

BUSHES AND BRIARS

Florence Henrietta Darwin

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CHARACTERS

THOMAS SPRING, *a farmer, aged 35.*

EMILY, *his wife, the same age.*

CLARA, *his sister, aged 21.*

JESSIE AND ROBIN, *the children of Thomas and Emily, aged 10 and 8.*

JOAN, *maid to Clara.*

MILES HOOPER, *a rich draper.*

LUKE JENNER, *a farmer.*

LORD LOVEL.

GEORGE, *aged 28.*

ACT I. Scene 1.

A wood. It is a morning in June.

GEORGE, *carrying an empty basket, comes slowly through the wood. On reaching a fallen tree he sits down on it, placing his basket on the ground. With his stick he absently moves the grass and leaves that lie before him, and is so deeply lost in his own thoughts that he does not hear the approach of MILES and LUKE until they are by his side.*

MILES. Here's the very man to tell us all we want to know.

LUKE. Why, if 'tisin't George from Ox Lease.

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[GEORGE *half rises*.

MILES. No, sit you down again, my lad, and we'll rest awhile by the side of you.

LUKE. That's it, Miles. Nothing couldn't have fallen out better for us, I'm thinking.

MILES. You're about right, Luke. Now, George, my man, we should very much appreciate a few words with you.

GEORGE. [*Taking up his basket.*] Morning baint the time for words, masters. I count as words will keep till the set of sun. 'Tis otherwise with work.

MILES. Work, why, George, 'tis clear you are come out but to gather flowers this morning.

LUKE. 'Tis the very first time as ever I caught George an idling away of his time like this.

GEORGE. 'Tis over to Brook as I be going, masters, to fetch back a couple of young chicken. Ourn be mostly old fowls, or pullets what do lay.

LUKE. I never heard tell of young chicken being ate up at Ox Lease afore July was in.

GEORGE. Nor me neither, master. Never heared nor seed such a thing. But mistress, her says, you can't sit a maid from town at table unless there be poultry afore of she. They be rare nesh in their feeding, maids from town, so mistress do say.

MILES. That just brings us to our little matter, George. When is it that you expect the young lady?

GEORGE. The boxes of they be stacked mountains high in the bedroom since yesterday. And I count as the maids will presently come on their own feet from where the morning coach do set them down.

LUKE. Nay, but there's only one maid what's expected.

GEORGE. Miss Clara, what's master's sister; and the serving wench of she.

MILES. Well, George, 'twas a great day for your master when old Madam Lovel took little Miss Clara to be bred up as one of the quality.

GEORGE. A water plant do grow best by the stream, and a blossom, from the meadows, midst the grass. Let each sort bide in the place where 'twas seeded.

MILES. No, no, George, you don't know what you're talking about. A little country wench may bloom into something very modish and elegant, once taken from her humble home and set amongst carpets of velvet and curtains of satin. You'll see.

GEORGE. 'Twould be a poor thing for any one to be so worked upon by curtains, nor yet carpets, master.

MILES. Take my word for it, George, Ox Lease will have to smarten up a bit for this young lady. I know the circles she has been moving in, and 'tis to the best of everything that she has been used.

GEORGE. [*Rising.*] That's what mistress do say. And that's why I be sent along down to Brook with haymaking going on and all. Spring chicken with sparrow grass be the right feeding for such as they. So mistress

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do count.

MILES. Stop a moment, George. You have perhaps heard the letters from Miss Clara discussed in the family from time to time.

GEORGE. Miss Clara did never send but two letters home in all the while she was gone. The first of them did tell as how th' old lady was dead and had left all of her fortune to Miss Clara. And the second was to say as how her was coming back to the farm this morning.

LUKE. And hark you here, George, was naught mentioned about Miss Clara's fine suitors in neither of them letters?

GEORGE. That I cannot say, Master Jenner.

MILES. Nothing of their swarming thick around her up in London, George?

