

MY MAN JOHN

Florence Henrietta Darwin

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MY MAN JOHN

CHARACTERS

MRS. GARDNER.

WILLIAM, *her son.*

JOHN, *his farm hand.*

SUSAN, *their maid.*

JULIA, *the owner of Luther's Farm.*

LAURA, CHRIS, NAT, TANSIE, *gipsies.*

ACT I. Scene 1.

The garden of the Road Farm. To the right an arbour covered with roses. MRS. GARDNER is seated in it, knitting. WILLIAM is tying up flowers and watering them.

MRS. GARDNER. And you have come to a ripe age when 'tis the plain duty of a man to turn himself towards matrimony, William.

WILLIAM. 'Tis a bit of quiet that I'm after, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. Quiet! 'tis a good shaking up as you want, William. Why, you have got as set in your ways as last season's jelly.

WILLIAM. Then let me bide so. 'Tis all I ask.

MY MAN JOHN

MRS. GARDNER. No, William. I'm got to be an old woman now, and 'tis time that I had someone at my side to help in the house-keeping and to share the work.

WILLIAM. What's Susan for, if 'tisn't to do that?

MRS. GARDNER. Susan? As idle a piece of goods as ever was seen on a summer's day! No. 'Tisn't a serving maid that I was thinking of, but someone who should be of more account in the house. 'Tis a daughter that I'm wanting, William, and I've picked out the one who is to my taste.

WILLIAM. Then you've done more than I have, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. 'Tis the young person whom Luther Smith has left his farm and all his money to. I've got my eye on her for you, William.

WILLIAM. Then you'll please to put your eye somewhere else, Mother, for I've seen them, and they don't suit me.

MRS. GARDNER. Come, this is news, William. Pray where did you meet?

WILLIAM. 'Twas when I was in church last Sunday. In they came, the two young maids from Luthers, like a couple of gallinie fowls, the way they did step up over the stones and shake the plumes of them this way and that. I don't hold with fancy tricks. I never could abide them. No foreign wenches for me. And that's about all.

MRS. GARDNER. 'Tis true they are from town, but none the worse for that, William. You have got sadly rude and cumbersome in your ways, or you wouldn't feel as you do towards a suitable young person. 'Tis from getting about with John so much, I think.

WILLIAM. Now look you here, Mother, I've got used to my own ways, and when a man's got set in his own ways, 'tis best to leave him there. I'm past the age for marrying, and you ought to know this better than anyone.

MRS. GARDNER. I know that 'tis a rare lot of foolishness that you do talk, William, seeing as you're not a year past thirty yet. But if you can't be got to wed for love of a maid, perhaps you'll do so for love of a purse, when 'tis fairly filled.

WILLIAM. There's always been enough for you and me so far, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. Ah, but that won't last for ever. I'm got an old woman, and I can't do with the dairy nor the poultry as I was used to do. And things have not the same prices to them as 'twas a few years gone by. And last year's season was the worst that I remember.

WILLIAM. So 'twas. But so long as there's a roof over our heads and a loaf of bread and a bit of garden for me to work on, where's the harm, Mother?

MRS. GARDNER. O you put me out of all patience, William. Where's the rent to come from if we go on like this? And the clothing, and the food? And John's wages, and your flower seeds, if it comes to that, for you have got terrible wasteful over the flowers.

WILLIAM. I wish you'd take it quieter, Mother. Look at you bed of musk, 'tis a grand smell that comes up from it all around.

MY MAN JOHN

MRS. GARDNER. No, William. I've no eye for musk, nor nose to smell at it either till you've spoken the word that I require.

WILLIAM. Best let things bide as they are, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. I'll leave you no rest till you do as I wish, William. I'm got an old woman, and 'tis hard I should be denied in aught that I've set my heart upon.

WILLIAM. Please to set it upon something different, Mother, for I'm not a marrying man, and John he'll tell you the same thing.

MRS. GARDNER. John! I'm sick of the very name of him. I can't think how 'tis that you can lower yourself by being so close with a common farm hand, William.

WILLIAM. Ah, 'twould be a rare hard matter to find the equal to John, Mother. 'Tis of gold all through, and every bit of him, that he is made. You don't see many like John these days, that's the truth.

MRS. GARDNER. Well, then, John, won't be here much longer, for we shan't have anything to give him if things go on like this.

WILLIAM. I'd wed forty wives sooner than lose John and that I would.

MRS. GARDNER. I'm not asking you to wed forty. 'Tis only one.

WILLIAM. And that one?

MRS. GARDNER. The young person who's got Luther's farm. Her name is Julia.

WILLIAM. [*Leaving his flower border and walking up and down thoughtfully.*] Would she be the one with the cherry colour ribbons to her gown?

MRS. GARDNER. I'm sure I don't know. I was not at church last Sunday.

WILLIAM. Or t'other one in green?

MRS. GARDNER. You appear to have used your eyes pretty well, William.

WILLIAM. O, I can see a smartish bit about me when I choose.

MRS. GARDNER. T'other wench is but the housekeeper.

WILLIAM. Where did you get that from?

MRS. GARDNER. 'Twas Susan who told me. She got it off someone down in the village.

WILLIAM. Well, which of the maids would have had the cherry-coloured ribbons to her, Mother?

MRS. GARDNER. I'm sure I don't know, but if you go up there courting this afternoon, may happen that you'll find out.

WILLIAM. This afternoon? O, that's much too sudden like.

MY MAN JOHN

MRS. GARDNER. Not a bit of it. Recollect, your fancy has been set on her since Sunday.

WILLIAM. Come, Mother, you can't expect a man to jump into the river all of a sudden like this.

MRS. GARDNER. I expect you to go up there this very day and to commence telling her of your feelings.

WILLIAM. But I've got no feelings that I can tell her of, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. Then you'll please to find some, William.

WILLIAM. 'Tis a thing that in all my life I've never done as to go visiting of a strange wench of an afternoon.

MRS. GARDNER. Then 'tis time you did begin.

WILLIAM. And what's more, I'll not do it, neither.

MRS. GARDNER. Then I must tell John that we have no further need of his services, for where the money to pay him is to come from, I don't know.

[She rolls up her knitting and rises.]

WILLIAM. Stop a moment, Mother stop a moment. Maybe 'twon't be so bad when I've got more used to the idea. You've pitched it upon me so sudden like.

MRS. GARDNER. Rent day has pitched upon me more sudden, William.

WILLIAM. Look you, Mother, I'll get and turn it about in my mind a bit. And, maybe, I'll talk it over with John. I can't do more, can I now?

MRS. GARDNER. Talk it over with whom you please, William. But remember 'tis this very afternoon that you have to start courting. I've laid your best clothes out all ready on your bed.

WILLIAM. *[Sighing heavily.]* O then I count there's no way out of it. But how am I to bring it off? 'Tis that I'd like to know.

MRS. GARDNER. Maybe your man will be able to give you some suitable advice. Such things are beyond me, I'm afraid.

[She gathers up her work things, and with a contemptuous look at her son, she goes slowly out of the garden.]

[WILLIAM remains on the path lost in perturbed thought. Suddenly he goes to the gate and calls loudly.]

WILLIAM. John, John!

JOHN. *[From afar.]* Yes, master.

WILLIAM. *[Calling.]* Come you here, John, as quick as you can run.

JOHN. That I will, master.

[JOHN hurries into the garden.]

MY MAN JOHN

WILLIAM. John, I'm powerful upset.

JOHN. Mistress's fowls bain't got among the flowers again, be they, Master William?

WILLIAM. No, no, John. 'Tisn't so bad as that. But I'm in a smartish fix, I can tell you.

JOHN. How's that, master?

WILLIAM. John, did you ever go a'courting?

JOHN. Well, master, that's a thing to ask a man!

WILLIAM. 'Tis a terrible serious matter, John. Did you ever go?

JOHN. Courting?

WILLIAM. Yes.

JOHN. Why, I count as I have went a score of times, master.

WILLIAM. A score of times, John! But that was before you were got to the age you are now?

JOHN. Before that, and now, master.

WILLIAM. And now, John?

JOHN. To be sure, master.

WILLIAM. Then you know how 'tis done?

JOHN. Ah, that I does, master.

WILLIAM. Well, John, you're the man for me.

JOHN. Lord bless us, master, but what have you to do with courting?

WILLIAM. You may well ask me, John. Why, look you here until this very morning, you would say I was a quiet and a peaceable man, with the right place for everything and everything in its place.

JOHN. Ah, and that you was, Master William. And a time for all things too, and a decenter, proper gentleman no man ever served that's truth.

WILLIAM. Ah, John the mistress has set her will to change all this.

JOHN. Now, you'd knock me down with a feather.

WILLIAM. That she has, John. I've got to set out courting – a thing I've never thought to do in all my living days.

JOHN. That I'll be bound you have not, Master William, though a finer gentleman than yourself is not to be found in all the country side.

MY MAN JOHN

WILLIAM. [*With shy eagerness.*] Is that how I appear to you, John?

JOHN. Ah, and that you does, master. And 'tis the wonder with all for miles around as how you've been and kept yourself to yourself like this, so many years.

WILLIAM. Well, John, it appears that I'm to pass out of my own keeping. My Sunday clothes are all laid out upon the bed.

JOHN. Bless my soul, Master William, and 'tis but Thursday too.

WILLIAM. Isn't that a proper day for this sort of business, John?

JOHN. I've always been used to Saturday myself, but with a gentleman 'tis different like.

