

*The Woodcutter*  
by Mary Russell Mitford

Murder most foul, as in the best it is;  
But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.

*Shakspeare.* [sic]

The tract of land which joins Hampshire to Berkshire is surprisingly wild and rude, considering that it is situated in what may be called the immediate neighborhood of the metropolis—that is to say, within twenty leagues, in the very midst of the best cultivated and most populous district of the South of England. It consists of a chain of hills, or, perhaps, more accurately speaking, of a belt of high table land, so high that the Romans, those dear lovers of a commanding position in every sense of the word, had erected a series of military posts along the line, embracing the two picturesque and precipitous stations called Cæsar’s Camp and the Beacon, and the city of Silchester, whose deep fosse, now a verdant meadow, whose rock-like wall, crowned with old trees and twined together with ivy, and whose graduated amphitheatre, remain almost entire, while the tessellated pavement of the baths is now and then exposed by the plough, and the course of the streets may still be traced by the stunted growth of the springing or ripening corn, forming altogether one of the most perfect and curious Roman remains in the kingdom.

In this tract there were few inhabitants of the higher classes. Divided among three or four large and distant landed proprietors, the old manor houses that still remained standing and degenerated from their pristine rank and beauty into the dwellings of yeomen of the second class, while even these farms were, from the prevalence of common land, remote and unfrequent; and the livings were, from the same cause, so small that two or three of them were mere appendages to richer benefices, and served by curates from the nearest town; so that that blessing of a rural district, the resident country clergyman, who, even in his secular capacity as the friend of the poor, their comforter in distress, and their counsellor in perplexity, the educated and intelligent man, known to them all, and to whom everyone may resort with the certainty of commanding his disinterested advice, and his zealous services, even this important functionary was wanting at Allonby.

As the farmers were few and scattered, so were the agricultural population, which may be said to depend upon them. The very shops were so far apart that if the inhabitants had been more numerous there would have been danger of a famine, and before the New Beer Act there was not an alehouse in the parish; but now that a beer shop, snugly ensconced beneath the very corner of the coppice, offered the delinquents a convenient rendezvous, the act of authorising the sale of game facilitated the disposal of the spoil, the severe and angry keeper found his hares and pheasants disappear with tenfold rapidity, and poaching became a fashionable employment in the village of Allonby.

This keeper, Michael Parr by name, was one of the most important personages of the neighborhood. Beside the liberal salary and comfortable residence which he derived from his situation, his late wife had been a widow of some little property for her station, and the two young daughters, by her first husband, who were left under his care and guardianship (he had no child himself), had each so many hundreds as would render them excellent matches for young

men in their own rank of life. The younger, Anne Rowarth, was indeed still a child, but her sister Lucy, a girl of nineteen, was one whose charm of person and manner, her sweetness and gayety, and a certain natural gentility and grace, rendered her, in addition to her little portion, an object of great attract to the beaux of the village.

Lucy's gentillesse had all the advantage of contrast; for, although gamekeepers be generally, in consequence probably of their frequent intercourse with their masters, among the best mannered of gentlemen's servants, Michael Parr was a notable exception to the rule, being about the roughest and surliest peasant in the whole country of Southampton, loud, rude, overbearing and obstinate. How his stepdaughter, reared under his roof, and with little benefit from female training, for her mother had been dead for many years, came by her smiling gentleness might be a puzzle, if we did not every day see living instances of such associations, the modest violet springing up from the roots of the gnarled oak, and the woodbine intertwisting its flowery garlands with the dark and prickly leaves of the holly. It seems to be a law of nature that the sweet and the gracious should mingle with the stern and the frowning, without either losing one particle of its distinguishing quality.

That Lucy would not have been happier with a stepfather of milder mood, I do not pretend to say; but she had the rare and precious secret of making the best of her situation, even under circumstances of more than usual trial to a young and soft-hearted girl.

"Never fret, Anne," said she one day in reply to certain murmurings and pityings of the affectionate and quick-tempered child; "never fret about me; times will mend. Perhaps my father may at last forget this old grudge between him and Master Prescott, for he cannot really believe, whatever he may say, that either he, my Lord's head woodman, or his son, are concerned in this poaching, which worries him so; perhaps Master Prescott and he may make up matters; or perhaps he may learn to distinguish between William and his father. I am sure nobody can be more respectful to him than poor William is; he treats him as if he were my lord himself; or, at all events, Annie, even if that shake of the head of yours say true, and there is no chance of his relenting, why eighteen months will soon pass away,—and then" —and with a blush and a smile of exquisite brightness Lucy turned away her fair face from her young sister and suddenly stopped, as suddenly as if William Prescott himself had been there to hear her.

