

Chapter VI - The Hall Farm

EVIDENTLY that gate is never opened, for the long grass and the great hemlocks grow close against it, and if it were opened, it is so rusty that the force necessary to turn it on its hinges would be likely to pull down the square stone-built pillars, to the detriment of the two stone lionesses which grin with a doubtful carnivorous affability above a coat of arms surmounting each of the pillars. It would be easy enough, by the aid of the nicks in the stone pillars, to climb over the brick wall with its smooth stone coping; but by putting our eyes close to the rusty bars of the gate, we can see the house well enough, and all but the very corners of the grassy enclosure.

It is a very fine old place, of red brick, softened by a pale powdery lichen, which has dispersed itself with happy irregularity, so as to bring the red brick into terms of friendly companionship with the limestone ornaments surrounding the three gables, the windows, and the door-place. But the windows are patched with wooden panes, and the door, I think, is like the gate - it is never opened. How it would groan and grate against the stone floor if it were! For it is a solid, heavy, handsome door, and must once have been in the habit of shutting with a sonorous bang behind a liveried lackey, who had just seen his master and mistress off the grounds in a carriage and pair.

But at present one might fancy the house in the early stage of a chancery suit, and that the fruit from that grand double row of walnut-trees on the right hand of the enclosure would fall and rot among the grass, if it were not that we heard the booming bark of dogs echoing from great buildings at the back. And now the half-weaned calves that have been sheltering themselves in a gorse-built hovel against the left-hand wall come out and set up a silly answer to that terrible bark, doubtless supposing that it has reference to buckets of milk.

Yes, the house must be inhabited, and we will see by whom; for imagination is a licensed trespasser: it has no fear of dogs, but may climb over walls and peep in at windows with impunity. Put your face to one of the glass panes in the right-hand window: what do you see? A large open fireplace, with rusty dogs in it, and a bare boarded floor; at the far end, fleeces of wool stacked up; in the middle of the floor, some empty corn-bags. That is the furniture of the dining-room. And what through the left-hand window? Several clothes-horses, a pillion, a spinning-wheel, and an old box wide open and stuffed full of coloured rags. At the edge of this box there lies a great wooden doll, which, so far as mutilation is concerned, bears a strong resemblance to the finest Greek sculpture, and especially in the total loss of its nose. Near it there is a little chair, and the butt end of a boy's leather long-lashed whip.

The history of the house is plain now. It was once the residence of a country squire, whose family, probably dwindling down to mere spinsterhood, got merged in the more territorial name of Donnithorne. It was once the Hall; it is now the Hall Farm. Like the life in some coast town that was once a watering-place, and is now a port, where the genteel streets are silent and grass-grown, and the docks and warehouses busy and resonant, the life at the Hall has changed its focus, and no longer radiates from the parlour, but from the kitchen and the farmyard.

Plenty of life there, though this is the drowsiest time of the year, just before hay-harvest; and it is the drowsiest time of the day too, for it is close upon three by the sun, and it is half-past three by Mrs. Poyser's handsome eight-day clock. But there is always a stronger sense of life when the sun is brilliant after rain; and now he is pouring down his beams, and making sparkles among the wet straw, and lighting up every patch of vivid green moss on the red tiles of the cow-shed, and turning even the muddy water that is hurrying along the channel to the drain into a mirror for the yellow-billed ducks, who are seizing the opportunity of getting a drink with as much body in it as possible. There is quite a concert of noises; the great bull-dog, chained against the stables, is thrown into furious exasperation by the unwary approach of a cock too near the mouth of his kennel, and sends forth a thundering bark, which is answered by two fox-hounds shut up in the opposite cow-house; the old top-knotted hens, scratching with their chicks among the straw, set up a sympathetic croaking as the discomfited cock joins them; a sow with her brood, all very muddy as to the legs, and curled as to the tail, throws in some deep staccato notes; our friends the calves are bleating from the home croft; and, under all, a fine ear discerns the continuous hum of human voices.

