

The Fair Maid of Devon

by

Frances Whistler

They stood for a moment watching from the window as a gust carried off petals from the collapsed tree at the end of the plot. Beyond the hedge, the ranked tops of Heaman's orchard rose crowded with blossom to the skyline, where the asbestos roof of the new cider factory poked up.

"They're later blooming," said the old woman, knuckles resting heavily on the window table. "Mind, they're grubbed out and replaced after so many years – they don't let them get old." She turned and smiled. "Not like the Fair Maid."

"It's such a shame it's dying!" said the younger woman.

"Oh well, happens to us all."

She sat slowly in the armchair and stretched her foot onto the footstool, and her visitor knelt and started laying out the bandages and cream for renewing the dressing that criss-crossed the old woman's shin. "Have you always lived here?" She liked chatting: it made the job pass quicker.

"Always, dear. My brother managed for the Buscombes – they owned all the land as far as Rickleigh. Young Mr Buscombe gave the name to the Fair Maid of Devon. My brother grew it, and he named it." She sighed as the last strip of gauze came off, exposing the purplish wound. "He married the most beautiful young lady from Ashburton. And then he went off and was killed. The District Nurse looked up. "The First War?"

"Yes he brought her here late summer 1913, when they were first wed – the tree was only young then, and my brother Bert was that proud of the tang in the fruit. He reckoned it'd be master good for cider, and was full of plans for taking grafts. Mrs Buscombe stood beside it with the apples right by her cheek – she was just of a height with the tree – and Bert couldn't stop chatting to her, and she chatted back and was very pretty with him, and young Mr Buscombe and I stood just outside here and watched – he didn't mind." She smiled. "Afterwards Bert said Mr Buscombe was the luckiest man alive.

The nurse laughed indulgently. "Did Bert see much of her after that?"

"No, not really dear. Young Mr Buscombe was dead by the next Michaelmas. The nephew Mr John Buscombe inherited, and had my brother set a big orchard for him and a bit of a nursery, and sold lots of grafts of the Fair Maid. Most farms had a cider-press back then."

"What became of Mrs Buscombe?"

"I heard she married again."

Things went on in silence, till the nurse picked up the soiled gauze and the old woman indicated the Rayburn. A waft of sharp fumes emerged when she opened the door and threw it in. "It'll be windy for my ride back." She put on her mackintosh.

After she had cycled off the old woman remained on the doorstep. Then with one finger she traced her eyebrow and down onto her cheekbone, as someone naming the tree had once done, lightly.