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'I tell you, Dada, that's what I mean.'

Her face bright with merriment, the young girl read again from the magazine: 'Ladies and farmers' wives will benefit equally from the scented sachets on their pillows. The fragrance is derived from rose petals, sweet briar blossom—' At this point the dark, bright eyes lifted from the page and swept over her family before she went on, gurgling now, 'Cow pats, well ground, as in Farmer Cox's boxings, sold by the pound and dampened, for poultices on the chin, and boils where boils have never bin . . . '

Her voice trailed off and joined the peals of laughter as, dropping the magazine on to the low oak table, she turned and clung to her sister, the while her two older brothers, their bodies bent forward, made guttural sounds and their younger brother, Jimmy, lay on his back on the mat before the open fire, his legs in the air treddling as if he were on a mill; the youngest of them all, a nine-year-old boy, leaned against his mother's side, and she drooped her head until it touched his, and they shook together.

The father hadn't openly joined them in their laughter; but rising from his seat at the side of the fireplace, he slapped his daughter playfully on

her bent head, saying, 'One of these days, Miss Clever Clops, that tongue of yours will get you into mischief. Now come on, all of you! It's half-past eight and bed is calling.'

Slowly the laughter subsided, as one after the other of the family rose to their feet and wished their mother good-night. First, there was Oswald and Olan, the eighteen-year-old twins, like her, both dark but different in stature, Oswald being almost half a head taller than his brother, and broad with it, and he, bending and kissing his mother on the cheek, said, 'Now, I've told you, Ma, you're not to get up to see us out. We're big enough and daft enough to cook a bit of gruel and heat a pan of milk.' But to this Maria Dagshaw answered, 'You see to your business, my boy, and I'll see to mine. So, go along with you both.' When, however, her son Olan bent towards her, she gripped his arm, saying, 'D'you think you'll be able to stick that driving and the winter coming on?'

'Don't you worry, Ma; anything's better than the mine; I would drive the devil to hell twice a day rather than go down there again. And the smell of the bread, anyway, keeps me awake. A wonderful new idea, isn't it, Ma? To send bread out and about to the houses?'

'Well, they do it with the tea, why not the bread?' said Nathaniel.

The two young men turned and looked at their father, and Oswald said, 'You're right, Dada. And Mr Green said there'll be other commodities on the carts before long. If they can carry stuff into the

market on a Saturday, why not carry it round the doors, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.'

'Well, there's something in that.' Nathaniel smiled on his sons and there was pride on his countenance. 'Good-night,' he said. And they both answered, 'Good-night, Dada.'

Nathaniel now turned to his daughters, saying, 'You two scallywags, get along with you into your bed before trouble hits you.'

'Oh, you wouldn't whip us, Dada, would you? Oh, you wouldn't! Oh, you wouldn't!'

'Stop your antics, Cherry, else you'll see whether I will or not. And you, Anna, stop your jabbering in bed. And don't shout up to the boys else I'll be in there with a horse whip; you're not too old to be skelped. D'you hear me?'

'Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Three bags full.' At this the two girls joined hands and were about to run down the long room when they turned again and doubled back to their mother, whom they kissed on both cheeks, while she smacked playfully at their bottoms.

When the door had closed behind them Nathaniel turned an unsmiling face towards his wife, saying, 'Those two are so full of the joy of life it frightens me at times.'

As Maria said, 'Oh, don't say that,' her fifteen-year-old son, Jimmy, looked at his father and asked him a question: 'Why does it frighten you, Dada? Because they laugh, and sing, and Anna can make up funny rhymes and stories? What is there in that to frighten you?'

Nathaniel walked towards the fair-haired boy, who was a replica of himself when young. 'I'm always afraid they'll be hurt eventually,' he said. 'And you know why, don't you? I've explained it to you.'

'Yes, Dada, I know why. But as you said, the boys have weathered it, the girls are weathering it in their own way and I in mine, because I have learned to fight like Ossie has taught me. Nobody insults Ossie, either in the village or in the market. And they won't me either, because as I grow I'll become stronger. Anyway, I can use my fists and feet to match any two . . . '

'Jimmy! Jimmy, quiet. You've heard me say the pen is mightier than the sword and from that you can gather the tongue is mightier than the fist or the foot.'

'No, Dada, I don't, not when you're dealing with Arthur Lennon or Dirk Melton.'

'You should keep away from them.'

The boy now turned to his mother, saying, 'How can I, Ma, when I have to pass through the village to get to the farm?'

