dweller and little more than a girl, while the barmaid was a woman of his own p. 126
age, generously yet perfectly formed, full of strength and health and physical splendour. She bent over to listen more carefully to the keeper’s whisper that was almost lost in the hubbub of the taproom, and Abner saw the smooth whiteness of her neck, faintly browned like an egg. The liquor that he had taken inflamed his imagination. For the moment she seemed definitely desirable.

Mick Connor, having kicked as many drinks out of his neighbours as they would give him, staggered over to Abner’s side. In this state he looked more than ever like a bird. His small eyes glistened and the arteries of his temples stood out like whipcord. He asked Abner for money, and when Abner said, quite truthfully, that he had none to spare, he began to round on him fiercely in a language that nobody could understand. It seemed as if a row were in the making, and this was the last thing that Abner wished for. He didn’t want to be involved with Mick in a dispute before the foreman, Eve, who stared critically at his friend, and particularly before the girl who stood behind the counter. He tried to lead Mick away before it was too late, but the Irishman wrenched himself free from his hands and began to take off his coat for a fight. The whole room was now listening and laughing at the scene. The girl behind the bar, seeing that things were getting serious, excused herself to the keeper and came down to ask Abner to take his friend away.

‘We can’t have this sort of thing in here, you know,’ she said.

She came so near to Abner that he was aware of the smell of her hair. Her nearness disturbed him so that he could scarcely answer her. Mick, however, found no difficulty in stating his case at the top of his voice.

‘I know,’ she said, with the air of one who was used to the settling of such complications. ‘You two boys had better go out and get a bit of fresh air. Go on now, be good chaps,’ she continued good-humouredly, ‘or I shall have to call father.’

Mick turned on her savagely. ‘Call your father, is it? Who said I was drunk?’

‘I never said you was drunk. Just you sit down and be quiet.’ p. 127

By this time Badger had reached her side. ‘Best leave him alone, Susie,’ he said. ‘Half-past six, then?’

She nodded, and the keeper went out. At the same moment the landlord of the house, a short, wheezy man, with yellow pockets under his eyes that made him look like an owl, appeared behind the bar, and shouted to Susie in a high-pitched voice, asking what was the matter.

‘It’s all right, dad,’ she said, smiling back at Abner, who had by this time succeeded in pushing

Mick Connor down into the seat next to the foreman and thrusting his own unfinished pot of beer into his hand.

‘Then what’s all the bloody noise about?’ Mr Hind inquired, with a violent wheeze at the end of the sentence. ‘Don’t forget we’ve got a new policeman here that’s a stranger to the ways of the place, and the justices lying in wait for me. I can’t have no rows here, or they’ll be saying the place isn’t properly conducted. You mind that, boys!’

But there was no further disturbance. Mick, having finished the rest of Abner’s beer, retired mechanically to the society of his first friend, the big navvy in corduroys, who was now too drunk to realise what money he was spending. The landlord walked to and fro behind the narrow bar, glancing anxiously at the minute hand of the clock that was gradually approaching the hour of two, and talked wheezily about his distrust of the new policeman. Through the little door of the kitchen behind the bar came the frizzle of a basted joint followed by the metallic clang of an oven door. Something savoury was doing for dinner. The clock gave a whirring noise which suggested that it was as asthmatic as its owner and struck two with a harsh, ringing note. The landlord stopped dead in his prowling. ‘Time . . .’ he shouted.

‘See you Monday,’ said the Gunner, winking at Abner, who was already preparing to rescue Mick Connor from his new friend. The bar emptied. In the space of two hours its atmosphere had become so thick with tobacco smoke and the fumes of liquor that it smelt stale and fetid. Mick p. 128
was walking arm in arm with the navvy in a state of unstable equilibrium. Abner took his arm. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s see about the lodge.’

‘And who the hell are you?’ said the Irishman truculently. ‘You keep a civil distance!’

The big man rallied to his supporter, and Abner saw that for the present Mick was best left alone. The other two went off together, Mick singing a song in which the navvy joined though he did not know the tune. A tall policeman with mutton-chop whiskers watched them from the other side of the road. Abner turned and saw that the young man whom the Gunner had addressed as George Malpas was waiting for him.

‘Best come along of me to the Buffalo and have a bite,’ he said, and they set off together.

Abner found that from the first he liked George Malpas. His dark face and eyes were bright with the drink that he had taken, his speech rapid and vivacious. They walked quickly towards Chapel Green and the hills, talking all the way, and Abner felt that this was the first person whom he had met on his travels who really accepted him with naturalness and without suspicion. Malpas told him that he need not worry about his lodging. ‘Dad’s getting up in years,’ he said, ‘and a shadow’d frighten him, but mother’s all there and she don’t know how to say “no” to me.’

He spoke all the time quickly and with a certain restlessness that, on the surface, made him seem free and daring. He questioned Abner eagerly about life in the black-country. Once he had been in North Bromwich and this experience had made him discontented with a country life. ‘It’s proper dead here, that’s what it is!’ he said. ‘Time a man gets to my age he ought to see a bit of the world; but a chap gets nabbed with a wife and a couple of kids and then it’s kiss me good-bye to all that! You single chaps don’t know your luck!’ Evidently George Malpas had tried his hand at everything. He had been a wheelwright; a farm bailiff; for a year or two he had helped his mother in the management of the Buffalo, and lately, since the job on the pipe-line had begun, he had been doing labourer’s work: a thing that seemed unnatural to a man so handsomely and p. 129
delicately made. ‘Anything for a change: that’s what I say,’ he maintained. ‘What a chap like me ought to do is go to sea, but these old hills are like a prison. Damn me if I wouldn’t as soon be in Shrewsbury jail as here!’

They crossed the bridge into Wales. By this time George Malpas’s mother had returned from chapel and the door of the Buffalo was unlocked. George opened it for Abner. In the bar, on the left, he saw the two bundles exposed prominently on the table. Beyond in the kitchen they found the old man sitting in the chimney-corner and Mrs Malpas dredging flour into the roasting-tin from which a joint of beef had been taken.

‘Just in time, mother!’ said George. ‘How’s the old legs, dad?’

‘Badly . . . badly, George,’ mumbled his father.

‘Can you give us a bite of dinner, mother?’

At first Mrs Malpas did not reply. She was a little woman, primly dressed in a constricted black dress. She had a mass of gray hair with a tinge of yellow in it; her features were finely shaped, like those of her son, but her mouth was hard as stone. When she had finished making her gravy she turned a pair of piercing black eyes on Abner and spoke in a low voice. It was level and expressionless, but one felt, all the time, that she meant exactly what she said and that nothing could turn her from a determination once expressed. Facing her, he found that her face was beautiful, but hardened by suffering, by the responsibility of an old and ailing husband and the anxiety of a wayward son.

‘Is this the young man who left his bundle here with dad?’ she asked.

‘Yes, this is the chap. All he wants is a bed.’

‘Well, I can’t do it, George, and you know I can’t,’ she cried; ‘what with the cloggers coming, and

all! Your father told them so.' The old man nodded.

'Give us some dinner first, mother,' said George persuasively. 'Then we'll talk about it.'

'It's no good talking,' Mrs Malpas persisted. 'I mean what I said, and so does your father.'

Although it was obvious that nothing that the old man might say would alter the course of events that she had ordained, his wife had acquired the habit of pretending that he shared the responsibility of her decisions. George, with a side glance of encouragement at Abner, tried to joke her out of her seriousness. p. 130

'You can't get over me that way, George,' she said; but when he took her arm her eyes and mouth softened and she made no attempt to prevent Abner sharing the meal which her son helped her to put on the table. At the end of the process he kissed her, and she suddenly stiffened.

'You've been to the Pound House, George! I can smell your breath.'

'Well, can't a chap go to the Pound House without a fuss being made?' he laughed. 'You'm jealous, mother, of that seven days' licence!'

'If it was to make my fortune this minute,' she said intensely, 'I wouldn't sell one spot of drink on a Sunday. Nor would father,' she added in a milder tone.

The flash subsided and she went on to ask about Mr Hind's asthma; but she took no notice of George's reply, for her inquiry had only been a preliminary to asking how Susie was. She watched him closely when he replied that Susie was all right. 'Her new friend Badger was there,' he added with a laugh.

'I mind the time,' said the old man dreamily, 'when there was three badgers dug out one month up the Castel Ditches. Turrible teeth a badger has. Turrible . . .'

'He means Mr Badger, the keeper, father,' said Mrs Malpas.

'All keepers is the same,' said the old man. 'Water or game-keepers, there's not a pin between 'em.'

He relapsed into one of those fits of vacuity which often droused his normal, if senile, intelligence. Mrs Malpas dragged him back with the announcement that the dinner was ready.

'I'll go and draw some beer,' said George.

'You'll do nothing of the sort, George,' replied Mrs Malpas. 'You've had all that's good for you at the Pound House. If your father can do without beer before evening, so can you!' p. 131

George passed the reproof off with a smile, but stayed where he was.

Meanwhile Mrs Malpas rescued four hot plates from the oven and thrust them into Abner's hands with 'Catch on, please!' and the party settled down at the table, the old man occupying a shiny chair with a patchwork cushion; the mother, rigid as her own chair-back, facing him, Abner and George disposed on either side of them. The food was excellent and Abner was more than ready for it. It was the first square meal that he had got his teeth into for a week. Mrs Malpas's appetite was in keeping with the ascetic character of her face, but the old man ate ravenously of beef, vegetables, and dumplings, and the two others were not far behind him. All through the meal Mrs Malpas cast anxious glances at her son's plate. Abner could see that beneath her mask of severity she was really full of a fierce maternal concern for his comfort. The only tokens of tenderness that ever appeared in her were shown towards him. When she spoke of George's wife and of the children there was an almost imperceptible hardening in her tone, and George answered her shortly, as if he knew that the subject had only been raised for politeness' sake.

For all this they enjoyed their meal. The room was dim, for the hot sun from outside was caught in the folds of a lace curtain and a mass of lush geranium plants with which the window-sill was crowded. The scent of their leaves filled the room with an atmosphere of summer, languid and happy. One could almost have guessed that it was Sunday.

When the meal was over Abner began to fill his pipe.

'No smoking in here, young man,' said Mrs Malpas sternly. 'If you want to smoke you'd best go into the tap.'

'It's mother's fancy on a Sunday,' George apologised.

'You know your father can't abear it,' said Mrs Malpas, but the old man, who usually woke up when his name was mentioned, did not hear her, being busy with a paper packet of snuff.

When she began to clear the table, George returned gallantly to the subject of their visit. 'What about this chap's lodging?' he asked. p. 132

'It's no good asking me, George. I've told you once.'

'You can give him a bed till Tuesday while he's looking round, mother.'

She shook her head positively. 'I've got to clean things up between now and Tuesday. Besides, there's two of them.'

‘Don’t you trouble yourself about the other,’ said George. ‘He’s gone off with one of our gang. This is a nice, steady chap. . .’

But Mrs Malpas did not budge. ‘Your father wouldn’t hear of it,’ she said finally. By this time she had cleared away the dinner things, taken off her apron and placed a family Bible with a blue silk marker on the table. Mr Malpas had settled back in his chair by the hearth with a snuffy handkerchief over his head.

‘Just for two days,’ said George.

‘George, ’tis no good.’

He knew better than to press her under the circumstances, and so they prepared to go. Abner took out his money to pay for the meal. Cupidity struggled with principle in Mrs Malpas’s eyes.

‘Not on a Sunday, young man,’ she said.

Abner thanked her clumsily. George kissed her, and for a moment she dropped her stiffness and clung to him.

‘Come on, then,’ he said to Abner. ‘Good-bye, dad.’

But Mr Malpas was already asleep, his mouth sagging beneath the edge of his handkerchief. Abner picked up his bundle in the taproom and he and George went out into the grilling sunshine.

The Eleventh Chapter

p. 133

George Malpas, having taken a fancy to Abner at first sight, had determined to ask his own wife to give him a lodging. The relation between the two young men had begun with a quick, spontaneous liking on either side. Abner was only too glad to see a friendly face, not being built, as was Mick Connor, for picaresque adventure, and feeling that it would be well to settle down again. George Malpas, on the other hand, liked him because he represented something new, because he had exhausted the possibilities of the cloggers’ company, which led no farther than the Pound House—a place which he could only visit with irritation since Badger, the keeper, had cut him out with Susie Hind—and because the idea of a presentable stranger living in his own house appealed to him on the score of variety as well as from the financial point of view.

As they left the Buffalo, George expounded his project to Abner. It did him good, he said, to talk, and particularly to talk to a man of his own age who could understand him. If Abner had been married he would have realised that it was useless talking to women who pretended to listen, but never gave a thought to what a man was saying. The thought of his marriage always roused him to bitterness. It had been imposed on him, indeed, by the anxiousness of his mother, who adored him, her only son, beyond words and, under the influence of chapel, had conceived it her particular duty to save his soul from hell. Hell, in the eyes of Mrs Malpas, meant neither more nor less than sexual promiscuity, and seeing in the handsomeness of George a spiritual danger, she had followed the advice of St Paul and married him safely, as she thought, before worse happened.

She herself had chosen a wife for him. Indirectly, for she knew that he was wilful and easily scared, she had contrived to make him fall in love with the daughter of a local farm-bailiff, Morgan Condover, a steady, and, as it seemed, a solid man, who managed the outlying members of the Powys estate. Mary Condover, the daughter, was a little older than George; a shy beauty, with whom the lad soon fell in love. George, as the only son of the innkeeper at Chapel Green, was considered a good match, and Mrs Malpas played her cards so well that within six months of falling in love George found himself married and installed in a house of his own. He was happy: Mrs Malpas could see that for herself, and she thanked Heaven that she had been permitted to save her son alive.

p. 134

Before a year was over George’s first child was born. There was a great christening party at Wolfpits at which old Mr Condover, having drunk a good deal more than Mrs Malpas approved, confided to her that his newly-born grand-daughter, whom they had christened Gladys, would take the first place in his will. This was exactly what Mrs Malpas had intended from the first, and her satisfaction was so deep that she could almost have forgiven the bailiff his lapse from sobriety in spite of the unfortunate example that he had given to his son-in-law. The intense thankfulness that flooded her heart when she saw George so happily and satisfactorily bound in the chains of domesticity atoned for the troubles that were crowding on her own life. Her husband, who had been ailing for some years, was smitten with a stroke of paralysis from which he never fully recovered. She knew that hard times were coming but faced them cheerfully. For many years Mr Malpas had meant less to her as a husband than as the father of her son. She would do her duty by him—nobody could suggest that she had ever done less—on the surface she would acknowledge him still as the head of her household, but his illness would give her the opportunity of managing the business to her own liking and scraping together, in the years that remained to them, a little money that, added to the small fortune of which Mr Condover had boasted to her at the christening, should make her son secure for life. She even hoped that he

might succeed Mr Condover in the care of the Powys estate.

Her *Nunc dimittis* was premature. Just before the birth of George's second child, a healthy boy whom they had decided to name Morgan after his grandfather, Mr Condover, at the very height of his prosperity, hanged himself in an outhouse. His death revealed the fact that the money of which he had boasted at the first christening did not exist. It soon appeared that he had defrauded the Powys estate of more than eight hundred pounds, and rumour said that he had been involved with some woman in Ludlow. This was a terrible blow to Mrs Malpas, for in remote country places the shames of the fathers are visited on the children to the third generation, and never forgotten. When the baby was born she begged her daughter-in-law not to give the child his grandfather's name; but Mary, who had loved her father, obstinately persisted, and Mrs Malpas could never hear it without feeling that it carried with it a reproach. She tried to persuade George to change it, but George did not care. He was no longer in love with his wife, who now stood to him for a symbol of the chains that his mother had imposed on him. He felt that she had cheated him out of an enjoyment of life that was his due. At any cost he meant to regain his freedom, and Mary and his mother were the sufferers. The wife, indeed, had the care of her children to console her for George's neglect; but the mother, against whom he nursed a deep, indefinite grudge as the author of all his misfortunes, found that she must bear the responsibility of her own schemes. p. 135

The household at Wolfpits now missed the subsidies which Mr Condover had generously distributed from his masters' money. George had drifted into an extravagant way of life that he had no intention of changing. Partly because of his expansive nature, and partly because, in truth, he had never had his fling, George found it difficult to settle to any steady work. He became a drain upon the resources of the Buffalo, and Mrs Malpas, who found it hard to refuse him anything, was forced to draw upon her savings to support him. In her irritation and despair she blamed Mary for all this, thinking of her as a feckless housewife who had been brought up in the lavish ways of her father.

'The bad blood's in her and is bound to come out,' she said, airing her grievances on Mr Malpas who now cared for nothing but his food. George did not mind who was to blame as long as he got the money that he wanted. He was beginning to be interested in other women, particularly, for a little while, in Susie Hind, the daughter of the proprietor of the Pound House, an inn which Mrs Malpas had always regarded as the Buffalo's bitterest rival. It pained her beyond words to think that her hard-earned savings should find their way into Mr Hind's till. p. 136

'George,' she said, 'if only you'll keep away from that there place I'll see what I can do for you. Or if only you'd settle to regular work. . .'

'Thank you kindly!' said George. 'Why don't you let me take on the licence of the Buffalo now that dad can't do it justice? Then you and dad could go and live somewhere quiet as you've a right to do at your age.'

'Never, George!' she said intensely. 'Never. . .'

He laughed at her. 'Why not?'

'I couldn't trust you,' she said. 'The man that keeps a public ought to be teetotal. I know what would happen to you.'

'You've never give me a chance,' he protested.

'What's more, I'm not going to,' she maintained.

'It's a job I'm cut out for. I like company. I could double your business in a month.'

'And drink yourself dead in six,' she said.

'You've never seen me drunk, mother.'

'But I know you, my son!'

'I'm dead sick of this country,' he said. 'Town's the place for me. If I could get away out of this and make a fresh start. Damn me if I won't do it.'

'Hush, George!' she said. 'I've never heard your father use a word like that in his life.'

But the thing that she was really frightened of was that he should go. He was the only thing left to her, and if he went all light would have gone from her life. She controlled her tears and took him into the little bedroom where, in an oak chest, she kept her savings. She gave him money, and he left her, contented, kissing her with an affection that was mingled faintly with pity. When she held him in her arms all her tense anxiety for a moment disappeared. She could only think of him as the son of her body in whose happiness and physical welfare she delighted. It seemed to her that she could now only purchase these precious moments with money, but for a little while she could forget this in the joy that he gave her. p. 137

Time after time he begged her to let him take on the business, but she always refused him, sheltering herself, as her habit now was, behind the negligible personality of her husband. It would have shocked her beyond words if George had pointed out to her that his father didn't count, and that her consideration for him was a pretence; but George knew better than to vex her in this way, for the key of the chest upstairs was kept in her pocket. What is more, even though

their two wills were always in conflict, he loved his mother. She meant a great deal more to him than Mary had ever done except in the first blindness of his passion, and for this reason, no less than for the other, he was tolerant.

'Don't you take no notice of mother,' he told Abner as they walked along together. 'She's got a funny way with her, but she's all right at the bottom. There's not many women could have done what she has. The only bad turn she ever done me was when she got me threw over the pulpit.'

It was the third time in their walk that George had spoken grudgingly of his wife, but this did not strike Abner as strange, for it was exactly the attitude not only of his father but of most of the men with whom he had worked at Mawne. He grunted sympathetically in answer to George's complaints, and all the time, as Malpas eagerly expounded his own aspirations towards freedom and adventure, they were climbing gradually, passing by many gyrations of a narrow road into the curve of the hills in which Wolfpits lay.

Within a mile of Chapel Green the character of the country changed. Before that only a hint of mountainous severity had been visible in the stone buildings of the village with their narrow windows and their cruel roofs of slate. At Chapel Green the pastures that lay beside the river were not greatly different from the water-meadows of Teme, which is an English river, but the p. 138
fields through which the road to Wolfpits passed were poor and of a paler green. Their hedges were scanty, writhen and knotted with hard life. The generous elms grew fewer, standing stunted, forsaken and sparing of leaf. They seemed to shiver with poverty in this alien soil. In their place the hardier mountain trees appeared: birches that quivered even in this tranquil air: oak and holly and yew crouching in the hedgerow sombrely but crowned with waxen honeysuckle. These poor fields seemed to feel the pressure of the hills on either side from the slopes of which blown spores of bracken and seeds of gorse had settled and thriven like hill-men in a rich plain. In the midst of the fields smooth water-worn boulders were scattered, and through the pit of the valley a noisy tributary of the Barbel, that Abner came to know as the Folly Brook, set up an unceasing murmur like that of a thunder-shower on summer leaves behind a dense curtain of green.

Still the road climbed. It rose in bold curves, like a kestrel soaring, into colder air. Sometimes the brook flowed near it, and Abner could see through gaps in the arras of alders roaring stickles of bright water. Sometimes it swept away from them, hugging the foot of the hills, sounding no more than the evening breeze in a poplar tree. Gullies that fed it scored the road with tracks of winter torrents. At that season of the year no moving water could be seen, but once or twice in shadier places slow moisture oozed and dripped from beds of mosses on the banks.

'The cloggers is coming up the Folly when they've finished down Lesswardine way,' said George. 'I reckon they'll liven things up a bit.'

The road grew rougher; it seemed to falter in its purpose.

'Where do you get to this way?' Abner asked.

'Right up into the Forest and on to Clun, but not many uses it,' said George. 'The Clun men don't come much over our way. 'Tis a stiffish bit of collar-work. This here's Wolfpits.'

The road swept up obliquely to a crest and then sank to the level of the stream. Abner had a p. 139
vision of the whole valley expanding into a kind of amphitheatre through the middle of which the little river pursued a more leisurely course, winding gently through the fields as though it rejoiced to linger under the open sky. On either side the mountains rose to their full height, no longer concealed by foothills: from lip to lip the cup was roofed with dazzling blue. In the open space beneath, an avenue of chestnuts led upwards from the river to a great red house fronted with three pointed gables and crowned by clusters of fantastic chimney-stacks.

'You don't mean that one?' said Abner.

'Ay, that's Wolfpits,' George replied. 'Looks all right, don't it?'

As they descended the house was lost from sight and George began to explain that Wolfpits had once been a great house, the most westerly possession of the family whom Condover, his father-in-law, had served, but that the pastures which surrounded it, for all their greenness were poor and the mansion itself too remote and gloomy for gentlefolks to inhabit in this age of comfort.

'They say it's ha'nted, too,' he declared, with a laugh, 'though I don't pay no heed to such stories. I reckon it stood here empty for close on a hundred years till Mary's father got Mr McKellar, the agent, to let it off in pieces to them that wanted houses. There's more than five farms up this valley lying empty for the want of a bit of work putting into them, but the old lord was so took up with his new model village down by Lesswardine, he hadn't the money to put into the old ones. Not that I grumble at him. . . . 'Tis a good solid house to live in. There's three families in it now, and room for four more in my opinion. And I reckon I've a kind of right to it,' he went on; 'the Malpases was big people in these parts at one time. You'll find their names on the vault in Lesswardine church. *John Malpas*, *Gentleman*, that's how it's written. There's a Reverent Cyril Malpas rector of Aston to this day. Mary's father went into the family history at the time we was married. The Condovers is an old family too.'

These claims to a faded aristocracy did not interest Abner, but he could not help being impressed p. 140
by the size of the house as they approached it through the shade of the chestnut avenue. It was built of small red bricks, strange to the country but now beautifully weathered by time. The

eastern end was covered with a gigantic growth of ivy, but from the western side, which they were approaching, the parasite had been stripped on Mr Condover's advice and the red wall glowed as though it were exuding the imprisoned sunshine of three centuries. In this generous light one did not notice an air of desolation which the uncurtained upper windows gave to it.

'All that's wrong with this old place,' said George, 'is the rats. But I reckon you've been sleeping rough and won't notice them. This is our garden. Mary's a great one for flowers.'

They had entered a drive that swept up in a spacious curve to the steps of the front-door, an entrance which had been closed for many years. In place of the lawns that had once been the pride of its inhabitants lay three long strips of garden, each carefully tilled and separated from its neighbour by a fence of wire netting, the remains of some dismantled fowl-run. A path of bricks, salved from one of the dilapidated stables of the mansion, ran down the middle of the nearest garden-patch, and in the centre of it two children sat playing in the sun, a fair-haired girl, some six years of age, and a boy, a little younger, in whose dark features Abner could trace a resemblance to the handsome face of George Malpas.

'Them's my youngsters,' he said carelessly. He opened the gate and tweaked the girl's ear as he passed. 'Well, Gladys?' he said; but neither of the children seemed much moved by his arrival, being more interested in the strange figure of Abner, whose progress up the path they watched with the vague suspicion of mountain sheep that stare before they plunge away through heather.

'I'll see if the missis is in,' said George. 'Mary . . .' he called. 'Where's the girl got to? Sit yourself down.'

The room had once been the kitchen of the great house. An enormous iron range was built into the wall on one side, and on the other were racks and shelves which must once have held many dozens of plates. The sun slanted through a western window and showed Abner that the comfort of this stone-paved room lay in its cleanliness. The iron range was almost handsome in its massive, shining bulk above the whitened hearth, and in the fender a bundle of green bracken was set in an attempt at decoration. The fronds of this plant filled the room with a warm and drowsy odour. In a corner a grandfather clock, with a solemn face on which the name of *Carver*, *Hay*, was engraved, marked the passage of time with a slowly swinging pendulum. p. 141

George Malpas called his wife again, and from a cool-smelling chamber on a lower level that might well have been a dairy, a woman appeared and stood in the doorway.

'I've put the dinner away, George,' she said. 'It's past three o'clock.'

'Don't you worry your head about the dinner,' he replied. 'I've brought this chap back with me. He's coming to work with us on the water job. Mother has a fancy she can't take any one in at the Buffalo, so I've arranged to give him a lodge here. You'd better put him in the top room. I reckon you won't find him particular.'

At first she made no reply, but stood looking intently at Abner. It was difficult for him to believe that she was George Malpas's wife and the mother of the two children whom he had seen playing in the garden: she seemed too young, too slight, little more, indeed, than a young girl. She wore a clean apron of white linen, still creased from the ironing, and her straight chestnut hair was bound back plainly on either side of her temples and braided in heavy plaits behind.

She was tall, and her slimness, together with the narrow apron, made her appear taller. Her brow was wide and unwrinkled, her eyes were hazel, her nose straight and slightly marked with golden freckles. One would have said that her face represented the most untroubled calm if it had not been that her mouth was a little sad. Only her lips betrayed the fact that she had suffered. She stood in the shadow and looked at Abner narrowly but did not speak, for she had known enough already of George's boon companions to be a little careful of them. p. 142

'Don't stare at the chap like that!' said George irritably, 'or he'll think you're cracked.'

Then she spoke in a voice that showed more refinement than could have been expected. Her speech was almost free from the pleasant burr of the Marches.

'I dare say we can manage,' she said. 'I'll see about it.' Then she addressed Abner directly. 'What's your name?'

'Damn me if I ever thought to ask him!' muttered George.

Abner told her, and she repeated it after him: 'Abner Fellows.'

'Well, that's a queer name,' said Malpas. 'I don't mind ever having heard it before.'

'It's out of the Bible, George,' said his wife.

'Out of the Bible, is it?' he laughed. 'Well, that's more in your line than mine.'

She left them quietly to attend to the details of Abner's room. Malpas, still a little restless, took him out again, talking incessantly and showing him what remained of the ancient features of Wolfpits: the line of damp stables with boxes for thirty horses, the yew-trees that had once been clipped to the shape of peacocks but had now straggled into those of monstrous antediluvian birds; the red-walled garden, now a wilderness of nettles, whose fruit trees spilled their pulpy produce on the mossed paths. From the farthest corner of the garden they could see the house which, from this angle appeared tall and narrow like a tower, with chimney-pots for battlements.

In an upper window there appeared the figure of a woman standing still and gazing out over the mountain.

‘That’s Mary putting your room to rights,’ said George, but he did not call to her.

He spoke to Abner of the other inhabitants of Wolfpits. One was an old woman, Mrs Mamble by name, the widow of a labourer who had worked on a neighbouring farm. ‘She don’t properly belong to these parts,’ he said; ‘they came from down Tenbury way, but she’s took up with Morgan and Gladys, and Mary likes her company. He must have been a good chap in his time, for they give her the house rent-free.’ p. 143

The other tenant, whom they saw working in his garden beneath the ivied end of the house, was another solitary creature, an old man named Drew who had worked as a farm-labourer in the district for more than thirty years. He, too, was a foreigner, having first come to Wolfpits in charge of a pedigree Devon bull. In the middle period of his life he had been employed in a flour mill a few miles down the valley of the Folly Brook. The new steam mills at Lesswardine had robbed him of this employment, but not before the constant carrying of heavy sacks had twisted his back to a curve in which rheumatism had fixed it. Now he could only walk with his shoulders bent so that when he spoke he had to raise his eyes, staring up at those who questioned him, as though his back still bore the burden of a phantom load. All his joints were swollen and knotted with rheumatism; his huge hands resembled the branches of an ancient tree and his whole aspect, staring with pale blue eyes beneath a tangle of reddish hair as yet untouched with gray, was that of a gnome, and proper to these inaccessible mountains. His life was lonely, and for this reason he had never lost the uncouth speech of the South Hams from which he had originally come. When they passed his garden on their way back George gave him good-afternoon and he raised himself, as with infinite labour, from his work, gazing at them with the patient eyes of a yoked beast of burden.

‘He’s a rum old chap,’ said George. ‘You wait till he’s on one of his boozing fits, and then you’ll see.’

By this time Mary had finished Abner’s room and set the table. The children, tired with play, had come in and were clamouring for their tea. At the same time the fourth member of the Malpas family arrived, a yellow lurcher bitch, named Spider, who had been absent on some dark business of her own and now returned to gambol with little Morgan on the floor. The children were never tired of teasing this animal, but George, who only tolerated her when he himself went rabbiting in the evening, generally treated her cruelly. The dog fawned on him, but there was more fear than affection in her devotion. Abner told them the story of Tiger. The children listened with wide eyes and the mother looked at him without speaking. A fire of sticks crackled merrily down in the room that Abner had taken for a dairy. At last Mary Malpas brought in tea and the children ate stolidly and shyly, talking to each other in whispers as though they were disturbed by the presence of the stranger. p. 144

Perhaps it was also the presence of Abner that made George Malpas take unusual notice of his wife. He treated her very much as he would have treated the children or the dog when the fancy took him, but his faintly patronising tone only appeared to embarrass her. When she gave him his tea he would have kissed her, but she stiffened slightly and even blushed, so that Abner could see the colour rising in her white neck. Later she softened a little from her seriousness and the children too, realising that Abner was no more than an ordinary mortal, began to raise their voices. They sat on with the door open in the mellow evening light, and an atmosphere of homeliness and quiet descended on the room so happily that Morgan cried when his mother told him that it was time for bed. During all the afternoon she had scarcely spoken to Abner, and she seemed relieved to find a chance of escape. She puzzled him. In his life he had only known one woman intimately, and that was Alice. He could not help comparing the two of them. The cleanliness and refinement of Mary Malpas became exaggerated by this comparison. Instinctively, at first, he had allowed himself to be influenced by George’s treatment of her, but her aloofness and reserve now made him feel that she was in some subtle way superior. He could not say that he liked her; but he wondered, none the less, what she was made of.

She disappeared upstairs and he and George sat on smoking in the twilight. The sun had fallen like a plummet behind the western hills; the valley now lay in deep shadow and only the upper air was overspread with films of light. Night fell. Down in the valley a night-jar began his mechanical trilling. Over by Mawne, in Dovehouse Fields, a hundred miles away, another night-jar was beginning. A sense of new and settled happiness descended on Abner. He had come, it seemed, to another stage in his pilgrimage. Wolfpits was not like one of the bivouacs in which he had sheltered with Mick Connor during this crowded week, but a resting place. He felt that the future need not trouble him, that his feet were firmly planted on this new soil. The only tie that held him to the past was the memory of Alice, so strangely awakened by the presence of this other, and so different, woman. He feared that there could be no such happiness for her. Lying in bed in that strange room he decided that as soon as he had earned some money he would send it to her. At least it was his duty to return her the two sovereigns that she had slipped into his pocket when he left her. Yet, when he remembered the life at Mawne against which he had fretted for so long, his heart was thankful for this release. He fell asleep. p. 145

The Twelfth Chapter

p. 146

Next morning Abner went with George Malpas to interview the clerk of the works, who engaged him as a labourer at twenty-two shillings a week off-hand. This man had been as long on the waterworks job as Gunner Eve himself. Year after year he had led a nomadic life moving from one point to another of the great pipe line that stretches from the valley of the Dulas Fechen to the reservoirs above Halesby.

The piece of work on which Abner and his friends were now engaged was no more than the result of one of the last feeble struggles of the gods of stone against their iron masters. In this part of its course the pipeline, crossing the swollen head waters of the Teme, had been lodged upon a deposit of old red sandstone, a rock that was easily worked and lent itself to Barradale's plans. A hidden leak, caused possibly by some obscure subsidence, had distorted its bedding. Two unsuccessful attempts had been made to deal with it, and now the engineers had decreed that the whole track must be deflected northwards for half a mile on to a shelf of harder Silurian stone. The scene of these new workings was placed at the mouth of the valley, some three miles below Wolfpits and immediately under the shadow of two hill bastions: the high peak which culminated in the earthwork known as Castel Ditches and a wide hog's back known as Callow hill.

Hither, in the early morning, Abner and George Malpas would set out together carrying the packets of fried bacon sandwiches with which Mary supplied them overnight. Spider, eager to follow them, would watch them go, quivering with anxiety; but George Malpas had lately taken a dislike to the dog and would curse her if she moved a step in their direction, throwing a stone that made her scamper back into the garden. These morning walks were very pleasant to Abner, and pleasant too was the sudden change from a green solitude to the sight of working men who swarmed in the cutting beneath their feet. A trolley way, crowded with iron trucks that were reddened by rust and by the sandstone of the Dulas valley from which they had come, cut through the workings, and beside it ran a deep trough cut ready to receive the black iron pipes that were dumped along its edge. Most of the workers were old hands at the game, but there remained a certain amount of rough digging labour for which Abner's strength and his experience in the colliery made him suitable. This was allotted to him by the foreman on the first day of his employment. p. 147

He looked eagerly for Mick Connor, who soon showed himself and appeared none the worse for the debauch in which he and Curly Atwell, the huge west-countryman, had engaged. He declared he was seven pounds better for it, expressing himself as usual in terms of the race-course, but Abner saw from the first that their travelling acquaintance was really at an end.

During the day's work he did not even see George Malpas, being paired, in his new labours, with a youth named Joseph Munn, whose face was disfigured by a hare-lip. These two were set to work at some distance from the rest, clearing the sub-soil from a shelf of rock where a culvert of stone would soon be built to carry storm water from the slopes of Callow. Chance had been kind to Abner in the selection of his companion, for it soon appeared that Joe Munn was a black-country boy who had been born in Dulston, and in his early days had even seen Abner himself playing football for Halesby Swifts. He spoke Abner's own speech, he knew the streets that were familiar to him, and a common knowledge of distant places is a greater bond between men than a common knowledge of their fellows. As far as actual work was concerned Abner might well have had a more satisfactory partner, for, physically, Munn was a typical product of the black-country at its worst, pale of face and lank of limb. He seemed indeed altogether too puny for the work on which they were engaged, and only a congenital consciousness of being born to labour induced him to accept a state that made demands above his strength. Abner would sometimes watch him as he stood panting with the sweat breaking out in beads along the unhealthy skin of his bossed forehead and matting the wisps of his neutral-coloured hair. In the end their partnership resolved itself into one in which Abner did most of the work when the foreman was not there. And he did not grudge this, for he had strength enough for two and so much vigour that he enjoyed the using of it. Munn would lie down in the sun with his chin in his hands, watching Abner at work, talking of famous cup-ties that he had seen, or of the excitements of Dulston Wakes. p. 148

'I don't know how you ever come to find yourself on a job like this,' Abner said one day.

'It was company I wanted,' Munn explained. 'Before I come here I was driving a traction injin down in Gloucestershire . . . what they call the Forest of Dean. That was a place, if you like! The other chaps used to go off into Cinderford and leave me alone with the engine up in those woods. Lonely . . .! I went half balmy, straight I did! Yo'd never guess what it was like. I used to start talking to myself for company like. Ever done that, Abner?'

Abner laughed. Of course he had never done that.

'So I went up to the foreman and says: "Mister, I can't stick it." I couldn't say no more, I couldn't . . . trembling like a bloody leaf. "What's up with you now?" he says. "I wants company," says I. "What you want is a nursemaid," says he, and gives me my money on the Saturday. Then I comes along here. Strike, if I wasn't glad to get away from all those trees! And Gunner Eve, he look after me a bit. He's a good chap, the Gunner, ain't he, kid?'

Working with Abner, or, more exactly, watching Abner work, Joe Munn recovered a little of his broken spirit; but the story of its destruction was older than his experience in the silences of the Forest of Dean. His earliest days had been spent in a double-back house in a Dulston slum, where, half-fed by an aged grandmother, he had made the pallid growth of a potato sprouting in

a cellar. Thence he had passed to the children's ward of Dulston workhouse, being shot out at the age of fourteen to make his best of the world. Even now he laboured, without knowing it, under the shadows and suppressions of those early days. These summer mornings, working with Abner, were the happiest that he had ever known. They became sound friends in a partnership wherein Abner was canonised as a hero and protector, a position which he sustained with an amused tolerance.

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His relation with George Malpas remained equally happy. They always walked down to work together in the morning, but after that Abner rarely saw his friend, for Wolfpits held no attraction for him, and he preferred to take himself, when the day's work was over, to the Pound House, or sometimes to the old people at the Buffalo. In a few weeks Abner's temporary lodging had become a permanency. Mary Malpas, in consultation with her husband, had settled the sum that he should pay for bed and keep, and Wolfpits itself, that sinister and desolate mansion, had become a pleasant and homely place.

At first he never accompanied George on his evening visits to the Pound House. It pleased him better to walk home up the valley in the cool of the evening and sluice his head and back beneath a pump of cold spring water that stood in the deserted stable-yard. Then Mary would give him his tea, always with the same air of watchful and remote reserve, and he would smoke his pipe in the garden, talking to the children who, in the confidence of their own secret alliance, were gradually becoming a little more friendly. Or he would play with Spider, who had now learnt to take a place near his chair at meal times in the hope of being fed with scraps from Abner's plate.

Sometimes, too, he would lean on the fence watching old Drew at work in his garden. The old labourer was as hardy as the knotted oak that he resembled. His day's work began before dawn: he had more than three miles to walk to the farm on which he was employed, but when he returned in the evening after trudging the fields all day, he could never rest, but must be putting his strip of garden in order so intently that he scarcely had time to answer Abner's questions, staring up at him with those patient, over-burdened eyes. His wages, which were regulated by his age rather than his capacity for labour, were only twelve shillings a week, so that his garden produce was really essential to his life. When he had finished his gardening, or when the light failed, he would retire to his kitchen and drink a crude, sweet spirit that he distilled from turnips. Sometimes at night they would hear him singing to himself the innumerable obscene verses of Devonshire folk-songs. Then, when he could sing no longer, he would drag his twisted limbs upstairs and sleep like a log in the certainty of waking before dawn to set out on his labours again. His life indeed had been so solitary that he distrusted any intrusion, and Abner had known him and spoken with him for many weeks before he felt that his presence was welcome.

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The other tenant of Wolfpits he rarely saw, though her five years in the old house had made her a confidante of Mary, and indeed her principal refuge in domestic emergencies. Sometimes when he came home at night he would find her talking to Mary in the kitchen, but at the sight of him she scuttled away so that he saw no more of her than one sees of a rabbit's vanishing tail.

Mary Malpas did not evade him in this primitive fashion and yet, even when he had been living at Wolfpits for more than a month, he felt that he really knew her no better than the fugitive Mrs Mamble. He could find no parallel to her in the history of his dealings with Alice at Mawne. The thing for which Alice had been mostly concerned was her dignity as mistress of John Fellows's house, and this she had been active to assert. Mary Malpas, on the other hand, had no need to stand upon her dignity. It was instinct in the refinement of her speech and even more in her silence. The fact that her father had been a swindler and a suicide could never rob her of it. Abner fancied for a time that the awkwardness between them was caused by the way in which he had been suddenly thrust upon her household. He felt that he might stand to her as a symbol of a new slight inflicted on her by her husband. Otherwise why should she deny him the least suspicion of human contact? He even made an awkward attempt to settle the matter by asking her if she would not be better pleased if he tried to find another lodging.

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'If I'm in the way like,' he told her, 'just you say so, and I'll be off.'

'Why should you think that?' she said, without the least sign of emotion. 'There's no reason why you should go away . . . if you are comfortable.'

She didn't say that they were glad to have him, though the fact remained that his money was useful to them. She didn't say that they would be sorry to lose him. He simply felt that she had made him look foolish, and as this was the usual result of his dealings with her in spite of her politeness and her care for his comfort he gave up trying to find out what she was made of, and settled down to his life at Wolfpits as though she had nothing to do with it.

He had always been fond of dogs and children, and Gladys, Morgan, and Spider soon became devoted to him. Morgan was evidently his mother's favourite, and the little girl soon took a shy but definite fancy to Abner, wandering alone down the lane in the hope of meeting him on his way home from work and riding back to Wolfpits perched on his shoulder. She would watch him gravely while he stripped and swilled himself in the stableyard, standing by with a towel ready to catch the beads of water that sparkled on his eyebrows and his hair. Then hand in hand they would wander round the farmstead, visiting the pigsties and the barn in which the fowls were housed and searching for the nests of broody hens in the hedgerows. She loved above all things to sit upon his shoulder when she carried home the eggs in the small cup of her hands. She liked his hugeness and his strength, and rather despised Morgan for the fact that he was his mother's

boy.

In those hills autumn came early, and soon sunset brought with it a hint of evening cold. The air of the mountains drooped upon the plain as soon as the western summits hid the sun, and in a little while their evenings were of lamplight. When Abner trudged home at night he could see the linnets gathering together for their autumn flights, hear the whir of their wings and their tender, p. 152
reedy notes. Starlings, southward bound, swept the air in wheeling cohorts, and swifts darted wildly round the chimneys of Wolfpits. Wood fires were lighted in the kitchen grate at night, and when Abner had finished his tea he would settle down on the right hand of the fireplace with a pile of cut logs at his feet.

At first he looked forward to these evenings with some anxiety, feeling that the presence of this silent and, as he thought, unsympathetic woman, would make him uncomfortable; but strangely enough this did not happen. The devotion of Gladys put him at his ease and occupied him so much that he did not have to speak to her mother. When first the fire was lighted Mary Malpas would move about the house on her own business. Abner would hear her talking softly to Morgan in the scullery while Gladys chattered to him in the flickering light that filled the room with moving shadows. Later, like a shadow herself, Mary would return with the boy and settle herself softly in the chair on the other side of the fire. Morgan would struggle up on to her knee and cuddle into his mother's breast, and Gladys, not to be outdone, would climb on Abner's knee and beg him to tell her stories. He knew no stories for children, for he had never had a mother to tell them to him, but he would talk to her about Mawne and the blind pit-ponies, about the rabbits that lived in Dovehouse fields, about Tiger and the excitements of the wakes with their galloping horses and soaring swing-boats. Gladys had never seen a fair and these descriptions fired her imagination most.

'Why ain't there no swing-boats here, mother?' she would ask.

'Because there aren't enough children to go up in them. You'll see them some day.'

'Abner'll take me to see his; won't you, Abner?'

By this time of the evening, Morgan, curled up on his mother's lap, was usually as sleepy as Spider who lay like a hedgehog on the hearth between them. Mary sat there hugging the child in her arms and never speaking for fear that she might disturb him, and Gladys, impressed by the p. 153
silence of the firelit room, would snuggle closer to Abner and talk to him in whispers that her mother could not hear. They sat on either side of the fire in these strangely divided camps, and Abner would become aware of the beauty and placidity of this silent woman sitting still in the gloom with firelight playing in her hair, listening all the time though she did not move, unless it were to touch with her lips the forehead of her sleeping child. He used to watch her and wonder what she was thinking. He could not help watching her as she sat like a statue staring at the fire. When she turned her eyes towards him he would look away. He became so used to her silent company that he could not have been happy without it.

The days shortened, the pollard elms turned gold and the rusty chestnut leaves in the avenue fell of their own heaviness. The drowsiness of summer had passed and a new restlessness seized him. He could not be contented with this peaceful static existence into which he found himself sinking. The silence of Mary Malpas lay on him like a heavy spell. He had rested enough and could no longer be contented to drowse before the fire with a child in his arms. The peace of Wolfpits could tempt him no longer when the chill autumn air stimulated him to action and the natural violence of youth. He felt that what he wanted was the society of men and the pursuits of manliness.

Once or twice he walked down to Chapel Green in the evening and drank a pint with the labourers who gathered in the Buffalo under the eye of old Mrs Malpas, but he found that he couldn't get on with her. She was always restrained and severe, giving him the impression that she had taken a dislike to him from the first, and when she talked to him he felt that she was trying in her own superior way to find out exactly what her daughter-in-law was doing at Wolfpits. Even her questions about the children seemed to him to be dictated by malevolent curiosity rather than by affection. He felt that he was like a child in her hands and that she could get what she liked out of him. When he went to the Buffalo he had expected to find the cloggers there, but they did little more than sleep in that dismal house, going for their pleasures to the p. 154
relative gaiety and light of the Pound House, where they could do as they liked. With the labourers at the Buffalo Abner had nothing in common. He understood nothing of their talk of crops and beasts and weather even when he could penetrate the meaning of their speech. He gave the Buffalo up as a bad job and went to the Pound House himself.

He used to go along there with George Malpas as soon as the whistle signalled that the day's work was at an end, and there, in a brighter light and in the stir of a roaring business he found an atmosphere more suited to his restless spirit. Sometimes he sat with George Malpas; but George was a gloomy drinker and better company when he was sober, so more often he took his seat next to Gunner Eve, who drank nothing but spirits, and sometimes, under their influence, would talk to him of his old days of service in the navy, of blue Pacific havens, palm-huts with brown women, or sometimes of that savage African river on which he had lost his eye. That was the kind of life that Abner wanted. In the Gunner's stories a vista of adventure opened before him. The liquor made him think that such was the only life for a man. The foreman's tales of amorous adventure enthralled him. Therein lay the proper use of women.

There was only one woman in the Pound House: Susie Hind, the fine, strapping girl whose presence had disturbed him on his first visit to the inn with George. Mrs Malpas's hints had led him to believe that she was an old flame of George's. He found himself comparing her with George's wife and thinking of the silence and remoteness of Mary he felt it was easy to understand why George had been led away. The freedom of Susie's manners had suggested that she was attainable. Abner, listening to the gunner's adventures, brooded on this, and the more he did so the more desirable Susie became. There seemed to him no reason why he should not possess her. Every night he sat in the Pound House looking at her. He drank more than he need have done simply in order that he might remain in her presence. This inflamed his imagination p. 155 and magnified in his eyes the physical elegance which she regarded as necessary to her calling, but he hardly dared to speak to her openly in this concourse of men, and when she came near him with her bold but beautiful eyes, his heart beat wildly and he could say nothing. He usually stayed in the alehouse till closing time and walked back to Wolfpits through the haunted night arm-in-arm with George Malpas who was by this time a little sentimental. In one of these walks he asked George about his relations with Susie.

'Oh, she's all right, you can take my word for that,' said George with a laugh.

'Yo've seen a good bit of her,' said Abner.

'All I want to,' George replied, with a wink that was invisible in the darkness.

Abner was silent and he continued: 'You'd best go easy for a bit, though. For the time being she's took up with that devil Badger. But that won't last. I know our Susie, bless her heart! Susie has her fancies.'

Abner knew already that there was something between Susie Hind and Badger. He had watched their whispers jealously often enough. Now he began to examine their intimacies more closely. The general unpopularity of Badger's occupation only helped to increase his jealousy. When he saw their hands meet over the counter he felt that the natural thing to do would be to rise from his seat, take Badger by the neck and throw him out of the bar. He measured the thickset keeper with a fighter's eye, and felt confident that he was a match for him. Meanwhile he must bide his time.

Every night he went regularly to the Pound House and sat there waiting for his opportunity, never doubting but that he would get her when the time came. By the mere habit of his presence a sort of relationship was established between them, for Abner's strength and his fairness pleased her, and she would sometimes pause for a moment in her business, standing close to him with a tray under her arm and one hand on her hip. The Gunner used to chaff her as she stood p. 156 there. He had done enough lovemaking in his young days and now his only attitude towards women was one of jovial cynicism. No doubt the foreman thought that Susie stayed because she enjoyed his teasing; but Abner knew better. He knew it was himself, not Eve, that Susie was watching. Between them, unseen by the other, the air was charged with potential passion like the sky of a hot night, placid and slumberous yet ready to burst into lightning. He could laugh at Gunner Eve, this dry old man who vainly imagined that he was pleasing her fancy. She smiled at Eve, but all the time her smouldering eyes were fixed on Abner, and he knew that she heard nothing. Then Badger would come in and handle her as if he were her master. Abner did not even mind this, for he saw that she was beginning to treat the keeper as a habit and her eyes did not caress him secretly. He began to feel that he could afford to despise Badger, but he hated him none the less.

In those days he saw little of George Malpas at the Pound House. Soon after Abner began to visit Mainstone regularly George had transferred his custom to an inn in Lesswardine. Abner did not ask him why he had done this, for to have done so might easily have compromised their friendship. If George preferred to spend his evenings away from his lodger's eyes, well and good. On the other hand he did renew his travelling acquaintance with Mick Connor, who remained one of the best customers of the Pound House. Mick had always been a generous drinker. When he was in low water he was not ashamed of sponging on his pals, but in these days he seemed never to be short of money, and this, together with the glibness of his tongue, made him a popular figure in the alehouse. Abner wondered where the money came from, for Mick's wages were the same as his own, and though he knew that the Irishman was a born gambler he could scarcely believe in the permanence of his friend's luck.

Quite by chance he discovered the source of Mick's income. One Sunday morning he had walked down to the Pound House followed by the dog Spider when Mick fell in with him by the way. He p. 157 surveyed Spider with a professional eye.

'That's a likely lookin' dog,' said Mick.

'Ay, she's all right,' said Abner.

'Give me a bitch every time for hunt'n . . . Ah, ye divil, get away wud you!'

Spider had suddenly become wildly interested in the Irishman's person and was jumping up and smelling at the tails of his coat.

'That's a wise dog,' said Mick. 'I'd be glad of a dog the like of that on a moonlight night.'

Abner had guessed what he meant, but Mick, who could never resist the chance of producing a sensation, opened his coat and showed him the contents of a game pocket that he had

constructed by making a slit in the lining. It was a fine cock-pheasant, splendid in its chestnut autumn plumage. Mick displayed it sentimentally. 'Doesn't that make your teeth water?' he said. 'God, you could ate it in your hand the way it is! And that bird do be worth a good half-crown in Craven Arms.'

'Where d'you get him?' said Abner.

'You ask Mr bloody Badger,' Mick replied with a wink.

Abner pressed him, and he went on to explain that he and Curly Atwell and one or two others had developed a plan of poaching on a commercial scale. A man named Harford, a rabbit merchant in Craven Arms, the railway junction and cattle-market over the hills, had arranged to deal with their produce. Naturally, in such a dangerous business, he bought cheap and sold dear; but the proceeds of their sport were enough to keep the whole gang in unlimited liquor, the thing that they needed most.

'It's the only way to keep clear of the buttermilk cure,' said Mick, 'the way they pay us in this cursed hole.'

He ended by pressing Abner to join them, pointing out that Spider would be a useful ally, and Abner, without any hesitation, accepted. He was glad of anything with a spice of adventure in it to give vent to his energies. He didn't care much about the money even though he remembered p. 158
that he had not yet been able to send Alice her two pounds, but it pleased him to think that this was another way of getting even with Badger, a feeling in which Mick, with no more definite reason than an instinctive hatred of gamekeepers, concurred.

In this way there began a series of midnight adventures that were a great joy to Abner and an even greater to George's dog, who asked nothing better in her sport than the help of human allies. On these nights of misty moonlight the secret beauty of the country-side smote on Abner's heart though he knew nothing of it but that he was happy. In the daytime the land was dead and nothing lived in it but he and his fellow men, but when evening came the hills, the woodlands, the rivers and the upland wastes of heather tingled with life. Something secret and timid that sunlight numbed into a protective sleep, now stirred and wakened. The voices of the rivers changed; they were no longer only torrents of swift water but living things. Trees that in day were silent awoke and whispered in the night. Amid miracles of nocturnal beauty Abner walked unseeing. He only knew that he lived more fully, more intensely in the night.

His senses quickened. His eyes were like the sharp eyes of a hunting owl so that he felt that in daylight he had been blind. His ears were tuned to an exquisite degree of sensitiveness. The cracking of a twig, a distant step on leaves, the least tremor of a growing tree, sent a shock of alert pleasure into his brain. And the impalpable cool mist of autumn sharpened his scent to a keenness that delighted him. This state of acute sensitiveness was the basis on which the more than physical thrill of imminent danger was imposed. The labourers who worked on the farms of Squire Delahay's estate were naturally in league with Badger against the depredations of these foreigners. Each of them was himself a poacher in a quiet way; but they poached for the pot rather than for the market and felt that the presence of Mick and his gang was a menace to their privileges. These men, if less intelligent, were as skilled in woodcraft as the Irishman himself, and Mick's friends followed their craft in a constant peril of discovery. p. 159

It was a profitable adventure. Abner soon found that his wages were trebled. Grouse from the mountains, pheasants from the spinneys, partridges from the stubbles, all found their way into Mick Connor's bag and were driven in a ragman's cart to Craven Arms. Mick was content to leave the rabbits to the labourers who spied upon him. He spent his money wildly. It even pleased him to treat Badger to drinks in the Pound House bar, knowing very well that the keeper guessed where the money came from.

In November salmon began to run up the Barbel to meet the winter floods, and Mick Connor was more than ever in his element, remembering desperate days upon the Barrow when he was a boy. Salmon spearing was to Abner the most exciting pastime of all: the stealthy approach to the riverside up to his knees in the ditches of the water-meadows: the milky whiteness of November fogs; the nearing clamour of the river roaring whitely over stickles into the salmon pool where it lay dumb and black: Mick Connor's hoarse whispers, the lumbering shadow of Curly Atwell, and, in the darkness, the swirl of an eddy black as ink.

'Ready . . .' Mick would whisper, and suddenly a flare of light, reddening faces, casting grotesque shadows, lighting the yellow tree-tops, making a beacon for miles of dreamy country, as though the forest were aflame. The night sounds vanished from Abner's ears. The woods held their breath and listened. He could hear nothing of the river's tumult—only the harsh breathing of Atwell and the hiss of the colza flare.

