

# The Disenchantment of 'Lizabeth

By Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

“So you reckon I’ve got to die!”

The room was mean, but not without distinction. The meanness lay in lime-washed walls, scant fittings, and uncovered boards; the distinction came of ample proportions and something of durability in the furniture. Rooms, like human faces, reflect their histories; and that generation after generation of the same family had here struggled to birth or death was written in this chamber unmistakably. The candle-light, twinkling on the face of a dark wardrobe near the door, lit up its rough inscription, “S. T. and M. T., MDCLXVII”; the straight-backed oaken chairs might well claim an equal age; and the bed in the corner was a spacious four-poster, pillared in smooth mahogany and curtained in faded green damask.

In the shadow of this bed lay the man who had spoken. A single candle stood on a tall chest at his left hand, and its ray, filtering through the thin, green curtain, emphasized the hue of death on his face. The features were pinched and very old. His tone held neither complaint nor passion; it was matter-of-fact even, as of one whose talk is merely a concession to good manners. There was the faintest interrogation in it; no more.

After a minute or so, getting no reply, he added more querulously:

“I reckon you might answer, 'Lizabeth. Do 'ee think I've got to die?”

'Lizabeth, who stood by the uncurtained window staring into the blackness without, barely turned her head to answer:

“Certain.”

“Doctor said so, did he?”

'Lizabeth, still with her back toward him, nodded. For a minute or two there was silence.

“I don't feel like dyin'; but doctor ought to know. Seemed to me 'twas harder, an'—an' more important. This sort o' dyin' don't seem o' much account.”

“No?”

“That's it. I reckon, though, 'twould be other if I had a family round the bed. But there aint none o' the boys heft to stand by me now. It's hard.”

“What's hard?”

“Why, that two out o' the three should be called afore me. And hard is the manner of it. It's hard that, after Samuel died o' fever, Jim shud be blown up at Herodsfoot powder-mill. He made a lovely corpse, did Samuel; but Jim, you see, he hadn't a chance. An' as for Wiiham, he's never come home nor wrote a line since he joined the Thirty-Second; an' it's little he cares for his home or his father. I reckoned, back along, 'Lizabeth, as you an' he might come to an understandin'.”

“William's naught to me.”

“Look here!” cried the old man sharply; “he treated you bad, did William.”

“Who says so?”

“Why, all the folks. Lord bless the girl! Do 'ee think folks use their eyes without usin' their tongues? An' I wish it had come about, for you'd ha' kept en straight. But he treated you bad, and he treated me bad, tho' he won't find no profit o' that. You'm my sister's child, 'Lizabeth,” he rambled on; “an' what houserom you've had you've fairly earned—not but what you was welcome: an' if I thought as there was harm done, I'd curse him 'pon my deathbed, I would.”

“You be quiet!”

She turned from the window and cowed him with angry gray eyes. Her figure was tall and meager; her face that of a woman well over thirty—once comely, but worn over-much, and prematurely hardened. The voice had hardened with it, perhaps. The old man, who had risen on his elbow in an access of passion, was taken with a fit of coughing, and sank back upon the pillows.

“There’s no call to be nifty,” he apologized at last. “I was on’y thinkin’ of how you’d manage when I’m dead an’ gone.”

“I reckon I’ll shift.”

She drew a chair toward the bed and sat beside him. He seemed drowsy, and after a while stretched out an arm over the coverlet and fell asleep. ’Lizabeth took his hand, and sat there listlessly regarding the still shadows on the wall. The sick man never moved; only in uttered once—some words that ’Lizabeth did not catch. At the end of an hour, alarmed perhaps by some sound within the bed’s shadow, or the feel of the hand in hers, she suddenly pushed the curtain back, and, catching up the candle, stooped over the sick man.

His lids were closed, as if he slept still; but he was quite dead.

’Lizabeth stood for a while bending over him, smoothed the bedclothes straight, and quietly left the room. It was a law of the house to doff boots and shoes at the foot of the stairs, and her stocking’d feet scarcely raised a creak from the solid timbers. The staircase led straight down into the kitchen. Here a fire was blazing cheerfully, and as she descended she felt its comfort after the dismal room above.