'Well, I take it back in the case of Arthur Lennon.' His father smiled down at him now. 'Being the son of a blacksmith, he's tough. But still, as I've always said, if you can use your tongue, it's better in the long run, because you know you can confound people with words. Only' – he smiled now – 'you've got to know what your tongue's saying and not let it run away with you.' And his voice now rising, he looked down the room and cried, 'Like my dear daughters do!'

'Oh, Nat.'

'Well, they are listening behind the door.'

'They're not; they'll be in bed.'

'I know them.' He now turned to his son, saying, 'And I know you, young fellow. Off you go; and take Ben with you, if you can drag him from his mother's arms.' He bent down and ruffled the brown-haired boy who, when he turned his head and looked up at him, caused a strange pang to go through his chest as he asked himself again how he had come to breed this boy, who had the look of an angel in a church window and the manner and gentleness of a female and the questing mind of someone twice his age. He was the seventh child and a seventh child was always different. But Ben was so different that every time he looked into his eyes he thought the gods must be jealous of such as he, and he feared their decree that the good die young.

The boy kissed his mother on the cheek and drew himself from her hold, then put his arms about his father's hips and laid his head against his stomach; and for a moment there came on the kitchen a silence that lasted while Nathaniel led his son up the room to the ladder that was set at an angle against the end wall. And as he helped his son onto it, he said softly, 'Don't let the boys get you talking; they've got to get up in the morning. You understand?'

'Yes, Dada. Good-night, Dada.'

The boy turned from the bottom rung and laid his lips for a moment against his father's cheek, and Nathaniel watched him climb, then disappear through the trap door and so into the long

roof-space that held four beds, but which allowed standing-room only down the middle of it.

When he turned from the ladder it was to find Maria standing at the far side of the long trestle table, which was already set for a meal with wooden bowls, wooden plates and a wooden spoon to the side of each plate. In the middle of the table stood a china bowl of brown sugar, and at one end of it was set a bread-board with a knife across it, while at the other was a wooden tray holding eight china mugs.

Maria was looking towards them as she said, 'We'll have to go careful on the milk until Minny is back in working order again. What d'you think she'll have this time?'

'Well, if William's done his duty it could be twins. Let's hope triplets, but that's too much to ask. If she comes up with one nanny we'll be thankful. Come and sit down.'

He went round the table and put his arm across her shoulders and led her back down the room towards the fire. And there he pressed her into the seat he had recently vacated, and with the liveliness of a man half his forty-four years he twisted his body into a sitting position at her feet, and laying his head on her knee he remained silent for quite some time before he asked quietly, 'How long d'you think it can last from now on? The twins are near men, the girls near women.'

'Oh Nat. You mean, our way of life?'

'Yes, just that, Maria, just that; our way of life and this present happiness that has grown and matured in spite of everything.'

'It'll last as long as we're together, and nothing can part us except death. And then if you were to go I wouldn't be long after, and I know it's the same with you.'

He put up his hand and placed it on hers where it was resting on top of his head, and in a low voice, he said, 'It's been a strange life, hasn't it?'

'And it'll go on being strange,' she replied; 'it's the way we've made it.'

'Yes. Yes, you're right. And consequently they'll all have to fight their way through it, each one of them. Yet they know where they stand, even down to Jimmy. He's a wise boy, that one. And then there's Ben. He doesn't somehow need to be told, he knows it already. He's imbibed it, whether from the others or the atmosphere in the house, but he knows he's one of a family that lives apart . . . You know what tomorrow is?'

'Yes, I know what tomorrow is, dear. It's the seventh of September, eighteen hundred and eighty and the anniversary of the day we first met. As if I could ever forget it!'

There was a pause now before he said, 'I can see you as if it were yesterday standing at the schoolhouse door. You were holding a lantern up high and it showed me your face as you said, "Can I come in? I want to learn to write . . ." '

There was another silence, and in it Maria saw herself walking into that schoolhouse room. It was a bare and comfortless room, but in the middle of it was a table on which were books and papers. She had looked at them as if they were bread and water and she were starving with a thirst for both.

He had told her to take a seat; and when he asked her, 'Haven't you attended this school?' she had shaken her head and said with bitterness deep in her voice, 'No; nor have I been allowed to go to the Sunday School so that I could write me name.'

When he had asked her why, he had watched her jaws tighten as her teeth came together, before she said, 'Because I would be breakin' into a fourteen- or fifteen-hour day's work for me father. I am from Dagshaw's farm down the valley.'

'Have you no brothers?' he had asked.

'Huh! None. I am the only one, an' I save a man's wages, perhaps two, for they will only work twelve hours. Some prefer the mines to workin' for him.'

'Couldn't you talk to him or stand up to him?'