WILLIAM. Well, John, there's nothing in this day or that as far as I can see. A bad job is a bad job, no matter what, and the day of it does make but very little difference.

JOHN. You're right there, master. But if I may be so bold, where is it as you be going off courting this afternoon?

WILLIAM. Ah now you and me will have a straight talk one with another for 'tis to you I look, John, for to pull me out of this fix where the mistress has gone and put me.

JOHN. And that I'll do, master with all the will in the world.

WILLIAM. Well then, John, 'tis to be one of those maids from strange parts who are come to live at old Luther's, up yonder.

JOHN. Ah, I seed the pair of them in church last Sunday. Fine maids, the both of them, and properly suitable if you was to ask me.

WILLIAM. 'Tis only the one I've got to court, John.

JOHN. And I reckon that's one too many, Master William.

WILLIAM. You're right there, John. 'Tis Mistress Julia I've to go at.

JOHN. And which of the pair would that be, Master William?

WILLIAM. That one with the cherry colour ribbons to her gown, I believe.

JOHN. Ah, t'other was plainer in her dressing, and did keep the head of her bent smartish low on her book, so that a man couldn't get a fair look upon she.

WILLIAM. That would be the housekeeper or summat. 'Tis Julia, who has the old man's money, I'm to court.

JOHN. Well, master, I'll come along with you a bit of the road, to keep your heart up like.

WILLIAM. You must do more than that for me, John. You've got to learn me how the courting is done before I set off.

MY MAN JOHN

JOHN. Why, master, courting baint a thing what wants much learning, that's the truth.

WILLIAM. 'Tis all new to me, John. I'm blessed if I know how to commence. Why, the thought of it at once sends me hot all over; and then as cold again.

JOHN. You start and get your clothes on, master. 'Tis half the battle clothes. What a man cannot bring out of his mouth of a Saturday will fall out easy as anything on the Sunday with his best coat to his back.

WILLIAM. No, John. The clothes won't help me in this fix. You must tell me how to start once I get to the farm and am by the door.

JOHN. You might take a nosegay with you, master.

WILLIAM. I might. And yet, 'tis a pity to cut the blooms for naught.

JOHN. I always takes a nosegay with me, of a Saturday night.

WILLIAM. Why, John, who is it that you are courting then?

JOHN. 'Tis that wench Susan, since you ask me, master. But not a word of it to th' old mistress.

WILLIAM. I'll not mention it, John.

JOHN. Thank you kindly, master.

WILLIAM. And now, John, when the nosegay's all gathered and the flowers bunched, what else should I do?

JOHN. Well, then you gives it her when you gets to the door. And very like she'll ask you into the parlour, seeing as you be a particular fine looking gentleman.

WILLIAM. I could not stand that, John. I've no tongue to me within a strange house.

JOHN. Well then, maybe as you and she will sit aside of one another in an arbour in the garden, or sommat of the sort.

WILLIAM. Yes, John. And what next?

JOHN. I'm blessed if I do know, master. You go along and commence.

WILLIAM. No, John, and that I won't. Not till I know more about it like.

JOHN. Well, master, I'm fairly puzzled hard to tell you.

WILLIAM. I have the very thought, John. Do you bring Susan out here. I'll place myself behind the shrubs, and do you get and court her as well as you know how; and maybe that will learn me something.

JOHN. Susan's a terrible hard wench to court, Master William.

WILLIAM. 'Twill make the better lesson, John.

JOHN. 'Tis a stone in place of a heart what Susan's got.

MY MAN JOHN

WILLIAM. 'Twill very likely be the same with Julia. Go and bring her quickly, John.

[**WILLIAM** *places himself behind the arbour.*]

JOHN. As you will, master but Susan have been wonderful nasty in her ways with me of late. 'Tis my belief as she have took up with one of they low gipsy lads what have been tenting up yonder, against the wood.

WILLIAM. Well, 'twill be your business to win her back to you, John. See am I properly hid, behind the arbour?

JOHN. Grandly hid, master I'll go and fetch the wench. [**JOHN** *leaves the garden.*]

[**WILLIAM** *remains hidden behind the arbour. After a few minutes JOHN returns pulling SUSAN by the hand.*]

SUSAN. And what are you about, bringing me into master's flower garden at this time of the morning? I should like for mistress to look out of one of the windows you'd get into fine trouble, and me too, John.

JOHN. Susan, my dear, you be a passing fine wench to look upon, and that's the truth.

SUSAN. And is it to tell me such foolishness that you've brought me all the way out of the kitchen?

JOHN. [*Stooping and picking a dandelion.*] And to give you this flower, dear Susan.

SUSAN. [*Throwing it down.*] A common thing like that! I'll have none of it.

JOHN. 'Tis prime you looks when you be angered, Susan. The blue fire do fairly leap from your eyes.

SUSAN. O you're enough to anger a saint, John. What have you brought me here for?

JOHN. I thought I'd like to tell you as you was such a fine wench, Susan. And that I did never see a finer.

SUSAN. You do look at me as though I was yonder prize heifer what Master William's so powerful set on.

JOHN. Ah and 'tis true as you have sommat of the look of she when you stands a pawing of the ground as you be now.

SUSAN. Is it to insult me that you've got me away from the kitchen, John?

JOHN. Nay 'tis to tell you that you be a rare smartish wench and I'll go along to the church with you any day as you will name, my dear.

SUSAN. That you won't, John. I don't mind taking a nosegay of flowers from you now and then, and hearing you speak nice to me over the garden gate of an evening, but I'm not a-going any further along the road with you. That's all. [*She moves towards the house.*]

JOHN. Now, do you bide a moment longer, Susan and let me say sommat of all they feelings which be stirring like a nest of young birds in my heart for you.

SUSAN. They may stir within you like an old waspes' nest for all I care, John.

MY MAN JOHN

JOHN. Come, Susan, put better words to your tongue nor they. You can speak honey sweet when it do please you to.

SUSAN. 'Tis mustard as is the right food for you this morning, John.

JOHN. I gets enough of that from mistress I mean well I mean [*in a loud, clear voice*] O mistress is a wonderful fine woman and no mistake.

SUSAN. You won't say as much when she comes round the corner and catches you a wasting of your time like this, John.

JOHN. Is it a waste of time to stand a—drinking in the sweetness of the finest rose what blooms, Susan?

SUSAN. Is that me, John?

JOHN. Who else should it be, Susan?

SUSAN. Well, John sometimes I think there's not much amiss with you.

JOHN. O Susan, them be grand words.

SUSAN. But then again I do think as you be getting too much like Master William.

JOHN. And a grander gentleman than he never went upon the earth.

SUSAN. Cut and clipped and trimmed and dry as that box tree yonder. And you be getting sommat of the same fashion about you, John.

JOHN. Then make me differenter, Susan, you know the way.

SUSAN. I'm not so sure as I do, John.

JOHN. Wed me come Michaelmas, Susan.

SUSAN. And that I'll not. And what's more, I'm not a—going to stop here talking foolish with you any longer. I've work to do within. [*SUSAN goes off.*]

[*JOHN, mopping his face and speaking regretfully as WILLIAM steps from behind the arbour.*]

JOHN. There, master. That's courting for you. That's the sort of thing. And a caddling thing it is too.

WILLIAM. But 'tis a thing that you do rare finely and well, John. And 'tis you and none other who shall do the job for me this afternoon, there that's what I've come to in my thoughts.

JOHN. Master, master, whatever have you got in your head now?

WILLIAM. See here, John we'll cut a nosegay for you to carry some of the best blooms I'll spare. And you, who know what courting is, and who have such fine words to your tongue, shall step up at once and do the business for me.

JOHN. Master, if 'twas an acre of stone as you'd asked me to plough, I'd sooner do it nor a job like this.

MY MAN JOHN

WILLIAM. John, you've been a good friend to me all the years that you have lived on the farm, you'll not go and fail me now.

JOHN. Why not court the lady with your own tongue, Master William? 'Twould have better language to it nor what I can give the likes of she.

WILLIAM. Your words are all right, John. 'Tisn't as though sensible speech was needed. You do know what's wanted with the maids, whilst I have never been used to them in any way whatever. So let's say no more about it, but commence gathering the flowers.

JOHN. [*Heavily, but resigned.*] Since you say so, master. [*They begin to gather flowers.*]

WILLIAM. What blooms do young maids like the best, John?

JOHN. Put in a sprig of thyme, master.

WILLIAM. Yes I can well spare that.

JOHN. And a rose that's half opened, master.

WILLIAM. It goes to my heart to have a rose wasted on this business, John.

JOHN. 'Tain't likely as you can get through courtship without parting with sommat, master. Lucky if it baint gold as you're called upon to spill.

WILLIAM. That's true, John I'll gather the rose –

JOHN. See here, master, the lily and the pink. Them be brave flowers, the both of them, and with a terrible fine scent coming out of they.

WILLIAM. Put them into the nosegay, John And now no more 'Tis enough waste for one day.

JOHN. 'Tis a smartish lot of blooms as good as done for, says I.

WILLIAM. A slow sowing and a quick reaping, John.

JOHN. 'Tis to be hoped as 'twill be the same with the lady, master.

WILLIAM. There, off you go, John. And mind, 'tis her with the cherry ribbon to her gown and bonnet.

JOHN. Why, master, and her might have a different ribbon to her head this day, being that 'tis Thursday?

WILLIAM. An eye like like a bullace, John. And a grand colour to the face of her like yon rose.

