

# **The Crooked Branch**

Elizabeth Gaskell

# Table of Contents

<u>The Crooked Branch</u> .....	1
<u>Elizabeth Gaskell</u> .....	1

# The Crooked Branch

Elizabeth Gaskell

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

Not many years after the beginning of this century, a worthy couple of the name of Huntroyd occupied a small farm in the North Riding of Yorkshire. They had married late in life, although they were very young when they first began to 'keep company' with each other. Nathan Huntroyd had been farm-servant to Hester Rose's father, and had made up to her at a time when her parents thought she might do better; and so, without much consultation of her feelings, they had dismissed Nathan in somewhat cavalier fashion. He had drifted far away from his former connections, when an uncle of his died, leaving Nathan by this time upwards of forty years of age enough money to stock a small farm, and yet have something over, to put in the bank against bad times. One of the consequences of this bequest was, that Nathan was looking out for a wife and housekeeper, in a kind of discreet and leisurely way, when one day he heard that his old love, Hester, was not married and flourishing, as he had always supposed her to be, but a poor maid-of-all-work, in the town of Ripon. For her father had had a succession of misfortunes, which had brought him in his old age to the workhouse; her mother was dead; her only brother struggling to bring up a large family; and Hester herself a hard-working, homely-looking (at thirty-seven) servant. Nathan had a kind of growling satisfaction (which only lasted a minute or two, however) in hearing of these turns of fortune's wheel. He did not make many intelligible remarks to his informant, and to no one else did he say a word. But, a few days afterwards, he presented himself, dressed in his Sunday best, at Mrs Thompson's back-door in Ripon.

Hester stood there, in answer to the good sound knock his good sound oak-stick made: she, with the light full upon her, he in shadow. For a moment there was silence. He was scanning the face and figure of his old love, for twenty years unseen. The comely beauty of youth had faded away entirely; she was, as I have said, homely-looking, plain-featured, but with a clean skin, and pleasant frank eyes. Her figure was no longer round, but tidily draped in a blue and white bed-gown, tied round her waist by her white apron-strings, and her short red linsey petticoat showed her tidy feet and ankles. Her former lover fell into no ecstasies. He simply said to himself, 'She'll do'; and forthwith began upon his business.

'Hester, thou dost not mind me. I am Nathan, as thy father turned off at a minute's notice, for thinking of thee for a wife, twenty year come Michaelmas next. I have not thought much upon matrimony since. But Uncle Ben has died leaving me a small matter in the bank; and I have taken Nab-End Farm, and put in a bit of stock, and shall want a missus to see after it. Wilt like to come? I'll not mislead thee. It's dairy, and it might have been arable. But arable takes more horses nor it suited me to buy, and I'd the offer of a tidy lot of kine. That's all. If thou'll have me, I'll come for thee as soon as the hay is gotten in'.

Hester only said, 'Come in, and sit thee down'.

He came in, and sat down. For a time, she took no more notice of him than of his stick, bustling about to get dinner ready for the family whom she served. He meanwhile watched her brisk sharp movements, and repeated to himself, 'She'll do!' After about twenty minutes of silence thus employed, he got up, saying

'Well, Hester, I'm going. When shall I come back again?'

## The Crooked Branch

'Please thyself', and thou'll please me,' said Hester, in a tone that she tried to make light and indifferent; but he saw that her colour came and went, and that she trembled while she moved about. In another moment Hester was soundly kissed; but, when she looked round to scold the middle-aged farmer, he appeared so entirely composed that she hesitated. He said

'I have pleased myself', and thee too, I hope. Is it a month's wage, and a month's warning? To-day is the eighth. July eighth is our wedding-day. I have no time to spend a-wooing before then, and wedding must na take long. Two days is enough to throw away, at our time o' life.'

It was like a dream; but Hester resolved not to think more about it till her work was done. And when all was cleaned up for the evening, she went and gave her mistress warning, telling her all the history of her life in a very few words. That day month she was married from Mrs Thompson's house.

The issue of the marriage was one boy, Benjamin. A few years after his birth, Hester's brother died at Leeds, leaving ten or twelve children. Hester sorrowed bitterly over this loss; and Nathan showed her much quiet sympathy, although he could not but remember that Jack Rose had added insult to the bitterness of his youth. He helped his wife to make ready to go by the waggon to Leeds. He made light of the household difficulties, which came thronging into her mind after all was fixed for her departure. He filled her purse, that she might have wherewithal to alleviate the immediate wants of her brother's family. And, as she was leaving, he ran after the waggon. 'Stop, stop!' he cried. 'Hetty, if thou wilt if it wunnot be too much for thee bring back one of Jack's wenches for company, like. We've enough and to spare; and a lass will make the house winsome, as a man may say.'

The waggon moved on; while Hester had such a silent swelling of gratitude in her heart, as was both thanks to her husband and thanksgiving to God.

And that was the way that little Bessy Rose came to be an inmate of the Nab's-End Farm.

Virtue met with its own reward in this instance, and in a clear and tangible shape, too; which need not delude people in general into thinking that such is the usual nature of virtue's rewards! Bessy grew up a bright affectionate, active girl; a daily comfort to her uncle and aunt. She was so much a darling in the household that they even thought her worthy of their only son Benjamin, who was perfection in their eyes. It is not often the case that two plain, homely people have a child of uncommon beauty; but it is so sometimes, and Benjamin Huntroyd was one of these exceptional cases. The hard-working, labour-and-care-marked farmer, and the mother, who could never have been more than tolerably comely in her best days, produced a boy who might have been an earl's son for grace and beauty. Even the hunting squires of the neighbourhood reined up their horses to admire him, as he opened the gates for them. He had no shyness, he was so accustomed from his earliest years to admiration from strangers and adoration from his parents. As for Bessy Rose, he ruled imperiously over her heart from the time she first set eyes on him. And, as she grew older, she grew on in loving, persuading herself that what her uncle and aunt loved so dearly it was her duty to love dearest of all. At every unconscious symptom of the young girl's love for her cousin, his parents smiled and winked: all was going on as they wished; no need to go far a-field for Benjamin's wife. The household could go on as it was now; Nathan and Hester sinking into the rest of years, and relinquishing care and authority to those dear ones, who, in the process of time, might bring other dear ones to share their love.

But Benjamin took it all very coolly. He had been sent to a day-school in the neighbouring town a grammar-school in the high state of neglect in which the majority of such schools were thirty years ago. Neither his father nor his mother knew much of learning. All they knew (and that directed their choice of a school) was that they could not, by any possibility, part with their darling to a boarding-school; that some schooling he must have, and that Squire Pollard's son went to Highminster Grammar School. Squire Pollard's son, and many another son destined to make his parents' hearts ache, went to this school. If it had not been so utterly a bad place of

## The Crooked Branch

education, the simple farmer and his wife might have found it out sooner. But not only did the pupils there learn vice, they also learnt deceit. Benjamin was naturally too clever to remain a dunce; or else, if he had chosen so to be, there was nothing in Highminster Grammar School to hinder his being a dunce of the first water. But, to all appearance, he grew clever and gentleman-like. His father and mother were even proud of his airs and graces, when he came home for the holidays; taking them for proofs of his refinement, although the practical effect of such refinement was to make him express his contempt for his parents' homely ways and simple ignorance. By the time he was eighteen, an articled clerk in an attorney's office at Highminster, for he had quite declined becoming a 'mere clod-hopper,' that is to say, a hard-working, honest farmer like his father Bessy Rose was the only person who was dissatisfied with him. The little girl of fourteen instinctively felt there was something wrong about him. Alas! two years more, and the girl of sixteen worshipped his very shadow, and would not see that aught could be wrong with one so soft-spoken, so handsome, so kind as Cousin Benjamin. For Benjamin had discovered that the way to cajole his parents out of money for every indulgence he fancied, was to pretend to forward their innocent scheme, and make love to his pretty cousin, Bessy Rose. He cared just enough for her to make this work of necessity not disagreeable at the time he was performing it. But he found it tiresome to remember her little claims upon him, when she was no longer present. The letters he had promised her during his weekly absence at Highminster, the trifling commissions she had asked him to do for her, were all considered in the light of troubles; and, even when he was with her, he resented the inquiries she made as to his mode of passing his time, or what female acquaintances he had in Highminster.

When his apprenticeship was ended, nothing would serve him but that he must go up to London for a year or two. Poor Farmer Huntroyd was beginning to repent of his ambition of making his son Benjamin a gentleman. But it was too late to repine now. Both father and mother felt this; and, however sorrowful they might be, they were silent, neither demurring nor assenting to Benjamin's proposition when first he made it. But Bessy, through her tears, noticed that both her uncle and aunt seemed unusually tired that night, and sat hand-in-hand on the fireside settle, idly gazing into the bright flame, as if they saw in it pictures of what they had once hoped their lives would have been. Bessy rattled about among the supper-things, as she put them away after Benjamin's departure, making more noise than usual as if noise and bustle was what she needed to keep her from bursting out crying and, having at one keen glance taken in the position and looks of Nathan and Hester, she avoided looking in that direction again, for fear the sight of their wistful faces should make her own tears overflow.

'Sit thee down, lass sit thee down! Bring the creepie-stool to the fireside, and let's have a bit of talk over the lad's plans,' said Nathan, at last rousing himself to speak. Bessy came and sat down in front of the fire, and threw her apron over her face, as she rested her head on both hands. Nathan felt as if it was a chance which of the two women burst out crying first. So he thought he would speak, in hopes of keeping off the infection of tears.

'Didst ever hear of this mad plan afore, Bessy?'

'No, never!' Her voice came muffled and changed from under her apron. Hester felt as if the tone, both of question and answer, implied blame; and this she could not bear.

'We should ha' looked to it when we bound him; for of necessity it would ha' come to this. There's exams, and catechizes, and I dunno what all for him to be put through in London. It's not his fault.'

'Which on us said it were?' asked Nathan, rather put out. 'Tho', for that matter, a few weeks would carry him over the mire, and make him as good a lawyer as any judge among 'em. Oud Lawson the attorney told me that, in a talk I had wi' him a bit sin. Na, na! it's the lad's own hankering after London that makes him want for to stay there for a year, let alone two.'

Nathan shook his head.

