

**Mary Webb**



*Precious  
Bane*

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[goodpress@okpublishing.info](mailto:goodpress@okpublishing.info)

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# **BOOK ONE**

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# chapter one:*Sarn Mere*

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IT was at a love-spinning that I saw Kester first. And if, in these new-fangled days, when strange inventions crowd upon us, when I hear tell there is even a machine coming into use in some parts of the country for reaping and mowing, if those that may happen will read this don't know what a love-spinning was, they shall hear in good time. But though it was Jancis Beguildy's love-spinning, she being three-and-twenty at that time and I being two years less, yet that is not the beginning of the story I have set out to tell.

Kester says that all tales, true tales or romancings, go farther back than the days of the child; aye, farther even than the little babe in its cot of rushes. Maybe you never slept in a cot of rushes; but all of us did at Sarn. There is such a plenty of rushes at Sarn, and old Beguildy's missus was a great one for plaiting them on rounded barrel-hoops. Then they'd be set on rockers, and a nice clean cradle they made, soft and green, so that the babe could feel as big-sorted as a little caterpillar (painted butterflies-as-is-to-be, Kester calls them) sleeping in its cocoon. Kester's very set about such things. Never will he say caterpillars. He'll say, "There's a lot of butterflies-as-is-to-be on our cabbages, Prue." He won't say "It's winter." He'll say, "Summer's sleeping." And there's no bud little enough nor sad-coloured enough for Kester not to callen it the beginnings of the blow.

But the time is not yet come for speaking of Kester. It is the story of us all at Sarn, of Mother and Gideon and me,

and Jancis (that was so beautiful), and Wizard Beguildy, and the two or three other folk that lived in those parts, that I did set out to tell. There were but a few, and maybe always will be, for there's a discouragement about the place. It may be the water lapping, year in and year out—everywhere you look and listen, water; or the big trees waiting and considering on your right hand and on your left; or the unbreathing quiet of the place, as if it was created but an hour gone, and not created for us. Or it may be that the soil is very poor and marshy, with little nature or goodness in the grass, which is ever so where reeds and rushes grow in plenty, and the flower of the paigle. Happen you call it cowslip, but we always named it the paigle, or keys of heaven. It was a wonderful thing to see our meadows at Sarn when the cowslip was in blow. Gold-over they were, so that you would think not even an angel's feet were good enough to walk there. You could make a tossy-ball before a thrush had gone over his song twice, for you'd only got to sit down and gather with both hands. Every way you looked, there was nought but gold, saving towards Sarn, where the woods began, and the great stretch of grey water, gleaming and wincing in the sun. Neither woods nor water looked darksome in that fine spring weather, with the leaves coming new, and buds the colour of corn in the birch-tops. Only in our oak wood there was always a look of the back-end of the year, their young leaves being so brown. So there was always a breath of October in our May. But it was a pleasant thing to sit in the meadows and look away to the far hills. The larches spired up in their quick green, and the cowslip gold seemed to get into your heart, and even Sarn

Mere was nothing but a blue mist in a yellow mist of birch-tops. And there was such a dream on the place that if a wild bee came by, let alone a bumble, it startled you like a shout. If a bee comes in at the window now to my jar of gillyflowers, I can see it all in clear colours, with Plash lying under the sunset, beyond the woods, looking like a jagged piece of bottle glass. Plash Mere was bigger than Sarn, and there wasn't a tree by it, so where there were no hills beyond it you could see the clouds rooted in it on the far side, and I used to think they looked like the white water-lilies that lay round the margins of Sarn half the summer through. There was nothing about Plash that was different from any other lake or pool. There was no troubling of the waters, as at Sarn, nor any village sounding its bells beneath the furthest deeps. It was true, what folks said of Sarn, that there was summat to be felt there.

It was at Plash that the Beguildys lived, and it was at their dwelling, that was part stone house and part cave, that I got my book learning. It may seem a strange thing to you that a woman of my humble station should be able to write and spell, and put all these things into a book. And indeed when I was a young wench there were not many great ladies, even, that could do much more scribing than to write a love-letter, and some could but just write such things as "This be quince and apple" on their jellies, and others had ado to put their names in the marriage register. Many have come to me, time and again, to write their love-letters for them, and a bitter old task it is, to write other women's love-letters out of your own burning heart.



