

THE HIGGLER

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I

On a cold April afternoon a Higgler was driving across Shag Moor in a two-wheeled cart.

H. WITLOW
Dealer in Poultry
DINNOP

was painted on the hood; the horse was of mean appearance but notorious ancestry. A high upland common was this moor, two miles from end to end, and full of furze and bracken. There were no trees and not a house, nothing but a line of telegraph poles following the road, sweeping with rigidity from north to south; nailed upon one of them a small scarlet notice to stonethrowers was prominent as a wound. On so high and wide a region as Shag Moor the wind always blew, or if it did not quite blow there was a cool activity in the air. The furze was always green and growing, and, taking no account of seasons, often golden. Here in summer solitude lounged and snoozed; at other times, as now, it shivered and looked sinister.

Higglers in general are ugly and shrewd, old and hard, crafty and callous, but Harvey Witlow, though shrewd, was not ugly; he was hard but not old, crafty but not at all unkind. If you had eggs to sell he would buy them, by the score he would, or by the lone hundred. Other odds and ends he would buy or do, paying good bright silver, bartering a bag of apples, carrying your little pig to market, or fetching a tree from the nurseries. But the season was backward, eggs were scarce, trade was bad — by crumps, it was indeed! — and as he crossed the moor Harvey could not help discussing the situation with himself.

‘If things don’t change, and change for the better, and change soon, I can’t last and I can’t endure it; I’ll be damned and done, and I’ll have to sell,’ he said, prodding the animal with the butt of his whip, ‘this cob. And,’ he said, as if in afterthought, prodding the footboard, ‘this cart, and go back to the land. And I’ll have lost my fifty pounds. Well, that’s what war does for you. It does it for you, sir,’ he announced sharply to the vacant moor, ‘and it does it for me. Fifty pounds! I was better off in the war. I was better off working for farmers — much. But it’s no good chattering

about it, it's the trick of life; when you get so far, then you can go and order your funeral. Get along, Dodger!"

The horse responded briskly for a few moments.

'I tell ye,' said Harvey adjuring the ambient air, 'you can go and order your funeral. Get along, Dodger!'

Again Dodger got along.

'Then there's Sophy, what about Sophy and me?'

He was not engaged to Sophy Daws, not exactly, but he was keeping company with her. He was not pledged or affianced, he was just keeping company with her. But Sophy, as he knew, not only desired a marriage with Mr. Witlow, she expected it, and expected it soon. So did her parents, her friends, and everybody in the village, including the postman who didn't live in it but wished he did, and the parson who did live in it but wished he didn't.

"Well, that's damned and done, fair damned and done now, unless things take a turn, and soon, so it's no good chattering about it."

And just then and there things did take a turn. He had never been across the moor before; he was prospecting for trade. At the end of Shag Moor he saw standing back on the common, fifty yards from the road, a neat square house set in a little farm. Twenty acres, perhaps. The house was girded by some white palings; beside it was a snug orchard in a hedge covered with blackthorn bloom. It was very green and pleasant in front of the house. The turf was cleared and closely cropped, some ewes were grazing and under the blackthorn, out of the wind, lay half a dozen lambs, but what chiefly moved the imagination of Harvey Witlow was a field on the far side of the house. It had a small rickyard with a few small stacks in it; everything here seemed on the small scale, but snug, very snug; and in that field and yard were hundreds of fowls, hundreds, of good breed, and mostly white.

Leaving his horse to sniff the greensward, the higgler entered a white wicket gateway and passed to the back of the house, noting as he did so a yellow wagon inscribed Elizabeth Sadgrove. Prattle Corner.

At the kitchen door he was confronted by a tall gaunt woman of middle age with a teapot in her hands.

‘Afternoon, ma’am. Have you anything to sell?’ began Harvey Witlow, tilting his hat with a confident affable air. The tall woman was cleanly dressed, a superior person; her hair was grey. She gazed at him.

“It’s cold,” he continued. She looked at him as uncomprehendingly as a mouse might look at a gravestone.

“I’ll buy any mottal thing, ma’am. Except trouble; I’m full up wi’ that already. Eggs? Fowls?”

“I’ve not seen you before,” commented Mrs. Sadgrove a little bleakly, in a deep husky voice.

“No, ’tis the first time as ever I drove in this part. To tell you the truth, ma’am, I’m new to the business. Six months. I was in the war a year ago. Now I’m trying to knock up a connection. Difficult work. Things are very quiet.”

Mrs. Sadgrove silently removed the lid of the teapot, inspected the interior of the pot with an intent glance, and then replaced the lid as if she had seen a blackbeetle there.

“Ah, well,” sighed the higgler. “You’ve a neat little farm here, ma’am.”

“It’s quiet enough,” said she.

“Sure it is, ma’am. Very lonely.”

“And it’s difficult work, too.” Mrs. Sadgrove almost smiled.

“Sure it is, ma’am; but you does it well, I can see. Oh, you’ve some nice little ricks of corn, eh! I does well enough at the dealing now and again, but it’s teasy work, and mostly I don’t earn enough to keep my horse in shoe leather.’

‘I’ve a few eggs, perhaps,’ said she.

‘I could do with a score or two, ma’am, if you could let me have ’em.’

“You’ll have to come all my way if I do.”

‘Name your own price, ma’am, if you don’t mind trading with me.’

‘Mind! Your money’s as good as my own, isn’t it?’

‘It must be, ma’am. That’s meaning no disrespects to you,’ the young higgler assured her hastily, and was thereupon invited to enter the kitchen.

A stone floor with two or three mats; open hearth with burning logs; a big dresser painted brown, carrying a row of white cups on brass hooks and shelves of plates overlapping each other like the scales of fish. A dark settle half hid a flight of stairs with a small gate at the top. Under the window a black sofa, deeply indented, invited you a little repellingly, and in the middle of the room stood a large table, exquisitely scrubbed, with one end of it laid for tea. Evidently a living-room as well as kitchen. A girl, making toast at the fire, turned as the higgler entered. Beautiful she was: red hair, a complexion like the inside of a nut, blue eyes, and the hands of a lady. He saw it all at once, jacket of bright green wool, black dress, grey stockings and shoes, and forgot his errand, her mother, his fifty pounds, Sophy — momentarily he forgot everything.

The girl stared strangely at him. He was tall, clean-shaven, with a loop of black hair curling handsomely over one side of his brow.

‘Good afternoon,’ said Harvey Witlow, as softly as if he had entered a church.

‘Some eggs, Mary,’ Mrs. Sadgrove explained. The girl laid down her toasting-fork. She was less tall than her mother, who she resembled only enough for the relationship to be noted. Silently she crossed the kitchen and opened a door that led into a dairy. Two pans of milk were creaming on a bench there, and on the flags were two great baskets filled with eggs.

‘How many are there?’ asked Mrs. Sadgrove, and the girl replied: ‘Fifteen score, I think.’