## The Crooked Branch

'And if it be his own hankering,' said Bessy, putting down her apron, her face all flame, and her eyes swollen up, 'I dunnot see harm in it. Lads aren't like lasses, to be teed to their own fireside like th' crook yonder. It's fitting for a young man to go abroad and see the world, afore he settles down.'

Hester's hand sought Bessy's; and the two women sat in sympathetic defiance of any blame that should be thrown on the beloved absent. Nathan only said

'Nay, wench, dunnot wax up so; whatten's done's done; and worse, it's my doing. I mun needs make my bairn a gentleman; and we mun pay for it.'

'Dear Uncle! he wanna spend much, I'll answer for it; and I'll scrimp and save i' the house, to make it good.'

'Wench!' said Nathan Solemnly, 'it were not paying in cash I were speaking on: it were paying in heart's care, and heaviness of soul. Lunnon is a place where the devil keeps court as well as King George; and my poor chap has more nor once welly fallen into his clutches here. I dunno what he'll do, when he gets close within sniff of him.'

'Don't let him go, father!' said Hester, for the first time taking this view. Hitherto she had only thought of her own grief at parting with him. 'Father, if you think so, keep him here, safe under your own eye!'

'Nay!' said Nathan, 'he's past time o' life for that. Why, there's not one on us knows where he is at this present time, and he not gone out of our sight an hour. He's too big to be put back i' th' go-cart, mother, or to keep within doors, with the chair turned bottom-upwards.'

'I wish he were a wee bairn lying in my arms again! It were a sore day when I weaned him; and I think life's been gettin' sorer and sorer at every turn he's ta'en towards manhood.'

'Coom, lass; that's noan the way to be talking. Be thankful to Marcy that thou'st gotten a man for thy son as stands five foot eleven in's stockings, and neler a sick piece about him. We wunnot grudge him his fling, will we, Bess, my wench? He'll be coming back in a year, or, may be, a bit more, and be a' for settling in a quiet town like, wi' a wife that's noan so fur fra' me at this very minute. An' we oud folk, as we get into years, must gi' up farm, and tak a bit on a house near Lawyer Benjamin.'

And so the good Nathan, his own heart heavy enough, tried to soothe his women-kind. But, of the three, his eyes were longest in closing, his apprehensions the deepest founded.

'I misdoubt me I hanna done well by th' lad. I misdoubt me sore,' was the thought that kept him awake till day began to dawn. 'Summat's wrong about him, or folk would na look me wi' such piteous-like een, when they speak on him. I can see th' meaning of it, thof I'm too proud to let on. And Lawson, too, he holds his tongue more nor he should do, when I ax him how my lad's getting on, and whatten sort of a lawyer he'll mak. God be marciful to Hester an' me, if th' lad's gone away! God be marciful! But, may be, it's this lying waking a' the night through, that maks me so fearfu'. Why, when I were his age, I daur be bound I should ha' spent money fast enoof, i' I could ha' come by iy. But I had to arn it; that maks a great differ'. Well! It were hard to thwart th' child of our old age, and we waitin' so long for to have 'un!' Next morning, Nathan rode Moggy, the cart-horse, into Highminster to see Mr Lawson. Anybody who saw him ride out of his own yard would have been struck with the change in him which was visible when he returned: a change greater than a day's unusual exercise should have made in a man of his years. He scarcely held the reins at all. One jerk of Moggy's head would have plucked them out of his hands. His head was bent forward, his eyes looking on some unseen thing, with long, unwinking gaze. But, as he drew near home on his return, he made an effort to recover himself.

'No need fretting them,' he said; 'lads will be lads. But I didna think he had it in him to be so thowtless, young as he is. Well, well! he'll, may be, get more wisdom i' Lunnon. Anyways, it's best to cut him off fra such evil lads as

## The Crooked Branch

Will Hawker, and such—like. It's they as have led my boy astray. He were a good chap till he knowed them a good chap till he knowed them.' But he put all his cares in the background, when he came into the house—place, where both Bessy and his wife met him at the door, and both would fain lend a hand to take off his great—coat.

'Theer, wenches, theer! ye might let a man alone for to get out on's clothes! Why, I might ha' struck thee, lass. 'And he went on talking, trying to keep them off for a time from the subject that all had at heart. But there was no putting them off for ever; and, by dint of repeated questioning on his wife's part, more was got out than he had ever meant to tell enough to grieve both his hearers sorely: and yet the brave old man still kept the worst in his own breast.

The next day, Benjamin came home for a week or two, before making his great start to London. His father kept him at a distance, and was solemn and quiet in his manner to the young man. Bessy, who had shown anger enough at first, and had uttered many a sharp speech, began to relent, and then to feel hurt and displeased that her uncle should persevere so long in his cold, reserved manner and Benjamin just going to leave them! Her aunt went, tremblingly busy, about the clothes—presses and drawers, as if afraid of letting herself think either of the past or the future; only once or twice, coming behind her son, she suddenly stopped over his sitting figure, and kissed his cheek, and stroked his hair. Bessy remembered afterwards long years afterwards how he had tossed his head away with nervous irritability on one of these occasions, and had muttered her aunt did not hear it, but Bessy did

'Can't you leave a man alone?'

Towards Bessy herself he was pretty gracious. No other words express his manner.. it was not warm, nor tender, nor cousinly, but there was an assumption of underbred politeness towards her as a young, pretty woman; which politeness was neglected in his authoritative or grumbling manner towards his mother, or his sullen silence before his father. He once or twice ventured on a compliment to Bessy on her personal appearance. She stood still, and looked at him with astonishment.

'Have my eyes changed sin' last thou saw'st them,' she asked, ' that thou must be telling me about 'em i' that fashion? I'd rayther by a deal see thee helping thy mother, when she's dropped her knitting—needle and canna see i' th' dusk for to pick it up.'

But Bessy thought of his pretty speech about her eyes, long after he had forgotten making it, and when he would have been puzzled to tell the colour of them. Many a day, after he was gone, did she look earnestly in the little oblong looking—glass, which hung up against the wall of her little sleeping—chamber, but which she used to take down in order to examine the eyes he had praised, murmuring to herself, 'Pretty, soft grey eyes! Pretty, soft grey eyes!' until she would hang up the glass again, with a sudden laugh and a rosy blush.

In the days when he had gone away to the vague distance and vaguer place the city called London Bessy tried to forget all that had gone against her feeling of the affection and duty that a son owed to his parents; and she had many things to forget of this kind that would keep surging up into her mind. For instance, she wished that he had not objected to the home—spun, home—made shirts which his mother and she had had such pleasure in getting ready for him. He might not know, it was true and so her love urged how carefully and evenly the thread had been spun: how, not content with bleaching the yarn in the sunniest meadow, the linen, on its return from the weaver's, had been spread out afresh on the sweet summer grass, and watered carefully, night after night, when there was no dew to perform the kindly office. He did not know for no one but Bessy herself did how many false or large stitches, made large and false by her aunt's failing eyes (who yet liked to do the choicest part of the stitching all by herself), Bessy had unpicked at night in her own room, and with dainty fingers had re—stitched; sewing eagerly in the dead of night. All this he did not know; or he could never have complained of the coarse texture, the old—fashioned make of these shirts, and urged on his mother to give him part of her little store of egg—and butter—money, in order to buy newer—fashioned linen in Highminster.

## The Crooked Branch

When once that little precious store of his mother's was discovered, it was well for Bessy's peace of mind that she did not know how loosely her aunt counted up the coins, mistaking guineas for shillings, or just the other way, so that the amount was seldom the same in the old black spoutless teapot. Yet this son, this hope, this love, had still a strange power of fascination over the household. The evening before he left, he sat between his parents, a hand in theirs on either side, and Bessy on the old creepie-stool, her head lying on her aunt's knee, and looking up at him from time to time, as if to learn his face off by heart; till his glances, meeting hers, made her drop her eyes, and only sigh.

He stopped up late that night with his father, long after the women had gone to bed. But not to sleep; for I will answer for it the grey-haired mother never slept a wink till the late dawn of the autumn day; and Bessy heard her uncle come upstairs with heavy, deliberate footsteps, and go to the old stocking which served him for bank, and count out the golden guineas; once he stopped, but again he went on afresh, as if resolved to crown his gift with liberality. Another long pause in which she could but indistinctly hear continued words, it might have been advice, it might be a prayer, for it was in her uncle's voice and then father and son came up to bed. Bessy's room was but parted from her cousin's by a thin wooden partition; and the last sound she distinctly heard, before her eyes, tired out with crying, closed themselves in sleep, was the guineas clinking down upon each other at regular intervals, as if Benjamin were playing at pitch and toss with his father's present.

After he was gone, Bessy wished to he had asked her to walk part of the way with him into Highminster. She was all ready, her things laid out on the bed; but she could not accompany him without invitation.

The little household tried to close over the gap as best they might. They seemed to set themselves to their daily work with unusual vigour; but somehow, when evening came there had been little done. Heavy hearts never make light work, and there was no telling how much care and anxiety each had had to bear in secret in the field, at the wheel, or in the dairy. Formerly, he was looked for every Saturday looked for, though he might not come; or, if he came, there were things to be spoken about that made his visit anything but a pleasure: still, he might come, and all things might go right; and then what sunshine, what gladness to those humble people! But now he was away, and dreary winter was come on; old folks' sight fails, and the evenings were long and sad, in spite of all Bessy could do or say. And he did not write so often as he might so each one thought; though each one would have been ready to defend him from either of the others who had expressed such a thought aloud. 'Surely,' said Bessy to herself, when the first primroses peeped out in a sheltered and sunny hedge-bank, and she gathered them as she passed home from afternoon church surely, there never will be such a dreary, miserable winter again as this has been.' There had been a great change in Nathan and Hester Huntroyd during this last year. The spring before, when Benjamin was yet the subject of more hopes than fears, his father and mother looked what I may call an elderly middle-aged couple: people who had a good deal of hearty work in them yet. Now it was not his absence alone that caused the change they looked frail and old, as if each day's natural trouble was a burden more than they could bear. For Nathan had heard sad reports about his only child, and had told them solemnly to his wife as things too bad to be believed, and yet, 'God help us if he is indeed such a lad as this!' Their eyes were become too dry and hollow for many tears; they sat together, hand in hand; and shivered, and sighed, and did not speak many words, or dare to look at each other: and then Hester had said

'We mauna tell th' lass. Young folks' hearts break wi' a little, and she'd be apt to fancy it were true.' Here the old woman's voice broke into a kind of piping cry; but she struggled, and her next words were all right. 'We mauna tell her: he's bound to be fond on her, and, may be, if she thinks well on him, and loves him, it will bring him straight!'

