

MARY GLADYS MEREDITH WEBB



**GONE TO
EARTH**

MUSAICUM REDISCOVERED CLASSICS

Mary Gladys Meredith Webb

Gone to Earth (Musaicum Rediscovered Classics)

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Chapter 1

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Small feckless clouds were hurried across the vast untroubled sky—shepherdless, futile, imponderable—and were torn to fragments on the fangs of the mountains, so ending their ephemeral adventures with nothing of their fugitive existence left but a few tears.

It was cold in the Callow—a spinney of silver birches and larches that topped a round hill. A purple mist hinted of buds in the tree-tops, and a fainter purple haunted the vistas between the silver and brown boles.

Only the crudeness of youth was here as yet, and not its triumph—only the sharp calyx-point, the pricking tip of the bud, like spears, and not the paten of the leaf, the chalice of the flower.

For as yet spring had no flight, no song, but went like a half-fledged bird, hopping tentatively through the undergrowth. The bright springing mercury that carpeted the open spaces had only just hung out its pale flowers, and honeysuckle leaves were still tongues of green fire. Between the larch boles and under the thickets of honeysuckle and blackberry came a tawny silent form, wearing with the calm dignity of woodland creatures a beauty of eye and limb, a brilliance of tint, that few-women could have worn without self-consciousness. Clear-eyed, lithe, it stood for a moment in the full sunlight—a year-old fox, round-headed and velvet-footed. Then it slid into the shadows. A shrill whistle came from the interior of the wood, and the fox bounded towards it.

'Where you bin? You'm stray and lose yourself, certain sure!' said a girl's voice, chidingly motherly. 'And if you'm alost, I'm alost; so come you whome. The sun's undering, and there's bones for supper!'

With that she took to her heels, the little fox after her, racing down the Callow in the cold level light till they came to the Woodus's cottage.

Hazel Woodus, to whom the fox belonged, had always lived at the Callow. There her mother, a Welsh gipsy, had born her in bitter rebellion, hating marriage and a settled life and Abel Woodus as a wild cat hates a cage. She was a rover, born for the artist's joy and sorrow, and her spirit found no relief for its emotions; for it was dumb. To the linnet its flight, to the thrush its song; but she had neither flight nor song. Yet the tongueless thrush is a thrush still, and has golden music in its heart. The caged linnet may sit moping, but her soul knows the dip and rise of flight on an everlasting May morning.

All the things she felt and could not say, all the stored honey, the black hatred, the wistful homesickness for the unfenced wild—all that other women would have put into their prayers, she gave to Hazel. The whole force of her wayward heart flowed into the softly beating heart of her baby. It was as if she passionately flung the life she did not value into the arms of her child.

When Hazel was fourteen she died, leaving her treasure—an old, dirty, partially illegible manuscript-book of spells and charms and other gipsy lore—to her daughter.

Her one request was that she might be buried in the Callow under the yellow larch needles, and not in a churchyard. Abel Woodus did as she asked, and was regarded askance

by most of the community for not burying her in Chrissenground. But this did not trouble him. He had his harp still, and while he had that he needed no other friend. It had been his absorption in his music that had prevented him understanding his wife, and in the early days of their marriage she had been wildly jealous of the tall gilt harp with its faded felt cover that stood in the corner of the living-room. Then her jealousy changed to love of it, and her one desire was to be able to draw music from its plaintive strings. She could never master even the rudiments of music, but she would sit on rainy evenings when Abel was away and run her thin hands over the strings with a despairing passion of grieving love. Yet she could not bear to hear Abel play. Just as some childless women with all their accumulated stores of love cannot bear to see a mother with her child, so Maray Woodus, with her sealed genius, her incapacity for expression, could not bear to hear the easy self-expression of another. For Abel was in his way a master of his art; he had dark places in his soul, and that is the very core of art and its substance. He had the lissom hands and cheerful self-absorption that bring success.

He had met Maray at an Eisteddfod that had been held in days gone by on a hill five miles from the Callow, called God's Little Mountain, and crowned by a chapel. She had listened, swaying and weeping to the surge and lament of his harp, and when he won the harper's prize and laid it in her lap she had consented to be married in the chapel at the end of the Eisteddfod week. That was nineteen years ago, and she was fled like the leaves and the birds of departed summers; but God's Little Mountain still towered as darkly to the eastward; the wind still leapt sheer from the chapel to the young larches of the Callow; nothing had changed at all; only one more young, anxious, eager creature had come into the towering, subluminous scheme of things. Hazel had her mother's eyes, strange, fawn-

coloured eyes like water, and in the large clear irises were tawny flecks. In their shy honesty they were akin to the little fox's. Her hair, too, of a richer colour than her father's, was tawny and foxlike, and her ways were graceful and covert as a wild creature's.