Nevertheless, the sense of being alone in the house with a dead man, and more than a mile from any living soul, was disquieting. In truth, there was room for uneasiness. ’Lizabeth knew that some part of the old man’s hoard lay upstairs in the room with him. Of late she had, under his eye, taken from a silver tankard in the tall chest by the bed, such moneys as from week to week were wanted to pay the farm hands; and she had seen papers there, too—title-deeds, maybe. The house itself lay in a cup of the hill-side, backed with steep woods—so steep that, in places, anyone who had reasons (good or bad) for doing so, might well see in at any window he chose. And to Hooper’s Farm, down the valley, was a far cry for help. Meditating on this, ’Lizabeth stepped to the kitchen window and closed the shutter; then, reaching down an old horse-pistol from the rack above the mantelshelf, she fetched out powder and bullet and fell to loading quietly, as one who knew the trick of it.

And yet the sense of danger was not so near as that of loneliness—of a pervading silence without precedent in her experience, as if its master’s soul in flitting had, whatever scripture may say, taken something out of the house with it. ’Lizabeth had known this kitchen for a score of years now; nevertheless, to-night it was unfamiliar, with emptier corners and wider intervals of bare floor. She laid down the loaded pistol, raked the logs together, and set the kettle on the flame. She would take comfort in a dish of tea.

There was company in the singing of the kettle, the hiss of its overflow on the embers, and the rattle with which she set out cup, saucer, and teapot. She was bending over the hearth to lift the kettle, when a sound at the door caused her to start up and listen.

The latch had been rattled; not by the wind, for the December night without was misty and still. There was somebody on the other side of the door; and, as she turned, she saw the latch lowered back into its place.

With her eyes fastened on this latch, she set down the kettle softly and reached out for her pistol. For a moment or two there was silence. Then someone tapped gently.

The tapping went on for half a minute; then followed silence again. ’Lizabeth stole across the kitchen, pistol in hand, laid her ear against the board, and listened.

Yes, assuredly there was someone outside. She could catch the sound of breathing, and the shuffling of a heavy boot on the door-slate. And now a pair of knuckles repeated the tapping, more imperiously.

“Who’s there?”

A man’s voice, thick and husky, made some indistinct reply.

’Lizabetb fixed the cap more securely on her pistol, and called again:

“Who’s there?”

“What the devil—” began the voice.

’Lizabeth shot back the bolt and lifted the latch.

“If you’d said at once ’twas William come back, you’d ha’ been let in sooner,” she said quietly.

A thin puff of rain floated against her face as the door opened, and a tall soldier stepped out of the darkness into the glow of the warm kitchen.

“Well, this here’s a queer home-coming. Why, hullo, ’Lizabeth—with a pistol in your hand, too! Do you shoot the fatted calf in these parts, now? What’s the meaning of it?”

The overcoat of cinder gray that covered his scarlet tunic was powdered with beads of moisture; his black mustaches were beaded also; his face was damp, and smeared with the dye that trickled from his sodden cap. As he stood there and shook himself, the rain ran down and formed small pools upon the slates around his muddy boots.

He was a handsome fellow, in a florid, animal fashion; well-set, with black curls, dark eyes that yet contrived to be exceedingly shallow, and as sanguine a pair of cheeks as you could wish to see. It seemed to ’Lizabeth that the red of his complexion had deepened since she saw him last, while the white had taken a tinge of yellow, reminding her of the prize beef at the Christmas market Last week. Somehow she could find nothing to say.

“The old man’s in bed, I reckon. I saw the light in his window.”

“You’ve had a wet tramp of it,” was all she found to reply, though aware that the speech was inconsequent and trivial.

“Damnably. Left the coach at Fiddler’s Cross, and trudged down across the field. We were soaked enough on the coach, though, and couldn’t get much worse.”

“We?”

“Why, you don’t suppose I was the only passenger by the coach, eh?” he put in quickly.

“No, I forgot.”

There was an awkward silence, and William’s eyes traveled round the kitchen till they lit on the kettle standing by the hearthstone.

“Got any rum in the cupboard?”

