

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Jane Bloom's husband took his lady out of Postbridge, so that she might live down a conubial scandal and pursue her cleansing occupation elsewhere, it was supposed that the deadly and famous quarrel between Avis and Honor would be healed. The gossips of Postbridge all prophesied a speedy return to friendship between the two widows, and not a few well-meaning women set to work to play peacemaker. But their efforts met no response. Both Avis and Honor made it clear that arbitration must be in vain, since this tragic matter went deeper than plummet of peacemaker could ever sound. Neither woman would make the first move; but Mrs. Mogridge was prepared to welcome any overture from the other. She accepted the inevitable with considerable philosophy; rightly appreciated the significance of the position; perceived how the idlest, least malignant word may sometimes fall like a scourge upon the back of the careless speaker. She held herself punished, and quite deservedly punished, for a very foolish error. She mourned the event, and with secret tears recalled the wisdom of her dead partner. Mrs. Hay-

craft, on the other hand, nursed her wrath and kept it warm. Her little boy justified the bygone criticism, and he grew less and less personable. But how could she know that? To her eyes he was beautiful above the children of men. Daily he grew more like his father; daily his little weak eyes reflected more of the blue of the sky.

Then he fell very sick and died.

A night of agony hid Honor, and in that darkness her tears descended like winter rain. Hopeless, helpless, red-eyed, she sat by the small body; and women came to comfort her, but she cursed both God and them, and bade them depart and leave her alone with grief greater than daughter of man had yet suffered.

The day before the funeral the mother took no food, and entered upon that nervous, neurotic period common to the time. She never sat down. She roamed for miles in the narrow space of the house and garden. She arranged and rearranged the flowers on the coffin; she magnified small griefs and temporary inconveniences. She quarrelled bitterly with the undertaker that the lining of the little box was cheaper than she had directed. She found a small flaw also upon the lid. This was concealed with putty, and Honor called down the wrath of the Everlasting upon the carpenter who had made it.

A master sorrow in the minor sort now fell

upon her. There is a belief on Dartmoor that if a little boy dies, he should be carried to his grave by little girls, and when a small maid passes it is thought good if boys are her bearers. Honor hugged this tradition as a precious and seemly observance; but it chanced that of small girls in Postbridge there were then but four, and the task she desired to set them would need six pairs of hands. The misfortune swiftly mounted into a tragedy when viewed from her distracted standpoint. Her unrestrained grief grew voluble; she mourned her lot to any who would listen. From the first storm of weeping and the first desire for peace and loneliness she became talkative, and, in a condition of sustained incoherence, chattered, light-headed, from morning until night. She was rude to the clergyman when he came to see her. Her friends suggested that two more little girls should be obtained from Princetown, or some neighbouring hamlet; but the poor soul explained that this rite allowed of no such deviation. The children must be those who had known her dead baby, and actually played with him. Others would not answer the proper purpose.

Upon the night before the funeral the undertaker went home a shattered man, for the matter of this tiny corpse had troubled him, and such failure to satisfy the parent hurt his professional feelings.

"There wasn't half the difficulties when us laid

by His Honour, Lord Champernowne, Peer of the Realm and J.P., an' ten coaches, an' a letter of thanks after from the steward," he grumbled to his wife. But she comforted him.

"The woman's stark, staring mad, my dear. Don't think no more about her. If you'd lined the casket with shining gold, her'd have grumbled because there weren't no diamonds in it. An' all for two pound, ten. 'Twas like your big heart to use elm, when any other man would have made deal do very nice."

Meantime, at the hour of gloaming, as Dartmoor vanished fold upon fold into the purple of night, did Avis Mogridge pluck heart, and cross the high road, and enter her neighbour's house. She did not knock, but lifted the latch boldly, walked in and stood before Honor, where the unhappy mother sat and worked upon a black bonnet by candle-light.

"You! You to come! You, as may be a witch an' overlooked my li'l darling, for all I know!" she cried, leaping to her feet.

"Yes, 'tis me, Mrs. Haycraft; but no witch. Only a woman as have seed sorrow too — though no sorrow like your sorrow just now. I've come to tell 'e I love 'e still, an' I can't bide away from 'e no more, an' I won't. You shan't drive me off."

Honor breathed hard.

"Everything do happen all to once," she said.

"Maybe I didn't ought to have intruded; but I'm older than you, an' I thought —"

"You be safe. I'm too weak to bear malice against you. My darling's screwed down now. If you'd seed him yesterday, you'd have called back your wicked word, Avisa Mogridge. He weren't ugly after he died — he — oh, God, an' not one sound of his little noise in the house. It's killing me."

"To be frank with you, Honor, you must marry again. You'm only twenty-three. Yes, I know you be. An' 'twas my little girls put them flowers 'pon your window-sill last June on your birthday morning. They done it afore daybreak. An' — an' — oh, woman, I be broken-hearted for 'e; God's my judge if I ban't."

Mrs. Haycraft was rocking herself backward and forward, and crying.

Suddenly she rose up.

"Come an' see the coffin," she said. "Several of the gentry have sent greenhouse flowers to me. There's a butivul smell to 'em."

"I will come; an' I want to say this. My girls — do 'e let 'em help with the thing you want. They'd make six with t'other children. Do 'e let 'em, Honor."

"'Tis too late; they can't get black now."

"You forget my old mother died last Christmas."

"Ah! so her did—that's lucky," said Mrs. Haycraft.

After the funeral the widows walked together. They left their friends at Postbridge, then returned home side by side.

As they ascended the hill, with Avisa's two little girls marching together behind them, a robin suddenly sang out sharp and clear.

"Thank the Lord I've heard that," said Honor, very earnestly, alluding to an ancient fable.

Her reconciled friend nodded.

"I be very glad also," she said. "To hear red-breast singing after a child is buried do mean the little one's safe in Heaven; though, all the same, God only knows where the babbies should go to, if not to Him."