'You can't talk to him; he's an ignorant man. But I have stood up to him with a shovel afore now; it can't go on, though. Me mother put it to me to come to you. She said, if I could write me name and read perhaps then I would get a good position in a house, not just in a scullery. She herself was from better people than my father but they died of the cholera and she never learned to read or write.'

He had said to her, 'You should have come to school.'

At that she had abruptly risen to her feet and said, 'If I could have come to school I wouldn't be here now, would I? And if he knew I was here now he'd come and lather me all the way back. Then God knows what I might do to him, because I hate him. I would likely end up in the House of Correction, for there's murder in me heart at times. Me mother feels the same an' all.'

'But it's dangerous for you to come this way in the dark at night, and not only that, your name . . . If it was found out you were visiting me so late . . . You understand?'

'Aye; yes, I understand. I'd be careful though. But you're afraid, aren't you? You're afraid, an' all; an' you're a respectable man.'

He had smiled at her and said, 'Not all that respectable,' which caused her to peer at him through the lantern light and say, 'Oh aye; you must be the school teacher with the drunken wife who caused an uproar in the village?'

It was some seconds before he answered, 'Yes. I am the school teacher with the drunken wife.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It was just the carter's prattle. I thought that man lived faraway in Gateshead Fell or thereabouts, because I had heard of you as a kindly young man.'

He had smiled wanly at her as he replied, 'News doesn't travel half as quickly in Africa as it does in this quarter of the land.'

'I won't trouble you any more,' she had said, 'cos you've got enough on your plate,' to which he had replied quickly and with a smile, 'Let's risk it. Twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays at about this time. But should there be anyone here I shall open the curtains and you'll see the lamp-wick up high.'

After going out of the door she turned to him and said, 'I'll never forget this night . . . '

Nathaniel turned his head now to gaze up into her warm, dark eyes and, as if reading her mind, he said, 'Did you ever forget that night? Because that's what you said to me: I'll never forget this night.'

'How could I, ever?'

'But it's a long time since we have spoken of it. We hardly spoke of it at all at first, you remember? because what followed was so painful.'

He dropped his head again onto her lap and looked towards the fire. The wood had mushed itself into a deep, dull, scarlet glow and in it he envisaged all that followed the night she first came to his door.

Within a month she could write her own name and copy and read aloud complete sentences. And during that month Nathaniel's wife had visited him again from her mother's house in South Shields, with the intention of staying by his side, as she had put it. But he had warned her that if she stayed then he would pack up and go, as he had done two years previously, except that this time he would leave no address. And she would have no support from him. That was the ultimatum, and she left, cursing him.

But that visit had brought him before the Board of School Managers in the Town Hall at Fellburn. They informed him that his wife had again disturbed the peace in the market place; that it was disgraceful and should another such incident happen he would be relieved of his post, because such unedifying goings-on were not to be tolerated when connected with a man in his position: a schoolmaster should be looked up to, not only by the children, but by the elders in the community, as a paragon of virtue and knowledge, a man in some ways on a level of respectability with a Minister of God. Did he understand?

He understood. And with this he had written a letter to his wife, which he knew would be read to her by the same penny letter-writer who composed her demanding scribes to himself. He told her of the situation, emphasising the fact that if she once again showed her face in the town or the nearby village, he would lose his position and consequently she would lose her support, because as he had already warned her, he would leave and she would never find him again.

But that day, when he walked out of the Town Hall, he knew he would already have lost his position if it hadn't been for Miss Netherton. Apparently the question of his conduct and dismissal had been put to a vote and it was only Miss Netherton's vote that had saved him.

Miss Netherton was a power, not only in Fellburn but also in the surrounding countryside. It was generally known that her people had owned quite a large area of the town. And even now, although she lived in Brindle House, which was no size in comparison to Ribshaw Manor, which had once been her home, she still owned a number of properties in the village as well as in Fellburn. Moreover, she was connected with big names in Newcastle, and further afield still.

He had been tutoring Maria for three months when one night their hands accidentally met, and they did not spring immediately apart, but only slowly did the fingers withdraw from each other, while their eyes clung in knowledgeable confrontation of what had been happening to each of them. Even so, no word was said.

Then December came, and something happened in that month that changed their lives. Tuesdays and Thursdays were the nights for instruction. But it was on a Friday night of this particular week that she visited him. He had been to a meeting with the Church Elders. He had wanted to put on a Christmas play in which all the children would take part. The Elders were willing to countenance this, but insisted that only hymns should be sung. It was almost ten o'clock when, frustrated and irritable, he entered the house and lit the lamp; but then there was a knock on the door, and when he opened it there she was standing shivering.

He had pulled her swiftly into the room, saying, 'You're like ice. What is the matter?'