While she was getting it out, he took off his cap and great coat, hung them up behind the door, and, pulling the small table close to the fire, sat beside it, toasting his knees. ’Lizabeth set bottle and glass before him, and stood watching as he mixed the stuff.

“So you’re only a private?”

William set down the kettle with some violence.

“You still keep a cursedly rough tongue, I notice.”

“An’ you’ve been a soldier five year. I reckoned you’d be a sergeant at least,” she pursued simply, with her eyes on his undecorated sleeve.

William took a gulp.

“How do you know I’ve not been a sergeant?”

“Then you’ve been degraded. I’m main sorry for that.”

“Look here, you hush up! Damn it! there’s girls enough have fancied this coat, though it aint but a private’s; and that’s enough for you, I take it.”

“It’s handsome.”

“There, that’ll do. I do believe you’re spiteful because I didn’t offer to kiss you when I came in. Here, Cousin ‘Lizabeth,” he exclaimed, starting up, “I’ll be sworn for all your tongue you’re the prettiest maid I’ve seen this five year. Give me a kiss.”

“Don’t, William!”

Such passionate entreaty vibrated in her voice that William, who was advancing, stopped for a second time to stare. Then, with a laugh, he had caught and kissed her loudly.

Her cheeks were flaming when she broke free.

William turned, emptied his glass at a gulp, and began to mix a second.

“There, there; you never look so well as when you’re angered, ‘Lizabeth.”

“’Twas a coward’s trick,” she panted. “Christmas-time, you spitfire. So you aint married yet? Lord! I don’t wonder they fight shy of you; you’d be a handful, my vixen, for any man to tame. How’s the old man?”

“He’ll never be better.”

“Like enough at his age. Is he hard set against me?”

“We’ve never spoke of you for years now, till to-night.”

“To-night? That’s queer. I’ve a mind to tip up a stave to let him know I’m about. I will, too. Let me see:

*“When Johnny conies marching home again,  
Hooray! Hoo—”*

“Don’t, don’t! Oh, why did you come back to-night, of all nights?”

“And why the devil not to-night as well as any other? You’re a comfortable lot, I must say! Maybe you’d like common meter better:

*“Within my father’s house  
The blessed sit at meat,  
Whilst I my belly stay  
With husks the swine did eat.*

Why shouldn’t I wake the old man! I’ve done naught that I’ in ashamed of.”

“It don’t seem you’re improved by soldiering.”

“Improved? I’ve seen life.” William drained his glass.

“An’ got degraded.”

“Burn your tongue! I’m going to see him.” He rose and made toward the door. ‘Lizabeth stepped before him.

“Hush! You mustn’t.”

“ ‘Mustn’t?’ That’s a bold word.”

“Well, then—‘can’t.’ Sit down, I tell you.”

“Hullo! Aint you coming the mistress pretty free in this house? Stand aside. I’ve got something to tell him—something that won’t wait. Stand aside, you she-cat!”

He pushed by her roughly, but she held on to his sleeve.

“It *must* wait. Listen to me.”

“I won’t.”

“You shall. He’s dead.”

“*Dead!*” He reeled back to the table and poured out another glassful with a shaking hand. Lizabeth noticed that this time he added no water.

“He died to-night,” she explained; “but he’s been ailin’ for a year past, an’ took to his bed back in October.”

William’s face was still pallid; but he merely stammered:

“Things happen queerly. I’ll go up and see him; I’m master here now. You can’t say aught to that. By the Lord! but I can buy myself out—I’m sick of soldiering—and we’ll settle down here and be comfortable.”

“We?”

His foot was on the stair by this time. He turned and nodded.

“Yes, *we*. It aint a bad game being mistress o’ this house. Eli, Cousin ’Lizabeth?”

She turned her hot face to the flame, without reply; and he went on his way up the stairs.

’Lizabeth sat for a while staring into the wood embers with shaded eyes. Whatever the path by which her reflections traveled, it led in the end to the kettle. She remembered that the tea was still to make, and, on stooping to set the kettle back upon the logs, found it emptied by William’s potatoes. Donning her stout shoes and pattens, and slipping a shawl over her head, she reached down the lantern from its peg, lit it, and went out to fill the kettle at the spring.

