

father. His missus had a little 'un. Eh!

Mrs. Buxton, an upright, stirring old body, in whose long pale face there could indeed be traced a certain resemblance to that of the white cow, was bustling energetically about the kitchen when Jim entered, and waylaid him as he was making for his wife's room.

"Thou mun tak' off thy shoon." Jim obediently kicked them off.

"Thou art na fuddled, I 'ope?" "Naww," said Jim, "I've nothin' had two gills."

"Thou munnot be talkin' an' mould-erin' our Maggie!"

"I'll never cheap," said Jim. "Well, then, coom!" She led the way, her son-in-law following her, treading heavily enough in his "stocking feet," an expression of awe on his swarthy face, and his eyes round with wonder. There lay Maggie in the four-post bed, her pale face, with its pretty dark eyes resting on a grand frilled pillow slip. This, with a new counterpane, and spotless linen sheets had been carefully prepared for the occasion. Jim came forward unawildly on tip-toe.

"Eh, Maggie," he said, with a little one-sided nod. "An' how art thou, lass?"

"It's a wench, Jim, whispered Maggie, "I doubt thou'd rather me ha' had a lad."

"Naww," said Jim, "I'd as soon 'ave a lass to start wi'."

"Eh, bless th' lad!" cried Mrs. Buxton, with shrill grandmotherly glee. "To start wi'?" he says. "Thou'r' fag goin' forward, art thou? Poor Maggie'll happen not be in such a hurry for another. Will thou lass? "To start wi'?" says he."

Maggie laughed weakly, and Jim began to think he had said something rather clever.

"Ah, a lass is reet enough," he remarked, rubbing his hands, and chuckling ecstatically. "for a beginnin' we's ha' a lad next."

"Ark at him," said Grandmother. "There now; howd thy din. What doest thou think our Maggie's yeard is made on? Well, doesn't thou want to see the child? See then.....eh, Hoo's a bonny little lass, hoo is, bless her little 'eart. Hoo's a gradely little wench—see her little legs, an' her 'ands. Eh, thee's a mony childer a month owd not half the size."

Jim bent over, and took the tiny fist tenderly in his great paw, shaking it gently up and down.

"Shake 'ands, little lass. Shake 'ands wi' Daddy. Eh, we's be gradely friends, thou an' me. See thou, Maggie, hoo's gotten howd o' my finger. My word, hoo has."

"I think hoo favours thee," murmured Maggie.

"Nay, nay, hoo tak's arter our family," said Mrs. Buxton hastily. "Hoo's gotten thy 'een, Maggie?" Jim gravely contemplated the child's puckered little red face, but did not commit himself.

Mrs. Buxton wrapped up mother and babe again, smoothing the sheet, and drawing forward the curtain of the bed, so as to screen Maggie's eyes from the light. Then she perceptibly desired Jim to take himself off, a command which the honest fellow obeyed without murmuring, merely pausing at the door for another look at Maggie. It had not occurred to him to kiss her, and tender words did not spring naturally to his lips. But Maggie's eyes rested lovingly on the awkward figure standing with clumsy fingers fumbling at the latch, and a queer half-sheepish smile on his grimy face. She smiled back, and drawing the bed-clothes down a little way, waved the baby's tiny arm. And so they parted, Jim returning with a beaming face to the kitchen.

Jim woke up next morning with a vague sense of exhilaration for which he could not at first account, but which presently resolved itself into paternal pride. When he had "cleared him," and scraped his week's growth of beard off—a painful and lengthy operation—plastered his locks well with hair-oil, and donned his Sunday suit of broad-cloth, he went on tip-toe to Maggie's door. He could hear her mother moving about and talking; then the splashing of the water, then a sound which startled him.

"It's never th' little un! Eh, but it is, for sure. 'Ark, how hoo shrieks out. Eh, my word, hoo's gradely lungs. Hoo's a rare little lass." He opened the door and peeped in. Baby's ablutions were going on, much to her own dissatisfaction, the

half-terrified admiration of her mother, and the delight of "Grandma."

"Coom thy ways in an' shut yon door," commanded the latter. "The child'll catch its death o' cold." Jim shut the door and advanced into the room, pausing at the foot of the bed to nod at Maggie; then, bending down, and resting his hands on his knees, he took note of the contortions of the pink wonder in Mrs. Buxton's lap.

"Hoo mind's me summat of a frog," he observed after a pause.

Grandma paused a moment in speechless indignation.

"Well, an' thou should be ashamed of thyself! Did ivir a body her o' sich a thing? A frog! As bonny a little wench as ivir drawn breath!"

"It were th' little limbs stretchin' out an' pullin' theirselves up as made me think it," explained Jim apologetically. "an' yon' little round body hoo's gotten—eh, I cannot but fancy hoo's a look of a frog."

"Did thou ivir leet on a frog wi' such a yeard of 'air'?" enquired Mrs. Buxton, rubbing the towel round and round the little helpless head with its coating of dark fluff.

"Nay, I cannot call to mind as I have," responded her son-in-law with a loud laugh. The suggestion seemed to him infinitely humorous.