'I . . . I had to see you. My . . . my mother wants your ad . . . advice,' she had stammered.

He had pushed her down into a chair, pulled the curtains, taken the bellows and blown up the fire. Then he had rushed into the other room and brought back the cover from the bed, and when he had put it round her, his arms remained there and, looking into her face, he said, 'How . . . how long have you been waiting?'

'An . . . an hour. It doesn't matter.'

'But why have you come?'

She had pressed him gently from her for a moment to put her hand inside her coat, and she brought out a stiff, yellowish-looking bag about nine inches long and four wide and, her voice trembling now with excitement, she said, 'We were cuttin' down wood, Mother an' me. There was a tree leaning over; the wind had got it. It wasn't all

that big, perhaps ten years' growth, big enough to make logs, you know, so we pulled on it and brought it down, and . . . and as I was chopping off the branches, me mother went to hack off the root. You see, it had left quite a hole where the roots had been dragged out, and as she bent over it she saw this bag sticking up at the bottom of the hole. And she pulled on it. She had to pull on it because the end seemed to be stuck; it's very sticky clay soil. Anyway, she called me and said, "Look!" And I said, "What is it? Open it." And for a moment she seemed frightened. You see it was tied at the top with a cord, but it's broken, as you see, because when she touched it it fell away; and the bag was stiff, brittle. Feel it.'

He felt it. Then her face brightened as she said, 'Guess what we found in it?' He shook his head and said teasingly, 'A fortune?' only for his surprise to be shown by his open mouth when she replied quickly, 'It could be. I don't know. But look!' and she had withdrawn from the bag a cross; not an ordinary cross in gold or silver or brass, but one studded with stones.

After gazing at it he had pulled the lamp further towards them and bowed his head over it. And then he had said, 'My God!'

'That's exactly what me mother said: my God! She says it may be worth something.'

'Worth something? Oh, yes; yes.'

Her hand now tightly clasping the bag, which seemed to crackle under her touch, she had then said, 'If he knew . . . Father, that's the last we would

see of it. So Mother said to bring it to you and ask what we should do.'

He had sat back in his chair and after a moment said, 'Well, this could be classed as treasure trove, you know, belonging to the Crown. A priest or monk must have buried this years and years ago, likely during the Reformation.'

'The what?'

'The Reformation. The breaking up of the monasteries. We must talk about that sometime. But this, I don't know. Once you let it out of your hands I think that's the last you'll see of it; I mean, of the money it might bring to the authorities. This has been known before. Or the ritual will pass through so many hands that your prize-money would be worth nothing when you got it, and it might take years.' Then after a pause he added, 'But then, there must be someone in the city who buys stuff like this. Look; will you leave it with me? I'll try and get advice. I think the best person to ask is Miss Netherton.'

'Oh, aye, yes, Miss Netherton, from Brindle House? They say she's a nice lady.'

'Well, she has helped me. But at first I won't say who you are, just that you have something you would like to sell on the quiet, and could she advise you. Will that do?'

'Oh, aye. Aye, I know you'll do your best. Oh!' She had put out her hands and touched his cheeks; then the next minute her arms were about him and his free arm was holding her, while his other was extended straight out, gripping the precious find. And thus they stood for some time before, slowly,

he laid the cross on the table and, pushing the rug from her, he then held her body close to his, and so tightly that they could scarcely breathe. When eventually he pressed her from him they looked into each other's eyes before their lips came together, and long and tenderly they remained so.

When it was over she leant against him as he muttered, 'Oh, my dear, dear, dear one.' And what she said was, 'I've loved you from the minute I clapped eyes on you. I knew it was only you for me. Even if your wife had not been what she is, it would have made no odds. I would have loved you in silence all me life. But now I'm yours an' you are mine for all time.'

And so it was . . .

He brought his gaze from the fire and again looking up into her face he said, 'There are fiends in this world, but thank God there are friends too. And if ever there was a friend, Miss Netherton has been one to us all these years.'

'How old is she now?'

'Oh, I should think in her early sixties, but she's still so brisk, and she has some spirit in that small frame of hers. She must have just been in her early forties when I first saw her as one of the School Managers. But I'll never forget the night I went to her with the cross . . . '

Again he turned and looked towards the fire. The embers were almost dead now, showing but pale grey and dull rose, yet in them he could see himself standing in the drawing-room of Brindle House. Ethel Mead had shown him in, and Miss

Netherton, on entering the room, had greeted him warmly: 'It's a bitter cold night. What brings you out in it? But first, before you tell me why you're here, would you like a drink? I can offer you port, whisky, brandy, or, on the other hand, a cup of tea or coffee.'