For the great barn-doors are thrown wide open, and men are busy there mending the harness, under the superintendence of Mr Goby, the 'whittaw,' otherwise saddler, who entertains them with the latest Treddleston gossip. It is certainly rather an unfortunate day that Alick, the shepherd, has chosen for having the whittaws, since the morning turned out so wet; and Mrs. Poyser has spoken her mind pretty strongly as to the dirt which the extra number of men's shoes brought into the house at dinnertime. Indeed, she has not yet recovered her equanimity on the subject, though it is now nearly three hours since dinner, and the house-floor is perfectly clean again; as clean as everything else in that wonderful house-place, where the only chance of collecting a few grains of dust would be to climb on the salt-coffer, and put your finger on the high mantel-shelf on which the glittering brass candlesticks are enjoying their summer sinecure; for at this time of year, of course, every one goes to bed while it is yet light, or at least light enough to discern the outline of objects after you have bruised your shins against them. Surely nowhere else could an

oak clock-case and an oak table have got to such a polish by the hand: genuine 'elbow polish,' as Mrs. Poyser called it, for she thanked God she never had any of your varnished rubbish in her house. Hetty Sorrel often took the opportunity, when her aunt's back was turned, of looking at the pleasing reflection of herself in those polished surfaces, for the oak table was usually turned up like a screen, and was more for ornament than for use; and she could see herself sometimes in the great round pewter dishes that were ranged on the shelves above the long deal dinner-table, or in the hobs of the grate, which always shone like jasper.

Everything was looking at its brightest at this moment, for the sun shone right on the pewter dishes, and from their reflecting surfaces pleasant jets of light were thrown on mellow oak and bright brass - and on a still pleasanter object than these, for some of the rays fell on Dinah's finely moulded cheek, and lit up her pale red hair to auburn, as she bent over the heavy household linen which she was mending for her aunt. No scene could have been more peaceful, if Mrs. Poyser, who was ironing a few things that still remained from the Monday's wash, had not been making a frequent clinking with her iron and moving to and fro whenever she wanted it to cool; carrying the keen glance of her blue-grey eye from the kitchen to the dairy, where Hetty was making up the butter, and from the dairy to the back kitchen, where Nancy was taking the pies out of the oven. Do not suppose, however, that Mrs. Poyser was elderly or shrewish in her appearance; she was a good-looking woman, not more than eight-and-thirty, of fair complexion and sandy hair, well-shapen, light-footed. The most conspicuous article in her attire was an ample checkered linen apron, which almost covered her skirt; and nothing could be plainer or less noticeable than her cap and gown, for there was no weakness of which she was less tolerant than feminine vanity, and the preference of ornament to utility. The family likeness between her and her niece Dinah Morris, with the contrast between her keenness and Dinah's seraphic gentleness of expression, might have served a painter as an excellent suggestion for a Martha and Mary. Their eyes were just of the same colour, but a striking test of the difference in their operation was seen in the demeanour of Trip, the black-and-tan terrier, whenever that much-suspected dog unwarily exposed himself to the freezing arctic ray of Mrs. Poyser's glance. Her tongue was not less keen than her eye, and, whenever a damsel came within earshot, seemed to take up an unfinished lecture, as a barrel-organ takes up a tune, precisely at the point where it had left off.

The fact that it was churning day was another reason why it was inconvenient to have the whittaws, and why, consequently, Mrs. Poyser should scold Molly the housemaid with unusual severity. To all appearance Molly had got through her after-dinner work in an exemplary manner, had 'cleaned herself' with great dispatch, and now

came to ask, submissively, if she should sit down to her spinning till milking time. But this blameless conduct, according to Mrs. Poyser, shrouded a secret indulgence of unbecoming wishes, which she now dragged forth and held up to Molly's view with cutting eloquence.

