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PRISCILLA OF THE GOOD INTENT



HALLIWELL
SUTCLIFFE

KD 13450



**Gift of the People of the United States
Through the Victory Book Campaign
(A. L. A. — A. R. C. — U. S. O.)
to the Armed Forces and Merchant Marine**



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PRISCILLA OF THE GOOD INTENT

PRISCILLA OF THE GOOD INTENT

A ROMANCE OF THE GREY FELLS

BY
HALLIWELL SUTCLIFFE

Author of "Mistress Barbara," "Benedick in Arcady," etc.

*Gift of The People of the United States
Through the Victory Book Campaign
(A. L. A. — A. R. C. — U. S. O.)
to the Armed Forces and Merchant Marines*

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PRISCILLA OF THE GOOD INTENT

CHAPTER I

THE blacksmith's forge stood just this side of the village as you entered it from Shepston, and David Blake, the smith, was blowing lustily at his bellows, while the sweat dripped down his face. The cool of a spring morning came through the doorway, against which leaned a heavy, slouching lad.

"Te-he, David the Smith! Sparks do go scrambling up chimney," said Billy the Fool, with a fat and empty laugh.

They called him Billy the Fool, for old affection's sake, with no sense of reproach; for the old ways of thought had a fast hold on Garth village, and a natural was held in a certain awe, as being something midway between a prophet and a child.

"Ay, sparks are scrambling up. 'Tis a way they have, Billy," answered the other cheerily. "What's your news?"

Again Billy laughed, but cunningly this time. "Grand news — all about myself. Was up at sunrise, and been *doing naught* ever since. I'm main fond of doing naught,

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David. Seems to trickle down your body, does idleness, like good ale."

The blacksmith loosed his hold on the bellows' handles and turned about, while he passed a hand across his forehead.

"Is there nought ye like better than idleness?" he asked. "Think now, Billy — just ponder over it."

"Well, now," answered the other, after a silence, "there's playing — what ye might call playing at a right good game. Could ye think of some likely pastime, David?"

"Ay, could I. Blowing bellows is the grandest frolic ever I came across."

Billy was wary, after his own fashion, and he looked at the blacksmith hard, his child's eyes — blue and unclouded by the storms of life — showing big beneath their heavy brows of reddish-brown.

"I doubt 'tis work, David," he said dispassionately.

"Nay, now! Would I ask *thee* to work, lad? Fond o' thee as I am, and knowing labour's harmful to thee?"

"I shouldn't like to be trapped into work. 'Twould scare me when I woke o' nights and thought of it."

"See ye, then, Billy" — blowing the bellows gently — "is it work to make yon sparks go, blue and green and red, as fast as ever ye like to drive 'em? Play, I call it, and I've a mind, now I come to think on't, just to keep ye out o' the game, and go on playing it myself."

Billy drew nearer, with an anxious look. "Ye wouldn't do that, or ye'd not be blacksmith David," he said, with unerring knowledge of the other's kindness. "Te-he! 'Tis just a bit o' sporting — I hadn't thought of it i' that light."

And soon he was blowing steadily; for the lad's frame was a giant's, when he chose to use it, and no fatigue had

ever greatly touched him. From time to time, as the blacksmith paused to take a red-hot bar from the furnace or to put a cold one in, he would nod cheerfully at Billy the Fool and emphasize the frolicsome side of his employment.

"Ye've an easy time, Billy," he would say. "See me sweating here at beating iron into horseshoe shape — and ye playing at chasing sparks all up the chimley!"

The sweat was pouring from Billy, too, by this time, but he did not heed. Plump and soft his laugh came, as he forced the sparks more swiftly from the coals.

"Was born for playtimes, I, David," he cried in great delight. "I've heard tell of silver spoons, popped unbeknownst-like into babbies' cradles. *I war a babby o' that make, I reckon, for sure 'tis I'm always playing, when I'm not always idling in between times.*"

"Ye were lucky fro' birth," David answered, driving the hole for the last nail. "Some folk is, while other-some must work."

"Why *do* ye work, David?" asked the other, with entire simplicity.

"Oh, just a fancy, lad. Seems as I have to, somehow. There were no silver spoons dropped into *my* cradle. Hive o' bees swarmed there, I fancy, for I've had a few in my bonnet ever since."

There was another silence, while Billy the Fool, working hard at the bellows, looked long and meditatively at David Blake.

"I wouldn't like to hurt ye, David," he said at last, "but I reckon ye're just a bit daft-witted like. Why don't ye play or idle all your time, same as I do?"

David threw the finished horseshoe on the heap at his left hand, and was about to answer when a shadow came

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between the reeking smithy and the fresh and open sunshine beyond the door.

"Oh, 'tis ye, Priscilla?" he said, looking up. "Ye've got the spring-look in your face."

As she stood half in, half out of the smithy door, Priscilla was radiant in her young and pliant beauty. To David Blake's fancy — rough, kindly, not far wide of the mark at any time — she "made the day new-washed and happier"; yet it was Billy who next found his tongue.

"Te-he! Ye look as if life was playtime for ye, too," said he, still blowing at his bellows, but looking at her slyly over his shoulder.

"Maybe," she laughed — and the kind, wise music of the thrush was in her laughter. "'Tis very true, Billy. Life's playtime for me."

David Blake looked at her, and liked her a little the better; for he knew that Priscilla worked hard, worked long and with a blithe face, each day of her life. To the blacksmith it seemed, in between doing odd jobs that brought him in a livelihood, that his prime work in life was to love Priscilla ever and ever a little more — and each day to find himself more tongue-tied in her presence.

Again it was Billy who took up the talk, though Blake would think to-morrow of twenty things he might have said, and curse himself in a quiet way for having failed to say them.

"I'm always playing, as a man might say, myself," chuckled the Fool. "Playing at bellows-blowing now. See the lile sparks go up, Miss Priscilla — 'tis I that send them, right enough."

"Why, yes," she said, nodding pleasantly at his wide and gaping face. "We're playing, Billy, you and I. Only the blacksmith works."

"He's a bit of a fool, by that token," hazarded Billy.

The blacksmith, when he laughed at all, laughed from his lungs outward. "Always guessed it, Priscilla," said he, making his anvil ring. "Billy's a child, but old in wisdom. Bit of a fool I'll be to the end, I reckon."

"I'm playing, David," said Billy, while the blacksmith halted in his work to steal a glance at Priscilla. "Get ye on with your work o' making horseshoes, if I'm playing the tune to ye."

Again David laughed. "Keeps me at it, Priscilla," he said. "Never met a taskmaster so hard to drive a man as Billy."

"We want ye at Good Intent," said Priscilla, laughing too — and her laughter was a pleasant thing to hear, reminding David again of throstles when the spring comes in.

"You can ease your hold of the bellows, Billy," said David, with an alacrity that was patent to the girl, modest and proud as she was. "When I am called to Good Intent Farm — well, I go, most times, and ne'er ask what's wanted, and leave smithy-work behind."

"Robbing me o' my playtime," panted Billy the Fool, as he mopped his forehead.

He looked up at David, and his blue eyes were wistful as a dog's asking for commands.

"Ye'll be idle now," said the blacksmith. "Play first, laddie, and idleness after."

"Ay, you're right, — you're always right, saving odd times, when you're a Fool Billy like myself. Miss Priscilla has a trick o' making ye daft-witted, I've noticed."

The village natural, with his huge body and his big, child's eyes, had a way of finding out his neighbours' secrets, and had no shame at all in telling folk what each wanted to hide from the other. Priscilla turned her face away, and David reddened like a lovesick lad.

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“Keep the forge-fire going quietly,” said the blacksmith. “That’s idleness for ye — just to lie dreaming this side of it, and time and time to put the fuel on.”

“Ay, that’s idleness,” said Billy, as he stretched himself — again like a shaggy, trusty dog — along the smithy floor. “Get ye to work, David, and leave me to my play-work.”

They went out into the springtime, David and Priscilla, and the breeze was cool and sweet about them as if it blew from beds of primroses. The lass wished that David Blake had more to say, wished that the quickness of the spring would run off his tongue’s end; she did not know that he felt it — more than she, maybe — but had no words in which to tell her of it.

“You make a body thoughtless-like, Priscilla,” he said at last. “Never asked ye what the job was I was wanted for; and here I am without a tool to my back.”

David was able to do so many jobs, and do them handily, that it might be one of twenty that was asked of him today, and he looked anxiously at Priscilla, to ask if he should go back for his tools.

“I was watching the water-wagtails,” she answered, scarcely hearing him. “They’re home to the old stream again, David, and that means the spring is here, or hereabouts.”

He watched the pair of mating birds sit, first on the low stone wall that guarded the stream, then flicker to the road, their white tails moving like a lady’s fan.

“Mating-time, Priscilla,” said he.

Something in his voice, something in the true, quiet ring of it moved Priscilla strangely.

“They’re bonnie birds, David,” she said. “Winter’s out, and springtime’s coming in, when they wag their trim, white tails.”

"Ay, true. But what tools ought I to have brought, like?"

Priscilla sighed, for dull-wittedness did not commend itself to-day. "No tools at all, David. The roan cow I'm so fond of has lodged a slice of turnip in her throat, and father cannot move it."

"Easy as falling out of a tree, Priscilla. Lord, I thought you farmer-folk knew somewhat — but when it comes to a cow, ye've got to whistle for David the Smith!"

Priscilla glanced at him with a roguery as dainty and secure as that of the spring itself. "They say ye can talk to the four-footed things, David, and make them understand ye. Pity ye can't spare more words for us poor two-footed folk."

"Ay, but the beasts are sensible, somehow, lass. They don't maze ye up with words and what ye might call the frills and furbelows o' life — they just look at ye, and feel your hands going smooth and quiet down their flanks, *and they know.*"

"Billy has that sort of instinct, I have noticed," said Priscilla demurely. "There's not a dog in the countryside that won't come and fawn on him — though some of our dogs are not just gentle."

David gave another of his great, hearty laughs. "My father always said, when he was alive, that I'd been intended for a natural, and missed it only by good luck. I'm fond of Billy the Fool myself; simple and slow is Billy, and what he lacks in wit he makes up for in heart-room."

"That's true, David," said the girl, a little daunted, as she often was, by David's settled outlook upon things.

For herself, there were times when she longed to cross the limits of this life at Garth, longed for the romance of the beyond; but when David talked as he was talking

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now she felt shamefacedly that he was in the right to be content within the boundaries of the fields and the blithe, raking hills, the village smithy and the village farmsteads.

David Blake did not belie his reputation when, after following the wood-path through the Ghyll, they came to Good Intent — a grey and well-found homestead — and sought the mistals. What with surgeon's skill and the skill that comes from utter friendship with all cattle, he did what neither Priscilla nor her father could have done.

"Give you thanks, David," said Farmer Hirst, a broad, well-timbered man, with a voice like thunder on the distant hills. "She's the pick of the lot, this roan ye've saved, and saving's saving, whether it is your child or your cow that's ailing."

"Ah, now!" murmured the blacksmith, "there's joy in saving beasties, and no thanks needed."

"Well, thanks are waiting for ye when ye care to pick 'em up — which ye seldom do, David — and meanwhile I've to see if my men are cutting the thorn-hedge to my liking. Priscilla, there's cake and ale within doors; there's one in Garth can look better to David's needs than ever I could do."

Now David's laugh was hearty; but it was a child's whisper when compared with Farmer Hirst's, especially when the older man fancied that he was using rare diplomacy. A true yeoman of the north was this master of Good Intent — owned his own house and land, his own quiet, wholesome pride, his line of goodly forbears. And so, because he had learned to know a man when he saw him, he had long ago chosen David as the favoured suitor.

"Lasses must wed, leaving their fathers lonely," the farmer would say to himself as he sat o' nights — Priscilla gone to bed — and drank his nightcap of hot rum.

“ I’d have felt less lonesome-like if Priscilla’s mother wasn’t lying green under sod, and me alone save for Cilla. But lasses must wed, and I’ve seen o’ late the mating look in Priscilla’s face. Well, her mother wore that look, once on a day, and I’ve seen no better in my long life, and never shall. It must be David — oh, ay, it must be David!”

So he left them together this morning, and his big voice seemed to echo up and down the grey, stone hills long after he had left.

Farmer Hirst had given the blacksmith many chances of this kind; and always it had been, as now, the signal for David to grow tongue-tied, for Priscilla to show the wild-rose flag of maidenly rebellion in her cheeks.

“ ’Tis kindly, this smell of a mistal,” ventured David by and by. “ Sweet o’ the kine, I call it — ’tis so lusty and so big to smell.”

Priscilla answered nothing. There’s something in the fragrance of a cattle-byre that makes for wooing, no man can tell you why; and the lass was young and was feeling two spring seasons meet in her — spring of her untried youth, and spring of the tried old world that knows its faith.

“ Cilla, the throstles are singing out of doors,” said he, bending an ear toward the open fields.

His meaning should have been clear; for, when a throstle sings across the reek of an open mistal-door, the human oddities of speech should be altogether lost, and the world’s tongue interpret all. Yet Priscilla missed it, and disdained the thrush’s clarion note.

“ Ay, David, and the world is turning round about the sun, and the stars come out o’ nights, and I’ve to do my churning by and by. David, is there naught beyond your throstles and your stars and the sun that guides the world?”

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"Naught," answered David stolidly. "They're life, Priscilla, and maybe when we're hid beneath the sward we'll know of bonnier things — but not just yet, I'm thinking."

It was David's moment, had he known it. It needed a touch, a glance, a right word spoken that should ring in tune with the spring; and while he halted there came a sound of whistling all across the mistal-yard. It was not like Farmer Hirst to turn back when once he had set off, and Priscilla wondered whose the footstep could be — the step that was quicker and lighter than her father's.

"One of the farm-men, maybe," muttered David, remembering, now that the opportunity was like to be lost, the one right speech he should have whispered into Priscilla's ear.

"No — nor yet father's. 'Tis a town-bred step, David. Cannot you hear the mincing tread, as if he thought the sweet yard-litter could hurt a body's feet?"

"Ay, now you name it, so I can. Treads nipperty-like, as a cat does. Mistrust that sort of going, I. Who can he be, Priscilla?"

"Some stranger likely. Some one that's never smelled the warmth of a cattle-byre, so I should say."

The footsteps sounded near and hurried now, but still there was that delicate, lady-like treading across what Priscilla had named the sweet yard-litter. David and the girl, looking from the shadows of the mistal into the open sunlight, saw a well-dressed figure of a man — a man neither short nor tall, neither dark nor fair — a man no way remarkable, unless the sun was full upon him, and, seeing him from a shadowed place, you noted the uncertain eyes which long ago had been a puzzle to his mother when he stood beside her knee.

"There was no one at Good Intent, except old Martha,"

said the newcomer, lifting his hat with an air which David Blake could not have copied had Priscilla's love depended on it. "She told me you were here — 'likely,' she added, in the queer speech I used to know, 'seeing the roan cow was sick, and you were tending her.' Priscilla, surely you've not forgotten me?"

David Blake was the best-tempered man in all the long vale of Strathgarth, so folk said; but there were times when he was as ill to meet, as ill to look at, as if he had been a north-born dog, guarding a north-built threshold from a stranger he distrusted. And David listened to this prit-a-prat man who tried to mimic old Martha's wholesome speech; and Priscilla, glancing sideways at the man who should have wooed her in the mistal — as women will glance toward a known lover from a rival known by instinct — Priscilla saw David Blake in a new guise, and one not pleasant to her on this peaceful day of spring.

She smiled at the newcomer, inclining her head a little in the pretty, willowy fashion that Garth village loved. "You've the better of me," she said. "I do not remember you at all. Stay, though," she added, seeing the sunlight on his face, with its inscrutable, wild eyes, "I seem now to have known you long ago."

"Five years ago, Priscilla," he answered, with a laugh which David swore was false to the note of throstles and all wholesome things.

"You ask me to remember some one I knew at fourteen," said Priscilla quietly. "It seems long ago to me."

David went to smooth the flanks of the roan cow, who turned her head and licked his waistcoat tranquilly from the topmost to the lowest button.

"I know him now," growled the smith. "Garth has

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been well rid of him these five years, to my thinking. Pity's he's come back."

He glanced again at the other man, and was overtaken by an impulse to throw his adversary bodily out of the mistal-yard; so he pulled himself together, as one who was accustomed to follow kindly instincts only.

"Well, I'll be jogging, Priscilla," he said, making for the door. "The cow is ailing naught so much, and 'tis time I got to smithy-work again."

"So you've forgotten me too, David?" said the stranger airily, as Blake was pushing past him.

"Nay," answered David, not seeing the proffered hand. "I remember you well, Gaunt of Marshlands — and I'll bid you good day, as I was ever glad to do."

CHAPTER II

THAT'S a pleasant sort of welcome, eh?" said Reuben Gaunt, as he watched David's broad back disappear round the corner of the stables.

Priscilla's interest was awakened already, and the smith had done an ill turn to his own cause by arousing her sympathy as well.

"You'll find pleasanter welcomes here in Garth," the girl answered, with that candour of thought and expression which in itself was dignity. "It was stupid of me to forget you, Mr. Gaunt, but I was so little, when you used to play big brother to me and show me all the wonders of the Dene."

"I think it must not be Mr. Gaunt. The folk who like me call me Reuben, as you did once."

Priscilla was vaguely disturbed. Softness of speech and manner she understood, for she had ever been a favourite with the landed gentlefolk of Strathgarth; and, because she understood them, she detected the false note in Gaunt's would-be correctness. Yet she pushed the distrust aside; for this man had been away from Garth for five long years, had seen the mysteries hidden in the beyond, and doubtless he could tell her of them.

"We are older now," she answered, a little smile betraying her rebuke. "It must be Mr. Gaunt, or naught at all."

"Well, then, it must be Miss Priscilla, too?"

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"'Twould be fitting, I think. Five years are not bridged in a moment, and father tells me I'm a woman grown, though I feel a child when the spring comes in as it is coming now."

An older and more constant playmate than Gaunt of Marshlands sang to her — sang blithe and high — through the mistal-door; but she scarcely heard the throistle, for Gaunt brought news from the beyond.

"Where have you been these years past?" she asked, moving restlessly from foot to foot.

"Everywhere, I fancy," laughed the other. "I've seen the world, as I always meant to do; and a queer world I've found it."

As a child wipes the school-day's sums from its slate, Priscilla lost the record of her working and her playtime hours. The grey serenity of Garth, the sweetness of its roadside gardens, the slow, rich gossip of its folk — these things went by her. She forgot the low, musical humming of the churn, the look of the butter as it lay, round and golden as a kingcup, on the stone tables of the dairy. She heard no longer the splash of milk into the foamy pail, the lowing of the kine as they gave their evensong of praise.

Not restless now, she leaned against the stall, her eyes wandering now and then to Gaunt's, then returning to the mistal-yard and the croft beyond. She was listening to this man who had spent five years beyond the limits of Garth village, and his tales enthralled her. In an absent way she wondered that those well-known fields, the familiar yard, had never seemed so small as now.

Reuben Gaunt was talking well. The picture of the girl, her lissome outline framed by the oaken stall, her hands clasped above her head, the lights and shadows of the mistal playing constantly about her eager eyes —

these might well have moved a duller wit than Gaunt's to make the most of itself. And, when he stopped, Priscilla was silent, her head thrown further back and her glance going out and out, over the grey field-walls of Strathgarth, over its dingles and its hills—out to the borderland, and across into the unknown.

"You have come back suddenly," she said at last. "None knew in Garth that you were coming home, or we must have heard of it."

"I chose to return unawares, and see what sort of welcome Garth would give me without preparation. — And, gad, I learned from David Blake quite soon enough," he finished, with an easy laugh.

"And shall you stay among us?"

He had been watching her during that long silence. Faults in plenty the man had, but in his way he could understand the finer lines of beauty; and now, as he met Priscilla's eyes, he found her exquisite—something as faultless, and yet as natural, as a harebell swaying to the wind.

"Yes, I shall stay," he answered.

Her eyes fell, in answer, not to the words, but to the tone. And, because she had been wont to look all folk bravely in the eyes, she grew impatient of her shamefacedness.

"I cannot idle all the morning through," she said. "I'll give you good day, Mr. Gaunt, and get to my housework."

David Blake, meanwhile, had turned aside before he reached his smithy, and had crossed, by the stile at the road-corner, into the field where Farmer Hirst was busy hedge-cutting with his men.

"Hallo, David! Followed me up, like, have ye?" roared Hirst, as he chanced to turn his head while the smith was still half a field away.

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“Ay, I like the sound and the look of cutting a thorn-hedge,” answered David, as he drew nearer. “Thought I’d come and set ye straight if ye were showing faulty hedge-craft.”

The two farm men turned with their bill-hooks in their hands. They nodded at David and grinned at his simple pleasantry. Lithe, clean-built fellows they were, both of them, such as they breed within the boundaries of Strathgarth, and they were friends and, save in the matter of wage-earning, they were roughly the equals of their master.

“Come ye, then,” chuckled the farmer. “See what we’ve done a’ready, David! See how trim and snug the whole line lies of it! Nay, not that way, lad!” he broke off, as one of the hands began to lay a stout hawthorn stem, sawn half-way through, all out of line with its fellow on the left.

He bent the branch as he would have it lie, then stepped aside — for a heavy man, Hirst was oddly active in his movements — and set to work to pluck a root of dog-briar from its deep bed. Twist and turn the root in his hands as he might, it would not budge.

“’Tis all these durned leather gloves,” he said, throwing his gauntlets off. “They keep the prickles out, David — or reckon to — but when a body wants his naked hands — well, let him wear them naked.”

Again he tugged, but the old root would not give; so David grasped Priscilla’s father by the middle, and “*Yoick!*” he cried, and they pulled together. The root left its hold, more suddenly than they had counted on, and David, being the hinder of the two, bore the full brunt of the farmer’s fall.

David got to his feet by and by, and coaxed the wind back into his lungs. Farmer Hirst was laughing till the

tears ran down his ruddy face; the men were laughing, too; so David, soon as he found breath, fetched out that slow, deep body-merriment of his.

"We got him out o' ground! Oh, ay, we daunted yond old briar-root!" said he.

Whereat the four laughed so heartily that a pair of curlews — just returned, like Reuben Gaunt, from sojourning God knew where — got up from the further side of the fence, and went crying toward the moor.

"Briar-roots are the devil and all," said Hirst, "when ye come to clean a hedge-bottom."

