

"So I will, Master Catchpole, an' so I would have done long ago, only I thought you know'd 'em. I quite think, as you do, that men ought to be good-tempered, specially when they do 'ear as the old Squire 'ave got a son an' 'eir. That's the brave news. The very bells do seem to know it. 'Ark at 'em."

"An' for *which* partikler reason shud *they* be such very good news, eh, Master Timothy? The Squire ain't as young as 'e was, 'e ain't as rich as 'is father was, an' if the boy turns out a bad 'un, what then? 'It 'll be great pain and small gains,' as Solomon do say."

"I don't know aught about that," replied Timothy. "But whatever you do say, I know as it's a proper, an' I might say even a Christian thing to be pleasant with folk, an' as the old Squire 'll rejoice to-day specially as the young Squire 'ave come into the world of a Christmas mornin', I rejoices with 'im. Besides which, Master Catchpole, I'm invited to go up to the 'All to-night, an' I'm sent invite you, an' the whole village 'll be there, an' there 'll be bonny times, I warrant you."

"Well, I'll be thur," grunted old Catchpole. "I mean the folks up there no 'arm, although I will say that in *my* opinion its a' ill wind that have blown the young Squire *this* road; but then, again, it's an ill wind that blows luck to *nobody*, as we do read in the Proverbs."

Such was the discourse that passed between Master Elijah Catchpole, cordwainer (shoemaker), and Master Timothy Hardiron, blacksmith, of the village of Little Bubbleton, in the county of Faircester, on Christmas-day in the morning in the year of our Lord 1820.

As the reader will have gathered already, a wonderful event had taken place that morning—nothing other, nothing less than the birth of a son, which proved to be the only one ever born to Squire Hardnut, of Beechwoods Park, Little Bubbleton, aforesaid.

Beechwoods Park was grandly situated. The park itself was very extensive, having been enclosed and laid out when land was of less consequence in this snug little island than it is to-day. Amid its glades one might have walked for miles in an almost straight line, and have obtained widely different views of the surrounding country from the many openings of its stately timber. In this delicious spot the Hardnuts had nestled for many generations, and, being blessed with good constitutions and good opinions of themselves, had managed to enjoy the things that be. But human hearts were frail even in Eden, and the earthly paradise in which they dwelt did not save the Hardnuts from the perils and disasters of life. Possibly, if they had taken the good advice of old Master Catchpole, and have read the Proverbs of Solomon, certainly had they both read and heeded them, "their earthly path might have been peaceabler." But every now and again in the course of their generations human ill broke out stiff and strong, and some Hardnut appeared who wasted his substance in riotous living. Thus the fair patrimony was curtailed, and the