Devonshire tongue again! I lay it helped her to pass in peace."

"It did so," declared the returned native. "She went out of life easy as a babby; for her appeared to see all her own folks very clear just afore she died, an' she was steadfast sure as there'd be a West-Country welcome waitin' up-along. Fill your glasses, my dears; an' give they boys some ginger-beer, ma'am, will 'e?"

THE TWO WIDOWS

THE TWO WIDOWS

CHAPTER I

Upon the great main road that crosses Dartmoor from Moretonhampstead to Plymouth, and distant but half a mile from the little hamlet of Postbridge, near the eastern arm of Dart, there stand two cottages. Here slopes the broad bosom of Merripit Hill upon the heart of the wilderness, and the cots, that appear on each side of the way, are built exactly alike — of yellow bricks and blue slates. They have doors of the same green shade and window blinds of white chintz; their woodwork is painted brown, and their chimney-pots are red. In every respect these habitations seem outwardly identical, save that one faces north, while the other, over against it, looks southerly. Their gardens are of equal proportion, and contain the same class of cabbage, similar rows of tall scarlet-runner beans sprout from each little plot in summer, and patches of red lettuce, dusted over with soot to keep away the slugs, appear in both during springtime. Once two men dwelt in these abodes, and they were wiser

than their wives and maintained an amiable acquaintance, but avoided hot friendship.

When Abel Haycraft and his newly married mate arrived at the northern-facing cottage, Henry Mogridge, the water-bailiff, who dwelt in the cottage that looked south, paid him a visit and put the position briefly and forcibly: —

"'Tis like this, Mr. Haycraft," he said. "I be very glad to have you for a neighbour, an' I hope you'll like Dartymoor, an' prosper up here, an' make good money at Vitifer Mine, where I'm told you be going to work; but this I'll say, don't let's be too friendly — nor our women-folk neither. Out of friendship I say it."

"What a word!" said Mr. Haycraft, who was only twenty-one and of a sanguine nature. "Why, I wants to be friends with everybody, if so be as they'll let me. An' my missis too."

"That's a very silly idea; but you'm young yet and will larn better come by an' by. I mean this: you an' me live a gert deal too close together to get too thick. We'm only human beings, an' so sure as we get too trustful an' too fond of listening to each other's business, so sure us will end by having a mortal row. 'Tis a thing so common as berries in a hedge. I ban't saying a word against my old woman, mind you. She's so truthful as light, an' a Christian to the marrow in her bones. Nor yet be I hinting anything disrespectful of Mrs. Haycraft. Far from it. But human creatures is mostly jerry-built in parts, an' the best have their weak spots. There's nought more dangerous on earth than a gert friendship struck up between folks who live close together 'pon opposite sides of the road. I've seed the whole story more than once, an' I know what I say be true."

Abel Haycraft considered this statement for a moment. Then he spoke: —

"I suppose you'm right. An' if by bad chance they was to fall out — I mean the women — us would have to take sides as a matter of duty. A husband — well, there 'tis."

"So us would; but God forbid as our wives should have any quarrel, or you an' me either; so we'll just bide friendly with your leave; but not too friendly."

"'Tis a very good plan, I'm sure," answered the younger; and that evening he told his wife about it after they had gone to bed.

Mrs. Haycraft felt great interest and enlarged Abel's vision.

"Do 'e know what that means? It means as his good lady can't be trusted, an' the old man well knows it. I lay she'm the sort as makes mischief. Well, don't you fear. I'll take care to keep her at arm's length. I wasn't born yesterday."

"She'm a kind enough creature so far, I'm sure,"

answered Abel. "A motherly fashion of woman, an' not so old as her husband by twenty years, I should judge."

"'Twas his way of giving us a warning, nevertheless," declared Honor Haycraft. "Or," she added, "seeing as I was a red-haired woman, and thinking maybe that I had a short temper, she may have reckoned that —"

"Not at all, not at all," interrupted the husband, hastily. "Do 'e think I'd have stood any such idea? God's my judge, I'd have hit the man in the mouth if he'd said a word against you or your butivul colour."

"If I thought she'd taken a dislike to me, because I was red, I'd never look at the woman," said Honor. "For that matter, I'm comelier far than her, though I say so."

"An' comelier than any other woman at Postbridge, or on all Dartymoor either," declared Abel, devoutly.