'Spinning, indeed! It isn't spinning as you'd be at, I'll be bound, and let you have your own way. I never knew your equals for gallowssness. To think of a gell o' your age wanting to go and sit with half-a-dozen men! I'd ha' been ashamed to let the words pass over my lips if I'd been you. And you, as have been here ever since last Michaelmas, and I hired you at Treddles'on stattits, without a bit o' character - as I say, you might be grateful to be hired in that way to a respectable place; and you knew no more o' what belongs to work when you come here than the mawkin i' the field. As poor a two-fisted thing as ever I saw, you know you was. Who taught you to scrub a floor, I should like to know? Why, you'd leave the dirt in heaps i' the corners - anybody 'ud think you'd never been brought up among Christians. And as for spinning, why, you've wasted as much as your wage i' the flax you've spoiled learning to spin. And you've a right to feel that, and not to go about as gaping and as thoughtless as if you was beholding to nobody. Comb the wool for the whittaws, indeed! That's what you'd like to be doing, is it? That's the way with you - that's the road you'd all like to go, headlongs to ruin. You're never easy till you've got some sweetheart as is as big a fool as yourself: you think you'll be finely off when you're married, I daresay, and have got a three-legged stool to sit on, and never a blanket to cover you, and a bit o' oat-cake for your dinner, as three children are a-snatching at.'

'I'm sure I donna want t' go wi' the whittaws,' said Molly, whimpering, and quite overcome by this Dantean picture of her future, 'on'y we allays used to comb the wool for 'n at Mester Ottley's; an' so I just axed ye. I donna want to set eyes on the whittaws again; I wish I may never stir if I do.'

'Mr Ottley's, indeed! It's fine talking o' what you did at Mr Ottley's. Your missis there might like her floors dirted wi' whittaws for what I know. There's no knowing what people WONNA like - such ways as I've heard of! I never had a gell come into my house as seemed to know what cleaning was; I think people live like pigs, for my part. And as to that Betty as was dairymaid at Trent's before she come to me, she'd ha' left the cheeses without turning from week's end to week's end, and the dairy thralls, I might ha' wrote my name on 'em, when I come downstairs after my illness, as the doctor said it was inflammation - it was a mercy I got well of it. And to think o' your knowing no better, Molly, and been here a-going i' nine months, and not for want o' talking to, neither - and what are you stanning there for, like a jack as is run down, instead o' getting your wheel out?

You're a rare un for sitting down to your work a little while after it's time to put by.'

'Munny, my iron's twite told; pease put it down to warm.'

The small chirruping voice that uttered this request came from a little sunny-haired girl between three and four, who, seated on a high chair at the end of the ironing table, was arduously clutching the handle of a miniature iron with her tiny fat fist, and ironing rags with an assiduity that required her to put her little red tongue out as far as anatomy would allow.

'Cold, is it, my darling? Bless your sweet face!' said Mrs. Poyser, who was remarkable for the facility with which she could relapse from her official objurgatory to one of fondness or of friendly converse. 'Never mind! Mother's done her ironing now. She's going to put the ironing things away.'

'Munny, I tould 'ike to do into de barn to Tommy, to see de whittawd.'

'No, no, no; Totty 'ud get her feet wet,' said Mrs. Poyser, carrying away her iron. 'Run into the dairy and see cousin Hetty make the butter.'

'I tould 'ike a bit o' pum-take,' rejoined Totty, who seemed to be provided with several relays of requests; at the same time, taking the opportunity of her momentary leisure to put her fingers into a bowl of starch, and drag it down so as to empty the contents with tolerable completeness on to the ironing sheet.

'Did ever anybody see the like?' screamed Mrs. Poyser, running towards the table when her eye had fallen on the blue stream. 'The child's allays i' mischief if your back's turned a minute. What shall I do to you, you naughty, naughty gell?'

Totty, however, had descended from her chair with great swiftness, and was already in retreat towards the dairy with a sort of waddling run, and an amount of fat on the nape of her neck which made her look like the metamorphosis of a white suckling pig.

