JOSEPH

JOSEPH

"I DO love they stuckit plants," said Mr. Joseph Hannaford.

He waved his hands toward some lettuces of a fat figure and plump proportions.

"Doan't want no work — that's why," answered Matthew Smallridge. "The straggly sort be better, but they axes for tying up an' trouble."

"Ezacally so. An' a man as goes out of his way to sow trouble be a fule, Matthew," retorted Joseph, triumphantly.

The gardeners met every day, and every day differed on affairs of horticulture and life. Joseph was stout, with a red face set in a white frill of whisker. He had a rabbit mouth, a bald brow and a constitutional capacity for idleness. He talked much. He had a fine theory that we do not leave enough to nature in matters of the garden.

Mr. Smallridge, the squire's gardener, enjoyed a different habit of body and mind. He was a man who lived for work and loved it; he read the journals proper to his business; he kept his subordinates to their labours from morn till eve; and idleness he loathed as the worst sin to be laid at

the door of any agriculturist, great or small. Mr. Hannaford alleged that the literature of his business was desirable for beginners, but he declared it to be unnecessary in his case. If asked concerning his authorities, he would tap his forehead and say, "Books? I don't want no books. 'Tis all here." No man possessed sure proofs that he could either read or write.

These two were ancient men, yet not old for Dartmoor, where those of hardy stock, who have weathered the ordeal of infancy, usually advance far into the vale of years before their taking off. Joseph attributed his excellent health and spirits to a proper sense of what was due to himself in the matter of rest; while Matthew, on the other hand, assigned his physical and mental prosperity to hard work and temperance. Now the men stood together in Joseph's little garden and discussed general questions.

"If us was all your way of thinking, theer'd be no progress, an' never a new pea growed an' never a new potato taken to a show," said Mr. Smallridge.

"I hate shows," answered Joseph. "'Tis flying in the face of nature an' God Almighty, all this struggling for size. If He'd a' meant to grow twenty peas in a pod, an' all so big as cherries, He'd have done it wi' a turn o' the wrist. He didn't do

it, an' for us worms to try an' go awver the Lord in the matter of garden-stuff be so bad as bad can be. 'Twas touching that very thing I fell out with the Reverend Truman. 'I be gwaine to show grapes, Joseph,' he said to me last year; an' I nodded an' said, 'Ess, sir,' an' went my even way. Us didn't show. Then 'twas chrysanths. Weern't satisfied wi' a nice, small, stuggy bloom, as nature meant, but must be pinching, an' potting, an' messing with soot an' dirt, an' watering twice a day — ten months' toil for two months' pleasure. Then what? A gert, ramshackly, auld blossom, like a mop dipped in a pail o' paint. However, I let his reverence do the work, an' what credit was about I got myself. Not that I wanted it."

"As true a Christian your master was as ever walked in a garden, however," declared Mr. Smallridge. "I hope the new parson will prove so gude."

"I be gwaine to see him this very day," answered Joseph. "'Tis my hope he'll take me on to the vicarage, for the place wouldn't be the place without me up theer. I knaw every blade of grass an' gooseberry bush in it — a very butivul kitchen-garden 'tis too."

"An' well out of sight of the sitting-room windows," said Matthew Smallridge, grimly.

"As a kitchen-garden should be," assented Joseph. "Gude times they was," he continued, "an'

I only hopes the Reverend Truman have got such a fine garden an' such a' honest man in it as he had here."

"But no li'l maid to go round with him, poor soul!"

"A bright child his darter was. Impatient also — like youth ever is. Her'd bring me plants to coddle, an' expect me to waste my precious time looking after her rubbish. Then a thing would be struck for death, along of want of water or what not, an' her'd come to me wi' her li'l face all clouded. 'Can't 'e make it well again, Joseph?' her'd say; an' I'd say, 'No, missy; 'tis all up wi' thicky geranium,' or whatever 'twas. ''Tis gwaine home.' An' her'd stamp her li'l foot so savage an' ferocious, an' say, 'But it *mustn't* go home! I don't *want* it to go home! 'Tis your business not to let it go home!' Poor little maiden!"

"An' now she've gone home herself."

