



CHAPTER 1

When Farmer Oak smiled, the corners of his mouth spread almost all the way to his ears. His half-closed eyes, with the creases on either side, looked like a drawing of a sunrise.

His first name was Gabriel. He was a young man of sound judgment, proper dress, and general good character. On Sundays, he put on his best clothes and went to church. However, he yawned privately as the service went on. While appearing to be listening intently to the sermon, his thoughts centered upon what there would be for dinner.

On working days, he wore a low-crowned felt hat, jammed tightly upon his head for security in high winds. He wore a long coat, leather pants, and thick boots. These garments were designed more for ruggedness than for style.

Had someone noticed Oak walking across his fields on a certain December morning, he might have noticed that Oak's face was beginning to change in appearance. The shining freshness of youth was giving way to the marks of manhood. He had just reached the time of life when people ceased referring to him as a "young" man. In short, he was twenty-eight and a bachelor.



The field he was in this morning ascended to a ridge called Norcombe Hill. A road connecting two towns ran across this ridge. Casually glancing in this direction, Oak saw, coming down the road toward him, a wagon, painted yellow and gaily decorated. The wagon was drawn by two horses, a wagoner walking alongside. The wagon was loaded with household goods and window plants. On top of this sat a woman, young and attractive. The wagon came to a stop just where Oak was standing behind a tall hedge that concealed him.

“The tailboard of the wagon is gone, Miss,” said the wagoner.

“Then I heard it fall,” said the girl, in a soft voice. “I heard a noise I could not account for when we were coming up the hill.”

“I’ll run back.”

“Do,” she answered.

The girl sat motionless, surrounded by tables and chairs with their legs pointing upwards. There were also pots of geraniums and cactuses, a caged canary, and a cat in a willow basket. The cat surveyed with interest the small birds fluttering around.

After some time, the girl picked up a hand-mirror from her lap and studied her face attentively. She parted her lips and smiled with satisfaction at what she saw. It was a fine morning, and the sun lighted up to a scarlet glow the crimson jacket she wore, and painted a soft luster upon her bright face and dark hair.

Why she should so glance at herself in the middle of the country, instead of in the privacy of her own bedroom, was a puzzle to Farmer Oak. There was no necessity whatever for her looking in the glass. She did not adjust her hat, or pat her hair, or press a dimple into shape. She simply admired herself as a fair product of nature, her thoughts seemingly elsewhere.

The wagoner returned, and she put down the mirror, and the wagon passed on. Before long, the vehicle halted before a tollgate. Oak could overhear a dispute concerning the amount of the toll. The wagoner insisently declared, “The lady says what I’ve offered ye, you great miser, is enough, and she won’t pay any more.”

“Very well. Then you can’t pass,” said the toll-keeper, closing the gate.

Oak looked from one to the other of the parties, who were quarrelling over a mere twopence. “Here,”

he said, stepping forward and handing two pennies to the gatekeeper. "Let the young woman pass." He looked up at her then. She heard his words, glanced quickly at him, and looked away, then instructed her man to drive on.

The gatekeeper surveyed the retreating vehicle. "That's a handsome maid," he said to Oak.

"But she has her faults," said Gabriel.

"True, Farmer."

"And the greatest of them is—well, what it is always."

"What, then?"

Perhaps Farmer Oak was annoyed by the woman's indifference. He looked back at the spot where she had admired herself in the mirror. "Vanity," Gabriel declared.



CHAPTER 2

It was nearly midnight on the shortest day in the year. A determined wind blew over the hill where Oak had watched the yellow wagon and its occupant in the sunshine of a few days earlier.

The wind sent the dry leaves on the ground rattling against the naked tree trunks with smart taps. Overhead, the sky was remarkably clear. The twinkling of all the stars seemed to be throbs of one body, timed by a common pulse.

Suddenly an unexpected series of sounds began to be heard. They had a clearness which was to be found nowhere in the wind. They were the notes of Farmer Oak's flute.