"Eighteen months, and then! And what then, sister?" enquired Anne, laughing.

"Why, then, you know, I shall be one and twenty—of age, as it is called."

"Well, but will that make Master Parr open his doors to let in William Prescott?"

"No!" rejoined Lucy; "but if William should continue in the same mind there will be nothing to hinder me from walking out of them to my aunt at Bedford—and then—you know, Annie, that by our poor mother's will, if, when I am one-and-twenty I should happen to—to marry, and have a home for you, you may come if you like and live with me. Would you come, Annie? Would you like to live with William and me?"

“Would I, my own dear Lucy! Would I not?” and instantly they were clasped in each other’s arms with the affection that so well became the near and dear relationship by which the young orphans were united.

This conversation took place as they were arranging the light and pretty cottage kitchen, bright and radiant with the mingled effects of cleanliness and order after their noontide meal. The repast itself had been embittered to Lucy, and still more to her loving little sister, by the violence and threats of Michael Parr, who passed the whole of dinner time in speaking ill of William and his father, but peaceful anticipation like this was fated to much of fearful and miserable preventive.

The two old men had unluckily met the night before at the sign of the Horse Shoes, a place which, although neither was a drunkard, both parties visited much too frequently; and the keeper, whose naturally surly temper was stimulated into tenfold fierceness by beer, having more than insinuated his suspicions that the woodcutter was art and part in the disappearance of his hares and pheasants, an accusation which, aided, in his own case, by mine host of the Horse Shoes’ good liquor, caused his adversary’s wrath to blaze forth so wildly that it was as much as the landlord and the rest of his company, consisting of the parish clerk, the blacksmith, and the shoemaker, could do to prevent the defiance which each had hurled at the other from ending in a personal conflict, while William who came in accidentally, had caused a diversion of the pugnacious keeper’s fury by calmly assuring him that some day or other he would repent his present conduct. Nothing is so provoking to a man in a passion as a cool prediction of this sort from one who is not; and this threat, as he called it, had not only thrown Michael Parr into fresh fury at the moment, but had rankled in his mind to that very hour; the last words that he spoke on leaving home implying his fixed resolution to detect the Prescotts, if, as he firmly believed, they were the poachers, and to bring it home to them if it should cost him his life.

And this was the declaration that had awakened Annie’s sympathy, and alarmed her for the fate of her sister’s love affair, in which, like most young girls led by circumstances into such confidences, she took a warm and anxious interest.

With a view to relieve the expression of gloomy thought which clouded Lucy’s countenance, Annie exclaimed, “Let us go to the Holm Coppice, Lucy, after we have called upon dear Aunt Benham. I have not gathered one primrose this year, and I do so love to find the very first. Besides,” quoth the little maiden, in a half whisper, “they are falling the elms, and William will be there. Let us go to the Holm Coppice.”

A momentary smile played round Lucy’s rosy mouth; love and joy were in every dimple. But a moment’s reflection changed the glad expression of her lovely face, although its sweetness was indestructible; she shook her head, and paused for an instant at the wicket, which she was opening. “No, Annie! you forget that my father will be there also, setting, as he declared, some trap, not for the game, but for the poachers. And even if he were not in that coppice, we ought not to go there. It is not maidenly, dearest Annie, to go without cause to the place where—” and with a blush, sudden and unconscious, which brought back the smiles and the dimples, a blush which rose to her very temples, she suddenly paused. “The time will come, mine own Annie, when you will understand these feelings. We must not go to the coppice! But we may, perhaps,

meet with some primroses on the southern side of the Mount. I should like you to find your favorite flower today, Annie; we'll walk over the Mount."

