

# **The New Year**

Florence Henrietta Darwin



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# The New Year

## **Florence Henrietta Darwin**

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The New Year

## THE NEW YEAR

### CHARACTERS

**STEVE BROWNING**, *a Blacksmith, also Parish Clerk.*

GEORGE DAVIS, *a Carpenter.*

HARRY MOSS, *a young Tramp.*

MAY BROWNING.

JANE BROWNING.

DORRY BROWNING, *aged twelve.*

ANNIE SIMS.

ROSE SIMS.

VASHTI REED.

ACT I.—Scene 1.

*A country roadside. It is late afternoon and already dusk.*

**MAY BROWNING** with **HARRY MOSS** come slowly forward . Close to a stile which is a little off the road, MAY stops.

**MAY.** There, you don't need to come no further with I, Harry Moss. You get on quick towards the town afore the night be upon you, and the snow, too.

**HARRY.** I don't care much about leaving you like this on the roadside, May. And that's the truth, 'tis.

**MAY.** Don't you take no more thought for I, Harry. 'Tis a good boy as you've been to I since the day when we fell in together. But now there bain't no more need for you to hold back your steps, going slow and heavy when you might run spry and light. For 'tis home as I be comed to now, I be. You go your way.

**HARRY.** I see naught of any house afore us or behind. 'Tis very likely dusk as is upon us, or may happen 'tis the fog getting up from the river.

**MAY.** [*Coughing.*] Look you across that stile, Harry. There be a field path, bain't there?

**HARRY.** [*Taking a few steps to the right and peering through the gloom.*] Ah, and that there be.

**MAY.** And at t'other end of it a house what's got a garden fence all round.

**HARRY.** Ah—and 'tis so. And now as I comes to look there be a light shining from out the windows of it, too, though 'tis shining dim—like in the mist.

**MAY.** 'Tis that yonder's my home, Harry. There's the door where I must stand and knock.

[*For a moment she draws the shawl over her face and is shaken with weeping.*]

**HARRY.** I wouldn't take on so, if 'twas me.

**MAY.** And did you say as how there was a light in the window? 'Twill be but fire light then, for th' old woman she never would bring out the lamp afore 'twas night, close-handed old she-cat as her was, what'd lick up a drop of oil on to the tongue of her sooner nor it should go wasted.

**HARRY.** There, 'tis shining better now—or maybe as the fog have shifted.

**MAY.** 'Tis nigh to home as I be, Harry.

**HARRY.** Then get and stand up out of the wet grass there, and I'll go along of you a bit further. 'Twill not be much out of my way. Nothing to take no count of.

**MAY.** No, no, Harry. I bain't going to cross that field, nor yet stand at the door knocking till the dark has fallen on me. Why, is it like as I'd let them see me coming over the meadow and going through the gate in this? [*Holding up a ragged shawl.*] In these? [*Pointing to her broken shoes.*] And—as I be to-day.

[*Spreading out her arms and then suddenly bending forward in a fit of anguished coughing.*]

**HARRY.** There, there, you be one as is too handy with the tongue, like. Don't you go for to waste the breath inside of you when you'll be wanting all your words for they as bides up yonder and as doesn't know that you be coming back.

**MAY.** [*Throwing apart her shawl and struggling with her cough.*] Harry, you take the tin and fill it at the ditch and give I to drink. 'Tis all live coals within I here, so 'tis.

**HARRY.** You get along home, and maybe as them'll find summat better nor water from the ditch to give you.

**MAY.** No, no, what was I a-saying to you? The dark must fall and cover me, or I won't never go across the field nor a-nigh the house. Give I to drink, give I to drink. And then let me bide in quiet till all of the light be gone.

**HARRY.** [*Taking out a tin mug from the bundle beside her.*] Where be I to find drink, and the frost lying stiff upon the ground?

**MAY.** [*Pointing.*] Up yonder, where the ash tree do stand. Look you there, 'tis a bit of spouting as do come through the hedge, and water from it, flowing downwards away to the ditch.

[*HARRY goes off with the can. MAY watches him, drawing her shawl again about her and striving to suppress a fit of coughing.*]

[*HARRY returns and holds out the can.*]

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**MAY.** 'Tis not very quick as you've been, Harry Moss. Here – give it to I fast. Give!

[HARRY *puts the can towards her and she takes it in her hands, which shake feverishly, and she drinks with sharp avidity.*

**MAY.** 'Tis the taste as I have thought on these many a year. Ah, and have gotten into my mouth, too, when I did lay sleeping, that I have. Water from yonder spout, with the taste of dead leaves sharp in it. Drink of it, too, Harry.

**HARRY.** 'Tis no water as I wants, May. Give I summat as'll lie more warm and comfortable to th' inside like. I bain't one for much water, and that's the truth, 'tis. [*He empties the water on the ground.*

**MAY.** Then go you out upon your way, Harry Moss, for the dark be gathering on us fast, and there be many a mile afore you to the town, where the lamps do shine and 'tis bright and warm in the places where they sells the drink.

**HARRY.** Once I sets off running by myself, I'll get there fast enough, May. But I be going to stop along of you a bit more, for I don't care much about letting you bide lonesome on the road, like.

**MAY.** Then sit you down aside of me, Harry, and the heat in my body, which is like flames, shall maybe warm yourn, too.

**HARRY.** [*Sitting down by her side.*] 'Tis a fine thing to have a home what you can get in and go to, May, with a bit of fire to heat the limbs of you at, and plenty of victuals as you can put inside. How was it as you ever came away from it, like?

**MAY.** Ah, and that's what I be asking of myself most of the time, Harry! For, 'tis summat like a twelve or eleven year since I shut the door behind me and went out.

[*A slight pause.*

**MAY.** Away from them all, upon the road—so 'twas.

**HARRY.** And never see'd no more of them, nor sent to say how 'twas with you, nor nothing?

**MAY.** Nor nothing, Harry. Went out and shut the door behind me. And 'twas finished.

[*A long pause, during which the darkness has gathered.*

**HARRY.** Whatever worked on you for to do such a thing, May?

**MAY.** [*Bitterly.*] Ah now, whatever did!

**HARRY.** 'Tweren't as though you might have been a young wench, flighty like, all for the town and for they as goes up and about the streets of it. For, look you here, 'tis an old woman as you be now, May, and has been a twenty year or more, I don't doubt.

**MAY.** An old woman be I, Harry? Well, to the likes of you 'tis so, I count. But a twelve year gone by, O, 'twas a fine enough looking maid as I was then—Only a wild one, Harry, a wild one, all for the free ways of the road and the lights of the fair—And for the sun to rise in one place where I was, and for I to be in t'other when her should set.

**HARRY.** I'd keep my breath for when 'twas wanted, if 'twas me.

**MAY.** Come, look I in the face, Harry Moss, and tell I if so be as they'll be likely to know I again up at home?

**HARRY.** How be I to tell you such a thing, May, seeing that 'tis but a ten days or less as I've been along of you on the road? And seeing that when you was a young wench I never knowed the looks of you neither?

**MAY.** Say how the face of I do seem to you now, Harry, and then I'll tell you how 'twas in the days gone by?

**HARRY.** 'Tis all too dark like for to see clear, May. The night be coming upon we wonderful fast.

**MAY.** The hair, 'twas bright upon my head eleven years gone by, Harry. 'Twas glancing, as might be the wing of a thrush, so 'twas.

**HARRY.** Well, 'tis as the frost might lie on a dead leaf now, May, that it be.

**MAY.** And the colour on me was as a rose, and my limbs was straight. 'Twas fleet like a rabbit as I could get about, the days that was then, Harry.

**HARRY.** 'Tis a poor old bent woman as you be now, May.

**MAY.** Ah, Death have been tapping on the door of my body this long while, but, please God, I can hold me with the best of them yet, Harry, and that I can. Victuals to th' inside of I and a bit of clothing to my bones, with summat to quiet this cough as doubles of I up. Why, there, Harry, you won't know as 'tis me when I've been to home a day or two—or may be as 'twill take a week.



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**HARRY.** I count 'twill take a rare lot of victuals afore you be set up as you once was, May.

**MAY.** Look you in my eyes, Harry. They may not know me up at home by the hair, which is different to what 'twas, or by the form of me, which be got poor and nesh like. But in the eye there don't come never no change. So look you at they, Harry, and tell I how it do appear to you.

**HARRY.** There be darkness lying atween you and me, May.

**MAY.** Then come you close to I, Harry, and look well into they.

**HARRY.** Them be set open wonderful wide and 'tis as though a heat comed out from they. 'Tis not anyone as might care much for to look into the eyes what you've got.

**MAY.** [*With despondence.*] Maybe then, as them'll not know as 'tis me, Harry Moss.

**HARRY.** I count as they'll be hard put to, and that's the truth.

**MAY.** The note of me be changed, too, with this cold what I have, and the breath of me so short, but 'twon't be long, I count, afore they sees who 'tis. Though all be changed to th' eye like, there'll be summat in me as'll tell they. And 'tis not a thing of shape, nor of colour as'll speak for I—But 'tis summat what do come straight out of the hearts of we and do say better words for we nor what the looks nor tongues of us might tell. You mind me, Harry, there's that which will come out of me as'll bring they to know who 'tis.

**HARRY.** Ah, I reckon as you'll not let them bide till they does.

**MAY.** And when they do know, and when they sees who 'tis, I count as they'll be good to me, I count they will. I did used to think as Steve, he was a hard one, and th' old woman what's his mother, hard too—And that it did please him for to keep a rein on me like, but I sees thing different now.

**HARRY.** Ah, 'tis one thing to see by candle and another by day.

**MAY.** For 'twas wild as I was in the time gone by. Wild after pleasuring and the noise in the town, and men a-looking at the countenance of I, and a-turning back for to look again. But, hark you here, 'tis powerful changed as I be now.

**HARRY.** Ah, I count as you be. Be changed from a young woman into an old one.

**MAY.** I'm finished with the road journeying and standing about in the streets on market days and the talk with men in the drinking places—Men what don't want to look more nor once on I now, and what used to follow if 'twasn't only a bit of eyelid as I'd lift on them, times that is gone.

**HARRY.** Ah, 'twould take a lot of looking to see you as you was.

**MAY.** Yes, I be finished with all of it now, and willing for to bide quiet at the fireside and to stay with the four walls round I and the door shut.

**HARRY.** I reckon as you be.

**MAY.** And I'm thinking as they'll be rare pleased for to have I in the house again. 'Twill be another pair of hands to the work like. And when I was young, 'twas not on work as I was set much.

**HARRY.** Ah, I did guess as much.

**MAY.** But when I gets a bit over this here nasty cough, 'tis a strong arm as them'll have working for they; Steve, th' old woman what's his mother, and little Dorry, too.

**HARRY.** Dorry? I han't heard tell of she.

**MAY.** That's my little baby as was, Harry Moss. I left she crawling on the floor, and now I count as she be growed into a rare big girl. Bless the innocent heart of her!

**HARRY.** Whatever led you to do such a thing, I can't think! You must have been drove to it like, wasn't you?

**MAY.** 'Twas summat inside of me as drove I, then. 'Twas very likely the blood of they gipsies which did leap in I, so that when I was tied up to Steve, 'twas as if they had got I shut in a box. 'Twas the bridle on my head and the bit in the mouth of I; and to be held in where once I had gone free. [*A short pause.*]

**MAY.** And I turned wild, Harry, for the very birds seemed to be calling I from the hedges to come out along of they, and the berries tossing in the wind, and the leaves blowing away quick from where they'd been stuck all summer. All of it spoke to I, and stirred I powerful, so that one morning when the sun was up and the breeze running, I comed out into the air, Harry, and shut the door behind I. And 'twas done—so 'twas.

