Sussex gorse, the story of a fight

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Title: Sussex gorse, the story of a fight

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ISLE OF THORNS
THREE AGAINST THE WORLD

SAMUEL RICHARDSON

WILLOW'S FORGE AND OTHER POEMS
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prologue. The Challenge</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Book I The Beginning of the Fight</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book II The Woman's Part</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book III The Elder Children</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book IV Treacheries</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book V Almost Under</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book VI Struggling Up</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book VII The End in Sight</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book VIII The Victory</td>
<td>432</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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SUSSEX GORSE

PROLOGUE

THE CHALLENGE

§1.

BOARZELL FAIR had been held every year on Boarzell Moor for as long as the oldest in Peasmarsh could remember. The last Thursday in October was the date, just when the woods were crumpling into brown, and fogs blurred the wavy sunsets.

The Moor was on the eastern edge of the parish, five miles from Rye. Heaving suddenly swart out of the green water-meadows by Socknersh, it piled itself towards the sunrise, dipping to Leasan House. It was hummocked and tussocked with coarse grass—here and there a spread of heather, growing, like all southern heather, almost arboreally. In places the naked soil gaped in sores made by coney-warrens or uprooted bushes. Stones and roots, sharn, shards, and lumps of marl, mixed themselves into the wealden clay, which oozed in red streaks of potential fruitfulness through their sterility.

The crest of Boarzell was marked by a group of firs, very gaunt and wind-bitten, rising out of a mass of gorse, as the plumes of some savage chief might nod mangily above his fillet. When the gorse was in bloom,
one caught the flare of it from the Kentish hills, or away westward from Brightling and Dallington. This day in the October of 1835, the flowerets were either nipped or scattered, or hidden by the cloths the gipsies had spread to dry on the bushes.

The gipsies always camped on the flanks of the Fair, which they looked on with greater detachment than the gaujos who crowded into its heart, either selling or buying, doing or being done. Just within the semi-circle of their earth-coloured tents were the caravans of the showmen, gaudily painted, with seedy horses at tether, very different from the Romany gris. Then came the booths, stalls piled with sweets in an interesting state of preservation, trays of neck and shoulder ribbons, tinsel cords, tin lockets with glass stones, all fairings, to be bought out of the hard-won wages of husbandry in love. Then there was the panorama, creaking and torn in places, but still giving a realistic picture of the crowning of King William; there was the merry-go-round, trundled noisily by two sweating cart-horses; there was the cocoa-nut shy, and the fighting booth, in the doorway of which half-breed Buck Washington loved to stand and display his hairy chest between the folds of his dressing-gown; and there was the shooting-gallery, where one could pot at the cardboard effigies of one's hates, Lord Brougham who had robbed the poor working man of his parish relief, or Boney, still a blood-curdler to those who had seen the building of the Martello towers.

To-day business was bad. Here and there a plough-boy pulled up his slop and fumbled for pennies in his corduroys, but for the most part the stalls were deserted, even in certain cases by their holders. This was not because the Fair was empty. On the contrary, it was much more crowded than usual; but the crowd clotted into groups, all discussing the same thing—the Inclosure.