‘Take the lot, higgler?’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he cried eagerly, and ran out to his cart and fetched a number of trays. In them he packed the eggs as the girl handed them to him from the baskets. Mrs. Sadgrove left them together.

For a time the higgler was silent.

‘No,’ at length he murmured, ‘I’ve never been this road before.’

There was no reply from Mary. Sometimes their fingers touched, and often, as they bent over the eggs, her bright hair almost brushed his face.

‘It is a loneish spot,’ he ventured again.

‘Yes,’ said Mary Sadgrove.

When the eggs were all transferred her mother came in again.

“Would you buy a few pullets, higgler?”

“Any number, ma’am,’ he declared quickly. Any number; by crumps, the tide was turning! He followed the mother into the yard, and there again she left him, waiting. He mused about the girl and wondered about the trade. If they offered him ten thousand chickens, he’d buy them, somehow, he would! She had stopped in the kitchen. Just in there she was, just behind him, a few feet away.

Over the low wall of the yard a fat black pony was strolling in a field of bright greensward. In the yard, watching him, was a young gander, and on a stone staddle beside it lay a dead thrush on its back, its legs stiff in the air. The girl stayed in the kitchen; she was moving about, though, he could hear her; perhaps she was spying at him through the window.

‘Twenty million eggs he would buy if Mrs. Sadgrove had got them. She was gone a long time. It was very quiet. The gander began to comb its white breast with its beak. Its three-toed feet were a most tender pink, shaped like wide diamonds, and at each of the three forward points there was a toe like a small blanched nut. It lifted one foot, folding the webs, and hid it under its wing and sank into a resigned meditation on one leg. It had a blue eye that was meek — it had two, but you could only see one at a time — a meek blue eye, set in a pink rim that gave it a dissolute air, and its beak had raw red nostrils as if it suffered from the damp. Altogether a beautiful bird. And in some absurd way it resembled Mrs. Sadgrove.

‘Would you sell that young gollan, ma’am?’ Harvey inquired when the mother returned.

Yes, she would sell him, and she also sold him two dozen pullets. Harvey packed the fowls in a crate.

‘Come on,’ he cried cuddling the squawking gander in his arms, ‘you needn’t be afeard of me, I never kills anything afore Saturdays.’

He roped it by its leg to a hook inside his cart. Then he took out his bag of money, paid Mrs. Sadgrove her dues, said ‘Good day, ma’am, good day,’ and drove off without seeing another sign or stitch of that fine young girl.

‘Get along, Dodger, get along wi’ you.’ They went bowling along for nearly an hour, and then he could see the landmark on Dan’el Green’s Hill, a windmill that never turned though it looked a fine competent piece of architecture, just beyond Dinnop.

Soon he reached his cottage and was chaffing his mother, a hearty buxom dame, who stayed at home and higgled with any chance callers. At this business she was perhaps more enlightened than her son. It was almost a misfortune to get into her clutches.

‘How much you give for this?’ he cried, eyeing with humorous contempt an object in a coop that was neither flesh nor rude red herring.

‘Oh crumps,’ he declared, when she told him, ‘I am damned and done!’

‘Go on with you, that’s a good bird, I tell you, with a full heart, as will lay in a month.’

‘I doubt it’s a hen at all,’ he protested. ‘Oh, what a ravenous beak! Damned and done I am.’

Mrs. Witlow’s voice began indignantly to rise.

‘Oh, well,’ mused her son, ‘it’s thrifty perhaps. It ain’t quite right, but it’s not so wrong as to make a fuss about, especially as I be pretty sharp set. And if it’s hens you want,’ he continued triumphantly, dropping the crate of huddled fowls before her, ‘there’s hens for you; and a gander! There’s a gander for you, if it’s a gander you want.’

Leaving them all in his cottage yard he went and stalled the horse and cart at the inn, for he had no stable of his own. After supper he told his mother about the Sadgroves of Prattle Corner. ‘Prettiest girl you ever seen, but the shyest mottal alive. Hair like a squirrel, lovely.’

‘An’t you got to go over and see Sophy to-night?’ inquired his mother, lighting the lamp.

‘Oh lord, if I an’t clean forgot that! Well, I’m tired, shan’t go to-night. See her to-morrow.’

2

Mrs. Sadgrove had been a widow for ten years — and she was glad of it. Prattle Corner was her property, she owned it and farmed it with the aid of a little old man and a large lad. The older this old man grew, and the less wages he received (for Elizabeth Sadgrove was reputed a ‘grinder’), the more ardently he worked; the older the lad grew the less he laboured and the more he swore. She was thriving. She was worth money was Mrs. Sadgrove. Ah! And her daughter Mary, it was clear, had

received an education fit for a lord's lady; she had been at a seminary for gentlefolk's females until she was seventeen. Well, whether or no, a clock must run as you time it: but it wronged her for the work of a farm, it spoiled her, it completely deranged her for the work of a farm; and this was a pity and foolish, because some day the farm was coming to her as didn't know hay from a bull's foot.

All this, and more, the young higgler quickly learned, and plenty-more he soon divined. Business began to flourish with him now; his despair was gone, he was established, he could look forward, to whatever it was he wanted to look forward, with equanimity and such pleasurable anticipation as the chances and charges of life might engender. Every week, and twice a week, he would call at the farm, and though these occasions had their superior business inducements they often borrowed a less formal tone and intention.

"Take a cup of tea, higgler? Mrs. Sadgrove would abruptly invite him; and he would drink tea and discourse with her for half an hour on barndoorn ornithology, on harness, and markets, the treatment of swine, the wear and tear of gear. Mary, always present, was always silent, seldom uttering a word to the higgler; yet a certain grace emanated from her to him, an interest, a light, a favour, circumscribed indeed by some modesty, shyness, some inhibition, that neither of them had the wit or the opportunity to overcome.

One evening he pulled up at the white palings of Prattle Corner. It was a calm evening in May, the sun was on its downgoing, chaffinches and wrens sung ceaselessly. Mary in the orchard was heavily veiled; he could see her over the hedge, holding a brush in her gloved hands, and a bee skep. A swarm was clustered like a great gnarl on the limb of an apple tree. Bloom was thickly covering the twigs. She made several timid attempts to brush the bees into the skep, but they resented this.

"They knows if you be afraid of 'em,' bawled Harvey; 'I better come and give you a hand.'

When he took the skep and brush from her she stood like one helpless, released by fate from a task ill-understood and gracelessly waived. But he liked her shyness, her almost uncouth immobility.

"Never mind about that," said Harvey, as she unfastened her veil, scattering the white petals that had collected upon it; 'when they kicks they hurts, but I've been stung so often that I'm 'nocolated against 'em. They knows if you be afraid of 'em.'