He had said, 'I would be pleased to have a cup of coffee, Miss Netherton. Thank you.'

He had watched her pull on a corded, tasselled rope to the side of the fireplace, and when Ethel Mead entered, she had said to her, 'A tray of coffee, Ethel, please'; then had said to him, 'Come and sit by the fire. But first let me have your coat.'

He had taken off his overcoat and she had laid it on the arm of an upholstered easy chair, then, sitting opposite him, she had said, 'I hope you're not in trouble again.'

'No; not this time, I can say, thanks be to God.' They had both laughed and her quick rejoinder had been, 'You must instruct Parson Mason on how to say that, because he irritates me every time I hear him drawling it out. Besides me, his Maker, too, must be tired of it.'

Again they had laughed together; and then she had waited for him to speak, but his first words caused her some surprise. 'Would you mind if I didn't tell you my business until after the coffee has been brought in?' he had said.

However, after a short pause she gave a little chuckle and said, 'Not at all. Not at all.'

Until the coffee arrived they had talked about the school and the Christmas concert and she had remarked, 'All that fuss about hymns. We get enough

of hymns on a Sunday, the adults twice and the children three times. We have a surfeit of hymns. But it was six to one this time, so I thought I'd better let them win, eh?'

Looking at her he had thought what a marvellous woman she was and had wondered why she hadn't married. Some man would surely have found life at least jolly married to a woman like her.

The coffee came and a cupful was drunk before he said, 'This is very private business I want to speak about because I think, in a way, it could be illegal.'

'My! My! My! Let's hear it then. It will be a change to deal with something really illegal and not all the little piffling things that come my way.'

'A friend of mine is in dire poverty; in fact, both she and her mother are in dire poverty and lead a life of hard work and restraint. They were pulling at a fallen tree prior to sawing it up when, underneath the roots, the mother found something that I'm sure you will think is very precious.' He now put his hand into his inner pocket and drew out the stiff leather bag, and, handing it to her, said, 'See what's inside.'

A minute later she was staring down at the cross on her palm and, strangely, she too called on God: in her case, it was: 'Dear God in heaven! How beautiful. How very, very beautiful.' Then lifting her eyes to his, she said, 'Where did you say she found it?'

'In the woodland attached to a farm. They own the farm, at least the husband does. Unfortunately,

the mother and daughter are treated like serfs.'

'Oh. Oh. I could put my finger on that farm. Is it Dagshaw's? Low Meadow Farm?'

After he had moved his head slightly in acknowledgement, she said, 'Oh, yes. Yes, he's an awful man, that one. I wonder how he came by such a distinguished name, because there are other Dagshaws, you know.'

'Yes. Yes, I know.'

'And so the mother found this? Well, it is a precious find.' But then, her head jerking, she asked, 'What do you want me to do?'

'I thought you might be able to advise them what should be done. If it is treasure trove it will go to the Crown, won't it?'

'Yes, I should think so; and then that's likely the last anybody will see of it.'

'I . . . I thought as much.'

'That is until it appears in some museum years hence, or more likely goes to a private collection. But if they were to get money for it, what would they do with it?'

'Escape, I think. I know the daughter will, and I should think the mother, too. The mother is originally from Cornwall. By what I can gather, her father was a Spaniard and there are relatives still living there.'

'But what will the daughter do?'

It was a long moment before he answered, 'She will come to me. We have discovered that we love each other.'

The small body in the chair seemed to stretch and bristle slightly. 'But you are a married man, and

your wife is . . . well, you know what your wife is. Will she allow this to go unheeded?'

'All she cares about, ma'am, is that she gets enough money for her drink. But even my stipend from the school hardly supplies that. Yet it keeps her at bay.'

'You mean you intend to work all your days to keep your wife at bay?'

'Yes; if need be. I had two years of literal hell living with her; I could stand no more. I had done everything in my power to help her. When we married, I did not know that she was addicted to drink. She and her mother were very clever in that way. I lodged with them for a time, you see.'

'Oh. Oh, that is often the way: lodgers should be warned against all landladies and their daughters. I've heard of this before. Anyway, do you know what will happen to you if you go ahead and take this girl into your house, because she is a young girl, isn't she?'

'Yes. But the thing is I won't have a house in which to place her; so, if she wishes to stay with me, we will likely have to take to the road until I find other kind of work.'