The tune came from the direction of a small dark object—a shepherd's hut. The hut stood on little wheels, which raised its floor about a foot from the ground. Such shepherds' huts are dragged into the fields at that time of year when lambs give birth, to shelter the shepherd in his enforced nightly attendance.

It was only recently that people had begun to call Gabriel "Farmer" Oak. During the twelve months preceding this time, he had been enabled by hard work and good spirits to lease the small sheep-farm where he presently lived. He had also managed to

stock the farm with two hundred sheep. Previously he had been a bailiff, or general manager of another's farm. Earlier still, he had been only a shepherd. He had helped tend sheep from childhood on.

This venture into the paths of farming as master, not hired hand, was a critical time for Gabriel Oak. The risk was all the higher, since he had yet to pay for the sheep. He counted on the wool of these animals to pay off the loan he had taken out to buy them. The increase of his flock at the present birthing season would be a large help to his financial situation.

Oak went out of the hut to his nearby flock. He returned to the hut, bringing in his arms a newborn lamb. The little speck of life he placed on a wisp of hay before the small stove, where a can of milk was simmering. Oak extinguished the lantern by blowing into it. He lay down on a rather hard couch, formed of a few corn sacks thrown carelessly down. In no time Farmer Oak was asleep.

The inside of the hut was cozy and comfortable. A fire cast a warm glow over the stock of bread, bacon, cheese, and a cup for ale or cider. Beside these provisions lay the flute. The house was ventilated by two round holes with wood slides.

The lamb, revived by the warmth, began to bleat. The sound entered Gabriel's ears and brought him to full wakefulness. He put on his hat, took the lamb in his arms, and carried it into the darkness. After placing the little creature with its mother, he stood and carefully examined the sky, to figure out the time of night from the altitudes of the stars.

“One o’clock,” said Gabriel.

As he looked into the distance, Oak gradually perceived that what he had previously taken to be a low star was in reality no such thing. It was an artificial light, almost close at hand.

Now, the land that made up Oak’s farm was ground he had leased from a sizeable farm, which contained many acres besides those tended by Oak. The light Oak spied came from the direction of the large farm adjoining his own.

Farmer Oak went toward the light, which came from a primitive shed. The structure was formed of boards nailed to posts and covered with tar as a preservative. Oak approached the shed and peered in through a hole.

The place contained two women and two cows. By the side of the latter a steaming bran-mash stood in a bucket. One of the women was past middle age. Her companion was apparently young and graceful. Oak could not see her clearly, as she had wrapped herself in a large cloak.

“There, now we’ll go home,” said the elder of the two, resting her knuckles upon her hips. “I do hope Daisy will get better now. I have never been more frightened in my life, but I don’t mind breaking my rest if she recovers.”

The young woman yawned but managed to say, “I wish we were rich enough to pay a man to do these things.”

“As we are not, we must do them ourselves,” said the other. “You must help me if you stay.”

“Well, my hat is gone,” continued the younger.

“The wind must have blown it off my head.”

The cow standing erect was of the Devon breed, as uniformly dark red as if the animal had been dipped in a dye of that color. The other was spotted, gray and white. Beside her Oak now noticed a little calf about a day old, looking idiotically at the two women.

“I think we had better send for some oatmeal,” said the elder woman. “There’s no more bran.”

“Yes, Aunt. I’ll ride over for it as soon as it is light.”

“But there’s no sidesaddle.”

“I can ride on the regular kind of saddle. Trust me.”

Oak, upon hearing these remarks, became more curious to observe the younger woman’s face. In a happy coincidence, the girl now dropped the cloak, and out tumbled curls of black hair over a red jacket. Oak knew her instantly as the heroine of the yellow wagon and lookingglass, also as the woman who owed him twopence.

The women placed the calf beside its mother again, took up the lantern, and went out to the main house. Gabriel Oak returned to his flock.