

S Chapter 1

Small feckless clouds were hurried across the vast untroubled sky—shepherdless, futile, imponderable—and were torn to fragments on the fangs of the mountains, so ending their ephemeral adventures with nothing of their fugitive existence left but a few tears.

It was cold in the Callow—a spinney of silver birches and larches that topped a round hill. A purple mist hinted of buds in the tree-tops, and a fainter purple haunted the vistas between the silver and brown boles.

Only the crudeness of youth was here as yet, and not its triumph—only the sharp calyx-point, the pricking tip of the bud, like spears, and not the paten of the leaf, the chalice of the flower.

For as yet spring had no flight, no song, but went like a half-fledged bird, hopping tentatively through the undergrowth. The bright springing mercury that carpeted the open spaces had only just hung out its pale flowers, and honeysuckle leaves were still tongues of green fire. Between the larch boles and under the thickets of honeysuckle and blackberry came a tawny silent form, wearing with the calm dignity of woodland creatures a beauty of eye and limb, a brilliance of tint, that few women could have worn without self-consciousness. Clear-eyed, lithe, it stood for a moment in the full sunlight—a year-old fox, round-headed and velvet-footed. Then it slid into the shadows. A shrill whistle came from the interior of the wood, and the fox bounded towards it.

‘Where you bin? You’m stray and lose yourself, certain sure!’ said a girl’s voice, chidingly motherly. ‘And if you’m alost, I’m alost; so come you whome. The sun’s undering, and there’s bones for supper!’

With that she took to her heels, the little fox after her, racing down the Callow in the cold level light till they came to the Woodus’s cottage.

Hazel Woodus, to whom the fox belonged, had always lived at the Callow. There her mother, a Welsh gipsy, had born her in bitter rebellion,

hating marriage and a settled life and Abel Woodus as a wild cat hates a cage. She was a rover, born for the artist's joy and sorrow, and her spirit found no relief for its emotions; for it was dumb. To the linnet its flight, to the thrush its song; but she had neither flight nor song. Yet the tongueless thrush is a thrush still, and has golden music in its heart. The caged linnet may sit moping, but her soul knows the dip and rise of flight on an everlasting May morning.

All the things she felt and could not say, all the stored honey, the black hatred, the wistful homesickness for the unfenced wild—all that other women would have put into their prayers, she gave to Hazel. The whole force of her wayward heart flowed into the softly beating heart of her baby. It was as if she passionately flung the life she did not value into the arms of her child.

When Hazel was fourteen she died, leaving her treasure—an old, dirty, partially illegible manuscript-book of spells and charms and other gipsy lore—to her daughter.

Her one request was that she might be buried in the Callow under the yellow larch needles, and not in a churchyard. Abel Woodus did as she asked, and was regarded askance by most of the community for not burying her in Chrissen-ground. But this did not trouble him. He had his harp still, and while he had that he needed no other friend. It had been his absorption in his music that had prevented him understanding his wife, and in the early days of their marriage she had been wildly jealous of the tall gilt harp with its faded felt cover that stood in the corner of the living-room. Then her jealousy changed to love of it, and her one desire was to be able to draw music from its plaintive strings. She could never master even the rudiments of music, but she would sit on rainy evenings when Abel was away and run her thin hands over the strings with a despairing passion of grieving love. Yet she could not bear to hear Abel play. Just as some childless women with all their accumulated stores of love cannot bear to see a mother with her child, so Maray Woodus, with her sealed genius, her incapacity for expression, could not bear to hear the easy self-expression of another. For Abel was in his way a master of his art; he had dark places in his soul, and that is the very core of art and its substance. He had the lissom hands and cheerful self-absorption that bring success.