Wearing neither veil nor gloves he went confidently to the tree, and collected the swarm without mishap. ‘Don’t want to show no fear of them,’ said Harvey. ‘Nor of anything else, come to that,’ he added with a guffaw, ‘nor anybody.’

At that she blushed and thanked him very softly, and she did look straight and clearly at him.

Never anything beyond a blush and a thank-you. When, in the kitchen or the parlour, Mrs. Sadgrove sometimes left them alone together Harvey would try a lot of talk, blarneying talk or sensible talk, or talk about events in the world that was neither the one nor the other. No good. The girl’s responses were ever brief and confused. Why was this? Again and again he asked himself that question. Was there anything the matter with her? Nothing that you could see; she was a bright and beautiful being. And it was not contempt, either, for despite her fright, her voicelessness, her timid eyes, he divined her friendly feeling for himself; and he would discourse to his own mother about her and her mother:

“They are well-up people, you know, well off, plenty of money and nothing to do with it. The farm’s their own, freehold. A whole row of cottages she’s got, too, in Smoorton Comfrey, so I heard; good cottages, well let. She’s worth a few thousands, I warrant. Mary’s beautiful. I took a fancy to that girl the first moment I see her. But she’s very highly cultivated — and, of course, there’s Sophy.’

To this enigmatic statement Mrs. Witlow offered no response; but mothers are inscrutable beings to their sons, always.

Once he bought some trees of cherries from Mrs. Sadgrove, and went on a July morning to pick the fruit. Under the trees Mary was walking slowly to and fro, twirling a clapper to scare away the birds. He stood watching her from the gateway. Among the bejewelled trees she passed, turning the rattle with a listless air, as if beating time to a sad music that only she could hear. The man knew that he was deeply fond of her. He passed into the orchard, bade her Good morning, and, lifting his ladder into one of the trees nearest the hedge, began to pluck cherries. Mary moved slimly in her white frock up and down a shady avenue in the orchard waving the clapper. The brightness of sun and sky was almost harsh; there was a little wind that feebly lifted the despondent leaves. He had doffed his coat; his shirt was white and clean. The lock of dark hair drooped over one side of his forehead; his face was brown and pleasant, his bare arms brown and powerful. From his high perch among the leaves Witlow watched for the girl to draw near to him in her perambulation. Knavish birds would scatter at her approach, only to drop again into the trees she

had passed. His soul had an immensity of longing for her, but she never spoke a word to him. She would come from the shade of the little avenue, through the dumb trees that could only bend to greet her, into the sunlight whose dazzle gilded her own triumphant bloom. Fine! Fine! And always as she passed his mind refused to register a single thought he could offer her, or else his tongue would refuse to utter it. But his glance never left her face until she had passed out of sight again, and then he would lean against the ladder in the tree, staring down at the ground, seeing nothing or less than nothing, except a field mouse climbing to the top of a coventry bush in the hedge below him, nipping off one thick leaf and descending with the leaf in its mouth. Sometimes Mary rested at the other end of the avenue; the clapper would be silent and she would not appear for—oh, hours! She never rested near the trees Witlow was denuding. The mouse went on ascending and descending, and Witlow filled his basket, and shifted his stand, and wondered.

At noon he got down and sat on the hedge bank to eat a snack of lunch. Mary had gone indoors for hers, and he was alone for awhile. Capriciously enough, his thoughts dwelt upon Sophy Daws. Sophy was a fine girl, too; not such a lady as Mary Sadgrove —oh lord, no! her father was a gamekeeper! — but she was jolly and ample. She had been a little captious lately, said he was neglecting her. That wasn't true; hadn't he been busy? Besides, he wasn't bound to her in any sort of way, and of course he couldn't afford any marriage yet awhile. Sophy hadn't got any money, never had any. What she did with her wages — she was a parlourmaid — was a teaser! Harvey grunted a little, and said 'Well!' And that is all he said, and all he thought, about Sophy Daws, then, for he could hear Mary's clapper begin again in a corner of the orchard. He went back to his work. There at the foot of the tree were the baskets full of cherries, and those yet to be filled.

'Phew, but that's hot!' commented the man, 'I'm as dry as a rattle.'

A few cherries had spilled from one basket and lay on the ground. The little furry mouse had found them and was industriously nibbling at one. The higgler nonchalantly stamped his foot upon it, and kept it so for a moment or two. Then he looked at the dead mouse. A tangle of entrails had gushed from its whiskered muzzle

He resumed his work and the clapper rattled on throughout the afternoon, for there were other cherry trees that other buyers would come to strip in a day or two. At four o'clock he was finished. Never a word had he spoken with Mary, or she with him.

When he went over to the house to pay Mrs. Sadgrove Mary stopped in the orchard scaring the birds.

“Take a cup of tea, Mr. Witlow,’ said Mrs. Sadgrove; and then she surprisingly added, ‘Where’s Mary?’

‘Still a-frightening the birds, and pretty well tired of that, I should think, ma’am.’

The mother had poured out three cups of tea.

‘Shall I go and call her in?’ he asked, rising. “You might,’ said she.

In the orchard the clapping had ceased. He walked all round, and in among the trees, but saw no sign of Mary; nor on the common, nor in the yard. But when he went back to the house Mary was there already, chatting at the table with her mother. She did not greet him, though she ceased talking to her mother as he sat down. After drinking his tea he went off briskly to load the baskets into the cart. As he climbed up to drive off Mrs. Sadgrove came out and stood beside the horse.

“You’re off now?” said she.

‘Yes, ma’am; all loaded, and thank you.’

She glanced vaguely along the road he had to travel. The afternoon was as clear as wine, the greensward itself dazzled him; lonely Shag Moor stretched away, humped with sweet yellow furze and pilastered with its telegraph poles. No life there, no life at all. Harvey sat on his driving board, musingly brushing the flank of his horse with the trailing whip.

‘Ever round this way on Sundays?’ inquired the woman, peering up at him.

‘Well, not in a manner of speaking, I’m not, ma’am,’ he answered her.

The widow laid her hand on the horse’s back, patting vaguely. The horse pricked up its ears, as if it were listening.

‘If you are, at all, ever, you must look in and have a bit of dinner with us.’

‘I will, ma’am, I will.’

“Next Sunday?” she went on.

‘I will, ma’am, yes, I will,’ he repeated, ‘and thank you.

‘One o’clock?’ The widow smiled up at him.

“At one o’clock, ma’am; next Sunday; I will, and thank you,’ he said.

She stood away from the horse and waved her hand. The first tangible thought that floated mutely out of the higgler’s mind as he drove away was: ‘I’m damned if I ain’t a-going it, Sophy!’

He told his mother of Mrs. Sadgrove’s invitation with an air of curbed triumph. ‘Come round — she says. Yes—I says—I’ull. That’s right — she says — so do.’

