

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

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WHEN Farmer Yelland died, everybody in Post-bridge village was sorry — for theirselves, but not for him, mind you. Because if ever a good man went straight to glory 'twas Michael Yelland. He'd had his ups an' downs like the best an' worst of us; but though the poor old gentleman weern't overblessed in his life, — nor yet his only son for that matter, — yet 'twas made up to him in a manner of speaking, for never a farm in Dartmoor did better. His things were always the first to be ready for market; his grass was always ready to cut a week ahead of his neighbours, an' he always had fine weather to cut it in; while as for his corn an' roots — why, at the Agricultural Show to Ashburton, it comed to be a joke all over the countryside, for first prize always went to Yelland as a regular thing. The Lord looks after His own, you see, in His own partickler way. An' such a patient, large-hearted man as he was! When Sarah Yelland, his wife, was took off, after clacking nonsense for fifty year, us all thanked God in our hearts for her good man. For 'tweern't a happy marriage, an' he'd had more to put up with unbeknownst

in his home circle than falls to the lot of many of us. But not an unkind word did he ever say either afore or after she died. Never would grumble about it, but kept his thoughts to hisself. I mind I met him in the churchyard six months after he'd buried his wife, an' he was smoking his old clay pipe an' seeing about a granite gravestone for the tomb.

"So there her lies at peace," I said in my civil way.

An' farmer takes his pipe out of his mouth an' spits 'pon the grave, but not with any rude meaning.

"Yes, John," he says to me. "There Sarah lies, poor old dear — at peace, I hope, I'm sure. Anyway, if she's so peaceful as I be since her's gone, she'll do very well."

Two year after that he was in the pit beside her, an' the space left 'pon the stone was filled up with his vartues.

Then Nicholas Yelland — his son — a lad five-an'-twenty years old an' a bit cross in the grain — found hisself master of Cator Court, as the place was called. We shook our heads, for he was known to us as a chap pretty near spoilt by over-educating. Old Yelland had got his patience an' sense from the land, an' his wisdom an' sweetness of disposition out of no other book than the Bible; but his

missis had great notions for her one an' only child, an' she wanted more than the Bible could teach him; which, in my judgement, is to cry out for better bread than can be made of wheat. Farm-ering weern't a grand enough trade for him, she thought; so she kept nagging an' nagging by day an' night, till, in self-defence, the old man sent his lad to Tavistock Grammar School — a very great seat of larning in them days, by all accounts. Yet what they didn't teach him was worth knowing too, for manners he never larned, nor yet his duty to his neighbour. He comed home at seventeen with some Latin, 'twas said, though 'twas only rumoured like, an' a very pretty way of reading the lessons to church on Sundays; but when he returned, the first thing as he told his faither was, "I be a Radical in politics evermore, an' I ban't going to touch my hat again to nobody living. One man's so good as another."

"So he be, Nick," said his faither. "An' a darned sight better, too, for that matter. The world will larn 'e that, if nothing else. I'm sorry ever I sent 'e to school, if they've taught 'e such tomfoolery there. But life will unlarn 'e, I hope. To touch your hat to your betters ban't no sign of weakness in you, but a sign of sense. Lord Luscombe hisself takes off his hat to the King, an' the King takes off his'n to God A'mighty. 'Tis the

laws of Nature," said farmer, "an' if you break the laws o' Nature, you'll damn soon get broke yourself, as everybody finds out after they'm turned fifty, if not sooner."

But Yelland died, as I tell 'e, an' the young man comed to his own. With all his airs an' graces, he knowed when he was well off, an' of course followed his faither's footsteps an' stuck to the land, despite his mother's hopes, as planned an' prayed with her last breath for him to be a lawyer. Though why a lawyer should be a greater man than a farmer, you'd have to ax a lawyer to tell 'e. An' I won't say that Nicholas was a bad farmer. He'd got sense, though no broad-mindedness. The difference between him an' his faither was showed by a path-field as ran through Cator Court lands and was very much used by folks coming up from Widecombe to Postbridge and the farms round about, because it saved foot-passengers a good mile of walking, an' it had been there time out of mind. But there weren't no right of way with it all the same, an' farmer he always used to shut it up one day a year to make good his claim in the eye of the law. He wouldn't have turned back the leastest little one he'd found on the field-path, for 'twas his pride an' pleasure always to make life easier for man, woman an' child when the chance offered. An' the boys had the filbert nuts an' the girls had the mush-

rooms; an' he never minded, bless you; he liked 'em to be there.

