

of late this joke has hidden within the pages of old, curious journals. There, indeed, many such-like strange matters shall be met with. Long they lie forgotten, buried in an ancient chronicle, tombed for centuries under the lumber of a muniment chest, until bidden to rise and live again.

JONAS AND DINAH

JONAS AND DINAH¹

CHAPTER I

"I PUBLISH the banns of marriage between Jonas Lethbridge, bachelor, and Dinah Mary Hannaford, spinster, both of this parish. If any of you know cause, or just impediment, why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony, ye are to declare it. This is for the first time of asking."

A pleasant rustle ran through the little congregation — an amiable and friendly sound. Jonas and Dinah sat together through the ordeal of the banns, and, out of sight, he squeezed her hand to support her.

"The maiden went so red as a rose, an' the man pale as a dog's tooth. Did 'e note it?" asked Blacksmith Chugg of Sexton Lethbridge, after service was at an end and the village folk had vanished.

"I noted that, and more than that. Old as I am, and so round in the back as a beetle with a lifetime o' burying, yet my eyes be gimlets o' sharpness still,

¹ Copyright by Paul R. Reynold.

thank God! 'Tis a trick my son Jonas have gotten from his mother. The red never comed in her cheek at high moments — blood all rushed to her heart, an' her growed so white you might have thought as her was going to die on the spot. When I axed her to marry me, she went fainty-like, an' her lips turned blue. But a good wife she was as ever a man lost an' mourned. They wondered how I could find nature enough in me to dig her pit myself. The fools! To think that a grave-digger like me could have rested easy in my bed if another had done it!"

"I hope as Dinah Hannaford will be such a wife an' mother as your missis an' mine," said the blacksmith. "But why for did tenor bell — that chap, Amos Thorn, the woodman — get up an' leave the church when they was axed out? A very unseasonable think to do."

"I marked it," answered Mr. Lethbridge. "Jonas says that Dinah kept company two years back with Thorn. But they falled out, because he have such a surly habit of mind an' her couldn't put up with his tantrums no more. If her so much as looked at another man or gived a chap 'good-day,' Thorn would go crazy; an' as life promised to be a burdensome business wi' such a touchy fashion o' man, she took courage to break off."

"A very sensible maid, they say."

"So she is, then; never seed any young woman with more sense. They be coming to live along wi' me. Then my old sister, as does for me now, can go off comfortable into that empty almshouse offered her to Tavistock."

Elsewhere the lovers walked and talked in a Devon lane. Her arm rested upon his, and grim exultation marked his features. Stern and hard was his countenance, yet his eyes glowed kindly and flashed with love as he looked down at her face. Ferns in all the glory of new green hung fronds about the way; seeding grasses softened the verdant banks, and flowers brightened them with red and purple. Field-roses and dog-roses trailed their beauty above, and in the air was scent of eglantine and song of bird. Speedwells and cinquefoil made blue-and-gold lace-work in the vernal walls of the lane; hawthorn turned to roseal harmonies in death, and the last bluebells faded.

"You'll love me for ever, my own dear?" she said.

"Till my heart be done wi' beating, Dinah," he answered. "No trouble as was ever hatched by man or the devil will come betwixt you an' me."

CHAPTER II

"I PUBLISH the banns of marriage between Amos Thorn, bachelor, and Dinah Mary Hannaford, spinster, both of this parish. If any of you know cause, or just impediment, why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony, ye are to declare it. This is for the first time of asking."

Again there followed a rustle of many curious folk; but a different emotion animated it, a different sound infused it. Human nature woke up and buzzed. This was more than merely pleasant; it was interesting. Mr. Thorn and Dinah Hannaford were not in the little church to face two hundred pairs of eyes. Jonas Lethbridge accompanied his father, and while the ancient grave-digger's head drooped and his mouth trembled, where it fell in over naked gums, the young man gazed unflinchingly before him, and no quiver marked his strong, hard face and dark eyes. He kept them fixed unblinking on a stained glass window that represented Christ bidding the waves be still.

Again the old-time neighbour of Sexton Lethbridge stumped along beside him under spring leaves; but

Jonas had disappeared as soon as the service was ended.