'God grant it !' said Nathan.

'God shall grant it!' said Hester, passionately moaning out her words; and then repeating them, alas! with a vain repetition.

## The Crooked Branch

'It's a bad place for lying, is Highminster,' said she at length, as if impatient of the silence. 'I never knowed such a place for getting up stories. But Bessy knows nought on 'em and nother you nor me belie'es 'em, that's one blessing.'

But, if they did not in their hearts believe them, how came they to look so sad and worn, beyond what mere age could make them?

Then came round another year, another winter, yet more miserable than the last. This year, with the primroses, came Benjamin; a bad, hard, flippant young man, with yet enough of specious manners and handsome countenance to make his appearance striking at first to those to whom the aspect of a London fast young man of the lowest order is strange and new. Just at first, as he sauntered in with a swagger and an air of indifference, which was partly assumed, partly real, his old parents felt a simple kind of awe of him, as if he were not their son, but a real gentleman; but they had too much fine instinct in their homely natures not to know, after a very few minutes had passed, that this was not a true prince.

'Whatten ever does he mean,' said Hester to her niece, as soon as they were alone, 'by a' them maks and wear-locks? And he minces his words, as if his tongue were clipped short, or split like a magpie's. Hech! London is as bad as a hot day i' August for spoiling good flesh; for he were a good-looking lad when he went up; and now, look at him, with his skin gone into lines and flourishes, just like the first page on a copybook.'

'I think he looks a good deal better, aunt, for them new-fashioned whiskers!' said Bessy, blushing still at the remembrance of the kiss he had given her on first seeing her a pledge, she thought, poor girl, that, in spite of his long silence in letter-writing, he still looked upon her as his troth-plight wife. There were things about him which none of them liked, although they never spoke of them; yet there was also something to gratify them in the way in which he remained quiet at Nab-End, instead of seeking variety, as he had formerly done, by constantly stealing off to the neighbouring town. His father had paid all the debts that he knew of, soon after Benjamin had gone up to London; so there were no duns that his parents knew of to alarm him, and keep him at home. And he went out in the morning with the old man, his father, and lounged by his side, as Nathan went round his fields, with busy yet infirm gait; having heart, as he would have expressed it, in all that was going on, because at length his son seemed to take an interest in the farming affairs, and stood patiently by his side, while he compared his own small galloways with the great shorthorns looming over his neighbour's hedge.

'It's a slovenly way, thou seest, that of selling th' milk; folk don't care whether its good or not, so that they get their pint-measure of stuff that's watered afore it leaves th' beast, instead o' honest cheating by the help o' th' pump. But look at Bessy's butter, what skill it shows! part her own manner o' making, and part good choice o' cattle. It's a pleasure to see her basket, a' packed ready to go to market; and it's noan o' a pleasure for to see the buckets fu' of their blue starch-water as yon beasts give. I'm thinking they crossed th' breed wi' a pump not long sin'. Hech! but our Bessy's a clever canny wench! I sometimes think thou'lt be for gie'ing up th' law, and taking to th' oud trade, when thou wedst wi' her!' This was intended to be a skilful way of ascertaining whether there was any ground for the old farmer's wish and prayer, that Benjamin might give up the law and return to the primitive occupation of his father. Nathan dared to hope it now, since his son had never made much by his profession, owing, as he had said, to his want of a connection; and the farm, and the stock, and the clean wife, too, were ready to his hand; and Nathan could safely rely on himself never, in his most unguarded moments, to reproach his son with the hardly-earned hundreds that had been spent on his education. So the old man listened with painful interest to the answer which his son was evidently struggling to make, coughing a little and blowing his nose before he spoke.

'Well, you see, father, law is a precarious livelihood; a man, as I may express myself, has no chanes in the profession unless he is known known to the judges, and tip-top barristers, and that sort of thing. Now, you see, my mother and you have no acquaintance that you may call exactly in that line. But luckily I have met with a man, a friend, as I may say, who is really a first-rate fellow, knowing everybody, from the Lord Chancellor

## The Crooked Branch

downwards; and he has offered me a share in his business a partnership, in short' He hesitated a little.

'I'm sure that's uncommon kind of the gentleman,' said Nathan. I should like for to thank him mysen; for it's not many as would pick up a young chap out o' th' dirt, as it were, and say "Here's hauf my good fortune for you, sir, and your very good health!" Most on 'em when they're gettin' a bit o' luck, run off wi' it to keep it a' to themselves, and gobble it down in a corner. What may be his name? for I should like to know it.'

'You don't quite apprehend me, father. A great deal of what you've said is true to the letter. People don't like to share their good luck, as you say.'

'The more credit to them as does,' broke in Nathan.

'Ay, but, you see, even such a fine fellow as my friend Cavendish does not like to give away half his good practice for nothing. He expects an equivalent.'

"An equivalent?" said Nathan; his voice had dropped down an octave.' And what may that be? There's always some meaning in grand words, I take it; though I am not book-larned enough to find it out.'

'Why, in this case, the equivalent he demands for taking me into partnership, and afterwards relinquishing the whole business to me, is three hundred pounds down.'

Benjamin looked sideways from under his eyes, to see how his father took the proposition. His father struck his stick deep down in the ground; and, leaning one hand upon it, faced round at him.

'Then thy fine friend may go and be hanged. Three hunder pounds! I'll be darned an' danged too, if I know where to get 'em, if I'd be making a fool o' thee an' mysen too.'

He was out of breath by this time. His son took his father's first words in dogged silence; it was but the burst of surprise he had led himself to expect, and did not daunt him for long.

'I should think, sir'

"Sir" whatten for dost thou "sir" me? Is them your manners? I'm plain Nathan Huntroyd, who never took on to be a gentleman; but I have paid my way up to this time, which I shannot do much longer, if I'm to have a son coming an' asking me for three hundred pound, just meet same as if I were a cow, and had nothing to do but let down my milk to the first person as strokes me.'

'Well, father,' said Benjamin, with an affectation of frankness; 'then there's nothing for me but to do as I have often planned before go and emigrate.'

'And what?' said his father, looking sharply and steadily at him.

'Emigrate. Go to America, or India, or some colony where there would be an opening for a young man of spirit.'

Benjamin had reserved this proposition for his trump card, expecting by means of it to carry all before him. But, to his surprise, his father plucked his stick out of the hole he had made when he so vehemently thrust it into the ground, and walked on four or five steps in advance; there he stood still again, and there was a dead silence for a few minutes.

'It 'ud, may be, be the best thing thou couldst do,' the father began. Benjamin set his teeth hard to keep in curses. It was well for poor Nathan he did not look round then, and see the look his son gave him. 'But it would come hard

## The Crooked Branch

like upon us, upon Hester and me; for, whether thou'rt a good 'un or not, thou'rt our flesh and blood, our only bairn; and, if thou'rt not all as a man could wish, it's, may be, been the fault on our pride i' the It 'ud kill the missus, if he went off to Amerikay, and Bess, too, the lass as thinks so much on him!' The speech, originally addressed to his son, had wandered off into a monologue as keenly listened to by Benjamin, however, as if it had all been spoken to him. After a pause of consideration, his father turned round:

'Yon man I wunnot call him a friend o' yourn, to think of asking you for such a mint o' money is not th' only one, I'll be bound, as could give ye a start i' the law? Other folks 'ud, may be, do it for less?'

'Not one of 'em; to give me equal advantages,' said Benjamin, thinking he perceived signs of relenting.

'Well, then, thou may'st tell him that it's nother he nor thee as 'll see th' sight o' three hundred pound o' my money. I'll not deny as I've a bit laid up again' a rainy day; it's not so much as thatten, though; and a part on it is for Bessy, as has been like a daughter to us.'

'But Bessy is to be your real daughter some day, when I've a home to take her to,' said Benjamin; for he played very fast and loose, even in his own mind, with his engagement with Bessy. Present with her, when she was looking her brightest and best, he behaved to her as if they were engaged lovers; absent from her, he looked upon her rather as a good wedge, to be driven into his parents' favour on his behalf. Now, however, he was not exactly untrue in speaking as if he meant to make her his wife; for the thought was in his mind, though he made use of it to work upon his father.

'It will be a dree day for us, then,' said the old man. 'But God'll have us in His keeping, and'll, may-happen, be taking more care on us i' heaven by that time than Bess, good lass as she is, has had on us at Nab-End. Her heart is set on thee, too. But, lad, I hanna gotten the three hunder; I keeps my cash i' th' stocking, thous know'st, till it reaches fifty pound, and then I takes it to Ripon Bank. Now the last scratch they'n gi'en me made it just two-hunder, and I hanna but on to fifteen pound yet i' the stockin', and I meant one hunder an' the red cow's calf to be for Bess, she's ta'en such pleasure like i' rearing it'.

Benjamin gave a sharp glance at his father, to see if he was telling the truth; and, that a suspicion of the old man, his father, had entered into the son's head, tells enough of his own character.

'I canna do it, I canna do it, for sure; although I shall like to think as I had helped on the wedding. There's the black heifer to be sold yet, and she'll fetch a matter of ten pound; but a deal on't will be needed for seed-corn, for the arable did but bad last year, and I thought I would try I'll tell thee what, lad! I'll make it as though Bess lent thee her hunder, only thou must give her a writ of hand for it; and thou shalt have a' the money i' Ripon Bank, and see if the lawyer wunnot let thee have a share of what he offered thee at three hunder for two. I dunnot mean for to wrong him; but thou must get a fair share for the money. At times, I think thou'rt done by folk; now I wadna have you cheat a bairn of a brass farthing; same time, I wadna have thee so soft as to be cheated.'

To explain this, it should be told that some of the bills, which Benjamin had received money from his father to pay, had been altered so as to cover other and less creditable expenses which the young man had incurred; and the simple old farmer, who had still much faith left in him for his boy, was acute enough to perceive that he had paid above the usual price for the articles he had purchased.