'By the houly! Look at him! Fourteen pounds if he's an ounce!'

The shadow of a lifted arm against the light. A violent descent, and then a swirl in the black water and the great fish struggling on the bank. For Mick Connor never missed his mark.

'Out with the light!' And then a sudden darkness in which the roar of the stickle and the vague noises of the trees returned.

This curious insulation, the way in which light blinded their pickets of alarm, was the great p. 160
danger of salmon-spearing. The glare in the tree-tops would always give them away if Badger

and his men were on the watch; and one frosty, owl-haunted night in the middle of November they had a narrow shave. Mick Connor was leaning over the bank with lifted spear when Abner heard the breaking of a stick. A man cursed as he floundered in a ditch not twenty yards away. Abner, who doubted the quickness of Atwell, smothered the flare with his hands. It scorched the horny skin of his palms, but it gave the signal of alarm. On that side of the pool the current had undercut the marly bank so that the poachers could not be seen, but Abner's ears recognised the sound of Badger's voice. The keeper's party ran towards the bank. A single man, the foremost, leapt down beside them, shouting that he had got them. Abner let out from the shoulder in the dark. His fist met the flesh of a man's face. The man gave a cry. For all he knew it might have been the face of Curly Atwell, but it gave him a good feeling in the dark, for he felt instinctively that it was Badger's. They left their spear on the bank, plunging into the swift stickle above the pool, and found refuge in a wood. Some one fired after them. He fired low, and the twigs snapped about them. Abner plunged on through the wood. He knew that he was running for his life. It was good to be running for his life. He went on crashing through the undergrowth of the wood battling with back-springing saplings, torn with briers, laughing, curiously, wildly exultant. He did not stop to think that he had lost touch with the others. In an affair of this kind each must look to himself. He only knew that he had escaped out of the mouth of danger. His head spun with the elation of his heart pumping blood into his brain. In that moment he felt that he had courage for anything, and it pleased him particularly to think that Badger had suffered this defeat.

He emerged from the woods into open fields, so calm under the peace of night that it was hard to believe that any human violence had lately invaded them. Westward the quiet hills stood folded for the night. A gibbous moon rose languidly above the mists. He stood in the middle of the field, tingling to his finger-tips. He forgot that his legs were sodden with muddy water, so splendidly his body glowed. It was ridiculous to think of crossing the hills to Wolfpits, for it was no more than nine o'clock. This was not a time for sleep but for living. He turned his steps in the direction of the Pound House. p. 161

Just before closing time he reached it. One end of the bar was full of cloggers, to whom Wigan Joe was reeling off Lancashire stories. The other was unusually empty, for the Gunner and most of his company had left the house for want, perhaps, of Mick Connor, who was their principal entertainer. Susie stood behind the counter at the deserted end of the bar swilling dirty glasses, wiping them one after another, and listening all the time to the clogger's stories, many of which she had heard before the same evening, since Wigan Joe had a way of running through his repertoire and beginning again like an automatic musical-box when the liquor was in him. As Abner entered the bar Mr Hind appeared in the door of the kitchen.

'I'm goin' up, Susie,' he said with a jerk of his head in the direction of the staircase. 'Two minutes to go, and then lock up.'

She said, 'All right, dad,' carelessly, never looking at him, for her eyes were on Abner. 'Night, all!' Mr Hind muttered as he disappeared.

Abner went straight up to her. The mood of physical triumph and elation was still on him, and she must have known that there was something strange about him since, for the first time, she lowered her eyes.

'I want a word with you, Susie,' he said, addressing her thus for the first time.

'Best hurry up, then,' she said, smiling. 'It's only two minutes afore we close. What are you taking?'

'Give us a double gin,' he said, and while she poured the limpid spirit into a clean glass he asked her what she was doing on Sunday afternoon.

She wouldn't answer him. 'Look what good measure I've given you,' she said, handing him his glass.

He put the drink down on the counter. 'You're not goin' to put me off like that,' he said. She murmured something about Mr Badger. p. 162

'Damn you and your Badgers,' he said. 'What about to-night, then?'

'Oh, don't be soft! Look at the time. It's just on ten.'

'Get on with you! The time don't matter.'

'No, I couldn't,' she said. 'Of course I couldn't. Father's gone upstairs.' The clock struck ten. Susie called, 'Time, please!' and the cloggers rose to go in the middle of one of Wigan Joe's most complicated stories. They moved toward the door in a bunch, bidding good-night to Susie, who stood waiting with the key in her hand. Abner stayed by the bar finishing his gin. The last good-nights echoed down the street. Susie stood at the open door waiting for him.

'Come on, do!' she said. 'It's after time.'

'Why shouldn't I stay here?' he said, with a laugh.

'You know as well as I do why,' she said, with a managing air. 'That new policeman, Bastard's got eyes like a weasel.'

‘Is that all?’ he asked.

‘Yes, of course that’s all.’

He came to the door and quickly closed it, then took her in his arms and kissed her. She returned his kisses.

‘Leave go of me now,’ she whispered. ‘Go out in the lane while I lock up and then come round to the back door, but don’t make too much row about it.’

‘Yo’m not codding me?’

‘Of course I’m not.’

She closed the door after him, saying ‘good-night’ in a clear voice for the benefit of the problematical constable. He heard her lock the door and slip an iron bar across into its sockets. The lighted windows went black. He slipped round to the back of the house and stood waiting in the angle that it made with an outhouse where dry bracken was stored. For a long time, as it seemed, he stood there staring at the faint and frosty stars. Then the door opened softly. She did not speak, but he stole on tiptoe to the door and entered the kitchen. Inside it was quite dark, for the shutters were closed and the fire banked down. He could not see her, being only conscious of her warm and fragrant presence. He groped in the dark, suddenly finding her face on his own. p. 163

‘My . . . how cold you are!’ she whispered.

Half an hour later she let him out into the yard, with more tender whispers of farewell and warnings that her father slept lightly. For a few minutes he stood away from the moonlight in the shadow of the house, bewildered, stunned. He saw the white road stretching in the direction of Chapel Green and Wolfpits, but it meant no more to him than if it had led to the world’s end. He was no longer a part of the world. He towered above it supreme and isolated in the flame of his own throbbing exaltation. He had no need of friends or houses or rest, no memory of the past, no thought for the future. He stood there self-sufficient and unassailable.

A little later he became aware of the fact that his feet were carrying him automatically over the moon-lit road toward the hills, but he was almost unconscious of his progress, and it filled him with a sort of mild surprise when he saw familiar landmarks of the road loom up before him, grow clear, and fall away behind. His footsteps rang upon the iron road as though he were shod with steel. From the brow of the hill above Wolfpits he saw the basin of the Folly Brook brimmed with mist. The gables of the house rose up into the moonlight, the hills stood black behind. Under the heavy chestnuts of the avenue it was almost dark; the water in the ruts had frozen to a thin crust so that the surface was curiously splashed with moonlight and with ice. Fifty yards in front of him he saw a figure moving with lurches from side to side of the lane. At first he thought it was a stray bullock, but there was something human in its movements and so he leapt to the conclusion that it was old man Drew rolling home drunk with sweet turnip from the cottage of some friend. The figure leaned for a moment against a stone wall, and Abner, coming abreast of it, saw that the drunken man was George Malpas.

‘Hallo, George, what’s up?’ he called.

‘God, Abner, is that you?’ George murmured thickly. ‘I haven’t half got a drop, I haven’t!’ The situation amused George so much that he shook with weak laughter. p. 164

‘Come on, then, old son!’ said Abner, taking him by the arm. Strong as he was he found it difficult to steer a straight course. George, having once submitted to the direction of another will, now became somnolent. Abner almost had to carry him up the garden path.

A light burned in the kitchen, and on the doorstep Mary stood waiting for them. She looked very frail and beautiful in the light of candles. From the first her eyes had taken in the situation, and she offered no spoken comment on it though her mouth showed that she was suffering the shame of the situation.

‘Give me a hand upstairs with him, please,’ she said.

The excuses that Abner was ready to offer for his friend died on his lips. Between them they directed the steps of George upstairs. When he reached the bedroom he stared about him as though he had never been there before, and then, giving the problem up, lurched over on to the bed covering his head with his hands.

‘We’d best get his boots off,’ said Abner.

He took the right and Mary the left. It was a strange thing how they had to wrestle with the leather laces and how tightly the boots stuck to his inanimate feet.

‘Now he’s all right,’ said Abner, when the job was finished. ‘He’ll come up like a daisy in the morning, never fear!’

She did not reply to him but stood with the candlestick in her hand staring at her husband’s body.

‘Will you come downstairs with me, please?’ she said.

Abner had not bargained for this. He could not think what she wanted of him, but he could not

very well refuse her, and so he followed her down the creaking stairs into the kitchen. She put the candle on the table and faced him silently from the other side. Then she said:—

'Tell me all about it, please . . . everything.'

There was nothing to tell her. He said that he had found George leaning up against a wall in the avenue and helped him over the last lap.

'Were you at the Pound House to-night?' p. 165

'Yes, I looked in just on closing time.'

'Then I'm sure that you know. Please tell me!'

'I've told you. I don't know nothing.'

'I don't believe you . . . not if you was at the Pound House. That's where he gets it.'

'Well, you know more about it nor me then,' said Abner.

'Don't talk to me like that! I know . . . I'm not a child.'

'It's no good talkin' like that. A chap must take a drop in and out. It's human nature.'

'Oh, it isn't the drink!' she said. 'He doesn't go to that place only for the drink. I should have thought you being with him would keep him straight.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Yes, you do,' she said, striking the table with her clenched fist. 'You know . . . you know. . . . It's that woman!'

'I don't know naught of George's women,' said Abner obstinately.

'Then you've no eyes,' she said, with a gesture of scorn. 'The woman at the Pound House!' She blazed with a white anger: 'That dark-eyed devil that's been after him these months, that Susie Hind . . .'

'Oh, her . . .' said Abner, with a laugh.

'Don't you put me off!' she cried. 'Don't put me off! It's not for me, it's for his children. You see, I know, so you'd best tell me.'

'I can tell you one thing,' he said. 'George ain't been with Susie Hind to-night.'

She clenched her hands furiously. 'You're only telling me lies . . . lies. How do you know? How do you know?'

'How do I know? I like that! I know because I've been with her myself.'

He thought it was a fine and brutal thing to say. With the same words he had rescued his friend from an awkward suspicion and proclaimed the thing that he had been wanting to shout to the stars on his way home. He had been burning to share his triumph with some one. George would have heard it if he hadn't been so drunk. Now it was out; he had got it off his chest; he stood p. 166
there smiling and triumphant, wondering what she could say next.

'So you needn't vex yourself about poor old George,' he said.

For a second she stared at him. The white anger died out of her face. She became suddenly red. Her clenched fingers opened and she clutched at the table. Then she gave a sudden, choking gasp, and spoke:—

'You . . .' she said, 'you . . . ! Oh, I shouldn't have thought it of you!'

'What's up with you now?' he said, good-humouredly. Her body was shaken with a fit of sobbing and she left him staring in the candlelight.

The Thirteenth Chapter p. 167

Next morning when Abner came downstairs in the dark he found George making himself a cup of tea in the kitchen.

'That you, Abner?' he said, turning his neck gingerly as though it hurt his head to speak. 'God! It's lifting the top of my skull off! This dose'll last me for a bit. Mind you, I wasn't so boozed I can't remember what happened. I should have slept up against that old wall if you hadn't come along. You'm a good pal, Abner.' At this point his voice gave out. 'Have a spot of tea?' he said in a hoarse whisper.

As usual they walked down the valley together at dawn. The fields lay hoary with rime, so that the light of dawn was like cloudy moonlight. Their heels crunched into the brittle ice of the wheel-ruts. Before them, on the white road, ran the wayward pattern of Spider's dancing feet.

Not a bird sang. The cold air gripped their temples. It was as though winter were closing on the world and those who dwelt in it like an iron vice. Dawn whitened beyond Castel Ditches: light without heat—light reflected from ice. But the steady walking thawed their limbs and George was soon asking in a husky voice for details of what had happened the night before. Something in Mary's attitude when they woke that morning had struck him as unusual. He guessed that she had found a new grievance, and was anxious to know what she had said. He laughed when Abner told him that she had questioned him on the subject of Susie: laughed till the cold air choked him.

'They'm all the same, the women,' he said. 'Jealous . . . that's the top and bottom of them. What did you tell her?'

'Said I hadn't seen you at the Pound House.'

'God! You didn't say I'd been to Lesswardine?'

'I dain't know naught about it.'

'And the less you know the better, or you'll be having these women buzz round you like flies. You p. 168
can tell our Mary what you like, but you'll need to keep your eyes skinned with mother. I've got to bide on the right side of the old woman or it's all up. She'll have it out of you before you know you're there.'

By this time they had reached the lower end of the valley to which the cloggers had lately transferred their work. The whole gang were now housed in the Buffalo and the other scattered cottages of Chapel Green, but a couple of tents were left standing on the banks of the Folly Brook and the smoke of a wood-fire went up blue into the air.

'I can't make mother out,' George grumbled. 'Here she is with Wigan Joe and the rest of them in the house: a mint of money for the asking, and she goes scaring them over to Mainstone with her long face. If I had the Buffalo I'd soon see they spent their money in the house. It's as good as robbing me the way she sends them away. She don't want the money, but I want it bad enough, God knows!'

They parted when they reached the workings. George whistled to Spider, but the dog only wagged her tail and then dived into a trench, preferring to stay with Abner. Munn appeared, rubbing his hands with cold. Abner laughed at him.

'Put your back into it, Joe, and you'll soon feel right,' he said.

The day's work began. A red sun rose sluggishly, half frozen. The light glinted on the long line of swinging picks and the sounds of the work rose cheerily in the thin air. Very different was this from the subdued activity of summer. The labourers did not work only for money but because the exertion sent the blood tingling warm into their hands and feet. Work was an ecstasy and to Abner a greater ecstasy than to the rest of them. He thought of Susie and of the night before. He whistled as he worked for sheer physical joy, rejoicing in his strength, for now once more, after months of soft disuse, his body was finding its right expression and coming splendidly to its own. He stretched his limbs in the sunlight, recapturing the moments of physical exaltation that used to come to him when the Mawne United team stepped out on to the smooth turf of the p. 169
Albion ground, a company of clean and splendid athletes. And all the time, beneath the pleasant anodyne of work, his body glowed with a rich contentment, knowing that in a few hours night would come and Susie be clinging in his arms again.

He had no fear that she would forsake him. He felt, in every fibre of his body that he was a match, and more than a match for Badger. Having once attained her he knew that he could keep her; and in this he was not deceived, for Susie, having looked on him and found that he was good, had taken a fancy to him and now kept pace with his passion, asking as much as he could give. Every evening, as was already his custom, he would go to the Pound House and take his seat beside Gunner Eve; but now he no longer needed to follow Susie with his eyes, was no longer tortured with vague jealousies, for when she passed him he could feel her soften and respond to his presence. Sometimes, when no one was looking, she would turn her head in his direction and for a moment their eyes would meet. He did not care when men spoke to her lightly or placed their hands upon her arm, for now he knew that she belonged to him and could be his for the asking. The events of the first night were repeated many times. Now a single whisper was enough to ensure that when the alehouse was empty and Mr Hind safely in bed, the kitchen door would be opened softly and Susie waiting for him in the warm darkness. It amused Abner to see the coldness that she now showed toward Badger. The keeper was puzzled, for all their love-making was secret and nocturnal, and Susie and Abner never appeared in public together. Badger knew that for some unknown reason he had lost her, and this made him more persistent than ever in his attentions, being far too important in his own estimation to be discarded without good reason. Abner laughed to see his irritation. He and Susie laughed together in the night. 'I can't imagine whatever I saw in him,' she said.

At the end of November Susie went away for a week to stay with her grandparents in Hereford. Without her the Pound House meant nothing to Abner, and without considering that his absence p. 170
might be noticed, he drifted back into his old habit of returning to Wolfpits in the evening. It was now more than a month since he had done this, and in the interval he had scarcely spoken to Mary Malpas. Returning, and expecting to pick up the threads of the old life exactly as he had left them, he was surprised to find the atmosphere of Wolfpits curiously changed. The attitude of Mary herself was cold and unfriendly. He found it difficult to make headway against it, for she

scarcely spoke to him, and even the children seemed to have become infected with their mother's distrust. It was true that they had seen so little of him as almost to have forgotten him, but it seemed strange that his old favourite, Gladys, no longer came instinctively to his arms. He could not accept the change without a protest. One evening, finding Mary alone, he tackled her.

'What's come over you?' he said.

'Nothing's come over me. What do you mean?' she replied coldly.

'Yo'm different . . . like you was scared of me. What have I done?'

'You know best. You know what you told me . . . that night,' she said, with tight lips.

'That's nothing to do with you,' he said.

'No . . . Nothing.'

'Then what's up with you?'

She laughed uneasily and went into the scullery. Abner was seized with sudden rage. It didn't surprise him that George couldn't get on with her. Mrs Malpas was right. She was trying to play the lady with him. With a woman like that it was useless trying to be frank. He could read suspicion into everything that she did. When Gladys, who was now regaining her confidence, climbed on to his knee, she followed the child with anxious eyes as though she feared that he would corrupt her. He determined to have the matter out with her, but she never gave him a chance, arranging carefully that they should never be alone. For this or for some other obscure reason she always invited her neighbour, Mrs Mamble, to come in and sit with her in the evening. This old woman, innocent of the strange relation between them, would sit in front of the fire talking incessantly of her dead husband and her distant relatives down Tenbury way. She had a brother who kept a small shop in a hamlet called Far Forest, and was never tired of talking of his importance as an elder of the local Wesleyan synod and the achievements of her nephew James, whom his father had destined for the ministry. The old woman tried to entertain them both with these recitals, but Abner had little patience with her, and tried to forget that she was there. He sat reading the football news in the last Sunday's *People*; but even this could not shut out the sound of her slow, insistent voice. One night he asked for pen and paper and wrote a short but laborious note to Alice, enclosing a postal order for two pounds, which he had bought in Chapel Green. Mary watched him all the time that he was writing. p. 171

'Ah, yo'm curious, bain't yo'?' he thought. 'Pretending to take no heed of me, but yo'd give your eyes to see what I've written.'

Indeed she offered to post the letter for him; but he declined, putting it in his pocket with a laugh.

In the end he found these evenings at Wolfpits so uncomfortable that he was glad when Mick Connor inveigled him into a new expedition against Badger's preserves. By this time the keeper had looked about him and made plans for defending his master's property, so that the game was getting more dangerous every day. Badger had made friends with Constable Bastard, the new policeman, who had been drafted to Mainstone from Shrewsbury and looked upon poaching with the uncharitable eye of a townsman. To the great embarrassment of Mr Hind, who, not unreasonably, lived in terror of the licensing justices, and had not yet determined in what degree the new policeman was corruptible, Bastard began to take an interest in the customers of the Pound House, poking his whiskered face inside the taproom every evening and taking count of the company like a shepherd numbering his sheep. Mr Hind's heart sank when he found that the constable was a teetotaller. The appearance of Bastard's face in the doorway made him tremble for his licence, though these visits only meant that the keeper and the policeman were working together, hoping to identify the authors of each poaching outrage by establishing their absence from the Pound House. p. 172

The first expedition in which Abner took part during Susie's visit to Hereford gave them a big haul. Abner's own share of it was fifteen shillings, and, thus encouraged, they raided the keeper's preserves on three nights in succession. The constable, checking the tale of drinkers at the Pound House, pointed out that Abner, Mick, Curly Atwell, and another had been absent on each of the nights in question, and that Mick had celebrated his return by recklessly standing treat to the whole taproom.

'That young Fellows,' said Bastard, 'he's not been nigh the place for more nor a week. For myself I'd say that he looks a quiet chap, but you never know . . . upon my word you don't.'

'The simpler they looks,' said Badger emphatically, 'the more they wants an eye kept on them. I'm pretty near certain I saw him that night they was arter the salmon.'

'Never you fear!' said the constable, 'I'll keep an eye on the lot.'

It never occurred to Badger, whose energies were centred for the present on one problem, to connect Abner's absence from the Pound House with Susie's visit to Hereford. He was an obstinate and not very intelligent man, thick-set in mind as in body, who had learnt his own craft thoroughly and knew little else. He had become aware of Susie's coldness toward him before her departure, but he had not thought to explain it by her fancying another man. In any case the matter might wait. He could only do one thing at a time, and for the present he was too busy

with Mick and his friends to waste good time in dangling round the Pound House. Perhaps it was only that Susie wanted more fuss made of her. All in good time . . .

After ten days she returned, and Abner began to visit the Pound House again. He found her imperious and exacting, she could not see too much of him. Bastard reported him to Badger as a regular attendant at the inn.

'You needn't trouble about that young Fellows,' he said. 'He's after other game.' p. 173

'There's no game here to speak on but ours,' said Badger stupidly.

'Ah, it's a different kind I mean,' said the constable. 'That girl of Hind's is looking after him. Any night of the week if you want to see a picture you can watch her take him in by the back door when the old man's asleep upstairs.'

Badger went livid and swore so violently as to shock the constable's principles.

'I don't believe it,' he said, 'not a word of it.'

'Seeing's believing,' said Bastard. 'At any rate seeing's good enough for me.'

All thought of the poachers vanished from Badger's single mind. He left the constable in the middle of their conversation and went straight to the Pound House, where he found Susie alone, making a petticoat from a pattern that she had bought in Hereford. She could see by his stormy entrance that something had upset him and switched on her most ingratiating manner.

'Well, it is a time since I've seen you, Mr Badger,' she said, laying aside her work. 'Will you have something?'

He wouldn't drink; he refused to waste time in preliminary skirmishing.

'You're not going to get round me that way,' he said. 'What's this about you and that chap Fellows?'

'Fellows?' said Susie. 'What Fellows is that?'

'Now don't start that game on me,' said Badger angrily. 'I've seen there was something up with you for the last month. Now I know what it is. You can't go on like that with me. I'm not that kind of man.'

'And I'm not that kind of girl, Mr Badger,' said Susie. 'I thought better of you, indeed I did.'

'You can drop all that,' said Badger, with a laugh. 'You can let on you're as innocent as a lamb, but I know better. Understand that!'

'If that's what you mean, I can tell you straight I'm not going to listen to your dirty tongue. I'm not accustomed to be spoke to by my friends like that.' She rose indignantly and would have gone into the kitchen but he caught hold of her arm.

'You don't deny it,' he said. p. 174

'I wouldn't demean myself.' She tried to wrench away from him, but he would not let her go. The warmth of her arm on his fingers made him mad. He wanted to use her roughly. She cried out with pain.

'Don't!' she cried. 'You're hurting me!'

He wanted to hurt her. He only held her tighter. 'Where's your father?' he said.

'Father's gone out,' she said. 'Oh, let me go!'

'Gone out, is he? Well, I'll have a talk to him about this when he comes back. Then we'll see . . .'

'You can tell him all the dirty lies you like,' she said defiantly.

But, in reality, his words had thrown her into a state of terror. That squat owl-faced father of hers was the one person on earth whom she dreaded. It came over her suddenly that somehow or other she must prevent his knowing, for though he had no objection to his daughter being free with men for the good of the house, she knew that he was anxious to keep on good terms with Badger and would be furious to think that she had taken up with a labouring man. Somehow she must flatter the keeper out of his intention; but she knew that a sudden change of front would be a manœuvre too transparent. It pleased her, therefore, to give vent to the emotions which she had so far controlled and to break down in the most natural tears. She put her handkerchief to her eyes and sobbed violently.

Badger was bewildered by this but still determined.

'You don't get over me that way,' he said. 'Not if I know it!'

She went on sobbing, and the spectacle began to get on his nerves.

'You can cry your eyes out, my girl, but I'm going to tell your father.'

She raised her eyes. 'It's not that!' she said violently. 'You can tell him any lie you like and it won't make no difference to me. What I can't stand is that you should think it of me . . . that you

should think I'd go with a common chap like that. It's cruel, Mr Badger . . . cruel! After the friends we've been. . .'

She put her hands on his shoulders and looked at him, pleading. His lust got the better of him and he took her violently in his arms. She submitted, and he began to forget his suspicions. She clung to him so that he could think of nothing but that she was desirable. Then, cunningly, gradually she became playful and childish, teasing him, indignant that he should have thought so ill of her. By the time that he left her she had convinced him that nothing could spoil their intimacy; but whatever she pretended she could not shake herself free from the fright he had given her. She felt that the time would never pass till she could see Abner and warn him. p. 175

It was no easy matter, for when the evening came and she began her work in the bar, moving among the drinkers with her usual smiling freedom, Badger was also there following her with hungry eyes as she went about her work. He sat in a corner, isolated, for none of the strangers would have anything to do with him. While serving a tot of gin to Gunner Eve she contrived to whisper to Abner, begging him to keep away from the house that night.

'Why? What's up?' he said.

'I can't tell you,' she whispered. 'Come to-morrow early, before it's light on your way to work. Just to please me!'

She spoke so urgently and with such evident distress that he obeyed her, and Badger, who had seen her bending over to speak to Abner, spent a cold night watching the back of the Pound House in vain. He might well have been better employed, for while he stood there shivering Mick Connor made free with half a dozen of his pheasants.

Next morning, in the half light of dawn, which made the cold kitchen look unspeakably sordid, she received Abner. The meeting had none of the warm glamour of their nightly love-making, and her anxiety made him impatient.

'What the hell do I care for Badger?' he said.

'Oh, quiet . . . quiet! Don't speak so loud!' she implored him. She submitted to his embraces, but her mind was not with him.

'I can't think what's up with you,' he said.

His unconcern irritated her. 'Can't you understand?' she said. 'It's better to do without me for a little than to lose me for good. That's what would happen if father knew. He'd send me away to Hereford, to grandma's. That's what he'd do. Only for a week, Abner. After that, when he's forgotten about it, things 'll be better.' p. 176

Her distress was so real and she seemed so little to belong to him in her present state that he consented not to see her for a week.

'Then I shan't come a'nigh the place,' he said. 'I'm not goin' to sit there looking at you and nothing after.'

'Yes . . . that would be best,' she said gladly. It inflamed him to think that she could take this complete divorce so calmly.

'Better finish it off,' he said.

Then she clung to him. 'No, no, Abner. . . . I couldn't bear that! Only a week, my love, only a week. . .'

He kept to his side of the bargain, and Badger was relieved to see him no more at the Pound House, although the suddenness of Abner's abstention coloured his suspicions. What with his pheasants and the woman the keeper's life was becoming too complicated for his intelligence, for Mick profited by Badger's new devotion to Susie by ravaging his coverts. In this Abner, who had no other way of killing time, joined his friend, and on the last night of the week came a sharp but bloodless encounter in which the keeper was more than ever certain that he had seen Abner's face. After this it became fixed in Badger's mind that Abner was his principal enemy, the man who was obstinately working against him wherever he went. Somehow or other, he determined, he must get the better of him.

On the night when Abner returned to the Pound House, Badger was already there. Mick, as usual after a successful foray, was spending money freely, and by nine o'clock the room was full of excited men. Abner was ready to drink with the best of them, for his pockets were full of money and he had not been inside a pub for a week. To add to this uproarious assembly in came George Malpas, returning early from his own dark business in Lesswardine.

'Go easy, boys,' he said, as he entered, 'that damned copper's outside.'

But Mick Connor had by now gone too far to go easy. The liquor which in the early stages of intoxication merely rendered him funny now made him boastful, and the sight of Badger, glowering in his corner over a hot whisky, provided him with a subject for his wit. Atwell tried to keep him within bounds, but Mick, once fairly nourished, could talk the cross off an ass's back. The laughter with which his sallies at the keeper's expense were greeted stimulated him. He plunged into wild excesses of simile, while Badger sat sipping his whisky, going redder and redder as he listened. He knew that the whole room was against him; felt that before long he p. 177

must do something to assert himself. If he went out into the road he would only be laughed at, but no man could sit there listening to Mick Connor without shame.

'Wait while I'm tellin' you,' said Mick. 'Over in Connemara there used to be an old gent named Hewish, a proper old sportsman. It was he that invented that game I've told you of . . . spider racing, spiders burning the legs off of them on a hot plate. Cock-fightin' too. And badger-baitin'. I'm after tellin' you that's the sport for a man!'

A roar of laughter greeted him. 'And so say all of us!' said Mick insolently, staring into Badger's corner. Badger pushed aside the table and rose to his feet. His glass went down with a crash.

'Oh, Mr Badger!' Susie cried.

'Gard! The baste's afther turning on me!' cried Mick. 'All together, boys!'

Badger pushed his way through the crowd to Mick. The Irishman lowered his head and butted him in the stomach like a ram. Badger, falling, saw Abner's smiling face and lashed out at it. The two men went down together, fighting on the floor. Susie rushed into the kitchen, calling for her father, and at the same moment the constable ran into the room. He began to try and pinion Abner, who had Badger on the floor.

'Leave them alone,' cried George Malpas excitedly. 'Badger hit him first!' He took hold of the policeman's shoulder, and tried to pull him back.

'Do you know what you're doing?' Bastard shouted. 'Obstructing my duty?'

But George would not let him go. The policeman left Abner and closed with Malpas. He was the taller, but the older man. They swayed in each other's arms and then, tripping on the leg of an overturned chair, went down together. The policeman was undermost and his head hit the stone floor with a dull thud. George, who had fallen above him, freed himself from his arms. p. 178

'The b—'s stunned,' said Atwell. 'Serve him right!'

Mr Hind had appeared on the scene and was bending over the prostrate policeman. George leaned panting against the bar.

'There's blood coming from his ears and nose,' Mr Hind said hoarsely.

'The b—'s stunned,' Atwell repeated stolidly.

'He's not stunned,' said the landlord, looking up. 'He's dead!'

By this time Abner had got the better of the keeper, whom he held beneath him on the floor. He heard the crash as George Malpas and Constable Bastard went over amid a hubbub of voices. Then, with the landlord's words, which Abner did not hear, fell a sudden silence. He wondered what was up, released Badger, and pushed forward to the cluster of men that surrounded the policeman's body. He heard the word 'dead' passing from one to another. 'Lock at the blood coming out of his ear,' they said. And there was George Malpas leaning up against the bar with his hands behind him gripping it, ghastly pale and panting with his mouth open, and twitching at the corners. He didn't see Abner or any one else. A curious inertia had fallen on the group of men about Bastard's body. They simply stared at it as though it had fallen into the midst of them from another planet. Mr Hind, by way of an experiment, lifted the constable's hand and let it fall again. It fell on the floor with a wooden sound.

'Somebody run to Lesswardine for the doctor,' said Mr Hind.

'I'll go myself,' said Abner.

'That's right. Tell 'im about the blood, and be's quick as you can.'

'It's snowing,' some one called.

Abner went hatless to the door. Looking back into the kitchen he saw the face of Susie. It was white, like a mask. For the moment it meant nothing to him. They looked at each other for that fraction of a second unrecognising. Abner started running toward Lesswardine. The hard road echoed. The night was deadly black and snow was falling. p. 179

He scarcely noticed the snow. He went on plodding over the road to Lesswardine without realising, for the time, the importance of his journey. He felt the snowflakes spatter his face, his neck, his chest, for in the struggle with Badger his shirt had been torn open. He was glad he had come to grips with Badger. He felt he could do what he liked with the keeper now. The white-faced vision of Susie, till then unrealised, came back to him out of the darkness. Scared, she must have been!

In Lesswardine yellow lamps beamed through halos of cold air. Crossing the bridge he saw that his clothes were as white as a miller's. The great flakes danced like moths in the lamplight, they flew into his mouth and melted on the heat of his tongue. His feet did not echo in these new streets, for the macadam was felted with an inch of snow. He had nearly reached his goal. It was senseless to go on running, panting, and swallowing mouthfuls of snow; but his legs would not obey these half-formed thoughts and carried him onwards.

The doctor was smoking his after-supper pipe when Abner arrived. The Hinds were good patients, and he did not hesitate to turn out. 'Give me a hand with the mare,' he said, and they

went out into the stable to put to. The doctor's wife had warmed his overcoat and wrapped a muffler round his neck. He gave Abner a peg of whisky to keep him warm. When they were clear of the Lesswardine lights he asked for details of the affair. 'By Gad, that's serious,' he said. 'That means an inquest and a P.M.' He thought to himself: 'Two guineas,' and touched up the mare with satisfaction.

'You say Bastard and George Malpas went down together? He was struggling with George?'

'Yes—it was me and Badger he was after.'

'That's beside the point,' said the doctor. 'It's a bad lookout for Malpas—and for his mother, poor old lady! A bad lookout. . . . It's homicide—manslaughter.'

The Fourteenth Chapter

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By the time that Abner and the doctor reached Mainstone, Bastard's body was growing cold, and the last hope that his unconsciousness was any less than that of death had vanished. The Pound House was still full of those who waited for the verdict, a silent, sober company. Mr Hind, who had not seen the beginning of the struggle, tried vainly to find out what had happened. All accounts of it were confused and contradictory, and in any case it mattered little to the landlord, for he knew that his house was already in the black books of the police, and felt sure that this catastrophe would mean the loss of his licence. The doctor scarcely needed to look at Bastard's body.

'Yes, fractured base,' he said. 'He must have died at once. An elderly man with brittle bones. There's nothing to be done, Hind. I'll knock up the sergeant when I get back to Lesswardine and telephone the coroner.'

'I wouldn't have had this happen for nothing, doctor!' moaned Mr Hind.

'Of course you wouldn't. It's not your fault.'

'He must have tripped over that chair.' And everybody, including the doctor, stared at the offending piece of furniture with interest.

'Come on, Abner,' said George Malpas. 'Good-night, Mr Hind.'

Mr Hind did not reply.

All through that night the snow fell slowly, incessantly. The soft, frozen sky drifted downward idly on the land, and George and Abner had to pick their way back to Wolfpits blindly in the small hours, guided through the plain by the presence of ghostly trees and in the Wolfpits valley by the snow-muffled tumult of the Folly Brook. The hills were desolate and savage. They lay dead, and the sky covered them. Wolfpits itself rose before the travellers' eyes sudden and black through the falling snow. There was no light in any of the windows, for Mary had given them up long ago and gone to bed. Wood embers smouldered in the kitchen grate. George poked them into a blaze. They took off their snow-plastered coats and sat in front of the fire.

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'Well, this is a bloody fine thing!' said George. 'Old Bastard gone and me a murderer. I've looked for some queer things but never for this.'

'I reckon it's my fault,' said Abner. 'That's bound to come out.'

'That's not going to help me,' said George, with a laugh. 'Not it! . . . It's mother I'm thinking of. There's no luck in our family. It's no good talking about it. It's my last fling, and I'd do it again for a pal. If it hadn't happened to-night, it wouldn't never have happened at all.'

Abner could say nothing. Even now he didn't realise the seriousness of his friend's position.

'Just my blasted luck!' said George. 'Better turn in unless you want to get frozen.'

He went upstairs with his candle, and Abner followed.

When daylight returned the snow had ceased, but the night's fall had obliterated the track of their returning feet. Wolfpits had become a black island in the surrounding whiteness. From the drift upon the doorstep the snow lay smooth to the tops of the hills which dawn illumined with a rosy light. Never had the mountains seemed so near to the house, so beautiful, and so little threatening.

Abner woke early and looked out on this transfigured world. In all the house no one was astir. Even old Drew, who worked in all weathers, had not yet emerged from his snowbound door. George and Mary still slept. It was very cold, and Abner threw his coat over his bedclothes. It was no good getting up, for he knew that with so deep a fall there could be no work on the pipe-track that day. He lay in bed, smoking, watching the clustered chimneys of Wolfpits against the sky. The rosy hue faded from the mountains. The sky cleared to a thin, dazzling blue. A thread of smoke issued from old Drew's chimney, rising, straight as a larch, into the clear air. In the room beneath him, where George and Mary slept, he heard voices. No doubt George Malpas was telling his wife what had happened. Sometimes the talk was rapid; sometimes there were long

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silences. Abner was thankful that the sad business of telling Mary had not been left to him. He heard the children's voices on the stair. The time had come when he would have to face them all.

They were all in the kitchen when he came downstairs. He could see from Mary's eyes that she had been crying; she scarcely dared to look at him lest she should cry again. George was pretending to be cheerful. He was playing with the children, telling them how they must make a snow man in the drive. He said good-morning to Abner as though nothing had happened overnight, and Abner's heart went out to him for his courage. Mary did not speak to him, but it seemed to him that her red eyes were reproachful. He felt that she probably considered him responsible for the tragedy, was conscious of his indirect share of guilt, and wished there were some way in which he could atone for it. He admired the manly way in which George took his trouble. Indeed he never felt so wholly friendly to George in his life.

The elders breakfasted in silence, but the children talked incessantly, being excited by the snow. An overwhelming impulse to put himself right with Mary made Abner stop her when she was carrying the breakfast things into the scullery.

'George has told you?' he said.

'Yes, he's told me. I suppose there's nothing to be done?'

'Naught that I know on,' he replied. And she left him quickly, for she did not want him to see her crying again.

George lit his pipe at the fire. 'Funny to hear them kids,' he said, with a half smile. 'I mind it just the same once before. It was at Mary's father's funeral when his sister, her Aunt Rachel, brought her youngsters over from Bromyard.'

They were spared more of these harrowing contrasts, for the air was warm, and the children, carefully wrapped up by Mary, ran out to play in the glistening stuff. Mary did not reappear, and the two men sat on over the fire. Only George spoke from time to time.

'It's all of a piece with my luck,' he said. 'I reckon I was born unlucky. One thing and another. . . . I don't mind as long as it don't come out what I was after in Lesswardine. She's a decent woman and I wouldn't have her damaged by it. I wish to God I'd stayed like she wanted me.' p. 183

He seemed to be waiting for Abner to speak, so that he felt bound to ask who the woman in Lesswardine was.

'A young woman, a widow . . .' said George. 'I wouldn't have her name mentioned if I could help it. She's got enough to put up with. Probably I shan't see her, so I'll give you a note for her.'

He relapsed into silence. 'The odds is,' he went on, after a long pause, 'this is the last time I shall see Wolfpits at night. Well, I'm not sorry for that, though there's no denying that Mary's been a good wife to me.'

He spoke more excitedly. 'There's one thing: try as they will, they can't make it murder. Accidental manslaughter, that's the most they can make of it. That means a couple of years hard labour. You can't tell. . . . It depends on the damned jury. Only mention the word "poaching" and the judges are again' you. Yes . . . you can't deny she's been a good wife, if I hadn't married her too young. I've got mother to thank for that. But I don't know what'll happen to her. She's too proud for charity, and she'd starve herself and the children rather than take a penny piece from mother.'

'She won't want while I'm here,' said Abner.

George looked at him steadily without replying.

'You mean you'll stay here and keep the home together?'

'If you want me to,' said Abner.

'You're a good pal, Abner,' he replied. 'I've said that before. And I wouldn't have her suffer. There's something in what her dad used to say . . . about good blood and that. If I hadn't took a fancy against her this wouldn't never have happened. I wouldn't have the home broke up.'

'I'll look to that,' said Abner. 'That is, if she don't turn against me.'

George's handsome face was working, against his will. He grasped Abner's hand in his. It seemed a natural gesture. 'You're a proper pal,' he said, and then, in a debauch of self-pity, 'By God, you're the only pal I've got that I can trust!' p. 184

Morgan came running into the room ahead of Gladys, anxious to be the bearer of exciting news. He ran straight to his father.

'Well, son?' said George.

'Dad . . . dad. . . . There's a pleeceman comin' up the drive with a bicycle,' he cried.

'A strange one we don't know,' Gladys added.

'Go into the back to your mother,' said George.

The constable from Lesswardine knocked at the door and handed two summonses to George and

Abner. ‘Inquest at the Pound House at two o’clock. You understand it’s important.’

‘Have a drink of beer before you go?’ said George.

‘I don’t mind,’ said the constable, becoming less official.

George went down into the cellar with a jug.

‘This is a bad job,’ said the constable. ‘A bad job, sure enough.’

Abner asked him which way he thought it would go. ‘There’s no saying,’ he replied. ‘As long as they don’t bring it in “murder.”’

He was a fair young man, newly recruited to the force from some Herefordshire village. The ride in the snow had freshened his complexion and made him look healthy and jolly.

‘There’s a nasty drift at the bottom of the hill by the bridge,’ he said. ‘A good six foot of it! Well, here’s luck!’ he said, as he drank off George’s beer.

‘Luck’s the word!’ said George, ‘and God knows I need some!’

Mary came into the room with a set face. ‘Warrants for the inquest,’ said George.

‘Oh, is that all?’ she answered, with relief.

They set off early for the Pound House, fearing that the driven snow might delay them. George was almost gay, and Abner wondered at his friend’s courage. They avoided Chapel Green, being anxious not to pass the Buffalo. In Mainstone a few women came to their doors and stared at them. The Pound House door was open. A number of jurors had already arrived. They were mostly farmers or shopkeepers from Lesswardine and had agreed that the day was a fine one in spite of the snow and that it was lucky that the tragedy had happened at a time when they were not busy on their farms. Susie was nowhere to be seen, but Mr Hind, worried and paler than usual, was doing an excellent trade in hot whisky and water. He was sorry, he told them, that there was no lemon in the house. Indeed he was feverishly anxious to put himself on good terms with the jurors. p. 185

When George and Abner entered an awkward silence fell upon the company. Several of those who knew Malpas said good-day to him. The fact that he was greeted by these men who were shortly to sit in judgment on him encouraged him. He took a seat on one of the benches in the corner of the room. Abner went to the bar and asked for a drink. Mr Hind, with hatred shining in his pale eyes, served him.

‘Hope you’re all right to-day, Mr Hind,’ said Abner friendlily.

The landlord trembled with rage. He pushed Abner’s glass at him, spilling a quarter of the whisky. ‘I hope I’ve seen the last of you,’ he said.

The jurymen now congregated in the other corner of the room as though they realised that it was not fitting that they should mix with such important figures in the affair as George and his friend. They talked together in low voices. Abner and George sat quietly listening, but only instinctive glances in their direction told them when George’s name was mentioned. At the end of the bar was another door, leading into the club-room, generally used for the meetings of friendly societies, in which the inquest would be held. Abner wondered if the body of Bastard lay inside it; for heavy steps were heard from time to time through the closed door. At last the door was opened and the sergeant of police from Lesswardine appeared in it.

He stood there very erect and official, bending stiffly to recognise the more important of the group of jurymen. Then his eyes fell on George and Abner. He beckoned to them and called them into the second room. Abner had expected that Bastard’s bony carcass would be revealed lying in state, but instead of this he saw a long deal table with an arm-chair at the head of it and six other ordinary chairs on either side. In front of the coroner’s seat were spread a pile of official papers, ink, blotting-paper, and a selection of equally impossible pens. On the wall above it hung a trophy, the horns of a North American bison with a boss of black hair between them, which, in a more savage age might well have symbolised the official’s power of life and death, but, in fact, represented those that were vested in the master of the local branch of the Ancient Order of Buffaloes. The sergeant looked at his watch. It was already past two o’clock. He went out to look down the road to see if the coroner was in sight. The young constable who had delivered the warrants earlier in the day was busy placing a copy of the New Testament in front of each of the jurymen’s seats. When the sergeant’s back was turned he winked at George and Abner. Then he closed the door and left them alone. p. 186

‘They’ve summonsed fourteen for the jury,’ said George. ‘I’ve counted ’em. There’s three good friends to me: Mr Prosser of The Dyke, Jones of Pensilva, and Watkins the tailor. The one I’m frightened of is the big chap with the red face. Williams, his name is. He fell out with mother over a hogshead of cider five years ago and haven’t spoken to me nor her since. He’d be glad enough to see me swing! Well . . . what’s coming’s bound to come. ’Tis no good thinking on it.’

He said no more, but began to beat out the rhythm of a music-hall song on the floor with the end of his stick, staring straight in front of him at the bison’s head. Abner wished that something would happen. He hated this mechanical tapping.

A loud voice was heard in the bar and with it the scraping of feet. The coroner had arrived. The

sergeant threw open the doors with a flourish and Mr Mortimer entered. He was a big man, with a handsome, rather heavy face, bushy white eyebrows over pale blue eyes, and a pointed beard in which a yellow, like that of tobacco stains, was mingled with white. He walked quickly to the head of the table, his coat-tails flapping behind. Under his arm he carried a sheaf of papers that he spread out flat in front of him. Then he patted the table on either side of them with his hands and took up a pen. The sergeant stood stiffly at his elbow, and the jury shuffled into their places. Mr Williams, as by common consent, planted himself at the coroner's right hand. p. 187

'I declare this court open in the King's name,' said Mr Mortimer in a deep, impressive voice. The sergeant stood as though hypnotised by the formula. The coroner turned on him suddenly. 'Now, sergeant,' he boomed, 'look alive! We don't want to stay here all day. Get the jury sworn!'

He dived once more into his papers, yawned, rubbed his hands, glanced behind him at the symbolical buffalo, and then suddenly decided to clean his nails with a pen-knife. Meanwhile, with Testaments lifted in their right hands, the jurymen, one by one in different inflections of the border tongue, repeated the oath which the sergeant administered to them. '*I swear by Almighty God*.' . . . I swear by Almighty God.' '*That I will well and duly inquire*.' . . . 'That I will well and duly inquire.' It was like the chorus that one may hear any morning of the week outside the windows of a country board-school. From time to time the coroner looked up impatiently from his manicure, and the sergeant increased his pace.

'Finished?' said Mr Mortimer at last.

'Yes, sir. All correct,' said the sergeant.

'Now, gentlemen, you must choose a foreman. Only be quick about it. We're late.'

In point of fact the jury had been waiting for him for more than an hour, but the question of choosing a foreman did not detain them for long, since Mrs Malpas's enemy, Williams of the Pentre, had already virtually chosen himself.

'Very good . . . very good!' said the coroner. 'Take them to view the body, sergeant.'

They filed out behind the policeman, opening their ranks at the door to admit the doctor from Lesswardine, who apologised for his lateness and shook hands with the coroner.

'You've done the post-mortem?' said the latter. p. 188

'Yes, that's what kept me.'

'And found what you expected?'

'Yes . . . fractured base. I had no doubt about it.'

'Cheap two-guineas' worth. You'd better take your money now to save time. Sign for it here.'

The doctor pocketed the sovereigns and placed the florin aside, according to the unwritten law that obtains in such cases, for the sergeant.

'Sad affair,' said the coroner, with a yawn. 'Good man, Bastard. One of the old sort. Conscientious. No brains. Ideal policeman. What the devil are those fellers doing? I've promised to call for tea at the Delahays.'

'I was hoping,' said the doctor, 'that you'd come back with me. My wife . . .'

'No, thanks. . . Very kind of you all the same.'

'We don't often see you this way.'

'No. Not since Condover's suicide. I believe his son-in-law's mixed up in this affair?'

'Yes. . . . He's over there in the corner. It's the usual thing, I think. A brawl in an alehouse. Alcohol.'

The coroner nodded his head dolefully. His cellar was the best in Ludlow.

The jurors returned, and with a final glance at the buffalo's head, as though he expected it to tell him the time, Mr Mortimer began business. First the sergeant identified the body of his subordinate. Standing rigidly at attention he rattled off the oath at a terrific speed, running his evidence on to the end of it without a stop. He could soon show the coroner how to do it. Mr Mortimer never raised his eyes from his papers.

'I may say, sir . . .' began the sergeant impressively.

'You may say what you like, sergeant, when you're asked for it,' snapped the coroner. 'That's enough.'

The sergeant stepped back, full of offended dignity. The jury were impressed. Mr Mortimer was behaving in accordance with his reputation.

Other evidence followed rapidly. George and Abner leaned forward, listening. George with his head in his hands and his eyes staring out under the arch of his fingers. The second finger of his right hand still beat out the rhythm of the music-hall song that was running in the back of his mind. p. 189

‘Dr Hendrie!’

‘I swear by Almighty God that the evidence I shall give to this court shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Arthur Cuthbert Hendrie. Thirty-eight. M.R.C.S. and L.R.C.P. I am a physician and surgeon practising in Lesswardine. I had seen deceased but did not know him. Yesterday evening before ten o’clock I was called to the Pound House. I arrived there between ten and eleven . . . nearer eleven, and found deceased lying on the floor of the bar with blood and serum flowing from ears and nose. Both ears. He was quite dead.’

‘Quite dead. . . . Can you say how long he had been dead?’

‘No.’

‘Very well. Go on.’

‘I immediately formed the opinion . . . they told me that he had had a violent fall . . . that death was due to a fractured base of the skull. There was a bruise over the left temporal region.’

‘You performed a post-mortem examination.’

‘Yes. This morning. I found the fracture that I had suspected in the middle fossa.’

‘Will your honour ask’n what that there means?’

‘The witness means the middle part of the base of the skull. FOSSA,’ the coroner explained loftily.

‘Death, no doubt, was instantaneous. The condition was consistent with the story of a violent fall on a stone floor. The same condition might have been caused by a blunt instrument. Deceased was old for his years, as shown by the atheromatous condition of the cerebral arteries.’

‘Very good. Have you any questions to ask the witness?’

The jury all shook their heads.

‘If you are in a hurry, Dr Hendrie, I think we can spare you.’

‘Thank you, sir. Good day.’

‘Daniel Prosser Hind!’

Daniel Prosser Hind, forty-nine, was a licensed victualler and the lessee of the Pound House. The owners were Messrs Astill of North Bromwich. He knew the deceased: couldn’t say that they were friends, as deceased had only lately come to Mainstone. He remembered last night. The bar was middling full. He himself was in the parlour working over accounts, his daughter being in charge of the bar. About nine-thirty he heard a row and ran into the bar. The first thing he saw was Mr Badger on the floor and young Fellows on the top of him. Behind them he saw Bastard lying on his back, with blood coming from his ears and nose. Some one said Bastard was stunned. He felt Bastard’s heart and said: ‘No, he’s dead.’ He did not see deceased fall. He was told. . . . He quite understood and begged his worship’s pardon. If he might say so, nothing of this kind had ever occurred in a house under his management before. What with the cloggers and the navvies it was no easy matter to keep an orderly house. He wished to express regret for what had happened. He could not say if Badger and Fellows had been drinking. Mr Badger was usually a temperate man. A man named Connor had the appearance of being the worse for liquor. p. 190

‘Were you not aware of this before?’

No. As he had explained, he was busy with the October accounts.

‘You consider your daughter a fit person to be in charge of a crowded bar?’

Yes. His daughter was quite competent and used to keeping order.

‘How old is she?’

She was twenty years of age. Messrs Astill, he persisted, always expected the accounts to be ready by the end of the month, and he had happened to be a little behind with them. Messrs Astill would speak for him.

‘You consider that you performed your duty as licensee of this inn?’

Yes. Certainly he considered he had done his duty. He had sent for the doctor at once.

‘You really expect me and the jury to believe that a girl of twenty is a fit person to be left in charge of a bar full of those rough men? Very well. . . . You can stand down.’ p. 191

Susan Hind, twenty, said she was daughter of the previous witness. She did not know deceased, though he was in the habit of looking in of nights. She had never served him in the bar. On the night in question there was nothing unusual. There were near about twenty men in the bar. Mr Badger was sitting alone over in the corner. He was not drunk. Fellows was not drunk. She didn’t think that Connor was drunk. She ought to know when a fellow was drunk! There was no special rule as to when they should be served or not. Yes, that was it, she used her discretion. Certainly Connor was excitable. He had had two or three quarts. No, that was nothing for

Connor. He was always quick with his tongue, and the others were laughing at him. She agreed with her father that she could manage men if any one could. She had been used to it for years . . . ever since she was sixteen. She hadn't noticed anything until Badger dropped his glass on the floor and came over to Connor. She supposed Connor had riled him, but she hadn't been listening. Connor always went on at people. She saw Badger give Fellows a hit in the face and then the two of them went down. She called her father, and while her back was turned Bastard must have come in. She saw him try to pull Fellows off Badger. She saw Malpas take Bastard by the arm. He didn't use no violence that she saw. Bastard tried to fix Malpas's arms. She saw the two of them swaying about together. They must have tripped over something, they went down so sudden. Bastard did not cry out. She remembered nothing more, she was that scared. Malpas had not been drinking. He had had one drink: a small whisky. Of course she couldn't say if he had got drink anywhere else. In her opinion he was sober. The only man in the room that was drunk was Atwell. She had gone on serving him because she knew by experience that he could behave decent with it. He was like that most nights.

Atwell, who had smiled at this tribute to his powers, was called next. He didn't remember nothing. He couldn't say if he was drunk because he didn't remember. Asked if he wasn't ashamed of himself, he had nothing to say. p. 192

Michael Connor corroborated the evidence of the witness Susan Hind. Anything he had said to Badger was not out of the way. He was only letting on. He admitted having a drop taken. He was nourished, not drunk. Atwell was drunk, more luck to him! That was making the court no impertinent answer. He said it by the way of no harm.

'Abner Fellows!'

He had been sitting half hypnotised by the progress of the evidence. Each of the witnesses had seemed to him strange and unfamiliar. This subdued, tight-lipped Susan was not the girl who came passionately to his arms. Mr Hind was pale, shabby, shrunken. Even Mick was not the radiant companion that he knew. He heard his own name in a dream. George Malpas pushed him forward as the sergeant took an officious step in his direction. He stood at the foot of the long table, staring at the top of the coroner's head and the buffalo horns above it. The foreman of the jury was examining him closely, much as on market days he would have examined a likely bullock. The man with the white beard went on writing in a large, fluent hand, while the sergeant thrust the Testament into Abner's fingers and dictated the oath to him. He had to clear his throat, for his voice had left him. The coroner blotted his notes methodically and looked up.

'Yes. . . . Abner Fellows. Age?'

'Twenty.'

'Occupation?'

'Labourer.'

'Tell me all you know of what happened last night . . . not too fast, I have to write it down.'

Slowly Abner told his own story.

'Very good! You say that Badger hit you in the face. Are you on bad terms with Badger?'

'I never spoke to him before.'

'When he struck you you lost your temper?'

'Any one would.'

'You say Malpas is a friend of yours?'

'I lodge with him.' p. 193

'And Malpas was not drunk?'

'Not that I could see.'

'Do you know where Malpas had been that evening?'

Abner hesitated. He felt that George's eyes were on him from behind. 'No.'

'Very well.'

Abner went back to his seat. He saw Mr Hind rubbing his hands together nervously, saw the white face of Susie. He flopped down heavily into the seat beside George. Malpas never stirred. He still sat with his hands to his head, drumming with his finger on his temple.

'William Badger!'

William Badger, gamekeeper in the employment of Sir George Delahay, said he had been to the Pound House on business. His business was to try and pick up information about poaching on his master's land. Nothing was safe in Lesswardine since the navvies had been working there. He was watching three men.