"Very sorry for your son, my dear soul; for I lay the fire in his eye was burning out of his heart if us could have but seen it," said Mr. Chugg, the blacksmith. "What a courage he've got to come to worship!"

"'Tis a very dreadful thing for all of us, Chugg."

Mr. Lethbridge spoke wearily. Of late his natural forces were abated, and Jonas did much of the work of the churchyard.

"Every maiden in the village be sorry for him," said the blacksmith.

"An' well they might be."

"Thorn hadn't the brass to be there hisself, I see. A chap from Princetown ringed tenor bell to-day."

"God won't never prosper such treachery, you mark me," said Mr. Lethbridge.

"If 'tis God's business to put down treachery, He'm a thought behind His work — to say it respectful. My experience is that the ungodly do very well 'pon Dartymoor. Be your sister going to bide with you?"

"Yes; she'm stopping. Her wouldn't go in the almshouse when the wedding fell through. But it won't be for long. I'm getting ripe an' ready for the grave myself now."

"The women of this generation ban't no better than reptile toads. But your young chap will find a good wife come presently, please God. There's a tidy maid here an' there yet."

"Not him. He'll bide a bachelor for evermore. He'm so bitter as gall to the roots of his being since she wrote that letter. It have turned him away from the Almighty's Self."

"Chucked him over with a letter, did her?"

"Ess — an' a very nice fashion of penmanship. Yet all written wi' needles, so to say, as stabbed the poor young youth cruel. He gasped when he read it, as if he'd swallowed his meat wrong way. Then he handed it to me. She just said as she'd been wickedly deceived in him, and that she'd rather have trusted the sun not to shine than believe he could have acted so bad to her. An' she also hoped the Lord would forgive him for treating a poor maiden so crooked."

"That weern't enough for Jonas Lethbridge, was it?"

"No, by Gor! He went straight to her, an' there was fiery words; but the truth, or what she thought was truth, he never knowed. Her love had turned to hate in a single night. He pressed for reasons; and she said that to ax for reasons was the worst insult of all, seeing she knowed the whole secret truth about him. Not a word more could he get,

though he tried, and was patient as Job for an hour of talk. Then, having his spark o' passion like any other man, he called her a wanton, wicked jilt an' left her. An' no girl ever deserved hard names more than she."

"'Tis a dark story, to be sure. That's why us never heard the third axing of the banns, then?"

"It happened last spring, afore the last axing. Then, come winter, Dinah Hannaford's mother died, an' next thing us heard was that she'd got on wi' Amos Thorn again."

"A very womanly piece of work."

"I don't know whether 'tis woman or man be at the bottom. I'd throw blame on Thorn if I dared wi'out running danger of violence; but I be old an' weak, an' 'tis no good saying things you can't enforce wi' your right arm. Still, I do think he kindiddled her away from my boy."

"'Tis no libel to think it, anyway," said Mr. Chugg, and the sexton nodded.

"There's parties as ought to be punished wheether or no," he said, "and I hope the A'mighty won't let it pass, an' that I'll live to see the wicked come by their deserts."

A mile away Amos Thorn and Dinah walked together where immortal flowers bloomed about them at the dawn of June.

"Oh, but you'll be true to me, dear heart — I can trust you?" she asked with a pleading voice.

The big blond man turned and hugged her to himself and kissed her.

"For ever an' ever, Amen, my pretty!" he said.

CHAPTER III

"FORASMUCH as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope —"

The clods fell; the familiar rite ended. There was a smell of earth and bruised grass. Dinah Thorn looked down into her husband's grave; and her child of three, clutching tight his mother's black-gloved hand, peeped fearfully into the abyss that had swallowed his father. Suddenly the infant appeared to realize his loss, and howled with all his little heart.

Anon every man went to his own house, while Mr. Lethbridge began to fill the grave. His friend the blacksmith had been one of the bearers. He, too, stayed behind; and now Chugg lighted his pipe, and sat upon a tomb, and watched the sexton. Once more they played the part of chorus.

"'Tis a wonder to see you with the spade again."