She stood in the lane above the cottage, which nestled below with its roof on a level with the hedge-roots, and watched the sun dip. The red light from the west stained her torn old dress, her thin face, her eyes, till she seemed to be dipped in blood. The fox, wistfulness in her expression and the consciousness of coming supper in her mind, gazed obediently where her mistress gazed, and was touched with the same fierce beauty. They stood there fronting the crimson pools over the far hills, two small sentient things facing destiny with pathetic courage; they had, in the chill evening on the lonely hill, a look as of those predestined to grief, almost an air of martyrdom.

The small clouds that went westward took each in its turn the prevailing colour, and vanished, dipped in blood.

From the cottage, as Hazel went down the path, came the faint thrumming of the harp, changing as she reached the door to the air of 'The Ash Grove.' The cottage was very low, one-storied, and roofed with red corrugated iron. The three small windows had frames coloured with washing-blue and frills of crimson cotton within. There seemed scarcely room for even Hazel's small figure. The house was little larger than a good pigsty, and only the trail of smoke from its squat chimney showed that humanity dwelt there.

Hazel gave Foxy her supper and put her to bed in the old washtub where she slept. Then she went into the cottage with an armful of logs from the wood heap. She threw them on the open fire.

'I'm a-cold,' she said; 'the rain's cleared, and there'll be a duck's frost to-night.'

Abel looked up absently, humming the air he intended to play next.

'I bin in the Callow, and I've gotten a primmyrose,' continued Hazel, accustomed to his ways, and not discouraged. 'And I got a bit of blackthorn, white as a lady.'

Abel was well on in 'Ap Jenkyn' by now.

Hazel moved about, seeing to supper, for she was as hungry as Foxy, talking all the time in her rather shrilly sweet voice, while she dumped the cracked cups and the loaf and margarine on the bare table. The kettle was not boiling, so she threw some bacon-grease on the fire, and a great tongue of flame sprang out and licked at Abel's beard. He raised a hand to it, continuing to play with the other.

Hazel laughed.

'You be fair comic-struck,' she said.

She always spoke in this tone of easy comradeship; they got on very well; they were so entirely indifferent to each other. There was nothing filial about her or parental about him. Neither did they ever evince the least affection for each other.

He struck up 'It's a fine hunting day.'

'Oh! shut thy row with that drodsome thing!' said Hazel with sudden passion. 'Look'ee! I unna bide in if you go on.'

'Ur?' queried Abel dreamily.

'Play summat else!' said Hazel, 'not that; I dunna like it.'

'You be a queer girl, 'Azal,' said Abel, coming out of his abstraction. 'But I dunna mind playing "Why do the People?" instead; it's just as heartening.'

'Canna you stop meddling wi' the music and come to supper?' asked Hazel. The harp was always called 'the music,' just as Abel's mouth-organ was 'the little music.'

She reached down the flicht to cut some bacon off, and her dress, already torn, ripped from shoulder to waist.

'If you dunna take needle to that, you'll be mother-naked afore a week's out,' said Abel indifferently.

'I mun get a new un,' said Hazel. 'It unna mend. I'll go to town to-morrow.'

'Shall you bide with yer auntie the night over?'

'Ah.'

'I shanna look for your face till I see your shadow, then. You can bring a tuthree wreath-frames. There's old Samson at the Yeath unna last long; they'll want a wreath made.'

Hazel sat and considered her new dress. She never had a new one till the old one fell off her back, and then she usually got a second-hand one, as a shilling or two would buy only material if new, but would stretch to a ready-made if second-hand.

'Foxy'd like me to get a green velvet,' said Hazel. She always expressed her intense desires, which were few, in this formula. It was her unconscious protest against the lovelessness of her life. She put the blackthorn in water and

contemplated its whiteness with delight; but it had not occurred to her that she might herself, with a little trouble, be as sweet and fresh as its blossom. The spiritualization of sex would be needed before such things would occur to her. At present she was sexless as a leaf. They sat by the fire till it went out; then they went to bed, not troubling to say good-night.