If it hadna been for Mister Beguildy I never could have written down all these things. He learned me to read and write, and reckon up figures. And though he was a preached-against man, and said he could do a deal that I don't believe he ever could do, and though he dabbled in things that are not good for us to interfere with, yet I shall never forget to thank God for him. It seems to me now a very uncommon working of His power, to put it into Beguildy's heart to learn me. For a wizard could not rightly be called a servant of His, but one of Lucifer's men. Not that Beguildy was wicked, but only empty of good, as if all the righteousness was burnt out by the flame of his fiery mind, which must know and intermeddle with mysteries. As for love, he did not know the word. He could read the stars, and tell the future, and he claimed to have laid spirits. Once I asked him where the future was, that he could see it so plain. And he said, "It lies with the past, child, at the back of Time." You couldn't ever get the better of Mister Beguildy. But when I told Kester what he said, Kester would not have it so. He said the past and the future were two shuttles in the hands of the Lord, weaving Eternity. Kester was a weaver himself, which may have made him think of it thus. But I think we cannot know what the past and the future are. We are so small and helpless on the earth that is like a green rush cradle where mankind lies, looking up at the stars, but not knowing what they be.

As soon as I could write, I made a little book with a calico cover, and every Sunday I wrote in it any merry time or good fortune we had had in the week, and so kept them. And if times had been troublous and bitter for me, I wrote

that down too, and was eased. So when our parson, knowing of the lies that were told of me, bade me write all I could remember in a book, and set down the whole truth and nothing else, I was able to freshen my memory with the things I had put down Sunday by Sunday.

Well, it is all gone over now, the trouble and the struggling. It be quiet weather now, like a still evening with the snow all down, and a green sky, and lambs calling. I sit here by the fire with my Bible to hand, a very old woman and a tired woman, with a task to do before she says good night to this world. When I look out of my window and see the plain and the big sky with clouds standing up on the mountains, I call to mind the thick, blotting woods of Sarn, and the crying of the mere when the ice was on it, and the way the water would come into the cupboard under the stairs when it rose at the time of the snow melting. There was but little sky to see there, saving that which was reflected in the mere; but the sky that is in the mere is not the proper heavens. You see it in a glass darkly, and the long shadows of rushes go thin and sharp across the sliding stars, and even the sun and moon might be put out down there, for, times, the moon would get lost in lily leaves, and, times, a heron might stand before the sun.

## chapter two: *Telling the Bees*

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MY brother Gideon was born in the year when the war with the French began. That was why Father would have him called Gideon, it being a warlike name. Jancis used to say it was a very good name for him, because it was one you couldn't shorten. You can make most names into little love-names, like you can cut down a cloak or a gown for children's wearing. But Gideon you could do nought with. And the name was like the man. I was more set on my brother than most are, but I couldna help seeing that about him. If nobody calls you out of your name, your name's like to be soon out of mind. And most people never even called him by his Christian name at all. They called him Sarn. In Father's life it was old Sarn and young Sarn. But after Father died, Gideon seemed to take the place to himself. I remember how he went out that summer night, and seemed to eat and drink the place, devouring it with his eyes. Yet it was not for love of it, but for what he could get out of it. He was very like Father then, and more like every year, both to look at and in his mind. Saving that he was less tempersome and more set in his ways, he was Father's very marrow. Father's temper got up despart quick, and when it was up he was a ravening lion. Maybe that was what gave Mother that married-all-o'er look. But Gideon I only saw angered, to call angered, three times. Mostly a look was enough. He'd give you a look like murder, and you'd let him take the way he wanted. I've seen a dog cringing and whimpering because he'd given it one of those looks. Sarns

