

Many a Tear

By M. P. Shiel

“God counts a woman’s tears.”—THE TALMUD

I first heard the name of Margaret Higgs one gloomy afternoon, when passing over the Chase by Tydenham, with Severn (they don’t say “*the*” Severn there) trailing itself away through a vale of haze far down on my right. The aged clergyman I was making the journey with showed me the mass of rags and grey locks, where the woman sat alone on a rock on the Chase, saying to me—“Mark that woman, a remarkable being I assure you, a woman who during sixteen years has plumbed even the deeps of human woe; for I say that if ever the arm of the Almighty bared itself to be known openly in the affairs of men, it was in that life. There, like a pine blighted by the lightning’s wrath, sits Margaret now, a living pledge of that Power which governs the world.”

He spoke with no little solemnity, though I must say that when he went on to tell me the facts, he left me utterly unconvinced of this “arm of the Almighty”; and I hope that by this time he, too, has nobler thoughts with regard to Margaret Higgs.

“I remember her when she had no resemblance to the object you see there,” he told me, “a shapely wench with a tripping run on her toes, soft-spoken and most soft-eyed, dark blue eyes and black hair, a gay gossip—‘news-hunter’ they say here—with a prayer-book in her hand in the lanes on Sunday, and a name for ‘knocking around’ with the young men; one of those earth-born souls of this part, unconscious of a world beyond Severn—save of Gloucester, because the magistrates say to the naughty ones: ‘Go to Gloucester for a month.’”

“She came of good farmer-folk in a small way, who died almost together, upon which Margaret chose to marry beneath her, a quarry-man from the Wyebanks near, a thickset, rather taciturn and nervous person, named Higgs, a widower some fifteen years Margaret’s senior. He had a son of twelve or so called Fred Higgs; and I think I have heard it said that as a girl Margaret had had the nursing of this boy, and that it was her fondness for the boy which caused the heiress to make choice of the father.

“Well, Margaret and Higgs got on very well for several years. I have observed them driving toward St. Bride’s of a week-end to market, frequently have called in to visit them, and they appeared happy. However, one summer there came to lodge with them a stranger—a sailor they say he was, though, as the house stands well out of the way in a bower, and as the stranger never at all showed his nose abroad, not much is known of him; one or two, however, of the Woolaston villagers lower down the mountain—a group of people known as the most ‘news-hunting’ in the country—gave it out that the stranger was a good-looking chap, and that Margaret had lost her heart to him; a tale which was confirmed when he was one afternoon loudly ordered out of the house by Higgs, and was observed to pass out of the house and away over the mountains.

“Well, some time after nine that night, when the boy Fred Higgs went to bed, Margaret, from motives of revenge, probably, destroyed her husband; for from that night Higgs has never been seen, and a daft fellow called Felix, who would frequently roam the countryside all night, reported that near three that morning he had seen Mrs. Higgs struggling in a storm across the fields towards Severn beneath the burden of a body.

“This was all the evidence to begin with, except the queer fact that Margaret breathed not a syllable to anyone with regard to her husband’s disappearance; but other signs and evidences soon followed, as I have told you, from—Heaven itself.

‘Owing, maybe, to the fact that this witness, Felix, was not a man able to appreciate the nature of an oath, the police took no open action in the matter; and at this apparent sluggishness of the law, you never saw such a gush of fury, every boatman for miles up the two rivers becoming an eye to scan the waters for a body; and both where the banks are all mud, and where there are reaches of beach, parties of diggers, organised by the villagers, were ferreting for a buried body.

“Well, no body was ever discovered; but by society, I can tell you, a way was discovered to avenge itself, and the woman was punished. The baker’s cart ceased to wait at Woodside farm, the butcher declined to deal; even so far off as St. Bride’s and the Forest of Dean Margaret Higgs could neither sell her starved calf nor get meal for her pig, nor find a forgiving smile.

“ ‘Her’s done away wi’n right enough,’ was the word everywhere: ‘hanging be too good for she, and shame ought to cover the face of the police.’