JOHN. That's enough, Master William. I'll not pitch upon the wrong maid, never fear. And now I'll clean myself up a bit at the pump, and set off straight away.

WILLIAM. [*Shaking JOHN's hand.*] Good luck to you, my man. And if you can bring it off quiet and decent like without me coming in till at the last, why, 'tis a five pound note that you shall have for your trouble.

JOHN. You be a grand gentleman to serve, Master William, and no mistake about that.

MY MAN JOHN

[Curtain.]

ACT II. Scene 1.

A wood. To the right a fallen tree (or a bench). JOHN comes from the left, a large bunch of flowers in his hand.

JOHN. Out, and a taking of the air in the wood, be they? Well, bless my soul, but 'tis a rare caddling business what master's put upon I. 'Tis worse nor any job he have set me to in all the years I've been along of him, so 'tis. But I'm the one to bring it off slick and straight, and, bless me, if I won't take and hide myself by yon great bush till I see the wench a-coming up. That'll give me time to have a quiet look at the both and pick out she what master's going a-courting of.

[JOHN puts himself behind some thick bushes as JULIA and LAURA come forward. JULIA is very simply dressed. Her head is bare, and she is carrying her white cotton sunbonnet. LAURA wears finer clothes and her bonnet is tied by bright ribbons of cherry colour.]

LAURA. *[Stopping by the bench.]* We'll sit down 'Tis a warm day, and I've had enough of walking.

[She sinks down on the seat.]

JULIA. *[Looking all round her.]* 'Tis beautiful and quiet here. O this is ever so much better than the farm.

LAURA. The farm! What's wrong with that, I should like to know?

JULIA. Everything. 'Tis more like a prison than a home to me. Within the house there's always work crying out to be done and outside I believe 'tis worse work nothing else speaking to me.

LAURA. You're a sad ungrateful girl. Why, there's many would give their eyes to change with you.

JULIA. But out here 'tis all peace, and freedom. There's naught calling out to be done. The flowers grow as they like, and the breezes move them this way, and that. The ground is thick with leaves and blossoms and no one has got to sweep it, and the hard things with great noises to them, like pails and churns, are far away and clean forgot.

LAURA. 'Tisn't much use as you'll be on the farm.

JULIA. I wish I'd never come nigh to it. I was happier far before.

LAURA. 'Tis a grand life. You'll see it as I do one of these days.

JULIA. No, that I shall not. Every day that I wake and hear the cattle lowing beneath my window I turn over on my pillow, and 'tis a heart of lead that turns with me. The smell of the wild flowers in the fields calls me, but 'tis to the dairy I must go, to work. And at noonday, when the shade of the woodland makes me thirsty for its coolness, 'tis the kitchen I must be in or picking green stuff for the market. And so on till night, when the limbs of me can do no more and the spirit in me is like a bird with the wing of it broken.

LAURA. You'll harden to it all by winter time right enough.

JULIA. O I'll never harden to it. 'Tis not that way I am made. Some girls can set themselves down with four

MY MAN JOHN

walls round them, and do their task nor ask for anything beyond, but 'tis not so with me.

LAURA. How is it then with you?

JULIA. [*Pointing.*] There see that blue thing yonder flying from one blossom to another. That's how 'tis with me. Shut me up close in one place, I perish. Let me go free, and I can fly and live.

LAURA. You do talk a powerful lot of foolishness that no one could understand.

JULIA. O, do not let us talk at all. Let us bide still, and get ourselves refreshed by the sweetness and the wildness of the forest.

JULIA *turns away and gives herself up to the enjoyment of the wood around her.*

LAURA *arranges her ribbons and smoothes out her gown. Neither of them speak for a few minutes.*

LAURA. [*Looking up and pointing.*] See those strange folk over there? What are they?

JULIA. [*Looking in the same direction.*] I know them. They are gipsies from the hill near to us.

LAURA. They should be driven away then. I don't like such folk roosting around.

JULIA. But I do. They are friends to me. Many's the time I have run out at dusk to speak with them as they sit round their fire.

LAURA. Then you didn't ought to have done so. Let's get off now, before they come up.

JULIA. No, no. Let us talk to them all. [*Calling.*] Tansie and Chris, come you here and sit down alongside of us. [*CHRIS, NAT, and TANSIE come up.*]

CHRIS. Good morning to you, mistress. 'Tis a fine brave day, to-day.

JULIA. That it is, Chris. There never was so fine a day. And we have come to spend all of it in this forest.

TANSIE. Ah, but 'tis warm upon the high road.

NAT. We be come right away from the town, mistress.

JULIA. Then sit down, all of you, and we will talk in the cool shade.

LAURA. Not here, if you please. I am not used to such company.

JULIA. Not here? Very well, my friends, let us go further into the wood and you shall stretch yourselves under the green trees and we will all rest there together.

LAURA. Well, what next! You might stop to consider how 'twill look in the parish.

JULIA. How what will look?

LAURA. How 'twill look for you to be seen going off in such company like this.

MY MAN JOHN

JULIA. The trees have not eyes, nor have the grass, and flowers. There's no one to see me but you, and you can turn your head t'other way. Come Tansie, come

Chris. [*She turns towards the three gipsies.*]

TANSIE. Nat's in a sorry way, this morning baint you, Nat?

NAT. Let I be. You do torment anyone till they scarce do know if they has senses to them or no.

TANSIE. You're not one to miss what you never had, Nat.

CHRIS. Let the lad bide in quiet, will you. 'Tis a powerful little nagging wench as you be.

JULIA. Why are you heavy and sad this fine day, Nat?

TANSIE. 'Tis love what's the matter with he, mistress.

JULIA. Love? O, that's not a thing that should bring heaviness or gloom, but lightness to the heart, and song to the lips.

TANSIE. Ah, but when there's been no meeting in the dusk since Sunday, and no message sent!

CHRIS. Keep that tongue of your'n where it should be, and give over, Tansie. Susan's not one as would play tricks with her lad.

JULIA. Now I have a thirst to hear all about this, Nat, so come off further into the wood, all of you, where we can speak in quiet.

[*She holds out her hand to NAT.*]

LAURA. Upon my word, but something must be done to bring these goings on to an end.

JULIA. Come, Nat you shall tell me all your trouble. I understand the things of the heart better than Tansie, and I shall know how to give you comfort in your distress come

[*JULIA and NAT, followed by CHRIS and TANSIE, move off out of sight. LAURA is left sitting on the bench alone. Presently JOHN comes out carefully from behind the bushes, holding his bunch of flowers.*]

JOHN. A good day to you, mistress.

LAURA. The same to you, master.

JOHN. Folks do call me John.

LAURA. Indeed? Good morning, John.

JOHN. A fine brave sun to-day, mistress.

LAURA. But pleasant enough here in the shade.

MY MAN JOHN

JOHN. Now, begging your pardon, but what you wants over the head of you baint one of these great trees full of flies and insects, but an arbour trailed all about with bloom, such as my master has down at his place yonder.

LAURA. Indeed? And who may your master be, John?

JOHN. 'Tis Master William Gardner, what's the talk of the country for miles around, mistress. And that he be.

LAURA. Master William Gardner! What, he of Road Farm?

JOHN. The very same, mistress. And as grand a gentleman as anyone might wish for to see.

LAURA. Yes I seem to have heard something told about him, but I don't rightly remember what 'twas.

JOHN. You may have heard tell as the finest field of beans this season, that's his.

LAURA. I don't think 'twas of beans that I did hear.

JOHN. Or that 'twas his spotted hilt what fetched the highest price of any in the market Saturday?

LAURA. No, 'twasn't that neither.

JOHN. Or that folks do come as thick as flies on a summer's day from all parts of the country for to buy the wheat what he do grow. Ah, and before 'tis cut or like to be, they be a fighting for it, all of them, like a pack of dogs with a bone. So 'tis.

LAURA. 'Twasn't that, I don't think.

JOHN. Or 'twas that th' old missis she as is mother to Master William her has a tongue what's sharper nor longer than any vixen's going. But that's between you and I, missis.

LAURA. Ah 'Twas that I did hear tell of. Now I remember it.

JOHN. But Master William the tongue what he do keep be smooth as honey, and a lady might do as she likes with him if one got the chance.

LAURA. Indeed? He must be a pleasant sort of a gentleman.

JOHN. For he could be led with kindness same as anything else. But try for to drive him, as old Missis do and very likely 'tis hoofed as you'll get for your pains.

LAURA. I like a man with some spirit to him, myself.

JOHN. Ah, Master William has a rare spirit to him, and that he has. You should hear him when th' old Missis's fowls be got into his flower garden. 'Tis sommat as is not likely to be forgot in a hurry. That 'tisn't.

LAURA. You carry a handsome nosegay of blossoms there, John. Are they from your master's garden?

JOHN. Ah, there're not amiss. I helped for to raise they too.

LAURA. And to whom are you taking them now, John?

MY MAN JOHN

JOHN. To the lady what my master's a-courting of, mistress.

LAURA. And whom may that be, John?

JOHN. Why, 'tis yourself, mistress.

LAURA. Me, John? Why, I've never clapped eyes on Master William Gardner so far as I know of.

JOHN. But he've clapped eyes on you, mistress 'twas at Church last Sunday. And 'tis not a bit of food, nor a drop of drink, nor an hour of sleep, as Master William have taken since.

LAURA. O, you do surprise me, John?

JOHN. That's how 'tis with he, mistress. 'Tis many a year as I've served Master William but never have I seen him in the fix where he be in to-day.