"Bear bonnie roses all the same, when June comes in," ventured the blacksmith, not telling Hirst that wild roses reminded him, too often for his peace of mind, of Priscilla. "Pity to stump 'em up, say I, and pity came of my lending my hand to the job just now."

He made pretence to rub himself, as if the farmer's bulk had raised painful sores on him. It is easy to laugh when the spring's a-coming in, and the four workers startled a black-faced ewe that was near to her first lambing season.

"Get away wi' your jests, David," answered Farmer Hirst. "D'ye think I want to have my lambs dropped hasty-like in the ditch down yonder?"

Yet by and by, when they had worked their fill at the hedge-cutting, and it was dinner-time, David drew the farmer aside. He had not known till now what had brought him to the fields here, instead of to the smithy where he had urgent work to do. For the blacksmith's brain was like an eight-day clock that stands in the kitchen corner; it moved slowly — *tick-tack, tick-tack*, with sober repetition — but, when the moment came to strike the hour, there was never any doubt as to the time he had in mind.

"John Hirst," he said, "ne'er mind your dinner yet

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awhile. I've somewhat lies on my chest, as a body might say."

"Well, I lay there not a long while since, a trifle sudden and a trifle hard," laughed Hirst.

"Ah, now, will ye be quiet? I'm like Fool Billy, as Priscilla said just now, and ye think I'm jesting when I'm trying to talk sober sense."

"Dinner-time is sober sense, David, judging by my itch to get at cheese and bread and good brown ale. What then, lad? What ails ye?"

"I'm slow of speech, unlike my smithy-bellows," went on the other doggedly. "I find the right word always the day after to-morrow, instead of the day's minute that I want it."

"I've a trick of the same kind myself, David. What then? Speech is speech, but trimming a thorn-hedge, or ploughing for your turnip-crop, is a sight better than hunting words. Tuts, David! Ye're yellow about the gills, and some trouble's sitting on ye, by that token."

"Ay, some trouble is," said David.

"Priscilla gave ye cake and ale?" put in the other anxiously.

"She forgot to offer it, and I forgot to lack it." David's eyes followed the neat line of the hedge, and he nodded gravely at it. "Wish men were more like thorn-bushes, John — wish you could lop their unruliness, and twist their ill-grown branches into shape, and make a clean, useful hedge at the end of all."

Farmer Hirst was thinking of his dinner with gaining tenderness. "What *is* in your mind, David, lad?" he asked. "'Tis like watching the kettle boil, this getting at your meaning."

"Reuben Gaunt is back again in Garth," the smith blurted out. "That's my meaning, John, and I tell you

we could well have let him stay t'other side of the world, and ne'er have missed him."

The farmer's face clouded for a moment. "We could have spared him — ay. But what of it? Because a fool chooses to come home again, are we to go pulling fiddle-faces on a blithesome day like this? Hark ye, David, I'll not bide a minute longer; there's cheese and ale all waiting in the hedge-bottom yonder, and you're going to share it with us."

So David laid his trouble aside for the moment, and the four of them sat on the sunny hedge-bank, and said little until for the second or third time they took more cheese to help the butter out, or more bread to help the cheese out, or another pull of ale "to settle the lot trimly into place."

"Wonderful March weather," said the farmer, draining a last draught. "Near to April, and not a lamb-storm yet. 'Twill be twelve year since I remember such a spring."

"Found a primrose fair in bloom this morn," said one of the farm-men. "Wonderful weather, I'll own, farmer — but what's to come with April? Mistrust these easiful, quiet March-times myself."

"Ah, get ye along!" cried Hirst. "Believe the best o' the weather, I, and always did. They laugh at me in Shepston market — say I'm no true farmer, because I'll not speak o' the weather as if she were a jade for any man to mock at."

There was a silence, while the men lay tranquilly against the bank and watched the blue sky trail her draperies of cool, white fleece across the west wind's track.

"Reuben Gaunt is back, I've heard," said one of the farm-hands presently. "Came last night, all unbeknownst-like, same fashion as he left, five years since."

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"There'll be brisk times for the lasses, then," put in his fellow drily.

Again the farmer's face darkened for a moment. "'Tis work-time, lads, not gossip-time, and many a yard of hedge to fettle up before we get our suppers."

"I'll be getting to my own work, too," said David, nodding his farewells and moving down the field.

At another time he would have put his own work off, would have taken a hand till nightfall with the hedge-trimmers, would have given them jest for jest and laugh for laugh, while he trimmed, and cut, and bent the hawthorn boughs into their place. But to-day he could not.

"There'll be a brisk time for the lasses, then," he muttered, echoing the farm-hand's idle speech. "Ay, there's always trouble o' that sort when Reuben Gaunt's at hand."

Through the quiet fields he went, but they brought little benediction to him. He remembered Gaunt and all his ways, remembered how, when he left Garth, there had been no sadness in the men's faces, but grief and bitterness in many women's.

"What the dangment do they see in him, these lasses?" growled David, as he climbed the wall and dropped into the highroad. "Littlish in the build—face as good to look at as a mangold-wurzel's—must be those devil's eyes of his, that never lie still for a moment, but go hunting like a dog that sniffs a fresh scent every yard."

David had summed up his man with unerring judgment in that last thought—so far, that is, as we can judge of any man. Had Gaunt been downright evil, it would have been easier for the men of Garth to have thrashed him long ago into a likelier and more wholesome habit. But even to-day, when he was in a mood that, for him, was bitter, the blacksmith knew that his enemy was neither

good nor bad, but purposeless. He had watched him grow from childhood; and year by year his name of Reuben seemed more and more a prophecy of days to come.

"Unstable as water — ay, just that," thought David, as he reached the smithy.

Billy the Fool, after dusting the smithy-fire with coke and smudge, had settled himself to sleep again; but he was awake on the instant when David's footsteps sounded on the roadway. He rose, and shook himself with a big, heedless satisfaction.

"I've been a-dreaming, David," was his greeting. "Dreamed I was wise, like ye are at most times — saving when Miss Priscilla comes."

"Ay?" said the other, patting Billy on the shoulder.

"I didn't like it, David! Glad to waken is Billy the Fool. There wasn't no frolic in't."

"I can believe you, lad. What news, Billy, since I went up street?"

It was the habit in Garth village to ask Billy for news, however many times a day you met him, though none could say how the idle custom had first come into use.

"Ay, there's news. I've been at my games again, David the Smith." A smile broadened slowly across the placid face, while the blacksmith listened good-humouredly.

"Never met your like for games, Billy," he said, fingering his tools after the fashion of a man who means to begin work by and by, but not just yet.

David, indeed, was thinking less of work, and less of Billy, than of the encounter in the mistal. Reuben Gaunt had come like a shadow between the springtime and himself, had blurred the sun for him: keen to foresee, as slow men often are, the blacksmith felt as if a blight had fallen on Garth village, checking the warmth, holding the green buds in their sheaths.

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Yet Billy soon claimed his ear. "I'd looked to your fire," went on the natural, "and stepped out into the road, to see what time o' day it was. Perhaps a half-hour since it was — and what d'ye think, David?"

"Couldn't guess, lad, couldn't guess."

"Well, there was a littlish man, all dressed up as if 'twere Sunday; and he came down the road, and I knew he'd been to Good Intent."

David glanced sharply up. "How did you know that?"

"Miss Priscilla lives there. All the younger men — and happen a few o' the old uns too — will always be wending Good Intent way when the spring comes in. Habit o' theirs, David — habit o' theirs! I go that way myself sometimes."

The blacksmith, not for the first time, was puzzled by Billy the Fool. The natural's unerring instinct for all that made for the primitive in bird or beast or human-folk, when coupled with his child's disdain of everyday good sense, would have troubled keener wits than David's. He recognized Reuben Gaunt, moreover, from the other's description, and he fingered his tools no longer, but followed Billy's story.

"Came whistling down the road, did the littlish chap. I wondered, like, at what, for ye or me could have outsized him two or three times over."

David laughed, though he was little in the mood for it. At every turn of his path to-day — whether he were talking to Priscilla, or dining in the hedge-bottom with Farmer Hirst, or talking to Billy — Gaunt's shadow crossed his path. Yet he laughed, for he was simple, too, and big, and there was something that tickled his fancy in this quiet assumption that little men had little right to whistle on the Queen's highway.

"Came whistling down, did he?" asked the blacksmith, strangely eager for the story.

"Ay, and stopped when he saw me. 'Flick-a-moroo!' says he, and twitched my chin, and seemed to think he'd played a jest on me."

Again David chuckled; for there was none in the Dale of Strathgarth that could mimic a man as faithfully as Billy, and he had caught Gaunt's mincing accent to the life.

"'Flick-a-moroo,' says I, easy as answering a blackbird when he calls. I didn't like having my chin tickled, David, but I bided like, as one might say. And then he says — 'tis queer and strange how little a grown man can be, yet can strut like a turkey-cock — 'Ye seem to know what's the meaning of *flick-a-moroo*,' says he, 'though it's more than I do.' 'Ay, I know the meaning of *flick-a-moroo*,' I says."

"Well, lad?" asked David, waiting till he had finished a laugh that came before the end of the story.

"Ye see, David" — a happy, cunning look was in the natural's face — "ye see, we were near t' other side o' the road yonder, and I minded there was a snug, far drop over th' wall, and some young nettles growing soft as a feather-bed. So I says again, 'Oh, ay,' says I, 'I know the meaning o' *flick-a-moroo*,' says I; and I catches him, heels and head — 'twould have made ye crack wi' laughter, David, to see it — and I holds him over the wall awhile, and drops him soft as a babby into th' nettles."

Again David laughed. He could not help it. "And then, Fool Billy?" he asked.

"Why, I went and looked at him, and I says, 'Oh, ay, I know what's the meaning o' *flick-a-moroo*,' says I — 'and so do ye, I'm thinking.'"

David felt a joy in this daft enterprise as keen as Billy's.

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Was it not the expression of feelings which he had himself only checked with an effort up yonder in the mistal-yard?

"'Twas outrageous, and not like ye, Billy," the smith observed, his whole face twinkling. "Should'st be more civil when strangers come to Garth."

Billy looked apprehensive for a moment; of all things, after work, he hated the reproof of those whom, in his innocence, he fancied to be wiser than himself. A glance at David's face, however, reassured him.

"Civil when strangers are civil, David," he chuckled. For Billy, vague as his outlook upon morals was, showed himself persistently on the side of the Old Testament. "I'd bested him, ye see! Owned he didn't know what *flick-a-moroo* meant. Billy the Fool did."

"We'll have a change of play, Billy," said the smith. "Just make the bonnie sparks go scumming up again, and I'll to my work o' making horseshoes."

David stole many a look at the other's face as they went forward with their labour. He was realizing that there were possibilities of tragedy about this lad with the big frame and the dangerous strength. It was a jest to drop a man gently into a bed of nettles — but what if Billy's passion were roused in earnest? What if some one pierced through that slothful outer crust of his, and touched some deeper instinct in him?

"Might be a sort of earthquake hidden in poor Billy," he muttered. "'Tis hard to guess what he's thinking of, right at the beating heart of the chap."

The smith would have been astonished, had he been able to sound these heart-beats of his comrade's. It was Priscilla he was thinking of — Priscilla of the Good Intent — Priscilla, who brought the sunshine into Garth for one poor fool whenever she crossed his path.

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"She'll be fettling up the house-place now, I reckon," said Billy suddenly.

"Who, lad?"

"Why, Miss Priscilla. 'Tis her time of day for doing on't. Te-he, David! I hoicked yon chap fair grandly over th' wall — Sunday clothes, and *pritty-prat* speech, and all. Nettles don't sting i' March, they say — but I've known 'em do that same."

CHAPTER III

SPRING was abroad indeed these days. Garth village, good to see even in grey winter-time, grew to the likeness of a well-kept garden. The winding street — white at one time, then glistening-grey when the sun shone on it through April rain — moved lazily between the cottages and the yeomen's square, substantial houses. And always, between the house-front and the highway, there was a garden, big or little. Sometimes — when the cottage was so small in itself that there seemed no room for a garden-space — there would be a strip, no more than two feet wide, fenced round to guard it from the wandering ducks and geese and dogs of Garth. Sometimes a bigger house would shrink, with disdainful pride, from too close a rubbing of shoulders with the street; and its garden would be wide and guarded by a grey stone wall, with a white-painted gate in the middle of the wall.

But always, right and left of the good street of Garth, there were gardens, and, whatever their size or shape might be, the same flowers bloomed in all. Crocuses still glowed yellow when the sun came out to waken them; but these were of the older generation, and daffodils were nodding already high above them with the effrontery of youth. Auriculas were showing the white miller's-dust about their buds; the ladslove bushes pushed out green, fragrant spikes into this unexpected weather; primroses caught the laughter of the spring, and celandines looked humbly at the sunlight.

Priscilla of the Good Intent, as she came down the street, was no way out of keeping — so the kindly gossips said, standing each at her sunlit door — with the gardens and the weather. For it was true that not men only, but women, were reminded always of a flower when their eyes fell on Priscilla; and each was apt to choose his own favourite flower as Cilla's namesake.

The village parliament, made up of men and women both, is seldom wrong when it passes judgment on a neighbour; and there was none in Garth who would deny off-hand that Priscilla of the Good Intent was rightly named, thanks to the title of the farm on which her father, and his fathers before him, had laboured thankfully.

"There goes slim Miss Good Intent," said one cottager to another, across the quickset hedge that parted them.

"Ay! Sunshine all along the street," the other answered. "Trust she'll fall into a good man's hands; for into some hands she'll fall soon, or else a lad will just reach up and pluck her."

Priscilla had smiled and nodded to them as she passed — nodded and smiled, indeed, the length of Garth Street, as if she were the lady of the village. She was no less, indeed, for she had that simple pride which knows its station and disdains no greeting on life's highroad. Unspoiled as a primrose, opening to the warmth of spring, was Priscilla; and it seemed the pity of life that she should ever have to meet contrary winds.

Billy the Fool, at the extreme end of Garth, was passing the time of day with David the Smith, as his wont was; for the two were rather like an elder and a younger brother, and sought each other out by instinct. It was two weeks and a day since Billy had dropped his victim into a bed of growing nettles, and neither he nor David had spoken of

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the matter since — the blacksmith, because he was too fastidious, in a rough fashion, when a rival was in case; the natural, because he forgot such trifles until the season for remembrance came. Reuben Gaunt, for his part, had kept silence, and had thanked heaven, in his own random way, that the jest of his sitting down among the nettles was not common gossip now in Garth. For Reuben hated to be laughed at, as the half and between men of this world always shrink from the laughter of their neighbours.

“The birds are all a-mating and a-building, David the Smith,” said Billy. “Cannot ye hear the throstles calling to the hen-birds?”

“Ay,” growled David, a sudden anger coming to him; “but ye and me are no way mated, Billy the Fool. What ails us, lad?”

“Life ails us,” said Billy unexpectedly. “We’re over slow and overpleasant, David. Chase ’em and have ’em, David the Smith — that’s how I’ve seen the bird-folk go a-wooing. Te-he, there’s Miss Priscilla!” he broke off, and seemed about to run and greet her, in his friendly, dog-like way, when a second figure came into the street from the bridle-track that led to Thorlburn.

The natural stopped, suddenly as if he had been indeed a dog and his master had whistled him down.

“Garth Street is not what it used to be, David,” he observed, dispassionately. “More muckiness about the roads, though why I know not, seeing they’re smooth and silver at this moment.”

David said nothing for awhile; but he saw Reuben Gaunt lift his cap to Priscilla, with that indescribable air of overdoing the matter which roused the blacksmith’s temper. He saw, too, that they stayed and chatted — Priscilla laughing — and afterwards went up the Thorl-

burn bridle-way, which led to a field-track winding at long last to Good Intent.

"Come in, Billy," said the smith — his voice came suddenly, and was half-brother to a sob — "come away in and play at blowing the bellows, while I fire the ends of those posts that Farmer Hirst is wanting."

"What does he want 'em for, like?" asked the natural, curious at all times.

"To make a pen for yon rambling turkeys. The hens will go wandering after the cock-bird, and they're laying all in the hedge-bottoms, and over t'other side the beck, and Lord knows where. 'Tisn't the hens I blame, Billy; 'tis the ruffling master-bird, with his tail spread like a silly peacock's. Pen him in we will, Billy — and, if he breaks his neck in the wire-netting, so much the better for all sides."

It was rarely that David allowed himself so stormy an outbreak. Had he taken his wooing in this fashion two weeks and a day ago in the farmyard of Good Intent, breaking down the barriers of diffidence — Priscilla's and his own — there might have been a different life-tale for David the Smith.

"Te-he!" chuckled Billy the Fool, shambling toward the smithy. "'Twould be a rare game to pen in the turkey-cock. *Gobble-gobble di-gobble*, he goes, whenever he comes across the likes o' me, and his wattle goes red as the floor, David, when a man's been killing a cow. Ay, I'll blow the bellows for ye, if so ye're going to prison up yond old, prideful devil."

"Soothes a body's temper," muttered David, after he had been at work for half an hour — thrusting the pine-posts into the blaze, turning them about, taking them away when the pointed ends were charred sufficiently, while Billy played contentedly and hard with the bellows.

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“God knows I’d like to see Priscilla happy, with me or another man; but Reuben Gaunt sticks in my gizzard like a fish-bone.” He laughed quietly, for he always sought from humour an antidote against the storm-winds of life. “Suits me, seemingly,” he said to himself, “to be fair mad with a man; for work takes the tetchy humours out of ye, and work pays ye afterwards.”

Could David have left his forge more often, in order to seek Priscilla’s company — and he was well-found already in the bread and cheese of life, and knew that there were savings of the years behind him — could David have understood that a maid, if you love her and she chances to love you, needs wooing with a desperate seriousness and a desperate gaiety — he would have been less interested to-day in the making of charred posts wherewith to furnish forth John Hirst’s turkey-pen.

Priscilla, mean-while, was wandering up the bridle-track with Reuben Gaunt, and the little, plain-featured man with the wild eyes was talking to her — talk being his prime work in life — and telling her of the countries he had seen, the busy streets, the things remote from Garth’s quiet highroad, and Garth’s quiet hill-slopes where the work of farming life was done.

Like cloud-land drifting before a merry wind, the old life went receding from Priscilla of the Good Intent. The street of Garth grew dull; the singing of a farm-hand, as he strode up the hilly field in front of them, was so much noise in a rustic bauble-shop. Reuben Gaunt’s plain face, his little body, receded too, and only his wild eyes were left — the eyes that looked into hers and reflected, so she thought, the world beyond Garth village.

Billy the Fool, had he been in this quiet lane, would have been finding the first wild strawberry bloom, or another blackbird’s nest; but Priscilla, who had loved

such things aforetime, was looking far beyond them now.

“You had seen so many countries, and there were more to see. Yet you return to Garth,” said Priscilla suddenly.

They had halted at the gate that opened on the field-track to Good Intent, and the girl was leaning with her arms upon the topmost bar. The long and quiet glance she gave her companion was childish in its wonderment.

“Yes — to stay, I doubt. ’Tis free and pleasant to go roaming; but a man grows tired of earning his bread as best he can. I’ve been a jockey, a trainer, a gold-miner — a publican, Lord help me, for one whole year — and all seemed to leave me as poor as it found me, Priscilla.”

It was a little sign of the new days, but a clear one, that the girl’s pride was content with his half-tender, half-easy use of her name. She did not call him Mr. Gaunt, but avoided any name when speaking to him.

“But you had the life — the life.” Her voice was almost passionate. “You did not see the same hills every day, and churn the butter whenever Thursday came, and milk the cattle o’ nights and mornings, from spring’s beginning to winter’s end.”

“No, Cilla — yet, somehow, when the old folk died and left me Marshlands, and word came to me that the snug property was mine, I longed for the home-fields — longed to settle down.”

Reuben was sincere in this, so far as his way of life allowed him to be sincere in anything. He was glad to be home again, glad to revisit nooks and corners which he had known in boyhood. Even the wanderers need their rest sometimes, and this man with the queer, wild eyes was fonder of Garth village than he had ever known.

“I must take a wife, Priscilla, now that I have some-

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thing to keep her on," he went on, leaning against the gate-post and stroking his upper lip. "Marshlands will never thrive unless it has a mistress."

Priscilla looked straight in front of her, with a heedlessness that angered Gaunt. Keen-witted as he was, he should have known that Yeoman Hirst's daughter was not one to be wooed at the end of two weeks and a day.

"Yes, twill need a mistress," she said, indifferently.

Her thoughts were all of the new lands that Gaunt had opened to her fancy, and she would have answered, had she been asked the reason of her interest in Reuben, that he was the bringer of stirring news, and heartsome news, into the round of her life at Garth.

Gaunt was silent for awhile; wooing had sped so easily with him in times past that contempt or opposition ruffled him.

"Suppose you choose my wife for me, Cilla?" he said at last, with would-be playfulness. "Fair or dark is she, and can she manage a dairy and a roomy house?"

"I had not thought of it," said Priscilla, turning her candid eyes on him again. "'Tis for you to settle such grave questions, I should think."

Her laughter hurt him afresh; and, while he was seeking for a way to meet rebuffs he little liked, John Hirst came up the road. Hirst was not one to scowl at any time; but his thick brows came together when he reached the top of the rise and saw these two together.

"Crossing homeward by the fields, Priscilla?" he cried, in a voice that startled them like thunder out of a tranquil sky. "Well, so am I, and we'll just gang together, lassie."

"Morning, Mr. Hirst," said Gaunt, soon as he had recovered from his surprise.

"Morning, Mr. Gaunt," answered the other gruffly, opening the gate. "Come, Priscilla — we'll go arm in

arm, as your mother came from kirk with me more years ago than I remember."

Priscilla felt a big hand grasp her arm, and found herself, with no time for a good-by to Reuben, moving quickly up the field-path at her father's side.

"Well?" said the farmer, presently.

Priscilla did not answer, but released her arm, and set a little distance between them as they crossed the fields. She was angered that her father had shown discourtesy — a thing uncommon with him — to the man who had laid strange, vivid colours on the palette of her fancy.

"Oh, you're out of temper with your dad," said Hirst a big laugh forcing its way, willy-nilly, through all his disquiet. "So was your mother, over and over again, before I brought her safely to kirk. Harken to me, little lass. Oldish men are foolish men, they say, and forget their youth; but Billy the Fool talks wonderful sense, just time and time, so I may do it with safety, eh?"

He halted to stroke the flanks of the roan cow which David had lately saved, then stole a look at his daughter's face, and found rebellion there.