In the middle of the night Foxy woke. The moon filled her kennel-mouth like a door, and the light shone in her eyes. This frightened her—so large a lantern in an unseen hand, held so purposefully before the tiny home of one defenceless little creature. She barked sharply. Hazel awoke promptly, as a mother at her child's cry. She ran straight out with her bare feet into the fierce moonlight.

'What ails you?' she whispered. 'What ails you, little un?'

The wind stalked through the Callow, and the Callow moaned. A moan came also from the plain, and black shapes moved there as the clouds drove onwards.

'Maybe they're out,' muttered Hazel. 'Maybe the black meet's set for to-night and she's scented the jeath pack.' She looked about nervously. 'I can see summat driving dark o'er the pastures yonder; they'm abroad, surely.'

She hurried Foxy into the cottage and bolted the door.

'There!' she said. 'Now you lie good and quiet in the corner, and the death pack shanna get you.'

It was said that the death pack, phantom hounds of a bad squire, whose gross body had been long since put to sweeter uses than any he put it to in life—changed into the clear-eyed daisy and the ardent pimpernel—scoured the

country on dark stormy nights. Harm was for the house past which it streamed, death for those that heard it give tongue.

This was the legend, and Hazel believed it implicitly. When she had found Foxy half dead outside her deserted earth, she had been quite sure that it was the death pack that had made away with Foxy's mother. She connected it also with her own mother's death. Hounds symbolized everything she hated, everything that was not young, wild and happy. She identified herself with Foxy, and so with all things hunted and snared and destroyed.

Night, shadow, loud winds, winter—these were inimical; with these came the death pack, stealthy and untiring, following for ever the trail of the defenceless. Sunlight, soft airs, bright colours, kindness—these were beneficent havens to flee into. Such was the essence of her creed, the only creed she held, and it lay darkly in her heart, never expressed even to herself. But when she ran into the night to comfort the little fox, she was living up to her faith as few do; when she gathered flowers and lay in the sun, she was dwelling in a mystical atmosphere as vivid as that of the saints; when she recoiled from cruelty, she was trampling evil underfoot, perhaps more surely than those great divines who destroyed one another in their zeal for their Maker.

Chapter 2

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At six the next morning they had breakfast. Abel was busy making a hive for the next summer's swarm. When he made a coffin, he always used up the bits thus. A large coffin did not leave very much; but sometimes there were small ones, and then he made splendid hives. The white township on the south side of the lilac hedge increased as slowly and unceasingly as the green township around the distant churchyard. In summer the garden was loud with bees, and the cottage was full of them at swarming-time. Later it was littered with honey-sections; honey dripped from the table, and pieces of broken comb lay on the floor and were contentedly eaten by Foxy.

Whenever an order for a coffin came, Hazel went to tell the bees who was dead. Her father thought this unnecessary. It was only for folks that died in the house, he said. But he had himself told the bees when his wife died. He had gone out on that vivid June morning to his hives, and had stood watching the lines of bees fetching water, their shadows going and coming on the clean white boards. Then he had stooped and said with a curious confidential indifference, 'Maray's jead.' He had put his ear to the hive and listened to the deep, solemn murmur within; but it was the murmur of the future, and not of the past, the preoccupation with life, not with death, that filled the pale galleries within. Today the

eighteen hives lay under their winter covering, and the eager creatures within slept. Only one or two strayed sometimes to the early arabis, desultory and sad, driven home again by the frosty air to await the purple times of honey. The happiest days of Abel's life were those when he sat like a bard before the seething hives and harped to the muffled roar of sound that came from within.

All his means of livelihood were joys to him. He had the art of perpetual happiness in this, that he could earn as much as he needed by doing the work he loved. He played at flower shows and country dances, revivals and weddings. He sold his honey, and sometimes his bees. He delighted in wreath-making, gardening, and carpentering, and always in the background was his music—some new air to try on the gilded harp, some new chord or turn to master. The garden was almost big enough, and quite beautiful enough, for that of a mansion. In the summer white lilies haunted it, standing out in the dusk with their demure cajolery, looking, as Hazel said, like ghosses. Goldenrod foamed round the cottage, deeply embowering it, and lavender made a grey mist beside the red quarries of the path. Then Hazel sat like a queen in a regalia of flowers, eating the piece of bread and honey that made her dinner, and covering her face with lily pollen.