**HARRY.** And didn't they never try for to stop you, nor for to bring you back, May?

**MAY.** No, Harry, they did not.

**HARRY.** And where was it you did go to, May, once you was out and the door shut ahind of you?

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**MAY.** Ah—where! To the east, to the south, every part. 'Twas morning with I in that time, and the heart of I was warm. And them as went along of I on the road, did cast but one look into the countenance of I. Then 'twas the best as they could give as I might take; and 'twas for no lodging as I did want when dark did come falling.

**HARRY.** And yet, look you here, you be brought down terrible low, May.

**MAY.** The fine looks of a woman be as grass, Harry, and in the heat of the day they do wither and die. And that what has once been a grand flower in the hand of a man is dropped upon the ground and spat upon, maybe. So 'twas with I.

*[She bows her head on her knees, and for a moment is shaken with sudden grief.]*

**HARRY.** Don't you take on so, May. Look you here, you be comed to the end of your journeying this day, and that you be.

**MAY.** *[Raising her head.]* Ah, 'tis so, 'tis so. And 'tis rare glad as them'll be to see I once again. Steve, he's a hard man, but a good one—And I'll tell you this, Harry Moss, he'll never take up with no woman what's not me—and that he won't—I never knowed him much as look on one, times past; and 'twill be the same as ever now, I reckon. And little Dorry, 'twill be fine for her to get her mammy back, I warrant—so 'twill.

*[A slight pause.]*

**MAY.** Th' old woman—well—I shan't take it amiss if her should be dead, like. Her was always a smartish old vixen to I, that her was, and her did rub it in powerful hard as Steve was above I in his station and that. God rest the bones of she, for I count her'll have been lying in the churchyard a good few years by now. But I bain't one to bear malice, and if so be as her's above ground, 'tis a rare poor old wretch with no poison to the tongue of she, as her'll be this day—so 'tis.

**HARRY.** Look you here—the snow's begun to fall and 'tis night. Get up and go in to them all yonder. 'Tis thick dark now and there be no one on the road to see you as you do go.

**MAY.** Help I to get off the ground then, Harry, for the limbs of me be powerful weak.

**HARRY.** *[Lifting her up.]* The feel of your body be as burning wood, May.

**MAY.** *[Standing up.]* Put me against the stile, Harry, and then let I bide alone.

**HARRY.** Do you let me go over the field along of you, May, just to the door.

**MAY.** No, no, Harry, get you off to the town and leave me to bide here a while in the quiet of my thoughts. 'Tis of little Dorry, and of how pleased her'll be to see her mammy once again, as I be thinking. But you, Harry Moss, as han't got no home to go to, nor fireside, nor victuals, you set off towards the town. And go you quick.

**HARRY.** There's summat in me what doesn't care about leaving you so, May.

**MAY.** And if ever you should pass this way come spring-time, Harry, when the bloom is white on the trees, and the lambs in the meadows, come you up to the house yonder, and may be as I'll be able to give you summat to keep in remembrance of me. For to-day, 'tis empty-handed as I be.

**HARRY.** I don't want nothing from you, May, I don't.

**MAY.** *[Fumbling in her shawl.]* There, Harry—'tis comed back to my mind now. *[She takes out part of a loaf of bread.]* Take you this bread. And to-night, when you eats of it, think on me, and as how I be to home with Steve a—holding of my hand and little Dorry close against me; and plenty of good victuals, with a bed to lie upon warm. There, Harry, take and eat.

*[She holds the bread to him]*

**HARRY.** *[Taking the bread.]* I count 'twill all be well with you now, May?

**MAY.** I warrant as 'twill, for I be right to home. But go you towards the town, Harry, for 'tis late. And God go with you, my dear, now and all time.

**HARRY.** I'll set off running then. For the night, 'tis upon us, May, and the snow, 'tis thick in the air.

*[MAY turns to the stile and leans on it heavily, gazing across the field. HARRY sets off quickly down the road.]*

**ACT II.—Scene 1.**

*The living room in the Brownings' cottage. The room is divided by a curtain which screens the fireside end from the draught of the principal door.*

**To the right of the fireplace is a door leading upstairs.** *Chairs are grouped round the hearth, and there is a table at which JANE BROWNING is ironing a dress by the light of one candle. DORRY leans against the table, watching her.*

**JANE.** *[Putting aside the iron.]* There, you take and lay it on the bed upstairs, and mind you does it careful, for I'm not a-going to iron it twice.

*[She lays the dress carefully across DORRY'S arms.]*

**DORRY.** Don't the lace look nice, Gran'ma?

**JANE.** You get along upstairs and do as I says, and then come straight down again.

**DORRY.** Couldn't I put it on once, Gran'ma, just to see how it do look on me?

**JANE.** And get it all creased up afore to-morrow! Whatever next! You go and lay it on the bed this minute, do you hear?

**DORRY.** *[Leaving the room by the door to the right.]* I'd like to put it on just once, I would.

*[JANE BROWNING blows out the candle and puts away the iron and ironing cloth. She stirs up the fire and then sits down by it as DORRY comes back.]*

**DORRY.** Dad's cleaning of himself ever so—I heard the water splashing something dreadful as I went by his door.

**JANE.** 'Tis a-smartening of hisself up for this here dancing as he be about, I reckon.

**DORRY.** *[Sitting down on a stool.]* I'd like to go along, too, and see the dancing up at the schools to-night, I would.

**JANE.** And what next, I should like to know!

**DORRY.** And wear my new frock what's ironed, and the beads what Miss Sims gived me.

**JANE.** *[Looking out at the window.]* I'm thinking as we shall get some snow by and bye. 'Tis come over so dark all of a sudden.

**DORRY.** Couldn't I go along of they, Gran'ma, and wear my new frock, and the beads, too? I never see'd them dance th' old year out yet, I haven't.

**JANE.** Get along with you, Dorry. 'Tis many a year afore you'll be of an age for such foolishness. And that's what I calls it, this messing about with dancing and music and I don't know what.

**DORRY.** Katie Sims be younger nor me and she's let to go, she is.

**JANE.** You bain't Katie Sims, nor she you. And if the wedding what's to-morrow isn't enough to stuff you up with nonsense, I don't know what is.

**DORRY.** I wish it was to-morrow now, Gran'ma, I do. Shall you put on your Sunday gown first thing, or wait till just afore we goes to church?

**JANE.** How your tongue do go! Take and bide quiet a bit, if you knows how.

**DORRY.** I shall ask Dad if I may go along of him and Miss Sims to the dance, I shall. Dad's got that kind to me since last night – he gived me a sixpence to buy sweets this morning when I hadn't asked. And won't it be nice when Miss Sims comes here to live, and when you has someone to help you in the work, Gran'ma?

**JANE.** Well—'tis to be hoped as 'twill be all right this time.

**DORRY.** This time, Gran'ma! Why, wasn't it all right when Dad was married afore, then?

**JANE.** *[Getting the lamp from a shelf.]* I don't light up as a rule till 'tis six o'clock, but I count it's a bit of snow coming as have darkened the air like.

**DORRY.** Gran'ma, isn't Miss Sims nice-looking, don't you think? I'd like to wear my hair like hers and have earrings a-hanging from me and a-shaking when I moves my head, I would.

**JANE.** *[Setting the lamp on the table.]* Here, fetch me the matches, do.

**DORRY.** *[Bringing the matches.]* Was my mammy nice-looking, like Miss Sims, Gran'ma?

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**JANE.** I'm one as goes by other things nor looks—For like as not 'tis fine looks as is the undoing of most girls as has them— give me a plain face and a heart what's pure, I says, and 'tis not far out as you'll be.

**DORRY.** Was my mammy's heart pure, Gran'ma? [*A moment 's silence. JANE lights the lamp. DORRY leans at the table, watching her.*]

**DORRY.** Was my mammy's—[*A loud knock on the outside door.*]

**JANE.** Who's that come bothering round! Run and see, Dorry, there's a good child.

**DORRY.** It'll be Gran'ma Vashti, I daresay. She do mostly knock at the door loud with her stick.

[*DORRY runs to the window and looks out.*]

**DORRY.** 'Tis her, and the snow white all upon her.

[*DORRY goes to the door to open it.*]

**JANE.** [*To herself.*] Of all the meddlesome old women – why can't her bide till her's wanted.

[*DORRY opens the door wide, and VASHTI Comes slowly in to the room, leaning on a big staff.*]

**JANE.** Well, Vashti Reed, and what brings you down from the hill to-day? 'Twould have been better had you bid at home, with the dark coming on and the snow.

**DORRY.** [*Who has closed the door.*] Sit down, Granny – there, close against the fire, do.

[*VASHTI stands in the middle of the room, looking from one to another.*]

**DORRY.** Sit down, Granny, by the fire, do.

**VASHTI.** 'Tis in the house and out of it as I have went. And down to the pool where the ice do lie, and up on the fields where 'tis fog, And there be summat in I what drives I onward, as might the wind. And no where may the bones of me rest this day.

**JANE.** If 'tis to talk your foolishness as you be come, you'd best have stopped away. Here, sit you down, Vashti Reed, and behave sensible, and maybe as I'll get you summat warm to drink presently.

**DORRY.** Yes, Grannie, sit you down along of we.

[*VASHTI sits stiffly down by the hearth, leaning on her stick. JANE resumes her place, and DORRY puts her little stool between them.*]

**VASHTI.** And in the night when I was laid down, against the windowpane it fled a three times. A three time it fled and did beat the pane as though 'twould get in. And I up and did open the window. And the air it ran past I, and 'twas black, with naught upon it but the smell of a shroud. So I knowed.

**DORRY.** What did you know, Granny?

**VASHTI.** [*Leaning forward and warming her hands at the fire, speaking as though to herself.*] Summat lost—summat lost, and what was trying to get safe away.

**DORRY.** Safe away? From what, Granny?

**VASHTI.** And there be one what walks abroad in the night time, what holds in the hand of him a stick, greater nor this staff what I holds here, and the knife to it be as long again by twice.

**DORRY.** O, Granny, I'll be a-feared to go across the garden after dark, I shall.

**JANE.** What do you want to go and put that there into the child's head for? I'd like for Steve to hear you talking of such stuff.

**VASHTI.** I sat me down at the table, but the victuals was as sand in the mouth, and the drink did put but coldness within I. And when the door was closed, 'twas as if one did come running round the house and did beat upon it for to be let in. Then I did go for to open it, but the place outside was full of emptiness, and 'twas they old carrion crows what did talk to I out of the storm.

**JANE.** How you do go on, to be sure! Why don't you speak of summat what's got some sense to it? Come, don't you know as Steve, his wedding day, 'tis to-morrow as ever is.

**DORRY.** 'Tis the New Year, too, Granny, as well as Dad's marriage.

**VASHTI.** [*Suddenly.*] Be this house made ready for a-marrying, then?

**DORRY.** Why, of course it be, Granny. Don't you see how 'tis cleaned and the new net curtains in the windows, and the bit of drugget 'gainst the door where the old one always tripped me up?

**VASHTI.** I see naught but what 'tis more like a burial here. So 'tis. And 'tis a burial as I've carried in my heart as I comed down from the hills.

**DORRY.** [*Looking out of the window.*] Granny, you'll be forced to bide the night along of we, 'cause the snow be falling thick, and 'twill be likely as not as you'll lose your way if you start for to go home again when 'tis

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snowing.

**JANE.** Th' old thing may as well bide the night now she be come. Hark you, Vashti, 'twill save you the journey down to-morrow like, if you bides the night, and the chimney corner is all as you ever wants.

