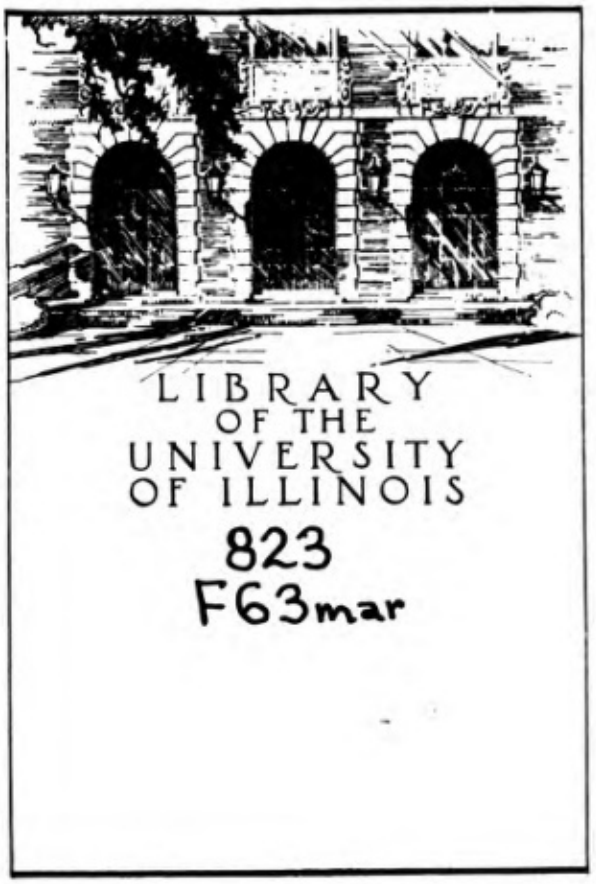
THE MARRIAGE LINES



THE MARRIAGE LINES

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BY

J. S. FLETCHER

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PART I

THE GREY SHADOW

I

MARTIN MUSCROFT, the tenant of the ancient windmill that stood, a well-known landmark, on the sharp edge of a long, low hill which overhung a wide valley, was later in returning home from the neighbouring market-town than he should have been under ordinary circumstances, and his niece, Judith, growing anxious about him, left the fireside of the old mill-house and went into the winter evening to look and listen for his coming. In the east a full moon had just risen above a belt of pine-trees which fenced in house and mill; the high road in the valley gleamed white in its unclouded radiance; Judith could follow that white strip for a good mile, but she saw no dark figure advancing along it, nor in the stillness which hung heavily over the land could she catch any sound of a horse's hoofs ringing musically on the frost-bound road. She turned instinctively towards the great bulk of the mill, and for the thousandth time saw the

grey shadow made whenever the sails were motionless, and sun or moon shone between them and the far horizon. And for the thousandth time she shivered, under the influence of a strange, nameless fear; the shadow was always in the form of a cross, and the cross fell athwart the strip of green which stretched between the house and the mill. It affected nobody but herself, she knew; she had never heard it mentioned by Martin, her uncle, nor by Michael, her cousin and lover, nor by Jael Quince, the woman who acted as servant and housekeeper and cherished many superstitions. But Judith always fancied that the long arm of the cross pointed to the door at which she and hers went in and out; that ceaseless pointing, so steady, so persistent, seemed to her to be an omen, a portent of evil.

It was very still and very cold up there on the edge of the hill. But Judith, who had spent fourteen out of her nineteen years of life in the mill-house and about it, cared nothing for frost, nor snow, nor rain, and the silence fascinated her. She drew the old shawl, which she had snatched up on leaving the house-place, a little more closely about her head and shoulders, and going to the low wall of the garden that stretched in terraces down the hillside, leaned upon its coping and

looked into the valley beneath her. The night was so clear, so frosty, the moonlight so strong, that she could see all that the valley had to show. The coppices and plantations which studded the tops of the opposite hills, two miles away, were clearly cut against the sky; the moonbeams shone on the vane of the little church of the only village, a mile off, which could be seen from that point; they shone, too, on the frozen surface of the narrow river, which made a hundred twists and turns beneath its fringe of alders and willows before it disappeared amongst the dark woods in the distance. This was a lonely land; Muscroft's Mill seemed to be far away from everywhere. True, there, plainly to be seen, was the little village in the valley; there was another, a larger village, behind the hill; three miles away, its presence indicated by a canopy of yellow light in the sky, was the market-town, a place of size and importance. But there were no homesteads in the valley nor on the long ridge of the hill; near Muscroft's there were no cottages. Thereabouts there was nothing but the mill itself, a great, gaunt thing, the foundations of which, according to clever people, had been laid in Saxon times, and the old house by it, with its garden, its orchard, its outbuildings. A by-lane connected it with the high road—a long, winding,

narrow, high-banked by-lane; it was a conceit of the old miller's to say that nothing could get up that lane but a three-horsed cart and a merry wind.

The top of the hill Judith knew as intimately as she knew the nooks and corners of the old house in which she had spent childhood and youth. It was a long hill-top, stretching for two miles above the valley, and though it nowhere attained a height of more than two hundred feet, it was so situated that those who walked upon it commanded far-stretching prospects. Ancient people in the adjacent villages affirmed that on very clear days sharp eyes, looking in the proper directions, could see from it the Peak of Derbyshire, the towers of Lincoln, set on their great hill, the waters of the Humber, the Yorkshire Wolds, and York Minster. The Peak and the Wolds Judith and Michael had often made out; sometimes a shining and a glory in the east had made them fancy that they beheld the Humber; certain grey somethings on the long horizon they had taken for York and Lincoln. But whatever there might be of thorpe and toft, spire and tower, river and mead in the blue-grey of the far-thrown landscape, there was always the mill, black, forceful, dominating everything.

And near the mill was a feature of the hill-top

which exercised a strange fascination over the girl. This was a curious hollow, sunk in the highest part of the hill, and fenced about with gnarled, twisted, and sinister-looking beech-trees of great age. Some people considered it to have been a quarry, but there was nothing to show that any mineral had been quarried there; nevertheless, beneath the undergrowth of bramble, and elder-bush, and briar there were still holes and pits, so deep that some of them were held to be bottomless. This place, Hobman's Hole, was said to be haunted by the ghost of the man from whom it took its name; who Hobman was, however, and why he haunted these cavities and beeches, nobody knew. Martin and Michael Muscroft laughed at the notion; Jael Quince maintained a prudent reserve in speaking of it; Judith was not sure whether she believed that Hobman's spirit came there or not. But it was certain that whenever a gale came from east or west there were strange, unearthly noises heard around the hollow, and that from the concealed cavities sounds arose which closely resembled the groanings of a sorely-troubled spirit.

Judith turned from a contemplation of the valley to look at the dark twisted shapes of the beeches which ringed-in this mysterious place. Presently she left the garden wall, and passing

through a small wicket-gate at the end of the house, walked slowly across the crisp grass, sparkling in the moonlight as if a million diamonds had been sprinkled over it, to the edge of the hollow. Something in its weirdness, its mystery, seemed to give her comfort, to afford her company. All that evening, from the time they had drawn blinds and curtains and lighted the lamps, she had felt a strange sensation of loneliness, a heaviness of spirit for which she could not account. Michael was away; they were wanting new machinery in the mill; he had gone to another part of the county to see what modern methods were coming into use. And Martin was late home from the market town, an unusual occurrence, for he was not the man to stop drinking and gossiping in inn-parlours, after his business was done. Within the mill-house everything was very silent. The supper-table was laid against the master's coming; a pot which contained a hot stew simmered on the hob; in a corner of the long settle Jael Quince sat silently working away with the bright knitting needles which she always picked up when she had no other task on hand. In the opposite corner there was a pile of sewing, to which Judith ought to have been giving her attention, but she had felt herself too restless, too full of some vague fidgettiness to take it in hand; the mere attempt

to put thread in needle, she felt, would have resulted in a loss of temper. There was the notion in her, indefinite, shapeless, but there, that something was going to happen.