Well, this here carmudgeon of a young Yelland — first thing he done, out of pure sourness of disposition, was to shut up the field-path an' stick up a lot o' scowling nonsense 'bout "trespassers would be prosecuted." So much for his radical ideas an' everybody being equal! But it's always that sort who talk loudest about the rights of men, be the sharpest about the rights of property. Belted Earls will throw open their beautiful parks, but you won't catch common men doing it. An' the boys knocked young Yelland's boards down with stones, an' broke his hedges; an' the Widecombe people, as didn't care a snap of the finger for the man, took their even way as usual. He spent half his time storming up an' down the great meadow in the farm-bottom, where Webburn river goes clattering to meet Dart; but he only turned back women an' children, for he was a little chap — thin an' not overstrong — so men just told him to get out of their road, else they'd knock him upsy-edgeways into the hedge.

But of course such a state of things couldn't last. There comed a terrible day when he turned back Mr. Matthew's wife — Matthew being the miller to Widecombe an' a churchwarden, an' a man of high renown in general. Then us had a proper tantara,

an' Matthew he took the opinion of Lawyer Pearce, an' Pearce he had a tell with young Yelland, an' parson Courtenay of Postbridge, he also done what he could; which was nought. They might so well have talked to a fuzz-bush as Nicholas. He stuck out his chin — he was a underhung toad, like a bulldog — and he said that rights was rights an' land was land; an' he turned on parson, like an adder, and said: "If you'll open a footpath through your vegetable garden an' let all Postbridge walk up an' down it when your gooseberries be ripe, then I'll do the same with my meadow, an' not sooner."

But parson, whose heart was in gooseberries, said the cases weren't similar; an' Nicholas held out they were.

Matters was let sink for a bit after that, but the upshot made a story, an' people laugh yet when you tell 'em about it.

You must know that young Yelland was courting just then, an' he'd got his hands so full with Mary Jane Arscott, the stone-breaker's darter, that for lack of leisure — nought else — he didn't watch his path-field so sharp as usual. The storm died down a bit, an' by the time that the matter of Mary Jane had come to a head, things were fallen back into the old way. All the notice-boards was knocked down — most of 'em had floated along the river; an' the people went to an' fro on Yel-

land's path, just as if his faither was still alive. He'd only made a lot of enemies by his foolish conduct, an' that thought made him so grim as a ghost, an' poor company for every living soul.

Well, this Mary Jane was a very fine woman — rather on the big side for a girl of twenty-two; but the small men always look for a large, helpful pattern of maiden, an' Nicholas was as much in love with her as he could be with any mortal she, despite her humble circumstances. Her liked him too, up to a certain point; but 'twas the sort of fondness a maiden naturally gets for any young man who be very well-to-do, an' have a fine house an' land an' a prosperous business. 'Tis hard to make up your mind about such a man, specially if he'm a trifle undersized an' underhung, an' not generally well liked by the neighbours. But, for all that, Mary Jane Arscott kept his beautiful farm in her eye an' seed her way pretty clear, if it hadn't been for a young youth by the name of Benjamin Pearn. But for him no doubt she'd have said "yes" long ago — perhaps afore Nicholas had had time to get out his proposal of marriage, for she comed of very pauper stock, an' had never known comfort in her life. But this here Ben Pearn chanced to have just what t'other man lacked — a comely countenance an' a fine, manly frame to him. A blue-eyed, sandy-headed man — hard as nails an' fairly pros-

perous for a chap only turned four or five-an'-twenty. He was a shepherd in springtime; an' looked after the common lands; an' he was verger of the church; an' he kept bees; an' he'd lend a hand at thatching or painting of sign-boards, or harvesting, or any mortal thing. But his father had been a famous poacher, though of course I ban't bringing that up against the man. Yet, with all his cleverness, he was a fool when he fell in love, as a many afore him. 'Twas love for Mary Jane found out the soft spot in him, an' showed that he was a thought weak in his head, for all his business, and could do an underhand deed, like anybody else in the same fix. For when we'm struck on a maid, if us can't see how to fight fair in it, us all fights foul without a blush. Which shows love ban't a Bible vartue, but just a savage strain in the blood, if you come to think of it. Besides, you can't forget his father was a poacher.