'Name them.'

Connor, Fellows, and Atwell. He believed Connor was the ringleader. He had not come there to watch Malpas. Constable Bastard knew that he was there on that business. He had told Bastard that he thought he had recognised Connor in an affray three nights before. He had sat in the corner quietly listening. Connor had been talking 'at him' all evening, and at last he had lost his temper. He was a quick-tempered man and couldn't abide poachers. He had meant to shut Connor's mouth. He couldn't say if he had meant to hit him. When he came up to Connor he saw Fellows looking ugly. They were all the same gang. He didn't remember hitting Fellows in the face, but if he hadn't done so Fellows would have hit him. The next moment Fellows was on the top of him. He didn't see Bastard come in. Bastard was a friend of his. He did not see Malpas and Bastard fighting. He could not have seen Bastard fall, as Fellows was on the top of him. In his opinion Bastard had died in the performance of his duty. Bastard had been a great help to him.

'George Malpas!'

George walked straight to the foot of the table, haggard, tall, handsome as ever. While he gave his evidence he still drummed with his fingers on the board. The tone of Mr Mortimer's voice sharpened as he questioned him, but George's account of the affair agreed in every detail with that of the other witnesses. p. 194

'You do not suggest that you attacked Bastard when under the influence of drink?'

'No. I had not been drinking.'

'Where had you spent the earlier part of the evening?'

'At Lesswardine.'

'In a public-house?'

'No. With a friend.'

'Were you and Bastard on good terms?'

'I had never spoken to him before in my life.'

'Then why did you suddenly attack him?'

'I never attacked him. Badger had hit out at Fellows and Fellows had a right to get his own back. I wanted to see fair play. I put my hand on Bastard's arm.'

'That's all very well, you know. It is a serious offence to interfere with a constable in the discharge of his duty.'

'Fellows was my pal. I never did nothing to Bastard. When I touched his arm he turned on me. He was trying to take me in charge. We must have tripped on something. We fell down together. I had nothing against Bastard.'

'Very well, you may sit down.'

The sergeant cleared his throat: 'If I may say a few words, sir . . .'

The coroner finished his notes, then sat back to listen.

'I may say, sir, that we have been dissatisfied for some time with the conduct of this house. Neither Mr Hind nor his daughter bear a good character with us, and Bastard has had occasion to speak to me about the goings-on here from time to time. He has also said that Mr Badger was a great help to him. Connor, Atwell, and Fellows all have the name of rough characters. We have only been waiting for the necessary evidence . . .'

'That will do, sergeant.'

'Very good, sir. On inquiries in Lesswardine, I find that Malpas spent the evening in the house of a young widow woman named . . .'

George rose to his feet and took a step forward. p. 195

'Sit down!' shouted the coroner.

'Named . . .'

'That will do, sergeant.'

'As you wish, sir.'

Mr Mortimer adjusted his glasses and sat for a moment in silence, turning over his paper:.

'Now, gentlemen,' he said at last, 'you have heard this . . . er . . . very distressing evidence. In this type of case—and I am glad to say they are rare in the district—it is usual to find a great conflict of evidence. Here the . . . ah . . testimony is unusually clear. In the first place you have a public-house. A public-house which, I am bound to say, appears to me to have been managed with a considerable degree of laxness. In this part of the country we . . . ah . . . suffer from the presence of a floating population, gipsies, cloggers, and at the present moment the men engaged on the North Bromwich Waterworks. These men have to spend their evenings somewhere, and it appears that the Pound House . . . ah . . . found favour with them. They were in the habit of

drinking here every night, sometimes under the supervision of a girl of twenty. The sergeant has said that he considers this young woman . . . ah . . . advanced for her years. That may well be; but none the less I think Hind has been lacking in responsibility. Very good. . . . Among the men who frequent this house are three notorious poachers: Connor, Atwell, and Fellows. Poaching is another of the pests that this floating population brings in its train. Badger, the keeper, who gave his evidence very clearly and straightforwardly, was in the habit of visiting the Pound House to keep an eye on this . . . ah . . . disorderly trio. As he had a right to do, he enlisted the help of the deceased. The affair began in the usual way of a public-house brawl. What Connor said to Badger; whether Badger assaulted Fellows: these are matters that do not concern you. Only, in passing, I say that the whole business could not have occurred in a properly managed house. There was a struggle. The deceased constable, in the plain performance of his duty, entered the bar and . . . ah . . . commenced to separate Badger and Fellows. If his desire was to protect p. 196
Badger, well and good . . . but even that is immaterial. Now comes the important part. Malpas says that he . . ah . . . says that he put his hand on the arm of the deceased and that thereupon Bastard turned on him and tried to take him in charge. He then, by his own admission, resisted arrest. He and Bastard struggled together and fell in each other's arms. The medical evidence tells us that Bastard died from a fractured base of the skull, the result of this fall. You may ask yourselves the question: "Was Bastard within his rights in arresting, or trying to arrest Malpas?" You need not find an answer to it. Legally the answer is "Yes;" but all that is expected of you is to determine how the deceased met his death. He met his death in a struggle with Malpas. Malpas, by his own admission, first laid hands on him, thus obstructing an officer in the performance of his duty. Next, again by his own admission, he resisted arrest. As a result of this resistance Bastard fell. As a result of the fall he fractured his skull and died . . . ah . . . instantaneously. You may trace, if you like, the responsibility for his death backward through Connor, Badger, and Fellows to Hind; but the immediate cause of it was Malpas.'

The coroner took off his glasses and pushed his notes aside. He spoke slowly, waving the pince-nez to mark his points.

'Very well. . . . Now it is your duty to determine the degree of Malpas's responsibility. Did Malpas intend to kill the deceased? The sergeant of the police has tried, very improperly, to make a statement as to Malpas's general character.'

The sergeant shuffled his feet and swallowed, but succumbed to a sense of discipline and was silent.

'I am bound to say that there is no evidence pointing to Malpas having killed Bastard of malice aforethought. There is no reason to suppose that he lied when he told you that he had never spoken to Bastard before. Did he, then, desire to attack Bastard on the spur of the moment with intent to kill. He has told you that he wanted to see fair play between Fellows, whom he describes as his "pal," and Badger, and I am inclined to believe him. Another question presents p. 197
itself: "Did he become murderous under the influence of drink?" This is negatived by all the evidence. Now you must be careful. If Malpas laid hands on Bastard with intent to kill, either under the influence of an old grudge or in a sudden fit of passion, whether drunk or sober, he is guilty of murder, and it is your duty to say so. If, on the other hand, he laid hands on Bastard without intending to offer him any violence, and if, in the course of a struggle in which he was resisting arrest, he caused Bastard to fall and thus brought about Bastard's end, his crime lies on the borderland between murder and homicide . . . ah . . . manslaughter. If Malpas had no part in the death of the deceased, you may say that the constable died by misadventure. I think this is a case in which you may be left to decide for yourselves. Nothing that you know of Malpas's private life, and I presume that you all know something of it, must influence your verdict. The death of a policeman, a man whom the law provides for your protection and the protection of your property, is a very serious matter. If policemen are to be obstructed in their duty with impunity the whole fabric of life in these remote districts becomes . . . ah . . insecure. You may now consider your verdict. You had better retire.'

Mr Mortimer put on his glasses. The jury, led by Williams, shuffled out like a group of sidesmen collecting in church. The sergeant bent over the coroner, whispered and handed him a paper which he put aside. 'You're in too great a hurry, sergeant,' he said. The witnesses sat motionless in the back of the court: Susie, as before, staring straight in front of her as pale and tragic as a young widow; Mr Hind with his hands clasped in front of him, bunched up like a sack, and his pouched, owl-like eyes paler than ever, waiting for a rider to the verdict; Badger, obstinate, with his head thrust forward; Mick and Atwell stolidly masticating tobacco. Abner saw them all petrified by the gloom of suspense. George's finger had ceased from its mechanical tattoo. All through the coroner's summing up he had listened intensely; once or twice his lips had moved and his muscles stiffened as though he wanted to say something. Now he sat quite still with his p. 198
hands on his knees, staring, as it seemed, at the buffalo's head.

One after another the witnesses were called up to sign their evidence. The coroner looked at his watch and sighed. It seemed as if he would not have time to take tea with the Delahays, and this annoyed him, for Lady Delahay was a very attractive woman and a visit to Lesswardine Court always left him with a pleasant afterglow and made him feel that but for his wife he might have become an ornament of county society. The sergeant stood like a waxen policeman in Madame Tussaud's. By a combination of frowns, winks, and rollings of the eyes, he indicated to his bewildered subordinate that the Testaments on the table might now be collected. The young constable stumped round the table on noisy tiptoes. No other sound was heard but the settling of thawed snow on the roof, the tinkle of a distant anvil, and the noise of a blob of nicotined saliva

which Atwell privily dropped upon the floor and then obliterated with a sideways motion of his foot.

The jury re-entered and took their seats at the table. The sergeant insensibly stiffened. Mr Williams held a paper in his hand.

'Well,' said the coroner. 'You have arrived at your verdict?'

'Yes, your honour. Unanimous. We find . . .'

'Wait a moment. . . . Yes, very good . . . go on.'

'We find, unanimous, that the deceased died in accordance with the doctor's evidence, and that his death was caused unintentionally by George Malpas.'

'That is manslaughter.'

'Yes, your honour. Unintentional manslaughter.'

'You can't qualify it. Manslaughter. You have added no rider?'

'No, your honour.'

'Well, I am bound to say I endorse your verdict. I think that you might profitably have expressed your opinion on the management of this house.' He called 'Daniel Hind!'

Mr Hind rose with a gasp.

'You have heard what I think of the management of your house, and I hope that the licensing justices will . . . ah . . . endorse it. Another time when an inquest is held in this room in winter the least you can do is to put a fire in it. George Malpas!' p. 199

George staggered to the end of the table.

'You have heard the jury's verdict. You will be committed on my warrant to take your trial on a charge of manslaughter. You are lucky that the charge is not . . . ah . . . graver.'

The sergeant, who had been waiting for this, again presented his paper to the coroner, and Mr Mortimer, having wiped the nib of his pen, signed it in his bold, deliberate handwriting. He signed it carefully and looked at his signature afterward. It was not often that he tasted so singular a sensation of power. The sergeant blotted the document and advanced toward George Malpas. He came like a dignified spider toward a fly safely entangled in its web.

'Better go and tell them,' George said to Abner. 'Tell mother first. . . . Tell 'em I'm all right.'

The Fifteenth Chapter

p. 200

Abner did not wait for George to be arrested. To the evident scandal of the sergeant he made straight for the door and slipped into the bar. He closed the door quietly, and stopped for a moment. There was something in the feeling of the room that told him he had broken in on a secret. No doubt the continued strain with which he had heard the evidence unfolded had tuned his nerves to a supersensitive pitch: he wasn't usually nervous under any conditions, but the sudden change from the courtroom to this cold, empty chamber, unfamiliar in the snow-light, took him aback, unsteadied him. At the moment of his entrance the room had been expectant, listening. Now, when he paused for a second to look at it, he saw nothing unusual, only the long shelves with their black bottles of dubious port and sherry, the keg-shaped receptacles of glass in which spirits were kept on tap, the polished handles of the beer-engine. The only unusual thing was the closed door of the room behind the counter in which Bastard's body now lay. He didn't try to find an explanation for the peculiar chill that this room gave him, midway between the dead man's flesh and the anguished soul of the man who had killed him; but he felt it, and when he turned the key in the locked door and stepped out into the street he felt again, behind him, the sense of something strange stealing back into the bar. He shivered and set off for Chapel Green to tell Mrs Malpas.

All sparkle of light had vanished from the snow; the sky had now grown colder than the land, and in the north a wind was rising. He walked fast to keep the heat in his limbs. He passed the last cottages of Mainstone and came into the length of Roman road which he and George had so often travelled at night. The wind set up a faint and mournful singing in the telegraph wires. The winter night descended. No human shape was to be seen on the long white road but that of Abner and another smaller figure that approached him rapidly from the west. He took it for granted that this was a little girl hurrying home to Mainstone from the dissenting school at Chapel Green, but when they met in the dusk and stared at one another he suddenly became aware that the wayfarer was George's mother. All the time since he left the inn he had been turning over in his mind the ways in which he might best reveal his tragic news. Now that he found himself face to face with Mrs Malpas, small, intense, and awful in her Sunday bonnet, he could say nothing. They stared at each other for a moment in which Abner was conscious of the hatred in her black eyes. p. 201

‘Evenin’, ma’am,’ he said. ‘It’s lucky I met you. George sent me along with a message.’

‘Tell me . . . tell me quick, young man,’ she cried. ‘Don’t keep it back whatever it be!’

‘Bad news, ma’am.’

‘I know it is. Tell me!’

‘They’ve took him in charge. It’s manslaughter.’

She made a shrill, wailing noise, something between a laugh and a cry. She gripped his arm tight. He knew that she would almost rather have touched any one on earth, but if she had not steadied herself she would have fallen.

‘Manslaughter. . . . Oh, God, my God! O Lord, have mercy on him, poor soul, and on us too. To think it should come to that! Oh, God . . . God!’

She clutched him again as though a wave were sweeping her legs from under her. Her bony fingers went into the muscle of Abner’s arm.

‘Now don’t take on, ma’am,’ he said. ‘Manslaughter’s a different thing from murder. Thank your luck for that!’

‘Don’t talk to me of luck!’ she cried. ‘Luck’s a heathen word. As a man sows so shall he reap. The hand of the Lord is heavy on me and my son. He hath forsaken the way of righteousness. Drink and strange women and all the abominations of the ungodly. All my prayers on him were wasted, young man, for I couldn’t keep his feet in the way. Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth. p. 202
The Lord gave and the Lord hath took away, and now he stands before an earthly judge. I must go and see him.’

She detached herself from Abner’s arm, but a fit of trembling took her and made her cling to it again.

‘You’d best come home along of me, ma’am,’ he said. ‘They’ll have took him to Lesswardine by this time.’

She broke down into harsh sobs, crying childishly, and in between her sobbing he could hear her babble the same curious mixture of scriptural and unscriptural lamentation. She talked so wildly that he thought the old woman was going off her head. When she sobbed the jet ornaments on her bonnet danced.

‘Come home along of me, ma’am,’ he repeated helplessly.

She seemed not to hear him. ‘George, my little George . . .’ she sobbed, abasing, accusing herself before the harsh personal deity that she imagined, wrestling with him in prayer and entreaty, ‘Oh, Lord, forgive him . . . forgive him . . . forgive him!’ Then, quite suddenly, she stopped. No sound was heard but that of her faint trembling. Abner thanked goodness that she had tired herself out, but he was mistaken. Without the least warning her weak hands pushed him away. She stood before him in the middle of the road and faced him with her ridiculous bonnet awry and her fingers clenched like the claws of some small, fierce wild animal, waiting to spring at a man’s throat. Her wrists worked with passion. She forgot all her scripture and cursed him in her own words.

‘It’s you who’ve led him astray,’ she cried. ‘You . . you! Didn’t I know it the very day when you and your mate came to our house? You, the scum of the roads! That’s fine company for a decent man! You can’t touch pitch and not be defiled! I begged him and begged him not to have the likes of you in his house, but he laughed at me. And you’ve dragged him down, down . . . as low as a man can be dragged. You with your drink and your poaching and your women! Don’t think I haven’t heard what happened . . . the two of you coming home drunk of nights, singing bawdy songs in the dark. That wasn’t enough for you! You must drag him into your drunken fighting, p. 203
drag him down and down into your mucky life. And then you come and talk to me of luck. Luck! He’s been led astray, that’s what George has, by your company. If George’s soul is damned, it’s you who will suffer for it, bringin’ your town ways into a country place. You and his precious wife! The two of you between you! What’s in the blood comes out in the life. Her father were a thief and a swindler and a suicide, and God visits the sins of the fathers. Like father, like daughter! That’s the sort of bedfellow my George has had, and this is what she’s brought him to, poor lamb! But don’t you think, young man, that God don’t remember! If you done it to the least of these you done it unto Me! Don’t you think you can push a young man into hell and not fall into the fire after him. You and her together. . . . You can trust God for that!’ She exhausted her breath and stood panting.

‘Come on, missus,’ said Abner heavily. ‘You’ll be perished out here.’ But when he clumsily approached her she ran away down the road toward Mainstone like a mad woman, this pathetic bundle of burning hatred in her Sunday clothes, and left him foolishly standing.

He went back in the dark to Wolfpits, heavily burdened with the second part of his task. The children were playing quietly on the hearthrug and Mrs Mumble, who considered it only neighbourly to give Mary the benefit of her company in a domestic emergency, was talking of homely, unimportant things with the idea of distracting her mind from the more tragic affair that held it. When Abner appeared she excused herself, kissed the children good-night, enveloped Mary in a more significant embrace, and left them.

Mary stood waiting for what he had to say. He could not help recognising the contrast between her impressive aloofness, her self-control, and the hysterics of old Mrs Malpas. She could not pretend that she felt nothing; since George's disaster, however little she might care for him, must bring with it all sorts of complications. She was a woman who had been used, in the lavish days of her father, to a certain degree of comfort and elegance, and even if she had known hard times p. 204
at Wolfpits during George's freakish periods of idleness, she had never been faced with anything so threatening to herself and her children as a complete stoppage of wages and, in the last resort, the humiliation of parish relief. She waited with her head erect, straight as a larch, in the perfect control of her finely-tempered mind.

'It's what we thought it would be, missus,' he said. 'Manslaughter they brought it in.'

'Where is he?' she asked, almost in a whisper.

'They've took him in charge. That'll mean the lock-up at Lesswardine, time they've got the case ready for the police-court.'

She was silent for a moment, and then:—

'Does he want me to see him?'

'He didn't say nought of that.'

'No,' she said reflectively.

'He said: "Tell 'em that I'm all right,"' Abner explained. 'Nowt else.'

'*Them*?'

'That's his mother . . .'

'Ah!' She stiffened a little, and Abner, scenting a new hostility, continued:

'This business bain't all George's fault. It's a bit of bad luck that might have happened to any one. It might just as well a' been me . . . as well and better. If that Bastard hadn't gone at me from behind George'd never have touched him.'

'If he'd been home here,' she interrupted, with a sudden energy, 'it wouldn't have happened at all. It's drink that's done for George,' she added.

'He hadn't a drap in him,' said Abner loyally. 'He was as sober as I am this minute. He hadn't set foot in the place not half an hour.'

She was silent for a moment, and then, with a curious directness, asked:

'Where had he been then?'

'How should I know where he'd been? I don't meddle or mak in George's affairs.'

She pressed him: 'Didn't it come out at the inquest where he'd been?'

He saw how things were going, and lied brazenly in George's defence. p. 205

'No,' he said.

'Well, that's one comfort,' she said, with a sigh. 'I've borne enough shame from George without that!' Then, as her suspicions flashed up again: 'But I don't believe you. They don't let things like that pass.'

'I don't know what you'm after.'

'Oh, you're all the same, you men! You think women are simple enough to be put off with anything. It's you who are simple. Do you think we don't know it? I know where George was that night as well as you do. I've known of his new fancy for three months now. That woman and me have met one another on the road, and looked at each other and smiled and passed the time of day and not another word, because we knew, both of us, the thing was best hidden and it would humble the two of us if it came to light. But I don't believe they'd let a thing like that go at a coroner's inquest.' She waited for his reply.

'They said he'd been at Lesswardine. A widow woman, they said, but they didn't tell her name. That's the truth.'

'Nothing more?'

'I tell you that's the lot. I was neyther piller nor bo'ster. I'd have told you at the first, but I thought to save your feelings.'

'Feelings!' she repeated. 'There's better ways of saving a woman's feelings than keeping the truth from her. That was George's way. If you guessed anything of what women are like you'd know that it's the truth they want. You can forgive a man a lot if he doesn't lie to you.' Her tone changed suddenly. She became dispassionate, practical, once more. 'When will it come on at the police court?'

'I don't know. I reckon they won't keep him long at Lesswardine.'

‘I shall have to go there,’ she said. ‘Even if he doesn’t want me it’s my place to be there. If I don’t go there George will think that I’ve thrown him over. I would have come to-day if he’d let me, but he begged me not to. He’s funny, like a child, is George.’

Her voice softened when she spoke the last words, as though her imagination had suddenly carried her back to the days of George’s courtship when her father was a hearty, prosperous man and no troubles whatever had entered her life. For the moment she seemed to Abner no more than a child herself. At the first moment he had thought her insensitive, in the next she had put him to shame by her frankness, now she was yielding, pitiful. These alternations of stoicism, passion, and tenderness bewildered him. He had not thought that women were so various. In addition to this she was beautiful. He wondered what perverse strain in George could ever have compelled him to desert her. p. 206

After another long silence she thanked him for what he had told her, then turned and left him. He heard her talking brightly to the children as though nothing had happened.

Although darkness had fallen it was still early. Abner’s natural impulse would have bidden him walk back to Mainstone and find Susie. It had been a torment to see her cold and remote, seeming no more to him than a stranger. In the hushed court-room when he had stolen out at the moment of George’s arrest she had not looked at him. He had left her staring straight in front of her like a pious churchgoer. He decided, in the end, to stay at Wolfpits, for the night was cold and unhomely and he still carried in his mind the sinister vision of the empty bar with Bastard’s body lying in the room behind it. More than this, he began to be conscious of a definite duty toward Mary, whose attitude had ended by filling him with admiration and loyalty. He felt it in his bones that she despised him, being undeniably a creature of finer clay than himself, but the moment in which she had demanded his confidence remained with him. It was as though the veil which had always hung between them had been suddenly rent, admitting them to an intimacy as clear as light. In all his life he had known no such experience. Even in the most passionate moments of his relation with Susie she had been no more to him than a strange woman for whose beauty he hungered without reason. He knew her body and thrilled to it, but of herself he knew nothing. With Mary it was different. At first he had felt vaguely that he must be loyal to her for the sake of his friend, not so much because he loved George as because their friendship had been the immediate cause of their disaster. It was for herself that he must now be loyal, and this seemed strange to him, for it was an obligation which he had never considered as possible between a man and a woman, and nothing but that sudden moment of vision could have revealed it to him. p. 207

He devoted his evening to the children. Their frolic in the snow had excited them. They were full of play and laughter. Mary moved about her business silently, watching the fireside group with benevolent eyes. At seven o’clock, just before their bedtime, another constable came to the door with the police-court summons. The case had been fixed for the following day—eleven o’clock at Lesswardine. The man was in a hurry to serve his other summonses, and would not enter. Abner told Mary the news.

‘Eleven o’clock,’ she repeated intently. ‘Come thy ways, Morgan, love, time for bye-byes.’

The children left Abner unwillingly, Gladys insisting that he should carry her upstairs. He did so, and Mary followed with her son in her arms, rubbing his cold-flushed eyelids with his fists.

Abner returned to the fire. Eleven o’clock! Less than twenty-four hours ago none of this had happened. He was impressed, in spite of himself, with the inevitable regularity of the machine that had drawn George Malpas into its ponderous clutches. He saw, for the first time, the tremendous power of the law, and his own helplessness.

Mrs Mamble joined them for supper. When they had nearly finished another knock came to the door, and Abner went to open it. The new visitor was old Drew, who came in, blinking at the light.

‘Please come in, Mr Drew,’ said Mary, ‘and take a seat.’

He stood for a moment, a bowed and awkward figure. Then he placed on the tablecloth three brown eggs that he had carried in his huge misshapen hand.

‘I bringed you two three eggs, missus,’ he said. ‘They’m getting tarrable scarce these days, and I reckon the chilring might like them.’ p. 208

‘That is good of you, Mr Drew,’ Mary cried.

‘Don’t ’ee mention it!’ said the old man. ‘I rackon it won’t be so aisy for ’ee with the maister in trouble. Us all knows what that be, and you’m welcome to them. Iss, us all knows what trouble be, praise God! I had a brother of my own to Lapton Huish as was took for the killing of his wife, though the poor twoad never knew what he done, for a’ suffered from fits, a’ did. Tried and hanged into Exeter he were . . . dear soul too! Iss, I know what trouble manes.’

‘We all know what trouble means,’ said Mrs Mamble, with a sigh, ‘from the highest to the lowest; but the law be kinder these days than it used to be. My poor dear Robert’s grandfather was a labourin’ man, a quiet, Christian man too, as never raised a hand against any livin’ creature, as Robert told me times, but that weren’t enough to save him from hanging. It was a hard winter, I can’t mind how many years agone, though Robert he told me, and they got him for stealing a sheep—stealing, they says!—as he found dead-stiff in the snow on Clee Hills. As he’d a right to,

with the fields like stone and no work and the children crying for bread. But they hanged men for that in Worcester jail in them days. Ay, and when my Robert was a lad, the other boys 'd put it up against him as his dad had kept sheep by moonlight: that's what they call hanging in chains, like the gibbet, so they call it, as used to stand in olden times near Clows Top. A quieter man never breathed, nor a better worker. Put a bit more wood on the fire, Mr Fellows, do!'

Abner threw a faggot on the fire and the flames leapt. This friendly flicker, aided, perhaps, by the hypnotic drone of Mrs Mamble's voice, as soothing as the sound of running water or the midnight rustle of poplars, so encouraged the old labourer that he let himself sink into a chair by the corner of the table.

The firelight glinted in his beard, and Abner saw that his full lips were red as those of a young man. He saw also Mary's face, withdrawn into the gloom. It seemed as if she were dreaming, her mind altogether removed from the voices of her comforters. p. 209

'Ay,' said Drew, 'I've heard of men that was strung up for stealing sheep down Exmoor way. There's a many sheep on the moors, and ponies too. You should see them when the foals come along, springtime, and when they'm drove down to Bampton fair. 'Tis a fine sight, sure 'nuff! But that there's nothing to the old times. My granf'er, 'er was barn up Somerset, not too far from Ta'nton, used to tell as how men was stringed up by the dozen, the same as jays or magpies, by a tarrable old chap of the name of Jeffereys. Bloody Jeffereys, that's what they called 'en. A judge he were. . . . Iss, bloody Jeffereys.'

'There now!' said Mrs Mamble, throwing up her hands.

'And them they durs'nt hang they sent off to Canada, so I'm told. Ay, many likely chaps was sent there and never came home no more, though what they sent 'en for I can't rightly call to mind, unless 'twere rick-burning. Had the redcoats to 'em, they did! But that's all past and gone, thanks-be! Iss, past and gone. . . . The law bain't what it used to be. There's juries these days. An' what be manslarter but a thing that might come to any man unbeknownst? Don't 'ee be afeared, missus! Don't 'ee be afeared! There be no shame in "going up the line," as they do call it down our way.'

'No shame, as you say, Mr Drew,' said Mrs Mamble solemnly. 'But the shame's not everything. It's a hard thing on a woman that has little children with her crying for an empty belly when a man's away in jail and not a penny in the house but what the parish gives her. And the questions they ask! That's where the shame comes in, and I've known many a proud woman starve for a crust of bread rather than answer them, they're that disgusting.'

'Ah, get away, do! woman,' said old Drew, with a laugh. 'What's questions? And Mrs Malpas here ban't going to do no such thing. A woman never knows what friends she's got till she's found trouble, and they that has a roof to their heads and a bit of garden to till can spare something for their neighbours. No, don't 'ee believe 'en, my dear! If it's only potatoes and swede out of the fields, no chilring 'll starve to Wolfpits, not they! Don't you believe it! An' a woman like your George's mother with a tidy little business at the Buffalo. . . . Trouble 'll tell you your friends.' p. 210

The clock struck nine.

'Now that's a fine thing to be sure,' he went on, with a glance of admiration, 'a fine thing to have a clock to tell 'ee when to be going up over, and keep 'ee company night-time. 'Tis hard to judge the hour in winter when the old sun be hid!'

He pulled his stiff limbs together painfully, and left them with more encouragements.

'He's a quiet man,' said Mrs Mamble, when they heard him treading softly over the snow, 'but I always reckoned he'd be a good neighbour.'

She seemed loath to leave Mary to herself, and even proposed that she should sleep with her, nominally for the sake of warmth, until the strain of George's trial should be over, an offer that Mary found it difficult to refuse with grace. When she left them she took the younger woman to her breast and kissed her tenderly. Abner opened the door for her, and when he returned he saw that Mary's eyes were bright with tears. He felt that he himself must struggle to add some words of reassurance, but before he could do so she had said good-night and vanished.

Next morning he rose early. He had lit the fire and made the kettle boil before she was astir. When she heard his feet in the kitchen she hurried to come down and thank him.

'You needn't have done that,' she said.

'That's nowt,' he replied bluntly. 'We've got to get on the road early.'

After breakfast she deposited the children, as had been arranged, with Mrs Mamble. Morgan, who scarcely ever left his mother's side, resented this.

'Where are you going, mam?' he cried.

'Only to Lesswardine with Abner here.'

'You're not going for good, mam? You're coming back again?' p. 211

'Don't be a silly boy, Morgan. Of course I'm coming back.'

‘When, mam?’

‘This afternoon.’

A new anxiety seized him. ‘What’s for dinner, mam?’ he said.

‘A nice brown egg, my love, what Mr Drew brought you,’ said Mrs Mamble, coming to the rescue. ‘You come along now, and you shall have dear Robert’s watch to play with.’

To the last temptation Morgan succumbed. This watch was the principal curiosity of Mrs Mamble’s bedroom. It hung there in the smell of rotting wood, a silver monster, like a toy warming-pan, suspended in a celluloid case above the old woman’s bed. Mrs Mamble whipped them away, and Abner set out with Mary.

Snow still covered the ground, but by this time, in lane and road, the trampled ways were clear and the bordering drifts marked with the treading of birds, squirrels, and other woodland creatures. Abner was so unused to walking with a woman that he set a pace that Mary could not equal. Breathless, she begged him to walk more slowly. The exertion and the cold air flushed her cheeks and reddened her lips to the hue of holly and spindle-berries in the hedge. Her body glowed, and her hair was bright as the fronds of bracken in the sun. In spite of their tragic mission her lips smiled. No spiritual anxiety could check the exhilaration of the blood that this crisp winter morning gave her walking under the open sky. But when they drew near to Lesswardine the houses closed in on them like the walls of a prison; the fine snow was swept and sullied, the light faded from the sky.

A special court had been summoned to deal with George’s case. The squire, Sir George Delahay, was driving down to take the chair, and before Abner and Mary arrived the court-room was nearly full of Lesswardine villagers who could always spare a morning if anything sensational was passing. Abner, as one of the principal witnesses, was soon separated from his companion. He p. 212
was herded together with the others into a small block of chairs on the right-hand side of the bench and opposite to the dock. From this point he could see the court, a mass of white faces from which arose a rumour like the buzzing of flies. In the midst of them he saw Mary, pale and innocent. It was in her agony that these buzzing tormentors would find delight. Almost on a level with her at the other end of the bench he saw old Mrs Malpas. She had come to the court as she would have come to chapel, in the same dour, determined spirit, in the same tight black dress. They sat abreast of one another, these two women to whom George Malpas belonged, and not a glance passed between them.

A new witness arrived, a fair young woman, clothed in black and veiled, who walked in hurriedly with lowered eyes and tried to conceal herself, as it seemed, behind the chairs of the men. The flies buzzed as loudly as when they are driven from a heap of filth. Abner guessed that this was George’s Lesswardine woman. Mrs Malpas darted one eager glance in the new-comer’s direction, but Mary did not raise her eyes. At the last moment Mr Hind entered with Susie. She smiled, and the sight of her made Abner’s blood leap, for she was no longer the white-faced impersonal being that she had seemed at the inquest. She met his eyes full, and smiled again. Mary also was looking at him now. Abner went hot under their two glances. Why did Mary look at him? The other was the woman that he wanted!

In a sudden silence George was brought forward. He seemed none the worse for his night in the cells. He walked straight to the dock with a policeman on either side of him, looking neither at his mother, whose hands went to her heart, nor at Mary, who did not move. His eyes found Abner on the opposite side of the court, and he smiled, but the smile suddenly vanished and he went pale, for beyond Abner he had seen the face of the woman from Lesswardine. He went pale with anger that they should have dragged her into this; but there was no one on whom his anger could fall. His hands, that had quickly clutched at the edge of the dock, fell to his sides. He p. 213
stood there with his fine, pale face and black hair, and on him were centred the emotions of those three women who would not look at each other. The court buzzed again, going suddenly silent as Badger’s master entered and took his seat on the bench above the head of the clerk.

The proceedings were formal, being no more than another step in George’s journey to Salop. The only new witness was the young woman whom the police had unearthed to establish the sequence of George’s movements on the night of Bastard’s death. She gave her evidence in a subdued voice and never raised her eyes. She said that George had never taken liquor in her house; that he had often come to see her; that he was her friend. No more.

When she had left the box George gave a sigh of relief. Abner wondered why he should have preferred this shrinking creature to Mary or to Susie Hind. The sitting ended in the obvious way, George being committed to take his trial at the county assizes. Nothing else could have been expected.

At the door of the court Abner rejoined Mary. Mrs Malpas, who had been whispering to the local solicitor, marched past them without speaking, and Mary flushed at this deliberate slight.

‘She won’t speak to me,’ she said. ‘I think that’s too bad! That was Lawyer Harley she was talking to.’

‘Don’t take no notice of her,’ said Abner. ‘That old woman’s half-cracked.’

He went on to tell her that Mick Connor, who had gone to the Buffalo out of curiosity the night before, had heard Mrs Malpas tell one of her customers that if George were sent to Shrewsbury

she would employ the best criminal advocate on the circuit, even if it cost her the last penny she possessed. He did not tell her that Mrs Malpas had declared that it was nothing but the proud ways of Mary, 'that thief's daughter,' she called her—that had driven George to his ruin.

'He didn't look at me once,' said Mary on the way home.

'He'd no call to look at nobody,' Abner replied.

'He looked at *her*,' said Mary bitterly. 'He's strange. I don't know what to make of him.' p. 214

'That's natural enough. He didn't want to see her dragged out in public.'

'Dragged out in public?' she cried, with an unusual flush of spirit. 'What about *me*?'

They settled down to another placid evening at Wolfpits. The children had enjoyed their day with Mrs Mamble, though Morgan was persuaded with difficulty to go to bed without the coveted warming-pan under his pillow. Mrs Mamble was just preparing to leave them for the night when a knock came to the door, and without waiting for it to be opened to her Mrs Malpas entered. Her walk to Wolfpits over the roadway, now slippery with ice, had exhausted her, so that she looked more like a wraith than a woman. Even so she did not stop to recover her breath. She clenched her hands in the queer gesture that Abner had noticed the evening before, and with trembling wrists began to storm in Mary's face.

'What have you done with the money?' she cried. 'What have you done with it?' Abner laid his hand on her shoulder, for she looked dangerous.

'Take your hands off me!' she screamed. 'The money. . . . I want my money!'

'I don't know what you mean,' Mary said.

'My money, you brazen madam!' she cried. 'The money out of the box in father's bedroom. More than fifty pound . . .'

'I don't know what you mean,' repeated Mary, bewildered.

'It's gone . . . gone! Don't tell me you don't know where it's gone, when I know you've a' had it! He can't have spent it all. Give me what's left . . . to pay the lawyers. George would never have gone and took it without you to put him up to it . . . you with your lady's ways and your fine speech! Ah, that's where the bad blood comes out. Your father was a thief, and you're no better! Bad blood . . . bad blood!'

'Don't you dare . . .' Mary cried. 'Don't you dare speak of my father!'

She stood tall and flushed above her mother-in-law. p. 215

'Give me the money . . . what's left of it,' Mrs Malpas pleaded. 'Give it me, and I won't say no more.'

Her violence had spent itself. Now she was only small, pathetic, withered. Mary controlled herself. She would not answer.

'I'd forgive him taking it. . . . I'd forgive him. Mr Harley says they'll want twenty pound before they touch the case. Only twenty pound. . . . I can find more later. Give me twenty pound.'

'She says she don't know nothing about it,' said Abner.

'*Says*! It must have been George. No one else knew where I kept it. He's hidden it. Up in his room. You must look . . . you must look!'

'I know nothing about it,' said Mary, mastering herself. 'I've not seen a penny. I . . . I can't talk to you. I wish you would go away.'

'Leave the woman alone, missus,' said Abner. 'She's enough to put up with without you. You'd best go out quiet. You'm not answerable. Come on, now!'

The old woman seemed to pull her strength together, looking from one to the other. They waited for a new outburst, but instead of speaking she suddenly threw up her hands and burst into a fit of choking sobs. Mary made a compassionate movement toward her, but Mrs Malpas stopped her with a violent gesture. Then she straightened her bonnet and moved to the door. She became her old, wiry, deliberate self. Her voice was clear and her face like stone.

'If George took it,' she said emphatically, 'it was the devil that drove him, and I can't do no more. But not one penny shall you ever get out of me, Mary Condover. You can starve, you and your children together, but don't come crying to dad and me. You and your pride. . . .! Now you can see what you've to be proud of. The daughter of a thief and the wife of a thief. That's what you are! I never want to set eyes on you again . . . you and your fancy lodger!'

She went out, leaving the door open behind her. Mary stood looking after her, shaken like a tree in the wind. Then she gave a curious laugh and sat down at the table. Abner could do nothing for her; but she managed to contain herself until she had risen and passed from his sight upstairs. p. 216

It was fortunate for them all in the suspense that now held them that the Shrewsbury assizes had been fixed for the middle of December, immediately before the Christmas vacation. On his

committal by the Lesswardine bench, George had been taken at once to the county jail where he lay awaiting his trial. In the meantime the leisurely routine of work in those wintry valleys, disturbed so abruptly by these violent events, reasserted itself. The snow melted. To the sodden days of thaw succeeded a period of mild and mistily golden weather that would have seemed like spring had it not been so silent. The work on the pipeline began again like the progress of some great engine that had kept its power hissing beneath the snow, and daily gathered speed. Even the Pound House, still suspect by the police but happily safe until the Brewster sessions, regained its old popularity, though Mr Hind, having been duly warned, gave more attention to his business than ever before. It had been clear from the first that he had taken a violent dislike to Abner, whom he regarded as the cause of all his trouble. On the day of the inquest he had shown this by his silence; but when Abner appeared again at the inn, he told him in as many words that his custom wasn't wanted. Susie, a little shaken by her father's severity, implored him not to persist in coming to the Pound House, and though she appeared no less passionately devoted to Abner, the lovers' meetings were fewer and their secrecy more precarious.

It was strange how little difference George's absence made to life at Wolfpits. Within a week it almost seemed as if the place and its inhabitants had forgotten him. Neither Mary nor the children ever mentioned his name, and since the day of the police-court proceedings Abner had heard nothing from him but a single scribbled letter which George contrived to send from the lock-up by the hand of the young policeman who had drunk his beer. In this letter a new flicker of care for his family had shown itself: he had reminded Abner of his promise to stay at Wolfpits p. 217 and look after them. 'I would have sent you some money,' he wrote, 'but they've taken it off me. Mary can ask mother if she's in a fix.' The reminder was quite unnecessary. Abner had given his word to a pal and meant to stick to it, though he foresaw a difficult moment when the plan should be disclosed to Mary. He could not see, for the life of him, how to open the subject, and so he let things take their course, waiting for the occasion to arrive without his interference.

It came, as he had half expected, at the end of the week, when the next payment for his lodging was due. Instead of his usual fourteen shillings he gave Mary the whole of his wages wrapped up in the piece of paper in which he received them at the works. The situation embarrassed her, as she told him, for she had no change.

'I don't want none,' he said bluntly.

'But I can't take it from you,' she protested. 'It isn't right.'

'Right or wrong,' said he, 'you and the children can't live on less, and you'll find it a tight pinch as it is.'

'I can't take it,' she said again.

They stood on either side of the table with the packet of money between them.

'It isn't only that,' she added. 'Don't suppose I think the less of your kindness. . . . I wish I could tell you what I do think . . . but I'm afraid it isn't right for you to stay on here now George is away.'

'That's why I ought to stay,' he said.

'You don't understand,' she replied. 'Men don't think of such things. It would be the talk of the village. They'd say there was something wrong.'

'As long as there bain't nothing wrong there's no harm in talk. Talk never hurt nobody.'

'There's George's mother . . . you don't know her! Remember what she said that night.'

'Do you think I'd ever take the upper hand of you?'

'No, no . . . it's not me,' she said quickly, turning away from him.

'Then there's no call to be soft over it.'

'There's George, too . . .'

'Don't you fret yourself about George,' he said, and showed her her husband's letter. 'That's p. 218 what George thinks about it. I reckon that's good enough.'

For a long time she would not take his money. The hard facts of her case, the words of Mrs Malpas, and the ugly necessity of applying for parish relief, seemed to weigh less with her than this tyrannous modesty.

'You can take it or leave it,' he said, 'but I've promised George and the money will come to you just the same. . . . Supposing I get another lodge, the money will be less, that's all. If you bain't afeard of me . . . .'

She protested: 'No . . . no . . . .'

'Then I may as well stay on. You can't do without a man in a place like this. There's the wood to chop and the water to draw and that. I should have to come here just the same. We've got to live on a poor wage, and it's all the better if I'm here.'

'I must think it over,' she said.

In the end she consented to his staying—happily for herself since otherwise life would have been almost impossible. During the three weeks that passed before George's trial, they settled down into a new and orderly condition, living poorly, it is true, but contentedly, and aided by the attentions of their neighbours. Mrs Mamble, perhaps at Mary's request, often softened the awkwardness of the situation by dropping in about supper-time and staying to talk over the fire, and old Drew was continually giving the children presents of eggs from his own fowl-yard, farm-produce from the land on which he worked, and even some of the milk which, according to the custom in those parts, he received in part payment of his wage. Mary could not refuse these gifts so beautifully given; she could not even return him adequate thanks; but she tried to add a little to the comfort of the rooms in which the old man lived, and offered to attend to his clothes, an attempt in which she failed, since Drew always locked his door when he left it in the dawn, resenting, in the manner of many bachelors, the least interference with his own homely dirt, and wore in winter every shred of clothing that he possessed.

The sense of an obligation unfulfilled would have made them awkward if the old man had not p. 219
accepted the help of Abner in his garden, a proceeding that he watched with suspicion, being as fidgety as any old maid, and that of Mary in the feeding of his fowls. Within a few weeks, indeed, the inhabitants of Wolfpits had settled down into a kind of communal life that was happy if only for the fact that its existence implied so much goodwill.

The subpoenas for the assizes arrived, and with them a new wave of rumour and excitement troubled the villages. It was agreed that George had no chance of being acquitted, but those who had experience of the law vied with those who had none in predicting the term of his sentence. Through the medium of Susie, Pound House gossip filtered back to Abner, and in this way he learned that Mrs Malpas had managed in spite of her loss to brief a barrister named Rees, who had a great reputation for skill in criminal defences on that circuit. A week before the trial Abner received a note from the lesser of the two local solicitors, who, being a liberal and a nonconformist, had nothing to lose by an implied opposition to the squire. Together with Mick Connor and Atwell, Abner repeated his version of the affair to this man.

'I shall let Mrs Malpas, senior, know by wire when the case is likely to come on,' he said, 'and you, of course, will hold yourselves in readiness.'

A fortnight later Mrs Malpas sent up a message by a small boy from Chapel Green to Wolfpits, telling Abner that it would be necessary to set out for Shrewsbury on the following morning. The message made no mention of Mary.

'But I shall go all the same,' she said.

They left Wolfpits in darkness, whispering their farewells to Mrs Mamble for fear of waking the children, whom Mary, dressing quietly, had left asleep. The nearest station to Chapel Green was that of Llandwlas, a minute hamlet hidden amid the springs of the Barbel, a little to the north of the single line that winds painfully out of Wales between the dominant masses of the forests of Radnor and Clun. From Wolfpits, cross-country, this made a five-mile walk. A dripping mist hid p. 220
the land, and they saw no soul until they reached the station. There, on the raw, deserted platform, where the porter had lit a single oil lamp to show that the day had begun, they waited, walking up and down to keep themselves warm. They were early, and the only other sign of life was the yellow square of the stationmaster's bedroom in the adjoining cottage. Even if daylight had come, the density of the mist would have given them the same sense of isolation. Little by little the place became alive: first a float drove up with a couple of milk-cans; next came a gnomish figure who carried a stick, with dead rabbits slung from it over his shoulder: then a noisy party of two, whom Abner recognised as his fellow-witnesses.

'That's Connor and Atwell come up,' he said.

'Let's keep at the other end,' Mary whispered, moving away.

Two more traps arrived, the first containing the Hinds, the second Badger, alone, and last, the small, energetic figure of George's mother. All these people, whom a chance blow had precipitated into the same grim business, stood waiting for the train singly or in isolated groups of two. A straining of wires was heard, and the fogged, red eye of the signal changed to green. The stationmaster threw up the shutter of the booking office with a rattle. Abner found himself wedged in front of the window between Badger and Mr Hind. Mrs Malpas, fidgeting with her purse, stood waiting in the background. As Abner rejoined Mary, a sound of distant panting was heard, and a minute later the front of the engine loomed enormous through the fog. They entered a third-class smoker at the end of the train. The milk-cans were rolled over the echoing platform into the van, and the train moved off with a clank of couplings and a hiss of white steam. Down through the valleys, mile on mile they wound. The train rocked on the gradients until it seemed that the carriages must touch the black edge of the woods. The mist turned white and dazzling. The sun had risen.

The Sixteenth Chapter p. 221

After nightfall on the same evening that train of old-fashioned coaches came blundering back

along the curves of the Llandwlas line. The snorting of its engine was the only sound, as its yellow windows and fire-belching funnel were the only light, in all those miles of woodland and valley. The train ran late as usual, stuttering up the gradients as though the weight it carried were too much for the power of its groaning pistons.

Scattered through the various compartments of its three short coaches sat all the witnesses of George's condemnation. The jury, having no alternative, had found him guilty of manslaughter, and the judge, who saw in front of him a programme of cases more important than this flicker of violence in a remote agricultural district, wasted no time on his sentence. If Bastard had not been a policeman, and therefore a humble symbol of the code which his lordship administered, if the witness Badger had not been a gamekeeper, which was much the same thing, George might easily have escaped with a few months' imprisonment, or half a year's at most. The barrister whom Mrs Malpas had employed for the defence realised this. The fact that he was most eager to establish seemed to be that George was not, and had never been, a poacher, and that he was not on bad terms with the man he had killed. Mrs Malpas, sitting in the public gallery on the bench in front of Mary, listened eagerly. Her heart sank as she listened to the evidence, the words that she had heard before in the police-court at Lesswardine, for she had expected that the little man in the gray wig who had shaken hands with her an hour before in consideration of the thirty pounds that she had scraped together to pay him, would throw some new and startling light upon the case, reducing Badger to tears and confounding the Lesswardine police. She had expected thunders and passionate appeals to the mercy of the jury. Instead of this he spoke in a p. 222 low voice, with a Jewish lisp, and even cracked a joke, at which the jury smiled, with one of the witnesses for the prosecution. The old woman felt that she had been betrayed. Seeking ideal justice she had found something trivial and cynical. The whole business was nearly over before she realised that it had begun. The judge summed up lazily, only pitching his voice when he dwelt upon the necessity of such men as Bastard to the public safety and the very existence of property. The jury retired for less than two minutes. The judge gave sentence of eighteen months' hard labour, and the white face of George, who had stood like a statue throughout the trial, disappeared from the dock. When she looked again she saw that another man, who looked like a tramp, had entered it. People around her began to talk, for this was a case of real murder, and this mean-looking creature was to fight for his life. Only then did the old woman realise that George's case was over. She passed Mary in the door of the gallery and hurried downstairs, where the counsel whom she had briefed congratulated her on the issue of the case. While she was engaged with him and with Harley, the solicitor, Mary passed her and joined Abner on the steps of the court. Mrs Malpas, in the middle of her conversation, gave them a queer sidelong glance that filled Mary with uneasiness.

'I don't think we had better go home together,' she whispered.

'Come on and get a spot of tea,' he said. 'I reckon you must be clammed, and there's near an hour before the train goes.'

It made her flurried and impatient to think that Abner had not understood her.

'I don't want you to be with me,' she said. 'She's watching us. Don't you see?'

'Let her watch!' said Abner, looking round in a way that made Mrs Malpas sure that they had been speaking of her. 'Come on . . .'

But she slipped away from him in the crowd outside the steps so quickly that he could not very well follow her with dignity. At the same moment Connor and Atwell appeared and solved his p. 223 perplexity by dragging him off into a public-house. Mick gave the ball a kick, as he called it, with a round of Irish whisky. None of them had tasted any food since they left their homes before dawn, and the spirit soon went into Abner's head. They sat in a corner of the bar, laughing uproariously at Mick's ridiculous stories, and making outrageous plans for getting their own back on Badger. Indeed, if the clock in the bar had not struck to warn them of the time, they would have missed their train. They had to hurry down the steep hill to Shrewsbury station. Lights were gleaming in the muddy streets and in the windows of tall, half-timbered houses. Above them hung the threatening mass of the castle.

'That's where poor old George will get his lodging,' said Mick.

'This time eighteen month . . .' said Atwell solemnly.

'Ah, not at all,' said Mick. 'Sure he'll be out and about next winter, if he plays his game.'

At the station they found they had still a few minutes to spare, and Abner's hazy intention of looking for Mary was lost in another rush to the third-class refreshment-room. Just before the train started he ran along the carriages to see if he could find her. In one carriage he saw Mrs Malpas, in another three Lesswardine policemen, in a third Mr Hind was sitting with Susie, who smiled at him. Mary was nowhere to be seen. Mick pulled him into a smoker as the train was starting.

'God help me!' said he, 'is it crazed you are that you can't leave the woman five minutes to herself. You'll be seeing all you want of her time her George comes out.'

Atwell laughed stupidly. Abner jumped up in a rage and was for throwing Connor through the window.

'Ah, be quiet now!' Mick persuaded, 'for I don't mane a word of it!'

Abner settled down sulkily. Atwell had already forgotten the incident and was snoring in his corner. Mick hummed quietly the song about Macarthy, spitting through a chink in the window between the verses. The train jolted on into the darkness, crossing the deep valley of Severn, skirting the eastern foothills of the Long Mynd, sliding down with braked engine into the basin of Teme. At Craven Arms a Welsh cattle dealer joined them, a small, red-bearded man, who eyed them suspiciously and would not be drawn into talk with Mick Connor. The train climbed painfully, the air grew colder. Atwell's snores joined with the clanking of the wheels to set a spell of drowsiness on Abner's fuddled brain. He fell asleep. p. 224

At Llandwlas Mick woke him. They tumbled out on to the deserted platform. Mary was nowhere to be seen. She had slipped him again, and though he was inclined to be angry at this unreasonable conduct he submitted to Mick's suggestion that they should walk back to Chapel Green together and get another drink. Two traps passed them on the road, flinging an uncertain light upon the frosty hedges. From the first of them Susie called good-night; in the second they could see the helmets of the police, but no trace either of Mrs Malpas or Mary was to be seen on the road.

The sleep had cleared Abner's head. They walked quickly through the raw air and in a little more than an hour they saw the poplars of Chapel Green.

'What about a drop at the Buffalo?' said Mick.

Even from a distance they could see that this forbidding resort had become unusually cheerful. It was now the time of evening at which the labouring men who formed the greater part of Mrs Malpas's customers finished their quarts and went home to bed. As the three men approached, many voices were heard.

'Sounds as if there's a drop stirrin',' said Mick. 'By the houly, an' so there will be! There's the Pound House, after being closed on them with Mr Hind and Susan away!'

He opened the door and a mist of tobacco smoke met the colder air. At the same moment a tall musical box, shaped like a grandfather clock and worked by a penny-in-the-slot apparatus, struck up the tune of Champagne Charlie. In front of it, beating time with a pint pot, dangerously full, stood Wigan Joe. The man was three-parts drunk, as were most of the other cloggers who crowded the bar. At his right hand, next the fire, sat old Mr Malpas, following with anxious eyes the evolutions of the big man's tankard. The room was so full of smoke and occupied by the jingle of the musical box that Abner and his friends entered without the clogger realising that they were there. . . . p. 225

'That's a good rousing tune, lad,' he cried, leaning over Mr Malpas and beating out the rhythm with his free hand on the old man's shoulder. 'Eh, it's a grand night is this. Makes you feel like you're young again. Let's have another bloody penn'orth!' Mr Malpas nodded, smiling feebly.

Fumbling in his pocket for the coin, he became aware of Abner, Mick, and Atwell.

'By gum, lads, is that you? Tell us quick what's happened . . .'

'They give him eighteen months,' said Abner.

'The b—s!' said Joe under his breath. He took them aside and explained that he and his mates had thought that old Mr Malpas would be lonely-like with George in trouble and his missus away. 'We thought we'd stay in and brighten things up a bit to take his mind off it like. We've had a nice bit of harmony,' he said. 'Eighteen months! Well, that's a b— that is!'

At this moment the musical box, after one or two metallic protests, inharmoniously stopped in the middle of its chorus. Joe threw a penny to the man who sat nearest to it. ''Ere, put in another copper,' he said, 'an' wind the blasted thing oop.' The clockwork grated and the tune began again. 'Don't say a word to the old 'un,' he said. 'Keep his mind off it: that's the ticket.'

With this end in view he left them and poked old Malpas, who had now relapsed into a state of nodding imbecility, in the ribs. 'Do you see that there gun, dad?' he shouted.

Malpas stared vaguely.

'Gun,' he repeated. 'Don't you go telling me you don't know what a gun is!' He pointed to an old muzzle loader that hung above the hearth.

'Oh, ay . . . gun!' said Old Malpas blandly. Wigan Joe bent over him and began to declaim in his ear an endless, and, as it seemed, pointless story, of how he had once gone out with a friend to shoot crows; how he had seen a crow on a haystack on the parish boundary, and how his friend, after taking careful aim, had missed it. At this point he raised his voice still louder. 'By gum, lad,' I says, 'you're the first ever I knew that shot at a haystack and missed a parish!' With the last words he gave the old man a hearty slap on the back, and Malpas collapsed into a feeble fit of laughter. p. 226

'Shot at a haystack and missed a parish,' the clogger repeated, roaring at his own joke, and presenting it to the company, who were now in a condition to laugh at anything.

At the same moment the door opened and Mrs Malpas entered. Joe steadied himself, the others were silent at the sight of her small, tragic figure, only the musical box continued to jangle out its tune and the old man to be shaken with equally mechanical chuckles. She did not speak, but took

in the whole assembly with her eyes.

‘Evening, ma’am,’ said the clogger. ‘We’ve been giving the old gentleman a bit of a tune to liven him up like, and make him forget his troubles.’

Without answering, she stepped straight over to the musical box and pulled a lever that stopped it. Then she shook the shoulder of her husband, who had not yet realised her coming.