He had met Maray at an Eisteddfod that had been held in days gone by on a hill five miles from the Callow, called God's Little Mountain, and crowned by a chapel. She had listened, swaying and weeping to the surge and lament of his harp, and when he won the harper's prize and laid it in her lap she had consented to be married in the chapel at the end of the Eisteddfod week. That was nineteen years ago, and she was fled like the leaves and the birds of departed summers; but God's Little Mountain still towered as darkly to the eastward; the wind still leapt sheer from the chapel to the young larches of the Callow; nothing had changed at all; only one more young, anxious, eager creature had come into the towering, subluminescent scheme of things. Hazel had her mother's eyes, strange, fawn-coloured eyes like water, and in the large clear irises were tawny flecks. In their shy honesty they were akin to the little fox's. Her hair, too, of a richer colour than her father's, was tawny and foxlike, and her ways were graceful and covert as a wild creature's.

She stood in the lane above the cottage, which nestled below with its roof on a level with the hedge-roots, and watched the sun dip. The red light from the west stained her torn old dress, her thin face, her eyes, till she seemed to be dipped in blood. The fox, wistfulness in her expression and the consciousness of coming supper in her mind, gazed obediently where her mistress gazed, and was touched with the same fierce beauty. They stood there fronting the crimson pools over the far hills, two small sentient things facing destiny with pathetic courage; they had, in the chill evening on the lonely hill, a look as of those predestined to grief, almost an air of martyrdom.

The small clouds that went westward took each in its turn the prevailing colour, and vanished, dipped in blood.

From the cottage, as Hazel went down the path, came the faint thrumming of the harp, changing as she reached the door to the air of 'The Ash Grove.' The cottage was very low, one-storied, and roofed with red corrugated iron. The three small windows had frames coloured with washing-blue and frills of crimson cotton within. There seemed scarcely room for even Hazel's small figure. The house was little larger than a good pigsty, and only the trail of smoke from its squat chimney showed that humanity dwelt there.

Hazel gave Foxy her supper and put her to bed in the old washtub

where she slept. Then she went into the cottage with an armful of logs from the wood heap. She threw them on the open fire.

'I'm a-cold,' she said; 'the rain's cleared, and there'll be a duck's frost to-night.'

Abel looked up absently, humming the air he intended to play next.

'I bin in the Callow, and I've gotten a primmyrose,' continued Hazel, accustomed to his ways, and not discouraged. 'And I got a bit of blackthorn, white as a lady.'

Abel was well on in 'Ap Jenkyn' by now.

Hazel moved about, seeing to supper, for she was as hungry as Foxy, talking all the time in her rather shrilly sweet voice, while she dumped the cracked cups and the loaf and margarine on the bare table. The kettle was not boiling, so she threw some bacon-grease on the fire, and a great tongue of flame sprang out and licked at Abel's beard. He raised a hand to it, continuing to play with the other.

Hazel laughed.

'You be fair comic-struck,' she said.

She always spoke in this tone of easy comradeship; they got on very well; they were so entirely indifferent to each other. There was nothing filial about her or parental about him. Neither did they ever evince the least affection for each other.

He struck up 'It's a fine hunting day.'

'Oh! shut thy row with that drodsome thing!' said Hazel with sudden passion. 'Look'ee! I unna bide in if you go on.'

'Ur?' queried Abel dreamily.

'Play summat else!' said Hazel, 'not that; I dunna like it.'

'You be a queer girl, 'Azel,' said Abel, coming out of his abstraction. 'But I dunna mind playing "Why do the People?" instead; it's just as heartening.'

'Canna you stop meddling wi' the music and come to supper?' asked Hazel. The harp was always called 'the music,' just as Abel's mouth-organ was 'the little music.'

She reached down the flitch to cut some bacon off, and her dress, already torn, ripped from shoulder to waist.

'If you dunna take needle to that, you'll be mother-naked afore a week's out,' said Abel indifferently.

'I mun get a new un,' said Hazel. 'It unna mend. I'll go to town to-morrow.'

'Shall you bide with yer auntie the night over?'

'Ah.'

'I shanna look for your face till I see your shadow, then. You can bring a tuthree wreath-frames. There's old Samson at the Yeath unna last long; they'll want a wreath made.'

