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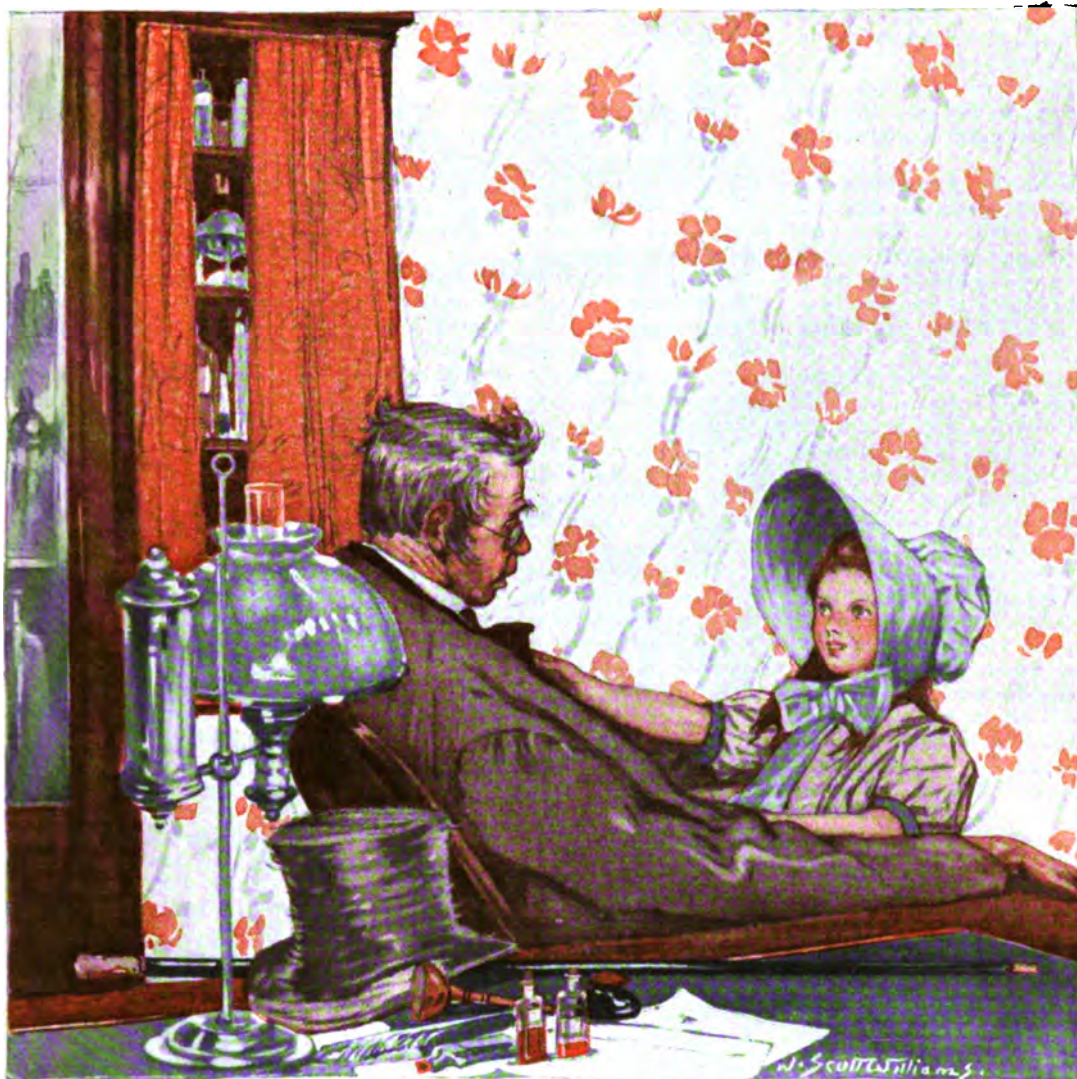
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# Dr. Cornthwait's Mistake

By Marion Pugh Read

Illustrated by J. Scott Williams



**W**HETHER it was because they were so little, or so "comical"—at any rate, for some reason all her own, Mary Ann Evans loved babies. To other households in the Pennsylvania village where she was a little girl in the early fifties they came as delightful surprises, appearing suddenly and mysteriously without any warning, but always welcome. Where they came from or how they got here, there was no way of knowing. You woke up in the morning and there they were, laughing and cooing and tossing their hands. Mary Ann waited in vain for one to come to their house.