It was pitch-dark; the rain was still falling, and as she crossed the yard the sodden straw squeaked beneath her tread. The yard had been fashioned generations since, by leveling back from the house to the natural rock of the hill-side, and connecting the two on the right by cow-house and stable, with an upper story for barn and granary, on the left by a low wall, where, through a rough gate, the cart-track from the valley found its entrance. Against the further end of this wall leant an open cart-shed; and within three paces of it a perpetual spring of water, gushing down the rock, was caught and arrested for a while in a stone trough before it hurried out by a side gutter, and so down to join the trout-stream in the valley below. The spring first came to light half-way down the rock’s face. Overhead its point of emergence was curtained by a network of roots pushed out by the trees above and sprawling over the lip in helpless search for soil.

’Lizabeth’s lantern threw a flame of yellow on these and on the bubbling water as she filled her kettle. She was turning to go when a sound arrested her.

It was the sound of a suppressed sob, and seemed to issue from the cart-shed. ’Lizabeth turned quickly and held up her lantern. Under the shed, and barely four paces from her, sat a woman.

The woman was perched against the shaft of a hay-wagon, with her feet resting on a mud-soiled carpet-bag. She made but a poor appealing figure, tricked out in odds and ends of incongruous finery, with a bonnet, once smart, hanging limply forward over a pair of light-colored eyes and a very lachrymose face. The ambition of the stranger’s toilet, which ran riot in cheap jewelry, formed so odd a contrast with her sorry posture that ’Lizabeth, for all her wonder, felt inclined to smile.

“What’s your business here?”

“Oh, tell me,” whimpered the woman, “what’s he doing all this time? Won’t his father see me? He don’t intend to leave me here all night, surely, in this bitter cold, with nothing to eat, and my gown ruined!”

“He?” ’Lizabeth’s attitude stiffened with suspicion of the truth.

“William, I mean; an’ a sorry day it was I agreed to come.”

“William?”

“My husband. I’m Mrs. William Transom.”

“Come along to the house.” ’Lizabeth turned abruptly and led the way.

Mrs. William Transom gathered up her carpetbag and bedraggled skirts and followed, sobbing still, but in *diminuendo*. Inside the kitchen ’Lizabeth faced round on her again.

“So you’m William’s wife.”

“I am; an’ small comfort to say so, seem’ this is how I’m served. Reely, now, I’m not fit to be seen.”

“Bless the woman, who cares here what you look like? Take off those fal-lahs, an’ sit in your petticoat by the fire, here; you aint wet through—on’y your feet; and here’s a dry pair o’ stockings, if you’ve none i’ the bag. You must be possessed, to come trampin’ over High Compton in them gingerbread timings.” She pointed scornfully at the stranger’s boots.

Mrs. William Transom, finding her notions of gentility thins ridiculed, acquiesced.

“An’ now,” resumed ’Lizabeth, when her visitor was seated by the fire pulling off her damp stockings; “there’s rum an’ there’s tea. Which will you take to warm yoursel’?”

Mrs. William elected to take rum, and ’Lizabeth noted that she helped herself with freedom. She made no comment, however, but set about making tea for herself; and, then, drawing up her chair to the table, leant her chin on her hand and intently regarded her visitor.

“Where’s William?” inquired Mrs. Transom.

“Upstairs.”

“Askin’ his father’s pardon?”

“Well,” ’Lizabeth grimly admitted, “that’s like enough; but you needn’t fret about them.”

Mrs. William showed no disposition to fret. On the contrary, under the influence of the rum she became weakly jovial and a trifle garrulous—confiding to Elizabeth that, though married to William for four years, she had hitherto been blessed with no children; that they lived in barracks, which she disliked, but put up with because she doted on a red coat; that William had always been meaning to tell his father, but feared to anger him, “because, my dear,” she frankly explained, “I was once connected with the stage”—a form of speech behind which ’Lizabeth did not pry; that, a fortnight before Christmas, Will had made up his mind at last, “‘for,’ as he said to me, ‘the old man must be nearin’ his end, and then the farm ’ll be mine by rights;’” that he had obtained his furlough two days back, and come by coach all the way to this doleful spot—for doleful she must call it, though she *would* have to live there some day—with no shops nor theaters, of which last it appeared Mrs. Transom was inordinately fond. Her chatter was interrupted at length with some abruptness.

