

Any reference to Gervase Alleyne, either within the household to which he belonged or in the village beyond it, held always a note of sympathy both for him and for a near relation, a man on whom he had never set his eyes.

‘Poor Squire!’ said the inhabitants of King’s Stratton: ‘Poor Mr. Alleyne—sad to think he never saw his son!’

Of that loss, which accounted for his premature birth, and in part for his mother’s subsequent ill-health, Gervase was blithely ignorant. He laughed at bluebottles and his own private jokes, stretched his limbs, which as time went on grew firm and rounded, pulled his mother’s hair and patted her face in easy sovereignty; while she for her part held him tight and close against her heart to prevent it from breaking utterly. Mary Alleyne’s life had in reality ended on that day when the village of King’s Stratton stood silent and bare-headed to watch its Squire, John Alleyne, carried up the main street from the hunting-field to his own house, dead upon a stretcher. She never recovered from the shock of that terrible home-coming. But although what remained was but the mere appearance of that Lady Mary Alleyne so intimately known to the old and the unhappy in King’s Stratton, life of a sort still lived in her, fed by the presence of the child, in whom she still touched the outward circumstance of that almighty sacrament of love, the realisation of which had been something almost beyond her strength.

Delicate, and fragile almost to an infirmity,