'Oh.' She got to her feet, really bristling now. 'Don't let me hear you talk such nonsense! You with your brain and capacity for teaching. And let me tell you, you shouldn't be teaching in that little school such as you're doing, you should be in the university taking a higher course. I have listened to you. Oh yes, when you haven't noticed, and I have seen your method of teaching. You're worth something more than a village school; and supposedly

being the power behind that school, I shouldn't be saying this, but your pupils . . . what are they? what intelligence? Will any of them get anywhere? They will be able to write their names and recite the alphabet, perhaps read a little and chant Jack and Jill. But then, you don't just Jack and Jill them, do you? you drop in bits of Shakespeare and Pope. I must tell you something funny in the midst of all this seriousness. When I said to the chairman of the Board that you were a clever young man and you spoke of Pope, he got straight on his feet and cried, "That's it! We'll have no popery here." And I couldn't stop my tongue from yelling at him, "Don't show your ignorance, Mr Swindle. Pope is a great writer; Alexander Pope not Pope Alexander." God help us! Some of those men on the Board should be put to the bottom of your class. But now, back to this gem.'

As her fingers stroked the stem of the cross she whispered, 'Rubies, sapphires, diamonds. Oh my! There's a great fortune here. But who is there who might pay its worth? Take this to a jeweller, one of the less distinguished in Newcastle, and what will he offer you for it? A hundred pounds, two hundred at the most, and then sell it for thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands. I don't think you could put a price on a thing like this. Anyway, if they give it up, it will definitely go to the Crown. Oh, and I couldn't bear that. I wish I was a very rich woman.'

When his eyebrows were raised she said, 'You're surprised that I'm not. In comparison with some, yes, but in comparison with others, no. One time

when my family owned the manor and houses all around and had their fingers in all kinds of pies, yes; but that was when I was very young. I had a father who delighted in travelling in grand style and gambled in every city in which he stopped, and left the affairs of his estates and works to others. Is it surprising that he should come home, together with my lady mother, and find that he had been rooked right, left, and centre? And that those he had left in power and had authority to sell to advantage, had sold to his disadvantage and feathered their own nests? But still, even when the manor had to go and all the works, this house, this ten-room small establishment, remained, together with Fox's farm and a number of houses in the village and a few of more value in the main thoroughfares of Fellburn and Newcastle. I live by my rents; so, of course, I am rich compared with many people. But' – her voice sank – 'I am not rich enough to buy this. How I wish I were. Look; could you leave this in my care until tomorrow? I can promise you I won't sell it on the quiet.' She laughed, an almost girlish laugh, then said, 'There's a plan forming in my mind, but I need to work it out and make sure it is the right one for those two women; and for you, because if you intend to take this girl to yourself you will need money, whether it is yours or theirs. Will you do that?'

'Yes, Miss Netherton.'

They had shaken hands like old friends.

Maria didn't come to the schoolhouse that night, and so he was to see Miss Netherton again before he could tell her his news. And what Miss Netherton

suggested the following day was, she would, in a way, buy the cross from them over a period of time. If she were to take a large sum out of the bank her agent who saw to the estate would wonder why; but it would be quite in order, owing to her generous nature, to pass over Heap Hollow Cottage and an acre and a half of land, the transaction to be duly signed as a deed of gift. Also, she would be able to afford the sum of two pounds a week out of her private income, which could be divided equally between mother and daughter. And an immediate payment of twenty pounds in cash to the mother would enable her to travel to her people in Cornwall. This arrangement was to last until the whole had totalled five hundred pounds, which would cover practically five years ahead. Of course, it would be a personal arrangement and they would have to trust her; although she would put the transaction in writing herself, as it would be unwise, because of possible enquiries as to why her generosity was stretching over this period, to do it legally.

Did he think Mrs Dagshaw and her daughter would agree?

Would they agree?

When, that night, he told Maria of the arrangement she burst into tears and her sobbing became almost hysterical. What he did not tell her was what Miss Netherton had said concerning their association: Did he realise, she had said, what the reaction of people in the village and round about would be towards them should they decide to take up their

abode in the cottage? Would it not save a lot of trouble if he remained at his post as a teacher and the girl lived in the cottage and cultivated the land? They could still see each other. But the way he was suggesting would bring a great deal of trouble on their heads. And to this he had replied that, be that as it may, he was determined that they should come together, and for the rest of his life he would look upon her as his true wife.

It was Maria herself who said, 'What will they do to us should we go there and live together?' And he had answered, 'Well, we'll find out, won't we?'

And they were to find out . . .

He got to his feet now and, taking her hands, he pulled her up towards him, saying, 'Come to bed. You've got a lot of cooking to do tomorrow for the big tea and I've got that patch to turn over to get the frost at it. And then I've the two Fowler boys from Fellburn in the morning. They're both as thick as deep fog, but nice all the same. But they'll have to work some, and so will I if they want to get into that fancy school. Yet, why worry? Their father will buy them in if their brains won't. But it's that pit lad, Bobby Crane, I'm interested in. I hope he can cut across without being noticed after coming up from his shift tomorrow.'