After some hesitation, Benjamin agreed to receive the two hundred, and promised to employ it to the best advantage in setting himself up in business. He had, nevertheless, a strange hankering after the additional fifteen pounds that was left to accumulate in the stocking. It was his, he thought, as heir to his father; and he soon lost some of his usual complaisance for Bessy that evening, as he dwelt on the idea that there was money being laid by for her, and grudged it to her even in imagination. He thought more of this fifteen pounds that he was not to have than of all the hardly-earned and humbly-saved two hundred that he was to come into possession of. Meanwhile,

## The Crooked Branch

Nathan was in unusual spirits that evening. He was so generous and affectionate at heart, that he had an unconscious satisfaction in having helped two people on the road to happiness by the sacrifice of the greater part of his property. The very fact of having trusted his son so largely seemed to make Benjamin more worthy of trust in his father's estimation. The sole idea he tried to banish was, that, if all came to pass as he hoped, both Benjamin and Bessy would be settled far away from Nab-End; but then he had a child-like reliance that 'God would take care of him and his missus, somehow or another. It wur o' no use looking too far ahead.'

Bessy had to hear many unintelligible jokes from her uncle that night, for he made no doubt that Benjamin had told her all that had passed.' whereas the truth was, his son had said never a word to his cousin on the subject.

When the old couple were in bed, Nathan told his wife of the promise he had made to his son, and the plan in life which the advance of the two hundred was to promote. Poor Hester was a little startled at the sudden change in the destination of the sum, which she had long thought of with secret pride as money i' th' bank'. But she was willing enough to part with it, if necessary, for Benjamin. Only, how such a sum could be necessary, was the puzzle. But even the perplexity was jostled out of her mind by the overwhelming idea, not only of 'our Ben' settling in London, but of Bessy going there too as his wife. This great trouble swallowed up all care about money, and Hester shivered and sighed all the night through with distress. In the morning, as Bessy was kneading the bread, her aunt, who had been sitting by the fire in an unusual manner, for one of her active habits, said

'I reckon we maun go to th' shop for our bread; an' that's a thing I never thought to come to so long as I lived.'

Bessy looked up from her kneading, surprised.

'I'm sure, I'm noan going to cat their nasty stuff. What for do ye want to get baker's bread, aunt? This dough will rise as high as a kite in a south wind.'

'I'm not up to kneading as I could do once; it welly breaks my back; and, when tou'rt off in London, I reckon we maun buy our bread, first time in my life.'

'I'm not a-goin to London,' said Bessy, kneading away with fresh resolution, and growing very red, either with the idea or the exertion.

'But our Ben is going partner wi' a great London lawyer; and thou know'st he'll not tarry long but what he'll fetch thee.'

'Now, aunt,' said Bessy, stripping her arms of the dough, but still not looking up, 'if that's all, don't fret yourself Ben will have twenty minds in his head, afore he settles, eyther in business or in wedlock. I sometimes wonder,' she said, with increasing vehemence, 'why I go on thinking on him; for I dunnot think he thinks on me, when I'm out o' sight. I've a month's mind to try and forget him this time, when he leaves us that I have!'

'For shame, wench! and he to be planning and purposing, all for thy sake! It wur only yesterday as he wur talking to thy uncle, and mapping it out so clever; only, thou seest, wench, it'll be dree work for us when both thee and him is gone.'

The old woman began to cry the kind of tearless cry of the aged. Bessy hastened to comfort her; and the two talked, and grieved, and hoped, and planned for the days that now were to be, till they ended, the one in being consoled, the other in being secretly happy.

Nathan and his son came back from Highminster that evening, with their business transacted in the round-about way which was most satisfactory to the old man. If he had thought it necessary to take half as much pains in ascertaining the truth of the plausible details by which his son bore out the story of the offered partnership, as he

## The Crooked Branch

did in trying to get his money conveyed to London in the most secure manner, it would have been well for him. But he knew nothing of all this, and acted in the way which satisfied his anxiety best. He came home tired, but content; not in such high spirits as on the night before, but as easy in his mind as he could be on the eve of his son's departure. Bessy, pleasantly agitated by her aunt's tale of the morning of her cousin's true love for her ('what ardently we wish we long believe') and the plan which was to end in their marriage end to her, the woman, at least looked almost pretty in her bright, blushing comeliness, and more than once, as she moved about from kitchen to dairy, Benjamin pulled her towards him, and gave her a kiss. To all such proceedings the old couple were wilfully blind; and, as night drew on, every one became sadder and quieter, thinking of the parting that was to be on the morrow. As the hours slipped away, Bessy too became subdued; and, by and by, her simple cunning was exerted to get Benjamin to sit down next his mother, whose very heart was yearning after him, as Bessy saw. When once her child was placed by her side, and she had got possession of his hand, the old woman kept stroking it, and murmuring long unused words of endearment, such as she had spoken to him while he was yet a little child. But all this was wearisome to him. As long as he might play with, and plague, and caress Bessy, he had not been sleepy; but now he yawned loudly. Bessy could have boxed his ears for not curbing this gaping; at any rate, he need not have done it so openly – so almost ostentatiously. His mother was more pitiful.

'Thou'rt tired, my lad!' said she, putting her hand fondly on his shoulder; but it fell off, as he stood up suddenly, and said

'Yes, deuced tired! I'm off to bed.' And with a rough, careless kiss all round, even to Bessy, as if he was 'deuced tired' of playing the lover, he was gone; leaving the three to gather up their thoughts slowly, and follow him upstairs.

He seemed almost impatient at them for rising betimes to see him off the next morning, and made no more of a good-bye than some such speech as this: 'Well, good folk, when next I see you, I hope you'll have merrier faces than you have to-day. Why, you might be going to a funeral; it's enough to scare a man from the place; you look quite ugly to what you did last night, Bess.'

He was gone; and they turned into the house, and settled to the long day's work without many words about their loss. They had no time for unnecessary talking, indeed; for much had been left undone, during his short visit, that ought to have been done, and they had now to work double tides. Hard work was their comfort for many a long day.

For some time Benjamin's letters, if not frequent, were full of exultant accounts of his well-doing. It is true that the details of his prosperity were somewhat vague; but the fact was broadly and unmistakably stated. Then came longer pauses; shorter letters, altered in tone. About a year after he had left them, Nathan received a letter which bewildered and irritated him exceedingly. Something had gone wrong what, Benjamin did not say but the letter ended with a request that was almost a demand, for the remainder of his father's savings, whether in the stocking or in the bank. Now, the year had not been prosperous with Nathan; there had been an epidemic among cattle, and he had suffered along with his neighbours; and, moreover, the price of cows, when he had bought some to repair his wasted stock, was higher than he had ever remembered it before. The fifteen pounds in the stocking, which Benjamin left, had diminished to little more than three; and to have that required of him in so peremptory a manner! Before Nathan imparted the contents of this letter to anyone (Bessy and her aunt had gone to market in a neighbour's cart that day), he got pen and ink and paper, and wrote back an ill-spelt, but very explicit and stem negative. Benjamin had had his portion; and if he could not make it do, so much the worse for him; his father had no more to give him. That was the substance of the letter.

The letter was written, directed, and sealed, and given to the country postman, returning to Highminster after his day's distribution and collection of letters, before Hester and Bessy came back from market. It had been a pleasant day of neighbourly meeting and sociable gossip; prices had been high, and they were in good spirits only agreeably tired, and full of small pieces of news. It was some time before they found out how flatly all their talk

## The Crooked Branch

fell on the ears of the stay-at-home listener. But, when they saw that his depression was caused by something beyond their powers of accounting for by any little every-day cause, they urged him to tell them what was the matter. His anger had not gone off. It had rather increased by dwelling upon it, and he spoke it out in good, resolute terms; and, long ere he had ended, the two women were as sad, if not as angry, as himself. Indeed, it was many days before either feeling wore away in the minds of those who entertained them. Bessy was the soonest comforted, because she found a vent for her sorrow in action: action that was half as a kind of compensation for many a sharp word that she had spoken, when her cousin had done anything to displease her on his last visit, and half because she believed that he never could have written such a letter to his father, unless his want of money had been very pressing and real; though how he could ever have wanted money so soon, after such a heap of it had been given to him, was more than she could justly say. Bessy got out all her savings of little presents of sixpences and shillings, ever since she had been a child of all the money she had gained for the eggs of two hens, called her own; she put the whole together, and it was above two pounds two pounds five and seven-pence, to speak accurately and, leaving out the penny as a nest-egg for her future savings, she made up the rest in a little parcel, and sent it, with a note, to Benjamin's address in London:

'From a well-wisher.

'Dr BENJAMIN, Unkle has lost 2 cows and a vast of monney. He is a good deal Angored, but more Troubled. So no more at present. Hopeing this will finding you well As it leaves us. Tho' lost to Site, To Memory Dear. Repayment not kneeded. Your effectonet cousin,

'ELIZABETH ROSE'

When this packet was once fairly sent off, Bessy began to sing again over her work. She never expected the mere form of acknowledgement; indeed, she had such faith in the carrier (who took parcels to York, whence they were forwarded to London by coach), that she felt sure he would go on purpose to London to deliver anything intrusted to him, if he had not full confidence in the person, persons, coach and horses, to whom he committed it. Therefore she was not anxious that she did not hear of its arrival. 'Giving a thing to a man as one knows,' said she to herself, 'is a vast different to poking a thing through a hole into a box, th' inside of which one has never clapped eyes on; and yet letters get safe, some ways or another.' (The belief in the infallibility of the post was destined to a shock before long.) But she had a secret yearning for Benjamin's thanks, and some of the old words of love that she had been without so long. Nay, she even thought when, day after day, week after week, passed by without a line that he might be winding up his affairs in that weary, wasteful London, and coming back to Nab-End to thank her in person.

One day her aunt was upstairs, inspecting the summer's make of cheeses, her uncle out in the fields the postman brought a letter into the kitchen to Bessy. A country postman, even now, is not much pressed for time; and in those days there were but few letters to distribute, and they were only sent out from Highminster once a week into the district in which Nab-End was situated; and, on those occasions, the letter-carrier usually paid morning calls on the various people for whom he had letters. So, half-standing by the dresser, half-sitting on it, he began to rummage out his bag.