"Ess. She didn't mean to be rude to an auld man. But of course I couldn't be bothered with such trash. As to watering, I always leave it to Nature. Who be us that we should knaw better what things want than her do?"

"Nature caan't water green stuff onder glass, can her?"

"No; then why put it onder glass? All this here talk 'bout glass houses is vanity an' flying in the face of Providence. If 'twas meant that grapes

an' tree-ferns an' 'zaleas an' hothouse stuff was to flourish in England, they'd be here doing of it on every mountain-side. Us takes too much 'pon ourselves. Same with prayers. What be prayer most times but trying to get the A'mighty round to our way of thinking? We'm too busy, — most of us, — an' that's the truth."

"Jimmery!" exclaimed Matthew. "I never did in all my born days hear tell of the like o' you! You won't work an' you won't pray — 'tis terrible. All the same, if you don't get the vicarage again, an' come as under-gardener to the squire, as he've offered you, I tell you frankly, friends though we be, that you'll have to work harder than you've worked for twenty years."

"I know it very well, Matt," said Mr. Hannaford. "Your way an' mine be different, root an' branch; an' I pray God as I may not have to come under you, for I'd hate it properly, an' that's the truth. An' I do work, an' I do pray likewise; an' I'd back my chance of going up aloft with my last shirt, if there was any to take the bet. You'm too self-righteous along of your high wages —"

"Joseph! 'tis time you put on your black," cried a voice from the cottage door.

Here grew a feeble honeysuckle that had been nailed up four years before, and still struggled gamely with a north aspect and neglect.

On the other side of the doorway was a thrush in a cage. It appeared too spiritless even to mount its wooden perch, but sat on the floor of its prison and listlessly pecked at nothing.

Mrs. Hannaford had a thin, flat figure, a hard mouth, keen eyes and a face like a fowl. Tremendous force of character marked her pale visage. The grey curls that hung there on each side of her narrow forehead looked like steel shavings.

"Dress," she said, "an' be quick about it. Ah, Mr. Smallridge — helping Joseph to waste his time."

"Not me, ma'am; that's about the only job he doesn't want helping with. I've just been telling your man that if Mr. Budd to the vicarage doan't need him, an' he takes squire's offer an' comes to me, theer must be more work an' less talk."

"The new parson will want him," said Mrs. Hannaford, decidedly. "Who should stick a spade in that earth after twenty-five years if not Joseph?"

"Very plants would cry out if anybody else was put awver them," said Mr. Hannaford, sentimentally.

"Cry out for joy, I reckon," murmured Matthew, but not loud enough for his friend's wife to overhear him. "Theer's wan thing you should know," he continued, changing the subject. "Parson Budd be a tremendous Church of Englander, so I heard squire say. He've got his knife into all chapel-people an' free-thinkers an' such like."

"'Tis a free country," answered Mrs. Hannaford, and her curls almost appeared to clatter as she shook her head. "He'd better mind his awn business, which be faith, hope an' charity, an' not poke his nose into other people's prayers!"

"As for religion," declared Joseph, "the little as I've got time for in that line be done along with my missis an' the Plymouth Brethren. But theer ban't no smallness in me. Room in the Lard's mansions for all of us; an' if the roads be narrer, theer's plenty of 'em, an' plenty of gates to the Golden Jerusalem."

Mrs. Hannaford frowned.

"You'm too free with your views, Joseph Hannaford," she said. "You'd best call to mind what pastor said to chapel last Sunday, 'bout the camel an' the needle's eye. Many be called an' few chosen, so theer's an end of it. The Brethren's way be the right way an' the strait way; an' ban't your business to be breaking gates into heaven for them as do wrong, an' think wrong, an' haven't a spark of charity, an' be busy about the Dowl's work in every other cottage in this village. I know what church folks be — nobody better."

Mr. Smallridge, himself of the established religion, retreated before this outburst.

"Hell of a female that," he said to himself. "How the man can keep heart after all these years

be a mystery. Yet she sits light upon him, seemingly."

Then Joseph, with some groans and grumbles, went to decorate himself, that the new incumbent might smile upon him and reappoint him to the care of the vicarage garden. He shaved very carefully, washed, showed Mrs. Hannaford his finger-nails, — a matter he usually shirked, — donned his best attire, and finally started beside his wife to appear before Mr. Budd.

