

have seemed easy; but as when a flower comes out in the forest, the bees appear where none were to be seen before, so if there is a pretty girl, those ne'er-do-weels young men will find her out; and poor Russell was sadly put about.

His nearest neighbour was an old woodcutter, a widower, whose children had all left him except the youngest, Maurice. He was a tall, well-grown stripling, about one-and-twenty, with a pleasant face, not in the least handsome; with a keen eye for a stag, and the fleetest runner in the parish. He was supposed to help his father in the wood, and if they both combined less lawful callings with their nominal one, No Man's Land did not think the worse of them. Old Lizzie Russell had been very fond of the striving woman who had died of hard work, and Maurice and Rachel had known each other from babies; many were the wood-pigeons' eggs, the feathers of wood-pecker and jay, that were among her treasures in those old days. And now, if he met her coming home with a bundle from the shop, four miles off, there was no harm in his carrying it for her, or in his helping with a yoke of water from the little well at the bottom of the steep orchard; for he had been scarcely allowed to come within the house since the old woman's death. Everything looked fair for the pair; he had never spoken a word of love to her, however, they were still on their old friendly footing, and old Silas, who did not like the prospect of losing his grandchild, could not have objected in the long run, when—there was a sudden change in the Government, the Ministry resigned, and a number of great people went in and out, with whom Maurice and Rachel did not seem at first sight to have much to do. But among a number of changes and cries for reform, there had been an outcry about the malversations of the Forest. The old ranger was dead, and the new Ministry appointed a fresh one, who began his reign as is the fashion of new brooms. The keeper of that part of the district was a very worthy old butler belonging to the last dynasty, who never stirred out after eight o'clock, and knew as much about wood-craft as a cobbler. He and his old wife lived about a mile and a half further in the wood, at a lodge in a most beautiful situation on a hill overlooking the country for miles round. Here Rachel was in the habit of coming as a child to Mrs. Strange, who was very fond of her mother. There were a multitude of creatures there in which she delighted: sometimes a fawn which had lost its dam and was kept to be fed, or a family of the little brown wild pigs, or a litter of pointer pups; even the stately bloodhound was not insensible to her blandishments, and would lie with his tawny muzzle and magnificent ears on her knee as she sat with a puppy in her lap embracing a fluffy chicken. Still his red eye was only at rest, not tamed; and there were few people whom Bran allowed to take liberties with him, but the helplessness and fearlessness of a little girl is very attractive to both man and beast.

On this pleasant place of much play and little work came the terrible shadow of reform. But abuses were long-lived in those days, and after much talk of stricter management, in a little while matters subsided, and the anticlimax of the magnificent plans of improvement was that the under-keeper was desired to take an assistant.

He was not long in appearing—one Ralph Leverton, the son of a small farmer a few miles off, shrewdly suspected of having the best possible chance of circumventing the poachers by being well practised in all their ways. He was a very good-looking fellow, tall and straight, with curling black hair, and keen eyes; and in his black velvet coat, and long gaiters, looked the very ideal of a young gamekeeper.

He was known to most in the village, but he graduated as it were, on the first Sunday after his appointment, when the congregation were much disturbed by discussing him outside in the church porch, and watching within how he joined in the hymns.

After church he seemed to think that so great a man might pick his company; and as Rachel was decidedly the prettiest girl there, he joined the old clerk at the first stile, ostensibly to inquire about a deer's run near the house, and

walked home with them, Rachel keeping shyly by her grandfather with her prayer-book wrapped in a red pocket-handkerchief. The old man, however, did not ask him in when they reached the cottage, and rather fought shy of his new acquaintance.

After that, however, Ralph was constantly in and out; sometimes 'would Master Russell give him a cup of mead,' or lend him a hammer, or he brought a bit of newspaper, only three weeks old, containing some wonderful battle or murder for the erudite clerk.

Rachel did not much like him; but she was very young and innocent; she never looked forwards, he rather amused her; he had seen the great world, had been even as far as 'Hampton,' and she thought it very good-natured of him to look in on them.

Maurice had been away, selling wood for his father, who was laid up with the rheumatics, and the few times he had been near the clerk's house, he had not 'chanced' on Leverton; but one day when he came to the well at the time Rachel generally fetched her water, he saw Ralph saunter slowly out of the house, with his hands in his pockets like an *habitué*, and go whistling up the hill. Poor Maurice was dumb-founded; his holy place, where he was scarcely allowed to enter, to be profaned by such a man; for Leverton's character was not particularly good; and moreover, he regarded the expocher with something of the feelings of a soldier towards a deserter. That evening Rachel did not come to the well; probably Ralph had carried her water for her, and Maurice went home in a towering rage.

He did not manage to see her for the next few days, while he was nursing his wrath to keep it warm. At last one evening she was tripping across the forest, the nearest way home; there was no path, only the aimless tracks of the cows in and out of the holly and thorn thickets, and round the great beech and oak.

Presently she heard a nearer rustle, and turning, found Maurice at her side; she gave him such a bright look, her face beamed with such genuine pleasure, that his wrath subsided at once.