‘What’s up with you, dad?’ she cried. ‘Are you stark mad?’

‘It’s all right, mother,’ he replied feebly.

‘Right?’ she cried. Then she turned on the others. ‘Out of this!’ she said. ‘Out of this, every one of you. . . . As if there wasn’t enough shame and sorrow in this house without your mocking it with your drink and your music. Out of it, I say!’ And she waved her arms as though she were driving cattle.

‘Now don’t take on so, ma’am,’ said Wigan Joe mildly. ‘It was all meant for the best. Can’t you let the man forget his troubles? It’s a poor heart that never rejoices!’

‘Don’t speak to me!’ she cried angrily. ‘To think that you have the face to come here, you that led him astray with your drink and your bawdiness! To come and make a mock of his own father!’ p. 227

Her eyes fell on Abner, who had risen to go to the door.

‘And that man!’ she cried, whipping herself up into a white paroxysm of rage. ‘That man who, if all had their rights, would be in the dock and in the prison where my son is lying! That’s the man he’s suffering for! That’s the serpent he took into his bosom!’ She stood before Abner spitting like a snake herself. ‘Never let me see your face again!’ she cried. ‘Never come nigh this door. It was the devil that sent you to bring trouble on a good Christian house!’

Again Wigan Joe protested the innocence of his intentions, while the old man sat nodding by the fire as if the storm had broken without him knowing it.

‘Don’t talk to me,’ she said, ‘with the liquor in your breath. Go away and leave us alone.’

Abner went out. The other men were standing on the pavement laughing. Mick implored him to go on with them to the Pound House where Mr Hind and Susie had by this time presumably arrived, but he shook his head and took the road to Wolfpits, pondering, through the darkness of night, on the curious turn which his fortune had taken.

He had now time to think about Mary, and the unreasonable obstinacy she had shown in leaving him on the steps of the court and later avoiding him both at Shrewsbury and Llandwlas. He felt a little concerned that she should have chosen to walk so many miles cross-country through the dark rather than submit to his company. After all it would have been only natural for them to go home together; he had always treated her with respect, and there was nothing in the history of their acquaintance that should have made her shy of him, nothing—unless it were perhaps that one curious moment on the night when they had carried George upstairs between them and put him to bed. Then he had told her, in George’s defence, of his own intimacy with Susie Hind, and this revelation, instead of putting her at ease, as it should have done, had actually seemed to embarrass her. This knowledge, however, gave her no reason for her present behaviour. Indeed, if she knew him to be so thick with Susie, there was surely less cause than ever for her to be shy with him herself. He gave women up—you never knew where you were with them. He supposed that nothing but fear of Mrs Malpas was at the bottom of Mary’s queer behaviour. ‘I don’t want you to be with me: she’s watching us,’ she had said when she gave him the slip at Shrewsbury. Another memory of Mrs Malpas returned to him: the end of her outburst at Wolfpits when she had come in search of her money. ‘You and your fancy lodger!’ she had screamed. Abner laughed to himself. It was clear that Mary hadn’t much of a fancy for him at present. p. 228

All the same he couldn’t entirely dismiss Mrs Malpas from his thoughts. She had shown herself definitely hostile to him, and his last vision of her clearing the bar of the Buffalo, a puny figure with white cheeks, burning eyes, and nodding plume of jet, showed him her fanatical strength, stronger for the fact that she regarded herself in her most violent moments as a representative of the right and the rest of the world as inspired by the devil. Yet he couldn’t get away from the ludicrous side of her, and found himself chuckling in the dark, ‘Poor old soul’ he thought. ‘She dain’t know what she wants, and that’s the truth!’ But Mrs Malpas did know what she wanted.

Mary had gone to bed when he reached Wolfpits, but she had left his supper ready on the kitchen table. He ate his bread and cheese and drank his beer. That night, exhausted with the strain of the day, he slept heavily.

So the new life began. If George Malpas, lying in Shrewsbury Jail, returned, in one of the debauches of sentiment to which his nature was subject, to the idea of his desolate wife and family, and dwelt on it with pity or remorse, he might well have spared himself the luxury of these emotions. There were few changes at Wolfpits. The children knew that they need no longer expect the violent attentions which George gave them when he felt like it; Spider, the bitch, settled down to a life untroubled by George’s kicks and stones; while Mary, that strange and secret creature, was spared at least the alternations of reproaches and endearments which made up the greater part of her marriage. George had vanished from her life. For three months at least no word, no sign from him might reach her. It was true that the family had to live more p. 229

simply. Abner's wages, which she now took without question every Saturday night, could buy them nothing more than the absolute necessities of life, and, even so, must be spent with care; but it pleased her to think that she was managing on them and that not one penny went on frivolous things.

Abner himself kept back no more than a couple of shillings for tobacco every week. To drink was out of the question, and it now seemed to him fortunate that Mr Hind, in a fit of temper, should have warned him off the Pound House. He now spent most of his evenings at home sitting before the fire, with Gladys on his knee, and making catapults or other wooden weapons for Morgan with his knife. Even in so small a household as theirs there was plenty of rough work that a man could do, not only in the way of digging and dressing the garden and hewing wood for the fires, but actually in patching up the crumbled fabric of Wolfpits which, left to the mercies of rain and frost, would have fallen about their heads. The sudden intimacy with their neighbours into which George's arrest had thrown them, continued, and the more Abner detached himself from the life of the cloggers and of his own mates, the more sufficient did this isolated communal life of Wolfpits become. It was the most peaceful and natural that he had ever lived, and he grew to love it for its regularity and calm.

The only force that tended to drag him out of this centripetal existence was Susie. Whatever her father might think of Abner, and however little he might come to the Pound House, she had no intention of giving up a man to whom she had taken such a passionate fancy. Of all those with whom she came in contact in Mainstone, Abner had pleased her best, being more completely her opposite than any of the others. His fairness, his strength, and a certain innocence in his composition, had made her choose him for her own, and even though he found the relation exacting and occasionally inconvenient, Abner was still under the spell of her physical attraction. Indeed there seemed to be no fear of this being exhausted, for their meetings were necessarily rarer and therefore more enthralling.

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In the regularity of his new life at Wolfpits lurked the obvious disadvantage that Abner's visits to Susie became conspicuous. Mary knew better than to question him on his movements—pride, as well as the tact which she had learned in her experience of George forbade her to do so—but when Abner returned late at night from these assignations she would look at him queerly, and a silence and restraint out of which she could not school herself, made it evident that she resented the mystery. He wished, indeed, that she would ask him where he had been, for then he would have been able to put her off with some deliberate lie which she could believe or reject as she pleased. Anything, he felt, was better than this uncomfortable chill, this shy curiosity of gaze, this silence. It was a condition of affairs that he could not stand and made him anxious, beyond all considerations of prudence, to blurt out his secret—if secret it were—and dissolve the grudging air of mystery with which she received him.

One night when he had come home late and could stand her silence no longer, he said suddenly:
—

'Where d'you reckon I've been to-night?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I don't want to know.'

He laughed, and she made a slight gesture of annoyance.

'I never met a woman yet who didn't want to know where a man had been,' he said.

She turned her back on him. 'Will you lock the door and put out the lamp?' she said coldly.

'I've been to the Pound House,' he volunteered, watching her all the time.

'I should have thought you'd had enough of the Pound House,' she was tempted to reply bitterly.

'To see Susie Hind . . .' he continued.

'Yes?'

'So now you know, missus.'

He wished, perversely, that she would turn on him and tell him what she thought of him. It would have cleared the air. Instead of this she spoke calmly and almost scornfully.

p. 231

'Why did you want to tell me this?'

'Because a woman's always itching to know.'

'Do you think I didn't know it already?' Then she repeated her first words: 'Please lock the door and put the lamp out,' and left him.

This made things no better. He had wanted to justify himself, or, at any rate, to brazen the matter out. He wanted to pierce her armour of reserve, to see her as she was. Whether she were jealous or merely actively scornful didn't matter as long as she showed herself to be alive and tangible. He wanted to feel the shock of their two wills, their two persons clashing without this irritating veil in which she hid herself intervening. Whether it were love or hate he wanted to feel some definite contact with her: something comparable with the moment when she had spoken to him of George's woman at Lesswardine. This she denied him. It was unreasonable that she should behave in this way to the man on whose charity, if he put it at the bluntest, she was now living. It seemed as if she had made the maintenance of this spiritual remoteness the

condition of her dependence on him. He felt, vaguely, that she wasn't playing the game, and explained her attitude to himself as the result of her unnatural fear of old Mrs Malpas's tongue. He was tempted, at times, to throw in his hand, to launch out again, to leave Chapel Green and let her go her own way. He pretended to himself that his promise to George, an obligation that went a good deal deeper than friendship, restrained him; but he knew in his heart that even if he had not undertaken the care of George's wife he would never have left Wolfpits. He only wished that her pride, or whatever it was, would let her be reasonable.

Susie wasn't like that. With Susie he knew exactly where he was. She had even, once or twice, shown herself jealous of his devotion to Mary, and tried to read into it an intimacy which was very far removed from their real state. She had seen Mary in the police-court and in the gallery p. 232
at the assizes, had recognised her beauty and the dignity which contrasted so deeply with her own abandon. She would ask Abner questions about her, implying that Mary must be jealous of his visits to Mainstone, in this way half convincing Abner that it was unnatural for her not to be jealous, and aggravating his grievance.

'I suppose she takes your money and then treats you like dirt,' she said scornfully. And Abner could not be sure that she hadn't described the situation exactly.

Christmas came and passed: a meagre Christmas such as their means imposed upon them. The morning was bright, and Mary took the children to church. In the evening Mrs Mamble and old Drew joined them, and in their company the bearing of Mary curiously lightened. She became young and gay, almost childish. There was laughter in her eyes and her cheeks were flushed with firelight. The old labourer had brought with him a bottle of cowslip wine that he had made in the spring, and they sat together late into the night telling stories of forgotten people and distant counties. About midnight the others left them, and though her attitude sensibly changed, a little of the glow was left in Mary's face.

'Last Christmas,' she said musingly, 'we all went down to the Buffalo in the evening—George and me and the children.'

Abner also remembered. He told her of his own Christmas at Hackett's Cottages, how John Fellows had been in hospital with his broken thigh and he had been left alone with Alice and little John. Mary leaned forward and listened to him in the firelight with her soft eyes fixed upon his face.

'Was it her you wrote that letter to?' she asked.

'The one you wanted to post?'

'I thought I could save you the trouble.'

He laughed. 'Yes . . . that was her.'

'How old was she?'

'Somewhere about the same as you, I reckon.'

'And two children?'

'No, only one kid.'

'How long was he . . . I mean your father . . . in hospital?' p. 233

'Pretty nigh six month.'

'And you had to keep the house going?'

'Of course I had. There wasn't nought coming in except his club, and that bain't nothing to speak on.'

'Six months . . .' She stared into the fire, and there was a long silence. 'It's funny, isn't it?' she said at last, without raising her eyes. 'Funny how things turn out?'

'Yes, it's a rum go.'

Then she began slowly to question him about Alice: what was she like, fair or dark, how tall, the kind of dress she wore—curious details that he had to search his memory to answer. She seemed to be working out for herself the obvious parallel, but never looked at him.

'Why did you leave them?' she said at last.

By this time is was no longer difficult to talk to her. He told her continuously the story of his last days at Halesby. She listened eagerly, putting in from time to time a short question for which he could see no reason. He told her of John Fellows's bouts of drink, of the way in which he had set himself to work through his compensation money, of the day of Dulston Wakes, the boxing booth, the brooch, the moment when he had come blundering down into the kitchen at Alice's cry for help, the struggle—and the blow with which he had knocked his father out. He even told her of the sovereigns that Alice had slipped into his pocket when he left her.

'That's what I sent back to her in that letter,' he said.

'Was that all? It was good of you.'

He was silent, and she pressed him again.

'Why didn't you go before?' she said. 'Why did you stay on there till that happened?'

'I dunno',' he said. 'I reckon I'd got to see it through. That football business turned me up.'

'You wanted to go before?'

'Yes, I was pretty well sick of it. Any one would have been.'

She looked at him, and her eyes were now humble. She spoke almost with diffidence. p. 234

'Abner,' she said, 'if ever you want to go from here for any reason, no matter what it is, promise me that you'll tell me straight. Don't you keep it hidden like that, feeling that the children and me are a drag on you! If you want to go to-morrow, you go. Don't you think of what you said to George. You don't owe him anything. You don't owe me anything at all. If ever you feel for one minute you want to go, please tell me straight. I can look after myself, and I shall understand. That's what I felt with George. Promise me. . .' She leaned toward him with clasped, beseeching hands.

'I'll tell you right enough,' he said awkwardly. 'Don't you fret yourself about that.'

She sighed, and pushed her hair back from her forehead.

'Now I feel easier,' she said. 'How late it is!'

She wished him good-night, and left him; but he did not move till the logs collapsed in the grate. He was thinking drowsily of the other Christmas in Halesby, of the different way in which Alice had approached him, how she had tried to draw him nearer to her and how he had resisted her. He thought of the clinging dependence of Alice contrasted with the strength and independence of this other woman. Poor Alice! She had never answered his letter or acknowledged his postal order; but then, she was never one for letter-writing. The suggestion of freedom, the open way of escape which Mary, in her pride, had shown him, made him feel for a moment curious about that other life that had seemed so far away. If he wanted to do so, he reflected, he could throw up his job at a week's notice and take a train that would transport him in half a day back to North Bromwich, back to the familiar smoke-pale sky, to the chimney stacks, the furnaces and the smell of pit mounds. The odour of coal-dust and slag-heaps was in his nostrils. He saw the packed amphitheatre of the Albion ground and the white-lined turf within it. He heard the rumour of a football crowd, the thud of the ball, the referee's whistle. So utterly remote. . . . He went to the p. 235
door and opened it before he turned the key in its wards. He saw nothing but the high blackness of the winter night, not even a single star. The dank air chilled him; it crept into the lighted room.

'It's a rum go . . . a bloody rum go!' he said, yawning.

With the New Year, Abner's work on the pipe-track became more strenuous, for much time had been lost in the ten days of snow that fell about the time of Bastard's death and in the violent floods that followed on the thaw. A mild January did little to dry the sodden workings, and the task of shovelling earth was heavier to Abner than his old labours in Mawne Pit. His mate, Munn, who lodged miserably in a leaky labourer's cottage on the river-bank at Mainstone, was taken ill with bronchitis, and Abner worked alone. Up to his ankles in reddish clay he toiled, his hands were rufous and his trousers caked with it. The burden of the wet earth weighed on him. It was like a sullen enemy that made his feet leaden and strained against the muscles of his arms. All the labourers felt it. Their speech, which had been gay and good-humoured, became dogged and irritable. Nor were they the only folk who suffered. In every farm of the sodden Wolfpits valley men were making the same struggle under the raw and steely sky. Brimming dykes that drained the meadows shone cold beside the black hedgerows. The Folly Brook, a brown torrent, dammed with broken branches that gathered leaves and creamy foam, filled the whole valley with melancholy roaring. Waterfowl, snipe, and mallard and even slow-winged herons, moved upward to the sodden springs. It was a sad season in which the solitary workers on the farms, seen at evening in the fields, looked as if they were stuck fast in mires from which they could not escape: so slowly they moved, so huddled and pitiful they seemed. Even on the drive at Wolfpits, where the gravel was reasonably dry, it was painful to see the bowed figure of old Drew returning at night, his boots so caked with mud that he could scarcely drag himself along. It was no wonder that the man found consolation in the sweet, fiery spirits that he distilled. He sang so loudly at p. 236
night that Mrs Mamble would come in and sit with Mary and Abner rather than listen to his high, cracked voice.

Toward the end of January the vicar of the parish awoke to the fact that George Malpas was in prison and his wife presumably destitute. Between his vicarage and Wolfpits lay the vast bulk of Castel Ditches, so that he rarely visited the valley in winter. George Malpas, too, was a member of a dissenting family, his mother being known as a fanatic Methodist; but the Condovers, in so far as they had ever professed religion, were church people. Morgan and Gladys had both been baptized in the parish church, and since scandal informed him that old Mrs Malpas, like the dissenter that she was, had abandoned her son's family, the vicar sent the parish relieving officer on a special visit to Wolfpits to see if Mary were starving.

It pained and astonished the vicar to learn that she was doing nothing of the sort. She was not even humble, as a woman in her degrading position should be. The relieving officer, who had made his long journey to Wolfpits for nothing, reported that she was not in need of relief, and for

the most shameful of reasons. There was a lodger, a young man employed on the water-works and known to the police as a desperate character, who appeared to be filling the absent husband's place. Malpas's wife had not even made any decent attempt to conceal this state of affairs. She had confessed brazenly that she was living on this young man's earnings. To help her in any way would merely be putting a premium on immorality. The vicar nodded his head gravely. Such cases were all too frequent in rural districts, and yet it was a relief to feel that his principles freed him from any further responsibility. He mentioned the matter with satisfaction to his wife at supper on Sunday. At this meal, his weekly labours being ended, he always felt that he could speak more lightly of parish matters.

The vicar's wife was shocked. 'I always thought her such a superior young woman, dear. Do have some more beef!' she said. The idea of the superior and desirable young woman, whom she remembered as the mother of those two sweet children, living in open sin, obsessed her. It was a terrible and fascinating picture, and since the usual supply of gossip failed at the next Lesswardine working party, she dilated, in hushed tones, on the latest enormity. p. 237

'One feels a thing like that in one's own parish,' she said, speaking, as usual, as if she, and not the vicar, were the incumbent. 'But I am afraid nothing can be done.'

Somebody made a suggestion. The sister of the vicar of Aston-by-Lesswardine, Mr Cyril Malpas—the name was a curious coincidence—was shortly to be married to a young engineer, and the vicar would consequently be in need of a housekeeper. What a providential escape it would be if this young woman could find a home in Mr Malpas's vicarage! 'If only Mr Malpas would overlook this terrible state of affairs and take her,' they added.

'The only difficulty that I see,' said the vicar's wife, 'is that of the children.'

'But the matron at the workhouse is so motherly, and such a religious woman. Poor little things! It would be a blessing in disguise.'

Mr Malpas readily consented. His sister Celia, to tell the truth, had not been very successful as a housekeeper. Her individuality had been too marked—not to say aggressive—for that position, and a woman who had her reputation to regain would surely be anxious to please.

The new arrangement was proposed to Mary. The vicar's wife put the matter delicately, for she prided herself on her tact. More than ever she was impressed with the young woman's superiority and the sweetness of the children.

'Then I shall tell Mr Malpas that you will be glad to come, Mrs . . . er . . . Malpas?'

'I must talk it over with Mr Fellows,' said Mary.

'Mr Fellows?'

'My lodger.'

'Oh . . . yes, I see . . .' said the vicar's wife. That evening Abner came in tired from a day's work in the rain. His clothes were soaked; they steamed as he stood before the fire and filled the room with a harsh odour of wool and sweat. She told him calmly of her visitor and of the proposal that she had made. She did not say a word of her own inclinations. p. 238

'What about the kids?' he asked.

'I couldn't take them with me. They would go to the workhouse.'

'To hell with the work'us!' said Abner. 'Not likely! What do they take you for?'

Mary smiled. She told him what they took her for.

Abner was seized with rage. 'They're a dirty lot of swine, that's what they are!' he said. 'By God, I'd like to tell 'em of it!'

'It's natural,' she said. 'It looks like that.'

'And what the hell does it matter what it looks like, so long as there bain't nothing wrong? Old George knows it's all right, and he'm the only one as matters.'

She did not answer.

'An' what's the difference you being here with me or living alone with that there parson?'

'He's a clergyman,' she said.

'A clergyman, is he?' Abner cried. 'A clergyman! I like that!'

It pleased her, in her heart, to see him so moved.

'Well, what do you think of it?' she said quietly. 'If you want to go, like you did before when you were at home, this is your chance.'

He stood scowling in front of the fire. He couldn't make her out. When he left the court at Shrewsbury he had set himself to a deliberate line of conduct and determined to go through with it. When they had spoken of it before it had seemed to him that he and Mary were agreed on it and that nothing could change it until George's return. Even now he couldn't bring himself to

believe that she wanted to make a change. He knew her quiet passion for the children too well to think that anything could tempt her to abandon them to the care of strangers. Also he knew her pride. He believed that her pride and nothing else was keeping her from telling him exactly what she felt. It was useless for her to pretend to him that she had no feelings. It struck him that she was not playing the game. When a man and woman were placed in their position anything but the most complete confidence in each other was unfair. He would force her to say what she thought. Even if it humbled her he would force her to speak.

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'It's naught to do with me,' he said. 'If you want to go, you go, and that's all that matters.'

She was silent for a long time.

'If you want to go, you go,' he repeated.

At last she spoke, very quietly.

'I don't want to go,' she said.

A feeling of joy swept over him, a curious, almost physical exultation. He had brutally broken through the veil in which she hid herself. He had seen herself at last. Now, with the blood tingling in his fingers, he would assert himself triumphantly as the man by whose labour she lived. She could despise him no longer. He wanted to tell her so, to make himself strong before her, but when he looked at her and saw her humility, he could do nothing. His words withered on his lips. He scarcely knew what he was saying.

'Give us a spot of tea, then,' he said roughly, and she turned from him without another word.

The Seventeenth Chapter

p. 240

She stayed at Wolfpits. The iron of winter lay heavy on the land. The hills were leagued with winter to hem them in and isolate them. It was as though Wolfpits were besieged. For many years there had been no such winter in the Powys march, and old men who divined portents of weather from the berries of holly and the conduct of birds, foretold that there was worse to come. By the end of January the cloggers, as sensitive to sky-change as any feathered migrants, had struck their tents in the Wolfpits valley, leaving half their harvest of alder ungathered, and set off north for Lancashire where, in a country parched with fire and warmed with millions of huddled houses, they might finish the shaping of their wood for market. In any case they had stayed in the country later than usual, and when old Mrs Malpas, shocked by Wigan Joe's attempts to put life into her husband, bundled them out of their lodging at the Buffalo, they had no choice but to go, for the tenting that flapped miserably by the banks of the Folly Brook was no shelter for men in that bitter weather.

'We'll be back to hear the cuckoo, lad,' said Wigan Joe. 'You'll none get rid of bad pennies like uz.' And Abner, walking down the valley to work, heard no longer the echoing of their axes nor the crack of rending wood. Where the trim piles of billets had stood covered in tarpaulin he now saw nothing but squares of withered grass, and charred circles where they had made their fires among the birches by the river. Their departure made Wolfpits seem more distant and desolate than ever. Little by little the constriction of winter was crushing all life out of the valley. Only Wolfpits was alive, and it seemed a miracle that even Wolfpits should live.

For a few days at the latter end of February there came a mockery of sunshine, sad, like the suns of autumn. Abner sang as he walked down the valley; the labourers sang at their work. In a moment, such is the indomitable hope of living things, the birds broke their silence, the purple hedges were flushed, the bare twigs of hazel trembled as though they would shake their pale catkins out; one could feel the sap of life secretly stirring. But on the third day March came in howling like a lion with a dry wind from the northwest, sweeping brown leaves along, and the branches of the trees that bowed before it rattled dryly like dead bones. Once more the floods arose and drowned the land, and there was no more thought of spring.

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Through all this season the excavations under Callow Hill went on, and this was fortunate for Mary and her children, since Abner's wages came in steadily through many weeks when snow and flood made it impossible for men to work on the farms. Sometimes old Drew would be weatherbound at Wolfpits for two days at a time, and this was a misery to him, for he had no life but his work, and his employer knew better than to pay him for anything less than he performed. On these days he would shut himself up in his rooms leading the life of a hibernating animal, lighting no fire and cooking no food, simply lying wrapped up in the blankets on his bed with door and windows closed against the cold. At night he would drink himself warm with his turnip-wine, and keep Mrs Mamble awake by singing.

Fair or foul, the work of the pipe-track never slackened, and Mary was kept busy scraping the caked mud from Abner's clothes. The rain ceased and the floods fell. There followed a hushed season in which the note of the chiff-chaff was heard sounding faintly, timorously. The trees whispered together in the night. The valley was silent, and yet, beneath the silence, one felt a secret battle of blind forces. Moment by moment, cell by cell, the creatures of earth were breaking free from the heavy lethargy that had sealed them. Even in the dull members of men

the slow flame quickened, the numb fibres stirred. As yet on the surface of the earth few changes might be seen. Over the fields flights of peewits wheeled and screamed, with flapping, tumbling wings. Only the bloom of purple on the hedgerows flushed to a warmer brown, only tassels of elm-blossom in bud softened the stark outline of their branches: only, on the fringe of the woodland, the green of dog-mercury appeared. p. 242

Then, with a sudden fervour unknown in more temperate climes, spring came. The sloes were sprayed with light; the hue of hawthorn twigs paled; in the space of a single week the whole earth broke in a green flame. Nor was it only green things that were born. White lambs appeared as by magic in the fields, seeming as little dependent on the agency of men as the white daisies. At evening, when Abner came home from work, they leapt into the air and twisted their heads sideways in the leap. The valley was full of tender bleatings. He laughed at them, striding homewards. His mates laughed and whistled at their work. Even the sad, disfigured face of Munn grew blandly, childishly happy.

Gladys and Morgan knew that spring had come—indeed they had known of its coming long before Abner suspected it. They made great plans to go out into the fields with Spider and see the lambs at play; they cried when bedtime came, for very excess of life. ‘But it ban’t dark, mam,’ they said, coaxing Mary to let them play a little longer. She could not refuse them, for she herself loved to sit sewing in the doorway, hearing their voices echoed from the warming walls of the house while the swallows darted to and fro under the eaves above her. She would sit there talking lazily to old Drew, who now began to be busy with his garden. When she inquired how his rheumatism was, he would straighten his back with a smile, and tell her that he felt like a man of thirty. When rain came he would stand on his step gazing at the garden fondly, as though he expected to see his seeds pushing above the finely-tilled soil.

During all these days they heard nothing of George. The three months of silence that the law imposes on a prisoner in jail were now over. Mick Connor, that specialist in all the details of a criminal’s life, informed Abner that when this time was over, the convict was usually allowed the privilege of writing one letter a month, and, if his conduct were good enough, he might even receive one visitor of his choice. But no letter came to Wolfpits. One day at his work Abner overheard a conversation between two of his mates from which he gathered that Mrs Malpas had made a journey to Shrewsbury and seen her son. ‘He’s looking up fine, by all accounts,’ said one of them, ‘and the old woman’s pleased as anything he hasn’t sent for his missus.’ p. 243

Abner experienced a sudden feeling of anger for Mary’s sake. He felt the slight almost as much as if it had been pointed against himself; but on the way home he decided that it would be better not to tell her. Probably she imagined that a prisoner was shut off from all communication with the outer world for the term of his sentence; and, if this were so, it was better that she should remain in ignorance. Who would be George’s next visitor? The woman from Lesswardine?

A drowsiness fell on the valley, a deep drowsiness of growth and heavy green. Cuckoos began to call at dawn: even in the heat of the day they called, flying from hedge to hedge. The monotony of their song lulled the valley to sleep. Twilights lengthened. Abner was now so settled in his life at Wolfpits that his friends would come up and see him there, sitting in the garden through the evening, talking to him and playing with the children. Munn, who had never yet shaken himself free from the toils of his unhappy childhood, came shyly, and was self-conscious in their company, particularly when Mary joined them; but Mick Connor, who had never been shy in his life and loved children, as most Irishmen do, made his visit to Wolfpits almost a daily custom. In this happy, languid season, he had no more serious business in hand. He even viewed Badger indulgently. Badger might shoot as many foxes, might hatch, rear, and put down as many young pheasants in the woods as he liked—the more the better! For the present Mick was content to take his ease.

Mary liked him . . . she couldn’t help liking him, for he made her laugh, and was so kind to the children. Morgan, in particular, looked forward to Mick’s coming, for his young animal instinct had discovered that the poacher’s pocket in the skirts of the Irishman’s coat sometimes contained bananas, a fruit to which Morgan would devote himself to the degree of suffering. Mick could never make Gladys forsake her Abner’s knee for his; but Morgan’s stomach always got the better of filial love when his new friend appeared. p. 244

‘Is there aught in your pocket, Mis’r Connor, to-night?’ he would say coaxingly.

‘Morgan, you mustn’t be rude!’ Mary would protest.

‘Mayn’t I ask him, mam?’

Mick would wink at him: ‘And how would I know what’s in there? Come and be looking, for yourself.’ He would take Morgan up on his knee and then, half awed by warnings that something might bite him, the child would slip his hand into the deep pocket and pull out the fruit with a chuckle of delight.

‘Mr Connor spoils you, and that’s the truth!’ Mary would reply.

Sometimes the pocket was empty, and at such times Mick was put to an elaborate explanation of what had happened, embracing the origin of this mysterious fruit.

‘Wait an’ I’ll tell you,’ he said. ‘Last night, when I looked in my box where the leprechaun puts it, there was a beautiful lot of fruit there. Oranges and grapes and apples and the rest, more’n I

could lift in the both of my hands.'

'Not any bananas?' Morgan asked anxiously.

'Bananners? Ah, don't be talkun! Three beautiful bunches of them fresh from the tree, with the juice runnun' out of the stalks of them, they was that ripe. "So," says I, "I'll put them all in my pocket, I will, and go out and ate one or two of them." His voice sank to an awed, confidential level. 'So, when I was after leaving Mainstone, and got out on the turnpike, I walked quick along the cemetery wall, for you never know what you mightn't see in a place the likes of that. An' then I heard a sound of wheels behind me and the hoofs of horses trottun' up to the corner. An' I thought, "Who would be driving after me at that time of night, an' not a star showun'. Houly saints, I thought, what can it be?"'

'I know what it was,' said Morgan grimly, for he had heard of this adventure before.

'Is that a fact?' said Mick, with impressive surprise. p. 245

'It was the dead-coach, mam,' said Morgan in a whisper.

'And so it was,' replied Mick, slapping his thigh. 'The dead-coach—and on the box of ut two men in long black coats with the faces blacked on them and hair like our ass. When they see me they pulls up sudden, and these black pair jumps off of the box and takes hould on me and puts their hands in my pocket, the way my shirt stuck to my back for fright, and stole all the fruit on me and drove off without a word.'

The sensation of this adventure was almost enough to compensate Morgan for the loss of his fruit. It was Morgan's favourite story. But Gladys was Abner's girl, and would rather sit on his knee listening with wide eyes. On Abner's knee she felt quite safe.

Sometimes Abner, Mick, and the two children would leave Mary busy with her sewing and walk down together to the bridge over the Folly Brook, or to the meadows where thickets of hazel and shy companies of birches stood along the stream. Mick always carried a catapult with him. Ever since his boyhood he had been a deadly shot with this weapon, and could 'knock the head off of a wran,' as he put it, at a range of thirty yards. He made Morgan a catapult with which the child blackened his thumb-nails, and carried in his pocket small round pebbles that he picked from the bed of the stream, now shrunken to a thread of gin-clear water.

Although he could never resist killing birds when he had the chance, Mick loved every feather on them, and indeed he knew them well: their nestings, their flight, their song, and their quick cries of alarm. He showed Morgan all the birds of that mountain valley: the tree pipits that sprang upward like a stone tossed into the air and then planed downwards with spread tails twittering like mechanical toys: the sandpipers that called plaintively from spits of sand: the black dippers that fled upstream under the arching alders; the water-ouzel that made in echoing, stony combes a noise that he imitated by tapping two pebbles together: the redstarts that fluttered their bright tails near the walls in whose crevices they nested. And they would stand still, this little group of p. 246 four, listening to the warble of the blackcap safely hidden in impenetrable thickets, or lift their heads, under the high shade of larches to hear the hissing note of the wood-wren, coming home tired in the twilight, the children's hands hot with the green smell of moth-like cuckoo-flowers that they had gathered in the meadows.

While the light faded the two men would smoke their pipes on the bridge, where the big black trout that inhabited the pool hung gorged with mayfly and held the stream with faintly quivering fins. Mick loved to watch them quietly, telling, in his slow, hypnotic tones, of the great cannibal trout of the Barrow, so strong that they could pull a child into the water after them. When they turned to go home Morgan would beg to shoot at the trout with his catapult. He never hit one, but when the stone reached the water they could see the dark streaks of the fishes vanishing under the shadows of the bridge.

Often Mick would talk of great days in Ireland, the days of country race-meetings and fairs, and round these events also a legend arose. When Morgan was shooting with his catapult the Irishman would encourage him with the patter of the man who kept a shooting gallery, reeling off long strings of words that meant nothing to the child, and standing up with bright eyes and flushed cheeks as though the hum of the fair were still in his ears.

'Now then, walk up, walk up. . . . Fire, my rattler, fire! Six more shots a penny! Right through the hardware shop—and very near winning the silver cane! Fire, my bold American, fire. Pass along to the next caravan: your halfpenny is no more!'

He told them of the maggie-man, a live Aunt Sally, who stood up in his tub with tangled hair and fierce beard warding off the flights of sticks that were hurled at his head, and of that great mystery, the Live Lion Stuffed with Straw. Morgan drank it all in eagerly.

'Why bain't there no fairs in these parts?' he said.

In a weak moment his mother told him that there were fairs in Shropshire, and above all, the great fair of Brampton Bryan, held every year in June. She told him how her father had taken her p. 247 there many years ago, when she was a little girl, and how she had eaten the cakes which are made on purpose for this festival. 'Bron cakes, they call them,' she said.

The fact that eating was added to these other delights inflamed Morgan's imagination.

‘Will they have Bron cakes this time?’ he asked.

‘Of course they will. They always have Bron cakes.’

‘Can’t we go, mam?’

‘It’s a long way away,’ she told him.

‘But granfer took *you* . . .’

‘Granfer had a horse and trap.’

‘Grandma Malpas has a pony,’ Morgan persisted.

‘Some day, when you’re a big boy, you shall go,’ said Mary.

The subject dropped from their conversation, but not from Morgan’s mind. The child knew better than to pester his mother about it, but as the time of the fair grew nearer, he talked to every one else that he met, to Mick, to Abner, to Mrs Mamble, and even to old Drew. The thought of Bron Fair obsessed him and even found its way into his dreams. The week before the event he became so persistent and showed so keen a disappointment at the thought of missing it, that Abner began to take him seriously.

‘Why shouldn’t we take ’em along?’ he said to Mary, when the children were in bed.

‘It’s too far away,’ she said. ‘Much too far.’

‘It’s not that far over the hills. Some of our chaps is going to walk there.’

‘You can’t drag children up hill and down dale.’

‘Well, there’s the train from Llandwlas.’

She shook her head. ‘You can’t get back the same day,’ she said.

‘You could put in the night at Redlake. There’s a station there.’

She said nothing. ‘It’s a shame to disappoint them,’ he added.

Her interest in the children’s happiness was her weak point, and in the end Abner had his way. He settled with the Gunner that he should leave work early on the Thursday afternoon and return on Saturday morning. He met Mary and the children on the platform at Llandwlas in the afternoon. Morgan had never travelled in a train before, and stood excitedly at the window, next to his mother. Gladys sat quietly by the side of Abner, who carried the brown paper parcel in which their clothes and provisions were packed. He was not quite comfortable, for it seemed to him even now that Mary had undertaken the expedition under protest. This was unreasonable, for he had enough money to carry them through, and it was no use going on an expedition like this unless she were determined to enjoy it. But Mary was thinking of her last journey from Llandwlas in the morning train to Shrewsbury. Perhaps she was thinking also of George. p. 248

A fit of train-sickness put a stop to Morgan’s enthusiasms for a time. In the cool of the evening they reached the station of Redlake, a small village which stands on a little river that is a torrent in winter but in summer no more than a trickle of water. From there a road, hung with heavy trees, runs straight to Brampton Bryan, three or four miles away. The train was crowded, and as they approached Redlake Mary grew uneasy, for she guessed that most of the travellers were bound for the same place and with the same purpose and began to wonder if they could find a lodging in so small a village. She whispered her fears to Abner, and they hurried from the station into the sloping street. The first inn that they came to was already full.

‘You might get a room at the Harley Arms, if you’re quick,’ a flustered landlord told them. They went straight on. Abner walked too quickly for them, and Mary almost had to run, dragging the children behind her. At the Harley Arms a fat woman eyed them suspiciously.

‘It’s the worst day of the whole year,’ she said. ‘I don’t see how I can do it. If you’d come in by the next train you wouldn’t have found a bed in the whole of Redlake.’

‘You can’t turn the children out,’ said Abner. ‘The little boy’s been sick in the train.’

Morgan’s face was still patched yellow and white at the corners of the mouth. The landlady, against all her intentions, softened. ‘Poor little soul!’ she said. She tied another knot in the string of the blue striped apron that she wore, as though her hands must be doing something to contribute to the general atmosphere of haste and flurry. ‘Poor little soul! Well, now, what can I do? What with the pies and one thing and another! The only thing I can do is to put the man in the front room along with Mr Prowse at the back; but I must say I don’t like disturbing Mr Prowse, the number of fairs he’s been with me. Comes regular, he does . . . you can look for him like the swallows. Still, he’s a nice man: a very nice man, and if I told him all about it I don’t think he’d stand in your way. Come along, my dear!’ p. 249

The last words were addressed to Mary, whose hand Morgan was clutching convulsively as though he still felt the train swinging under his feet. They all entered a room on the left of the doorway. In it were two long tables spread with coarse linen cloths of a gleaming whiteness and laden with a series of boiled hams crisped with golden bread-crumbs, and gigantic pies whose crusts were of the same rich hue. Loaves of white bread stood between them, and at the head of

each table a leaning tower of plates. At the other end of the room a barrel of cider had been propped upon two bottle-boxes.

Even Morgan's revolted stomach could not resist the inspiration of seeing so much food. In a hushed voice he asked Mary what was inside the pies.

'Inside of them, my love?' cooed the landlady. 'There's bunny rabbits inside of them, and lovely pieces of bacon in a jelly that would stand by itself. You'll see what's inside of them soon!' She laughed happily and then, tying another knot in her apron-string, explained to Mary that the rabbit pies of the Harley Arms were an institution on the eve of Bron Fair. 'We used to make as many as thirty of them,' she said, 'but the fair's not what it was in those days. Still, they must have their pies. They'd drop down dead if they came into the room and never see them! There they are, waiting ready for them: pies and ham and bread and cider, and they helps themselves. We're too busy to look after them. They takes what they want, and pays the same whether its much or little. That's the custom, you see.' p. 250

By this time the concentration of rich smells had overcome Morgan's interest. 'I want to lie down, mam,' he said, and Mary stopped the landlady in a flood of reminiscence to inquire again about their room before disaster came.

'Well, now,' she said in a more kindly, mysterious voice. 'I'll tell you what do. I'll put you in Mr Prowse's room without asking him. That's the best way. If you're there, you're there, and that's the end of it. You can put the little girl on the sofa and the little boy can sleep in between the two of you. 'Tis a fine, old-fashioned bed. A family bed, as the saying is.'

Abner saw Mary go red. He came quickly to the rescue.

'We're not man and wife, missus,' he said.

'What! You're not a married couple? That's different altogether,' said the landlady, her tone hardening.

'This young man only came along with me to help me with the children,' Mary explained.

'I've kept this place respectable all my life, and I don't intend to start anything different,' said the landlady severely. 'I think you'd better look somewhere else.'

Mary, half shocked, half frightened, would have taken the children away at once. 'Come along, Abner,' she said. But Abner would not be beaten.

'Look here, missus,' he said to the landlady. 'If we wasn't respectable, we could have took you in, and you been none the wiser. I'm here looking after this young woman. There's nothing else between us. If there was I should have codded you we was married.'

'Don't, Abner!' said Mary.

The landlady looked from one to the other of this strange couple. Morgan began to whimper, and the sight of the child's tiredness melted her heart.

'You'd better come on upstairs,' she said to Mary, and then, with a defiant glance at Abner: 'But the young man will have to look out for himself. There's no bed here I can give him. My husband and the boys'll have to sleep in the loft as it is. I oughtn't to take you in, by rights, and that's the truth.' p. 251

'Never you mind me,' said Abner. 'It won't hurt me to sleep rough.'

She took Mary and the children upstairs. Abner stayed on in the long room alone, listening to the busy clatter of the house. The landlord, his sons, and a couple of village girls, who had been brought in to deal with the rush of business, went running up and down stairs and stone passages and in and out of the bar as quickly and apparently as aimlessly as the inhabitants of a disturbed ants' nest. The sun dipped behind the mountains. A train arrived from the north, then another from the south, and each time the street was flooded with a crowd of excitable men knocking at door after door in search of lodging for the night. Abner heard the landlord in the bar refusing them one after another. With the second train arrived the important Mr Prowse, a tall, lumbering man in cord breeches and black leggings covered with the red dust of the Black Mountain, from the slopes of which he came. He wore a close red beard, and spoke in a high sing-song, for part of his mountain pasturage was in Wales. He had already drunk too freely at the Craven Arms station buffet to be much worried by the idea of a sleeping companion.

'What is it you're after this fair, Mr Prowse?' asked the landlord.

'Draught horses,' said the farmer. 'They're very scarce down our way, and a price that would frighten you.'

'Then you and me are going to have a field day, Mr Prowse,' said a fat, asthmatical Cardiff Jew, who had just arrived in the doorway.

'Ah, Mr Myers, how is it then?' said the farmer. 'Mr May says he's put you and me to sleep in the same room. There's a young woman in the front.'

'A young woman?' growled Myers. 'What's a young woman doing here at this time?'

'The more of them the better!' said the farmer, with a laugh.

‘No. . . . I’ve got over all that,’ said the Jew, shaking his head. p. 252

‘Now, what are you two gentlemen taking with me?’ asked the landlord.

They all settled down to talk about horses. Abner was getting more and more hungry and wondering when Mary would come downstairs. The sight of that magnificent array of food whetted his appetite, but he did not want to be the first to begin. He drew himself a mug of cider from the cask: a dry, half bitter product of the Hereford orchards. He drank a pint of it, and the alcohol, taken on an empty stomach, made him happy and confident. He no longer felt uneasy that Mary was so long away.

Now he had not long to wait for his supper, for Prowse and Myers came in from the bar, and in a few moments other men arrived. They all carved for themselves huge segments of pie and rich slices of ham with knives that were whetted thin with use. Abner took his place among them. Nobody spoke to him, for he seemed to be the only stranger in the company. Many of them had not seen their friends for a whole year, since their last meeting in the same place. Twilight came, and the lamps were lit. The buyers sat on talking and drinking at the tables, running with one accord to door or window when the hoofs of some horse that had been brought to the fair for sale were heard trotting down the road.

‘Jenkins wants to sell that there cob to-night rather than take him to Bron,’ said Myers.

‘Never buy a horse you don’t see by daylight,’ Prowse replied, shaking his clay pipe to mark the words.

‘I don’t,’ said Myers, with a wink. ‘I heard a fellow from Brum offer him forty, and he’s a fool if he don’t take it.’

‘There’s high prices going this fair,’ said Prowse. ‘There’s a great scarcity down our way. Jenkins is a chap as knows his business.’

‘And so do I,’ said the Jew. ‘So do I.’

Abner, mildly exalted, walked out into the moonlit street. At the cottage doors and down by the bridge little groups of men in breeches and leggings stood talking together with low voices. p. 253
From time to time the clatter of approaching hoofs was heard and the men stopped to listen. The village was full of a strange sense of expectancy. Abner wandered over the bridge and a little way upstream. In the hush of the night he heard a girl laughing. The sound disturbed him. He thought suddenly of Susie. The excitement of drink and a full stomach turned his thoughts in the direction of physical desire. He stopped and listened for the girl’s voice again, and wondered what man was with her.

He walked back irritably into the village. An old man was putting out the oil lamps that gave a feeble light to the street. What was he, Abner, doing without a woman, when the village was full of them? He looked up at the front room of the inn where Mary and the children were sleeping. It filled him with an unreasoning annoyance to think of her sleeping calmly there. She was treating him ridiculously, without confidence. Why hadn’t she come down into the room for supper as soon as she had put the children to sleep? Just because the landlady had shocked her by suggesting that they should sleep together, he supposed, and, by God, it might have put some sense into her if they had done so. He laughed. He hadn’t thought of Mary in that light before; but in this curious state to which the liquor, the moonlight, and that light voice heard in the darkness had excited him, he felt that he had been a fool not to make love to Mary. If once he had treated her that way and she had accepted him, there would be an end of her airs and graces. George . . .? Well, George’s own life didn’t exact a high degree of fidelity from his wife.

So, like a hungry animal, Abner prowled beneath the inn windows. The panes of that which belonged to Mary’s bedroom shone blankly in the moon through twigs of white jessamine. In the bar, Mr Prowse, now very drunk, was declaiming staccato judgments on the value of basic slag. Abner would have joined them and got drunk if he had any money to spend, but the small sum that he had saved for the occasion would do no more than pay for their lodging and their return p. 254
fares to Llandwlas. The moonlight seemed to cool the air. Even the smell of jessamine grew fainter in the cold. It was no good standing there any longer, and so he found a sleeping place on some straw in the loft above the stable, and settled down as well as he could, listening to the steady grinding of the horses’ jaws and the snatching noise that they made as they pulled out hay from the racks above their mangers.

Mary slept badly. Earlier in the evening, when Morgan and Gladys had fallen asleep, she had caught the landlady on the stairs and begged that her supper might be brought to her in her bedroom. There she had devoured a solitary plate of the famous rabbit-pie, but hearing below her the sound of many men’s voices and still dreading to be mistaken for Abner’s wife, she had not dared to go downstairs and find him. Instead of thinking any more about it she decided to go to bed, creeping gently under the sheets for fear of disturbing the children. But she could not sleep. The bedroom was immediately over the room in which supper was served, and she could not hear so many voices buzzing beneath her without wanting to catch what they were saying. As the evening wore on the house grew noisier. It seemed as if they would never go to bed; and when, at last, the noise ceased and she had nearly fallen asleep, the moonlight, beating in through the muslin-curtained window, awoke Morgan. He said that he was thirsty, and after much groping, she gave him water from the ewer on the washhand-stand. Thus awakened from the sleep that followed his train-sickness, the excitement of his strange surroundings kept him

going for a couple of hours of questions about the fair.

‘Why bain’t Abner up here?’ he said at last.

This was more than she could explain. ‘If you don’t keep quiet, my son,’ she said, ‘I shall take you right out and give you to Abner for the night. Then you’ll cry to come back to your mother. You’re a little nuisance, that’s what you are!’

She tucked him away and huddled him against her breast away from the moonlight, and so, at length, he fell asleep.

Next morning, Abner, who had slept well, was early astir, but no earlier, it seemed, than the rest of the world. In the yard below him the owner of the stabled horses was up and grooming them. He asked Abner to give him a hand and offered him a shilling for his trouble. ‘I reckon they’m going to make wonnerful prices to-day,’ he said. An opaline sky, covered with the faintest veil of mist, promised a hot morning. p. 255

The landlord of the Harley Arms had not yet risen, but the girls were sweeping the passage and setting the table for breakfast in the long room, and his wife was watching them with sleepy eyes, while she sipped a cup of tea. Abner joined her, paid the bill for the night, five shillings, and took some tea with bread and butter to the door of Mary’s room. He knocked and called to her, and she answered in a voice that seemed alarmed by his nearness.

‘I bain’t going to eat you *nor* the children,’ he said. ‘It’s going to be a fine day. How long do you want to keep us waiting?’

She assured him timidly that they wouldn’t be long, and by half-past nine they had become part of the stream of traffic flowing along the road from Redlake to Brampton Bryan, raising clouds of hot dust under the heavy green of the trees.

‘I don’t think the sun will come through, after all,’ said Mary regretfully, though the sight of the horses sweating on the road should have told her that this was fortunate. They walked slowly along the edge of the white highway, Mary anxiously pulling in the children to her side when swift traps or single horses, southward bound, came past them. It seemed to her that so great a collection of strong, spirited animals, which snorted and sniffed the air excited by the presence of strangers of their kind, was dangerous. What would happen to Morgan and Gladys if some sudden noise or infectious fear threw them into a stampede? All the way along the road she was looking anxiously ahead for the next gateway or gap in the hedge, planning ways of escape.

The children loitered, and it was nearly noon when they reached the outskirts of Brampton Bryan. The sky was still white. Mist lay cold on the hills, but the plain grew suffocating. At this point, where the traffic began to feel the backward pressure of the congested village, matters were complicated by an actual constriction of the road. Horses and traps were crowded together in a block, and the men who drove them looked serious and impatient. There was scarcely room along the side of the road for them to pass. p. 256

‘Come on,’ said Abner. ‘What are you waiting for?’

‘Can’t we wait here till they move on?’ said Mary, gathering the children closer to her. If she could have done so without encountering other advancing dangers she would have turned back. She hated this narrow, twisting neck of roadway.

They waited, leaning up against an iron fence, breathing the hot smell of the horses. Other people on foot passed them in a steady stream. Among these Abner saw the farmer from the Black Mountain and his friend the lethargic Jew. They appeared to be talking together, and thinking of nothing else, but their eyes were wide open, and when they saw a likely animal they would stop and ask the driver about prices or stoop and run their hands along the horse’s slender legs. They did not notice Abner with Mary and the children in the hedge. The block of vehicles moved on a little and was checked. The movement, slight as it was, infected the animals with restlessness. They snorted, and champed their bits; they danced with springing fetlocks and necks arched to the tightened reins. Mary pressed closer to the iron railings. She felt that she was foolish to be scared, and yet it irritated her to see the unconcern of Abner. What was his strength compared with the violence of horses? Again the block moved on.

‘We can’t wait here all day,’ he said; but she only shook her head.

A strange cart pulled up opposite to them, drawn by a spiritless pony and bearing a black tin plate with the words: Hughes, Brecon, painted on it in a scrawl of white. A gipsy drove it, and behind, on the tilted cart-tail sat a withered, dirty woman and a girl of fifteen with a beautiful dark face and long, black hair, which the old woman was carefully and necessarily combing. To the tail of the cart a cowed and mangy mongrel of the greyhound breed was tied with a strand of rope. The eyes of the girl were dark and wild as those of an animal, and she stared insolently at Abner, half-smiling, attracted, no doubt, by the contrast of his fair strength. For some strange reason Mary felt that the girl’s glance hurt her. ‘She’s smiling at you. Don’t look at her, Abner!’ she whispered. ‘How dirty she is!’ The whisper disturbed the old woman, who ceased her hairdressing, wiped the comb on her apron and smiled across at Mary. She had no teeth but a single yellow tusk in the middle of her lower jaw. She leaned over the edge of the cart and held out her hand toward them. p. 257

‘Shall the old woman tell your fortune, my pretty dear?’ she whined. ‘You and your lovely

children and your husband? A fine upstanding man, my dear, if ever there was one. Cross the old woman's hand with a bit of silver and she'll tell you the future as it's written!'

Mary looked away. The gipsy girl continued to stare at Abner.

'Ah, don't you want to know the happiness that's coming?' the old woman went on, with her hand outstretched. 'I tell you that's worth more to you than a piece of silver. All that lays before you, my pretty dear. . .'

Mary clutched at Abner's arm. 'Don't look at her! She's staring at you! I think we'd better go on,' she whispered. But a cart had pulled in to the side in front of them, and they could not move. The old woman continued to pester them with her whinings. When she saw that no silver would cross her palm she changed her tone. She leaned further out of her cart, speaking now of ill-fortune rather than good, gratuitously prophesying evil, and a near evil at that. Abner bandied words with her and laughed, but Mary felt her heart sinking within her. From more maledictions they were saved by a sudden forward movement of the block. The cart started with a jerk which pulled the mongrel who had been biting at fleas on its belly, to its feet. The girl gave Abner a final, dark smile; the old woman spat in Mary's direction. p. 258

'Come on,' said Abner, 'now's your chance!'

But Mary could not move. In some way the encounter had destroyed her nerve. 'Let's wait till it's clearer!' she pleaded.

A drove of mountain ponies that the gipsies had driven down to the fair from some heathery upland of Montgomery or Clun, followed them. They were small, shaggy, and very wild. They stamped and snorted, then huddled together anxiously in a bunch, sniffing the air with distended nostrils. The sense of being herded together between the hedge and the iron railings made them tremble with fright, and Mary was no less frightened than they. Her anxiety spread to the children, and for the first time since they had left Redlake Morgan forgot his cakes. He began to whimper.

'They're all right,' said Abner. 'Don't you take no notice of them.'

A little black stallion, the last of the herd, suddenly took fright. He made a dash for the hedge on the opposite side, but the blackthorn was too high for him and he stood quivering half-way up the bank. A heavy loutish man, of Atwell's build, who seemed a giant beside the little animal, climbed up and took hold of it by the ear. It gave a sudden convulsive movement, and in a moment the man and the horse were fighting together. The animal pulled him to the ground and for a moment they struggled in the dust. Then another man sat on its head and put a snitch on its muzzle. They jumped aside and the pony leapt to its feet. It stood trembling and screamed with pain. The big man, panting and dusty, held the rope of which the snitch was made. A bitter fight followed, the pony rushing wildly from side to side with fierce, terrible screams, the man holding on grimly yet barely keeping his feet. The other gipsies drove on the rest of the herd, and those who came behind ran forward to watch the duel, with cries of encouragement now to the man, now to the beast. It was a horrible sight, at which Mary did not dare to look, though Abner enjoyed it. To and fro the panting animal plunged. It rolled on the ground, leapt in the air, with fierce snortings and shrill cries. Its eyes were bright with rage. At last it stood stock still in the middle of the road and would not move. The man who had sat on its head approached it with a halter. Still it stood its ground, trembling violently, shaken with angry snorts, foaming. It seemed that the fight was over and the wild spirit conquered, but before he could slip the halter on its head the animal had taken another violent leap. Abner saw its body hurling through the air and threw himself in front of Mary and the children. He went over with the stallion on the top of him, hearing Mary's cry. The iron railings were bent back, and Mary was holding Gladys in her arms. The shouts of the crowd rang in Abner's ears: 'Her's dead! They've no business to drive 'em on a public road! Savage they are! Poor little thing! These bloody gipsies! That chap did his best . . .' p. 259

Two men were now holding the pony, and the big fellow was bending over Mary and the ghastly face of the child. Abner pushed him aside. 'She's all right . . . she's all right!' said Mary. Gladys was crying in shrill, frightened gasps.

'My leg, mam, oh, my leg!' she wailed.

'Try to move your toes, love,' a woman said. 'If she can move her toes the bone's not broken.'

A dozen others clustered round with various advice, while the men stood staring stupidly with pained eyes. Mary was hiding the child's face in her bosom. Morgan clung crying to her skirts. Her face was terribly set, but she soon recovered her presence of mind.

'Abner . . . you take Morgan,' she said. 'We must find a doctor.'