"'Tis a grievous choice," he said; "an' if the man doan't take me on, I'll have to go to the Hall under Smallridge — a very ill-convenient thing to think upon."

"'Tis a matter of form, but better the Hall than any paltering with what's right; an' better be under Smallridge than against your conscience."

"My conscience is very well, an' always have been since I was a bwoy."

"You'm a deal tu easy, however," she answered sternly — "a deal tu easy, an' you'll very likely find that out when 'tis tu late. Your conscience be like proud-flesh, I reckon: don't hurt 'e 'cause 'tis past feeling. I wish it pricked you so often as your rheumatics do. 'Twould be a sign of grace."

"You'm like poor Parson Truman's li'l maiden wi' her flowers, you be," he retorted. "Her was always dragging up the things to see how they prospered, an' you'm always dragging up your conscience by the roots, same way, to see how 'tis faring. I let mine bide."

"You can't," snapped back Mrs. Hannaford. "Conscience ban't built to bide — no more'n a growing pear upon a tree. It goes from gude to better, or else from bad to worse. You ban't so righteous-minded as I could wish 'e, Joseph; but I've done a deal for you since we've been man an' wife; an' if you'm spared ten year more, I lay I'll have your conscience to work so hard as a man saving his own hay."

"Pity you can't live an' let live, my dear," answered the gardener. "Even the weeds was made by God for His own ends, as I always told Truman. You'm a very religious woman; an' nobody knaws it better'n you; all the same, if folks' consciences ax for such a power of watching, 'tis enough for every human to look after theer own, surely."

"Why for don't you do it, then?"

"Here's the vicarage," he answered. "Us better not go in warm — might be against us. I'll dust my boots, an' you'd best to cool your face, for 'tis glistening like the moon in the sky."

Presently they stood before a busy newcomer. He proved a young, plump, and pleasant man — a man fond of fishing and fox-hunting, a man of rotund voice and rotund figure. Joseph's heart

grew hopeful. Here was no dragon of horticulture, but one, like himself, who would live and let live, and doubtless leave the garden in the hands of its professional attendant.

"Your servant, sir," he said. "I hope your honour be very well an' likes the church an' the hunt — also the garden."

"Mr. Joseph Hannaford, I suppose, and this is Mrs. Hannaford — good parishioners both, of course? Sit down, Mrs. Hannaford, please."

"'Tis in a nutshell, sir, an' we won't keep a busy gentleman from his business," said the old woman, very politely. "Joseph here have been gardener at the vicarage, man an' bwoy, for twenty-five years — ever since theer was a garden at all. He helped to cut out the peat an' make the place, as was just a new-take from Dartymoor, though now 'tis so good stuff as ever growed a cabbage."

"Ess fay; all rotted manure an' butivul loam, so sweet as sugar, an' drains like a sieve," declared Joseph.

"I want a gardener, of course, and cannot do better than Mr. Hannaford, though I'm not sure if it isn't too much for one elderly man."

"It is!" almost shouted Joseph. "Never a Bible prophet said a truer word! Too much by half. Not that I'd demean myself to ax for another man, but a bwoy I should have, an' I hope your

honour will give me a bwoy, if 'tis only to fetch an' carry."

"What wages did you get from Mr. Truman?"

"Pound a week; an' another shilling would be a godsend, if I may say it without offence."

"An' up to squire's they only offered him seventeen an' sixpence, with all his ripe experience," said Mrs. Hannaford. "'Twould be a fine lesson in Christianity to squire, I'm sure, if you seed your way to twenty-one shilling."

"Better than a waggon-load of sermons, if I may say so," continued Joseph.

"A sight better, seeing squire's not greatly 'dicted to church-gwaine, best of times," chimed in Mrs. Hannaford.

"You'd be under-gardener there, no doubt?"

"Ezacally so, dear sir. Under-gardener beneath Smallridge — a man three year younger than me. But ban't for me to tell my parts. All the same, I wouldn't work under Smallridge, not for money, if I could help it. Very rash views he've got 'bout broccoli, not to name roots an' sparrowgrass."

