

herself and her father alike, meant even more perhaps to Mary than to the old man, though every clod on Whitelands farm was as near to him as his own flesh and blood. For the threatened disaster meant to Mary a parting not only from Whitelands, but from her sweetheart as well.

The two were standing next morning among the sunlit autumn beeches, where a great stretch of woodland ended sheer like a wall on the lip of the down above the narrow valley, which held the farm and overlooked the far levels of the vale toward Barndon all wrapped in a faint October haze. Three years ago Tom Haygarth had come as keeper to the cottage that lay far in the wood among its pheasant coops and kennels, and long before now he had earned a right to share in all the anxieties that were thickening around the daughter of Whitelands farm. Often at these meetings all the trouble was forgotten, but on this beautiful autumn morning the black retriever, who was Tom's regular companion, very soon became aware that things were going wrong again with his master and mistress, and that the occasion called for the profoundest melancholy of demeanor.

'Well, lass,' said Tom Haygarth, 'since Mr. Longcroft would have nowt to say to 'un, what's there to worry about? 'Twould be a sight different if he'd closed wi' 'un, seems to me.'

'Ah! but Tom, father do feel it so dreadful that anyone should think of it at all, that's where it is. He hasn't never said nothing of it right from the beginning, but I do know just how it takes him. And I be so afeared as it'll be only a little while more afore we can't help ourselves at all, and be forced to go. And then I mayn't never see thee again.'

'Ah, won't thee, lass,' said Tom. 'I've shifted my billet more than once for a sight less reason than that, and I count I can do it again. Don't thou fear for that.'

'I didn't, Tom, not really,' said Mary, smiling a moment through her tears, so that the old retriever wagged his tail in encouraging appreciation. 'But I be so miserable for father, for I know 'twould nigh kill he. I think sometimes he be half heart broke always because of Philip, you know.'

'Aye, aye,' nodded Tom, gravely. 'I know.' For the story of how John Longcroft years ago had driven from home his only son, a boy of sixteen, and had never set eyes on him again, had passed into the most popular legendary tragedy of the countryside.

'That were all because he were so set on Whitelands, too, you see, Tom. He thought there were no such place anywhere, just like he do now, and when Philip took to fretting and asked to be let go and see more of the world it angered him. And Philip were hasty like he, so father told him to go and see it, and never set foot on Whitelands no more, since he thought so little of it. Mother do often talk about it and fall to crying; but father feels it most, I be sure, though you might think he'd forgotten clean all about it ever since I were born, and longer.'

The old retriever turned sad eyes of mystification from one downcast face to the other. Mary stroked his glossy head, and brushed the falling beech leaves from his thick black coat. A pheasant called suddenly beside them in the cover, and a grey flight of wood pigeons came swerving over the long line of the down, where the sunshine bathed the slopes of the nine great tumuli in its mellow light.

'Well, lass,' said Tom Haygarth, at last, 'I reckon 'twill all come right, if we put a stiff face on it. But if so be as we be forced to shift, then why shouldn't us all go up to the north, where I do come from? 'Tis a main different country from all this here, and I reckon Mr. Longcroft mightn't feel so much of the change where folks hadn't known him all along. However, we needn't think of that for a long time yet, my lass. Keep thy heart up, and I'll swear there's good luck on the road for us.'

So Mary went back to Whitelands, and played her part bravely in house and poultry yard, while John Longcroft bent his back week by week on the plough lands with a dogged energy that put his laborers to shame. But the lean years still continued. When the autumn rains should have fallen to replenish the deep chalk springs the golden weather still held unbroken, turning day by day the crests of the great elms ranged beside the farm to deeper tones of orange and amber fire. Then, soon after New Year's, came weeks of fierce fleet laden north-easters, so that the lambing season, which means so much to the downlands farmers, was one of the most disastrous for years past. The losses in the lambing fold, that not all the care of the old man and his shepherd could prevent, just about destroyed John Longcroft's last chance of weathering the storm. He held on through the spring and summer, and saw the bare hillsides

where the young corn was shooting bleach away from the emerald of the sprouting blades and the roar of rain-washed chalky loam, to a parched calcareous whiteness that threatened drought to come. And when harvest came at last, and old John Longcroft worked himself like ten men in place of the laborers whom he could scarcely have paid even if he could have found them, he turned dizzy one day in the waggon, and was carried in to Mary and her frightened mother with a broken arm.

