

CHAPTER THREE

Poor Widow.

The folk tale of the poor widow who lived in her cottage with her two daughters and an amazing cockerel was often told, but not till Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* was published a few years hence would it be carried down the centuries.

*A poor widwe, somdel stape (somewhat advanced) in age,
Was whilom dwelling in a narwe (narrow)cottage,
Bisyde a grove, standing in a dale.
This widwe, of which I tell you my tale,
Sin thilke day that she was last a wyf,
In pacience ladde (led) a ful simple lyf,
For litel was hir catel and hir rente;
By housbondrye, of such as God hir sente,
She found (kept?) hir-self and eek (also) hir doghtren (daughters) two.
Three large sowes had she, and nomo,
Three kyne (cows), and eek (also) a sheep that highte (was called) Malle,
Full sooty was her bour, and eek (also) her halle,
In which she eet ful many a sclender meel,
Of poynaunt (piquant) sauce hir needed never a deel,
No dayntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte;
Her dyete was accordant to hir cote.*

Beyond the seaport of Bridgewater just such another widow lived with her two daughters in just such a narrow cottage of two rooms with a little land surrounding. Her few animals and fowls sustained her family; a reduced family since the dreadful day when her husband and son had been hacked down in revenge for the peasants' revolt.

Weeks and months had passed slowly since, but the changing seasons had healed her heart a little. Her cows gazed at her with uncomprehending eyes, passively grateful when she removed their milk and eased the discomfort of their heavy udders. A daily routine of feeding and caring for her little herds and flocks gave purpose to her life, but essential cheese-making and the vegetable garden left little time to clean the house or her own clothes.

In the first summer of her widowhood, the fragrance of mown grass wilting under a hot sun had lifted her spirits for a few days and brought an unaccustomed spring to her step. Helped by her brother and neighbours they had been able to manage the exhausting work, making enough hay to get her cows through the winter. Heavy labour and human companionship proved an effective therapy for an aching heart.

The ricks of hay were a comforting sight throughout the next winter though they diminished with worrying speed before the grass grew again. In March, an intensely bright sun behind leafless trees in a cold blue sky, exposed the dust and grime of her neglected cottage. The widow could no longer ignore the layers of dust in unforgiving sunlight.

The daughters were press ganged into cleaning duties though neither they nor their mother were rightly sure where to start. By the end of the day the sheepskin bedding and clothes had been hung on the bushes and beaten thoroughly. The few small amounts of furniture had been removed and the floors swept clean. Clean new straw had been lightly stuffed into woven sacks. As the day passed the cows reminded the widow of milking time. Leaving the girls to carry everything back into the house she collected her bucket and stool and a bit of food for the first cow. It was a relief to sit down with her face against Bluebell's friendly flank and to stroke her warm udder.

Spring and summer passed in a disorderly progression of cows calving, months of milking and cheese making leading on to regular visits by a succession of cheese buyers. Hard and anxious men for the most part, but one sympathetic to her situation, offered a slightly better price and sometimes joined her for a meal. She came to enjoy his company and looked forward to his return.

Life continued its seasonal course; the girls grew older and stronger and better able to help their mother. The elder was now twelve years old, the younger a couple of years less and they would wander off around the village with their friends and cousins.

One day the cheese factor arrived with a strikingly attractive young assistant. Emma was mesmerised and could not take her eyes off him, and he responded to her intense interest. Though only six weeks later, it seemed an age till the cheese buyer and his assistant came again. The young couple went off together to bring the cows in for milking and the assistant cheese buyer even took a stool and a bucket to milk one of the cows himself. Between them they completed the milking leaving mother to entertain the senior buyer.

The sympathetic cheese buyer took to stopping overnight at the house of the widow's brother, but throughout the lean winter months there was no sign of the gorgeous assistant cheese buyer; Emma's agonies were only aggravated by her happy giggling mother. There came a day when the cheese buyer arrived on a Saturday, and at a time of year when there was no cheese ready for sale. On Sunday he returned to the widow's house and suggested he harness the horses and get ready to drive the family into Bridgewater.

They passed across the Parrett with tide rushing in, swiftly covering the mud banks to create a broad sheet of water, the girls slightly overawed by this demonstration of energy and power. By the time they reached the harbour it was almost high tide and the crew of a small freighter moored to the harbour wall were making busy clearing the deck and lashing down.

"Where are you heading for?" asked the cheese buyer of a young deckhand.

"We be bound for Bristol."

"What are you taking up to Bristol then?"

"Oh, bales of cloth mostly."

"How long will that take?"

