

# JENNY

*A Village Idyl*

BY

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'Nothing but the Infinite Pity is sufficient for the infinite pathos of human life.'  
—*John Inglesant*.

**JENNY**

# CHAPTER I

## IN THE TRAIN

THE chimes of the cathedral had just announced the hour of six when the train left the station, and passing the tall chimneys which were overshadowed by the cathedral towers steamed out into the country beyond the town.

The July day was sinking into evening, an evening light that was soft and mellow in spite of the line of stormcloud above the cathedral. It was the first bright day that had been known for many weeks, and all available hands had been turned to work upon the hay which, green and damp still from recent experiences, was lying spread or in haystacks on the ground. Here and there, on soil close to the river's brink, the masses of purple loosestrife made a glow of colour; or in some uncut field where the grass was short and brown the dark red cows were pasturing quietly; or now and then one, unconsciously picturesque, would be standing on the bank of the river, a distinct picture there. The train steamed onwards with its scanty freight of passengers, between the lines of the river and the canal, in the midst of the quiet fields and the mellow evening light.

The freight of passengers, as I have said, was scanty, for indeed not many had left the town that evening—the foundrymen, even those who lodged in villages, having, for the most part, tramped off to their homes an hour before; whilst, as it was Thursday, and therefore not market-day, no women with market-baskets were to be expected in the train. Some few, however, were returning from their friends; and some workmen had lingered for the advantage of

the 'ride;' while there was also, of course, a small proportion of those who were journeying to some distant town, some of these being strangers much interested in the cathedral, and others less interested inhabitants of the city. All these different classes of people were represented, at any rate, in one third-class railway carriage—a railway carriage in which we must journey too.

A dark gipsy-looking woman, with fierce eyebrows and eyes, who had a dark little girl by her side, seemed to be a stranger to the town, for she sat by one of the windows and with excited gestures pointed out the cathedral to the child in the corner opposite, whilst she was observed placidly by a motherly tradesman's wife who was conveying to her daughter in a distant village some parcels of groceries from her husband's shop. In another corner, neatly dressed and quiet, was a young woman who had the appearance of the wife of a village workman; and opposite to her a lad in working-clothes, pale, grimy, and over-tired, lounged at his ease. These passengers did not appear to know each other, and conversation did not flow easily; with the exception of one or two spasmodic efforts, which fell back rapidly into silence. These had been made by the gipsy-looking woman, who seemed to be one of those people who are disposed to talk.

The first cause of her remarks had been the sight of some scaffolding which had been erected about one of the cathedral towers, and which appeared to excite her very much, for she leant her head out of the window that she might be able to observe it more closely. Then she drew in her head again with a laugh that was short and dry, and an expression that appeared to border on contempt.

'Well,' she exclaimed, 'not finished yet!' The tradesman's wife heard her, and heaved a placid sigh.

'Ah!' she breathed out softly, '*and it never will be.*' Her manner was that of one who pronounces some final verdict.

'An' yet it must ha' been many years abuilding,' the stranger remarked, with renewed contempt, again leaning out of the window, with her eyes fixed upon the venerable towers above the town. Her remark was a challenge, or at least was taken as such, and the tradesman's wife hastened to explain herself.

'You see,' she said, 'it's a fack as I have heerd, as all the cathedrals belong to the Roman Catholliks, an' they keeps the woorkmen always at woork upon 'em, for fear lest the Catholliks should take 'em. For they ca'ant take 'em, as I've heerd, till they be done, so them as manages do contrive to keep 'em out!'

This extraordinary historical statement was received with a slight snort but with no incredulity, and the conversation fell once more into silence. The dark woman, however, was not to be daunted, and after a while burst into speech again.

'I'm a-goin' a good way,' she said, 'nigh to the sea, to a child o' mine as has been ill; I don't think they've done to her all they should 'a done, an' I'm going to see to it or know the reason why!' She did not make this remark to the passenger facing her, but threw it out for the benefit of all who heard, and it seemed to attract the attention of the young woman opposite, who was seated in the farther corner of the carriage. She raised her head, as if she had been herself addressed, and her words came as if against her will.

