

"I'd rest easy i' th' ground if I knowed as Margaret was seein' to thee. Hoo's a wonderful hand at pork-pie, Tom, and as fur passages an' black-puddin's hers is reckoned the best i' th' village."

"Say no moor," cried Tom with sudden determination, we's do it if thou'rt so set on't! Hoo isn't wan as I'd ha' thought o' pickin' fur mysel', but if thou'rt satisfied all's reet."

"An' thou'll call round to Margaret's tomorrow wilst? an' ax her to step over here a bit. I'd like to put her in th' way o' things afore I go."

Mr. Alty assented; and the next day, donning his Sunday coat and hat, but retaining his corduroy nether-garments—a costume eminently adapted to the solemn but business-like errand on which he was bent—he duly betook himself to the abode of poor Betty's prospective successor.

Margaret Heptonstall, a tall gaunt woman, with a frosty eye, and an angular cast of feature, was standing with her back to the door, and her bony arms plunged up to the elbows in soap-suds.

"Good-afternoon," observed Tom diffidently, his eyebrows climbing a little further up his forehead than usual. "Yo'll have heerd as our missus is down wi' th' titus an' not expected to recover."

"Ah," returned Margaret, I did hear summat o' th' kind. It'll be a bad job fur you, Mr. Alty, won't it? Dun yo' want me to lay her out or that?"

"Not exactly," returned Tom dolefully, "who isn't dead yet, yo' see—"

"En, but's allus well to look for'ard an' not be leavin' things to the last."

"Hoo tow'd me to step round and ax' yo' to look in fur a two-three minutes. Hoo's awful anxious to see yo', an' hoo'd tak it very kind o' yo' to coom."

Margaret's face clouded, and she clacked her tongue against the roof of her mouth before replying.

"Well, if it hadn't ha' been washin' day there'd ha' been no trouble about it, but I'm i' th' very thickest of my wark now. I'd ha' thought yo'r Betty 'ud ha' knowed Tuesday was a busy day wi' me. Is it summat partic'lar?"

"Well, it is rayther partic'lar," said Tom, while his eyebrows actually disappeared under his hat. "Hoo wouldn't ha' axed it I'm sure wi'out it wur thot. Hoo's awful troubled i' her mind, Margaret, and hoo allus thought a dale o' yo'."

Miss Heptonstall slowly withdrew her arms from the tub, wiped them, and pulled down her sleeves; then she stalked into the adjoining room, presently emerging, bonnetted and shawled.

"I'll nobbut feed th' dumb things an' then I'm ready," she remarked.

Tom stood by while two large black cats were each provided with a saucer of milk, and a fat and ancient collie dog invited to partake of an immense dish of porridge; after which Margaret sallied forth with a pailful of scraps for the hens.

"Yo' might give pigs their mate," she observed, nodding sideways at an overflowing bucket in the corner. "It'll save time."

Tom looked ruefully at his Sunday coat and wondered what Betty would say; but he did not venture to protest, and neither was he possessed of sufficient enterprise to doff the garment in question before betaking him to his task.

At last they set off, Tom lagging comfortably behind, according to his invariable custom when escorting Betty. But to his annoyance, Margaret accommodated her pace to his, and insisted on keeping abreast of him.

She asked questions, too, which required answers, instead of keeping to the good old-established rule which prescribes an occasional

placid remark on the one hand and a monosyllabic grunt on the other.

When they arrived at his cottage he ushered Miss Heptonstall, according to Betty's orders, straight into the sick room. Betty was sitting up in bed, a flush on her hollow cheeks and her eyes unusually bright. She received her visitor solemnly and pointed to a chair.

"Sit yo' down, Margaret, do, and Tom, dunnot thou be fur leavin' us. Coom round here to cheer t'other side o' th' bed."

Tom, who had been going out of the room, came back rather unwillingly, walked round the bed, and sat down, hitching up his trousers at the knees.

Betty thereupon, at great length and with much persuasive detail, broached her plan to Margaret, whose astonishment knew no bounds.

"Well, of all!" she began, when at last a pause in Betty's speech enabled her to put in a word. "Well, Betty! I never could ha' dreamed o' sich a thing! I never reckoned to change my condition at this time o' day, and I never did hold wi' men folks as how 'tis. Nay, nay, no men fur me, I've allus said!"

"Ah, but, see yo', Margaret," cried Betty warmly, "our Tom's not same's other folks. Eh, he's that quiet and that good natured I could never tell you. I scarce know half my time whether he's in th' house or out o't."

Here Tom's countenance assumed an expression of gratified surprise, and he hitched up the knees of his trousers again.

"I welly believe thee never was sich a wan as our Tom! Never no drinking nor swearin' nor traipsin' off to th' town o' neets. Every penny of his wage he hands ower to me reg'lar, an' he'll wark—eh, dear! how thot mon of mine will wark! Never one minute idle."

Tom, rubbing his hands up and down on his knees, looked more and more elated and astonished. Really he had had no idea that Betty had such a high opinion of him.

"And see how coomfortable he'd mak' yo'. He's addlin' good wage—eighteen shillin' a week, yo' know—and he's saved a bit, an' he's wan o' thowdest members o' the club."