"I'll be civil to her, then, but no more. An' I wish her hadn't brought over that gert dish of Irish stew the day us comed in an' were sinking for a morsel to eat; for us ate it, an' licked the bones, an' now she've got a hold on us."

"Not at all," said the larger-minded man. "'Tis a poor spirit as can't stomach a kindness without worriting to pay it back. Us'll have a chance of

doing her a good turn for sartain, living at her door same as we do. Just let things go their own way, an' they'll go right. We'm all Christian creatures, thank God, an' there's no reason because we live in a outlandish sort of place like this here that we should forget it."

"All the same," declared his plump, red girl, pouting, "I could wish as Mr. Mogridge hadn't spoke them words. He've hurt my pride. I wasn't going to jump down their throats. I'm not that sort."

"'Twas a bit chilly like, perhaps; but he'm older than us, an' wiser, an' he meant well."

"He'm not wiser than you be, anyway. I believe, if us knowed, you'd find you made better money than what he do."

"Us'll leave it at that, then; an' now us'll go to sleep, if you please."

CHAPTER II

WITHIN a month Honor Haycraft and Avisa Mogridge were the closest of friends, for, despite the water-bailiff's caution and the younger man's attempt to profit by it, their wives took the matter into their own hands. Both husbands were away all day at work; their cottages stood half a mile distant from any others, and the two lonely women soon struck up a close and intimate relation. Mrs. Mogridge was honourable, truthful, warm-hearted and affectionate; she had two young children, both girls; she loved her elderly husband dearly; she knew the life-history of every man and woman in Postbridge; and she related the affairs of the village with full detail for the benefit of Honor, who was an Exeter girl, and did not know the people of the Moor.

"I can talk straight to 'e," said Mrs. Mogridge, "for you come without one particle of feeling against anybody or for anybody. So I'll tell you what they all be like down-along, an' who you can trust an' who you can't trust, so far as I know 'em. You'll go your own way, but 'tis never any harm to hear another opinion."

Thus Mrs. Haycraft, instead of forming indepen-

dent conclusions from experience, took her view of the new neighbours and environment from another woman; and this was a happier circumstance than might be guessed, because Avisa Mogridge possessed plenty of good sense and a kindly heart, whereas, though the red girl's heart was warm enough, her head was rather weak, and of sense, or patience, or knowledge of human nature she had none to name. She was a superstitious woman, full of old saws and sayings. If she met a single magpie, she went in fear for a week. Her husband tried to laugh her out of such folly, but he never succeeded.

And so the friendship ripened and the men looked on. In secret Henry Mogridge prophesied a catastrophe, as sure as women were women all the world over; while Abel Haycraft listened and nodded, but hoped the water-bailiff might be mistaken.

Avisa and Honor worked side by side at the same wash-tub when their husbands were away, compared notes, listened to each other's wisdom and opinions. Honor petted her friend's little girls, and made sugar-plums and cakes for them; Avisa took the deepest interest in Honor's approaching motherhood.

A boy was born to the young wife — a flaxen, Saxon atom, with a first crop of hair the colour of straw, blue eyes, a flat nose like his father's, red cheeks, and very fat limbs.

Then came winter, and Henry Mogridge, catching a chill in the night watches by the river, passed away, a victim to his duty beside Dart.

Honor comforted her friend as much as might be, and Postbridge showed sympathy also, until it was announced that Mrs. Mogridge had been left with £40 a year. Thereupon, feeling that commiseration would be wasted, the village turned to more interesting matters.

Time sped, and when her child was a year old, Honor Haycraft followed Avisa into the state of widowhood. An accident at Vitifer Mine ended the burly Abel's life; and with him there also perished another man and a boy.

CHAPTER III

THE two widows, united in tribulation, became greater friends than before. Neither married again, and the one lived for her little maidens, the other for her son. Such close amity proved a strain at times, however, and as each knew all that there was to know about the other, each, conscious of the other's imperfections, secretly regretted them in the friendliest spirit. Then came a little difference of opinion over the children; and then, from a personal attitude of irritation not divulged to anybody, Avisa, smarting somewhat at a pin-prick from Honor Haycraft touching her eldest little girl, spoke in overt fashion to a common friend at Postbridge.