Now, there were no flowers in the garden; only the yew-tree by the gate that hung her waxen blossom along the undersides of the branches. Hazel hated the look of the frozen garden; she had an almost unnaturally intense craving for everything rich, vivid, and vital. She was all these things herself, as she communed with Foxy before starting. She had wound her hair round her head in a large plait and her old black hat made the colour richer.

'You'm nigh on thirty miles to go there and back, unless you get a lift,' said Abel.

'A lift? I dunna want never no lifts!' said Hazel scornfully.

'You'm as good a walker as John of No Man's Parish,' replied Abel, 'and he walks for ever, so they do say.'

As Hazel set forth in the sharp, fresh morning, the Callow shone with radiant brown and silver, and no presage moved within it of the snow that would hurtle upon it from mountains of cloud all night.

When Hazel had chosen her dress—a peacock blue serge—and had put it on there and then in the back of the shop, curtained off for this purpose, she went to her aunt's.

Her cousin Albert regarded her with a startled look. He was in a margarine shop, and spent his days explaining that Margarine was as good as butter. But, looking at Hazel, he felt that here *was* butter—something that needed no apology, and created its own demand. The bright blue made her so radiant that her aunt shook her head.

'You take after your ma, 'Azal,' she said. Her tone was irritated.

'I be glad.'

Her aunt sniffed.

'You ought to be as glad to take after one parent as another, if you were jutiful,' she said.

'I dunna want to take after anybody but myself.' Hazel flushed indignantly.

'Well! we *are* conceited!' exclaimed her aunt. 'Albert, don't give 'Azal all the liver and bacon. I s'pose your mother can eat as well as schoolgirls?'

Albert was gazing at Hazel so animatedly, so obviously approving of all she said, that her aunt was very much ruffled.

'No wonder you only want to be like yourself,' he said. 'Jam! my word, Hazel, you're jam!'

'Albert!' cried his mother raspily, with a pathetic note of pleading, 'haven't I always taught you to say preserve?' She was not pleading against the inelegant word, but against Hazel.

When Albert went back to the shop, Hazel helped her aunt to wash up. All the time she was doing this, with unusual care, and cleaning the knives—a thing she hated—she was waiting anxiously for the expected invitation to stay the night. She longed for it as the righteous long for the damnation of their enemies. She never paid a visit except here, and to her it was a wild excitement. The gas-stove, the pretty china, the rose-patterned wall-paper, were all strange and marvellous as a fairy-tale. At home there was no paper, no lath and plaster, only the bare bricks, and the ceiling was of bulging sailcloth hung under the rafters.

Now to all these was added the new delight of Albert's admiring gaze—an alert, live gaze, a thing hitherto unknown to Albert. Perhaps, if she stayed, Albert would take her out for the evening. She would see the streets of the town in the magic of lights. She would walk out in her new dress with a real young man—a young man who possessed a gilt watch-chain. The suspense, as the wintry afternoon drew in,

became almost intolerable. Still her aunt did not speak. The sitting-room looked so cosy when tea was laid; the firelight played over the cups; her aunt drew the curtains. On one side there was joy, warmth—all that she could desire; on the other, a forlorn walk in the dark. She had left it until so late that her heart shook at the idea of the many miles she must cover alone if her aunt did not ask her.

Her aunt knew what was going on in Hazel's mind, and smiled grimly at Hazel's unusual meekness. She took the opportunity of administering a few hometruths.

'You look like an actress,' she said.

'Do I, auntie?'

'Yes. It's a disgrace, the way you look. You quite draw men's eyes.'

'It's nice to draw men's eyes, inna it, auntie?'

'Nice! Hazel, I should like to box your ears! You naughty girl! You'll go wrong one of these days.'

'What for will I, auntie?'

'Some day you'll get spoke to!' She said the last words in a hollow whisper. 'And after that, as you won't say and do what a good girl would, you'll get picked up.'

'I'd like to see anyone pick me up!' said Hazel indignantly. 'I'd kick!'

'Oh! how unladylike! I didn't mean really picked up! I meant allegorically—like in the Bible.'

'Oh! only like in the Bible,' said Hazel disappointedly. 'I thought you meant summat *real*.'

'Oh! You'll bring down my grey hairs,' wailed Mrs. Prowde.