Her mother, when appealed to, offered little encouragement. "One might come

to us some day," was all she could promise. "But thee'd best not count on it."

But a baby was so essential to Mary Ann's happiness that she set out, all unaided, to get one for herself. It was not a little brother she wanted, nor a little sister either, for to her way of thinking a baby in long clothes was neither as yet. It was just a *baby*, and it was precisely that that Mary Ann set out to find. All the valley, watching (but not one of them offering to help!), knee in how many ways she went about it.

Everyone that knew Benny Tucker, and who didn't know Benny Tucker?—"Notions and Ladies' Accessories, Gentlemen's Fittings, Household Necessities, Needlework Novelties, and *et ceteras*"—

had heard how she tried to buy one. Coming into his shop one day to spend a penny "on herself," she was just about to relinquish the coin for a stick of horehound candy she had finally decided on, when she drew it back with a sudden inspiration.

"Has thee any little babies for sale?" she inquired hopefully.

"Sorry, but I haven't—not a single one!" Benny answered, sober as a judge.

Mary Ann kept tight hold of her penny. "Is thee waiting for the *styles*?" she asked, that being the apology Benny always offered if he failed to have what her mother had sent for. When he shook his head and told her it was a line of goods he had never carried, she defended

herself from a touch of amusement she detected in his manner—evidently Benny hadn't stayed as sober as a judge! "Thee's got most everything else!" she exclaimed accusingly, her eye roving over the odd jumble of wares that filled his counter.

**N**EXT, Mary Ann tried to obtain one by barter. Calling one day with her mother at Rebecca Hill's to see a new baby there, she was so delighted with it that she decided she couldn't go home without it. A sudden inspiration was again the fruit of her desire. She leaned over to Rebecca.

"Does thee know what we've got over at our house?" she said temptingly. "It's a dear little calf! We like him better than anything else we've got. Will thee trade if I bring him over? But thee would if thee could just see him once," she went on artfully. "He's a good deal smarter than thy baby. He's only been here two days now and he can walk already. And thee ought to see him run! His legs shake till thee has to laugh, but they go."

The next day she appeared by herself. "Did thee know about that little white star on his forehead when thee said thee wouldn't trade?" she began, and, after Rebecca had resisted even that, went on, "Of course thee knows thy baby won't stay a baby forever?" For the only thing against babies was that afterward they grew into something else. It was only a transitory state. "It'll turn into an old person before thee knows it. But that little calf, when he's all done being a calf, if thee doesn't let the *butcher* get him,"—she was frank in emphasizing the condition,—"he'll be a cow and give milk for thee. *He'll* be worth something!"

Then Sarah Franklin told how Mary Ann tried to get one of her babies. It was one day toward spring when Mary Ann's mother had sent her over with a basket of winter pears. Mary Ann loved to be sent there on errands, for Sarah had three babies. To-day she had them all with her, the youngest in her lap and the other two toddling about. Mary Ann set her pears down and began to play with the one in her lap. It was a jolly little thing, just the kind Mary Ann wanted for herself. Every time when, in a response that only Sarah could waken, it laughed a low, gurgling, delicious laugh, Mary Ann's eyes met Sarah's with a look of delight. "Now make it sneeze!" she commanded. And when, after a while, it did sneeze, all of its own accord, she laughed in glee. But how fondly her glance went back to it! How soft was the wonder in her eyes as she watched to see what it would do next. There wasn't a mother in all the valley who didn't love Mary Ann for loving her baby best.

"Thee never saw a dearer little baby anywhere, did thee?" Sarah said.

Mary Ann shook her head, and her eyes grew a little wistful. She wanted that baby! Then, looking around, her glance happened to light on the basket of pears. Suddenly an idea occurred to her: she meditated a minute, and then she began:

**"WE SHARE** everything, don't we? When we've got something thee hasn't, we share with thee; and when thee's got something we haven't, thee

shares with us. It's back and forth all the time, isn't it?"

Sarah nodded; that was the way it was between the two households.

"Thee hasn't any late pears, has thee? But we have, so as soon as ours got ready to eat we shared with thee, didn't we?"