'It's risky for the boy, don't you think?'

'Yes, but he wants to carry on, and that's the main thing. He's got a lot in his napper, that boy, and he wants to get out of the pit; but God help him! He'll be out soon enough if they know he's learning to read and write. Still, who's to give him

away except his own lot; and there are those among them that will do just that, because they're as bad as Praggett and the owners. They think that once a man can read and write he'll never go down a shaft again; and that's true in a way, for who but a maniac would go down there if he didn't have to eat and feed his family? Here!' He handed her a spill. 'See if you can get a spark from the ashes and light the candle, and I'll lock up and put the lamp out.'

Together they walked down the deep shadows of the room to the far end where the ladder went up to the trap door and where, to the side of it, was the door of the girls' room, and opposite the one that led into their bedroom.

Within ten minutes of entering the room they were lying in bed, side by side, their hands joined as usual; and now he said to her, 'Go to sleep. I can tell when you're thinking. There's been enough thinking for one night. Good-night, my love.' He turned slightly on his side and kissed her, and again he said, 'Go to sleep.' And she answered, 'Yes, I'm almost there.'

But she was far from sleep, for she knew that he had been thinking of the past, as she had been, and, her eyes wide now, she stared into the blackness and she was back to the day when she first saw this house. And she looked upon it now as a house and no longer a cottage, because it was twice the size it had been on that day.

She could see the grass where it grew up to the window sills of the long, low, one-storeyed building, and when they had pushed the door open the smell of staleness and damp had assailed them.

But she could hear Nat's voice, as he looked up to the roof, saying, 'That's firm enough. There's not a slate missing. And look at the size of the room; it must be fifteen feet long. And this other one.' He had hurried from her and through a door, then had shouted, 'This is the same length, almost.' He had then climbed the ladder, and she had heard him stumbling along overhead, and he had called to her, 'It's quite clear and there's piles of space.'

Down the ladder again, he had taken her hand and run her through the rooms to one of two doors at the far end. The first one led into a scullery-cum-kitchen, about seven feet square. Then they were out through the other door into the yard. And there, as if stuck onto the end of the house, were two byres, and beyond them a stable; and across a grass-strewn, stone-cobble yard was a coalhouse and a privy. But what was much more noticeable was the large barn. It was an old erection, and although the roof was gaping in many places the timbers were sound.

She could hear him saying, 'It's wonderful, wonderful.' And she had thought so too, but she was speechless with the promise of joy to come. But what she did say to him when they returned to the house was, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if this could be one big room. Could you break the wall down?'

'Why not, my love?' he had said. 'Why not? We'll take the wall down and we'll make a fine kitchen of that scullery. And as for that fireplace–' he had pointed. 'Out will come that small grate and we'll have an open fire, a big open fire.'

'But where will I cook?' she had said.

'You'll have a fancy oven, my love,' he had answered. 'There's a showroom in a foundry in Gateshead Fell; I've seen it many times. We'll choose a stove with an oven and a hob and a flue leading upwards, connecting with this main chimney. Oh, we'll do wonders here, my love.' And they had kissed and he had waltzed her round the uneven floor.

When at last they were outside again he said, 'Miss Netherton tells me this used to be a splendid vegetable garden; and it'll be so again. And we'll have a cow.'

'I'd rather have goats,' was her immediate reaction.

'Then we'll have goats, dear.'

How wonderful that day had been; but how they'd had to pay for it; how terrifyingly they'd had to pay for it.

Three days later, her mother had left the farm, leaving a letter for her husband, a letter penned by Nathaniel; and the irony of it was that Mr Dagshaw had rushed to the schoolmaster's house in a rage and asked him to read it. And it was with pleasure that Nathaniel had read his own writing:

> 'I am leaving you and going back to my people. I have known nothing but cruelty from you all my married life. I've had our child; she too is leaving you. It is no use you coming after me and trying to force me back for my people will protect me. If you remember, they never liked you. It was by chance that we met, a sorry day for me, when I visited my late cousin in Gateshead Fell. But now it is over and you will have to pay for slaves in the

future. I do not sign myself as your wife because I have been nothing but a servant to you. I sign myself Mary Clark, as I once was.'

Nathaniel had said that the man had looked thunderstruck for a moment, and then had said, 'D'you want payin' for readin' that?' And Nathaniel had answered, 'I do not charge for reading letters, and that one has given me the greatest pleasure to convey.' Her father, she understood, had screwed up his face and peered at Nathaniel as if he were puzzled by the answer. And it was a full two weeks before the puzzle was solved for him, and then only when he went into the market, where some toady commiserated with him about his daughter disgracing herself and going to live with the schoolmaster in Heap Hollow Cottage. And didn't he know the village was up in arms and the schoolmaster had been dismissed and the vicar had practically put a curse on them both?