Leaning over the broken fencing which shut off Hobman's Hole from the hillside, Judith stared moodily at the gnarled beeches, the clumps of bramble, the shafts of moonlight which quivered through the nearly naked branches overhead. A light wind was rising; it began to whistle through the time-worn trunks of the trees, and presently to sob and moan in the concealed cavities. Judith listened to its sighings with a pleasure that was chiefly derived from the mystery of them; to her the wind was not the cause of these complaints, but rather a signal which called forth a response from the spirit of the hollow. She heard other sounds, too; somewhere close by her, some living thing rustled away amongst the dry undergrowth; in the masses of dead leaves there were stirrings and shiverings, as if the things that had made their beds there were afraid; from the depths of a briar-brake two specks of fire glared at her. At that her courage departed, hastened by a loud sobbing of the wind in the beeches; she turned and went back to the mill and the house. And with her hand on the sneck of the door she turned and

looked at the shadow which lay athwart the stretch of green sward; it was still there, clearer-cut than ever, and the long arm pointed steadily at the threshold she was about to cross.

II

BEFORE Judith could open the door a man came round the corner of the mill-house, softly speaking her name. The voice was familiar enough, and she turned slowly and with obvious reluctance to its owner, her cousin Stephen, Martin's younger son, dismissed his father's house a twelvemonth because of his dissolute habits. He came cautiously up to her in the shadow, glancing at the lighted window as if he feared that his voice might penetrate glass and curtain.

"Michael inside?" he asked, nodding at the door.

"Michael is away," answered Judith, brusquely. "He's away until to-morrow noon."

Stephen Muscroft, now come into the glare of the moon, frowned.

"Damn!" he muttered. "That's just my luck. And I want a bit of money, Judith, my girl. I'll always say this for old Michael, he's never close-fisted. Always has a pound for his

brother when nobody else has a penny. Flesh and blood in him, has Michael."

Judith edged away from the atmosphere of spirits with which Stephen was always clothed. She lifted her hand again to the sneck.

"Well, he's away," she repeated.

"Stop a bit," said Stephen, motioning her to stay her hand. "Well—yourself now, Judith, lass? You see, it's this way—Sherratt and me, we're not over and above well-off, as everybody knows, and it seems we've out-run the constable a bit at the shop, and the order is, no more without cash down or something off the old bill. Give you my word, Judith, we've nothing in the house. If Michael had been at home, now—come, my girl, you can't see your own cousin want."

Judith removed her hand from the sneck. She looked at Stephen's weak, handsome face; the moonlight showed her the blotched cheeks, the reddening nose, their colour accentuated by the sharp frost. Under her scrutiny Stephen smiled—a feeble smile, yet a cunning one.

"Come on, now!" he said, coaxingly. "Family ties, you know, Judith."

Judith hesitated.

"Oh, Stephen!" she said. "If—if I give you any money, you'll only go straight to the Hooded Hawk with it! You know you will."

Stephen drew a step nearer.

"Honour bright, I won't, Judith!" he asserted. "Sherratt's waiting down the road there—I made sure Michael would be at home, you know—and I'll give it to her. Come on—I know you always have a bit put by. There'll be no supper for us, if you don't, my lass. Now, Michael——"

Judith sighed heavily. She knew that Stephen was speaking the truth as regards his brother. Michael, himself steady as a rock, contemptuous of swillers and tosspots, still kept a soft corner in his heart for the lad to whom drink had been a curse before he was out of his teens. His hand was always in his pocket for Stephen's benefit, and what he took out of it in that way he never expected to put back. And, therefore, if Michael set her the example—Michael, whom she worshipped with a blind adoration. . . .

"Come on, Judith, love," said Stephen, seeing all her thoughts in her face. "You were always a good sort. Make it a couple of pounds, now."

"I haven't got a couple of pounds, Stephen," she answered. "I've about twenty-five shillings put away. Go round to my window and I'll drop it out to you."

Then she lifted the latch, and entered the house, and went up to her chamber, and finding a small linen bag, full of silver, in a corner of her

chest, opened the window, and leaning out, lowered it to Stephen's eager hands.

"Don't go to the Hooded Hawk, Stephen," she whispered imploringly. "You know, your father always hears of it, and then it makes him harder than ever. Don't!"

"All right, my lass, all right!" replied Stephen. "I won't—at least," he added to himself, "at least, not until after supper." He looked up in the moonlight, smiling and nodding. "I'd do the same for you, Judith," he said, confidently. "I'm not the sort to see old friends go short. And if ever Michael's fixed as I am——"

Judith's pride in Michael flashed up into a quick reply.

"He never will be!" she exclaimed. "Michael's too——"

Stephen laughed grimly.

"Don't you be too sure, my girl!" he said "It's a queer world this, and you never know what's going to happen. Who'd have thought that I——"

"You'd better go, Stephen," she said, leaning further out of the window. "I'm expecting your father every minute. He's not back from Sicaster yet, and if he finds you here, or you meet him in the lane, there'll only be a quarrel. Besides, you said Sherratt was waiting."

"I'm going," he answered, turning away. "And you needn't tell him I've been or he'll be cutting down my allowance, as he calls it. Allowance!—to his own son."

He seemed to be about to say more, but then thought better of it, and turned away with a nod. Judith watched him cross the stretch of moonlighted grass which lay between house and mill, and as he stepped into the shadow made by the sails she shivered for the second time that evening. Closing the window she went away to join the woman whom, half an hour earlier, she had left knitting steadily and silently in her usual seat at the side of the hearth in the house-place. And as she made her way down the unlighted stairs and along the dark passages of the old house, she found herself wondering how it was that on that night she felt what she never remembered to have felt before, in all her life—a strange sense of loneliness, a strange longing for company.

III

JUDITH entered the house-place to find Jael Quince sitting back in the corner of the long settle, staring fixedly at a candle which stood on the little table drawn closely in front of her.

Her knitting lay idle in her lap, as if she had suddenly forgotten its existence; her lips muttered something inaudible; she slowly nodded her head at the candle. Hearing Judith enter she withdrew her gaze, and turned to the girl with a meaning look.

"That's the third," she said.

"Third what?" asked Judith, half listlessly.

"Warning. Warning of a death. This morning, when I woke—long before the light came, that was—I heard the death-watch. I ha'nt ever heard it in this house since Stephen's mother died, and you can't remember that, so you may judge how long ago that is. However, there it was, and there's no mistaking it—at least, them as knows it never fails to recognise it. I knew it."

"How do you come to know it so well if you haven't heard it in all these years?" asked Judith, with some accent of scornful incredulity.

"I didn't say I hadn't heard it in all these years. I said I hadn't heard it in this house. But I have heard it. I heard it when I went to help to nurse John Groom's wife in the village—didn't I sit up with her the last two nights, and didn't I hear it each night, as plain as could be? And didn't she die the third day?"

"She'd have died in any case," said Judith,

dropping into a favourite corner of the settle and picking up an old book that she had been trying to read earlier in the evening. "The doctor said there wasn't any hope for her from the very first."

"I reckon naught much of what doctors say: I've known folk come round again when doctors and better doctors have given them up. Besides, they didn't say when she was to pass. I knew. And I know what I heard this morning. And what I saw, too, when I was tidying up the master's chamber."

