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Richard Jefferies  
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# THE LIFE OF THE FIELDS.

## *THE FIELD-PLAY.*

### I. UPTILL-A-THORN.

“ Save the nightingale alone ;  
She, poor bird, as all forlorn,  
Lean'd her breast uptill a thorn.”

*Passionate Pilgrim.*

SHE pinned her torn dress with a thorn torn from the bushes through which she had scrambled to the hay-field. The gap from the lane was narrow, made more narrow by the rapid growth of summer; her rake caught in an ash-spray, and in releasing it she “ranted” the bosom of her print dress. So soon as she had got through she dropped her rake on the hay, searched for a long, nail-like thorn, and thrust it through, for the good-looking, careless hussy never had any provision of pins about her. Then, taking a June rose which pricked her finger, she put the flower by the “rant,” or tear, and went to join the rest of the hay-makers. The blood welled up out of the scratch in the finger more freely than would have been sup-

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posed from so small a place. She put her lips to it to suck it away, as folk do in all quarters of the earth yet discovered, being one of those instinctive things which come without teaching. A red dot of blood stained her soft white cheek, for, in brushing back her hair with her hand, she forgot the wounded finger. With red blood on her face, a thorn and a rose in her bosom, and a hurt on her hand, she reached the chorus of rakers.

The farmer and the sun are the leading actors, and the hay-makers are the chorus, who bear the burden of the play. Marching, each a step behind the other, and yet in a row, they presented a slanting front, and so crossed the field, turning the "wallows." At the hedge she took her place, the last in the row. There were five men and eight women; all flouted her. The men teased her for being late again at work; she said it was so far to come. The women jeered at her for tearing her dress—she couldn't get through a "thornin'" hedge right. There was only one thing she could do, and that was to "make a vool of zum veller" (make a fool of some fellow). Dolly did not take much notice, except that her nervous temperament showed slight excitement in the manner she used her rake, now turning the hay quickly, now missing altogether, then catching the teeth of the rake in the buttercup-runners. The women did not fail to tell her how awkward she was. By-and-by Dolly bounced forward, and, with a flush on her cheek, took the place next to the men. They teased her too, you see, but there was no spiteful malice in their tongues. There are some natures which, naturally meek, if much condemned, defy that condemnation, and will-

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ingly give it ground of justification by open guilt. The women accused her of too free a carriage with the men ; she replied by seeking their company in the broad glare of the summer day. They laughed loudly, joked, but welcomed her ; they chatted with her gaily ; they compelled her to sip from their ale as they paused by the hedge. By noon there was a high colour on her cheeks ; the sun, the exercise, the badinage had brought it up.

So fair a complexion could not brown even in summer, exposed to the utmost heat. The beams indeed did heighten the hue of her cheeks a little, but it did not shade to brown. Her chin and neck were wholly untanned, white and soft, and the blue veins roamed at their will. Lips red, a little full perhaps ; teeth slightly prominent but white and gleamy as she smiled. Dark brown hair in no great abundance, always slipping out of its confinement and straggling, now on her forehead, and now on her shoulders, like wandering bines of bryony. The softest of brown eyes under long eyelashes ; eyes that seemed to see everything in its gentlest aspect, that could see no harm anywhere. A ready smile on the face, and a smile in the form. Her shape yielded so easily at each movement that it seemed to smile as she walked. Her nose was the least pleasing feature—not delicate enough to fit with the complexion, and distinctly upturned, though not offensively. But it was not noticed ; no one saw anything beyond the laughing lips, the laughing shape, the eyes that melted so near to tears. The torn dress, the straggling hair, the tattered shoes, the unmended stocking, the straw hat

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split, the mingled poverty and carelessness—perhaps rather dreaminess—disappeared when once you had met the full untroubled gaze of those beautiful eyes. Untroubled, that is, with any ulterior thought of evil or cunning; they were as open as the day, the day which you can make your own for evil or good. So, too, like the day, was she ready to the making.

No stability; now fast in motion; now slow; now by fits and starts; washing her face to-day, her hands to-morrow. Never going straight, even along the road; talking with the waggoner, helping a child to pick watercress, patting the shepherd's dog, finding a flower, and late every morning at the hay-field. It was so far to come, she said; no doubt it was, if these stoppings and doublings were counted in. No character whatever, no more than the wind; she was like a well-hung gate swinging to a touch; like water yielding to let a reed sway; like a singing-flame rising and falling to a word, and even to an altered tone of voice. A word pushed her this way; a word pushed her that. Always yielding, sweet, and gentle. Is not this the most seductive of all characters in women?