Hazel sat and considered her new dress. She never had a new one till the old one fell off her back, and then she usually got a second-hand one, as a shilling or two would buy only material if new, but would stretch to a ready-made if second-hand.

'Foxy'd like me to get a green velvet,' said Hazel. She always expressed her intense desires, which were few, in this formula. It was her unconscious protest against the lovelessness of her life. She put the blackthorn in water and contemplated its whiteness with delight; but it had not occurred to her that she might herself, with a little trouble, be as sweet and fresh as its blossom. The spiritualization of sex would be needed before such things would occur to her. At present she was sexless as a leaf. They sat by the fire till it went out; then they went to bed, not troubling to say good-night.

In the middle of the night Foxy woke. The moon filled her kennel-mouth like a door, and the light shone in her eyes. This frightened her—so large a lantern in an unseen hand, held so purposefully before the tiny home of one defenceless little creature. She barked sharply. Hazel awoke promptly, as a mother at her child's cry. She ran straight out with her bare feet into the fierce moonlight.

'What ails you?' she whispered. 'What ails you, little un?'

The wind stalked through the Callow, and the Callow moaned. A moan came also from the plain, and black shapes moved there as the clouds drove onwards.

'Maybe they're out,' muttered Hazel. 'Maybe the black meet's set for to-night and she's scented the jeath pack.' She looked about nervously. 'I can see summat driving dark o'er the pastures yonder; they'm abroad, surely.'

She hurried Foxy into the cottage and bolted the door.

'There!' she said. 'Now you lie good and quiet in the corner, and the death pack shanna get you.'

It was said that the death pack, phantom hounds of a bad squire, whose gross body had been long since put to sweeter uses than any he put it to in life—changed into the clear-eyed daisy and the ardent pimpernel—scoured the country on dark stormy nights. Harm was for the house past which it streamed, death for those that heard it give tongue.

This was the legend, and Hazel believed it implicitly. When she had found Foxy half dead outside her deserted earth, she had been quite sure that it was the death pack that had made away with Foxy's mother. She connected it also with her own mother's death. Hounds symbolized everything she hated, everything that was not young, wild and happy. She identified herself with Foxy, and so with all things hunted and snared and destroyed.

Night, shadow, loud winds, winter—these were inimical; with these came the death pack, stealthy and untiring, following for ever the trail of the defenceless. Sunlight, soft airs, bright colours, kindness—these were beneficent havens to flee into. Such was the essence of her creed, the only creed she held, and it lay darkly in her heart, never expressed even to herself. But when she ran into the night to comfort the little fox, she was living up to her faith as few do; when she gathered flowers and lay in the sun, she was dwelling in a mystical atmosphere as vivid as that of the saints; when she recoiled from cruelty, she was trampling evil underfoot, perhaps more surely than those great divines who destroyed one another in their zeal for their Maker.

D Chapter 2

At six the next morning they had breakfast. Abel was busy making a hive for the next summer's swarm. When he made a coffin, he always used up the bits thus. A large coffin did not leave very much; but sometimes there were small ones, and then he made splendid hives. The white township on the south side of the lilac hedge increased as slowly and unceasingly as the green township around the distant churchyard. In summer the garden was loud with bees, and the cottage was full of them at swarming-time. Later it was littered with honey-sections; honey dripped from the table, and pieces of broken comb lay on the floor and were contentedly eaten by Foxy.

Whenever an order for a coffin came, Hazel went to tell the bees who was dead. Her father thought this unnecessary. It was only for folks that died in the house, he said. But he had himself told the bees when his wife died. He had gone out on that vivid June morning to his hives, and had stood watching the lines of bees fetching water, their shadows going and coming on the clean white boards. Then he had stooped and said with a curious confidential indifference, 'Maray's jead.' He had put his ear to the hive and listened to the deep, solemn murmur within; but it was the murmur of the future, and not of the past, the preoccupation with life, not with death, that filled the pale galleries within. Today the eighteen hives lay under their winter covering, and the eager creatures within slept. Only one or two strayed sometimes to the early arabis, desultory and sad, driven home again by the frosty air to await the purple times of honey. The happiest days of Abel's life were those when he sat like a bard before the seething hives and harped to the muffled roar of sound that came from within.