"What?" demanded Judith.

"I saw the blind fall. And yesterday it was that I put that blind on the roller—clean blinds in all the chamber windows I put on yesterday. Fell down, without warning—top to bottom."

"Because the cord wasn't tight."

"The cord was tight. Yes, the death watch before dawn, and then a fallen blind, and now this. There's a death at hand."

Judith looked at the candle towards which Jael was pointing a skinny forefinger. There she saw what the folk thereabouts called a winding-sheet. And though she was not going to confess it, she felt a qualm of fear. All her life she had been listening to tales of premonition and apparition, tales of the Bargest, of the White Rabbit,

of visions seen in the church porch at midnight, of voices and mysterious whisperings heard by folk who walked alone in the woods, and her mind had become impregnated in spite of herself. From looking at the winding-sheet in the candle, she looked at Jael Quince, wondering if the woman really believed in what she had been saying. The housekeeper was a little, dried-up, atom of a person, flat of bosom, virginal of waist; the tight stays that enclosed her apparently fleshless figure were not more rigid than the lines of her thin-lipped mouth: everything about her suggested inflexibility, determination, practical notions about life. Her vinegary expression, her cold eyes of bluey-green, her attitude, her very garments, seemed to indicate anything but a tolerance of mysticism or superstition. Yet Judith knew her to be as full of talk about signs and omens as a good egg is full of meat.

"Whose death?" she asked, suddenly waking up from the reverie into which she had fallen. "Whose?"

Jael Quince had picked up her knitting; the bright needles were clicking again; from their polished brightness scintillations of light shot out, darting here and there as they moved in her subtle fingers.

"How can I tell?" she replied. "It might

be you, or it might be me, or the master, or Michael."

"Or Stephen," said Judith. "That is, if it's to be in the family."

Jane shook her head.

"Not Stephen. Because he's no longer under the roof. The signs are for those of the household."

Judith laughed, but she stirred nervously in her seat.

"You don't believe it, Jael!" she said.

"Three signs together never fail," answered Jael Quince, with determination. "It wouldn't surprise me if the master was carried in feet first, nor to hear that Michael had happened his death. The last death in the family was Stephen's mother. First, there was the magpies. I saw them—they sat in a row on the rails of Hobman's Hole yonder for three days running, a thing they've never done before or since, at least to my knowledge. Then, Lightforth, that worked in the mill in those days, saw the White Rabbit in the stackgarth—there wasn't a doubt about that, for it was a moonlight night, such as this is, and Lightforth was a sober and serious man, a chapel-goer, and religious. And that time, too, there was a winding-sheet in the candle, as there is now. Then she died."

"But—but," said Judith, timidly, "didn't—if as you told me, once—didn't she die in childbirth?"

"What's that got to do with it? The thing is that she died. First there was the signs and then the death."

"And quite young, wasn't she?" asked Judith. She already knew the whole story by heart, but she asked the question because she felt a morbid interest in the fate of one cut off in the spring of youth.

"Naught but a slip of a lass," replied Jael. "No older than yourself. In some things Stephen is the very spit of her—the same light hair and blue eyes—good-looking, both of 'em."

"Michael's mother must have been dark, then," said Judith, reflectively.

"I know naught about Michael's mother. The master never brought her into these parts—she was gone before he came here. Him and Stephen's mother had just been wed when I came to live with them."

Judith was familiar enough with the story of how Jael Quince came to be a member of the household: the old miller had revealed it to her when he and she were alone in the house, at the time when Jael went to nurse John Groom's wife in the adjacent village. One winter after-

noon, soon after Martin Muscroft's second marriage, he, coming in with his cart from a country round, had found a queer-looking little woman sitting on a heap of stones at the junction of the lane and the high road, who asked him if he knew of any folk thereabouts who needed help in the house. It so chanced that Martin's wife was neither well nor strong; after questioning the woman and forming an opinion that she was clean, capable, and strong, he took her in as help, and soon found that he had got a bargain. Jael Quince became a permanent feature of Muscroft's Mill; she took all the heavy work off the mistress's hands; she nursed her when she fell ill; she brought up the child Stephen when he was left motherless; she had remained the active spirit of the place ever since. Judith remembered that Jael was practical ruler of the household when she herself came there, left to the care of her uncle Martin by his brother Matthew, who, himself a widower, wished her seen to while he went to try his fortune in America, from which far-off land he had never returned. Michael was then a boy of nine years; Stephen of six; she was four. Jael Quince had mothered them all, ruling with a rod of steel in all matters entrusted to her governance. Of the three only Stephen was readily amenable to her rule;

Michael resented any exercise of it, and, as he grew older, openly defied her, inciting Judith to follow his example. When the 'teen time came to all of them there were two armed camps in the house: Michael and Judith formed one; Jael constituted the other. It was to Jael's shelter that Stephen always turned; she concealed his boyish sins and his weaknesses from the master. When he grew up she still shielded him; when Martin, wearied of his dissolute ways and incensed by his secret and inadvisable marriage, turned him out of the house, Jael locked her lips and maintained a strange silence. Silent enough she could be, as Martin knew, for, as he remarked to Judith when he told her how Jael came to the place, he knew no more of her antecedents after nearly thirty years than he knew when he brought her into the kitchen and bade her hang up her shawl and bonnet. She was, and always had been, a woman of mystery.

"She must have been dark, because Michael's dark," repeated Judith. "Uncle Martin is light, like Stephen—or, at least, he was." Then, finding that Jael made no answer, noticing indeed, from the added tightness of the thin lips, that the housekeeper was not going to offer any comment on Michael's supposed likeness to his mother, she said, "Jael—Stephen was here just now."

Jael Quince looked up quickly, and if Judith had been more observant, she would have seen a curious flashing of the oddly-coloured eyes. But Jael made no remark.

"Wanting Michael—and money, of course," added Judith. "He always wants money. However, as Michael wasn't at home, I gave him some. So you needn't think he went without."

Jael Quince bent over her knitting. But presently she looked up, and the thin lips curved in something like a smile.

"It's a poor thing when a grown man has to beg at his own father's door!" she said.

Judith's family pride flashed up.

"Who's fault's that?" she exclaimed. "Does not his father give him enough to live on? Thirty shillings a week for doing nothing, Michael says. And where does most of it go? To the Hooded Hawk!"

"I never forget my place," said Jael Quince. "It's not for me to speak. But folk may be driven to worse things than drink. A young man'll turn to liquor if he's nothing to turn to at home."

"You're meaning that Michael's the favourite," said Judith suspiciously.

"I say it's not for me to speak, nor yet interfere. But when there's three on one side, and only one

on another, the one'll go elsewhere for company It's poor work to feel yourself left out in the cold."

"His own fault," repeated Judith. "And Michael works for what he gets. He never went to sit all the afternoon in public-houses with toss-pots and gossipers, nor raked out at night as Stephen did. Stephen's a bad lot, Jael Quince! I gave him my pocket-money, because, as Michael says, we can't see him want, but I'd lay anything that when he'd given that Sherratt some of it he'd go to the Hooded Hawk and spend the rest. And if Michael has been thought of more than Stephen, you must remember that Michael's the eldest, and he'll be master."

"And you—mistress," said Jael Quince, quietly.

