

A decorative illustration featuring a thistle on the left, a butterfly on the right, and a branch with leaves and small flowers in the center, all rendered in a dark, textured style.

Lassie

by the author of

"Miss Toosey's Mission" and "Laddie"



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LASSIE

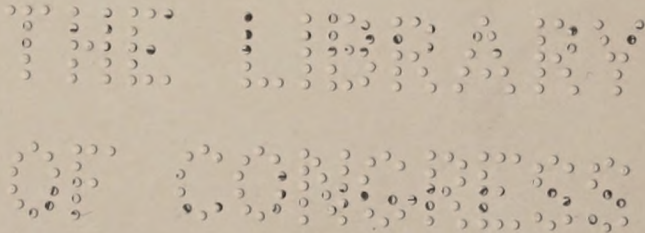


LASSIE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"MISS TOOSEY'S MISSION," "BELLE,"
"TOM'S BOY," ETC.

Evelyn Whitaker



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L A S S I E.



CHAPTER I.

A QUIET, little, out-of-the-way village is Midgely, and its inhabitants practise the good old rule of 'Early to bed and early to rise,' though I am not sure that it produces the desired effect of making them 'healthy, wealthy, and wise.'

On a certain Sunday evening in October, most of the lights in the village were out though it was barely nine o'clock; but, in the Wingates' thatched cottage, a dim light shone between the curtains of the bedroom window, telling of some one waking or watching within.

But the two occupants of that room could hardly be said to be either waking or watching, for Mrs. Wingate was coming very near her last long sleep; and the deaf old crone by the bedside, who had been waiting all the evening with ill-concealed impatience to begin her work of laying out the body, had dropped off into an uneasy sleep, with many jerks of a heavy head, and snorts and groans of discomfort. For the old lady had been longer in dying than Mrs. Murphy had reckoned on, and she felt a little bit hardly used at having another night's rest disturbed. But once, when she woke with a start, she saw in the dim light of the little, smoky, paraffin lamp that the dying lips were moving, and made out with some difficulty that

the words they were trying to form were, 'Send for Lassie.'

And those were the last words that came from Mrs. Wingate's lips; and yet, not the very last, for the ruling passion strong in death made the tired brain rouse itself again with a final effort from the long sleep, to try and explain where the master's new pipe was stowed away, and the screw of tobacco in the pie-dish on the shelf in the wash-house, before she set Mrs. Murphy free to finish her work and go home to her well-earned rest.

Mrs. Wingate's ruling passion had been the care of what the rest of the world of Midgely called a worthless, drunken, good-for-nothing husband, for whom she had slaved and toiled night

and day, and whose battles she had fought against all the neighbours' candid criticisms, though at the bottom of her heart she was shrewd enough to know that the worst they said was true, and a good deal more known only to herself.

And yet, while she knew all his faults only too well by heart, she took him a good deal at his own valuation, and admired the smartness and education and knowledge of the world to which he laid claim; though she, poor soul, before all others should have been, and in truth was, aware what a fraud his pretensions were. But that is the way with love; it sees the clay feet clear enough, but worships the image all the same.

He never thought now of coming into

the little, stuffy bedroom where his wife lay a-dying, to see her off on her long journey which was to part them; nor did she expect it of him. He had reached a solemnly maudlin condition by this time, in consequence of neighbourly sympathy taking the form of half-pints at the 'Jolly Farmers;' and though he complained dolefully of how 'unked' it was, and of how 'terrible put about' he felt, with no one to get him a bit of victuals, he felt a sort of importance in the position of having a missus of whom the doctor 'didn't give no hopes, and as ain't likely to see the day out.'

Now, Lassie would have come from the other end of the world if she had known of her mother's illness; but how

was she to know? Letters from home were few and far between, mother being avowedly a poor scholar; and father, who had always had the reputation of being a 'terrible fine writer,' having shrunk of late years from putting this reputation to the test by practical use of the rusty steel pen (used also for cleaning out his pipe) and the dried-up ink-bottle on the mantelpiece, made available by a drop or two of hot water.

He had, however, on this occasion managed to get a few lines written, 'hoping it found her well as it left him at present,' and mentioning the main object of his writing—her mother's illness—in a casual way, and in very modified terms, such as would hardly of itself have roused any anxiety.

Even this letter lay unposted on the dresser for a couple of days, and might easily have been mislaid among the odds and ends that accumulate about a place when there are no women-folk to tidy up, but that the baker's boy, when he brought the Wingates' loaf, found it and shouted up the stairs to ask if he should put it in the post — the post-office being at the baker's.

Mrs. Jones at the post-office, finding the envelope open, took the liberty to read its contents, such being the friendly custom at Midgely. She likewise took upon herself to add a postscript of a direct and forcible nature — 'Her's took for death ; you best come to onst' — in characters that looked as if written with the wrong end of the pen, and of a black-

ness in striking contrast with Timothy Wingate's pale-brown writing.

Besides this, Mrs. Wingate had not been ill many days — that is to say, she had not been twice as ill as most of us are when we take to our beds and send for a doctor.

Why, she stood at the wash-tub all Tuesday. Tuesday was her washing-day, and she must have been ill indeed if the wash-tub was not steaming away by eight o'clock in the morning. And she washed for several of the neighbours since Timothy had that rheumatic attack, on the memory of which he lived a life of idleness and much complaining ever since.

She felt a bit shaky on her legs, but that was not a very uncommon symptom of late years; and one of the neighbours

who dropped in told her she 'looked sadly' and was 'a burden to see,' but that was only a compliment, as in another rank you might tell any one she looked charming.

It was a good drying day, so she did a little more work than usual, and put off her midday meal for an early cup of tea, to which she was just sitting down when loud remarks from the pig-sty announced the fact that Tim had forgotten to feed the pig.

Tim did not like washing-days, and had gladly accepted the offer of the butcher to drive him over to a neighbouring farm to fetch a calf. He had come in tired to death 'with the joggling of that there cart, as did seem to shake every bone in his body! And Pullen never so much as

to offer him a drink after all the dust he'd a-swallowed!' So it was not to be expected that he could stir from his arm-chair after he had spread his red pocket-handkerchief over his knees, and poured his tea out in the saucer to cool.

So the missus had to get up and silence the noisy clamour in the pig-sty, and this effort seemed to be the last straw that broke the back that had borne the burden of life so patiently ; for she did not come back though her tea was more than cool, and though Tim was shouting to know if she was going to be all day over the job, and to tell her to look sharp as the kettle was boiling over.

A passer-by saw something lying on the brick path, with a faded lilac sun-bonnet against the lavender bush, and

stepping in, picked up the old woman, a mere bag of bones, and carried her in, and went for the doctor; seeing there was that remarkable look about the face as of one set Zionwards, and a limp drop in the old, hard-worked hands as if the six days of labour were over for them, and the Sabbath of the Lord were dawning.

That was on the Tuesday. Every one at Midgely recollected that, because it was washing-day with most of them; and on Sunday she died; and on Monday Lassie came.

CHAPTER II.

THE congregation was pouring out of Westminster Abbey that Sunday evening in October when Mrs. Wingate died.

It is a far cry from quiet little Midgely, and the cottage bedroom where the old woman's last laboured breath was drawn, to great Babylon and the stately Abbey, where so many of earth's greatest and best sleep their last sleep. And yet to one of the congregation gathered there that evening odd little details of that country home and mother kept recurring quite unaccountably, as it seemed to her.

There did not seem much connection of ideas between the rolling peals of the great organ, or the beautiful harmonies of the well-trained choir, and a cracked old woman's voice singing over the soap-suds a simple hymn a little bit out of tune, and adorned with small, unnecessary turns and flourishes, exasperating to an accurate ear. Nor did the elaborate hat, obscuring the prospect in front with a profusion of gigantic roses, bear any resemblance to a faded old sun-bonnet; nor was the voice of the preacher, as he gave out his text in clear accents — 'For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me, and I say unto this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth

it' — obviously suggestive of a voice indistinct from lack of teeth, and with a broad Loamshire accent, saying, 'There, child, take and go!' with a touch of a hardworked hand (damp from the wash-tub) on perhaps an unwilling shoulder.

But when once the sermon had begun, Lassie Wingate's mind was no longer distracted by thoughts of home and mother any more than the child Samuel when he lay down 'ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord,' thought of Hannah and the country home in Mount Ephraim; and she leaned forward, with such a look on her face as the boy may have had when he answered, 'Speak, for thy servant heareth.'

The preacher began by dwelling on the marvellous faith of the heathen Roman centurion in recognising in the humble Galilean Teacher, with His rough following of ignorant fishermen and despised publicans, One in whose hands were the issues of life and death, who could speak the word of command and bid sickness and suffering and death go, and life and healing come, just as he himself obeyed the orders of his superior officer, or exacted prompt obedience from his well-disciplined century of men. Then he went on to speak of the great Captain of our Salvation, who for our sakes became a man under authority, and took upon Him the form of a servant; who came not to do His own will, but the will of His Father, and bore the

yoke of the law and the heavy discipline of life, and was obedient to the death, even the death of the Cross; and how He expects the like obedience from His faithful soldiers and servants, and says to this man 'Go,' and he goeth, and to another 'Come,' and he cometh, and to His servant 'Do this,' and he doeth it. The word of command comes in different ways and at different times: sometimes as it did to Adam in the garden in the cool of the evening; to Noah in the noisy turmoil of an evil world, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage; to the boy Samuel in the quiet courts of the tabernacle at Shiloh, in the still Eastern night, when he had laid aside the linen ephod in which he ministered before the Lord,

and the little coat made by his mother's loving hands, and was laid down to sleep; to Matthew in the fretting, sordid strife of the receipt of custom in the busy town; to Simon Peter mending his nets by the blue sea of Galilee. It is the same now, but in this hurrying, restless life of ours we are apt to miss the call. We must pray that to us the *epiphatha* may be spoken, and our dull ears, deafened by the noises of the world, may be opened; and that, having heard what things we ought to do, we may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same, and whatsoever He saith unto us, do it.