"'Tis as old as the hills, lass, this tale of what to do, and what not to do," he went on, his voice quite gentle on the sudden. "Two folk leaning over a gate — a lad and a lass — and no harm done, maybe. Did it myself, when your mother was slim as you and I was courting her. But ye want the right lad and the right lass, Priscilla, for that sort of gate-over-leaning."

Priscilla was no want wit, and the years had taught her that Yeoman Hirst could never so subdue his voice unless he were deeply moved.

"Father, 'tis so perplexing," she said, taking his arm again in obedience to a friendship that was like no other in Garth village, save that between the blacksmith and his

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crony. "I do not like to see you disdain Reuben Gaunt."

"And why, if I might ask?"

"Because there's something bigger than Garth and its grey street."

"Something lesser, too, I reckon. Go on, lassie. I felt the same myself once, and tried t'other thing, and came back in great content to Garth. I once —"

"The world beyond, father!" she broke in, with one of those passionate gusts that were apt to surprise folk who thought her even-tempered and reserved.

"Ay — a small world, Priscilla," chuckled John Hirst.

"Yet *you* longed for it once — father, you know how we have sat on Sabbath evenings in the brink-fields, and watched the sun go down, and played at seeing lakes and rivers and steep mountains in the clouds. 'Tis the same with me now. Reuben Gaunt has talked of strange cities, strange countries, lying out beyond the cloud-line yonder — and, oh, I want to get to them!"

"Reuben Gaunt *would* talk that sort of trash!" said Hirst, the strength and the stubbornness of the man showing plainly. "A here to-day and gone to-morrow man, is Reuben, lass, whether ye like to hear me say it or no. Cities and countries are there, over beyond where Sharp-rose cuts the sky? Well, then, they're men and women in them, and men and women have been much the same since Adam's time, I take it, save for tricks of speech and wearing-gear. You'd find naught different to Garth, Priscilla — but ye'd miss the homely hills, and the clover-fields, and the look of Eller Brook when spring is painting both banks yellow."

Priscilla, because in her heart of hearts she was disposed to think her father right, was bent all the more, in her present mood, on being out of sympathy with him.

"I should like to see them — should like to judge for myself, father, as you and Reuben Gaunt have done."

John Hirst had had his say, and now was minded to smooth the rough edges, as good-tempered men are apt to be when they have hurt a woman.

"And shall do, then," he said, drawing her to him. "Only choose a likelier comrade for the journey, lass, when the time comes for leaving Good Intent."

They had reached the hedge which Hirst and his men had been laying on the morning when Reuben Gaunt had come afresh into Priscilla's life. Trim and low it stretched, the strokes of the bill-hook showing yellow between the green, primal budding of the thorns.

"Good work, yond, though I say it myself," muttered Farmer Hirst.

"Yes, good work, father," the girl answered absently.

She was not thinking of the thorn-hedge. Her father's "Choose a likelier comrade for the journey," meant in all kindness and desire to warn her, had cleared her outlook suddenly. Reuben Gaunt had looked love enough in these two weeks to have lasted another man a year, but she had disdained to acknowledge the meaning of his glances. Priscilla — even to herself — seldom lost that habit of drawing maiden skirts away from men when they showed a disposition to intrude; but this morning she was forced to see the matter in its true perspective. Words dropped by Reuben, as if haphazard, recurred to her. He was no longer the scarcely-seen interpreter of worlds beyond her reach; he grew on the sudden to be the man who had seen these lands beyond, and she wondered if that wild look in his eyes were the mirror of something gallant and good to look upon.

The girl was so silent and so grave that her father twitted her good-naturedly. "Day-dreams, eh, lassie?"

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They come in spring, I've noticed — ay, even to grizzled elders like myself."

"Day-dreams, or day-realities — I scarce know which, father," she answered.

Reuben Gaunt, meanwhile, was smarting under a sense of foolishness. Priscilla had laughed at him. The farmer had sent him about his business as if he were a hind.

"I get queer welcomes in this Garth," he said, watching father and daughter move up the fields. "'Twould seem it's naught at all to own Garth's biggest house and richest lands. Garth is a bit like Billy the Fool — likes or dislikes at sight, and always did, however good a man's coat is."

Reuben was admitting unconsciously that his experience of the bigger world had led him to expect a welcome according to his station. He turned fretfully to return across the fields — in all his movements and his way of taking life he suggested something of a child's perverseness, as if his body had aged and left his soul behind in the race of life.

He halted when he came to the first stile. His pride was smarting; his love for Priscilla — which touched already the random good in him — was rendered barren for the moment by that one girl's laugh of hers. Small wonder that this man — who, after all, was as God made him, and therefore to be pitied somewhat — had never caught the fancy of the forthright villagers of Garth. He was too big in his own eyes, too eager to see insult where only friendly raillery was meant; too heedless of the truth that the right word at the one right moment is more than lands and raiment. Reuben could not stand against a real insult, such as Farmer Hirst had given him just now; and he sat on the stile and nursed his wrath, and, like his namesake, he was unstable as the wind.

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He watched the patient fields, where the sunlight glistened on the clean, new blades of grass. Far up the pastures, a glint of limestone caught the sun and showed a track which, years ago, before he left Garth village, had been a wooing-trail for him.

"I'll go and see Ghyll Farm again," he said, getting down from the stile.

It was one of the big moments of Gaunt's life, had he but known it. Yet he seemed to guess as little of it as the wind which, like himself, was turned by any hill that met it in its passage. He crossed the high road, and climbed the further stile, and went up the track that led him to Ghyll Farm; and he whistled as he went, and moved with an eager step which folk, less versed in the ways of Reuben than the villagers of Garth, would have thought full of purpose.

The farm stood high up on the rise where the pasture-fields ran into the moor and lost themselves, and Reuben, seeing the rough, black outline of it a half-mile ahead, began to think of other days.

As if in answer to his thoughts, a big, strapping lass came up from the shallow dingle that cut the moor in two. She carried a basket of eggs on her arm, and she moved with a lithe, free swing that was almost insolent in its strength.

Gaunt forgot Priscilla, forgot her father's insult. The worse man in him stepped forth, triumphant and uncaring as the girl who came to meet him.

"Why, 'tis you, Peggy?" said Gaunt, touching his cap, but not lifting it with the flourish which exasperated David the Smith.

"Seems so, Reuben," she answered, setting down her basket and standing with a hand on either shapely hip.

It was not easy to read the look in Peggy's face. There

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was derision, and rosy pleasure at the meeting, and defiance; and Reuben was daunted a little, for he liked women to go easily upon the rein.

"I'm home again, you see," he said, awkwardly.

"Seems so. I heard you were back two weeks ago, and fancied you were overproud these days to visit Peggy Mathewson. Got a fine house of your own, and what not, now your folk are dead?"

"I used not to be overproud to visit you," said Reuben, his eyes catching fire at hers.

"Well, no. But that was years ago, and you were always light to come and go, Reuben. D'ye remember that you left without a good-by said?" she went on, the grievance of five years coming out with sudden bitterness. "Mother talked to ye, Reuben Gaunt — would have thrashed you, I believe, but for your luck — mother is strong as a man to this day, and that's more than you will ever be."

Reuben's face was like a dog's when he has done amiss, and knows it, and tries to make you understand that he is innocent. Of all the welcomes he had found in Garth, this was the sharpest and most tantalizing.

"Had my folk to think of, Peggy. 'Twould have broken father's heart —"

"Oh, ay!" The girl was fine in the strength with which she treated Reuben Gaunt. "You always had somebody's heart to think of, Reuben, when you wanted to run wide and free from trouble. What of me, lad, left here to think of things?"

"You're looking bonnier for the trouble, Peggy, left here or not."

"Old trick o' yours, Reuben. Your arm was ever lithe to slip about a lass's waist, and your tongue to grasp a lie."

They looked at each other, and Priscilla of the Good Intent was far away from Reuben.

“Could slip an arm about your waist this minute, Peggy.”

“Doubtless — if I’d let you.”

She stood away from him, alert, secure, yet with a careless touch of invitation in her glance.

“What is your errand, Peggy?” he asked after a pause.

“I’m taking a sitting of eggs to Hill End Farm. Folk fight rather shy of mother and me, Reuben, but they seem to know where to come when they want a clutch of Black Minorca eggs.”

He fell into step beside her, and Peggy only shrugged her shoulders. It was natural, and like old times, that Gaunt should ask no leave.

“Carrying my eggs all in one basket,” she said, by and by, after he had helped her over a clumsy stile. “Always did, Reuben, if ye call to mind. ’Tis a failing of the Mathewsons, I’ve heard tell. They don’t look to see if the basket is strong and well-found — they just take a daft fancy to the look on ’t, and pop the whole clutch in.”

“I’m here in Garth to be sneered at,” said Gaunt, with sudden passion. “I knew it after the first day or two, Peggy, but I’d looked for something different from you.”

“You’re always like yourself, Reuben.” The girl looked at him with a quiet, impersonal surprise that was almost pity. “You’d pour honey into one ear and trust it to run out safely at the other. I’m the only lass in the world to ye, eh? Those will-o’-wispish eyes of yours are saying it. Yet honey stays sometimes; and a lass goes on eating it, and finds the taste on ’t sweet.”

Reuben Gaunt took the basket from her arm and set

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it down; and then he grasped her hands and stood facing her. There was a suddenness and fire about him that the girl liked to see — as she would have liked to find the withes of her egg-basket not quite so slender as they seemed.

“Peggy, I’d thought to find a welcome here at Garth. There’s a damned conspiracy against me, and yet I came home again with soft and quiet thoughts enough, God knows. You’ve failed me, too.”

“You did not seek me out, Reuben, till you were tired of better folk.”

“More fool I, then, Peggy.”

“It takes you a fortnight to tire, I remember, and two weeks chasing other game, and then you’re back again.”

The girl laughed suddenly. To know a man to the core of him and find him wanting, and yet to be weak in his hands when he returns — it is a plight which brings women to the borderland where tears meet laughter. And tears are apt to conquer in such a case, though laughter is the safe, abiding road.

Across the ages came the call to the girl’s heart — “As a hen gathers her chickens under her wing.” She heard the voice. She was stronger than Reuben Gaunt, and knew it, and her pity lay about him like a mother-wing.

“Come close and hither, Reuben. There’s naught else will do for ye, ’twould seem,” she said.

“’Tis five years since I kissed ye, Peggy,” he said by and by.

“Ay,” she answered, with a weariness that shamed her big, straight body. “Ay, Reuben. We’re as we are made, I reckon, and ye and me are equal fools, each in our own way.”

She picked up her basket, and they went along the quiet fields together. The grass was growing under their feet,

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and a lark was singing to the sun. There was no hint, from lark or greening pastures, that this narrow sheep-track which they followed was leading two folk into idleness.

CHAPTER IV

THOUGH spring blew warm and soft from the west and Garth village saw its trim, quiet gardens blossom out to welcome the young summer, there was unrest about, as if an east wind blew.

Neighbours passed the time of day together, and farmers from the hills came down and stayed to ask if this God's weather-time would last.

"Likely not," was the answer always.

"Ay, likely not," the farmers would agree, though their wholesome, wind-blown faces suggested a more friendly outlook even on the weather.

"Ye're looking glum-like, misters," said Billy, stepping up one morning to a group of them who stood chatting in Garth. It was a week after Reuben Gaunt had walked across the fields with Peggy Mathewson.

They were not aware of any special gloom, but began to think it must be true if Billy said so.

"And I'll tell ye why," went on the Fool imperturbably. "Te-he! I'll tell ye why, ye wise farm-folk. Simple and fain to play am I; but I think a lot, just whiles and whiles, and Billy can answer riddles when more sensible-like folk seem bothered."

These farmer-folk, who could guide a plough, turned all to Billy the Fool, who could not guide his own reason. They waited for him to tell the cause of their ailment — an ailment of his own discovering, not of theirs — as if

he had been the village doctor or the village parson, or something more practical than either; and Billy, finding himself the hero of this springtime gathering in Garth village, laughed vacantly.

“Tell ye the answer to yond riddle in a brace of shakes, farmers all. Easy as tumbling off a wall; but ye wise folk look downwards when ye see a stone fence, and wonder how ye’ll light. Shameful poor thing to wonder how you’re going to fall off a wall. Never did think o’ the matter myself. Just climbs up, and drops soft-like down, does Billy, and finds himself on t’other side somehow.”

“Ay, ye’re plump enough to fall soft, Billy,” laughed a red-cheeked farmer.

It was curious to see his brethren check the unruly speaker with nods and murmurs; they were men, for the most part, who had seen the frosts of April come to nip the April buds, and therefore they were superstitious. It boded ill to laugh at Billy the Fool when he wore the look he did just now, for to them all naturals were “wise.”

“Tell us, Billy,” said a grey old man coaxingly, as if he held a baby in his arms.

“Well, now, I will, seeing ye put it that way.” The natural’s placid smile roved from one to another of the group. “Could tell ye in a twinkling, farmer-folk, if I were minded to.”

“Tuts, thou’rt minded to,” said the grey old man, coaxing still. “Ye can tell us how the weather sits, and where the first nest goes a-building — surely ye can tell us what’s the matter with Garth village?”

“Ay, I could tell ye,” said Billy the Fool, his slow smile spreading like quiet sunshine on them all. “’Tis Reuben Gaunt ails Garth. Don’t need the likes o’ he, misters; he’s, as ye might say, a cuckoo in the wrong nest.”

The men looked at one another. Billy the interpreter

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had put into words for them a vague unrest that had been with them during these past weeks. It was not that they bore Gaunt of Marshlands ill will; they were too forthright and too clean of habit to harbour malice. It was rather that they all felt as if the grey village was itself no longer; they had remembered Gaunt's record before he left them, and the peace that followed his long wanderings abroad. And now, at a word from Billy, they understood these matters.

"Hadn't ye thought of it afore?" asked Billy, his lazy eyes as full of laughter as a moorland pool when April breezes sport across it. "Knew it myself the first day I clapped een on Reuben Gaunt. Te-he! Ye're fearful wise and terrible hard in the headpiece, misters, but 'tis soft Billy has to guide ye time and time."

"We'll give you credit for it too," muttered the grey old man.

"Never had money myself — not to speak of," he said, with a tranquil chuckle. "Spoils folk's lives and bothers 'em, does money, so I've heard tell. Cannot lie under a hedgerow on June nights and hear the birds a-tweeting them to sleep. Must be prisoned in a great big bed, must folks wi' money, and have a great big roof sitting down on them. Not for Billy the Fool, thank ye, that sort o' smothered life! But there's summat else, misters. Ye who've got money, like, might do a service to Garth village."

"Ay, and how, if a body might ask?" said a kindly farmer.

"Well now, ye might take your shovels and a big sack, each of ye, and ye might spade your money into 't sack."

A friendly smile passed from one to another of the farmers. Billy the Dreamer had stepped in front of Billy the Wise Fool, and they waited for a jest. There was a

fine, free suggestion of untold wealth about the lad's talk of a shovel and a sack that appealed to their humour. For they had tended, all of them, the niggard fields.

"Then ye'd bring your sacks o' gold," went on the natural — his face was so solemn and so sly that none could guess whether or not he knew that he was jesting — "and ye'd pour your gold out right along the roadway here, and Reuben Gaunt would never see that the daffy-down-dillies were fuller of sunshine than the gold that strewed Garth Street."

"To be sure he wouldn't," said the grey old man. His tone suggested the quietness of a man who sees a moorland trout spreading dark fins in a pool, and moves warily to tickle him out on to the bank.

"Ye see," went on Billy, with his inscrutable, large air, "ye see, ye might put it to him this way. 'Reuben Gaunt,' ye'd say — or 'Mister Reuben Gaunt,' seeing he owns land — 'silly boy Gaunt,' ye'd say, 'just look ye at all this shovelled gold that lines Garth Street.' And he'd answer, 'What o' that?' And ye'd answer back, 'Silly boy Gaunt,' ye'd say, 'there's a line of gold from here to Elm Tree Inn. 'Tis yours for asking,' ye'd say, 'granted ye do one thing. Oh, ay, 'tis yours for sure, granted ye do one thing!'"

"And what's that one thing, Billy?" rapped out the grey-haired farmer.

"Why, that he'd quit Garth and take the gold along with him. Never would miss gold and Reuben Gaunt myself. What say ye, misters? Billy the Fool's a child, but somehow, as a chap might say, his head is screwed on right foremost way. Give him your gold, say I, and shift him out o' Garth."

A great laugh went up. These farmers, not greedy of money by nature, but fond of it, as most north-born people

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are, saw the slow humour of that trail of gold which ended at the Elm Tree Inn.

“And what when Reuben Gaunt had quitted, Billy?” asked one.

Billy the Fool took out a black and antique pipe before replying. There were half a dozen pouches waiting for him on the instant, and he filled from the first offered — Priscilla’s father’s, as it chanced — and borrowed a match. Billy was always borrowing from his neighbours, and thrived on it.

“Well, look ye here, neighbour-folk,” he said, puffing long trails of smoke into the sunlit quiet of Garth. “I reckon there’d be ease of heart, and spring a-coming in, when Reuben Gaunt had left us. Don’t know myself, misters, but that’s what Billy the Fool has to say to ye wise folk.”

They left him by and by, one or two of them patting him affectionately on the shoulder, and went down the street in twos and threes. It chanced to be market-day in Shepston, as any dweller on the fells could have told, seeing so many farmers in Garth Street at this hour of a busy springtime morning.

“Slow and wise is Billy,” said one to the other as they walked between the limestone wall on one hand, the budding hedgerow on the other.

“Ay, knows a lot. Only lacks the trick o’ letting out all he knows, or we’d be wiser, Daniel, us folk in Garth.”

Billy meanwhile leaned placidly against the grindstone which stood at the road-edge just this side of Widow Lister’s cottage. The grindstone had been out of work these many years, and the lichens gave it a mellow dignity such as sits on old men after their labour is done, and well done, and the resting-time has come. Perhaps, if you had asked the lovers of Garth village to name their friend-

liest landmark, they would have said at once, "Why, th' old grindstone. Have leaned against it many a time, and talked right good sense the while on summer's evenings."

Billy was not talking now. One could not have said whether he were thinking even, so imperturbably he watched the smoke from his pipe curl up into the blue and tranquil air. Yet, just as he had been the interpreter of Garth's unrest not long ago, he was the interpreter of spring just now. Like some primeval dweller in the green forests of a younger world, Billy the Fool looked out at nature, and watched the seasons pass him, and knew that weather and fresh air were relatives of his. They pitied him in Garth, as having no kin; but Billy, had he found words at any time in which to speak of it, could have told them, with that sudden, easy laugh of his, that he had a mother and sister-folk and brothers.

"Might as well be wending down-street way," he said at last, shaking himself as he stood upright and knocking out the ashes from his pipe. "Terrible lad to smoke is Billy, and I feel the need of another pipeful, as a chap might say. Will go and sit on the seat, under the old elm tree, and happen a body's body might come along and offer me a fill."

The big tree in the roadway, fronting the inn to which it gave its name, was browning fast, in token of green leaves to come. The wide circle of the street here, where there roads met, was shimmering in the sunshine as if new-washed and wholesome.

"Terrible fond of a seat is this plump lad," murmured Billy, sinking carefully into the oaken bench that circled the great elm.

He sat there, empty pipe in mouth, and he watched young April glow upon the inn-front and the further hills

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behind. Great faith had Billy, and therefore great tranquillity; and, though he hungered for another pipe, he sat beneath the elm tree, as if tobacco fell, as dew falls, from the skies of eventide.

As he waited, noting lazily for the twentieth time that the wagtails had returned to Garth and were dusting themselves in the roadway, Reuben Gaunt came down the street. The natural saw him — scented him rather, so it seemed — a hundred yards away; and he shifted the empty pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other, and gripped it with his teeth.

“Hallo, Billy, give you good day!” said Gaunt, as he came nearer. It was Reuben’s way at all times to conciliate a fool, if he were strong and liable to play Fool’s-Day jests with a man by dropping him into a nettle-bed. “Give you good day, Billy. An empty pipe, eh? Well, I’ve a full pouch at your service.”

Billy yearned for another fill and another borrowed match wherewith to light it; and they thought him weak of will in Garth, but now he looked over and beyond the tempter.

“Thank ye, no. I’ve smoked enough for a daft boy’s headpiece to withstand that same,” he said, with the courtesy which seldom failed him. “I be looking at the springtime gathering over Garth, Mr. Gaunt, and I do seem, as a witless chap might say, to have scant thought for baccy.”

“But a right good brew of ale?” suggested Gaunt, nodding at the grey and newly pointed front of the Elm Tree Inn. Like a child, Reuben was always most eager to have his way when he was thwarted. “A right good brew of ale, Billy? You like it, so they say, and have a head to stand it, too.”

A second and an equal temptation came to Billy the

Fool. He was silent for awhile, and turned the matter round about in that queer mind of his.

"Thank ye, no, Mr. Gaunt," he said at last, with desperate sobriety. "I'm busy as can be with thinking o' Miss Good Intent. She wouldn't like to see either of us drinking ale at this hour of a spring morning."

"Give you good day again, Billy," said Gaunt, his little sense of humour leaving him.

"Ay, glad to give ye good day," answered Billy, and watched Gaunt follow the line of the grey street.

Billy sat on beneath the elm tree and hoped for better things than Reuben Gaunt could ever bring him. Yet he looked wistfully from time to time, first at the inn-front, then at his pipe.

"They're heartsome matters, now, are a half-pint of beer and a pipe o' baccy. Ye'd own to yourself, Billy — now, wouldn't ye? — that they were heartsome matters," he murmured.

Reuben Gaunt, meanwhile, had turned up the lane that led to Good Intent. He knew that John Hirst would be at Shepston market, and was sure therefore of his welcome at the farm. He did not get as far as the house, however, for Priscilla was standing in the homecroft as he came through the stile. From sheer frolic she had donned a sun-bonnet, pretending that this April sunshine was overwarm to bear uncovered. The bonnet was pink, and her simple gown was lavender-blue, and she looked, to Gaunt's eyes, the trimmest and the bonniest maid that he had seen in all his travels.

She was feeding a noisy multitude of hens and turkeys, and it was pleasant to see how carefully the bigger birds refrained from stealing from the fowls — nay, left the tit-bits to them often, and showed altogether the behaviour of a big, good-tempered dog towards a small and fussy one.