'It's a queer-like thing I've got for Nathan this time. I am afraid it will bear ill news in it; for there's 'Dead Letter Office' stamped on the top of it.'

'Lord save us!' said Bessy, and sat down on the nearest chair, as white as a sheet. In an instant, however, she was up; and, snatching the ominous letter out of the man's hands, she pushed him before her out of the house, and said, 'Be off wi' thee, afore aunt comes down'; and ran past him as hard as she could, till she reached the field where she expected to find her uncle.

'Uncle,' said she, breathiess, 'what is it? Oh, uncle, speak! Is he dead?'

## The Crooked Branch

Nathan's hands trembled, and his eyes dazzled, 'Take it,' he said, 'and tell me what it is.'

'It's a letter it's from you to Benjamin, it is and there's words written on it, 'Not known at the address given;' so they've sent it back to the writer that's you, uncle. Oh, it gave me such a start, with them nasty words written outside!'

Nathan had taken the letter back into his own hands, and was turning it over, while he strove to understand what the quick-witted Bessy had picked up at a glance. But he arrived at a different conclusion.

'He's dead!' said he. 'The lad is dead, and he never knowed how as I were sorry I wrote to 'un so sharp. My lad! my lad!' Nathan sat down on the ground where he stood, and covered his face with his old, withered hands. The letter returned to him was one which he had written, with infinite pains and at various times, to tell his child, in kinder words and at greater length than he had done before, the reasons why he could not send him the money demanded. And now Benjamin was dead; nay, the old man immediately jumped to the conclusion that his child had been starved to death, without money, in a wild, wide, strange place. All he could say at first was

'My heart, Bess my heart is broken!' And he put his hand to his side, still keeping his shut eyes covered with the other, as though he never wished to see the light of day again. Bessy was down by his side in an instant, holding him in her arms, chafing and kissing him.

'It's noan so bad, uncle; he's not dead; the letter does not say that, dunnot think it. He's flitted from that lodging, and the lazy tykes dunna know where to find him; and so they just send y' back th' letter, instead of trying fra' house to house, as Mark Benson would. I've always heerd tell on south-country folk for laziness. He's noan dead, uncle; he's just flitted; and he'll let us know afore long where he's gotten to. May be, it's a cheaper place; for that lawyer has cheated him, ye reck'lect, and he'll be trying to live for as little as he can, that's all, uncle. Dunnot take on so; for it doesna say he's dead.'

By this time Bessy was crying with agitation, although she firmly believed in her own view of the case, and had felt the opening of the ill-favoured letter as a great relief. Presently she began to urge, both with word and action, upon her uncle, that he should sit no longer on the damp grass, She pulled him up; for he was very stiff, and, as he said, 'all shaken to dithers.' She made him walk about, repeating over and over again her solution of the case, always in the same words, beginning again and again, 'He's noan dead; it's just been a flitting,' and so on. Nathan shook his head, and tried to be convinced; but it was a steady belief in his own heart for all that. He looked so deathly ill on his return home with Bessy (for she would not let him go on with his day's work), that his wife made sure he had taken cold; and he, weary and indifferent to life, was glad to subside into bed and the rest from exertion which his real bodily illness gave him. Neither Bessy nor he spoke of the letter again, even to each other, for many days; and she found means to stop Mark Benson's tongue and satisfy his kindly curiosity, by giving him the rosy side of her own view of the case.

Nathan got up again, an older man in looks and constitution by ten years for that week of bed. His wife gave him many a scolding on his imprudence for sitting down in the wet field, if ever so tired. But now she, too, was beginning to be uneasy at Benjamin's long-continued silence. She could not write herself; but she urged her husband many a time to send a letter to ask for news of her lad. He said nothing in reply for some time; at length, he told her he would write next Sunday afternoon. Sunday was his general day for writing, and this Sunday he meant to go to church for the first time since his illness. On Saturday he was very persistent, against his wife's wishes (backed by Bessy as hard as she could), in resolving to go into Highminster to market. The change would do him good, he said. But he came home tired, and a little mysterious in his ways. When he went to the shippin the last thing at night, he asked Bessy to go with him, and hold the lantern, while he looked at an ailing cow; and, when they were fairly out of the car-shot of the house, he pulled a little shop-parcel from his pocket and said

## The Crooked Branch

'Thou'lt put that on ma Sunday hat, wilt 'on, lass? It'll be a bit on a comfort to me; for I know my lad's dead and gone, though I dunna speak on it, for fear o' grieving th' old woman and ye.'

'I'll put it on, uncle, if But he's noan dead.' (Bessy was sobbing.)

'I know I know, lass. I dunnot wish other folk to hold my opinion; but Id like to wear a bit o' crape out o' respect to my boy. It 'ud have done me good for to have ordered a black coat; but she'd see if I had na' on my wedding-coat, Sundays, for a' she's losing her eyesight, poor old wench! But she'll ne'er take notice o' a bit o' crape. Thou'lt put it on all canny and tidy.'

So Nathan went to church with a strip of crape, as narrow as Bessy durst venture to make it, round his hat. Such is the contradictoriness of human nature that, though he was most anxious his wife should not hear of his conviction that their son was dead, he was half-hurt that none of his neighbours noticed his sign of mourning so far as to ask him for whom he wore it.

But after a while, when they never heard a word from or about Benjamin, the household wonder as to what had become of him grew so painful and strong, that Nathan no longer kept the idea to himself Poor Hester, however, rejected it with her whole will, heart, and soul. She could and would not believe nothing should make her believe – that her only child Benjamin had died without some sign of love or farewell to her. No arguments could shake her in this. She believed that, if all natural means of communication between her and him had been cut off at the last supreme moment if death had come upon him in an instant, sudden and unexpected her intense love would have been supernaturally made conscious of the blank. Nathan at times tried to feel glad that she should still hope to see the lad again; but at other moments he wanted her sympathy in his grief, his self-reproach, his weary wonder as to how and what they had done wrong in the treatment of their son, that he had been such a care and sorrow to his parents. Bessy was convinced, first by her aunt, and then by her uncle honestly convinced on both sides of the argument, and so, for the time, able to sympathise with each. But she lost her youth in a very few months; she looked set and middle-aged, long before she ought to have done, and rarely smiled and never sang again.

All sorts of new arrangements were required by the blow which told so miserably upon the energies of all the household at Nab-End. Nathan could no longer go about and direct his two men, taking a good rum of work himself at busy times. Hester lost her interest in the dairy; for which, indeed, her increasing loss of sight unfitted her. Bessy would either do field-work, or attend to the cows and the shippin, or chum, or make cheese; she did all well, no longer merrily, but with something of stem cleverness. But she was not sorry when her uncle, one evening, told her aunt and her that a neighbouring farmer, job Kirkby, had made him an offer to take so much of his land off his hands as would leave him only pasture enough for two cows, and no arable to attend to; while Farmer Kirkby did not wish to interfere with anything in the house, only would be glad to use some of the out-building for his Battening cattle.

'We can do wi' Hawky and Daisy; it'll leave us eight or ten pound o' butter to take to market i' summer time, and keep us fra' thinking too much, which is what I'm dreading on as I get into years.'

'Ay,' said his wife. 'Thou'll not have to go so far a-field, if it's only the Aster-Toft as is on thy hands. And Bess will have to gie up her pride i' cheese, and tak' to making cream-butter. I'd allays a fancy for trying at cream-butter; but th' whey had to be used; else, where I come fra', they'd never ha' looked near whey-butter.'

When Hester was left alone with Bessy, she said, in allusion to this change of plan

'I'm thankful to the Lord that it is as it is; for I were allays afeared Nathan would have to gie up the house and farm altogether, and then the lad would na know where to find us when he came back fra' Merikay. He's gone there for to make his fortune, I'll be bound. Keep up thy heart, lass, he'll be home some day; and have sown his

## The Crooked Branch

wild oats. Eh! but thatten's a pretty story i' the Gospel about the Prodigal, who'd to cat the pigs' vittles at one time, but ended i' clover in his father's house. And I'm sure our Nathan 'll be ready to forgive him, and love him, and make much of him may be, a deal more nor me, who never gave in to 's death. It'll be liken to a resurrection to our Nathan.'

Farmer Kirkby, then, took by far the greater part of the land belonging to Nab-End Farm; and the work about the rest, and about the two remaining cows, was easily done by three pairs of willing hands, with a little occasional assistance. The Kirkby family were pleasant enough to have to deal with. There was a son, a stiff, grave bachelor, who was very particular and methodical about his work, and rarely spoke to any one. But Nathan took it into his head that John Kirkby was looking after Bessy, and was a good deal troubled in his mind in consequence; for it was the first time he had to face the effects of his belief in his son's death; and he discovered, to his own surprise, that he had not that implicit faith which would make it easy for him to look upon Bessy as the wife of another man than the one to whom she had been betrothed in her youth. As, however, John Kirkby seemed in no hurry to make his intentions (if indeed he had any) clear to Bessy, it was only now and then that his jealousy on behalf of his lost son seized upon Nathan.

But people, old, and in deep hopeless sorrow, grow irritable at times, however they may repent and struggle against their irritability. There were days when Bessy had to bear a good deal from her uncle; but she loved him so dearly and respected him so much, that, high as her temper was to all other people, she never returned him a rough or impatient word. And she had a reward in the conviction of his deep, true affection for her, and her aunt's entire and most sweet dependence upon her.

One day, however it was near the end of November Bessy had had a good deal to bear, that seemed more than usually unreasonable, on the part of her uncle. The truth was, that one of Kirkby's cows was ill, and John Kirkby was a good deal about in the farmyard; Bessy was interested about the animal, and had helped in preparing a mash over their own fire, that had to be given warm to the sick creature. If John had been out of the way, there would have been no one more anxious about the affair than Nathan: both because he was naturally kind-hearted and neighbourly, and also because he was rather proud of his reputation for knowledge in the diseases of cattle. But because John was about, and Bessy helping a little in what had to be done, Nathan would do nothing, and chose to assume that nothing to think on ailed th' beast; but lads and lasses were allays fain to be feared on something.' Now John was upwards of forty, and Bessy nearly eight-and-twenty; so the terms lads and lasses did not exactly apply to their case.