**VASHTI.** And what should I be journeying down to-morrow for, Jane Browning?

**DORRY.** Why, Granny, 'tis Dad's wedding day to-morrow, and 'tis a white frock with lace to it as I'm going to wear, and beads what Miss Sims gived me, and the shoes what was new except for being worn to church three times. Shall I fetch them all and show to you, Granny?

**JANE.** Yes, run along and get them, Dorry; very likely 'twill give her thoughts a turn, looking at the things, seeing as she be in one of her nasty moods to-day when you can't get a word what isn't foolishness out of her.

[DORRY runs upstairs.

**VASHTI.** [*Leaning forward.*] Was her telling of a marriage?

**JANE.** Why, yes, Vashti Reed. And you know all about it, only you don't trouble for to recollect nothing but what you dreams of yourself in the night. 'Tis our Steve what's going to marry Annie Sims to-morrow.

**VASHTI.** Steve Browning?

**JANE.** I haven't patience with th' old gipsy! Yes—Steve. And 'tis a twelvemonth or more as you'd knowed of it.

**VASHTI.** Our Steve, what's husband to my May?

**JANE.** 'Tis a fine thing to fetch up May this evening, that 'tis. May, what went out trolloping along the roads 'stead of she biding at home to mind the house and child! 'Tis how you did breed she up, Vashti Reed, what led her to act as her did. And if you'd have bred her different, 'twould have been all the same; for what's in the blood is bound to out and show; and when you picks a weed and sets it in the room, 'tain't no flower as you must look for.

**VASHTI.** 'Tis summat like a twelve year since her went. But in the blinking of an eye the latch might be raised, and she come through the door again. God bless the head an feet of she!

**JANE.** There you are, Vashti, talking so foolish. A bad herb like she, was bound for to meet her doom. And 'twas in the river up London way where the body of her was caught, floating, and the same petticoat to it as I've seed on May a score of times. Don't you recollect how 'twas parson as brought the news to we?

**VASHTI.** 'Taint with no parsons as I do hold, nor with what may come from the mouths of they, neither.

**JANE.** And Steve, I knowed what was in his mind when parson was gone out. 'Twas not much as he did say, being a man what hasn't many words to his tongue. But he took and fetched down his big coat what do hang up yonder, and told I to put a bit of black to the sleeve of it. Leastways, he didn't speak the words, but I seed what he was after, and I took and sewed a bit on, and he's wore it ever since till yesterday—And that's eleven year ago it be—so there.

**VASHTI.** Her be moving about upon the earth, her be. And I seems to feel the tread of she at night time, and by day as well. Her bain't shrouded, nor boxed, nor no churchyard sod above the limbs of she—you take my words—and there shall come a day when the latch shall rise and her be standing among us and a-calling on her child and husband what's forgotten she.

**JANE.** For goodness sake, Vashti, have done speaking about such things to-night. If Steve was to hear you, why I shouldn't wonder if he was to put you out of the door and into the snow—and 'tis most unfitting for to talk so afore the child.

**VASHTI.** [*Calling out loudly.*] Come back to I, May—you come back to I—there bain't no one what thinks on the name of you, or what wants you but your old mother. You come back to I!

**JANE.** I'll thank you for to shut your mouth, old Vashti! 'Tain't nothing to be proud on as you've got, and 'twould be better if you was to be less free in your hollering. Look, here's Dorry coming.

[DORRY comes into the kitchen; she is wearing her new white frock.

**DORRY.** See, Granny, I've been and put it on for to show you better. See the lace? Isn't it nice? And the beads, too. I didn't stop for to put on my shoes, nor my new stockings. Nor my hat, what's got a great long feather all round of it.

**JANE.** You bad, naughty girl, Dorry, you'll crease and tumble that frock so as it's not fit to be seen to-morrow! Whatever did you go to put it on for?

**DORRY.** So as that Gran should see something pretty, and so as she should come out of her trouble. Gran's

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always got some trouble in her mind, han't you, Granny?

**VASHTI.** A twelve year gone by, my child.

**JANE.** I'll give it you if you starts off again.

**VASHTI.** A twelve year gone by –

**DORRY.** A twelve year gone by, what then, Granny?

**VASHTI.** 'Tis more'n eleven years since her wented out of the door, my child—your poor mammy. Out of the door, out of the door! And likely as not 'twill be feet first as her shall be brought in again.

**DORRY.** Granny, was my poor mammy, what's dead, nice looking like Miss Sims as is going for to marry Dad, to—morrow?

**VASHTI.** 'Twas grand as a tree in full leaf and the wind a—moving all the green of it as was your mammy, my dear.

**DORRY.** And did she have fine things to her, nice gowns and things, like Miss Sims, Granny?

**JANE.** 'Twas the looks of her and the love of finery and pleasuring what was her undoing, as 'twill be the undoing of you, too, Dorry, if you don't take care. 'Tis she as you favours, and none of your father's people, more's the pity, and 'tis more thoughtful and serious as you'll have to grow if you don't want to come to harm. You take and go right up, and off with that frock, do you hear me?

**DORRY.** O, I wanted to be let to go to the dancing now I'd got it on, I did.

**JANE.** Dancing, there you are! Dancing and finery, 'tis all as you do think on, and 'tis plain to see what's got working in the inside of you, Dorry. 'Tis the drop of bad blood as you has got from she what bore you. But I might as well speak to that door for all you cares. Only, hark you here, you'll be sorry one of these days as you han't minded me better. And then 'twill be too late.

*[STEVE comes down the stairs, pushes open the door and enters.]*

**STEVE.** Well, Mother, what's up now? Gran, you here? Why, Dorry, what be you a—crying for?

**DORRY.** I wants to be let to go to the dancing, Dad—now that I've got my frock on and all.—O, I wants to be let to go.

**STEVE.** Well, Mother—what do you say? 'Twouldn't hurt for she to look in about half an hour, and Annie and me we could bring her back betimes.

**DORRY.** O, Dad, I wants to go if 'twas only for a minute.

**STEVE.** There, there—you shall go and we'll say no more about it.

**JANE.** I never knowed you give in to her so foolish like this afore, Steve.

**STEVE.** Well, Mother, 'tain't every day as a man's married, that 'tain't.

**VASHTI.** And so you're to be wed come to—morrow, Steve? They tells me as you're to be wed.

**STEVE.** That's right enough, Gran.

**VASHTI.** *[Rising.]* And there be no resting in me to—day, Steve. There be summat as burns quick in the bones of my body and that will not let me bide.—And 'tis steps as I hears on the roadside and in the fields—and 'tis a bad taste as is in my victuals, and I must be moving, and peering about, and a—taking cold water into my mouth for to do away with the thing on my tongue, which is as the smell of death—So 'tis.

**JANE.** Now she's off again! Come, sit you down, Vashti Reed, and I'll give you summat as'll very likely warm you and keep you quiet in your chair a while. Just you wait till I gets the water boiling.

*[She begins to stir up the fire and sets a kettle on it.]*

**DORRY.** *[From the window.]* Here's Miss Sims coming up the path, and Rosie too. O, they're wrapped up all over 'cause 'tis snowing. I'll open, I'll open.

*[She runs to the door and unlatches it. ANNIE and ROSE SIMS come in, shaking the snow from them and unbuttoning their cloaks, which STEVE takes from them and hangs on the door.]*

**ACT II.—Scene 2.**

**ANNIE.** [*As STEVE takes off her cloak.*] 'Tis going to be a dreadful night. The snow's coming down something cruel.

**ROSE.** There won't be many to the dance if it keeps on like this, will there?

**STEVE.** Get you to the fire, both of you, and warm yourselves before we sets out again.

**DORRY.** Miss Sims, Miss Sims—Miss Rosie—I'm going along with you to the dance, Dad says as I may.

**JANE.** Bless the child! However her has worked upon her father, and he so strict, I don't know.

**ANNIE.** Well, you be got up fine and grand, Dorry—I shouldn't hardly know 'twas you. [*Turning to VASHTI REED.*] Good evening, Mrs. Reed, my eyes was very near blinded when I first got in out of the dark, and I didn't see as you was there.

**ROSE.** Good evening, Mrs. Reed, and how be you keeping this cold weather?

**VASHTI.** [*Peering into their faces as they stand near her.*] What be you a—telling I of?

**ANNIE.** We was saying, how be you in this sharp weather, Mrs. Reed?

**VASHTI.** How be I?

**ROSE.** Yes, Mrs. Reed, how be you a—keeping now 'tis come over such nasty weather?

**VASHTI.** And how should an old woman be, and her one child out in the rain and all the wind, and driv' there too by them as was laid like snakes in the grass about the feet of she, ready for to overthrow she when her should have gotten to a time of weakness.

**JANE.** Take no account of what she do say, girls, but sit you down in the warm and bide till I gets the time to take and look on the clothes which you have upon you. [*Moving about and putting tea things on the table.*] I be but just a—going to make a cup of tea for th' old woman, with a drop of summat strong to it as will keep her from using of her tongue so free till morning time.

**ANNIE.** [*Sitting down.*] Poor old woman, 'tis a sad thing when folks do come to such a pass as she.

**ROSE.** And han't got their proper sense to them, nor nothing. But she's better off nor a poor creature what we saw crouching below the hedge as we was coming across the meadow. "Why," I says to Annie, "it must be bad to have no home to bide in such a night as this!" Isn't that so, Mrs. Browning?

**STEVE.** Ah, you're right there, you're right.

**ROSE.** I wouldn't much care to be upon the road to—night, would you, Steve?

**VASHTI.** And at that hour when th' old year be passing out, and dark on all the land, the graves shall open and give up the dead which be in they. And, standing in the churchyard you may read the face to each, as the corpses do go by. There's many a night as I have stood and have looked into they when them did draw near to I, but never the face I did seek.

[*Here JANE, who has been making a cup of tea, and who has poured something in it from a bottle, advances to VASHTI.*]

**JANE.** Here, Vashti Reed, here's a nice cup of hot tea for you. Take and drink it up and very likely 'twill warm th' inside of you, for I'll lay as you haven't seen a mouthful of naught this day.

**STEVE.** Ah, that's it, that's it. When folks do go leer 'tis a powerful lot of fancies as do get from the stomach to the heads of they.

[*VASHTI takes the cup and slowly drinks.*]

**DORRY.** O, Miss Sims, you do look nice. Look, Gran'ma, at what Miss Sims have got on!

**VASHTI.** [*Putting down her cup and leaning forward.*] Which of you be clothed for marriage?

**JANE.** Get along of you, Gran, 'tis for the dance up at the school as they be come.

**VASHTI.** Come you here—her what's to wed our Steve. Come you here and let I look at you. My eyes bain't so quick as they was once. Many tears have clouded they. But come you here.

**DORRY.** Go along to her, Miss Sims, Granny wants to look at your nice things.

**ANNIE.** [*Steps in front of VASHTI.*] Here I be, Mrs. Reed.

**VASHTI.** Be you the one what's going to wed our Steve come New Year.

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**ANNIE.** That's it, Mrs. Reed, that's it.

**VASHTI.** And be these garments which you be clothed in for marriage or for burial?

**STEVE.** Come, Granny, have another cup of tea. Annie, don't you take no account of she. 'Tis worry and that as have caused the mind of she to wander a bit, but she don't mean nothing by it.

**ANNIE.** All right, Steve. She don't trouble me at all. [ *To VASHTI.* ] 'Tis to be hoped as I shall make a good wife to Steve, Mrs. Reed.

**VASHTI.** Steve! What do Steve want with another wife? Han't he got one already which is as a rose among the sow-thistles. What do Steve want for with a new one then?