'He lives just round the corner, ma'am,' a bustling woman cried. 'The red 'ouse with the trees in front of it. You can see the roof.'

'Let me take her. She's too heavy for you,' said Abner and Mary surrendered the child, picking up Morgan in her own arms. A curious crowd followed them to the doctor's house.

The Eighteenth Chapter

They found the doctor just setting out on his morning round. His wife, a forbidding woman, plainly dressed and flat-chested, caught him in the stableyard and brought him back into the surgery.

'It's the first accident . . . a little girl,' she said. 'Did you ever know the fair without one?'

He followed her in fussily, hoping that there was nothing to keep him, for he had a long list of country visits to get through before the broken heads should begin to roll up in the evening. Abner had laid the child down on a high couch covered with American leather. In the road she had screamed her breath away and now she lay shivering and whimpering softly, almost quiet.

'Well, what is it?' said the doctor brusquely.

'It's her leg,' Mary whispered. 'I'm afraid it's broken.'

'A kick from a horse,' said the doctor's wife from the background.

'Let's see!'

Mary's fingers fumbled with the tapes of the child's drawers.

'Scissors!' said the doctor. The sudden touch of steel made Gladys cry out loud, and the first cry of alarm was quickly changed to one of pain. She struggled with the pain and by her movement increased it. The doctor leaned his left arm above her body and held her still. Mary, clasping Gladys's hands in hers, put down her face to the child's tear-dabbled cheek. Her own tears were mingled with those of her child, but she made no sound. Abner stood helpless, watching, and behind him also stood the doctor's wife, gaunt, flat, immobile. In a former state she had been a sister at the North Bromwich Infirmary.

The doctor was leaning over Gladys and breathing heavily through his nostrils. His hands, lean, brown, and slightly stained with iodine, were placed firmly yet tenderly upon the pink and white of the child's thigh. His fingers moved like tentacles, searching, soothing the spastic muscles under the skin. Gladys gave a sudden frightened, 'Oh . . . *mam*!'—and the fingers tightened like bands of steel. All the man's mind was in his fingers; his eyes gazed vaguely out of the window to the cascades of fading laburnum blossom in his shrubbery, the billowy outline of lilac against the white sky.

'Yes . . .' he said at last. 'Separated epiphysis. Lower end of femur. I shall want a small Liston splint and plenty of strapping. I expect she'll need a whiff of chloroform, too. If you'll get it I won't move.' Then he addressed Mary. 'I think it will be better if the small boy is out of the room. They can look after him in the kitchen.'

Bribed by a sup of cocoa, Morgan allowed himself to be taken away from his mother by the doctor's wife, who soon returned with the splint, the dressings, and the anæsthetic.

'I'll just get her under, if you'll see that she doesn't move. If she kicks about there may be a lot more hæmorrhage.'

His wife took his place and he sprinkled a few drops of heavy liquid on to a wire mask covered with lint. A sweetish odour mingled with that of the lilac. It seemed to Abner that the room had suddenly become oppressively hot.

'Now breathe deeply. Smell it in! It's ever so nice!' said the doctor. Gladys sniffed, then choked, and tried to push away the mask with her hands.

'Hold her fingers, mother!' said the doctor. Mary closed her eyes and took the child's fingers in her own.

'That's better . . . that's better.' He sprinkled more chloroform on the lint. In another minute he raised the mask. Gladys was now breathing heavily; her face was suffused, and she puffed out her lips with each breath. The doctor handed over the mask to his wife. 'Give her a drop now and then,' he said, 'and plenty of air as well. She's just nicely under.' He pushed back an eyelid with his finger to see that the pupillary reflex was active. 'Nicely . . . nicely.'

He rose to his feet and changed places with his wife.

Again he placed his hands on the child's thigh, but now the hands were no longer gentle agents of perception, but strong and ruthless weapons. His brown fingers grasped the limb firmly. The room swam before Abner's eyes. He went down like a stone. Mary gave a cry of alarm.

'He's all right,' said the doctor, with a glance over his shoulder. 'These big strong fellows are always the most liable to faint over a job like this. Give me a woman, any day!'

When Abner came to his senses the limb was set. A long splint with a serrated lower end had been strapped to the child's body from armpit to heel. Her face was still flushed, but she breathed as softly as though she were lying in a natural sleep. The doctor was washing his hands and preparing to set out again. He offered Abner a medicine glass full of cold water with a dash of brandy in it.

‘What’s owing, gaffer?’ Abner asked.

The doctor looked him up and down. ‘A labourer,’ he thought, ‘with a wife and two kids: a decent-looking young fellow.’ He hated asking those people for money in the middle of a misfortune; but he had to live.

‘Oh, we’ll say five shillings,’ he said, ‘but don’t forget to send me the splint back. Dr Davies, Brampton Bryan. That will find me!’

Abner gave him two half-crowns that were loose in his pocket.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘You must be careful how you carry her. The bone’s in a nice position if you don’t disturb it.’

‘How long will it take, doctor?’ Mary asked.

‘Five or six weeks with luck. Good-morning!’

For an hour or more they stayed in the surgery, visited from time to time by the doctor’s wife. Gladys awoke as from a gentle sleep. The support of the splint freed her from the spasm of the torn muscles. She rubbed her eyes and cried softly in her mother’s arms.

‘We’d best go straight to the station,’ said Abner.

So, having torn the unwilling Morgan from the material attentions of the cook, they set off along the hot road that they had travelled earlier in the day. They walked slowly, for they had at least p. 263
three hours to spare before the afternoon train left Redlake station. They reached their goal at three o’clock and laid the child down flat on a bench in the waiting room, while Abner produced the sandwiches which he had cut earlier in the morning at the inn. Morgan, having fed and cried a little because his dinner did not include specimens of the famous Bron cakes, fell asleep upon his mother’s knees. Mary and Abner talked together in undertones for fear of waking the children, until the station-master entered the waiting-room with a swagger and threw up the shutter of the booking-office, peering at them with official eyes through the wire grille.

‘I reckon I’d better get the tickets,’ said Abner. He went to the window, asking for two third singles and two halves to Llandwlas. The station-master whipped the tickets out and stamped them as smartly as though a queue of a hundred trippers was waiting for him. ‘Five and four pence ha’penny,’ he said.

Abner felt for his purse: he knew that the doctor’s fee had only left him a few coppers loose in his pocket. A panic seized him. He could not find it. He turned to Mary.

‘You got my purse?’

‘No, I’ve never seen it.’

‘There was a quid in it. I must have put it in my waistcoat. Wait a moment, gaffer. . . . God! my watch is gone too!’

‘Don’t get moithered now,’ she urged.

But though he searched everywhere he could not find it. He appealed again to Mary, but she had no money, not a single penny. Abner had nothing but a handful of coppers left.

‘They must have took both of them . . . picked my pocket!’ he said.

She advised him to look again, but it was useless. ‘While we was standing up again’ those railings,’ he muttered, ‘talking to that gipsy woman. It’s gone right enough. Not a bloody cent except this!’ He threw the coppers on the sill of the booking window.

‘Had your pocket picked?’ said the station-master with a laugh. ‘It’s not the first time that’s p. 264
happened at Bron Fair!’ A bell clanged in the signal box, and a porter peered at them through the door with a stupid, rustic face.

‘Can’t you let us have a ticket on strap?’ Abner asked.

‘Not likely!’ said the stationmaster. ‘I’ve heard that tale before.’

‘The little girl’s had an accident . . . broken her leg,’ Mary pleaded.

The station-master shook his head.

‘There’s not another train to-day,’ she said. ‘Have we time to try and get some money in the village?’

The porter gave a stupid laugh.

‘Train’s two minutes overdue now,’ said the station-master blandly, glancing at the clock on the booking-office wall.

‘But what can we do?’ she cried.

The train clanked in. A number of country people in their Sunday clothes, coming from the villages under the Long Mynd, swarmed on to the platform. They came laughing into the booking-office. ‘All tickets!’ shouted the porter at the door. Abner was still rummaging in his

pockets when the train went out. They were left quite alone.

‘What can we do?’ Mary repeated, in a voice full of trouble.

‘We’ve got to walk, that’s all,’ said Abner.

‘But you can’t carry her all that way!’

‘It’s only eight or nine miles over the hills. We can walk that easy before dark if we take our time.’ She shook her head. ‘There’s Morgan,’ she said.

‘You’ll have to help Morgan on a bit.’

‘It’s too much. You can’t carry her all that way.’

He laughed at her and, in the end, persuaded her. By this time Morgan, awake and refreshed, was again clamouring for food. In the post-office at Redlake they bought him a packet of acid-drops and some biscuits.

‘Now that’s got to last you, my son,’ Mary told him, and for the present he was satisfied.

They set out slowly on their journey home. For a mile or more the road ran along the side of the little river, but soon the valley fell away beneath them, a deep trough clogged with brushwood, and the road degenerated into a stony track. It seemed that they had now penetrated a country that was untouched by the excitements of Bron Fair, for whenever they came near to a farm, and these grew fewer and fewer, being hidden for the most part in folds of the hills and lost in sheltering trees, they found men moving slowly about the fields or calling cattle to the byre for the evening’s milking. p. 265

Soon the distances of the landscape had faded from them altogether. They came to an upland scarred with stony lanes where they could see nothing on either side of them but thistle pastures, poor and unkindly, huge fields where many sheep were feeding in the mist. Morgan enjoyed himself, running up the banks to a gap in the broken wall and scaring them as he stood there like a phantom himself, waving his arms. At last, when it seemed that they could climb no farther into the clouds, the road began to fall.

Abner was glad of this, for, strong as he was, the weight of Gladys, made more awkward by her long splint, was telling on him. The road gave him no rest: it went on inflexibly between its walls of stone, and when his breath failed him there was no clean air with which he might fill his lungs: only this thin, clammy whiteness. They jolted down into a valley, where they found a village of stone houses, so cold and mountainous in character that it seemed to have been scoured with snow.

Above the door of the post-office Abner spelt out the word, *Newchurch*.

‘New church?’ said Mary, with a sinking heart. ‘But Newchurch is miles and miles away from us! I drove here once with father. Are you sure it’s the right road?’

‘It’s right by what I heard at the Pound House, when Mick talked of walking over to Bron. It’s right enough . . . only the hills make it seem longer.’

A little later she asked him anxiously what the time was.

‘Don’t you know my watch is gone?’ he replied irritably. ‘By what it was in Newchurch I reckon we’ve a good four hour before dark. And then there’s a moon.’ p. 266

They crossed another ridge of hills. Half-way up the slope Morgan said that he was tired, and asked his mother to carry him. She took him up in her arms without a word and dragged along behind Abner. He looked back at her, questioning, for the slowness of her pace impeded him. She knew what he was thinking.

‘I can’t go faster,’ she said, trying to smile; but at the next brow she had to stop to fetch her breath, putting Morgan down on the bank beside her under a bush of green broom.

‘I want to walk again now, mam,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Are we nearly there?’

He had pestered her so often with this question that for a moment her strained temper gave way.

‘Don’t worry, Morgan!’ she said sharply. ‘I’ll tell you when we’re there.’

Abner laughed, and she turned on him with annoyance. She thought he was laughing at her irritability, but found that his eyes were kindly.

‘Lucky for them they don’t know,’ he said, shaming her with a smile.

She tried to cover her annoyance by asking if they were anywhere near the top of the hills.

He knew no more than she did. Certainly by the time that they had rested and moved on again the fog had thickened. The stone walls and the clumps of hawthorn and furze with which the fields were scattered looked misty, wild, gigantic.

‘Time we quickened up a bit,’ he said.

‘How can you be sure it’s the right road?’

‘Because there bain’t no other, missus,’ he replied. ‘Up you come, my pretty!’ And he hoisted Gladys into his arms again.

They could no longer guess at the time of day. Mary supposed that it was now getting on for six o’clock, but the sky that drooped upon them was of a uniform, milky whiteness, and they could not guess the level of the sun. The air, indeed, grew colder, but that was a relief in itself after the oppression of the valleys.

They walked on, maybe for another hour. Mary’s arms ached with the burden of Morgan, who told her from time to time that his legs hurt him or that he wanted to go to bye-bye, and vexed her to the point of anger with his cry of, ‘Are we nearly there?’ She herself was utterly fagged and hungry. Her anxiety for Gladys had made it impossible for her even to think of food in the earlier part of the day. Now her stomach ached with emptiness, and the cold, moist air that she drew into her labouring lungs did nothing to quench the drought in her throat. Morgan suddenly began to whine for a drink of water. The sweets had made him thirsty. p. 267

‘They don’t lay on the water up here, my son,’ said Abner cheerfully.

‘But I *want* some,’ Morgan insisted. ‘*Or* tea,’ he added, as a slight concession.

Mary quietened him as well as she could with promises. They had not passed a farm or a shepherd’s cabin for miles. She could see no hope of any building ahead short of the Wolfpits valley, not even as much as would shelter them for the night if they lost their way or if the strength of the weakest failed. They were wandering on and on, blindly, as it seemed, into a desert of high, poor pastures. Now they no longer saw large flocks of sheep. Those that they startled were solitary creatures that sprang up in alarm from the wayside tangles of furze and brier, horned mountain sheep, with shaggy fleeces and black faces.

She felt that the light was failing. Perhaps the sun had set. Surely it had set, for they had walked endlessly. At sunset the birds began their song in the thickets about Wolfpits, but here there was no shelter for birds. Only the wheat-ears bobbed their white rumps in front of them and the meadow-pipits flew before them in their endless game of waiting and of flight, so tame that Morgan ran to catch one with his hands. Out of the whiteness above them they heard the lost bubbling voices of curlews, or the harsh cawing of the carrion crow.

She dragged on behind, and Abner walked ahead, never tiring. She would have died rather than have complained, as long as he made no complaint. A stone cottage rose up out of the mist. p. 268

‘Now you shall have your drink,’ she cried encouragingly to Morgan. The sight brightened her, for she was parched dry herself. But the cottage was only a ruin with a broken gate on either side of it that had made a walled enclosure for sheep. Not very long ago sheep had been penned there, for torn fleece had stuck to the splinters of the gates and the road was strewn with dry dung. Abner went up to the door to see if by any chance they were mistaken; but the place was quite deserted.

‘Let’s sit down a bit,’ he said, and lit his pipe. She sat down wearily beside him. Morgan, smelling round the garden like a puppy, came back with a bunch of wallflowers and gave them to her. Their scent was a poor substitute for food, but she kissed his cold face.

‘I want a drink of water, mam,’ he said again.

She looked desperately at Abner.

‘Wait till we come on a bottle of pop, son,’ he said. Morgan stared at him with big eyes. ‘Real pop?’ he asked.

‘You wait and see,’ said Abner cheerfully.

Gladys, who had just begun to cry quietly in his arms, said that she was cold.

‘We’ll keep you warm, my pretty!’ he said, gathering her to his breast.

‘Are we nearly there, mam?’ came the voice of Morgan.

‘Yes . . . yes . . .’ She turned to Abner: ‘It can’t be much farther, the time we’ve been walking.’

He did not answer. ‘Up she comes!’ he said, kissing Gladys and lifting her gently.

‘Your ‘stache is all over water, Abner,’ the child whispered.

They passed through the second gate, but here a new perplexity faced them. They had come to open moorland. The road that had hitherto been enclosed by stone walls was now no more than outlined by wheel-ruts bitten deep into the peaty soil. Mile upon mile of misty heather rolled away before them. Then the track faded altogether, splitting into three narrow lanes between the masses of ling. Abner stopped, and this, his first hesitation, filled Mary with dread. p. 269

‘Which way is it?’ she called.

He could not answer. ‘We must be somewhere near the top,’ he said at last. ‘Somewhere on the far side of the Ditches. If it wasn’t for this stuff we could see all right.’

‘But you can’t see,’ she said. ‘You don’t know. You don’t know any more than I do. We’re lost.’

‘Don’t you go on so quickly,’ he said. ‘If we keep to the middle we can’t be far out.’

He pushed on a little. A hen grouse rose with a frightening flutter from under his feet. She went whirring away low over the heather with a harsh stuttering cry.

‘Where’s the cattypult, Morgan?’ Abner cried.

And then they found water.

‘Come along, here’s the pop-shop!’ he said. The child ran forward and knelt above a tiny cup of peat fringed with yellow stars of butterwort. He lapped up the precious stuff eagerly like a dog, so greedily that he choked, spluttered, and soused his white lace collar. Mary wiped his face for him. ‘Go on!’ said Abner, and she too stooped her aching back and drank. Abner drank last, having laid Gladys down in the yielding heather and scooped up water for her in his hands.

Now they were refreshed, almost joyful; but Mary could not help looking anxiously at the hills in front of them, for every moment it seemed to her that the heather grew blacker and the distance fainter in the mist.

A crest that had once seemed unattainable fell behind them. Reaching it they had expected to find themselves looking down into the Wolfpits valley. Instead of this they saw more broken walls and the outlines of two huge trees. It puzzled them. It seemed that they had come to the edge of a shallow basin scooped in the top of the hills. Perhaps they might find a farm. The idea encouraged them.

They walked forward more quickly, for here the turf was smooth and the heather no longer impeded them. The trees came up out of the mist, not only two of them but a whole avenue of beeches planted by the hands of men, stretching away before them in the line that they had followed. p. 270

‘There must be a house,’ said Mary. ‘They wouldn’t plant trees like this for nothing.’

Abner nodded. In spite of his air of gaiety he had been anxious and was now relieved. It was a noble avenue of more than a hundred trees. They walked on midway between the two lines of them, expecting at every moment to see the shadow of the house. But the avenue ended suddenly as it had begun, and instead of a house they saw nothing but two gateposts of stone, ancient and weathered, surmounted by immense round balls. The man who had built them two hundred years before had planned a stately approach to his mansion. It was easy to imagine the gates of wrought iron that would have swung there. But of the house that he had dreamed there remained not as much as a ghost.

‘There must be a house!’ Mary cried.

Abner shook his head. Nothing could now be seen but the desolate line of the beech avenue stretching away behind them. A light wind rose on their right, driving the mist in front of it. They seemed to hear the endless volumes of it hurrying by, but it was only the long sighing of a waste of heather. This sound made Mary really aware of the threatening silence that surrounded them. Even the presence of Abner standing there as stolid and unmoved as ever could not steady her.

‘We can’t stay here,’ she said. ‘It’s an awful place. It’s like a churchyard. Do let us go on.’

She left the desolate gateposts with a shiver. She hurried, taxing her strength to the last, to put them behind her. The wind rose; the mist was whirled along the slopes before them in torn fleeces. She crossed another ridge and then sank down in the heather, ready to cry herself. The buffetings of the wind were fit to break her heart.

Then a miracle happened. A gust of wind tore an opening in the mist and the vision of a heaped mountainous landscape grew before their eyes. Southward the indented bow of Radnor Forest rose blue-black, the summit of Black Mixen hugely threatening. Westward in molten clouds the sun went down over Wales and fifty miles of thin air and solid mountain were mingled in a fiery haze. The sky was a furnace in which the mountains melted away. But Abner and Mary had no desire to see these splendours. Their eyes were fixed, peering into the trough of the valley beneath them. They saw green woods, blue in the evening light, the squares of barns, the rich mosaic of fields, the gleam of a river. And their hearts fell, for each was certain that the valley beneath them was not that of the Folly Brook. It was far wilder and more strange. They looked at each other. p. 271

‘Do you know where it is?’ he asked.

‘I can’t think, unless it’s somewhere near Clun.’

‘Better get down while the light lasts. There’s farms there,’ he said. As he spoke the sun dipped down. White clouds swept across their window. Only the memory of what they had seen told them that they were not utterly lost.

They descended the slope carefully, for the grass was slippery and the only tracks were scattered with stones. Abner could not help her; she knew that he was far too busy saving Gladys from unnecessary jars. She fell, and Morgan cried out that she had hurt his arm. She pulled her strength together and tried to carry him. Somehow she must struggle on, for the darkness was falling. Even with their sudden vision in her mind she could not now feel certain that their

direction was right. For a time they followed a wheel-track skirting the mountain, but it ended by turning upwards, and they knew that this could not help them. Downward it was difficult to go, for the fields were small and irregular, and the hedges often impassable, yet downward, somehow, they must go.

They beat through a zone of these entanglements in wood and stone. Night was falling fast. Since the revealing moment of the last summit they had sunk so deep that they must now surely be near the bottom of the valley, whatever valley it might be. But when the barrier of irregular fields lay behind them they found themselves on open, sloping ground again. Abner stalked on ahead without pausing. She, at the end of her tether, called out after him to stop for a moment, p. 272
but he did not hear her. His shape went on into the dusk, and she knew that if she did not follow she must be left behind.

Suddenly the white air was full of the screaming of birds . . . a shrill, high, sound that took her back into her childhood. Once, with her father, she had been taken to Swansea on a business trip and had heard gulls calling on the Gower Cliffs. She felt that she must be dreaming. Even on a night of storm no gulls could be blown so far inland as this, and yet she was sure that her childish memory could not have failed. The cries that she heard now were the cries of gulls wheeling and screaming in the mist above her head.

Abner turned and called her. 'Did you ever hear the like of it?' he called. 'I never heard such a chronic row!'

'They're gulls,' she shouted. Her voice was thin in the mist. 'Seagulls.'

'That's where they must have come from. Off of this water,' he called.

And she saw, peering in front of her, a ghostly wood of pines and before them a lake of dark water fringed with reeds. The wind swept across it, bending the reeds, breaking the glassy surface into ripples, and rolling milky mist before it. The wind came in gusts, roaring through the trees with a noise that was like that of the sea, and the gulls screamed above them, unseen, as they might have screamed over storm-bound cliffs. She stood with her knees trembling at Abner's side, and Morgan clutched her hand. She herself felt like a child, lonely, frightened. They stood so quietly together that some of the birds swooped down on to the water as though driven by the wind.

'Yes, they're gulls,' she said. 'Seagulls. We're more than fifty miles away from the sea. I don't understand.'

She laughed nervously. It came to her suddenly that she could go no farther. Her legs could not make a single step. The gulls came dropping down in twos and threes, and settled on the lake. They were smaller than those that she remembered, she thought. They dropped down just like p. 273
pigeons when you scatter grain.

'Come on,' said Abner. 'It's near dark.'

But she could not move. The child tugged at her skirt. She felt the tugging in a dream.

'We can't stand staring here all night,' Abner was saying. She was aware of him standing beside her in the dusk, holding Gladys to his breast. She saw the child's white hands clasped about his neck, as quietly as if she were asleep. She heard him, but could not stir. Then Abner touched her upper arm, and the pressure of his fingers went through her body like fire along a fuse exploding some mine of passion that had lain hidden beneath her long silence. It burned her like flame, burned her and rent her. . . . She trembled and turned on him violently. Words of abuse came tumbling out of her mouth. She did not know or care what she was saying. She lashed him, wildly, desperately. It was he who was to blame for all this trouble, he who had persuaded her to take the children to Bron and allowed her to be insulted in the inn at Redlake; he who had entangled them in the crowd where Gladys's leg was broken; and now he'd lost them, and brought them to a place where they might all die of cold with his damned foolishness. Some devil inside her brain drove her on, delighting in the vile things she said, raking up little grudges of the past and throwing them in his face, revealing, against her will, such petty miseries as her jealousy of Susie Hind. 'It's with her you ought to be,' she cried, 'instead of troubling us! That's where you ought to be! You'd better go on and leave us, Gladys and Morgan and me. You don't know any more than I do where we are, with the night coming on. We can't go a step farther, neither me nor Morgan, poor little thing! Oh, go! Go! I wish to God I'd never set eyes on you!' She threw herself down, exhausted, on the wet grass.

He had stood up to it utterly bewildered. He couldn't protest, for all her ravings were so childish, so disconnected, so passionately illogical. He simply let her go on until she had finished with him. Then he disengaged Gladys's arms from his neck and laid her down gently. p. 274

'You're just about done in,' he said. 'It's natural.'

Again he placed his hand on Mary's arm, hoping to soothe her and to persuade. She gave a strange shudder, as though his fingers had been ice, and burst into tears, covering her face with her hands.

He comforted her clumsily, talking to her as he would have done to a child, until she no longer shrank from him, being too weak to care. Then she took hold of his coat and clung to him, still sobbing her heart away. She was broken . . . quite broken.

The moment was terrible for Abner. He felt his heart leap so wildly that he knew she must be conscious of its thudding. The movement of her body, shaken with sobs, against his own, filled him not with pity but with exultation. There was no woman like her in the world. He knew it. Hadn't he known it long enough? If he told himself the truth he must admit that for months he had never wanted any other woman. The desires that had hungered him the night before, walking beneath her window and in the moonlit lane, returned to him in waves of greater force. He laughed to think that, being so near to her, he should ever have given a thought to Susie Hind. Now she was in his arms. His hands caressed her beauty. How should he touch her body without passion? And why? Surely she could feel the blood beating in his fingers, even if she told herself that he was only trying to comfort her. No one could see them there . . . no one except the two children, crying softly together because they heard their mother crying. Why shouldn't he gather her in his arms, overwhelming her with kisses? He could see nothing but her lips. . . .

But when he strained her to him she stopped sobbing and pushed him away. It was now dark but for the light of the moon hidden above the mist, and he could only see the paleness of her face. Her ghost spoke to him.

'I've lost my handkerchief,' she said simply.

He gave her his own, and she thanked him.

'I don't know what I've been saying,' she whispered. 'I think I must have been mad, Abner. Please forget it.' p. 275

He would have helped her to her feet, but her muscles would not respond to the brain's message. She gave a weak laugh. Now she did not mind being weak. She looked at him helplessly.

'I can't go another step,' she said. 'I'm sorry, but I can't. Perhaps, if you left us here, you might find if there's a house near. I'll look after these poor lambs. We can keep warm close together.'

No doubt she spoke wisely. He left them without a word, though Gladys cried out with alarm to see him going. His shoulders loomed up in the cloud, and as he skirted the lake the gulls rose screaming from its surface to be lost in the sky.

Abner continued his course downhill. Relieved of the weight of Gladys he now felt himself master of his limbs. The hedges and the roughness of the road troubled him no longer, and when he had been walking no more than ten minutes he saw in the growing brilliance of the moonlight a gate that gave on to a metalled road. He strained his ears to listen for any sound, and heard, at length, the noise of a dog howling at the hidden moon. That meant a farm, or at least a shepherd's cottage. A walk of ten minutes in the direction of the sound brought him within sight of a mass of outbuildings that made a courtyard in front of a low-roofed house. Two long windows on the right of a central doorway were lighted. He saw the shadows of geraniums in pots against the blinds. Another dog came at him out of the darkness, snarling and sniffing him from a distance. He knocked at the door and heard a chair pushed back over the stone floor.

'Come in . . . come in!' some one cried.

The farm kitchen was bright, with a heavy brass lamp in the centre of the table and a yellow shade that threw a mild radiance over the many hams and sides of bacon that were slung from the smoky ceiling. The table was laid for supper and a shrewish-looking woman was eating bread and cheese. She stared at Abner with a piece of cheese stuck on the end of her knife, looking neither astonished nor frightened.

'Who is it, please. And what do you want at this time of night?' she said, without moving. p. 276

'I'm sorry to put you out, ma'am,' he said. 'Me and three others, a woman and two children, lost our way coming over the hills from the fair. The little girl's had an accident and we had to carry her. Proper done in, they are, and I left them about a mile away over there.' He pointed in the direction of the hills.

'Well, I don't see how I can help you,' said the woman, who went on eating. 'The master never has no dealings with gipsies. What's more, he's gone to the fair himself in the trap and ban't back yet.'

Abner explained to her that he was not a gipsy. 'You can't leave a woman an' two kids out there at night,' he said.'

'Where did you leave them?' she asked.

'Up by a pool. There's a lot of birds on it. Seagulls, she said.'

'Oh, ay, them's the sea-crows. They comes here every year. But that's not ten minutes' walk from here, that isn't!'

'There must be a man about the place as can give me a hand with them,' said Abner, irritated by her unconcern.

'All gone home an hour ago,' she said, shaking her head. 'There's only me and the master, and he's not back yet.'

At that moment all the dogs began to bark together. She got up and opened the door, and the lights of a gig turned the corner and dashed into the yard. Another cob was tied to the cart tail. The woman ran to meet the new-comer, and a big man threw the reins over the horse's flanks and got out of the trap. The dog yelped round him friendlily, and he cursed it. 'Get away!' he said.

'You'd best take out,' he said to the woman. 'I'm properly starved, I am. What do you think of the new cob? Forty-eight pound! I never knew such prices!'

'There's a chap here says he's a woman and two children lost up by the sea-crows' pool,' she said, disregarding his question. 'You'd better go and have a word with him.'

'Gipsies?' he said angrily; but without waiting for her reply he stalked stiffly into the room, slapping his dank hands and blinking at the light. He stared at Abner. p. 277

'Hallo!' he said. 'I know you. You'm George Malpas's lodger.'

Abner also recognised his host. It was Mr Williams of Pentre Higgin, the farmer who had chosen himself foreman of the jury at Bastard's inquest.

'Well, what's all this I hear about a woman and two kids?' said the fanner threateningly. 'Is that Malpas's wife?'

Abner told him what had happened. What bewildered him most was to realise that after all they had hit the upper part of their own valley. The Pentre was indeed the farm on which old Drew worked, and less than five miles from Wolfpits itself. The farmer poured himself out a glass of cider and stood smacking his lips while Abner told his story.

'Well, this is a pretty turn-out!' he said. 'I heard some talk of an accident to a little girl over there.'

He went to the door. 'Hi!' he shouted, 'you'd better put to again, missus! Shove the new cob in the stall and give 'en some hay. Mind he don't bite you.'

He chuckled to himself, being what people in those parts call 'market-peart,' then drank off another glass of cider, and motioned to Abner to follow him. 'We'd best find Badger to give us a hand,' he said.

He tied the reins of the harnessed horse to a post in the yard, and threw a blanket over its back. Abner followed him silently out of the yard and up the road. They stopped in front of a small cottage, and Williams knocked at the door. After some delay Badger in his shirt-sleeves opened it, emitting a queer odour of naphthaline and the dried skins of animals and birds.

'Put your coat on, Bill,' said the farmer. 'Malpas's wife and kids is up by the sea-crows' pool. Got lost in the fog.'

In a few moments, as it seemed, they had found the derelicts. By this time Mary protested, she was quite able to walk. Abner again picked up Gladys, Williams carried Morgan, and an easy path brought them down to the farm again. Badger walked beside Abner, but never spoke a word. p. 278

'Now I reckon I've got to drive you home,' said Williams sourly. 'You'd better jump up quick.'

The lights of the house shone on Mary's pale face. She did not look at Abner, but the woman of the farm, who appeared to be Williams's wife, stared at her with hostile eyes. 'Good-night, Bill!' the farmer called, as Badger slouched away.

'Thank'ee, Mr Badger!' Abner added. But Badger only mumbled something that he could not hear.

The sweating horse jogged easily down the lane to Wolfpits.

The Nineteenth Chapter p. 279

All that night Abner heard Gladys crying softly and Mary moving about in the room beneath him. In the small hours she knocked at his door and begged him to take Morgan into his bed. Gladys was so restless that the child could not get to sleep. They spoke together with the oak door between them, and a moment later, having knocked again, she thrust a small, red-eyed figure into the room. Abner picked him up and carried him into bed. The child nestled close to him, like a small, warm-blooded animal. Abner wrapped him up in his arms, protectively, as though, by steadying his muscles, he could compel him to settle down to sleep. Morgan's fingers lay gently on his forearm, soft and listless. He was so quiet that Abner thought he had fallen asleep already. In this he was mistaken. The change of rooms and the adventure of finding a new bedfellow had completely wakened him, and when he had lain dead still for a little while, Morgan's fingers began to stroke Abner's arm. Then he fidgeted and spoke in a reverent whisper:

'Abner, are you awake?'

‘Ay, what is it?’

‘Why is your arm all hairy, Abner?’

‘Why? Because I’m grown up.’

‘Mam’s isn’t,’ said Morgan, after a thoughtful pause, and then: ‘I like being here.’

‘Then don’t you go asking questions or I’ll put you out again,’ said Abner.

After this the child was quiet. He lay there burning in Abner’s arms. Falling asleep, his limbs relaxed, and then, suddenly clutching at consciousness, twitched violently. These movements were like those of a very young animal, feeble and frightened, and Abner, feeling them, gathered the child more closely in his arms, until he moved no longer save with the gentle breathing of a sweet sleep.

Abner had never slept with a child before. It gave him a queer, almost physical sensation of comfort in addition to the protective emotions which Morgan’s helplessness aroused. He had never thought seriously what it would be like to have a child of his own, and even now he did not explain his feelings in that way. He pictured himself, for a moment, in the position of father to a child of Susie Hind’s, and the prospect did not move him. The only way in which he could explain this curious enthralling tenderness was by the fact that Morgan was really part of Mary, that the child had come to him straight from the warmth of her arms, carrying with him an impalpable essence of herself. He wondered vaguely what he would have felt like if the child had been not only Mary’s but his as well, and in the midst of these tender and dangerous reflections he fell asleep himself. p. 280

Next morning, before returning to work, he left a message with the doctor at Lesswardine, asking him to call at Wolfpits. All through the day he was restless and unhappy, feeling that his proper place was at Wolfpits lending Mary a hand, supporting her anxieties. He consoled himself with the knowledge that Mrs Mamble was used to domestic troubles and would probably be of more use to Mary than himself, even apart from the fact that their finances would not easily stand the strain of the lost time. He only wondered, all the time, what the doctor’s report would be, and whether their wild night-journey might have added to the child’s injury. He did not mention anything of what had happened to his mates, and the day was therefore long and anxious.

It was after dinner-time when the doctor reached Wolfpits. Escorted by Mrs Mamble, he soon got to business and took down the injured limb, complimenting the Brampton Bryan surgeon on the way in which he had done his job. The dislocated fragments, he said, had been skilfully opposed, and the leg now lay in a good position. Gladys was young, a child’s tissues were full of vitality, and the splint, which he put on again, need not be worn for more than three weeks.

He stayed a little longer than he need have done, for he had finished his round and Mary Malpas was an attractive woman. He was a middle-aged man and not above taking a kind of guarded pleasure in the intimacy with such charming creatures that his profession gave him. He asked her how it had all happened, and Mary told him, without hesitation, of their train journey two nights before, of their difficulty of finding rooms at Redlake, and of all that had led up to the accident. He listened gravely, giving no sign of unusual interest when Abner’s name was mentioned, but when he drove away again he chuckled to himself, being intrigued by this new little sidelight on the frailty of human nature, and taking an interest that was not wholly professional in the idea of this extraordinarily desirable woman finding consolation in the arms of her lodger. For that was how he interpreted the case. p. 281

When he got home that evening he told the story to his wife. Little incidents of this kind, which came so often into his professional experience, supplied him with a vicarious sexual stimulus which his marital relations had lacked for some years. Mrs Hendrie, listening, pursed her lips, and smiled. The story was not one for general publication, but she knew that it would be acceptable to the vicar’s wife, who had already taken such a kindly, if profitless, interest in this unfortunate young woman.

In this way the scandal of the Redlake adventure began to be whispered in that most exclusive circle of which the sewing-party at the vicarage was the centre. In this quarter, indeed, Mary had been already judged and damned as a woman who preferred a life of open sin to the privilege of attending to the blameless, physical needs of the Rev. Cyril Malpas. The new intelligence did no more than supply a sorrowful confirmation of what was already suspected. ‘It’s those two sweet children I’m thinking of,’ said the vicar’s wife. ‘Imagine the awful effects of surroundings of that kind in later life!’ The vicar only shook his head. After all, Wolfpits was so very nearly in his neighbour’s parish as to make him scarcely responsible.

It came as a great relief to Abner to find that Gladys was none the worse for her journey in his arms. In the morning they pulled round the long kitchen settle into the sun, and in the evening he carried this out of doors so that the child might enjoy the mellow light with the others. She took a few days to get over the original shock of the accident, but after that she settled down into a placid convalescence, fully aware of her importance and treating, not only Mary and Mrs Mamble, but Abner and Mick Connor, as her slaves. Morgan was vaguely jealous of the attention that they paid her. p. 282

‘But *I* slep’ with Abner,’ he said, ‘and Gladys an’t, has her, mam?’

Mary smiled at him. Now that she knew that Gladys’s injury was not so severe as they had

imagined she could afford to smile, sitting there in the summer evening with her friends about her. It was so quiet at Wolfpits. Not even the birds were singing. She sat there and heard the trout rising and plopping in the pool beneath the bridge, a hundred yards away, and then the murmurous wings of a humming-bird-hawk moth, hovering in a nebula of bronze, swooping to plunge its curled trumpet into the cups of flowers. Then beetles droned above them and bats zig-zagged with rapid wings. She told Abner that it was time for him to take the settle into the house. While he did so she held Gladys in her lap and watched the man's big shoulders as he moved almost without effort under the weight of the settle. It reminded her of another memory of him that she knew she would never forget: a picture of trailing mists and loneliness, and a man walking before her with a child in his arms.

In this state of happiness and innocence neither of them suspected any mischief of tongues. It is true that Abner had found the presence of Badger at the Pentre on the night of the fair a little sinister at first, but the fact that they had chosen to descend into the Wolfpits valley at the level of the sea-crows' pool and Williams's farm was the purest accident, and Mary, who only knew the keeper by name, and had never seen him outside a court of law, thought nothing of it, while Mr Williams of the Pentre never entered into their calculations as a source of evil.

But Williams, in spite of his ready kindness in driving them back to Wolfpits with his tired horse, had chuckled to find in this incident a chance of annoying his old enemy, Mrs Malpas of the Buffalo. In all things he was a gross and childish man, whose plan of life embraced only two classes of acquaintance, enemies and friends, and he spent the greater part of his time in scheming to annoy the former and overwhelm the latter with the most naïve of kindnesses. As for Mrs Malpas, not even pity for her in the affair of George could induce him to forget his quarrel over the hogshead of cider. He knew very well that her weak spot was her own claim to an unassailable chapel morality, and having already enjoyed the pleasure of scoring her off by sending her only son on his first stage to Shrewsbury as a felon, he could not now resist the satisfaction of telling her that her daughter-in-law had been away with the lodger while George was in Salop jail. p. 283

Next week, at Ludlow market, he entertained the farmers' ordinary with the story, and in the evening, having done a good day's business and drunk enough to make him fear no man, he drove home, chuckling to himself, by way of Chapel Green, pulling up at the Buffalo for a final drink. It was the first time that he had visited the inn since that unfortunate quarrel. The cloggers who had gone away in the previous winter had found lodgings in a village farther westward on their return in the spring, and the Buffalo had never emerged from the silence in which they had left it. Mrs Malpas seemed surprised that any one should call so late at night. The bar was empty, and she had to light the swinging oil lamp for him, standing on a chair. Williams himself found a match and lit it for her out of sheer fuddled kindness. It struck her that he was too kind by half. He drank his whisky standing in the middle of the taproom, smacking it on his tongue.

'You didn't go to Bron Fair, ma'am?' he said.

'No,' Mrs Malpas replied. 'Nor have I these many years.'

'There's pretty things to be seen there,' said Williams, with a grin. She made no reply, and he advanced obliquely from another angle.

'How's your son getting on?' p. 284

'But for the shame that we all bear, Mr Williams, he's out of harm's way.'

'Yes, it's a good Christian prison, I'm told,' said he, laughing. 'Chaplains and all! How's his wife, eh?'

'I don't know,' said Mrs Malpas shortly. 'And I don't want to know.'

'Smart looking young woman!' Williams leered.

'I know nothing about her, Mr Williams.'

'Then I'll tell you something, ma'am. She's been off on the spree, childer an' all, to Bron Fair. Slept the night at the Harley Arms, Redlake, with that lodger chap. What do you think of that?'

Mrs Malpas blenched. 'That's your story, Mr Williams, but there's no need to believe you, thanks be!'

'But seeing's believing, ma'am,' said Williams heavily. 'And I seen. What is it I owe you now?'

She gasped: 'Sixpence,' and took the money. Williams gave her a cheery good-night. He wondered at the way in which she had taken his scandal. 'A proper hard old case, an' no mistake!' he thought. Mrs Malpas, forgetful of economy, left the light burning and went straight in to her husband. In moments of stress, even though she despised him and knew that he hardly understood her, she would use him as a dummy on which to vent her feelings.

'Dad, dad!' she cried. 'That was Mr Williams of the Pentre.'

'Ay, mother . . . good land, good land! Williams. . . . Ay.'

'He has a tale of our George's wife. She's going on with that Fellows as lodges with them, the one that brought trouble on George. They was caught the two on them, at the Harley Arms,

Redlake. You know . . .'

The old man, who was now awake, mumbled something about that being in the nature of things when a young woman was left too long to herself. She picked up the word furiously.

'Nature!' she cried. 'It's the nature of a brute beast, not the nature of a Christian woman! It's the bad blood in her!'

He let her rave on in the dark. It was late, and now unlikely that any one else would call in at the bar. His head nodded, while she went on fuming, half to him and half to herself. She persuaded herself that her morality had been offended, though it was really the spiteful satisfaction of Williams rather than his news that had wounded her, for she could not think any worse of Abner and Mary than she did already. When the heat of her irritation against the farmer subsided, its place was taken by another and more subtle flame. She realised that she had found something to explain her former unreasonable hatred. Williams, in trying to shame her, had put a new weapon into her hands, one with which she might positively injure Abner and Mary together in George's eyes. It had been the hardest part of her dealings with him at the time of the trial to see the way in which his loyalty to Mary, however little that might mean, returned. Now that her chance had come, George couldn't keep up this sentimental pretence of a belief in Mary's goodness any longer. Williams had justified her at last. p. 285

She helped the old man up to bed, blew out his candle, and left him in the dark. Then she went downstairs, carried the lamp from the bar into the parlour, took out a sheet of lined paper, and a penholder carved out of olive wood from the garden of Gethsemane, and—began a letter to George. She wrote without haste, in the firm pointed characters that she had learnt as a young girl, carefully, methodically, with a perfect and cold precision. From first to last not the least quaver of indecision stayed her pen; but when she held the paper to the light to read what she had written, her hands trembled and the words ran like fire across her brain.

> '*My dear Son*,'—*she had written*, '*I hope this finds you in perfect health as it leaves me, thank God, and your father. I am sorry to say that I have sad news to tell you which, I am afraid, is all too true. Your wife and the young man Fellows have been away together, living in sin at the Harley Arms, Redlake. It was madness of you, as I tried to tell you before, but you would not listen to your mother, to have trusted them, but you only laughed me to scorn. Now it is an open scandal and hard for your poor father to bear. You can do nothing to mend it where you are, but be patient, dear George, and remember the word of Hebrews xii. 6*: "*Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.*" *I wish I had not to write this, George, but I have always told you that she was a light and wicked woman. Still it is just as well, and God moves in a mysterious way, for when you come back you can take the children away from her, though do not think that you will have the Buffalo, even if God should take your dear father, for the justices would never give it to one who had been in jail, even for no fault of their own. In this way you are saved from temptation. This is the Lord's doing, dear George, and it is marvellous in our eyes. Why did you not send for me last month, my son? I will tell you more, please God, when we meet, I remain, with fond kisses,*
>
> *Your loving mother*,
> '*Arabella Malpas*.' p. 286

She sighed, sealed the envelope, and addressed it to:—

'*George Malpas*,
'*No.* 157. *County Jail*,
'*Shrewsbury*.'

Then she folded her spectacles, blew out the light, and went upstairs in the dark to the room where her husband was already snoring. She crept into bed beside him and soon fell asleep in the blessed consciousness of innocence.

Williams, blabbing to old Mrs Malpas in the childish hope of irritating her, was not the only person who found an interest in spreading the story. Badger, pulled into the mist out of the stink of his preservatives and walking sullenly up the slope toward the sea-crows' pool, had slowly realised that here was an opportunity of discrediting Abner in the eyes of Susie Hind once and for all. Although the lovers' meetings had of late been fewer and secret, while Susie, reminded from time to time of the keeper's jealousy, had been clever enough to laugh him off and to make him feel ridiculous, Badger had not forgotten his suspicions. It was true that he never now saw Abner at the Pound House, and never heard his name mentioned outside the tirades of Mr Hind, who was still anxious for his licence, but the rearing of his young pheasants was now keeping Badger busy, and since he had no time to waste in watching, he could never be quite sure that Abner was not profiting by his forced neglect. Sometimes he would threaten Susie as he had done before, pretending that he knew more than he did; but experience had taught her how to deal with this crude creature; she treated his violence as though it amused her, and he always ended by accepting what she said with certain dark reservations that only troubled him beneath the threshold of consciousness, and set him strangely wondering at night. p. 287

In the middle of one of these doubting moods Williams had come knocking at his door with Abner beside him, asking for his help in the search for Mary, and next day he and his neighbour had talked together, Williams delighted as a child in his discovery of such frailty in old Mrs Malpas's

daughter-in-law. Badger cared nothing one way or the other for Mary's chastity, he had no particular grudge against Mrs Malpas or her son, but he quickly saw that in Williams's discovery he had hit on a rare touchstone for Susie's feelings toward Abner. He saw that he must make use of it before the tale became common talk, so he cornered Susie at the first opportunity that he found, and told her, as bluntly as was his custom, what had happened.

'He's brazen-faced enough, that chap Fellows,' he said, 'seeing that he told Mr Williams right out that he and George Malpas's wife had slept at the Harley Arms, over Redlake way. Took the two children with 'em and all! That was the rum part of it!'

While he spoke he watched Susie with his small keen eyes, sharpened by the habit of observing wild game, waiting for her face to betray to him exactly what she felt toward Abner. But it was not for nothing that Susie had learnt the art of being all things to all men. Badger's eyes were a little too eager, and she was quick to see it.

'Why do you want to tell me this, Mr Badger?' she said slowly. p. 288

'He's an old friend of yours. You don't put me off as easy as that!'

'Then you might have saved yourself the trouble,' she said, turning her back on him. 'If you've any other dirty stories to tell, I'll be obliged if you'll keep them to yourself.'

He flushed darkly, so that she felt she was overdoing it. She came back to him and stood talking of other things, her hand on the table within an inch of his own.

'I hope you didn't take any offence,' she said softly. 'Only I don't like to hear my name coupled with a chap of that kind.'

Badger swallowed his liquor with satisfaction. It seemed to him that he had artfully secured his point. He looked Susie up and down, appraising her, lazily satisfied. She had gained a new value in his eyes. He held her in talk, and she loitered by his table, standing on one leg. In taking away his glass she even touched his hand. They were alone in the bar. He caught her and kissed her. Protesting, as a matter of form, she smiled. In her heart she hated him like poison. Her mind was aflame with vague jealousies, for any fool could see that Abner was worth two of this man.

That night she heard the gang from the pipe-track discussing the accident at Bron, winking at each other over the way in which the story had come out. They laughed without condemning. To them it seemed no more than a good joke. When her father's back was turned the Gunner began to pull her leg about it; but she laughed back at him, giving him coarseness for coarseness, and went on wiping her glasses, humming to herself the refrain of a pantomime tune. She heard herself singing. Her voice sounded toneless and unreal. When she went to bed she could not sleep for fretting. Abner had not been near her for more than a week, and she did not dare to take the risk of sending him a message at his work. She knew that she wanted him. She was not going to lose him without a fight.

Next afternoon she was free, and knowing that Abner would be safely at work, she dressed herself elaborately in her best clothes and a pair of new shoes and set off boldly for Wolfpits. Her hands trembled and her frock was drenched with perspiration as she dressed. p. 289

'Where are you off to, got up like that?' her father called after her.

'Can't I dress as I like, dad?' she said, with a toss of her head.

'There's tempest about. You'll get soaked to the skin!' he shouted.

She felt as if she were soaked to the skin already. The long spell of rainless weather had reached its climax, and the delaine frock that she had chosen had been cut for elegance rather than for comfort. The sun went in, leaving a white and heavy sky. The leaves of elm and chestnut drooped in the heat as with the weight of their own dust. Her new shoes were too small for her, and by the time that she had toiled up to the bridge over the Folly, she wished that she had not come. A yaffle mocked her from the edge of the wood. Swallows were hawking low down over the dust of the road. An awful, oppressive silence weighed on the land. She hesitated, then turned painfully up the Wolfpits avenue, but when she had almost decided to turn back, the thunder broke above her and big drops spattered the dust. The thought of the new tulle in her hat made her run for shelter. The trees of the avenue gave a long sigh and the rain swished down in torrents. Round the corner she saw Mrs Mamble running about, like a woman possessed, after the washing that she had spread on the bushes to dry.

'Slip into the porch, miss,' she cried, catching sight of Susie, 'or you'll be drownded.' Then she called to Mary, who was ironing in the kitchen: 'There's a young lady got caught in the storm, Mrs Malpas!'

'Please come inside and wait till it's over,' Mary cried, glancing through the window.

Susie entered. 'Take a seat,' Mary said, and went on with her ironing. One side of her face was flushed with the heat of the iron that she had tested by holding it to her cheek. It made her look as if she were angry or embarrassed. The kitchen was full of the sweet, scorched smell of linen. p. 290
Susie, sitting nervously on the edge of the seat to which she had been shown, felt that the falseness of her position must be made clear. She was out to fight, and not without courage.

‘My name is Hind . . . Susan Hind,’ she said. ‘From the Pound House, you know.’

Mary stopped ironing and looked at her. She began to wish that she had not turned herself out so elegantly. She felt that she must look like a street-woman.

‘Yes . . . I thought I knew you,’ Mary said.

‘I came over to speak to you.’ Susie hesitated: ‘About Mr Fellows . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘There’s a tale going round . . .’ She faltered. She wished that she were not sitting on the edge of the chair, that Mary were not taller than herself. There was something unfair and consciously superior in the woman’s plain white apron. More than this, she had the subtle, inexplicable advantage of being a married woman with children . . . even if her husband had deserted her. Mary put down her iron on its stand and looked her full in the eyes. Now her cheeks were equally flushed. Susie wished that she would speak, even if she were only to repeat her provocative ‘Yes?’ She took fright suddenly, stood up, and plunged.

‘It’s not fair!’ she cried. ‘You know it’s not fair! You, a married woman, that have had your life and a couple of children! But as soon as your husband’s well out of sight you must go running after another man. Take his money—that’s one thing! But take him—that’s another! I suppose you’re the kind that can’t make yourself happy unless you’re making some man soft on you . . . so they can hang round you and you play the lady on them! Don’t you imagine I don’t know the dog’s life you give George! And now you’ve got hold of your lodger—lodger, I says!—and turned him crazy. Call yourself a lady! Doesn’t every one know what your father was? We all know about that. George himself told me. And I can tell you what you are, straight. You’re nothing better than a whore on the streets if the truth was known.’ p. 291

Mary trembled. ‘Don’t shout so! Don’t shout so!’ she said. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘What I mean?’ cried Susie hysterically. ‘What I mean? Why, going about the country in strange places and laying about with single men. That’s what I mean. Call yourself a married woman . . .’

‘You’re wrong . . . you’re quite wrong!’

‘Am I wrong then? I know whose word I’d sooner take: Mr Williams’s and Mr Badger’s or yourn! I know that was the first time it came out, but that makes no difference to what every one in the district has known for a fact these months. But I’ll tell you one thing—and don’t you forget it!—you’re not going to take Abner off me. Not if I kill him first. And I’m not talking wild, understand. I mean it. If I have to shame you to your face I’m not going to let him go. Shame . . .’ she laughed. ‘That’s a fine word to use for the likes of you!’

She gave a gasp for breath, then, with a flash of hopeless hatred, as though she were searching the room for something that her violence might appropriately destroy, she went out blindly into the rain.

Mary stood rigidly at her ironing-table. A flash of lightning ripped the sky in front of her window, nearly blinding her, and her lips uttered a cry. Mrs Mamble ran in with her skirt thrown over her head, for she was frightened of thunder.

‘My!’ she cried from under the skirt. ‘My, what a downpour!’ She looked out timidly. ‘Well, I never! She’s gone!’

‘Yes,’ said Mary, with a helpless laugh. ‘She’s gone!’

‘Gone? Why, the girl must be mad!’

Again Mary laughed at the wide astonishment in Mrs Mamble’s eyes. Another flash followed and the old woman wrapped up her head again, waiting for the thunder. It came with a crash, right overhead, and the house shook. Mary suddenly remembered the children, who were playing in the parlour.

‘Do go and see to them, Mrs Mamble,’ she said. ‘There’s a dear.’

She herself could not move. She went on folding her linen. It seemed as if she must find some mechanical task for her hands to do. In a moment Mrs Mamble returned to say that the children were not in the least frightened. She kept dodging in and out of the house all afternoon for fear of the storm returning and catching her unawares, telling of the damage that the rain might have done to the hay lying out in the meadows or to the standing corn. p. 292

‘But there’s no denying that it’s wanted,’ she said inconsequently.

By the time that Abner left work that evening the storm had rolled away, rumbling over the treetops of Bringewood Chase. All day he had worked under the heavy sky, breathing an air that was dead and choked with dust. Now the vault was clear and brilliant as that of an evening in spring. The smell of dust rose from the road, blackbirds were singing, and from the pale, steaming hayfields waves of sweetness drifted across his path. His steps were light and his heart happy.

Mary received him as usual and gave him his tea. He laughed with her over the violence of the

storm and asked her gaily if the doctor had been to take the splint off Gladys's leg.

'We must put by a shillin' or two for that,' he said. For the moment he was so full of his own content that he had scarcely noticed her preoccupation; but when he mentioned money she made a quick, instinctive movement, as though she wanted to speak and to refuse it. Little by little he began to realise that she was trying to avoid him and sometimes leaving his questions unanswered.

'What's up with you, missus?' he said.

'Nothing,' she replied. 'Nothing at all that I know of.'

But her denial did not convince him. All the evening he tried to guess what could have upset her, but she evaded him, pretending that she was her normal self. He knew better. Even when she spoke to the children or to Mrs Mamble, who came in to talk about the havoc of the storm and to give them the news that a sheep had been struck by lightning on Williams's farm, Mary was listless and dull.

Abner used her gently. He knew that women must have their moods, and that a man needed to be patient with them if he would be happy; but day after day now passed without any change in her attitude. Since the discovery of his own passion that he had made by the sea-crows' pool, it had been hard enough as it was for him to live with her on ordinary terms; but now, even though he humoured her, she was distant with him. p. 293

He tried to make her explain herself. She only shook her head. It seemed, indeed, as if a single day had thrown them back into all the awkwardness of his early life at Wolfpits, and that she had suddenly taken it into her head to upset the convention under which they had agreed to live. Most of all, she avoided him whenever he spoke of money, and when he brought her his wages at the end of the week she left them lying on the table as though touching them would have burned her fingers. If he had not loved the woman, and her children too, he would have broken away in accordance with his nature. As it was, he hung on, sore and bewildered, wondering what new coldness she could inflict upon him.