That intent look on Lassie's face as she listened was noticed with a feeling almost akin to irritation by her com-

panion, who, as well as Lassie Wingate, wore the uniform of the Nurses of St. Barnabas Hospital. It was not that Alice Nugent did not sympathise with Lassie to a very great extent in her feelings, but this sermon was curiously appropriate to a subject which had been much discussed between the friends of late — a subject in which, as had often before been the case, Lassie's enthusiasm had led the way, carrying Alice Nugent along with her almost against her will, and setting aside such obstacles as Alice's less excitable temperament saw in the way.

They were great friends these two, with much in common, and yet differing sufficiently for one to be the complement of the other, and make up what was

wanting in the other's character, as true friends should, being counterparts, not duplicates of one another ; Lassie's spirit and energy and enterprise supplying the motive power, while Alice Nugent's common-sense and sound judgment acted as ballast.

In the nurse's dress it is not always easy to estimate rank, but a discriminating observer, seeing these two girls sitting side by side, would have guessed at a glance that the tall, dark girl was a lady born and bred, there being an unmistakably thorough-bred look about her clean-cut, refined face and the pose of her well set head ; while the other girl with her thick-set figure and round, rosy face, and somewhat inelegant attitude, was as evidently from a lower rank.

So you would have judged at first glance — and perhaps for a good many further glances — and you would have judged quite wrongly, for the tall, dark nurse was Lassie Wingate, to whose father and mother we have been introduced in the first chapter; while Nurse Nugent has an ‘honourable’ before her name, and blue blood running under the thick nails of her stumpy little hands and freckled skin, and has a long pedigree of cultured and elegant ancestors, such as should by right have transmitted an inheritance of grace and refinement both of body and mind.

But such are the freaks of Nature, as dog-fanciers occasionally experience when she presents them with a faultlessly perfect mongrel, and brings out

in some carefully-bred treasure a blemish, derived, no doubt, from some remote ancestor who had made a *mésalliance* unrecorded in history, and so entailed on his descendant, after many generations, a white toe or a pricked ear, meaning a consequent loss of value, highly vexatious to his possessor.

Perhaps there had been at first a touch of condescension in Nurse Nugent's liking for Nurse Wingate, who was wise and honest enough to make no concealment of her humble origin, and who, perhaps, on her side, felt a little elated at being distinguished and sought out by the one of all the nurses who was most highly connected and aristocratic.

But by the time my story begins both condescension and elation had long

since been merged in the sincere affection of the two girls, and I do not think Lassie thought any more of belted earls and Norman blood in connection with Alice Nugent than Alice did of clodhoppers and boors in connection with Lassie Wingate.

You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, the saying is; and a very good thing, too, in this highly commercial age of ours, for if such a metamorphosis had been possible, and especially if the silk purse were found to contain a coin or two, poor old mother pig would go crop-eared for the rest of her days, and despoiled of her beautiful—I say it advisedly, in spite of the pig-sty and unsavoury surroundings—her beautiful natural organ of hearing. But that

great refiner Love, when he gets hold of a piece of good metal — there must be that to begin with, for even love cannot do anything with base metal — can work wonders. So the love of her work had put the guinea-stamp on what had been sterling to start with; and her love for Alice had strengthened the impression; and her love for—— But that she hardly realised herself, so perhaps we should not mention it just yet.

The subject that had been discussed so much between the girls of late had been that of volunteering for nursing in South Africa, where war had just been declared. In her heart of hearts Alice Nugent would have been well content to stay at St. Barnabas, but Lassie had taken up the idea of volunteering so

strongly and ardently that Alice, almost in spite of herself, was infected by her friend's enthusiasm — swept off her feet, as it were, and carried along by the swift-running tide, when she would just as soon have stayed quietly on the shore.

To-day she was feeling tired, and a little discouraged by some episode in her day's work, and Lassie's rapturous anticipations of all the dangers and hardships and privations of a field-hospital, which only seemed to whet her desire to face them, did not appear so very alluring to her friend. And now, when she really thought she had produced some effect on Lassie by her arguments that they were very well where they were, and that there was plenty of good and

valuable work to be done at home, there came this sermon to add fuel to the fire, and she could feel how Lassie's every nerve was thrilling in response to what she felt was a direct call; and Alice knew that Lassie was not one to turn a deaf ear or change her mind, and that once realising the order, 'Do this,' as being to her, she would not hesitate to obey.

The service was over, and the congregation poured out into the busy, gas-lit streets, the pealing organ tones following them out, like a yearning mother's love, till they were drowned in life's stunning tide, choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of the world.

Lassie put her hand under her friend's arm, and they turned with tacit consent

towards the river, and stood, still in silence, on the embankment, watching the black, oily rush of the water sweeping past, and the line of lights across the bridge reflected in waving lines on the surface. Scattered lights on the other side made more intense the darkness of the great masses of buildings, behind which the lurid light from the streets throbbed up into the sky, like the smoke of the cities of the plain when Abraham got up early in the morning and looked towards them after the last 'peradventure' had been said and the ten righteous had not been found; while overhead a troubled, pale young moon veiled her face behind hurrying clouds, as if for the sorrow and shame of the London streets.

The two girls stood for a few min-

utes in that sympathetic silence that is sometimes more eloquent than words. It was Alice who first spoke, and she drew her arm almost brusquely away from Lassie's hand as if she half-resented the influence which, however, she could not resist.

‘Well, then, I suppose it's all settled, and we'd better fill in our papers and send them at once. I dare say there won't be any war. The Boers will be frightened as soon as they see we really mean business.’

‘So much the better,’ answered Lassie, ‘if we're not wanted; but I sha'n't feel easy till I'm on the army nursing reserve. Oh! Alice, wouldn't it be just glorious if we were together out there! But I suppose that's too good luck to

reckon on; and even if we both go, we may be hundreds of miles apart.'

'I don't see that there's much glorious about it,' Alice said a little fretfully. 'And I tell you what it is, Lassie, we are sure to get more kicks than halfpence, and do all the dirty work, and see other people get the credit. And you need n't go prancing off that way, as if South Africa were just round the corner. Half the nurses in England will volunteer, so I dare say we sha'n't have a chance.'

And then Big Ben struck out nine great, strong, solemn notes, and the girls turned to go back to St. Barnabas; but, before they left the embankment, Lassie bent and kissed her friend's cheek, saying, with a little tremble of

emotion in her voice, all the more noticeable as she was not usually demonstrative or emotional, least of all in religious matters: "Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it." We shall think of that in South Africa.'

'Or at home,' Alice answered rather gruffly, to conceal the thrill that responded to Lassie's enthusiasm.

As the two girls passed into the hospital, Alice glanced into the office.

'Why, there's a letter for you, Lassie. It must have come last night, and you never thought to look for it.'

A letter with the Midgely post-mark, and directed in her father's writing, with an uncertainty in the spelling of the word 'hospital,' and a smear to conceal the intrusion of an unnecessary 'r.'

And then she opened the letter, and her eye was caught at once by the post-script in Mrs. Jones's black and decided characters :

‘ Her ’s took for death ; you best come to onst.’

CHAPTER III.

I HAVE said that Lassie would have come from the other end of the world if she had known that her mother was ill, for between mother and daughter there was a very close bond of affection of an entirely undemonstrative character, perhaps all the stronger for finding no outward expression. But Lassie's feeling for her father was very different; and at the time of her confirmation, when the good old vicar was preparing the village maidens for the rite, she had told him, with passionate tears in her honest young eyes: 'Please, sir, I can't be done

this time, thank you, for I can't honour father — no! that I can't! — so I don't think I ought to pretend I'm keeping God's commandments.'

The old vicar, who knew Tim's peculiarities, which were not of a kind to inspire filial respect, softened down the obligation laid upon her, and bade her, as much as was possible, be obedient and forbearing, for God did not expect impossibilities. He shook his gentle old head sadly when, the very next day, an aggrieved mother represented to him in high-pitched accents of wrath how 'that gal of Wingate's had boxed her Liza's ears shameful because she said old Tim was drunk, as was nothing but the truth, as did ought to be ashamed of hisself!'

He calmed the infuriated mother, and patted Liza's crimson ear soothingly, and seeking out the culprit, found out what he had half-guessed might be the explanation: 'If I can't honour him myself, I won't let any one else dishonour him — that I won't!'

Tim had an uneasy consciousness that this young daughter of his took his measure pretty accurately, and he writhed a little under the direct look of her gray eyes, that set aside all the little pretences that imposed more or less on other people and on himself, and left him exposed as the poor, worthless creature he really was.

