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*The Complete Works of*

**MARY WEBB**

(1881-1927)



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*The Complete Works of*  
**MARY WEBB**



*By Delphi Classics, 2023*

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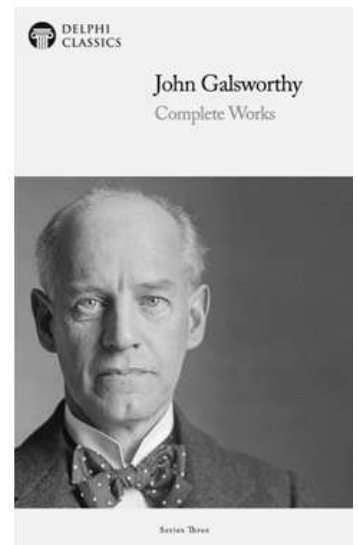
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## The Novels



*The Shropshire village of Leighton — Mary Webb's birthplace*



*The birthplace, Leighton Lodge*

## The Golden Arrow (1916)



*The Golden Arrow* was first published in 1916 in London by Constable & Co. It was Mary Webb's first published novel; she had predominately written poetry in her younger years and had attained some modest success when some verses had been printed in local newspapers. One poem that she wrote in 1907 about the Shrewsbury rail accident of 15 October, when a train derailed and killed eighteen people, was published anonymously in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*. It was well received by many in the community and the paper received complimentary and appreciative letters from readers that had been affected by the tragedy. Webb was in her mid-thirties by the time she released her first novel and her writing career was truncated by ill-health and an early death.

Webb wrote *The Golden Arrow* while she was living in the village of Pontesbury in her beloved Shropshire, the county that she lived in for most of her life. The novel centres on the Arden family: John, the patriarch; Patty, his wife; and their children Deborah and Joe. They reside on a farm in rural Shropshire and live a simple lifestyle tending to their animals and weathering whatever nature has in store for them. Joe is besotted with Lily, a pretty, young woman from a neighbouring village, while Deborah muses airily about love until she encounters Stephen Southernwood, the new young preacher at her local church and falls desperately in love with him. The relationships are filled with moments of euphoria and desolation as Webb explores the desires, contradictions and aspirations of her characters navigating life and love at the turn of the twentieth century.





*Webb, aged 15, c. 1896*

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TO  
A NOBLE LOVER

H. L. W.

We have sought it, we have sought the golden arrow  
(Bright the sally-willows sway)  
Two and two by paths low and narrow,  
Arm-in-crook along the mountain way.  
Break o' frost and break o' day!  
Some were sobbing through the gloom  
When we found it, when we found the golden arrow —  
Wand of willow in the secret cwm.  
M. W.

## INTRODUCTION by G. K. Chesterton



MANY OF US can remember the revelation of poetical power given to the world with the songs of a Shropshire Lad. Much of the noble, though more neglected, work of Mary Webb might be called the prose poems of a Shropshire Lass. Most of them spoke in the spirit, and many through the mouth, of some young peasant woman in or near that western county which lies, romantic and rather mysterious, upon the marches of Wales. Such a Shropshire Lass was the narrator of *Precious Bane*; such a one is the heroine, and a very heroic heroine, of *The Golden Arrow*. But the comparison suggested above involves something more than the coincidence of a county and a social type. Those two writers of genius, devoted to the spirit of Shropshire and the western shires, do really stand for two principles in all living literature to-day; and especially in all literature concerned with the very ancient but very modern subject of the peasantry. I do not put them side by side here for comparison in the paltry sense of competition. I have the strongest admiration for both literary styles and both literary achievements. But the comparison is perhaps the clearest and most rapid way of representing what is really peculiar to writers like Mary Webb and to books like *The Golden Arrow*.