Had they left her alone, would it have been any different? Those bitter, coarse, feminine tongues which gave her the name of evil, and so led her to openly announce that, as she had the name, she would carry on the game. That is an old country saying, "Bear the name, carry the game." If you have the name of a poacher, then poach; you will be no worse off, and you will have the pleasure of the poaching. It is a serious matter, indeed, to give any one a bad name, more especially a sensitive, nervous, beautiful girl.

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Under the shady oaks at luncheon the men all petted her and flattered her in their rude way, which, rude as it was, had the advantage of admitting of no mistake. Two or three more men strolled up from other fields, luncheon in hand and eating as they came, merely to chat with her. One was a mower—a powerful fellow, big boned, big everywhere, and heavy fisted; his chest had been open since four o'clock that morning to the sun, and was tanned like his face. He took her in his mighty arms and kissed her before them all; not one dared move, for the weight of that bone-smashing fist was known. Big Mat drank, as all strong men do; he fought; beyond that there was nothing against him. He worked hard, and farmers are only too glad of a man who will work. He was rather a favourite with the master, and trusted. He kissed her twice, and then went back to his work of mowing, which needs more strength than any other country labour—a mower is to a man what a dray-horse is to a horse.

They lingered long over the luncheon under the shady oaks, with the great blue tile of the sky overhead, and the sweet scent of hay around them. They lingered so long, that young Mr. Andrew came to start them again, and found Dolly's cheeks all a-glow. The heat and the laughter had warmed them; her cheeks burned, in contrast to her white, pure forehead—for her hat was off—and to the cool shade of the trees. She lingered yet a little longer chatting with Mr. Andrew—lingered a full half-hour—and when they parted, she had given him a rose from the hedge. Young Mr. Andrew was but half a farmer's son; he was destined for a merchant's office in town; he had

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been educated for it, and was only awaiting the promised opening. He was young, but no yokel; too knowing of town cunning and selfish hardness to entangle himself. Yet those soft brown eyes, that laughing shape; Andrew was very young and so was she, and the summer sun burned warm.

The blackbirds whistled the day away, and the swallows sought their nests under the eaves. The curved moon hung on the sky as the hunter's horn on the wall. Timid Wat—the hare—came ambling along the lane, and almost ran against two lovers in a recess of the bushes by an elm. Andrew, Andrew! these lips are too sweet for you; get you to your desk—that smiling shape, those shaded, soft brown eyes, let them alone. Be generous—do not awaken hopes you can never, never fulfil. The new-mown hay is scented yet more sweetly in the evening—of a summer's eve it is always too soon to go home.

The blackbirds whistled again, big Mat slew the grass from the rising to the going down of the sun—moon-daisies, sorrel, and buttercups lay in rows of swathe as he mowed. I wonder whether the man ever thought, as he reposed at noontide on a couch of grass under the hedge? Did he think that those immense muscles, that broad, rough-hewn plank of a chest of his, those vast bones encased in sinewy limbs—being flesh in its fulness—ought to have more of this earth than mere common men, and still more than thin-faced people—mere people, not men—in black coats? Did he dimly claim the rights of strength in his mind, and arrogate to himself the prerogatives of arbitrary kings? Who knows what big processes of

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reasoning, dim and big, passed through his mind in the summer days? Did he conclude he had a right to take what others only asked or worked for?

The sweet scent of the new-mown hay disappeared, the hay became whiter, the ricks rose higher, and were topped and finished. Hourly the year grew drier and sultry, as the time of wheat-harvest approached. Sap of spring had dried away; dry stalk of high summer remained, browned with heat. Mr. Andrew (in the country the son is always called by his Christian name, with the prefix Master or Mr.) had been sent for to London to fill the promised lucrative berth. The reapers were in the corn—Dolly tying up; big Mat slashing at the yellow stalks. Why the man worked so hard no one could imagine, unless it was for pure physical pleasure of using those great muscles. Unless, indeed, a fire, as it were, was burning in his mind, and drove him to labour to smother it, as they smother fires by beating them. Dolly was happier than ever—the gayest of the gay. She sang, she laughed, her white, gleaming teeth shone in the sunshine; it was as if she had some secret which enabled her to defy the taunts and cruel, shameless words hurled at her, like clods of earth, by the other women. Gay she was, as the brilliant poppies who, having the sun as their own, cared for nothing else.