Now this Mount, as the country people call it, is the very perfect remains of the old Roman amphitheatre. The level space in the middle a direct and most equal oval, with its open entrances for wild beasts at each end, and the graduated seats for the spectators, rising rank over rank, each distinctly traceable, although overgrown with ivy and trailing plants, and mixed with huge trees, the growth of centuries, in which the rooks have formed a large and noisy colony. This amphitheatre, so perfect and yet so changed, the oval space in the middle being all that is now clear of wood, and that is quite as level as a lawn, had been always one of the sisters' favorite haunts. Passing, therefore, the rock-like walls, crowned with old pollard oaks, and tufted with immense bushes of ivy, maple trees, and hoary thorns, with the dark and mirror-like pool, which reflects so finely the tall elms upon the margin, the white speckled clouds, and the clear blue sky, they reached the amphitheatre, and found, in a southern nook, among the roots of an old beech, a tuft of primroses, in all the variety of blossom, from the full expanded flower, already fading, to the tiniest bud; and close beside this fresh, fragrant plant, at the sight of which Annie clapped her hands and laughed, insensible to the dignity which a maiden almost in her teens ought to have displayed—close to the "sothe primrose," she had the delight of finding a half-blown violet, dim as Cytheria's eyes, at which treasure brave Annie fairly jumped and shouted with ecstasy; and then proceeding to gather her wild nosegay, together with other stray blossoms which she found scattered in that sheltered nook, she and Lucy proceeded to the widow Benham's cottage, which stood beside the Mount, snugly protected from the chill north-east, and doubled the pleasure which the flowers had already given her, by presenting them to her venerable friend, and emerging them in a small cup of delicate old china—a relic of better days, of which the white ground was almost as transparent as an egg-shell, while the raised flowers might vie in delicacy of coloring and arrangement even with these, the first beauties of the spring.

Mrs. Benham took the freedom of age and affection to speak of William Prescott, and lament the squabble of the Horse Shoes, and especially the threat of vengeance of which she had heard: "And yet he is a fine youth, Lucy. A good son has he been to the dead and the living, to her who is gone and to him who remains; and the good son will make the good husband. If my brother Michael could but be reconciled—but we must wait and hope: ye are full young yet, and may have many happy years in store. A blessing will go with you, Lucy, if only for your kindness to a lone widow who has none to care for her now save your gentle heart, my precious child." And the tears fell from the good dame's eyes, while answering drops mingled with the smiles and blushes on Lucy's blooming cheeks.

It was now sunset, for the primrose guest, and the daily cares rendered by both the girls to the sick widow, had caused the time to pass by unheeded. But it became every moment more and more probable that the keeper, always unstable and impatient, might return home for his tea, and Lucy, laying aside her scruples respecting William agreed to return by the shortest path; in the present case, certainly not the quickest; for the woodcutter, whether attracted by the light and graceful figure as the two young maidens passed the stile leading into the coppice, or whether he was really leaving work, so that the meeting was purely accidental, did yet join the fair sisters just as they were passing rapidly on their way; and the five minutes hurried talk, which ensued,

albeit full of fear and consciousness, a brief and stolen interview, was yet inexpressibly soothing and comfortable to both.

“Your *step*-father (William, who never used ill-words toward anybody, proved his distaste toward Michael Parr by the constant addition of that ominous monosyllable; never had he been known to say ‘your father,’) your step-father, Lucy, will repent his unkindness toward us both before long. Of that I am certain. He shall repent it. Will you go, Lucy? Can’t you stay a little longer? Five minutes? One? This is meeting only to part. Well, then, if go you must, goodnight, my Lucy! Goodnight, Annie! If you won’t let me return with you I must run back to fetch my axe, which I have left in the copse, Annie! One word, Annie! A secret! A great secret! Lucy must not hear—come nearer: Now listen! Do contrive to call upon Mrs. Benham just about this time, and to come back this way! Manage that for me, Annie. Goodnight, dear Lucy!” said the lover, disappearing over the stile.

Annie, charmed to find herself of importance, and making a great mystery of William’s whisper, tripped back in the gayest spirits; and such is the buoyancy of youth and so contagious the hilarity of a young and innocent girl, that, unpromising as their prospects appeared, Lucy herself was happy and hopeful in no ordinary measure. Little cause had they for the haste which they had made to gain their home before the return of the cross-grained keeper. They waited tea (the meal which in that sort of life is, perhaps, especially among women, that which they like the best), they kept the teakettle on their cleanly swept hearth, until an hour so fashionable that it would not have been credited in Allonby; and when at last they took their own simple meal, they deposited the keeper’s nicely made toast, together with the teapot, in the chimney corner, to keep it warm for him in case of his returning shivering with cold and fatigue from a night watch of the coverts; for, with these poor girls, Lucy especially, duty was almost as wakeful and careful as love. Midnight came and passed, and still no signs of Michael Parr.