GEORGE. They may be swarming by the thousand for aught as I do know. They smells gold as honey bees do smell the blossom. Us'll have a good few of them a-buzzing round the farm afore we're many hours older, so I counts.

MILES. Well, George, that'll liven up the place a bit, I don't doubt.

LUKE. 'Tis a bit of quiet and no livening as Ox Lease do want. Isn't that so, George, my lad?

GEORGE. [*Preparing to set off.*] I'll say good morning to you, masters. I count I've been and wasted a smartish time already on the road. We be a bit hard pressed up at the farm this day.

MILES. But George, my man, we have a good many questions to ask of you before you set off.

GEORGE. Them questions will have to bide till another time, I reckon. I'm got late already, master.

[*He hurries off.*]

MILES. Arriving by the morning coach! I shall certainly make my call to the farm before sunset. What do you say, Jenner?

LUKE. You're a rich man, Miles, and I am poor. But we have always been friends.

MILES. And our fathers before us, Luke.

LUKE. And the courting of the same maid shall not come between us.

MILES. [*Slowly.*] That'll be all right, Luke.

LUKE. What I do say is, let's start fair. Neck to neck, like.

MILES. As you please, my good Luke.

LUKE. Then, do you tell me honest, shall I do in the clothes I'm a-wearing of now, Miles?

MILES. [*Regarding him critically.*] That neckerchief is not quite the thing, Luke.

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LUKE. 'Tis my Sunday best.

MILES. Step over to the High Street with me, my lad. I've got something in the shop that will be the very thing. You shall have it half price for 'tis only a bit damaged in one of the corners.

LUKE. I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you, Miles.

MILES. That's all right, Luke.

LUKE. George would look better to my thinking if there was a new coat to the back of him.

MILES. Ah, poor beggar, he would, and no mistake.

LUKE. I warrant as Emily do keep it afore him as how he was took in from off the road by th' old farmer in his day.

MILES. I flatter myself that I have a certain way with the ladies. They come to me confidential like and I tell them what's what, and how that, this or t'other is worn about town. But with Missis Spring 'tis different. That's a woman I could never get the right side of no how.

LUKE. Ah, poor Thomas! There's a man who goes down trod and hen scratched if you like.

MILES. 'Tis altogether a very poor place up at Ox Lease, for young Miss.

LUKE. [*Pulling out his watch.*] Time's slipping on. What if we were to stroll on to the shop and see about my neckerchief, Miles?

MILES. I'm sure I'm quite agreeable, Luke. 'Twill help to pass away the morning.

[*He puts his arm in LUKE'S and they go briskly off in the direction of the village.*]

ACT I. Scene 2.

CLARA, followed by **JOAN,** comes through the wood . **CLARA** is dressed in a long, rich cloak and wears a bonnet that is brightly trimmed with feathers and ribbons. **JOAN** wears a cotton bonnet and small shawl. She carries her mistress' s silken bag over her arm.

CLARA. [*Pointing to the fallen tree.*] There is the very resting place for us. We will sit down under the trees for a while. [*She seats herself.*]

JOAN. [*Dusting the tree with her handkerchief before she sits on it.*] Have we much further to go, mistress?

CLARA. Only a mile or two, so far as I can remember.

JOAN. 'Tis rough work for the feet, down in these parts, mistress.

CLARA. If London roads were paved with diamonds I'd sooner have my feet treading this rugged way that leads

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to home.

JOAN. What sort of a place shall we find it when we gets there, mistress.

CLARA. I was but seven when I left them all, Joan. And that is fourteen years ago to-day.

JOAN. So many years may bring about some powerful big changes, mistress.

CLARA. But I dream that I shall find all just as it was when I went away. Only that Gran'ma won't be there.

[There is a short silence during which CLARA seems lost in thought. JOAN flicks the dust off her shoes with a branch of leaves.]

JOAN. 'Tis the coaches I do miss down in these parts.

CLARA. I would not have driven one step of the way this morning, Joan. In my fancy I have been walking up from the village and through the wood and over the meadows since many a day.