LAURA. Why how is it with him then?

JOHN. As it might be with the cattle when the flies do buzz about they, thick in the sunshine. A-lashing this way and that, a-trampling and a-tossing, and never a minute's rest.

LAURA. Well, now to think of such a thing. Indeed!

JOHN. I've seen a horse right up to the neck of him in that old quag ahind of our place a-snorting and a-clapping with his teeth and a-plunging so as 'twould terrify anyone to harken to it. And that's how 'tis to-day with Master William up at home, so 'tis.

LAURA. And only saw me once at Church last Sunday, John?

JOHN. Ah and they old maid flies do sting but once, but 'tis a terrible big bump as they do raise on the flesh of anyone, that 'tis.

LAURA. O John 'tis a fine thing to be loved like that.

JOHN. So I should say ah, 'tisn't every day that a man like Master William goes a-courting.

LAURA. But he hasn't set out yet, John.

JOHN. You take and hold the nosegay, mistress, and I'll go straight off and fetch him, so being as you're agreeable.

LAURA. O yes, and that I am, John You go and fetch him quick. I'll bide here gladly, waiting till he comes.

JOHN. That's it. I knowed you for a sensible lady the moment I pitched my eyes on to you. And when master do come up, you take and talk to him nicely and meek-like and lead him on from one thing to t'other: and you'll find as he'll go quiet as a sheep after the first set off, spite of the great spirit what's at the heart of he.

LAURA. John, I'll do all as you say, and more than all. Only, you get along and send him quickly to me. And yes, you might give him a good hint, John I'm not averse to his attentions.

MY MAN JOHN

JOHN. Ah, and I should think you wasn't, for 'twould be a hard job to find a nicer gentleman nor Master William.

LAURA. That I know it would. Why, John, my heart's commenced beating ever so fast, it has.

JOHN. Then you may reckon how 'tis with the poor master! Why, 'tis my belief as 'twill be raving madness as'll be the end of he if sommat don't come to put a finish to this unrest.

LAURA. O John, 'twould never do for such a fine gentleman to go crazy. Do you set off quick and send him along to me, and I'll take and do my very best for to quiet him, like.

JOHN. [*Rising and about to set off.*] Ah, 'tis a powerful lot of calming as Master William do require. But you be the one for to give it him. You just bide where you do sit now whilst I goes and fetches him, mistress.

LAURA. O that I will, my good, dear John.

[*Curtain.*]

ACT II. Scene 2.

The same wood.

WILLIAM and **JOHN** come up. **WILLIAM** carries a large market basket containing vegetables.

JOHN. [*Looking round and seeing no one.*] Bless my soul, but 'twas on the seat as I did leave she.

WILLIAM. We have kept her waiting a bit too long whilst we were cutting the green stuff. And now 'twill be best to let matters bide over till to-morrow.

JOHN. Why, master 'tis my belief as you be all of a-tremble like.

WILLIAM. I wish we were well out of this business, John. 'Tis not to my liking in any way.

JOHN. 'Tis a fine looking lady, and that 'tis. You take and court her, Master William.

WILLIAM. How am I to court the wench when she's not here?

JOHN. [*Pointing.*] Look yonder, master, there she comes through them dark trees.

WILLIAM. You've got to bide somewhere nigh me, John. I could not be left alone with a wench who's a stranger to me.

JOHN. Don't you get flustered, Master William. See here, I'll hide me ahind of yon bushes, and if so be as you should want me, why, there I'm close at hand.

WILLIAM. I'd rather you did stand at my side, John.

[*JOHN hides himself behind the bushes. LAURA comes slowly up. WILLIAM stands awkwardly before her, saying nothing. Presently he takes off his hat and salutes her clumsily and she bows to him. For some moments*

MY MAN JOHN

they stand embarrassed, looking at one another.

WILLIAM. [*Suddenly bringing out a bunch of carrots from his basket and holding them up.*] See these young carrots, mistress.

LAURA. Indeed I do, master.

WILLIAM. 'Tisn't everywhere that you do see such fine grown ones for the time of year.

LAURA. You're right there, master. We have none of them up at our place.

WILLIAM. [*Holding them towards her.*] Then be pleased to accept these, mistress.

LAURA. [*Taking the carrots.*] Thank you kindly, master. [*There is another embarrassed silence. WILLIAM looks distractedly from LAURA to his basket. Then he takes out a bunch of turnips.*

WILLIAM. You couldn't beat these nowhere, not if you were to try.

LAURA. I'm sure you could not, master.

WILLIAM. They do call this sort the Early Snowball. 'Tis a foolish name for a table root.

LAURA. 'Tis a beautiful turnip.

WILLIAM. [*Giving her the bunch.*] You may as well have them too.

LAURA. O you're very kind, master.

[There is another long silence. WILLIAM shuffles on his feet – LAURA bends admiringly over her gifts.]

WILLIAM. There's young beans and peas and a spring cabbage too, within the basket. I do grow a little of most everything.

LAURA. O shall we sit down and look at the vegetables together?

WILLIAM. [*Visibly relieved.*] We might do worse nor that. [*They sit down side by side with the basket between them.*

LAURA. [*Lifting the cabbage.*] O, this is quite a little picture! See how the leaves do curl backwards so fresh and green!

WILLIAM. Ah, and that one has a rare white heart to it, it has.

LAURA. I do love the taste of a spring cabbage, when it has a slice of fat bacon along with it.

WILLIAM. I might have brought a couple of pounds with me if I'd have thought. Mother do keep some rare mellow jowls a-hanging in the pantry.

LAURA. [*Shyly.*] Next time, maybe.

WILLIAM. [*Eagerly.*] 'Twouldn't take ten minutes for me to run back.

ACT II. Scene 2.

MY MAN JOHN

LAURA. Not now O no master not now. Do you bide a little longer here and tell me about about t'other things in the basket.

WILLIAM. [*Mopping his face with a handkerchief.*] Well there's the beans I count that yours haven't come up very smart this year.

LAURA. That they've not. The whole place has been let to run dreadful wild.

WILLIAM. I'd I'd like to show you how 'tis in my garden, one of these days.

LAURA. I'd be very pleased to walk along with you there.

WILLIAM. [*Hurriedly.*] Ah you should see it later on when the the the parsnips are a bit forrarder.

LAURA. I'd like to see the flower garden now, where this nosegay came from.

WILLIAM. [*Looking round uneasily.*] I don't know what the folks would say if they were to see you and me a-going on the road in broad day I'm sure I don't.

LAURA. Why, what should they say, Master Gardner?

WILLIAM. They might get saying they might say as as I'd got a-courting, or sommat foolish.

LAURA. Well and would that be untrue?

WILLIAM. [*Looking at her very uncomfortably.*] I'm blessed if I do know I mean –

LAURA. This nosegay and look, those young carrots and the turnips and beans, why did you bring them for me, master, unless it was that you intended something by it?

WILLIAM. [*Very confused.*] That's so. So 'tis. That's true. I count you have got hold of the sow by the ear right enough this time. And the less said about it the better. [*A slight silence.*]

LAURA. [*Looking up shyly in WILLIAM's face.*] What was it drew you to me first, master?

WILLIAM. I believe 'twas in Church on Sunday that I chanced to take notice of you, like.

LAURA. Yes, but what was it about me that took your fancy in Church on Sunday?

WILLIAM. I'm blessed if I know, unless 'twas those coloured ribbons that you have got to your bonnet.

LAURA. You are partial to the colour?

WILLIAM. Ah, 'tis well enough.

LAURA. See here. [*Taking a flower from her dress.*] This is of the same colour. I will put it in your coat.

[*She fastens it in his coat. WILLIAM looks very uncomfortable and nervous.*]

WILLIAM. Well, bless my soul, but women folk have got some powerful strange tricks to them.

MY MAN JOHN

LAURA. [*Pinning the flower in its place.*] There my gift to you, master.

WILLIAM. You may call me by my name, if you like, 'tis more suitable, seeing that we might go along to Church together one of these days.

LAURA. O William, you have made me very happy I do feel all mazy like with my gladness.

WILLIAM. Well, Julia, we might do worse than to to name the day.

LAURA. Why do you call me Julia?

WILLIAM. Seeing that I've given you leave to call me William 'tis only suitable that I should use your name as well.

LAURA. But my name is not Julia.

WILLIAM. What is it then, I should like to know?

LAURA. 'Tis Laura, William.

WILLIAM. Folks did tell me that you were named Julia.

LAURA. No Laura is my name; but I live with Mistress Julia up at Luther's Farm, and I help her with the work. House-keeping, dairy, poultry, garden. O there's nothing I can't turn my hand to, Master William.

WILLIAM. [*Starts up from the seat in deepest consternation.*] John, John Come you here, I say! Come here.

JOHN. [*Emerges from the bushes.*] My dearest master!

WILLIAM. What's this you've been and done, John?

JOHN. Why, master the one with the cherry ribbons, to her you did say.

WILLIAM. [*Disgustedly.*] 'Tis the wrong one.

LAURA. What are you two talking about? William, do you mean to say as that man of yours was hid in the bushes all the while?

WILLIAM. Now, John, you've got to get me out of the fix where I'm set.

JOHN. O my dear master, don't you take on so. 'Tis a little bit of misunderstanding to be sure, but one as can be put right very soon.

WILLIAM. Then you get to work and set it right, John, for 'tis beyond the power of me to do so. I'll be blessed if I'll ever get meddling with this sort of job again.