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It was the turkey-cock that first warned Priscilla of Gaunt's approach. The "proudful devil," as Billy the Fool had called him, was proving his right to the title in good earnest. His tail was spread, his wattle grew and grew until the head of him was crimson as a wild-rose berry when autumn's sunshine lights the hedgerows. He made towards Gaunt, moreover, with little steps that in their fretfulness and self-importance suggested comedy.

Priscilla turned to learn the reason of this outbreak, and her eyes met Reuben's. A delicate flush and a look of pleasure in the girl's candid face was Gaunt's welcome — a greeting which John Hirst would have understood had he been there.

"Good day," she said sedately, and turned to feed her birds again.

Gaunt laughed bitterly.

"Do you see the turkey-cock's welcome, Cilla? All the male folk of Garth seem out of humour with me somehow."

It was another sign of the new days which Reuben had ushered into Garth — one of those signs which are no bigger than a cloud the size of a man's hand — that Priscilla of the Good Intent did not resent the shortened name which few but her father had been privileged to use till now.

"You are out of heart with life," she said, scattering the last of the food abroad and turning to meet his glance again.

"Nay, life's out of heart with me, Cilla. They seem to think I'm lying, these Garth folk, when I tell them I'd be glad to be here again among the old home-fields, if only they would let me."

The man was sincere. It was a dangerous gift of his, this habit of speaking what was truth for the moment,

though it had no quality of strength and purpose behind it.

It was a dangerous gift of his, too, that women were compelled, when near him, to feel an odd, protective instinct. Peggy Mathewson had felt the motherhood of life rise up and cloud her judgment as she walked with Reuben a week ago through the sunlit fields; and now Priscilla of the Good Intent felt pity's strength awake.

"'Tis a bad habit," she said, moving a little closer to him, "this being out of heart with life, Reuben" — forgetting that she had vowed to call him Mr. Gaunt perpetually. "There's enough and to spare of gladness, and we must just search for it when times fare ill. Shame on you, to go whimpering like a child when spring is flooding all the countryside!"

She was not thinking for the moment of those fairy seas and lands which Gaunt had painted for her. In this quiet field, with the turkeys and the fowls about her, she was answering the prime instinct of all human life — to better a sad man's outlook on the world by spoken word, and, if need were, by that touch of hand on hand which she had disdained.

"Cilla," said Gaunt, his face a man's at last, because for his little moment he had gripped hold of love. "Cilla, you're the sunlight and the joy of life to me. Have you never thought of wedlock?"

The girl withdrew and put a hand to her skirt of lavender-blue as if by instinct, and looked at the distant hills.

"I seldom think of it," she answered crisply. "The spring and the needs of the feathered flock are enough for me."

"Are they, Cilla? What of the beyond lands — or was I dreaming when you said you'd like to see them?"

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Priscilla only smiled with the dainty aloofness which angered Reuben and enticed him.

"'Tis April," she said, "and I'm entitled to my whimsies, like the weather. Besides, I met Billy the Fool in the lane yestreen, and he was showing other pictures to me. Nay, do not frown, Reuben," she broke off, not guessing that Billy's name was unwelcome to the other on more counts than one. "He knows the hedgerows and the fields so well, and he showed me things as old as the hills — things new and wonderful each spring — things that come to you again each year, Reuben, with a surprise that seems each year to grow fresher and more eager."

"And what did he show you, Cilla?" asked the other jealously, turning to cry "*Gobble-di-gobble-di-gobble*" to the turkey-cock, and provoking a hot answer.

"The first wild-strawberry bloom, the first throstle's nest, the first April look of Sharprise Hill when the sun slants on it through the clouds that mean no harm. Your foreign lands grow misty, Reuben, somehow, and I love Garth village once again. Billy had ever that trick — to make you wise in spite of yourself."

Reuben paced up and down in a restless way he had; then he stopped and looked at Priscilla of the Good Intent, and in his eyes there was the mischief of a partial truth.

"Those beyond-places will haunt you, Cilla, all the same, and I could take you to them."

The girl was silent for awhile, and then she drew her lavender-blue skirt more closely round her.

"Ay, so you could; but, Reuben, I prefer to stay at Garth with father. I've enough to do in a day, and am happy in it. Hark, ye! The throstle yonder is singing his throat dry. Did ye ever hear sweeter music, Reuben?"

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On the bench that fronted Elm Tree Inn sat Billy the Fool meanwhile. He had waited, with his inimitable faith and patience, for a fill of tobacco and a half-pint of ale to drop from the skies; and his faith had been fulfilled, for down the road from his forge came David the Smith.

"Looking sulky-like," said David, laying his bag of tools beside his crony and sitting near to him.

"Nay, not I. I never look sulky, David. 'Tis not good for this right wholesome world to look sulky," said Billy. "I was thinking, David, and thinking makes a daft-witted chap have fearsome aches and pains in his inward parts, as a daft-witted chap might say."

David gave out his big, rolling laugh as he clapped Billy on the back.

"Guess what's a-going wrong with thee, laddikins. Empty pipe, I see."

"Ay. And I'm empty o' matches too," said Billy, his face like Sharprise Hill with the April look on it.

"Empty in the low-ward parts, moreover," he added, after he had filled his rakish pipe and lit it. "I'm terrible in need of a sup o' summat, David. Reuben Gaunt came by this way awhile since and offered me what ye might call body-warmth, and I couldn't seem to stomach it—nay, I couldn't, David, not how he'd tried to pour it down my windpipe."

"Gaunt been down to the village to-day?" snapped David. "Pretends to be a farmer, yet doesn't go on farmward shanks to Shepston market come Thursday every week."

"No, he wouldn't," said the other slowly, as he pulled eagerly at his pipe. "Mister Reuben Gaunt is not by way of farming, as I look on and see ye busy folk a-farming, like. Does it for play, like Billy."

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David rarely lost his temper, and still more rarely did he seek expression for his feelings in strong language; but now he was silent for a moment, thinking of his love for Priscilla, fearing Gaunt's love of her; and a sudden cry escaped him.

"Damn Reuben Gaunt, and the first day he set eyes on Garth again!" he said.

"Shouldn't swear, David," put in the other slyly. "Parson do say, whenever he stoops to talk to the likes o' me, that folk who swear go to a fearful dry and overwarm spot. He's wiser than ye or me, is parson, David, and we should listen to him, we."

"Then he should tell us," responded David grimly, "why deep-set troubles come to a man, Billy, without his earning them, and why a man must swear at times, or else do something worse."

"Ay, 'tis a terrible makeshift sort of a world — terrible makeshift, David; but yet, in a manner of speaking and as a body might say, ye understand, it suits Billy right well. There's always fields and hedgerows, eh?"

It was not till late, as Billy and he moved up the street toward his forge, that a strange fancy came to David Blake. He remembered, as a lad, the stir and gossip there had been in Garth nigh twenty years ago. A company of strolling players had come to Garth, had played there to wondering rustics in the barn at the end of the village, and had gone their way — all save one, who stayed behind and found her way, late on a mirk and windy night, as far as Marshlands. She was found dead at the gate of the homestead on the morrow, and a four-year-old child was crying at her side. None ever knew the rights of the tale; but old Gaunt of Marshlands was known as the wildest roysterer in the dale, and, though some disbelieved the story that the woman had come to him for help and that he had

deliberately turned her back, to die in the rain and cold, yet all believed that Gaunt was father to the child.

The child was Billy the Fool, adopted and well cared for by all Garth — a village bairn, the plaything and the property of all kindly folk. And Reuben Gaunt was the acknowledged son and heir to Marshlands.

“’Tis odd,” muttered David often and often, as he worked at the anvil and glanced at Billy. For he remembered the consistent hatred shown by the natural toward Reuben Gaunt.

CHAPTER V

GHYLL FARM was in the parish of Garth, but it lay so high on the moor-edge, and so far away from the sheltered village, that it was reckoned out of bounds. Moreover, Widow Mathewson, who lived there with her daughter Peggy, was accounted something of a heathen even in the charitable judgment of Garth folk.

These two, mother and daughter, lived alone at Ghyll, doing their own farm work — even to scything of the one small meadow when haytime came. They went never at all to church or chapel; they were distant in their greetings when they chanced at rare intervals to meet their neighbours; they were pagan, self-reliant and alone, and it was said that Peggy was wild as the widow, and never a stiver to choose between them.

Widow Mathewson was at her door this morning, watching the lambs play antics with their mothers in the fields below. Big-boned she was, and tall, and her face wore that lined, hard look of weather which women rarely show.

She ceased to watch the lambs by and by, and her eyes wandered to the track that led to Garth — the track that glistened like a living thing beneath the April sun. Far down the slope of the path a slight, dark speck appeared, growing each moment till it showed itself as a man's figure. The man was walking fast, steep as the field-track was, and Widow Mathewson laughed quietly when he came near enough to show the eagerness of his every movement.

She left the doorway, and went and rested her arms on the rail that guarded the potato-patch from the fields. And she waited, with a look on her face such as David Blake had worn, three days ago, when he swore outright in the presence of daft-witted Billy.

The man was so full of his own thoughts that he did not see Widow Mathewson until the path had brought him to within a score of yards of her garden railing; and then, for shame's sake, he had to come forward with a jauntiness that was obviously ill-assumed.

"I'm here to give you good day," he said. "After five years, 'tis only neighbourly to call."

"You're here to see Peggy, and know it, Reuben Gaunt. We didn't part such friends five years since that you need come trying to smooth me down with lies."

Gaunt reddened, and flicked a hazel-switch uneasily against his riding breeches.

"Lies go terrible smooth into a woman's ear when she loves ye," went on the other; "but they're puffs o' wind when she loathes the sight of a man."

"I find a deal of pleasant home-coming welcomes," said Gaunt, stung into bitterness.

"We're not pleasant, ye see. Have to meet the weather, we, and rear the crops. You may be Mr. Reuben Gaunt of Marshlands, or you may be son to the devil that fathered ye — 'tis all one to me. I like a man, or I don't, and I never set eyes on one I liked less than ye."

"I'll be saying good morning, then," said Reuben, with an uneasy laugh.

"Nay, but ye won't — not just yet awhile. Ye came here to daften my lass Peggy again, so ye thought. Well, ye're here, as it chances, to listen to sense from Peggy's mother. It runs in our family, Reuben Gaunt, for the women to love undersized and weakly men. We're over-

strong, maybe, and must have some fretful babby or other to dandle, same as big men like to do. Peggy's father was just such a one as you in his time, and I loved him. Ay, I cried when I buried him, and I cry still o' nights sometimes when I wake and find an empty bed. Yet I looked down on him in life, Reuben Gaunt, as I look down on you. Queer oddments go to make up a woman."

"That's true, mother," came Peggy's low, rich voice. She had returned from a haphazard scramble on the moor, and had listened to half the talk with a simplicity that came of pagan habits.

"Go within doors, Peggy!" snapped her mother, turning sharply. "D'ye want to catch the plague, or what, that ye go breathing the same air as Reuben Gaunt?"

But Peggy did not move. Perhaps the closest bond between these two, strong mother and strong daughter, was the knowledge that they feared each other not at all.

"We're made up of oddments, ye and me, mother. Ay, 'tis a good word, that. I happen to love Reuben Gaunt, as you loved father once — and ye'd better just leave us to it."

Widow Mathewson smiled on them both — a smile that was bitter in its avowal of defeat, in its hapless faith that what would be, would be, and that the would-be must be bad.

"Sorrow along, Peggy," she said. "If ye choose to strew your way with tears, 'tis not I that ought to blame you. Good night, Reuben Gaunt."

The quiet dignity of her farewell troubled Gaunt more than all her previous outspokenness had done. He felt like a country clown in the presence of a lady, and he hated Widow Mathewson.

"Ah, well, now, mother's hard on ye, and always was,"

said Peggy, touching the man's arm with a certain fierce tenderness.

He answered nothing, and Peggy went through the wicket, and moved slowly across the field, knowing that he would follow.

"You seem to think the same, from what you said just now," he muttered, falling into step with her. He was minded to return in dudgeon by the path which had brought him up to Ghyll, but the girl's pliable, trim look disarmed him.

"I said that I loved you, Reuben Gaunt. Whether I trust ye or not, and am a fool for all my pains to love where I can't place trust, is not for me to ask. Oh, pity of me!" Her shoulders opened to the wind, and she laughed at herself and him. "To have a mind to think with, Reuben, and to live near to the fresh air and the wind, and yet to let your heart go loving, spite of all. I've trained a few dogs in my time, Reuben. Wish I could give myself some wholesome thrashings, and be quit of you for good and all!"

Gaunt was no fool, just as he was no wise man. It seemed the wind had blown from the four quarters at one time when he was born into a usually steady world. He was no fool; and, though he smarted still from Widow Mathewson's contempt, he was quick enough to see that Peggy had some special grievance of her own.

"What's amiss, lass?" he asked.

"This much is amiss — that now and then I find myself in Garth, and now and then I hear gossip of Miss Good Intent. She's bonnie and slim to look at, I own, and worth perhaps a score or two of you, Reuben; but I'm not concerned with what she is or what she's not — I've no mind to share you with another."

"What are they saying, then, in Garth?" He stooped

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to pluck an early daisy, and Peggy's mouth twitched with a sort of scornful humour. Reuben Gaunt was not wont to take a tender interest in wild flowers.

"They are saying," she went on, "that you're seen over-often with Priscilla Hirst; they say that you've a look on your face, when with her, that they remember from old days. *I remember it, for that matter.*"

They had come to the little wood where water ran between the budding hazels, where catkins yielded to the fluttering wind. Reuben stopped, and put an arm about her waist, and the remembered look was in his eyes.

"Look ye, lass, and see if I am true or not," he said.

Peggy laughed openly — it was her protest against this renewed, yet long discarded, half-belief in him. "Miss Good Intent has said no to you, eh?" she murmured, with that bewildering frankness which attached to her mother and herself. "Shame to come begging crumbs, when you wanted something better."

She knew by his eyes that her guess was a true one, that he had come, inconstant as the wind, to find one playground when another was denied him. He was the same Reuben Gaunt who five years since had all but broken her courage and her heart. And, because he was the same, she felt the old love return, and let her reason go.

"Mother is vastly right at times, Reuben," she said. "'Tis in our family to love a man o'er keenly, and to listen to his lies, and to go on caring all the more. There's one thing puzzles me, all the same."

He waited, perplexed as he often was by women's moods, though by this time he ought to have known their every turn.

"Nay, only this, Reuben" — there was pathos in the quietness of the deep, strong voice — "I was young and unused to heartache when I found it first. I'm five years

older, lad, and I've suffered and come through it. Seems it has taught me little. Seems I might as well be weaker than ye, instead of stronger. 'Tis a bit of a muddle, Reuben, this life o' wind and sun and turmoil."

David the Smith, meanwhile, was walking up the lane to Good Intent. He did not need to watch Yeoman Hirst well out of Garth before he stole into the fold, for he was welcome there at all times.

A desperate business David had on hand. He had thought much of Priscilla of the Good Intent during these last days; and this meant only that he had halted more often in his work of smithying or what not to wonder how the lass would best be made happy.

It was while he was sharpening a bill-hook on the grindstone in his smithy-yard that David had got his adventure well in hand.

"Never thought of that before," he said, running his thumb along the blade. "I'm a rum chap enough, God knows; but, if it comes to a tussle 'twixt me and Reuben Gaunt — well, I'm stronger in the thews than he, and maybe I'm what ye call steadier-like."

So David, with plain faith in plain strength of stronger thews and steadier morals, laid down the bill-hook, and bade his faithful comrade, Billy, to sleep on guard; and he strode along the quiet street of Garth, and turned into the lane that led to Good Intent.

He found Priscilla in the kitchen, her arms bared above her elbows. She was making a pigeon pie for Farmer Hirst, and David thought, as he saw her in the sunlight, that no man need ask for a bonnier sight than Garth could give him.

"I've something to say to ye, Priscilla," was his greeting.

David could never do any business save in his own way.

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If he were driving a stake into the ground, he took up his mallet and hit it plumb; if he were asked to shoe a horse, he did not stay for talk, but brought the nag to reason soon as he could and clapped the shoe on it. So now he proposed, in great simplicity, to deal with this more desperate business.

“Something to say?” laughed Cilla of the Good Intent. “’Tis not often you have that, David.”

He did not heed. If he had spoken out like this at that gloaming tide when Priscilla had first waited for him to speak, when Gaunt had shadowed the mistal-door, it might have been better, or worse, for David; but now it was too late. “The time of day was behind him,” as they say in Garth, but he did not heed.

“Yes, I’ve something to say,” he went on doggedly. “When you were a lile slip of a lass, and when you were maiden-grown and proud, Priscilla, I loved you just the same. I’m busy to-day, Cilla, but I broke off to ask if you would wed me. Could aught be plainer, now?”

The girl rested her hands on the table, and looked at David Blake. She was silent, for surprise had given way to deeper feelings. It had been easy to disdain Reuben Gaunt, when he came wooing at a few weeks’ end; but David’s love was a thing to be reckoned with, a big, protecting force which had been about her for so long that it seemed fixed and righteous as Sharprise Hill — a part of this gracious world of Garth, a part of the comeliness and peace which brooded over its grey old fells, its grey and fragrant street.

Priscilla of the Good Intent had little in common with Peggy Mathewson; but they were alike in this, that each looked out at life with candour and with little coquetry.

Cilla glanced with troubled eyes at David — glanced wistfully and anxiously.

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"It cannot be, David; yet, if you asked me why, I could not tell you. I know you love me. I know that Garth would seem lone and empty if you were not in it. What ails me, David? Tell me, and I'll right it if I can."

But David the Smith knew nothing of such matters. He had made his last effort — a hard one — and looked for a plain answer, yes or no. Even yet, had he known how to come nearer to the girl, instead of standing, very big and very bashful as he swung from one foot to the other — even yet he might have scattered those fantastic mists which Reuben Gaunt had woven about Priscilla's life.

"There's no two ways, Priscilla," he said slowly. "Either ye'll have me and make life a different matter; or ye won't, and I'll trust ye to find a likelier mate."

"I'm not for mating — father has need of me — oh, David, David, I'm so fond of you, so loth to hurt you. Cannot you understand? I'm fond of you, but 'tis not just love — 'tis not just love, David!"

Her voice was trembling, and she fingered restlessly the loose scraps of dough that littered the baking-board.

David stood motionless. The boy's look, that is in every lover's face, was gone. Not till now — now, when he had greatly dared and greatly lost — did he fully know what stake he had in Cilla's love; and his face was hard and stern.

"You were kind to hear me out, little lass," he said at last. "Ay, ye were always kind and comely. And I've lost ye. Perhaps I may go on keeping watch and ward about ye, as I always did? 'Tis little I can do in that way, but I've always liked to think I was watch-dog, like, ever since as a child ye *would* loiter round about the pool in Eller Beck, and I feared ye'd tumble in."

"Ah, hush, David! You've been too good, and I am not strong enough for Garth. I dream too many dreams"

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— with a pitiful attempt to smile — “and I’ve lost the way of the love I might have had for you.”

“So you’re at Good Intent, David — and welcome!” shouted Yeoman Hirst, tramping in from the fields across the threshold of the sunlit doorway.

It was a jest in Garth that John Hirst, though no way deaf himself, fancied all other folk were so.

Priscilla dropped her eyes and took up the rolling-pin again.

“Thank ye,” said David, with a quietness that contrasted oddly with the other’s roar. “Ay, I’m here passing the time of day with Priscilla. I must be off by that token, for there’s work crying out for me at the forge yonder.”

“Always was, so long as I remember. Outrageous man to be doing somewhat, is David — fair outrageous. Tuts! Ye’ll stay for a bite and sup with us? Cilla has a pigeon pie in the making, I see. Always said, I, that a pigeon pie served two good usages — keeps a lile lass out of mischief while she’s making it, and keeps her menfolk strong to work for her after they have eaten it.”

David shook his head. “I’ve too much on hand, and thank ye, farmer. Will come another day, if ye’re so good as to think of naming it again. Good day, Priscilla.”

With a nod to them both he was off, and John Hirst chuckled weightily. “Fair gluttonous for labour, eh, Cilla?” he said. “David would do better if he took more while-times o’ rest, say I.”

Priscilla was busier with her task than the time of day demanded; and her father, getting no answer, came round to her side of the table, and pinched her cheek, and watched the dough of the pie-crust as she rolled it into shape — watched with the eye of faith, and trusted it

would be brown and wholesome by half-past twelve o'clock, or thereby.

"The lile lass is busy, too," he laughed, in what was meant to be a gentle tone of raillery. "Busy with your hands, Cilla — and busy awhile since with your eyes, I reckon, when David came a-courting."

She glanced up sharply, and again the farmer laughed, as if a half-gale had got into his throat. "Nay, I overheard nothing, Cilla," he said. "I only looked at David's face, and I gathered ye'd said no. Second thoughts are best, lile lass, second thoughts are best. Never saw a properer man than David myself, and I'm reckoned a judge of cattle."

"Can you measure human-folk by the ways of the kine, father?" she said, fitting the dough to the edge of the pie-bowl.

"Mostly — ay, mostly, Cilla. Chips of the old gnarled tree o' life, are all us living folk, two legged or four. Choose a likely lad, Cilla — and, for the Lord's sake, get that pie into the oven. Have been up the fields since seven of the clock, and hunger's timepiece says 'tis dinner-hour, or ought to be."

John Hirst went out again, for he had a virile wisdom and a knowledge of the time to leave a woman when he had spoken truth to her.

David the Smith, meanwhile, had gone down the lane. He could never wed Priscilla now — for Yea and Nay seemed always absolute to him — but at least he had concealed his heart-sickness from Yeoman Hirst. So do the younger men think always, not understanding that with age there comes a clearer understanding of the passions which greybeards view as onlookers.

David was of the men who snatch their courage from the thick of despair, ride out with it, and count it the more

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precious because it is riddled through and through, like a banner well baptized by fire. So he held his head high, and swung staunchly down the lane.

Three usual folk he met as he came into Garth Street and crossed to his smithy. They noted nothing out of the common in his cheery greeting; but Billy, rousing himself from sleep beside the smithy fire, knew by instinct what his comrade's humour was.

"You're terrible gloomy, David the Smith," he said, as he stretched his idle shoulders. "What's amiss with us all, now spring's come into Garth?"

"Life," snapped David, and picked up his tools, abandoned for Priscilla's sake. "Just life, Fool Billy, and I'd no real quarrel with life, that I know of, before to-day."

"Comes of being wise," said the other tranquilly. "Try being a Fool Billy — just try it, David, and lie in a hedge-bottom when 'tis seasonable, and hear the chirrup o' the throstle. Begins to try his whistle, does throstle-boy, before the dawn comes rightly in."

