

according to the almanac. Still it was spring, beautiful spring! and as we drew near to the old beech-wood called Barkham Dingle, we felt in its perfection all the charms of the scene and the hour.

Although the country immediately round was unenclosed, as had been fully proved by the last half mile of undulating common, interspersed by old shaggy trees and patches, (islets, as it were) of tangled underwood, as well as by a few rough ponies and small cows belonging to the country people; yet the lanes leading to it had been intersected by frequent gates, from the last of which a pretty, little, rosy, smiling girl, to whom I had tossed a penny for opening it, had sprung across the common like a fawn, to be ready with her services at that leading into the Dingle, down which a rude cart-track, seldom used unless for the conveyance of faggots or brushwood, led by a picturesque but by no means easy descent.

Leaving chaise, and steed, and driver, to wait our return at the gate, Dash and I pursued our way by a winding yet still precipitous path to the bottom of the dell. Nothing could be more beautiful than the scene. On every side, steep shelving banks, clothed with magnificent oaks and beeches, the growth of centuries, descended gradually, like some vast amphitheatre, to a clear, deep piece of water, lying like a mirror in the midst of the dark woods, and letting light and sunshine into the picture. The leaves of the beech were just bursting into a tender green from their shining sheaths, and the oaks bore still the rich brown, which of their unnumbered tints is perhaps the loveliest; but every here and there a scattered horse-chestnut, or plane, or sycamore, had assumed its summer verdure: the weeping birch, "the lady of the woods," was breaking from the bud, the holly glittering in its unvarying glossiness, the hawthorn and the briar-rose in full leaf, and the ivy and woodbine twisting their bright wreaths over the rugged trunks of the gigantic forest-trees; so that green formed even now the prevailing color of the wood. The ground, indeed, was enamelled with flowers like a parterre. Primroses, cowslips, pansies, orchises, ground-ivy, and wild hyacinths, were blended in gorgeous profusion with the

bright wood-vetch, the light wood-anemone, and the delicate wood-sorrel,\* which sprang from the mossy roots of the beeches, unrivalled in grace and beauty, more elegant even than the lilly of the valley that grew by its side. Nothing could exceed the delightfulness of that winding wood-walk.

I soon came in sight of the place of my destination, a low-browed, thatched cottage, perched like a wild-duck's nest at the very edge of the pool, and surrounded by a little garden redeemed from the forest—a small *clearing*, where cultivated flowers, the beds of berry-bushes, and pear and cherry trees, in full blossom, contrasted strangely yet pleasantly with the wild scenery around.

The cottage was very small, yet it had the air of snugness and comfort which one loves to associate with the dwellings of the industrious peasantry. A goodly faggot-pile, a donkey-shed, and a pigsty, evidently inhabited, confirmed this impression; and geese and ducks swimming in the water, and chickens straying about the door, added to the cheerfulness of the picture.

As I approached, I recognized an old acquaintance in a young girl, who, with a straw basket in her hand, was engaged in feeding the cocks and hens—no less than pretty Bessy the young market-woman, of whom I have before spoken, celebrated for rearing the earliest ducks and the fattest and whitest chickens ever seen in these parts. Any Wednesday or Saturday morning, during the spring or summer months, might Bessy be seen on the road to Belford, tripping along by the side of her little cart, hardly larger than a wheelbarrow, drawn by a sedate and venerable donkey, and laden with coops full of cackling or babbling inmates, together with baskets of fresh eggs—for Bessy's commodities were as much prized at the breakfast as at the dinner table. She meant, I have said, to keep the market; but, somehow or other, she seldom reached it; the quality of her merchandize being held in such estimation by the families around, that her coops and baskets were generally emptied before they gained their place of destination.

\* There is a pink variety of this beautiful wild flower but the pencilled white is the most elegant.