An actress was bad, but an infidel! 'That I should live to hear it—in my own villa, with my own soda cake on the cake-dish—and my own son,' she added dramatically, as Albert entered, 'coming in to have his God-fearing heart broken!'

This embarrassed Albert, for it was true, though the cause assigned was not.

'What's Hazel been up to?' he queried.

The affection beneath his heavy pleasantry strengthened his mother in her resolve that Hazel should not stay the night.

'There's a magic-lantern lecture on tonight, Hazel,' he said. 'Like to come?'

'Ah! I should that.'

'You can't walk home at that time of night,' said Mrs. Prowde. 'In fact, you ought to start now.'

'But Hazel's staying the night, mother, surely?'

'Hazel must get back to her father.'

'But, mother, there's the spare-room.'

'The spare-room's being spring-cleaned.'

Albert plunged; he was desperate and forgetful of propriety.

'I can sleep on this sofa,' he said. 'She can have my room.'

'Hazel can't have your room. It's not suitable.'

'Well, let her share yours, then.'

Mrs. Prowde played her trump-card. 'Little I thought,' she said, 'when your dear father went, that before three years had passed you'd be so forgetful of my comfort (and his memory) as to suggest such a thing. As long as I live, my room's mine. When I'm gone,' she concluded, knocking down her adversary with her superior weight of years — 'when I'm gone (and the sooner the better for you, no doubt), you can put her in my room and yourself, too.'

When she had said this she was horrified at herself. What an improper thing to say! Even anger and jealousy did not excuse impropriety, though they excused any amount of unkindness.

But at this Hazel cried out in her turn:

'That he never will!' The fierce egoism of the consciously weak flamed up in her. 'I keep myself to myself,' she finished.

'If such things come to pass, mother,' Albert said, and his eyes looked suddenly vivid, so that Hazel clapped her hands and said, 'Yer lamps are lit! Yer lamps are lit!' and broke into peals of laughter. 'If such a thing comes to pass,' laboured Albert, 'they'll come decent, that is, they won't be spoken of.'

He voiced his own and his mother's creed.

At this point the argument ended, because Albert had to go back after tea to finish some work. As he stamped innumerable swans on the yielding material, he never

doubted that his mother had also yielded. He forgot that life had to be shaped with an axe till the chips fly.

As soon as he had gone, Mrs. Prowde shut the door on Hazel hastily, for fear the weather might bring relenting. She had other views for Albert. In after years, when the consequences of her action had become things of the past, she always spoke of how she had done her best with Hazel. She never dreamed that she, by her selfishness that night, had herself set Hazel's feet in the dark and winding path that she must tread from that night onward to its hidden, shadowy ending. Mrs. Prowde, through her many contented years, blamed in turn Hazel, Abel, Albert, the devil, and (only tacitly and, as it were, in secret from herself) God. If there is any purgatorial fire of remorse for the hard and selfish natures that crucify love, it must burn elsewhere. It does not touch them in this world. They go as the three children went, in their coats, their hosen, and their hats all complete, nor does the smell of fire pass over them.

Hazel felt that heaven was closed—locked and barred. She could see the golden light stream through its gates. She could hear the songs of joy—joy unattained and therefore immortal; she could see the bright figures of her dreams go to and fro. But heaven was shut.

The wind ran up and down the narrow streets like a lost dog, whimpering. Hazel hurried on, for it was already twilight, and though she was not afraid of the Callow and the fields at night, she was afraid of the high roads. For the Callow was home, but the roads were the wide world. On the fringe of the town she saw lights in the bedroom windows of prosperous houses.

'My! they go to their beds early,' she thought, not having heard of dressing for dinner. It made her feel more lonely

that people should be going to bed. From other houses music floated, or the savoury smell of dinner. As she passed the last lamp-post she began to cry, feeling like a lost and helpless little animal. Her new dress was forgotten; the wreath-frames would not fit under her arm, and caused a continual minor discomfort, and the Callow seemed to be half across the country. She heard a trapped rabbit screaming somewhere, a thin anguished cry that she could not ignore. This delayed her a good deal, and in letting it out she got a large bloodstain on her dress. She cried again at this. The pain of a blister, unnoticed in the morning journey, now made itself felt; she tried walking without her boots, but the ground was cold and hard.

The icy, driving wind leapt across the plain like a horseman with a long sword, and stealthily in its track came the melancholy whisper of snow.