'It ain't what I call dootiful,' he would protest to his wife; 'if she don't contradict flat, she looks it all the same. Chil-

dren was n't like that in my young days; they minded what their elders and betters told them, and did n't set themselves up to know better. I'd not have turned out the man I be if my father had let me cheek him that fashion.'

And it struck neither him nor his wife that the result was not a forcible recommendation of the training.

So it was a decided relief to Tim when Lassie left school and got a place as nursery-maid with the vicar's married daughter, and moved away from Midgely. Her mother was not sorry either, as the collisions between father and daughter worried her, having always to take the part of the one whom she knew to be in the wrong, and to soften down and cover up little slips she would hardly have

noticed herself if the girl's clear eyes had not been so keenly alive to them.

Tim in her absence started a sort of fatherly pride in 'my gal,' and talked to the neighbours of how she was getting on, and what a lot her missus thought of her, and of the well-written letters, 'wrote for all the world like a book,' which came so regularly. ' 'Tis plain to see who she takes after,' he would say, 'as the missus ain't never been much of a scholard or given to book-larnin'.'

So Lassie's accomplishments became another feather in his cap, instead of being an aggravation as when she was at home.

Her few holidays were not long enough to allow of much jarring, and Tim was

on his best behaviour, and her mother would not have dreamed of complaining of him ; indeed, I do not think she ever felt there was anything to complain of.

But each holiday was less of a pleasure to Lassie than the preceding one, though she would hardly acknowledge the fact to herself. She was growing away from the old life year by year, month by month, almost day by day, and it was nearly with a sense of relief that, when her holiday was over, she got into the train that was to take her away from Midgely ; though before she was out of sight of the station a sudden qualm of compunction made her lean out of the window, and wave her hand, and nod to the little, shrunken-up figure on the platform, whose eyes were too misty

under the big print sun-bonnet to discern these tardy demonstrations.

She was hardly sorry when one year her holiday was prevented by the illness of one of the children, and she gained praise, which she was conscious was unmerited, for the willingness with which she gave it up.

It was that illness that led her to take up nursing, and she was admitted as probationer at St. Barnabas, one of the big London hospitals.

She took to the work with the greatest delight and enthusiasm, and loved it so much that she could not fail to do it well; and she was so strong in body, and bright and intelligent in mind, that nothing seemed hard or disagreeable to her.

‘Well, a-never!’ Mrs. Wingate said when she first heard of it. ‘To think of Lassie messing about after a lot of sick folk! Men, too, as is always awk’ard sort of bodies when there’s ought amiss with them. Bless us! if a husband ain’t about as much as one woman can manage, sick or well; it’s all her day’s work to see to him. There’s a deal talked about nursing these days; but, lor’ bless ye! we got along well enough in old days. Each on us minded our own sick; and when folk went into the ’firmary, there was two or three old women as was n’t good for nothing else to do for ’em.’

Lassie had only been home once in the five years during which she had been at St. Barnabas, each year some-

thing having occurred to prevent the going home — something which perhaps might not have stood in the way if she had been more keenly set on going, but which easily assumed sufficient proportions when there was not a very decided will to clear the way.

One year it was a pressing invitation from her old mistress, who was living in Ireland; and on three other occasions another of the nurses at St. Barnabas, who was taking her holiday at the same time, persuaded her to come to the sea with her. The old people quite acquiesced in the arrangements, and if there was any disappointment felt, and a tear or two splashed into the wash-tub, or on the darn in the master's stockings which were being 'goblified'

for Sunday, no trace of it was to be detected in the laborious letters that reached her at long intervals.

Her one visit was not very pleasant to any of them, as it was in the first year of her training, when she was full of undigested scraps of knowledge of hygiene and sanitation, not at all in accordance with old-fashioned cottage ways ; and she was inclined to introduce sweeping and drastic reforms, filling up the old bottles of custom and immemorial usage with the strong wine of her young wisdom, which had not yet had time to settle down from its first raw exuberance.

So that holiday of Lassie's was not a very enjoyable one at the time, though when next she came to Midgely, on that

Monday which I have mentioned before, it seemed very sunny to look back upon ; certain things, such as old print sun-bonnets, having the knack of painting themselves on the memory with sunshiny effects which we are not aware of when they are actually present, and we are looking at them and perhaps thinking how washed-out and shabby they are.

So four years had gone by without Lassie coming home, and all that time she had been growing more away from the old home and less in sympathy with it, without at all realising the great gap that was opening between them, which might have become more gradually and less painfully apparent to her if she had gone home more frequently.

Now it struck her with a blank feeling

of dismay as she went into the untidy, stuffy little kitchen, where Tim sat smoking over the fire with his hat on and looking dirty and unshaven, with a mug on the table at his side, which, as she entered, he tried ineffectually to push out of sight behind the Bible which a neighbour had fetched out and dusted, as an appropriate object in times of affliction, when the parson might be likely to call in.

She did not need to be told the fact which more than one neighbour, with that curious anxiety to be the bearer of bad news, had called out to her as she came from the station and passed along the village street—a fact which the drawn blind in the bedroom window above confirmed — that her mother was dead.

CHAPTER IV.

IN most villages there is some place set apart by the unwritten law of custom for the discussion of public events. I do not mean such events as the fall of empires or the conquest of continents, or death-dealing famines or pestilence or earthquake. Things at a distance naturally look small even though in themselves gigantic, and are hardly visible to the naked eye from such a little village as Midgely, lying embowered in trees. There is hardly enough elevation anywhere to raise observers above the level of its black-

berry hedges, or fall enough to help the lazy little stream as it loiters along on its very leisurely journey to the sea ; so, as it has plenty of time, and no necessity to take short cuts, it meanders in big curves, fringed with rushes and meadow-sweet, through the pastures, and throws a shining silver arm adorned with broad green lily-leaves, turning up red facings when the wind ruffles them, nearly round the little village, which indeed tempted the embrace, so sweet and so demure did it look with its clustered, overhanging thatched roofs and windows peeping out of a tangle of roses.

Village eyes are not provided with the powerful telescope of the public press, which brings all the ends of the

world so near to those in town, and makes events occurring in other hemispheres almost too appallingly near and real to us. London papers were few and far between at Midgely, and in the *Yokelburn Gazette*, which the carrier brought every Saturday for Mrs. Muggridge at the 'Jolly Farmer,' there was more interesting local news, such as a rick on fire in the next village; or boys had up before the magistrate for stealing apples from orchards not unknown to Midgely boys; or men convicted of trespassing after game or driving without reins or being drunk and disorderly on market-days — offences against the law to which many Midgely consciences pleaded guilty. This consciousness gave a zest to the recital spelt out with some

difficulty by the best scholar in the bar of the 'Jolly Farmer,' and obscured as the week passed on by rings of beer-mugs set down on it, while the page recording the latest news from the seat of war or decisive victory, remained unstained and unstudied.

The place of discussion at Midgely was the bridge which spanned what might be called the elbow of the encircling arm of the stream at one end of the village street. It was well adapted for the purpose, as there was a low wall on which any one could sit and swing his legs reflectively, or over which he could lean and watch the shoals of minnows flitting past in the shallow water, or the weed waving gently in the sluggish current, or the deposits of cabbage

leaves and rubbish that gradually collected against the pier of the bridge.

It was handy, too, for the 'Jolly Farmer,' which was the last house by the bridge; and, as talking is dry work, Mrs. Muggridge got a good many extra customers when there was any special subject of interest under discussion, and could herself occasionally join in the talk over the white garden palings. On the other side of the street, over against the 'Jolly Farmer,' was the blacksmith's forge, and Joe Lockett's stentorian voice would sometimes make itself heard in between the blows of the hammer on the anvil, or while he held the great, hairy foot of a cart-horse under his arm ready for the adjustment of a shoe.

Old Tim Wingate was very often to

be found on the bridge. It was a nice, easy distance from his cottage, even for a lame leg, for the Wingates' cottage stood about half-way along the village street, lying back from the road with a big cherry-tree in front of the door, and a gay border of flowers on either side of the brick path up from the wicket-gate.

There was a certain part of the bridge where one of the coping bricks had been pushed off, offering a lower seat for any one not capable of hoisting himself up, and sitting with his feet swinging, and this was called 'old Tim's seat' for ever so long after the old man had disappeared from the village conclave; and if he was seen hobbling along the street, any one who was occupying it would

shuffle away as if it were the old man's by right, though they generally waited till he was well past the 'Jolly Farmer' before they stirred, as there was a good chance of his never reaching the bridge after all.

Of course the afternoon of the day of his wife's funeral, etiquette (of which there is almost more in a village than in fashionable society) forbade Tim's appearance on the bridge, still more at the 'Jolly Farmer.' More than once he thought longingly of the sympathy that he would have received at either of those places, and of the respect that would have been paid to his experiences as chief mourner and newly-made widower, as he sat in the oppressive neatness and quiet of his cottage, with Lassie

opposite to him writing a letter at the table.

There was not even the solace of wearing his old, battered wide-awake hat, which he had worn morning, noon, and night, indoors and out — and, some people even maintained, in bed — for a period beyond the memory of mortal man; and he was desperately afraid that Lassie had thrown it out on the dust-heap when she provided the tall hat with the deep crape band on it which was so impressive at the funeral, but hardly suited for fireside wear. Lassie had brought him his pipe, to be sure; but it gave him the first *bona fide* pang of regret for his lost wife, that the tobacco had been forgotten, and he was afraid to disturb his daughter, so

absorbed was she in the letter she was writing.

