

a tramp. He is away. She will not go until she has seen him. She is bidden to go into the oast-house for shelter. When the master comes home late at night he is told of the woman waiting to see him in the oast-house. He gropes his way down to the house. He raises the latch, opens the door, and peers around.

"Great God!" he exclaimed a moment afterwards, then he dashed into the oast-house swiftly at last, and towards the figure of a woman lying face-foremost on the floor, half-way towards the door, as if making for fresh air, and life, and one last chance, and with her dead hands full of papers. Yes — dead! Rachel Shargool had not lasted out till midnight, and the important business between her and Abel Mayson was put off till the crack of doom.

Who was Rachel Shargool, and what was her business with Abel Mayson? These are first among the questions which it is the object of this story to explain. She was not his wife. He was not the father of her child. She did not owe him the twenty Bank of England notes for five hundred pounds each which her dead fingers were clutching when Abel Mayson found her in the oast-house. Had she been murdered? Did Jabez Cloke, the drier, know? What became of the twenty notes? What had become of the woman's child, Grizzogan Shargool, who was and was not? Here are questions enough to begin with.

It is seldom that a novel arouses a reader's curiosity more strenuously than this, at the outset, or baffles it more effectually to the close. At a dozen points it turns and turns upon itself, winding its involutions in and out, crossing its tracks, and entangling speculation in a maze of uncertainty. Mr. F. W. Robinson has gotten possession of Wilkie Collins's pen, and produced a work not unworthy of comparison with the *Moonstone* and the *Woman in White*.

Abel Mayson has a son, Dudley, who comes home from Australia, well off, but supposed to be poor. It is a sorry welcome his father gives him. Goldingbury has an inn, the "White Hart," and the "White Hart" acquires a new landlady, Miss Croft; and the subtle relation between Miss Croft and Grizzogan Shargool is left for the reader's slow apprehension. May Riversdale has a lover, the rich young brewer, and his painful suit paradoxically throws a glint of humor across an otherwise rather somber expanse of character and incident.

The story has outlandish names, whose artificiality and unnaturalness are a fault. Its characters are strongly drawn and powerful in themselves. There is much dramatic force in its action. Its plot is extraordinary for invention and complication. Its dialogue is easy and life-like. And it is interesting, almost absorbing. Altogether it comes near to being Mr. Robinson's best work, and it is one of the better novels of the day.

A FAIR MAID.*

TWO "fair maids" are just now simultaneously asking the suffrages of English and American novel readers; but E. Fairfax Byrrne's has the distinction over F. W. Robinson's of being a "fair country maid." Just what the difference, in novelist's eye and treatment, may be between a "fair maid" and a "fair country maid" we shall have to wait to see; in the present article Mr. Robinson's "fair maid," pure and simple, will be all that we can manage.

She was a "country" maid, though, notwithstanding, this May Riversdale, living with her widowed uncle, Abel Mayson, a hop-grower, at Goldingbury in Kent.

It was a large house which had gone a great way to ruin; one could see even in the night that the white stucco of it was weather-stained and green with damp, with big rents here and there, which looked like blots of blackness on it. To the left of it rose the oast-house, where the hops were to be dried after picking; and a tumble-down "ramshackle" oast-house it was, which the first boisterous wind was likely utterly to destroy. The door of it was open, and a bright light glared within from a huge charcoal fire, and streamed in a line of crimson out across the grass. A dark figure crossed and recrossed the light, and threw his shadow on the grass, too — the uncouth, gaunt shadow of a man with tangled hair, and in his shirt-sleeves — an ugly-looking phantom enough in the distance, too, whatever might be its reality and boldly presence when approached more closely.

A dramatic scene is presently to be enacted in this same oast-house. A woman, accompanied by a little girl, has called to see Abel Mayson — a poor woman, looking like

* A Fair Maid. By F. W. Robinson. Harper & Brothers. Franklin Square Library. 20c.