mostly have grey eyes—cold grey like the mere in winter—and the Sarn men are mainly dark and sullen. “Sullen as a Sarn,” they say about these parts. And they say there’s been something queer in the family ever since Timothy Sarn was struck by forkit lightning in the times of the religious wars. There were Sarns about here then, and always have been, ever since there was anybody. Well, Timothy went against his folk and the counsels of a man of God, and took up with the wrong side, whichever that was, but it’s no matter now. So he was struck by lightning and lay for dead. Being after awhile recovered, he was counselled by the man of God to espouse the safe side and avoid the lightning. But Sarns were ever obstinate men. He kept his side, and as he was coming home under the oakwood he was struck again. And seemingly the lightning got into his blood. He could tell when tempest brewed, long afore it came, and it is said that when a storm broke, the wildfire played about him so none could come near him. Sarns have the lightning in their blood since his day. I wonder sometimes whether it be a true tale, or whether it’s too old to be true. It used to seem to me sometimes as if Sarn was too old to be true. The woods and the farm and the church at the other end of the mere were all so old, as if they were in somebody’s dream. There was frittening about the place, too, and what with folk being afraid to come there after dusk, and the quiet noise of the fish jumping far out in the water, and Gideon’s boat knocking on the steps with little knocks like somebody tapping at the door, and the causeway that ran down into the mere as far as you could see, from just outside our garden gate, being lost in the water, it was a very lonesome

old place. Many a time, on Sunday evenings, there came over the water a thin sound of bells. We thought they were the bells of the village down under, but I believe now they were nought but echo bells from our own church. They say that in some places a sound will knock against a wall of trees and come back like a ball.

It was on one of those Sunday evenings, when the thin chimes were sounding along with our own four bells, that we played truant from church for the second time. It being such a beautiful evening, and Father and Mother being busy with the bees swarming, we made it up between us to take dog's leave, and to wait by the lych-gate for Jancis and get her to come with us. For old Beguildy never werrited much about her church-going, not being the best of friends with the parson himself. He sent her off when the dial made it five o'clock every fourth Sunday—for we had service only once a month, the parson having a church at Bramton, where he lived, and another as well, which made it the more wicked of us to play truant—but whether she got there early or late, or got there at all, he'd never ask, let alone catechize her about the sermon. Our Father would catechize us last thing in the evening when our night-rails were on. Father would sit down in the settle with the birch-rod to his hand, and the settle, that had looked such a great piece of furniture all the week, suddenly looked little, like a settle made for a mommet. Whatever Father sat in, he made it look little. We stood barefoot in front of him on the cold quarries, in our unbleached homespun gowns that mother had spun and the journeyman weaver had woven up in the attic at the loom among the apples. Then he'd question us, and when we

answered wrong he made a mark on the settle, and every mark was a stroke with the birch at the end of the catechizing. Though Father couldn't read, he never forgot anything. It seemed as if he turned things over in his head all the while he was working. I think he was a very clever man with not enow of things to employ his mind. If he'd had one of the new-fangled weaving machines I hear tell of to look after, it would have kept him content, but there was no talk of such things then. *We* were all the machines he had, and we wished very heartily every fourth Sunday, and Christmas and Easter, that we were the children of Beguildy, though he was thought so ill of by our parson, and often preached against, even by name.

I mind once, when Father leathered us very bad, after the long preaching on Easter Sunday, Gideon being seven and me five, how Gideon stood up in the middle of the kitchen and said, "I do will and wish to be Maister Beguildy's son, and the devil shall have my soul. Amen."

Father got his temper up that night, no danger! He shouted at Mother terrible, saying she'd done very poorly with her children, for the girl had the devil's mark on her, and now it seemed as if the boy came from the same smithy. This I know, because Mother told it to me. All I mind is that she went to look very small, and being only little to begin with, she seemed like one of the fairy folk. And she said—"Could I help it if the hare crossed my path? Could I help it?" It seemed so strange to hear her saying that over and over. I can see the room now if I shut my eyes, and most especially if there's a bunch of cowslips by me. For Easter fell late, or in a spell of warm weather that year, and