Another shock awaited her. One day, when Abner was away at work, the postman bicycled up to Wolfpits and handed her a letter. This was so rare an event at Wolfpits that the man waited, as country postmen, who also act as interpreters, often do, to hear its contents.

'You'll see by the postmark it's come from Shrewsbury,' he said.

'Yes, so I see,' she replied, thrusting it into the pocket of her apron.

She had already recognised George's freehand writing. He went away, but she kept the letter in her pocket unopened. She dared not open it; and when at last she did so, the words sent a chill over all her body.

> '*My dear Wife*,'—*she read, shivering*—'*Although I may be doing time I'm not yet dead that I know of. They say that love is blind, but don't you go imagining that other people haven't got eyes*.
>
> '*Your loving husband,*
> '*George*.'

She was seized with a pain that had scarcely abated when Abner came home at night. She could not bring herself to speak to him. She desired, passionately, to show him the letter, but shame would not let her do so. He, in his turn, was sick of the wretchedness of their present relation, and when the children had been put to bed, he told her so in words that he had chosen for their roughness. She stared at him from the other side of the supper table with grief and resentment in her eyes. p. 294

'If it's as bad as that, what makes you stay here?' she said slowly.

'I like that!' he replied. 'You know as well as I do.'

She took fright at this, for she wasn't sure of his meaning, though she knew in her heart what she wanted him to mean. She was afraid that he would guess at her unspoken admission.

'*I* don't keep you here,' she said.

He got up and walked the room. A hay-moth hurled itself against the shade of the lamp with a sharp ringing sound and fell crippled on the tablecloth.

'It's hurt,' she cried. 'Kill it!'

Abner crushed the insect with his thumb and threw it in the fireplace. The coppery bloom came off on his fingers. For a moment she was hypnotised watching him. Then she recovered her senses.

'I don't keep you. There's no need for you to stay in every night,' she said.

'No. There bain't. I'm damned if there be!' he replied.

He picked up his cap and walked out of the room. She nearly ran after him to thrust George's letter into his hand. But she was too late. 'So much the better,' she thought. She felt that she

had been saved from some calamity.

He set off, walking furiously through the mellow evening, trying to cool his blood with violent exertion as instinctively as an animal eats grass. By nightfall he had reached the remote valley, nine miles away in folds of the Forest of Clun, whither his friends the cloggers had returned in the spring. He found their canvas pitched in a coomb under high sheepwalks, and Wigan Joe made him as welcome as ever. They sat out in the soft, moonless night, talking and drinking beer. It was like old times for Abner to hear Joe reeling off stories one after another in his flat Lancashire dialect. He lolled there listening till the company grew drowsy. There was no question of his returning to Wolfpits that night, for the sky drooped like a pall of velvet on the earth and he could never have found his way. He turned in with the others on a pile of dried bracken, waking at dawn to set off again toward Chapel Green. p. 295

For a few hours he had shed his restlessness, but when he reached Wolfpits in the evening the sense of restraint descended on him again. He felt that Mary was watching him, wondering where he had been. Her eyes were tragic, and, as he thought, reproachful.

This only irritated him. He couldn't be bothered with her moods. When, speaking to Mrs Mamble, he happened to mention that he had walked over in the evening to the sloggers' workings, she looked at him with such a searching suspicion that he could not contain himself.

'What's up with you?' he said. 'Do you think I'm codding you?'

She looked away without answering.

'There's no need to believe me if you don't want to,' he said.

And what the hell did it matter to her where he went or what he did? If he were to leave her to herself for a bit perhaps she'd begin to realise that he was useful, and that it wouldn't pay her to treat him like dirt. It was time she had a lesson!

He spent the next evening with Mick Connor in a pub at Lesswardine, mixing his drinks, standing treat recklessly. He had to borrow six shillings from Mick to pay his score. It pleased him to think how Mary would stare at his money next Saturday when she found it six bob short . . . she, who was too proud to pick it up when he gave it her!

At the yellow turnpike house outside Lesswardine their paths diverged; and this was unfortunate, for it was easier to walk arm in arm. Mick left him; but as soon as he found himself alone the vision of Mary returned to him: Mary, as he had seen her and desired her, sitting pale on the border of the pool a fortnight ago. In his perverse and drunken mind he hated her. It seemed to him that she had been making a fool of him, alternately alluring and rejecting. p. 296

He walked along, sweating violently, in the direction of Mainstone, wishing to God he'd never known the damned woman. Women . . . and yet a lusty man of his age couldn't live without women! It was against nature to live without women, and a man was a fool if he did so. He went hot and cold, thrilled with voluptuous sensations. He laughed at himself, and staggered up to a gate at the side of the road to light his pipe. He broke three matches and then discovered that they were damp and would not strike. He remembered indefinitely that Mick had upset a pint of beer into his pocket. He cursed the matches and Mick together.

A light breeze moved above him, and as in the distance he heard a sound like that of a gentle shower falling on leaves in June: a sound that meant something to his memory. He became suddenly aware that he was standing at that moment on the outskirts of Mainstone village, immediately beneath a big poplar tree. A dozen times he had stood there in the shadow waiting for the light to go out in the windows of the Pound House, for the steps of Bastard to pass him, for the moment when he might safely steal across to Susie's door.

His pulse quickened. Some hidden instinct must have made him stop there. No light could be seen, but there, in the darkness, was a woman whom he could have for the asking. He pulled himself together, and a moment later was standing by the outhouse door. He threw a clod at her window-pane. She had better not try putting him off to-night! If he had to climb in at her window she must come to him. He fretted with impatience.

But he had not long to wait. In a few minutes she had opened the back door. He heard the door scrape, but it was so dark that he could not see her. He put out his hands, groping in the darkness, and found her, warm and breathing. p. 297

'I thought you were never coming again,' she whispered.

He took her in his arms and clothed her in kisses. She clung to him, breathing softly, while his kisses enveloped her. His misery left him, vanished miraculously in the darkness. In the black confusion of his thoughts it seemed to him as if he were kissing Mary Malpas.

The Twentieth Chapter p. 298

A STRANGE fate awaited this renewal of passion. Over the border in Wales, where many dark and violent things are born, a sultry flame had been kindled about this time in the heart of a Wesleyan

local preacher named Evan Hughes. He was a Montgomery peasant, a carpenter by trade, on whom, brooding over the historical sanctity of his calling, an inspiration had fallen. He preached in the chapel Bethesda, in the hamlet Llandewi Waterdine. He spoke in the dialect of his fellow-workmen; his words were ludicrous and pathetic; but the fire that scorched his heart was in them, so that men and women rode over the mountains on their ponies to hear him and many professed themselves converted. Why, or to what they were converted it would be hard to say, unless it were that the isolation of their lives laid them open to long broodings on sin and on salvation, and that knowing, as all men know, that they were sinful, they could not be happy in solitude till they were saved.

The unconverted said maliciously that Evan Hughes had been shocked into sanctity by proceedings of affiliation and a maintenance order. However this may have been, his preaching was on chastity of the body, and more particularly of the bodies of women, a doctrine that was acceptable, for the most obvious reasons, to married men with wives younger than themselves, and on sentimental grounds to young unmarried girls. The flame spread quickly through these green shoots, and the dry, withered twigs went up with a crackle. Women of sixty years and older stood up on the chapel floor and prayed God to grant them continence. Evan Hughes, with a singular lack of humour, hailed them as souls plucked from hell and greeted them as sisters. Thus, having cleansed the Kerry Hills and the borders of Clun, he set his eyes, like any spiritual freebooter, on the English border, cursing the fatness and laxness of the Teme valley so violently and with such free quotations from the prophet Jeremiah, that the local circuit invited him to conduct a revival from their pulpits. p. 299

First he came to Chapel Green, and naturally enough converted old Mrs Malpas, who was always on the side of the angels. She sat under him with tears streaming from her eyes for the sins of her friends, and afterward had the honour of putting him up at the Buffalo in spite of his prejudices against the licensed trade. On this, the first Sunday of the revival, the Chapel Green Methodists achieved the authentic shiver, and the vicar of Mainstone, who had heard all about it, made a reconnaissance of his parish, shaking his head and warning his people against the influence of unhealthy fanatics.

‘It’s a crime,’ he said, ‘putting such ideas into young people’s minds. We don’t want that sort of thing in the country. Mainstone is a clean parish. Apart from that unfortunate young Mrs Malpas at Wolfpits there is scarcely an . . . unsavoury household in it.’

In spite of this official discouragement, Evan Hughes increased. The revival, unlike those epidemics of disease which afflict the body, spread steadily eastward. Chapel Green with its sober, bucolic population, had made the mildest of beginnings. At Mainstone half the vicar’s congregation thronged the chapel. People walked over from Lesswardine on the Sunday evening in little laughing groups and returned in silence with a Roman segregation of the sexes. Those who scoffed had such a bad time of it that they held their tongues.

Among the victims of this collective exaltation was Susie Hind. No doubt the violence of her renewed passion for Abner had thrown her into an emotional state. Abner was now absorbed in it, and content to be absorbed, seeing that in this way he purchased forgetfulness; but Susie had to run the risk of discovery or worse until her nerves were all on edge.

At first Abner could not make out what was the matter with her. One Sunday night she cried and cried in his arms and would not tell him why. For the rest of the week she brooded on the extremity of her sin; then, with the same queer directness that had driven her to confront Mary Malpas some time before, she sought an interview with the evangelist and laid her confession before him. He turned away from her. p. 300

‘Don’t tell me,’ he said. ‘I cannot hear these things. My ears are full of them. “*Go and sin no more*!” and remember me when you pray.’

She went home burning but humiliated, and gave herself up to an ecstasy of self-abasement in prayer. When the men joked with her in the bar at night she would not listen to them. Next Sunday she went again to the chapel and wept. She knew that after dark that night Abner would come and call her. She loved him, but it seemed to her that her immortal soul was more precious than mortal love, and here were two souls to be saved. She lay stiff in bed waiting for his signal, compelling herself to be cold. A clod struck the window-pane. She clasped her hands in an attitude of prayer and lay like a stone. Again he signalled to her. She dared not lie there any longer for fear he should become impatient and waken her father. She slipped on some clothes and came to the door.

‘I can’t see you, Abner,’ she whispered hurriedly. ‘I can’t let you in. I can’t . . . don’t ask me.’

He thought she had taken leave of her senses. ‘What the devil’s up with you?’ he said.

She shook her head and would have closed the door on him, but he put his foot in it. ‘Don’t!’ she said. ‘Oh, don’t!’

He had no intention of being put off like this. He tried to kiss her, but she kept him at arm’s length, and when he had done his best with persuasions and still could get no sense from her, he became angry and raised his voice. Now genuine fear was added to her other emotions, and in order that he should not awaken her father she consented at last to follow him out into the lane. He was on the point of agreeing when it flashed into his mind that this was only a ruse to get him away from the door so that she might lock it in his face.

The only explanation that suggested itself to him was that she might be expecting another lover. 'No, you don't my girl!' he said. 'You'll come along with me.' p. 301

He waited for her, and in another moment they had crossed the road under the shadow of the poplar. From that point she could see the roof of the cottage where the evangelist was staying. The gable rose up high like a symbol of the power she was obeying. 'Not here,' she whispered. 'We might be seen.' He helped her over the gate, taking her down in his arms. She stiffened beneath his touch. A heavy dew had come out on the grass that washed her ankles as she walked, for she had not pulled on her stockings. Owls were hunting in the misty starlight. One floated before them along the hedgerow—ghostly on quiet wings. He caught her up in his arms.

'Now what's it all about?' he said.

She hurried to tell him before it grew more difficult, stammering with haste; but when she came to the story of her conversion and her interview with Evan Hughes she felt the weight of his ridicule overbearing her. She hadn't humbled herself enough to bear the indignity of being laughed at, and least of all by Abner. She stopped suddenly.

'Let me go back!' she said, trying to free herself. 'Let me go back!'

He only held her closer.

'What's all this havering?' he said. 'What's up with you, eh? Give us a kiss!'

She put her hands up to his mouth, struggling. 'I can't . . . I can't!'

'What do you want then?'

She took her plunge. 'Abner, why don't you marry me?' she said.

'Marry you? Marry?' he cried. He laughed out loud at the idea.

Then it came to him in a flash that there must be some urgent reason for her request. People in his class and in that part of the country rarely married unless they were obliged to in accordance with the local custom. He had been caught in the same way as nine out of ten of his married mates. It was like his cursed luck! He wouldn't believe it. His first feeling was one of bitter rage. He saw himself tied hand and foot, helplessly handed over to the commonest of fates, p. 302 another fool caught in the web that women spun for a free man's undoing. He saw in front of him an endless dull routine of life at Mainstone. He saw himself finished, and the idea of paternity gave no consolation to his bitterness. Then, in the same swift vision, he saw the little household at Wolfpits that depended on him for support, and among them the wan, devoted face of Mary Malpas.

'Why didn't you tell me before?' he said at last. 'How do you know you're like that?'

She flushed in the dark, with an involuntary affectation of modesty.

'How dare you?' she cried. 'How dare you? I'm not. There's nothing wrong with me.'

'Then what the hell is all this talk of marrying about?' he cried. 'What d'you take me for? I'm not that soft?'

He laughed out loud in the suddenness of his relief. It stung her pride to think that he was laughing at her. Anger boiled up in her, and she forgot all her pietistic resolves as she freed herself in abuse. In a single second the penitent had been turned into a virago mad with jealousy, letting fly at him a spate of foul words that she had learned in the taproom. She didn't stop to think what she was saying. The words swept over her mind in a flood and made her deaf. Then she saw Abner shaking with laughter at her performance and pulled herself together.

'I've finished with you, you great beast!' she said. 'A dirty chap that goes running all over the country after women! I'm not going to take turn and turn about with a married woman, so don't you think it! You and that great stick of a Condover as George Malpas got sick and tired of in three year . . . you and your Mary!'

'Here, drop that?' said Abner darkly. 'Shut your mouth!'

'Drop it?' she cried. 'You're not going to shut my mouth when the whole village is disgusted with you and your goings on . . . and her putting on a face as innocent as a saint and taking the children out for walks, poor little devils! You wait till George comes back and then she'll show p. 303 you the back door quick enough. I don't know what you want taking up with a piece of muck like that. You're a dirty hypocrite, and as for her . . .'

Abner stopped her mouth, but she fought and struggled.

'Next time you'd better go farther off than Redlake,' she spluttered. 'You dirty, rotten swine!'

It was lucky for her that she wrenched herself away from him, for Abner's blood was in his head. She went running like a madwoman over the ghostly field. If she had stayed he could have murdered her. Slowly following, he came to himself, and wondered what the devil he was doing in that damp field in the middle of the night. He cursed all women as he saw them in her violent image, but when he set his feet on the high road, his anger had subsided and he began to realise how blind he had been. He knew that Susie had probably spoken no less than the truth about the local scandals. Looking backward he found that he could explain the smiles and winks and

sidelong glances of his mates. Fine friends they were, who made sport of a man and never told him why! And it dawned on him, still stupidly incredulous, that this trouble and nothing else was the cause of the change in Mary's behaviour, the thing that had snatched her so violently away from him. No doubt it had come to her ears through Mrs Mamble. All women were spiteful by nature, and could not resist the pleasant temptation of giving pain to others of their kind. They had let her know in some covert way what folk were saying, and she, too proud to confide in him, was protecting herself as best she could. He knew her pride . . . he wished to God she were not so proud, and yet, since that was her nature, he must be patient with her.

He was not built for patience. Walking home to Wolfpits with the high road beneath him, and the mild humming of telegraph wires that stretched away to the ends of the earth above, he felt once more the restlessness with which his spirit was so familiar: the desire that had come over him in fierce gusts from time to time ever since the days of his childhood, the will to be free, to cut all p. 304
coils and launch out into the life to which he had a right. Ever since his boyhood he had been as much a prisoner as George Malpas, and for even less reason. Breaking free from Mawne and reaching out over these hills, he had merely passed from one prison to another. The only periods of freedom he had known had been those dimly-remembered days with his father before Alice came to Hackett's Cottages, and the week of his travels on the road with Mick Connor. Always, somehow or other, a woman had been at the bottom of his slavery. Women were the curse of his existence. It pleased him fiercely to think that in his breach with Susie he had shorn through one of these shackles. He hated women, and yet, in his heart, he could not remember Mary without tenderness, and knew that, however loudly he might protest, he was going back along the road to Wolfpits of his own free will, and whatever it might cost him, must stay there until George Malpas returned.

That night he was too late to see Mary; but next morning, when he arrived at the work, he tackled Munn on the subject of the Redlake scandal.

'What do they say about me and Mrs Malpas, Joe?' he asked.

Munn stammered. 'Nowt as I know, Ab,' he said.

'Drop that, kid! Don't you come that over me!' he said. 'Spit it out!'

'Naught out of the way,' Munn said at last. 'They say as you and her is pretty thick.'

'Oh, they do, do they?' said Abner. 'And what do you think about it, eh?'

'It's none of my business,' said Munn doggedly.

'No more it is, my son,' Abner laughed. 'Get on with it!'

'They said you'd been caught out over at Redlake.'

'Then it's that bleeder Badger!' said Abner. 'Wait till I see the sod! That all?'

'I didn't hear no more,' said Munn.

'Well, kid,' said Abner. 'You keep clear of the women! Don't you have naught to do with them!'

'No fear,' said Munn, with a smirk of his hare-lip.

Abner had meant to have the matter out with Mary, but when he thought it over he saw that p. 305
nothing was to be gained by this. He understood her awkwardness, and, knowing the delicacy of her temper, left well alone. She, on her part, would have suffered an agony of shame in showing him George's letter. After his final interview with Susie she noticed a change in him and wondered what had caused it. He began to spend his evenings again at Wolfpits, going out to talk in the stables with old Drew, picking baskets of fruit from the walled garden and working, more rarely, in their own tilled plot. She was curious to know what had happened, but kept her thoughts to herself, and was grateful at least for his forbearance.

She had heard no more of George, and though she had lived in fear of seeing old Mrs Malpas ever since Susie's visit had told her that the new scandal was abroad, the weeks passed by and no outside intelligence penetrated the remoteness of Wolfpits. At times, when she saw Abner moving quietly about the heavy work of the house she was overwhelmed with a sensation which she persuaded herself was gratitude, and longed to burst through the convention of silence or commonplace that bound them. It would have been fairer, she thought, to open her heart to him, to stand face to face without a veil between. But she did not know what her own heart contained, or what the veil concealed, and her courage always failed her. Not only would her confession involve an abasement, a sacrifice of pride that she could not face, but Heaven only knew where it might lead. And yet, in spite of these things, they were almost happy.

One Wednesday evening early in August, just before the gang knocked off for the day, the clerk of the works came walking gingerly among the scattered culverts to the trench in which Abner and Munn were working. He carried a paper in his hand which he consulted with short-sighted eyes before he addressed them.

'Fellows and Munn, isn't it?' he mumbled. 'Munn and Fellows. Yes.'

'That's us!' said Abner, throwing down his shovel.

'I've a letter from the boss,' said the clerk, 'orders to cut down the wage-bill on this job. We've p. 306

got to sack all supernumerary hands—those that aren't regular, that is—so we shan't need you two after Saturday week. That gives you ten clear days' warning to look about you.'

'Right you are, gaffer!' said Abner.

The clerk went blundering on to another trench, having ticked off two names on his list.

'Well, Joe,' said Abner. 'What about it, my son?'

'I dunno, Ab,' said Munn dolefully. 'Back to bleedin' old Brum, I reckon. That's about the ticket. I wouldn't have had this happen not for a bit! I shall never find another lodge like old Mrs Taylor's. She's been a mother to me, that woman! What are you going to do?'

'Stay on here, Joe,' said Abner. 'Pick up another job somewhere.'

'That's right enough for you,' said Munn. 'I can't go farmerin' an' all.'

'Right enough is it?' Abner laughed. 'You wait and see!'

The siren sounded, and Connor came along the trench whistling jauntily as he always did when he was up against it.

'Got the boot, Mick?' Abner asked.

Mick nodded. 'It breaks the heart in me to think I'm afther leavin' all them pheasants,' he said. 'Off on the touch again: that's what it's come to. Ireland's the only place to live in, and I'll knock down enough for a double at Punchestown if it's only hawking of dead Roses of Jericho round the basements of Merrion Square. Shure, an' you'll come along wud me!'

Abner shook his head.

'God help you, you couldn't be worse if you was married' said Mick, with a leer.

Abner laughed. He knew Mick Connor too well to take his tongue seriously.

That night when he went home he did not tell Mary what had happened, for it seemed to him his news would only disturb her needlessly. At the same time he knew that something must be done, and after tea he went down to the bridge to wait for old Drew's return.

The labourer looked at him and scratched his head. 'That's the worst of they casual jobs,' he said. 'Money? Yes . . . but you never get knowed, and there's nothing permanent to them.' p. 307

Abner asked how he should set about finding a job in the district, and the old man looked solemn.

'I rackon you'll find it easy enough for a month or maybe six week with the harvest coming. They be glad of any help they can get in they times. After that you can whistle for it.'

'Anything 'll do for me,' said Abner.

'Now mark 'ee, 'tis like this,' the old man explained, 'this country, when fust I know'd 'en, were a tarrable place for barley and wheat, but now, like the vules they be, they've a' given it up and gone in for this dairyin'. Proper women's work, I call it; and women be cheap in these parts, as they ought to be. I don't say as there ban't the apples as well.'

Sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof. Abner knew now that he could not look beyond the harvest for regular work, but harvest labour, being rare, was well paid, and by working overtime he might easily amass a little store of money. More than that, he might even prolong his employment, if he made good friends, by helping to pick the yellow apples from which thin Shropshire cider is made, but on this, he knew well, he could not count with any certainty, as the orchards were alien and few. He begged old Drew not to mention his quest to any one at Wolfpits, and the old man blinked his assent.

Next Sunday evening he said good-bye to the friends who shared in his dismissal. Munn, who had scraped together a little money, was going to Ludlow, where he would catch a train for Dulston. Mick Connor, being sick of England, as he said, was tramping north to Holyhead. Abner walked with him to the crest of hills above Clun.

'If you're ever in the city of Dublin,' Mick said, 'all you've got to do is to go into Nagle's Back. Ask for the devil they call Kerry Mick, used to lodge with Mother Muldoon, and the grocer's curate 'll give you a naggn' for the love on him.'

Abner watched him swing away down the hill, with his loose-jointed, loping stride. He returned home late at night. Mary, contrary to her custom, was sitting up for him. p. 308

She sat at the table reading, and he quickly tumbled to her reason for doing so. In the midst of his farewells he had forgotten to give her his week's wages the night before. She would not ask him for money; but she was hoping that her unusual presence would make him realise what he had forgotten. Seeing this he was tempted, for a moment, to withhold it; to wait and see what she would do, to force her into a spiritual submission; but then he remembered that the shock which he was being forced to give her would be quite enough.

'Here's the brass,' he said, placing it on the table in front of her.

'Thank you, Abner,' she said.

‘I reckon it’s got to go a long way this week. I’ve kept none back.’

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

‘It’s going to be the last, far as I can see.’

For a second she thought that the moment had come; that her coldness had actually forced him into leaving her. Remorse, mingled with cold fear for the future, overwhelmed her; but he saw her bewilderment and told her simply what had happened.

‘I’ve got to look out for work,’ he said. ‘It may come along any day, only the harvest’s late.’

‘We shall have to manage,’ she said calmly. ‘You can trust me to do the best I can.’ She stood waiting as if she wanted to say something more, but at the last her courage failed her. ‘I have a few shillings put by,’ she said. ‘I always thought something might happen.’

‘Well, yo’m a marvel and no mistake!’ he cried.

During his first week of idleness Abner went out every day visiting the farms of the neighbourhood in search of a promise of harvest work. It was a lean year: the drought of the summer had stunted the straw; a couple of violent thunderstorms had done more harm than good, and the farmers were now hanging on as long as they dared, gambling on the chance of rain that was due. Wherever Abner went they shook their heads. p. 309

‘Can’t say when we’ll be cutting,’ they said. ‘Next week, or week after, or three weeks’ time. It depends on the weather, and the damned stuff’s that poor it isn’t worth reaping. Worse than the hay . . . and that’s saying something!’

At night, when he came home, Mary looked anxiously for his news, but he could tell her nothing. He made casts farther afield. He did not care how far he went if only he could find work; but down in the plains, although he could see for himself that the ears were fuller, he was met by the same evasive replies. He came to hate the sight of these sour, prosperous farmers. It seemed to him that they all had the same callous faces as the distant Mr Cookson who had killed his dog; but he knew better than to let Spider follow him on these visits.

‘You might try Mr Prosser of The Dyke,’ said old Drew one evening. ‘That be a fine big farm, and they say he do go in for barley.’

Next day Abner visited The Dyke. It was a farm that he had missed in his former expeditions, a house buried in beechwoods that stood, unappropriately, high and dry on a lofty ridge south of the main road between Mainstone and Lesswardine. It lay five miles from Wolfpits as the crow flies, and nearly seven by road. A green drive bordered by hazels and sheltered by smooth beeches in which squirrels were playing, brought him to the house: a melancholy edifice, built four-square, and covered with plaster that had once been painted white but was now streaked with green. He knocked at the back door, but could make nobody hear. A dog flew out of a kennel near the yard gate, tugging at his chain, and inside the house two others, excited by the sound, came pattering along the passage and scraped at the lower edge of the door with their paws.

Abner gave it up. Evidently nobody was at home. He took a drink of cold water at the pump and set off home through the green lane. Half-way down it he heard a sound of muffled hoofs, and a dog-cart, of the sturdy kind that farmers use, came swinging round the corner. The driver was a woman of twenty-five to thirty years of age, swarthy, with a rich autumnal colouring, and gray eyes. Another, younger girl, with her hair in a pigtail, sat beside her. They passed Abner at a trot, but twenty yards later the driver pulled up and looked back. p. 310

‘Have you been up to The Dyke?’ she called.

‘Yes, miss,’ said Abner, taking off his cap, and approaching.

‘I don’t suppose you’d find any one in,’ she said. ‘Dad’s gone to Ludlow, and the girl’s out. What do you want?’

‘I came to ask if Mr Prosser wants any outside help for harvest.’

She looked at him steadily. Their eyes met. ‘I don’t know. What’s your name?’

‘Fellows. Abner Fellows.’

‘Where do you live? You don’t belong to these parts?’

‘Wolfpits.’

‘Wolfpits?’ She examined him more closely, repeating the word with an accent of surprise. She put a brown-gloved finger to her lip. ‘I think dad will want some one: they’re beginning the barley on Monday,’ she said slowly. ‘Tell you what . . . you’d better look up here to-morrow morning. I’ll tell dad you’re coming. So long!’

She touched up the horse and the dog-cart shot forward. Abner went on his way encouraged.

‘Where did you try to-day?’ Mary asked him. She was doing her utmost to appear interested in his quest. Indeed she could not well do less.

‘Up to The Dyke . . . Prosser’s place.’

Mary blushed. ‘Did you see any one there?’

‘The place was all shut up,’ he said, ‘but I met a young lady as I took to be Mr Prosser’s daughter in the drive just after I turned back.’

‘What age was she?’

‘Summat about yourn.’

‘Dark?’

‘Ah, darkish. There was a young ’un along with her.’

‘How was she dressed?’

‘Now you’m asking things out of reason,’ Abner laughed. ‘Them’s the sort of things a man don’t notice.’ p. 311

‘It must have been Marion,’ she said, and later in the evening she explained to him that Mr Prosser’s elder daughter was an old schoolfellow of hers, and rather more than a schoolfellow, for they had once been great friends. Mary’s father, the unfortunate Condover, had been something of a crank on the subject of education and had sent her to a school in Ludlow, where she had mixed with all sorts of people who were, in fact, her social superiors. ‘But that’s all ages ago,’ she said. ‘I expect that she’s forgotten me by now. Mr Prosser lost his wife five or six years ago, and Marion’s had charge of the house ever since then. A great big place, The Dyke! She’s a queer girl, I’ll give you my word for that.’

Next day Abner went up early to the farm. In the yard he found the younger of the two girls. She was dressed in a holland overall and a big straw hat and was watching a hatch of ducklings that an anxious hen had mothered, learning to swim in an iron bath. When she saw Abner she ran into the house calling: ‘Marion! Marion!’

The elder came to the door. Abner scarcely recognised her, for she had changed her tweeds and her sporting hat for an overall like that of her sister, and her dark hair was bound in thick plaits about her head. She greeted him frankly, smiling and showing between her parted lips a set of beautiful teeth.

‘I’ve told dad about you,’ she said. ‘He’s just gone over to have a look at the bull and ’ll be back in a minute. Have a glass of cider?’

Abner thanked her. She returned brightly with a mug of cider and a plate of scones hot from the girdle.

Five minutes later Mr Prosser came into the yard with his ploughman Harris. The farmer was a tall, fair man, with golden whiskers and a moustache that almost hid the weakness of his mouth.

‘H’m, you’re the young man, are you?’ he said, looking Abner up and down with more curiosity than he could have been expected to show for a casual labourer. ‘What is it you want? Eh?’

Abner repeated his request, and the farmer, with a little less than the usual surliness of his kind, said: ‘Well, yes, I dare say we can do with you so long as you’re not afraid of work. But it’s a short job, I warn you!’ p. 312

The younger girl, who had been listening dreamily to their conversation, turned and uttered a shrill cry. ‘Dad! Dad!’ she said, ‘I’m afraid I’ve drowned one of them!’ She ran forward with an inanimate piece of yellow fluff in her hand. ‘Oh, what a shame!’

‘That’s like you, Ethel,’ the father grumbled. ‘Take it in to Marion.’

But by this time the elder sister had appeared and was holding the duckling to her breast as though she would have liked to nurse it back to life. Ethel stood watching her with tears in her eyes.

‘You’ll never make a farmer’s wife, Ethel,’ said Mr Prosser, teasing her. ‘Come here! Give us a kiss!’ He held the child’s face in his hands and kissed her noisily. Marion had carried the duckling into the house. He turned to Abner.

‘Day after to-morrow,’ he said. ‘Come up early . . . about five o’clock.’

The Twenty-First Chapter

p. 313

Since the time of her Ludlow schooldays and her friendship with Mary Condover, Marion Prosser’s horizon had widened to an extent that might easily have explained the distance which now separated them. From Ludlow she had been sent on to finish her education at a Cheltenham college; for her mother had social ambitions and knew that the nearest way to the homes of her superiors lay through the schools that their daughters frequented. She always taught Marion to speak of her father as a ‘gentleman-farmer,’ a description which Mr Prosser accepted under more

protest than he usually offered to anything that his wife dictated. For all that, he was proud of the fact that The Dyke had belonged to his family for six generations, and when he walked round his fields on a Sunday evening and surveyed their richness from the crumbled earthwork of Offa's Dyke, which gave the farm its name, could even be sentimental on the subject.

Marion went to Cheltenham when her sister Ethel was a baby two years old. She made many friends, for she was good at games and a creature of unusual spirit; but the principal feature of her life was a sudden and passionate friendship for one of her mistresses, a languid pre-Raphaelite young woman with a phthisical tendency who made her read a good deal of romantic literature of a sentimental kind. Miss Randall's literary heroes were Parsifal and Galahad, and her fetish personal purity, the shame-faced purity of impotence. She was not fond of men, she said, although she allowed herself the licence of a spiritual flirtation with an advanced young priest of the Church of England, to whom she opened her soul.

In due course Marion's adoration of her mistress went the way of all such passions; but her taste for letters remained. In her eighteenth year her mother suddenly died, and she returned to The Dyke to look after her father and her baby sister. Even in the excitement of her new activities p. 314
she rebelled, feeling herself isolated, alien, condemned to an infinity of small-talk.

She became the hostess of her father's friends; farmers of every age and type, who made love to her with varying degrees of rustic clumsiness but seemed to Mr Prosser the most desirable of suitors. Usually they drove up to The Dyke on Sunday evenings or after Ludlow market. Some, by their liquorish assumption of an easy conquest, offended her and caught the rough side of her tongue; but she soon found that with them her genteel shades of irony were so much waste of time, since they were not even understood.

The young men retired puzzled, and their sisters sympathised with them. 'She isn't natural,' they said, 'and you can't go against nature like that. I never could think what you saw in her.' In this way Marion Prosser got a reputation for shrewishness and conceit. The young men of the neighbourhood felt that even the possession of The Dyke would be a small compensation for that of such a difficult wife. They began to treat her with the instinctive respect of the terrier for the hedge-hog, leaving her to her books and to her fancies.

With these, for some years, she was content. The walls of her bedroom at the Dyke showed evidences of culture in as many strata as can be found in the coloured ribbon along the edge of a geological map of England. They ranged from the primary Rossettis of her Cheltenham period to reproductions of late impressionist pictures. Among books she groped her way determinedly. In Ludlow she found a branch of one of the London circulating libraries. Every week she would drive there in her pony trap and bring back the books that she had ordered, to the amazement of the stationer who kept the shop. Her father laughed at her tastes. Among his friends she gained the reputation of a bluestocking, which was enough to make any young man think twice before he spoke to her. And the years went by.

They were dull years, and for very boredom she tried to identify herself with the work of the farm. She threw herself violently into these new interests to the amazement of her father. p. 315
Although he was still more than a little afraid of her, he could not help respecting her capability. During the lifetime of her mother he had been so infused with the spirit of this active woman that he had appeared to be a man of some determination. Her death annihilated him: he had relapsed into nonentity, caring nothing, as it seemed, for his crops or his herds, driving in regularly every week to Ludlow market like an automaton, driving back in the evening, morose and fuddled, with no clear idea of what he had been about. On these occasions he would talk piteously of his motherless girls, and his large, sentimental eyes would fill with tears. He confided to his friends that he himself was not long for this world, though, physically, he was as strong as a horse.

Marion's determination changed all that. Subtly, without his knowledge, she pulled him together and made a man of him again, and, never having known the subjection with which her mother had entered the estate of marriage, she did what she liked with him, sometimes wounding his pride with her rather brutal frankness. Yet, even when he was wounded, he submitted to her; for she flattered him by pretending that he was the real head of the household. At root he was a lazy man, and dared not quarrel with his comforts. He realised, too, that the knowledge of practical farming, that was as deeply rooted in him as an instinct, was more essential to the success of their partnership than Marion's acute and active mind.

He prospered, and in moments of exaltation would tell himself that she was only a girl after all and that he was the man who counted. He made a startling recovery of his self-possession and talked no more of death; but his greatest happiness he still found in the society of his younger daughter Ethel, a child whose nature was nearer to his own. Some day, he decided, Ethel should marry a solid husband of his choosing, some big man with many lowland acres, and when the grandchildren began to come along, he would pass a quiet old age among them. Marion should have The Dyke. Even if she were not the elder she had earned it. It seemed unlikely that she would ever marry, being so hard to please.

Now, at the age of twenty-eight, Marion found herself lonely. The farm work had become so p. 316
intimate a part of her life that it served no longer to distract her. Life was slipping away from her. Ten years had passed almost without her knowing it. In another ten she would be nearly forty. A hidden fear possessed her that by separating herself from her own class and kind she had sacrificed the chance of living. Life was the thing that mattered, and she had exchanged her heritage for a few pitiful shreds of culture. The motherly cares that she lavished on Ethel were a

poor substitute for veritable maternity, and she knew it. She began to see that by refusing all commerce with the men of her own class in the hope of realising a problematical grand passion she had sacrificed all opportunity of passion whatever.

For some years after leaving Cheltenham she had exchanged letters with a number of her college friends, but little by little this correspondence had grown more slender and at length it had ceased. In her growing apprehension she made an attempt to revive several of these ancient friendships. The result filled her with despair and vague envies. Most of her girl friends were married: many of them sent her photographs of their husbands and children. She alone, it seemed, of all their company was left alone. It was her own fault. She knew it was her own fault, for her mirror told her that she did not show her age and that she was still desirable. All things seemed to conspire in fostering her unrest. The sights and sounds of the great farm around her were full of insistence on the cycle of birth, fruitfulness, and decay. Her books helped her no more. Her old æsthetic idols had long since been broken, and her latest passion, Whitman, whom she had discovered through the anthologies, swamped her mind with an endless adoration of the body's pride, the splendour of the flower no less than that of the fruiting.

In this distressful and desirous state, two incidents moved her deeply. The first was the dismissal of one of the farm girls who had been seduced by a clogger and had gone into the workhouse to have her baby. She was a puny, undesirable creature, with neither beauty nor health, yet she had found a lover. The second was the scandal of Mary Malpas, her old school friend, and the young lodger at Wolfpits, rehearsed with many winks by Mr Williams, whom her father had brought in for a glass of whisky on a Sunday evening. p. 317

'A well set-up chap, that Fellows!' said Williams to her father. 'It's no great wonder she's took a fancy to him.'

'Well, well, 'tis the way of the world!' said Mr Prosser comfortably. 'Fill Mr Williams's glass, Marion!'

She did so, and then, furiously blushing, left the room.

'What's up with your maid?' Williams asked. 'I reckon I've shocked her. Did I say anything out of the way?'

'Not you! She's a rum 'un is Marion,' Mr Prosser laughed.

And a few days later she had met Abner returning from his fruitless visit to The Dyke.

She had looked at him standing bare-headed in the level sunshine, and seen that he was well-favoured, but when she pulled up her horse and emerged from the dream state into which the rhythm of trotting hoofs had thrown her she had not thought that this meeting would be different from any other with a labourer out of work. She liked Abner's face, and for this reason had taken the trouble to ask him where he lived. Then came the word 'Wolfpits,' and a sudden realisation that Fellows was the name that Mr Williams had mentioned in his scandalous tale. It thrilled her to find herself face to face with Mary's lover. She lowered her eyes, not daring to look at him, and all the time her soul was consumed with a curiosity to see more of him, to find out what he was like. She knew that this curiosity was dangerous, that she was deliberately courting temptation, but she had had enough of prudence and felt that she was old enough to look after herself. And yet she knew that she had done a momentous thing when she told him to call next morning at The Dyke, and feared that trouble, indefinite trouble, might come of it.

Abner had not been working three days on the farm when Harris, his principal labourer, told Mr Prosser who the new workman was: 'Young Mrs Malpas's fancy man,' he called him; and Mr Prosser, who set great store on the respectability of his farm, felt that he had made a mistake in employing him. The matter had been settled by Marion. No doubt if she had known all the circumstances of the case she would not have taken him on. p. 318

'Do you know who this young chap is, Marion?' he asked.

'Yes. He comes from Wolfpits.'

'Do you realise that he's the chap Williams was talking about, the one that's living with Mary Malpas?'

'Yes, I do. Mr Williams himself said he didn't blame her.'

'I thought you yourself were put out a bit by his mentioning it.'

'Put out? Of course I wasn't. Why should I be put out?'

'I think it's bringing the scandal rather near home having him here.'

'He's a good workman, isn't he?'

'I don't think there's anything wrong with him that way.'

'Well, that's all you want to know.'

'Harris doesn't speak well of him.'

'Harris is jealous of every one who sets foot in the place. You'd think he owned it.'

‘And what’ll the vicar say?’ he joked.

‘I don’t know nor care. But I’m sure we’re doing right to employ him. I don’t know what would happen to poor Mary with that good-for-nothing Malpas in jail and this man out of work.’

‘Well, I suppose you know best,’ said Mr Prosser. He had not expected Marion to take the matter up so warmly. And Abner stayed.

He was not long in finding out who was the real ruler of The Dyke and that Mr Prosser, for all his commanding figure, stood for nothing. When the men knocked off for their dinner at midday and the two girls came down the field carrying ‘baggins’ of bread and cheese and great jugs of harvest beer, they would wink at each other and say: ‘Here comes the boss!’

Marion scarcely ever spoke to him more than a word, but her eyes were conscious of him, and he always felt that he was working under her scrutiny. Whenever they spoke together he was aware of the fact that it was she who had got him his job and that she could take it away from him as easily. When he came back from his work at night Mary would ask him questions about her old friend, but he could never satisfy her. p. 319

‘Does she know that you come from here?’ she would say.

‘Of course she knows. I told her at the first.’

‘But she’s never mentioned me? Never asked after me?’

‘We’ve never spoke ten words together.’

‘It’s funny, that! When you come to think of her and me having slept in the same bed. . . . She must know about me!’

‘She’s a rum ’un, Miss Marion. There’s no getting away from that.’

He and Mary never saw much of each other in those days, for Abner had to get up very early in the morning in time for his seven mile walk, and the harvest labour was severe. Severe, and yet pleasant, for the summer weather held and no rain fell. The sun shone pitilessly on the whitening stubbles, but the corn-fields of The Dyke were so lifted upon the back of the hills that they seemed to be part of a high cloudland and free from all heaviness. On the lower levels the whir of reaping machines might be heard, but higher up the fields were so unlevel, following the broken contour of the hills and bounded by the sloping ramparts of the dyke, that all the reaping must be done with sickles and the dry shocks carried to the head of a rough road. Abner had not the skill to wield a sickle, and so in this part of the labour he was useless. Harris, the labourer, who acted as foreman when Mr Prosser was not in the fields, resented this. Before Marion’s interest in the farm began he had been his master’s right-hand man. He had been present at the time when Abner was first employed by Mr Prosser, and knowing that the newcomer was a protégé of Miss Marion’s, was naturally jealous. When the men sat in the shade of a hedgerow for lunch he grumbled to his mates and grudged Abner his share of the food. The two casual labourers were inclined to take Harris’s side; but old Avery, a man of sixty who had worked at The Dyke all his life, stood up for Abner. p. 320

‘I don’t know what the place is coming to,’ Harris said. ‘We don’t want no navvies here. There’s too many about as it is. ’Tis a farming man’s job, reaping. I reckon you’re one of Miss Marion’s fancies. You’d a’ better look out!’

The men laughed, and Abner asked him what the hell he meant.

Harris was a dangerous-looking customer for all his years, strong as a bull, with a low, ape-like forehead, badger-gray hair, and long, ungainly arms that seemed to have been bowed by the carrying of trusses of hay.

‘You know what I mean,’ he said. ‘And I’ll tell you another thing. We don’t want no bleedin’ outsiders here, snatching the bread out of our mouths.’

Violence would surely have followed, but at the most dangerous moment the farmer and his daughters arrived. The reaping of the twelve-acre field was almost finished, a huge expanse of stubble lay gleaming under the noon-day sun, and crackled with heat. In the midst of the field a square of barley stood unreaped and shimmering, and within it cowered a secret multitude of field-mice, hares, and rabbits that the destruction of their homes had driven inwards. Mr Prosser and Marion carried guns, and Ethel was playing with three dogs that sniffed and trembled with eagerness for this annual pastime of slaughter.

‘Now, Harris, let’s get a move on!’ said the farmer.

The horses, that had stood stamping and swishing their tails and flicking flies from their ears in the shade of an elder-bush, were brought round with cries of encouragement, and the machine rolled clanking over the stubble towards the standing corn. Prosser and his daughters stayed behind in the hedgerow, the day’s work went on, and as the square diminished, narrowing with each turn of the machine, the dogs sniffed along the edge of that narrow sanctuary until the guns were ready.

‘Give Miss Marion a hand with her loading, Fellows,’ Prosser shouted. ‘Tell the men to get their sticks ready, Harris, and we’ll put the dogs in on the far side.’ p. 321

Abner and Marion stood together with the sun beating on their backs. The dogs ran barking into the corn. Above them, in the eye of the sun, a kestrel hovered. Three frightened rabbits bolted from the farther edge. Prosser fired two barrels and killed one. Another was wounded, and Harris ran after it with ungainly strides and stick uplifted. He brought down the stick with a savage cry and dashed out the animal's brains. 'I got him, the varmint!' he shouted.

The multitude within the square of corn trembled. One by one, terror drove them out into the open. Marion fired twice and missed. Her hands shook as she gave the gun to Abner to reload. She could not see her pitiful target; she saw nothing but the young man at her side with his sun-bleached hair, his red chest and neck, and the milk-white skin above the roll of his shirt sleeves.

'Quick! You'm missing of them!' he cried.

She fired again, and missed. She could hit nothing.

'I don't know what's the matter with me,' she said. 'I think I've been too long in the sun. You'd better take the gun yourself.'

And she stood watching the sureness of his aim as he fired, knocking over the pitiful, bright-eyed, furry creatures one by one. She watched him, fascinated, conscious only of his health and strength and the perfect co-ordination of his body. She saw it as that of her friend's lover, and in a yearning tenderness she thought of that hidden life away in Wolfpits. She could stand it no longer.

'Give me the gun,' she said. 'Don't shoot any more.'

She took the weapon from him and went over to join her sister in the hedge, where she sat watching the scene of slaughter in a dream. Then she got up suddenly, telling Ethel that the sun was too much for her, and went straight home to her bedroom. All afternoon she lay on her bed in the green light of a venetian blind. Her eyes burned and her head was splitting, but she knew that this was not altogether because of the sun. Later, when she had bathed her eyes in cold water and done her hair, she pulled out an old album in which there was a photograph taken at the Ludlow school where Mary Malpas had been her friend. It was a group ranged round the central figures of the two precise spinsters who kept the academy. She and Mary Condover were standing side by side: two solemn, self-conscious, childish faces with eyes staring straight at the photographer. Now Mary Condover was Mary Malpas, and had this man for a lover. Over in the secrecy of Wolfpits they loved. Ethel came knocking at the door with a cup of tea. The sound of her knock made Marion jump. It was not like her to be nervous.

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'They've counted the rabbits,' said Ethel. 'Thirty-two! That's two more than last year. Dad's ever so pleased. Is your headache better?'

'Yes, I'm all right,' said Marion. 'I'll be down in a minute.'

For several days she saw next to nothing of Abner. One morning, however, her father sent him up to her with a message. She was making pastry in the kitchen; her hands and arms were white with flour and the heat of the range had flushed her face. Again she found that in his presence she lost her self-possession, and falling on an awkward silence she blurted out:

'Well, how does it suit you?'

'Well enough,' he replied. 'Thanks to you, miss.'

'Oh, don't thank *me*!' she said, with a laugh.

He was going, but she called him back to the kitchen door.

'Don't you find the walk to Wolfpits rather tiring?' she asked.

'It's a fair step,' he said. 'But I don't take much count of it.'

'Why don't you stay up here till harvest's over?' she said. 'You could make up some sort of a bed in the loft.'

He thanked her, but refused. 'I find a good bit to do when I get home nights,' he said. 'They can't get on in the house without me.'

'They?' she said, with a laugh. 'Ah, well, it won't be for long.'

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While they were speaking together at the door Harris passed them with his basket slung over his stooping shoulders. He touched his cap to Marion, and gave Abner a wry smile as he passed. Marion returned to the kitchen without another word, and Abner, on his way back to the field began to puzzle his head as to what she had meant by her sudden change of front when he had excused himself from sleeping at The Dyke. The scorn that she had put into her repetition of the word 'they' made him think that perhaps there was more justification than he had imagined in Mary's feeling of resentment against Marion Prosser. But if she felt sore with Mary for any reason, there was no need for her to practise on him. He wasn't going to be lugged in to any petty feminine quarrel, they might be sure of that! He had quite enough to do on his own keeping even with that leering devil Harris. Mr Harris was going to cop it one of these days, and no mistake!

He dismissed Marion Prosser from his mind. And yet, all through the hot harvest season the two

of them were meeting and passing with a sense of something desired but unspoken on the part of Marion; and whenever they met there came into Abner's mind a grudging recognition of her physical presence. He decided that he did not like this strong, dark, almost boyish creature who, without even speaking, could so thrust herself upon his consciousness. She was too secret for him. He wished that she would speak out what she had to say so that they might know where they were and be finished with it, and since she would not do so he avoided her.

Meanwhile the harvest season was drawing to a close. The later crops were marred by the long-awaited rain. From every corner of the uplands came the same story: straw so weak as to be worthless and wheat sprouting in the ear. Prosser, who could well stand these losses and many more, picked up an infection of grumbling at the Ludlow market ordinary. Not only were the standing crops ruined but the extra hands were eating their heads off. Harris echoed his lamentations, and Abner, together with the two other outsiders who had been engaged for the harvest, would have been paid off but for the intervention of Marion.

He knew nothing of this. Through all that dead, wet season, when the baked hill-sides steamed p. 324
with rain and morning skies were heavy with autumnal mist, he busied himself with odd jobs about the farm. It was important for him if he were to find work in the neighbourhood when the job at The Dyke was over, that he should learn as much as he could of the farm-labourer's craft. He learned to milk, to brush the horses and to bed them down, helped with the lifting of the main-crop potatoes and dug them into the immense buries, shaped like the barrows of the stone-men on Castel Ditches, in which they were stored for winter.

Then, sudden, unheralded, came a September summer. The mists disappeared; the drowned crops stood up golden in a hot and level sunshine; the work of the fields began again. They laboured incessantly, for the sunshine and drought were now more precious than gold. They worked so hard from the light of dawn until the stunted sheaves threw gigantic shadows, that there was no room in his mind for the foibles of Marion or the growing jealousy of Harris. Prosser and his girls came down into the fields to aid them. The sheaves ripened against time, and Prosser watched the sky and tapped his glass all day long. He held on as long as he dared; but on the eighth day of the drought the glass began to fall, and the last sheaves were carted from the fields by moonlight.

At one o'clock in the morning they knocked off, exhausted, and strangely happy in the consciousness of a work well done; but the sense of happiness departed from Abner as he walked home through the owl-haunted twilight, for he knew that the job at The Dyke was over, and he had nothing else before him. At the end of the week, he supposed, he would draw his money and be faced with a new search for employment.

Next day, in accordance with the ancient custom of The Dyke, a harvest home was held in the long kitchen of the house. All morning Marion, her sister, and Agnes the maid were busy baking cakes and boiling hams for the festival. The wives and children of the labourers were asked to
share in these rejoicings, and more than twenty usually sat down to the long table at night. p. 325
Abner and the other extra hands were expected to come, but Mary Malpas was not invited.

Abner saw nothing strange or pointed in the omission, and indeed he had no time to spare for ceremonies of this kind, having been bred in a country where feudal customs had long since died away under the new and harder influence of capitalism. But to the labourers at The Dyke, and particularly to older men such as Daniel Avery, the harvest home was a feast as religious as any ancient mystery. To them it was the crown of the year and its labours, more vital and more significant than any convention of the calendar. Mr Prosser, as a member of the older generation, was himself attached to the custom. It reminded him of his boyhood, of the days when his father was master of The Dyke and his grandfather sat watching the dances from the chimney corner, and in this way it comforted him with a sense of continuity and flattered those vestiges of family pride which were the deepest elements in his nature. The day always found him in the best of spirits, and Marion, who loved to see her father made happy even by the simplest things, caught a little of his joyful infection. The house was in a stir; the servants laughed and sang about their work; the oaken dresser was spread with holiday fare. Marion caught old Avery in the yard and made him promise to sing his mole-catcher's song.

'If I do sing it, I mun sing it right through,' said the old man, with a wink. 'I can't mind the verses without I sing them in arder.'

She laughed; for many of his verses were indecent. 'You shall sing just what you like, Dan,' she said. As well quarrel with the indecency of the Bible as that of Avery's songs.

Mr Prosser had told the men to leave their work at five o'clock instead of at six, in order that they might go home to clean themselves and fetch their families. Only Hayes, the cowman, who slept on the premises, was to be left behind. Abner, old Avery, and Harris set off down the drive together. The others moved too slowly for Abner, for he had seven miles in front of him. All day
long Harris had taken a malicious pleasure in letting Abner know that his time was up and that p. 326
The Dyke would soon be shut of him. There had been one or two ugly moments, softened by the good humour of old Dan. Now they walked alongside in silence, Abner setting the pace.

'Hey, you do go too fast for old bones, my son!' said Avery.

'Wants to get home to his missus,' said Harris.

'Here, you'd better drop that!' said Abner warningly.

But Harris would not be warned. He knew, as well as the others, that Mary Malpas had not been invited to The Dyke. 'I reckon you'm going to leave her behind to-night,' he said.

'I reckon you'd better mind your own business. I've had a damn sight too much of your lip.'

Harris laughed. 'Stands to reason they won't have that kind of muck in the company of decent married women and innocent childer,' he said.

Abner did not wait to answer him. He let out with his right, catching Harris on the temple, and sent him spinning toward the ditch.

'Steady, lad, steady!' cried old Avery.

Harris pulled himself together and made straight for Abner with his head low down like a bull. He was the older man, and, in spite of the iron strength of his arms, Abner always had the advantage. Harris fought desperately with his hob-nailed boots as well as his fists. They fought till their faces were bloody and their clothes torn. Old Avery whined at them to give over, but they took no notice of him. At last Abner drove Harris into the ditch, where he lay spluttering blood. 'I reckon that'll teach you to keep your bleedin' mouth shut!' said Abner savagely, and left him there with the old man trembling and shedding weak tears above him.

He washed in the Folly Brook and had made himself fairly presentable by the time he reached Wolfpits.

'I thought you were going to the harvest home,' said Mary.

'Then you thought wrong,' said Abner irritably. 'Give us some tea.'

Neither Harris nor his family turned up at The Dyke that evening. Old Dan, who had kept his own counsel, was in the middle of his mole-catching song when one of the ploughman's children came in with a message to say that her dad was in a fever, and the bed wringing wet under him. p. 327

'Why didn't your mother come?' Prosser asked.

'Dad wouldn't let her,' said the child.

Marion took her aside and gave her a piece of cake.

'It never rains but it pours,' Prosser grumbled. 'Here's Harris badly, and now Hayes tells me he's got a poisoned finger. I don't know what we'll do for the milking to-morrow.'

'There's Fellows,' said Marion.

'Yes, it's lucky we've got him. Why, he isn't here either! What the devil's the matter with them all?'

Marion said nothing. She had guessed long ago why Abner was not there. She had half suspected that he would not come to The Dyke without Mary, but her pride would not let her ask her father to invite the family from Wolfpits. In the bottom of her heart she doubted if she would dare to meet her old friend. It would be so difficult, and besides that she felt that the intuitions of the other woman might discover her own leaning toward Abner. It was too dangerous.

Next morning Abner arrived at his usual hour. During the night Dr Hendrie had been summoned to The Dyke and had found that the neglected splinter in the cowman's finger threatened him with blood-poisoning, and the loss of his arm. At dawn Mr Prosser had driven him in to the infirmary at Shrewsbury. Marion received Abner on his arrival.

'Why didn't you come up last night?' she said.

'That sort of thing bain't much in my line,' he replied.

'I wanted you to come,' she said.