JOHN. Now don't you get so heated, master, but leave it all to me. [*Turning to LAURA.*] My good wench, it seems that there has been a little bit of misunderstanding between you and my gentleman here.

LAURA. [*Angrily.*] So that's what you call it misunderstanding 'tis a fine long word, but not much of meaning, to it, I'm thinking.

MY MAN JOHN

JOHN. Then you do think wrong. Suppose you was to go to market for to buy a nice spring chicken and when you was got half on the way to home you was to see as they had put you up a lean old fowl in place of it, what would you do then?

LAURA. I don't see that chickens or fowls have anything to do with the matter.

JOHN. Then you're not the smart maid I took you for. 'Tis not you as would be suitable in my master's home. And what's more, 'tis not you as my master's come a-courting of.

LAURA. If 'tis not me, who is it then?

[WILLIAM *looks at her sheepishly and then turns away.*

JOHN. 'Tis your mistress, since you wants to know.

LAURA. [*Indignantly.*] O, I see it all now How could I have been so misled!

JOHN. However could poor master have been so mistook, I say.

LAURA. [*Turning away passionately.*] O, I've had enough of you and and your master.

JOHN. Now that's what I do like for to hear. Because me and master have sommat else to do nor to stand giddle-gaddling in this old wood the rest of the day. Us have got a smartish lot of worry ahead of we, haven't us, master?

WILLIAM. You never said a truer word, John.

JOHN. Come along then Master William. You can leave the spring vegetables to she. 'Tis more nor she deserves, seeing as her might have known as 'twas her mistress the both of us was after, all the time.

[LAURA *throws herself on the seat and begins to cry silently, but passionately.*

WILLIAM. O John, this courting, 'tis powerful heavy work.

JOHN. [*Taking WILLIAM'S arm.*] Come you along with me, master, and I'll give you a helping hand with it all.

LAURA. [*Looking up and speaking violently.*] I warrant you will, you clown. But let me advise you to look better afore you leap next time, or very likely 'tis in sommat worse than a ditchful of nettles as you'll find yourself.

JOHN. [*Looking back over his shoulders as he goes off with WILLIAM.*] I reckon as you've no call to trouble about we, mistress. Us is they what can look after theirselves very well. Suppose you was to wash your face and dry your eyes and set about the boiling of yon spring cabbage. 'Twould be sensibler like nor to bide grizzling after one as is beyond you in his station, so 'twould.

[JOHN and WILLIAM *go out, leaving LAURA weeping on the bench, the basket of vegetables by her side.*

[*Curtain.*]

ACT II. Scene 3.

JULIA *is sitting at the foot of a tree in the wood. CHRIS, NAT and TANSIE are seated near her on the ground.*

JULIA. I wish this day might last for always.

CHRIS. Why, when to-morrow's come, 'twill be the same.

JULIA. That it will not. To-day is a holiday. To-morrow's work.

TANSIE. One day 'tis much the same as t'other with me.

NAT. 'Tis what we gets to eat as do make the change.

TANSIE. I should have thought as how a grand young mistress like yourself might have had the days to your own liking.

JULIA. Ah, and so I did once. But that was before Uncle died and left me the farm. Now, 'tis all different with the days.

CHRIS. How was it with you afore then, mistress?

JULIA. Much the same as 'tis with that bird flying yonder. I did so as I listed. If I had a mind to sleep when the sun was up, then I did sleep. And if my limbs would not rest when 'twas dark, why, then I did roam. There was naught to hold me back from my fancy.

TANSIE. And how is it *now* with you, mistress?

JULIA. 'Tis all said in one word.

CHRIS. What's that?

JULIA. 'Tis "work."

NAT. Work?

CHRIS. Work?

TANSIE. Work! And yet 'tis a fine young lady as you do look in your muslin gown with silky ribbons to it and all.

JULIA. I'm a farmer, Tansie. And for a farmer 'tis work of one sort, or t'other from when the sun is up till the candle has burned itself short. If 't isn't working with my own hands, 'tis driving of the hands of another.

CHRIS. I've heard tell as a farmer do spin gold all the day same as one of they great spiders as go putting out silk from their mouths.

JULIA. And what is gold to me, Chris, who have no one but myself to spend it on

MY MAN JOHN

CHRIS. Folks do say as the laying up of gold be one of the finest things in the world.

JULIA. It will never bring happiness to me, Chris.

CHRIS. Come, mistress, 'tis a fine thing to have a great stone roof above the head of you.

JULIA. I'd sooner get my shelter from the green leaves.

NAT. And a grand thing to have your victuals spread afore you each time 'stead of having to go lean very often.

JULIA. O, a handful of berries and a drink of fresh water is enough for me.

TANSIE. And beautiful it must be to stretch the limbs of you upon feathers when night do come down, with a fine white sheet drawn up over your head.

JULIA. O, I could rest more sweetly on the grass and moss yonder.

NAT. I did never sleep within four walls but once, and then 'twas in gaol.

JULIA. O Nat, you were never in gaol, were you?

NAT. 'Twas that they mistook I for another. And when the morning did come, they did let I go again.

CHRIS. I count 'twas a smartish long night, that!

NAT. 'Twas enough for to shew me how it do feel when anyone has got to bide sleeping with the walls all around of he.

JULIA. And the ceiling above, Nat. And locked door. And other folk lying breathing in the house, hard by. All dark and close.

CHRIS. And where us may lie, the air do run swift over we. We has the smell of the earth and the leaves on us as we do sleep. There baint no darkness for we, for the stars do blink all night through up yonder.

TANSIE. And no sound of other folk breathing but the crying of th' owls and the foxes' bark.

JULIA. Ah, that must be a grand sound, the barking of a fox. I never did hear one. Never.

CHRIS. Ah, 'tis a powerful thin sound, that but one to raise the hair on a man's head and to clam the flesh of he, at dead of night.

NAT. You come and bide along of we one evening, and you shall hearken to the fox, and badger too, if you've the mind.

JULIA. O that would please me more than anything in the world.

TANSIE. And when 'twas got a little lighter, so that the bushes could be seen, and the fields, I'd shew you where the partridge has her nest beneath the hedge; where we have gotten eggs, and eaten them too.

CHRIS. And I'll take and lead you to a place what I do know of, where the water flows clear as a diamond over the stones. And if you bides there waiting quiet you may take the fish as they come along – and there's a dinner

MY MAN JOHN

such as the Queen might not get every day of the week.

JULIA. O Chris, who is there to say I must bide in one place when all in me is thirsting to be in t'other!

CHRIS. I'm sure I don't know.

NAT. I should move about where I did like, if 'twas me.

TANSIE. A fine young lady like you can do as she pleases.

JULIA. Well then, it pleases me to bide with you in the free air.

CHRIS. Our life, 'tis a poor life, and wandering. 'Tis food one day, and may be going without the next. 'Tis the sun upon the faces of us one hour and then the rain. But 'tis in freedom that us walks, and we be the masters of our own limbs.

JULIA. Will you be good to me if I journey with you?

CHRIS. Ah, 'tis not likely as I'll ever fail you, mistress.

JULIA. Do not call me mistress any longer, Chris, my name is Julia.

CHRIS. 'Tis a well-sounding name, and one as runs easy as clear water upon the tongue.

JULIA. Tansie, how will it be for me to go with you?

TANSIE. 'Twill be well enough with the spirit of you I don't doubt, but how'll it be with the fine clothes what you have on?

NAT. [*Suddenly looking up.*] Why, there's Susan coming.

JULIA. [*Looking in the same direction.*] So that is Susan?

TANSIE. I count as her has had a smartish job to get away from th' old missis so early in the day.

CHRIS. 'Tis a rare old she cat, and handy with the claw's of her, Susan's missis.

[*SUSAN comes shyly forward.*]

NAT. Come you here, Susan, and sit along of we.

JULIA. Yes, sit down with us in this cool shade, Susan. You look warm from running.

SUSAN. O, I didn't know you was here, Mistress Julia.

JULIA. Well, Susan, and so you live at Road Farm. Are you happy there?

SUSAN. I should be if 'twern't for mistress.

JULIA. No mistress could speak harshly to you, Susan you are so young and pretty.

MY MAN JOHN

SUSAN. Ah, but mistress takes no account of aught but the work you does, and the tongue of her be wonderful lashing.

JULIA. Then how comes it that you have got away to the forest so early on a week day?

SUSAN. 'Tis that mistress be powerful took up with sommat else this afternoon, and so I was able to run out for a while and her didn't notice me.

TANSIE. Why Su, what's going on up at the farm so particular to-day?

SUSAN. 'Tis courting.

ALL. Courting?

SUSAN. Yes. That 'tis. 'Tis our Master William what's dressed up in his Sunday clothes and gone a-courting with a basket of green stuff on his arm big enough to fill the market, very nigh.

CHRIS. Well, well, who'd have thought he had it in him?

NAT. He's a gentleman what's not cut out for courting, to my mind.

SUSAN. Indeed he isn't, Nat. And however the mistress got him dressed and set off on that business, I don't know.

JULIA. But you have not told us who the lady is, Susan.

SUSAN. [*Suddenly very embarrassed.*] I I don't think as I do rightly know who 'tis, mistress.

CHRIS. Why, look you, Susan, you'll have to take and hide yourself if you don't want for them to know as you be got along of we.

SUSAN. What's that, Chris?

