

**GRISELDA: A
NOVEL; IN THREE
VOLUMES: VOL. I**

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GRISELDA.



CHAPTER I.

PURE white snow everywhere. Lying thick on the hill-tops against the slate-coloured sky, in drifts on the fields, where the hedges were mere lines in the whiteness, in patches on the red tiles of the village-houses — snow clinging to the grey church-steeple, clustering upon the green ivy, which was black in contrast to the

Pen. in. Ray Esq. in 2. Marshall. 30.

dazzling, sparkling crystals — snow melting slowly from the sloping roof of the vicarage close by.

It was a wintry Christmas Eve at the little village of Crowsfoot, in Midlandshire. Crowsfoot nestled in a grassy valley under the Langton Hills. There were farms here and there about, but no village for three or four miles. The small population of Crowsfoot consisted of farm-labourers, a few tradespeople to supply these with bread and living necessities; the doctor, Mr Mayne,—and the vicar, the Reverend John Black.

There was no squire; there were no 'gentlemen farmers.' The Crowsfoot folk were rough and ready, living from hand to mouth. A hard, toiling life, but pleasant because it was lived out in the lap of Nature. And ignorant — stupid,

perhaps, as those hard-handed, rough men and women were, there was the charm of Nature upon them, the rude sweetness of her big babies that have never been weaned from her bosom.

When 'Parson Black,' or 'Parson,' as his rural flock called him, came to live among them, there was a tinge of savagery about these tillers of the ground. He felt it, and determined to tone it down.

John Black was strong in soul and body. He had been a friendless orphan of mysterious origin ; he had never known exactly how he came to be one of the struggling, passionate atoms called men. He had come into consciousness, living with an old nurse and her husband, but treated by them as their superior. It was 'Master John' with them, and they

waited upon him, not he upon them. Their name was Hobbs; but he was 'Master John' till he was fetched away to school—a strict boarding-school, where he found, to his astonishment, that his name was 'Black.'

Self-contained, thoughtful, naturally surly, his school-life would have been unhappy had he not worked with all his might, carried off prizes, plodded upward doggedly till, as captain of the school, he won a scholarship and went to Cambridge. Here he continued his persistent efforts, took a good place among the wranglers, and went in for Holy Orders.

His life had been utterly friendless. Except poor old Hobbs and his wife, he had neither kith nor kin. He had known no father's pride, no mother's ten-