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I

LUCY BETTESWORTH

I

IT was the aptness of it that made the question saucy. A little girl, who had been condescendingly familiar with old Bettesworth, and had caught a glimpse of Mrs. Bettesworth in the distance, came back to her friends on the lawn to ask embarrassing questions on the subject of matrimonial affection. Her inquiry, "Do husbands love their wives?" was answered by a daring generalization which failed to satisfy her. With a roguish twinkle of the eyes she asked, "Does Mr. Bettesworth love Mrs. Bettesworth?" It was too startling. The sudden laughter she had played for rewarded the little maid's impish precocity: there was something irresistibly incongruous in the idea of poor old Mrs. Bettesworth being "loved."

For the appearance of old Lucy is the reverse of prepossessing. She is a strange-looking figure, a

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kind of substantial shadow, standing motionless in the sunshine of the garden. Motionless she will stand—you might mistake her for a field scarecrow—for quite a long time, and when she stirs it is with a slow, dubious movement, as of some piece of antiquity resuming forgotten life. An odd slate-coloured and dishevelled, not quite human, apparition, even on a summer's day—such is Bettesworth's wife, seen at a distance.

As you approach her more nearly the impression of unattractive strangeness is intensified. Presumably she wears the ordinary clothes of an old peasant woman, but they do not look quite ordinary on her. You are reminded again of the field scarecrow, but there is something else, too, in her appearance—something suggestive of bats' wings or of old cobwebs. A dingy woollen cross-over, once red, fails to weaken the impression produced by the slate-hued things in which the old woman moves so curiously. Her black straw hat is shaped like an inverted bowl, and has a drooping brim, a wide descending brim that hides half her face; and the inky shadow of it seems to be a peculiar atmosphere that she alone moves in. Once, in Bettesworth's garden, where early peas were set, there appeared a strange row of diminutive scarecrows, several of which consisted chiefly of older hats of this pattern, while all

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were oddly reminiscent of Mrs. Bettesworth. Little witchcraft images of herself they seemed, and the main characteristic of them was uncanny.

Go quite close to the old woman, and the chances are that you will be shocked. She is short of stature, but if you can peer under the hat brim to see more than her bristly chin, you will possibly look hurriedly away again. For the face there, though placid and kindly, is somehow hardly in keeping with our modern times. It is short and broad; the eyes in it have a dark and unspeculative gleam; the teeth have gone and the lips have fallen in, yet are held tightly together. But this is not all—this might be the picture of many a worn-out working woman, and there is something else than this that makes one unwilling to regard Mrs. Bettesworth. Her face is a face of the fields: it is unhomely, undomesticated. Swarthiest of the swarthy, that she must have been in her young days; there is the dark streak of the moustache to prove it, while dots and specks of blue, like Nature's tattoo marks, are visible here and there on her skin. Yet it cannot be all swarthinness that darkens the old woman's withered features and begrimes the strong creases which run from nostrils to fallen-in mouth. Perhaps it is only the stain and sun-tan of many years spent in the fields, but the aspect of Mrs. Bettesworth's face is unwashed. And

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there are her hands like it ; and there, too, where the bodice wants a brooch, the dark coarse skin of neck and bosom owes some redness to the sun, but little enough, if anything at all, to womanly care of the person.

She is dishevelled. Imagine once more in one glance, the wrinkled, broad face shaded by the hat, and now observe the grey hair, how it straggles out below the hat brim. It is not cared for or twisted up, it is too scanty for that. It hangs down rather stiffly and inclined to stick out towards the nape of the neck, but there is neither regularity of length to it nor evenness of disposal. You can see what it is—the remains of strong black hair turned grey at last and irregularly shortened, drooping in wisps under the shadowy hat brim, back behind that swarthy wrinkled face. And there, in the enigmatic face, the eyes give no clue to the thoughts, but all is cryptic and unfamiliar. You feel that you are looking upon an English peasant woman of perhaps the fifteenth century, and she seems out of place, out of touch with our times. She is one who has been overburdened by strange burdens. Even the mild-eyed placidity discernible in her countenance has its afflicting side—it is the sign of resignation to such a fate as few women experience to-day. She looks obedient and quiet and dumb, like an overdriven

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animal; and in that look you may read her history. For she is of the fields, one of their unvalued products; and the fields have, as it were, overlaid her humanity with an enigmatic and half-dreadful composure like their own. At sight of her the little girl of the roguish questions was startled as well as amused, and the little girl's seniors are themselves set wondering by the question, "Does Mr. Bettesworth love Mrs. Bettesworth?" The old woman is far removed from comeliness. She seems too unlovely to be loved.

But you must not judge Dartmoor as though it were a lawn in a suburban garden, or people like the Bettesworths as though they lived for bridge and paying calls. The labours that have claimed so ruthlessly and have so cruelly marred this old woman are of another order. They rank among the great things for which our race has lived. Unrecognized, unrecorded, their place is beside our Armada conflict, our occupation of India, our mastery of the seas; viewed in the large, they are not less splendid, and they are more venerable than these; nor could there have been any Agincourt or Waterloo had there been no forgotten folk left at home to enforce the harvests from our English valleys. On pleasant hillsides, or by quiet-flowing rivers, taking her share in the immemorial duties of the fields, Mrs. Bettesworth has

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played her infinitesimal yet vital part in the doings of the English ; and this must not be forgotten when considering her poor old person and the record of her life. She has a brave record, although for details of it there is little beyond surmise to go upon. One or two incidents, one or two chance allusions to her by her husband—that is all the foundation one has on which to build up an account of her life.