‘I’ve a child at home as is badly,’ she said, and then she sighed. Her words and manner were both very quiet, but there was something in them so simple and pathetic that they arrested the observation of the others, and for the moment all eyes were turned on her. The stranger honoured her with a bold and steady stare; the wife of the shopkeeper turned towards her with compassion; whilst even the foundry lad, to whom she seemed familiar, let his glance rest curiously upon her for a while. Indeed, it must be confessed with regard to her appearance, that these various eyes might have been worse employed.

She has been described as young, for her slight and youthful figure gave that impression to all who saw her first, but a closer inspection soon revealed the fact that she must have owned between thirty and forty years. Her face, too, was more worn than might have been expected, although it had preserved much of the delicate beauty of its outline—a beauty, however, so unobtrusive in character that it needed some close attention to observe it. She had the simple attire of a village workman’s wife, without any of the fineries in which the wives of workmen occasionally indulge, a gown of dark stuff, although it was summer time, a rusty black jacket, and a close-fitting bonnet of black straw, already old and limp. The lad could have told the others who she was, although he had not much acquaintance with her himself; and he might also have been able to give some explanation of the look of sadness upon her patient face. This was Jenny Salter, who lived in the village of Warton, who lived by the Thackbusk, and was Rob Salter’s wife.

Her appearance was too quiet to maintain the interest she had excited, the curiosity slackened, and the conversation dropped; save when the irrepressible stranger now and then made some

remark on the fields or on the cows. Jenny shrank into her corner with her face turned to the window, and her mind occupied with tender yearning over her sick child at home; whilst the lad opposite, who had been disturbed by his looks at her, began turning over in his mind, with some compunction, the thought of a certain 'rare game' with which she was connected, and in which, in common with the other lads of the village, he intended to be engaged that night. His compunction did not extend to a renunciation of his purpose, but it made him a little uneasy all the same.

And now the train was beginning to slacken speed, and already could be seen the irregular lines of village roofs, the grey church-tower just peeping above the trees on the hill, and, beneath, the red chapel that had been lately built. With the timidity of a nervous nature, Jenny Salter rose to her feet before the train had stopped, and hastened to take her basket on her arm, that she might be found quite ready to descend. The movement recalled to her something that her dress kept concealed, a bruise on her shoulder that a man's clenched hand had left.

As she stepped on to the platform of the station, and looked wearily up the river, aglow with evening light, the sight that she saw was one that might have attracted a mind less preoccupied than her own. For the line of storm-cloud was heavy above the cathedral, and beneath was the glory of an intensely golden radiance, against which the hill that was crowned with cathedral towers stood out as a shadow of deepest purple. Jenny looked on these things, but seeing did not see them; she gave up her ticket, and turned towards the village and her home.

## CHAPTER II

### IN THE VILLAGE

THE village of Warton is situated on the river, about three miles from the cathedral town of Lindum, and commands a good view of the cathedral towers, and, from its highest ground, a wide outlook over the Fens. It slopes upwards from the river to the summit of a little hill, on the side of which are the church-tower, and the trees round the old grey Hall; and, to the left, the irregular village street, with its old-fashioned roofs of red tiles, or of thatch, the churchyard gates, and the old village tree beneath which are some ancient stone steps, once surmounted by a cross. Below the hill the road, which is at a right angle to this principal street of the village, pursues on one side its way to the town, at some distance from the triple lines of the river, railway, and canal; and, on the other, winding to a greater distance from them finds its way out into the great stretch of Fenland, which is bordered on the far horizon by the blue line of the Wolds. It is a quiet village, whose inhabitants are more artisan than agricultural; for the town of Lindum, although three miles away, is near enough to supply them with employment, to which the men and lads tramp through the darkness of winter mornings, or the pale light and mists of the earlier summer dawns.

