

The Field Of Mustard

A.E. Coppard

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On a windy afternoon in November they were gathering kindling in the Black Wood, Dinah Lock, Amy Hardwick, and Rose Olliver, three sere disvirgined women from Pollock's Cross. Mrs. Lock wore clothes of dull butcher's blue, with a short jacket that affirmed her plumpness, but Rose and Amy had on long grey ulsters. All of them were about forty years old, and the wind and twigs had tousled their gaunt locks, for none had a hat upon her head. They did not go far beyond the margin of the wood, for the forest ahead of them swept high over a hill and was gloomy; behind them the slim trunks of beech, set in a sweet ruin of hoar and scattered leaf, and green briar nimbly fluttering, made a sort of palisade against the light of the open, which was grey, and a wide field of mustard which was yellow.

The three women peered up into the trees for dead branches, and when they found any Dinah Lock, the vivacious woman full of shrill laughter, with a bosom as massive as her haunches, would heave up a rope with an iron bolt tied to one end. The bolted end would twine itself around the dead branch, the three women would tug, and after a sharp crack the quarry would fall; as often as not the women would topple over too. By and by they met an old hedger with a round belly belted low, and thin legs tied at each knee, who told them the time by his ancient watch, a stout timepiece which the women sportively admired.

'Come Christmas I'll have me a watch like that!' Mrs. Lock called out. The old man looked a little dazed as he fumblingly replaced his chronometer. 'I will,' she continued, 'if the Lord spares me and the pig don't pine.'

'You... you don't know what you're talking about,' he said. 'That watch was my uncle's watch.'

'Who was he? I'd like one like it.'

'Was a sergeant-major in the lancers, fought under Sir Garnet Wolseley, and it was given to him.'

'What for?'

The hedger stopped and turned on them: 'Doing of his duty.'

'That all?' cried Dinah Lock. 'Well, I never got no watch for that a-much. Do you know what I see when I went to London? I see'd a watch in a bowl of water, it was glass, and there was a fish swimming round it....'

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘There was a fish swimming round it...’

‘I tell you I don’t believe it...’

‘And the little hand was going on like Clackford Mill. That’s the sort of watch I’ll have me; none of your Sir Garney Wolsey’s!’

‘He was a noble Christian man, that was.’

‘Ah! I suppose he slept wid Jesus?’ yawped Dinah.

‘No, he didn’t,’ the old man disdainfully spluttered. ‘He never did. What a God’s the matter wid ye?’ Dinah cackled with laughter. ‘Pah!’ he cried, going away, ‘great fat thing! Can’t tell your guts from your elbows.’

Fifty yards further on he turned and shouted some obscenity back at them, but they did not heed him; they had begun to make three faggots of the wood they had collected, so he put his fingers to his nose at them and shambled out to the road.

By the time Rose and Dinah were ready, Amy Hardwick, a small slow silent woman, had not finished bundling her faggot together.

‘Come on, Amy,’ urged Rose.

‘Come on,’ Dinah said.

‘All right, wait a minute,’ she replied listlessly.

‘O God, that’s death!’ cried Dinah Lock, and heaving a great faggot to her shoulders she trudged off, followed by Rose with a like burden. Soon they were out of the wood, and crossing a highway they entered a footpath that strayed in a diagonal wriggle to the far corner of the field of mustard. In silence they journeyed until they came to that far corner, where there was a hedged bank. Here they flung their faggots down and sat upon them to wait for Amy Hardwick.

In front of them lay the field they had crossed, a sour scent rising faintly from its yellow blooms that quivered in the wind. Day was dull, the air chill, and the place most solitary. Beyond the field of mustard the eye could see little but forest. There were hills there, a vast curving trunk, but the Black Wood heaved itself effortlessly upon them and lay like a dark pall over the outline of a corpse. Huge and gloomy, the purple woods draped it all

completely. A white necklace of a road curved below, where a score of telegraph poles, each crossed with a multitude of white florets, were dwarfed by the hugeness to effigies that resembled hyacinths. Dinah Lock gazed upon this scene whose melancholy, and not its grandeur, had suddenly invaded her; with elbows sunk in her fat thighs, and nursing her cheeks in her hands, she puffed the gloomy air, saying:

‘O God, cradle and grave is all there is for we.’

‘Where’s Amy got to?’ asked Rose.

‘I could never make a companion of her, you know,’ Dinah declared.

‘Nor I,’ said Rose, ‘she’s too sour and slow.’