CHRIS. [*Pointing.*] See there, that man of Master Gardner's be a-coming along towards us fast. Look yonder –

SUSAN. O whatever shall I do? 'Tis John, and surely he will tell of me when he gets back.

SAT. Come you off with me afore he do perceive you, Susan. I'll take you where you shall bide hid from all the Johns in the world if you'll but come along of me.

JULIA. That's it. Take her off, Nat; take her, Tansie. And do you go along too, Chris, for I have a fancy to bide alone in the stillness of the wood for a while.

[SUSAN, TANSIE and NAT go out.]

CHRIS. Be I to leave you too, Julia?

JULIA. [*Slowly.*] Only for a little moment, Chris; then you can come for me again. I would like to stay with myself in quiet for a while. New thoughts have come into my mind and I cannot rightly understand what they do say to me, unless I hearken to them alone.

MY MAN JOHN

CHRIS. Then I'll leave you, Julia. For things be stirring powerful in my mind too, and I'd give sommat for to come to an understanding with they. Ah, that I would.

[They look at one another in silence for a moment, then CHRIS slowly follows the others, leaving JULIA alone. JULIA sits alone in the wood. Presently she begins to sing.]

JULIA. *[Singing.]*

**I sowed the seeds of love,
It was all in the Spring;
In April, in May, and in June likewise
When small birds they do sing.**

[JOHN with a large basket on his arm comes up to her.]

JOHN. A good day to you, mistress.

JULIA. Good afternoon.

JOHN. Now I count as you would like to know who 'tis that's made so bold in speaking to you, Mistress.

JULIA. Why, you're Master Gardner's farm hand, if I'm not mistaken.

JOHN. Ah, that's right enough. And there be jobs as I wish Master William would get and do for hisself instead of putting them on I.

JULIA. Well, and how far may you be going this afternoon?

JOHN. I baint going no further than where I be a-standing now, mistress.

JULIA. It would appear that your business was with me, then?

JOHN. Ah, you've hit the right nail, mistress. 'Tis with you. 'Tis a straight offer as my master have sent me out for to make.

JULIA. Now I wonder what sort of an offer that might be!

JOHN. 'Tis master's hand in marriage, and a couple of pigs jowls, home-cured, within this here basket.

JULIA. O my good man, you're making game of me.

JOHN. And that I baint, mistress. 'Twas in the church as Master William seed you first. And 'tis very nigh sick unto death with love as he have been since then.

JULIA. Is he too sick to come and plead his cause himself, John?

JOHN. Ah, and that he be. Do go moulting about the place with his victuals left upon the dish a sighing and a grizzling so that any maid what's got a heart to th' inside of she would be moved in pity, did she catch ear of it, and would lift he out of the torment.

JULIA. Well, John, I've not seen or heard any of this sad to-do, so I can't be moved in pity.

MY MAN JOHN

JOHN. An, do you look within this basket at the jowls what Master William have sent you. Maybe as they'll go to your heart straighter nor what any words might.

[JOHN *sits down on the bench* by JULIA and opens the basket. JULIA *looks in.*

JULIA. I have no liking for pigs' meat myself.

JOHN. Master's pig meat be different to any in the county, mistress. "Tell her," says Master William, "'tis a rare fine bit of mellow jowl as I be a sending she."

JULIA. O John, I'm a very poor judge of such things.

JOHN. And look you here. I never seed a bit of Master William's home-cured sent out beyond the family to no one till this day. No, that I have not, mistress.

JULIA. [*Shutting the basket.*] Well I have no use for such a gift, John, so it may be returned again to the family. I am sorry you had the trouble of bringing it so far.

JOHN. You may not be partial to pig meat, mistress, but you'll send back the key of Master William's heart same as you have done the jowls.

JULIA. I have no use for the key of Master William's heart either, John. And you may tell him so, from me.

JOHN. Why, mistress. You don't know what you be a talking of. A man like my master have never had to take a No in place of Yes in all the born days of him.

JULIA. [*Rising.*] Then he'll have to take it now, John. And I'm thinking 'tis time you set off home again with your load.

JOHN. Well, mistress, I don't particular care to go afore you have given me a good word or sommat as'll hearten up poor Master William in his love sickness.

JULIA. Truly, John, I don't know what you would have me say.

JOHN. I warrant there be no lack of words to the inside of you, if so be as you'd open you mouth a bit wider. 'Tis not silence as a maid is troubled with in general.

JULIA. O, I have plenty of words ready, John, should you care to hear them.

JOHN. Then out with them, Mistress Julia, and tell the master as how you'll take the offer what he have made you.

JULIA. I've never seen your master, John, but I know quite enough about him to say I'll never wed with him. Please to make that very clear when you get back.

JOHN. 'Tis plain as you doesn't know what you be a talking of. And 'tis a wonder as how such foolishness can come from the mouth of a sensible looking maid like yourself.

JULIA. I shall not marry Master William Gardner.

MY MAN JOHN

JOHN. I reckon as you'll be glad enough to eat up every one of them words the day you claps eyes on Master William, for a more splendid gentleman nor he never fetched his breath.

JULIA. I'll never wed a farmer, John.

JOHN. And then, look at the gift what Master William's been and sent you. 'Tisn't to everyone as master do part with his pig meat. That 'tish't.

JULIA. [*Rising.*] Well, you can tell your master I'm not one that can be courted with a jowl, mellow or otherwise. And that I'll not wed until I can give my heart along with my hand.

JOHN. I'd like to know where you would find a better one nor master for to give your heart to, mistress?

JULIA. May be I have not far to search.

JOHN. [*Taking up the basket.*] You're a rare tricky maid as ever I did see. Tricky and tossy too.

JULIA. There that's enough, John. Suppose you set off home and tell your master he can hang up his meat again in the larder, for all that it concerns me.

JOHN. I'll be blowed if I do say anything of the sort, mistress. I shall get and tell Master William as you be giving a bit of thought to the matter, and that jowls not being to your fancy, 'tis very like as a dish of trotters may prove acceptabler.

JULIA. Say what you like, John. Only let me bide quiet in this good forest now. I want to be with my thoughts.

JOHN. [*Preparing to go and speaking aloud to himself.*] Her's a wonderful contrary bird to be sure. And bain't a shy one neither, what gets timid and flustered and is easily netted. My word, but me and master has a job before us for to catch she.

JULIA. I hear you, and 'tis very rudely that you talk. There's an old saying that I never could see the meaning of before, but now I think 'tis clear, "Like master, like man," they say. I'll have none of Master William, and you can tell him so.

[*JOHN goes out angrily. JULIA sits down again on the bench and begins to sing.*]

JULIA. [*Singing.*]

**My gardener stood by
And told me to take great care,
For in the middle of a red rose-bud
There grows a sharp thorn there.**

[*LAURA comes slowly forward, carrying the basket of vegetables on one arm. She holds a handkerchief to her face and is crying.*]

JULIA. Why, Laura, what has made you cry so sadly?

LAURA. O, Julia, 'twas a rare red rose as I held in my hand, and a rare cruel thorn that came from it and did prick me.

MY MAN JOHN

JULIA. And a rare basket of green stuff that you have been getting.

LAURA. [*Sinking down on the seat, and weeping violently.*] His dear gift to me!

JULIA. [*Looking into the basket.*] O a wonderful fine gift, to be sure. Young carrots and spring cabbage. I've had a gift offered too but mine was jowls.

LAURA. Jowls. O, and did you not take them?

JULIA. No, I sent them back to the giver, with the dry heart which was along with them in the same basket.

LAURA. O Julia, how could you be so hard and cruel?

JULIA. Come, wouldn't you have done the same?

LAURA. [*Sobbing vehemently.*] That I should not, Julia.

JULIA. Perhaps you've seen the gentleman then?

LAURA. I have. And O, Julia, he is a beautiful gentleman. I never saw one that was his like.

JULIA. The rare red rose with its thorn, Laura.

LAURA. He did lay the heart of him before me thinking my name was Julia.

JULIA. And did he lay the vegetables too?

LAURA. 'Twas all the doing of a great fool, that man of his.

JULIA. And you did you give him what he asked of you before he knew that your name was not Julia?

LAURA. O, I did that I did. [*A short silence.*]

JULIA. And could you forget the prick of the thorn, did you hold the rose again, Laura?

LAURA. O that I could. For me there'd be naught but the rose, were it laid once more in my hand. But 'tis not likely to be put there, since 'tis you he favours.

JULIA. But I don't favour him.

LAURA. You'll favour him powerful well when you see him, Julia.

JULIA. I've given my heart already, but 'tis not to him.

LAURA. You've given your heart?

JULIA. Yes, Chris has all of it, Laura. There is nothing left for anyone else in the world.

LAURA. O Julia, think of your position.

JULIA. That I will not do. I am going to think of yours.

ACT II. Scene 3.

MY MAN JOHN

LAURA. [*Beginning to cry.*] I'm no better in my station than a serving maid, like Susan.

JULIA. [*Pointing.*] There she comes [*calling*] Susan, Susan!

[*SUSAN comes up. During the next sentences LAURA takes one bunch of vegetables after another from the basket, smoothing each in turn with a fond caressing movement.*]

SUSAN. Did you call, mistress?

JULIA. Yes, Susan. That I did.

SUSAN. Can I help you in any way, Miss Julia?

JULIA. Yes, and that you can. You have got to run quickly back to the farm.

SUSAN. Be it got terrible late, mistress?

JULIA. 'Tis not only that. You have got to find your master and tell him to expect a visit from me in less than an hour's time from now. Do you understand?