They say that people's ears burn when their owners are being talked about, so that afternoon Lassie's ears should have been red-hot under the dark hair that, brush it as smooth as she would, still let a soft ring escape sometimes on her broad forehead or white neck, and that felt strange and out of order without the hospital-cap which she put up her hand involuntarily to adjust. Tim's ears should also have felt the glow under the spotted red handkerchief which, when Lassie was not looking, he put over his head in place of the lamented old hat on the dust-heap. For, down on the bridge, there was quite a gathering of Midgely folk debating as to what would

happen at the Wingates' now the old missus was gone, and whether Lassie would bide at home and look after the old man, or whether she would go back to her nursing and let her father go into the workhouse infirmary.

‘Well, ’t will be a burning shame if her lets her father go to the house when he’ve slaved all the best years of his life to put bread in her mouth and clothes on her back!’ It was Farmer Elliot’s carter who gave vent to this remark, strengthened with one or two expletives which I omit as they are immaterial to this story or to anything else. He was a little, sandy man, with a dazzled look in his pale-blue eyes, as if he were always in the sun; and, as is often the case with small,

mild-looking men, had unexpectedly strong opinions, and expressed them forcibly when out of earshot of 'the missus,' in whose presence he might hardly call his soul his own.

He had brought one of the cart-horses to have a shoe put on, an operation that generally took the whole afternoon, as Farmer Elliot knew to his cost and Mrs. Muggridge to her profit.

His remark was answered by a derisive 'Haw! haw! haw!' from the blacksmith, holding the hammer suspended above the glowing, transparent-looking bit of metal on the anvil. 'First time I ever heard of old Tim Wingate slaving. I'd give up a good day's work — that I would — to see the old chap doing a

stroke of anything. But, all the same, his gal did ought to stick to un; and if she bides, I'm thinking as he won't be wanting that bit of 'lotment next to mine — the best bit of the lot, to my mind — and I don't care if I take it over. It could stand in his name all the same, so there would n't be no bother with the Squire as to my having more than my share. His gal don't look the sort to hoe and weed and work about, same as the old woman did, and it ain't likely as Tim will trouble hisself — it ain't his natur'.

‘And there's the washing as Mrs. Wingate done,’ a slatternly woman said, who had just joined the group at the bridge, pushing a lob-sided perambulator containing a sack of potatoes and a

fat, dirty baby amusing itself with a large, black-handled dinner-knife. 'It ain't to be supposed as Lassie'll stand at the wash-tub early and late as her mother did, doing other folks' washing, even if she does her own; and though she do dress so plain outside, you never see such frills and tucks and all sorts as she've got on her under-things, for I see 'em on the table when I step in the first evening she come home. I would n't mind taking the washing over myself, as I could manage it easy in with mine. I always says it don't make much odds if you have much or little to wash; and it would bring in a som'at to help along, as would n't come amiss these days, what with the boys wearing out such a lot of shoe-leather, and thin' — this in a lower

voice lest Mrs. Muggridge, just inside her garden palings, should overhear — ‘a husband always at the public.’

‘Why, we shouldn’t know ourselves without the old gentleman,’ Mrs. Muggridge declared, leaning her elbows on the fence for a comfortable gossip. ‘I won’t go for to deny as he is a bit overtook at times — and I’m the last one to encourage such ways, as have always kep’ my house respectable and quiet. But there! folks makes him out a deal worse than he is. It ain’t often as he’s the worse, and I reckon I’m as likely to know the rights of it if any one does; and he’ve had a lot of trouble ’long of his leg, and that pig of his dying just before Michaelmas rent-day, and now it’s his old missus. I always says,

“Wait till we’re tried afore we’re so hard on other people when they wants a drop of comfort;” and Lassie did ought to make a comfortable home for him.’

‘And it would be just going agin her mother’s last dying words,’ Mrs. Jones, the post-mistress, added. From the bridge you can command a full view of the post-office door, so Mrs. Jones could safely leave her official duties for a few minutes to join the conclave. “Send for Lassie” was what the poor dear said just before she was took, and it were n’t for her own sake as she said it, for she knew very well as she were n’t long for this world, for she says to me that very morning — or it might ’a’ been the day before — “Mrs. Jones,” she says, “I’m never going to get off this bed no more;” and I could n’t

go for to contradick the poor soul, seeing death as plain as plain in her face. So it shows as she wanted the gal sent for to look after the old man; and if I were in her place I could n't, were it ever so, give the go-by to a mother's words; though there ain't that feeling about dooty to parents as there did used to be, and as the Scripture says, "Train up a child and away they go," as was n't the way in my time. Lassie used to be a terrible good needle-woman, and me and Liza's been thinking if between 'em they might n't do a bit of dress-making, for Liza's a good eye for cuttin' and fittin', though her back ain't strong enough to sit long at her needle. There might be a card in my winder, and my best parlour'd be handy if

ladies came in from the country round to be fitted.'

'There! ain't that just like mother?'

Liza interrupted, with a toss of a much-frizzled head. 'Any one might think it was all settled. I've got to make up my mind first, and I'm not sure as Lassie Wingate's quite my style. It wants some one a bit stylish for the dressmaking, and I never see anything so dowdy as that black she wears.'

She gave a coquettish look at Joe Muggridge, who had just come out of the 'Jolly Farmer' with a handsaw to grind on the stone outside the smithy. Joe was Mrs. Muggridge's only son, and in his opinion, and in that of his mother's, and of most of the Midgely girls, he was

a very smart young fellow, and one whose notice would confer infinite distinction on any girl to whom he condescended to drop the handkerchief.

But Liza Jones, who flattered herself she was ahead of all the other girls in his good graces, met no responsive glance this afternoon ; for in days gone by, when they were at school together, Joe had cherished a sheepish admiration for Lassie, and all the other girls in the place had made themselves so exceedingly cheap that there was a sort of attraction in one who did not turn to look after him when he swaggered by, or do more than briefly reply to his ' Good-morning ' when he met her in the street. I suppose it was something of the same feeling that made Alexander

cry for new worlds to conquer, for neither to Alexander or Joe Muggridge did it occur that there was any doubt about the conquering; for Joe had no fear but that Lassie would be as flattered by his attentions as any other girl, for he was serenely confident that there was not any other young man in or near Midgely worth looking at — and, for the matter of that, not many in London; ‘leastways,’ he told himself, with becoming modesty, ‘as she’s likely to have come across in that old hospital place.’

So he too was of opinion that Lassie’s right place was at home, and he was expressing it in a somewhat raised voice to be heard above the whirr of the steel on the grindstone, when the vicar

passed over the bridge on the way to the vicarage, which lies at the other end of the village, near the church. He was a new vicar, who had succeeded the kind old man who had prepared Lassie for confirmation and patted Liza's offended ear, and he had a young wife who had been greatly attracted by the look of Lassie as she stood by her mother's grave that morning.

‘All the village is talking of Lassie Wingate, and whether she will go back to London or stop with her father,’ he told his wife as they sat over their tea.

‘It's plainly her duty to remain at home,’ Mrs. Bruce said decidedly. How wonderfully plain other people's duties are to all of us! ‘Poor old man! it

would be hard if his only child deserted him ; and he looked so broken-hearted at the funeral. And besides, she would be so useful in the place. I think I shall get her to speak a few words about nursing at the mothers' meeting, and show the women a few simple things, such as bandaging and making poultices. And she would help a little if any one was ill. Only think how glad we should have been of her last year when the influenza was so bad ! Oh, it's clearly her duty to stop.'

'If he had any other children,' agreed the vicar, 'it might be different. The old man wants looking after. He had evidently been taking a drop too much last night when I met him. She would be such a good influence in the place,

too! She seems a very steady, superior young person. You might get her to help you with your friendly girls, my dear. And there's the Sunday-school; we badly want teachers for the elder girls.'

It was very curious how in every case, even at the vicarage, some side-issues crept in to influence the general opinion of what Lassie's clear duty was.

CHAPTER V.

AND meanwhile Lassie had already made up her mind on the debated point, and was even now writing to the matron at St. Barnabas to resign her place as nurse. She was glad that the red pocket-handkerchief over her father's head prevented him seeing the moisture that gathered on her lashes as she wrote that letter, and the one to the War Office withdrawing her name from the number of volunteers for the war nursing; and she was obliged to leave her letter to Alice Nugent to finish when Tim had gone to bed, as the tears blinded her

eyes more than once, and she could not stifle a sob, which made an observant eye appear from under the red handkerchief.

She had not cried at all at the funeral, as critical eyes had noticed ; she had not even kept her handkerchief to her face, as is the usual etiquette at country funerals ; and the neighbours commented on such a want of proper feeling, and told how differently this one and the other had behaved — how ‘ Mary Jane, when her granny was took, had ’stericks terrible, so as they could hardly bring her to ; ’ and ‘ Harriet took on ever so when her baby brother died, though she were n’t partial to children, and could n’t a-bear the sight of him when he were alive ; but she had such a feeling ’eart, poor thing ! ’

But they might not have thought Lassie so hard-hearted if they could have seen her the night before as she sat in the little bedroom where she had slept as a child, leading out of the bigger room into which the stairs led where the old mother lay now for the last time.