Here, then, in this place had Jenny Salter lived, although she was not by descent a native of the village, for her father, Nat Phillips, had once lived close to London, and had only by accident drifted to the north. He had happened to hear, through a friend, when he was out of work, of some foundry employment that could be found in Lindum, and, the result of his journey proving beyond his hopes,

he had settled down in the village near the town. The country people are habitually averse to strangers; they looked with suspicion upon this unknown workman, and would not admit him to any intimacy. It was only when years had proved his harmlessness; and, more especially, after he had married a village girl, that they condescended to be favourable, and could be heard to say that they knew 'no harm' of him. By this time, however, the timid, delicate Phillips had become obscured from another cause, he was hidden from sight by the superior qualities of the lady who went by the name of 'Mrs Nat.'

In many villages there is some admirable woman who acts as a sort of oracle to the rest, who is an authority on all village matters, and rules supreme with a rod to which iron is soft. Mrs Phillips was one of these superior creatures, and as such was recognised in all the place; the daughters of the Rector did not command much more deference, and were not to the same extent called upon to rule—it was enough for them to teach in the Sunday School, to assist in prize-givings, and to pour out tea at entertainments. Mrs Nat had brought some money to her husband with herself; and, besides that, he earned good wages in the town; she was able to appear in a silk gown on Sundays, and her income was not limited by her charities. For it was one of the principles of Mrs Nat not to give away anything to any cause whatever, and all sorts of collectors had all sorts of stories of the results of making appeals to her in her home. A hard, uneducated, vigorous, despotic woman, with much local knowledge and unassailable ignorance, she ruled alike over her husband and her neighbours, kept her home in order, and her children neat, sold the chickens she reared in the town on market-days, and asserted her authority on all occasions without dispute. Her husband, meanwhile, submitted to her sway, left his children

and his wages entirely in her hands, read books and newspapers when she allowed him to be quiet, was a competent workman, and a continual invalid. They lived in a house in the lower street of the village, rather larger than those which other workmen owned, with a view from the back-windows of the canal and railway lines, with iron railings in front, and a brass knocker on the door.

In this house had Jenny spent her early years, a shy, timid child, continually found fault with by her mother for being slow, and otherwise attracting little notice from anyone. She had inherited, indeed, from her father the beauty of her face, but it was a quiet beauty, not readily observed; she was a delicate creature, easily tired and frightened, not likely to reign as a belle amongst the lads. The other children of Mrs Nat were boys, bold, black-eyed urchins, who were their mother's pride, and she had not much affection for the only girl, who was not in any particular like herself. Jenny crept silently about the house, shrank away from scoldings into solitary corners, climbed up on her father's knee when her brothers were not near, admired her mother, and felt herself dull and slow. At that time, as afterwards, she was willing to accept the estimate that other people formed of her; she early learned that conviction of unworthiness which is scarcely to be unlearned in later life. A gentle creature, timid and patient, she sang her songs low to herself, and was content.

It was not in the least to be expected that poor Jenny would have power over her fate when her fate came in her way, and indeed her mother assumed the complete control, and did not require her to have an opinion for herself. Mrs Nat took a liking to the dark-eyed, handsome, young fellow who, in those days, haunted the house persistently, professing himself willing to leave the sea-coast where he had lived, to settle in the village, and find work in the

town. Mrs Nat found him lively, and loved to joke with him; the father was secretly uneasy, but dared not express his doubts; and Rob Salter himself had a fancy for the welcome and the suppers, and the pretty child who was shy when he looked at her. In those days they would often make excursions to the sea, and Rob would be generous and pay for everyone; and Jenny loved the tumbling waves, and the long, low line of sand-banks, and the bare, flat fields that gleamed in the evening light. It was on one of those evenings when he stood alone with her on the shore, and a pale light made a mystery of the sea and sands, that he whispered to her, and it was all arranged. The father and mother were merry as they travelled back that night; it was well for them that they did not live to see the rest.