"Well, then," summed up Mrs. Buxton, as though that clinched the matter.

Jack and Jim went their way to church, presently, equally jubilant, each after his own fashion; and received with a certain dignified triumph the congratulations of friends and kinsfolk congregated outside the lych-gate.

"I like as if I were glad it's Easter to-day," observed Jim to his father-in-law as they sauntered homewards. "Why so?"

"Eh, because—all they hymns thou know's—so j'ful like—Hallylovers an' that—seems as if all wor o' count o' th' little wench."

"Eh!" said Jack, "Well—thou'r' a rum chap, I dun know but what thou'r' reet, though. But Christmas 'ud ha bin happen a better time for't to ha coomed. 'Unto us a child is born, thou know's."

"Ah," meditated Jim, "but they cooms when they'n a mind, they childer."

"Nay, they comes when th' 'Amighty sends 'em," corrected Farmer Buxton; which pious sentiment Jim endorsed by a sigh, and a shake of the head.

The house seemed very silent when they returned; Bob came forward to meet them, wagging his tail, but otherwise nothing seemed to be stirring.

"The child's asleep," said Jack, nudging his son-in-law with a grin. "Thou mun' mak' no noise, lad. Eh, thou't ha' to larn to keep quiet, noo thee's a little un f' th' 'ouse."

"I'll nobbut creep up t' ax how they 'ind theirselves," answered Jim, kicking off his boots, and mounting the stairs with a creaking pause on each step. Before he had got half way up, however, the door of Maggie's room opened, and Mrs. Buxton appeared, her long white face longer and whiter than ever, her finger on her lip.

"Go thy ways down, Jim; thou mun keep f' th' kitchen. Hoo's none so well."

"What?" gasped Jim. "What's amiss?—th' little un?"

"Nay, go thy ways down, I tell 'ee. Th' little un reet enough. It's our Maggie, Hoo's takken a turn or summat, I've sent for doctor."

She withdrew, closing the door very softly, and Jim went creaking down again with a woful face.

"Our Maggie's takken a turn."

"What sort o' turn?"

"A bad turn I reckon"—this with a quivering lip.

"Eh, they lasses, they do sometimes wi' their first childer! Dunnot looked so scared, mon. Hoo'll be reet—thou't see. Hoo's allus bin a strong, 'erthy wench—naught niver ailed her. Is doctor coming?"

"Ah, they'n fetched him."

"Reet... Hoo'll be hersel' f' no time I tell thee."

Jim sat down, rubbing his knees, and staring disconsolately into the fire. Jack wandered up and down between door and window, making the same encouraging remarks over and over again, though his face gradually lengthened, and he was obviously uneasy.

Presently the doctor came. The men looked at each other as he descended the stairs, but neither of them found courage to question him. Mrs. Buxton's face as she followed him told

a tale of its own, and sundry phrases which they caught of the murmured colloquy filled them with dismay.

"Hard work to pull through. Peritonitis set in—"

"What's that?" whispered Jim to Jack.

"The titus—our Maggie's gotten th' titus—brown-titus," answered Jack.

"Eh, an' we never heered her cough," ejaculated Jim, and then the pair fell to listening again; but they could hear no more.

Soon the doctor drove off, and Mrs. Buxton re-entered the kitchen. She stood still for a moment resting her hand on the table, and looking from one to the other; then she tried to speak, failed, and raised her apron to her eyes.

Through the open door they could hear the distant church bells chiming merrily.

Jim rose, and walked upstairs without a word. When Mrs. Buxton followed she found him seated by his wife's bed, half hidden by the curtain.

"Go down, Jim," she murmured softly, "there's a good lad." "Ark," as Maggie moaned, "Hoo's too bad to notice—thou'r' nobbut f' th' road' ere. Thou cannot do her no good."

"I'll bide, as how t'is," said Jim sullenly; and bide he did; all through the long hours that ensued that silent motionless figure kept its place at the bedside, Maggie's pain left her a little before the end, and her feeble hand withdrew the curtain that concealed her husband's face from her.

"Art thou there, lad?"

"Aye—I'm here."

"Thou's gotten th' little wench, Jim. Hoo'll soon be company for 'ee."

Jim said nothing.

"Thou't love her...an' see to her?"

He nodded, and Maggie with a sigh closed her eyes.

Late on that same day, Jim left his place by the bedside; he was no longer wanted there—Maggie had gone Home.

He and the old farmer sat opposite each other in the kitchen, and neither spoke a word. Jack shifted his position in his big elbow chair every now and then, cleared his throat, drummed with his fingers on the table; but Jim sat glowering into the fire without moving. Overhead they could hear the women moving to and fro about Maggie's bed.

Presently Jack, heaving a deep sigh, drew forward a covered basket that stood on the neighbouring table. Jim heard him fumbling with it, though he would not turn his head; but after a moment or two, a smothered exclamation made him look round. His father-in-law had come upon poor Maggie's last piece of work: an unfinished baby's shirt with the needle sticking in it.

"Hoo wur—hoo wur allus a great hand at th' needle," said Jack piteously.

And then Jim, covering his face with his rugged hands, burst out sobbing.