SUSAN. O, yes, mistress, and that I do to tell master as you be coming along after he as fast as you can run.

JULIA. Well I should not have put it in that way, but 'tis near enough may be. So off, and make haste, Susan.

SUSAN. Please, mistress, I could make the words have a more loving sound to them if you do wish it.

JULIA. My goodness, Susan, what are you thinking of? Say naught, but that I'm coming. Run away now, and run quickly. [*SUSAN goes off.*]

LAURA. [*Looking up, a bunch of carrots in her hands.*] What are you going to do now, Julia?

JULIA. You shall see, when you have done playing with those carrots.

LAURA. He pulled them, every one, with his own hands, Julia.

JULIA. My love has gathered something better for me than a carrot. See, a spray of elder bloom that was tossing ever so high in the wind.

[*She takes a branch of elder flower from her dress, and shews it to LAURA.*]

LAURA. The roots that lie warm in the earth do seem more homely like to me.

JULIA. Well each one has their own way in love and mine lies through the dark woods, and yours is in the vegetable garden. And 'tis your road that we will take this afternoon so come along quickly with me, Laura, for the sun has already begun to change its light.

[*LAURA replaces the vegetables in her basket and rises from the seat as the curtain falls.*]

MY MAN JOHN

ACT III. Scene 1.

The Garden of Road Farm as in Act I.

MRS. GARDNER *is knitting in the Arbour.* **WILLIAM** *strolls about gloomily, his hands in his pockets.*

MRS. GARDNER. And serve you right, William, for sending the man when you should have gone yourself.

WILLIAM. John has a tongue that is better used to this sort of business than mine.

MRS. GARDNER. Nonsense, when was one of our family ever known to fail in the tongue?

WILLIAM. If she that was asked first had only been the right one, all would have been over and done with now.

MRS. GARDNER. 'Tis John that you have got to thank for the blunder.

WILLIAM. [*Sighing.*] That was a rare fine maid, and no mistake.

MRS. GARDNER. And a rare brazen hussy, from all that has reached my ears.

WILLIAM. Well I've done with courting now and for all time, that I have. And you may roast me alive if I'll ever go nigh to a maid again.

MRS. GARDNER. That you shall, William and quickly too. There's no time like the present, and your Sunday clothes are upon you still.

WILLIAM. I was just going up to change, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. Then you'll please to remain as you are. You may take what gift you like along with you this time, so long as it's none of my home-cured meat.

WILLIAM. I'm blessed if I do stir out again this day. Why, look at the seedlings crying for water, and the nets to lay over the fruit and sommat of everything wanting to be done all around of me. I'll not stir.

[**JOHN** *comes towards them.*]

MRS. GARDNER. Here's John. Suppose he were to make himself useful in the garden for once instead of meddling in things that are none of his business.

JOHN. I'll be blowed if 'tis any more courting as I'll do, neither for Master William nor on my own account.

WILLIAM. Why, John, 'twasn't your fault that the lady wouldn't take me, you did your best with her, I know.

JOHN. An that I did, Master William, but a more contrary coxsy sort of a maid I never did see. "I baint one as fancies pig meat," her did say. And the nose of she did curl away up till it could go no higher. That's not the wench for me, I says to myself.

MRS. GARDNER. Is the jowl hung up in its right place again, John?

MY MAN JOHN

JOHN. That 'tis, mistress. I put it back myself, and a good job for that 'taint went out of the family and off to the mouths of strangers, so says I.

MRS. GARDNER. Do you tend to Master William's garden John, instead of talking. We've had enough of your tongue for one day.

JOHN. Why, be Master William goin' out for to court again, this afternoon?

WILLIAM. No, John No, I've had enough of that for my life time.

JOHN. So have I, master, and more nor enough. I don't care particular if I never set eyes on a maid again.

WILLIAM. [*Pointing to a plot of ground.*] That's where I pulled the young carrots this morning.

JOHN. Ah, and so you did, master.

WILLIAM. And there's from where I took the Early Snowballs.

JOHN. And a great pity as you did. There be none too many of that sort here.

WILLIAM. She had a wonderful soft look in her eyes as she did handle them and the spring cabbage, John.

JOHN. Ah, and a wonderful hard tongue when her knowed 'twasn't for she as they was pulled.

WILLIAM. Was t'other maid anything of the same pattern, John?

JOHN. Upon my word, if t'other wasn't the worst of the two, for she did put a powerful lot of venom into the looks as she did give I, and the words did fall from she like so many bricks on my head.

WILLIAM. Pity the first was not the right maid.

JOHN. Ah, a maid what can treat a prime home-cured jowl as yon did baint the sort for to mistress it over we, I'm thinking.

MRS. GARDNER. See here, John suppose you were to let your tongue bide still in its home awhile, and start doing something with your hands.

JOHN. That's right enough, mistress. What's wanted, Master William?

WILLIAM. I'm blessed if I can recollect, John. This courting business lies heavy on me, and I don't seem able to get above it, like.

JOHN. I'd let it alone, master, if I was you. They be all alike, the maids. And 'twouldn't be amiss if we was to serve they as we serves the snails when they gets to the young plants.

[*SUSAN comes hurriedly into the garden.*]

SUSAN. Please master, please mistress.

MRS. GARDNER. What do you mean, Susan, by coming into the garden without your cap? Go and put it on at once.

MY MAN JOHN

SUSAN. The wind must have lifted it from me, mistress, for I was running ever so fast.

MRS. GARDNER. Do you expect me to believe that, Susan and not a breath stirring the flowers or trees, or anything?

SUSAN. 'Twas the lady I met as as as I was coming across the field from feeding the fowls.

MRS. GARDNER. What lady, Susan?

SUSAN. Her from Luther's, mistress.

JOHN. And what of she; out with it, wench.

SUSAN. She did tell I to say as she be coming along as fast as she may after Master William.

WILLIAM. [*As though to himself with an accent of despair.*] No. No.

JOHN. There, master, didn't I tell you so?

WILLIAM. [*Very nervously.*] What did you tell me, John?

JOHN. That, let her abide and her'd find the senses of she presently.

WILLIAM. O I'm blessed if I do know what to do.

[*JOHN takes his master's arm and draws him aside.*]

JOHN. You pluck up your heart, my dearest master, and court she hard. And in less nor a six months 'tis along to church as you'll be a-driving she.

WILLIAM. But John, 'tis t'other with the cherry ribbons that has taken all my fancy.

JOHN. No, no, Master William. You take and court the mistress. You take and tame the young vixen, and get the gold and silver from she. T'other wench is but the serving maid.

SUSAN. The lady's coming along ever so quickly, master.

[*MRS. GARDNER, rising and folding up her knitting.*]

MRS. GARDNER. You'll please to come indoors with me, William, and I'll brush you down and make you look more presentable than you appear just now. Susan, you'll get a cap to you head at once, do you hear me! And John, take and water master's seedlings. Any one can stand with their mouths open and their eyes as big as gooseberries if they've a mind. 'Tis not particular sharp to do so. Come, William.

WILLIAM. I'd like a word or two with John first, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. You come along with me this moment, William. 'Tis a too many words by far that you've had with John already, and much good they've done to you. Come you in with me.

WILLIAM. O I'm blessed if I do know whether 'tis on my head or on my feet that I'm standing.

MY MAN JOHN

[WILLIAM *follows his mother slowly and gloomily into the house.*

JOHN. Well if ever there was a poor, tormented animal 'tis the master.

SUSAN. Ah, mistress should have been born a drover by rights. 'Tis a grand nagging one as her'd have made, and sommat what no beast would ever have got the better of.

JOHN. I wouldn't stand in Master William's shoes, not if you was to put me knee deep in gold.

SUSAN. Nor I.

JOHN. Ah, this courting business, 'tis a rare caddling muddle when 'tis all done and said.

SUSAN. 'Tis according as some folks do find it, Master John.

JOHN. 'Tis a smartish lot as you'll get of it come Sunday night, my wench. You wait and see.

SUSAN. That shews how little you do know. 'Twill be better nor ever with me then.

JOHN. 'Twill be alone by yourself as you'll go walking, Su.

SUSAN. We'll see about that when the time comes, John.

JOHN. All I says is that I baint a-going walking with you.

SUSAN. I never walk with two, John.

JOHN. You'll have to learn to go in your own company.

SUSAN. I shall go by the side of my husband by then, very likely.

JOHN. Your husband? What tales be you a-giving out now?

SUSAN. 'Tis to Nat as I'm to be wed come Saturday.

JOHN. Get along with you, Susan, and put a cap to your head. Mistress will be coming out presently, and then you know how 'twill be if her catches you so. Get along in with you.

SUSAN. Now you don't believe what I'm telling you but it's true, O it's true.

JOHN. Look here There's company at the gate, and you a-standing there like any rough gipsy wench on the road. Get you in and make yourself a decenter appearance and then go and tell the mistress as they be comed.

SUSAN. [*Preparing to go indoors and speaking over her shoulder.*] 'Tis in the parson's gown as you should be clothed, Master John. Ah, 'tis a wonderful wordy preacher as you would make, to be sure. And 'tis a rare crop as one might raise with the seed as do fall from your mouth.

[*She goes indoors. JULIA comes leisurely into the garden.*

JULIA. Well, John, and how are you feeling now?

MY MAN JOHN

JOHN. Nicely, thank you, mistress. See yon arbour?

JULIA. And that I do, John.