When this began, Hazel was in the open, half-way to Wolfbatch. She sat down on the step of a stile, and sighed with relief at the ease it gave her foot. Then, far off she heard the sharp miniature sound, very neat and staccato, of a horse galloping. She held her breath to hear if it would turn down a by-road, but it came on. It came on, and grew in volume and in meaning, became almost ominous in the frozen silence. Hazel rose and stood in the fitful moonlight. She felt that the approaching hoof-beats were for her. They were the one sound in a dead world, and she nearly cried out at the thought of their dying in the distance. They must not; they should not.

'Maybe it's a farmer and his missus as have drove a good bargain, and the girl told to get supper fire-hot agen they come. Maybe they'll give me a lift! Maybe they'll say "Bide the night over?"'

She knew it was only a foolish dream; nevertheless, she stood well in the light, a slim, brow-beaten figure, the colour of her dress wan in the grey world.

A trap came swaying round the corner. Hazel cried out beseechingly, and the driver pulled the horse up short.

'I must be blind drunk,' he soliloquized, 'seeing ghosts!'

'Oh, please sir!' Hazel could say no more, for the tears that companionship unfroze.

The man peered at her.

'What in hell are you doing here?' he asked.

'Walking home-along. She wouldna let me bide the night over. And my foot's blistered in a balloon and blood on my dress.' She choked with sobs.

'What's your name?'

'Hazel.'

'What else?'

With an instinct of self-protection she refused to tell her surname.

'Well, mine's Reddin,' he said crossly; 'and why you're so dark about yours I don't know, but up you get, anyway.'

The sun came out in Hazel's face. He helped her up, she was so stiff with cold.

'Your arm,' she said in a low tremulous voice, when he had put the rug round her—'your arm pulling me in be like the

Sunday-school tale of Jesus Christ and Peter on the wild sea
—me being Peter.'

Reddin looked at her sideways to see if she was in earnest.
Seeing that she was, he changed the subject.

'Far to go?' he asked.

'Ah! miles on miles.'

'Like to stop the night over?'

At last, late certainly, but no matter, at last the invitation
had come, not from her aunt, but from a stranger. That
made it more exciting.

'I'm much obleeged,' he said. 'Where at?'

'D'you know Undern?'

'I've heard tell on it.'

'Well, it's two miles from here. Like to come?'

'Ah! Will your mother be angry?'

'I haven't one.'

'Father?'

'No.'

'Who be there, then?'

'Only Vessons and me.'

'Who's Vessons?'

'My servant.'

'Be you a gentleman, then?'

Reddin hesitated slightly. She said it with such reverence and made it seem so great a thing.

'Yes,' he said at last. 'Yes, that's what I am—a gentleman.' He was conscious of bravado.

'Will there be supper, fire-hot?'

'Yes, if Vessons is in a good temper.'

'Where you bin?' she asked next.

'Market.'

'You've had about as much as is good for you,' she remarked, as if thinking aloud.

He certainly smelt strongly of whisky.

'You've got a cheek!' said he. 'Let's look at you.'

He stared into her tired but vivid eyes for a long time, and the trap careered from side to side.

'My word!' he said, 'I'm in luck to-night!'

'What for be you?'

'Meeting a girl like you.'

'Do I draw men's eyes?'

'Eh?' He was startled. Then he guffawed. 'Yes,' he replied.

'*She* said so,' Hazel murmured. 'And she said I'd get spoke to, and she said I'd get puck up. I'm main glad of it, too. She's a witch.'

'She said you'd get picked up, did she?'

'Ah.'

Reddin put his arm round her.

'You're so pretty! That's why.'

'Dunna maul me!'

'You might be civil. I'm doing you a kindness.'

They went on in that fashion, his arm about her, each wondering what manner of companion the other was.

When they neared Undern there were gates to open, and he admired her litheness as she jumped in and out.

In his pastures, where the deeply rutted track was already white with snow, two foals stood sadly by their mothers, gazing at the cold world with their peculiarly disconsolate eyes.

'Eh! look's the abron un! Abron, like me!' cried Hazel.

Reddin suddenly gripped the long coils that were loose on her shoulders, twisted them in a rope round his neck, and kissed her. She was enmeshed, and could not avoid his kisses.

The cob took this opportunity—one long desired—to rear, and Reddin flogged him the rest of the way. So they arrived with a clatter, and were met at the door by Andrew Vessons

—knowing of eye as a blackbird, straw in mouth, the poison
of asps on his tongue.

