

TOLD TO PARSON

By Eden Phillpotts

A LITTLE girl came rushing into the gate of the vicarage at Postbridge, Dartmoor, and it chanced that she met the minister himself as he bent in his garden and scattered lime around upspringing seeds.

"These slugs would try the patience of a saint," he said, hearing footsteps, and not looking up. "They have eaten off nearly all my young larkspurs. How can one fight them?"

Then a small, breathless voice broke in upon him.

"Please, sir, mother sent me, an' I've runned a'most all the way from our cottage w/out stopping once. 'Tis old Mr. Mundy, please. He'm dying—so he told mother when her fetched him his milk this morning—an' he says he've got something very special to tell anybody as'll care to come an' listen to it. But nobody don't want to hear his secrets in the village; so mother said 'twas your job, please, an' sent me for your honor."

"My job—yes, so it is, little maid. I'll come at once. An' they'd better send for the doctor. It isn't his regular visiting day until Thursday, but probably it's his job, too."

"Mother axed the old man that; an' he said as he didn't want no doctor, nor his trade (medicine) neither. He say he'm nearly a hundred years old, an' he won't be messed about with at his time of life, but just die easy an' comfortable."

In twenty minutes the clergyman had walked a mile and crossed a strip of the wilderness that stretched round about the little hamlet on Dartmoor where he labored. A single cottage separated from the rest by wide tracts of furze and heather stood here, and near it lay a neglected garden. But "Gaffer" Mundy had long ceased to fight the moor or care for his plot of land. His patch of the reclaimed earth returned fast to primitive savagery. Brake fern sprouted in the potato bed; rush, heather and brier choked the currant bushes; fearless rabbits nibbled every green thing.

"Come in, whoever you may be," said an ancient voice, so the visitor obeyed and entered, to find the sufferer, fully dressed, sitting by a fire of peat. Nosh Mundy was once very tall, but now his height had vanished and he had been long bent under his burden of years. A bald, yellow skull rose above his countenance, and infinite age marked his face. As the earth through centuries of cooling has wrinkled into mountains and flattened into ocean beds between them, so these aged features, stamped and torn with the fret and fever of long life, had become as a book whereon time had written many things for those who read them. Very weak was the man, and very thin. He was toothless and almost hairless; the scanty beard that fell from his chin was white, while his mustache had long been dyed with snuff to a lively yellow. His eyes remained alive, though one was filmed over with an opaline haze. But from the other he saw clearly enough for

all his needs. He made it a boast that he could not write, and he could not read. There was no book in his house.

"'Tis you, eh? I could have wished for a man out of your trade, but it won't matter. I've got a thing worth telling; but mark this, I don't care a button what you think of it, an' I don't want none of your bunkum an' lies after I have told it. Sit down in that thick chair an' smoke your pipe an' keep cool. Ban't no use getting excited now, for what I be going to tell 'o happened more'n sixty years ago—afore you was born or thought about?"

"My smoke won't trouble you?"

"Bah? I've smoked and chewed an' snuffed for more'n half a century. I'm baccy through and through—soaked in it, as you might say. An' as for smoke, if what you tell to church be true, I shall have smoke, an' fire too, afore long. But hell's only a joke to frighten females. I don't set no store by it."

"Better leave that, Mr. Mundy. If you really believe your end is near, let us be serious. Yes, I'll smoke my pipe. And you must feel very, very sure, that what you tell me is absolutely sacred, unless you wish it otherwise."

"Nought sacred about it, I reckon—ali t'other way. An' as for telling, you can go an' shout it from top of Bell-ever Tor you'm minded to. I don't care a farden curse who knows it now. Wait till I'm out of it; then do as you please."

He drank a little milk, remained silent a moment with his eyes upon the fire, and presently began to tell his story. "But that's to overrun the matter. Life's strange tale.

"Me an' my brother was the only children our parents ever had; an' my brother was five years older'n me. My father, Jonas Mundy, got money through a will, an' he brought it to Dartmoor, like a fool, an' rented a bit of moor from the Duchy of Cornwall, an' built a farm upon it, an' set to work to reclaim the land. At first he prospered, an' Aller Bottom Farm, as my father called it, was a promising place, so long as sweat of man poured out there without ceasing. You can see the ruins of it yet, for when Jonas Mundy died an' it failed to me, I left it an' comed up here; an' the chap as took it off my hands—he went bankrupt inside three year. 'Tis all failed to pieces now, for none tried again.

When I was fifteen an' my brother, John James, was twenty, us both failed in love with the same maid. You stare; but though fifteen in years, I was twenty-five in understanding, an' a very oncoming youth where women were concerned. Nelly Baker had turned seventeen, an' more than once I told her that though a boy of fifteen couldn't wed a maid of her age without making folks laugh, even if he could get a parson to hitch them, yet a champ of three-an'-twenty might very properly take a girl of five-an'-twenty without the deed calling for any question. An' her loved me truly enough; for though you only see a

worn-out scarecrow afore you now, yet seventy year agone I filled the eye of more maidens than one, and was a bowerly youth to look upon—tall, straight, tough, wi' hair so black as a crow.

"John James he never knowed that I cared a button for Nelly. I never showed it to a living soul but her by word or look; an' she kept quiet—for fear of being laughed at, no doubt. Her folks were dead on the match with John James, an' he pressed her so hard that she'd have took him but for me. He was a pretty fellow too—the Mundys were very personable as a family. Quite different, though, from me. Fah polled, wi' flaxen hair, an' terrible strong was John James,

an' the best wrestler on Dartmoor in them days.

"Me an' her met by appointment a week afore she'd got to give him a final 'yes' or 'no.' I mind it very well to this hour; an' yet 'tis seventy-odd years agone. On Hartland Tor us sat in the heather unseen, an' I put my arms around her an' loved her, an' promised to make her a happy woman. Then I told her what she'd got to do. First I made her prick her finger wi' a thorn of the furze, an' draw blood, an' swear afore the Living God she'd marry me as soon as I could make her mistress of a farm.

"She was for joking about the matter at first, but I soon forced her to grow serious. She done what I told her, an' since she believed in the Liv-



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