“Passing by the farm one morning, I walked up the garden-path, and saw Margaret. The round of industry there was suspended now, her stepson appeared to be aiming shots at imaginary rabbits, and the young woman, swinging her knee between her hands, was seated on the door-sill of her snowy low home. She sprang up to offer me a chair, and I said then sorrowfully to her: ‘Well, Mrs. Higgs, things are not so well with you as they have been,’ at which she at once became visibly inflamed, and cried out, ‘the gossiping, news-hunting lot, ignorant as wagon-horses! I do have nothing off they, Mr. Somerset! They don’t keep me! Why should I trouble about what they have to say?’

“ ‘But how, Mrs. Higgs, do you propose to live, to manage the farm?’ I asked.

“ ‘I did live and find bread for the boy before, and I’ll do it again, sir,’ she answered.

“ ‘But for one to defy many is up-hill work, and you without a protector now,’ I said . . . ‘Tell me the truth, Margaret,’ I added, ‘is Higgs dead?’

“She stood against the wall, eyeing the ground, and after a silence said with a shrug of her shoulders: ‘Er *be* dead, I suppose—God knows; I don’t.’

“Well, I was angry at this callous shrugging, and left her at once.

“The next Sunday she dared to come to church, and as I surmised that this would be resented, especially as she walked up the aisle with so haughty a toss of the head, I uttered in my sermon a few words as to the beauty of Christian forbearance. But it had no effect, and all up the back lane that leads steeply to Woodside, though it was a stormy afternoon, Margaret was followed by the congregation— most of them her cousins, and cousins of one another. They did not at first molest her, but tittered coughs, whistles, catcalls; all which she endured without looking round, till by becks and signs they managed to induce her boy to leave her side and join the enemy, and thenceforth the walk became a cross-fire of abuse yelled from side to side, the woman hastening on in front afraid, with a grey face, but defiant eyes on fire, the people eagerly speeding upon her heels with no peaceable meaning.

“ ‘Go on!’ she shouted to them, laughing with a rather ghastly grin of the mouth—‘you gossiping, news-hunting lot! Shame ought to cover your face!’

“ ‘Where’s Higgs?’ they all roared at her.

“ ‘Go on, you! ignorant as wagon-horses, with your silly, foolhardy questions!’

“And so till they came to her house, where the crowd surrounded her; and now, finding herself at bay, her defiance suddenly failing, the woman broke into tears, and falling to her knees, called out upon the Almighty in passionate tones of reproach, saying ‘What have I done, my good God?’

If I have done any wrong, send that my house may be burnt to the ground, may every evil befall me, may I be struck paralysed from my crown to my foot—’ a vow so apparently hearty, and so awful to the villagers that they went away and left her.

“But that night her house was burned to the ground.

“When the crowd had left her, she had flung herself upon a couch in the house, where she had remained in the grip of an ague till nine in the night; and getting up then to go to bed her still trembling hand had dropped the lamp. . . .

“The news of that thing flew that night like loosened effluvia, and in a few minutes Woolaston was at Woodside. They found the boy, Fred Higgs, confined in the house by the fire, for in the first panic Margaret had run out, calling out to him, but he had been asleep, and now was screaming at his window, which was too little for him to squeeze through to leap to the ground. Seeing this, some of the crowd darted off to look for the orchard-ladder, when Margaret herself, to the awe of all, dived back into the fire, and presently appeared tearing at the framework of the boy’s window, half of which was a fixture, and half a sideward slide. Well, as she as ever a person of great strength, the woodwork gave way to her tuggings, leaving space for the leap to the ground, and they came down safely.

“Fred Higgs was taken home by Price, the grocer; and Margaret, now all bald and baked on one side of the face, found a shelter in her stable with the body of her starved horse, which had died that day.

“But the woman’s spirit was not yet broken. When, the next morning, Morgan, the policeman, called to invite her, things being as they were, to make a clean breast of what had happened to Higgs, she still sat dumb, rocking her body to and fro. She seems to have entertained still the crazy hope of carrying on the farm on which she was born, but that same day Mr. Millings, Loreburn’s land-steward, called to tell her that, of course, she must go now, offering, however, to give her a price for her implements, etc., which no one else would buy of her. These terms she had to accept; but she showed then as ever a fierce determination not to leave the place of her birth, and like a spider whose web has been torn, at once the woman set mutely to work to build up her life anew.