Chapter 3

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Undern Hall, with its many small-paned windows, faced the north sullenly. It was a place of which the influence and magic were not good. Even in May, when the lilacs frothed into purple, paved the lawn with shadows, steeped the air with scent; when soft leaves lipped each other consolingly; when blackbirds sang, fell in their effortless way from the green height to the green depth, and sang again—still, something that haunted the place set the heart fluttering. No place is its own, and that which is most stained with old tumults has the strongest fascination.

So at Undern, whatever had happened there went on still; someone who had been there was there still. The lawns under the trees were mournful with old pain, or with vanished joys more pathetic than pain in their fleeting mimicry of immortality.

It was only at midsummer that the windows were coloured by dawn and sunset; then they had a sanguinary aspect, staring into the delicate skyey dramas like blind, bloodshot eyes. Secretly, under the heavy rhododendron leaves and in the furtive sunlight beneath the yew-trees, gnats danced. Their faint motions made the garden stiller; their smallness made it oppressive; their momentary life made it infinitely old. Then Undern Pool was full of leaf shadows like

multitudinous lolling tongues, and the smell of the mud tainted the air—half sickly, half sweet. The clipped bushes and the twisted chimneys made inky shadows like steeples on the grass, and great trees of roses, beautiful in desolation, dripped with red and white and elbowed the guelder roses and the elders set with white patens. Cherries fell in the orchard with the same rich monotony, the same fatality, as drops of blood. They lay under the fungus-riven trees till the hens ate them, pecking gingerly and enjoyably at their lustrous beauty as the world does at a poet's heart. In the kitchen-garden also the hens took their ease, banqueting sparsely beneath the straggling black boughs of a red-currant grove. In the sandstone walls of this garden hornets built undisturbed, and the thyme and lavender borders had grown into forests and obliterated the path. The cattle drowsed in the meadows, birds in the heavy trees; the golden day-lilies drooped like the daughters of pleasure; the very principle of life seemed to slumber. It was then, when the scent of elder blossom, decaying fruit, mud and hot yew brooded there, that the place attained one of its most individual moods—narcotic, aphrodisiac.

In winter the yews and firs were like waving funeral plumes and mantled, headless goddesses; then the giant beeches would lash themselves to frenzy, and, stooping, would scourge the ice on Undern Pool and the cracked walls of the house, like beings drunken with the passion of cruelty. This was the second mood of Undern—brutality. Then those within were, it seemed, already in the grave, heavily covered with the prison of frost and snow, or shouted into silence by the wind. On a January night the house seemed to lie outside time and space; slow, ominous movement began beyond the blind windows, and the inflexible softness of snow, blurred on the vast background of night, buried summer ever deeper with invincible, caressing threats.

The front door was half glass, so that a wandering candle within could be seen from outside, and it looked inexpressibly forlorn, like a glow-worm seeking escape from a chloroform-box or mankind looking for the way to heaven. Only four windows were ever lit, and of these two at a time. They were Jack Reddin's parlour, Andrew Vessons' kitchen, and their respective bedrooms.

Reddin of Undern cared as little for the graciousness of life as he did for its pitiful rhapsodies, its purple-mantled tragedies. He had no time for such trivialities. Fox-hunting, horse-breeding, and kennel lore were his vocation. He rode straight, lived hard, exercised such creative faculties as he had on his work, and found it very good. Three times a year he stated in the Undern pew at Wolfbatch that he intended to continue leading a godly, righteous, and sober life. At these times, with amber lights from the windows playing over his well-shaped head, his rather heavy face looked, as the Miss Clomers from Wolfbatch Hall said, 'so chivalrous, so uplifted.' The Miss Clomers purred when they talked, like cats with a mouse. The younger still hunted, painfully compressing an overfed body into a riding-habit of some forgotten cut, and riding with so grim a mouth and such a bloodthirsty expression that she might have had a blood-feud with all foxes. Perhaps, when she rode down the anxious red-brown streak, she thought she was riding down a cruel fate that had somehow left her life vacant of joy; perhaps, when the little creature was torn piece-meal, she imagined herself tearing so the frail unconquerable powers of love and beauty. Anyway, she never missed a meet, and she and her sister never ceased their long silent battle for Reddin, who remained as unconscious of them as if they were his aunts. He was, of course, beneath them, very much beneath them—hardly more than a farmer, but still—a man.