Judith made no reply. She threw aside the old book, rose from the settle, and stretching her arms above her out of sheer laziness of body, glanced at herself in the great mirror, set in an ancient oaken frame, which hung above the mantelpiece. A sudden thought, prompted by the housekeeper's observation, flashed upon her mind—when she and Michael were married, as they were to be in the coming spring, they would be the handsomest couple in all the countryside. No one could question Michael's claim to be the properest man in those parts; she thought of his

six feet of height, his thew and sinew, his cheery, laughing face, his vigorous health, glowing in cheek and eye—oh, he was as goodly a man, Michael, as ever a maid could desire! And, not without a warm glow of pride, she recognised herself as a fitting mate for him. The old mirror showed her a fine, strapping, buxom lass, dark of eye, dusky of hair, rosy of lip and cheek, deep bosomed, generously proportioned, bursting with the vast, mysterious potentialities of wife and mother. Her cheek, hot from the blazing fire of wood logs, glowed more hotly as she eyed herself with shy looks and thought of Michael and marriage.

Suddenly Judith turned and glanced at the figure which sat so silently in the corner of the long settle. Jael Quince was paying no regard to her; the knitting needles were still at work, her eyes were fixed on the winding sheet in the candle, and around her thin lips the ghost of a smile struggled for existence.

IV

STEPHEN MUSCROFT crossed the moonlit patch of ground between the house and the mill, and instead of turning down the lane which led to the

high road made his way through a gap in the hedge of the mill croft. A meadow lay on the other side; across this he struck diagonally, striking a path towards a mass of dark woodland which rose on its further side. That mass represented a long avenue of lime and beech which led into the village beyond the shoulder of the hill, in which Stephen and his wife Sherratt lived; somewhere in the avenue Sherratt was awaiting his coming. In his imagination, which was a lively one, Stephen pictured her walking up and down, wondering if her husband was going to bring back the wherewithal to purchase some supper. This was the first time supplies had failed them; until then the village shopkeeper, Crawdale, had given them credit; that day, however, on Sherratt delivering an order Crawdale had refused to fulfil it; he, like most other people in the place, had a shrewd suspicion that Stephen spent most of his weekly allowance on drink, and that old Muscroft at the mill was unaware of it.

"He's thinking," observed Crawdale to his wife, "he's thinking, is Martin, that if he cuts Stephen down to thirty shilling a week there'll not be so much to spend on threepennorths o' gin. But he doesn't know Stephen, for all he's his own son. Stephen'll keep the brass in his pocket and get credit for his butcher's meat and his groceries

and for all that he can from such like as us, as are soft-hearted enough to trust him. But I shall put the 'stinguisher on before all the candle's burnt away."

In the middle of the field Stephen stopped and drew out of his breeches pocket the money which Judith had given him. It was all in small silver; he counted it carefully in the moonlight. Then, with a low laugh and a sly smile, which showed his white teeth and gave him a somewhat vulpine appearance, he separated ten shillings from the little heap of coins and slipped them away into an inner pocket of his waistcoat. Whatever was wanted for the table, or the larder, or the fire, he himself must not be left short of the means to treat his own hot palate and those of his particular cronies.

Climbing a post-and-rail fence at the far boundary of the meadow, Stephen dropped into the high road beneath the overarching lime trees. From behind them, his wife, a tall, thin young woman, came hurriedly to meet him, shivering as she wrapped a shawl more closely about her shoulders. Her greeting was as abrupt as her approach.

"Have you got aught?" she demanded.

Stephen caused the silver to jingle in his pocket. His wife made no effort to suppress a sigh of genuine relief.

"That's something to be thankful for," she exclaimed. "I'm half starved as it is. How much is it, Stephen?"

"None so much, my lass," answered Stephen. "You see, Michael wasn't there—gone away somewhere—so I had to borrow a bit from Judith."

The woman laughed sneeringly.

"Borrow!" she said. "It's fine work borrowing what ought to be your own. Well, what did you get from my fine madam?"

"Fourteen or fifteen shillings," answered Stephen readily, beginning to pull the money out of his breeches. "About that, anyway."

Sherratt uttered a peevish ejaculation.

"What use is that, except for to-night?" she demanded. "It 'ud ha' been more like if it had been fourteen or fifteen pounds."

"Half a loaf's better than no bread," said Stephen philosophically. "This'll do for to-night, as you say. Here, take it—I'll keep a shilling for a glass at the Hawk while you're getting a bit of supper ready."

He counted out fourteen shillings into his wife's hand, and ostentatiously retained a couple of sixpences. Sherratt took the money indifferently.

"What's the use of getting supper ready for

you ? " she said. " If you once get into the Hawk you'll stop there till you're turned out."

Stephen affected good-humoured laughter.

" It 'ud only be ten o'clock, then, my lass," he remarked. " But you'll see me in before that. It's eight now. I'll be in at nine sharp. A bit of steak, now, Sherratt ? And onions ? I'm hungry myself. And tell that Crawdale, if you go for any groceries, that I shall pay him off and go elsewhere."

Sherratt made no answer ; she was becoming used to Stephen, who invariably manifested ideas of his own importance which were based on the airiest of foundations. Husband and wife walked on in silence until they came to the entrance to the village—a place of one long, straggling street, at the head of which stood the Hooded Hawk, from the gable end of which a swinging sign projected, glittering in the moonlight. Almost opposite to it stood Crawdale's shop ; near it, a single lamp lighted the dead meat lying on the wooden slabs in the butcher's shop.

Stephen stopped instinctively at the little cobble-paved yard which lay in front of the Hooded Hawk.

" Now, nine o'clock sharp, mind ! " he said, seeming to glance with one eye at the red curtains of the inn and with the other at his wife. " I

shall be there to the minute, Sherratt, my lass. And mind you give that Crawdale a bit of your mind. I'll teach him before I've done with him."

The woman again made no answer. Still clutching the silver in her hand she crossed the road in the direction of the shop, while her husband, again reiterating his intention of being home at nine o'clock, went towards the door of the public-house. A waft of warm air, pregnant with the odour of cheap spirits and rank tobacco, surged out upon him as he lifted the latch, enveloped him, and sucked him within.

Sherratt made her purchases without any undue waste of words, and carried her parcels to the cottage in which she and Stephen had set up their establishment under such unpromising conditions. It was an old cottage, but not uncomfortable, there was plenty of room in it; a good garden lay around it, and the miller had given his son sufficient sound, substantial furniture to equip it thoroughly. Nevertheless, the larder into which Sherratt carried her purchases was, until she laid them down, bare as a bone at which a dog has patiently laboured until he knows there is nothing more left on it. Its very nakedness made her feel hungrier than ever; she made up the fire and prepared to cook the food which she had brought in. She had no intention of waiting

for Stephen; nothing could have surprised her more than his return home at any moment earlier than that in which the portals of the Hooded Hawk must be closed in obedience to the law. She would eat and drink and go to bed, and in sleep forget her injuries and wrongs.

For Sherratt considered herself a much-wronged young woman. Old Martin Muscroft, of Muscroft's Mill, was supposed to be a wealthy man; at that time, and all through his time, the corn-milling trade was good, and the old place at the edge of the hill had a monopoly of it in that neighbourhood. Sherratt, previous to her marriage a barmaid in the adjacent market-town, had believed that she was doing a fine thing when she wedded the rich miller's son; it had been a shock to her to find her husband speedily turned out by his father, given what she called a handful of sticks wherewith to furnish a cottage, and practically pensioned off with thirty shillings a week. And the experience was all the harder to bear because Martin meted out vastly different treatment to Michael and Judith. Michael had a fine horse to ride about on, while Stephen trudged afoot; Judith, who, to use Sherratt's phraseology, was kept out of charity, her own father having failed to provide for her, went by to church every Sunday morning in fine feathers, while she herself

was coming in sight of the day when she would have but one gown to her back. Stephen might have his faults, but that was no reason why she should suffer; in her opinion Martin ought to provide her with a good house, and a servant girl, and at least five pounds a week.