“On the third day after the fire she came with her face in bandages to my daughter, Nina, who owned a cottage high up there near the Chase; and though I felt bound to warn my daughter of the danger of letting, she chose to do so. On this the woman went away to Newport, bought there some new things, took her sow and fowls to her new abode, and was about once more to commence housekeeping. But it was not to be: for when all was ready, and she went down to Price, the grocer, who had taken in her boy, the boy roundly refused to go with her, saying to her: ‘No mother, I don’t want to see thee face never again.’

“These words seemed to strike the woman quite silly; and turning toward the crowd for pity, with a wry mouth that tried to smile, she let slip the words: ‘Why, it was for him chiefly I did it!’

“Did it! You hear her? Did what?’ cried some, while the rest of the boors booed and hissed her.

“ ‘Come with your mother, hearty,’ wooed the woman to the boy, ‘don’t be hard.’

“ ‘Thee go away,’ said the boy, emboldened by the mob, ‘thee bisn’t my own mother, nor I never did despise anybody so much as I do despise thee, never in all my life, and shame ought to cover thee face.’

“Margaret looked awe-struck at this last disaster. She said nothing more, but throwing her arm languidly at him was gone with lagging steps, as if broken down now, given over, cowed, and done for; nor from that day, I think, did she ever show any resistance to whatever was done to her, except once, when she threw a stone at a throng of boys who were pursuing her.

“Morgan, the policeman, however, and I also, thought that with regard to the boy, to whom from his youth the woman had ever been a good mother, a hardship had been done her; especially as without his help her new nook of land would be of little use to her. So after three weeks of talk the grocer formally agreed to give up the boy; and the same morning Morgan, happening to be passing up there, called to Margaret across her gate that her boy would be coming back to her at once. Upon this she seems to have run to stand under an ash tree at the end of the lane to see him coming up the hill; several persons, hurrying past in the rain, saw her standing there that day with her dress thrown over her head; and though the boy did not come for some hours, there she stood patiently on the look out, until the afternoon had become late and dark with storm. At last the boy came. But it was to find her lying helpless on her right side, apparently struck by lightning—the ash, at any rate, had been shivered, and she was found paralysed right down one side. Babbling with her blighted tongue, she begged the boy to give her a hand, to try to get her home without uttering a word to anyone, but he, as if cut of his wits, flew down the hill, howling out the news to the four winds.

“Well, however deep the woman’s sin, what followed for her that evening is really shocking to recount, for a legion of fiends seem to have taken possession of the people to make a scene out of pandemonium on the mountain that evening. The words arose, ‘drum her out’—for, of course, whatever doubt may have lingered in any mind with regard to Margaret’s guilt was gone now, since all that her vow had called down upon herself was now fallen upon her; nor did the rain and darkness make any difference; with one accord the crowd started up the mountain. Happily, she guessed their approach, and in her terror, gathering whatever forces remained to her, she fled before them, managing to drag her frame into some bush before they reached the tree; while they, going on to her cottage to find her, and not finding her, threw all her new goods into a hurly-burly, and by accident or design burned to the ground my daughter’s house. It was not till the next morning that Margaret was discovered lying in the field called the Morplepiece, and was then carried away by the police, to be put into the St. Bride’s infirmary.

“There pressure was afresh brought to bear upon the woman to make some sort of confession, but she remained as dumb as ever; and after some months was sent out with that maimed drag in her gait and speech, which even now marks her. She dared again, though now penniless and hopeless of gaining a living here, to face the load of pain that awaited her in her native place; and hereabouts, Heaven knows how, has continued to exist. My daughter Nina, whose heart has always deeply grieved for her, sometimes of an angry night will say to me: ‘That poor Margaret Higgs, papa; perhaps out on the Chase in it all.’ Aye, and I have known her go out with a groom and a lantern to look for the woman, and on discovering her under one of those two-arched kilns which are common in this part, has wooed the poor soul to come home with her. Margaret when dragged has come, but always before morning was gone again. In deed, she had soon become much of a wild woman, imbued with the mood of storm-winds and dark nights, as shy and gloomy-eyed as those shaggy nags on the Chase, her only mates, whose manes and great tails the gales up there ever fret; so that belated yokels on their way home have often paused to hearken to some moan or laugh of hers in the dark. Once she was sent to prison, when, ever unlucky, on happening to throw a stone at a throng of boys, the stone cut one of them, and the magistrates gave her their ‘go to Gloucester for a month.’ One of these magistrates, by the way, was none other than her stepson, Fred Higgs, who had been taken up by some mysterious business man—in Glasgow they say it was—had graduated at Oxford, and is now, you may say, one of our magnates. The man has simply ignored his stepmother’s existence.