"As to that, I'm past it — have been these three year — but this particular job — well, somehow,

Jonas had got a feeling that he'd cussed the chap so often in life that he couldn't dig his pit decent; an' I be clever yet for such an old blid, so I comed out o' my well-earned rest. Can't say as it hurt my mind to dig, though my rheumatics will smart for it come to-morrow."

The earth dropped from the shovel, and the coffin beneath rumbled to the thud.

Old Lethbridge worked slowly, and stopped often to talk.

"'Twas always said he'd got a careless way of throwing elms. An' now an elm have throwed him. A great tree in Widecombe Park falled when he was looking t'other way, an' a bough scat his brains out. An' now he'm coffined in elm, an' never good wood held a worse man."

The blacksmith smoked and shook his head.

"Yet the Church feels no doubts of him. Have 'e ever marked the cocksureness of the parsons? 'Tis that I marvels at! 'Sure and sartain hope' be the words. When they buried Sam Pridham, the poacher — him as beat his wife and dranked the boots an' shoes off his children's feet — parson was just so dead positive 'bout it as when he put away my old woman, who was a holy saint o' God, bar her temper. How can us know that it have pleased the A'mighty to take to Hisself the soul of this here Amos Thorn?"

"We can't be sure, and for my part I ban't," said the other. "We know mighty little of any man except this: that king and tinker breed the same fashion o' worms come they die. The chap down there was a liar, an' he won Dinah Hannaford from my son by a wicked trick. He told her falsehoods — 'twas this dust I'm covering with honest earth that made dust of my son's life; an', old as I am, I be glad to bury him. If 'tis wicked, then 'tis wicked; but, any way, 'tis true."

"Don't puff an' fret, my dear. He'm gone now, an' 'tis very bad for you to be so hot at your age. He'll get his proper payment. For that matter, he have got it."

"I say us have no right to believe that God have took this man's soul to Hisself. It ban't justice, an' I won't stomach it. Nice company for the bettermost in heaven! The like of Amos Thorn —! Tchut! I can't onderstand it."

"'Tis a very difficult question, and best left alone," said the blacksmith, uneasily. "It be quite enough to know there is such a place. I never much like to think about it."

"Us have more right to commit his soul to the Dowl, an' a lot more reason, too," said the angry ancient. "Do 'e think I've read an' pondered the Scriptures fifty years for nothing? The wages of sin be death; that's a cast-iron, black-an'-white

fact; and I'll back the Bible against the Prayer-book any day of the week for money. If Bible's true, he'm lost."

"The punishment do fall on his wife an' child, come to think of it. He was cut off so sudden, an' left no provision for 'em at all."

"That's the law and the prophets," declared Mr. Lethbridge. "Sins of the fathers be visited on the children — also pretty often on the widows, though they ban't named by name."

"Where's the justice of that, then? Got you there!" cried the blacksmith, triumphantly.

"If you've got anybody, you've got the Old Testament," answered the other, grimly, "an' I'd advise you to call home your words again, an' not flout the Book o' Life in a graveyard. 'Twon't be for your good. An' such things will turn the scale at Judgment. The man was cut off, an' 'tis the quality of punishment not to stop at the sinner, but to catch the innocent folk all around him — like measles or a fever do."

"As a husband, it be generally granted he was a very good an' proper man," ventured Mr. Chugg.

"You can't be a good husband and a bad man."

"You'm so quick at words, there's no being even with ye!"

Then the blacksmith went his way, and his friend shouted after him:—

"Justice be justice; an' for my part I'll always tell the truth, as I always have, whether it be to a man's face or his coffin-lid."

CHAPTER IV

THERE came a day after long years, and June smiled as of yore, and the scythe of Jonas Lethbridge smoothed the grassy graveyard, even as the scythe of Time filled it. He took a gloomy pride in the place; and while his father, who now slept beneath, had been content to dig deep and bury well, this silent man passed his abstracted days among the graves, and made the face of the little churchyard fair to see.

Few problems troubled him; yet upon this hour in young summer he was faced with a difficulty. He paused, looked with down-drawn brows at a faint path worn in the grass between certain tombs. It was a way trodden there by a woman's feet, and it led — not to the grave of Amos Thorn, but to a little mound near it, where the woodman's son slept beside him.