“I suppose,” said ’Lizabeth meditatively, “you was pretty, once.”

Mrs. Transom, with her hand on the bottle, stared, and then tittered.

“Lud! my dear, you aint over-complimentary. Yes, pretty I was, though I say it.”

“We aint neither of us pretty now—you especially.”

“I’d a knack o’ dressin’,” pursued the egregious Mrs. Transom, “an’ nice eyes an’ hair. ‘Why, Maria, darhin’,’ said William one day, when him an’ me was keepin’ company, ‘I believe you could sit on that hair o’ yours, I do reely.’ ‘Go along, you silly!’ I said, ‘to be sure I can.’ “

“He called you darling?”

“Why, in course. Haint you never had a young man?”

’Lizabeth brushed aside the question by another.

“Do you love him? I mean so that—that you could lie down an’ let him tramp the life out o’ you?”

“Good Lord, girl, what questions you do ask! Why, so-so, o’ course, like other married women. lie’s wild at times, but I shut my eyes; an’ he hav’n struck me this year past. I wonder what he can be doin’ all this time.”

“Come and see.”

’Lizabeth rose. Her contempt of this foolish, faded creature recoiled upon herself, until she could bear to sit still no longer. With William’s wife at her heels, she mounted the stair, their shoeless feet making no sound. The door of the old man’s bedroom stood ajar, and a faint ray of

light stole out upon the landing. 'Lizabeth looked into the room, and then, with a quick impulse, darted in front of her companion.

It was too late. Mrs. Transom was already at her shoulder, and the eyes of the two women rested on the sorry spectacle before them.

Candle in hand, the prodigal was kneeling by the dead man's bed. He was not praying, however; but had his head well buried in the oaken chest, among the papers of which he was cautiously prying.

The faint squeal that broke from his wife's lips sufficed to startle him. He dropped the lid with a crash, turned sharply round, and scrambled to his feet. His look embraced the two women in one brief flicker, and then rested on the blazing eyes of 'Lizabeth.

"You mean hound!" she said very slowly.

He winced uneasily, and began to bluster:

"Curse you! What do you mean by sneaking upon a man like that?"

"A man?" echoed 'Lizabeth. "Man, then, if you will—couldn't you wait till your father was cold, but must needs be groping under his pillow for the key of that chest? You woman, there—you wife of this man—I' in main grieved you should ha' seen this. Lord knows I had the will to hide it!"

The wife, who had sunk into the nearest chair, and lay there huddled like a half-empty bag, answered with a whimper.

"Stop that whining!" roared William, turning upon her, "or I'll break every bone in your skin."

"Fie on you, man! Why, she tells me you haven't struck her for a whole year," put in 'Lizabeth, immeasurably scornful.

"So, cousin, you've found out what I meant by 'we.' Lord! you fancied *you* was the one as was goin' to settle down wi' me an' be comfortable, eh? You're jilted, my girl, an' this is how you vent your jealousy. You played your hand well; you've turned us out. It's a pity—eh?—you didn't score this last trick."

"What do you mean?" The innuendo at the end diverted her wrath at the man's hateful coarseness.

"Mean? Oh, o' course, you're innocent as a lamb! Mean? Why, look here."

He opened the chest again, and, drawing out a scrap of folded foolcap, began to read

*"I, Ebenezer Transom, of Compton Burrows, in the parish of Compton, yeoman, being of sound wit and health, and willing, though a sinner, to give my account to God, do hereby make my last will and testament.*

*"My house, lands, and farm of Compton Burrows, together with every stick that I own, I hereby (for her good care of me) give and bequeath to Elizabeth Rundle, my dead sister's child—" "Let be, I tell you?"*

But Sally had snatched the paper from him. For a moment the devil in his eye seemed to meditate violence. But he thought better of it; and when she asked for the candle held it beside her, as she read on slowly.