**STEVE.** Come on, girls. I can't stand no more of this. Let's off, and call in to George's as we do go by.

**ROSE.** We did meet Mr. Davis as we was coming along and he said as how 'twouldn't be many minutes afore he joined us here, Steve.

**STEVE.** That's right, then we'll bide a bit longer till George do call for we, only 'tis more nor I can stand when th' old lady gets her tongue moving.

**DORRY.** Why, look, Gran's fell asleep! O, Miss Sims, now that Gran's dropped off and can't say none of her foolish things any more, do stand so as Dad and Gran'ma can see the frock which you've got for the dance.

**ANNIE.** O, Dorry, you're a little torment, that's the truth.

[*She gets up and turns slowly round so that all can see what she has on.*]

**ROSE.** Well, Steve?

**STEVE.** Well, Rosie.

**ROSE.** Haven't you got nothing as you can say, Steve?

**STEVE.** What be I to say, Rose?

**ROSE.** Well, something of how you thinks she looks, of course.

**STEVE.** O, 'tis all right, I suppose.

**ROSE.** All right! And is that about all as you've seen? Why, bless you, Steve, where have you gone and hid your tongue I should like to know!

**STEVE.** Well, there bain't nothing wrong, be there?

**ROSE.** Of course there isn't. But I never did see such a man as you, Steve. Why, I don't believe as you'd know whether Annie haves a pair of eyes to her face or not, nor if they be the same colour one to t'other.

**STEVE.** I sees enough for me. I sees as Annie is the girl as I've picked out of the whole world. And I know that to-morrow she and I is to be made man and wife. And that be pretty nigh enough for me this night, I reckon.

**DORRY.** O, Miss Sims, do you hear what Dad is saying? O, I wonder what I should feel if 'twas me that was going to be married!

**ROSE.** You get and ask Annie how 'tis with her, Dorry. I could tell a fine tale of how as she do lie tossing half the nights, and of the candles that's burned right down to the very end of them, I could.

**ANNIE.** Don't you go for to listen to her, Dorry, nor Steve, neither. She's that flustered herself about the dance to-night that she scarce do know what she's a-saying of. But suppose you was just to ask her what she's got wrapped so careful in that there paper in her hand.

**DORRY.** O, Rosie, whatever is it?

**STEVE.** What's that you've got hold on now, Rosie?

**ANNIE.** Come, show them all, Rose.

[*ROSE slowly unfolds the paper and shows them all a hothouse carnation and a fern.*]

**ROSE.** There 'tis, then.

**DORRY.** O my, Rosie—isn't it beautiful. Be you going to wear it to the dance?

**ROSE.** No, Dorry, 'tisin't for me.

**ANNIE.** You just ask her for whom it is, then, Dorry.

**DORRY.** O, who is it for, Rosie—who is it for?

**ROSE.** No—I'm not a-going to tell none of you.

[*She wraps it up carefully again.*]

**ANNIE.** I'll tell then, for you.

**ROSE.** No, you shan't, Annie—that you shan't!

**ANNIE.** That I shall, then—come you here, Dorry—I'll whisper it to your ear. [*Whispers it to DORRY.*]



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**DORRY.** [*Excitedly.*] I know who 'tis—I know—'tis for Mr. Davis—for Mr. Davis! Think of that, Dad—the flower 'tis for George Davis.

**ROSE.** O, Annie, how you could!

**STEVE.** George –

**VASHTI.** [*Suddenly roused.*] Who named George? There was but one man as was called by that name—and he courted my girl till her was faint and weary of the sound and shape of he, and so on a day when he was come –

**DORRY.** There's Gran gone off on her tales again.

[*JANE crosses the hearth and puts a shawl over the head of VASHTI, who relapses again into sleep.*]

**STEVE.** [*Sitting down by ROSE.*] What's this, Rose? I han't heard tell of this afore. Be there aught a-going on with you and George, then?

**ROSE.** No, Steve, there isn't nothing in it much, except that George and me we walked out last Sunday in the evening like—and a two or three time before.

**STEVE.** And is it that you be a-keeping of that flower for to give to George, then?

**ROSE.** Well—'tis for George as I've saved it out of some what the gardener up at Squire's gived me.

**STEVE.** [*As though to himself.*] 'Tis a powerful many years since George he went a-courting. I never knowed him so much as look upon a maid, I didn't since –

**ROSE.** Well, Steve, I'm sure there's no need for you to be upset over it. 'Tis nothing to you who George walks out with, or who he doesn't.

**STEVE.** Who said as I was upset, Rose?

**ROSE.** Look at the long face what you've pulled. Annie, if 'twas me, I shouldn't much care about marrying a man with such a look to him.

**ANNIE.** What's up, Steve? What's come over you like, all of a minute?

**STEVE.** 'Tis naught, Annie, naught. 'Twas summat of past times what comed into the thoughts of me. But 'tis naught. And, Rose, if so be as 'twas you as George is after, I'd wish him to have luck, with all my heart, I would, for George and me—well, we too has always stuck close one to t'other, as you knows.

**JANE.** Ah—that you has, George and you—you and George.

**ANNIE.** Hark—there's someone coming up now.

**DORRY.** O, let me open the door—let me open it!

[*She runs across the room and lifts the latch. GEORGE stands in the doorway shaking the snow from him. Then he comes into the room.*]

**DORRY.** I'm going to the dance, Mr. Davis. Look, haven't I got a nice frock on?

**STEVE.** Good evening, George, and how be you to-night?

**GEORGE.** Nicely, Steve, nicely. Good evening, Mrs. Browning. Miss Sims, good evening—Yes, Steve, I'll off with my coat, for 'tis pretty well sprinkled with snow, like.

[*STEVE helps GEORGE to take off his overcoat.*]

**ROSE.** A happy New Year to you, Mr. Davis.

**JANE.** And that's a thing which han't no luck to it, if 'tis said afore the proper time, Rosie.

**ROSE.** Well, but 'tis New Year's Eve, isn't it?

**GEORGE.** Ah, so 'tis—and a terrible nasty storm as ever I knowed! 'Twas comed up very nigh to my knees, the snow, as I was a-crossing of the meadow. And there lay some poor thing sheltering below the hedge, with a bit of sacking throwed over her. I count 'tis very near buried alive as anyone would be as slept out in such a night.

**STEVE.** I reckon 'twould be so—so 'twould. But come you in and give yourself a warm; and Mother, what do you say to getting us a glass of cider all round afore we sets out to the dancing.

**JANE.** What do you want to be taking drinks here for, when 'tis free as you'll get them up at the school?

**STEVE.** Just a drop for to warm we through. Here, I'll fetch it right away.

**JANE.** No, you don't. I'll have no one meddling in the pantry save it's myself. Dorry, give me that there jug.

**DORRY.** [*Taking a jug from the dresser.*] Here 'tis, Gran'ma, shall I light the candle?

**JANE.** So long as you'll hold the matches careful.

**ANNIE.** Well—'tis to be hoped as the weather'll change afore morning.

**ROSE.** We shall want a bit of sunshine for the bride.

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**GEORGE.** That us shall, but it don't look much as though we should get it.

[JANE BROWNING and DORRY go out of the room.]

**STEVE.** Sit you down, George, along of we. 'Tis right pleased as I be for to see you here to-night.

**GEORGE.** Well, Steve, I bain't one for a lot of words but I be powerful glad to see you look as you does, and 'tis all joy as I wishes you and her what's to be your wife, to-morrow.

**ANNIE.** Thank you kindly, Mr. Davis. I shall do my best for Steve, and a girl can't do no more, can she?

**ROSE.** And so you're going to church along of Steve, Mr. Davis?

**GEORGE.** 'Tis as Steve do wish, but I be summat after a cow what has broke into the flower gardens, places where there be many folk got together and I among they.

**ROSE.** O, come, Mr. Davis!

**GEORGE.** 'Tis with me as though t'were all hoof and horn as I was made of. But Steve, he be more used to mixing up with the quality folks and such things, and he do know better nor I how to carry his self in parts when the ground be thick on them.

**ANNIE.** Very likely 'tis a-shewing of them into their places of a Sunday and a-ringing of the bell and a-helping of the vicar along with the service, like, as has made Steve so easy.

**ROSIE.** But, bless you, Mr. Davis, you sees a good bit of the gentry, too, in your way, when you goes in to houses, as it might be the Squire's for to put up a shelf, or mend a window, and I don't know what.

**GEORGE.** Ah, them caddling sort of jobs don't much agree with I, Miss Rose. And when I gets inside one of they great houses, where the maids do pad about in boots what you can't hear, and do speak as though 'twere church and parson at his sermon, I can't think of naught but how 'twill feel for to be out in the open again. Why, bless you, I do scarce fetch my breath in one of they places from fear as there should be too much sound to it, and the noise of my own hammer do very near scare I into fits.

**ROSE.** Well, Mr. Davis, who would ever have thought it?

[MRS. BROWNING and DORRY come back and the cider is put upon the table, DORRY and ANNIE getting glasses from the dresser.]

**GEORGE.** [Drinking.] Your health, Steve, and yours, too, Miss Sims. And many years of happiness to you both.

**STEVE.** Thank you kindly, George.

**ANNIE.** Thank you, Mr. Davis.

**DORRY.** Hasn't Miss Sims got a nice frock on her for the dance, Mr. Davis?

**GEORGE.** Well, I'm blessed if I'd taken no notice of it, Dorry.

**DORRY.** Why, you're worse nor Dad, I do declare! But you just look at Rosie, now, Mr. Davis, and ask her what she's got wrapped up in that there paper in her hand.

**ROSE.** O, Dorry, you little tease, you!

**DORRY.** You just ask her, Mr. Davis.

**ROSE.** [Undoing the parcel.] There, 'tis nothing to make such a commotion of! Just a flower—see, Mr. Davis? I knowed as it was one what you was partial to, and so I just brought it along with me.

**GEORGE.** That there bain't for I, be it?

**ROSE.** Indeed 'tis—if so as you'll accept of it.

**GEORGE.** O, 'tis best saved against to-morrow. The freshness will be most gone from it, if I was to wear it now.

**DORRY.** No, no, Mr. Davis, 'tis for now! To wear at the dance. Put it on him, Rosie, put it on him.

**ROSE.** [Tossing the flower across the table to GEORGE.] He can put it on hisself well enough, Dorry.

**GEORGE.** [After a moment's hesitation.] I don't know so well about that.

**ANNIE.** Go on, Rosie—pin it into his coat. Come, 'tis getting late.

**DORRY.** O, pin it in quick, Rosie—come along—and then we can start to the dancing.

**ROSE.** Shall I, Mr. Davis?

[GEORGE gets up and crosses the room; ROSE takes the flower and DORRY hands her a pin. She slowly pins the flower in his coat.]

**STEVE.** [Stretching out his hand to ANNIE.] You be so quiet like to-night, Annie. There isn't nothing wrong, is there, my dear?

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**ANNIE.** 'Tis only I'm that full of gladness, Steve, as I don't seem to find words to my tongue for the things what I can talk on most days.

**STEVE.** And that's how 'tis with I, too, Annie. 'Tis as though I was out in the meadows, like—And as though 'twere Sunday, and such a stillness all around that I might think 'twas only me as was upon the earth. But then summat stirs in me sudden and I knows that you be there, too, and 'tis my love for you what has put me right away from the rest of them.

**ANNIE.** Steve, you've had a poor, rough time, I know, but I'll do my best for to smooth it like for you, I will.

**STEVE.** See here, Annie—I be comed out of the rain and into the sun once more.

**DORRY.** [*Leading GEORGE forward.*] See how fine Mr. Davis do look—see, isn't he grand? O, Miss Sims, see how nice the flower do look what Rosie has pinned in his coat! See, Gran'ma.