Perhaps it was fortunate that the day her father confronted her, in such a rage as to bring his spittle running down his chin and his hands clawing the air as he screamed at her, was the day the second-hand dealer from Fellburn had brought his flat cart full of oddments of furniture, including a bedstead, a chest of drawers, a wooden table, two chairs, and a large clippie mat, besides kitchen utensils, and when he saw the red-faced farmer raise his hand to the nice young lass who had sat up on the front of the cart with him and had chatted all the way from the town, he had thrust himself between them, saying, 'Look! mister. If you don't want to find yourself on

your back, keep your hands down, and your voice an' all.' And her father had yelled at him, 'She's my daughter and she's turned into a whore,' to which the man retorted, 'Well, if that's the case you won't want anything to do with her, will you? So be off! for I'll be stayin' till her man gets back from Fellburn where, she tells me, he's on business.'

At this her father had yelled, 'He's not her man, he's a schoolmaster who's been thrown out of his job. He's a waster, a married man.'

'Well, if that's the case, to my mind he's a nice waster, from what I saw of him yesterday. So will I have to tell you just once more to get goin'!'

At this her father had thrust his head out towards her as he growled, 'I'll see you crawling in the gutter. D'you hear? And I'll have the village about your ears. They won't put up with the likes of you; they'll stone you out. And you're no longer akin to me, nor is the one that bore you. Not a penny of mine will ever come your way. And you'll rot, d'you hear? You'll rot inside. You filthy hussy, you!'

And at this she had cried back at him, 'Well, as a filthy hussy I've worked for you since I could toddle, never less than fourteen hours a day and not a penny piece for it. An' the clothes on my back, an' my mother's, were droppin' off afore we could get a new rag. An' then they weren't new, were they? if you could manage to pick up something from the market stall. Even the food was begrudged us; we only got what you couldn't sell. Well, now you've got your money in the locked box in the attic, I hope it's a comfort to you, because you'll never have any other.'

She felt sure he was going to have a fit. And when she saw him turn his cold, glaring eyes on the man, she knew what was in his mind: she had told a stranger about the locked box in the attic. He would go back now to the house and move it, perhaps bury it, like the cross had been buried. At the thought of the cross she laughed inside. If he'd had even an inkling of what they had found, he would have gone mad, really mad.

She had watched him walk away like someone drunk; but after he disappeared round the foot of the hill that bordered the hollow to the right of the cottage, her knees began to tremble so much that she felt she would fall to the ground. It was only the dealer's kindly tone that steadied her when he said, 'Well, if I had to choose atween him and the devil for me father, I know which side I'd jump to. Now don't take on, lass. Get yourself inside and if there's any way of making a hot drink, be it mead with the poker in it, or tea, or a small glass of beer or what have you, I'll be thankful for it, for like yourself I'm froze to the bone. And in the meanwhile, I'll get this stuff unloaded; then we can put it where you want it.'

She had blown up the small fire in the grate, then had put a pan of water on and made some tea.

An hour later, after the dealer had gone, she pushed the bolt in the door and sat crouched shivering near the fire, waiting for Nathaniel's return. And when he came she had flung herself into his arms and cried while she related her father's

visit and his last words to her. And what Nathaniel said in reply was, 'Well, it's what we expected and we've got to weather it . . .'

The onslaught began a week later when the barn was set on fire. She could see herself even now springing up in bed to see the room glimmering in a rose glow and to hear the crackling sound of wood burning. They had rushed out and made straight for the well but had stopped when, with both hands on the bucket, Nathaniel had said, 'It would take a river to put that out. A bucket is no use.' But she had cried at him, 'The sparks! They're catching here and there in the grass: if they spread, they'll get to the cottage.'

The rate at which they were able to bring up water from the well would have been of little use had it not been that the grass was still wet from rain earlier in the day.

In the flickering light they saw shapes seeming to emerge from the shadows and a voice came through the night so high and loud that, for the moment, it shut out the crackling of the burning barn as it cried, 'It'll be your house next, the whore house.' And so, maddened, Nathaniel had been about to rush in the direction from which he thought the voice had come when voices from different areas began to hoot and yell.

The following day Miss Netherton, after looking sadly on the burnt-out frame, said, 'Well, I expected something like this. But it's got to be put a stop to in some way else your lives could be threatened.' And Maria remembered thinking, They're already threatened.