Till suddenly, just before the close of harvest, Dolly and Mat were missing from the field. Of course their absence was slanderously connected, but there was no known ground for it. Big Mat was found intoxicated at the tavern, from which he never moved for a fortnight, spending in one long drain of drink the lump

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of money his mighty arms had torn from the sun in the burning hours of work. Dolly was ill at home; sometimes in her room, sometimes downstairs; but ill, shaky and weak—ague they called it. There were dark circles round her eyes, her chin drooped to her breast; she wrapped herself in a shawl in all the heat. It was some time before even the necessity of working brought her forth again, and then her manner was hurried and furtive; she would begin trembling all of a minute, and her eyes filled quickly.

By degrees the autumn advanced, and the rooks followed the ploughman. Dolly gradually recovered something of her physical buoyancy; her former light-heartedness never returned. Sometimes an incident would cause a flash of the old gaiety, only for her to sink back into subdued quietness. The change was most noticeable in her eyes; soft and tender still, brown and velvety, there was a deep sadness in them—the longer she looked at you, the more it was visible. They seemed as if her spirit had suffered some great wrong; too great for redress, and that could only be borne in silence.

How beautiful are beautiful eyes! Not from one aspect only, as a picture is, where the light falls rightly on it—the painter's point of view—they vary to every and any aspect. The orb rolls to meet the changing circumstance, and is adjusted to all. But a little enquiry into the mechanism of the eyes will indicate how wondrously they are formed. Science has dispelled many illusions, broken many dreams; but here, in the investigation of the eye, it has added to our marvelling interest. The eye is still like the work of



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a magician: it is physically divine. Besides the liquid flesh which delights the beholder, there is then the retina, the mysterious nerve which receives a thousand pictures on one surface and confuses none; and further, the mystery of the brain, which reproduces them at will, twenty years, yes, threescore years and ten, afterwards. Perhaps of all physical things, the eye is most beautiful, most divine.

Her eyes were still beautiful, but subdued and full of a great wrong. What that wrong was became apparent in the course of time. Dolly had to live with Mat, and, unhappily, not as his wife. Next harvest there was a child wrapped in a red shawl with her in the field, placed under the shocks while she worked. Her brother Bill talked and threatened—of what avail was it? The law gave no redress, and among men in these things, force is master still. There were none who could meet big Mat in fight.

Something seemed to burn in Mat like fire. Now he worked, and now he drank, but the drink which would have killed another did him no injury. He grew and flourished upon it, more bone, more muscle, more of the savage nature of original man. But there was something within on fire. Was he not satisfied even yet? Did he arrogate yet further prerogatives of kings?—prerogatives which even kings claim no longer. One day, while in drink, his heavy fist descended—he forgot his might; he did not check it, like Ulysses in the battle with Irus—and Dolly fell.

When they lifted her up, one eye was gone.

It was utterly put out, organically destroyed; no skill, no money, no loving care could restore it. The

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soft, brown velvet, the laugh, the tear gone for ever. The divine eye was broken—battered as a stone might be. The exquisite structure which reflected the trees and flowers, and took to itself the colour of the summer sky, was shapeless.

In the second year, Mr. Andrew came down, and one day met her in the village. He did not know her. The stoop, the dress which clothed, but responded to no curve, the sunken breast, and the sightless eye, how should he recognize these? This ragged, plain, this ugly, repellent creature—he did not know her. She spoke; Mr. Andrew hastily fumbled in his pocket, fetched out half a crown, gave it, and passed on quickly. How fortunate that he had not entangled himself!

Meantime, Mat drank and worked harder than ever, and became more morose, so that no one dared cross him, yet as a worker he was trusted by the farmer. Whatever it was, the fire in him burned deeper, and to the very quick. The poppies came and went once more, the harvest moon rose yellow and ruddy, all the joy of the year proceeded, but Dolly was like a violet over which a waggon-wheel had rolled. The thorn had gone deep into her bosom.

## II. RURAL DYNAMITE.

In the cold North men eat bread of fir-bark; in our own fields the mouse, if pressed for food in winter, will gnaw the bark of sapling trees. Frost sharpens the teeth like a file, and hunger is keener than frost. If any one used to more fertile scenes had walked across