David fingered his tools. They steadied him at all times, and his patient love for them was returned in full, at this moment of his direst sorrow. He felt his heart grow lighter — less heavy, rather — as he handled them.

"Humming a tune, are you?" said Billy presently, with an approving nod. "Terrible fool's trick, that, and comforting. Shows ye're getting upsides wi' yourself, as a body might say."

"Getting upsides with myself?" growled David the Smith. "Have got to do, or what's the use o' life?"

CHAPTER VI

RUMOUR was not less busy in Garth than elsewhere where folk congregate, and Reuben Gaunt gave food for it these days. His rules of conduct, or the lack of them, were a constant puzzle; his wish to play the gentleman, when by rights he should have been a yeoman, and proud of the same, perplexed them; moreover, he could be brave and generous on occasion, and this fitted ill with their notions of a scamp.

Ne'er-do-wells, pure and simple, they could understand. There were two or three of the breed in Garth, but these consistently were idle at the best, and in dire mischief at the worst.

Gaunt was a puzzle to them, and therefore a whetstone for their tongues. Then, too, he was fond of horses, and master of them; fond of dogs, and knowledgeable as regards their ways; and these were qualities that Garth village liked to see in any man.

Just now, indeed, it was his love of horseflesh that was talked of most in Garth. They said that his patrimony was rich, as a farming yeoman counted riches, but not enough to let him hand over the direction of his lands to a bailiff — as he had already done — while he himself rode idly up and down the countryside, or followed race-meetings.

“Gallop to the devil, eh, as many a lad has done before him,” one would say to the other.

“Ay. Seems like as a horse is the best thing God ever

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made — barring a good human-chap at his best," the other would answer; "yet a horse is the devil and all when ye get a man o'er-fond of him."

Another whisper was abroad in Garth, one remote altogether from bankruptcy or horseflesh. They said that Priscilla of the Good Intent was not herself of late, that Reuben Gaunt was seen too often in her company.

"Too good for the likes of yon — eh, Silas Faweather?" one would say.

"Aye, a mile and a half too good; but what's to come has got to come, and lasses are mostly fools i' the spring-time of their life. Not just such fools, I take it, come later times, when the fairies' pranks are over with, and bairns arrive, like, and a sackless husband still runs daft-wit, following what he calls his pleasure."

Cilla of the Good Intent knew her own mind as little, this mid April time, as Gaunt himself. The man's plausible, deft homage when he met her; his seeming forgetfulness of the day when he had wanted her to marry him, and she had answered with a laugh; his low, quiet voice as he talked of glamoured countries far away — all these were fast making Reuben the centre of her thoughts. She missed him if he failed to come, though she might draw aloof and set a barrier between them when he did approach her.

Yet David the Smith was about Garth Street each day, and his nearness, though she did not guess as much, steadied Priscilla. Beneath all else there was an assured and pleasant liking for David, a dependence on his judgment, a looking-out for him, as if her eyes needed shading against the glare of life, when troubles came too thickly on her. For this reason she seemed nowadays to play with Reuben Gaunt, though she was wondering only what her own heart had to say to her.

News seldom travelled from Ghyll Farm to Garth. The house lay so far up on the border of the moor, and Widow Mathewson had discouraged intercourse so long, that you might have travelled through the village, and asked by the way for news of those at Ghyll, and yet have learned no tidings at the end of all. Had the widow been ill, or Peggy dying, days might well have passed before they knew in Garth what had chanced at the lone and churlish farmstead. So they guessed nothing nowadays of Reuben's new infatuation for Peggy Mathewson; had they guessed it, Cilla of the Good Intent would have had a whisper, kindly and wholesome, dropped into her ear.

She heard no rumour, would have disdained rumour had she heard it. Clean of thought and heart, Priscilla wondered if she loved Reuben Gaunt just well enough to marry him. She never questioned his good faith. It was hers to say no or yes — spoiled little queen of the little village as she was — and she asked herself, over and over again, with Puritan self-question, if this light of the glamoured lands were not a will-o'-the-wisp such as danced across the upland marshes. When she saw David, and spoke with him, it was sure that marshlights flickered about her fancied love for Gaunt. Then Reuben would come, soft of speech and pliable, and David would seem a big and country lad upon the sudden.

Spring, meanwhile, flushed into splendour round about the gardens of Garth Street, and in the woods, and along the length of mossy lane-banks. A foam of green-stuff feathered the larches and the rowans, the dog-rose bushes and the blackthorns. The low, sequestered dingle hiding Eller Beck was banked so thick with primroses on either side that it seemed a thousand golden eyes looked up, winking the dew away, when farm-folk went through the dene at blithe of the dawning-time.

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The weather held, with playful showers that were like a child's tears, gusty and soon over. Seldom in the memory of Garth had the pomp and circumstance of the young summer proceeded with so few mischances. There had been no sudden snow to hinder the lambs new-dropped about the pastures; there had been no frost o' nights; and the throstles sang their clarion note as if no winter's wind had ever piped a harsher tune about the grey fell-village.

At eight of one of these spring mornings — the wind light from the south, and the sun playing bo-peep with fleecy clouds — Priscilla of the Good Intent stood waiting under the elm tree which long ago had given its name to the village inn. She had been fitful lately in her temper, and Yeoman Hirst, thinking a day's holiday would be "good for the lile lass," had asked her to carry out some farming business for him at Keta's Well, high up the valley.

So Cilla waited, a trim and slender figure, near the old elm-tree. The public vehicle by which the Dales folk went from Shepston to Keta's Well — a vehicle half coach, half omnibus — halted here to take up passengers. The coach was overdue, as it happened, and while she waited, Priscilla saw Reuben Gaunt ride down the street.

Reuben saw her, too, but pretended that his mare was fidgeting upon the rein. He pulled her sharply back at the entry to the stable-yard, plucked her forward again, and disappeared.

"He does not see me," murmured Priscilla of the Good Intent. "Light to come and light to go, is Reuben Gaunt, they say — but surely —"

Gaunt had found the ostler in the inn-yard. "Dick," he said, "has the coach gone by?"

"Not yet, sir. She's late this morning, like, and that's rare for Will the Driver."

"Put the nag in the stable, Dick, and look well after

her. I had forgotten that the coach went up this hour to Keta's Well. Better drive than ride, eh, when there's a long way to travel?"

"Well, that's true. Better be carried than suit your knee-grip to a horse's whimsies," laughed the other, turning his straw from the left to the right side of his mouth.

Reuben strolled out into the highway. Not slow at any time, he had guessed, seeing Priscilla standing under the old elm with a basket in her hands, that she was waiting for the coach; and, though awhile since he had been sure that he meant to ride to a pigeon-match three miles away, he was certain now that he must go to Keta's Well.

"Good day, Priscilla," he said, with quiet surprise.

"Good day," she answered, the wild rose coming to her cheeks. "You did not see me, Mr. Gaunt, when you rode into the inn-yard."

The ready lie came to Reuben's tongue. Like water slipping down between the ferny streamways of the hills, he sought only the quiet pools — sought them at any hazard of the rocks that met his course.

"I feared I had lost the coach, Priscilla, and was riding hard to catch it."

The wild rose crimsoned into June in Cilla's face. "Are you going, too, to Keta's Well?" she asked.

"I've business there. And you?"

"I've business, too. Father is busy in the fields, and has asked me to do some bargaining for him up yonder."

"You're too bonnie and slim-to-see for bargaining, Cilla," said Reuben.

"Am I?" she laughed, with frank disdain of flattery. "I can bargain well, Mr. Gaunt, when needs must. Ask father."

The irony of life rose up and laughed at her, in the

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midst of this hearty springtime weather. If ever she had needed a hard heart and a clear knowledge of what barter meant, she needed them now. She had a great gift to bestow, or to withhold — the gift which lies in the hand of every woman once in a lifetime — and yet the spring, and Gaunt's whimsical, gay air, bewildered all her judgment.

“You always flout me nowadays, Cilla,” he said.

Gaunt was strangely like the dogs he loved so well. Careless of the past, careless of the future, he longed always for the instant pleasure, and, if he were thwarted, assumed a helpless face of innocence. It seemed that the sense of guilt was left out of him at birth; thwartings by the way surprised him, when another man would have admitted that he got no more than his deserts.

Priscilla of the Good Intent, also, was strangely like herself this morning. She remembered that her father, and all the men-folk of Garth, were hard on Reuben. She looked at his devil-may-care and pleading face, and decided impulsively that they were wrong.

“I do not flout you willingly,” she answered, her candid eyes looking straight into Reuben's own. “They are not fair to you in Garth here, and I am sorry.”

Across their talk came the patter of horse-hoofs, and the coach swung merrily round the corner and stopped with a flourish at the inn-door.

“Good morning, Miss Priscilla!” said Will the Driver, lifting his whip with a brave salute. Cilla of the Good Intent was his favourite passenger, and he had seen her, with the quick eye of friendship, as soon as he had turned the corner.

He got down to help the ostler with the buckets; for his team of three were mettled horses, and Garth was the baiting-stage on their journey up to Keta's Well, and Will

would never admit that the business could be rightly done unless he bore a hand in it himself.

There were seats for eight at the top of the coach, but Reuben Gaunt, though all were empty this morning, did not choose to sit beside the driver. He handed Priscilla, by way of the yellow-painted wheel, into the rearmost seat and clambered up beside her.

“Not on horseback this morning, Mr. Gaunt?” said the driver, who had a word for every one and knew each dalesman’s habits.

“No, there’s good in changing, Will,” laughed the other, “if ’tis out of one coat into another. A fine spring morning, this, for sitting on a seat instead of on the top of a horse’s temper.”

“Ay, my cattle, too, are feeling young Spring come back into their bones. Terrible wild to handle this morning, Mr. Gaunt. You’ll soon be up at Keta’s Well, I fancy.” He gathered the reins into his hands, looked round with a cheery nod to the knot of idlers gathered about the inn, and was starting forward when Widow Lister ran crying down the highroad.

“Here, Will! Nay, lad, you surely wouldn’t have gone and left my bit of a basket behind?”

“How was I to know you were coming?” said Will, pulling up and surveying the woman’s apple-red face — a face brimming over just now with jollity.

“Should’st have guessed,” she went on briskly. “And me a lone widow, too — and to have run myself all out o’ breath at my age, just to catch a young man who does naught for his living save sit on a seat and let himself be carried.”

A placid titter went up from the onlookers.

“Right!” cried Will the Driver. “Hand up your basket, Widow! Where must I set it down?”

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“There! Not to guess a simple matter like that! Ye’ve to leave it at the first stile on your right after you’ve passed through Rakesgill. Mrs. Fletcher it’s for, and she’s wiser than you were a minute since, Will, for she knows it’s coming. Oh, and Will,” she added, her red cheeks dimpling with roguery, “it goes from one poor body to another, does this bit of a basket, and happen ye wouldn’t charge for it at either end.”

“Wouldn’t I?” said Will. “Want me to take it as my own private baggage, eh?”

“There’s only some roots of double-daisy in it, and a few plants of auricula, and a little, round Garth cheese. Mrs. Fletcher’s fond, as you might say, of flowers and cheese; ’tis all by way of a present to another lone widow woman — and she my own sister.”

“Some folk thrive on loneliness, ’twould seem,” laughed Will, putting the basket under the seat. “All right, Widow! I’ll leave it on the stile, and we’ll trust to Robin Goodfellow to pay.”

He started forward, got his team into the straight, then turned round to Cilla. “By your leave, Miss Priscilla, there’s some of your sex have longish tongues. I’m proud of being to time, and here we’ve wasted five whole minutes. No man likes bringing cattle home in a lather, but these beauties will have to go.”

“They’ll stand it, Will,” said Gaunt. “Never met a man myself who could better get a horse into shape and keep it so.”

Will the Driver showed what his team could do. Like a true dalesman, he was proud of his own trade, and Gaunt had found a sure way to his ear. Between the white and sunlit limestone walls they swung, and between hedgerows where the bird-cherry showed its glossy leaves. Little, tinkling streams flew by them; and, up above the roadway

hedges or the roadway walls, the clean, sweet fells raked forward to the blue and fleecy sky.

To Priscilla it was a journey into the outskirts of that Beyond which tempted and enthralled her. The sunshine, the quick going of the coach, the deft, quiet interest which her companion aroused — all helped to round off this adventure into the heart of spring. They stopped at Rakesgill, to set down the scanty mail and a few odd packages, and to take up a passenger on the box seat. As at Garth, the villagers had met to see the mail-coach in, and Cilla watched the group, and listened to their banter, with a sense that the freshness of the growing year was blowing round their old-time jests.

Widow Fletcher was waiting at the stile — the first on their right hand as they trotted out of Rakesgill — and it was plain, from her red, plump cheeks and her cheery air, that she was own sister to Widow Lister of Garth.

“Nothing to pay?” she asked, as she took the basket into her hands.

“No. Widows thrive well in these parts, and wear the luck of the rowan-berry in their cheeks,” said Will, flicking his whip.

“Comes of losing men-folk’s company, Will — though thank ye for the basket.”

“Men-folk are always wrong, ’twould seem, Widow Fletcher. Came of listening to a woman in those far-off Bible-times.”

“Ay, Adam blamed Eve, and Eve’s been blaming Adam ever since. So we’re quits, Driver Will.”

“Tongues are longer than time,” said Will, with a happy laugh. “I’ve naught to do with Eve and Adam, Widow, but I have to be at Keta’s Well come twelve o’clock.”

“Like a man,” said the widow to herself, as she watched the coach go swiftly in the van of the light, smooth April

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dust. "Like a man, to be worsted by a lone widow's tongue, and then to flick his horses up and drive away."

The driver checked his team again, a mile further up the road, to take another parcel from underneath the roomy driving-seat. This he laid on the top of a gate that opened on a farm-track.

"Only a ham for farmer Joyce, Miss Priscilla," he said, with the trick he had of laughing over his shoulder at passengers behind. "Seems he's not just hungry, yet, or he'd be here for it."

"Mr. Gaunt," said Cilla, as they rattled forward, "it is odd that you should be going to Keta's Well to-day. I go so seldom, and you would be riding, surely, if you were not lazy?"

"You want to know my business there?"

"No. Why should I need to know it? Perhaps you are going to buy another horse."

"I'll tell you my business on the way home, Cilla, because then I'll know whether it is speeding well or not."

Cilla's eyes rested lightly on his, then danced away to the grey, far hills. The girl was a madcap this morning, and deserved to be; for she had many working days, but enjoyed few spendthrift days of holiday, with a green world and warm spring winds about her.

"As you will," she answered. "For my part, I have father's work to do."

With a flourish, as if he carried great personages — Will was never so happy as when driving Cilla of the Good Intent — the coach drew up at Keta's Well. There was an inn on the left hand of the grey, wide roadway, another on the right, and the two were so friendly, as it chanced, that Will baited and took his dinner at either hostelry upon alternate days.

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Priscilla took Gaunt's hand daintily, and clambered down into the roadway.

"We say good-by here?" she murmured, with a shy flush.

"Yes," he answered, "until Will is ready to drive us home again."

"Yet 'tis only a good walk to Garth for one as strong as you."

"I am lazy to-day, Cilla, as you told me. You go on your business, I on mine. Remember that the mail goes back at five o'clock."

The men all said it was a devil's trick of Gaunt's to know just when to stay and when to leave; the women, most of them, found the trick praiseworthy; and Reuben, had you asked him, would have laughed, like the man-child he was, and have said that he deserved neither praise nor blame, since he was as the good God had made him. At any rate, he had judged wisely now in guessing that Priscilla would shrink from sharing a meal with him.

Priscilla of the Good Intent dined sparingly at the inn on the left hand of the road, where the landlady mothered her always after a brisk, impersonal fashion. Reuben dined at leisure in the right-hand inn, and sauntered out a half-hour after Cilla — punctilious always, even in the midst of a holiday, when business was to be done — had crossed the street and walked up into the grey bridle-way that sought the fell-top farms.

When Gaunt came out at last, he wandered up the fields. He had found business here at Keta's Well, and his business was to think of Priscilla and to long for her. He saw the rathe-ripe primroses shine out at him from sheltered dingles, and he gathered a likely bunch. They were cool and fragrant, and he thought again of Cilla. The larks sang overhead, and the sad, wild curlews shrilled

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wide about the fields their song of destiny. And now from a watered hollow, as he passed it, a heron clattered noisily from among the trees; and again, as he looked up some dancing streamway, a kingfisher would dart, with a flash of blue that startled him, across the sunlight; and everywhere upon the hills the sheep were bleating happily, calling the lambs to the udders.

Few dalesmen could have withstood a day which seemed to hold, in the hollow of the quiet sky's arch, all that was lusty, and good to hear and see, and sweet to smell. This was the land's answer to those who said that her winter-time was bleak and bitter; and out from some forgotten Eden the west wind seemed to blow.

Reuben Gaunt withstood few pleasures at any time, and now he swung completely into friendship with this land which no remembrance of other countries could ever belittle to him. He felt again the throb of boyhood, of boyhood's keen, unspoiled delights. Good impulses rose and carried healing with them. For this one day he was a good man in his own eyes, and that boded ill for Priscilla, who was going sedately about her business, moving from farm to farm with a lightness and a happy zest in holidaying which suggested something of the kingfisher.

Gaunt roved the fells, the primitive, strong motherhood of nature crying constantly to him from the pastured slopes, where big and little dots of white against the green showed fine sheep-harvests for the farmer-folk. His heart was big and clean — for this one day — and he thought of Cilla, and she seemed the brave, sweet symbol of this vale of Garth.

He thought, too, of Peggy Mathewson, living wide yonder of Garth village and likely wanting him beside her at this moment. He shook the thought away, and prided

himself, God help him, on finding the better man in himself to-day.

Another thought he had — repentance for his sins — and this boded ill again for Cilla of the Good Intent. Repentance heretofore, with Reuben, had been a bird that laid her eggs in another's nest, and left her young to turn out the foster-mother's offspring.

The larks were shrilling about him. A peewit circled, dropped, and fell, not five yards from him as he stood motionless in dreamland; the bird looked shyly once at him, then dropped her plumed head and went on feeding placidly. So still the man was that a lamb, new-born and guileless, came bleating to inquire what manner of thing he was; and the old ewe-mother ran, forgetting that by nature she was timid, and butted Reuben with a quiet, yet warlike pressure.

He woke from his dream, and gave the ewe a playful kick. "Look to your own married life," he laughed, "as I am hoping to look to mine before the year is out."

He glanced at the sun, and guessed that it was after four. Repentance and memory of Peggy Mathewson slipped from him. He strode down the fields; and, short-statured as he was, and slight of build, he carried a look of bigness with him. It was Reuben's holiday, as it was Priscilla's. The sun shone on him, just or unjust, and he stood apart from himself and his past, and felt that the good love and the strong love were his to ask and take.

Priscilla, waiting for the coach, and just five minutes before her time, as her wont was, was surprised by Gaunt's straight, forthright air as he crossed the street of Keta's Well. She had never seen him in the light with which this witching day of April glamoured all the land. Every man was better than he guessed to-day, and every woman

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comelier; and down the breeze played Puck the Sprite, laughing at all wayfarers as he laid the cobwebs on their eyes.

“How has your business sped, Cilla?” asked Reuben, lucky as he always was in being five minutes before his time, instead of five minutes after.

“Well,” she answered, lifting the eyes of truth to his. “And yours?”

“Well, also, Cilla. I have found what I came to Keta’s Well to seek.”

They plighted their troth — neither altogether understanding the long glance — there in the grey road of Keta’s Well. Reuben’s eyes caught honesty from Cilla’s, and she thought the mirror truthful; and, by and by, Will the Driver came thundering down the road.

“Up to time, in spite of women’s tongues,” he laughed, pulling up his team. “Lord help us drivers, Miss Priscilla, for we suffer much from women’s tongues. Widow Fletcher will be waiting for me, too, on the homeward road, if I know her, for ’tis her twice-a-day time to crack talk with Will the Driver.”

Gaunt spoke little on the homeward journey, and Priscilla was strangely silent, too. Passengers climbed up into the coach, or scrambled down, but these two heeded little of what went on about them. There were stoppages, at this hamlet and at that, to take up the mails which Will stuffed into the sack that grew bulkier and bulkier as they went along. From hill-top farmsteads lasses ran down, bareheaded and cleanly outlined against the background of the fells, to give Will another letter for his sack, or another parcel to be hidden underneath the box seat. All was life and movement on the Garth highroad, but two who travelled on it were thinking altogether of each other.

"I gathered these primrose blooms for you, Cilla," said Reuben, breaking one of their long silences.

"Was that your business, then, in Keta's Well?" The girl's laugh was low and happy.

"Yes."

She glanced at him with that wild-bird look which her father had noted and distrusted weeks ago. Then she looked out again at the fell-tops and the pastures, which swung past on either hand in wide half-circles. The magical, blue sunset-time was spreading light fingers already about the hills and dimpled fields.

Gaunt did not know himself. Good thoughts came to him like a mystery as deep as this veil of evening that was clothing all the land. For this one day he loved Priscilla as a better man might do; he lacked only the courage to be true to another, at any hazard of his present happiness. For Reuben Gaunt had never learned, or had never cared to learn, that honesty is ever and ever like the tight, grey walls of Garth valley — foundationed well, well built, and proof against the winds of winter-tide. He loved Priscilla; that was all; and good love, for the moment, was his pleasure.

"Ah, I guessed I should see you here, Widow Fletcher," the driver's voice broke in. "What can I do for you this time, in a littlish way?"

The plump-cheeked woman was standing at the gate as if she had never left it since the morning. She was laughing, too, as if her face had kept its dimples all the day — a guess that came near to truth.

"Nay, I only want you to take the basket back. Lone widows are lone widows, aren't they, Will?"

"Aye, and there's a plague of them about, 'twould seem. They swarm like bees in June about this road to Garth. Terrible pranksome cattle, widows and

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horses, and terrible hard to deal with," retorted the driver.

"We're lonely, Will, though. Widows are always sorrowful and lonely. You're thinking of charging for the carry of this basket home to Garth? Men-folk were always selfish."

Will laughed, as Priscilla's father might have laughed, giving innocent villagers the notion that thunder was springing from a clear and fleecy sky.

"I'm selfish this way, Widow Fletcher — that I've only a minute more to waste in talk. Hand up your basket. 'Tis just another trifle to the load."

Mrs. Fletcher let the team start forward, after giving the basket into safe keeping; then ran down the road with an agility surprising for her years.