"Thee surely did. Thy mother's generous to send me that great basket-ful."

"Thee's generous too," Mary Ann prompted her. "Last summer when our Rambo apple-tree blew over but thine didn't, thee couldn't bear to think of our not having any, so thee shared with us, didn't thee?"

Sarah remembered.

"Thee's got no rhubarb in thy garden," Mary Ann went on, "but thee didn't plant any because we have so much. I heard thee say to Mother thee'd just look to her for rhubarb."

"Thy mother's a kind neighbor."

"Thee is too!" Mary Ann insisted. "Thee just racks thy brains, trying to think what thee's got that we haven't. And then thee sends it over, even if thee can't spare but a *taste!*"

Sarah smiled, wondering what Mary Ann was coming to. It wasn't always easy to tell beforehand.

"We share *everything*, don't we? Well, then," she said, sitting back, her case proved already, "has thee never thought how thee has *three babies* and we have *none?*"

It never had occurred to Sarah in just that light! "Thee wants me to divide with thee, is that it?"

Mary Ann nodded. "If thee's looking to Mother for rhubarb," she suggested, "perhaps she's looking to thee for a baby."

"I have my doubts," Sarah answered; "but if she is, I'll have to pay her back some other way. When it comes to babies I couldn't spare her even a taste!"

"But doesn't thee know," Mary Ann argued quaintly, a sweet persuasiveness in her voice, "that if thee means to be generous it's just what thee wants most for thyself thee has to give up? And hasn't thee found how, when thee shares something thee likes, thee enjoys what's left all the more? If thee's been greedy, thee's bound to wish *afterward* thee hadn't!"

When Sarah didn't yield even then, she thought a minute. "Did thy mother never teach thee," she reminded her, "that the more thee gives the more thee *has*? Did she never show thee out in the garden, the more posies thee cuts off the bush the more will come in their place? Maybe it's that way with thee and the babies—the more thee'd give away the more would come to thee. Won't thee let me take one to Mother," she coaxed, "and see?"

Sarah shook her head. "Even if a dozen should come in its place, and come this minute, I couldn't spare thee a single one! Babies are like posies if thee likes, Mary Ann, but they're posies for the home garden."

Mary Ann's face was a study of censure repressed. It was so evident she thought it would be better for Sarah's morals to let one go. Keen disappointment was there too. Sarah couldn't help laughing at her and kissing her all in one breath.

"If thee's patient, who knows?" she said. "I wouldn't wonder if a little baby came to thy mother some day."

Mary Ann's smile was a little sardonic. "Does thee think it?" she said, edging away from her.

"I know she thinks I'm stingy as taling," Sarah said when she told the tale, and Mary Ann certainly did.

**S**HE had still another way of getting a baby, a way all her own, for who else in the village—unless it was old Nancy who came to help in the kitchen—ever suspected that gipsy wagons were full of them? and that the canvas tops were there on purpose to keep them from getting away, and to hide them from their mothers? For they were stolen babies. The gipsies picked them up when their mothers weren't watching, put them in their baskets, and hurried away with them in their wagons, away, 'way off, where their mothers never heard of them again.

Outside the village was a clump of woods where a tribe of gipsies came every spring and camped out for the summer. Whenever Mary Ann caught sight of one of their dilapidated old carts creaking along the road, she followed it with mingled thrills of hope and fear just as close and just as far as she dared, ready to turn and fly the instant a swarthy face should look around from the front or an arm reach out in her direction,—she didn't want to be "nabbed" herself,—but following still to see if any of the babies spilled out from the back.

She wished she ever dared go up close and peer through the torn canvas to see how many were there. Once a forlorn little wail came to her from the mysterious depths, the unmistakable plaint of a baby that wanted its mother. Mary Ann never forgot that cry. It confirmed as nothing else could have done the cruelty of the gipsy captors. But though she put her fate in jeopardy anew every time one of their forlorn old wagons came in sight, no dear little baby ever jolted off the load for her to pick up and run home with and keep for her own.