‘Her disposition’s too serious. Of course, your friends are never what you want them to be, Rose. Sometimes they’re better — most often they’re worse. But it’s such a mercy to have a friend at all; I like you, Rose; I wish you was a man.’

‘I might just as well ha’ been,’ returned the other woman.

‘Well, you’d ha’ done better; but if you had a tidy little family like me you’d wish you hadn’t got ’em.’

‘And if you’d never had ’em you’d ha’ wished you had.’

‘Rose, that’s the cussedness of nature, it makes a mock of you. I don’t believe it’s the Almighty at all, Rose. I’m sure it’s the devil, Rose. Dear heart, my corn’s a-giving me what-for; I wonder what that bodes?’

‘It’s restless weather,’ said Rose. She was dark, tall, and not unbeautiful still, though her skin was harsh and her limbs angular. ‘Get another month or two over — there’s so many of these long dreary hours.’

‘Ah, your time’s too long, or it’s too short, or it’s just right but you’re too old. Cradle and grave’s my portion. Fat old thing! he called me.’ Dinah’s brown hair was ruffled across her pleasant face and she looked a little forlorn, but corpulence dispossessed her of tragedy. ‘I be thin enough a-summertimes, for I lives light and sweats like a bridesmaid, but winters I’m fat as a hog.’

‘What all have you to grumble at then?’ asked Rose, who had slid to the ground and lay on her stomach staring up at her friend.

‘My heart’s young, Rose.’

‘You’ve your husband.’

‘He’s no man at all since he was ill. A long time ill, he was. When he coughed, you know, his insides come up out of him like coffee grouts. Can you ever understand the meaning of that? Coffee! I’m growing old, but my heart’s young.’

‘So is mine, too: but you got a family, four children grown or growing.’ Rose had snapped off a sprig of the mustard flower and was pressing and pulling the bloom in and out of her mouth. ‘I’ve none, and never will have.’ Suddenly she sat up, fumbled in her pocket, and produced her purse. She slipped the elastic band from it, and it gaped open. There were a few coins there and a scrap of paper folded. Rose took out the paper and smoothed it open under Dinah’s curious gaze.

‘I found something lying about at home the other day, and I cut this bit out of it.’ In soft tones she began to read:

‘The day was void, vapid; time itself seemed empty. Come evening it rained softly. I sat by my fire turning over the leaves of a book, and I was dejected, until I came upon a little old-fashioned engraving at the bottom of a page. It imaged a procession of some angelic children in a garden, little placidly-naked substantial babes, with tiny bird-wings. One carried a bow, others a horn of plenty, or a hamper of fruit, or a set of reed-pipes. They were garlanded and full of grave joys. And at the sight of them a strange bliss flowed into me such as I had never known, and I thought this world was all a garden, though its light was hidden and its children not yet born.’

Rose did not fold the paper up; she crushed it in her hand and lay down again without a word.

‘Huh, I tell you, Rose, a family’s a torment. I never wanted mine. God love, Rose, I’d lay down my life for ’em; I’d cut myself into fourpenny pieces so they shouldn’t come to harm; if one of ’em was to die I’d sorrow to my grave. But I know, I know, I know I never wanted ’em, they were not for me, I was just an excuse for their blundering into the world. Somehow I’ve been duped, and every woman born is duped so, one ways or another in the end. I had my sport with my man, but I ought never to have married. Now I’d love to begin all over again, and as God’s my maker, if it weren’t for those children, I’d be gone off out into the world again to-morrow, Rose. But I dunno what ’ud become o’ me.’

The wind blew strongly athwart the yellow field, and the odour of mustard rushed upon the brooding women. Protestingly the breeze flung itself upon the forest; there was a gliding cry among the rocking pinions as of some lost wave seeking a forgotten shore. The angular faggot under Dinah Lock had begun to vex her; she too sunk to the ground and lay beside Rose Olliver, who asked:

‘And what ’ud become of your old man?’

For a few moments Dinah Lock paused. She too took a sprig of the mustard and fondled it with her lips. ‘He’s no man now, the illness feebled him, and the virtue’s gone; no man at all since two years, and bald as a piece of cheese — I like a hairy man, like ... do you remember Rufus Blackthorn, used to be gamekeeper here?’

Rose stopped playing with her flower. ‘Yes, I knew Rufus Blackthorn.’

‘A fine bold man that was! Never another like him hereabouts, nor in England neither; not in the whole world — though I’ve heard some queer talk of those foreigners, Australians, Chinymen. Well!’

‘Well?’ said Rose.