It was so still that Tim's snores were distinctly audible from the bed made up for him in the kitchen below, and the chirruping of the cricket on the hearth. Outside the house was the sweet country silence, so noticeable to an ear accustomed to the great, awful roar of the London streets, a silence only accentuated by the tap of a rose-branch against the window, or a little sigh of wind in the chimney; and in the next room

reigned the mysterious, solemn silence of death, that seems more than the mere absence of sound, but something tangible and positive like the Egyptian darkness that could be felt.

She had brought out her little writing-case to write to St. Barnabas to say she should return to her duties without fail on Saturday, and as she opened it and took out the pen, a little, shy smile touched the corners of her mouth, and brightened the eyes under the lashes where the tears had gathered as she passed through the outer room. The pen had been given her the other day by a friend at St. Barnabas, who had said, 'You must use it to write to me when you are in Africa;' and she put it aside and chose another for her letter

to the matron. She was sitting by the little window, over whose diamond panes the thatch frowned like a heavy eyebrow, and she drew back the patchwork curtain to look out into the darkness, while her thoughts were full of the giver of the pen. But the touch of the patchwork brought her mind back suddenly and filled her eyes with a rush of tears, so suggestive was it of the mother and the old, homely ways; the constant little unconsidered acts of kindness and unselfishness; the small daily sacrifices of self done without the slightest feeling of heroism, hardly consciously, and without any elegance or idea of effect; and of the never-ending patience she showed to Tim, who even in those three days during which Lassie had

been at home had tried her patience sorely.

‘Poor mother! she must have had a lot to put up with.’

And then she set herself seriously to consider the future and decide what would be best to do about her father while she was away. Of course it was too late to make any alterations in her own plans. She was pledged — she had sent in her papers volunteering for the war nursing; she had no right to turn back, having once put her hand to the plough. And the call had been so clear and plain; it was no hasty resolve, no whim or self-will. Alice had felt just the same, and she was not impulsive or easily carried away by the excitement of the moment. If this had happened before it was all

settled it might have been different, though she told herself that it would have just broken her heart to have given up her dearly-loved work — all that made life bright and interesting — to take up a very doubtful and unpleasant duty in a mean little gossiping place among narrow interests and limited minds. She tried to occupy her mind with plans for her father's comfort, telling herself how, when she came back, she would often be able to run down and see after him ; endeavouring all the time to turn a deaf ear to a text that kept recurring again and again with vexatious appropriateness : ' If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me ; he shall be free.

. . . Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition.'

The light from the little window under the thatch in the Wingates' cottage twinkled out long after the other lights in Midgely were extinguished ; and the old patchwork curtain, with its faded lilacs and browns and rows of uneven sewing, was wet with many tears before Lassie had come to the end of her self-communing, and before she got up and went into the next room to kneel for a few minutes by the closed coffin.

'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.'
Sometimes the word comes by the voice of the preacher in the great Abbey, and sometimes by the mother's voice on a dying-bed : 'Send for Lassie.'

‘Do this, and he doeth it.’

And so that letter of Lassie’s announcing her return to the matron was never written, and the pen that had been given to write interesting details from the seat of war was dropped in the bedroom, and trampled out of all possible use by the clumsy feet of the bearers as they carried the coffin down; and instead, she wrote to resign her post at St. Barnabas, and to withdraw her name from the list of volunteers for nursing abroad.

But, once having made up her mind, she set about her life at home with plenty of pluck and spirit, being of too wholesome a nature not to do with all her might whatever her hand found to do.

And in those early days in the pleasant, bright autumn weather — with Tim on his very best behaviour, and all the neighbours beaming approval and inclined to be friendly and helpful; and Mrs. Bruce, the vicar's wife, making much of her and seeking her company; and Mrs. Jones quite motherly and confidential; and Joe Muggridge bringing papers with the latest news from Africa, and executing commissions for her on market-days — altogether Lassie did not find the change as bad as she expected. 'They are all so kind and good-natured,' she said. And though she had learnt discretion with greater knowledge, and did not try to force her opinions red-hot down every one's throat, she felt that, in return for their

kindness, she might be of some use in Midgely, where nursing and sanitary matters were in a most elementary condition.

‘So, if I am not to nurse the soldiers, I may find something to do here,’ she told herself hopefully; ‘so my training will come in handy after all, and this is the work I’m meant to do.’

She began her reforms at home, and rather took old Tim’s breath away by some of her arrangements.

Tim had quite made up his mind that she meant to go back to St. Barnabas, and at the bottom of his heart hoped she would, though he had prepared stores of eloquence to be expended on ungrateful and undutiful children. He always had some grievance on hand —

the weather, or his leg, or the potato disease, or the pig, and of late, of course, his wife's illness and death. He had rather pictured to himself, being established with this inspiring grievance, to lodge with some one in the village, Lassie, of course, liberally contributing to his support to help out the small pension left him by a former mistress. There was an old Mrs. Sims, a few doors up the street, where he thought he might be fairly comfortable. She liked a glass herself, so she would not be down on any one as the missus, poor soul, used to be. Worst come to worst, he might go into the infirmary, where an old crony of his was established and reported it 'pretty middlin',' but his leg was only very bad when he

had nothing else to complain of; and he thought if he lodged with Mrs. Sims he might make shift to do a bit of hoeing or tidy up any one's garden, an effort that had not occurred to his mind of late years.

To any one of Tim's disposition it was quite a trial to be suddenly deprived of a full-flavoured grievance such as Lassie's desertion of him would have been, and for every one to be telling him what a fine thing it was for him to have his daughter at home; so it was only natural that he should recur to one of his old grumbles and suffer excruciating pain in his leg. But even that was spoilt by the neighbours thinking him lucky for having a 'gal as understands them things, and can do it every bit as

well as a doctor, and not charge nothing.' And who was to explain that that was just the worst of it, and that Lassie knew about 'them things' too well to believe in all the agonising sufferings he described, or to credit sudden accesses of pain and lameness which came on, curiously, when the parson or the Squire's lady happened to be passing?

'I've nothing to say agin her,' Tim would begin querulously when — and it was not very often now — he joined the party in the bar of the 'Jolly Farmer.' People always begin like that when they are going to say a good deal against some one. 'I've nothing to say agin her — ne'er a word! And I ain't one as would shut my door on a child of mine, however undootiful and wrong-headed

they may be. As long as I've a roof over my head and a crust to eat, why, there! she's welcome to a share of it. And I don't blame the girl, mind ye, for getting sick of that hospital work, where, as I'm told, they've a terrible hard time of it; and it's only in natur' as she'd rather bide at home and take her ease where she ain't nothing to do. But I tells her plainly as I won't stand her masterful ways, nor her new-fangled notions neither. I never heard such a clutter about washing as she keeps up! I dare say it's all very well for they dirty folk up in London what she've been used to. I'll not go for to say as they may n't want it. But for decent, or'nary folk like us, we don't want always to be messing about with water;

and as to a grown man, well in years too, washing all over just like a babby, why, it's agin natur', and I never heard tell of such a thing! And, my word! the fuss she made over my flannel shirt! I'd a bit of a cold, ye see, and I'd been waiting till the wind went round a bit before I changed it, as nothing's so likely to chill a man as putting on a clean shirt. Well, you'll mind as the wind stuck in the east for a goodish bit, so I just bided the Almighty's time and weren't in no hurry. But she were in a taking and no mistake, and said she'd a mind to burn it when it came off. And she've stripped off all them bits of paper what I and the missus pasted round the windows to keep out the draught; and hail, rain, or snow, there's them win-

dows open. And she took down the sack of shavings out of the bedroom chimney, and won't have none of it, though it were her own mother as put it there, and the draught is just fit to blow any one's head off. And then there's the sow! I wonder she don't have her to live indoors—that I do! I tells her over and over as it's 'the habits of the creature, and as they likes dirt and thrives on it; but she's always arter me to clean the sty out, and says the smell's enough to pizen any one, though I tells her it ain't nothing like as bad as that carbolic stuff she's so terrible fond on. I ain't no patience with such finnickin' ways!'

To which complainings the neighbours paid little attention at first.

CHAPTER VI.

SIX months have passed since Mrs. Wingate died and Lassie came home to look after her father — six months full of stirring public events, history written in blood and fire and broken hearts, just as much as that history in old times was written which we take down from our shelves and read so calmly to-day. But in Midgely time dawdles along as peacefully as the sluggish little river, without any incidents to notch the stick and mark its passage; and if a nation is happy which has no history, Midgely may be reckoned a place of perfect

felicity. The only thing that changes there is opinion, and that so gradually that the people are quite unaware of it themselves; and I think if at the end of those six months you listened to the talk on the bridge at Midgely, you would be quite surprised at the change that had come over people's sentiments about Lassie Wingate, and would wonder if you had misunderstood the unanimous opinion in October, or had not heard aright.

For in six months it had become obvious to most of the Midgely neighbours that Lassie had made a great mistake in coming home, and had much better have stayed away.

They all of them declared they had seen it would not answer from the very

first, and called all sorts of people to witness that they had told them so, and that if folks had only listened to them at the time it would have been settled quite differently.

Even at the vicarage, the vicar's wife was not superior to the failings of her fellow-mortals, but appealed frequently to the memory of her husband, who could not exactly remember the fact that she had always feared Lassie's return home would not do. And the vicar was not anxious to remind her of her sanguine expectations, as he wished to impress on himself and her that he always had misgivings on the subject. It is human nature to shrink from confessing one's self wrong in one's anticipations.