Things usually had a humorous side for Mary Ann, but in her quest of a baby there wasn't a sparkle of fun anywhere. She was so serious and so determined that she was fairly grim sometimes. If only she knew where they came from in the first place! She was always on the lookout for a clew to the mystery. One day a cousin from over the river came to spend the day, and reported a number of births in her neighborhood. Her mother exclaimed, "Well, I declare! It's just raining babies across the creek!" Mary Ann pricked up her ears. She didn't say anything, but she remembered, and every time it rained after that she looked out to see whether it had rained anything worth while on their side of the creek; but it never had.

Now, in a little shanty on the very outskirts of the village there lived an English family by the name of Joy. They had so many children and so little to feed them with when they got here that all the village had them on their minds. There was always one more little Joy coming along to claim their sympathy. In fact, the Joys got so many of what babies



"Has thee any little babies for sale?" she inquired hopefully

there were that Mary Ann couldn't help feeling it lessened the general supply. They were too greedy! Nor was it all her own theory: she had heard someone who ought to know say that when it came to children the Joys never knew when to stop. Mr. Joy worked in people's gardens. He had the name of being obstinate and, no matter what you said or did, of digging always in his own particular way. Mary Ann, when she finally appealed to him, found him as little open to suggestion as anyone else.

"Won't thee please stop taking any babies for a while? Won't thee let them all go past, so the rest of us can have a chance at them?"

For wherever they started from in the first place, mustn't they be brought into the village over the old stage-road, like

everything else that came in from the outside world? It was because the Joys lived away out there and had first chance at them that they got them all. It was like the old peddler and his pack: by the time Mary Ann's mother got a look at his wares he'd nothing left.

She was concise in the wording of her request, but it took some time to make her meaning clear. Then his gruff, "Huh! Stop 'em if you can!" she took for a dare. There was no help to be had from him.

Mary Ann was getting discouraged. "Aren't we ever going to have a baby of our own, Mother?" she asked. "Will we have to depend on the neighbors forever?" To "depend on the neighbors" was a phrase synonymous in the valley with utter shameless and unregenerate

shiftlessness. You couldn't say anything much worse of anyone than that. But there were brighter days ahead for her. A conversation she happened to overhear between her mother and a neighbor cleared the situation of all its mystery, and showed her how to go about it in the right way.

"Thee's foolish to depend on Dr. Cornthwait. He's an old fogey!" the neighbor was saying. "He's forever making mistakes. And does thee know it? He's a great hand for egg-noggs; but thee can reckon on this for a surety, it's not for the egg or the milk he takes them!"

"That may be," her mother answered mildly. "But for all that, thee knows if it hadn't been for him Rebecca Hill would never have had her baby."



Following still to see if any of the

Mary Ann didn't wait to hear any more, but slipped away unnoticed. Dr. Cornthwait was the one to go to, was he? Mary Ann was in too much of a hurry even to be surprised. Straight down the street she flew to his office. What he had done for Rebecca Hill he would do for her, for she and Dr. Cornthwait were friends of long standing.

He was there when Mary Ann burst into his office, sitting in the chair that turned round and round, in front of his old secretary that had bottles instead of books on all but the very top shelves; for, as he used to say, he needed the bottles, but he was done with the books. Mary Ann loved to open the glass doors and let the pungent smell of the medicines steal through the room, but to-day she had something else on hand.

"Will thee get *me* one?" she demanded.

"One what?" Dr. Cornthwait replied, laying down his quill pen and looking at her over the gold rims of his glasses.

"Why, a baby, of course," she answered, climbing up on his knee.

"What makes thee think I can do it?"

"Thee brought one to Rebecca Hill. She'd never have had it in the world if it hadn't been for thee!"

"So! And who told thee that?"

"Mother did. That is," she explained more accurately, "she told Amelia Watson. But it's all the same—I heard her."

"And thee's a notion thee'd like me to bring thee one, is that it?"

Mary Ann's eyes answered for her.

"Well, as long as thee wants it, thee shall have it," he promised. "The very next baby that comes to the village shall come to thy mother."

"*The very next?*"

He nodded, and Mary Ann's delighted face was a picture. "I wish I'd come to thee *years* ago!" she sighed. "Can I have it right off? Will thee get it now and let me take it home myself?"

"Oh, thee's not to imagine I can make such quick work of it as that! Thee'll have to have patience. I may not get hold of one for weeks, but thee can depend on me. Some day, when thee's forgotten all about it, thee'll come home and find it there waiting for thee."