‘He was a devil.’ Dinah Lock began to whisper. ‘A perfect devil; I can’t say no fairer than that. I wish I could, but I can’t.’

‘O come,’ protested Rose, ‘he was a kind man. He’d never see anybody want for a thing.’

‘No,’ there was playful scorn in Dinah’s voice; ‘he’d shut his eyes first!’

‘Not to a woman he wouldn’t, Dinah.’

‘Ah! Well — perhaps — he was good to women.’

‘I could tell you things as would surprise you,’ murmured Rose.

‘You! But — well — no, no. I could tell you things as you wouldn’t believe. Me and Rufus! We was — O my — yes!’

‘He was handsome.’

‘O, a pretty man!’ Dinah acceded warmly. ‘Black as coal and bold as a fox. I’d been married nigh on ten years when he first set foot in these parts. I’d got three children then. He used to give me a saucy word whenever he saw me, for I liked him and he knew it. One Whitsun Monday I was home all alone, the children were gone somewheres, and Tom was away boozing. I was putting some plants in our garden—I loved a good flower in those days — I wish the world was all a garden, but now my Tom he digs ’em up, digs everything up proper and never puts ’em back. Why, we had a crocus, once! And as I was doing that planting some one walked by the garden in such a

hurry. I looked up and there was Rufus, all dressed up to the nines, and something made me call out to him. "Where be you off to in that flaming hurry," I says. "Going to a wedding," says he. "Shall I come with 'ee?" I says. 'Ah yes," he says, very glad; "but hurry up, for I be sharp set and all." So I run in-a-doors and popped on my things and off we went to Jim Pickering's wedding over at Clackford Mill. When Jim brought the bride home from church that Rufus got hold of a gun and fired it off up chimney, and down come soot, the bushels of it! All over the room, and a chimney-pot burst and rattled down the tiles into a prambulator. What a rumbullion that was! But no one got angry — there was plenty of drink and we danced all the afternoon. Then we come home together again through the woods. O Lord — I said to myself — I shan't come out with you ever again, and that's what I said to Rufus Blackthorn. But I did, you know! I woke up in bed that night, and the moon shone on me dreadful — I thought the place was afire. But there was Tom snoring, and I lay and thought of me and Rufus in the wood, till I could have jumped out into the moonlight, stark, and flown over the chimney. I didn't sleep any more. And I saw Rufus the next night, and the night after that, often, often. Whenever I went out I left Tom the cupboardful — that's all he troubled about. I was mad after Rufus, and while that caper was on I couldn't love my husband. No.'

'No?' queried Rose.

'Well, I pretended I was ill, and I took my young Katey to sleep with me, and give Tom her bed. He didn't seem to mind, but after a while I found he was gallivanting after other women. Course, I soon put a stopper on that. And then — what do you think? Bless me if Rufus weren't up to the same tricks! Deep as the sea, that man. Faithless, you know, but such a bold one.'

Rose lay silent, plucking wisps of grass; there was a wry smile on her face.

'Did ever he tell you the story of the man who was drowned?' she asked at length. Dinah shook

her head. Rose continued.

'Before he came here he was keeper over in that Oxfordshire, where the river goes right through the woods, and he slept in a boathouse moored to the bank. Some gentleman was drowned near there, an accident it was, but they couldn't find the body. So they offered a reward of ten pound for it to be found....'

'Ten, ten pounds!'

'Yes. Well, all the watermen said the body wouldn't come up for ten days....'

'No, more they do.'

‘It didn’t. And so late one night — it was moonlight — some men in a boat kept on hauling and poking round the house where Rufus was, and he heard ’em say “It must be here, it must be here,” and Rufus shouts out to them, “Course he’s here! I got him in bed with me!”’

‘Aw!’ chuckled Dinah.

‘Yes, and next day he got the ten pounds, because he had found the body and hidden it away.’

‘Feared nothing,’ said Dinah, ‘nothing at all; he’d have been rude to Satan. But he was very delicate with his hands, sewing and things like that. I used to say to him, “Come, let me mend your coat,” or whatever it was, but he never would, always did such things of himself. “I don’t allow no female to patch my clothes,” he’d say, “’cos they works with a red-hot needle and a burning thread.” And he used to make fine little slippers out of reeds.’

‘Yes,’ Rose concurred, ‘he made me a pair.’

‘You!’ Dinah cried. ‘What — were you...?’

Rose turned her head away. ‘We was all cheap to him,’ she said softly, ‘cheap as old rags; we was like chaff before him.’