"Will! Will the Driver!" she called.

He pulled up with a sort of weary haste. "Ay?" he asked over his shoulder.

"You'll be passing here to-morrow? Well, you might just call at Mason's little shop in Garth and bring me a half-pound of tea. There's number three painted on the canister, Will — but Mason will know the number, if you say 'tis for me. Poor widows need their comforts in this life, and tea soothes a body, like."

Will started forward in earnest this time, and addressed the empty road in front of him, where the leafing hedge on the right hand was casting plumper shadows than it had thrown since last its twigs were bare.

"Runs in the family," he said, flicking an early fly from the leader's back. "Widow Fletcher here, and Widow Lister yonder at Garth — they always want you to do something for them, and always ask you to do it after you've fairly started. There's a trade in widowhood up hereabouts, I fancy. Gee-up, Captain, will ye?" he broke

off, touching the leader more sharply with his whip. "You were born of the male kind, Captain, and so was I, and we've got to make up for lost time 'twixt here and Garth."

"Cilla, shall we get down this side of the village?" said Gaunt suddenly. "We're nearing Willow Beck Bar, and 'tis summerlike for a saunter home by the fields."

Priscilla looked again at the fells, and smelt the sweet of the breeze as it passed her. It was three miles from the grey little toll-house to Good Intent, and there was a suggestion of mystery and adventure in this finish to a holiday.

"Why, yes," she answered simply, "I've seven packages with me, but Will will see that they get safe to Good Intent."

They got down at the squat, quiet toll-bar, with its windows fronting, like a bee's eyes, on all sides of its face. They went through the gate together, and Will the Driver watched them for a moment as they turned into the path that followed the slight stream's course.

"See her parcels safely 'livered at Good Intent?" he said to himself. "Would do more for the lile lass, I. Pity she seems so friendly-like with Mr. Gaunt. Should keep to dogs and horses, Mr. Gaunt—he understands 'em. Now, Captain, *will* you know I'm late on the road, and trust to you to make the whole team work?"

CHAPTER VII

THEY followed the winding stream-track, Gaunt and Cilla of the Good Intent. And now it was that the day, receding in the west, grew beautiful as it had never been at height of noon. Strange purples shadowed all the distant fells, while near at hand the pasture-fields moved in green, tranquil softness to the heath above.

"You are quiet, Cilla," said the other by and by.

"Quiet? I was listening to the curlews."

Not the words, but the girl's low, passionate voice told what the curlews meant to her. Now, when the silences crept, dumb of feet, all down the furrows of the land, it was the curlews only that were loud. Wide about Sharprise Hill they called, and along the raking backs of Hilda Fell, and across and over the ordered lines of grey walls, green fields, and scanty woods that were Garth Valley. They would not let folks rest, but went crying, crying, fretting, fretting, while Sharprise wore his ruddy sunset-mantle, and Garth Crag, away to the east, was donning her grey night-cap.

Garth folk, when they are compelled to be far away from home, remember always how the curlews fret and cry about the fells. The sob in the bird's call — the sadness that begins so quietly, and afterwards goes shuddering out across the gloaming's stillness — they are the interpreters of music, sad enough, but understood and loved. In the daytime, complaining of the sheep; near dusk, the curlew's melancholy; folk who have known and heard

these things will lie o' nights amid the welter of the tropics, and call the clear sounds back to mind. Reuben Gaunt, random as he was, had done the same, and Cilla's earnestness came home to him to-night.

"They're sad birds, though, when all is said," he answered.

"Sad? Ay, and so is life, or was meant to be, if we could only see it so."

Priscilla — whether the curlews had caused her this dismay, or not — felt restless, ill at ease, as if the light of some great truth were coming to her, and her eyes were unprepared for it.

"Now, listen, lile lass!" said Gaunt. He was helping her to cross a strip of marshy field, and his grasp tightened on her arm. "Suppose life was meant just otherwise? Suppose there was love of a man for a maid, and the lark singing up to the sun?"

The candour in her eyes bewildered Reuben for a moment, as she freed herself and sprang lightly to the drier ground, and stood facing him, her hands clasped in front of her.

"Yes, if it *were* love, Reuben." She was no longer proud, or self-secure. It was rather as if she reached out in search of guidance, feeling the throb of new, quick impulses, as if she asked Gaunt to tell her, out of his riper wisdom, whether it were good or ill to follow these same impulses.

There was flattery in this to Reuben. He felt big, protective, and again he yielded to a half-truth — that Cilla had shown him the good way of love.

"Lile lass," he said — and Garth Valley knows no softer endearment than those words — "lile lass, must I be asking you again and again to marry me? Cilla, I love you, and I could house you well."

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She thrust her clasped hands outward, as if to ward off an evil thought. "What does the house matter, Reuben?" she said, with another gust of that passion which few suspected in Cilla of the Good Intent. "D'ye think I would wed for house and gear? I'm asking, Reuben, whether love is going to sit on the hearthstone and keep it warm — if love is going to sit at meat with us —"

"Try, and see, Cilla," he broke in quietly.

More magical, and still more magical, the gloaming deepened over the patient fields. Sharpshoot Hill was a clear-cut wedge of purple now, pointing up into an amber sky, and Hilda Fell showed as a dark blue, jagged line, with a tuft of crimson cloud lying over it like the tattered banner of day's defeated armies. Low and roving wide, deep and tremulous, the curlew's voice went round and about the pastures, telling, it seemed to-night, that two human folk were drifting on life's glamour-tide, telling, too, of the mysteries, the tumult, and the pains which lay ahead.

They had been silent, awed by the kindred silence of the eventide, the subtle uproar of the curlews, awed by the gift that had come to each of them. On the sudden Reuben Gaunt set his arms about the girl, and drew her to him; and Cilla of the Good Intent, not knowing why, lay there and did not heed. And then again, not knowing why, she stood away, and her face was pitiful to see, because she tried to check her sobs.

"Why, lile lass, you're crying!" cried Gaunt, awakening from his happiness.

At all times brave, at all times candid as the sky, Priscilla checked her tears, but not the sobs just yet. "I was never kissed before — and, Reuben — all my pride is gone."

Gaunt laughed openly. He would never learn how like

a child was Cilla, how like a braver woman, too, than he deserved.

“ Because I ask to wed you, Cilla ? ”

“ Because the old life is gone, and I fear the new one. I was never one to fear — yet now — Reuben, you’ll be kind and true ? I can never give my heart at twice.”

“ Don’t ask you to, lile lass,” he answered cheerily. “ Once is good enough for me, seeing you’ve chosen Reuben Gaunt.”

Another silence fell on them, broken only by the low complaining of the curlews. Then Cilla, smiling and sobbing both, looked Reuben in the face again.

“ It should be no time to be afraid ? Tell me again ’tis happiness.”

“ To our lives’ end,” said Gaunt, and meant it at the moment.

They were nearing the track to Good Intent, and their footsteps lagged. The Beyond, which Cilla had thought to lie out and away behind the fells, had come to Garth, it seemed, to-night; for each detail of this homely land she knew from childhood took on a warm, new aspect. This was her first love-time, and life held unsuspected melodies.

“ Cilla,” whispered Gaunt, “ you’re making a new man of me. You — ”

He halted in his speech, and the girl, had she glanced at him, would have seen perplexity and helpless anger in his face; but she was looking ahead with dreamy eyes — looking so far ahead that she scarcely saw the strapping lass, limber and well-featured, who was coming up the stream-track.

Gaunt had seen her, though, and was asking himself why Peggy Mathewson had chosen this one hour for a saunter up the waterside. As they drew near his anger changed to fear; for Peggy was apt to be outspoken, and

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might ruin with a word this new and better life which, to his fancy, opened out before him.

Banned by Garth village as she was, there was no man in it who could say that this lass from Dene Farm was anything but comely; more than one, indeed, had sought her company, in a diffident and non-committal way, to the anger of their womenfolk. Yet Peggy had never shown her beauty to the full, as she did now in the moment of her tribulation. She had seen Gaunt before he was aware that she was near, and had needed no second glance to convince her that a lover and his lass came wandering down the stream; and, having lived a country life, she knew that there was no way of dealing with a nettle save to grasp it. For that reason she straightened her firm, tall body — which had drooped a little because, until she turned the bend of the stream, she had been thinking kindly thoughts of Reuben — and she moved up the stream as if she were over-lady of Garth Valley.

To Gaunt's surprise she took no heed of him, but stayed to pass the time of day with Cilla.

"Spring's here at last, after the long winter," she said, in the rich voice that even now moved Reuben.

"Here at last, Peggy," answered Priscilla, who banned no one, child or man or woman, whatever folk might say of them. "You've chosen the best time of day for your saunter, too."

"Likely I have," laughed the other. "I'm courtship-high, Miss Priscilla, as they say in Garth, and my lad waits me somewhere up the stream."

"Well, then, I wish you happiness," said Cilla, out of the warmth of her own glamour-tide. "'Twill be no secret soon, Peggy, that Mr. Gaunt here wants me to marry him some day."

Cilla rarely stayed to measure the wisdom of her words,

and never when her heart was glad, because then, of all times, it was right to give sunshine out.

Peggy Mathewson winced, recovered as from a blow, and turned to Gaunt with an impassive face.

"Did not see you before, Mr. Gaunt. Miss Priscilla here wears such a look of spring about her that a plain body seems to want to see no farther, like. You might have chosen worse."

With a nod to Priscilla she went her way, and Cilla turned to look after her and to admire the bold, free swing of limbs and body.

"There's something whimsical about her, Reuben. Yet why they give the Mathewsons so bad a name, I could never guess."

"Nor I," said the other lamely.

"'Tis not as though they did aught amiss, save live outlandishly away from Garth and show little care for company. They're an odd couple, mother and daughter both; but they carry themselves as if they had a pride in life, and even father owns that they know how to treat their cattle and how to rake the hay crop in. That's much for father to say, who thinks that women's place is in the dairy and the house-place."

"I was thinking of you, Cilla," broke in Reuben desperately. "Why spoil the night with talk of Peggy Mathewson?"

"Nay, I know not. The girl has always puzzled me. I could have liked her, and been friendly, Reuben, but she seems always like the east wind, that will be friends with none."

Peggy herself, meanwhile, had carried her aching heart till she was sure of being out of sight. Then she stumbled to the nearest gate, and looked out at the grey, soft darkening of the hills. Sharprise was an ill-defined, blue-

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purple splash across the fell-scape now, and the curlew's note waned softer and more soft.

"'Twas to be," murmured Peggy. "Oh, ay, 'twas like as it was to be. The queer thing is, that I bear no malice to slim Miss Good Intent. Should hate her, I — yet, if 'twere not she, 'twould be another."

She spoke as if half stunned; for, though her judgment had foreseen such trouble long ago, her heart had covered up its doubts. She, too, heard the wailing farewell of the curlews to the twilight; but it reminded her only of sad weather on the moor — of wet east winds, with snow behind them, just when the lambing season seemed like to prosper — of frosty labour in the fields of barren harvests.

"He'll break my life in two. Tried hard to, once, did Reuben Gaunt; and now he's home-returned to finish off the brave job, 'twould seem."

She gathered the remnants of her courage together. With a pitiful defiance she laughed, though a sob broke half-way through the laugh.

"Kept my pride to the end. Told Miss Good Intent I went to meet my lad. Oh, I know Reuben! He'll think of that in a while, and grow jealous. — Pity o' life!" she broke off, straightening herself with sudden passion and flinging out her capable, strong arms with a gesture that was tragic in its impotence. "Women keep crying, crying out to God — if there is one — and asking why men were sent into the world for mischief. And no answer comes, not if you mucky your knees with going down in the peat to pray for 't. And women go on saying there's no such thing as heart-break; and men believe 'em, because they daren't do otherwise; and graves keep being dug, and good lives shovelled under 'em, with a word or two from parson to smooth the sods down. Lord, I wish a few o'

the surpliced folk would come to Peggy Mathewson for guidance!"

The last silence of the fells came down about the girl. Yet she stood there, not thinking much, but feeling more than weaker folk could have borne. So quiet it grew that the busy travels of the field mice could be heard, as they pattered through the grass, and the nestling of the lambs against their mother's fleece was a call, almost, across the stillness of the night.

"I knew all along, and I wouldn't heed," she whispered to the night. "I wouldn't heed again, if all were to be done afresh. Yet what he's missed! God, what the lad has missed!"

CHAPTER VIII

PRISCILLA had forgotten Peggy Mathewson soon after they had passed her by. She was thinking of Reuben, sauntering step by step beside her, and of the new elusive joy there was in these April gloaming-tides which she remembered from her childhood.

As in all joy, there was a corner somewhere, unswept by the cool evening breeze, which harboured distrust of happiness. It was not Reuben she distrusted — for she was one of the brave, simple kind who, once loving, are hard to move from faith; it was belief in God's ulterior harshness, which is the cold refuge of the weak: it was a doubt of the reality of what she felt, a looking out toward something steadier and more calm.

"Troubled still?" asked Gaunt, recovering quickly from the shock of meeting Peggy, now the danger of it was over for the present.

"It seems too good, that is all," she answered.

And then he talked to her, as they moved through the quiet after-light and neared the stile that brought them to the croft of Good Intent. He put his love, his hopes of a finer life, his resolutions for the future days, into words that would have moved a harder and more clear-sighted maid than Cilla. He talked once more of foreign lands, and again of this sweet Garth that lay about them, and he twined his love of Cilla throughout it all like a golden thread.

Priscilla forgot that dark corner where vague distrust span webs like a spider in a dusky room. Out of her heart she gave her love to Gaunt; and, because her heart was full, she needs must laugh.

“ Reuben, we’ve not told father yet ”

“ No, but will do soon. What’s the thought in your bonnie head, Cilla? ”

“ Why, that I must wash my face, for I’ve been crying. Father is never so tired o’ nights but he looks at me at home-coming, and he seems to know if an eyelash lies out of its own proper place.”

This side the stile, where they had halted, there was a well-spring for the cattle — a trough of stone, all but hidden long since by the mosses and the ferns that fed greedily upon the water. Priscilla dipped her kerchief in, and washed her face, and dipped the kerchief in again.

“ Good night,” she said demurely, when she was satisfied that all the stains of the night’s tumult were removed.

“ Ah, but not so quietly, if you please.”

So she reached up her face to him; and then he said he would wait till she was safely home, for even the home-croft held dangers when you loved a maid. And Priscilla tripped happily across the grey-dark grass, and, because she was happy, she turned at the bend of the mistal-yard and hooted like a barn-owl, to let Reuben know that she was safe.

Gaunt laughed as he turned home about. He did not follow the wandering line of the stream this time, but took a straight course across the fields — a course that led him, as it chanced, to the gate over which Peggy Mathewson was leaning, still fighting despair as best she might. Her back was turned to him, but even in the dim light Gaunt could not mistake the figure; he bit his lip impatiently,

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and wondered if he should pass on and climb the wall a little further up.

"Nay, she would know, though she won't seem to see me now," he muttered. "Best have it out, and have done with it."

He moved quietly to the gate, and laid a hand on her arm. "Peggy —" he began.

She swept his hand away, and turned on him, and Reuben Gaunt, who had seen mainly the softer side of women until now, was awed by the storm that broke about him. She said little; but in her voice, in every movement of her body, there was contempt and loathing.

"Get you home!" she cried, pointing across the grey haze of the fields. "Get home to your kennel, Reuben Gaunt. D'ye think I want such as you to come touching me?"

"But, lass —"

"Ay, and *but, lass* and *but, lass* — and you want to explain, and explain — fool Reuben, haven't I learned your tricks and your wheedlesome ways by this time? Little Miss Good Intent is younger to 'em. Come out of your kennel to-morn, and talk to her; *she'll* believe ye, maybe."

"We'd best not part in anger," he stammered.

"Hadn't we? 'Tis the only way we are like to part. I'm waiting for my lad, as I told Miss Priscilla just now. He'll *explain* to ye, Reuben Gaunt, if that's what lies in your mind."

The suggestion of physical cowardice — not true of him at any time — stung Gaunt as much as anything the girl had said or left unsaid.

"If that's so, I'll wait for him here with you, Peggy," he said, holding his ground.

For a moment she relented. Gaunt was always showing

her glimpses of a certain hardihood of courage which she liked to see in man or woman. Then she remembered Cilla, and saw again the look those two had worn as they came down the fields to meet her — came whispering, hand in hand, as if they robbed no woman of her birthright.

“Will you go?” she cried. “I’ve done with you, Reuben Gaunt, and you with me, and ’twill be a far day and an ill day that brings me within speaking length of you again.”

“As you like,” he said doggedly. “I only wanted to —”

“Ay, to explain! Reuben, I’m too old to your tricks.”

The tiredness and the scorn of those last words left Gaunt no choice. Without a word, he set a hand on the top bar of the gate, vaulted it, and passed out into the greyness of the night.

“He should end that way,” said Peggy, looking after him. “Sometimes he’ll take a three-barred gate too many, all in his easy style, and light on his head the further side.”

Tired out with passion, wearied of scorn, she turned to wander up the stream. And she met her lad, and walked with him; and he was known by the name of heart-break to the few who believe in such old-world superstitions.

Cilla of the Good Intent, meanwhile, after crossing the croft in safety and giving her owl’s call to Reuben, had gone indoors. Yeoman Hirst was sitting by the fire — it was rarely so warm in Garth, but what a fire o’ nights was pleasant — and he was nursing a long clay pipe in his hand. He had been counting his gains in live stock during this wonderful propitious lambing-time; but he looked up quickly as Priscilla entered, and in his glance there was that close-seated affection which proved Cilla right when

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she had said that "father would know if an eyelash lay out of its own proper place."

"Look'st brave and well, Cilla!" was his greeting. "Got the wind to your cheeks, eh? Now, I do begin to think, spite o' being your father, that you've some claim to winsomeness."

Priscilla was not so happy as she had been a moment since. This steady warmth of greeting seemed out of keeping with the quick, random happiness she had seized by stealth to-night. It had in it something of the security she had missed in Reuben's wooing.

"Ah, shame to go spoiling your own lass, father!" she answered. "And see, you have no horn of ale beside you."

"Not like to have till you come to fill it. I must be getting old and daft, Cilla, for I cannot rightly taste the wholesome bitter in my evening draught, unless you come and fill it."

She busied herself to fill the horn from the cask of October ale which stood in the outer kitchen. In outward seeming she was the same Cilla as of old — capable and gentle, wholesome to look at, and careful of a good man's wants; yet until now she had never known what it meant to hold any but a trifling secret from her father.

"Now, sit ye down, Cilla," said Hirst, after a quiet pull at his ale. "Sit ye down, and tell me all about your day at Keta's Well. I'm in good humour, lass. Been thinking, lass, while you tarried shamefully, that never was such a lambing-time in Garth. These Scotch ewes are bonnie to see — like 'em best of all, for my part — but they seldom drop two lambs. Seems there's a fairy-wand about, Cilla. I go to bed o' night, and hear the lark whistle me up next morning, and go up the pastures, like — and there's another ewe twinned lambs. The lan's fair white wi' the wee beasties."

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It was Priscilla's unrest that answered, and the words slipped from her unawares. "You're boasting in April, father, and I've heard that wise folk never boast till May is out — and seldom then."

The farmer ran his hand along the arm of his high-backed chair, in token of his faith that touching wood was a sure antidote to pride. "There, you're a lile, trim farmer's wife already, Cilla!" he cried. "Wouldn't you trust even such a weather-time as this?"

Cilla thought of to-night's wooing weather, of how little, after all, she trusted it. "I've seen a foot of snow in May, father," she answered.

Hirst gave out that thunder laugh of his that rattled the pewter on the shelves. "Oh, and have you, maid? How many, then, has your father seen? Never get older that way myself, Cilla — sure as heartsome weather comes, I believe in 't like a brother. There may come a storm in May enough to ding the house-walls in, but, come the next soft May, ye'll find me like a lad again, thinking the sweetstuffs will never end."

He filled his pipe afresh, then kindled it with one of the paper spills which Cilla took from the mantel-shelf and lit for him at the wide hearth.

"David is late," he said. "Promised to be here by now, to talk over a matter of some wheel-axles I want from him, and to join me in a pipe."

"David? Is David coming to-night?"

The girl was surprised by her own terror of David's coming. To hold a secret from her father was ill enough, but to meet David, just to-night — she could not bear it.

"Well, no, it seems he's not," the other answered drily, "or he'd have been here by now, surely. So you've had your frolic, lass, at Keta's Well. And your packages all came up before you, with a message from Will the Driver

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that you were following on. Likely pranks, these — you finished the day with a gossip, eh? Your mother was the best soul that ever lived, but she aye relished a gossip, I remember.”

Cilla had taken up some knitting, and bent her head under the pretence that she had dropped a stitch. Her father's trust in her, his kindly banter, the old home look of everything, were each a separate reproach.

“I walked from Willow Beck Bar, father. The evening was so still, and the look of the quiet fields tempted me.”

“Would have tempted me, too. So long as you picked up no gallant on the road — but there, that's not your way, lile lass.”

David, meanwhile, had not forgotten his promise to Hirst; but on his way to keep it he found himself a half-hour before his time, and, meeting Billy in the fields, had good-humouredly joined him in a saunter.

David, as he went up and down the fields with his boon comrade, had a feigned interest at first in the nests which Billy showed him; for he was thinking of Priscilla. But by and by his interest awoke; he saw the blackbird's dappled clutch of five, and the wise throstle looking at him as she sat brooding, and the hedge-sparrow's ragged nest, built in the kink of a grey limestone wall and bottomed with blue eggs; and he felt his boyhood return to him.

“Now, there's a wren a-sitting over across yond field,” said Billy. “Wouldn't ye come with a body, David, and see yon same?”

“Another day, Billy, another day. I'm due with Farmer Hirst, and must be getting back.”

“Well, then, a body must turn when he must turn. There's no denying that, David. I'm going to see the little shy bird a-sitting myself, so I'll bid ye good e'en.”

Billy the Fool was moving away, after the loose easy

way he had of carrying his great body, when he felt a lack of something, and stopped and turned about.

"Haven't a fill o' baccy on ye, David?"

"Ay, lad — three, if ye'll take them."

"Nay, I'm only wanting one," said the other, briskly filling his pipe. "And a match, as a body's body might say."

He lit his pipe, nodded tranquilly at David, then went up the fields. David watched his unhurried stride, the unhurried trail of smoke that drifted in his wake.