"She's a very good woman," said Mrs. Mogridge, while she drank a dish of tea with Mrs. Bloom. "A pattern wife her was, an' steady as time since her man was called, an' a pattern mother, though her goose is a swan, as one might expect, an' she thinks her ugly, li'l fat boy is a cherub, poor dear. Well, 'tis natural so to do. I wouldn't blame her; we mothers be all alike there. But I could wish she had more brains, an' didn't believe such a lot of rummage an' nonsense. To credit all that dead an' gone stuff

about pixies, an' the heath-hounds, an' the use of herbs picked in moonlight, an' the planting of seeds 'pon a Good Friday — why, 'tis onbecoming in a growed-up woman as went to Sunday-school; an' I wish she'd drop it."

That was all that Avisa said to Mrs. Bloom, the washerwoman; but a fortnight afterward it happened that by evil chance Mrs. Bloom fell out bitterly with the water-bailiff's widow, and told Mrs. Mogridge that she was a cat, and that 'twas well known her husband never died of a chill at all, but from his wife's unkindness and cruelty. She said a great many other things of a nature not necessary to set down; and, as a result, Mrs. Mogridge felt it impossible longer to affect the society of Mrs. Bloom.

Then did Mrs. Bloom ask Honor Haycraft to a cup of tea; and Honor, smarting with indignation at the treatment her dearest friend had received from the washerwoman's venomous tongue, accepted the invitation. Her purpose was loyal to the other widow. She intended to glean further particulars concerning Mrs. Bloom's abominable opinions and assertions touching Avisa. Because a man in the village had told them that Mrs. Bloom's statements were in the nature of a libel, and might even put her into prison.

Hoping to catch Mrs. Bloom in some outrageous utterance, and so assist her friend to crush the washer-

woman, Honor Haycraft appeared in a cottage that always reeked of soap and steam.

Mrs. Bloom immediately came to personalities; and then Honor's freckles stood out brown upon her red skin; she grew hot from her heart outward; the tea lost its savour, and the toast its charm.

"Sorry am I to quarrel with any living thing — man, woman or mouse — but one has one's pride," said Mrs. Bloom. "Ess, one has one's pride; an' if there's a thing I do pride myself upon, after my gift of washing, 'tis my gift of silence. It don't come easy to any healthy-minded woman in a village this size to keep her mouth shut; an' I confess that it didn't come easy to me; but I larned how to do it, an' I've been a faithful friend to a gert many people, an' never quarrelled with a living soul, gentle or simple, till Avisa Mogridge broke with me."

"She's got a proper grudge against you," said Honor, cautiously. "An' I'm on her side, I warn you."

"No doubt: you've heard her tale. I'm not going to say anything about it to you, because you are her particular friend, an' blessed are the peacemakers. But this I'll say, though far be it from me to set friends against friends: I would advise you to take care. She's a fire as a very little spark will set on light, — a very critical woman, — always was so. It's a fault where there's no judgement. Her can't help it. Her criticises other folks' ways, an' their

habits, an' their ideas, an' even their children. Now, if there is a dangerous trick on God's earth, 'tis to criticise other folks' children."

"She's a right to her opinions, however."

"Most surely she have; an' she've a right to the air she breathes, an' the water she drinks. She've a right to her ideas; but she's no right to utter 'em where they might do harm. You an' me be the best friends possible, thank God, an' she's no right to say an unkind word of you to me, any more than I'd have a right to say an unkind word of her to you; because you an' she be the best friends possible likewise. An' not a word against her would ever pass my lips to you; because you'm a woman as feels very deeply, an' I should make mischief, which God forbid."

"Her never said a word against me, that I'll swear to," said Honor, hotly; "an' if an angel from heaven told me her did, I wouldn't believe it."

"An' quite right you'd be," said Mrs. Bloom. "You put it like a true friend. True friendship be a-thought blind always; an' 'tis well it is so, for where there's clear seeing between any two human beings, old or young, man or woman, perfect friendship can't be. That's why I've always kept my mouth shut so close all my life; and I ban't going to begin to open it now I'm turned forty-five — not even to you, my dear."

"Not a word would I believe — not a syllable," repeated Honor.

"An' not a word would you hear from me — good or bad. What she said was kindly meant — very kindly meant indeed. It only showed that no two humans look at life from the same point of view. We knowed that afore. For my own part I've always declared that 'twas weak of you to believe all they stories of ghosts an' goblins, an' dancing stones an' the like. As a deep-thinking an' true Christian I feel it. But the difference between me an' her is that I say it to your face; she blames you behind your back."

"Avisa Mogridge has laughed at me often enough about it. That's nothing," said Honor. "I know 'tis nonsense really, but I can't help believing the things."