Between these two men, Ben an' Nicholas, it rested, an' Mary Jane took her time to make up her mind. She was in love with Benjamin's self an' Yelland's farm. That's how it stood. She didn't want to miss the farm, an' she didn't want to miss Benjamin; but her couldn't have both; an' her found it a bit difficult to make up her mind, though Lord He knows her faither an' mother done their best to make it up for her. They had an eye

on the gert chimney-corners to Cator Court, no doubt.

Then things happened that helped Mary Jane to decide.

The rights of it got out long after, but what took place was this, for I heard it direct from Nicholas. Whatever else he was, he was a truth-teller. One fine evening in late summer, when Yelland was walking down his field-path in a devil of a gale, because he found that folks had been breaking his hedge again for the hazel-nuts an' running all about the meadow after mushrooms, there comed by Ben Pearn, an' he marked the trouble an' spoke.

"'Tis a shame to see what you get for your goodness in letting folks go up an' down your field-path, Mr. Yelland," he says.

But Nick looked at him sideways, for he knowed Ben was his rival, an' didn't feel like trusting him a yard.

"They wouldn't be here if I could help it. But seemingly I can't," he answered back.

Ben nodded.

"The law won't help 'e? 'Tis a crying shame; but if I was you, I'd help myself an' hang the law."

"I've tried often enough, surely. I've done every mortal thing that I can think of. I wish to God us was allowed to use man-traps, like landowners did in the old time. But the law's got so weak as water

nowadays. A man mayn't even shoot a burglar, they tell me. 'Twill be a penal offence next to ax a housebreaker to leave the family Bible behind him."

"Well, there's man-traps an' man-traps. The meadow be yours to do what you please with, ban't it?" says Ben, very artful like.

"It did ought to be."

"You can graze sheep in it?"

"Yes."

"Or cattle?"

"Of course. What's that to do with the matter?"

"You might even let your great red Devon bull, as takes so many prizes an' have got such a douce an' all of a temper, run loose there, if you was minded to — eh?"

"By Gor!" said Nick Yelland. "If that ban't an idea!"

"I judge you wouldn't have no more trouble then, Nicholas. Better'n notice-boards. He'd work quicker, too. One sight of him would be enough for most people."

"Thank you," said the farmer. "Thank you very much. You'm a quick-witted chap, for sartin, an' I'm greatly obliged to you. I'll turn him in this very evening, an' be damned to everybody."

An' so he did, an' next day that gert bull was

wallowing in a pool o' mud in the middle of the meadow an' wondering at his luck.

An' when young Ben left Yelland he went straight down to see Mary Jane Arscott. A crooked game he played, sure enough!

They had a bit of love-making by the river, for she lived in a cot down that way; an' then Ben arranged to meet her next day an' go out upon Bel-lever Tor an' pick whortleberries. But he never said no word touching his talk with Nicholas Yelland.

Well, the girl started pretty early from her mother's cottage down the valley and came up as a matter of course over the path-field past Cator Court; an' for that matter, Yelland had long since given her special permission to do so. Her was halfway across the great meadow, with nothing in her thoughts but mushrooms an' whortleberries an' Benjamin Pearn, when there comed a sound very high-pitched an' ugly. It got louder an' deeper till she heard a proper bellow, an' there, right ahead, she seed Nick Yelland's great red Devon bull, a-pawing an' a-prancing as if he was trying to dance the sailor's hornpipe. If he'd been a thought farther off, no harm could have come, for the path-way ran nigh the hedge; but as it was, Mary Jane had a narrow squeak, for she'd roamed a bit to pick mushrooms, an' when the old bull went for her, she'd got fifty

yards to get to the hedge, an' he'd got a bit more than a hundred to catch her. He was in a good temper, I believe, an' never really tried to hurt her; but what's a joke to a bull may be mighty serious earnest for a twelve-stone female.

She dropped her basket an' ran for her life. She weren't built for running, but nature will do a great deal, even for the roundest of us, in a pinch like this, an' for once her got over the ground in very fine fashion. She'd reached within ten yards of the hedge, when she heard a shout, an' a man came tearing along; but he was too late. Mary Jane went head first into the hazel hedge, screaming to the Everlasting to spare her; an' the bull's horn just gave her the ghost of a touch—enough to swear by after—as she went through, all ends up. She weren't really hurt, an' only took a chair a thought gingerly for a day or two; but by God! her temper didn't heal so easy, I promise you—not by no means; an' presently, when the man as had shouted an' runned to help her took the poor maiden home, she let him know what she thought about the world in general an' Nicholas Yelland in particular, so soon as she had got wind enough to tell with.

