



Jabez looked black as thunder. . . . "Who's he, to go on as if he were measter?" he muttered.

"COME, LIVE WITH ME, AND BE MY LOVE."

AN ENGLISH PASTORAL.

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CHAPTER I.

IN THE HAYFIELD.

There grew two roses in the light—
Hey the wind and the weather!
And one was red, and one was white,
And they shone in the sun together!—*Old Song.*

"TCHIK! That went down rarely! Thy turn next, Amandy!"

"Cannikin's empty!"

"Then take a buss instead!"

She held up her mouth to his, and a loud "smack" followed. Then, cushioned softly on the sweet-smelling hay, Jabez Doyle lay back and closed his eyes.

"Now, I'll ha' a snooze," he said.

"Wake up, ye dumbledore!" she cried, shaking him.

"I'm dreaming o' thee, Amandy!"

"Dreaming o' rubbish!"

"Oh, how I love 'ee! Say, you—when is it to be?"

"What?"

"As if ye don't know! Me and you and passon" (nudging her with his elbow, but still lying with his eyes shut).

"Eh?"

"I'm goin back to my work," said Amandy, rising.

"No you bean't!" answered Jabez, springing up and throwing the loose hay over her while she puffed and gasped for breath.

"Haw! haw! haw!"

"Ye great vule! I'm choking!" she cried, administering a box on the ear strong enough to fell an ox.

It was the noontide siesta. Jabez Doyle, labourer, and Amanda Jane Thistlewaite, farm-servant, had stolen away to

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the corner of the five-acre field, to eat their bread and cheese and empty their cannikins of thin ale. Both were tanned red with the sun—Jabez the lean, with his powerful bony frame and perpetual grin; Amanda the stout, built in the ample mould of the Amazon, but sleepy-eyed and good-tempered as one of her own cows. Jabez was in his shirt-sleeves, without coat or waistcoat, and with an old billycock perched on his shaggy brown hair; Amanda wore a white cotton gown with blue flowers worked upon it, and swung her great sun-bonnet in her hand. An ash-tree spread its shade above and around them, and the brook or rivulet which fringed the field ran clear and shallow at their feet.

All round, the perfumed fields and meadows swimming in the mists of summer heat. Warm stillness everywhere, as if the heart of Nature had almost ceased to beat. Far off, at the farther side of the five-acre, a half-laden wain, with men and women sheltering in its shade.

"Gie me thy hand, Amandy. I want to measure thy finger."

"Shannot"; then, after hesitating, "what for?"

"Why, for ring, surely! If you'll ha' me, and I'll ha' you, no knife can cut our love in two."

"Let be. I'll tell Sam Wood!"

"And I'll punch Sam's head!"

"You? He could lick 'ee with one hand."

But she grinned, and let her fat finger rest in her lover's horny palm. Suddenly she started, and drew it away. A white gate opened twenty yards off, and a man on horseback entered the field.

A firm-set, grave-faced man, dressed in a dark tweed suit, with leathern gaiters and a low-crowned felt hat.

"Measter Geoffrey!" whispered Amandy, while Jabez wiped his brow with the back of his hand and looked sulky.

Up came the rider, sitting loosely in the saddle, and scarcely guiding the round, well-fed, thick-set horse that bore him. His firm-set head, seen more closely, showed just a touch of grey behind the ears; his brown eyes, though thoughtful, were deep-set and keen. He was only thirty years of age, but he would have passed for thirty-five, or even more, so grave and even stern was his expression.

"Wasting time as usual, Jabez Doyle!" he said as he passed, "and still philandering with Amandy. Get back to work!—the day's half done."

Jabez looked black as thunder, and made a mocking grimace behind the rider's back.

"Who's he, to go on as if he were measter?" he muttered.

"Nice cock o' the walk, him!" said Amandy, putting on her bonnet and striding out into the sun.

Right across the field rode Geoffrey Doone the overseer, and the groups in the distance rose and became active as they saw him coming. Part of the field was yet to be mowed, though the grass of the greater part was already cut and drying in the midsummer heat. Presently the whole field was busy again, the mowers at work in the long grass, the others busy tossing the hay or piling it into cocks. Geoffrey reined in his horse in the centre of the field, and looked round.

It was high ground, and he could see the fields and meadows for miles and miles, the green hedges, the dark clumps of woodland, and beyond, the sunny slopes of the high downs. Right above the field, a mile away, was the farm-house—an old straggling house, with many outbuildings, a garden, and an apple orchard. How still and peaceful all looked! How warm and glowing! He knew every landmark, every tree and stone, in the old farm: for had he not lived there, man and boy, for twenty years? had he not witnessed twenty hay-makings and twenty harvests in that very place? His thoughts travelled back to the time when he came to the farm, a friendless boy, and was welcomed and sheltered by the old farmer, now long since dead. And now, when Miss Catherine ruled in her father's stead, he was her right-hand man and overseer. Scarcely ever had he taken holiday, or wandered away for more than a day at a time, and then only to the county town on market or other business. He had grown, like a firm-rooted oak, in that soil, and had few wishes or dreams beyond it. His heart welled up in gratitude for favours past, for kindnesses received; for had he not had "schooling," and been treated by his first benefactor almost like a son?

As he passed close to the wain, making for another gate at that side of the field, he caught sight of two figures standing in the shadow—a woman and a man, neither of the species "clothopper," like Jabez and Amandy.

The man was young, handsome, and somewhat delicate of feature, and his dress betokened some superior station in country life. The woman was about eight-and-twenty, tall, and firmly built, brown with the sun, dark haired and dark eyed, and though her gown was only of common cotton, and she wore the great white sun-hat of the place and period, her manner bespoke a certain authority.