With Martin, with Michael, or with Judith, Stephen's wife had never exchanged speech since their coming to the village. The folk at the mill were held to be proud and exclusive by the village people; moreover, Martin Muscroft was still regarded as an outsider, a foreigner, for it was scarcely twenty-five years since his arrival. They came little into the village, except on Sundays, when they dutifully attended the church services. Once or twice Sherratt had met them, singly, on the road between the village and the town; Martin had ridden by with a strong look on his face; Michael, with a reddened cheek and an expression of discomfort; Judith, with shy, distressed glances. As for Sherratt, she had turned up her nose and curved down her lips; herself the daughter of a farmer who had had the misfortune to break, she considered herself much above mere corn-millers. And she hated Martin and Michael and Judith because they looked prosperous and were well clad.

Sitting over her supper Sherratt allowed her

resentment to smoulder. She had nothing else to think about. She supposed things were always going to be like that. Stephen would drink most of the money that came in—it was paid to him every week by Michael, and Sherratt had a shrewd suspicion that Michael always added a bit of his own—he would never do any work, and the tradespeople would refuse further credit. She almost wished herself in rags and obliged to apply for parish relief so that the fine folk at the mill might be put to shame.

The sound of a horse's hoofs on the cobble-stones in the cottage yard sent Sherratt to the door. As she opened it, she heard a rider dismount, and presently in the light of the lamp which she had caught up she recognised Martin Muscroft. For a moment the two looked at each other, she sullenly defiant, he sternly, and yet with some evidence of concern for her.

"Stephen's not in," she said abruptly.

Martin threw the reins across his horse's neck.

"I didn't think for him to be in," he answered. "It's a word with you that I want, mistress."

Sherratt made no answer. She turned back into the cottage, set the lamp on the table, and resumed the eating of her supper. Her attitude, her behaviour, were meant to show contemptuous indifference.

The miller followed his daughter-in-law with hesitating steps. He left the door slightly ajar, and taking off his hat, leaned a hand on the table at which Sherratt sat.

"I say I didn't think for to find Stephen in," he repeated. "By all accounts, he spends most of his time at the Hawk. I wanted to have a word or two with his wife. You're aware, mistress, that I make my son a 'lowance of thirty shilling a week."

"I ought to be!" sneered Sherratt.

Martin caught and understood the sneer. He shook his head.

"It's a good 'lowance," he said. "Some would call it a handsome 'lowance, under the circumstances. He's no rent to pay for this cottage; I gave him proper furnishing for it; he's only two mouths to fill, and if he liked he could addle as much as what I give him, aye, an' more. Him and you, mistress, should live very comfortably on that money. And yet, I understand—it's come to my ears, only to-day—you're in debt. Is that right, or is it wrong, now?"

Sherratt laughed.

"Right enough!" she answered.

"It's the first time, then, that it could ever be said of one of our name," said Martin slowly. "We were never for getting into debt, us

Muscrofts; always t'other way about. Now, mistress, I can't have it. I will not have my name dragged i' the muck, neither here nor elsewhere."

Sherratt made no reply. She pushed her plate away from her, folded her arms on the table, and stared at Martin impudently. The miller shook his head again.

"It must stop, mistress," he said.

"Stop it, then," exclaimed Sherratt. "If you can."

"Can and will," said Martin. "Now, mistress, you must tell me who you're owing money to in the place. Out with it—keep naught back! I shall pay every man Jack of 'em to-night. No man's going to have my name on the wrong side of his books. Out with it!"

Sherratt felt an agreeable sense of surprise. She had no objection to this; if Martin settled off old scores, she would be able to run up new ones, for the tradesfolk would argue that if Mr. Muscroft paid up once he could be expected to pay up again. She began to consider the extent of the joint debts of Stephen and herself, wondering if she might include an item or two in the market-town—the settlement of one of those items would mean that she could order a new gown.

"I want the lot," continued Martin. "Keep

naught back—naught! Never mind the amounts —give me the names of the folks that brass is owing to, and there'll be no brass owing before the night's over. Keep naught back, I say—let me hear it all. I'll make a clear sweep now I've ta'en the besom in hand."

Sherratt took courage; the prospect of a new gown encouraged her. She reeled off the names of the creditors. After all, it was no very formidable list. And Martin nodded his head at the name of each, checking the number on his broad-tipped fingers.

"Nobody more?" he questioned.

"That's all—that I know of," answered Sherratt.

"Then, all that's in this village'll be paid to-night," he said. "Those that are elsewhere'll get their brass to-morrow. And now, mistress, you'll hearken to me. There'll be no more of this. The first time you or Stephen gets credit, you'll get no more 'lowance from me."

"How're we going to live, then?" demanded Sherratt. "You know as well as I do that Stephen drinks most of the money! I can't keep a home going on what he gives me."

Martin shook his finger at her.

"Stephen 'll have no money to handle," he said. "I will not have my brass wared and

wasted across at yon Hawk—at no Hawks, nor Dogs and Ducks, nor Foxes and Hounds, nor nowhere! What's to be in future, mistress, is this —I shall give orders to all them as you've dealt with, butcher, grocer, and such like, to supply you in reason—you shall be in comfort, and have no stint—and to send the bills to me every week. You shall want for naught, you shall live as well as what I do. I'll find everything for you. You shall have a matter of pocket-money for yourself—I'll arrange where you can call for it. But there'll be no more brass paid out to Stephen; if he wants brass to ware on pots and glasses he can addle it himself. I've spoken, mistress."

Sherratt had listened to him carefully. When he came to an end she shook her head. Then she laughed, cynically.

"And you're Stephen's father, and you don't know him better than that!" she said. "Why, if he knew I'd pocket-money he'd tease and worry the life out of me till he got it! Like as not, if you sent in a piece of beef, or a parcel of groceries, and he'd no money for drink he'd go out and sell 'em for what they'd fetch. He'll get money anywhere—as long as he hasn't got to work for it. He gets money from Michael—that housekeeper of yours gives him money—he got money out of your niece, Judith, to-night. Oh!" she

added, rejoicing that she had the power to make him wince, "you don't know him, nor half! If I buried half-a-crown in that yard he'd howk every stone up to get at it, if he'd naught in his own pocket and the thirst was on him."

Martin shook his head wearily.

"I can do no more, mistress," he said. "No more! What more could a man do?"

Certain memories rankled in Sherratt's bosom: despite Martin's generous offer of complete provision, she hated him. Her face grew dark with anger and sullenness.

"You should treat him as you do the others," she muttered. "'Tisn't fair, Mr. Muscroft, to make a difference 'twixt your own flesh and blood. Stephen's as much yours as what Michael is, for all he's not the first-come."

If Sherratt had been looking at him she would have seen Martin wince. But she was glowering at the empty plate before her, and saw nothing of the shadow that stole across his face.

"I ha' judged for the best, my lass," he said, not unkindly. "Michael's been the best o' sons to me ever since he was breeched, and Stephen's given me naught but pain and sorrow. It 'ud be no kindness to Stephen to give him money—I've done it till it's beyond me to do it longer. I can but take care that neither him nor you

wants roof nor fire nor your meat—I can do no more ! "

He lingered for a moment as if expecting some answer or comment from her ; getting none he turned with a sigh and went out to his horse, and taking its bridle in his hand, moved heavily away across the cobble-paved yard. But Sherratt, when she heard the gate click behind him, rose from the table and hurried out to follow his movements. She watched him go along the street and call in at Crawdale's shop : she waited until he came away from it and crossed over to the butcher's ; in a ray of light which spread fan-like from the window of the Hooded Hawk's parlour she saw him, the butcher done with, mount his horse and ride slowly up the village. As he passed out of the light and her field of vision, she noticed that he rode like a tired man and with bent head.