The starch having been wiped up by Molly's help, and the ironing apparatus put by, Mrs. Poyser took up her knitting which always lay ready at hand, and was the work she liked best, because she could carry it on automatically as she walked to and fro. But now she came and sat down opposite Dinah, whom she looked at in a meditative way, as she knitted her grey worsted stocking.

'You look th' image o' your Aunt Judith, Dinah, when you sit a-sewing. I could almost fancy it was thirty years back, and I was a little

gell at home, looking at Judith as she sat at her work, after she'd done the house up; only it was a little cottage, Father's was, and not a big rambling house as gets dirty i' one corner as fast as you clean it in another - but for all that, I could fancy you was your Aunt Judith, only her hair was a deal darker than yours, and she was stouter and broader i' the shoulders. Judith and me allays hung together, though she had such queer ways, but your mother and her never could agree. Ah, your mother little thought as she'd have a daughter just cut out after the very pattern o' Judith, and leave her an orphan, too, for Judith to take care on, and bring up with a spoon when SHE was in the graveyard at Stoniton. I allays said that o' Judith, as she'd bear a pound weight any day to save anybody else carrying a ounce. And she was just the same from the first o' my remembering her; it made no difference in her, as I could see, when she took to the Methodists, only she talked a bit different and wore a different sort o' cap; but she'd never in her life spent a penny on herself more than keeping herself decent.'

'She was a blessed woman,' said Dinah; 'God had given her a loving, self-forgetting nature, and He perfected it by grace. And she was very fond of you too, Aunt Rachel. I often heard her talk of you in the same sort of way. When she had that bad illness, and I was only eleven years old, she used to say, 'You'll have a friend on earth in your Aunt Rachel, if I'm taken from you, for she has a kind heart,' and I'm sure I've found it so.'

'I don't know how, child; anybody 'ud be cunning to do anything for you, I think; you're like the birds o' th' air, and live nobody knows how. I'd ha' been glad to behave to you like a mother's sister, if you'd come and live i' this country where there's some shelter and victual for man and beast, and folks don't live on the naked hills, like poultry a-scratching on a gravel bank. And then you might get married to some decent man, and there'd be plenty ready to have you, if you'd only leave off that preaching, as is ten times worse than anything your Aunt Judith ever did. And even if you'd marry Seth Bede, as is a poor wool-gathering Methodist and's never like to have a penny beforehand, I know your uncle 'ud help you with a pig, and very like a cow, for he's allays been good-natur'd to my kin, for all they're poor, and made 'em welcome to the house; and 'ud do for you, I'll be bound, as much as ever he'd do for Hetty, though she's his own niece. And there's linen in the house as I could well spare you, for I've got lots o' sheeting and table-clothing, and towelling, as isn't made up. There's a piece o' sheeting I could give you as that squinting Kitty spun - she was a rare girl to spin, for all she squinted, and the children couldn't abide her; and, you know, the spinning's going on constant, and there's new linen wove twice as fast as the old wears out. But where's the use o' talking, if ye wanna be persuaded, and settle down like any other woman in her senses, i'stead o' wearing yourself out with walking and

preaching, and giving away every penny you get, so as you've nothing saved against sickness; and all the things you've got i' the world, I verily believe, 'ud go into a bundle no bigger nor a double cheese. And all because you've got notions i' your head about religion more nor what's i' the Catechism and the Prayer-book.'

'But not more than what's in the Bible, Aunt,' said Dinah.

'Yes, and the Bible too, for that matter,' Mrs. Poyser rejoined, rather sharply; 'else why shouldn't them as know best what's in the Bible - the parsons and people as have got nothing to do but learn it - do the same as you do? But, for the matter o' that, if everybody was to do like you, the world must come to a standstill; for if everybody tried to do without house and home, and with poor eating and drinking, and was allays talking as we must despise the things o' the world as you say, I should like to know where the pick o' the stock, and the corn, and the best new-milk cheeses 'ud have to go. Everybody 'ud be wanting bread made o' tail ends and everybody 'ud be running after everybody else to preach to 'em, instead o' bringing up their families, and laying by against a bad harvest. It stands to sense as that can't be the right religion.'