the cowslips were very forrard in sheltered places, so we'd pulled some. The room was all dim like a cave, and the red fire burning still and watchful seemed like the eye of the Lord. There was a little red eye in every bit of ware on the dresser too, where it caught the gleam. Often and often in after years I looked at those red lights, which were echoes of the fire, just as the ghostly bells were reflections of the chime, and I've thought they were like a deal of the outer show of this world. Rows and rows of red, gledy fires, but all shadows of fires. Many a chime of merry bells ringing, and yet only the shadows of bells; only a sigh of sound coming back from a wall of leaves or from the glassy water. Father's eyes caught the gleam too, and Gideon's; but Mother's didna, for she was standing with her back to the fire by the table where the cowslips were, gathering the mugs and plates together from supper. And if it seem strange that so young a child should remember the past so clearly, you must call to mind that Time engraves his pictures on our memory like a boy cutting letters with his knife, and the fewer the letters the deeper he cuts. So few things ever happened to us at Sarn that we could never forget them. Mother's voice clings to my heart like trails of bedstraw that catch you in the lanes. She'd got a very plaintive voice, and soft. Everything she said seemed to mean a deal more than the words, and times it was like a person fumbling in the dark, or going a long way down black passages with a hand held out on this side, and a hand held out on that side, and no light. That was how she said, "Could I help it if the hare crossed my path—could I help it?"

Everything she said, though it might not have anything merry in it, she smiled a bit, in the way you smile to take the edge off somebody's anger, or if you hurt yourself and won't show it. A very grievous smile it was, and always there. So when Father gave Gideon another hiding for wishing he was Beguildy's boy, Mother stood by the table saying, "Oh, dunna, Sarn! Hold thy hand, Sarn!" and smiling all the while, seeming to catch at Father's hands with her soft voice. Poor Mother! Oh, my poor Mother! Shall we meet you in the other world, dear soul, and atone to you for our heedlessness?

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I'd never forgotten that Easter, but Gideon had, seemingly, for when I remembered him of it, saying we surely durstn't take dog's leave, he said, "It's nought. We'll make Sexton's Tivvy listen to the sermon for us, so as we can answer well. And I dunna care much if I *am* leathered, so long as I can find some good conkers and beat Jancis, for last time she beat me."

Conkers, maybe you know, are snail shells, and children put the empty ones on strings, and play like you play with chestnut cobs. Our woods were a grand place for snails, and Gideon had conker matches with lads from as far away as five miles the other side of Plash. He was famous all about, because he played so fiercely, and not like a game at all.

All the bells were sounding when we started that Sunday in June—the four metal bells in the church and the four ghost bells from nowhere. Mother was helping Father with the bees, getting a new skep ready, down where the big chestnut tree was, to put the play of bees in. They'd



swarmed in a dead gooseberry bush, and Mother said, with her peculiar smile, "It be a sign of death."

But Gideon shouted out—

*"A play of bees in May is worth a noble that same day.*

*A play in June's pretty soon."*

And he said—

"So long as we've got the bees, Mother, we're the better of it, die who may."

Eh, dear! I'm afraid Gideon had a very *having* spirit, even then. But Father thought he was a sensible lad, and he laughed and said—

"Well, we've got such a mort of bees now I'm in behopes it wunna be me as has the telling of 'em if anybody does die."

"Where be your sprigs of rosemary and your Prayer Books and your clean handkerchers?" says Mother.

Gideon had been in behopes to leave them behind, but now he ran to fetch them, and Mother began setting my kerchief to rights over my shoulders. She put in her big brooch with the black stone, that she had when George the Second died, and while she was putting it in she kept saying to herself—"Not as it matters what the poor child wears. Deary, deary me! But could I help it if the hare crossed my path? Could I help it?"

Whenever she said that, her voice went very mournful and I thought again of somebody in a dark passage, groping.

“Now then, Mother! Hold the skep whilst I keep the bough up,” said Father; “they’ve knit so low down.”

I’d lief have stayed, for I dearly loved to see the great tossy-ball of bees’ bodies, as rich as a brown Christmas cake, and to hear the heavy sound of them.