There are two ways of dealing with the dignity, the pain, the prejudice or the rooted humour of the poor; especially of the rural poor. One of them is to see in their tragedy only a stark simplicity, like the outline of a rock; the other is to see in it an unfathomable though a savage complexity, like the labyrinthine complexity of a living forest. The Shropshire Lad threw on all objects of the landscape a hard light like that of morning, in which all things are angular and solid; but most of all the gravestone and the gallows. The light in the stories of the Shropshire Lass is a light not shining on things, but through them. It is that mysterious light in which solid things become semi-transparent; a diffused light which some call the twilight of superstition and some the ultimate violet ray of the sixth sense of man; but which the strictest rationalist will hardly deny to have been the luminous atmosphere of a great part of literature and legend. In one sense it is the light that never was on sea or land, and in another sense the light without which sea and land are invisible; but at least it is certain that without that dark ray of mystery and superstition, there might never have been any love of the land or any songs of the sea. Nobody doubts that peasantries have in the past, as a matter of fact, been rooted in all sorts of strange tales and traditions, like the legend of *The Golden Arrow*. The only difference is between two ways of treating this fact in the two schools of rural romance or poetry. For the pessimist of the school of Housman or of Hardy, the grandeur of poverty is altogether in the pathos of it. He is only softened by hard facts; by the hard facts of life and

death. The beliefs of the peasant are a mere tangle of weeds at the feet of the pessimist; it is only the unbelief of the peasant, the disillusion and despair of the peasant, which remind the pessimist of dignity and warm him with respect. There is nobility in the benighted darkness of the hero; but there is no light or enlightenment, except from the atheism of the author. The poor man is great in his sufferings; but not in anything for which he suffered. His traditions are a tangle of weeds; but his sorrows are a crown of thorns. Only there is no nimbus round the crown of thorns. There is no nimbus round anything. The pessimist sees nothing but nakedness and a certain grandeur in nakedness; and he sees the poor man as a man naked in the winter wind.

But the poor man does not see himself like that. He has always wrapped himself up in shreds and patches which, while they were as wild as rags, were as emblematic as vestments; rags of all colours that were worn even more for decoration than for comfort. In other words, he has had a mass of beliefs and half-beliefs, of ancestral ceremonies, of preternatural cures and preternatural consolations. It is amid this tangle of traditions that he has groped and not merely in a bleak vacuum of negation; it is in this enchanted forest that he has been lost so long, and not merely on the open moor; and it is in this rich confusion of mystical and material ideas that the rural characters of Mary Webb walk from the first page to the last.

Now we may well for the moment leave the controversy open, as to whether these works make the rustic too transcendental, or whether the works of the pessimists make him too pessimistic. But something like a serious historical answer can be found in the very existence of many of the rustic fables, or even of the rustic names. It is very difficult to believe that any people so brutal, so bitter, so stupid and stunted as the English rustics are sometimes represented in realistic literature could ever have invented, or even habitually used and lived in the atmosphere of such things as the popular names for the country flowers, or the ordinary place-names and topographical terms for the valleys and streams of England. It looks rather like bad psychology to believe that those who talked of traveller's joy were never joyful, that those who burdened their tongues with the title of love-lies-bleeding were never tender or romantic, or that the man who thought of some common green growth as Our Lady's bedstraw was incapable of chivalry or piety. The characters in the romances of Mary Webb are the sort of rustics who might have invented such names. The Golden Arrow itself would be a name of exactly such a nature, whether it were invented by the natives or invented by the novelist. The legend of The Golden Arrow, which lovers went wandering to find, 'and went with apple-blow scent round 'em and a mort o' bees, and warmship, and wanted nought of any man,' is a myth bearing witness, as do all myths and mythologies, to the ancient beauty for which man was made, and which men are always unmaking. But this mystical or mythological sense would not be genuine, if it did not admit the presence of an evil as well as a good that is beyond the measure of man. One of the things that makes a myth so true is that it is always in black and white. And so its mysticism is always in black magic as well as white magic. It is never merely optimistic, like a new religion made to order. And just as in *Precious Bane*, the old necromancer was driven by an almost demoniac rage to raise up the ghost of the Pagan Goddess, so in *The Golden Arrow*, a man is lured into the ancient and mazy dance of madness by that heathen spirit of fear which inhabits the high places of the earth and the peaks where the brain grows dizzy. These things in themselves might be as tragic as anything in the realistic tragedies; but the point to seize is the presence of something positive and sacramental on the other side; a heroism that is not negative but affirmative; a saintship with the power to cast out

demons; expressed in that immemorial popular notion of an antidote to a poison and a counter-charm against a witch.