The intimacy between Mrs. Bruce and Lassie had rather languished of late. Mrs. Bruce complained that Lassie was disappointing on nearer acquaintance. Perhaps it was that the girl was a little independent and disinclined to follow as meekly in Mrs. Bruce's path as that lady expected from a young person in her position. That idea of teaching the mothers' meeting a few simple rules of nursing very soon collapsed, as did also the intention of calling in Lassie's aid in cases of sickness. There were certain old-established, ignorant methods of treatment in Midgely, and certain nearly as long-established and quite as ignorant old women who presided over the sick and dying in the village; and whether it was that the Midgely con-

stitutions were of a tougher kind than others, or whether modern science and laws of hygiene are not as infallible as people would have you think, certain it is that the Midgely people did not all die of typhoid, and recovered from various illnesses, such as 'pomonia,' 'brown-typus,' or 'indigestion of the lungs,' by the use or in spite of remedies quite unknown to the British Pharmacopœia.

Babies who were born with a longing for some particular article of food, such as raspberry-jam, spring onions, or red herrings, were indulged at the very earliest period of their young lives with such luxuries as they desired, and sucked down the unusual food as sweet as a nut, and 'was n't the same child afterwards, bless her!' Children who

seemed sure to go off in a 'gallopading' consumption were restored to robust health by the application of snails down 'the spine of the back' or a decoction of fieldmice; and a little boy with peritonitis, who fancied some marmalade, was at once supplied with a pot of Keiller and lived to tell the tale.

So also for most grown-up ailments brandy or port-wine were the infallible cure, and Lassie's very outspoken disbelief in their universal efficacy put her out of court at once with half of the Midgely people, who returned with renewed confidence to old Mrs. Murphy; who, after listening to the description of various aches and pains and curious symptoms, such as being 'all of a tremble in the innerds' or feeling 'all

upside down, anyhow,' would gravely suggest, as if it were a remedy of an original character that had only just occurred to her mind: 'Now, if you takes my advice, Betsy Ann, you'll just take a teaspoonful of brandy when you feels like that. No, I knows as it ain't to your liking, but you did oughter think of your pore 'usban' and all them blessed little steps of children.' Or it might be: 'Now, I wonders how a drop of that port-wine would do, same as Squire's housekeeper give to Joe Norris when he was dying. 'T were rare good stuff, for I just had the leastest little taste of it, as it were n't a bit of good giving it to him, poor chap, as were too far gone to know what he swallered.'

Neither did Mrs. Jones's little plan

for Liza and Lassie to combine in a dressmaking venture, with Lassie to do all the work and Liza to look on and reap the benefit, come to anything, for the two girls did not take to one another. Perhaps Joe Muggridge was partly accountable for the failure of this arrangement, for he had received such a severe snubbing for certain loutish overtures to Lassie as made his self-conceit smart for many a day; and that is the most painful part to have a wound in, though it does not go very deep and never proves fatal.

‘A nasty, stuck-up thing,’ Liza said, ‘giving herself such airs, as if there was any harm in a bit of fun! Joe Muggridge took the length of her foot from the first, but I couldn’t believe it of her

till I see it with my own eyes. Joe says she was a girl he never could abide, and most of the young men's of the same opinion, seemings, and I ain't surprised. Why, just see how she looked when I asked her to come to fair with me, and said as there was a deal of fun in the evening, and kiss-in-the-ring, and I'd see as she wasn't left out of it. My gracious! she nearly snapped my head off. She needn't have troubled herself; I don't think one of the Midgely lads would have cared to kiss such a sour-faced old maid.'

'Not they!' said the admiring mother; 'they've better taste — trust 'em!'

'Oh, I know what you mean,' said Liza, bridling, and frisking her fringe into more becoming frizziness; 'but it

ain't my fault if all the men comes after me. It's not for any asking of mine.'

'No, sure!' said Mrs. Jones; 'they've eyes in their heads, bless you! But you'll have to mind what you're about. Joe'll have a word to say about it, I'm thinking.'

Mrs. Muggridge was at first a little relieved at Joe's change of sentiment as regards Lassie — as what mother ever thought any one good enough for her only son? But her satisfaction was mitigated by his conspicuous attentions to Liza Jones ('A little, empty-headed minx!') — attentions which Joe fondly hoped would be the surest way to revenge himself on Lassie, but which she took with the greatest equanimity, if indeed she noticed them at all.

The hostess of the 'Jolly Farmer' did not find Tim such a good customer as in former days, when the purse-strings were held by more lenient old hands.

'Why, you're quite a stranger, master,' she would say to him; and such very occasional half-pints hardly made it worth her while to listen to his long-winded complaints, especially if a more lucrative customer claimed her attention.

Neither did the blacksmith get that patch of the allotment which was as Naboth's vineyard to him; for though, as he rightly opined, Lassie was not the sort to hoe and weed as her mother had done with her own hands, still she got the work done somehow, partly by Tim's unwilling and intermittent labours, and partly by a half-

witted lad whom she had protected against his persecutors, the village boys, and who accordingly had taken a sort of dog-like fancy to her.

Nor did Mrs. Hicks get the washing which she thought would go begging now Mrs. Wingate was gone, for Lassie found that her savings were melting away in eking out her father's pension, and that it was necessary she should do something to bring in a little money as her mother did. 'And a poor business she makes of it, too!' her employers said, having grumbled equally in Mrs. Wingate's time. 'There's a shirt for you! The old lady, anyhow, washed clean, though she didn't get the things up much to speak of.'

As to the good example she was to be in the place, over that, too, the vicar shook his head in disappointment. Somehow she seemed to be on a different level to the rest of the people; and so, because she did certain things, it seemed no manner of reason why others should do the same. Her regular church-going produced no more effect on the neighbours than the vicar's attendance himself or the clerk's. Her simple, rather severe, plainness of dress did not shame one poppy or nodding plume out of Matilda's hat, or abate one curl or frizzle of Liza's exuberant fringe.

Because she sat at work in the evening under the big cherry-tree or by the hearth was no reason why the

Midgely girls should not lark about the lanes with the boys, or stand gossiping on the bridge; and her calm indifference to the heavy, coarse chaff of the hobbledehoys outside the 'Jolly Farmer' as she passed did not hinder other girls from bridling and colouring and answering back.

An example should not be too far above our heads, I was going to say, forgetting for the moment the great Example infinitely above the best of us; but there His infinite love brings Him near to the least, and while He is highly exalted, He is yet the Friend of publicans and sinners.

Even to herself Lassie was sometimes fain to confess that she had made a mistake, and that her sacrifice was thrown

away (as if a sacrifice ever were!), though she was not one of those introspective self-torturers who enfeeble the present with vain laments over the past.

She was tingling to the finger-tips with the feeling of the ability and with the wish to help these neighbours who rejected her help. She felt her isolation, and sometimes, sitting alone over her work and hearing the gay voices and laughter from the village street, she would have been glad to throw it down and join in some of the fun, though the next minute the horse-play and romping revolted her. With her father she felt unceasingly she was a failure ('After all, I can't manage him as mother did!'), not realising that that management con-

sisted merely in constant failures and constant beginning again, that patient, untiring love that is like the beautiful affection of a dog, never asking 'How oft?' but going on to the seventy times seven.

'I can't even keep him clean,' she used to say to herself bitterly; 'and the house doesn't look half as nice as it used in mother's time.'

Mrs. Muggridge could have testified that Tim's visits to her were not so frequent, but to Lassie the shame and vexation of his coming home stupid and fuddled lasted long after Tim had forgotten such an insignificant occurrence; and she did not realise how, in those old days that seemed so much better, her mother had kept such back-slidings out

of sight, got him quietly to bed, or invented an errand for the clear-sighted young daughter to get her out of the way.

‘And he does n’t even like me,’ she would sigh; ‘he is quite glad to get out of my way, and I heard him tell Mrs. Martin that it was n’t a bit like home.’

At first her hopeful young nature shook off these discouragements, and she would tell herself that it would all come right in time and that better days were in store; but after a certain Sunday, of which I will tell in the next chapter, she left off looking hopefully into a future that was no longer lighted by the rays that had made rainbows on her tears when her mother died.

CHAPTER VII.

IT was one Sunday at the end of June, a beautiful, bright day with the roses blooming in royal abundance in all the gardens, and the tall, white lilies beginning to open their waxen flowers in stately purity. The air was full of the sweet odours of new-cut hay and honeysuckle and lime blossoms — a very ideal day for a bicycle ride away, away from London, with its noise and hurry and exhausted air and stale smells, right away into the very heart of the country, through pine-woods with their rich, resinous fragrance, and with shafts of

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sunlight striking between the red trunks on to the vivid green bracken below. Passing out of the cool silence of the pine-woods, the way leads through leafy country lanes with meadows on either side rippling with the long grass, the green shot with the brown of ripe seeds and the red of sorrel tops, or the same lying in fragrant swathes where the machine — no longer, alas! the scythe — had left it the day before, ready to be tossed or turned on Monday by that heap of prongs and wooden rakes in the corner.

Now and again comes a wheat-field, unbelievably, vividly green in the sunshine, with streaks of red poppies audaciously gay. It is quite a relief to the eye after such brilliance to turn to the

wayside elms with their sober summer green, and the sycamores with their pink-tinted clusters of tassels, and the limes whose dainty green blossoms are spreading their honey sweetness far and wide to summon the bees to their feast.