"I'm very glad you've got the sense to see it so. 'No,' I said, 'no, Mrs. Mogridge, whatever Honor Haycraft may be, she's not a fool. Her father told her about these solemn things in her youth, an' many an old ancient man hereabouts do still believe in 'em, though of course the Bible is short an' sharp with witches an' such like.'"

"She didn't say I was a fool?"

"Well, since you ax me, I must be honest, for my own soul's sake. Trouble I won't make, an' you'm far too sensible to think of it again. 'Fool' was not

the word she used, but she wished you had more brains. That may be the same thing, or it may not. I up rather sharp an' denied you had any lack of intellects; but she said she was in the right. 'Prove it,' I said. 'Prove it you can't, Avisa Mogridge. She'm a sensible, clever, good girl,' I said, 'an' her head's screwed on the right way.'

"She bided silent a moment. Then she said, 'Honor reckons her goose is a swan, an' thinks that her ugly, li'l fat boy is a cherub.' I stared at her till my eyes bulged out; I couldn't believe my own ears. She meant it, of course; but no call for you to grow so red, my dear, she didn't mean it a bit unkindly. 'Twas just her honest opinion that your little angel be too fat an' too ugly for anything. 'If you think that,' I answered her, 'you'd better not mention it.'"

"She said my li'l boy was ugly?"

"She thinks so. She's positive of it. She's a very honest woman, mind you. With all her many faults, she's honest. She wouldn't have said it if she hadn't really believed it. She'm dead certain of it."

"My Billy ugly! Did 'e ever set eyes on a finer babby, tell me that?"

"Me? I never seed such a purty child in all my life. He'm a like a li'l blue-eyed Love off a valentine. But she —"

"A woman who could say my child was ugly could only say it for malice," declared the red-haired mother, with a rising breast.

"Don't think that. Her own maidens be very homely, you see. 'Tis a little natural jealousy, belike."

"'Tis a lie, Jane Bloom, an' I'll never believe she said it — never."

"You'll be sorry for that word, Honor Haycraft. Ax her, then. Ax her if her didn't tell me your little boy was fat an' ugly. She's never been catched out in a lie yet, 'tis said. See what she'll answer you. An' when you've heard her speak, I shall expect you to say you'm sorry to me. I never yet willingly uttered an unkind word against any living soul, an' never will. If you want to live in a fool's paradise, that's your lookout. But it shall never be said I didn't do my duty to my neighbour according to the Prayer Book ordinance."

With this vague but masterly speech Mrs. Bloom rose from her tea and held the cottage door open. Her guest took the hint, and in ten minutes was at home again.

Then she crossed the road, and seeing Avisa Mogridge in her garden with the little girls and the infant Billy, who had been left in trust with her, Honor spoke: —

"Just one word, an' only one, afore I go down to

the village an' give that old cat-a-mountain, Jane Bloom, the lie to her crooked face."

"Ah! What have she said, then?" asked the other. Mrs. Mogridge rose from pulling up weeds, and lifted her shoulders to ease her back.

"She've told me as you told her that my child was fat an' ugly. I answered in one word that she was a wicked liar. An' she answered back that I'd better ax you, for you'd never been known to tell a falsehood in all your born days. Did you say it or didn't you, Avisa? I only want your word. Then I'll go back-along and give her what for."

Mrs. Mogridge paused with a bit of groundsel in her hand. The children frolicked beside her, and she bade them be silent, sharply. Then she dropped the groundsel and turned and spoke.

"I told you that you was wrong to go an' speak to her. I warned you against it. Now, I suppose, the fat's in the fire. You'd made me cross a fortnight agone, when you said that my Minnie's second teeth would never come right. An' I got talking like a fool just afterward, an' I certainly said to Mrs. Bloom that your goose was a swan — same as it is with all of us mothers — an' I said that your little, dear boy was — was ugly. 'Twasn't a right or a kind thing to say, an' I'm very —"

"You said it! An' like enough you've said it a thousand times. You'm a wicked traitor; an' I'll

never speak to you again, so help me God; an' if your beastly childer cross my threshold any more, or so much as touch my garden palings, I'll throw boiling water over 'em, so now you know, you evil-minded, jealous devil!"

Mrs. Haycraft spoke no more, and waited for no answer. She snatched up her child, rushed into her own house, banged the door and was soon sobbing over her fat-nosed Billy.