So it came to pass that, although the old man never gave word or sign, he showed no anger or surprise when one September day soon after he was feebly on his legs again the straggling reddish whiskers of Daniel Pigg appeared once more at Whitelands gate on a hint conveyed him from poor Mary during a visit of Tom Haygarth's to Barndon. Although Daniel had been privately primed by Mary with encouraging assurances before he made his public entry up the farm roadway, he approached the old man and his subject with considerable misgiving. His anxiety, unfortunately, found outward expression in such vigorous flappings of his red handkerchief and nervous scrapings and shufflings of the shoulders as gave him an appearance bordering on the demented, and the interview began by his old friend Mr. Longcroft sharply inquiring of Daniel if he thought his house were built as an asylum for the afflicted. This was hardly an encouraging start, and it was, after all, the old man who came to the point first.

'Daniel,' he said, 'is there e'er a one as be asking after Whitelands these times, I wonder? I mind you, speakin' of some one as came to you about it a twelvemonth ago.'

'Oh, ah,' said Daniel, with elaborate indifference. 'I've had inquiries. But o' course, I told 'em how you said as you'd never think o' sellin' it.'

The silence of the autumn sunshine closed round them, while Daniel Pigg affected an absorbing interest in the desultory progress of a black sow up the rickyard.

'Daniel,' said John Longcroft, in a level voice. 'I've changed my mind. I be goin' to part with Whitelands. So, thinkin' as you might care for the job of arrangin' the sale like, I reckoned I'd speak about it to you.'

Despite his efforts, Daniel Pigg looked quickly around at him, but the old man's face repelled his glance and forbade the slightest expression of surprise.

'Aye, Mr. Longcroft,' he said, in a tone he tried to bring to ordinary office pitch; 'I've had inquiries from a likely client—in fact, two likely clients.' The phrase gave him confidence, and he checked himself with a jerk in the act of pulling out the fatal handkerchief. 'First and foremost, there be the gentleman as I told 'ee—that's to say, as applied to me a twelvemonth ago. And there was another just last week. Now, you'd naturally like to receive information as to the natur' of their offers, in which circumstances—'

'Now, stop there, Daniel,' said John Longcroft. 'If one or t'other of these here clients o' your'n were to get the place, what do they want it for? D'you know aught o' that?'

'Aye, aye,' said Daniel, communicatively; 'the first gentleman as inquired be anxious to find a nice bit o' property to turn into a country residence for himself and family—something pretty fairish, I tell 'ee, with a god bit o' park to it and all. And, Lor' there, where could us find a sweeter spot for a seat like than Whitelands, as I always said were the sweetest spot in forty miles of country. Pull down the farm here, build a noo mansion up there, just under the barrows—'

He saw the old man's eye strike fire, and realised that this enthusiasm for the development of the property had better have been suppressed.

'Aye, aye,' he went on, 'that's all as might be. But as for the other 'un as applied, he didn't say much, but he didn't seem to think of no improve-alterations like, not to speak of.'

Once more the handkerchief twitched half way out of the pocket, and was rammed home again. The old man gazed steadily at the far side of the valley, where the black junipers dotted the hill. The chances of the future were burning into his heart.

'I'd sooner sell to the second 'un,' he said, at last. 'We can't foresee what'll happen to the place in years to come, but so long as I do live I'll never do aught toward bringin' in one as means to destroy it. But I count I ain't good for much longer, and that's why it don't make much odds, for I ain't got no son to hold it after me: Longcrofts be done for, Daniel. They be done for at last.'

So before Daniel Pigg went away it was arranged that he should enter into communication with the second of the two applicants who aimed at founding a dynasty of usurers at Whitelands farm. The property agent secretly felt a twinge of dis-