When Bessy brought the milk in from their own cows, towards half-past five o'clock, Nathan bade her make the doors, and not be running out i' the dark and cold about other folks' business; and, though Bessy was a little surprised and a good deal annoyed at his tone, she sat down to her supper without making a remonstrance. It had long been Nathan's custom to look out the last thing at night, to see 'what mak' o' weather it wur'; and when, towards half-past eight, he got his stick and went out two or three steps from the door, which opened into the house-place where they were sitting Hester put her hand on her niece's shoulder and said

'He's gotten a touch o' rheumatics, as twinges him and makes him speak so sharp. I didna like to ask thee afore him, but how's yon poor beast?'

'Very ailing, belike. John Kirkby wur off for th' cow-doctor when I cam in. I reckon they'll have to stop up wi 't a' night.'

Since their sorrows, her uncle had taken to reading a chapter in the Bible aloud, the last thing at night. He could not read fluently, and often hesitated long over a word, which he miscalled at length; but the very fact of opening the book seemed to soothe those old bereaved parents; for it made them feel quiet and safe in the presence of God, and took them out of the cares and troubles of this world into that futurity which, however dim and vague, was to their faithful hearts as a sure and certain rest. This little quiet time Nathan sitting with his hem spectacles, the

## The Crooked Branch

tallow candle between him and the Bible throwing a strong light on his reverent, earnest face; Hester sitting on the other side of the fire, her head bowed in attentive listening; now and then shaking it, and moaning a little, but when a promise came, or any good tidings of great joy, saying 'Amen' with fervour; Bessy by her aunt, perhaps her mind a little wandering to some household cares, or it might be on thoughts of those who were absent this little quiet pause, I say, was grateful and soothing to this household, as a lullaby to a tired child. But this night, Bessy, sitting opposite to the long, low window, only shaded by a few geraniums that grew in the sill, and to the door alongside that window through which her uncle had passed not a quarter of an hour before, saw the wooden latch of the door gently and almost noiselessly lifted up, as if some one were trying it from the outside.

She was startled, and watched again, intently; but it was perfectly still now. She thought it must have been that it had not fallen into its proper place, when her uncle had come in and locked the door. It was just enough to make her uncomfortable, no more; and she almost persuaded herself it must have been fancy. Before going upstairs, however, she went to the window, to look out into the darkness; but all was still. Nothing to be seen; nothing to be heard. So the three went quietly upstairs to bed.

The house was little better than a cottage. The front door opened on a house-place, over which was the old couple's bed-room. To the left, as you entered this pleasant house-place, and at close right angles with the entrance, was a door that led into the small parlour, which was Hester's and Bessy's pride, although not half as comfortable as the house-place, and never on any occasion used as a sitting-room. There were shells and bunches of honesty in the fireplace; the best chest of drawers, and a company set of gaudy-coloured china, and a bright common carpet on the floor; but all failed to give it the aspect of the homely comfort and delicate cleanliness of the house-place. Over this parlour was the bedroom which Benjamin had slept in when a boy, when at home. It was kept, still, in a kind of readiness for him. The bed was yet there, in which none had slept since he had last done, eight or nine years ago; and every now and then a warming-pan was taken quietly and silently up by his old mother, and the bed thoroughly aired. But this she did in her husband's absence, and without saying a word to anyone; nor did Bessy offer to help her, though her eyes often filled with tears, as she saw her aunt still going through the hopeless service. But the room had become a receptacle for all unused things; and there was always a corner of it appropriated to the winter's store of apples. To the left of the house-place, as you stood facing the fire, on the side opposite to the window and outer door, were two other doors; the one on the right led into a kind of back kitchen, and had a lean-to roof, and a door opening on to the farm-yard and back-premises; the left-hand door gave on the stairs, underneath which was a closet, in which various house-hold treasures were kept; and beyond that was the dairy, over which Bessy slept, her little chamber window opening just above the sloping roof of the back-kitchen. There were neither blinds nor shutters to any of the windows, either upstairs or down; the house was built of stone; and there was heavy framework of the same material around the little casement windows, and the long, low window of the house-place was divided by what, in grander dwellings, would be called mullions.

By nine o'clock this night of which I am speaking, all had gone upstairs to bed; it was even later than usual, for the burning of candles was regarded so much in the light of an extravagance, that the household kept early hours even for country-folk. But, somehow, this evening, Bessy could not sleep; although in general she was in deep slumber five minutes after her head touched the pillow. Her thoughts ran on the chances for John Kirkby's cow, and a little fear lest the disorder might be epidemic and spread to their own cattle. Across all these homely cares came a vivid, uncomfortable recollection of the way in which the door-latch went up and down, without any sufficient agency to account for it. She felt more sure now than she had done downstairs, that it was a real movement, and no effect of her imagination. She wished that it had not happened just when her uncle was reading, that she might at once have gone quick to the door, and convinced herself of the cause. As it was, her thoughts ran uneasily on the supernatural; and thence to Benjamin, her dear cousin and playfellow, her early lover. She had long given him up as lost for ever to her, if not actually dead; but this very giving him up for ever involved a free, full forgiveness of all his wrongs to her. She thought tenderly of him, as of one who might have been led astray in his later years, but who existed rather in her recollection as the innocent child, the spirited lad, the handsome, dashing young man. If John Kirkby's quiet attentions had ever betrayed his wishes to Bessy if

## The Crooked Branch

indeed he ever had any wishes on the subject her first feeling would have been to compare his weather-beaten, middle-aged face and figure with the face and figure she remembered well, but never more expected to see in this life. So thinking, she became very restless, and weary of bed, and, after long tossing and turning, ending in a belief that she should never get to sleep at all that night, she went off soundly and suddenly.

As suddenly she was wide awake, sitting up in bed, listening to some noise that must have awakened her, but which was not repeated for some time. Surely it was in her uncle's room her uncle was up; but, for a minute or two, there was no further sound. Then she heard him open his door, and go downstairs, with hurried, stumbling steps. She now thought that her aunt must be ill, and hastily sprang out of bed, and was putting on her petticoat with hurried, trembling hands, and had just opened her chamber door, when she heard the front door undone, and a scuffle, as of the feet of several people, and many rude, passionate words, spoken hoarsely below the breath. Quick as thought she understood it all the house was lonely her uncle had the reputation of being well-to-do they had pretended to be belated, and had asked their way or something. What a blessing that John Kirkby's cow was sick, for there were several men watching with him! She went back, opened her window, squeezed herself out, slid down the lean-to roof, and ran barefoot and breathless to the shippon

'John, John, for the love of God, come quick; there's robbers in the house, and uncle and aunt 'll be murdered!' she whispered, in terrified accents, through the closed and barred shippon door. In a moment it was undone, and John and the cow-doctor stood there, ready to act, if they but understood her rightly. Again she repeated her words, with broken, half-unintelligible explanations of what she as yet did not rightly understand.

'Front door is open, say'st thou?' said John, arming himself with a pitchfork, while the cow-doctor took some other implement. 'Then I reckon we'd best make for that way o' getting into th' house, and catch 'em all in a trap.'

'Run! run!' was all Bessy could say, taking hold of John Kirkby's arm, and pulling him along with her. Swiftly did the three run to the house round the corner, and in at the open front-door. The men carried the hem lantern they had been using in the shippon; and, by the sudden oblong light that it threw, Bessy saw the principal object of her anxiety, her uncle, lying stunned and helpless on the kitchen-floor. Her first thought was for him; for she had no idea that her aunt was in any immediate danger, although she heard the noise of feet, and fierce, subdued voices upstairs.

'Make th' door behind us, lass. We'll not let 'em escape!' said brave John Kirkby, dauntless in a good cause, though he knew not how many there might be above. The cow-doctor fastened and locked the door, saying, 'There!' in a defiant tone, as he put the key in his pocket. It was to be a struggle for life or death, or, at any rate, for effectual capture or desperate escape. Bessy kneeled down by her uncle, who did not speak or give any sign of consciousness. Bessy raised his head by drawing a pillow off the settle, and putting it under him; she longed to go for water into the back kitchen, but the sound of a violent struggle, and of heavy blows, and of low, hard curses spoken through closed teeth, and muttered passion, as though breath were too much needed for action to be wasted in speech, kept her still and quiet by her uncle's side in the kitchen, where the darkness might almost be felt, so thick and deep was it. Once in a pause of her own heart's beating a sudden terror came over her; she perceived, in that strange way in which the presence of a living creature forces itself on our consciousness in the darkest room, that someone was near her, keeping as still as she. It was not the poor old man's breathing that she heard, nor the radiation of his presence that she felt; someone else was in the kitchen; another robber, perhaps, left to guard the old man, with murderous intent if his consciousness returned. Now Bessy was fully aware that self-preservation would keep her terrible companion quiet, as there was no motive for his betraying himself stronger than the desire of escape; any effort for which he, the unseen witness, must know would be rendered abortive by the fact of the door being locked.

Yet, with the knowledge that he was there, close to her still, silent as the grave with fearful, it might be deadly, unspoken thoughts in his heart possibly even with keener and stronger sight than hers, as longer accustomed to the darkness, able to discern her figure and posture, and glaring at her like some wild beast Bessy could not fail

## The Crooked Branch

to shrink from the vision that her fancy presented! And still the struggle went on upstairs; feet slipping, blows sounding, and the wrench of intentioned aims, the strong gasps for breath, as the wrestlers paused for an instant. In one of these pauses, Bessy felt conscious of a creeping movement close to her, which ceased when the noise of the strife above died away, and was resumed when it again began. She was aware of it by some subtle vibration of the air, rather than by touch or sound. She was sure that he who had been close to her one minute as she knelt, was, the next, passing stealthily towards the inner door which led to the staircase. She thought he was going to join and strengthen his accomplices, and, with a great cry, she sprang after him; but just as she came to the doorway, through which some dim portion of light from the upper chambers came, she saw one man thrown downstairs, with such violence that he fell almost at her very feet, while the dark, creeping figure glided suddenly away to the left, and as suddenly entered the closet beneath the stairs. Bessy had no time to wonder as to his purpose in so doing, whether he had at first designed to aid his accomplices in their desperate fight or not. He was an enemy, a robber, that was all she knew, and she sprang to the door of the closet, and in a trice had locked it on the outside. And then she stood frightened, panting in that dark corner, sick with terror lest the man who lay before her was either John Kirkby or the cow-doctor. If it were either of those friendly two, what would become of the other of her uncle, her aunt, herself? But, in a very few minutes, this wonder was ended; her two defenders came slowly and heavily down the stairs, dragging with them a man, fierce, sullen, despairing disabled with terrible blows, which had made his face one bloody, swollen mass. As for that, neither John nor the cow-doctor was much more presentable. One of them bore the lantern in his teeth; for all their strength was taken up by the weight of the fellow they were bearing.