We went through the wicket and along the top path, because it was the nighest way to the church, and we wanted to catch Tivvy afore she went in. The coots were out on the mere, and the water was the colour of light, with spears in it. “Now,” said Gideon, “we’ll run for our lives!”

“What’s after us?”

“The people out of the water.”

So we ran for our lives, and got to the church just as the two last bells began their snabbing “*Ting tong! Ting tong!*” that always minded me of the birch-rod.

We sat on the flat grave where we mostly sat to play *Conquer*, and the church being on a little hill we could watch the tuthree folks coming along the fields. There was Tivvy with her father, coming from the East Coppy, and Jancis in the flat water-meadows where the big thorn hedges were all in blow. Jancis was a little thing, not tall like me, but you always saw her before you saw other people, for it seemed that the light gathered round her. She’d got golden hair, and all the shadows on her face seemed to be stained with the pale colour of it. I was used to think she was like a white water-lily full of yellow pollen or honey. She’d got a very white skin, creamy white, without any colour unless she was excited or shy, and her face was dimpled and soft, and just the right plumpness. She’d got a red, cool, smiling mouth,

and when she smiled the dimples ran each into other. Times I could almost have strangled her for that smile.

She came up to us, very demure, in her flowered bodice and blue skirt and a bunch of blossom in her kerchief.

Although she was only two years older than I was, being of an age with Gideon, she seemed a deal older, for she'd begun to smile at the lads already, and folks said, "Beguildy's Jancis will soon be courting." But I know old Beguildy never meant her to get married. He meant to keep her as a bait to draw the young fellows in, for mostly the people that came to him were either young maids with no money or old men who wanted somebody cursed cheap. So at this time, when he saw what a white, blossomy piece Jancis was growing, he encouraged her to dizen herself and sit in the window of the Cave House in case anybody went by up the lane. It was only once in a month of Sundays that anybody did, for Plash was nearly as lonesome as Sarn. He made a lanthorn of coloured glass, too, the colour of red roses, and while Jancis sat in the stone frame of the window he hung it up above her with a great candle in it from foreign parts, not a rushlight such as we used. He had it in mind that if some great gentleman came by to a fair or a cockfight beyond the mountains he might fall in love with her, and then Beguildy planned to bring him in and give him strong ale and talk about charms and spells, and offer at long last to work the charm of raising Venus. It was all written in one of his books: how you went into a dark room and gave the wise man five pound, and he said a charm, and after awhile there was a pink light and a scent of roses, and Venus rose naked in the middle of the room. Only it

wouldna have been Venus, but Jancis. The great gentleman, howsoever, was a long while coming, and the only man that saw her in the window was Gideon one winter evening when he was coming back that way from market, because the other road was flooded. He was fair comic-struck about her, and talked of her till I was aweary, he being nineteen at the time, which is a foolish age in lads. Before that, he never took any account of her, but just to tell her this and that as he did with me. But afterwards he was nought but a gauby about her. I could never have believed that such a determined lad, so set in his ways and so clever, could have been thus soft about a girl. But on this evening he was only seventeen, and he just said, "Take dog's leave oot, Jancis, and come with us after conkers."

"O" said Jancis, "I wanted to play '*Green Gravel, Green Gravel.*' "

She's got a way of saying "O" afore everything, and it made her mouth look like a rose. But whether she did it for that, or whether she did it because she was slow-witted and timid, I never could tell.

"There's nought to win in *Green Gravel,*" said Gideon, "we'll play *Conquer.*"

"O I wanted *Green Gravel!* You'll beat me if we play *Conquer.*"

"Ah. That's why we'll play."

Tivvy came through the lych-gate then, and we told her what she'd got to do. She was a poor, foolish creature, and she could hardly mind her own name, times, for all its outlandishness, let alone a sermon. But Gideon said, so long as she got an inkling of it he could make up the rest. And he

said if she didn't remember enough of it he'd twist her arm proper. So she began to cry.