The broad patches of shadow cast by the trees on the road are very welcome after a stretch of June sunshine. The cuckoo still calls its spring message, though it is beginning that hiccupping which is, I suppose, that 'change of tune' tradition tells us comes to his note in June, before July comes, when 'Away I fly.' Thrushes and blackbirds sing fitfully, for the cherries are getting ripe and they are busy. The ringdoves purr in the midsummer warmth with a drowsy

sweetness that invites any one who is hot and has left forty miles of road behind him to dismount and rest on that grassy bank under the big beech-tree, where the prickly little nuts are showing themselves, though the lark rising from the wheat and poppies opposite and going up, up, up, singing as he goes, seems to preach untiring effort, untiring praise.

But the rider is beguiled by the ring-doves to rest a bit before he enters the little village just in sight, with its thatched roofs and timbered, white-washed walls, clustering round the little, stumpy, towered church, from which the mellow old bells are inviting, rather jerkily, to afternoon service.

Under one of those thatched roofs the

peace which the whole outward scene suggested did not reign.

Old Tim had been unusually cantankerous and perverse that day, and Lassie's patience had given way, a thing that very rarely happened. It is unfortunately true that on Sunday there seems more danger of friction than on other days; the day that above all others should be 'so cool, so calm, so bright,' is often the one when mental quiet is disturbed.

Lassie had been to church in the morning, and during her absence Tim had annexed some pence she had put aside on the dresser to pay the baker the following day, and he had stoutly denied the fact when inquiry was made.

There had been mysterious disappearance of this sort on previous occasions, which had been generally followed by visits to the 'Jolly Farmer' and the usual sequel, so perhaps Lassie may be pardoned for being a little irate at the thing happening again; but she was ashamed, directly it was over, at the altercation that ensued in high-pitched tones, and of having put out her hand to stop him when he got up to slink out of the cottage, declaring he should not go till he had given back the money.

It was only for a moment, and she let him push her arm away, though she could easily have prevented him, being tall and strong and active, while he was shrunken-up and feeble. He had knocked over a chair on the way to the

door, and a plate had fallen from the table and lay smashed on the bricks; and Tim turned when he was outside in the garden and swore at her, and went hobbling down the path with his hat crushed in at one side, which might have been — but was not — the effect of a blow.

Altogether, to any one passing in the road it would have given the effect of an angry quarrel — of a loud-tongued, scolding woman venting her rage in words, if not in blows, on an old and feeble man, whose age and infirmity should have been his protection.

And such a passer-by there was; and such, no doubt, was his interpretation of the scene, for Lassie could hear her father's voice raised in querulous tones,

evidently laying his wrongs before some sympathising listener.

But Lassie was too sick at heart and sorry to care what her father might be saying or to whom. She had covered up her face, and stood leaning her shoulder against the doorpost, with her back turned to the road; and she did not move when the garden gate opened, and steps sounded on the path behind her, till a voice said, 'Does Nurse Wingate live here?'

Then she dropped her hands and gave a little exclamation of pleased surprise, that died away into embarrassed silence as she quickly drew back the welcoming hand she had involuntarily extended, and wrapped it in the dirty apron she had put on to wash up the dinner things.

Lassie's hair was rough and disordered, and her face stained and flushed with her passionate tears. The room behind her looked squalid and untidy with the overturned chair and broken plate on the bricks, the dinner things heaped at the end of the table, and a cat taking advantage of the turmoil to snatch a hasty meal from the potato-dish.

It was so very different from the Nurse Wingate Dr. Milton remembered when he was house-doctor at St. Barnabas. Nurse Wingate was always exquisitely neat and trim, with an indescribable niceness and daintiness about her in all her ways and movements, which made it scarcely credible that she did not come of gentle parentage — a fact, however, which she never

attempted to conceal, but of which, somehow, he had lost sight in his intercourse with her.

He had been thinking a great deal of her lately, and he had come that June day to find her and tell her of the prospects opening before him, and of the practice he had secured in a country town in the west of England, and he was going to ask Lassie to share these bright prospects with him.

Before he entered the village, as he sat listening to the doves, his thoughts were full of her. No girl had ever taken his fancy as she had; and something deeper than his fancy, he told himself. What matter if her parentage were not exalted—if her people were farmers, or even respectable trades-people? It did

not signify; Lassie in herself was a lady beyond dispute, and her new home would be miles away from Midgely.

And then he went into the village and heard a noisy quarrel at a cottage door, where the smell of the pig-sty drowned the fragrance of the roses and honeysuckle, and a scolding virago of a woman was shouting at a blear-eyed old rustic, who, without any reticence, had opened his woes to this casual passer-by, and had finished by asking a trifle to drink his health.

And then to find that this scolding virago was Lassie, the soft-voiced, mild-eyed nurse who was his ideal of gentleness and refinement, and of whom, not ten minutes ago, he had confidently

affirmed that she was a lady beyond all dispute!

I think Lassie read in his eyes that first moment the end of her little romance — ‘Finis’ written very plainly — and she accepted it without any effort to set matters right or explain. She did not even put up her hand to arrange her hair, which is almost an involuntary movement in a woman even in the most tragic circumstances. She did not take off her washing-up apron or turn down her sleeves; far less did she pick up the overturned chair, or collect the broken pieces of the plate, or drive the cat from her surreptitious meal.

If he had come half-an-hour later, and she had washed up the dinner

things, and was sitting, as she often did on Sunday afternoons, under the cherry-tree, as daintily neat and tidy as she ever had been in the hospital; if he had come in then and sat down by her, it would all have been different, as she had thought and dreamed and pictured it hundreds of times when work had been distasteful, or the present difficult, and she had wanted something to help her through.

The glimpse of the cottage room, he would then have had through the open door, would have been nice and pleasant and cheerful even if it were simple and homely. There would have been a glass of roses on the dresser; she always put some fresh ones there on Sunday afternoon, and never

without a thought how he had once said she arranged flowers so tastefully. The hearth would have been swept up and the kettle on, and by-and-by she would have gone in and made some tea for him in those pretty cups she and Alice used for their tea, and she would have brought it out under the cherry-tree. She had pictured all these little details over and over again, but she had never thought of it like this.

He was very kind. Yes, that was almost the worst of it; he was so kind — just as he was to the ward-maids and scrubbers, or to the poorer patients.

‘He is always kindest to the poorer ones,’ she had once said; and she remembered that now he would be kind

even to the scolding daughter of a disreputable-looking old father.

In the old days he had sometimes spoken curtly, almost roughly, to her, and she had liked it as coming from him, as showing a sense of equality and intimacy which makes ceremony unnecessary. There was none of that now.

She could almost have recognised the change if she had not read it in his face; the very tone of his voice told her he was not speaking to an equal.

‘What a pretty place Midgely is!’ he said. ‘I had no idea the country was so pretty about here. It’s no wonder you forsook poor, smoky old St. Barnabas!’

She made some inarticulate answer,

and he went on : ‘ You are looking very well. Country life suits you.’

And then he gave a little, unconscious sniff, and Lassie remembered that her father had not cleaned out the pig-sty yesterday; though she was so used to such omissions by this time that she had not noticed any whiffs from that direction.

‘ I met an old gentleman outside,’ he continued, ‘ who seemed greatly excited in his mind about something.’

‘ Yes,’ she said ; ‘ that is my father.’

She looked much more like the Nurse Wingate he had liked so much — the Lassie he was beginning to do something more than like — as she said this, drawing herself up and looking him straight in the face with a little touch of defiance

in the truthful gray eyes, as there had been years ago when she had told the old vicar, 'If I can't honour him myself, I won't let any one else dishonour him,' and had boxed Liza's ears in consequence.

'What a good-looking girl she is!' he thought. 'What a pity she should be wasted in this smelly hole of a place!' But he thought now only what an excellent nurse was wasted, not of an excellent wife. He had almost forgotten already that he had ever thought of her in that capacity, or that that had been the purpose of his long bicycle ride that day, or that it had filled his thoughts as he lay under the beech-tree and listened to the doves.

I think, after all, Lassie had only taken his fancy; a deeper feeling might have

survived the dirty apron and the disreputable old father and the smell of pig-sty.

She was more herself after that defiant acknowledgment of her father, but she did not ask Dr. Milton to come in or to sit down ; and he was very glad she did not, for he suddenly realised that he had a long way to get home, and that the days were drawing in (it was barely past midsummer !), and that he had only thought he would look in for a minute as he happened to be passing — and he really thought he was speaking the truth.

She answered when it was necessary, putting a respectful tone into her voice, though she had to make a desperate effort to do so ; and she called him ‘ Sir ’

once, and would have liked to make a curtsy when he took his leave, but he would shake hands. Yes, she had seen him shake hands with a poor old crossing-sweeper who had swept a crossing near the hospital.

‘Oh, by the way,’ he said as he went down the path, ‘I have just taken over a practice down in Devonshire. If you are ever that way you must come and give me a call.’

Devonshire is a large and vague address for any one wanting to pay a call; but it was only a compliment, as she knew, and as he knew too, so it was unnecessary to be more exact.

She walked down to the gate with him, and saw him mount his bicycle and ride away along the village street, and

past the forge, and over the bridge, and round the corner where the big elm stands — out of sight, out of her life ; and then she turned back and picked up the broken bits of the plate, and, hardly aware of what she was doing, tried to fit them together. But there are some broken things that never, never can be mended.