The characterization in *The Golden Arrow*, if rather less in scope than that in *Precious Bane*, is sometimes even more vivid within its limits. The difference between the two girls, brought up under the same limitations, observing the same strict rural conventions, feeling the same natural instincts in two ways which are ten thousand miles apart, is very skilfully achieved within the unities of a single dialect and a single scene. And through one of them there passes, once or twice, like the noise and rushing of the Golden Arrow, that indescribable exaltation and breathing of the very air of better things; which, coming now and again in human books, can make literature more living than life.

G. K. CHESTERTON.

## CHAPTER ONE



JOHN ARDEN'S STONE cottage stood in the midst of the hill plateau, higher than the streams began, shelterless to the four winds. While washing dishes Deborah could see, through the small, age-misted pane, counties and blue ranges lying beneath the transparent or hazy air in the bright, unfading beauty of inviolate nature. She would gaze out between the low window-frame and the lank geraniums, forgetting the half-dried china, when grey rainstorms raced across from far Cader Idris, ignoring in their majestic progress the humble, variegated plains of grass and grain, breaking like a tide on the unyielding heather and the staunch cottage. Beyond the kitchen and attached to the house was the shippen, made of weather-boarding, each plank overlapping the next. This was lichen-grey, like the house, stone and wood having become worn as the hill-folk themselves, browbeaten and mellowed by the tempestuous years, yet tenacious, defying the storm. Sitting in the kitchen on a winter night, the Ardens could hear the contented rattle of the two cow-chains from the shippen, the gentle coughing and stamping of the folded sheep, while old Rover lay with one ear pricked, and now and then a hill pony — strayed from the rest — whickered through the howling ferocity of the gale.

But now it was July, and every day when Deborah set her mother's milk-pails upside-down on the garden hedge to sweeten, she stooped and smelt the late-blooming white bush roses. She was gathering them in the honey-coloured light of afternoon, while large black bees droned in the open flowers and hovered inquiringly round the close, shell-tinted buds.

'Deborah!' called Mrs. Arden from the kitchen, 'they're coming. I see them down by the Batch Stone now. Eli's walking as determined-angry as ever. Making up sins for other folks to repent of till he canna see anything in the 'orld.'

'Danged if he inna!' said John, going to the window and breaking into the wholehearted laughter of an old man who has never wilfully done wrong or consciously done right; for he was lifted by his simple love of all creatures as far above right and wrong as his cottage was above the plain. His brown, thin face ran into kindly smiles as easily as a brook runs in its accustomed bed. No one minded him laughing at them when they saw the endless charity of his eyes, which were set in a network of fine lines, and were wistful with his long gazing into oncoming storm and unattainable beauty and the desperate eyes of his strayed and sick sheep.

'Put out a bit of honey, mother!' he called, as his wife set out the old cups and saucers painted with dim and incorrigibly solemn birds, that made the dresser look like an enchanted aviary.

'Oh! John, you spendthrift! And not but a pound or two left of the last taking,' said Mrs. Arden. 'It's only Eli and Lil, after all.'

'Well, mother,' said John, 'Eli's got no honey in his heart, so he mun have some in his belly, whether or no!'

Deborah had gone out on to the green hill-track, mown by the sheep until no millionaire's lawn could be smoother. Folk to tea was a great event, for here it was only in the summer that the hamlets could link hands over the ridges, the white blossom flow up from the plains till it almost met on the summit, the farmer's wife on one side of the ridge walk over to see her sister on the other side.



‘Well, Deborah!’ said Eli, as she met them, ‘I see you’m going the broad road. Ribbons and fanglements! Aye! The ‘ooman of Babylon decked herself for the young captains — ’

‘I think she looks very nice, father,’ said Lily, in the habitually peevish tone of a snubbed child. She took stock of Deborah jealously; detested her for having blue ribbon and a normal father; and put an arm round her waist to disguise the fact and to see if Deborah had made her waist smaller by tight-lacing. Deborah received the embrace with the unquestioning gratitude and ineradicable reserve with which she met all demonstration. Without realizing the fact, she disliked being touched; physical contact with anything larger and less frail than a bee or raindrop worried her. At night, when she and Joe and the old folk gathered round the fire, she would draw her chair a little apart, unaware that she did so. Warm-hearted and without egoism, she was yet one of the women who are always surrounded by a kind of magic circle. The young men who leant on meadow bridges — locally known as ‘gaubies’ bridges’ — on a Sunday, when she paid a rare visit to the plain, did not call after her; when Joe’s friends came in for the evening, she thought they disliked her; she wished she were more like Lily — who boxed their ears and had her feet heavily stamped on under the table and once had an April-Fool postcard with ‘I love you’ on it.