“However, the new proprietor of Glanna has given orders that the woman be housed, and provided with the means of a livelihood—has let it be understood, too, that whoever injures her will incur his displeasure. In fact, during the few weeks that this Mr. Ogden has been in residence his goodness to the poor has become the talk, though he seems something of a queer sort, and almost a hermit. At any rate, through him, the condition of Margaret may shortly be expected to undergo a change, though it is not easy to rescue her—she resists, appears to be suspicious, can’t now believe perhaps that anyone really wishes her well—and whether she is capable of being reclaimed from her half-savage state it is hard to say: for the years alter us all, sir, the years leave the marks of their passing upon us.

So much Mr. Somerset, the aged clergyman, was able to give me of the story of Margaret Higgs, and that morose star of hers; and two days later I learned in further detail that every effort was being made to tame and help her.

But the bad destiny that seemed to have the woman in hand was not even yet done with her. Her new abode was actually ready for her, and she had agreed to go into it, glad, I suppose, poor soul, of a bed at last, when some men, digging for a foundation down by Severn, found the remains of a man.

It was near the spot where the daft Felix over fifteen years before had seen Margaret Higgs with a body on her back one dark morning, and the cry arose, “the body of Higgs at last.”

Again, then, was Margaret taken to prison; and I, hearing of all the to-do, took train to St. Bride’s to witness her trial in the petty sessions there.

Of the two justices one was her own stepson, Fred Higgs, a good-looking man of not much more than thirty, and the other, the new lord of the Manor of Glanna.

As to the woman herself, she sat through it all—she was too woefully weak to stand—in a spiritless attitude, as unmoving as a statue. It was understood that, on being pressed in prison, she had admitted that the body discovered was that of her husband, buried by her; to which admission one Inspector Jonas deposed, and spoke as to the enforcing of the Coroner’s warrant, and the whole story of the horror.

But what struck me from the first was the nervousness of one of the justices, the lord of Glanna—a short-built and broad-faced man, with cropped hair, and squat fingers, with which he kept tapping on his chin, tapping on his chair, tapping ever on everything near him.

And presently his keenness to procure the release of the accused became quite clear, till it was painful. One never saw a judge so jumpy in his chair, so agitated, so impatient of opposition. When his brother justice once leaned toward him, perhaps to whisper some remonstrance, Mr. Ogden cried out loudly: “You be sure to shut your mouth!” and I then noticed that the very slight rocking of Margaret Higgs’s body, which was going on as regularly as a pendulum’s swing, suddenly ceased, and the woman seemed to start and hearken.

Evidence, however, is evidence, and no magistrate could have saved the woman from the County assizes, had it not been that at the last, when the prosecution was summing-up, saying, “there can be no doubt therefore that the remains now found are actually those of Barnaby Higgs—” Mr. Ogden at those words leaped from his chair, calling out: “But how can all that be so certain to you, sir, when here’s Barnaby Higgs himself, a living man, talking to ye?”

The hand which the old man spread before us shivered with strong emotion, while tears blinded his eyes. I heard Mr. Somerset, seated near me on the bench, twice breathe to himself: “My God!” The mass of rags in the dock sprang straight with a crazy stare. Throughout the crowded room hardly a sound was heard till Mr. Higgs, stepping to the rail, spoke—with a most painful agitation at the beginning, but presently more calmly and then again with wrathful

agitation when, turning upon Fred Higgs, he scourged his son with invective. And ever afresh at the object of sorrow and rags arraigned before him he stretched his forefinger, with red-veined eyes, and a moan of love in his choked throat, calling her blessed, calling her saint.