"A born smoker, is the lad. Puffs none too fast and none too slow, but fair as if he had 'twixt this and Judgment to finish a pipeful in. No wonder Billy needs only a match at a time; yond pipeful will burn its way till there isn't a strand o' baccy left in 't."

In some dim way, David Blake was awakening nowadays from that bluntness and reserve which, even toward himself, it had been his habit to maintain. In part he was vastly diffident, and in part his days were filled with earnest labour, so that all his life he had feared to indulge in what he named "fancy feelings." Yet to-night, as he saw the utter content of Billy the Fool, he was moved to a speculation which, before the spring came in, he would have counted dreaminess.

"Will die a lad, yond Fool Billy," he muttered, as the summing up of all his thoughts. "He's the only man of his age in Garth that's what ye might call rightly happy. Has no worries, he, and can make a wise fool like myself see ladhood pictured all afresh in a clutch of blackbird eggs. Would swop places with Billy, I rather fancy, if the chance were gi'en me."

He gave a last look at the evening hills, the evening fields, behind him; and for the first time he wondered if Priscilla's refusal of his suit were final. Greatly brave

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in speculation was David to-night, and the mere hope that Cilla might find second thoughts—a hope slender as a reed, but real for all that—set a new light in his eyes and a brisker movement in his feet as he stepped out toward Good Intent.

He went on the high ground overlooking Willow Beck, and as he walked he kept looking constantly into the valley. So gently the gloaming filtered down the valley's length like a wide stream of silver-grey—so prayerful and so still the evening was—that a man of harder heart than David might well have found his eyes go seeking peace and finding it.

“She's bonnie, when all's said, is Garth Valley,” was his thought; “and here am I, all late for Farmer Hirst.”

Suddenly he halted, though wishing to get forward. Through the silver-grey of Garth Valley two figures came; as yet they were no more than outlined against the grey, but David was held by some unhappy intuition, and he needs must stay and watch them at a nearer distance.

Slow, but pitiaibly sure for David, their progress was; and soon, though it was too far to know their faces, he knew them by their carriage and their walk. Spring was over in a moment for David, but boyhood was not altogether past, it seemed, for he felt his throat grow big, and his eyes were smarting.

Once, as he watched them, they stopped, came closer still together, and went on again; and over David—whom folk thought slow and cheery, not given to feeling overmuch—there passed the bitterness of death.

It was no selfish love he had for Cilla. To see any man so close to the lile lass, whom he had watched over so long, would have been a grief, because he frankly sought her for himself these days; but had the man been honest, clean of his hands, David would have felt no bitterness, only

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a self-sorrow that he would not have nursed for long, because such sickliness was foreign to him.

"If't had been any one but Gaunt," he said, "any one in all Garth village save Reuben Gaunt! Lord knows I hate the willowy slim way of the man, and he'll send Priscilla's happiness abroad — ay, will he, like any ladkin blowing bubbles for a frolic on his mother's doorstep."

He turned away, and he thought that he could not bear to go to Good Intent to-night. Yet he had promised, and David's word, till now, had been good as Queen's coin in Garth village.

Up and down the fields he wandered. If Cilla were not sure to meet him at Good Intent, he could have gone at once, and covered up his bitterness from Farmer Hirst as best he might; but it was nearing dark, and he knew that she would return before the last of nightfall came.

"I cannot bear to see the lile good lass, and never speak a warning word!" he cried.

Out of the silence presently there came a cry — Priscilla's call to Gaunt, in token that she had crossed the home-croft in safety — and David bent an ear and listened.

"Only a daft old barn-owl," he muttered. "Birds and their ways, and maids and their ways — I'm weary of 'em."

David was unlike himself, and knew it. It was well for growing lads to be peevish at these times, but he was old enough, he had fancied, to have learned some common sense. So he squared his shoulders; and his face, in the gathering dusk, wore the look he had when he was driving a stake into the ground or was hammering a horseshoe on the anvil.

"I'll go," he said. "Promises run down the wind, they say, and catch in any hedgerow — but not David's prom-

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ises to Farmer Hirst. Bless me, and there's a letter in my pocket all the while, and I'd forgotten it!"

He set out in earnest this time for Good Intent, not heeding the beauty of the grey night; and he came to the wicket-gate that opened on the garden at the rear of the farmstead, and went down the five steps leading to the door, and knocked.

"Step in, David!" sounded Hirst's big voice. "I knew you'd come, lad, though I said you wouldn't."

David the Smith opened and went in; and he felt himself forlorn, seeing the look of things within doors. On one side the hearth, with its back to him, was the hooded chair in which the farmer took his ease at nights; and a rough-coated elbow showing round the corner of the oak, a haze of blue smoke curling up toward the rafters, witnessed to Hirst's presence. On the other side, facing David, as he entered, sat Priscilla, her work on her lap, her eyes on the fire that threw quiet, homely patches of ruddy light and sombre shadow round about the room. The farm-dog, Fanny, stretched at full length beside the fender, was too full of dreams to do aught save wag her tail in a feeble way, though she knew that one of her oldest friends had come.

It was home, thought David; no subtle detail was wanting to complete this picture of fair prosperity and honest ease and fellowship — no detail lacking to save David an added pang. He had been content, till lately, with his work, his freedom, his trim little house with its garden sloping down to the stream; to-night he saw only the warm look of Good Intent, and by contrast his life seemed barren and unprofitable. He longed for a lass of his own, and a dog stretched half the length of the ingle-nook, and maybe the cry of a bairn as it waked in its mother's arms and fell asleep again.

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"Come forrard, lad!" cried the farmer, getting himself out of his chair with a cheerful groan — for he was stiff after the long day's work. "None so welcome at Good Intent, come late or early. Fanny," he broke off, stirring the dog with his foot, "wilt get thy great body under settle, thou jade, and let a better than thee draw up a chair?"

The dog stretched herself, gave a low "yeow-ow" of protest, looked up at Yeoman Hirst to learn if he were in earnest. Seeing he was, she turned to David, and put her fore paws on his chest and licked his face.

"Nay, nay!" said he. "What sort of guest would David be, lass, if he let thee wheedle him after the master had said *under*?"

Fanny had liquid eyes, of a shade and lustre that any woman might have owned to the shaming of her sisters; she lifted them now to David's, in between the patient licking of his face, with surprise that he should turn the cold shoulder to a friend in this way. So it ended — seeing the man's heart was soft and foolish toward all dumb things — in David's bringing a chair up to the hearth, in his taking the dog's brown-black, wistful head into his hands and stroking her muzzle softly.

"Shame on thee, David!" laughed Hirst. "She'll be all spoiled by to-morn, when I want her to drive up the sheep into the moor."

"We'll chance it, Farmer! Ay, we'll chance it. Like to feel a dog's head in my hands, I — seems to hearten a man."

Now that he had met his trouble, had seen Priscilla face to face and conquered the outward signs of heartache, David was almost merry. It had been a desperate venture, this of meeting Cilla so soon; and, now that he was in the thick of it, he felt something of the glow and mad-wit gaiety which attends on great adventures.

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Never had Cilla guessed till now that David Blake could be so light of talk. The sobriety, nearing dulness, which she associated with him was gone. Keen, quick lights of humour played about his face. He had stories at command — droll tales which Will the Driver had told him of the road, sly anecdotes concerning the foibles of his neighbour-folk. He was guarding a heartache bravely, was David.

Once, in the pause of talk, he looked at Cilla, and found her eyes resting on him with strange intentness. She was thinking that the helping hand-grip she had sought not long ago, when she resisted and yet longed for Gaunt's caresses, was David's own. And, when she saw that he had caught the glance, and was trying to read it, she took up her sewing, and hoped the colour in her cheeks would be counted to the firelight's credit.

"Why, Cilla, I've a horn of ale beside me, and David here has none!" said the farmer abruptly. "Where are your manners, lass?"

"Nay, now, take no trouble," protested David. "I've a pipe betwixt my teeth, Farmer, and what more should a man want?"

"Trouble is as it's taken, David. If ye go forth from Good Intent without a something good and mellow in your inwards — why, bless me, there's no cheer left in Garth."

Priscilla was glad of the excuse to put her sewing down and busy herself with David's comfort.

"I'll leave you to your talk, father," she said, after making sure that the farm's hospitality — cherished for three centuries or more — was no way shamed to-night.

"Ay, but come back to lay a trifle of cheese, and cake, and oat-bread on the table. Have supped once already, I, and so has David, likely; but strong work comes strong to victuals, Cilla, at the second asking."

CHAPTER IX

PRISCILLA gave some fleeting answer, and was gone. Up the stone stairway she went, and into the chamber beside the apple-tree, which, grown sturdy, was putting out green springtime leaves. A slim, white sickle moon lay helpless on her back—lighting in a softened fashion Garth's fragrant valley. Through the opened casement the tempered April wind was fretting, as it blew the muslin blind aside. It was a night when fairies played about the land, when human ears, not deaf to all romance, heard music fluting through the dull world's uproar.

Priscilla of the Good Intent leaned her two arms on the window-seat, and looked out upon the vagueness of the landscape lit by the young moon. She was thinking of her surrender to Reuben Gaunt, and wondering if she were happy in her choice; and always as she asked the question—pretending to herself that she asked it not at all—David's shadow stole in between herself and happiness.

Gaunt himself about the same hour was standing on the threshold of his own house of Marshlands. He had turned the loose silver in his pocket on seeing the new moon, as superstition bade him, and had prayed for luck. He had tried, moreover, to think constantly of Cilla, but had thought instead of Peggy Mathewson, and of the lad she hoped to meet by the winding-path of Willow Beck.

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Peggy, when she had planted that retreating arrow in Reuben Gaunt, had judged wisely.

"Must see her once more to-morrow," murmured Gaunt. "Must tell Peggy that new times have come in, and old ones gone — but who, in the deuce's name, is the lad she means to take to nowadays?"

"Reuben is true at heart," murmured Cilla, as she watched Garth Valley, grey under the sickle moon. "They wrong him, these Garth folk; he only wants love and a helping hand, and I have promised to give both."

David, below stairs, was talking with John Hirst, while both sent up clouds of smoke toward the rafter-beams. They had settled the matter of the axles, and Hirst was chuckling.

"Wish ye'd come up to-morrow's evening, David. Yond turkeys of mine are not penned up yet, and 't has grown to be a jest in Garth. What with being throng with the lambs, and cutting a new ditch in Marshy Field bottom, and all the spring work coming faster than I can deal with, I've no time to think o' turkeys. The stakes ye made for me are lying just where ye left 'em, and they say in Garth — ay, pretty well every time I go down street — that the pen will be nice and ready for next year's breeding-season."

"'Tis time they were penned, Farmer, I own."

"Time? I should think it was. Look ye, David, be up at five o' the afternoon or so. There'll be myself and my two men, and with you to help we should get the durned thing up in no time."

"Right! Yond red-wattled dandy 'ull be fair uproarious, I reckon, when once his wings are clipped. Wakes the whole village as 'tis."

They were silent, puffing quietly at their pipes, till David remembered the letter lying in his pocket and began

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to fumble for it among the odds and ends — nails and screws, a clasp-knife and a two-foot rule — which bulged his pocket out.

“Want your knowledgeable sort of head to help me, Farmer,” he said, handing the letter across Fanny’s curly hide. “Will the Driver brought the mails this morning, but I little fancied he carried aught for me, till the postman dropped a letter for me at the smithy. Write few letters myself, and get few; life’s over-short for such thankless waste o’ time.”

Hirst read the letter through. “Come all the way from Canada, ’twould seem,” he muttered. “And I should know the writer’s name, though I’m puzzled to guess where and when I last saw Joanna West.”

“Forgotten my mother’s sister, have ye, who wedded Joshua West of High Lands? So had I, or nearly, seeing ’tis twenty year since they left Garth.”

“Why, I must be getting past my memory, David! A bonnie lass she was, and spirited. I remember looking her way as a lad, till Cilla’s mother put all such fool’s nonsense out of my head for good and all! She was over-good for Joshua West, all the same. Bird of a feather, he, with Reuben Gaunt — settled to naught, liked spending money better than the earning of it; wanted to be pretty-boy-rover over all the countryside.”

David was silent for awhile. Mention of Gaunt brought sharply to him the remembrance of what he had seen to-night, when looking down from the higher fields on the grey of the valley’s gloaming. He wanted to warn Cilla’s father, as he had wanted to warn the girl herself; but, for the like reason, he held his peace; for Gaunt was his rival, and David was sensitive almost to absurdity when honour was in case.

“Ay,” he answered at last. “He was feather-bird

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to Gaunt. Lost his money and his lands, Farmer, ye remember, and went overseas to see if he could frame better, like? Framed well, too, as it proved."

"They sometimes do. I remember you told me, years ago, that he was farming to some purpose at last, and was earning gear and gold."

"Puzzles me, too, why that should be. Is't that Joshua West's sort o' breed cannot rightly stand against Garth weather, with its ups and downs, and its east wind in May, and its heartsome, daft contrariness? Or is it that there's fewer wayside drinks to be had in foreign parts?"

"Bit o' both, I reckon. Well, then, he's dead, by what the letter says."

"Ay. Slipped under a timber-waggon, he — Joshua was always fond o' slipping one way or another — and they picked him up with his back cut in two. My Aunt Joanna has not favoured me overmuch with letters, but she's in trouble now. Life's always playing that queer game with me, Farmer; when folk are up and about, damned if they care a stiver for David the Smith — but when they're down, 'tis always I'm their best friend, and must hurry off at once."

"Up or down, folk look to ye, David," said the other, with unabashed and honest praise. "Ye're a bit like Sharprise Hill, ye — Garth folk *will* turn for a look at ye, come evil times or good, before they step indoors o' night. So Joanna West, having no sons of her own, is lonely over yonder, now her good man's gone, and she wants ye to go out and set things straight?"

"That's about it. Yet Garth Village is good enough for me, and always was. What make of moonshine would it be to go marlaking in overseas parts?"

"Now, I'm thinking," said Hirst slowly. "We're talking no secrets, David, when I tell ye that ye want my

Cilla, and that I want ye to have the lass, though I can ill spare her. Well, now, maids are pranksome."

"Maybe," assented David, his face ruddier than its wont. "No news that, Farmer. Perhaps, in a littlish way, ye'd let me ask what bearing the matter has on Aunt Jane?"

Hirst took his pipe-stem in his hand and waved it to and fro, with a chuckle intended to be low. "Like ye! Always like yourself, David. Hit life on the head with a hammer, ye, and never stop to dither round about the nail-top. What has Cilla to do with this letter coming overseas? Well, 'tis this way, David. When I was courting Cilla's mother, there were ups and downs—more downs than ups, so far as I remember. The bonniest lass in the world, David, but I couldn't get near her anyway; like a mare she was, when you try and catch her in the paddock, and she looks at you out of the corner of her bonnie brown een, and says, 'Catch me if you can.' What, short of baccy, David?"

"Nay, and thank ye; but I'm listening, Farmer, and my pipe may rest awhile."

"Well, there came a day when I couldn't bide it any longer. She was not for John Hirst, I fancied, and the devil came gripping the reins of me. 'Priscilla,' said I, going up to her father's farmstead one summer's gloaming and chancing to find her in the garden—'Priscilla,' says I, 'I'm going forth from Garth.' And she looked at me. I can see the look yet, David, though the poor lass is lying under Garth kirkyard to-night. 'How far are you going, John, from Garth?' said she. 'Oh, a world and a half away,' says I, as jaunty as may be."

"Go on," said David.

"Well, I meant all I said, for I couldn't bide to live in Garth unless I got Priscilla for wife—mother and

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daughter of the one name, ye'll notice, David, for 'tis a name I love, and smells of double stocks and pansies. 'A world and a half away,' says I. And Cilla's mother fell to crying, same as her heart would break; and I cuddled her to me, David, and I mind to this day that a yellow-legged bumble-bee got up from the arabis flowers and boomed across our faces as we kissed one the other."

"I'm beginning to catch your drift, Farmer," said David.

"Time you did, David! Mind ye, there's no two women like each other in this world. Men-folk are plain this and that, more oft than not, and easy 'tis to reckon up their substance and their shape; but women are teasy-like, and I'm no way for advising ye, David the Smith."

"Ye think I'd better go overseas?" said David slowly.

"Well, ye'd better tell Cilla ye're going, anyhow, and see how the lile lass takes it."

Had David not halted to-night to look down from the hills into the grey valley, he might have welcomed Yeoman Hirst's advice; but, so far as his leaving Garth affected his chances with Priscilla, he harboured no false hopes. Cilla was not one to walk lightly in the fields with any man, and it was sure that her choice had fallen, once for all, on Reuben Gaunt.

"She's not for me," said the smith, looking straight and bravely into Hirst's face.

"Tuts! Where's your pluck, David? Put a bit of the devil into that honesty of thine, lad, for all women like a touch of keen sauce to their victuals."

"There's devil enough in me nowadays, and thank ye — rather too much for my liking. Truth is, my temper's breaking, Farmer, and breaking badly. Like an ill-forged bit of metal it is — breaks if ye hit it gently."

"Ay, I know — I know, David, lad!" put in the other,

with the wise, tolerant smile of age. "Bless me, 'tis a few odd years since the first man went daft-wit over the first woman, and there's been other some in your place, David, in the in-between years."

"I'll go, anyway," said David by and by. "Can't bide still in Garth as things are. Yet how I'm going to live without Garth street, and the forge, and the fields running up to the moor — I cannot guess. 'Twill be a wrench when it comes, for sure."

"Well, now, 'tis not for a lifetime, supposing Cilla lets ye go — which, mind ye, I don't believe."

The door at the stairway foot was opened suddenly. Priscilla had left her watching of the moonlight and her thoughts of Reuben Gaunt to come down and spread the supper-board. Her tread was light at all times, and the two men were so intent on their talk that they heard nothing until the rattle of the door-sneek warned them.

Yeoman Hirst prided himself on taking any situation by the horns at a moment's notice. So now he laughed, setting the roof quivering again, and, "David," said he, "you're full of droll tales to-night. Pity that Cilla did not come before to hear yond last."

Cilla knew her father's diplomacy, and guessed at once that they had been talking of her. Her self-command had in it some of David's quality; perplexed as she was by her constant wish to ask David's help, bewildered by the glamour-web that Gaunt had spun about her, she gave no sign of trouble.

"David is merry to-night, father," she answered quietly, and went into the outer kitchen to fetch the supper things.

"Ay, my word, he's merry!" muttered David ruefully.

"Mustn't let her guess that ye and me are as thick as thieves," said Hirst, subduing his voice with hardship. "Love's as good as lost, David, when a lass knows her

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father wants the lad as much as she. Must run contrary, these maids, or else there's no frolic in't. I'd have their fathers choose their lasses' mates, for my part; but they'd rather seek counsel from the first beggar coming to the door to ask for scraps."

After supper — a quiet, unrestful meal to-night — David got up to say farewell.

"Thou'lt open to him, Cilla?" cried the farmer, feigning to be stiffer in the joints than the day's work warranted. "Old bones are old bones, choose how you try to prove them young."

Priscilla rose gravely, and opened the inner door; then went out into the porch, and stood looking at the crisp, clean night.

"I wouldn't have troubled you," said David awkwardly.

"'Tis no trouble, David; and yet, in other ways, you make great trouble for me."

"Now, how's that?" he asked, surprised into putting his hand on hers and drawing her into the roadway. "David make trouble for the lile lass? 'Twas not wont to be, Priscilla, before new times came in."

"It is this way, David. You ask too much, and I cannot make a friend of you."

"Seems a pity, lass, for a better friend you never had."

"Well, then, but wilt be just a friend, David? One I could come to, and ask for help?"

David looked at her. The moon and the stars were tender with her face, and with her slim and upright body. Cilla had always been the one maid for him, but to-night there was magic in her eyes and in her touch. He remembered, suddenly and with hardship, how he had looked from the hilly fields not long ago, and had seen her in Gaunt's arms. It was true that his temper was brittle nowadays — the temper of David the Smith, which Garth

folk spoke of reverently as they spoke of steadfast summer weather — and he had been over-brave to-night.

“Friendship be damned!” he said. “I’ll take more or less, Priscilla, and good night to you.”

He was gone, and Priscilla of the Good Intent was left in the starlit road. And first she laughed, because she could not help it, hearing David break away from his quiet, Puritan mother tongue. And then she sighed, and wished him back again. And afterwards she glanced at Charley’s Wain, overlooking the trim farmstead, and wondered if she had a heart at all, or whether it had only gone astray. Certain it was that she had never liked David as she did to-night, had never seen the real man peep out so clearly. Still wanting help from him — help against herself, or against Gaunt, she knew not which — she had called to him before she could check the words.

“David, come back!” she cried.

But David was striding down Garth Street, and was blaming himself for the odd language he had used toward Priscilla.

“Quiet of tongue, am I?” he muttered. “Why break out when the lile lass comes to bid good night to me? Nay, David, nay! Thou’rt a clumsy lad, when all’s said, and deserved to lose her.”

Quiet and still was Garth village, as David walked down its moonlit length. The gentle noises of the day were gone; no voice passed gossip up and down the road, no footfall, save David’s, lifted the light April dust; the grey fronts of the houses seemed full of ripe and mellow thought, and from their gardens came a warm faint smell of flowers and green-stuff.

Now that he was to leave it, the sense of home rushed in on David with new-found force. He had felt the more in times past, maybe, because he rarely found an outlet

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for his affections in words or ordered thoughts; and to-night he knew, keenly and with pain, how much he cared for Cilla, how much he cared for this grey street and the grey circling hills.

"I've got to leave ye, Garth," he muttered huskily. "Ay, that's about the size of it."

As he neared the grindstone — standing by the wall-side like some old pensioner who knows his working past secure and thrives upon the after ease — he saw a light go shining out across the road from Widow Lister's cottage. He saw, too, a plump, small figure of a woman standing at the door. Nanny Lister, it was said in Garth, would never go to bed till the last chance of a gossip had gone down the night, and she was holding to her reputation, so it seemed.

"Ah, 'tis ye, David!" she said, after peering out to learn who this late comer might be. "Well, ye're just in time, for I've a grievance, and you're the best-tempered man i' Garth —"

"Am I?" laughed David, not sorry for this interruption to his thoughts.

"Well they say so, though I trust no man's temper myself. Men have a trick of crazying about some lile slip of a lass or other, and I should know their tempers by this time, having lived with a husband and buried him."

"Lister lies snug, Widow," said David, with a touch of that lightness which Cilla had noticed in him throughout the evening. "Turfed over, he, and resting from the *clack-clack* of a tongue, eh?"