‘I suppose it’s because of Lily’s golden hair,’ she once said to her mother wistfully. Her own was brown as a bark-stack, and had the soft sheen of a wood-lark’s wing or a hill-foal’s flank.

‘No danger!’ said her mother tartly. The more she loved people the more tart she was, until her husband used to say ruefully that he wished she was a bit more callous-like to him, for he felt like a pickled damson.

‘What’s a fellow want with nasty straw-hair for his chillun? You needna “O mother!” me; folks *do* have chillun — as I know full well, as have give their first wash to a power of ’em, *and* the lambs (poor things!) — not as I wash them, being woolly, and I’d as soon bring a lamb into the ‘orld as a child, for if they hanna got immortal souls they’re more affectionate than most that has — but as I was saying, chillun there are, and married you’ll be, and chillun you’ll have, and they won’t have straw thatch like Lily’s, but nice cob-coloured yeads with a polish on ’em! Dear ‘eart, she’s gone!’

As Deborah came with Eli and Lily along the sward, all the sheep, newly shorn and self-conscious, arranged themselves like a Bible picture, with the three figures as shepherds. The ‘cade’ lambs, remembering Deborah’s punctual feeding, and feeling an aura of protection about her, pressed round.

‘Dirty beasts!’ said Eli, sweeping them back with his stick. ‘Not but what that black ‘un will bring a good price come Christmas.’

‘Dunna clout ’em, Eli!’ came John’s voice from the threshold. ‘I’d liefer they’d come round me than find the pot of gold under the rainbow. They be my friends, as you know well, and they’m not speechless from emptiness of heart. No, sorrowful and loving they be.’

‘Meat, that’s what they be,’ said Eli.

‘Deb!’ whispered Lily, ‘isn’t he an old beast? I hate him more every day, and I wish I could get married — that I do!’

‘Oh, Lily!’

‘Not that I like sheep myself,’ Lily continued, ‘soft things! But as for him, he’s always growling and grudging and taking on religious all at once.’ Her lips trembled. ‘I hanna got so much as a bit of ribbon, nor nothing,’ she said.

Deborah stooped and gathered a red rose — the only one.

‘There! that’s nicer than ribbon, and Joe likes red,’ she said with a smile.

Lily simpered.

‘Where be Joe?’ she asked negligently, hiding her wearing anxiety as to whether Joe would be present at tea or not.

‘Haying at the Shakeshafts’, but it’s so nigh that he comes back to his tea now and agen.’

Colour came into Lily’s pale face. Her eyes shone. She was vital for the first time that afternoon.

‘Can I come to your room and do my hair, Deb?’ she asked. ‘The curls do blow about so. I should think you’re glad yours is straight, and never blows out in curls?’

Deborah was looking at a giant shadow — the astral body of the gaunt Diafol ridge, blue-purple as a flower of hound’s-tongue — which stretched across the hammock-like valley towards their own range at this time in the afternoon.

‘Aye,’ she said absently.

‘Do you like these sausage-curls at the back, Deb?’ asked Lily, thirsting for female praise, since the more nerve-thrilling male was not obtainable.

‘Aye,’ said Deborah again.

Lily stamped.

‘You never looked, Deborah Arden! I suppose you’re jealous.’

Deborah awakened from her dreams and smiled.

‘I was thinking that shadow was like a finger pointing straight at you and me, Lil,’ she said. ‘A long finger as you canna get away from. What does it token?’

‘Weddings!’ said Lily, thinking of Joe and the underclothes she would buy in Silverton, and blushing at an impropriety that Deborah would not have seen.

‘Maybe — or maybe summat darker,’ said Deborah.

‘Oh, don’t be so creepy and awful, Deb!’ And Lily pulled her blouse tighter to show the outline of her figure better — a very pretty, pigeon-like outline, so poor Joe thought later, desperate at Lily’s provocative hauteur.

‘Deb!’ shrieked Mrs. Arden up the breakneck stairs, ‘take the tray and ring up Joe, there’s a good girl.’

‘Me too!’ cried Lily, taking the largest tray.