**JANE.** I've enough to do putting away all these glasses which have been messed up. What I wants to know is when I shall get off to bed this night, seeing as 'tis late already and you none of you gone off yet.

**DORRY.** O, let us be off, let us be off—and what am I to put over my dress, Gran'ma, so as the snow shan't get to it?

**JANE.** If you go careful and don't drop it in the snow may be as I'll wrap my big shawl around of you, Dorry, what's hanging behind the door.

**ROSE.** Give me my cloak, Steve—O, how I do love a bit of dancing, don't you, Mr. Davis?

**GEORGE.** I be about as much use in the ball room as one of they great drag horses, Miss Rose.

**ROSE.** O, get on, Mr. Davis! I don't believe half what you do say, no more does Annie.

**ANNIE.** If Mr. Davis don't know how to dance right, you're the one to learn him, Rose. Come, Dorry, you take hold of my hand, and I'll look after you on the way. Good-night, Mrs. Browning. Good-night, Mrs. Reed.

**DORRY.** Why, Granny's sound asleep, Miss Sims, you know.

**JANE.** And about time, too. 'Tis to be hoped as we shan't have no more trouble with her till morning.

**DORRY.** [*Her eyes raised to the door latch.*] Just look, why the latch is up.

**ANNIE.** Whoever's that, I wonder?

**ROSE.** 'Tis very likely someone with a horse what's lost a shoe, Steve.

**JANE.** I guess as 'tis a coffin wanted sudden, George Davis.

**STEVE.** I bain't a-going to shoe no horses this time of night, not if 'twas the King hisself what stood at the door.

**GEORGE.** If 'tis a corpse, I guess her'll have to wait till the dancing's finished, then.

[*VASHTI groans in her sleep and turns over in the chair, her face to the fire.*]

**STEVE.** [*Going to the door and speaking loudly.*] Who's there?

**GEORGE.** Us'll soon see.

[*GEORGE unbolts the door and opens it, first a little way, and then wide. MAY is seen standing in the doorway. Her shawl is drawn over head and the lower part of her face.*]

**GEORGE.** Here's someone what's missed their way, I count.

**ROSE.** Why, 'tis like the poor thing we seed beneath the hedge, I do believe.

**ANNIE** **Whatever can she want a-coming-in here at this time of night!**

**JANE.** [*Advancing firmly.*] 'Tis one of they dirty roadsters what there's too many of all about the country. Here, I'll learn you to come to folks' houses this time of night, disturbing of a wedding party. You take and get gone. We don't want such as you in here, we don't.

[*MAY looks fixedly into JANE'S face.*]

**GEORGE.** I count 'tis very nigh starved by the cold as she be.

**STEVE.** Looks like it, and wetted through to the bone.

**JANE.** Put her out and shut the door, George, and that'll learn the likes of she to come round begging at folks' houses what's respectable.

**GEORGE.** 'Tis poor work shutting the door on such as her this night.

**STEVE.** And that 'tis, George, and what's more, I bain't a-going for to do it. 'Tis but a few hours to my wedding, and if a dog was to come to me for shelter I'd not be one to put him from the door.

**JANE.** 'Tain't to be expected as I shall let a dirty tramp bide in my kitchen when 'tis all cleaned up against to-morrow, Steve.

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**STEVE.** To-morrow, 'tis my day, Mother, and I'll have the choosing of my guests, like. [*Turning to MAY.*] Come you in out of the cold. This night you shall bide fed and warmed, so that, may be, in years to come, 'twill please you to think back upon the eve afore my wedding.

[*STEVE stands back, holding the door wide open. MAY, from the threshold, has been looking first on one face and then on another. Suddenly her eyes fall on ANNIE, who has moved to STEVE'S side, laying her hand on his arm, and with a sudden defiance, she draws herself up and comes boldly into the room as the curtain falls.*]

**ACT II.—Scene 3.**

*The same room, two hours later. VASHTI REED seems to be sleeping as before by the fireside. On the settle MAY is huddled, her head bent, the shawl drawn over her face. JANE BROWNING moves about, putting away work things, cups and plates, seeing that the window is closed, winding the clock, etc. There is a tap at the outer door and JANE opens it. STEVE, ANNIE and DORRY enter.*

**JANE.** Whatever kept you so late, Steve, and me a—sitting up for to let you all in and not able to get away to my bed?

**DORRY.** O, Gran'ma, it was beautiful, I could have stopped all night, I could. We comed away early 'cause Miss Sims, she said as the dancing gived her the headache, but the New Year han't been danced in yet, it han't.

**JANE.** You get and dance off to bed, Dorry, that's what you've got to do—and quickly.

**DORRY.** All right, Gran'ma. Good—night, Miss Sims; good—night, Dad. O, why, there's Granny! But her's tight asleep so I shan't say nothing to her. O, I do wish as there was dancing, and lamps, and music playing every night, I do!

*[DORRY goes towards the staircase door.]*

**JANE.** *[Calling after her.]* I'm a—coming along directly. Be careful with the candle, Dorry.

*[JANE opens the door and DORRY goes upstairs. STEVE and ANNIE come towards the fireplace.]*

**STEVE.** Was there aught as you could do for yonder poor thing?

**JANE.** Poor thing, indeed! A good—for—nothing roadster what's been and got herself full of the drink, and that's what's the matter with she. See there, how she do lie, snoring asleep under the shawl of her; and not a word nor sound have I got out of she since giving her the drop of tea a while back.

**STEVE.** Well, well—she won't do us no harm where she do bide. Leave her in the warm till 'tis daylight, then let her go her way.

**JANE.** She and Gran' be about right company one for t'other, I'm thinking.

**STEVE.** Ah, that they be. Let them sleep it off and you get up to bed, Mother.

**JANE.** That I will, Steve. Be you a—going to see Annie safe to home?

**ANNIE.** Do you bide here, Steve, and let me run back—'tis but a step—and I don't like for you to come out into the snow again.

**STEVE.** I'm coming along of you, Annie. Get off to bed, Mother. I'll be back to lock up and all that in less nor ten minutes.

**JANE.** All right, Steve, and do you cast an eye around to see as I han't left nothing out as might get took away, for 'tis poor work leaving the kitchen to roadsters and gipsies and the like.

*[JANE lights a candle and goes upstairs. STEVE takes ANNIE'S hand and they go together towards the outer door. As they pass to the other side of the curtain which is drawn across the room, MAY suddenly rears herself up on the settle, throwing back her shawl, and she leans forward, listening intently.]*

**STEVE.** To—morrow night, Annie!

**ANNIE.** There'll be no turning out into the snow for us both, Steve.

**STEVE.** You'll bide here, Annie, and 'tis more gladness than I can rightly think on, that 'tis.

**ANNIE.** Steve!

**STEVE.** Well, Annie.

**ANNIE.** There's summat what's been clouding you a bit this night. You didn't know as how I'd seen it, but 'twas so.

**STEVE.** Why, Annie, I didn't think as how you'd take notice as I was different from ordinary.

**ANNIE.** But I did, Steve. And at the dancing there was summat in the looks of you which put me in mind of a thing what's hurted. Steve, I couldn't abide for to see you stand so sad with the music going on and all. So I told you as I'd the headache.

**STEVE.** O Annie, 'twas thoughts as was too heavy for me, and I couldn't seem to get them pushed aside, like.

**ANNIE.** How'd it be if you was to tell me, Steve.

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**STEVE.** I don't much care for to, Annie. But 'twas thoughts what comed out of the time gone by, as may be I'd been a bit too hard with—with her as was Dorry's mother.

**ANNIE.** O, I'm sure, from all I hear, as she had nothing to grumble at, Steve.

**STEVE.** And there came a fearsome thought, too, Annie, as you might go the same way through not getting on comfortable with me, and me being so much older nor you, and such—like. Annie, I couldn't bear for it to happen so, I could not. For I holds to having you aside of me always stronger nor I holds to anything else in the world, and I could not stand it if 'twas as I should lose you.

**ANNIE.** There's nothing in the world as could make you lose me, Steve. For, look you here, I don't think as there's a woman on the earth what's got such a feeling as is in my heart this night, of quiet, Steve, and of gladness, because that you and me is to be wed and to live aside of one another till death do part us.

**STEVE.** Them be good words, Annie, and no mistake.

**ANNIE.** And what you feels about the days gone by don't count, Steve, 'cause they bain't true of you. You was always a kind husband, and from what I've hear—ed folks say, she was one as wasn't never suited to neither you nor yours.

**STEVE.** Poor soul, she be dead and gone now, and what I thinks one way or t'other can't do she no good. Only 'tis upon me as I could take you to—morrow more glad—like, Annie, if so be as I had been kinder to she, the time her was here.

**ANNIE.** Do you go off to bed, Steve, you're regular done up, and that's what 'tis. I never hear—ed you take on like this afore.

**STEVE.** All right, my dear, don't you mind what I've been saying. Very like 'tis a bit unnerved as I be this night. But 'tis a good thought, bain't it, Annie, that come to—morrow at this time, there won't be no more need for us to part?

**ANNIE.** *[As he opens the door.]* O, 'tis dark outside!

*[They both leave the cottage. MAY throws back her shawl as though stifled. She gets up and first stands bending over VASHTI. Seeing that she is still sleeping heavily, she goes to the door, opens it gently and looks out. After a moment she closes it and walks about the kitchen, examining everything with a fierce curiosity. She takes up the shawl DORRY has been wearing, looks at it hesitatingly, and then clasps it passionately to her face. Hearing steps outside she flings it down again on the chair and returns to the settle, where she sits huddled in the corner, having wrapped herself again in her shawl, only her eyes looking out unquietly from it. STEVE re-enters. He bolts the door, then goes up to the table in front of the fire to put out the lamp.]*

**STEVE.** Can I get you an old sack or summat for to cover you up a bit this cold night?

*[MAY looks at him for a moment and then shakes her head.]*

**STEVE.** All right. You can just bide where you be on the settle. 'Tis warmer within nor upon the road to—night, and I'll come and let you out when 'tis morning.

*[MAY raises both her hands in an attitude of supplication.]*

**STEVE.** *[Pausing, with his hand on the burner of the lamp.]* Be there summat as you wants what I can give to you?

*[MAY looks at him for a moment and then speaks in a harsh whisper.]*

**MAY.** Let I bide quiet in the dark, 'tis all I wants now. *[STEVE puts out the lamp.]*

**STEVE.** *[As though to himself, as he goes towards the door upstairs.]* Then get off to your drunken sleep again, and your dreams.

*[Curtain.]*

ACT II.—Scene 4.

*The fire is almost out. A square of moonlight falls on the floor from the window. VASHTI still sleeps in the chimney corner. MAY is rocking herself to and fro on the settle.*

**MAY.** Get off to your drunken sleep and to your dreams! Your dreams—your dreams—Ah, where is it as they have gone, I'd like for to know. The dreams as comed to I when I was laid beneath the hedge. Dreams!

*[She gets up, feels down the wall in a familiar way for the bellows—blows up the fire and puts some coal on it gently. Then she draws forward a chair and sits down before it.*

**MAY.** *[Muttering to herself.]* 'Tis my own hearth when 'tis all said and done.

*[She turns up the front of her skirt and warms herself, looking sharply at VASHTI REED now and then.*

*[Presently VASHTI'S eyes open, resting, at first unseeingly, and then with recognition, on MAY'S face.*

**VASHTI.** So you be comed back, May. I always knowed as you would.

**MAY.** How did you know 'twas me, then?

**VASHTI.** 'Cause I knowed. There 'tis.

**MAY.** I be that changed from the times when I would sit a—warming of myself by this here fire.

**VASHTI.** Ah, and be you changed, May? My eyes don't see nothing of it, then.

**MAY.** Ah, I be got into an ugly old woman now, mother, and Steve—Steve, he looked in the face of I and didn't so much as think who 'twas. "Get off to the drunken sleep of you and to your dreams." 'Twas that what he did say to I.