Of course the man was Benjamin Pearn. An' he knowed really that the path-field ran nigh the hedge, an' he'd been dead sure as Mary Jane would

not get into no real danger. Besides, he had planned to be there in plenty of time, an' it wasn't till he actually seed Mary Jane flying an' the bull a-bellowing after her with his tail up an' his head down, that he knowed what he'd done. Then he rushed out from the hedge, where he was hid, an' thanked his stars in secret, for everything had happened just ezacally as he wanted it to—though I don't suppose he ever wished for the maiden to have such a narrow shave.

"To think!" gasped Mary Jane. "To think as I might be a lifeless jelly this moment but for my own legs! As 'tis, that gert beast's horn have horched me somewheres, an' I may die of it yet. An' if you'm a man, Benjamin Pearn, you'll go an' get your gun an' shutt him."

"God's goodness! you don't mean Mr. Yelland?" said Ben.

"No, I don't; you can leave him to me," the maiden answered; "I won't have no living soul come between me an' Nicholas Yelland now. He'll be sorry as he was born afore his dinner-time, if I've got a tongue in my head; an' he shall have all Postbridge hooting at him in the open street—an' Widecombe too—come to-morrow. But 'tis your part to shutt thicky beastly bull wi' a gun; an' if you love me, you'll do it. He shan't take no more prizes, if I can stop him."

"As to shooting the bull, they'd put me in prison for it, — not that I'd mind that if you'd have me when I comed out," said Ben, very eager like. "But," he added as an after-thought, "the dashed luck of it is, I haven't got a gun."

Her black eyes flashed an' her gipsy-dark face growed darker still. She still panted an' puffed a bit. But Ben confessed arter that she never looked so lovely afore or since as she did when he pulled her out of the brambles in the hedge an' comforted her.

"You'd best to borrow a gun, then," she told him. "Anyway, I won't marry you while that bull's alive; an' if you was a man, you'd never sleep again till you'd put a bullet through it."

Same afternoon she went up with her mother to Cator Court an' gave Nicholas Yelland the whole law an' the prophets, by all accounts. I seem his ears must have tingled to hear her; but he was a pretty cool hand; an' when she'd talked herself out of breath an' falled back on torrents an' oceans of tears; an' when her mother had also said what she comed to say, which was mere tinkling brass after Mary Jane, Nick popped in a word or two edgeways.

"If you'll be so very kind as to hold your noise a minute, — the pair of you, — I'll tell you how the bull got in the field," he said. "'Twasn't my idea at all. Ben Pearn put me up to it. So you've got

to thank him, not me. I didn't know as you was coming that way to-day, God's my Judge, or I'd have been at the stile to meet you an' see you over the meadow safe; but Pearn knowed you was coming, an' any fool can see that he wanted to kill you."

"He axed me to come," said Mary Jane.

"Did he? Then 'tis him you've got to thank, not me. 'Tis only by the mercy of Heaven he ban't a murderer."

"You'd better look after him, then," said Mary Jane, thoughtful like, "for I've told un to kill your bull."

"Let un," answered Nicholas, very cunning. "I've a good mind to shoot the old devil myself for daring to run after you."

Then Mrs. Arscott struck the iron while it was hot, an' afore she left that farm parlour, Mary Jane had named the day!

'Twas rather a funny case of a chap overreaching himself in a love affair. You see, Ben Pearn was so blessed soft-headed, that he couldn't look on to the end of the game like any cleverer man might. He said to his silly self, 'I'll make her hate the chap, so she'd like to scratch his eyes out'; but he never seed that the end must be differ'nt; he never remembered that Nicholas Yelland had a tongue in his head same as other people.

So Ben was sent off with a flea in his ear, an' the world laughed at him, an' he changed his opinion about marriage an' growed to be a hard an' fast bachelor, an' a very great lover of saving money. But as for Mary Jane, she did her husband a power of good an' enlarged his mind every way. An' when they got a family, young Yelland's nature comed very well through the usual ups an' downs of life. He fancied hisself less, an' thought of his little people an' his good lady first, an' growed a bit more like his faither before him. Not, of course, that he was the man his faither was. But what chap ever be, for that matter? I never see none.

CROSS WAYS