And Dr. Milton bicycled home another way ; and the roads were dusty and the sun scorching and the country less picturesque ; and he punctured his tyre, and was glad to have something with which to be angry, and on which to vent the undefined dissatisfaction that possessed him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE war was over. The words 'Peace, be still,' had been spoken once again over the turbulent tide of battle and the stormy winds of warfare, and 'there was a great calm.' The clouds were clearing away that hung over the battle-field, the confusion and noise, and terror of the war had abated; and Time, setting the campaign at a greater distance, was making plain much that seemed at the moment utterly incomprehensible, and showing how success and failure were alike the working out of the Divine will, using victory and defeat, brilliant

attack and dogged resistance, bloodshed, suffering, and death, great triumphs of generalship or heart-breaking mistakes and disasters, even treachery, cruelty, and cowardice, for His great purpose. The very fierceness of men shall turn to His praise.

A nurse in the uniform of the army reserve was travelling out of London one October day, her blue cloak and red hood winning many a kindly glance from her fellow-passengers. One old woman, seeing the red cross on her sleeve, asked if she would let her give her a kiss for the sake of 'my Sam in the South Berks as died in 'orspital. I've got his chorklet-box as the Queen sent him, God bless her!'

'I am going to see Lassie, as we used

to call her,' Nurse Nugent said to a friend who was seeing her off at Paddington — 'Nurse Wingate. I wonder if you remember her at St. Barnabas? A tall, good-looking girl.'

And the friend thought he did remember Nurse Wingate.

'Do you know,' Alice Nugent went on, 'I don't believe I should have volunteered if it had not been for her. She was much more keen about it than I was, and regularly worked me up. I am so glad she did. Only think of all I should have missed if I had not gone! And she, poor girl, did not go after all. Her mother died, and she had to go home to her father.'

And the friend said he had heard of it, 'poor girl!'

Alice Nugent's heart was glowing within her with all the memories of the past year; for memories of work in a field-hospital, loyally, bravely, untiringly carried out, make a picture that glows with heaven's own brightness. And the picture had only yesterday been framed in gold. It was a day to be remembered by many a 'soldier of the Queen,' for the war medals were presented by royalty itself, amidst the clash and clang of military bands, and the glitter and pomp of splendid uniforms, and the long lines of the troops who had faced death so bravely, and the enthusiastic shouts of thousands of spectators.

And among the 'soldiers of the Queen' rank the field-hospital nurses,

and to some of these a royal red cross is given for conspicuous devotion to duty ; and among those so distinguished was Alice Nugent.

Truly she had much to think of as the train bore her out into the country, where the woods and hedgerows were all in gala array, carried out by that unrivalled decorator Autumn with lavish use of gorgeous colouring, crimson and gold, purple and orange, beside which the colour and gilding, garlands and bunting in the town make but a poor show.

Lassie had been strangely in Alice Nugent's mind the last few days ; she hardly knew why. The nurse who stood next her the day before had reminded her of Lassie, ' though she was

not really the least like her when I came to look at her. It must have been something in her height and the way she stood. And it was so curious that when my name was called it sounded exactly as if they said Lassie, though of course if it had been she they would not have called her by that name. It was odd how vivid it all was; I quite expected her to step forward to receive her medal, and held back till some one touched me, and I found it was my turn.'

This was why she had made up her mind to go down to Midgely and find Lassie before she went home to her people in Devonshire.

'I must show her my red cross, and tell her all about it, and that it was her

doing that I went at all, and that I shall always feel grateful to her.'

That friend of Alice Nugent's had given her a bunch of violets at the station, and she looked at them and smelt their delicious fragrance. Life seemed very, very bright to her just then.

'He did not seem to remember much about Lassie,' she said to herself; 'and yet, in old days, I used to fancy that he liked her the best of the two.'

'What a pretty place!' she said to herself—as Dr. Milton had done a few months before—as she entered the village.

At the forge, the smith was leaning brawny arms on his hammer, and talking to a group of men about some

subject of such interest, apparently, that they did not notice the stranger passing, and she did not like to inquire of them for Lassie's house.

Some girls, however, standing at the post-office door, though also deep in talk, were not too much engrossed for a good stare; and they directed her to a thatched cottage close by, over whose roof a Virginia creeper threw a royal standard of crimson foliage, and from which a flight of white pigeons rose with a whirr as she opened the gate.

'I don't know,' one of the girls called after her, 'whether you 'll be in time.'

'In time! What do you mean?'

'Why, didn't you know as she was ill? Terrible bad, too, the doctor says' —

But Alice did not stop to hear more, but opened the little wicket-gate and went into the cottage.

If she had not seen many others about in the place, she would have thought that all the women in the village were assembled in the little room; and old Tim seemed to be dispensing some refreshment out of a black bottle, from which he had evidently been sustaining himself freely.

They made way before her nurse's dress and authoritative manner, her sudden appearance having taken them so by surprise that they had not time to wipe their lips and put their aprons to their eyes, or begin the recital of all they had done or would have done for the 'poor dear.'

She went straight up the wooden staircase to the room above, where Lassie lay dead.

The room was stuffy and close, and the fourpost bedstead, with the patchwork quilt half-dragged off, and the sheets tumbled and soiled, and one of the curtains off its rings, looked squalid and wretched. Dirty cups and plates heaped the table, and some curious decoction in a mug had been upset and was dripping from the table on to the floor.

Lassie's hair — that long, dark hair Alice used to envy sometimes — was loose and tangled about her face, and the pillow lay on the floor, plucked away by one of the women as the end drew near, as it might contain a game-

feather, which makes it hard for the soul to get free if the dying head is lying on it.

Lassie! with her love of fresh air, and her dainty niceness that Alice used to laugh at sometimes and think mere fidgets. Lassie! to die like this!

‘She were a masterful one, and no mistake!’ the women said of Alice; and they resented it at first, though later they learnt to bless Alice Nugent’s name.

She cleared them out of the cottage in double-quick time, and gave old Tim such a talking to as he never forgot to the end of his days. And then, with loving, tender hands she did the last offices for her friend, and made the room tidy and sweet, with the gentle October

air blowing in through the wide-open window and stirring the soft little rings of hair on the dead girl's forehead and the bunch of violets in her folded hands. You might almost have thought that Lassie knew of the change Alice had wrought in her surroundings, for there was a smile on her lips that had not often been there of late — that look of content that rests sometimes on dead faces — a foretaste, perhaps, of the wakening when we shall be satisfied.

‘She do make a beautiful corpse, and no mistake!’ the neighbours said, when curiosity compelled them to overcome their resentment at their summary dismissal, and they asked leave to come in and see. ‘She were a bit or’nary when she were alive — nothing much

to look at — but the lady nurse had set her out just for all the world like a lady, and put on one of them night-gowns as we used to make such game of when Lassie first came back and hung 'em on the line, as didn't seem fit for the likes of she, with all them frills and lace. And she'd put a bunch of violets in her hands, and wouldn't have no other flowers, though I told her I'd a lot of red dahlias, and them big yaller marigolds, as she was welcome to. And there! if she had n't gone and put a red cross medal — same as the soldiers have as has been to the war — on her breast. I could n't think at first what it were as shone so, but a medal it were, and something special, too, my 'usband says,

as they gives for extry devotion to duty — as if the poor gal had ever done anything! And there she let it bide till the coffin lid was closed down.'

But Dr. Milton's violets were buried with Lassie.

Tim Wingate went to the workhouse the day of his daughter's funeral.

'And the best place for him,' all the neighbours agreed; 'and a thousand pities he did n't go when his wife died, as we always said as it would n't answer with poor Lassie, as could n't manage the old man a bit.'

Even Tim himself, after he had got over the first pang of the enforced cleanliness of the infirmary, allowed that he'd 'better a-come sooner and had his leg seen to afore, as might

have saved him a deal of sufferin'; and he'd a lot to put up with from that gal, though he would n't go for to speak a word agin her.' But he made use of 'that gal's' memory to twit the infirmiry nurse — when she made light of his ailments — with Lassie's superior training and attainments.

But the Midgely people had no time to pay attention to old Tim's grumbling, for it was then that the epidemic of typhoid attacked the village and made so many fresh mounds in the churchyard. There were several others ill when Lassie died, and Alice, out of love for her old friend, stopped on and helped with the nursing, and won for herself the gratitude of the parish.

‘We shall always feel grateful to you, Mrs. Milton,’ the vicar’s wife used to say in after-years when they met. ‘We can never forget all you have done for the village. Midgely is quite another place since that terrible typhoid time. It was quite providential you should have come just then when poor Lassie Wingate died, and the lessons you taught the people of cleanliness and care in sanitary matters have been of untold value.’

And so Lassie’s sacrifice led to nothing but failure? Yes, in the sight of man, who can only judge by results; but perhaps a clearer sight than ours may judge differently, and that when the Son of Man shall come in His glory, and His soldiers are gathered from all

nations for the great day of reward, 'Well done!' may be said to many an one whom the world reckoned — and who reckoned himself — a miserable failure.

And it may be that, among the crowns cast down before the throne, those painfully formed of meekly-borne failure and disappointment will not be among the least pleasing in the eyes of Him who also wore the crown of thorns.

THE END.

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