"Oh, it'll be slow I reckon, till we get a good westerly. We won't get far fighting the tide out there without wind."

The skipper came up from below.

"Hoi, hoi, don't stand about talking. We have to get down river on the falling tide you know."

The crewman made himself busy, and in a few minutes the mooring ropes were cast off, though the freighter hardly moved.

Imperceptibly she crept towards the harbour gates as a very weak flow of water bore her towards the river. Emma could not help but notice the crewman's deep suntan, nor the wonderful muscles of his upper arms. How tightly would he hold her she wondered? For another hour they could see the single mast above the sand dunes as the boat made slow but accelerating progress along the narrow twisting river. The skipper would hope to be carried out into the Bristol Channel beyond the mud flats of Bridgewater Bay where he could wait for the rising tide; a force of water that would carry him swiftly towards Bristol for several hours even without a helpful wind.

As the boat disappeared, the girls wandered away from the harbour wall. Their mother turned to watch them, urging caution. She leaned back and found a supporting arm around her shoulders and smiled shyly. But he did not remove his arm. This was a comfort she had forgotten during the hard and lonely years.

At length they stirred themselves and began to wonder where they might find the girls. The girls meanwhile had found a group of boys who were practising hand to hand combat, a form of wrestling with no holds barred. The winner would be challenged by one bystander after another till beaten eventually by physical exhaustion. The most cunning boys would hang back till the strongest had been eliminated. A couple of older men encouraged the contest while assessing their potential for more advanced military skills.

The boys who had been eliminated and had lost interest in the contest chatted to the girls who were suitably impressed by the display of virility and valour. The eldest daughter was coming quickly to the conclusion that the port of Bridgewater was far more exciting than life in the countryside.

Within a few weeks the cheese factor had arranged for Emma to start work at the house of a business contact. She would return to her mother on Sundays, ostensibly to attend Church with the family, but she had outgrown the patient life on the farm and preferred to frequent the port on her time off.

Emma was working at the house of a comfortably wealthy young family as a cleaner and kitchen assistant. The first few days were quite strange, and she was slightly overawed by the obvious wealth of the family. She was also astonished to discover how much effort went into keeping the house clean each day of the week, she even had to carry out a light dusting on Sunday before her few hours away from duty. But she came to enjoy the cleanliness and soon thought it to be normal.

She ate with the staff and ate well. After dinner was served and cleared away, the leftovers were re-heated and the remains of the big joint of meat was carved and shared around by the cook. There were four people working in the house under the direction of the cook/housekeeper. The young wife had two small children and was pregnant again.

Emma was quite untrained for domestic service, and it was immediately apparent she was best suited for the care of the two children; her knowledge of food preparation and cooking was completely inadequate. She worked hard however and was keen to learn. The young mother began to trust her with the children and over many months came to depend on the calm and sensible village girl.

But Emma lived for her day off. After the essential dusting she joined the short procession family procession to Church. She walked behind her mistress ready to assist with the two children. Emma was becoming attached to the little girls and enjoyed the parade through the town.

The understanding was that on each Sunday she would return to her mother's house attending the evening service with her family before returning to her employer in Bridgewater before nightfall. And for a few weeks, this she diligently did. But as she came to know people of her own age, she spent more and more time in the town and family visits became shorter and shorter. Her mother seemed to be quite engrossed with the sympathetic cheese buyer and scarcely noticed. One Sunday the same freighter she had seen a few months earlier was tied to the harbour wall again. Though she walked up and down several times and quite slowly, she saw no-one on

the boat. She spoke to an acquaintance recently made and asked if he recognised the freighter. He looked at it without much interest and muttered he thought he had seen it before. Emma wondered where the crew might be and wandered along the short streets near the harbour returning to the boat at intervals. She could not wait much longer for a late return from her half day would be questioned.

Sadly, reluctantly, she turned away when almost immediately she saw three young men coming towards her. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the deckhand with the rather fine biceps. Something in the expression on her face encouraged him to pause, though his shipmates did not. Emma spoke first, "How often do you come into Bridgewater?"

"Whenever we have an order."

"Well, how often is that?"

"Oh, I don't know.... four weeks maybe six, I suppose."

"I can only get out on a Sunday after Church,"

"Where do you work?"

"Well, I am going there now. Do you want to see the way?"

But it would be four months before the boat came in again on a Sunday. The family were walking to Church and Emma was concentrating on the little children when she heard a low whistle. She looked up and her delighted smile told him all he needed to know.

He was still there when she came out of church and later again when she had returned to the big house and changed out of her Sunday Best for her precious afternoon off.