"Oh, I'll not forget!" Mary Ann assured him. "Not for a minute! I won't think about anything else!"

"Well, thee mustn't speak of it anyhow," he cautioned her. "I have a good many calls for babies, and if word got around that one was coming, everyone would be after it. Thee wants it when it does get here,"—Mary Ann did!—"so



babies spilled out from the back

thee'd best be close-mouthed," he concluded. "Don't say a word to anyone."

"Don't thee worry! I'll not let the cat out of the bag!" she assured him. Then she looked a little dubious. "Would it spoil things if I let *Mother* know?"

"What would thee say to surprising her? Could thee keep it a secret?"

That would be better still. "Won't she be tickled when it lands in!" she exclaimed in glee. But after a bit she had a disturbing thought, "Thee likes babies too, doesn't thee?" He nodded.

"Does thee like them more than anything? More than *snuff*?" He nodded again. Mary Ann looked at him sharply. "Thee won't just decide to keep it thyself, will thee?"

"No, I'll hand it over," he promised. "I'm like thee, I love babies; but, better

still, I love to see mothers made happy with them."

Mary Ann was reassured. "Thee's like me in other ways too," she confided. "We're exactly alike when it comes to egg-noggs. It's not the egg or the milk I like either."

"Hey! What is it then?"

"Why, the sugar at the bottom, of course!"

Dr. Cornthwait threw back his head and laughed. "The sugar at the bottom, eh? That's what I like? And how did thee come by that information?"

"I heard Amelia Watson tell Mother. She said it wasn't the egg or the *milk*. The sugar at the bottom's all there is left. That's what Grandmother saves for me every time, and if that's what *thee* likes best, we're just alike there too, aren't we?"

He agreed with a chuckle. "And did

thee find out any more points in common between us?"

Mary Ann looked up a little dubiously. She hardly knew about this. "What's an *old foggy*?" she asked.

"It's what they call everyone nowadays that's not out and out newfangled."

"Then I'm an old foggy too!" she discovered.

Dr. Cornthwait's eyes twinkled. "That's nothing against us, is it? And one thing about old foggies, they keep their word better than 'tis fashionable to nowadays. Thee can count on that baby. I'll get it for thee for sure."

**AFTER** that Mary Ann didn't look enviously at a single baby. She loved them all still, but they weren't irresistible any longer. It was wonderful how complacently she compared them all with the one that was coming; all superlative

attributes were reserved for it. One day when someone, to tease her, asked if she wouldn't like to take Rebecca Hill's baby home, she only smiled demurely and shook her head, nor could anyone extract an explanation of her fickleness.

"But he's the nicest baby thee ever saw, isn't he?"

"The nicest *so far!*"

"And he's the best baby in the valley!"

"I dare say," she granted, "he's as good as any there is *yet.*"

"Anything new over at thy house?" one of the neighbors asked one day.

"Nothing new when I *left,*" she answered. She never wavered from the truth, but she was so discreet! No one could get a word out of her, in spite of the fact that her thoughts were so much on the baby that was coming that she never left the house for a minute without wondering all the way home whether she would find it there when she got back.

But she could hardly expect to carry through so important a project without some anxieties, especially when she had to arrange everything herself. Her responsibilities were heavy; she couldn't rest till she had sounded her mother on the subject.

"Thee wouldn't be vexed with me, would thee, Mother, if thee came downstairs some morning and found a dear little baby had come for thee in the night?"

"Why should I be vexed with *thee?*"

Mary Ann hardly knew what to say

to that! "Well," she qualified, after she had meditated a moment, "would thee be vexed with *anyone* if they'd gone out and got the promise of one—and, Mother, thee's no idea how scarce they are! If it was all their doings it was coming, but if they'd arranged all about its getting here, and tended to *everything,* so that all thee had to do was to take it up in thy arms and love it and be its mother, would thee be put out with them?"

"No; I dare say I should be delighted," her mother answered.

Mary Ann was reassured on that point; it was going to be all right as far as her mother was concerned. The next thing that bothered her was the baby's clothes. She went to Dr. Cornthwait.

"Will that baby have plenty of clothes when thee brings it?"