3

On the Sunday morn he dressed himself gallantly. It was again a sweet unclouded day. The church bell at Dinnop had begun to ring. From his window, as he fastened his most ornate tie, Harvey could observe his neighbour’s two small children in the next garden, a boy and girl clad for church-going and each carrying a clerical book. The tiny boy placed his sister in front of a hen-roost and, opening his book, began to pace to and fro before her, shrilly intoning: ‘Jesus is the shepherd, ring the bell. Oh lord, ring the bell, am I a good boy? Amen. Oh lord, ring the bell.’ The little girl bowed her head piously over her book. The lad then picked up from the ground a dish which had contained the dog’s food, and presented it momentarily before the lilac bush, the rabbit in a hutch, the axe fixed in a chopping block, and then before his sister. Without lifting her peering gaze from her book she meekly dropped two pebbles in the plate, and the boy passed on, lightly moaning, to the clothes-line post and a cock scooping in some dust.

‘Ah, the little impets!’ cried Harvey Witlow. ‘Here, Toby! Here, Margaret!’ He took two pennies from his pocket and lobbed them from the window to the astonished children. As they stooped to pick up the coins Harvey heard the hoarse voice of neighbour Nathan, their father, bawl from his kitchen: ‘Come on in, and shut that bloody door, d’y’ear!’

Harnessing his moody horse to the gig Harvey was soon bowling away to Shag Moor, and as he drove along he sung loudly. He had a pink rose in his buttonhole. Mrs. Sadgrove received him almost affably, and though Mary was more shy than ever before, Harvey had determined to make an impression. During the dinner he fired off his bucolic jokes, and pleasant tattle of a more respectful and sober nature; but after dinner Mary sat like Patience, not upon a monument, but as if upon a rocking-horse, shy and fearful, and her mother made no effort to inspire her as the higgler did, unsuccessful though he was. They went to the pens to look at the pigs,

and as they leaned against the low walls and poked the maudlin inhabitants, Harvey began: ‘Reminds me, when I was in the war....’

“Were you in the war!” interrupted Mrs. Sadgrove.

“Oh, yes, I was in that war, ah, and there was a pig.... Danger? Oh lord, bless me, it was a bit dangerous, but you never knew where it was or what it ’ud be at next; it was like the sword of Damockels. There was a bullet once come ’ithin a foot of my head, and it went through a board an inch thick, slap through that board.’ Both women gazed at him apprehendingly. ‘Why, I might ’a been killed, you know,’ said Harvey, cocking his eye musingly at the weather-vane on the barn. ‘We was in billets at St. Gratien, and one day a chasseur came up—a French yoossar, you know—and he began talking to our sergeant. That was Hubert Luxter, the butcher: died a month or two ago of measles. But this yoossar couldn’t speak English at all, and none of us chaps could make sense of him. I never could understand that lingo somehow, never; and though there was half a dozen of us chaps there, none of us were man enough for it neither. ‘Nil compree,’ we says, ‘non compos.’ I told him straight: ‘you ought to learn English,’ I said, ‘it’s much easier than your kind of bally chatter.’ So he kept shaping up as if he was holding a rifle, and then he’d say ‘Fusee—bang!’ and then he’d say ‘cushion’ — kept on saying ‘cushion.’ Then he gets a bit of chalk and draws on the wall something that looks like a horrible dog, and says ‘cushion’ again.

‘Pig,’ interjected Mary Sadgrove softly.

“Yes, yes!” ejaculated Harvey, ‘so ’twas! Do you know any French lingo?’

“Oh, yes,’ declared her mother, ‘Mary knows it very well.’

‘Ah,’ sighed the higgler, ‘I don’t, although I been to France. And I couldn’t do it now, not for luck nor love. You learnt it, I suppose. Well, this yoossar wants to borrow my rifle, but of course I can’t lend him. So he taps on this horrible pig he’d drawn, and then he taps on his own head, and rolls his eyes about dreadful! “Mad?” I says. And that was it, that was it. He’d got a pig on his little farm there what had gone mad, and he wanted us to come and shoot it; he was on leave and he hadn’t got any ammunition. So Hubert Luxter he says, “Come on, some of you,” and we all goes with the yoossar and shot the pig for him. Ah, that was a pig! And when it died it jumped a somersault just like a rabbit. It had got the mange, and was mad as anything I ever see in my life; it was full of madness. Couldn’t hit him at all at first, and it kicked up bobs-a-dying. “Ready, present, fire!” Hubert Luxter says, and bang

goes the six of us, and every time we missed him he spotted us and we had to run for our lives.'

As Harvey looked up he caught a glance of the girl fixed on him. She dropped her gaze at once and, turning away, walked off to the house.

'Come and take a look at the meadow,' said Mrs. Sadgrove to him, and they went into the soft smooth meadow where the black pony was grazing. Very bright and green it was, and very blue the sky. He sniffed at the pink rose in his buttonhole, and determined that come what might he would give it to Mary if he could get a nice quiet chance to offer it. And just then, while he and Mrs. Sadgrove were strolling alone in the soft smooth meadow, quite alone, she suddenly, startlingly, asked him: 'Are you courting anybody?"

'Beg pardon, ma'am?" he exclaimed.

"You haven't got a sweetheart, have you?" she asked, most deliberately.

Harvey grinned sheepishly: 'Ha, ha, ha,' and then he said, 'No.'

'I want to see my daughter married,' the widow went on significantly.

'Miss Mary!' he cried.

'Yes,' said she; and something in the higgler's veins began to pound rapidly. His breast might have been a revolving cage and his heart a demon squirrel. 'I can't live for ever,' said Mrs. Sadgrove, almost with levity, 'in fact, not for long, and so I'd like to see her settled soon with some decent understanding young man, one that could carry on here, and not make a mess of things.'

"But, but," stuttered the understanding young man, 'I'm no scholar, and she's a lady. I'm a poor chap, rough, and no scholar, ma'am. But mind you...'

"That doesn't matter at all," the widow interrupted, 'not as things are. You want a scholar for learning, but for the land...'

"Ah, that's right, Mrs. Sadgrove, but..."

'I want to see her settled. This farm, you know, with the stock and things are worth nigh upon three thousand pounds.'

"You want a farmer for farming, that's true, Mrs. Sadgrove, but when you come to marriage, well, with her learning and French and all that..."

‘A sensible woman will take a man rather than a box of tricks any day of the week,’ the widow retorted. ‘Education may be a fine thing, but it often costs a lot of foolish money.’

‘It do, it do. You want to see her settled?’

‘I want to see her settled and secure. When she is twenty-five she comes into five hundred pounds of her own right.’

The distracted higgler hummed and haa-ed in his bewilderment as if he had just been offered the purchase of a dubious duck. ‘How old is she, ma’am?’ he at last huskily inquired.

‘Two-and-twenty nearly. She’s a good healthy girl, for I’ve never spent a pound on a doctor for her, and very quiet she is, and very sensible; but she’s got a strong will of her own, though you might not think it or believe it.’