So out ran the two maidens, their frocks flying, nimble feet scudding over the springy turf, armed with green trays painted with fat roses, beating on them like bacchanals with pokers. They were quite grave and earnest, quite unaware that they were quaint, beautiful, and the inevitable prey of oncoming destiny.

A brown figure appeared far down a cwm of the steep hillside, at first indistinguishable from the blurs that were rocks and sheep, climbing the hot, slippery hill.

Lily watched with veiled eagerness; leaning out to this new force of manhood with no thought of it, but with the complete absorption in her own small, superficial ego in face of great primeval powers which makes a certain type of woman the slave of sex instead of the handmaid of love. She was what is called a good girl, thinking no worse thoughts than the crude ones of most farm women. She was insatiably curious, and was willing to face the usual life of the women among whom she lived in order to unravel the mysteries of the Old Testament and other Sunday meat of the congregation at her place of worship. She was full of tremors and flushes — the livery of passion — yet incapable of understanding passions’s warm self. She was ready to give herself as a woman for the sake of various material benefits, with a pathetic ignorance of her own unthinkable worth as a human being. She was rapacious for the

small-change of sex, yet she would never be even stirred by the agony of absence from the beloved.

Deborah went indoors like a good sister, and left Joe to his fate.

In the calm, brown kitchen, alive with the ticking of the grandfather clock, Mrs. Arden's alarum and John's turnip watch — which, when wound, went stertorously for an hour and then stopped — the three old folk, like wintered birds, sat round the board in a kind of unconscious thankfulness for mere life and absence of pain. Eli always had the robin cup, the robin being the only bird that did not rouse him to hoarse grumblings about pests and vermin. In the dim past his mother had cajoled and threatened him into a belief that the robin was a sacred bird; so sacred it was. A robin might perch on his spade while he stooped to shake potatoes from the haulm, and he only gave it a crooked smile. Any other bird he would have stoned. They drank from the cups, where the gold was worn at the rim, with a kind of economy of pleasure, as if they felt that the cup of life was slowly emptying, the gold upon it growing faint.

'Honey, Eli?' said John. 'There's a bit of acid in to suit your taste!' By such mild satire he comforted himself for the heart-sickness often given him by Eli's treatment of small creatures.

'Here's our Deb,' he said, with his unfailing delight in his children. 'Where's Lily?'

Mrs. Arden, ever ready to further the designs of nature, kicked him under the table; he gazed at her with steadfast inquiry till the truth slowly dawned on him, and the china rattled to his delighted thump of the table.

'What, Joe?' he asked, and let Eli into the secret in a twinkling.

'Aye,' said Eli, with a kind of sour pride, unable to help approving of success, though disapproving of youth, beauty and love. 'Aye, she'm a terror with the men, is Lilian. The mother was the same.' He always spoke of his late wife in the detached manner of one alluding to a cow.

'Eh, well! The dead say nought,' remarked Mrs. Arden, who always had a veiled hostility to Eli.

'And that's a silence we all come to,' said John pacifically. 'Poor Thomas o' Wood's End's gone, I'm told. You'll be making a noration on his coffin, Eli, I suppose?'

'No. I bain't good enough for them seemingly,' said Eli. 'Some young chap's to come as is new in these parts. Foreman at the Lostwithin Spar Mine. Tongue hung on in the middle. All faith and no works, and the women after 'un like sheep at a gap. I shanna go.'

'I'm going,' said John. 'He was a good neighbour, was Thomas. Stood godfather to our Deb, too, when mother took an' got her named in Slepe Church.'

'Well!' said Mrs. Arden oracularly, 'chapel I was reared and chapel I am. But when it comes to weddings and christenings, you want summat a bit older than chapel — plenty of written words and an all-overish feeling to the place and a good big zinc-lined font. And is the new young man married or single, Eli?'

Eli made no reply — a custom of his when a question bored him, and one so well understood by his intimates that no one dreamt of being offended.

As Deborah sat with the old people, she wondered if the strange experience that had come to Joe and Lily would ever come to her. Would she ever pluck bracken as rosily and earnestly as Lily, waiting for a step — a voice? She felt rather forlorn in the staid environment, rather homesick for adventure, yet with the sense of somnolent peace that broods over afternoon services.