All his means of livelihood were joys to him. He had the art of per

petual happiness in this, that he could earn as much as he needed by doing the work he loved. He played at flower shows and country dances, revivals and weddings. He sold his honey, and sometimes his bees. He delighted in wreath-making, gardening, and carpentering, and always in the background was his music—some new air to try on the gilded harp, some new chord or turn to master. The garden was almost big enough, and quite beautiful enough, for that of a mansion. In the summer white lilies haunted it, standing out in the dusk with their demure cajolery, looking, as Hazel said, like ghosses. Goldenrod foamed round the cottage, deeply embowering it, and lavender made a grey mist beside the red quarries of the path. Then Hazel sat like a queen in a regalia of flowers, eating the piece of bread and honey that made her dinner, and covering her face with lily pollen.

Now, there were no flowers in the garden; only the yew-tree by the gate that hung her waxen blossom along the undersides of the branches. Hazel hated the look of the frozen garden; she had an almost unnaturally intense craving for everything rich, vivid, and vital. She was all these things herself, as she communed with Foxy before starting. She had wound her hair round her head in a large plait and her old black hat made the colour richer.

‘You’*m* nigh on thirty miles to go there and back, unless you get a lift,’ said Abel.

‘A lift? I dunna want never no lifts!’ said Hazel scornfully.

‘You’*m* as good a walker as John of No Man’s Parish,’ replied Abel, ‘and he walks for ever, so they do say.’

As Hazel set forth in the sharp, fresh morning, the Callow shone with radiant brown and silver, and no presage moved within it of the snow that would hurtle upon it from mountains of cloud all night.

When Hazel had chosen her dress—a peacock blue serge—and had put it on there and then in the back of the shop, curtained off for this purpose, she went to her aunt’s.

Her cousin Albert regarded her with a startled look. He was in a margarine shop, and spent his days explaining that margarine was as good as butter. But, looking at Hazel, he felt that here *was* butter—something that needed no apology, and created its own demand. The bright blue made her so radiant that her aunt shook her head.

‘You take after your ma, ’Azal,’ she said. Her tone was irritated.

‘I be glad.’

Her aunt sniffed.

‘You ought to be as glad to take after one parent as another, if you were jutiful,’ she said.

‘I dunna want to take after anybody but myself.’ Hazel flushed indignantly.

‘Well! *we are* conceited!’ exclaimed her aunt. ‘Albert, don’t give ’Azal all the liver and bacon. I s’pose your mother can eat as well as school-girls?’

Albert was gazing at Hazel so animatedly, so obviously approving of all she said, that her aunt was very much ruffled.

‘No wonder you only want to be like yourself,’ he said. ‘Jam! my word, Hazel, you’re jam!’

‘Albert!’ cried his mother raspily, with a pathetic note of pleading, ‘haven’t I always taught you to say preserve?’ She was not pleading against the inelegant word, but against Hazel.

When Albert went back to the shop, Hazel helped her aunt to wash up. All the time she was doing this, with unusual care, and cleaning the knives—a thing she hated—she was waiting anxiously for the expected invitation to stay the night. She longed for it as the righteous long for the damnation of their enemies. She never paid a visit except here, and to her it was a wild excitement. The gas-stove, the pretty china, the rose-patterned wall-paper, were all strange and marvellous as a fairy-tale. At home there was no paper, no lath and plaster, only the bare bricks, and the ceiling was of bulging sailcloth hung under the rafters.