As the night wore on, the placid cheerfulness with which the betrothed maiden had been blessed yielded naturally enough to anxiety and depression. The rain had long been pattering on the eaves, a cold wind moaned among the tall trees, whose huge branches creaked in the rising tempest like the masts of some mighty ship; and the dogs, the keeper’s especial charge, howled in a manner which even they who are most accustomed to these sagacious animals cannot, under certain circumstances, help feeling to be ominous, however difficult it might be to convey the impression to any who had not heard that most dismal of living sounds.

“Hark!” interrupted Annie; “I hear steps; they are coming. Can that be Chloe’s bark? How wild and strange! Don’t open the door yet, sister. It can’t be them!”

And wild and strange was the short, quick, unintermitted bark, which, sharp, piercing, and painful even to agony, rose above the redoubled chorus of howling from the kennel, above the blasts of the tempest, and above the steps and voices of many men, who were now distinctly heard approaching the cottage. They paused in the court, afraid, it may be, to convey to the innocent girls the shock which their dreadful burthen could not fail to impart; but Chloe had no such scruple; she, continuing her wild, shrill cry, flung herself against the door, scratching at it with her slender paws, as if she would have beaten it in, and, when Lucy’s trembling hands undid the latch, rushed wildly toward the hearth, pausing for a moment in front of her master’s high-

backed oaken chair, and then returning restlessly to the group in the court, and endeavoring to search some object in the background.

The sight of Chloe had prepared the sisters in some degree for what was to follow. The poor dog's silky coat was dabbled in blood not her own; and when Thomas Leigh, the under-keeper, tried, a strong, rough man as he was—tried in vain—to announce the dreadful tidings to Miss Lucy, she at once relieved and surprised him by inquiring in a low voice, "Is he dead?"

Dead Michael Parr had been for some hours. The body when found was stiff and cold. Marks there were of a severe, though probably a brief struggle, the ground being considerably trodden, and one or two hazel branches broken and torn down. But upon the whole the death had been quick and sudden; a ghastly wound in the head, by some sharp and weighty instrument, having extinguished life at a blow. Beyond this all was mystery. The under-keeper, Thomas Leigh, whose cottage was placed at a considerable distance, to watch other coverts upon this extensive tract of woodland manors, had been roused, just as he was retiring to rest, by the same sharp, shrill cry of distress, I may say of anguish, from poor Chloe, accompanied by beatings apparently much too violent for her strength against the door of his dwelling. Upon his answering her summons, she instantly seized his coat; and being well acquainted with her sagacity, and her strong affection for her master, he and his brother had followed her to the Fifty Acre Coppice, and there,—“I mean the coppice where the woodcutters are at work,” added Thomas, in explanation, “there we found the body”;—what he would have said further was interrupted by Lucy's falling down in a fainting fit, from which she was with a great difficulty recovered—recovered only to hear of fresh horrors.

Judicial inquiry soon led to the development of some circumstances which were suspicious only to professional acumen. Tracks and foot-marks had been discovered, which suddenly disappeared at the cottage. The elder Prescott had been engaged during the previous day and still remained at some distant woods, selecting and marking, under the direction of an eminent surveyor, the oak timber to be included in this year's fall. He was out of the question. William, beside the worn and harassed appearance of a man who had passed the night in tremendous crime or overwhelming misery, presented the strange mixture of reserve and recklessness so often observed in great criminals. Circumstance upon circumstance combined to fix the guilt upon him and upon him only. The remarkably tipped shoes, which the village shoemaker and his neighbor, the blacksmith, both identified as ordered by himself, were actually found upon his feet; a jacket, with stains, which, although partially washed out, still bore traces of which the surgeon called to examine the body recognized as the ineffaceable marks of blood, this jacket, still wet and known by twenty persons as William Prescott's usual dress, was thrown carelessly in a corner, and underneath it lay, equally well known, the axe which he was accustomed to use in his labor, and which, beside corresponding exactly to the wound on the head, which had proved Michael Parr's death-blow, retained ghastly evidence of the deed. 'The grey hairs yet stuck to the heft!' From the moment that the police officer held up the axe, mute but eloquent accomplice of this awful deed, the doubt and pity which had before accompanied the search throughout the cottage disappeared before the natural horror which such a crime awakened. The accused took no means to revive or awaken a more favorable feeling. He sank upon the settle beside the hearth, whose untended embers had been long extinguished, in shivering silence, and when handcuffed to one of the constables, and roughly commanded to follow, he seemed rather

to obey the mechanical impulse of the man to whom he was linked than to apprehend the meaning of the words.