‘She’s a fine creature, Mrs. Sadgrove, and I’m very fond of her. I don’t mind owning up to that, very fond of her I am.’

‘Well, think it over, take your time, and see what you think. There’s no hurry, I hope, please God.’

‘I shan’t want much time,’ he declared with a laugh, ‘but I doubt I’m the fair right sort for her.’

‘Oh, fair days, fair doings!’ said she inscrutably, ‘I’m not a long liver, I’m afraid.’

‘God forbid, ma’am!’ His ejaculation was intoned with deep gravity.

‘No, I’m not a long-living woman.’ She surveyed him with her calm eyes, and he returned her gaze. Hers was a long sallow face, with heavy lips. Sometimes she would stretch her features (as if to keep them from petrifying) in an elastic grin, and display her dazzling teeth; the lips would curl thickly, no longer crimson, but blue. He wondered if there were any sign of a doom registered upon her gaunt face. She might die, and die soon.

“You couldn’t do better than think it over, then, eh?” she had a queer frown as she regarded him.

‘I couldn’t do worse than not, Mrs. Sadgrove,’ he said gaily,

‘They left it at that. He had no reason for hurrying away, and he couldn’t have explained his desire to do so, but he hurried away. Driving along past the end of the

moor, and peering back at the lonely farm where they dwelled amid the thick furze snoozing in the heat, he remembered that he had not asked if Mary was willing to marry him! Perhaps the widow took her agreement for granted. That would be good fortune, for otherwise how the devil was he to get round a girl who had never spoken half a dozen words to him! And never would! She was a lady, a girl of fortune, knew her French; but there it was, the girl's own mother was asking him to wed her. Strange, very strange! He dimly feared something, but he did not know what it was he feared. He had still got the pink rose in his buttonhole.

4

At first his mother was incredulous; when he told her of the astonishing proposal she declared he was a joker; but she was soon as convinced of his sincerity as she was amazed at his hesitation. And even vexed: 'Was there anything the matter with this Mary?'

"No, no, no! She's quiet, very quiet indeed, I tell you, but a fine young woman, and a beautiful young woman. Oh, she's all right, right as rain, right as a trivet, right as ninepence. But there's a catch in it somewhere, I fear. I can't see through it yet, but I shall afore long, or I'd have the girl, like a shot I would. 'Tain't the girl, mother, it's the money, if you understand me.'

'Well, I don't understand you, certainly I don't. What about Sophy?'

'Oh lord!' He scratched his head ruefully.

"You wouldn't think of giving this the go-by for Sophy, Harvey, would you? A girl as you ain't even engaged to, Harvey, would you?'

"We don't want to chatter about that,' declared her son. 'I got to think it over, and it's going to tie my wool, I can tell you, for there's a bit of craft somewhere, I'll take my oath. If there ain't, there ought to be!'

Over the alluring project his decision wavered for days, until his mother became mortified at his inexplicable vacillation.

'I tell you,' he cried, 'I can't make tops or bottoms of it all. I like the girl well enough, but I like Sophy, too, and it's no good beating about the bush. I like Sophy, she's the girl I love; but Mary's a fine creature, and money like that wants looking at before you throw it away, love or no love. Three thousand pounds! I'd be a made man.'

And as if in sheer spite to his mother; as if a bushel of money lay on the doorstep for him to kick over whenever the fancy seized him; in short (as Mrs. Witlow very clearly intimated) as if in contempt of Providence he began to pursue Sophy Daws with a new fervour, and walked with that young girl more than he was accustomed to, more than ever before; in fact, as his mother bemoaned, more than he had need to. It was unreasonable, it was a shame, a foolishness; it wasn't decent and it wasn't safe.

On his weekly visits to the farm his mind still wavered, Mrs. Sadgrove let him alone; she was very good, she did not pester him with questions and entreaties. There was Mary with her white dress and her red hair and her silence; a girl with a great fortune, walking about the yard, or sitting in the room, and casting not a glance upon him. Not that he would have known it if she did, for now he was just as shy of her. Mrs. Sadgrove often left them alone, but when they were alone he could not dish up a word for the pretty maid; he was dumb as a statue. If either she or her mother had lifted so much as a finger then there would have been an end to his hesitations or suspicions, for in Mary's presence the fine glory of the girl seized him incontinently; he was again full of a longing to press her lips, to lay down his doubts, to touch her bosom — though he could not think she would ever allow that! Not an atom of doubt about her ever visited him; she was unaware of her mother's queer project. Rather, if she became aware he was sure it would be the end of him. Too beautiful she was, too learned, and too rich. Decidedly it was his native cunning, and no want of love, that inhibited him. Folks with property did not often come along and bid you help yourself. Not very often! And throw in a grand bright girl, just for good measure as you might say. Not very often!

For weeks the higgler made his customary calls, and each time the outcome was the same; no more, no less. 'Some dodge,' he mused, 'something the girl don't know and the mother does.' Were they going bankrupt, or were they mortgaged up to the neck, or was there anything the matter with the girl, or was it just the mother wanted to get hold of him?

He knew his own value if he didn't know his own mind, and his value couldn't match that girl any more than his mind could. So what did they want him for? Whatever it was Harvey Witlow was ready for it whenever he was in Mary's presence, but once away from her his own craftiness asserted itself: it was a snare, they were trying to make a mock of him!

But nothing could prevent his own mother mocking him, and her treatment of Sophy was so unbearable that if the heart of that dusky beauty had not been proof against all impediments, Harvey might have had to whistle for her favour. But whenever he was with Sophy he had only one heart, undivided and true, and certain as time itself.

‘I love Sophy best. It’s true enough I love Mary, too, but I love Sophy better. I know it; Sophy’s the girl I must wed. It might not be so if I weren’t all dashed and doddered about the money; I don’t know. But I do know that Mary’s innocent of all this craftiness; it’s her mother trying to mogue me into it.’

Later he would be wishing he could only forget Sophy and do it. Without the hindrance of conscience he could do it, catch or no catch.

He went on calling at the farm, with nothing said or settled, until October. Then Harvey made up his mind, and without a word to the Sadgroves he went and married Sophy Daws and gave up calling at the farm altogether. This gave him some feeling of dishonesty, some qualm, and a vague unhappiness; likewise he feared the cold hostility of Mrs. Sadgrove. She would be terribly vexed. As for Mary, he was nothing to her, poor girl; it was a shame. The last time he drove that way he did not call at the farm. Autumn was advancing, and the apples were down, the bracken dying, the furze out of bloom, and the farm on the moor looked more and more lonely, and most cold, though it lodged a flame-haired silent woman, fit for a nobleman, whom they wanted to mate with a common higgler. Crafty, you know, too crafty!