Now to all these was added the new delight of Albert’s admiring gaze—an alert, live gaze, a thing hitherto unknown to Albert. Perhaps, if she stayed, Albert would take her out for the evening. She would see the streets of the town in the magic of lights. She would walk out in her new dress with a real young man—a young man who possessed a gilt watch-chain. The suspense, as the wintry afternoon drew in, became almost intolerable. Still her aunt did not speak. The sitting-room looked so cosy when tea was laid; the firelight played over the cups; her aunt drew the curtains. On one side there was joy, warmth—all that she could desire; on the other, a forlorn walk in the dark. She had left it until so late that

her heart shook at the idea of the many miles she must cover alone if her aunt did not ask her.

Her aunt knew what was going on in Hazel's mind, and smiled grimly at Hazel's unusual meekness. She took the opportunity of administering a few hometruths.

'You look like an actress,' she said.

'Do I, auntie?'

'Yes. It's a disgrace, the way you look. You quite draw men's eyes.'

'It's nice to draw men's eyes, inna it, auntie?'

'Nice! Hazel, I should like to box your ears! You naughty girl! You'll go wrong one of these days.'

'What for will I, auntie?'

'Some day you'll get spoke to!' She said the last words in a hollow whisper. 'And after that, as you won't say and do what a good girl would, you'll get picked up.'

'I'd like to see anyone pick me up!' said Hazel indignantly. 'I'd kick!'

'Oh! how unladylike! I didn't mean really picked up! I meant allegorically—like in the Bible.'

'Oh! only like in the Bible,' said Hazel disappointedly. 'I thought you meant *summat real*.'

'Oh! You'll bring down my grey hairs,' wailed Mrs. Prowde.

An actress was bad, but an infidel! 'That I should live to hear it—in my own villa, with my own soda cake on the cake-dish—and my own son,' she added dramatically, as Albert entered, 'coming in to have his God-fearing heart broken!'

This embarrassed Albert, for it was true, though the cause assigned was not.

'What's Hazel been up to?' he queried.

The affection beneath his heavy pleasantry strengthened his mother in her resolve that Hazel should not stay the night.

'There's a magic-lantern lecture on tonight, Hazel,' he said. 'Like to come?'

'Ah! I should that.'

'You can't walk home at that time of night,' said Mrs. Prowde. 'In fact, you ought to start now.'

'But Hazel's staying the night, mother, surely?'

'Hazel must get back to her father.'

'But, mother, there's the spare-room.'

'The spare-room's being spring-cleaned.'

Albert plunged; he was desperate and forgetful of propriety.

'I can sleep on this sofa,' he said. 'She can have my room.'

'Hazel can't have your room. It's not suitable.'

'Well, let her share yours, then.'

Mrs. Prowde played her trump-card. 'Little I thought,' she said, 'when your dear father went, that before three years had passed you'd be so forgetful of my comfort (and his memory) as to suggest such a thing. As long as I live, my room's mine. When I'm gone,' she concluded, knocking down her adversary with her superior weight of years—'when I'm gone (and the sooner the better for you, no doubt), you can put her in my room and yourself, too.'

When she had said this she was horrified at herself. What an improper thing to say! Even anger and jealousy did not excuse impropriety, though they excused any amount of unkindness.

But at this Hazel cried out in her turn:

'That he never will!' The fierce egoism of the consciously weak flamed up in her. 'I keep myself to myself,' she finished.

'If such things come to pass, mother,' Albert said, and his eyes looked suddenly vivid, so that Hazel clapped her hands and said, 'Yer lamps are lit! Yer lamps are lit!' and broke into peals of laughter. 'If such a thing comes to pass,' laboured Albert, 'they'll come decent, that is, they won't be spoken of.'

He voiced his own and his mother's creed.

At this point the argument ended, because Albert had to go back after tea to finish some work. As he stamped innumerable swans on the yielding material, he never doubted that his mother had also yielded. He forgot that life had to be shaped with an axe till the chips fly.

As soon as he had gone, Mrs. Prowde shut the door on Hazel hastily, for fear the weather might bring relenting. She had other views for Albert. In after years, when the consequences of her action had become things of the past, she always spoke of how she had done her best with Hazel. She never dreamed that she, by her selfishness that night, had herself set Hazel's feet in the dark and winding path that she must tread