## PART II.

The sod had green on Maggie's grave for nearly three years, and "the little wench" was a well-known personality in the neighbourhood of the Upper Farm. A sturdy little monkey, standing firm on her plump brown legs, and taking notice of her small world with a pair of bright dark eyes that might have been Maggie's own. "Sharp!" said her grandmother, "Eh, hoo is that. Theer's nought hoo doesn't know, I welly believe. T'other day, soombry axed her wheer hoo coomed fro' an' who her mother wur. Ah' hoo tells 'em as hoo lives at th' Upper Farm. I haven't got no mother," hoo says, "but I've two daddies," who says. "Ah hoo tow'd us all about it when hoo coom whoam. Did y' ivir hear sich a tale?" "Two daddies," says hoo."

"Daddy Jack," and "Daddy Jim," were indeed little Curly's devoted slaves. (She had been christend Maggie after her mother, but the members of the bereaved household found it as yet difficult to pronounce that once familiar name, and so "th' little wench" was generally entitled "Curly"—in allusion to the thick wavy golden-brown crop which adorned her little round head.)

She slept in her grandmother's room, so Daddy Jack had generally the first of the day's enjoyment. She would crawl out of her cot on to the big bed with early dawn, creeping cautiously over Mrs. Buxton's sleeping form, and smuggle close to Daddy Jack; bestowing sundry attentions on

him, which a less good-humoured or affectionate man would have found a trifle trying. But he only smiled sleepily when she pulled open his eyes, and patted his nose, and twisted his whiskers; imprisoning the dimpled little tormenting hand.

"Eh, thou'r' a little rpgne, thou art! Why the birds are not wakened up yet. Whatever will thy gronny say? See, coom in here wi' thee—thou'r' welly starved wi' cowl;—thy little feet's near perished."

Sometimes Curly accepted the invitation, but more frequently she declined, first by vigorous shakes of the mop aforesaid; then by little muttered remonstrances, and finally by shrill defiance which ultimately awoke her grandmother, who thereupon invariably petted her, and scolded Daddy Jack; a state of things of which "th' little wench" entirely approved.

"The poor innocent knows no better," Mrs. Buxton would grumble. "But a body 'ud think thou'd ha' more sense, nor to be encouragin' her f' sich ways. See, lovey, get under th' blankets, do. Eh, hoo's as cowl!—I wonder at thee, Jack, thot I do! Thou might know better. The child's got no sense."

"I got no sense," Curly echoed reprovingly one day, crossing one fat leg over the other, and looking severely at her grandfather; upon which Jack's lecture was cut short for once, and the old pair chuckled and winked at each other in equal rapture. "Sense indeed," as Jack remarked, "hoo's more nor a many grown men!"

When Curly's toilet was completed, Daddy Jim's innings began. She sat on his knee at breakfast, and ate occasionally out of his plate; she rode on his shoulder afterwards, when he went his round of the shippons and pigsties, varying that form of exercise by an occasional jaunt on the back of a cart-horse, or even a cow. Once indeed, she insisted on riding a pig, and after a sharp altercation carried her point; Daddy Jim selected a matronly and safe old lady for her steed, and placed his folded coat for Curly to sit on. But the experiment was not a success—both Curly and the coat speedily slipping off into the mire.

The little maid was always seen with one or other of her daddies; and not unfrequently with both. The two men accommodating their paces to her little toddling steps, and stepping awkwardly sideways that she might cling to a finger of each.

When she had chicken-pox they nearly went mad, especially as kindly neighbours were not wanting sympathetic suggestions that happen her mother were callin' her. Hoo wanted her up yonder, very like, an' hoo'd coom fur her. However, these predictions were not realized. And luckily for the peace of mind of the two daddies, no other childish maladies found their way to the Upper Farm.

The days passed quietly and peacefully. Jim went on working for his father-in-law, just as he used to do during his brief wedded life, and Mrs. Buxton washed, and mended him, and "did for him," and occasionally "barged at him," almost as poor Maggie herself might have done. But it wasn't the same. "Eh dear no," as Jim often sighed to himself, "Theer's a deal o' difference. Eh, Maggie!"

No one could say he fretted much. The neighbours thought he bore up wonderful. He was never seen to cry, and never mentioned his wife; when he passed her grave on his way to the church door, he looked the other way. But he missed her in his dull, uncomplaining, unreasoning fashion, at every turn, in every hour. Only Curly had power to chase away the vague pain—only her sunny baby presence could fill the void.

When Curly was more than halfway through her third year, an event occurred which stirred the placid current of her daddies' lives.

It was on a Sunday in June; a Sunday so warm and bright that the eyes of the congregation were tempted to wander to the church windows, through which the sky appeared very blue, and the woods very green and enticing. It was so warm that the sermon had had rather a soporific effect, and one or two prayer-books slipped out of the owners' hands long before the Rector had come to "Thirdly."

Well, service was over, and dinner was over, and Daddy Jack was smoking on the bench outside the door, digesting his roast beef, and dozing now and then. Mrs. Buxton was reading "Letts' Almanac" (which always came out on Sunday) in the parlour, and Curly was fast asleep on the