

holidays. But the old fellow, though he professed all anxiety to do everything he was told, did not believe in that "cadding," as he termed it.

"They'd be wild birds," he said, "and they are best left to their natural proclivities. Their instinct ought to tell 'em what's good for them."

So he just fed them daily, and he left the door of the enclosure open, and never bothered his head as to where they slept at night.

When Harry returned to school he found the birds sadly demoralized. It took him a month to drill them into shape, and expenditure on sprats was a heavy item in his fiscal economy. He pleaded with the fish-monger for a preferential tariff, but without success.

And now we come to the exciting part of this humble drama—so cheer up, my boy-reader!

On a dismal, foggy evening in November, Mother Scrubhard was busy over her washtub in the kitchen of the cottage. Punchey had gone out that morning, and had not yet returned. There had been some mystery about his movements ever since that time when he attended Dorchester market and had been absent a week. His wife had her curiosity aroused. She plied him with questions and tried to make him explain his conduct, but he showed an obstinate front and met her advances with surly insolence. We boys of Highfield House worried over his frequent absence from the gate. Our commissariat was considerably impoverished by the want of his basket of apples and nuts.

Mother Scrubhard had her arms up to elbows in soap-suds. The flickering firelight made fantastic play of shadows on the walls, and flashed the steamy vapors into lurid clouds around her. She might have posed for a witch concocting evil broth in her caldron, with

Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,

Lizard's leg and owl's wing.

Suddenly three sharp knocks with a stick sounded on the outer door. The dame's heart gave a jump—she was not accustomed to visitors at such a time. She hastily dried her hands and went to the door. She opened it, and a gleam of fire-light rested on the face of a man. She started back, scared by his repulsive appearance. A rabbit-skin cap fitted his head close—his nose was twisted askew, and one eye had an ugly squint.

"Be you Mrs. Brown?" asked the man.

"Yes. What may you want?"

"Well, it's this way—I want a bit of a talk with you. In the first place, mum, can I come in? You've no cause to be afeared. I'm not what you might call a handsome chap to look at, but I don't mean no harm."

Mother Scrubhard was scarcely reassured by this announcement, but she dared not refuse, and the man came in.

He took off his cap, and brushed the fur with his sleeve. He looked up, and he looked down; and then he spoke.

"It's like this, mum. Your man has had a bit of an accident, as you may say—nothing to seriously alarm you—but a

bit of an accident. Well, you see, 'twas somehow like this. We was up at the 'Bird in Hand,' me and a few pals, and Brown came in and got arguifying with one of the chaps. Summat to do with a bet over at Dorchester time of the market last July, when they had some horse-racing on. Then there was a bit of rum-pus, and Brown, he took to flinging pewter-pots about. And, you see, one of them pots came against a chap's head, and pretty high did for him. And then the other chaps set upon Brown, and kinder gave him what for. And one way or t'other there was a regular fuss up at the 'Bird in Hand,' and the landlord thought as you had better go up yonder, and get your man to go home. That's how it is, mum."

Such gruesome news might well agitate a woman of ordinary nerve, and Mrs. Brown was not indifferent to its serious nature. But she was not one to make the worst of things, and she met the troubles of life with certain stolid philosophy. She controlled her emotions, and said:

"Ah, there—Brown, he always was a wilful man, and a wilful man must have his way. It's a reg'lar bad job; but I'll fetch him home right enough."

She put on her mushroom hat and wrapped the drab shawl round her shoulders, and set off for the "Bird in Hand."

Things had quieted down a bit by the time she arrived. The victim of the pewter-pot had recovered from the blow, and had gone off with his pals. Punchey was huddled up in a corner of the settle. His wife went to him, and, finding him in better condition than she had feared, she pulled him by the arm, and said:

"Come along, Punchey, old man; you go home with me."

"All right, Mary," he replied, and slowly got upon his legs. Then, leaning heavily on her arm, he shuffled out into the fog.

A night's rest went far towards restoring Punchey Brown to his normal vigour. Beyond a head-ache, inside and out, he did not feel much the worse. He ate his breakfast as usual and afterwards smoked his pipe. Then his wife made a bid for judicial inquiry, which was not very successful owing to the prisoner's attitude towards the hench.

"So that's what you were after at Dorchester, was it?—going to the race-course along with low chaps; betting and losing money as you hadn't got and couldn't pay! A nice thing for a respectable man, with a wife and family!"

Punchey snuffed sullenly at his pipe, and made no reply.

"You may well be ashamed of yourself. I'd never have thought it of you! But I'd like to know how much you lost, and if you mean to pay up, and, if so, how you are going to get the money. Nobody knows what you've been up to lately; the young gents at the school are always askin', 'Where's Punchey. Why doesn't he bring his basket?' You're neglectin' your business, and I'd like to