Sherratt went back into the cottage. It was then past nine o'clock. She put a portion of the steak and onions between two plates and set the plates on the top shelf of the oven. Then she sat down—to do nothing, and to wait for Stephen.

When ten o'clock struck Sherratt heard the usual sound of heavy boots on the little quadrangle which separated the Hooded Hawk from

the street. That was the frequenters of parlour and kitchen being turned out in accordance with the rural licensing regulations. The footsteps went in various directions; but she listened in vain for the lifting of the cottage gate. And at last she rose and went out into the yard, looking across the street. Although the front door was shut there were still lights in the public-house, and by them she saw the landlord standing at the end of his garden, smoking a cigar and inhaling a breath of clean air as a refresher after his labours of the evening. Sherratt went across the street.

"Seen anything of Stephen, Mr. Gibb?" she asked, familiarly.

The landlord removed the cigar, starting as if the question was a surprising one.

"Stephen, now, Mrs. Muscroft? Well, I did see him going off with the gamekeeper and young Trippett. Heard something about a game of cards, I think." Then he added, jocularly, "Took a bottle of gin along with 'em, anyway."

Sherratt made no answer. She turned and went down the street to the gamekeeper's cottage. Stealing softly up to the uncurtained window she looked inside. There, seated round the table, under the light of a swinging lamp, Stephen, the gamekeeper, and a young fellow who looked to be

half asleep, were busy with some simple game. There was a little pile of small silver and copper before each man; each pile was flanked by a glass, and in the middle of the table stood the bottle to which Gibb had jestingly referred.

Sherratt watched for a minute or two—long enough to see that the gamekeeper, a smart, sly fellow, was going to win all the money that the other men might have about them. Then she turned homewards, and entering the kitchen went straight to the oven and took out the plates. There was a goodly piece of tender steak on the undermost one, and an appetising mass of fried onions to keep it company. But Sherratt walked straight out into the yard and threw both steak and onions into the pig-tub, laughing maliciously. That done, she left the door wide open to the night, and, still laughing, went upstairs to bed.

V

WHEN nine o'clock had come and gone Judith's uneasiness would not permit of her remaining longer in the house. Never, within her memory, had Martin been so late home from the market-town. It was his usual practice to be back at the mill by six o'clock at the latest, the regular hour

for the family supper. On market nights in winter, a fire was always lighted for him in a little parlour which opened out of the house-place: to this he retired after eating his supper, and spent an hour in attending to his books and accounts—a task which he would not share with either Michael or Judith; they, he said, could attend to it, on methods of their own devising, when he was gone. The fire had been duly lighted on this particular evening, and Judith had twice replenished it with logs. Now she went in to the parlour again, threw more logs on, and looked to the lamp. Then wrapping her shawl closely about her, she left the house and walked down the lane towards the high road.

On the level of the high road all was still as only the land can be still on a winter night. The moon rode high in the unclouded heavens, its silvery shafts playing on the rounded cap of the old mill and sparkling on the panes of glass in the house windows. Looking in one direction Judith saw a glimmer of its light on the vane which topped the spire of the little church deep down in the valley; in another on that which surmounted the high grey tower of the church in the larger village wherein Stephen Muscroft lived. There was a faint glow of light over the tree-tops of that village; further away, beyond

the shoulder of the rising ground to the north, a wider glow showed where the market-town lay. These radiances, and the gleam of the church vanes, were the only evidences that human life was in the land; no foot sounded on the road; no rattle of far-off cart on highway or by-lane came to break the stillness. That stillness began to affect Judith, already impressed by Jael Quince's talk of portents and omens. She grew more restless and uneasy, and instinctively wished for Michael: vaguely she recognised that there is nothing so desirable or sweet to a woman as to have a strong man to lean upon in all matters.

When she had arrived at a state of feeling in which she was prepared to see a ghost at every corner and to be confronted by the much-feared White Rabbit or the dreaded Bargest, Judith heard the sound of a horse's hoofs padding steadily along the frost-bound road. But they were no sooner heard than she realised that they were advancing from the village behind her instead of from the town in front. Never thinking that they were those of Martin's horse, and not wishing to be found wandering about the highway by any strange horseman at that late hour, she retreated within the high banks of the lane and walked slowly towards the house. But the horse

turned into the lane behind her, and she ran back and recognised Martin. The miller looked down at the anxious face which she lifted to him.

"Frightened, my lass?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. She laid a hand on the bridle as if to make sure that she had got horse and rider in safe keeping. "You've never been home as late as this before—never, Uncle Martin!" she added. "I thought something had happened. And—you came the other way."

"I'd a deal of business in town, my lass, and then I came round by the village yonder—I'd business there, too," he said. "Aye, business, business that I none liked!"

Judith knew that the miller was referring to Stephen's life and affairs; she walked on at the horse's side, still holding the bridle, and made no answer.

"Judith, my lass," said Martin, "you've been giving money to yon lad. His wife told me. You won't do it again, my girl, nor yet Michael. As for Jael Quince, if she likes to throw her brass down a sink, she must do it—it's no concern of mine. But you and Michael won't give Stephen any more."

"We can't see him want," said Judith in a low voice. "And it was my own money—it was

what you'd given me out of the duck money, and you said it was mine."

Martin reached down and patted the girl's hand.

"Aye, my little lass, aye!" he said. "And you'd a right to do what you liked wi' it, and if you wanted aught for a good object, you've naught to do but ask me for it and it's there, on the nail. But to give yon lad money, Judith, is to throw it down one o' them pits in Hobman's Hole yonder. It all goes to the Hawk, or elsewhere of the same nature, or into some o' them card-playing fellows' pockets. And as for them wanting, my lass, I've made that all right. Listen you here." And as he rode slowly up to the house he told her all that he had said to Sherratt, and of the arrangements he had made with the village tradespeople.

"I shall pay all off in the town to-morrow," he said as he dismounted from his horse, "and we'll try a new start. But naught'll be much good, my lass, till yon lad is stopped off the drink."

"I'll have your supper ready in a minute," said Judith, as Martin led his horse away to the stable. "Don't be long."

"Why, my lass, to-night I don't want any supper," he said. "I was kept so long in town yonder that I had a bite o' something there.

But," he added, with an attempt at a cheery laugh, " it's that cold that I think I must have a drop o' something, so you can carry in the little tray, and I'll have a glass before I get to them books."

Then as Judith entered the house and he turned aside to the outbuildings, Martin groaned.

" God forgive me for telling the lass a lie ! " he muttered. " Bite ? I feel as if a bite 'ud choke me—the bread 'ud turn bitter in my mouth."

He exercised more than his usual care in stabling and feeding his horse, and in seeing to its comfort for the night. And when he walked into the house-place it was with an assumption of cheerfulness and a jest on his lips—the jest, as usual, being on Jael Quince, who still sat in her corner, steadily knitting.

" What, at it yet, missis ? " he exclaimed. " Ecod, I think ye might be aiming to supply all the parish with stockings. And yet ye look a bit gloomy about it, like."

Jael Quince looked up, and regarded her master steadily ; she seemed to search his features with keen inspection.

" You shouldn't go without your supper, master," she said quietly. " It's bad for you after a long day."