Dr. Cornthwait lifted his eyebrows quizzically. "Well, no, not *many,* I'm afraid. Thee'll have to look after that."

Mary Ann didn't see how she was going to manage without somebody's help. There were practical drawbacks about taking her mother so completely by surprise. But an idea occurred to her, and in accordance with it she searched through all the cupboards, looked behind the clothes that were hanging there, stood up on chairs to look on the upper shelves, and poked into all the out-of-the-way places she could think of, but failed, after all, to find what she was seeking. Finally she went to her mother.

"I was a baby once myself, wasn't I?"

"Thee was."

"And wore clothes as little as anyone?"

"Thee did for a certainty."

"Then, where are those clothes all gone to?"

"Perhaps thee wore them out," her mother suggested, not without a sense of prevarication, for only that morning more than one little yellowed slip, fragrant with lavender, had been brought down from the chest in the attic to be whitened in the sun and made ready for service again.

"Was I hard on my clothes so *early?*" Mary Ann said desperately.

"Thee didn't wear stout gingham then. Thee wore the finest of nainsook."

"I wish thee'd dressed me in some thing more durable!" she sighed.

She worried about it all the morning but that afternoon she happened to see some of the neighbors gathered together making clothes for the latest Joy baby who was soon to be "shortened." Mary Ann watched the little garments fastening themselves in their nimble fingers and an inspiration came to her. If she did that for a Joy baby, surely— She didn't wait to finish her thought before she leaned up to one of them and said confidently:

"Thee'd do as much for *any* baby that hadn't clothes, wouldn't thee?"

After that she didn't worry about



"We share everything, don't we? Well, then, has thee never thought how thee has three babies and we have none?"



"Mary Ann, thee always was the drollest child!"

clothes any more, or regret that she had been so hard on her own; but a more vital anxiety confronted her. For as they sat sewing someone had remarked that by the time they got this Joy baby provided for the next one. If it should be Mary Ann's baby that the Joys had their eye on! She wished they would move away! Across the creek and clear out of the county! She couldn't rest till she had seen Dr. Cornthwait again. "Thee won't let the Joys get our baby, will thee?" she pleaded, and he promised that they shouldn't.

IT WASN'T many days after that until, one bright morning in early May, Mary Ann was given permission to spend the day with a relative who lived at the other end of the village. Mary Ann loved to go visiting, and this time she was to stay all day. Swinging her little basket, full of presents for Cousin Ellen, she started out, too happy to care that when she met Dr. Cornthwait driving toward her in his gig he was in such a hurry he didn't even see her.

She had a delightful morning, for there were new little chickens, "ridiculous" ducks, and a "cantankerous" turkey gobbler whose antics, viewed from a safe distance, filled her with glee. In the evening, Cousin Ellen made cookies and let her choose one out of every painful package home in her basket. Then came the best of all, in spite of her staid caution, "Now, don't thee go to fuss on my account!" Convention

did not hamper her enjoyment of the meal. "I do like to be visiting at meal-time!" she exclaimed happily. "It makes me feel as though I'd been away forever!"

But early in the afternoon one of the neighbors came in with her baby. It was a dear little baby, just the age Mary Ann loved best, but, oddly enough, the minute she laid eyes on it she declared she had to go home.

"But thy mother said thee could stay till sundown," Cousin Ellen protested. "Isn't thee feeling well?"

"Yes, but I've got to get home! I've got to get home!" she insisted, and their urging was of no avail. She rushed off in such a hurry that she almost forgot to say good-by. And it was well she went when she did, for just as she got to the big white house where the Browns lived the door opened and a friend came out.

"Has thee heard of the new little baby that's come to Hannah Brown?" she asked.

Mary Ann stopped short. "When did it come?" she demanded.

"At tea-time last evening—a dear little girl. Its mother is so happy! Thee'll love it when thee sees it."

She went on her way, but Mary Ann stood rooted to the spot. *At tea-time last evening!* Their baby! And Hannah had got it instead of them, and kept it all this time! Well, she shouldn't have it any longer! Mary Ann was quick to act.

She dropped her little basket on the sidewalk and went in through the open

front door. There was no one about in the front of the house, and she made her way on up the stairs. The door at the head of the stairs was ajar, and Mary Ann peeped in.