Margaret, visibly moved, gazed at Tom with an appraising eye, he, meanwhile endeavoring to appear wholly unconscious; but he thought within his own mind that Margaret would be very foolish indeed if she did not at once close with the offer.

"Ah, Margaret, I tell yo'," pursued Betty emphatically, yo'll be a happy craitur if yo'll take our Gaffer. Ony woman 'ud think hersel' lucky to get sich a chance."

"Coom," said Tom, grinning bashfully, "theer, missus, thot'll do! Thou'rt sayin' too mich."

"Nay, lad, I couldna say too mich, nor half enough. Who's to say it if I dunnot? I ought to know, as has been wed to thee thirty year an' more."

"Thou has, owd lass, thou has," cried Tom, suddenly beginning to whimper. "Thirty year, eh! dear o' me. I dunno however I'm to take up wi' a new un."

He wiped his eyes with his coat-cuff, and sobbed.

"Get away wi' thee, wilst, leatherhead," said Betty in an angry whisper: "thou'rt allus sp'ilin' everything! Out wi' thee to kitchen, an' set 'taters on to boil."

He shambled out, and the two women continued to discuss the projected alliance; Margaret finally consenting to become, in due time, the second Mrs. Alty.

"It'll be a wonderful coomfort to my mind, Margaret," observed the present possessor of that title. "I know yo're jest sich a wan fur scrubbin' an' cleaning as mysel'. Yo'll keep steel bar on my fender bright, an' wash the chany careful; an' theer's a two-three silver spoons i' th' cupboard, but I never use them, yo' know."

Margaret nodded.

"I reckon I'll have a look round afore I go," she said. Con I do anything for yo', Betty.

"Nay, thank yo'; I have a drink here. Barley-water an' milk, yo' see. I dunnot care fur mich else. But stop an' have a bit o' dinner yoursel'. Theer's a nice bit of cowl pork, an' 'taters 'ull be ready afore aught's long."

"Well, I could do wi' a bit," replied Margaret.

A great snuffing and scratching at the bedroom door interrupted her, and she laughed.

"Why, here's poor Laddie! Eh, weren't it clever o' th' craitur to follow me here? It's wonderful the sense he has!"

She opened the door as she spoke, and the collie rushed in; bounding up against Betty's bed with his fore paws, and making muddy tracks on her sheets. She pushed him feebly away, with a little scream, at once angry and terrified.

"My word, Margaret, whatever are yo' thinkin' on? An' Tom—I do wonder at him, lettin' the brute in here! Th' mon hasn't a bit o' sense! Eh, Margaret, turn it out, do!"

"He'll noan hurt yo'," said Miss Heptonstall; "he's the goodnaturedest beast alive, an' that knowin', yo'd think he'd talk sometimes. I'm fond of all wick things, but he's my favorite. Ah, when him an' me's sat aside o' th' fire, I'd ax no better company. An' he sleeps under my bed o' neets, as quiet as a Christian."

"Under th' bed!" exclaimed Betty, deeply scandalized—"under th' bed! Did onybody ever hear o' sich a tale? My word, Marg'ret, yo'll ha' to give ower that mak' o' wark if yo reckon to coom here! I'll no ha' dogs an' sich-like coomin' into my 'ouse, messin' about wi' their muddy paws, an' knockin' ower things wi' their great tails! I never did howd wi' 'em, an' I'm noan goin' to have 'em about when I'm gone."

Margaret was either too good-tempered or too obtuse to make the obvious retort that, when she was installed as Tom's missus, Betty would no longer be in a position to object to any novelty she might wish to introduce. She sniffed a little instead of replying, and stalked into the kitchen, leaving the door ajar.

Betty lay back, panting; the recent discussion had exhausted her, and her growing irritation was now almost more than she could bear. With dilated nostrils and parted lips she listened to the movements and conversation of the pair in the kitchen.

"Dun yo' allus ha' 'taters boiled i' their jackets?" she heard Margaret say, "I like 'em better peeled an' steamed mysel'!"

"Our missus reckons it's more wasteful," rejoined Tom.

"Not a bit, if it's done careful. An' they're a deal tastier. Boiled an' steamed, yo' know, an' then browned a bit, i' th' oo'n, eh, they're wonderful good."

"Very like they are," agreed Tom, and Betty felt unreasonably angry.

"Here's the pork," went on Margaret. "H'm! time to eat it; it's getting mouldy."

"'Twas nobbut cooked day afore yesterday," cried Betty, but so feebly that no one heard her.

Margaret clattered about, peering into dishes and opening drawers. Betty writhed as she pictured the cold eyes prying into her treasures, the calculating fingers touching them.

"Hoo might ha' waited till I were dead," she said to herself.

"Here's a good few apples," Margaret observed presently. "They'll coom in nice fur sauce wi' that dry bit o' pork. I'll make it in a minute, see!"

"Nay, they apples is fur turnovers at the week end yo' know," returned Alty. "When beef's done, an' we're put to fur a bit, it makes a change wi' a mouthful or two o' cheese. We