Out in the sun Lily pulled to pieces the small, soft fingers of the bracken with her back to the ascending Joe. A hawk hovered overhead, and the snipe that had been bleating ceased and became still. Up from the meadow Joe had left, came faint shouts; microscopic figures moved there. Joe's black hair was stuck with hay, which gave his steadfast face an absurdly rakish air.

'Waiting for me, Lil?' he asked, his delight overflowing.

'No danger!'

'Oh!' said Joe, crestfallen.

'What are you gallivanting here for, when they're haying?' queried Lily, giving him a chance for a compliment.

'Me tea,' said Joe, truthfully but disastrously.

Lily was silent, surveying his corduroyed and blue-shirted figure with great disfavour.

As he had climbed the slope, there had flickered before him, pale and shaken as the nodding blue heads of the sheep's-bit scabious, a vision of firelight and small faces, with Lily presiding over a giant teapot. For Joe's most spiritual was to some eyes grossly material. His winged desires, his misty gropings after the beautiful were clothed by him in the most concrete images. Therefore, because he loved Lily so much, the teapot of the vision was large enough for a school-treat, larger than any he had seen in the sixpenny bazaar windows last Michaelmas Fair, and the children's faces were quite innumerable. But now, near enough to touch that wonderful blouse of Lily's — a very transparent green butter-muslin made in the latest fashion by Lily and fastened with pins — now the vision went out like a lantern when a blown bough smashes the glass.

'Lil, will you come pleasuring along o' me to the Fair on Lammas holiday?' he asked humbly.

Lily disguised her thrill of joy.

'Fraid I canna,' she said.

'Oh, Lil! And I've saved five shillings on purpose.'

'If so be I came, would you buy me a blue bow?'

'I would that!' said the beaming Joe; 'a whacking big 'un!'

'Oh, not big — little and pretty. I don't like big things.'

'I be a bit on the big side myself, Lil, but it ain't my fault, and I met be able to keep folk from jostling you — being broad like.'

'If I come,' said Lily, 'will you bring Deb too?'

'Deb? Lord o' mercy, I dunna want Deb.'

'It's not proper 'ithout,' said Lil.

Joe flushed redder than he already was. The mere possibility of a state of things that could be construed as improper existing between himself and this mystery — this radiant creature that had suddenly appeared out of the chrysalis of the Lil Huntbatch he had known all his life — went to his head like home-brewed.

'A' right,' he said meekly.

'And as Deb would be dull, when we went off together — '

'Aye,' said Joe with much relish.

'And as she dunna like the chaps about here much — '

'I canna think why — good chaps they be, drawing a straight furrow and handy with the sheep — '

'A girl doesn't think much of that in the man she's going to wed,' said Lily loftily.

'What does she think on? Chapel-going? I'll go to chapel every week, Lil, if you like. I be more of an outside prop than an inside pillar now, but — '

‘It doesn’t matter to me if you never go,’ said Lily. ‘But as I said, as she doesn’t like them, why not ask that new chap that’s come to Lostwithyn yonder — a town chap and very smart, they say. He’s going to speak over Thomas o’ Wood’s End come Sunday; you could ask him then.’

Joe pondered.

‘If I do, will you come to chapel along o’ me and walk back arm-in-crook and promise faithful to come to the Fair?’

‘If you like.’

‘What little small arms you’ m got, Lil! And shining white, like a bit of spar. I wish — ,

‘What?’ said Lily, trembling with curiosity and delight.

‘Ne’er mind,’ said Joe; ‘come Sunday night, when we’re by the little ‘ood and it’s quiet, maybe I’ll say. And now I’ll go round by the back and wash me.’

Lily went into the kitchen, thinking how rough Joe was — better than her father, of course, but probably not as nice as the new Lostwithyn foreman, whom she had, with such well-laid plans, arranged to captivate. John glanced up at her and remembered his courting days. Mrs. Arden decided to put off pig-killing till Joe should be ‘called,’ in order to have black pudding at the wedding. She also considered other abstruse questions. Deborah felt rather like Lily’s aunt, and was very motherly to her, retiring soon at an urgent call from Joe to see to the proper adjustment of his best tie — no mere knot, but a matter of intricate folds of crimson silk embellished with large horseshoes. All the things Joe did and possessed were large.



*End of Sample*