Then we saw Sexton coming across the ploughed field, very solemn, with his long staff, black and white in bands, and we could hear Parson's piebald pony clop-clopping up the lane, so we made off, and left Tivvy with her round chin trembling, and her mouth all crooked with crying, because she knew she'd never remember a word of the sermon. Tivvy at a sermon always used to make me think of our dog being washed. He'd lie down and let the water souse over him, and she did the same with a sermon. So I knew trouble was brewing.

It was a beautiful evening, with swallows high in the air, and a powerful smell of may-blossom. When the bells stopped, ours and the others, we went and looked down into the water, to see if we could get a sight of the village there, as we did most Sundays. But there was only our own church upside down, and two or three stones and crosses the same, and Parson's pony grazing on its head.

Times, on summer evenings, when the sun was low, the shadow of the spire came right across the water to our dwelling, and I was used to think it was like the finger of the Lord pointing at us. We went down into the marshy places and found plenty of conkers, and Gideon beat Jancis every time, which was a good thing, for at the end he said he'd play *Green Gravel*, and they were both pleased. Only we were terrible late, and nearly missed Tivvy.

"Now, tell!" says Gideon. So she began to cry, and said she knew nought about it. Then he twisted her arm, and she screamed out, "Burning and fuel of fire!"

She must have said that because it was one of the texts the Sexton was very fond of saying over, keeping time with tapping his staff the while.

“What else?”

“Nought.”

“I’ll twist your arm till it comes off if you dunna think of any more.”

Tivvy looked artful, like Pussy in the dairy, and said—

“Parson told about Adam and Eve and Noah and Shemamanjaphet and Jesus in the manger and thirty pieces of silver.”

Gideon’s face went dark.

“There’s no sense in it,” he said.

“But she’s told you, anyway. You must let her go now.”

So we went home, with the shadow of the spire stretching all across the water.

Father said—

“What was the text?”

“Burning and fuel of fire.”

“What was the sarmon about?”

Poor Gideon made out a tale of all the things Tivvy had said. You never heard such a tale! Father sat quite quiet, and Mother was smiling very painful, standing by the fire, cooking a rasher.

Suddenly Father shouted out—

“Liar! Liar! Parson called but now, to say was there sickness, there being nobody at church. You’ve not only taken dog’s leave and lied, but you’ve made game of *me*.”

His face went from red to purple, and all veined, like raw meat. It was awful to see. Then he reached for the

horsewhip and said—

“I’ll give you the best hiding ever you had, my boy!”

He came across the kitchen towards Gideon.

But suddenly Gideon ran at him and bunted into him, and taking him by surprise he knocked him clean over.

Now whether it was that Father had eaten a very hearty supper, after a big day’s work with the bees, or whether it was him being in such a rage, and then the surprise of the fall, we never knew. However it was, he was taken with a fit. He never stirred, but lay on his back on the red quarries, breathing so loud and strong that it filled the house, like somebody snoring in the night. Mother undid his Sunday neck-cloth, and lifted him up, and put cold water on his face, but it was no manner of use.

The awful snoring went on, and seemed to eat up all other sounds. They went out like rushlights in the wind. There was no more ticking from the clock, nor purring from the cat, nor sizzling from the rasher, nor buzzing from the bee in the window. It seemed to eat up the light, too, and the smell of the white bush-roses outside, and the feeling in my body, and the thoughts I had afore. We’d all come to be just a part of a dark snoring.

“Sarn, Sarn!” cried Mother. “Oh, Sarn, poor soul, come to thyself!”

She tried to put some Hollands between his lips, but they were set. Then the snore changed to a rattle, very awful to hear, and in a little while it stopped, and there was a dreadful silence, as if all the earth had gone dumb. All the while, Gideon stood like stone, remembering the horsewhip Father meant to beat him with, so he said after. And though

he'd never seen anyone die afore, when Father went quiet, and the place dumb, he said in an everyday voice, only with a bit of a tremble—

“He's dead, Mother. I'll go and tell the bees, or we met lose 'em.”

We cried a long while, Mother and me, and when we couldna cry any more, the little sounds came creeping back—the clock ticking, bits of wood falling out of the fire, and the cat breathing in its sleep.