**VASHTI.** Your old mother do know better nor Steve. Ah, 'tweren't in no shroud as I seed you, May, nor yet with the sod upon the face of you, but stepping, stepping up and down on the earth, through the water what layed on the roads, and on the dry where there be high places, and in the grass of the meadows. That's how 'twas as I did see you, May.

**MAY.** And I would like to know how 'twas as Steve saw I.

**VASHTI.** Ah, and there was they as did buzz around as thick as waspes in summer time and as said, "She be under ground and rotting now—that her be." And they seed in I but a poor old woman what was sleeping in the chimney corner, with no hearing to I. "Rotting yourself," I says, and I rears up sudden, "She be there as a great tree and all the leaves of it full out—and you—snakes in the grass, snakes in the grass, all of you! There 'tis.

**MAY.** *[Mockingly.]* "It's a good thought, bain't it, Annie, that to—morrow this time there won't be no need for us to part?" And in the days when I was a young woman and all the bloom of I upon me, 'twouldn't have been once as he'd have looked on such as her.

**VASHTI.** And 'tis full of bloom and rare fine and handsome as you appear now, May, leastways to my old eyes. And when you goes up to Steve and shows yourself, I take it the door'll be shut in the face of the mealy one what they've all been so took up with this long while. I count that 'twill and no mistake. So 'tis.

**MAY.** *[Fiercely.]* Hark you here, Mother, and 'tis to be wed to—morrow as they be! Wed—the both of them, the both of them! And me in my flesh, and wife to Steve! "Can I cover you up with a bit of old sack or summat?" Old sack! When there be a coverlet with feathers to it stretched over where he do lie upstairs. "I'll let you out when 'tis morning." Ah, you will, will you, Steve Browning? Us'll see how 'twill be when 'tis morning—Us'll see, just won't us then!

**VASHTI.** Ah, 'tis in her place as th' old woman will be set come morning—And that her'll be—I count as 'tis long enough as her have mistressed it over the house. *[Shaking her fist towards the ceiling.]* You old she fox, you may gather the pads of you in under of you now, and crouch you down t'other side of the fire like any other old woman of your years—for my May's comed back, and her'll show you your place what you've not known where 'twas in all the days of your old wicked life. So 'tis.

**MAY.** Her han't changed a hair of her, th' old stoat! Soon as I heard the note of she, the heat bubbled up in I, though 'twas chattering in the cold as I had been but a moment afore. "One of they dirty roadsters—I'll learn you to come disturbing of a wedding party, I will." *[Shaking her fist towards the ceiling.]* No, you bain't changed, you hardened old sinner—but the words out of the cruel old mouth of you don't hurt I any more—not they. I be

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passed out of the power of such as you. I knowed I'd have to face you when I comed back, but I knowed, too, as I should brush you out of the way of me, like I would brush one of they old maid flies.

**VASHTI.** Ah, and so I telled she many a time. "You bide till my May be comed home," I says. "She be already put safe to bed and 'tis in the churchyard where her do take her rest," says she. Ah, what a great liar that is, th' old woman what's Steve's mother! And the lies they do grow right out of she tall as rushes, and the wind do blow they to the left and to the right. So 'tis.

**MAY.** Ah, she han't any more power for to hurt I in the ugly old body of her. I be got beyond she. There be but one or two things as can touch I now—But one or two. And I be struck to the heart, I be, struck to the heart.

*[She bends forwards, rocking herself to and fro and weeping.]*

**MAY.** *[As though speaking to herself.]* Back and fro, back and fro—On the dark of the earth and where 'twas light. When 'twas cold and no sound but the steps of I on the road, and the fox's bark; when 'twas hot and the white dust smouldered in the mouth of I, and things flying did plague I with the wings of they—But 'twas always the same thought as I had—"Some day I shall come back to Steve," I did tell me. And then again—"Some day I shall get and hold Dorry in my arms." And now I be comed. And Steve—and Steve—Ah, I be struck deep to the heart, 'tis so. Struck deep!

**VASHTI.** You get upstairs to Steve, May. Get you up there and take the place what's yours.

**MAY.** My place, my place! Where's that I want to know! 'Tis another what's got into the nest now, to lie snug and warm within. And 'tis for I to spread the wings of me and to go out into the storm again. So 'tis.

**VASHTI.** Get you to Steve, May, and let him but look on the form of you and on the bloom, and us'll see what he will do with t'other hussy then. Ah, they sneaking, mealy wenches what have got fattened up and licked over by th' old woman till 'tis queens as they fancies theirselves, you shall tell they summat about what they be, come morning. And your poor old mother, her'll speak, too, what hasn't been let sound her tongue these years gone by. Ah, hern shall know what us do think of they, hern shall squat upon the floor and hear the truth.

**MAY.** He thought as I was sleeping; but I looked out on her and seed the way his eyes was cast upon the girl. Steve, if you had cast your eyes on me like that but once, in days gone by—maybe, maybe I'd not have gone out and shut the door behind I.

**VASHTI.** Get you to Steve and let him see you with the candle lit. Her bain't no match for he, the young weasel! 'Tis you as has the blood of me and my people what was grand folk in times gone by, 'tis you, May, as is the mate for he, above all them white-jowled things what has honey at the mouth of they, but the heart running over with poison—Ah, and what throws you the bone and keeps the meat for their own bellies. What sets the skin afore you and laps the cream theirselves. Vipers, all of them, and she—cats. There 'tis.

**MAY.** Sit you down, Mother, and keep the tongue of you quiet. We don't want for to waken they.

**VASHTI.** *[Sitting down heavily.]* But we've got to waken Steve for he to know as how you be comed home again.

**MAY.** And where's the good of that, when there bain't so much as a board nor a rag, but what's been stole from I?

**VASHTI.** You go and say to him as 'tis his wife what have come back to her place. And put th' old woman against the chimney there, and let her see you a-cutting of the bread and of the meat, and a-setting out of the food so as that they who be at the table can loose the garments of them when the eating 'tis finished, if they has a mind to, 'stead of drawing they together so not to feel 'tis leer. Ah, 'tis time you be comed, May, 'tis time.

**MAY.** *[Bitterly.]* I'm thinking 'tis time!

**VASHTI.** 'Tis the lies of they be growed big as wheat stalks and the hardness of their hearts be worse nor death. But 'tis to judgment as they shall be led, now you be comed home, May, and the hand of God shall catch they when they do crawl like adders upon the earth. "Ah, and do you mind how 'twas you served old Vashti, what never did harm to no one all the life of her," I shall call out to th' old woman in that hour when her shall be burning in the lake. And her shall beg for a drop of water to lay upon the withered tongue of she, and it shall be denied, for other hands nor ours be at work, and 'tis the wicked as shall perish—yes, so 'tis.

**MAY.** *[Who has been bending forward, looking steadily into the fire.]* Stop that, Mother, I wants to get at my thoughts.

**VASHTI.** Be you a-going to set on I, too, May, now that you be comed home. 'Tis poor work for an old woman like I.



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**MAY.** [*As though to herself.*] And as I was laid beneath the hedge—"Tis cold as my limbs is, now," I says, "but I shall be warm this night." And the pangs what was in the body of me did fairly quail I—"Tis my fill of victuals as I shall soon put within," thinks I. And they was laid a bit. The bleakness of the tempest fell on I, but "I shan't feel lonesome no longer than this hour," I telled me. For to my thinking, Steve, he was waiting all the time till I should be comed back. And Dorry, too. There 'tis. [*A long silence.*]

**MAY.** I'd have been content to bide with the door shut—so long as it was shut with they two and me inside the room—th' old woman—well, I count I shouldn't have took many thought for she—she could have bided in her place if she'd had a mind—I'd have set me down, when once my clothes was decent and clean, and put my hands to the work and made a tidy wife for Steve, as good nor better than that there dressed-up thing out yonder—And bred Dorry up the right way, too, I would. But 'tis done with now, so 'tis.

**VASHTI.** [*As though to herself.*] And when 'tis morning and she gets her down—"There, 'tis my girl as is mistress here, I'll say to her—and 'tis my girl as shall sit cup end of the table—and you get you to the fire corner and bide there, like the poor old woman as you be, spite that you do slip about so spry on the wicked old legs of you."

**MAY.** And I could set she back in her place, too, that tricked-up, flashy thing over the way. I've but to climb the stairs and clap my hand on Steve—"Get you from your dreams," I have got but to say, "the woman what's yourn be comed home. Her have tasted the cup of death, very near, and her have been a-thirst and an hungered. But her has carried summat for you in her heart all the way what you wouldn't find in the heart of t'other, no, not if you was to cut it open and search it through." And the right belongs to I to shut the door on t'other hussey, holding Steve to I till death divides we.

**VASHTI.** Going on the road I seed the eyes of they blinking as I did pass by. "And may the light from out the thunder cloud fall upon you," I says to them, "for 'tis a poor old woman as I be what has lost her child; and what's that to you if so be as the shoes on her feet be broken or no? 'Tis naked as the toes of you shall go, that hour when the days of this world shall be rolled by. Ah, 'tis naked and set on the lake of burning fire as the hoofs of you shall run!"

**MAY.** I could up and screech so that the house should ring with the sound of me, "I be your wife, Steve, comed back after these many years. What's this that you've got doing with another?" I could take hold on him and make him look into the eyes of I, yes, and th' old woman, too. "See here, your 'dirty roadster,' look well on to her." "Why, 'tis May." But the eyes of him would then be cast so that I should see no more than a house what has dead within, and the blind pulled down. And I, what was thinking as there might be a light in the window!

**VASHTI.** "And you may holler," I says to them, "you may holler till you be heard over the face of all the earth, but no one won't take no account of you." And the lies of them which have turned into ropes of hempen shall come up and strangle they. But me and my child shall pass by all fatted up and clothed, and with the last flick, afore the eyelids of they drop, they shall behold we, and, a-clapping of the teeth of them shall they repent them of their sins. Too late, too late! There 'tis.

**MAY.** Too late! There 'tis, I be comed home too late.

[*She rises and takes up her shawl, wrapping it about her shoulders, and muttering.*]

**MAY.** But I know a dark place full of water—"Tis Simon's pool they calls it—And I warrant as any poor wretch might sleep yonder and be in quiet.

**VASHTI.** Be you a-going up to Steve now?

**MAY.** No, I bain't. 'Tis out from here that I be going. And back on to the road.

**VASHTI.** May, my pretty May, you're never going for to leave I, what's such a poor old woman and wronged cruel. You step aloft and rouse up Steve. He'll never have you go upon the roads again once he do know as you've comed back.

**MAY.** Steve! What's it to Steve whether the like of I do go or bide? What be there in I for to quell the love of she which Steve's got in him? Dead leaves for new. Ditch water for the clear spring.

**VASHTI.** Give him to drink of it, May.

**MAY.** [*Looking upwards to the ceiling.*] No, Steve. Hark you here. I bain't a-going to do it. I bain't going to knock over the spoonful of sweet what you be carrying to your mouth. You take and eat of it in quiet and get you filled with the honey. 'Tain't my way to snatch from no one so that the emptiness which I has in me shall be fed. There, 'tis finished now, very nigh, and the sharpness done. And, don't you fear, Steve, as ever I'll trouble

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you no more.