'Nay, dear aunt, you never heard me say that all people are called to forsake their work and their families. It's quite right the land should be ploughed and sowed, and the precious corn stored, and the things of this life cared for, and right that people should rejoice in their families, and provide for them, so that this is done in the fear of the Lord, and that they are not unmindful of the soul's wants while they are caring for the body. We can all be servants of God wherever our lot is cast, but He gives us different sorts of work, according as He fits us for it and calls us to it. I can no more help spending my life in trying to do what I can for the souls of others, than you could help running if you heard little Totty crying at the other end of the house; the voice would go to your heart, you would think the dear child was in trouble or in danger, and you couldn't rest without running to help her and comfort her.'

'Ah,' said Mrs. Poyser, rising and walking towards the door, 'I know it 'ud be just the same if I was to talk to you for hours. You'd make me the same answer, at th' end. I might as well talk to the running brook and tell it to stan' still.'

The causeway outside the kitchen door was dry enough now for Mrs. Poyser to stand there quite pleasantly and see what was going on in the yard, the grey worsted stocking making a steady progress in her hands all the while. But she had not been standing there more than five minutes before she came in again, and said to Dinah, in rather a flurried, awe-stricken tone, 'If there isn't Captain Donnithorne and Mr

Irwine a-coming into the yard! I'll lay my life they're come to speak about your preaching on the Green, Dinah; it's you must answer 'em, for I'm dumb. I've said enough a'ready about your bringing such disgrace upo' your uncle's family. I wouldn't ha' minded if you'd been Mr Poyser's own niece - folks must put up wi' their own kin, as they put up wi' their own noses - it's their own flesh and blood. But to think of a niece o' mine being cause o' my husband's being turned out of his farm, and me brought him no fortin but my savin's - - '

'Nay, dear Aunt Rachel,' said Dinah gently, 'you've no cause for such fears. I've strong assurance that no evil will happen to you and my uncle and the children from anything I've done. I didn't preach without direction.'

'Direction! I know very well what you mean by direction,' said Mrs. Poyser, knitting in a rapid and agitated manner. 'When there's a bigger maggot than usual in your head you call it 'direction'; and then nothing can stir you - you look like the statty o' the outside o' Treddles'on church, a-starin' and a-smilin' whether it's fair weather or foul. I hanna common patience with you.'

By this time the two gentlemen had reached the palings and had got down from their horses: it was plain they meant to come in. Mrs. Poyser advanced to the door to meet them, curtsying low and trembling between anger with Dinah and anxiety to conduct herself with perfect propriety on the occasion. For in those days the keenest of bucolic minds felt a whispering awe at the sight of the gentry, such as of old men felt when they stood on tiptoe to watch the gods passing by in tall human shape.

'Well, Mrs. Poyser, how are you after this stormy morning?' said Mr Irwine, with his stately cordiality. 'Our feet are quite dry; we shall not soil your beautiful floor.'

'Oh, sir, don't mention it,' said Mrs. Poyser. 'Will you and the captain please to walk into the parlour?'

'No, indeed, thank you, Mrs. Poyser,' said the captain, looking eagerly round the kitchen, as if his eye were seeking something it could not find. 'I delight in your kitchen. I think it is the most charming room I know. I should like every farmer's wife to come and look at it for a pattern.'

'Oh, you're pleased to say so, sir. Pray take a seat,' said Mrs. Poyser, relieved a little by this compliment and the captain's evident good-humour, but still glancing anxiously at Mr Irwine, who, she saw, was looking at Dinah and advancing towards her.

'Poyser is not at home, is he?' said Captain Donnithorne, seating himself where he could see along the short passage to the open dairy-door.

'No, sir, he isn't; he's gone to Rosseter to see Mr West, the factor, about the wool. But there's Father i' the barn, sir, if he'd be of any use.'