"I'm going without naught," answered Martin, hastily. "No need to fear. Judith, love, I think I'll have a drop o' brandy—you'll find the bottle in the corner cupboard yonder. Eh, dear!" he added, glancing at the clock, "it's later nor what I reckoned on, and I've these books to see to—I mun be at 'em."

But when Judith entered the little parlour a few minutes later, bearing the spirits and the hot water, she found him in his easy chair, still coated and shawled. He smiled at her feebly when she uttered a startled exclamation.

"It's all right, my gel, it's all right!" he said, reassuringly. "I'm just a bit overdone, and my breath's none so long as it was. Give me a drop to drink, lass."

Judith mixed brandy and water for him, and stood by while he sipped it. There was a vague fear upon her as of coming evil. And for the third time that night she longed for Michael's presence.

"Don't do anything at your books to-night, Uncle Martin," she pleaded. "Leave it till morning, or let me do it. If you told me what to set down——"

Martin affected laughter.

"Eh, bless you, my lass, we should get all at sixes and sevens!" he said. "You'd never understand my ways, and I should never make

out your fine-lady writing. No, no! I'm all right now, my lass. Run away, and I'll get done, and then I'll come and smoke a pipe wi' you."

But when Judith had gone and had closed the door, he rose from his chair with difficulty, and before he attempted to take off his heavy coat and the thick shawl which he wore round his neck and shoulders, he helped himself to more brandy, shaking his head the while.

"I misdoubt it's worse nor what he said," he muttered. "I misdoubt it is. Well, I mun do what I can while there's time—while there's time!"

Judith, returning to the house-place, found Jael Quince standing on the hearth-rug, her knitting laid down, her hands planted on her meagre hips. She looked meaningly at the girl and shook her head.

"What is it?" demanded Judith, half angrily. "What do you shake your head like that for? You're enough to frighten a body, Jael, what with your talk and your nods. What is it?"

"There's need to be frighted," answered Jael in a low voice. She inclined her head towards the door of the parlour. "I don't like the looks of him," she said. "But, of course, I knew there was something. That winding-sheet, and the blind, and——"

"It's all nonsense!" cried Judith. "Don't talk so. He's only tired."

"There's something wrong with him," insisted Jael. "It's his heart, is my opinion. Mr. Stubbs, t'other side of the hill—but you'll not remember him—he contracted heart trouble, as they term it, and his face looked just like what the master's does now—there's a drawn look on the faces of them as gets that complaint that can't be mistaken if you once know it, and they turn puffy and blue, like, under their eyes. And then him asking for the brandy, too!—strong spirits like that there, when nobody ever knew him take more nor a drop of gin or so before going to bed."

"I tell you he's tired," said Judith. "And I'm not going to be frightened by you, Jael Quince. You're always croaking. He's had a harder day than usual."

"And it's a bad thing him taking no supper and sipping spirits on an empty belly," continued Jael, imperturbably. "It's the worst——"

"He's had his supper in Sicaster," said Judith. "He'd got it at the Lion. He said so."

"He'd the appearance of a fasting man," insisted the housekeeper. "You can't tell me—I've eyes in my head. And I shall not go to bed till he comes out, and then I shall coax him to have

a bowl o' soup—I've some right good soup 'ats that rich that you could stand a spoon up in it."

But when Martin came out of his parlour twenty minutes later, Jael found her plans upset. He looked himself again, and his voice was as strong as usual.

"Hullo, missis!" he exclaimed, glancing at Jael. "Not off to bed yet? Come—come! It's well past your time; you're missing your beauty sleep—ha' you forgotten that one hour before twelve's worth two after! No, no! I want naught, neither soup nor meat—all I want is a pipe o' bacca and a talk with my niece here—I've a bit o' business to talk over wi' her. So good-night, missis."

Jael took her dismissal in silence and went away. But she had no intention of repairing to her chamber in a far wing of the old house at that moment. Between the house-place and the stone-walled hall from which the staircase ascended to the upper rooms, there was a roomy store closet, which had doors opening into it from both sides. Into this she presently betook herself, moving as silently as a mouse. She had proved from long experience that any one hidden in that place could easily overhear all that was said in the room in which she had left Martin and his niece.

VI

MARTIN, the housekeeper being gone, sank down into the easy chair which was always set for him before the hearth, and with a look summoned his niece to her usual place at his side. For a while he smoked in silence, staring at the leaping flames and caressing the head which Judith rested against his knee. The girl began to feel more satisfied about him: this was a return to the usual order of things. They had often sat like that in the last quiet of the evening when Jael had gone to bed and Michael was out visiting his friends or putting in an hour at the village club. But when Martin spoke she was quick to observe that his voice trembled.

"Judith, my lass," he said, "there's a something that I must say to you, my dear. And happen it'll frighten you, but you see, my lass, you might be worse frighted if I didn't say it."

Judith twisted herself round and stared at him with a sudden suspicion in her eyes. And Martin averted his face, and looked away into the shadows.

"You may have noticed, lass, that I've not been—not what I used to be, of late," he went on after a pause, in which the girl began to hear her

own heart begin beating at a more rapid rate, and noticed, with a queer sense of unreality, that it seemed to be racing with the old clock in the corner, and going at the rate of three to one: "there's been that shortness o' breath, and that wanting to sit down after doing aught, and—and other things. Happen you've noticed, joy?"

"Yes," she whispered, "yes!"

"I been to the doctor, my lass."

Again Judith looked up. Her eyes fixed themselves on Martin's, and this time Martin met their enquiring gaze with one as steady. He pressed the girl's hand and smiled at her.

"We've always been a good lot, us Muscrofts, for facing matters," he said. "Leastways, most of us. We mun put a good face on things, my lass, we mun put a good face on things."

"Tell me!" she said. "Tell me!"

"It's the heart," he answered. "Very bad is my heart, Judith. The doctor he said it was no use concealing the fact—it's in a very bad state—has been for some time, he says."

Judith had got a firm hold of both his hands by that time, and was holding them as if something were coming that purposed to drag him away from her. Instead of speaking, she nodded her head, meaning to show that she understood. Martin bent forward and kissed her forehead.

"That's a brave lass!" he said. Then, looking at her gravely, he added in steadier tones than had come to him so far, "Judith," he said, "I might go at any minute."

The girl quivered in every nerve: Martin felt the pulses leap and quiver in the hands that held his.

"Any minute," he repeated. "Any minute! It's a terrible thought, that, lass, when you're face to face with it, like. Not that I'm afraid —no! But when you come to look straight at a thing, you know. Hows'ever, it was not that that I wanted to talk about. But there is things as I mun talk about, because of the danger. Any minute, he said, did the doctor. And I thought—I thought the minute was come when I got in to-night and the feeling came on. That was why I asked for the brandy—he said, did the doctor, to take a sip of that when I were seized, and to rest quiet for a bit."

Judith released one of her hands and turning to the table took up the glass which Martin had carried in with him, and made him drink. Now that she looked more closely at him she, too, saw the symptoms which Jael Quince had spoken of.—And full of pain and horror at the prospect before them, she unconsciously cried out the first instinct of her heart.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I wish—I wish Michael was here!"

Martin put down his glass and stroked his niece's head again.

"Aye, my pretty!" he said soothingly. "It's right that ye should turn to Michael when there's trouble. Stick to him, my lass, in all that comes—he's a good and a straight lad, is my son Michael, and a man that any woman can be proud of, I'll warrant! But, Judith, I'm glad that Michael isn't here—to-night."

Judith looked at him wonderingly. Knowing how devotedly fond Martin was of his elder son, how he leaned on him, relied upon him, loved to have him about him, these words surprised her. Martin saw the surprise and shook his head.