**VASHTI.** [*Rising.*] I be a-going to fetch him down, and that's what I'm a-going for to do.

**MAY.** [*Pushing her back into her chair.*] Harken you, Steve, he's never got to know as I've been here.

**VASHTI.** I tell you, May, I'll screech till he do come!

**MAY.** [*Sitting down by VASHTI and laying her hand on her.*] I'll put summat in your mouth as'll stop you if you start screeching, mother. Why, hark you here. 'Tis enough of this old place as I've had this night, and 'tis out upon the roads as I be going. Th' old woman—there's naught much changed in she—And Steve—well, Steve be wonderful hard in the soul of him. "Can I get you an old sack," says he—and never so much as seed 'twas I—Ah—'tis more than enough to turn the stomach in anyone—that it is. [*A slight pause.*]

**MAY.** I was never a meek one as could bide at the fireside for long. The four walls of this here room have very near done for me now, so they have. And 'tis the air blowing free upon the road as I craves—Ah, and the wind which hollers, so that the cries of we be less nor they of lambs new born.

**VASHTI.** God bless you, May, and if you goes beyond the door 'tis the mealy-faced jade will get in come morning, for Steve to wed.

**MAY.** So 'tis. And if I stopped 'twould be the same, her'd be between us always, the pretty cage bird—For look you here on I, Mother, and here—[*pointing to her feet*—and here—and here—See what's been done to I what's knocked about in the world along the roads, and then think if I be such a one as might hold the love of Steve.

**VASHTI.** [*Beginning to whine desolately.*] O, do not you go for to leave your old mammy again what has mourned you as if you was dead all the years. Do not you go for to leave I and the wicked around of I as might be the venomous beasts in the grass. Stop with I, my pretty child—Stop along of your old mother, for the days of I be few and numbered, and the enemies be thick upon the land.

**MAY.** Hark you here, Mother, and keep your screeching till another time. I wants to slip out quiet so as Steve and th' old woman won't never know as I've been nigh. And if you keeps your mouth shut, maybe I'll drop in at our own place on the hill one of these days and bide comfortable along of you, only now—I'm off, do you hear?

**VASHTI.** I can't abide for you to go. 'Tis more nor I can stand. Why, if you goes, May, 'tis t'other wench and th' old woman what'll get mistressing it here again in your place. [*Rising up.*] No—you shan't go. I'll holler till I've waked them every one—you shan't! My only child, my pretty May! Ah, 'tis not likely as you shall slip off again. 'Tis not.

**MAY.** Look you here, Mother—bide still, I say. [*Looking round the room distractedly.*] See here—'tis rare dry as I be. You bide quiet and us'll have a drink together, that us will. Look, th' old woman's forgot to put away the bottle, us'll wet our mouths nice and quiet, mother—she won't hear I taking out the cork, nor nothing. See!

[*MAY gets up and crosses the room; she takes the bottle off the shelf where she has just perceived it, and also two glasses; she fills one and hands it to her mother.*]

**VASHTI.** [*Stretching out her hand.*] 'Tis rare dry and parched as I be, now I comes to think on it, May.

**MAY.** That's right—drink your fill, Mother.

**VASHTI.** 'Tis pleasant for I to see you mistressing it here again, May.

**MAY.** Ah, 'tis my own drink and all, come to that.

**VASHTI.** So 'tis. And the tea what she gived me was but ditch water. I seed her spoon it in the pot, and 'twas not above a half spoon as her did put in for I, th' old badger. My eye was on she, though, and her'll have it cast up at she when the last day shall come and the trumpet sound and all flesh stand quailing, and me and mine looking on at her as is brought to judgment. How will it be then, you old sinner, says I.

**MAY.** [*Re-filling the glass.*] Take and drink this little drop more, mother.

[*VASHTI drinks and then leans back in her chair again with half closed eyes.*]

**MAY.** [*Putting away the bottle and glasses.*] Her'll sleep very like, now. And when her wakes, I take it 'twill appear as though she'd been and dreamt summat.

**VASHTI.** Do you sit a-nigh me, May. The night be a wild one. I would not have you be on the roads.

**MAY.** [*Sitting down beside her.*] O, the roads be fine on nights when the tempest moves in the trees above and the rain falls into the mouth of you and lies with a good taste on your tongue. And you goes quick on through it till you comes to where the lights do blink, and 'tis a large town and there be folk moving this way and that and

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the music playing, and great fowls and horses what's got clocks to the inside of they, a—stirring them up for to run, and girls and men a—riding on them—And the booths with red sugar and white, all lit and animals that's wild a—roaring and a—biting in the tents—And girls what's dancing, standing there in satin gowns all over gold and silver – And you walks to and fro in it all and 'tis good to be there and free – And 'tis better to be in such places and to come and to go where you have a mind than to be cooped in here, with th' old woman and all— 'Tis a fine life as you lives on the roads—and 'tis a better one nor this, I can tell you, Mother.

**VASHTI.** [*Who has gradually been falling into sleep.*] I count 'tis so. 'Tis prime in the freshening of the day. I count I'll go along of you, come morning.

**MAY.** That's it, Mother, that's it. Us'll take a bit of sleep afore we sets off, won't us? And when morning comes, us'll open the door and go out.

**VASHTI.** That's it, when 'tis day.

[*Her head falls to one side of the chair and she is presently asleep.*

[*MAY watches her for some moments. Then she gets up softly and wraps her shawl round her. The window shews signs of a gray light outside, MAY goes quietly towards the outer door. As she reaches it, DORRY comes into the room from the staircase.*

**DORRY.** [*Going up to VASHTI.*] Granny, 'tis the New Year! I'm come down to see to the fire and to get breakfast for Dad and Gran'ma. Why, Granny, you're sleeping still. And where's that poor tramp gone off to? [*She looks round the room and then sees MAY by the door.*

**DORRY.** O, there you are. Are you going out on the road afore 'tis got light?

**MAY.** [*In a hoarse whisper.*] And that I be. 'Tis very nigh to daybreak, so 'tis.

**DORRY.** Stop a moment. [*Calling up the stairs.*] Daddy, the tramp woman, she's moving off already.

**STEVE.** [*From upstairs.*] Then give her a bit of bread to take along of she. I don't care that anyone should go an—hungered this day.

**DORRY.** [*Turning to MAY.*] There—you bide a minute whilst I cuts the loaf. My Dad's going to get married this day, and he don't care that anyone should go hungry.

[*MAY comes slowly back into the room and stands watching DORRY, who fetches a loaf from the pantry and cuts it at the table. Then she pulls aside the curtain and a dim light comes in.*

**DORRY.** The snow's very nigh gone, and 'tis like as not as the sun may come out presently. Here's a piece of bread to take along of you. There, it's a good big piece, take and eat it.

[*MAY hesitates an instant, then she stretches out her hand and takes the bread and puts it beneath her shawl.*

**MAY.** And so there's going to be a wedding here to—day?

**DORRY.** 'Tis my Dad as is to be married.

**MAY.** 'Tis poor work, is twice marrying.

**DORRY.** My Dad's ever so pleased, I han't seen him so pleased as I can remember. I han't.

**MAY.** Then maybe the second choosing be the best.

**DORRY.** Yes, 'tis—Gran'ma says as 'tis—and Dad, he be ever so fond of Miss Sims—and I be, too.

**MAY.** Then you've no call to wish as her who's gone should come back to you, like?

**DORRY.** What's that you're saying?

**MAY.** You don't never want as your mammy what you've lost should be amongst you as afore?

**DORRY.** I never knowed my mammy. Gran'ma says she had got summat bad in her blood. And Granny's got the same. But Miss Sims, she's ever so nice to Dad and me, and I'm real pleased as she's coming to stop along of us always after that they're married, like.

**MAY.** And th' old woman what's your gran'ma, Dorry?

**DORRY.** However did you know as I was called "Dorry"?

**MAY.** I heard them call you so last night.

**DORRY.** And whatever do you want to know about Gran'ma?

**MAY.** What have her got to say 'bout the—the—wench what's going to marry your dad?

**DORRY.** O, Gran'ma, she thinks ever such a lot of Miss Sims, and she says as how poor Dad, what's been served so bad, will find out soon what 'tis to have a real decent wife, what'll help with the work and all, and what won't lower him by her ways, nor nothing.

**MAY.** Look you here—'tis growing day. I must be getting off and on to the road.

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**DORRY.** [*Moving to the door.*] I'll unbolt the door, then. O, 'tis fine and daylight now.

**MAY.** [*Turning back at the doorway and looking at the room.*] I suppose you wouldn't like to touch me, for good luck, Dorry?

**DORRY.** No, I shouldn't. Gran'ma, she don't let me go nigh road people as a rule. She's a—feared as I should take summat from them, I suppose.

**MAY.** [*Hoarsely, her hand on the door.*] Then just say as you wishes me well, Dorry.

**DORRY.** I'll wish you a good New Year, then, and Gran'ma said as I was to watch as you cleared off the place. [*MAY goes out softly and quickly. DORRY watches her until she is out of sight, and then she shuts the door.*]

**ACT III.—Scene 1.**

*The same room. It is nearly mid-day, and the room is full of sunshine. JANE BROWNING, in her best dress, is fastening DORRY'S frock, close to the window.*

**DORRY.** Dad's been a rare long time a-cleaning of his self up, Gran.

**JANE.** Will you bide still! However's this frock to get fastened and you moving this way and that like some live eel—and just see what a mark you've made on the elbow last night, putting your arm down somewhere where you didn't ought to—I might just as well have never washed the thing.

**DORRY.** Granny's sound asleep still—she'll have to be waked time we goes along to the church.

**JANE.** That her shan't be. Her shall just bide and sleep the drink out of her, her shall. Do you think as I didn't find out who 'twas what had got at the bottle as Dad left on the dresser last night.

**DORRY.** Poor Gran, she do take a drop now and then.

**JANE.** Shame on th' old gipsy. Her shall be left to bide till she have slept off some of the nonsense which is in her.

**DORRY.** Granny do say a lot of funny things sometimes, don't she, now?

**JANE.** You get and put on your hat and button your gloves, and let the old gipsy be. We can send her off home when 'tis afternoon, and us back from church. Now, where did I lay that bonnet? Here 'tis.

*[She begins to tie the strings before a small mirror in the wall. STEVE comes downstairs in his shirt sleeves, carrying his coat.*

**DORRY.** Why, Dad, you do look rare pleased at summat.

**STEVE.** And when's a man to look pleased if 'tis not on his wedding morn, Dorry?

**DORRY.** The tramp what was here did say as how 'twas poor work twice marrying, but you don't find it be so, Dad, do you now?

**STEVE.** And that I don't, my little wench. 'Tis as nigh heaven as I be like to touch—and that's how 'tis with me.

**JANE.** *[Taking STEVE'S coat from him.]* Ah, 'tis a different set out altogether this time. That 'tis. 'Tis a-marrying into your own rank, like, and no mixing up with they trolloping gipsies.

**DORRY.** Was my own mammy a trolloping gipsy, Gran?

**JANE.** *[Beginning to brush STEVE'S coat.]* Ah, much in the same pattern as th' old woman what's drunk asleep against the fireside. Here, button up them gloves, 'tis time we was off.

**DORRY.** I do like Miss Sims. She do have nice things on her. When I grows up I'd like to look as she do, so I would.

**STEVE.** *[To JANE.]* There, Mother, that'll do. I'd best put him on now.

**JANE.** *[Holding out the coat for him.]* Well, and you be got yourself up rare smart, Steve.

**STEVE.** 'Tis rare smart as I be feeling, Mother. I'm all a kind of a dazzle within of me, same as 'tis with the sun upon the snow out yonder.