'No, thank you; I'll just look at the whelps and leave a message about them with your shepherd. I must come another day and see your husband; I want to have a consultation with him about horses. Do you know when he's likely to be at liberty?'

'Why, sir, you can hardly miss him, except it's o' Treddles'on market-day - that's of a Friday, you know. For if he's anywhere on the farm we can send for him in a minute. If we'd got rid o' the Scantlands, we should have no outlying fields; and I should be glad of it, for if ever anything happens, he's sure to be gone to the Scantlands. Things allays happen so contrairy, if they've a chance; and it's an unnat'ral thing to have one bit o' your farm in one county and all the rest in another.'

'Ah, the Scantlands would go much better with Choyce's farm, especially as he wants dairyland and you've got plenty. I think yours is the prettiest farm on the estate, though; and do you know, Mrs. Poyser, if I were going to marry and settle, I should be tempted to turn you out, and do up this fine old house, and turn farmer myself.'

'Oh, sir,' said Mrs. Poyser, rather alarmed, 'you wouldn't like it at all. As for farming, it's putting money into your pocket wi' your right hand and fetching it out wi' your left. As fur as I can see, it's raising victual for other folks and just getting a mouthful for yourself and your children as you go along. Not as you'd be like a poor man as wants to get his bread - you could afford to lose as much money as you liked i' farming - but it's poor fun losing money, I should think, though I understan' it's what the great folks i' London play at more than anything. For my husband heard at market as Lord Dacey's eldest son had lost thousands upo' thousands to the Prince o' Wales, and they said my lady was going to pawn her jewels to pay for him. But you know more about that than I do, sir. But, as for farming, sir, I canna think as you'd like it; and this house - the draughts in it are enough to cut you through, and it's my opinion the floors upstairs are very rotten, and the rats i' the cellar are beyond anything.'

'Why, that's a terrible picture, Mrs. Poyser. I think I should be doing you a service to turn you out of such a place. But there's no chance of that. I'm not likely to settle for the next twenty years, till I'm a stout

gentleman of forty; and my grandfather would never consent to part with such good tenants as you.'

'Well, sir, if he thinks so well o' Mr Poyser for a tenant I wish you could put in a word for him to allow us some new gates for the Five closes, for my husband's been asking and asking till he's tired, and to think o' what he's done for the farm, and's never had a penny allowed him, be the times bad or good. And as I've said to my husband often and often, I'm sure if the captain had anything to do with it, it wouldn't be so. Not as I wish to speak disrespectful o' them as have got the power i' their hands, but it's more than flesh and blood 'ull bear sometimes, to be toiling and striving, and up early and down late, and hardly sleeping a wink when you lie down for thinking as the cheese may swell, or the cows may slip their calf, or the wheat may grow green again i' the sheaf - and after all, at th' end o' the year, it's like as if you'd been cooking a feast and had got the smell of it for your pains.'

Mrs. Poyser, once launched into conversation, always sailed along without any check from her preliminary awe of the gentry. The confidence she felt in her own powers of exposition was a motive force that overcame all resistance.

'I'm afraid I should only do harm instead of good, if I were to speak about the gates, Mrs. Poyser,' said the captain, 'though I assure you there's no man on the estate I would sooner say a word for than your husband. I know his farm is in better order than any other within ten miles of us; and as for the kitchen,' he added, smiling, 'I don't believe there's one in the kingdom to beat it. By the by, I've never seen your dairy: I must see your dairy, Mrs. Poyser.'

'Indeed, sir, it's not fit for you to go in, for Hetty's in the middle o' making the butter, for the churning was thrown late, and I'm quite ashamed.' This Mrs. Poyser said blushing, and believing that the captain was really interested in her milk-pans, and would adjust his opinion of her to the appearance of her dairy.

'Oh, I've no doubt it's in capital order. Take me in,' said the captain, himself leading the way, while Mrs. Poyser followed.