'Why, Maurice, where ha' ye been this age, like?' 'Out o' sight, out o' mind,' said he, sadly; 'you've had other things to mind nor mindin' o' me, Rachel.' She looked up surprised, and then blushed deeply at the expression in Maurice's face. 'He's abeen in and out, out and in, most days, I da know, Rachel. I'd swaller it, and never miake no muoan, but that I da know he be na fit for thee; he be a loose hand, a wild chap that fears neither God nor man, and he means no good by thee. Tain't 'cause I hate one as have turned on his own trade, darling; there's deeper wrong nor thissen; ask them as da know Ralph Meverton. Do ye love un, Rachel, dear?' he said, tenderly and sadly. 'I ha' little to offer, heaven do know; but I ha' loved thee ever sin' thou werst so high, wid all my soul, and all my strength. I've never looked at ere a lass only thee. I'd twoil all a man mid to make thine a happy life—God bless thee.'

In her sudden terror, she sat down where she stood, among the fern, and covered her face with her hands. As Maurice had been speaking, she remembered her first instinctive repugnance to Leverton; that strange power by which natures perfectly innocent and ignorant of evil detect by instinct what more practised minds often miss; as if endowed with an additional sense for their preservation, if they would but listen to it. Leverton had unconsciously modified his ordinary bold, reckless look and manner when he came near her gentle purity, as you would hardly speak harshly to a fawn, and her first impression had worn off.

Poor Rachel instinctively felt that what Maurice said was true; she remembered her early impression against Leverton; could it be possible that she could care for this man? Then came up before her the frank, hearty nature that was standing near her, the loving and tender hand which had always been helpful in her little perplexities, and the tears began to start through her fingers. It took a long time, or it seemed so to him, for her little mind, so unpractised in

reading its own or others' emotions, to get so far; and poor Maurice standing on thorns watching her, and at last seeing her tears, thought it was all up with him and turned away with a sort of smothered groan.

'Good-bye, Rachel,' he said, and he swore within himself (though in his rude chivalry he thought it unmanly to threaten her with it), that he'd 'list next day.'

'Bide, Maurice, bide,' cried Rachel, leaping up in terror, 'I carena naught for yon man.' 'But then you care naught for me either, Rachel, I'm feared,' answered Maurice with a bound back to her side; but his arm round her waist certainly belied him. Rachel, however, did not push it away; on the contrary, she lifted up her little, shy, blushing, tearful face for him to kiss—at least that was the result, the first he had ever given her; and then the two sauntered together into paradise, through that open door still left for poor scrubby earth, as some people consider it. (I do not mean heaven at all, but only that garden out of which Adam had us all turned out.)

Then Rachel crept quietly home, and was perfectly unconscious of her grandfather's remarks, answering yes or no at random all the evening, 'for the beating of her own heart was all the sound she heard,' while she lived that one hour over and over again.

Leverton was not long in finding out the difference of her manner. She had never shown him anything more than simple civility, but now she looked fluttered instead of amused when he came into the house, and he very soon guessed the cause. Next he dogged her footsteps and found the two together. Maurice had been working hard to find some settled occupation, when he thought he might go to the old clerk with a better chance of success. One evening Rachel heard his low whistle near the cottage and stole out to hear news of his plans. They lingered just a little too long at the edge of the orchard, bidding good-bye a little too often, for Leverton passed by the edge of the wood and scowled like the fiend at the sight of Adam and Eve. He went immediately by the back of the house in to the old clerk.

'Do ye know where be Rachel at this minit, Master Russell? that young scoundrel Maurice and she be colluging in the orchard, at the stile.' Old Silas hobbled out in time to see the parting, and when Rachel turned homeward she met his angry growls, as he seized her arm and dragged her into the cottage, vowing that Maurice should never darken his doorstep, a beggarly fellow, who would never own naught; a chap as were no use to nobody, &c.

Poor Rachel led a sad time of it. Her grandfather hardly let her go out of his sight. Leverton continued to frequent the house. Rachel had till now been a mere plaything for a spare half hour: his inclination for her would probably have died away if all had been smooth, but it became very earnest now that she took so much winning. His whole soul was bent upon catching Maurice in some act which might entail a long imprisonment upon him, and so dispose of him for a time. He hated him as an overbearing nature detests what stands in the path to its will.

Maurice had kept out of the way as much as possible in order that poor Rachel might not suffer, and had continued his earnest search for permanent work which yet should not take him out of the district, (which your true forest autochthones hate like death). One fine autumn Sunday, however, he went up to church, keeping rather apart from the scattered groups out of the different cottages. The church, built of flint with stone quoins, stood on a little hill apart from any village, with some beautiful old elms and picturesque oaks round it.

Rachel was sitting on the tombstone of her grandmother (whom she sorely missed), in a quiet part of the churchyard, just before the service, while the old clerk was busy inside. She sat sad and silent, playing with little Reuben, youngest of ten boys of one of her few acquaintances, when Maurice's voice sounded close to her.

'She var a good friend to me,' he muttered,