'Take care,' said Bessy, from her corner; 'there's a chap just beneath your feet. I dunno know if he's dead or alive; and uncle lies on the floor just beyond.'

They stood still on the stairs for a moment. just then the robber they had thrown downstairs stirred and moaned.

'Bessy,' said John, 'run off to th' stable and fetch ropes and gearing for us to bind 'em; and we'll rid the house on 'em, and thou can'st go see after th' oud folks, who need it sadly.'

Bessy was back in a very few minutes. When she came in, there was more light in the house-place, for someone had stirred up the raked fire.

'That felly makes as though his leg were broken,' said John, nodding towards the man still lying on the ground. Bessy felt almost sorry for him as they handled him not over-gently and bound him, only half-conscious, as hardly and tightly as they had done his fierce, surly companion. She even felt sorry for his evident agony, as they turned him over and over, that she ran to get him a cup of water to moisten his lips.

'I'm loth to leave yo' with him alone,' said John, 'though I'm thinking his leg is broken for sartin, and he can't stir, even if he comes to hissel, to do yo' any harm. But we'll just take off this chap, and mak sure of him, and then one on us 'll come back to yo', and we can, may be, find a gate or so for yo' to get shut on him o' th' house. This felly's made safe enough, I'll be bound,' said he, looking at the burglar, who stood, bloody and black, with fell hatred on his sullen face. His eye caught Bessy's, as hers fell on him with dread so evident that it made him smile; and the look and the smile prevented the words from being spoken which were on Bessy's lips.

She dared not tell, before him, that an able-bodied accomplice still remained in the house; lest, somehow, the door which kept him a prisoner should be broken open and the fight renewed. So she only said to John, as he was leaving the house

'Thou'll not be long away, for I'm afeared of being left wi' this man.'

'He'll noan do thee harm,' said John.

## The Crooked Branch

'No! but I'm feared lest he should die. And there's uncle and aunt. Come back soon, John!'

'Ay, ay!' said he, half-pleased; 'I'll be back, never fear me.'

So Bessy shut the door after them, but did not lock it, for fear of mischances in the house, and went once more to her uncle, whose breathing, by this time, was easier than when she had first returned into the house-place with John and the doctor. By the light of the fire, too, she could now see that he had received a blow on the head, which was probably the occasion of his stupor. Round this wound, which was bleeding pretty freely, Bessy put cloths dipped in cold water; and then, leaving him for a time, she lighted a candle, and was about to go upstairs to her aunt, when, just as she was passing the bound and disabled robber, she heard her name softly, urgently called

'Bessy, Bessy!' At first the voice sounded so close that she thought it must be the unconscious wretch at her feet. But, once again, that voice thrilled through her—

'Bessy, Bessy! for God's sake, let me out!'

She went to the stair-closet door, and tried to speak, but could not, her heart beat so terribly. Again, close to her ear —

'Bessy, Bessy! they'll be back directly; let me out, I say! For God's sake, let me out!' And he began to kick violently against the panels.

'Hush! hush!' she said, sick with a terrible dread, yet with a will strongly resisting her conviction. 'Who are you?' But she knew quite well.

'Benjamin.' An oath. 'Let me out, I say, and I'll be off, and out of England by to-morrow night, never to come back, and you'll have all my father's money.'

'D'ye think I care for that?' said Bessy vehemently, feeling with trembling hands for the lock; 'I wish there was noan such a thing as money i' the world, afore yo'd come to this. There, yo 're free, and I charge yo' never to let me see your face again. I'd ne'er ha' let yo' loose but for fear o' breaking their hearts, if yo' hanna killed him already.' But, before she had ended her speech, he was gone off into the black darkness, leaving the door open wide. With a new terror in her mind, Bessy shut it afresh shut it and bolted it this time. Then she sat down on the first chair, and relieved her soul by giving a great and exceeding bitter cry. But she knew it was no time for giving way; and, lifting herself up with as much effort as if each of her limbs was a heavy weight, she went into the back kitchen, and took a drink of cold water. To her surprise, she heard her uncle's voice saying feebly

'Carry me up, and lay me by her.'

But Bessy could not carry him; she could only help his faint exertions to walk upstairs; and, by the time he was there, sitting panting on the first chair she could find, John Kirkby and Atkinson returned. John came up now to her aid. Her aunt lay across the bed in a fainting-fit, and her uncle sat in so utterly broken-down a state that Bessy feared immediate death for both. But John cheered her up, and lifted the old man into his bed again; and, while Bessy tried to compose poor Hester's limbs into a position of rest, John went down to hunt about for the little store of gin which was always kept in a corner cupboard against emergencies.

'They've had a sore fright,' said he, shaking his head, as he poured a little gin and hot water into their mouths with a tea-spoon, while Bessy chafed their cold feet; 'and it and the cold have been welly too much for 'em, poor old folk!'

He looked tenderly at them, and Bessy blessed him in her heart for that look.

## The Crooked Branch

'I maun be off. I sent Atkinson up to th' farm for to bring down Bob, and Jack came wi' him back to th' shippon, for to look after t'other man. He began blackguarding us all round, so Bob and Jack were gagging him wi' bridles when I left.'

'Ne'er give heed to what he says,' cried poor Bessy, a new panic besetting her. 'Folks o' his sort are allays for dragging other folk into their mischief. I'm right glad he were well gagged.'

'Well! but what I were saying were this: Atkinson and me will take t'other chap, who seems quiet enough, to th' shippon, and it'll be one piece o' work for to mind them and the cow; and I'll saddle t' old bay mare and ride for constables and doctor fra' Highminster. I'll bring Dr Preston up to see Nathan and Hester first; and then, I reckon, th' broken-legged chap down below must have his turn for all as he's met wi' his misfortunes in a wrong line o' life.'

'Ay!' said Bessy. 'We maun ha' the doctor sure enough, for look at them how they lie like two stone statues on a church monument, so sad and solemn!'

'There's a look o' sense come back into their faces though, sin' they supped that gin-and-water. I'd keep on a-bathing his head and giving them a sup on't fra' time to time, if I was you, Bessy.'

Bessy followed him downstairs, and lighted the men out of the house. She dared not light them carrying their burden even, until they passed round the corner of the house; so strong was her fearful conviction that Benjamin was lurking near, seeking again to enter. She rushed back into the kitchen, bolted and barred the door, and pushed the end of the dresser against it, shutting her eyes as she passed the uncurtained window, for fear of catching a glimpse of a white face pressed against the glass, and gazing at her. The poor old couple lay quiet and speechless, although Hester's position had slightly altered: she had turned a little on her side towards her husband, and had laid one shrivelled arm around his neck. But he was just as Bessy had left him, with the wet cloths around his head, his eyes not wanting in a certain intelligence, but solemn, and unconscious to all that was passing around as the eyes of death.

His wife spoke a little from time to time said a word of thanks, perhaps, or so; but he, never. All the rest of that terrible night, Bessy tended the poor old couple with constant care, her own heart so stunned and bruised in its feelings that she went about her pious duties almost like one in a dream. The November morning was long in coming; nor did she perceive any change, either for the worse or the better, before the doctor came, about eight o'clock. John Kirkby brought him; and was full of the capture of the two burglars.

As far as Bessy could make out, the participation of that unnatural Third was unknown. It was a relief, almost sickening in the revulsion it gave her from her terrible fear, which now she felt had haunted and held possession of her all night long, and had, in fact, paralysed her from thinking. Now she felt and thought with acute and feverish vividness, owing, no doubt, in part, to the sleepless night she had passed. She felt almost sure that her uncle (possibly her aunt, too) had recognised Benjamin; but there was a faint chance that they had not done so, and wild horses should never tear the secret from her, nor should any inadvertent word betray the fact that there had been a third person concerned. As to Nathan, he had never uttered a word. It was her aunt's silence that made Bessy fear lest Hester knew, somehow, that her son was concerned.

The doctor examined them both closely; looked hard at the wound on Nathan's head; asked questions which Hester answered shortly and unwillingly, and Nathan not at all shutting his eyes, as if even the sight of a stranger was pain to him. Bessy replied, in their stead, to all that she could answer respecting their state, and followed the doctor downstairs with a beating heart. When they came into the house-place, they found John had opened the outer door to let in some fresh air, had brushed the hearth and made up the fire, and put the chairs and table in their right places. He reddened a little, as Bessy's eye fell upon his swollen and battered face, but tried to smile it off in a dry kind of way

## The Crooked Branch

'Yo' see, I'm an ould bachelor, and I just thought as I'd redd up things a bit. How dun yo' find 'em, doctor?'

'Well, the poor old couple have had a terrible shock. I shall send them some soothing medicine to bring down the pulse, and a lotion for the old man's head. It is very well it bled so much; there might have been a good deal of inflammation.' And so he went on, giving directions to Bessy for keeping them quietly in bed through the day. From these directions she gathered that they were not, as she had feared all night long, near to death. The doctor expected them to recover, though they would require care. She almost wished it had been otherwise, and that they, and she too, might have just lain down to their rest in the churchyard so cruel did life seem to her; so dreadful the recollection of that subdued voice of the hidden robber smiting her with recognition.

All this time, John was getting things ready for breakfast, with something of the handiness of a woman. Bessy half-resented his officiousness in pressing Dr Preston to have a cup of tea, she did so want him to be gone and leave her alone with her thoughts. She did not know that all was done for love of her; that the hard-featured, short-spoken John was thinking all the time how ill and miserable she looked, and trying with tender artifices to make it incumbent upon her sense of hospitality to share Dr Preston's meal.