Some among the villagers had observed the previous quarrel, as well as the parting of the lovers, and, more dead than alive, Lucy obeyed a summons to the inquest in trembling silence, and, deaf from excess of nervous irritation, tried to hear and to comprehend the mild and soothing address of the official functionary. Looking up for that purpose, she caught sight of William. The expression of his countenance, his attitude, and the irons with which he was loaded, told her at a glance, the dreadful truth. She listened to no question, she waited for no pause, but, shrieking with fearful rapidity, "He is innocent! He is innocent!—beware how ye, too, commit murder!" she fell upon the floor in strong hysterics. From that hour many weeks of fever and delirium passed away before she was restored to the agonizing consciousness that a verdict of willful murder had been returned against William Prescott.

This tragedy occurred just after the Lent Assizes had been holden at the county town, so that the prisoner had the advantage of a considerable space of time in which to seek such testimony as might counterbalance the strong chain of circumstantial evidence upon which the verdict of the inquest had been founded. And after the immediate and fierce indignation had subsided, the usual reaction had taken place, and many began to balance the virtues of a life against the suspicions of an hour, and offers were conveyed to the jail of whatever money might be needed to trace the real criminal. Calmly and thankfully were they declined. Without confessing the crime, William Prescott seemed resolved to abide the punishment. Even from one, the dearest, he had refused such proffers—refused even to admit her to his cell.

"It is strange, Annie," said she, one evening, as they were walking together on a balmy May evening, when the sun, almost level with the horizon, shone upon a row of weeping birches that crowned a bank covered with gorse and broom—the light, magical in its effect, tinting the silver bark and golden tassels of the lady of the woods with a fairy lustre, that more than realized Turner's daintiest fancies—"it is passing strange that William seems to take as much pains to prevent any friends establishing his innocence as another might do to prevent the proof of guilt. Why, if it were indeed the poachers whom our good vicar suspects—why for them should he throw his life away, since, if he still persists in this silence, the lawyers say that nothing can save him? Well," continued she, in the same calm and resigned tone in which she had hitherto spoken, "I shall not survive him long! Do not cry so, dear Annie; in that certainty is my only comfort."

"Nay, dearest sister," began Annie, when she was interrupted by a rustling on the other side of the bank, accompanied by a renewal of that fearful barking, never heard save on that fearful night, from Chloe, the murdered keeper's favorite dog.

A miserable man, lean, pallid, unwashed, unshaven, ragged, starved, crawled forth, scarcely resisting the attacks of Chloe, whose furious assaults were restrained with difficulty by the trembling girls, and, dragging himself to the feet of Lucy, demanded, in a tone of agony: "As you would save a sinful soul, tell me the truth, and the whole truth—if the murderer be not found, must William die?"

"As surely as I stand here," was the reply.

“Take me to the good vicar, drag me before the magistrates, let all the country hear me—bring them hither before I die”—and he fell back as if already his last hour were come.

“This is what I have believed in my inmost heart,” said Lucy, “ever since I have known that William’s father had disappeared. Oh, Master Prescott!” said she, as the old man, upon whose pallid face Annie had sprinkled cold water from a bright spring by the way-side, was once more reviving—“oh, Master Prescott, clear, if you can, your innocent son! I always knew that he was innocent!”

The old man spoke with effort and difficulty: “We met that night in the coppice. I had returned to ascertain the girth of one particular tree. He seized me, pretending to take me for a poacher; knocked me down, spurned me, being down; and, when I rose, maddened by his insults, the axe was in my hand, and in my frenzy——then came they noble boy: he dragged me away——made me promise not to surrender myself. Oh, Miss Lucy, bring witnesses, bring officers to carry me to prison! Think, if I should die without clearing my boy!”

And that night the miserable father did die; but not until, before competent authorities, he had established the innocence of his son.

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