For it was all settled, and there was a quiet wedding-day, and Jenny returned after two days to a cottage of her own, and it was all so wonderful that she could not imagine how she should ever get over the wonder of it. And yet, after all, it was but a commonplace experience, and she settled down, by degrees, to her cottage-home, though the first weeks of her new life were overshadowed by such grief as she had not known before. For Nat Phillips came home with a fever from the town, and his wife caught it from him as she nursed him that night, and in the course of a few days both were dead, and Jenny followed her parents to their grave. She was overwhelmed with grief and bewilderment; she could not imagine herself without her mother's rule; and the villagers, who had more knowledge than she had of her husband, shook their heads over the thought that the protection of her parents was lost. Of this, however, they said nothing to the young wife; and, perhaps, if they had done so, she would not have understood.

No, she did not understand, and although in that first year of marriage, Rob left his young bride continually alone, although his varied employments seemed to take him in all directions, she was not suspicious, and she did not complain. It was natural that he should not stay with her ('him so clever!'), of course he had plenty of other things to do; the meekness that had not rebelled at her mother's harshness was not even surprised at her husband's indifference. She had something to console her, for before a year was over her little Annie was born, and the next year her little Nat, and the care and affection she lavished on her babies made such an opportunity for love as she had not known before. She had been only just seventeen at the time she married, and was barely nineteen when her last child was born.

And so the years slipped away slowly, one by one, in the simple employments of a workman's wife, marked by the continual development of the children, and by drunken outbursts too frequently from Rob. But, as years went on he was still less at home, and even when he professed to be there he was not seen there often, though Jenny often sat up for him all the night that she might open the door as soon as his step was heard. No home in the village was kept more daintily, no children were prettier or more neatly dressed, the heavy poverty that pressed continually had nothing repulsive in its outward signs. But the neighbours complained that Mrs Salter kept herself too much apart; she had the reserve of sorrow, and preferred to be alone.

More than eighteen years had passed since Jenny's wedding day, and she had lived in the same place all the time, for the vagaries and expenses of her husband had never left him able to provide a larger house. At the foot of the hill there is a public-house, and by the side of it is a tiny lane, a lane that is not many feet in length,

and is closed by a gate that leads out into the fields. Rob owned the old, whitewashed, red-tiled cottage that was nearest to the gate, with a little garden at the side, between it and the field. It was not large enough for a growing family, but those who are poor must do the best they can.

And, certainly, if there was not much room in the cottage the same thing could not be said of the fields beyond, the wide, marshy fields that stretched down to the canal, and were known as the 'Thackbusk' by the village-folk. There were silver-grey willows in those wide-stretching fields, and masses of elder in the summer-time, and above could be seen the red roofs of the village, and far in the distance the grey cathedral towers. The Thackbusk allowed you plenty of room to play; the children of Jenny knew that very well.

But those children were almost man and woman on that July evening when Jenny left the train, and walked alone down the street beneath the hill with the bruise on her shoulder, and a sore weight on her heart. Some red cows passed peaceably by her as she went, with the urchin who drove them loitering behind; and a young workman was leaning outside the railings of the chapel, proud of holding his baby in his arms. Jenny went on alone, with her head bent always downwards, and her mind in her child's sick-room, and in tender contrivances, and the burdens that were both of memory and foreboding pressing their habitual weight upon her heart till she did not hear the good-evening of a neighbour who stood at his door with his pipe in his mouth. The man's eyes followed her curiously as she walked, but she did not turn round, so she was not aware of it.

‘Well, mother, you have been a while,’ were the words that greeted her, as she slowly opened her cottage-door at last, not prepared for the fever-worn face that raised itself from the cushions of the great wooden arm-chair on the hearth. ‘You wouldn’t expect to see me here downstairs, but I couldn’t rest after what Mrs Beeton said—she says that they’re going to Rantan us through the village—I wish I was a man, that I might kill them all! We’ll never get over this even’, never, never; we had best leave the place as soon’s this night is done!’

These were not the most cheering words to come as greeting to an anxious heart at the close of a weary day; but Jenny, although they struck her like a blow, was more alarmed for her daughter than herself. With renewed anxiety she laid aside her bonnet, and came to the hearth to bend above her child; and Annie raised slowly her languid, beautiful face, shaken with the sobs that she had till then restrained. We will leave them to cling to each other, and to whisper, and go out into the village street to learn the rest.

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