II

Of her childhood and girlhood even surmise can reconstruct very little. The girl and her character are quite unknown : it is with difficulty that one may picture so much concerning her as the mere environment she lived in. For though she has never dwelt elsewhere than in this valley, much has changed here since her birth some seventy years back. There, it is true, not far from her present home, is still the cottage where she was born, scarcely, if at all, altered ; and there beside it, between the old hedgerows, still slopes down the narrow lane, sunk between slanting cottage gardens on either side. Below, in the depths of the valley, is the winding stream-bed. On this bank of it, as of old, the hill-side is broken off in abrupt sand-cliffs ; on the other

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bank, beyond a cramped meadow, a meaner slope struggles upwards, not so high as to shut out the view of farther hills and of Hindhead's blue on the far southern horizon. There are all the old landmarks, but they no longer look as they did in Lucy Bettesworth's childhood. In the distance the hills have become bearded with fir-woods; on the mean slope beyond the meadow, dwarf ugly cottages now thrust their shabby roofs against the sky-line; and—greater change than all—the surrounding common has been enclosed, and a rubbishy cultivation of the sandy soil occupies the place of the old beautiful heath and furze. To imagine the hamlet as little Lucy Harding knew it (Harding was Lucy's maiden name), much modern disorder must be forgotten. The whole long hillside, with its spurs and windings, must be thought of—as it slants towards the sunshine and the southern distance—clad with heath, except where this and similar hollows, with their cottages and gardens, give rapid access to the stream in the depth of the valley. Down in these hollows there is shelter from the unimpeded winds that sweep overhead; yet in Lucy's young days the little hamlet must have been a rather grim place to live in, for all its warmth—a place of poor soil and struggling cultivation, without trees; a place of merciless sunshine in summer and of dreary bleakness in winter;

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a place in which human life must needs be hardy, and would easily run to savagery.

And as it was an isolated place, so it was a neglected one, where children would grow up untamed, for as yet it contained neither church nor serviceable school. The nearest civilization was a mile away, where, in the wide and fertile valley to the north of the intervening hill, there lay an old peaceful town, which, however, could not much concern itself with this tiny village. At best the town provided a little work for the folk here, but such civilization as it boasted hardly trickled out so far as to their unconsidered homes. Northwards there was this; southwards, on the slopes of Hindhead, villages approachable by mere sand-tracks across the open heaths enjoyed an evil reputation as the haunts of lawless people. Between lawlessness and sleepy civilization—such was the position, and such, too, was the character, of Lucy's home.

Here, in this rugged environment, one must picture her as best one can—a little black-eyed and swarthy creature running wild almost from the cradle. She went to school for a few months, she says, “but never to larn nothin' like.” There was no church for her to go to. During a few years there would be rough games for her with other children—tumblings in the heath, scramblings and noisy rompings up and

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down the sand-cliffs by the stream—a healthy harum-scarum existence, unchecked and untaught. But that could not last long. At six or seven years old—hardly later—she would have to begin earning the food she ate. We may think of her at seven years old going out with her mother to her first day's work. It was the winter's task of trimming swedes, and her wages began at twopence a day.

At this point one must beware lest the imagination go astray. It were easy to be over-compassionate of the child, fancying hardships that were not felt. She had enjoyed no schooling or other contact with the refinements of life, such as village children now get, to make her harsh fate seem dreary by the contrast. And, unlike girls who become the household drudges to families of another caste, she was working with her own people at outdoor occupations she could understand. There is no need, therefore, to think of her as a little slave: she may rather be imagined a sturdy, matter-of-fact, careless creature, at worst subdued by her hard work, but not at all crushed by it.

Still more, on the other hand, one must beware of idyllicizing. To us, looking back through the years upon the quiet valley and the girl's life maturing there, there is a great temptation to dwell upon the idyllic aspects of it. Every evening Lucy would

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see the cows come slowly down the valley, each to its own stall—for in those days half the cottagers kept cows, which a boy herded on the common all day. And of evenings the air would grow fragrant with the smoke of turf-fires lit for the evening meal, and the valley would look full of peace. In fact, one might soon conjure up out of the conceivable circumstances a fanciful setting for a young maid's life. Or in the seasonable change of her vocations one might find much that is poetical, recalling the hay-making and the harvest, the hop-picking and the gathering-up of potatoes on airy fields; and one would probably be justified in attributing to these employments a wholesome influence on the girl's soul. But one would almost certainly be wrong did one think of her as sentimentalizing over them in a romantic Wordsworthian way. She who was destined to become Bettesworth's wife and comrade is far more likely to have been a practical and vivacious damsel than a dreamer of poetical dreams. Besides, the social environment would discourage any such indulgence. They must have been a roughly living set—Lucy's neighbours: the men unlettered, hard-fisted, coarse of speech, not seldom fighting, often drunken, impoverished, and yet (for otherwise they would have starved) invariably habituated to the severest labour; and the women equally unlettered