"Terrible wilful touching fruit, also, they tells me," added Mrs. Hannaford.

"Well, you must come, I suppose. I could hardly turn you out of your old garden; nor is there any need to do so."

"An' thank you with all my heart, your hon-

our; an' you'll never regret it so long as I be spared."

"The extra shilling you shall have. As to a boy, I want a stable-boy, and he'll be able to lend you a hand in the summer."

Mr. Hannaford nodded, touched his forehead, and mentally arranged a full programme for the boy.

"Enough said, then. On Monday I shall expect you, and will walk round with you myself and say what I've got to say. Good-bye for the present."

Mr. Budd rose, and the old pair, with many expressions of satisfaction, were about to depart when their vicar spoke again.

"One more matter I may mention, though doubtless there is no necessity to do so with two such sensible people. There are more sects and conventicles here than I like to find in such a very small parish. Of course you come to church every Sunday, Mr. Hannaford?"

"As to that, your honour —" began Joseph; then his wife silenced him.

"We'm Plymouth Brethren from conscience," she said. "You ban't gwaine to object, surely — you as have come here to preach charity an' such like?"

Mr. Budd flushed.

"I've come to do my duty, ma'am, and don't

need to be told what that is by my parishioners, I hope. All servants of the vicarage will, as a matter of course, go to church twice every Sunday, and upon week-days also, if I express any wish to that effect."

"Let 'em, then," answered the old woman, fiercely. "You can bind 'em in chains of iron, if you will, an' they'm feeble-hearted enough to let 'e. But us won't. Us be what we be, an' Plymouth Brethren have got somethin' better to do than go hunting foxes, whether or no. I'm a growed woman, an' Joseph's my husband, an' he shan't be in bondage to no man. To squire's garden he shall go, an' save his sawl alive, so now then! Gude evening, sir."

"If I may have a tell —" began Joseph, in a tremor of emotion; but his wife cut him short.

"You may not," she cried sternly. "You come home. Least said soonest mended. Awnly I'm sorry to God as a Cæsar of all the Roosias have come to Postbridge instead of a Christian creature."

So saying, she clutched Joseph and led him away. But on their silent journey homeward Mr. Hannaford pondered this tremendous circumstance deeply. Then, at his cottage gate, he rallied and spoke his mind.

"We've done wrong," he said, "an' I be gwaine back again to confess to it afore I sleep this night."

"We've done right. You'll save your sawl an' take seventeen shilling an' sixpence. You'll be a martyr for conscience, an' I be proud of 'e."

"Martyr or no martyr, I knaw a silly auld woman, an' I ban't proud of 'e at all, nor of myself neither. Anything in reason I'd do for you, an' have done ever since I took you; but being put to work in cold blood under Smallridge is more'n I will do for you or for all the Plymouth Brothers that ever bleated hell-fire to a decent man. I won't go under Smallridge. He'd make me sweat enough to float a ship; an' at my time of life 'twould shorten my days."

"The Lord'll help 'e, Joseph."

"Lord helps those who help theerselves."

"You'm gwaine to the Hall, however, for I've said it."

"Not me — never."

"You be, Joseph Hannaford, as I'm a living woman."

"No. Not for nobody, Jane! I've never crossed you in my life; I've knuckled under like a worm for forty-three year, an' shall henceforward just the same; but wheer Smallridge be in question I'm iron. I go to church next Sunday."

"You never shall!"

"I always shall — an' glad to get back. 'Twas a very silly thing to leave it."

Mrs. Hannaford put her fowl-like nose within two inches of her husband's.

"I dare you to do it."

"Ban't no use flustering yourself, my old dear. Every human man's got one kick in him. An' kick I'm gwaine to this instant moment."

He turned and left her with great agility, while she — the foundations of her married life suddenly shaken by this earthquake — stood and stared and gasped up at heaven.

Joseph quickly vanished into the dusk, and soon stood once more before the new vicar. Mr. Budd thereupon raised his eyes from his desk and asked a question without words.

"Well, your honour, 'tis like this here: I'll go back to church again very next Sunday as falls in."

"Ah! But I thought that Joseph would be in bondage to no man?"

"Nor no woman neither," said Mr. Hannaford.