"Aye, my lass," he continued. "I'm glad that the lad's away—'cause I want to talk to you. You've come to woman's estate now, Judith, and you've more sense than most women. And I've that to say to you that's between you and me. What I've got to say, what I'm going to tell you, you must never say or tell to mortal soul—no, not even to Michael when he's your lawful wedded man—never!"

Judith half shrank away from him.

"Not even to Michael!" she repeated. "I—I haven't a secret in the world from him!"

"Right, lass, right—and God grant that ye never may have," said Martin fervently. "But —you must keep this secret from him."

"Always?" she faltered. "For ever!"

"For ever. My lass, it's for Michael's good. When I'm gone," he said, with emphasis, "When I'm gone, Judith, there's not a soul in the world'll know that secret but you and one other body 'at it's safe with—safe as it'll be wi' you. And you must keep the secret—keep it, I say, for ever."

Judith, crouched at Martin's feet, looked up at him for a full minute without speaking.

"Oh!" she said at last. "But it's an awful thing to keep a secret from—from your husband. And to have to keep it for—for all the years to come!"

Martin's face, bending down to her, grew stern with purpose.

"It's for his own good, my lass," he repeated. "It's a thing that he mun never know. But somebody mun know—or else——"

He ceased at that, and shaking his head looked fretfully about him until his glance rested on some old books that lay piled together on the top of an ancient chest of drawers set against the wall.

"Somebody mun know," he said. "Or else—or else Michael 'ud be a beggar."

"A beggar!" she exclaimed, shrinking still

further away. "Michael!—a beggar! And—your son!"

Martin moved fretfully in his chair. He pointed to the old books.

"Ye don't understand, my lass," he said. "I'll strive to make it clear to yer. But you mun swear to me. Here, take this key, Judith—there's an old Bible in the top drawer o' my desk. Bring it here."

There was such an insistence, such a peremptoriness in his tone, that the girl rose against her will and hastened to do his bidding. She found and brought back the Bible, and Martin signed to her to unclasp it, and to place her hand on the open pages.

"Ye mun say after me," he ordered firmly. "Say the very words. Now then. 'I swear on this Bible never to tell to anybody what my uncle Martin now tells me unless it becomes necessary to do so, according to his instructions.' Say that, Judith."

He repeated the words again, slowly, and Judith said them after him, he nodding his head at each.

"You mun kiss the Book," he said. "That's the right way. And if ye ever break your oath you'll be damned, mind you that, my lass! But it's for Michael's good, I say."

"Oh, what is it—what is it?" she cried, sinking down at his knees again. "I'm frightened."

Martin laid his hand soothingly on her shoulder.

"You mun think of your love for Michael," he said. "It's for him you've done this. Put the Book away, my lass, and come back, and I'll tell you everything. I ha'nt never told mortal man nor woman—'cepting that other that I told you about, that the secret's safe with."

Judith obeyed his bidding mechanically. The haunting dread which had been on her in the earlier part of the evening had now returned with renewed force; she was quivering in every limb with hardly-repressed fear at the thought of what might be told to her, and it was only by a great effort that she controlled herself sufficiently to assume and counterfeit an expression of calmness. Everything in her was demanding Michael's support and protection; what made her so afraid was the knowledge that she must hear this thing alone. And upon that came the added knowledge that she might have to keep this secret—whatever it was—all her life. It had been her great dream that she and Michael should never have anything between them; she wanted to share everything with him, in keeping with the policy which they had pursued ever since their boy-and-girl days. But now . . .

"I've promised," she said, almost apathetically. "What is it? Let me know—I shall feel better when I know."

Martin bowed his head over her.

"It's hard to tell, my lass," he began. "But there, now, I'm coming to an end with it. I think the world's a hard place, in some ways—only in some ways. Now, I'll try to put it straight. And you mun do your best to gather it up, Judith. Now, to start with, you mun understand that pretty nearly all I'm possessed on, my lass, is in what the lawyers calls real estate; with the exception of maybe five or six hundred pound in the bank and what's in the house, it's all in real estate. This mill and house, and the fifty acres of land round 'em, is mine; yon Hopewell Farm down in the valley is mine. I bought it and paid for it twelve year come May-day; there's two streets of good house property in Sicaster is mine. And they're all clear—there's no mortgages, nor naught o' that sort on 'em. It's a niceish bit o' property, Judith, for a man to leave."

Judith nodded her head. This was not the secret. Already she knew all that Martin had told her.

"Now then," continued Martin, "if so be as I die without making a will all that there real estate, according to what they call the strict letter of

the law, falls to Michael, being the elder son. As for the money, it 'ud be shared between Michael and Stephen. But Michael would take all the property, being, as I say, the elder brother."

"Yes," said Judith. "I understand."

"And it's right that it should be so," said Martin, with distinct emphasis, as if he were arguing the matter. "It's right! Michael's a lad to be trusted; he'll take care of what I've laboured hard to get together, and he'll see that Stephen's right provided for and done to out of it. But if it was to be divided between him and Stephen, I know what Stephen 'ud do wi' his share—it 'ud all be poured down his throat or wasted in card-playing and race-going before two years was out! It's best that Michael should have all, for he'll never see them two down in the village yonder want, any more nor what I should Judith."

"Michael would always do what he knew you'd wish him to do," said Judith, with the assurance of perfect faith.

"Aye, my lass, I'm well aware of that," asserted Michael. "I've no doubts on that score. Well, now, that's where it stands—I've made no will as yet, my lass, and if I were to go to-night, or whenever it might be, without will, Michael comes into all but the bit o' ready money and

that he'd share wi' Stephen. But—there's a danger."

"What?" asked Judith, noticing a sudden change in Martin's voice. "Danger of what?"

For a moment Martin made no answer. Looking up at him, Judith saw that he was staring into the shadowy part of the house-place, staring at she knew not what; his hands, seamed and sinewy, gripped the arms of his chair in a fierce hold.

"I shall ha' to rake up the past days," he said in a low voice. "I shall ha' to speak o' what I wanted to be dead and gone. I mun speak of the matter whether I like it or no, and you mun hear, my poor lass, whether you like it or no. Judith, you're a grown young woman, and you'll maybe understand things a deal better nor what I fancy you do—nowadays young folks seems to know a deal more than they used to."

"I'll try to understand whatever you tell me," she answered.

Martin looked down at her upturned face. His own was grave and set.

"You're aware," he said, speaking firmly, as with a determination to shirk nothing. "You're aware that Michael and Stephen had different mothers?"

"Yes," she said timidly. "I know that."

"You've always thought, as all other folks think, that Stephen were the second wife's and Michael the first's," he went on. "Aye!—but it were wrong! Ye see, Judith, the truth is, though God knows I loved her as a wife, me and Michael's mother, we weren't—wed. He—he weren't born in wedlock!"

It seemed to Judith that something suddenly turned all the live, hot blood in her veins first to streams of molten fire, then to rivers of ice that bit and stung worse than the flames they succeeded. In spite of that icy coldness she felt her face burn to a hot flush; her temple throbbed; the tongue in her mouth turned dry; her throat became parched as if it had been filled with hot, fine sand. Then, as the meaning of Martin's words slowly forced itself upon her, she experienced a strange sort of sickness, and almost unconscious of what she was doing she grasped at the glass on the table and hastily gulped part of its contents. Martin half rose from his chair, alarmed, ready to cry out. But Judith waved her hand at him.

"Leave me be!" she murmured. "I'm all right. I——"

She stopped, and still crouching at Martin's feet, gazed down at the floor on which she knelt.