JOHN. Well, you may go and sit within it till the master has leisure to come and speak with you.

JULIA. Thank you, John, but I would sooner stop and watch you tend the flowers.

JOHN. 'Tis all one to me whether you does or you does not.

JULIA. Now, John, you are angry with me still.

JOHN. I likes a wench as do know the mind of she, and not one as can blow hot one moment and cold the next.

JULIA. There was never a moment when I did not know my own mind, John. And that's the truth.

JOHN. Well, us won't say no more about that. 'Taint fit as there should be ill feeling nor quarrelling 'twixt me and you.

JULIA. You're right, John. And there was something that I had it in my mind to ask you.

JOHN. You can say your fill. There baint no one but me in the garden.

JULIA. John, you told me that since Sunday your master has been sick with love.

JOHN. That's right enough, mistress. I count as we shall bury he if sommat don't come to his relief.

JULIA. Now, John, do you look into my eyes and tell me if 'tis for love of Julia or of Laura that your master lies sickening.

JOHN. You'd best go and ask it of his self, mistress. 'Tis a smartish lot of work as I've got to attend to here.

JULIA. You can go on working, John. I am not hindering you.

JOHN. No more than one of they old Juney bettels a-roaring and a-buzzin round a man's head.

JULIA. Now, John you must tell me which of the two it is. Is it Laura whom your master loves, or Julia?

JOHN. 'Tis Julia, then, since you will have it out of me.

JULIA. No, John, you're not looking straight at me. You are looking down at the flower bed. Let your eyes meet mine.

JOHN. [*Looking up crossly.*] I've got my work to think of. I'm not one to stand cackling with a maid.

JULIA. Could you swear me it is Julia?

JOHN. 'Tis naught to I which of you it be. There bide over, so as I can get the watering finished.

JULIA. [*Seizes the watering can.*] Now, John, you have got to speak the truth to me.

MY MAN JOHN

JOHN. Give up yon can, I tell you. O you do act wonderful unseemly for a young lady.

JULIA. [*Withholding the can.*] Not till I have the truth from you.

JOHN. [*Angrily.*] Well then, is it likely that my master would set his fancy on such a plaguy, wayward maid? Why, Master William do know better nor to do such a thing, I can tell you.

JULIA. Then 'tis for Laura that he is love-sick, John.

JOHN. Give I the watering can.

JULIA. [*Giving him the can.*] Here it is, dear John. O I had a fancy all the time that 'twas to Laura your master had lost his heart. And now I see I made no mistake.

JOHN. I shouldn't have spoke as I did if you hadn't a buzzed around I till I was drove very nigh crazy. Master William, he'll never forgive me this.

JULIA. That he will, I'm sure, when he has listened to what I have got to say to him.

JOHN. You do set a powerful store on what your tongue might say, but I'd take and bide quiet at home if I was you and not come hunting of a nice reasonable gentleman like master, out of his very garden.

JULIA. O John, you're a sad, ill-natured man, and you misjudge me very unkindly. But I'll not bear malice if you will just run in and tell your master that I want a word with him.

JOHN. A word? Why not say fifty? When was a maid ever satisfied with one word I'd like to know?

JULIA. Well I shan't say more than six, very likely, so fetch him to me now, John, and I'll wait here in the garden. [*JOHN looks at her with exasperated contempt. Then he slowly walks away towards the house. JULIA goes in the opposite direction to the garden gate.*]

JULIA. [*Calling.*] Chris! [*CHRIS comes in.*]

JULIA. [*Pointing.*] O Chris, look at this fine garden and yon arbour see the fine house, with lace curtains to the windows of it.

CHRIS. [*Sullenly.*] Ah I sees it all very well.

JULIA. And all this could be mine for the stretching out of a hand.

CHRIS. Then stretch it.

JULIA. 'Twould be like putting a wild bird into a gilded cage, to set me here in this place. No, I must go free with you, Chris – and we will wander where our spirits lead us over all the world if we have a mind to do so.

CHRIS. Please God you'll not grieve at your choice.

JULIA. That I never shall. Now call to Laura. Is she in the lane outside?

CHRIS. There, she be come to the gate now.

MY MAN JOHN

[LAURA *comes in, followed by NAT and TANSIE.*

JULIA. [*Pointing to a place on the ground.*] Laura, see, here is the place from which your young carrots were pulled.

LAURA. O look at the flowers, Julia Lillies, pinks and red roses.

JULIA. 'Tis a fine red rose that shall be gathered for you presently, Laura. [JOHN *comes up.*

JOHN. The master's very nigh ready now, mistress.

[SUSAN *follows him.*

SUSAN. The mistress says, please to be seated till she do come.

JOHN. [*To CHRIS and NAT.*] Now, my men, we don't want the likes of you in here. You had best get off afore Master William catches sight of you.

JULIA. No, John. These are my friends, and I wish them to hear all that I have to say to your master.

JOHN. Ah, 'tis in the grave as poor Master William will be landed soon if you don't have a care.

LAURA. [*Anxiously.*] O is he so delicate as that, John?

JOHN. Ah and that he be. And these here love matters and courtings and foolishness have very nigh done for he. I don't give him but a week longer if things do go on as they be now.

[WILLIAM and MRS. GARDNER *come in.* WILLIAM *looks nervously round him.* MRS. GARDNER *perceives the gipsies, and SUSAN talking to NAT.*

MRS. GARDNER. Susan, get you to your place in the kitchen, as quick as you can. John, put yon roadsters through the gate, if you please. [*Turning to JULIA.*] Now young Miss?

JULIA. A very good evening to you, mistress. And let me make Chris known to you for he and I are to be wed to-morrow.

[*She takes CHRIS by the hand and leads him forward.*

MRS. GARDNER. What's this? William, do you understand what the young person is telling us?

JULIA. [*Taking LAURA with her other hand.*] And here is Laura to whom I have given all my land and all my money. She is the mistress of Luther's now.

JOHN. [*Aside to WILLIAM.*] Now master, hearken to that. Can't you lift your spirits a bit.

JULIA. [*To MRS. GARDNER.*] And I beg you to accept her as a daughter. She will make a better farmer's wife than ever I shall.

JOHN. [*In a loud whisper.*] Start courting, master.

WILLIAM. O I dare not quite so sudden, John.

MY MAN JOHN

MRS. GARDNER. [*Sitting down.*] It will take a few moments for me to understand this situation.

JULIA. There is no need for any hurry. We have all the evening before us.

JOHN. [*Hastily gathers a rosebud and puts it into WILLIAM'S hand.*] Give her a blossom, master. 'Tis an easy start off.

WILLIAM. [*Coming forward shyly with the flower.*] Would you fancy a rosebud, mistress?

LAURA. O that I would, master.

WILLIAM. Should you care to see to see where the young celery is planted out?

LAURA. O, I'd dearly love to see the spot.

WILLIAM. I'll take you along to it then. [*He gives her his arm, very awkwardly, and they move away.*]

MRS. GARDNER. [*Sitting down.*] Well things have changed since I was young.

JOHN. [*Looking viciously at NAT and SUSAN.*] Ah, I counts they have, mistress, and 'tis all for the worse.

SUSAN. [*Comes forward timidly.*] And me and Nat are to be married too, mistress.

MRS. GARDNER. I should have given you notice anyhow to-night, Susan, so perhaps it's just as well you have made sure of some sort of a roof to your head.

NAT. 'Twill be but the roof of th' old cart, mistress; but I warrant as her'll sleep bravely under it, won't you, Su.

SUSAN. That I shall, dear Nat.

TANSIE. Well, Master John, have you a fancy to come tenting along of we.

JOHN. Upon my word, but I don't know how 'tis with the young people nowadays, they be so bold.

JULIA. [*Who has been standing apart, her hand in that of CHRIS.*] New days, new ways, John.

JOHN. Bless my soul, but 'tis hard to keep up with all these goings on, and no mistake.

JULIA. No need for you to try, John. If you are too old to run with us you must abide still and watch us as we go.

CHRIS. But there, you needn't look downhearted, master, for I knows someone as'll give you a rare warm welcome if so be as you should change your mind and take your chance in the open, same as we.

TANSIE. You shall pay for that, Chris.

JOHN. [*Stiffly.*] I hope as I've a properer sense of my duty nor many others what I could name.

MRS. GARDNER. Those are the first suitable words that have been spoken in my hearing this afternoon.

[*WILLIAM, with LAURA on his arm, returns. LAURA carries a small cucumber very lovingly.*]

MY MAN JOHN

LAURA. Julia, look! The first one of the season! O, isn't it a picture!

JULIA. O Laura, 'tis a fine wedding gift to be sure.

WILLIAM. [*Stepping up to JOHN.*] John, my man, here's a five pound note to your pocket. I'd never have won this lady here if it hadn't been for you.

JOHN. [*Taking the note.*] Don't name it, dear master. 'Tis a long courtship what has no ending to it, so I always says.

MRS. GARDNER. 'Tis one upset after another, but suppose you were to make yourself useful for once, Susan, and bring out the tray with the cake and glasses on it.

JOHN. Ah, that's it, and I'll go along of she and help draw the cider. Courtship be powerful drying work.

LAURA. [*Looking into WILLIAM'S eyes.*] O William, 'twas those Early Snowballs that did first stir up my heart.

WILLIAM. 'Twas John who thought of them. Why, John has more sensible thoughts to the mind of him than any other man in the world and when the cider is brought, 'tis to John's health we will all drink.

[*Curtain.*]