It was the same Barnaby Higgs, he told the court—was rather surprised that some of them hadn't recognised him—only sixteen years older now, and a big-wig, in a frock-coat, and without a beard, but the same.

One summer there had come to the farm a man named John Cheyne—a sailorman he was—a cousin, who had got into trouble for abducting a girl, and Higgs had hidden him.

But the chap had not been three days on the place when Higgs began to be jealous.

“Though she told me that there was nothing in it, I didn't believe her, nor I don't now believe her, for I distinctly saw John Cheyne kissing, or trying to kiss, her behind the sty; and that same day, between three-thirty and four by the clock, I turned the fellow off the place.”

The sailor took his departure, but by ten in the night was back at the farm, craving to be again taken in; this Higgs refused. Cheyne pushed himself in, hot words arose, then fisticuffs, during which Cheyne, who must have had heart-disease, “dropped down dead before a right-handed cross-counter in the left ribs, after a lead-off with the left by himself.” Some moments afterwards, Margaret, who had been out “at fair,” walked in and saw what that was which Higgs was crouched down over on the floor.

Higgs, in the crowd of his terrors, knowing that his row with the sailor was known, could foresee nothing but the gallows; but Margaret, after sitting like a stone a long time, proposed flight, she to bury the body down by Severn, and in three nights' time to meet Higgs secretly on the Chase, to let him know whether he might safely return home.

This was agreed. Higgs ran, Margaret buried the sailor—no one suspected that he was dead, but as to the rendezvous on the Chase on the third day Higgs, ever nervous, had shirked it. Terrified by the tidings heard in his hiding that Margaret had been seen carrying a body on her back, he had not dared to return into the region of danger, but, having reached Liverpool, took ship.

“Yes,” he said from the bench, “I abandoned her, little thinking that she'd be seriously charged with killing me, who knew myself to be alive and hearty, and all the time I was in South Africa I was that shy and sick of my cowardice I couldn't write to her; I preferred she should think me dead and gone. But I didn't know, I made sure she'd be going on all right in the old style. . . . Hadn't I left one to protect her, friends? Didn't I get a business friend in Glasgow to adopt him? He did nothing for her. My own son—this man—he did nothing for her. Ah! the squalls that caught her and the frosts that froze her bones were never a bit so hard on her as this bitter heart. It was for him she did it, friends, just think! She said to me that night, for she was cross wi' me, ‘it's not to screen *thee*, I do it,’ she said, ‘so I tell thee straight; but what kind of a life will it be for Fred with everybody having it to say he be a murderer's son?’ And she kept the truth dark from him and from all—how long? For two months? For ten? While he was a dutiful boy to her? No, sixteen solid years down to this hour, though he was a beast to her. Why, sirs, talking of Christianity, there stands a Christian for you, I think? And you—you, couldn't you do some little something for her who did so much for you? Were you really bound to send her to Gloucester? And when you saw that her own husband had coward-like abandoned her, and all the crowd of them was hounding her, and the Almighty God on high Himself that ought to have been her Father was all dead agen her, and she stood dumb and astonished, was that the moment for you, too, Fred, hard heart . . . ? For if only from this confession she has made that she did kill me, I can pretty well judge what she's been through; she has confessed because, when she'd once

tasted her prison cell that's proved a palace of rest to her after her kilns, and her brackens, and her barns, and her storms, she was afraid of being set free, maybe, if she didn't confess; or maybe she was too aweary to trouble to say no to aught they asked her. Oh, well, poor wounded woman, you've had it to do, haven't you, poor mute ewe, with all your wounds and bruises on you; but a bosom is here at last to guard you, Margaret Higgs, like the morning to a murky night, and the turning to a long lane, aye, a bosom is here to guard you . . . The prisoner is discharged! Officer, I give myself in charge for the manslaughter of one John Cheyne."

It was now that the woman, babbling something, put out both her hands one moment toward her husband, but in the very act failed and fell. She was raised and taken out, and I, rushing out with the rest just behind her husband, witnessed everything that was done in vain to revive her, and the raver's frenzied vain prayers to his dead.