When Gideon came in again, the three of us managed to get Father on to a mattress, and lap him in a clean sheet. He looked a fine, good-featured man, now that the purple colour was gone from his face.

Gideon locked up, and went round to look the beasts and see all well.

“Best go to bed now, Mother,” he said. “All's safe, and the beasts in their housen. I told every skep of bees, and I can see they're content, and willing for me to be maister.”



# **chapter three: *Prue takes the Bidding Letters***

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IN those days there was little time for the mourners to think of their sorrow till after the funeral. There was a deal to do. There was the mourning to make, and before that, if a family hadn't had the weaver lately, there was the cloth to weave and dye. We hadn't had the weaver for a good while, so we were very short of stuff.

Mother told Gideon he must go and fetch the old weaver, who lived at Lullingford, by the mountains, and went out weaving by the day or the week. Gideon saddled Bendigo, Father's horse, and picked up the riding whip with a queer kind of smile. As soon as he was gone, Mother and I began to bake. For it wasn't only the weaver that must be fed, but the women we were going to bid to the funeral sewing-bee. They would come for love, as was the custom, but we must feed them.

It seemed lonesome that night without Gideon. He had to bait and sleep in Lullingford, but he came back in good time next day, and I heard the sound of the hoofs on the yard cobbles through my spinning. We were hard at it, getting yarn ready for the old man. He came riding after Gideon on a great white horse, very bony, which put me in mind of the rider on the white horse in the Bible. He was the oldest man you could see in a month of Sundays. He hopped about like a magpie, prying here and there over the loom, looking at his shuttle for all the world like a pie that's pleased with

some bright thing it's found. I had to take his meals up to the attic, for he wouldna waste time leaving off for them. It was a good thing the apples were all done, so he could hop about the loft without let or hindrance. "Now you must take the bidding letters for the sewing, Prue," Mother told me.

"Can I take one to Jancis, Mother?"

"No. We munna spend money paying for a bidding letter to Jancis. But she can come, and welcome."

"I'll go and tell her. She sews very nice."

"But not so well as you, my dear. Whatsoever's wrong, thee sews a beautiful straight seam, Prue."

I ran off, mighty pleased with praise, which came seldom my way. I met Gideon by the lake.

"Taking the biddings?" he said.

"Ah."

"Jancis coming?"

"Ah."

"Well, when you be there, ask Beguildy to lend us the white oxen for the funeral, oot?"

"To lug Father to the church?"

"Ah. And when we've buried Father, you and me must talk a bit. There's a deal to think of for the future. All these bidding letters, now, you met as well have written 'em and saved a crown."

I wondered what he meant, seeing he knew I couldna write a word, but I knew he'd say in his own time, and not afore, that being his way. Nobody would have thought he was but seventeen; he seemed five-and-twenty by the way he spoke, so choppy and quick, but ever so quiet.

When I got to Plash, Jancis was sitting in the garden, spinning. She said we could borrow the beasts, that were hers by right, being a present from her Granny, though she never had the strength to control them in a waggon nor to drive plough with 'em like I had in the years after. But she got a bit of pin money by hiring them out for wakes, when Beguildy didna pocket it. They dressed up beautiful with flowers and ribbons after they'd been scrubbed.

I went in to speak to Beguildy.

"Father's dead, Mister Beguildy," I said.

"So, so! What's that to me, dear soul?"

He was a very strange man, always, was Beguildy.

"Tell me what I knew not, child," he said.

"Did you know, then?"

"Ah, I knew thy feyther was gone. Didna he go by me on a blast of air last Sunday evening, crying out, thin and spiteful, 'You owe me a crown, Beguildy!' Tell me summat fresh, girl—new, strange things. Now if you could say that the leaves be all fallen this day of June, and my damsons ripe for market; or that the mere hath dried; or that man lusteth no more to hurt his love; or that Jancis looketh no more at her own face in Plash Pool, there would be telling, yes! But for your dad, it is nought. I cared not for the man."