5

The marriage was a gay little occasion, but they did not go away for a honeymoon. Sophy’s grandmother from a distant village, Cassandra Fundy, who had a deafness and a speckled skin, brought her third husband, Amos, whom the family had never seen before. Not a very wise man, indeed he was a common man, stooping like a decayed tree, he was so old. But he shaved every day and his hairless skull was yellow. Cassandra, who was yellow too, had long since turned into a fool; she did not shave, though she ought to have done. She was like to die soon, but everybody said old Amos would live to be a hundred; it was expected of him, and he, too, was determined.

The guests declared that a storm was threatening, but Amos Fundy denied it and scorned it. ‘Thunder p’raps, but ’twill clear; ’tis only de pride o’ der morning.’

‘Don’t you be a fool,’ remarked his wife enigmatically, ‘you’ll die soon enough.’

‘You must behold der moon,’ continued the octogenarian; ‘de closer it is to der wheel, de closer der rain; de furder away it is, de furder der rain.’

‘You could pour that man’s brains into a thimble,’ declared Cassandra of her spouse, ‘and they wouldn’t fill it — he’s deaf.’

Fundy was right; the day did clear. The marriage was made and the guests returned with the man and his bride to their home. But Fundy was also wrong, for storm came soon after and rain set in. The guests stayed on for tea, and then, as it was no better, they feasted and stayed till night. And Harvey began to think they never would go, but of course they couldn’t and so there they were. Sophy was looking wonderful in white stockings and shiny shoes and a red frock with a tiny white apron. A big girl she seemed, with her shaken dark hair and flushed face. Grandmother Fundy spoke seriously, but not secretly to her.

‘I’ve had my fourteen touch of children,’ said Grandmother Fundy. ‘Yes, they were flung on the mercy of God—poor little devils. I’ve followed most of ’em to the churchyard. You go slow, Sophia.’

“Yes, granny.”

“Why,’ continued Cassandra, embracing the whole company, as it were, with her disclosure, ‘my mother had me by some gentleman!’

The announcement aroused no response except sympathetic, and perhaps encouraging, nods from the women.

“She had me by some gentleman — she ought to ha’ had a twal’ month, she did!”

“Wasn’t she ever married?” Sophy inquired of her grandmother.

“Married? Yes, course she was,’ replied the old dame, ‘of course. But marriage ain’t everything. Twice she was, but not to he, she wasn’t.’

“Not to the gentleman?”

‘No! Oh, no! He’d got money — bushels! Marriage ain’t much, not with these gentry.’

“Ho, ho, that’s a tidy come-up!” laughed Harvey. “Who was that gentleman?” Sophia’s interest was deeply engaged. But Cassandra Fundy was silent, pondering like a china image. Her gaze was towards the mantelpiece, where there were four lamps — but only one usable —and two clocks — but only one going—and a

coloured greeting card a foot long with large letters KEEP SMILING adorned with lithographic honeysuckle.

‘She’s hard of hearing,’ interpolated grandfather Amos, ‘very hard, gets worse. She’ve a horn at home, big as that . . .’ His eyes roved the room for an object of comparison, and he seized upon the fire shovel that lay in the fender. ‘Big as that shovel. Crown silver it is, and solid, a beautiful horn, but’ - he brandished the shovel before them — ‘her won’t use ’en.’

‘Granny, who was that gentleman?’ shouted Sophy. Did you know him?’

‘No! no!’ declared the indignant dame. ‘J dunno ever his name, nor I don’t want to. He took hisself off to Ameriky, and now he’s in the land of heaven. I never seen him. If I had, I’d a given it to him properly; oh, my dear, not blay-guarding him, you know, but just plain language! Where’s your seven commandments?’

At last the rain abated. Peeping into the dark garden you could see the fugitive moonlight hung in a million raindrops in the black twigs of all sorts of bushes and trees, while along the cantle of the porch a line of raindrops hung, even and regular, as if they were nailheads made of glass. So all the guests departed, in one long staggering, struggling, giggling and guftawing body, into the village street.

The bride and her man stood in the porch, watching and waving hands. Sophy was momentarily grieving: what a lot of trouble and fuss when you announced that henceforward you were going to sleep with a man because you loved him true! She had said good-bye to her grandmother Cassandra, to her father and her little sister. She had hung on her mother’s breast, sighing an almost intolerable farewell to innocence — never treasured until it is gone, and thenceforward a pretty sorrow cherished more deeply than wilder joys.

Into Harvey’s mind, as they stood there at last alone, momentarily stole an image of a bright-haired girl, lovely, silent, sad, whom he felt he had deeply wronged. And he was sorry. He had escaped the snare, but if there had been no snare he might this night have been sleeping with a different bride. And it would have been just as well. Sophy looked but a girl with her blown hair and wet face. She was wiping her tears on the tiny apron. But she had the breasts of a woman and decoying eyes.

“Sophy, Sophy!” breathed Harvey, wooing her in the darkness.

“It blows and it rains, and it rains and it blows,” chattered the crumpled bride, ‘and I’m all so be-scambled I can’t tell wet from windy.’

“Come, my love,’ whispered the bridegroom, ‘come in, to home.’

6

Four or five months later the higgler’s affairs had again taken a rude turn. Marriage, alas, was not all it might be; his wife and his mother quarrelled unendingly. Sometimes he sided with the one and sometimes with the other. He could not yet afford to instal his mother in a separate cottage, and therefore even Sophy had to admit that her mother-in-law had a right to be living there with them, the home being hers. Harvey hadn’t bought much of it; and though he was welcome to it all now, and it would be exclusively his as soon as she died, still, it was her furniture, and you couldn’t drive any woman (even your mother) off her own property. Sophy, who wanted a home of her own, was vexed and moody, and antagonistic to her man. Business, too, had gone down sadly of late. He had thrown up the Shag Moor round months ago; he could not bring himself to go there again, and he had not been able to square up the loss by any substantial new connections. On top of it all his horse died. It stumbled on a hill one day and fell, and it couldn’t get up, or it wouldn’t—at any rate, it didn’t. Harvey thrashed it and coaxed it, then he cursed it and kicked it; after that he sent for a veterinary man, and the veterinary man ordered it to be shot. And it was shot. A great blow to Harvey Witlow was that. He had no money to buy another horse; money was tight with him, very tight; and so he had to hire at fabulous cost a decrepit nag that ate like a good one. It ate — well, it would have astonished you to see what that creature disposed of, with hay the price it was, and corn gone up to heaven nearly. In fact Harvey found that he couldn’t stand the racket much longer, and as he could not possibly buy another it looked very much as if he was in queer street once more, unless he could borrow the money from some friendly person. Of course there were plenty of friendly persons, but they had no money, just as there were many persons who had the money but were not what you might call friendly; and so the higgler began to reiterate twenty times a day, and forty times a day, that he was entirely and absolutely damned and done. Things were thus very bad with him, they were at their worst — for he had a wife to keep now, as well as a mother, and a horse that ate like Satan, and worked like a gnat — when it suddenly came into his mind that Mrs. Sadgrove was reputed to have a lot of money, and had no call to be unfriendly to him. He had his grave doubts about the size of her purse, but there could be no harm in trying so long as you approached her in a right reasonable manner.