**JANE.** Why, look you, there's George a-coming up the path already.

**DORRY.** He's wearing of the flower what Rosie gived him last night.

**STEVE.** *[Opening the door.]* Good morning, George. A first class New Year to you. You're welcome, if ever a man was.

**JANE.** You bide where you do stand, George, till your feet is dry. My floor was fresh wiped over this morning.

**GEORGE.** *[Standing on the door mat.]* All right, Mrs. Browning. Don't you fluster. Good morning, Dorry. How be you to-day, Steve?

**JANE.** Dorry, come you upstairs along with me and get your coat put on, so as your frock bain't crushed.

**DORRY.** O, I wish I could go so that my nice frock was seen and no coat.

*[They go upstairs. GEORGE rubs his feet on the mat and comes into the room, walking up and down once or twice restlessly and in evident distress of mind.]*

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**STEVE.** [*Who has lit a pipe and is smoking.*] Why, George, be you out of sorts this morning? You don't look up to much, and that's the truth.

**GEORGE.** [*Stopping before STEVE.*] Hark you, Steve. 'Tis on my mind to ask summat of you. Did you have much speech with the poor thing what you took in from the snow last night?

**STEVE.** No, George, and that I didn't. Her was mostly in a kind of drunken sleep all the time, and naught to be got out from she. Mother, her tried. But 'twas like trying to get water from the pump yonder, when 'tis froze.

**GEORGE.** Your mother's a poor one at melting ice, Steve, and 'tis what we all knows.

**STEVE.** Ah, 'twasn't much as we could do for the likes of she—what was a regular roadster. Bad herbs, all of them. And if it hadn't been so as 'twas my wedding eve, this one shouldn't have set foot inside of the house. But 'tis a season when a man's took a bit soft and foolish, like, the night afore his marriage. Bain't that so, George?

**GEORGE.** And when was it, Steve, as she went off from here?

**STEVE.** That I couldn't rightly say, George, but I counts 'twas just upon daybreak. And 'twas Dorry what seed her off the place and gived her a piece of bread to take along of her.

**GEORGE.** And do you think as she got talking a lot to Dorry, Steve?

**STEVE.** I'm blest if I do know, George. I never gived another thought to she. What's up?

**GEORGE.** They was getting the body of her from out of Simon's Pool as I did come by. That's all.

**STEVE.** From Simon's Pool, George?

**GEORGE.** I count her must have went across the plank afore 'twas fairly daylight. And, being slippery, like, from the snow, and her—her—as you did say.

**STEVE.** In liquor.

**GEORGE.** I reckon as her missed her footing, like.

**STEVE.** Well, upon my word, George, who'd have thought on such a thing!

**GEORGE.** I count as her had been in the water and below the ice a smartish while afore they catched sight of she.

**STEVE.** Well, 'tis a cold finish to a hot life.

**GEORGE.** They took and laid her on the grass, Steve, as I comed by.

**STEVE.** If it had been me, I'd have turned the head of me t'other side.

**GEORGE.** There was summat in the fashion her was laid, Steve, as drawed I near for to get a sight of the face of she.

**STEVE.** Well, I shouldn't have much cared for that, George.

**GEORGE.** Steve—did you get a look into the eyes of yon poor thing last night?

**STEVE.** No, nor wanted for to, neither.

**GEORGE.** There was naught to make you think of –

**STEVE.** Of what, George?

**GEORGE.** There—Steve, I can't get it out, I can't.

**STEVE.** Then let it bide in.

**GEORGE.** 'Twas the way her was laid, and the long arms of she, and the hands which was clapped one on t'other, as it might be in church.

**STEVE.** [*Looking through the window.*] You shut up, George. Here's Annie with Rose a—coming up to the door. Don't you get saying another word about yon poor wretch nor the end of her. I wouldn't have my Annie upset for all the world to—day. 'Tis a thing as must not be spoke of afore they, nor Dorry neither, do you hear?

[*He moves towards the door and puts his hand to the latch.*]

**GEORGE.** Hold back, Steve, a minute. There's summat more as I've got to say.

**STEVE.** You take and shut your mouth up, old George, afore I opens the door to the girls.

**GEORGE.** 'Tis bound for to come from me afore you goes along to church, Steve.

**STEVE.** I warrant 'twill keep till us do come home again, George.

[*He throws the door wide open with a joyous movement. ANNIE and ROSE in white dresses stand outside.*]

**STEVE.** Well, Annie, this is a rare surprise, and that's the truth. [*ANNIE and ROSE come into the room.*]

**ROSE.** Father, he's outside, and Jim and Bill and Katie, and all the rest. We said as 'twould be pleasanter if we was all to go up together along to the church.

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**STEVE.** So 'twould be—so 'twould be—"Twas a grand thought of yourn, Rosie.

**ANNIE.** Steve –

**STEVE.** [*Taking her hand.*] Annie, I'm fair beside myself this day.

**ANNIE.** O, Steve, there was never a day in my life like this one. [*DORRY and JANE come down.*]

**DORRY.** O, Miss Sims, you do look nice! Gran'ma, don't Miss Sims look nice? And Rosie, too. O, they have nice gowns and hats on, haven't they, Dad?

**STEVE.** I don't see no gowns nor hats, and that's the truth. But I sees summat what's like—what's like a meadow of grass in springtime afore the sun's got on to it.

**DORRY.** Why, Dad, 'tis white, not green, as Miss Sims is wearing.

**STEVE.** 'Tis in the eyes of her as I finds my meadow.

**DORRY.** O, let me see, Dad, let me look, too!

**ROSE.** [*Going up to GEORGE, who has been standing aloof and moody in the background.*] Come, Mr. Davis, we must have a look, too.

**JANE.** 'Get along, get along. We han't time for such foolishness. It be close on twelve already.

**ANNIE.** O, let me be, all of you! I declare, I don't know which way to look, I don't.

**STEVE.** I'll show you, Annie, then.

**ROSE.** [*To GEORGE.*] Well, Mr. Davis, you don't seem over bright this morning.

**STEVE.** 'Tis with the nerves as he be took!

**DORRY.** Look at what he's wearing in his buttonhole, Rosie.

**ROSE.** 'Tis kept beautiful and fresh.

**STEVE.** Come on, come on, all of you. 'Tis time we was at the church.

**ROSE.** Hark to him! He's in a rare hurry for to get out of the house to-day.

**GEORGE.** Bain't the old lady a-coming?

**JANE.** That she bain't, the old drinking gipsy—'tis at the spirits as her got in the night—and put away very near the best part of a bottle. Now she's best left to sleep it off, she be.

**STEVE.** Come on, George. Come, Dorry.

**DORRY.** O, isn't it a pity as Granny will get at the drink, Mr. Davis? And isn't Miss Sims nice in her white dress? And don't Dad look smiling and pleased? I never did know Dad smile like this afore.

**GEORGE.** [*Heavily.*] Come on, Dorry—you take hold of me. You and me, we'll keep nigh one to t'other this day, won't us?

**ROSE.** [*Calling from outside.*] Come on, Mr. Davis.

[*They all go out.*]

**ACT III.—Scene 2.**

*Nearly an hour later. The cottage room is full of sunlight.*

**VASHTI REED** *is awake and gazing vacantly about her from the same chair by the fire. Someone knocks repeatedly at the door from outside.*

**VASHTI.** And 'tis no bit of rest as I gets for my bones, but they must come and hustle I and call I from the dreams which was soft. [*The knocking is heard again.*]

**VASHTI.** And I up and says to they, "Ah, and you would hustle a poor old woman what's never harmed so much as a hair out of the ugly heads of you. You would hunt and drive of her till she be very nigh done to death. But there shall come a day when you shall be laid down and a-taking of your bit of rest, and the thing what you knows of shall get up upon you and smite you till you do go screeching from the house, and fleeing to the uttermost part of the land—whilst me and mine –

[*The door opens and HARRY MOSS enters.*]

**HARRY.** Beg pardon, old Missis, but I couldn't make no one hear me.

**VASHTI.** Seeing as them be sick of the abomination which was inside of they. [*Perceiving HARRY.*] Well, and what be you as is comed into this room?

**HARRY.** 'Tis Moss as I be called, old Missis. And as I was a-going by this place, I thought as I'd look in a moment, just for to ask how 'twas with May.

**VASHTI.** They be all gone out from the house. All of them. They be in clothes what do lie in boxes most of the time with lumps of white among they. Them be set out in the best as they has, and in grand things of many colours. There 'tis.

**HARRY.** And be you th' old lady what's Steve's mother?

**VASHTI.** I be not, sir. 'Tis mother to May as I be. May, what's comed back, and what'll set t'other old vixen in her place soon as they get home.

**HARRY.** Then May, she be gone out, too, have her?

**VASHTI.** [*Looking round vaguely.*] Ah, I counts as her be gone to church along of t'other.

**HARRY.** To church, Missis?

**VASHTI.** There's marrying being done down here to-day.

**HARRY.** Marrying, be there? Well, but I was 'most feared as how it might have been t'other thing.

**VASHTI.** Ah, that there be—marrying. But there bain't no more victuals got into the house as I knows of. Th' old woman's seen to that.

**HARRY.** And be May gone out, too, along of them to see the marrying?

**VASHTI.** Ah, I counts as her be. But her's a-coming back in a little while, and you may sit down and bide till she does.

**HARRY.** I'd sooner be about and on my way, Missis, if 'tis all the same to you. But I thanks you kindly. And you get and tell May when she do come home, that 'tis particular glad I be for to know as her bain't took worse, nor nothing. And should I happen in these parts again, 'tis very likely as I'll take a look in on she some day.

**VASHTI.** Ah, her'll have got t'other old baggage set in the right place by then.

**HARRY.** [*Looking round him.*] Well, I be rare pleased to think of May so comfortable, like, for her was got down terrible low.

**VASHTI.** T'other'll be brought lower.

**HARRY.** Look you here, old Missis, 'tis a stomach full of naught as I carries. If so be as you has a crust to spare –

**VASHTI.** [*Pointing to a door.*] There be a plate of meat inside of that cupboard. You take and fill your belly with it.

**HARRY.** Thank you kindly, Missis, but I counts I han't the time for heavy feeding this morning.

**VASHTI.** 'Twould serve she right, th' old sinner, for the place to be licked up clean, against the time when



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her was come'd back, so 'twould.

**HARRY.** Well, Missis, you can tell May 'tis a brave New Year as I do wish she.

**VASHTI.** [*Listening to bells which are heard suddenly ringing.*] There, there they be! Harken to them! 'Tis with bells as they be coming out. Bells what's ringing. I count 'tis fine as May do look now in her marriage gown. Harken, 'tis the bells a-shaking of the window pane. I be an old woman, but the hearing of me bain't spoiled.

**HARRY.** I warrant it bain't, Missis. Why, they're ringing wonderful smart. 'Tis enough, upon my word, for to fetch down every stone of the old place.

**VASHTI.** Get you out upon the garden path and tell I if you sees them a-coming.

**HARRY.** That's it, old Missis, and so I will.

[*He goes outside the house.*]

**VASHTI.** [*Sitting upright and looking with fixed vacancy before her.*] And when they was all laid low and the heads of them bowed. "You would, would you," I says, for they was lifting the ends of their ugly mouths at I. And I passed among they and them did quail and crouch, being with fear. And me and mine did reach the place what was on the top. "See now yourselves," I says, "if so be that you do not go in blindness and in dark." 'Twas May what stood there aside of I. And "Look you," I says, "over the bended necks of you my child shall pass. For you be done to death by the lies which grewed within you and waxed till the bodies of you was fed with them and the poison did gush out from your lips." But my little child stood in the light, and the hands of her was about the stars.

**HARRY.** [*Coming in.*] Look, they be all a-coming over the meadow, old Missis. But May han't comed with they—May han't come too.

[*The wedding party enters the room as the curtain falls.*]