*". . . to Elizabeth Rundle, my dead sister's child, desiring that she may marry and bequeath the same to the heirs of her body; less the sum of one shilling sterling, which I command to be sent to my only surviving son, William—"*

"You needn't go on," growled William.

“. . . because he's a bad lot, and he may as well know that I think so. And to this I set my hand, this 17th day of September, 1856.

“Signed

“EBENEZER TRANSOM.

“Witnessed by

“JOHN HOOPER,

“PETER TREGASKIS.”

The document was in the old man's handwriting, and clearly of his composition. But it was plain enough, and the signatures genuine. 'Lizabeth's hand dropped.

“I never knew a word o' this, William,” she said humbly.

Mrs. Transom broke into an incredulous titer.

“Ugh! get along, you designer!”

“William,” appealed 'Lizabeth, “I've never had no thought o' robbin' you.”

'Lizabeth had definite notions of right and wrong, and this disinheritance of William struck her conservative mind as a violation of Nature's laws.

William's silence was his wife's opportunity.

“Robbery's the word, you baggage! You thought to buy him wi' your ill-gotten gains. Ugh! Go along wi' you!”

'Lizabeth threw a desperate look toward the cause of this trouble—the pale mask lying on the pillows. Finding no help, she turned to William again:

“You believe I meant to rob you?”

Meeting her eyes, William bent his own on the floor, and lied.

“I reckon you meant to buy me, Cousin 'Lizabeth.”

His wife tittered spitefully.

“Woman!” cried the girl, lapping up her timid merriment in a flame of wrath. “Woman, listen to me. Time was I loved that man o' your'n; time was he swore I was all to him. He was a liar from his birth. It's your natur' to think I'm jealous; a better woman would know I'm sick—sick wi' shame an' scorn o' mysel'. That man, there, has kissed me, oft'n an' oft'n—kissed me 'pon the mouth. Bein' what you are, you can't understand how those kisses taste now, when I look at *you*.”

“Well, I'm sure!”

“Hold your blasted tongue!” roared William. Mrs. Transom collapsed.

“Give me the candle,” 'Lizabeth commanded. “Look here “

She held the corner of the will to the flame, and watched it run up at the edge and wrap the whole in fire. The paper dropped from her hand to the bare boards, and with a dying flicker was consumed. The charred flakes drifted idly across the floor, stopped, and drifted again. In dead silence she looked up.

Mrs. Transom's watery eyes were open to their fullest. 'Lizabeth turned to William and found him regarding her with a curious frown.

“Do you know what you've done?” he asked hoarsely.

'Lizabeth laughed a trifle wildly.

“I reckon I've made reparation.”

“There was no call—” began William.

“You fool—'twas to *myself*! An' now,” she added quietly, “I'll pick up my things and tramp down to Hooper's Farm; they'll give me a place, I know, an' be glad o' the chance. They'll be sittin' up to-night, bein' Christmas time. Good-night, William!”

She moved to go; but, recollecting herself, turned at the door, and, stepping up to the bed, bent and kissed the dead man's forehead. Then she was gone.

It was the woman who broke the silence that followed with a base speech.

"Well! To think she'd lose her head like that when she found you wasn't to be had!"

"Shut up!" said William savagely; "any listen to this: If you was to die to-night I'd marry 'Lizabeth next week."

\* \* \*

Time passed. The old man was buried, and Mr. and Mrs. Transom took possession at Compton Burrows and reigned in his stead. 'Lizabeth dwelt a mile or so down the valley with the Hoopers, who, as she had said, were thankful enough to get her services, for Mrs. Hooper was well up in years, and gladly resigned the dairy work to a girl who, as she told her husband, was of good haveage, and worth her keep a dozen times over. So 'Lizabeth had settled down in her new home, and closed her heart and shut its clasps tight.