For a week or two he held off from this appeal, but the grim spectre of destitution gave him no rest, and so, near the close of a wild March day he took his desperate courage and his cart and the decrepit nag to Shag Moor. Wild it was, though dry, and the wind against them, a vast turmoil of icy air strident and baffling. The nag threw up its head and declined to trot. Evening was but an hour away, the fury of the wind did not retard it, nor the clouds hasten it. Low down the sun was quitting the wrack of storm, exposing a jolly orb of magnifying fire that shone flush under eaves and through the casements of cottages, casting a pattern of lattice and tossing boughs upon the interior walls, lovelier than dreamed-of pictures. The heads of mothers and old dames were also imaged there, recognizable in their black shadows; and little children held up their hands between window and wall to make five-fingered shapes upon the golden screen. To drive on the moor then was to drive into blasts more dire. Darkness began to fall, and bitter cold it was. No birds to be seen, neither beast nor man; empty of everything it was except sound and a marvel of dying light, and Harvey Witlow of Dinnop with a sour old nag driving from end to end of it. At Prattle Corner dusk was already abroad: there was just one shaft of light that broached a sharp-angled stack in the rickyard, an ark of darkness, along whose top the gads and wooden pins and tilted straws were miraculously fringed in the last glare. Hitching his nag to the palings he knocked at the door, and knew in the gloom that it was Mary who opened it and stood peering forth at him.

‘Good evening,’ he said, touching his hat.

‘Oh!’ the girl uttered a cry, ‘Higgler! What do you come for?’ It was the longest sentence she had ever spoken to him; a sad frightened voice.

‘I thought,’ he began, ‘I’d call - and see Mrs. Sadgrove. I wondered...’

‘Mother’s dead,’ said the girl. She drew the door farther back, as if inviting him, and he entered. The door was shut behind him, and they were alone in darkness, together. The girl was deeply grieving. Trembling, he asked the question: ‘What is it you tell me, Mary?’

‘Mother’s dead,’ repeated the girl, ‘all day, all day, all day.’ They were close to each other, but he could not see her. All round the house the wind roved lamentingly, shuddering at doors and windows.

‘She died in the night. The doctor was to have come, but he has not come all day,’ Mary whispered, ‘all day, all day. I don’t understand; I have waited for him, and he

has not come. She died, she was dead in her bed this morning, and I've been alone all day, all day, and I don't know what is to be done.'

'I'll go for the doctor,' he said hastily, but she took him by the hand and drew him into the kitchen. There was no candle lit; a fire was burning there, richly glowing embers, that laid a gaunt shadow of the table across a corner of the ceiling. Every dish on the dresser gleamed, the stone floor was rosy, and each smooth curve on the dark settle was shining like ice. Without invitation he sat down.

'No,' said the girl, in a tremulous voice, 'you must help me.' She lit a candle: her face was white as the moon, her lips were sharply red, and her eyes were wild. 'Come,' she said, and he followed her behind the settle and up the stairs to a room where there was a disordered bed, and what might be a body lying under the quilt. The higgler stood still staring at the form under the quilt. The girl, too, was still and staring. Wind dashed upon the ivy at the window and hallooed like a grieving multitude. A crumpled gown hid the body's head, but thrust from under it, almost as if to greet him, was her naked Jean arm, the palm of the hand lying uppermost. At the foot of the bed was a large washing bowl, with sponge and towels.

"You've been laying her out! Yourself!" exclaimed Witlow. The pale girl set down the candle on a chest of drawers. 'Help me now,' she said, and moving to the bed she lifted the crumpled gown from off the face of the dead woman, at the same time smoothing the quilt closely up to the body's chin, 'I cannot put the gown on, because of her arm, it has gone stiff.' She shuddered, and stood holding the gown as if offering it to the man. He lifted that dead naked arm and tried to place it down at the body's side, but it resisted and he let go his hold.

The arm swung back to its former outstretched position, as if it still lived and resented that pressure. The girl retreated from the bed with a timorous cry.

'Get me a bandage,' he said, 'or something we can tear up.'

She gave him some pieces of linen.

'I'll finish this for you,' he brusquely whispered, 'you get along downstairs and take a swig of brandy.'

'Got any brandy?'

She did not move. He put his arm around her and gently urged her to the door.

‘Brandy,’ he repeated, ‘and light your candles.’ He watched her go heavily down the stairs before he shut the door. Returning to the bed he lifted the quilt. The dead body was naked and smelt of soap. Dropping the quilt he lifted the outstretched arm again, like cold wax to the touch and unpliant as a sturdy sapling, and tried once more to bend it to the body’s side. As he did so the bedroom door blew open with a crash. It was only a draught of the wind, and a loose latch Mary had opened a door downstairs, perhaps — but it awed him, as if some invisible looker were there resenting his presence. He went and closed the door, the latch had a loose hasp, and tiptoeing nervously back he seized the dreadful arm with a sudden brutal energy, and bent it by thrusting his knee violently into the hollow of the elbow. Hurriedly he slipped the gown over the head and inserted the arm in the sleeve. A strange impulse of modesty stayed him for a moment: should he call the girl and let her complete the robing of the naked body under the quilt? That preposterous pause seemed to add a new anger to the wind, and again the door sprang open. He delayed no longer, but letting it remain open, he uncovered the dead woman. As he lifted the chill body the long outstretched arm moved and tilted like the boom of a sail, but crushing it to its side he bound the limb fast with the strips of linen. So Mrs. Sadgrove was made ready for her coffin. Drawing the quilt back to her neck, with a gush of relief he glanced about the room. It was a very ordinary bedroom: bed, washstand, chest of drawers, chair, and two pictures—one of deeply religious import, and the other a little pink print, in a gilded frame, of a bouncing nude nymph recumbent upon a cloud. It was queer: a lot of people, people whom you wouldn’t think it of, had that sort of picture in their bedrooms.

Mary was now coming up the stairs again, with a glass half full of liquid. She brought it to him.

“No, you drink it,’ he urged, and Mary sipped the brandy.

‘I’ve finished — I’ve finished,’ he said as he watched her, ‘she’s quite comfortable now.’

The girl looked her silent thanks at him, again holding out the glass. ‘No, sup it yourself,’ he said; but as she stood in the dim light, regarding him with her strange gaze, and still offering the drink, he took it from her, drained it at a gulp and put the glass upon the chest, beside the candle. ‘She’s quite comfortable now. I’m very grieved, Mary,’ he said with awkward kindness, ‘about all this trouble that’s come on you.’