'I've seen as the cows is milked,' said he, 'yourn and all; and Atkinson's brought ours round fine. Whatten a marcy it were as she were sick this very night! Yon two chaps 'ud ha' made short work on't, if yo' hadna fetched us in; and, as it were, we had a sore tussle. One on 'em 'll bear the marks on't to his dying day, wunnot he, doctor?'

'He'll barely have his leg well enough to stand his trial at York Assizes; they're coming off in a fortnight from now.'

'Ay, and that reminds me, Bessy, yo'll have to go witness before Justice Royds. Constables bade me tell yo' and gie yo' this summons. Dunnot be feared: it will not be a long job, though I'm not saying as it'll be a pleasant one. Yo'll have to answer questions as to how, and all about it; and Jane' (his sister) 'will come and stop wi' th' oud folks; and I'll drive yo' in the shandry.'

No one knew why Bessy's colour blenched, and her eye clouded. No one knew how she apprehended lest she should have to say that Benjamin had been of the gang; if indeed, in some way, the law had not followed on his heels quick enough to catch him.

But that trial was spared her; she was warned by John to answer questions, and say no more than was necessary, for fear of making her story less clear; and, as she was known, by character at least, to justice Royds and his clerk, they made the examination as little formidable as possible.

When all was over, and John was driving her back again, he expressed his rejoicing that there would be evidence enough to convict the men, without summoning Nathan and Hester to identify them. Bessy was so tired that she hardly understood what an escape it was; how far greater than even her companion understood.

Jane Kirkby stayed with her for a week or more, and was an unspeakable comfort. Otherwise she sometimes thought she should have gone mad, with the face of her uncle always reminding her, in its stony expression of agony, of that fearful night. Her aunt was softer in her sorrow, as became one of her faithful and pious nature; but it was easy to see how her heart bled inwardly. She recovered her strength sooner than her husband; but, as she recovered, the doctor perceived the rapid approach of total blindness. Every day, nay, every hour of the day, that Bessy dared, without fear of exciting their suspicions of her knowledge, she told them, as she had anxiously told them at first, that only two men, and those perfect strangers, had been discovered as being concerned in the burglary. Her uncle would never have asked a question about it, even if she had withheld all information respecting the affair; but she noticed the quick, watching, waiting glance of his eye, whenever she returned from any person or place where she might have been supposed to gain intelligence if Benjamin were suspected or caught: and she hastened to relieve the old man's anxiety, by always telling all that she had heard; thankful that, as

## The Crooked Branch

the days passed on, the danger she sickened to think of grew less and less.

Day by day, Bessy had ground for thinking that her aunt knew more than she had apprehended at first. There was something so very humble and touching in Hester's blind way of feeling about her husband stern, woe-begone Nathan and mutely striving to console him in the deep agony of which Bessy learnt, from this loving, piteous manner, that her aunt was conscious. Her aunt's face looked blankly up into his, tears slowly running down from her sightless eyes; while from time to time, when she thought herself unheard by any save him, she would repeat such texts as she had heard at church in happier days, and which she thought, in her true, simple piety, might tend to console him. Yet, day by day, her aunt grew more and more sad.

Three or four days before assize-time, two summonses to attend the trial at York were sent to the old people. Neither Bessy, nor John, nor Jane, could understand this: for their own notices had come long before, and they had been told that their evidence would be enough to convict.

But, alas! the fact was, that the lawyer employed to defend the prisoners had heard from them that there was a third person engaged, and had heard who that third person was; and it was this advocate's business to diminish, if possible, the guilt of his clients, by proving that they were but tools in the hands of one who had, from his superior knowledge of the premises and the daily customs of the inhabitants, been the originator and planner of the whole affair. To do this, it was necessary to have the evidence of the parents, who, as the prisoners had said, must have recognised the voice of the young man, their son. For no one knew that Bessy, too, could have borne witness to his having been present; and, as it was supposed that Benjamin had escaped out of England, there was no exact betrayal of him on the part of his accomplices.

Wondering, bewildered, and weary, the old couple reached York, in company with John and Bessy, on the eve of the day of the trial. Nathan was still so self-contained that Bessy could never guess what had been passing in his mind. He was almost passive under his old wife's trembling caresses. He seemed hardly conscious of them, so rigid was his demeanour.

She, Bessy feared at times, was becoming childish; for she had evidently so great and anxious a love for her husband, that her memory seemed going in her endeavours to melt the stoniness of his aspect and manners; she appeared occasionally to have forgotten why he was so changed, in her piteous little attempts to bring him back to his former self

'They'll, for sure, never torture them, when they see what old folks they are!' cried Bessy, on the morning of the trial, a dim fear looming over her mind. 'They'll never be so cruel, for sure?'

But 'for sure' it was so. The barrister looked up at the judge, almost apologetically, as he saw how hoary-headed and woeful an old man was put into the witness-box, when the defence came on, and Nathan Huntroyd was called on for his evidence.

'It is necessary, on behalf of my clients, my lord, that I should pursue a course which, for all other reasons, I deplore.'

'Go on!' said the judge. 'What is right and legal must be done.' But, an old man himself, he covered his quivering mouth with his hand as Nathan, with grey, unmoved face, and solemn, hollow eyes, placing his two hands on each side of the witness-box, prepared to give his answers to questions, the nature of which he was beginning to foresee, but would not shrink from replying to truthfully; 'the very stones' (as he said to himself, with a kind of dulled sense of the Eternal justice) 'rise up against such a sinner.'

'Your name is Nathan Huntroyd, I believe?'

## The Crooked Branch

'It is.'

'You live at Nab-End Farm?'

'I do.'

'Do you remember the night of November the twelfth?'

'Yes.'

'You were awakened that night by some noise, I believe. What was it?'

The old man's eyes fixed themselves upon his questioner with the look of a creature brought to bay. That look the barrister never forgets. It will haunt him till his dying day.

'It was a throwing-up of stones against our window.'

'Did you hear it at first?'

'No.'

'What awakened you, then?'

'She did.'

'And then you both heard the stones. Did you hear anything else?'

A long pause. Then a low, clear 'Yes.'

'What?'

'Our Benjamin asking us for to let him in. She said as it were him, leastways.'

'And you thought it was him, did you not?'

'I told her' (this rime in a louder voice) 'for to get to sleep, and not be thinking that every drunken chap as passed by were our Benjamin, for that he were dead and gone.'

'And she?'

'She said as though she'd heerd our Benjamin, afore she were welly awake, axing for to be let in. But I bade her ne'er heed her dreams, but turn on her other side and get to sleep again.'

'And did she?'

A long pause judge, jury, bar, audience, all held their breath. At length Nathan said

'No!'

'What did you do then? (My lord, I am compelled to ask these painful questions.)'

## The Crooked Branch

'I saw she wadna be quiet: she had allays thought he would come back to us, like the Prodigal i' th' Gospels.' (His voice choked a little; but he tried to make it steady, succeeded, and went on.) 'She said, if I wadna get up, she would; and just then I heerd a voice. I'm not quite mysel', gentlemen I've been ill and i' bed, an' it makes me trembling-like. Someone said, "Father, mother, I'm here, starving i' the cold wunnot yo' get up and let me in?"'

'And that voice was ?'

'It were like our Benjamin's. I see whatten yo're driving at, sir, and I'll tell yo' truth, though it kills me to speak it. I dunnot say it were our Benjamin as spoke, mind yo'— I only say it were like'

'That's all I want, my good fellow. And on the strength of that entreaty, spoken in your son's voice, you went down and opened the door to these two prisoners at the bar, and to a third man?'

Nathan nodded assent, and even that counsel was too merciful to force him to put more into words.

'Call Hester Huntroyd.'

An old woman, with a face of which the eyes were evidently blind, with a sweet, gentle, careworn face, came into the witness-box, and meekly curtseyed to the presence of those whom she had been taught to respect a presence she could not see.

There was something in her humble, blind aspect, as she stood waiting to have something done to her what her poor troubled mind hardly knew that touched all who saw her, inexpressibly. Again the counsel apologised, but the judge could not reply in words; his face was quivering all over, and the jury looked uneasily at the prisoner's counsel. That gentleman saw that he might go too far, and send their sympathies off on the other side; but one or two questions he must ask. So, hastily recapitulating much that he had learned from Nathan, he said, 'You believed it was your son's voice asking to be let in?'

'Ay! Our Benjamin came home, I'm sure; choose where he is gone.'

She turned her head about, as if listening for the voice of her child, in the hushed silence of the court.

'Yes; he came home that night and your husband went down to let him in?'

'Well! I believe he did. There was a great noise of folk downstairs.'

'And you heard your son Benjamin's voice among the others?'

'Is it to do him harm, sir?' asked she, her face growing more intelligent and intent on the business in hand.

'That is not my object in questioning you. I believe he has left England; so nothing you can say will do him any harm. You heard your son's voice, I say?'

'Yes, sir. For sure I did.'

'And some men came upstairs into your room? What did they say?'

'They axed where Nathan kept his stocking.'

'And you did you tell them?'

## The Crooked Branch

'No, sir, for I knew Nathan would not like me to.'

'What did you do then?'

A shade of reluctance came over her face, as if she began to perceive causes and consequences.

'I just screamed on Bessy that's my niece, sir.'

'And you heard someone shout out from the bottom of the stairs?'

She looked piteously at him, but did not answer.

'Gentlemen of the jury, I wish to call your particular attention to this fact; she acknowledges she heard someone shout some third person, you observe shout out to the two above. What did he say? That is the last question I shall trouble you with. What did the third person, left behind, downstairs, say?'

Her face worked her mouth opened two or three times as if to speak she stretched out her arms imploringly; but no word came, and she fell back into the arms of those nearest to her. Nathan forced himself forward into the witness-box

'My Lord judge, a woman bore ye, as I reckon; it', a cruel shame to serve a mother so. It wur my son, my only child, as called out for us t' open door, and who shouted out for to hold th' oud woman's throat if she did na stop her noise, when hoo'd fain ha' cried for her niece to help. And now yo've truth, and a' th' truth, and I'll leave yo' to th' judgement o' God for th' way yo've gotten at it.'

Before night the mother was stricken with paralysis, and lay on her death-bed. But the broken-hearted go Home, to be comforted of God.