She never met William to speak to. Now and then she caught sight of him as he rode past on horseback, on his way to market or to the "Compton Arms," where he spent more time and money than was good for him. He had bought himself out of the army, of course; but he retained his barrack tales and his air of having seen life. These, backed up with a baritone voice and a largehandedness in standing treat, made him popular in the bar parlor. Meanwhile, Mrs. Transom, up at Compton Burrows—perhaps because she missed her "theaters"—sickened and began to pine; and one January afternoon, little more than a year after the home-coming, 'Lizabeth, standing in the dairy by her cream-pans, heard that she was dead.

"Poor soul," she said; "but she looked a sickly one." That was all. She herself wondered that the news should affect her so little.

"I reckon," said Mrs. Hooper with meaning, "William will soon be lookin' round for another wife."

'Lizabeth went quietly on with her skimming.

It was just five months after thus, on a warm June morning, that William rode down the valley, and, dismounting by Farmer Hooper's, hitched his bridle over the garden gate, and entered. 'Lizabeth was in the garden; he could see her print sun-bonnet moving between the row of peas. She turned as he approached, dropped a pod into her basket, and held out her hand.

"Good-day, William." Her voice was quite friendly.

William had something to say, and 'Lizabeth quickly guessed what it was.

"I thought I'd drop in an' see how you was gettin' on; for it's main lonely up at Compton Burrows since the missus was took."

"I daresay."

"An' I'd a matter on my mind to tell you," he pursued, encouraged to find she harbored no malice. "It's troubled me since, that way you burnt the will, an' us turnin' you out; for in a way the place belonged to you. The old man meant it, anyhow."

"Well," said 'Lizabeth, setting down her basket, and looking him full in the eyes.

"Well, I reckon we might set matters square, you an' me, 'Lizabeth, by marryin' an' settlin' down comfortable. I've no children to pester you, an' you're young yet to be givin' up thoughts o' marriage. What do 'ee say, cousin?"

'Lizabeth picked a full pod from the bush beside her, and began shelling the peas, one by one, into her hand. Her face was cool and contemplative.

"'Tis eight years ago, William, since last you asked me. Aint that so?" she asked absently.

"Come, 'Lizabeth, let bygones be, and tell me; shall it be, my dear?"

“No, William,” she answered; “’tis too late an hour to ask me now. I thank you, but it can’t be.” She passed the peas slowly to and fro in her fingers.

“But why, ’Lizabeth?” he urged; “you was fond o’ me once. Come, girl, don’t stand in your own light through a bit o’ pique.”

“It’s not that,” she explained; “it’s that I’ve found myself out—an’ you. You’ve humbled my pride too sorely.”

“You’re thinking o’ Maria.”

“Partly, maybe; but it don’t become us to talk o’ one that’s dead. You’ve got my answer, William, and don’t ask me again. I loved you once, but now I’m only weary when I think o’t. You wouldn’t understand me if I tried to tell you.”

She held out her hand. William took it.

“You’re a great fool, ’Lizabeth.”

“Good-by, William.”

She took up her basket and walked slowly back to the house; William watched her for a moment or two, swore, and returned to his horse. He did not ride homeward, but down the valley, where he spent the day at the “Compton Arms.”

When he returned home, which was not before midnight, he was boisterously drunk.

Now it so happened that when William dismounted at the gate Mrs. Hooper had spied him from her bedroom window, and, guessing his errand, had stolen down on the other side of the garden wall parallel with which the peas were planted. Thus sheltered, she contrived to hear every word of the foregoing conversation, and repeated it to her good man that very night.

“An’ I reckon William said true,” she wound up. “If ’Lizabeth don’t know which side her bread’s buttered she’s no better nor a fool—an’ William’s another.”

“I dunno,” said the farmer; “it’s a queer business, an’ I don’t fairly see my way about in it. I’m main puzzled what can ha’ become o’ that will I witnessed for th’ old man.”

“She’s a fool, I say.”

“Well, well; if she didn’t want the man I reckon she knows best. He put it fairly to her.”

“That’s just it, you ninny!” interrupted his wiser wife; “I gave William credit for more sense. Put it fairly, indeed! If he’d said nothin’, but just caught her in his arms, an’ clipped an’ kissed her, she couldn’t ha’ stood out. But he’s lost his chance, an’ now she’ll never marry.”

And it was as she said.