And taking up his little hammer, he beat on a row of flints that he had, till the room was all in a charm. Every flint had its own voice, and he knew them as a shepherd the sheep, and it was his custom when the talk was not to his mind to beat out a chime upon them.

"I came to see if we could borrow the beasts for our waggon. Jancis said yes."

“You mun pay.”

“How much, mister?”

“The same as for wakes, a penny a head. So you be taking the biddings? Now who did your mam pay to write ‘em?”

“Parson wrote ‘em for us, and Mother put a crown in the poor-box.”

“Dear soul! The bitter waste! I’d have wrote ‘em very clear and fine for half the money. I can write the tall script and the dwarf, round or square, red or black. Parson can only do the sarmon script, and a very poor script it be.”

“I wish I could write, Mister Beguildy.”

“Oh, you!”

He laughed in a very peculiar way he had, soft and light, at the top of his head.

“It’s not for children,” he said.

But I thought about it a deal. I thought it would be a fine thing to sit by the fire, in the settle corner, and write bidding letters and love-letters and market bills, or even a verse for a tombstone, and to do the round or the square, tall or little, red or black, and sermon script too if I’d a mind. I thought when anybody like Jancis angered me by being so pretty, I’d do her letters very crabbed, and with no red at all. But I knew that was wicked of me, for poor Jancis couldna help being pretty.

Then Beguildy went off to cure an old man’s corns, and Jancis and I played lovers, but Jancis said I did it very bad, and she thought Gideon would do it a deal better.

## **chapter four: *Torches and Rosemary***

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IT was a still, dewy summer night when we buried Father. In our time there was still a custom round about Sarn to bury people at night. In our family it had been done for hundreds of years. I was busy all day decking the waggon with yew and the white flowering laurel, that has such a heavy, sweet smell. I pulled all the white roses and a tuthree pinks that were in blow, and made up with daisies out of the hay grass. While I pulled them, I thought how angered Father would have been to see me there, trampling it, and I could scarcely help looking round now and again to see if he was coming.

After we'd milked, Gideon went for the beasts, and I put black streamers round their necks, and tied yew boughs to their horns. It had to be done carefully, for they were the Longhorn breed, and if you angered them, they'd hike you to death in a minute.

The miller was one bearer, and Mister Callard, of Callard's Dingle, who farmed all the land between Sarn and Plash, was another. Then there were our two uncles from beyond the mountains.

Gideon, being chief mourner, had a tall hat with black streamers and black gloves and a twisted black stick with streamers on it. They took a long while getting the coffin out, for the doors were very narrow and it was a big, heavy coffin. It had always been the same at all the Sarn funerals, yet nobody ever seemed to think of making the doors bigger.

Sexton went first with his hat off and a great torch in his hand. Then came the cart, with Miller's lad and another to lead the beasts. The waggon was mounded up with leaves and branches, and they all said it was a credit to me. But I could only mind how poor Father was used to tell me to take away all those nasty weeds out of the house. And now we were taking him away, jolting over the stones, from the place where he was maister. I was all of a puzzle with it. It did seem so unkind, and disrespectful as well, leaving the poor soul all by his lonesome at the other end of the mere. I was glad it was sweet June weather, and not dark.

We were bound to go the long way round, the other being only a foot road. When we were come out of the fold-yard, past the mixen, and were in the road, we took our places—Gideon behind the coffin by himself, then Mother and me in our black poke bonnets and shawls, with Prayer Books and branches of rosemary in our hands. Uncles and Miller and Mister Callard came next, all with torches and boughs of rosemary.

It was a good road, and smoother than most—the road to Lullingford. Parson used to say it was made by folk who lived in the days when the Redeemer lived. Romans, the name was. They could make roads right well, whatever their name was. It went along above the water, close by the lake; and as we walked solemnly onwards, I looked into the water and saw us there. It was a dim picture, for the only light there was came from the waning, clouded moon, and from the torches. But you could see, in the dark water, something stirring, and gleams and flashes, and when the moon came clear we had our shapes, like the shadows of fish gliding in