"Haven't spoke a word to her since her flinged me over, an' never thought to; but 'tis my duty," the sexton reflected, "an' my duty I must do. I could set sticks across, but she'd only think I was 'feared of her. For that matter, so I be."

Opportunity offered within the hour. The man

mowed, and the blackbirds sang. From an ancient tomb, long sunk out of straightness, came a tapping where a thrush broke a snail and feasted upon it. The air danced, and the scythe's strokes rose and fell regularly, like the deep breath of a sleeper.

Then came a woman, and her feet pressed the grasses where Lethbridge had too often marked their passing. His face grew white, his brows frowned, and he put down his scythe and came forward. Dinah saw him, and hesitated and stood still. A little bunch of purple columbines fell out of her hand, and she bent and picked them up.

"Mrs. Thorn," said the man, "I must ax you to go around t'other way to your graves in future. I won't have 'e tramping about here. You'm wearing the young grass away. See how bad it do look. An' if you'd only let your child's grave alone, the turves would jine suent and smooth; but you'm always putting in jam-jars wi' flowers in 'em, an' planting things that die, an' worrying the place so cruel that no grass can grow. I don't want to say nought to hurt your mother's heart, but the grave will never look seemly the way you treat it; and I shall be blamed."

She stood in a dream to hear his voice again.

"If tears could make it grow —"

"Tears! 'Tis a poor, feeble sorrow tears will drown."

"Men an' women be different. Tears do soften the cutting edge to us females. But I'll go round t'other way henceforth, Mr. Lethbridge, an' I'm very sorry I hurt the grass and troubled you about it."

He looked hard at her, and the mists of memory rose a little from off his spirit. Life had left him petrified, while for the woman the years were full, mostly of sorrow. Her husband and child were both dead, and she lived alone.

Now the man's cold heart felt a throb.

"'Tis strange to hear your voice," he said. "Do 'e ever think 'bout the old days, ma'am, or do they hurt 'e?"

"Both," she said. "I think an' I suffer. But I've lived a lifetime since then."

"Yet you ban't very old now?"

"Twenty-six, Mr. Lethbridge."

"I know that well enough — twenty-six come tenth o' next month — July."

"I was very sorry for 'e when your old faither died."

"So was I."

"He never would speak to me after —"

"Faither was a very great man for justice. An Old Testament man, you might say. 'Twas he as digged your husband's grave, Mrs. Thorn. I couldn't do it."

"Amos Thorn wronged you more'n ever a man wronged a man — God rest his soul."

"An' he wronged you?"

"I've forgiven him," she said.

"He told you as I had a woman an' a child hidden down to Newton Abbot."

"I've forgiven him."

"An' you could believe it?"

"I've never forgiven myself, nor never shall."

There was a silence.

"Well, if you'll keep off this here place an' go round by the old stones there, I'll thank you. I take a pride in the burying-ground, as be well known. The graves be wife and children to me. If you'll look around at other churchyards, you'll see there ban't one this side of Plymouth that's so trim and tidy as this."

"It's well known; people comes from long ways off to see it. I'll be careful in future not to do harm."

She turned, and followed the road that he pointed out. Then she put fresh water in a jam-pot, and arranged the columbines upon a little mound of sickly turf. Hard by his scythe began its measured rhythm in the heart of the green grass.

CHAPTER V

THE light took a golden tincture before dusk, and nature rested. Mellow sunshine cast long shadows, interspersed with a tender radiance; the cottages and house-places were still; and peace brooded over hamlet and homestead, for the day's work was done.

The 10th of July sank to lovely close, and through a blue dusk one window glimmered on the confines of the village.

Toward it walked a man, and in his pocket he carried a little parcel. Once he hesitated, and seemed disposed to hurl his gift into the hedge and return whence he came. But he held on, and presently reached the cottage door and knocked at it.

"Might I come in an' have a tell, Mrs. Thorn?" he asked in a deep voice.

There was a moment of silence, then a fluttered uprising.

"Yes, if you'm in a mind to, Mr. Lethbridge."

BENJAMIN'S MESS