In the great four-poster in the center of the room, Hannah was lying half asleep, and on the pillow by her side it was there, the baby Mary Ann had been waiting for.

Hannah opened her eyes wider as Mary Ann stepped in. "Why, it's thee, little Mary Ann Evans!" she said with a smile. "How did thee find thy way up here? Here's something thee'll like! Come and see the dear little baby that's come to me."

Mary Ann, hardly hearing her, stood spellbound, looking at it. Fast asleep it lay in its little white robe, their baby—her baby, really! And without a doubt the dearest little baby in the world.

"Thee never saw such a tiny baby, did thee?" said Hannah, amused at her intentness. Pride of motherhood was in the smile with which she beamed down upon this little admirer of her first-born.

MARY ANN, her survey ended, heaved a deep sigh of content and turned her attention to Hannah, who, for anyone displaying stolen goods, showed herself strangely unperturbed.

"Thee'll have to give it up now," she announced. It was all she could do to keep from picking it up and running right off with it.

Hannah didn't understand how gently



she was being dealt with. "What say, Mary Ann?" she said.

"Thee can kiss it once more and say good-by," Mary Ann offered, "and then I'm going to take it. It's *our* baby, the one we've been waiting for all this time."

"And what makes thee think it's thy baby?"

"I could tell, just to look at it! And it was *promised* to me long ago."

"But it was promised to me too."

"Not this baby—it couldn't have been! Did anyone ever tell thee thee could have the *very first* baby that came to the village?"

"No, but—"

"Well, they told me *I* could; so this is mine. Thee can have the next one, if there is another. Thee can have the next *two*—thee can have all that come along for a while," she promised lavishly.

"But this one is mine, and thee'll have to let me have it."

"Is thy mother expecting it?"

"No," Mary Ann had to admit. "She doesn't know anything about it. But can't thee see that's the very best part of all? It's *me* it was promised to. I'm just waiting to surprise her!"

"But I've been waiting too, this ever so long. Pull open the drawer there and see all the little dresses and socks I made ready. Does thee find the little caps?"

Yes; Mary Ann found everything. Hannah had been able to do so much more about clothes than she had! Somehow that array of little garments gave her claim some justification. Her delusion only made the case more complicated for Mary Ann to deal with.

"Thee's convinced it's thy child?" she asked, lifting up serious eyes to Hannah's face.

Hannah laughed, a low delicious laughter. "Mary Ann, thee always was the drollest child! Yes, I'm sure, *quite* sure!"

"But it isn't, though!" Mary Ann insisted desperately. "Thee's all wrong. It's ours! Thee wouldn't want to keep what didn't belong to thee, would thee?"

Hannah made no answer, but there was something in the way she looked down at the baby that made Mary Ann suddenly forget her own longing. She seemed so proud of it, so happy with it, so attached to it already! How she would miss it when it was gone! For one minute Mary Ann forgot how happy they were going to be at home to have it, out of pity for Hannah, who had become so used already to being its mother, but who, in spite of everything, would have to let it go.

"I'm sorry for thee," she said, her whole expression full of sweet sympathy. "If it was anything else, thee could keep

it and welcome, whether it was thine or not. But I'll have to take it now. We can't spare it any longer. Thee can come and *see* it as often as thee likes, but thee can't *keep* it another minute. I'm going!

Just as Hannah would have had to restrain her the door opened and Hannah's mother came in.

"Mary Ann Evans! What's thee doin here?" she cried. "Hasn't thee heard the news? Thee has a little brother waiting for thee at home!"

Mary Ann looked at her, spellbound. "There's a little baby there *now*?"

"Yes."

"As nice as *this* baby?"

The Quaker grandmother could not truthfully acknowledge the superiority of any child over her first grandchild, but she was resourceful.

"Thee'll come to like him even better, she promised.

With lightning rapidity, then, incredulity gave place to rapturous belief on Mary Ann's face. Her wonderful expression was reflected in the smile of irresistible delight with which the two women's glances met and lingered with a mutual gaze.

"Did thee *ever* see the like of Mary Ann?"

But by that time Mary Ann herself was flying along in a whirlwind of twinkling pantalettes and floating pinafore ties



Flying along in a whirlwind of twinkling pantalettes and floating pinafore ties