She was motionless as a wax image, as if she had died in her steps, her hand still extended as when he took the glass from it. So piercing was her gaze that his own drifted from her face and took in again the objects in the room: the washstand, the candle on the chest, the little pink picture. The wind beat upon the ivy outside the window as if a monstrous whip were lashing its slaves.

“You must notify the registrar,’ he began again, ‘but you must see the doctor first.’

‘I’ve waited for him all day,’ Mary whispered, ‘all day. The nurse will come again soon. She went home to rest in the night.’ She turned towards the bed. ‘She has only been ill a week.’

“Yes?” he lamely said. ‘Dear me, it is sudden.’

‘I must see the doctor,’ she continued.

‘I’ll drive you over to him in my gig.’ He was eager to do that.

“I don’t know,’ said Mary slowly.

“Yes, I’ll do that, soon’s you’re ready. Mary,’ he fumbled with his speech, ‘I’m not wanting to pry into your affairs, or any thing as don’t concern me, but how are you going to get along now? Have you got any relations?’”

‘No,’ the girl shook her head, ‘No.’

‘That’s bad. What was you thinking of doing? How has she left you—things were in a baddish way, weren’t they?’

‘Oh, no,’ Mary looked up quickly. ‘She has left me very well off. ‘I shall go on with the farm; there’s the old man and the boy — they’ve gone to a wedding to-day; I shall go on with it. She was so thoughtful for me, and I would not care to leave all this, I love it.’

‘But you can’t do it by yourself, alone?’

‘No. I’m to get a man to superintend, a working bailiff,’ she said.

‘Oh!’ And again they were silent. The girl went to the bed and lifted the covering. She saw the bound arm and then drew the quilt tenderly over the dead face. Witlow picked up his hat and found himself staring again at the pink picture. Mary took the candle preparatory to descending the stairs. Suddenly the higgler turned to her and ventured: ‘Did you know as she once asked me to marry you?’ he blurted.

Her eyes turned from him, but he guessed — he could feel that she had known.

‘I’ve often wondered why,’ he murmured, ‘why she wanted that.’

‘She didn’t,’ said the girl.

That gave pause to the man; he felt stupid at once, and roved his fingers in a silly way along the roughened nap of his hat.

‘Well, she asked me to,’ he bluntly protested.

‘She knew,’ Mary’s voice was no louder than a sigh, ‘that you were courting another girl, the one you married.’

‘But, but,’ stuttered the honest higgler, ‘if she knew that why did she want for me to marry you?’

‘She didn’t,’ said Mary again; and again, in the pause, he did silly things to his hat. How shy this girl was, how lovely in her modesty and grief!

‘I can’t make tops or bottoms of it,’ he said; ‘but she asked me, as sure as God’s my maker.’

‘I know. It was me, I wanted it.’

‘You!’ he cried, ‘you wanted to marry me!’

The girl bowed her head, lovely in her grief and modesty: ‘She was against it, but I made her ask you.’

“And I hadn’t an idea that you cast a thought on me,” he murmured. ‘I feared it was a sort of trick she was playing on me. I didn’t understand, I had no idea that you knew about it even. And so I didn’t ever ask you.’

‘Oh, why not, why not? I was fond of you then,’ whispered she. ‘Mother tried to persuade me against it, but I was fond of you — then.’

He was in a queer distress and confusion: ‘Oh, if you’d only tipped me a word, or given me a sort of look,’ he sighed. ‘Oh, Mary!’

She said no more, but went downstairs. He followed her and immediately fetched the lamps from his gig. As he lit the candles: ‘How strange,’ Mary said, ‘that you should come back just as I most needed help. I am very grateful.’

‘Mary, I’ll drive you to the doctor’s now.’

She shook her head; she was smiling.

“Then I’ll stay till the nurse comes.’

“No, you must go. Go at once.’

He picked up the two lamps, and turning at the door said: ‘I’ll come again tomorrow.’ Then the wind rushed into the room: ‘Good-bye,’ she cried, shutting the door quickly behind him.

He drove away into deep darkness, the wind howling, his thoughts strange and bitter. He had thrown away a love, a love that was dumb and hid itself. By God, he had thrown away a fortune, too! And he had forgotten all about his real errand until now, forgotten all about the loan! Well, let it go; give it up. He would give up higgling; he would take on some other job; a bailiff, a working bailiff, that was the job that would suit him, a working bailiff. Of course there was Sophy; but still - Sophy

Story Notes:

A. E. Coppard's "The Higgler" is a masterfully crafted story that explores themes of economic anxiety, missed opportunity, and the collision between pragmatic calculation and genuine emotion. Set in the stark landscape of Shag Moor, the narrative follows Harvey Witlow, a struggling poultry dealer torn between financial survival and matters of the heart.

Coppard's prose is richly atmospheric, opening with vivid descriptions of the windswept moor that establish both setting and mood. The barren landscape—"full of furze and bracken" with telegraph poles "sweeping with rigidity from north to south"—mirrors Harvey's internal desolation and the mechanical constraints of his circumstances. This symbolic geography recurs throughout, the isolated farm at Prattle Corner representing both possibility and entrapment.

The story's central irony is exquisitely developed. Harvey's suspicion of Mrs. Sadgrove's marriage proposal—his conviction that "there's a catch in it somewhere"—reveals how poverty breeds cynicism. His fear that people "with property did not often come along and bid you help yourself" blinds him to Mary's genuine, if painfully shy, affection. Coppard handles this dramatic irony with subtlety; Mary's silence, which Harvey misreads as indifference or superiority, is actually the paralysis of unexpressed love.

The characterization is economical yet vivid. Mary emerges through careful accumulation of detail: "red hair, a complexion like the inside of a nut, blue eyes, and the hands of a lady." Her muteness becomes eloquent, each brief utterance weighted with significance.

Harvey himself is neither hero nor villain but recognizably human—shrewd yet obtuse, capable of kindness yet fatally ruled by caution and his prior attachment to Sophy.

The narrative's final section achieves genuine poignancy. Harvey's return to Prattle Corner to beg a loan—the very pragmatism that prevented his acceptance of Mrs. Sadgrove's offer—becomes the occasion for devastating revelation. The scene where he helps lay out the dead woman is handled with restraint and dignity, the gothic elements (the stiff arm, the wind-blown door) never overwhelming the human core. When Mary finally confesses "I was fond of you then," the past tense carries enormous weight.

Coppard's theme resonates beyond its rural setting: the tragedy of choices made from suspicion rather than trust, the irrecoverable nature of certain opportunities, and the sad comedy of people failing to communicate across barriers of class, gender, and self-protection. Harvey's closing thoughts—"And he had forgotten all about his real errand until now"—suggest bitter self-recognition, though the trailing "Of course there was Sophy; but still—Sophy" leaves his ultimate response ambiguous.

"The Higgler" is a small masterpiece of the short story form—compressed, psychologically acute, and quietly devastating in its portrait of love deferred and fortune lost.