He only smiled awkwardly, and she wished that she had been more prudent. She told him that Hayes was in hospital and that Harris was laid up with influenza. It would be a convenience to them if he could take over Hayes's work, which was the care and milking of the cows and the driving of milk-cans morning and night to Llandwlas station. He was astonished at this turn of luck, for he had expected to be dismissed with his harvest earnings in his pocket. For all that, he didn't mean to take the job on false pretences. p. 328

'So Harris has caught the influenza, has he?' he said.

'Yes, he sent up his little girl with a message last night.'

'Well,' said he, 'it wasn't true. What Harris got was a damned good hammering from me—one that he won't forget.'

She thrilled to hear him. In her eyes he had become a hero. She knew already that he could be gentle. It gave her a curious, almost physical pleasure to realise him as a fighting man, for every one in the district was aware of Harris's iron strength.

'Tell me what happened,' she said.

'He only got what he asked for,' said Abner, 'with his dirty talk about young Mrs Malpas.'

‘Mary Malpas . . .’ she said quickly. ‘Oh, I’m sick of hearing her name.’

She did not pass on to her father what Abner had told her. He came back from Shrewsbury that evening tired and depressed. ‘The doctors reckon that we were only just in time with poor Hayes,’ he said. ‘It’s a near shave for his left arm. They’ve had to open it right up to the shoulder and he’ll be lucky if he’s out of hospital by Christmas. I don’t know what we can do, with Harris ill as well.’

‘There’s Fellows,’ she said.

‘Yes, there’s Fellows,’ he repeated, thinking of other things. He stared at her vaguely, but it seemed to her that his eyes were searching her, and she left him, blushing.

Abner’s new work kept him almost exclusively on the farm premises, and for this reason he and Marion often crossed each other’s paths. They met so often that Marion lost a little of her shame in speaking with him. She handled him cleverly, so that in the end he lost a good deal of the awkwardness that she herself had created. She was frank and kind, helping him in many small things. He came to take her for granted, and even to like her. In a little time he became accustomed to the cowman’s job and took a pride in it. To all intents and purposes he was his own master; for the dairy was Marion’s province, and Mr Prosser rarely interfered with its management. p. 329

Within a week of his hammering, Harris returned, apparently not much the worse for it. Nobody but old Avery knew what had happened, and the ploughman kept to himself a story that was hardly flattering. Abner had been prepared to treat him friendlily; but he soon saw that Harris had no intention of doing the same, maintaining a surly silence that was never to be broken, since their work now lay in different directions.

So autumn passed, the first frosts of winter whitened the upland, and the first ploughing began. Abner kept to his own work. The Prossers’ dairy was a small one, for their pasture land was limited, but he found that with the two station deliveries, the milking, and the care of the cows, his hands were pretty full. He saw less and less of Wolfpits, for it had been arranged that he should take his evening meal at the farm on his return from the station, and Mary was not altogether sorry for this, since it freed her from many embarrassing moments.

Abner was now earning a good wage, and the household was relatively prosperous. He was even able to replace the watch that had been stolen at Bran. In this peaceful interlude the only thing that really disquieted Mary’s mind was George’s letter. She had never yet dared to show it to Abner, but she had not destroyed it, and from time to time a cruel fascination compelled her to take it from the drawer where she had hidden it and to read it again. It seemed strange to her that she had received no other word from him. If he could write once he could surely write again, and though she did not dare to confide its contents to Mrs Mamble, she induced the old woman to question the wife of a policeman at Lesswardine whom she had attended in a confinement as to the conditions under which a prisoner in the county jail might receive visitors or write letters. A prisoner in George’s condition, Mrs Mamble told her, was entirely separated from the outside world for the first three months of his sentence. After that, if his conduct were good, he might write and receive one letter every month, and invite one visitor to see him during the same period. This knowledge amazed her; for George had now been in jail more than nine months but had only written her this one, disturbing letter and had never once asked her to visit him. The fact filled her with an inexplicable pang of jealousy; but what troubled her more deeply was to know that Mrs Mamble was conscious of her humiliation. p. 330

‘The less you think about him the better,’ said the old woman stoutly. ‘He was never no good to you, and never will be.’

But Mary could not put the matter out of her mind. Once again she commissioned Mrs Mamble to make inquiries in Chapel Green and find out if old Mrs Malpas had visited George in prison. The answer was definite. Mrs Malpas had never left the village since the day of the trial, although she had received several letters from George, as the postman, who lodged with one of Mrs Mamble’s friends, could vouch.

Then Mary hardened her heart; for she guessed that George was choosing for his only visitor the widow woman from Lesswardine, whom she had seen at the trial. Re-reading George’s letter she burned with anger. What right had he to dictate to her how she should behave? Her soul was full of hatred and contempt, so that she almost wished that she had given him real cause for suspicion. In this state she allowed her memory to dwell with tenderness on the surprising moment that had come to her and Abner by the sea-crows’ pool. She felt that she had been foolish to shrink from it. And yet she dared not let Abner see what she was thinking; knowing for certain, that if she did so something violent and terrible must happen to them. For herself she had no fear; but the thought of what the children might suffer chilled her. And she released her surfeit of feeling in a more passionate devotion to these small creatures, determining, whatever might happen, to hold on for the remaining eight months of George’s imprisonment. This artificial resolution made her harden herself more than ever against Abner.

One day Mrs Mamble brought her the news that Susan Hind was being married in less than a week to Badger, the keeper. She now saw so little of Abner that she could not be sure that his old relations with Susie had ceased, but she found herself snatching eagerly at an occasion for wounding him. p. 331

‘I hope you’re going to your old friend’s wedding, Abner,’ she said.

‘I don’t know nothing about one,’ he said. ‘I’ve no friends in these parts that I know to.’

‘Susie Hind . . . she’s marrying Mr Badger next Monday.’

She watched him carefully.

‘Well, he’s welcome!’ said Abner, with a laugh.

And then, instead of being relieved, she found herself overwhelmed by a new suspicion. He would not have spoken like that unless he had been entangled with some other woman. She wondered who it could be, and a few days later began to ply him with deliberate questions about Marion Prosser. He did not guess what she was driving at; imagined that she was still brooding over her old slight.

‘I know naught about her,’ he said.

‘Do you like her any better than you did?’

‘I don’t mind her,’ said Abner. ‘At any rate she don’t werrit me with questions about you.’

One day in October Marion renewed her proposal that Abner should sleep at The Dyke. She told him that she didn’t like to think of him walking to and from Wolfpits every day. If she had substituted ‘Mary Malpas’ for ‘Wolfpits’ she would have been nearer to the truth.

‘We can make you quite comfortable in the little loft above the harness-room,’ she said. ‘There’s no point in your wearing yourself out.’

He said nothing; but told Mary of her proposal. Listening, she held her breath.

‘I don’t want to keep you,’ she compelled herself to say. ‘You’d better go.’

‘No fear!’ said he. ‘You don’t catch me losing my liberty that way! A man that sleeps over his work’s no better than a slave.’

She felt a sudden relief. ‘Yes, you’re quite right,’ she said. ‘I’m sure you’re right.’ She spoke as if it were the matter of principle that interested her.

Next day he refused Marion’s offer, and she left him in a huff. She was miserable, for she could not overcome the attraction which he had exercised over her from the first, yet was too bashful to declare herself more openly. She tried to tell herself that Abner was only a labouring man and her inferior in station, but she could not pretend that physically he was not her equal, nor deny his influence. She hoped that he would notice the change in her attitude, see that she was avoiding him, and, perhaps, miss her; but he went on with his work as usual and did not seem to care whether she came near him or sent him messages by Ethel or Agnes, the maid, and so, gradually, with a feeling of shame, she was driven back to his company. p. 332

The days were now drawing in rapidly, and it was after sunset when the cows came to be milked. It had been Marion’s custom to carry the scoured pails to the byre and stand by Abner’s side while he milked. When he drove the cows into the shed he would light a stable lantern and hang it from a nail in the wall before he found his stool and took the pail from her hands. These were the moments when she felt herself nearest to him. Standing in the doorway of the shippon she would watch him as he sat with his fair head pressed to the cows’ flanks and listen to the milk swishing into the pails. It was a moment of most soothing silence. Neither of them spoke, nor was there any other sound but that of the cows snatching hay from the racks above them with their lips and filling the shed with their sweet breath. Marion stood very still in that slow-breathing quietude, and thither, like shadows, came the cats that lived in the lofts and roofs of the granary, shy, half-savage creatures. It was part of Abner’s ritual to set a tin basin of milk frothing-warm on the floor for them, and round this they would walk, five or six of them, with sidelong gait and tails uplifted. Every night at milking-time they came. But if she stirred a muscle they were gone. She watched them, quiet, hallucinated; and when they were gone she stayed on in the silence, while Abner strained the milk into her scalded buckets and passed from stall to stall.

One evening she found him troubled.

‘I don’t half like the look of Daisy here,’ he said. p. 333

Daisy was a red Devon cow, the only one of her breed in Prosser’s herd of white-nosed Herefords. Some weeks before she had calved; but the calf had been feeble and had died, and though they had given her a calf-skin stuffed with straw to lick she had pined, and the milk had failed in quality. Now she stood miserably in her stall with her ears turned back and her sleek coat staring.

‘Why, what’s wrong with her?’ Marion asked.

‘She was coughing a good bit when I drove her in—seemed to have no heart in her either—and you can see she’s breathing quicker than the others. You put your ear to her and hearken. It’s like a lot of bubbles going off inside of her.’

He put his arm over the animal’s neck and listened. Marion did as he told her. They listened together, but she could hear nothing but Abner’s own deep, placid breath. He seemed very near

to her. She could see his serious eyes shining with pin-points of lantern-light. Her heart began to beat so violently that she feared he must hear it. She felt a choking sensation in her breast, as though her heart was bursting and she must cry out or weep. It was intolerable.

'Do you catch it?' he asked.

'Yes, I hear,' she said.

'I reckon she's worse than she seemed,' said Abner. 'I think she's got the bronchitis. You'd best let the gaffer know.'

'He's gone down to Craven Arms for the sales to-morrow,' she replied. 'He's booked a bed at the Railway Hotel.'

'Like our luck!' Abner grumbled. 'Well, we'd better give her a drench of gruel and poultice her when we've finished the milk.'

When he came back from the station she was ready with a draught of oatmeal gruel. Then she set herself to making a poultice of linseed meal and brought it out to him.

'I reckon I can't leave her to-night,' he told her.

'Hadn't we better send for Harris?' she asked.

He flared up at once. 'Harris? . . . I don't want that Harris poking his nose in my shippon!' p. 334

'Very well,' she said mildly. She watched him adjust the poultice over Daisy's throat. The animal was now coughing painfully, and the chill of the night air seemed to strangle her breathing. Marion found it difficult to leave him.

'There's no call for you to go catching your death of cold,' Abner said.

Again she submitted. 'But I think we'd better take turns with her,' she said. 'I'll go and tell Agnes.'

She left him, and though she could not persuade him to let her take his place she returned from time to time to the byre. He scarcely spoke to her, for the animal's condition made him more and more anxious. At one o'clock in the morning she came out in her dressing-gown with her dark hair braided down her back for the night. The cow was now a terrible sight. She had sunk down upon the floor of the shed and was breathing in desperate, quick gasps, with her brown eyes piteously upturned.

'I don't like the look of her,' said Abner, 'not half.'

'We shall have to send for Harris. He understands them,' she said.

'All right,' he returned, grudgingly.

'I'll send Agnes down to the village. And then I'll bring you some tea.'

'Don't you worry about that!'

'Agnes is making it now.'

She sent the maid running off at once. The kitchen fire was nearly out and the kettle would not boil. It seemed to her an age before she could get it boiling. Then she filled a jug with tea and prepared to take it to him. At the door a shadow startled her and she gave a cry. Abner was standing on the step.

'It's a bad job,' he said. 'She's gone. She went off quite sudden.'

She did not realise what he was saying. She gave a nervous laugh.

'Oh, what a start you gave me!' she said, putting down the jug on the table. And then, suddenly, she put her hands to her face and started sobbing hysterically.

'Don't take on like that!' he said. 'It's no fault of yourn.' p. 335

'Oh, it's not that!' she cried. 'It's not that!'

He put his hand on her shoulder, trying to soothe her, and the next moment she was clinging in his arms and he was covering her face and neck with kisses. Harris, who had run up from his cottage as fast as he could travel, stood panting and gazing at them in the doorway, but neither Abner nor Marion saw him, and when he had stared at them for a moment he moved quietly across the yard into the byre.

The Twenty-Second Chapter p. 336

When Mr Prosser returned from Craven Arms next evening he was in a bad temper. At the Railway Hotel on the night before he had fallen in with a number of cattle dealers from North Bromwich and Manchester. He had drunk more than he could stand, and had sat up playing

cards in the commercial room till three o'clock in the morning, losing the price of a bullock in the process. Marion, who met him at Llandwlas station, told him that the Devon cow had died in the night.

'Died?' said he, 'what do you mean "died"? She was all right yesterday.'

'Fellows says it was bronchitis. It was awful to see her breathing.'

'Bronchitis! They don't die that quick with bronchitis. What the hell does Fellows know about it?'

'He couldn't have done more than he did,' she replied. 'He sat up with her till she went.'

'I've never known such an unlucky year,' he grumbled. 'Hayes's wife says that he won't be out of hospital for another month or more. Fellows means well enough, but he's not like an experienced cowman.' He sat broodily in the trap for a few moments. 'Why didn't you send for Harris?' he asked at length.

'We did, but Daisy died before he could get up.'

'I shall advertise for a cowman,' he said, with a show of determination that gave him a better opinion of himself.

'Fellows did his best. It wasn't his fault.'

'What do you know about it, anyway?' said Mr Prosser roughly.

Reaching The Dyke in the worst of tempers, he had not even time to give Ethel the kiss for which she stood waiting. He went straight into the dining-room and mixed himself a stiff whisky and water, then, feeling masterful and businesslike, he went straight out into the fields to look for Harris. He found him driving in his team from the plough.

'Did you see Daisy last night?' he asked. p. 337

'Yes, I see'd her, but not afore she was wellnigh cold.'

'How did she come to go off sudden like that, eh?'

'If you want to know what I thinks, Mr Prosser, I'll tell you. That cow she died of violent neglect. I've had my eye on her some days now.'

'Then why the devil didn't you say so?'

'Me and Fellows don't speak to one another, and you was gone off to the sales.'

'Why didn't you tell Miss Marion, then?'

'It's no good talking to Miss Marion about he. Her wouldn't hear a word against Fellows, though he be no more fit to look after cows than rabbits, and I know for why.' Harris shook his head knowingly.

'What do you mean by that? Why don't you speak plain?'

'And I will speak plain, Mr Prosser, though I don't know where your eyes have been if you haven't seed it for yourself. Miss Marion's soft on that Fellows, and he knows it and takes advantage on it.'

Prosser gave an uneasy laugh. 'You don't get me to believe that,' he said.

'You can believe it or not, gaffer,' said Harris. 'It's all the same to me. I'm only telling you of what I knows, and what I've seen with my own eyes. When Daisy was dying that Fellows was in your own kitchen and the two of them kissing one another, so took up they never saw me coming. And that's the truth, as I'm standing here!'

Prosser could only stare at him.

'You ought to have known the name that chap has with women. There's Mr Hind's daughter over at the Pound House; there's George Malpas's wife, not counting those that was never found out. He's a proper young bull, that Fellows, and no mistake!'

The farmer left him in a fury. He found Marion laying the supper-table in the dining-room. Ethel was crouched by the fire reading a book of fairy-tales.

'You go out into the kitchen, Ethel,' he said. 'I want to talk to Marion.'

'I'm so comfy here, dad,' said the child sleepily. p. 338

'Do as you're bid!' he shouted, and Ethel, frightened, left the room.

'You've scared her,' said Marion. 'She's not used to being spoken to like that.'

'No,' said he, 'and it 'ld be better for the both of you if you were. Just you put those things down and tell me the truth about Fellows.'

'What do you mean, father?' she asked. 'I've told you he did all he could. He sat up with her.'

‘And that’s a damned lie to start with! Sat up with her, did he? Sat up spooning in the kitchen along with you. That’s more like it!’

She blushed, then straightened herself and faced him with her hands clasped before her. He was almost frightened of her burning eyes.

‘Who told you that?’ she said quietly.

‘Never you mind who told me. They that told me saw it with their own eyes. Saw you behaving like a labourer’s girl in a hedge. That’s a fine thing to come to! You deny it if you can!’

‘I’m not going to deny it,’ she said.

‘Then you’ve no shame left in you. Thank God your poor mother hasn’t lived to see it! I never thought to hear a daughter of mine speak like that!’

He waited for her to defend herself; but she stood as though petrified, cold, with a furnace of emotions flaming inside her. He took her by the arm, roughly, and shook her.

‘Don’t dad!’ she whispered.

‘Here, tell me how far it’s gone.’

She wouldn’t answer him.

‘You’d better make a clean breast of it. How long has it been going on? There’s nothing wrong with you, eh? Better tell me straight!’

The implication affronted her modesty, for though she had fearfully imagined physical passion and its admonitions had found their way into her dreams, the least suggestion of crudity shocked her. Her father’s words made her want to cover her face for shame. Her resolution wavered. In a piercing moment of revelation she saw the scene in which she was taking a part: the hard, tasteless room, with its steel engravings of sporting pictures and its horsehair-covered furniture, the coarse cutlery that she had been putting on the table, the metallic ticking bronze clock on the mantelpiece, the worn hearthrug, and, in front of her, the angry, flushed face of her father, the face of a man inflamed by passion and the prejudices of his class. And she saw herself, a farmer’s daughter in a print overall, discovered, shamed, in a gross affair with a labouring man. How many times in the history of the countryside had the same scene been enacted? How many women of her kind had been pestered with the same urgent questions? And still he pressed her. p. 339

‘What’s done can’t be mended. Better tell me straight, my girl!’

All her suppressed idealism rose in revolt against him, against her surroundings, against her whole manner of life. She hated her father and utterly despised him.

‘I won’t have you talking to me like that,’ she said. ‘I’m not a child, and you shan’t treat me like one. I’m a woman. I’m nearly thirty. Do you think a woman can go on living this miserable, separated life and settle down into an old maid like Aunt Isabel without feeling anything? No . . . people like you don’t think that a woman should have any feelings. You think as long as you’re well fed and get your glass of whisky at night and all your books kept up to date, you think that’s enough life for a woman, you think that it’s a privilege for her to spend her days looking after you. Do you think a woman never wants a man?’

Prosser gasped. ‘I think you’ve taken leave of your senses, Marion,’ he said.

‘I’ve a life to live as well as you!’ she cried. ‘You call yourself a farmer, but you’ve no more idea of nature . . .’ She could say no more, but threw her hands wide in a gesture of despair.

It slowly dawned on him that she was defending herself. He saw himself shamed among his fellows. There had never been a scandal at The Dyke in his time. He said: ‘Good God! Good God!’ then helped himself to another glass of whisky and took a stiff gulp. ‘Well, I never thought it of you,’ was all he could say. He poured out another tot. p. 340

A sudden gust of anger swept over Marion. Scarcely knowing what she did, she picked up the cut-glass whisky decanter and sent it crashing into the fire. The flames roared up the chimney; blue tongues of lighted spirit ran out over the hearthrug.

‘Marion! My God, you’re mad!’ he cried. ‘You’ll set the house afire! What do you think you’re doing?’

He snatched a rug from the sofa and went down on his knees stifling the flame. She burst out into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. He stared at her, frightened. ‘What are you laughing at?’ he cried.

‘I don’t know,’ she said weakly. ‘I felt I must break something. What an awful mess!’ The outburst had sobered her, and more than that the sight of her father’s scared and innocent face.

‘It’s all right now,’ she said. ‘I’ll fetch a cloth from the kitchen.’

He looked so bewildered that she couldn’t help laughing at him.

‘I’m damned if I can make you out,’ he said.

‘Of course you can’t. You’ve not the least idea. . .’

‘Then it’s all right?’ he said solemnly.

The dawning relief in his face was too much for her. She knelt down on the carpet beside him and kissed his head.

‘Oh, dad, you’re too killing!’ she said. ‘Do you think I can’t look after myself?’

‘Well, thank Heaven for that!’ was all he could say.

They talked the matter out more soberly that evening over the embers of the fire when Ethel had been sent off to bed. They were as happy in each other’s company and as tender as lovers who have quarrelled and made it up again. The moment of vision had faded for ever. The room in which they sat had regained its old familiarity in Marion’s eyes, forcing itself to be accepted as her home; Mr Prosser was no longer a coarse, fair-whiskered man with more than a drop of whisky in him, but the father whom she had always known; the sombre life of The Dyke, with its slow, rich comfort, was the life to which she had been born. And she considered what would be p. 341
the effect on that life of her marrying Abner Fellows, for if her father’s suspicions had been justified there was no doubt but that he would have compelled the lover to make an honest woman of her. No happiness worth the daring lay in that direction. She knew that she could hope for nothing but a continual clashing of the two men’s wills and herself a buffer between them. Her father had a long memory for his hates. There could never be any peace in the house till he died. Rather than submit to such a humiliation she would cut herself free from The Dyke and share Abner’s life. Love in a cottage with a vengeance! But did he love her? She had no real reason to believe it. And did she love him? She could not say. Better, far better, cling to the certainties, whatever they might be.

‘We’ll say no more about it,’ said Mr Prosser. ‘Let bygones be bygones, eh?’

She nodded her head slowly at the fire. A piece of the shattered decanter that had escaped her brush suddenly caught a gleam of light. It meant no more to her now than a flake of the stone-men’s flint of the kind that she and Ethel found on their picnics at Castel Ditches.

‘Of course Fellows must go,’ said Mr Prosser. ‘I reckon I can find another man by the end of the week.’

‘Yes,’ Marion murmured. ‘At the end of the week.’

‘Luckily there’s no scarcity of labour,’ said Mr Prosser happily.

Marion’s thoughts turned idly to Wolfpits. She shut the idea of Wolfpits out of her mind. It was wrong, she thought, that Mary Malpas should ever have come again into her life. It was always wrong to uncover the past. They sat for a long time in silence. She crouched on the floor at her father’s side and his arm was thrown carelessly over her shoulder. His head nodded and he fell asleep, but Marion still stared into the embers, seeing nothing. It was nearly midnight when Mr Prosser woke with a start and rubbed his eyes.

‘I think I must have dropped off,’ he said. ‘Why, look at the clock!’ He kissed her good-night.

‘By the way,’ he said, ‘I saw young Fred Maddy over at Craven Arms. He talked about riding over p. 342
for tea Sunday. He’s doing pretty well, is Fred Maddy, since his father died.’

He stood blinking at her curiously; but she made him no reply.

‘Will you put out the light in the kitchen, dad, and see to the doors?’ she said.

Next morning, when he had listened to Abner’s own version of Daisy’s death and stood for a few moments in contemplation of the carcass, Mr Prosser told him without offering any explanation that he would not be wanted at The Dyke after the end of the week. Abner took it for granted that the loss of the cow explained his dismissal. It was a piece of bad luck, and no more was to be said for it. The blow was a heavy one, for he had felt that his position on the farm was secure and that the fortunes of Wolfpits were safe for the winter. He would have to begin his search for work all over again, and this at a time when the demand for labour was at its lowest. What made him particularly savage was the look of triumph that he now saw on Harris’s face. No doubt the ploughman had managed to put a word in against him with Mr Prosser. Well, a man who had taken such a hammering as Harris got on the night of the harvest home had a right to get his own back, particularly when fortune had given his enemy a trip.

What puzzled Abner more was the strangeness of Marion’s attitude. He did not attach any great importance to her breakdown in the farm kitchen and the tender moment that followed: that was the kind of thing that might happen with any woman: but he did find it rather shabby of her to abandon him as soon as he was down on his luck, for he had always felt that she was his friend and supporter, and knew, indeed, that he had owed his job to her from the beginning. Still, he believed that it was in keeping with human—and even more with feminine nature—to kick a man when he was down. The school in which he had been brought up had left him with few romantic illusions: so, instead of brooding over her defection, he went on steadily with his work until the day of his departure.

On the last evening they met, for one moment only. She came into the byre at milking-time and p. 343
took up her old station in the doorway, watching him as he worked. He looked round and found her standing there: it was too dark for him to see her face. She handed him the pails in silence, and when he had finished and stood wiping his hands on his trousers, she said, almost timidly:

‘This is the last time.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘and I’m sorry to go.’

‘I’m sorry too,’ she said, though she could not be sure that she was speaking the truth. ‘You’ve been a great help to us.’

He gave an uneasy laugh. ‘If that old Daisy hadn’t gone and catched cold,’ he said.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked abruptly.

‘That’s a hard one to answer,’ he said.

‘I wish I could help you.’ She found it difficult to speak without wounding his delicacy. ‘If you’re in want of money at any time . . .’ She felt it was her duty to give him anything she possessed. It was necessary for her own self-esteem that she should not feel under any obligation to him.

‘Money’s no use to me,’ he said, falling back on one of Mick Connor’s characteristic phrases.

‘But if ever you’re in need?’ she persisted. ‘I know that Mrs Malpas and her children are dependent on you.’

It was the second time that she had ever mentioned Mary’s name. She compelled herself to do so now because in this way she could make it quite clear that the incident of the other night was forgotten and that he could not build on it. She wanted to clear herself at any price. Even as she spoke the consciousness of her own motives filled her with shame. She held out her hand.

‘You won’t forget that, will you?’ she said.

‘No, Miss Marion, you’ve been a good friend to me.’ And he took her hand in his.

His unexpected use of the respectful prefix emboldened her and made her feel surer of herself. In a moment the indefiniteness of the situation had gone. They were back on their old footing of servant and mistress. Her heart gave a leap of thankfulness. She felt that she was saved. The p. 344
man whose rough hand her fingers now touched for a moment was no longer the symbol of an ideal but simply a farm-labourer whom her father had dismissed. She withdrew her own hand hurriedly.

‘I’ll say good-bye, then,’ she said.

‘Good-bye, miss, and thank ’ee,’ said Abner, and touched his cap.

The idea of leaving The Dyke had shocked him; but when he passed down the drive for the last time, with Prosser’s money in his pocket, Abner experienced a sudden feeling of relief. It was probable that hard times were ahead of him, and yet he had never felt so free since the day when he left his father’s house at Halesby. When he got home he told Mary with an affectation of lightness that he had got the sack. Her first impulse was one of fear for their finances, but almost as quickly she found herself thankful that Abner was no longer in touch with Marion Prosser. The world in which she and Marion had been friends was so far behind and spoke to her so poignantly of a lost content that she was glad to be wholly freed from it. She could not disguise the fact that she was jealous of Marion, not only for this but for other reasons. She put on a bold and heartening front.

‘I’ve a nice bit of money in hand,’ she said. ‘That shows how wise we were to go easy.’

Her show of cheerfulness and courage pleased him. ‘I thought it ‘d put you out a bit,’ he said.

‘We ought to be used to uncertainty by this time,’ she replied. ‘I’m glad you won’t have that long walk there and back. It was enough to take the strength out of any man.’

‘It’s a rum thing,’ he said, ‘but I don’t mind it any more than you do, leaving The Dyke.’

‘You must get a job nearer home now,’ she said. ‘You’re quite a stranger.’

‘Ay, I’ll have a look round to-morrow,’ he said.

When the day came he had not the heart to set out in quest of work. Instead of doing so he lounged all morning, and after dinner took the children out for a long walk over the stark, wintry fields. They were wildly excited to go with him, for it was now many months since they had p. 345
known such a holiday. Mary watched them, smiling as they left Wolfpits. She saw that they were happy, and marvelled at her own happiness. Abner and the children made their way through the silent larchwoods to the top of Castel Ditches and sat there gazing idly down upon the river valleys. About the time when cohorts of starlings wheeled through the sky above the reed-beds of the Barbel where they made their nightly roosting place, the three of them dropped down the slope towards the waterworks. There Abner found a diminished gang still working on the last details of the track. The sidings, the cranes, and the engines were gone, and in place of the trenches on which Abner had worked a year before, he now saw trim walls, culverts, and bridges of stone. A single wooden hut remained standing, and there he found the Gunner rubbing his hands over a bucket of coke. He stared at Abner as though he were a stranger.

‘Well, our Abner,’ he cried, when he recognised him, ‘how goes it? I thought you’d left these parts long ago. What have you been up to?’

‘Farm-labouring, up at The Dyke,’ Abner told him.

‘That’s a poor game,’ said the Gunner, shaking his head.

‘Don’t I know it!’ said Abner. ‘I’ve just finished with it. . . Can’t you give us a job here?’

‘No, my son . . . nor any one else,’ said the Gunner. ‘We’re just clearing up like. I’ve got ten men of the old gang left, but in another week we shall have finished the lot. Don’t you imagine I’m sorry for it either. I’ve had enough of Mainstone to last me for a bit.’

‘Well, I’ve got to get a job somehow,’ said Abner.

‘Then you won’t get it here. This place is dead, my son, and that’s the truth! You’d best get back to dear old Brum. Or Coventry, that’s the place for you. Everybody’s going mad on these here motor-cars the same as they did on bicycles. Coventry’s your ticket!’

He gave the children a red-cheeked apple apiece. Abner bade him good-night and turned homewards.

‘Did you hear about our wedding at the Pound House?’ the foreman shouted after him. ‘Whisky? You could have swum in it! Pity old Mick wasn’t about.’ p. 346

It was dusk when Abner reached Wolfpits.

He began his quest for a new job hopefully, undeterred by the foreman’s warning or the still gloomier prophecies of old man Drew. He knew that work was scarce at that season; but it could not well be scarcer than it had been when he found continued employment at The Dyke. Abner felt that luck would come to him in much the same unexpected way.

His first attempts seemed full of promise. At the time when he had set out canvassing before, he had always been received with a kind of negative pessimism that he learned to consider as the normal attitude toward life of the border farmer. Now, he noticed that the farm-people, and particularly the women, listened to his applications with more interest, remembered his name, asked him questions about himself, and even appeared to regard his person with curiosity. He took this as a good sign; but though he was encouraged his hopes came no nearer to realisation. One after another the local farmers or their wives heard his story, had a good look at him, and turned him down.

The reason for their interest was not far to seek. In spite of Mr Prosser’s anxiety to keep dark the true cause of Abner’s dismissal and the scandal that it implied, Harris, the ploughman, had not been able to resist the temptation of making public his enemy’s discomfiture, and though nobody dared to whisper to the principal actors in the comedy that they knew what had happened, the whole story of Marion Prosser’s infatuation for her father’s cowman went the rounds of the neighbourhood. At Ludlow market it passed for a good tale against Prosser, who was envied for his possessions, and Marion, whose aloofness had made her unpopular.

In the most frequent version of the story Abner had been caught out with Marion in the byre at a time when that astute young woman had arranged for her father to stay the night at Craven Arms for his health’s sake. Marion, it was said, had refused, for the most pressing of reasons, to give her cowman up; but Prosser’s family pride—a well-known quantity—had been so deeply wounded that he had threatened to shoot the fellow on the spot and let his daughter’s name go hang. The men enjoyed the joke against Prosser; the women were agreed that proud creatures such as Marion usually found their own level by some such violent means. The principal question of interest that remained was where Marion would go to hide her shameful condition. p. 347

In every stratum of local society from that of Lesswardine Court to that of the newly-married Mrs Badger at the Pentre, the incident was discussed; but nobody in the district heard it with more triumph and satisfaction than old Mrs Malpas of the Buffalo. By this time the whole village was so used to her vilifications of Mary that they were scarcely taken seriously, for village opinion, even when it is censorious in expression, is, as a rule, charitable in deed. Now that she found herself armed with a new enormity to reinforce the old, she set herself steadily to the task of making it impossible for Abner to find work. She determined to drive him out of the district, for in this way she knew that Mary and her children must undergo the suffering that they deserved and that Abner’s devotion had spared them.

With incredible patience she made it her business to interview every farmer within five miles of Lesswardine and to beg him, or failing him his wife, to refuse employment to such a scandalous character. The Wesleyan minister at Chapel Green, who regarded Mrs Malpas as one of the principal pillars of his church, helped her in this, and only the laziness of the vicar of Mainstone prevented his wife from making him a party to the same plan. Abner, in his ignorance, was faced by a deliberate boycott. The men who spoke him fairly, when he asked them for work were prepared to see him and the family that he supported starve before they gave it to him.

For a whole month this heart-breaking business went on. When first Abner began to look for work Mary had greeted him every evening with enquiring eyes, Now she no longer dared ask him what had happened during the day. The monotony of unfulfilled promises told on him. He began to avoid her society and to shrink from that of the children, trying to exhaust his strength with long walks afield and cutting wood for Mrs Mamble and old Drew as well as for their own household. She pitied him with all her heart, but dared not show him pity lest it should tax his courage too heavily. Money was running short. She starved herself in order that he and the p. 348

children might not lack, and thus found herself dragged into a vicious circle, for her sacrifice lessened her own resistance and made her temper uneven and liable to be irritated by Abner's moroseness. They did not speak of their troubles, but neither of them could see what the end would be.

Wolfpits, in its utter isolation, was the last place in the district that rumour ever reached. It was five weeks after Abner had left The Dyke when Mrs Mamble heard the cause of Abner's dismissal and whispered it to Mary. In a normal state she might have borne it, but her exhaustion made her an easy prey to jealousy. One evening Abner found her unusually pale and speechless, and asked her what was the matter with her.

'I've only just heard the truth,' she said, scarcely controlling her passion.

'What about?' he asked innocently.

'About why you left The Dyke. Why didn't you tell me?'

'I did tell you. You know as well as I do.'

'You never said a word about Marion. Not one word!'

'Who's been putting that rubbidge into your head?' said Abner angrily.

'Rubbish!' she repeated. 'You can call it that now! But if you'd left the girl alone we shouldn't be where we are now, not knowing where to look for a shilling and the children likely to want for bread.'

'You've got a maggot in your head, missus,' he said. 'Why I left The Dyke's got nothing to do with Miss Marion, so don't you think it.'

'Oh, I'm tired of you!' she cried. 'It's no use your telling off your lies to me. I'm dead sick of you and your women . . . you and your Susie Hinds and Marion Prossers! Running after loose women with your eyes shut and never a thought for those that keep themselves decent like me. And if there was another caught your eye to-morrow, you'd be up and away after her the same. You're no better than an animal! Like the rest of men: they're all the same!' p. 349

She stood up to him, trembling with rage. At that moment she was ugly, and rising to the violence of her challenge, he hated her. He lost sight of her weakness. All he saw was her impudent provocation. An answering anger fumed up into his head and carried him away so that he could easily have struck her. He came towards her with his hand lifted.

'Don't! Don't!' she shrieked in terror.

He dropped his hand and walked straight out of the room. Left alone, she was overborne with shame for what she had done, and cried for her lost dignity. Never in her life had she so abased herself. 'But he lied to me! He lied to me!' she told herself. 'If he hadn't lied to me it wouldn't have happened!' Little by little the turmoil of her thoughts abated and she began to remember his goodness, his patience, all that she owed to him. 'If he had struck me,' she thought, 'I should have deserved it.' She almost wished that his hand had fallen, for nothing less than a blow could have justified her violence and her base ingratitude. The only thing with which she could comfort herself was a firm determination that she would never offend him again. By nothing but the most complete sacrifice of her feelings could she repay him a thousandth part of what she owed him.

After that day she never uttered one complaint, though the tale of her sufferings increased beyond the bounds of endurance. To their hardships she turned a front of steel, but to Abner himself she was as tender as she dared to be. The consciousness of this discipline sustained her. She was a new woman, worn and anxious but invincibly cheerful; and Abner himself took heart from her courage.

Winter fell upon them. The snow-bound ramparts of the hills came nearer to them, encircling the valley with a clear-cut beauty. The colours of life faded from the land, and every farm was like a fortress of stone, close-barred against the assaults of rain and icy wind. The fields lay cold and dead; the sap sank downward from every frozen branch. There was no colour in all the land but a brilliant mockery of red berries on brier and holly and thorn. 'There's a tarrable lot of berry this year,' said old Drew. 'I reckon we'm in for a hard winter again.' p. 350

And so the remotest possibility of finding work on the farms drifted away from Abner. The few labourers who moved about the fields, the solitary teams at plough, seemed glued to the frozen surface of the land, stirring sadly as in a dream. In spite of the kindness of their neighbours, so delicately shown in the gifts of roots and bundles of wood that old Drew carried home on his bent shoulders, the family at Wolfpits felt the pinch of cold and want. Mary, true to her resolution, uttered no word of complaint, but her face told Abner what she was suffering so plainly that he could not bear to look at her. One night he left her and spent the evening with old Drew in his bedroom, drinking the labourer's home-made poison till his brain was fuddled and his limbs, for the first time, were warm. Mary heard him stumbling up the stairs at night, but when they met next morning she did not reproach him.

Her little store of money was nearly gone. One day, racking her brains for some new expedient to stave off the inevitable end, she remembered Mrs Malpas's visit and the story of the fifty pounds which George had stolen from the Buffalo on the eve of his imprisonment. She wondered, desperately, if the old woman was right, and he had hidden it in some corner of the house. She

began to search, with the fierce enthusiasm of a seeker after treasure. She spent all her energy in turning the bedroom and kitchen inside out; she looked into the chimneys, for she had heard that money was sometimes hidden in such places. By the end of the day she was utterly exhausted but had found nothing. 'At any rate,' she thought, 'the place looks tidier.' A poor consolation!

That night it occurred to her that if only she could get as far as Shrewsbury she might pawn some of her wedding presents, particularly a set of plated tea-things which her father, lavish in the p. 351
expenditure of other people's money, had given her. They made a clumsy parcel, difficult to conceal, and in order to spend as little as possible on the railway fare she decided to walk over the hills towards Clun and catch a train on the branch railway. She left the children in Mrs Mamble's care, and slipped away without letting Abner know that she had gone. In Shrewsbury a sad discouragement awaited her. The man in the pawnshop sniffed at her property. 'This kind of thing's gone out of fashion,' he said. 'If you'd brought it here five year ago I might have done better for you. Twenty-five shillings's all it's worth.' The sacrifice hurt her, but she accepted his figure. The fare home to Llandwlas left her with a guinea in hand, and on that money they existed for more than two weeks. She only prayed that Abner would not notice the blank in the cupboard from which she had taken the silver, but she need not have been frightened, for Abner had no eye for things of that kind. One imprudence, however, nearly betrayed her. On the way to the station at Shrewsbury she had seen a box of oranges newly imported for Christmas and had not been able to resist the temptation of buying two for the children. Next day Abner saw them on the table.

'Oranges?' he said, his eyes shocked by her extravagance.

She lied quickly.

'Yes, Mrs Hendrie met me on the road and gave me them for Morgan and Gladys.'

Afterward, in the curiously sensitive state of her conscience, this lie troubled her. He himself was so open with her that she felt it almost a duty to tell him the truth. She brooded over the question for several days, but in the end it sank into insignificance before the fact that they had no money left. Looking at her empty purse she felt that she could face the situation no longer. She dared not ask for credit in any shop in Mainstone, for she suspected that all the shop-people must be aware of her plight. Greatly daring, she made an expedition to Lesswardine and entered a grocer's with whom she had not dealt since the days before her marriage. The man had been a p. 352
friend of her father's. Perhaps that would count for something.

It was Saturday night, and the shop was buzzing with people. The grocer, flurried with work, scarcely nodded to her, and she was nearly leaving the shop in fright when a new assistant whom she did not know asked her what he could serve her with. Fortunately, she had dressed herself with care and looked respectable. She ordered blindly, lavishly, and the smart young man dumped her purchases on the counter with a flourish and dashed off the bill with a pencil that he carried behind his ear in a hieroglyphic of his own.

'Cash or account, madam?' he asked rapidly.

'Account,' she murmured.

'Certainly. What was the name?'

'Mrs Malpas, Wolfpits.'

'Of course,' said the young man, excusing himself. 'Pardon. Shall we send them?'

'To-morrow's Sunday, isn't it?' she said. 'I think I'd better take them with me.'

'Thank you, madam. Very kind of you,' said the assistant, making a large blue-paper parcel, which he handed her over the counter with an obsequious bow.

She picked up her parcel and fled, thankful that the grocer was too busy to notice her. She felt that the eyes of all the women were on her and that they knew her for a thief. Also she knew that she could never attempt this adventure again.

So the end came, or what they thought must be the end. They sat together one night in the kitchen at Wolfpits, and both of them knew that they were beaten. A fire burned brightly in the hearth—in this thickly wooded valley they need never lack warmth—the room seemed cosy and almost gay in the firelight, showing no signs that they had fallen from prosperity, for though Mary had paid three more visits to the pawnbroker's and now felt hardened to the adventure, she had always managed to conceal the deficiencies in the furniture by some new arrangement. On her last journey to Shrewsbury, hurrying to the station under the walls of the jail, the idea had struck her that she might be forced in the end to pawn her wedding ring, and she had laughed p. 353
bitterly to herself. Much good had it done her! The idea had only struck her as a whimsical prospect. She had too much common sense to allow herself to be driven to this conventional expedient. She knew that they could not go on indefinitely stripping the house of its furniture. It would be far better to face the facts. If Abner could not find work, and there seemed no probability of his doing so, the best that they could do was to part. He must leave her, and she, pocketing her pride, must apply to the relieving officer, whom she had once shown to the door, for money from the parish. She knew that it must come to this, and yet she could not bring herself to tell Abner. She had settled in her mind that the proposal must come from him, and for

the present he seemed numbed, worn, incapable of thinking. He sat opposite her in silence with an empty pipe between his teeth staring at the fire. After a little while she found herself silently weeping, and turned her face away from him, blowing her nose to hide her tears.

Some one knocked at the door, and she cried: 'Come in!'

It was old Drew. They were not surprised. By this time they were used to the labourer's visits. Often, in the evening, he would drop in with the excuse of having a talk with Abner, though most of the talking fell to Mary, and then, just as he was on the point of leaving, he would produce from one of the vast pockets in his coat some article of food that he had picked up at the farm. They knew so well this delicate subterfuge! At first Mary had been amused by it, and more than a little touched. Now she only waited impatiently to see what the old man had brought.

That night it seemed as if he would never go; but just when they had reached the point when it seemed that the eggs or turnips must appear, he turned to Abner and told him that he had some good news for him.

'Good news?' said Abner. 'It's a long time since I've heard anything of that.'

'I was talking about 'ee to Mr Willums,' said Drew, 'and told en that you was in a purty bad way. p. 354
"Well, Drew," says he, "if it's as bad as that, I don't say we mightn't do something. There do be a heap of stones scattered over the top fields as us might well be rid on. It do be a boy's work, 'tis true, but Fellows might be glad of it."'

Mary flushed with pleasure and clasped her hands. 'I'd be glad of anything,' said Abner.

'Well,' the old man went on, 'I do reckon that there be no more'n a fortnight's work there, and a poor, niggling job that's like to break your back at that. But I thought you'd be glad of it, and I told en so. So up you comes along with me at six o'clock to-morrow morning, for I told en you'd come for sure. Threepence an hour he'll pay 'ee. That makes twelve shillin' a week. 'Tis not much, but 'tis something.'

They thanked him without reserve, but he shook his head at them. 'I don't know as it's me you have to thank,' he said. ''Tis your old mother down to the Buffalo as you'd ought to be grateful to. Mr Willums have took it into his head as giving Abner work would make her mazed. He've never forgive her over that cider, and never will. He's a long memory, Mr Willums.'

When he left them Mary was so full of an emotional thankfulness that she could not speak. Abner went to bed cheerfully. She heard him whistling in his room above her.

Next morning his work at the Pentre began. As Mr Williams had said, it was a boy's work by rights and unfitted to a man of Abner's strength. At first sight it seemed like one of those labours which malignant kings impose upon their daughters' suitors in fairy tales. The Pentre was a large farm of miserable land. Its uppermost cultivated fields reached nearly to the crown of the smooth hills at the valley head, ending abruptly at the foot of stony screes. From these unstable precipices the winter torrents rolled down many stones, flat rocky fragments that impeded the plough. Nor were these all, for the soil was so thin, that every ploughing turned up thousands more, and in winter the fields were overspread with a pale bloom of stones.

At this season of the year the uplands were always cold, enwrapped in icy vapours or glistening p. 355
with frost that glued each fragment to the ground. Abner's task was to clear these stubborn acres of their surface stones: an endless labour, for no sooner had he picked the surface over than new stones appeared. No convict labour could have been more monotonous, more thankless, nor, as it seemed, more futile. From dawn to sunset he worked in loneliness. No single human figure approached him all day long except that of Mr Williams, whom he would see coming like a speck in the lower distance urging his pony upwards. When he reached Abner the farmer would stay scowling at him for a few minutes. He was a surly man, and rarely spoke except on Monday evenings after Ludlow market. Then, having satisfied himself that Abner was not shirking, he would turn away and walk his pony down the hill again.

There was never any fear that Abner would not work. It was only by violent exertion that he could keep any heat in his body, for his food was poor, and the winter, as old Drew had prophesied, severe. He toiled there in rain, in sleet, in snow, and in blinding mist. The pay was so poor that he knew he could not afford to miss a day, picking up stones with numbed and ragged fingers when no other labourers were afield. Every evening he walked home dead tired, scarcely knowing if his legs were his own, for the continual stooping took all sensation away from them.

Once, in the dusk, he lost his way, for he had tried to shorten his journey by a cross-cut. He found himself suddenly on the brink of the sea-crows' pool, but not a bird was to be seen, for in winter they returned to their homes on the Cardigan coast. His memory of what had happened there was as hazy as that of a dream. It seemed to him that he had lived half a lifetime since that night. He stumbled down through the fog and passed the door of Badger's cottage. A light burned in the window, and he thought he saw Susie moving in the parlour. He laughed to himself and damned her . . . damned all women. Another evening on his way home a dog-cart overtook him coming over the hills from Clun. It had passed him before he saw that its occupants p. 356
were Marion Prosser and a young farmer named Maddy, whom Abner only knew by sight. They bowled by him at a good pace. He wondered if she had recognised him, for he had been in their sight for some time. If she had, she made no sign of having seen him. And again he hardened his

heart against all women.

And yet, though he did not know it, the sight of Abner trudging homeward down the lane had awakened a palpitating interest in Marion's heart, and inspired her with a sudden distaste for the man who was sitting in the trap beside her. She looked down on him from the height of the driver's seat, seeing his mean shoulders, the thin nape of his neck, and his small foxy face in profile. She felt that she would like to lash at him with the whip that she held in her hand; but since she knew that ladylike young women did not do such things, she flicked him with the lash of her tongue instead.

'That was Fellows, our cowman, Fred,' she said, knowing that the name would wound him.

He gave an ugly laugh. 'I know him. He had the face to come and ask me for work. I soon gave him the right-about!'

'You!' she cried scornfully. 'You're not fit to talk to him! He's twice the man that you are.'

He flushed. 'Look here, Marion, who the hell do you think you're talking to?' he said, clutching her arm with a show of strength.

'Don't!' she cried. She wrenched herself free and slapped his face. The horse broke into a canter.

'That's not the way to get yourself married,' he said.

She would not reply to his insult and they drove to The Dyke in an uncomfortable silence.

Next day she set out deliberately to meet Abner on the road. She called 'Good-evening' to him, but he, still smarting under the discomfort of Mary's outburst, would not answer her. She followed him and took him by the arm.

'Abner,' she said. 'Will you ever forgive me? I don't like to think of the way we parted.'

'I don't bear you any ill-will,' he said. 'That's all over and done with.'

'I want you to think of me as a friend,' she said. 'Abner, if ever you're in need of money . . . if you want money now . . . I wish you'd take it from me.' p. 357

He laughed. 'I'm in work now,' he said. 'You'd best leave us alone. We don't want your money.' His resentment burst out afresh. 'Nor you neither,' he added.

She controlled herself. 'Very well. That's understood,' she said, and left him without another word.

She walked home violently in the dusk, thinking of the desperate mess she had made of her life, wondering if she could ever bring herself to marry a man with sloping shoulders and a squeaky voice like Fred Maddy. What did it matter? What did anything matter?

Mr Williams had reckoned that the top fields would provide Abner with a fortnight's work. He had merely given him the job to satisfy a passing whim of inflicting a pin-prick on Mrs Malpas, and had told him from the first that he could not continue to employ him when the work was done. Luckily for Abner at the end of the fortnight half the fields remained uncleared. Mr Williams recognised that he had worked well, and decided to keep him on, for perhaps another ten days. The expense was trivial, and the job worth doing. Christmas, his second Christmas at Wolfpits, intervened, but by the third of January Abner's work at the Pentre was nearly finished.

The Twenty-Third Chapter p. 358

Once again the situation had to be faced. This time Abner was in no doubt as to what must be done. Those lonely days on the cold upland had given him time to think. He now realised that as far as finding work in the Lesswardine district went he was definitely beaten, and that every day that he spent at Wolfpits must make him more and more a drag upon the resources of the family. The obvious thing for him to do was to turn his early experiences at Mawne to account, to set off southward for the coal valleys and work as a miner underground. On the Welsh coalfield, wages ran high and he might be sure of earning enough to keep himself in comfort and to supply the Wolfpits household with a living that would seem luxurious after their long privations. In solitude this determination had been easily made, and the feeling that something definite was in view had made him happier and better pleased with himself; but when he left the Pentre and came to lay his plans before Mary, his course did not seem so clear or so free from complications.

During their three months of hardship their relations had undergone a curious change. Mary's outburst of jealous anger when she learned the true cause of his dismissal from The Dyke, had swept through her like a storm, stripping her heart of its hidden grudges and reservations. It passed, leaving her weak, bewildered, and yet happy. It was as if this sudden tempest, while almost destroying her, had snapped the last threads that bound her to her old life. All the past was broken. It rolled away from her in a tumult of spent cloud, and in the serene silence that followed she came to herself, realising that she was alone in the world with Abner and her

children. It was like the bewildered calm that comes after an escape from death; the hushed birth of a new world; a strange, unearthly quiet.

In this new state she found herself most eager to atone for the endless, wordless contest that she had waged against him. She knew that she could never repay him a hundredth part of what he had given her and suffered at her hands. The money was nothing. What he had sacrificed for her was his freedom, a hard denial for a man in the prime of youth. And so, thinking gratefully of his goodness toward her and of his unfathomed patience, she began to dwell tenderly on other aspects of the man: his splendid, supple strength, his honest eyes, the straightness and simplicity of his whole nature, and to compare them, instinctively, with what she knew of her husband: his superficial charm, his persuasive manners, and his callous heart: all those qualities that she had been taught by bitterest experience to hate and to mistrust. It was in this light that Abner seemed to her most wonderful. And she had used him like a shrew! Every natural impulse of kindness in him she had checked and thwarted! Pride had made her thankless; prudishness had hardened her. She was detestable, and if he hated her she had only herself to thank for it. p. 359

But did he hate her? She hoped, fervently, that he did not. She could not bear that he should hate her. It pained her even to think that she owed his kindness to the fact that he had given some promise to George, and in the simplicity of his nature felt that he must redeem it. She knew that he was fond of the children and could not bear to see them suffer; but that was not enough for her. Her new being craved for a personal devotion. If that were not forthcoming she felt that she would have little left in the world, that her life must be finally bitter and useless. And she knew that she was far too young for any such finality. She hated the pride that had brought her to this, and resolved to proclaim her new humility by every means in her power.

Abner himself was sensible of the change in her attitude toward him. During the time of his work at the Pentre, he became aware of it. Little by little, for she was far too cautious to make the change a sudden one, she was demolishing the barrier that she had built so carefully between them, and he, reluctantly, had accepted. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, they were nearing once more the point which they had reached in a moment of stress and abandonment on the night of the white mist six months before, the moment when he had seen her transfigured, or rather revealed, as the one woman in the world whom he wanted, body and soul. p. 360

In all those hard days not a single chilling word passed her lips, not a single intolerable silence drove him away from her. Her kindness made her beautiful, but the nearness of her beauty frightened him and he withdrew himself, having once cruelly burnt his fingers at that flame. He was happy, but could not trust his happiness, not because any scruples of honour pricked him, but because he feared a new rebuff.

Even though he dared not believe in her submission he could not escape the influence of her tenderness. The lean days were the best he had ever known at Wolfpits: even if he had had money to spend he would not have gone elsewhere, and every moment that brought him nearer to the inevitable parting on which he had decided, made the idea of it more painful and more difficult. It now seemed to him monstrously unreasonable that when such complete happiness was in his grasp he should wilfully renounce it. And yet, what else could he do? A sense of the futility of her kindness made him shrink from it.

She saw what was happening, knew that she deserved it, and in order that she might justify herself she now tried to play on his affection for the children, to create an atmosphere of interdependence among the four of them, to bind him closer to her with a web of many strands each so slender that he need not be aware of the process. But he felt the light pressure of the net in which he was being entangled; he struggled to free himself. And she saw the convulsions of his struggle and feared to lose him. The thrill of this new, half-hidden conflict held her.

On the Saturday night before his last week at the Pentre, he kept back five shillings of his earnings. By working from dawn till sunset each day he had managed to put in many hours of overtime, so that he was able to give her half a sovereign clear. It seemed to him a good opportunity for breaking the news of his plan to her. Sooner or later the word must be spoken. She held the gold coin in her hand and looked at him inquiringly. p. 361

‘You’ll be two bob short this week,’ he said, ‘but if any one knows how to manage, you do. After that I reckon things’ll begin to look up a bit.’

She flushed with a sudden pleasure.

‘Abner!’ she cried. ‘You don’t mean to say that Mr Williams is going to keep you on?’

‘Not he!’ said Abner. ‘There’s not more than four or five days left of the stone picking, and I can tell you I’m not all that sorry. My back’s fair broke at it! No, I’m thinking of a change. I might stay on round here a year before I find another job worth calling one. They’ve got a down on you and me, these farming chaps, them and your old mother. There’s only one thing to be done as I can see. And that’s what I’ve kept five bob back for to-night.’

‘I don’t understand, Abner,’ she said, understanding only too well.

‘Of course you don’t. Well, I’ll tell you. While I’ve been up on the hill I’ve had a good few hours for thinking. I’ve reckoned it all up square. There’s about four month as you’ll have to hang on here afore old George comes out, and you can’t keep the lot of us for four odd month on nothing. That’s clear enough, bain’t it?’

She assented.

‘So I thought like this. What’s the use of a chap of my sort, that’s learned a trade and all, and can pick up good money at it, going round cadging work from a lot of beggars that don’t mean to give it me? I’ve had a bellyful of farmers’ promises, I have, and I tell you straight!’

Again she said: ‘Yes . . .’

‘And so this is how I see it. The only thing left for me when I’ve finished along with old Williams is to take a turn down Swansea way.’

‘Swansea?’ she cried.