Dinah Lock lay still, very still, ruminating; but whether in old grief or new rancour Rose was not aware, and she probed no further. Both were quiet, voiceless, recalling the past delirium. They shivered, but did not rise. The wind increased in the forest, its hoarse breath sorrowed in the yellow field, and swift masses of cloud flowed and twirled in a sky without end and full of gloom.

‘Hallo!’ cried a voice, and there was Amy beside them, with a faggot almost overwhelming her. ‘Shan’t stop now,’ she said, ‘for I’ve got this faggot perched just right, and I shouldn’t ever get it up again. I found a shilling in the ’ood, you,’ she continued shrilly and gleefully. ‘Come along to my house after tea, and we’ll have a quart of stout.’

‘A shilling, Amy!’ cried Rose.

‘Yes,’ called Mrs. Hardwick, trudging steadily on. ‘I tried to find the fellow to it, but no more luck. Come and wet it after tea!’

‘Rose,’ said Dinah, ‘come on.’ She and Rose with much circumstance heaved up their faggots and tottered after, but by then Amy was turned out of sight down the little lane to Pollock’s Cross.

‘Your children will be home,’ said Rose as they went along, ‘they’ll be looking out for you.’

‘Ah, they’ll want their bellies filling!’

‘It must be lovely a-winter’s nights, you setting round your fire with ’em, telling tales, and brushing their hair.’

‘Ain’t you got a fire of your own indoors,’ grumbled Dinah.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, why don’t you set by it then!’ Dinah’s faggot caught the briars of a hedge that overhung, and she tilted round with a mild oath. A covey of partridges feeding beyond scurried away with ruckling cries. One foolish bird dashed into the telegraph wires and dropped dead.

‘They’re good children, Dinah, yours are. And they make you a valentine, and give you a ribbon on your birthday, I expect?’

‘They’re naught but a racket from cockcrow till the old man snores—and then it’s worse!’

‘Oh, but the creatures, Dinah!’

‘You... you got your quiet trim house, and only your man to look after, a kind man, and you’ll set with him in the evenings and play your dominoes or your draughts, and he’ll look at you — the nice man — over the board, and stroke your hand now and again.’

The wind hustled the two women closer together, and as they stumbled under their burdens Dinah Lock stretched out a hand and touched the other woman’s arm. ‘I like you, Rose, I wish you was a man.’

Rose did not reply. Again they were quiet, voiceless, and thus in fading light they came to their homes. But how windy, dispossessed and ravaged, roved the darkening world! Clouds were born frantically across the heavens, as if in a rout of battle, and the lovely earth seemed to sigh in grief at some calamity all unknown to men.

Story Notes:

Coppard’s *Field Of Mustard* is a masterfully crafted short story that reveals the emotional textures of rural working-class women’s lives through deceptively simple means.

The narrative architecture is particularly skillful. The story opens with physical labor—gathering kindling—but this mundane activity becomes the framework for excavating deeper emotional truths. The movement from the comic banter with the hedger to introspective melancholy feels organic rather than contrived.

Dinah Lock emerges as the emotional center—voluble, sensual, contradictory. Her confession about motherhood ("I'd cut myself into fourpenny pieces so they shouldn't come to harm... But I know, I know, I know I never wanted 'em") captures profound ambivalence without resolving it. The revelation about Rufus Blackthorn structures the central dramatic movement. What begins as nostalgic reminiscence darkens when both women's intimacy with him emerges. Rose's admission "he made me a pair" of reed slippers crystallizes their shared history with devastating economy.

The prose achieves a remarkable register shift. The dialogue captures authentic rural speech without condescension, while descriptive passages—the Black Wood as "a dark pall over the outline of a corpse," clouds "born frantically across the heavens, as if in a rout of battle"—create symbolic resonance beyond social realism.

Rose's reading about "angelic children" poignantly counterpoints Dinah's complex feelings about her real children and Rose's childlessness. The story's treatment of female desire is remarkably frank: Dinah's account of her affair is sensual and unapologetic, yet acknowledges the costs.

The ending is particularly accomplished. Rose's romanticized vision of Dinah's domestic life reveals her isolation; Dinah's gruff dismissal masks reciprocal envy. Dinah's gesture—touching Rose's arm while saying "I wish you was a man"—contains layers of meaning: affection, sexual yearning, recognition that their friendship can never fully satisfy their desires within the constraints of their world.

The cosmic imagery of the conclusion—the "calamity all unknown to men"—suggests the women's emotional experiences exist beneath male awareness, a feminine catastrophe the world cannot recognize. This is writing of considerable sophistication masquerading as a simple regional tale.