‘That’s it. I looked it up Sunday in the time-table on Llandwlas station, and asked about the fare. You go down through Builth and Brecon and Neath, and five bob’ll do it. There’s plenty of work p. 362
going in the Western Valleys, they say, and good money and all. You can pick up two pound ten a week, without killing yourself either. They say lodging’s dear, but I reckon I can send you a clear pound easy: postal orders you can change at Mainstone and nobody know where they come from. I ought to have done it before. I know that. But now it looks like as if there’s nothing else.’

While he spoke he was walking up and down the little room, never looking at her. Her eyes followed him, but her heart fell within her. He finished and faced her. She could scarcely answer him.

‘You mean that you must go away . . . leave me?’

‘That’s the ticket,’ he said. ‘I ought to have done it afore. If I had they’d have left you alone.’

‘But you can’t,’ she said. ‘You can’t!’

‘You can’t live on nothing,’ he said brutally.

She could not listen to reason. She was beyond reason now.

‘No, no,’ she cried. ‘Abner, you mustn’t go!’

He set his will against her. She stood and trembled before him, but he would not face her for fear that he should be softened. He kept silence.

‘You can’t,’ she cried again. ‘I couldn’t face it . . . the loneliness! I couldn’t, really! This place . . . all alone. No, Abner, you can’t!’

‘It’s not for so long,’ he reassured her. ‘What’s four month? After that you’ll have George back again.’

‘George!’ she cried. ‘Oh, don’t speak of it! You’re cruel!’

Her words came as a shock to him. It was now many months since they had spoken of George. Since the evening of his letter she had not even mentioned his name to the children nor encouraged Abner to talk about him. Abner saw the fateful direction in which the tide was drifting, and held steadily to his course.

‘It’s not so long since,’ he said, ‘that you told me to go away if I wanted to. The time they tried to get you to go and keep house for the parson. I reckon you’ve changed about a good bit since then.’

‘Of course I’ve changed,’ she said. ‘I was a fool then. I didn’t know what I wanted. It’s different p. 363
now.’ She paused, and then returned instinctively to her first words. ‘You can’t! You can’t!’

‘You’re talking wild,’ he said brusquely. ‘I’ve thought it all out. It’s the only thing. You’ll have the comfort you’m used to, you and the kids. You won’t find it all that lonely with your stomachs full. It’s the bad times we’ve been having that makes you talk like that.’

Still she protested. ‘No, no, it isn’t. I couldn’t bear it. It’s like taking the life away from me.’

He didn’t wait to think what she meant. He was angry that she should increase the difficulty of his parting.

‘It’s no good talking to you,’ he said, ‘if you can’t see sense. I can’t take you along with me, can I?’

‘Why not?’

She stood before him, meek, submissive. He was overwhelmed. Through all those months he had schooled himself so thoroughly that this sudden, voluntary surrender staggered him. His heart melted within him; the blood beat in his wrists. The past shrivelled away in that moment’s flame. The future was a blaze of light, and in the present he saw nothing but the woman of his desire. There had been no one like her. In all his lighter loves he had been able to see himself from without as a creature fevered with appetite. But now he was lost. He knew nothing in the world but Mary: her softened eyes, the curve of her lips, the thrill of her yielding body. He picked her up in his arms, holding her so that her breath came quickly on his cheek, and strained her toward him as though, by doing so, he might make her a part of himself. Even if he killed her with his strength in that moment she was made his, clasped immutably to him in the surrounding

darkness. Their lips were joined in eager kisses. Her proud body gave itself to his arms. Her eyes were closed: her lips infinitely happy.

'Mary, Mary . . .' he whispered to her, rejoicing in the sound of her name. But his voice was strange, distant, thick with passion, and his clasping hands could not be certain that they held her. They followed every curve of her body, seeking to know if it were really she. His tongue stumbled on phrases that had never come to him before. p. 364

'Mary, my little one, my beauty! Did I use you rough? Did I hurt you?'

She shook her head and smiled back at him, full of content. She herself, shyly daring, allowed her hands to caress his head, stroking his hair, his ears, his neck. And the light contact of her fingers maddened him, finding strange nerves that had never felt before, awakening new yearnings.

At last she opened her eyes.

'The lamp's flaring,' she said, in a curious, toneless voice. Smiling gently she freed herself from his arms and turned down the wick. He followed her, feeling that she was escaping him. Never again should she escape him. Obedient to his will she came back to him.

'Us bain't gooin' to wait for the parson, bin' us?' he said, and when she would not answer: 'Durs'n't you, wench? We've waited above a bit, us two!'

'There's the children,' she said, lowering her eyes. 'I thought I heard Morgan cry out in his sleep.'

'Bless them!' he said. 'And don't I love every bone in their bodies as if they was my own?'

'I know,' she said. 'I know. And they're so fond of you.'

'It's because they'm yours,' he said. 'So what does it matter?'

'Don't ask me. Poor sweet lambs! Oh, Abner, where am I?'

'You'm here with me, wench! In my arms. You belong to me, Mary. There's nought can take you away from me. I don't let you go now I've got you. Not a minute, not a second!'

'I can't take it in,' she said. 'If Mrs Mamble could see through the wall! To think of all that people have said of us!'

'They can say it again. They're welcome now! Talk? They can talk their damned heads off. We've been through all that!'

'I should just think we have,' she sighed. 'They can't touch us now. Abner! Abner!'

She clung to him and kissed him again and again. 'Ah, Abner, don't ask me!' she said. 'Just let things happen as they will.' p. 365

She hid her face against him.

'But afterward,' she whispered. 'What can we do? How can we get away, Abner? I feel as if something might stop us. Let's get away at once. Let's go. I can't bear waiting!'

He laughed at her. 'To-night?'

'No, to-morrow.'

'Nobody will know it's any different till we're gone,' he said. 'They can't say worse of us than they have done.'

'They will. . . . Of course they will. They can't help seeing. Mrs Mamble . . . an old woman like that sees everything. I shall look different. I know I shall, if it's only that I'm happy.'

He laughed as he kissed her. 'Bin yo' happy, my love?'

'Oh, Abner!'

'Three or four days'll see me finished up at old Williams's. He done us a good turn, and don't you forget it. Besides that you couldn't get ready by to-morrow. You'll take a few days over that, and I'll go on and look for a home.'

'No, no, Abner!' she cried. 'Don't leave me now! Don't you leave me! If ever I lose sight of you now something will happen. I know it as sure as sure.'

'You'm a baby, that's what you are!' he said, teasing. He gathered her up in his arms and talked foolishly to her.

'No,' she said, shaking her head. 'I mean it. I'm as serious as I can be.'

'A damned sight too serious for me!' he grumbled.

'We must all go together. In three days I can be ready. No, two.'

'In that case every one'll see us. You'm all the other way now.'

‘I don’t care who sees us now,’ she said passionately. ‘What does it matter? Let it take its chance! It’s nothing to us. I’m so sick of their talk that it means nothing to me.’

She became thoughtful once more. p. 366

‘Abner,’ she said suddenly, ‘tell me truly, when did you first want me?’

Again he teased her.

‘What does that matter?’

‘I want to know,’ she protested.

And he told her of the night at Redlake when he had stood burning in the moonlight beneath the jasmine-covered windows of the inn.

‘I knew, I knew!’ she said softly. ‘I couldn’t sleep that night. The time we’ve lost, us two! Oh, how I hate myself! It was nearly the same with me. Just when we’d missed our way and my legs ached so that I felt I couldn’t walk another step. Poor little Morgan, and the bottle of pop you promised him! And then those strange sea-birds crying up in the dark. Do you remember how I turned on you and told you I hated the sight of you? That was when I loved you. Then and ever since.’

‘We’ve been through something, one time and another,’ he said.

She laughed softly.

‘It’s like a long courtship,’ she said. ‘George and I only knew each other six weeks before we were married.’

It amazed her to find that now she could speak of George without discomfort. Her mind ran swiftly over those early days.

‘Abner,’ she said, ‘I feel sorry for George now, don’t you?’

‘Don’t speak of him!’ said Abner seriously.

‘You’re jealous . . .’

‘Don’t speak of him. I gave old George my word. I’ve not been a pal to George.’

‘You’re a funny boy,’ she said, loving him with her eyes.

‘I want to forget old George,’ he said obstinately.

‘Then I won’t speak of him, Abner. What time is it?’

She put her hand into his waistcoat pocket and took out his watch. The sweet familiarity of the action entranced him. His eyes followed her fingers, and the newly conscious turn of her head as she looked at it.

‘Ten o’clock,’ she said. ‘Who’d have thought it?’ p. 367

She rose, and again she abandoned herself to his arms. Then she left him suddenly and went before him, never looking back. He followed with the little lamp in his hand. At the foot of the stairs he stopped.

‘What’s the matter?’ she whispered, turning. ‘Aren’t you coming?’

‘There’s a step outside,’ he said. ‘Some one on the garden path.’

‘Whoever can it be at this time? Take the light to the door and see.’

The darkness of the staircase engulfed her as he opened the kitchen door and peered outside.

‘Who’s that?’ he called.

‘Is that you, Abner?’ a voice replied. ‘Now I thought I see’d a light. I guessed you’d have gone up over by this.’

‘What do you want, Mr Drew?’

‘You wait while I do get my breath back,’ said the old man. He had evidently been drinking and walked unsteadily. ‘Ah, that’s better! Well, Abner, I’ve a’ been down to the Buffalo to-night for a quart, and I thought as how I’d bring ’ee a bit of downright good news I heared. Yes, old Mrs Malpas she’ve got news from Shrewsbury—whether it be by letter or word of mouth I can’t say for certain—as young George have behaved himself so well into prison that they’m going to knock off part of his time. Any day this week he may be coming home along, so they says, and I thought I’d better bring the news quick to his missus.’

‘Coming home . . .?’ said Abner, dazed.

‘Yes. ’Tis not onusual, they do say. If she’s abed you can tell her in the marnin’. Wish ’ee good-night, Abner.’

‘I’ll tell her. Thank’ee for looking in.’

‘Oh, that’s nothing! ’Tis only natural. Good-night!’

‘Good-night, Mr Drew.’

He closed the door. The light fell on Mary, standing pale at the foot of the stairs.

‘He’s coming back,’ said Abner.

‘I heard. When?’

‘He couldn’t say certain. In a day or two.’

‘Abner!’ p. 368

‘Well, there it is! We’re only just in time, my girl.’ She stood mute, paralysed. He wished she would speak.

‘It’s no good your standing there,’ he said. ‘Go on up. I’ll hold the lamp.’

She did not move.

‘I can’t take it in,’ she said.

He put the lamp down on the table again and held out his arms.

Still she did not move.

‘Mary . . .!’

She obeyed, came to his arms, shuddering, shaken with sobs, and through her tears he kissed her, comforting: ‘Mary, don’t cry now, don’t cry . . .’

‘What did I tell you?’ she wailed. ‘Abner, I knew, I knew! I told you something would happen. Thank God it came in time! We’ve not a minute to think. Two or three days! Abner, we *must* go to-morrow.’

He did not answer her, for his mind was deeply troubled.

‘I think I can manage if you leave it to me,’ she said. He held her closer. ‘What does it matter if we take nothing away? Only just a few clothes for me and the children. I can leave everything tidy, just as it was when he went.’ She hesitated, for she remembered the tea-set that she had pawned in Shrewsbury. He would miss that. Then she realised, thankfully, that it was her wedding present, not his.

‘Nearly everything,’ she said. ‘Don’t you think it’s better that we should start with nothing? In lodgings at first. Won’t it be strange?’ She laughed softly. ‘And not a soul to know! It’s beginning life all over again. Oh, Abner, my love!’

So she spoke, confidently, at times almost gaily, and he made believe that he was listening to her, humouring her childishness.

‘And isn’t it lucky,’ she said, ‘that Mr Drew’s working up at the Pentre. You won’t need to go there yourself. If you get up early you can catch him before he goes and send up a message to the farm. It isn’t as if it mattered your breaking your word to Mr Williams. People must make p. 369
allowances, mustn’t they?’

He did not answer her, and she became conscious of his brooding.

‘Abner! What’s up with you? Tell me! You’re frightening me. Abner!’

‘We can’t go to-morrow,’ he said.

‘But, Abner, we must, we must! Two or three days, he said. He might even be a day early. He might come to-morrow. Think of it, Abner! I should die.’

‘If George is coming home like that we can’t go.’

‘Abner, are you mad? What’s come over you?’

‘I don’t know. Naught’s come over me. It’s hearing his name sudden like that. It’s like a judgment. It makes you think.’

‘Judgment!’ she scoffed. ‘Oh, Abner, haven’t we thought enough? Haven’t we been thinking for six months? I’m sick of thinking!’

‘Like a warning. Just the very second. If he’d come an hour later . . .’

‘What’s the difference, Abner? If he’d come to-morrow or in a week’s time it would be no different. We’d made up our minds, Abner, we’re not children. Things like that don’t count. Whether you’ve had me or not, I’m yours. You know that.’

She clung closer to him, but his mind would not accept the sway of her emotion. He freed himself from her hands, and the movement swept her into a passion.

‘Abner!’ she cried. ‘Don’t do that! Don’t! You’ll kill me . . . kill me!’

‘George is my pal,’ he said stolidly. ‘I gave old George my word. We shook hands on it, George

and me. “Abner,” he said, “you’m the only pal I’ve got that I can trust.”’

‘Oh, that’s it, is it?’ she cried, and her voice went shrill. ‘That’s it? What children men are! Gave George your word! Don’t you see that you’ve broken your word already . . . broken it long ago, ever since you thought of me like that? And then you say you love me! That isn’t love, Abner, not my kind anyway!’

He caught her up in his arms, and she could not speak now for tears. His own face was anguished.

‘You’d better kill me and have done with it,’ she sobbed. ‘Far better. Oh, why don’t you kill me right out if you’re going to leave me? I wish I were dead! I do! Abner, if we don’t go away to-morrow I shall lose you. I know it . . . I know it! For my sake, Abner! I’ve had so little happiness.’ p. 370

He fondled her as she spoke. ‘I’m not going to leave go of you,’ he said. ‘Don’t you ever think that!’ He kissed her tearful face. ‘But I gave old George my word,’ he continued obstinately.

‘Oh, damn your word!’ she cried, violently wrenching herself away from him.

‘Don’t get wild,’ he protested. ‘Listen to me.’

‘I won’t listen. You’re talking wickedly, madly.’

‘You’ve got to listen, my girl!’ He took hold of her and held her with his strength. ‘A chap may go back on his word. Every one knows that. But a man that’s worth calling don’t go slinking away behind another chap’s back like a dog. If old George is coming home he’s got to hear what I say to his face, not find the place empty and say I’ve run away from him. Me and George has got to have this out.’

‘Then take us away first,’ she pleaded, ‘and come back to see him afterward.’

‘You’m talking soft now!’

‘I’m frightened, Abner . . . frightened!’

‘You’ve no need to be while I’m here. I can look after myself and you too. I’m going to see old George and tell him straight. You may like it or lump it. That’s my way.’

She wept, inconsolable. She would not let him comfort her. She hoped that her tears would soften him.

‘Can’t you do just one thing for me, Abner? You’re cruel . . . cruel! You don’t love me. That isn’t love.’

‘I’ve got to do it my own way.’

‘You might just as well kill me.’

‘I’ve never run away from a man yet.’

‘If you don’t take me away from here now,’ she said desperately, ‘you’ll never have me at all. Never! I know it, Abner, it’s our last chance.’

‘It’s been too much for you,’ he said. ‘You can’t see anything clear. I’m not a chap that changes.’

She stared at him in silence with sad, resentful eyes. Then she lost control of herself and began to curse the clumsiness of old Drew, who had blundered in on them with his drunken gossip in the middle of the night. ‘I’ll never forgive him!’ she cried. ‘Never!’ She shouted like a drunken woman. Then she stopped and listened intently, just as an animal listens in suspicion. Morgan, awakened by the sound of raised voices, had begun to cry. p. 371

‘It’s Morgan,’ she whispered.

‘You’d better go to him,’ Abner replied.

She put her hands to her face.

‘Don’t!’ she cried. ‘Oh, Abner, don’t! You’re driving me!’

‘Go on!’ he said roughly. ‘I’ll put the light out. Got the matches?’

She saw that he meant it, and blindly went.

Slowly, methodically, Abner locked the kitchen door and put out the light. A moment later he himself went upstairs in the dark. Morgan was still sobbing, mechanically, for the sake of hearing his own voice, and as Abner passed the door he was aware of a soft moaning which told him that Mary was crying too. His heart ached, his body yearned for her; but in his brain George Malpas’s words re-echoed: ‘By God, you’re the only pal I’ve got that I can trust!’ In a day or two George would be home, and then the situation must be faced. He could not be a man and run away from it.

He got into bed. Lying there in the dark, listening to the ceaseless creaking of the boards and joists, he cursed himself for a fool. His body was on fire. He knew that he could not possibly sleep, and guessed that Mary surely was awake. He was a damned, soft fool, and nothing more!

Lying there with eyes open, staring at the darkness, it seemed to him that he heard a soft step on the stairs. The latch of his door started. His heart dissolved within him. He leapt out of bed, trembling, tingling in every limb. Mary had been wiser. He knew it. She had come to him for comfort. She was his. In a moment she would be sinking warm into his arms. His scruples vanished like a puff of smoke. He heard himself swallow, heard his breath coming in short grunts. He opened the door to meet her, to take her. The stair was empty and dark. A rat scuttled away in the wainscot. A dank, wintry air possessed the house. He slammed the door to, viciously.

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Next morning, before Mary had stirred from her bed, he had set out as usual for the Pentre.

The Twenty-Fourth Chapter

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On the same day, at noon, George Malpas paraded before the Governor of Shrewsbury Jail to take his discharge. The interview was short, almost friendly. The prisoner had behaved well throughout his term, the chaplain had reported on him as a young man of superior intelligence, and for these reasons a remission of a quarter of his sentence had been recommended and sanctioned. From the governor's office he was marched across the rigid quadrangle that he knew and hated to another room where he signed a receipt for the personal belongings that had been taken from him in the Lesswardine police-court and now miraculously reappeared. A warder checked them as each was handed out:—

'One watch. Silver chain with medal. One packet of letters. One notebook and lead pencil. One steel foot-rule, folding. Four shillings and twopence, silver and copper. One pocket-knife.' He paused. 'Is that all?'

George Malpas was seized with a sudden anxiety. He tried to speak; but long familiarity with the ways of warders made him frightened to use his tongue.

'Not half!' said the other, with a wink. 'One leather wallet. Fifty pounds in Bank of England notes.'

'God! That's something like!' said the other, handing it to George with a wink.

He thrust it into the breast pocket of the coat which had been placed that morning in his cell, and the action gave him an unfamiliar thrill. What a thing it was to have pockets!

'Well, Malpas, it's good-bye, then,' said the warder, who was also a humorist. 'Look in any time you're passing!'

George Malpas did not smile. They showed him out of a small doorway at the side of the arch under which the prison vans came grinding in. From his cell he had been able to hear the sound of the horses' shoes sliding on the stone. He saw a street along which free men were moving with a rapt, purposive hurry. Sometimes a passer-by would turn and look up idly at the great nail-studded doors and the fan of spikes that surmounted them. George had never seen the gateway before. He only knew the jail as a heavy building dominating the hill above the station. When they had brought him handcuffed from the train, humiliated, wondering if it were worth while wrenching himself free and throwing his body on the rails, they had driven him to the prison in a black van. Now he stood undetermined, not knowing which way to take. Over the hill-side the city of Shrewsbury sprawled: spires, chimney-pots, towers, and smoke stacks blowing in a free and windy sky. Not a leaf on the trees, and black, unfriendly dust whirling along brick pavements.

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He shivered. For some reason his newly-pressed clothes hung loose and damp upon him. He must have lost flesh. Of course he had lost flesh. Who wouldn't after fourteen months in jail? A cart came slowly past him with a load of horse manure. A good smell . . . a country smell! The driver cracked his whip, and the noise made George Malpas jump. That was a bad sign surely! The sooner he got a drink and steadied his nerves the better. He looked up and down the road for the sign of a public-house. A hundred yards away a strip of hoarding with gilt letters topped the sky-line of a red brick building. Astill's Celebrated Entire, it said. Brummagem beer was better than nothing. He crossed the road with long strides, but a dog-cart driven fast down the middle of the street made him pause. There was a bicycle behind it, and he did not think he could avoid both. People should not be allowed to drive so furiously.

He reached the public-house and thanked God for his escape. He felt that in gaining the shelter of its walls he was doing more than sheltering from the bitter wind and the dust. He grew surer of himself, cracked a joke with the barmaid, and paid for his beer. The florin that she tendered him in change for a half-crown looked like a foreign coin. He examined it suspiciously.

'It's all right,' she said. 'One of these new ones. It's quite a change to get the Prince of Wales' head, isn't it? I don't think he looks half the man of King Edward.'

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'No,' he agreed. 'No, he don't.' He examined the coin, bewildered. Then, fearing that she must read the whole of his story in his ignorance, he pocketed his money and darted out into the street again. It was strange how a broken habit reasserted itself. He put his hand in his unfamiliar

waistcoat pocket and pulled out his watch. Nine o'clock. That was impossible. He laughed, realising that his watch had run down at its usual winding time on the night of his arrest.

'I'm like a fool,' he thought. 'I don't know what I'm doing. I'm dull, useless. I want another drink.'

Gradually, under the influence of the liquor, his confidence returned. It must be market day in Shrewsbury, he thought, for the streets were so full of people; but reflection told him that Shrewsbury market is not held on a Monday and that the crowd that moved on the pavements of the steep high street was no more than the normal week-day traffic. It gave him a thrill of pleasure to realise that people were not staring at him. He was encouraged to slacken his pace, to walk no longer as if some one were pursuing him. He stared in several shop windows, and at last found himself gazing at his own image in a long mirror. It gave him a start to find himself facing an elongated lath of a man that he did not know, until he realised that the mirror was a convex affair placed as an advertisement outside an eating-house to emphasise the contrast between a man who had fed there and one who had not. It was not such a bad idea. He would go in and eat his first square meal.

The place was nearly empty, for Shrewsbury does not dine till one o'clock. They brought him steak and kidney pudding, the best that he had ever tasted, and a pint of half and half. He began to feel a man again. He called the waiter for a second drink and ordered, with it, a local time-table. Looking through it at leisure he found that the trains to Llandwlas had not been altered, though there was now time to get a drink in the change at Craven Arms. If he caught the afternoon train he would have time to look about Shrewsbury for another two hours and see to certain business matters that were in the back of his mind. p. 376

He paid his bill, gave the waiter a liberal tip, and walked up the hill past the half-timbered houses to the main street. He wondered if the place was where it used to be. Yes, it was still there. It pleased him to think that he hadn't lost his memory. Nothing would have surprised him after all those useless, numbing months. Above the shop door was the inscription: 'Emigration Office.' Inside, a long counter, backed by posters of shipping companies, and a single yawning clerk who had been left in charge during the luncheon hour. He asked George what he could do for him.

'Canada,' said George. 'I want to know all about it.'

The young man produced a sheaf of circulars and began to explain. He found it difficult to place the applicant, his pale face, his hat jammed on his head to hide the prison crop, his equivocal hands.

'Are you a mechanic?' he asked.

'No. Farmer.'

The clerk stared at him. 'Farmer? You want to buy land?'

'No, I don't. I want to work on it. I have a little money.'

'Married?'

'Yes.'

'Taking the missus with you?'

'Yes.'

'And children?'

'No children.'

'You have to get two references for an assisted passage, you know,' said the clerk, producing a form.

'Never mind that. I can't wait for any rubbish of that kind. What's the fare, steerage?'

The clerk looked it up. 'Liverpool, Quebec. That's what you want,' he said. 'Then you get right over to Calgary if you take my advice. I'll write it all down for you.'

He did so, in a sloped, flourishing hand, on the back of one of the circulars. 'You'll get the Allan boat from Liverpool Saturday week,' he said. George thanked him and plunged out into the street.

At the station he bought a daily paper, the North Bromwich *Courier*. As usual on Monday it was full of football. Albion at the top of the first league: Notts Forest, second. Strange clubs from the Southern League had invaded that sanctuary: the season was half over, and they were shaping well. He read words that meant nothing to him. He could not concentrate, for he had drunk as much as was good for him. The platform seemed to him a noisy, exposed situation; for he could not yet be at his ease in a crowd. He started at the sound of a familiar voice speaking the word Lesswardine. A man passed him in a drab covert-coat: Mr Prosser of The Dyke, talking to young Maddy. They had not recognised him. He slipped into a urinal to avoid them and waited there till he heard the south-bound train roll in. Then he made a dash for a non-smoking carriage and hid himself behind his newspaper in the corner. The train was not full, and to his great relief no one entered his compartment. p. 377

They started smoothly and soon left Shrewsbury behind. A wintry landscape unfolded on either side of him: the low bow of the Wrekin; Caer Caradoc, a sheer crag on the left; the cloven bastions of the Long Mynd. He threw up the window and drank in great draughts of hill air. He laughed to see the green of the fields and the gray, monstrous hills. But he knew that he was a stranger. The country that he rejoiced to see had rejected him. If he lived to be a hundred not a single man of his acquaintance would forget that he had spent a year in jail. As soon as he should have left Craven Arms the hills would fold him in, draw him within the confines of his old life. He was free, but this could never be a real freedom. A wider country, a new life, Canada. . . . He was dying for a drink.

At Craven Arms the satisfaction of this desire did not seem easy, for others were before him in the Refreshment Room and every moment his chance of meeting Lesswardine people increased. He took a flask of brandy from the counter and paid for it without waiting for the change. The local train stood humbly in the siding. He chose a carriage already full of Radnor farmers whom he did not know. He drank down the whole of his flask of brandy, and then fell into a kind of p. 378
doze lulled by the sing-song voices of his companions. The train twisted along the valley in the dark, pulling up with a jolt at every upland station. At Llandwlas he turned out in a hurry and handed his ticket to a new porter, who stood at the gate in the dusk swinging a lantern. Men were shouting, driving bullocks into a pen. A trap was waiting with the lamps already lit. He avoided their light, but guessed by the colour of the horse and the erect figure of the driver that Marion was waiting for Mr Prosser. A year before he might have dared to ask for a lift to Chapel Green. God, how strange, how hauntingly strange the country smelt!

An hour later he staggered into the bar at the Buffalo. Mrs Malpas, a withered, pathetic figure, half the size of the woman whom he remembered, gave a cry and ran to meet him.

‘My son, my son!’

He kissed her, laughing heavily, blowing gusts of brandy into her eyes. She would not think of the spirit in his breath. Her hands caressed his face. She turned him to the light to see if he were changed.

‘Oh, George, you’re that thin! They haven’t fed you proper.’

He freed himself from her. ‘How’s dad?’ he asked.

‘The same as ever, George.’

‘Poor old devil!’ he said.

She drew him into the bar-parlour where the old man was sitting.

‘It’s George, my dear,’ she cried excitedly. ‘It’s our George!’

George slapped his father on the back: ‘Don’t you know me, dad?’

The old man only mumbled.

‘He’s gone downhill,’ said George. ‘You’ve been with him all the time. You don’t see the change like I do.’

‘Perhaps,’ she said listlessly. She could not keep her eyes from her son. ‘You’re thin, George, so thin!’

‘Then give us a drop of beer, mother. That’ll help fatten me.’

She could not refuse him. While she was filling the tankard at the counter old Drew and another p. 379
labourer from the Pentre who had been driving Williams’s bullocks to Llandwlas station came into the bar.

‘My son’s home,’ she told them gaily. ‘And so thin! It’s a scandal. They starve them.’

‘So I’ve always heard tell, ma’am,’ said Drew, with a wink. ‘Here’s his health.’

‘Who’s that?’ George asked anxiously. He still found it difficult to resist the impulse of hiding himself.

‘I didn’t see,’ Mrs Malpas lied.

She gave George his beer, and he settled down to it. The two labourers spoke spasmodically in the bar.

‘Well, mother,’ he said at last. ‘Tell us how things have been going on.’

Mrs Malpas pursed her lips. ‘Going on! That’s the word. I wrote to you, George. You got my letter?’

‘Yes, I got that all right.’

Mrs Malpas grew intense. Her hands trembled with emotion. ‘She’s a bad woman, George. Downright bad. I told you so before.’

‘There’s not another kid waiting for me, no surprise packet of that kind?’

‘No. But she’s that deceitful, George. She’s no better than her father. She couldn’t have used

you worse than she has. So open! You never made a worse mistake.'

'You let me teach her!' said George between his teeth. 'I'll learn her her bleeding duty!'

'Don't swear, George!'

'You ought to be more shocked at her than me!'

'And that Fellows is no better. Rotten bad. Always going after women. There's Susie Hind.'

'God! He's welcome!'

'And Mr Prosser's daughter. They had to turn him off The Dyke.'

'Her?' George laughed. 'He's a proper young bull!'

'And all the time living as man and wife with Mary. Laughing at you, the two of them, behind your back.'

'I'll see to that!' said George grimly. The liquor was spreading in hot fumes through his brain.

'But you won't go up to-night, George,' she said anxiously.

'Won't I? You bet I will.' p. 380

'You'd best stay here, George. Don't you go near her. She'll talk you round.'

'I'll shut her mouth for her. And I'll get level with him too!'

The old woman grew alarmed.

'Don't go near them, George,' she pleaded. 'There's a home for you here. Leave them to it. They're not worth taking the notice of.'

'What about the kids, eh?'

'Fellows will have set them again you. They won't know you. You see!'

'That's what I'm going to do.' He grew excited. 'And I tell you, if I have to do time again I'm going to put that b— on his back!'

He put down his tankard with another oath. One of the drinkers in the bar knocked at the counter.

'Keep still till I'm back, George. I won't be a minute,' she said.

'Get us another pint, then,' George grumbled.

She took his tankard, and having given the labourers their change and wished them good-night, she brought it back to him filled. God would forgive her this sin. Even if he were drunk she wanted to keep him at the Buffalo, for she dreaded Abner's strength. When she returned he was still on his feet, talking indistinctly to the old man, who was shaken by a fit of coughing that choked him. She thumped his back.

'That's right, dad,' said George. 'Better out than in!' The joke appeared to please him.

She drew him down gently to his chair and gave him the tankard.

'Sit down, my dear,' she said. 'I want to talk to you.'

'I've done talking,' said George obstinately. 'Let me get at him: that's what I want. Let me get at the dirty pair of them!'

She bent over him and whispered in his ear.

'The money, George,' she said. 'Where did you put it? She told me you hadn't hid it in the house, but I reckon she lied to me, or they couldn't have lived all this time with him out of work. They must have got at it. Where did you put it, my son?'

He stared at her with affected stupidity. 'What money?' p. 381

'Fifty pounds. Out of my box. I guessed it was you that had it. That's why I didn't dare tell the police.'

He laughed. 'Good old woman! I knew you wouldn't. You're a good mother. I'll say that for you.'

'Then you can give it back to me. Give it to me, my son.'

His cunning returned to him.

'I've lost it, mother. Every penny. It's gone.'

'Gone? Fifty pounds? You couldn't lose it, George.'

'You try backing horses, and you'll see,' he said.

'Racing, too!' she cried. 'Oh, George, George! It was all I had.'

‘Well, you’ve got me, mother,’ he said. ‘What more do you want? It’s no good crying over spilt milk.’

She came to his arms, weakly sobbing, and clung to him.

‘Now don’t go crying all over me,’ he said thickly. ‘Loose me! I’m going.’

‘George, you mustn’t go, dear. You’re not fit.’

‘I tell you I’m going. Leave hold of me!’

‘George!’

‘Do you say I’m drunk? I’ll show you if I’m drunk!’

Still she clung to him. He gave her a push and she went over into the hearth with a clatter of fire-irons. The old man began to wail in a high-pitched voice: ‘Help! Help!’

‘Shut your damned mouth, you!’ said George.

He blundered out into the bar, knocking against the end of the counter and bringing down a tray of glasses with a crash. A freakish idea seized him. He took the key from the door and locked it on the outside. He shook with laughter at the joke.

A young moon sank slowly over the misty woodland. He stopped in the middle of the road and solemnly turned over the packet of banknotes in his pocket for luck. Drunk? Not he! He was sharp enough to think of everything. He turned his uncertain steps toward Wolfpits.

Before him, with half an hour in hand, old Drew went pounding along the same road as fast as his rheumatic knees would let him. He reached Wolfpits breathless and knocked violently at Mary’s kitchen door. She was upstairs, putting the children to bed. Morgan was tucked in already, and Gladys was having her hair brushed. Panic seized Mary when she heard the old man’s knock. Those rapid blows seemed to her to herald catastrophe. She ran downstairs and came to the door with an ashen face. p. 382

‘Hey, missus,’ Drew panted. ‘Be Abner in there with ’ee?’

‘No, he’s not back yet,’ she said, relieved. Then, as a new fear chilled her: ‘Isn’t he at the Pentre?’

‘Most like he be,’ said Drew, slowly regaining his breath and leaning on the doorpost. ‘I’ve been a driving they bullocks to Llandwlas station.’

She looked at the clock. It was a little earlier than Abner’s usual hour of return.

‘Better wait if you want him. Take a seat, Mr Drew. He’ll be back in a few minutes.’

‘You must stop ’en . . . you must stop ’en!’ said the old man impressively. ‘If he come down over the field I shall meet ’en myself. But often he do come by the road. You must send some one to stop ’en that way.’

‘Stop him? What do you mean?’ she cried.

‘You must stop ’en. Your George be coming up from the Buffalo, mad with the drink. You must stop Abner. Keep him away, or there’ll be murder done, sure ‘nuff! Murder! You take my word for it!’

‘How can I stop him? What can I do, Mr Drew?’ she cried.

‘Go yourself, missus. Or send Mrs Mamble. Her’ll run along for ’ee.’

‘No. I must wait for George,’ she said.

An inspiration came to her. She took a piece of paper and scribbled a note to Abner, telling him that George was coming, begging him, for her sake, to keep out of the way until she had seen him. Then she called upstairs: ‘Gladys!’ and the child came down with her hair plaited for the night.

‘Come here, my darling,’ she said. ‘Put your shoes on. I want you to go down to the corner and meet Abner and give this to him.’ p. 383

‘Isn’t it rather dark, mam?’ said Gladys, thrilled by the prospect of adventure. She shivered.

‘No, my darling. There’s a lovely moon, isn’t there, Mr Drew? Just wait at the bottom of the drive till he comes, or go a little way up the road. Let me put your coat on.’

She helped the child into her overcoat and kissed her. Gladys took the note. ‘Won’t our Abner be surprised?’ she said, as she went.

‘I’d best bide along with you, missus,’ said old Drew darkly.

‘I’d rather you went, Mr Drew,’ she replied. ‘I know you mean it kindly.’

‘Well, my dear, I’ll be going on up to the Pentre. Maybe I’ll meet Abner up the fields. Shall I send Mrs Mamble in to ’ee?’

‘No. Mrs Mamble’s out: gone to the shops in Lesswardine. I’d rather be alone when he comes. It was good of you to warn me.’

He left her, and she waited. Her brain followed the messenger down the avenue step by step. She realised that the most awful moment of her life was upon her. She wondered if she ought to pray. She could not pray. What right had she, a guilty woman, to call on Divine help? She must fight for herself. She looked at the clock. Barely two minutes had passed since she had looked before. Surely Abner could not be long.

Her strained ears heard steps in the distance. She peered out into the moonlight. Two dim figures were visible. Abner, in his obstinate folly, had seen her note and refused her warning. Even now there was time to stop him. She dared not call, for it struck her that George might well be coming up behind him. She stood, trembling with impatience, waiting for him to come within earshot. The figures of the man and the child became more distinct. His gait was unsteady but too fast for Gladys, who ran at his side. He carried her note unfolded. The paper showed white in the moonlight. They came toward her, and she saw that it was George. A cry came from her p. 384
lips. He left the child behind him, stalked straight into the kitchen and flung his hat on the table. He was as pale as death; his cropped head shaped like a skull. The walk had partially sobered him.

‘Go straight upstairs, Gladys,’ she called.

‘It’s dad, mam. I give him Abner’s note.’

‘Go upstairs as I tell you!’

Gladys’s mouth fell. ‘Why, mam?’ she faltered.

George pulled a chair toward him and flopped into it. ‘You be said!’ he shouted.

The child ran upstairs, frightened. George sat on, his eyes staring savagely at her out of his sunken orbits.

‘Well, Mary,’ he said at last. ‘This is a bloody fine game!’

She could not speak for her increasing terror. She had never felt so frightened of him in her life. ‘He looks like a criminal,’ she thought.

‘Speak up,’ he said. ‘What’ve you got to say for yourself. What’s the meaning of this?’ He held out her note. ‘Tell him to keep away, would you? You dirty bitch!’

‘George,’ she said. ‘You mustn’t believe all people tell you. You know your mother’s against me!’

‘Hold your noise about my mother! She’s a good woman, she is, and a good wife. The likes of you’s not fit to go near her. I know what’s been going on here without her telling me. Sleeping with the lodger! Don’t you deny it, or I’ll bash your mouth in for you!’

‘Never, George, never!’ she cried, passionately righteous. ‘I swear by God as I’m standing here, it never came to that.’

‘You can swear by the devil for all I care. I’ve finished with you. It’s him I want!’ His voice left him. He cleared his throat and spat viciously in the fire.

Mary pulled her senses together. ‘George,’ she said, ‘have you ever known me tell you a lie?’

‘I never knew a woman who wouldn’t,’ he said, with a laugh.

She let his speech pass. ‘Imagine the hard times we’ve had,’ she went on, ‘and not so much as a word from you! Not a penny in the house! The way he’s worked for us and suffered for us, and p. 385
all for the sake of the word he gave you. There’s not a man in a million who’d have done it! And all for nothing!’

‘All for nothing!’ he mocked: ‘tell that to some one else!’

‘Without him we should have starved . . . me and the children. Can’t you see that for yourself? And yet you believe the first word that’s spoken against him and me. You ought to go down on your knees to him and thank him for what he’s done. If it hadn’t been for him you’d have found us all in the workhouse. George, you must believe me!’

‘Oh, shut your bloody mouth!’ he said, rising clumsily.

‘George, you must!’ she repeated. She put her hand on his shoulder, but he pushed her away. Both of them heard a step on the path. She made a last, desperate effort. ‘George, if you touch him . . . ‘ she cried. ‘If you . . .!

Abner stood in the doorway. His face was solemn and heavily lined. The sight of Malpas did not seem to disturb him.

‘Hallo, George,’ he said, in a thick voice. ‘How goes it?’

‘Don’t you talk to me!’ said George, threateningly. ‘You wait till I’ve told you what I think of you, you damned swine!’

Abner flushed.

‘Steady, George! Go steady! We’ve got to talk this over. You sit down.’

‘There’s a sight too much talk about the both of you,’ George snarled. ‘When you’ve broke up a man’s home behind his back and then tell him to take a seat in it. I’m going to give you your lesson before you get kicked out!’

He made a threatening movement toward Abner, who watched him closely. Spider came dancing into the room. She leapt up at Abner with little yelps of joy at his return, licking his hand. At this sight the anger that smouldered in George’s brain leapt into flame.

‘Not only the wife and the kids,’ he cried. ‘You’ve got round the lot of them, even the bleeding dog!’ p. 386

He snatched up the poker and hit out at Spider. Abner took the blow on his thigh.

‘Here, drop that!’ he cried.

But George’s senses had left him. He flew at Abner, raining desperate blows at his head.

‘George! You’ll kill him!’ Mary screamed.

Abner had picked up a chair and protected himself as best he could. For a second the two men stood staring at one another, panting for breath. Then another gust of anger swept over George and he made for Abner again. Mary tried to throw herself between them, but Abner flung her aside. The legs of the chair were splintered under George’s blows. He continued to lash out, and it was as much as Abner could do to defend himself. He saw that the man’s flushed brain meant murder, nothing less. Somehow he must put an end to this madness. George’s hobnails slithered on the stone flags. Abner took his chance, and timed his blow. George went down with a groan: his poker sang like a tuning fork on the floor.

‘Abner, Abner, what have you done?’ Mary cried. She ran to George and bent over him, pulling up his head. Abner, with black blood dripping from a bruised vein on his forehead, stood back. The corners of his mouth twitched with his violent breathing: he still held his chair uplifted.

‘It was him or me,’ he panted.

‘He’s dead! You’ve killed him!’

‘Not he! That sort don’t die.’

But he himself was anxious for a moment and stooped over George’s body, breathing heavily.

‘No. He’s all right,’ he said. ‘Just knocked out. I’ve been like that myself.’

‘What can we do?’ she cried, staring at him with frightened eyes.

‘Leave him alone. He’ll come round.’

‘I sent you a note by Gladys,’ she said inconsequently. ‘He met her and took it off her. I’d told you to keep away.’

‘If I’d had it it would have made no difference. You can’t stop a thing like this. Get up and put your things on. I’ll keep an eye on him. Get the children dressed and all.’ p. 387

She stared at him as though she couldn’t take in what he was saying. She was still holding one of George’s inanimate hands that she had clutched in her first anxiety. ‘Dress them, Abner? What do you mean?’

‘It’s time we cleared. He won’t hurt.’

‘But I couldn’t leave him like this!’

He took her arm. ‘Do what I tell you. Go on! The sooner we clear the better.’

‘Abner, we can’t turn out in the middle of the night.’

‘That’s all right. You won’t come to no harm. I’ll look after you.’

‘Abner, I can’t!’ she wailed. ‘You don’t know what you’re asking.’

‘It’s either go now or stay altogether. I can’t stop here. That’s clear enough. If you and me are going together we must go now.’

‘Abner, my dear, I can’t face it. Not after this. Abner, I’m too frightened to move a step. And if he died . . .’

‘I tell you he’s all right. He’ll come round sober. If I was to wait for that there’d be no end to it. It’d begin all over again.’

She gazed at him, anguished.

‘Abner, my love, I daren’t. Don’t you understand? They’ll follow us. They’re bound to. The police . . .’

‘It’s no good thinking of that,’ he said.

She began crying softly, there on the floor above the prostrate body. Her fingers mechanically stroked George's hand. The action irritated Abner. He could not look at her. He took a cloth from the table and mopped the blood that was running into his eyes. He propped himself up with the table edge, for he was still giddy from George's blow on his temple. A sudden vision came to him of another kitchen, another man lying on the floor, another woman crying. The room swam before him. He steadied himself and sank down into a chair. The sense of time left him. He could not be certain where he was or in what period of his life. A shrill singing noise was in his ears. Through it, distantly, he heard the clear tone of a clock striking eight; and this recalled him to life, to the room that he had lost in a blur of confused memories, to the sound of Mary's sobbing. He remembered that he had been speaking, but could only repeat the last words that had left an echo in his memory: 'It's no good . . .' p. 388

'What?' he heard her ask.

'Wasting time over this. If you're coming you must come now. Now or never.'

She neither moved nor answered him. He felt sorry for her: bent over her, pressed her to him. She turned her face away.

'I can't, Abner . . . not now,' she whispered. 'I can't think: I can't feel. Oh, why didn't he kill me . . . why didn't he kill me?'

He would have lifted her to her feet, but she lay a dead weight in his arms. All power of volition had left her. She sank back again limply, shaking her head from side to side. Her hair had become loose. It hung down over her shoulder.

Abner felt that he must do something to break the paralysing spell that held them.

'I'm going, Mary,' he said. 'I can't stay. Let me help you up! Come along now!'

She shook her head. 'It's no use, Abner.'

'There's naught left for you here that I can see. It's only you and the kids I want to look after.'

She could only go on sobbing: 'It's no use . . . it's no use!'

'Well, I'm no judge. Maybe yo'm right,' he said.

He turned from her and went upstairs to collect a few of his belongings. On his way down again Gladys came timidly to the door of Mary's room and called his name. Her piteous fragility touched him. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

'Where are you going, Abner?' she whispered. 'Where's mam?'

He picked the child up and carried her to her cot, telling her that she must be a good girl and go to sleep. Morgan was sitting up with his fingers in his eyes, crying mechanically. 'You look after our Morgan till mam comes,' he told her. p. 389

He came down into the kitchen.

'Mary . . .' he said.

She did not answer. He went to her and put his arms round her neck.

'Good-bye, lass,' he said.

Her sobbing increased, but she would not raise her head. He wanted to pick her up in his arms as he had picked up Gladys, to carry her away with him; but he knew it was useless. He kissed her again, then rose and went to the door, closing it softly behind him. The cold air revived him. He drew it gratefully into his lungs. He was conscious of a strange physical lightening, as though a material load had slipped from his shoulders.

The Twenty-Fifth Chapter p. 390

BEHIND him Wolfpits lay brooding in the moonlight on its departed life. He did not turn to look at it, and in half an hour had reached the main road. He did not know where he was going, but turned mechanically toward the east, the quarter from which he had first entered the hills. At present it was not in him to strike out a way for himself; he could do no more than retrace his steps. He walked fast, impelled by an unconscious energy, and all the time one dominant thought possessed his brain. 'Curse women! Curse all women! Curse the bloody lot of them!'

He passed through Chapel Green and Mainstone, dead villages both. Not a light in their windows. As dead as Wolfpits. The poplar under which he had trysted with Susie hung above him. The moonlight broke in ripples on its lofty crown. He saw nothing at all, heard nothing but the steady rhythm of his feet and the monotonous burden of words in his brain. The moon sank. Now the road was only faintly luminous with the reflected pallor of the sky. He heard a new noise behind him, and the lamps of a motor-car swept a slanting beam that carried his shadow into the hedge. The noise of the engine became distinct. A top-heavy van loomed up above the

two blinding eyes of the headlights. He stood aside to let it pass; but as its roar overtook him, his own voice gave a hail that was swept along in the draught. He did not know why he had shouted, but a second later the car pulled up with grinding brakes, striking sparks of fire from the road. He ran after it.

'What's up?' the driver called.

It was a man whom Abner had sometimes met at Llandwlas station when he was driving the milk from The Dyke.

'Oh, it's you, is it?' he said. 'Want a lift?' Abner caught him up and climbed into the seat next his.

They set off again, whirling like a tornado through the darkness. They could only speak to each other by shouting, for the engine was old and full of rattles, and the milk-pails jangled behind. p. 391

'Drop you Lesswardine Bridge?' the driver shouted.

'Drop me in hell if you like,' Abner replied.

'What about Shrewsbury to be going on with?'

'That'll do me!'

The roar and vibration filled Abner's aching brain. They turned northward at Craven Arms and plunged on between the rising masses of the Mynd and Caer Caradoc. The hotels of Church Stretton burned like a constellation in the darkness on their left. The lights of Shrewsbury appeared.

'That's good going, bain't it?' said the driver, with a laugh.

He refused the drink that Abner offered him and set him down in the outskirts of the city. Abner's head was splitting. He staggered into a pub and drank three double whiskies straight off. What was there for a man to do but drink?

He passed into the main streets of the town. After the silence and darkness of Wolfpits it seemed to him a city of palaces sparkling with light. He moved in a dazed manner through the streets; had another drink, and began to feel better. For the first time since he had set out he felt capable of a determination. He resolved, as far as his money would let him, to get drunk.

He sampled several pubs and at last found one to his fancy. There, in a small and crowded bar, he settled himself in a corner next the counter and ordered his drinks methodically. Nobody took much notice of him, for most of the men who had gathered there were regular customers who came in every night. The only person with whom he had anything in common was a lanky labourer with a small head and dark eyes who sat at a table opposite to him drinking beer. The evening wore on. Abner was no longer conscious of such details. The only things that detached themselves from the warm, rosy confusion were certain points of light, the stopper of a cut-glass decanter that flashed rays of ruby and emerald-green; a brooch of brilliants that the barmaid wore; a medal hanging on the watch-chain of the labourer opposite to him. Abner's fancy played with these lights childishly fascinated. He heard not a word of the conversation that buzzed around him, keeping only enough of his senses to ask and pay for his drinks. p. 392

It was nearly ten o'clock when another figure entered the bar: a man dressed in a military uniform with staring eyes and a red face that appeared to be transfixed by the skewer of a waxed moustache. He carried a silver-headed cane under his arm; his tunic fitted his back like a glove, and in his cap he wore a raffish bunch of ribbons. He shook hands with the barmaid, swept the room with a curious glance and settled down with his drink at the elbow of the lanky labourer. He spoke so loudly, and with such an accent of gentility that his voice could be heard above the rumour of the bar. He slapped his neighbour on the back.

'Out of work?' he said. 'There's no need for any one to be out of work in these days. I know the kind of work you chaps get, and damn me if I can see how you put up with it. Now, what have you been earning on the farm? Fifteen shilling a week? I guessed as much. And ten hours' work a day. That's a fine life for a man! That's a damned fine life! I know what it is, my boy. I've had some of it. But that was many years ago. I had the sense to join the army, the good old Fifty-third, and I've lived the life of a gentleman ever since. That's what you ought to do. Take the King's shilling! You don't know what you're missing. Travel? See the world? I can tell you I've seen things you wouldn't credit. India . . . Egypt . . . Cyprus. That's a fine place now. You should see the women in Cyprus! Hey? Women!' He broke into an obscene laugh.

The last word echoed late in Abner's brain. 'Women!' he heard himself mumble. 'Curse the lot of them! That's what I say.'

The sergeant turned to him, delighted to have dragged another person into the conversation. The old hands nudged each other and smiled.

'No, that's going too far, my boy,' he said. 'You don't know women till you've rolled about the world a bit. There's many a chap that's been disappointed with them in England that's gone into the army and changed his mind. Now you're another, like my friend here, that's cut out for a gentleman's life. There's no saying that a fine chap like you mightn't go a lot farther than I ever did. Athletics count a lot in the army. Football, cricket, and that. Upon my word, it's just like a p. 393

long holiday, and that's the truth. A chap like you might be an officer before he finished with it.' He crossed to Abner, took his arm, and whispered in his ear: 'If you went out to Egypt where the second battalion is now, I could show you some places in Cay-ro as would soon change your mind about women. God, it's a gentleman's life, Egypt, with all the blacks to wait on you as if you was a lord! And whisky twopence a glass in the canteen! Women! I'd learn you about women.'

'I've learned all I want about *them*,' said Abner sullenly.

But he allowed the sergeant to stand him a drink, and found, as the time went on, that he was as good a fellow as he had ever met . . . he and the dark labouring man who sat at their table. When Abner's money was finished, the sergeant behaved like a friend to him. 'Money! What's money?' he said, and pulled out of his pocket a handful of silver that fell in a tinkling cascade on the marble-topped table. They sat and talked. The sergeant kept the ball rolling, patting Abner on the back and taking him by the arm with a friendly grip. He passed through a phase of exaltation into one of contented stupor, in which his only anxiety was where he should find lodging for the night.

'Don't you worry about that!' said the sergeant. 'I'll see you through, my boy! You trust me. There's just time for another.'

So, in a flash of brilliant light, the evening passed. A policeman put in his head at the door and disappeared. Abner found his new friend helping him to his feet. He laughed weakly, for he found that he could not stand.

'Steady does it, my boy, steady does it. You holt on to me and you'll be all right. God, you're a tidy weight!' p. 394

They passed laughing through an uncomfortably narrow doorway and out into the road. Street lamps danced before them in an eddying line. The road had a resilient, velvety feeling, like no other road that Abner had known. They walked arm in arm, the three of them. Abner felt himself impelled to stop suddenly, and take the sergeant into his confidence.

'Look here, kid,' he said, 'I'm boozed.'

'Boozed? Not a bit of it!' said the sergeant, with an encouraging slap on the back.

'Here, you'll look after me?' said Abner anxiously.

'You bet I will!'

'You're a good pal, kid,' said Abner. 'Straight, you are!'

Half an hour later he threw himself with relief upon a mattress that was built up of three distinct slabs and pulled a gray blanket over his eyes to shut out the host of lights that swam before them. He heard the voices of men buzzing round him and heavy, regular steps on the stone flags. All he cared about now was sleep.

He fell into a drugged slumber, haunted by many dreams. He dreamed of Halesby, of old Mrs Moseley's room and Susan Wade sitting demurely at the foot of her aunt's bed. Alice put in her head and called him, telling him that his father was dead and that she could not do without him. He got up and followed her with Tiger prancing at his heels. 'I can't abear dogs, Abner,' she cried. All his old resentment against her rose up in him, and he would have told her what he thought of her had not Mick Connor appeared at that moment and shouted his name. 'Come along wud you!' said Mick, 'why would you be bothering your head about the likes of her? It's time we were looking for a drop in Nagle's Back.' They walked on over twilight fields talking of old times. 'Go aisy round the corner,' Mick warned him, 'for the ould devil of a policeman's got his eye on us!' They went round the edge of the woodland on tiptoe, and there, sure enough, stood Bastard, with a face as white as death and a thin stream of blood trickling from his nose. p. 395 'He's dead said Abner. 'Don't look at him. Our George killed him!' 'Don't you believe it,' Mick replied. And as he spoke Bastard turned and stared at them with blank eyes. Abner set off running. He knew that his only chance was to run as hard as he could. He plunged into a close lane, smelling of elder trees and nettles. Now he knew where he was! This was the Dark Half-hour, and if he kept on running he would emerge in safety on the hill-side above Mawne Colliery, just below the cherry orchard. Even now he could hear the thudding of hammers at Willises' forge. Bastard was gaining on him, pounding along behind him, but a man stood in his path and barred the way. At first he thought it was his father, but a sudden revelation showed him that it was George Malpas. George Malpas, deathly white under his prison crop, and armed with a poker. They closed and struggled. It was a desperate business, for George managed to keep on battering his head with the poker, and Mary, in her strange tragic beauty, clutched at his arm. He knew that he was done for; fell with his hands locked about George's throat. Bastard seized him from behind, and he woke.

In prison? Surely this could be nothing else. A long stone room lit by a single gas-jet burning low and blue. He saw that he was not alone. The whole room was spread with mattresses, on which were lying figures covered with gray blankets like his own. His neighbour, a man who snored heavily and clutched at his hair with his hands, gave a groan. This could not be a dream. Through the thudding of hammers in his head his consciousness painfully emerged. He remembered that he had come to Shrewsbury the night before, that he had slunk into a pub and drunk heavily. Where was he now? In a workhouse . . . a hospital . . . a doss-house . . . a jail? He could not guess. In any case it hurt his head to think. He tried to get his bearings. He had gone

to bed in his boots. That was natural enough. He felt for his new watch. It was not there. He swore under his breath, not at the unknown people who had stolen it but at his evil luck. He supposed that they had stripped him of his money too—not that it mattered! He searched his left hand trouser pocket to see if anything remained. Not a penny! He laughed to himself. In the other pocket, to his astonishment, his fingers lighted on a single coin. How the devil had it got there? He fished it out, then propped himself on his elbow and held it up in the faint light. It was a new shilling. He stared at it; then spat on it for luck. So, tired and wretched beyond words, he turned over on his side, wrapped the blanket round his head, and went to sleep.

Anacapri;
March, *1910*.

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