It was odd that the widow, old and ripish in experience, felt just as Cilla had done — that David showed comelier when he got a bright edge to his tongue. She bridled a little, to be sure; but that was only a return of youth,

an instinct to stand off from and thwart a man when most she liked him.

“Unwedded folk should never talk to wedded ones, David. Maids and bachelors, I always did say, are like children playing wi’ dandelion-fluff, blowing to ask if ’tis this day, or next day, sometime, never, that the right lad’s going to come a-wooing. Well, he comes, and he isn’t so bright, after all, when ye’ve lived with him a year or two — but ye’re sort of fond of him and his foolishness — and ye put up with him, and bake his bread for him, and hearken to his whimsies when he comes home tired o’ nights and hugs the chimney-corner. That’s all a side o’ life ye’re deaf to, David, and I go pitying all ye stark, unwedded folk.”

David would have winced at another time; but to-night he had fought his battle, had decided once for all to give up Cilla and the grey village which she queened, and he was perilously gay.

“Give pity where ’tis asked, Widow,” he answered blithely. “I have the forge, for my part, and a quiet cottage to go home to, and a power o’ freedom ye wedded folk seem always to be missing. Did ye ever hear of the fox that got caught in a gin in Sharprise Wood and lost his tail, and went prating afterwards that he looked bonnier for the loss?”

“Ye’re very full of heart to-night, David. Pranksome, I should call ye.”

“Have need to be. Just once a year the springtime comes, Widow, and it behoves folk to be pranksome then.”

“Well, now, listen to me, for I said you were sound of temper, and I’m in one of my angry fits just now.”

David looked at her plump, wholesome cheeks, and laughed. “Ye carry it well, I must say, Widow.”

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"Ay, women — specially lone widows — were born just to try and hold up their heads and pretend, like, naught matters anyway. What I want ye to look at, David — the moon, young as she is, is better than a candle to see by — what I want ye to look at is my bit of a garden here. 'Tis no way big, David, and a plumpish cow could lie along it, and ye'd never know there was a garden there; but 'tis all I've got, and it rears a good few blooms from March time on to winter."

"Bonniest slip o' garden in all Garth. Well, then, Widow?"

"'Tisn't well at all. Stoop down, David, and see where the auriculas were when I slipped, yesternight, to bed. See where the tulips were, and where the daffy-down-dillies were blowing all their trumpets."

"Ay, they're gone, for sure," said David, with real concern.

"Gone? Should think they were. I came out this morning — feeling as cheerful as a lone widow ever does — and thought to water my bit of a garden. Found every single bloom picked off, David, and laid along the ground."

"Now, then, I'm sorry! Pride ourselves, we in Garth, that our gardens neighbour the road, and yet no hand comes picking flowers by stealth."

"'Twasn't a hand. 'Twas greedy bird-beaks, David. Ye're friends with John Hirst, up yonder at Good Intent? Well, ye can tell him from Widow Lister that 'tis time he penned his turkeys up."

"We've settled to do that to-morrow, as it chances."

"Should have done it a two-week ago," went on the other briskly. "Fussy, ill-conditioned fowls, I call 'em. Every morn they come gobble-di-gobble down street, waking honest folk before 'tis time to wake. Heard 'em this morn, louder than ever, right under my up-stairs

window, but I didn't guess they were picking off my flower-heads for a bit o' frolic. Wish I had. Would have been after them wi' the thick end of a besom."

"What's done can't be mended, Widow. There's a lot of comfort in that. Good night to ye; and, if you're civil-like to David the Smith to-morn, he'll likely bring a fresh lot o' flowering stuff to fashion up your garden with."

The widow bade him good night in return, and let him go some twenty yards along the street. Then, with the trick that ran in her family, she followed him and called him back.

"'Tis not only John Hirst's turkeys," she panted, coming close to David. "His daughter went roving, too, to-day. Got up on the coach for Keta's Well, and Reuben Gaunt beside her. They didn't return to Garth by coach, I noticed, and if I had John Hirst's ear —"

"Ye'd talk a lot of nonsense into it," broke in David, sharply. "Miss Priscilla came home along the fields with Mr. Gaunt, for I met them. And why shouldn't she, say I, if she's a mind to?"

It was not just truth that David spoke; but it was true to the hilt in this — that the good name of Cilla was to be kept sacred in Garth village at any hazard.

As he neared the forge, a shadow got out from the wall-side and approached him.

"Going to work, like?" said Fool Billy, stretching himself with easy unconcern. "Knew you would, though ye're longer in coming than I looked for."

"Knew I would?" echoed David. "How's that, lad?"

"Ay. Ye said ye were going to Good Intent, and Fool Billy knew ye'd come home by soon, or sooner, and work it off. Ye always do, David, after Good Intent. I'm

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ready for my playtime, too. Have slept awhile, I, since watching the lile trim wren-bird sitting on her eggs as snug as clover to the ground. Ready to play, David, is this same Billy."

They went into the forge, and got the fire alight and glowing, and David worked till the sweat ran down him, because only in the friendly feel of iron and tools could he find ease.

"Billy," he said, looking up suddenly, "I'm leaving Garth — leaving grey Garth, Billy, and going overseas."

"Why, then, I'm coming with ye," said the other instantly. "Me to play and ye to work — how would this Fool Billy of a world do without us two?"

David took up his hammer again, and made the anvil ring. "Stay and see to Miss Good Intent — stay and watch over her, Billy," he said.

Billy looked steadfastly at his comrade; and, though the fire-glow shone on his face, showing each smooth, un-wrinkled curve, David could not understand what was in the natural's thoughts. It was a half-hour before Billy explained himself.

"Best take her with us, David," he said.

CHAPTER X

REUBEN GAUNT, on the morrow of his holiday at Keta's Well, woke early. A thrush was piping from the lilac-trees outside his window, and the clean smell of the morning came through the casement. He remembered the magic of that evening walk across the fields, and found resolution come easily to him.

His resolution did not fail him when he had breakfasted and ordered the black cob to be saddled. He would ride across to Good Intent, find Cilla's father, and tell his errand.

Yet, while his horse was being saddled, another thought came to him; he was pacing up and down the trim, smooth lawn which, newly-mown, stretched to the low wall bordering the highroad. The house behind him showed big for a yeoman's, prosperous and well built, and the garden-spaces about the lawn were trimly kept. It looked a good home for a bride to come to.

"John Hirst will be busy, likely, about the fields," he thought, "before I get to Good Intent. Well, then, I'll ride round by the moor, and take my time about it, and trust to finding him nearer the dinner-hour."

He was not sorry for the respite, as he mounted and turned the cob's head, not down the broad, white highway to Garth, but up the winding track that led him to the moor. This meeting with Cilla's father had to be, but he liked it none the better on that account, and he guessed what sort of welcome he would get.

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Gaunt seldom probed into other folks' motives, or his own; and he did not know that there was more behind this roundabout journey to Good Intent than was explained either by mistrust of his welcome, or by liking for a long ride up the open lands. His project was so dimly formed that, even when he reached the moor, he turned again to the left, and not along the right-hand track that led him to Hirst's farm.

He crossed the stream that, just below, ran brown and sparkling into the walled pool used in time of sheep-washing. The track now was only a narrow, lumpy lane, winding between sloping moor above and sharply falling moor beneath, such as was plied in October by the bracken-sledges. Presently it narrowed again into a foot-trail of the sheep; but Gaunt, keeping his eyes on the pitfalls by the way, went forward and up towards the waving line of grey-black which marked the topmost ridge of heath. His cob moved daintily, not liking the rude menace of the ground, until at last they gained the higher lands, went quietly over a level stretch of peat, and halted at the edge of Water Ghyll.

He looked down upon the steep descent — rocks, and heather-clumps, and tufts of fern new-greening in among the rusty last year's fronds — then glanced across at Clifford's Peel, where its battered remnants stood four-square still to the winds, and prated of old days when the Scotch came raiding sheep and cattle from off the pastured slopes of Garth. It was here that Cilla and he had wandered as boy and girl, here that they had sought great mysteries in among the beetling rocks, the rowans, the deep, thick clumps of ling and cranberry. Water Ghyll had been a forbidden, happy land to them in those days, and they had always reached Garth again with tired feet and glowing cheeks, feeling that they had come safely

through hazardous adventures, and trusting soon to tempt again the frowns of peril.

Gaunt thought tenderly of Cilla, as he recalled those far-off scampers. Wisdom in action came harder to him always than tenderness of thought; and by that token more women's tears had been shed on his account than he deserved.

He had won her at long last, he told himself; and this wild trough of the moors, filled all with peat and rocks and silver music of the stream below, seemed to hold some special greeting for him.

As he looked about him, and across the Ghyll, and down into the haunted streamway, his horse began to fidget, then reared suddenly.

"What's amiss, old lad?" laughed Reuben, all but unseated. "Was in a brown study, I, and thou'st spoilt it all."

A moment later a woman, climbing the steep face of the Ghyll, showed her head above the ling. Gaunt had been too lost in his own dreams to hear the rattle of loose stones that witnessed to her climb, though his horse had not.

The woman's face was beaten hard by toil and weather, yet she carried it straight on her broad shoulders.

"Ay, ye, Reuben Gaunt?" she said, without surprise.

Reuben, scarce recovered from the first shock of the cob's uprearing, was met by a sharper one. Yet again he laughed, for the crisp of the morning's vigour was in him, as in all things that moved on two legs or on four.

"Give you good day, Mrs. Mathewson! Scarce looked to see you here in these lone parts."

"Same to ye! Least looked for, surest found, is Mr. Gaunt of Marshlands." Her eyes — hazel and big and clear, the one youthful relic that Widow Mathewson

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possessed — rested quietly on Gaunt's own until he flinched. She was so sure of his frailty; so acquiescent, in a bitter, stifled way, under the trouble he had caused her aforetime, and now was causing her; so sure of her own honesty, and of his lack of it. "As usual, 'twould seem, I am busy, and ye are idle."

"'Tis a day to be idle on, if ever there was one."

"Maybe, for those born to addle no bite and sup. For my part, I've been seeking strayed sheep all across the moor, and not found them yet."

"Then ye've done no more work than I since sunrise," said Gaunt.

Widow Mathewson rested both hands on her hips, and drew herself yet straighter. Standing there in the sunlight, framed by the swart moor and the dappled sky, she seemed to Gaunt like a carven likeness of her daughter Peggy — of Peggy, grown older, harder, disillusioned altogether. The straight glance that rested on him was Peggy's, too, and the mouth curved into a disdain that despised itself; only the daughter's comely youth was lacking, and the flood of passion in her cheeks.

"Looking for sheep would seem to be my trade in life from cradle-time," she said. Her voice was grimly playful, lest the tragic note should sound too clearly and beat down the reserve she cherished. "Ay, I've been all my life looking for sheep and not finding 'em, Reuben Gaunt. A man's love, and bairns, and profit from farming lean, intaken land — I've sought 'em all in my time, and found 'em go bo-peeping like the ewes I'm following now. Life's like that, till ye've done with it — and maybe then we'll find no softer bed to lie on."

"You're cheery, Mrs. Mathewson," put in Reuben drily. "Nice neighbour-body to fall in with, when a man's spirits are running high."

“ Oh, I’ve done with cheeriness — done with overmuch grief, too, by that token. Sometimes, when I look at ye, Reuben Gaunt, a touch of the old fire comes to me, and I long to throttle ye, stark where ye stand. Then I laugh to myself, knowing I’d fail at the job, somehow, though I brought all the will in the world to it. Peggy will have to thole her misery, as I did mine at her age; and, by that token, I’m keeping ye from riding out to see her.”

Gaunt knew at last the hidden motive for his journey. He had not confessed it to himself; but this woman, with the hard, clear eyes and clear, hard insight into life, had found the truth for him.

“ I’m riding in the contrary direction, as it chances,” he said.

“ Ah, that proves the matter. There’s other birds like ye, prettyish and small of build, that fly zig-zag to their nests.”

Gaunt was nettled in earnest now. “ As you want a plain tale, you shall have it,” he said quietly. “ I’m going to marry John Hirst’s daughter.”

Widow Mathewson knew no surprises nowadays; she had outlived them. “ Guessed as much yester-night,” she said, speaking only half the truth for once, like Reuben himself. Yet it was only the name of her daughter’s rival that she had lacked. “ Peggy went to bed with tears in her een, and in the middle of the night she wakened me with her sobbing in the next-door room. Queer that such as ye can keep such as Peggy wetting blankets with her tears; but I did the same in my time for as poor a dandy-tuft of a man as ye.”

“ We are good friends, seemingly,” said Gaunt impatiently.

“ Ay, close as bee and flower, Reuben Gaunt. Ride down to Peggy — she’s throng with churning — and tell

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her the same lies that I hearkened to when I was ripe and young. God plants the like garden for all women, I take it, with the like apples in it; and, whether the man be half a man or a tenth part, 'tis all one. Reuben Gaunt," she broke off, with the passion she had denied not long ago, "why did ye keep your saddle just now when I frightened that horse of yours? There's a sharp rock on either hand of ye, and two or three in front; whichever way your horse had thrown ye, ye'd not have lighted soft — and it might have been on your head."

"I learned young to keep the saddle, though I'm loth to disappoint you, Mrs. Mathewson," said Gaunt, recovering his air of unconcern.

"Should have been glad, I, to see ye with your head smashed in," went on the other dispassionately; "glad, too, to think 'twas I that started your horse. But it was not like to be; for ye always had the luck. Luck doesn't run in my family, and never did."

There was a silence between them, as they faced each other, the only human folk in this lonely stretch of heath. In a place more busy, with others near at hand to temper the reality of what he saw in the woman's face, of what he heard in her voice, Reuben Gaunt might have carried the matter off with more success; but they were alone with the rugged moor. He saw, during this time of silence, his past life stretching behind him like a miry, ill-found road. He knew himself dishonest, though he tried to find again his old, easy outlook upon life. A naked man, facing the naked truth, was Reuben Gaunt this once; and there was no Cilla here, sitting beside him as they travelled down the road to Garth and bringing to him thoughts of tranquil betterment.

"I'll be going up the moor," he said at last, fumbling with the reins.

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“Ay, I would. Then turn to the right, and down to the right again — ye know your way to Peggy.”

There was something in the woman's bitter jest that struck deeper than any curse would have done. Gaunt looked over his shoulder once, as he rode up the slope, and saw her standing, at once the victim of destiny and its symbol; and the breeze felt chilly to him on the sudden, as if there were snow behind it.

“’Twas she that put the notion into my head,” he thought. “Well, then, I'll ride to Ghyll, as she bids me, and I'll see Peggy for the last time. We should part friends, and last night's parting was no friendly one.”

He came to the marshy flats on the moor-top where the stream had birth that ran through Water Ghyll. Wide to the north and south, wide to the east and west, swept the hills and moors and fields; here a broken ridge, and there a soft-descending, rolling spur of hills, showed like a rude girdle to the comely Vale of Garth. Beneath his horse's feet the grouse got up and whirred, crying, crying over the desolate land; and the sky seemed near, as if a man, by reaching up, could touch it almost.

In amongst the marshes Gaunt saw the sheep which Widow Mathewson was seeking. They were feeding on the rich butter-grass that grew in treacherous places, and he knew them by the branded *M*, red-painted on their fleeces. Good-naturedly he turned shepherd for awhile, drew round them — the cob showing frankly his distaste for the wet ground — and, by dint of whistling, as if he had a farm-dog with him, and by skill of horsemanship, he gathered the ewes into a flock before him. And so he rode down the moor again, forgetting his mistrust of Widow Mathewson in the sly pleasure of succouring her at need.

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She was standing where he left her, looking up the moor. Indeed, the big heath held only one figure and one thought for her; strong and weak herself, she loved the weakness and the strength of her daughter, the one link in her life that no storm had been powerful enough to break. She was past the stress of youth; but she remembered, and in her heart she was praying — she, who never went to kirk or chapel — that Reuben Gaunt might die.

Gaunt whistled low and clear again, and sent down the sheep — a huddled, scampering flock — toward the woman. He was no fool in matters of the farm, but at usual times he was too indolent to use his gifts in that direction.

“Coals of fire!” he shouted, putting a hand to his mouth to carry the sound up-wind. “Here are your sheep — gather them in and drive ’em home, Widow.”

“Like him,” said Mrs. Mathewson, with patient wonder. “Kills the heart in a woman one minute, and the next goes out of his home-bee road to do her a good turn. Would God I knew what sort o’ clay this Reuben Gaunt is made of!”

She gathered her flock together, and started to drive them home; but Gaunt was riding straight across the moor, and riding fast, for Ghyll.

It was easy, seeing the farm to-day, with the mellow spring light dwarfed and Sundered by its blackened walls — it was easy to understand the gospel in which Widow Mathewson and her daughter had been reared. It was chary of spring, this farm; it had received more kicks than halfpence from the weather; it looked askance at gifts o’ grace, and would not listen to the larks on this blithe morning.

Peggy had just finished churning, when she heard the sound of horse-hoofs. She stood and listened, and there

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was expectation in every line of her strong figure — and in her face a wild self-pity and derision.

“ So you’ve come ? ” was her greeting, as Gaunt stepped inside the dairy, after slipping the cob’s bridle about the top bar of the outer gate. “ Knew you would, soon or late — but ’tis full soon, Reuben, seeing that only last night — ”

“ I want us to part friends. That’s why I’m here,” broke in the other, tapping his riding-breeches restlessly with his crop.

The girl laughed. Gaunt had never heard disaster so assured in any voice. It was as if the farmstead, and the weather it had seen, and the tumults that had scarred its walls, took human shape and utterance.

“ That’s how ye want us to part ? ” she said. “ Will ye be a fool to the end, Reuben Gaunt, or are ye thinking life’s a game for bairns to sport with ? Ride back through the ling to lile Miss Good Intent, and tell her I’ve returned ye with all the will in the world. Tell her that lasses catch ye, like the plague, and lose what little looks they’ve got through fretting for your tom-fool ways. Tell her — ”

She broke down suddenly, for the strain of the past night, of the day’s labour at the churn, had told on her. She had no tears left; but her eyes were full of a soft mist, such as a warm gloaming draws from Garth Valley in the spring. Peggy was beautiful to-day; her tragedy was that of the ages, but her pathos was her own, single and direct in its appeal.

The cool, whitewashed dairy framed her; the warm, rich smell of milk and butter was about her.

“ Peggy,” said Reuben Gaunt, “ God knows ’tis hard to part from ye.”

“ Ay, and God knows that Peggy Mathewson knows your lies — knows them within and without — as she

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knows her own face — her face, Reuben, that was bonnie enough to catch ye, but not bonnie enough to hold ye afterwards. See ye, lad, ye're bent on killing me one way or another. Why not take some handy stave and do it now? Better soon than late, Reuben, if a body's got to die."

"I'm marrying Priscilla of the Good Intent," said Gaunt doggedly.

"Oh, I know so much since yestere'en. D'ye think to give her happiness, Reuben? I could never tell, myself, what was in your mind, or out of it, at any moment."

"Come for a walk in the fields, Peggy," he said, after a restless silence.

"Can as well talk here, and thank ye. As I was saying, ye puzzle me. A bit like thunder-weather, ye — the wind blows one way and the clouds drive forrard t' other way. Reuben, *do* ye think to make a happy wife of Miss Good Intent?"

It was characteristic of this upland lass that she bore no malice toward Cilla. Her quarrel was with Reuben here, with her own weakness, with life itself; Priscilla was a harmless and unmeaning bit of flesh to her, counting for little either way, save that she chanced to be the one to come between herself and Gaunt.

"I'm going to make her happy — yes. May a man never begin the good life, Peggy?"

"Ay," answered the other quietly. "A *man* may always — but I cannot see ye doing it, Reuben, somehow."

"I had so much to tell you," he said, after another silence. "I wanted —"

"Oh, I dare say, Reuben. Wanted to patch up the road ye've fouled behind ye, afore taking to the smooth road ready-made in front? Eh, but you must be a fool to the marrow, after all! Dress all in your good clothes, if

it pleases ye, and put on a Sabbath face for other folk — but, for mercy's sake, don't come to Peggy Mathewson after that fashion. Going to lead the good life, are ye? Well, what of me?"

There was no soft wind blowing here at Ghyll Farm, as it had blown last night all down Garth Valley. For the second time this morning Gaunt saw the simple, candid picture of himself.

"You were crying last night, Peggy. I looked for a softer welcome," he said, blurring out his thoughts as a child might have done.

"Oh, and was I? Who told ye that?"

"I fell in with Mrs. Mathewson as I rode up here. Besides, I can see it in your eyes."

"Has she found the sheep?" said Peggy, with desperate pretence to ward off the graver issue.

"I found them for her. Say, Peggy, what were you crying for?"

Peggy thought of the heart-break that had been her mate last night. "Crying for a lad ye'll never know, Reuben," she answered.

He was quiet for awhile. Then suddenly his eyes caught fire at hers. "Oh, come away to the fields," he said. "We could aye talk better out o' doors, Peggy."

An hour later Mrs. Mathewson returned, driving her sheep, and found Gaunt's horse tethered to the gateway. The house was empty.

"I'll thole a lot," she muttered, "but I'm no way going to let Reuben Gaunt stable his horse in my paddock while he goes knocking nails in Peggy's coffin."

She unfastened the cob's bridle, opened the gate, and sent him up in the moor. But first she took the bit from his mouth, and laid it with the reins upon the ground; for she had no wish to let the beast break his knees through

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getting the reins across his legs. The horse, glad of his freedom, turned his head once or twice in search of Reuben, then galloped off. And Widow Mathewson, who seldom smiled, laughed grimly as she saw him breast the moortop, then disappear.

“Gaunt has galloped as free in his time,” she thought. “Let him find his horse if he can, and catch it.”

CHAPTER XI

PRISCILLA of the Good Intent had been restless when she bade good night to David the Smith and provoked from him a discourteous farewell. She was more restless still when the birds awoke her soon after dawn of the next day and would not let her get to sleep again. So she got up, and lingered often at the open window, listening to the bird-calls and all the fret of newly-wakened life about the fields, while she washed, and dressed herself, and went through the simple rites that accompanied the beginning of the day in Garth.

She wondered if Reuben would like the blue print gown better than the lilac one. Her head a little on one side, a shy, quick splash of colour in her cheeks, she looked from one dress to the other, and could not make her choice. Cilla of the Good Intent was a changed lassie since that glamoured walk across the fields with Reuben; wearing-gear had troubled her little until yesterday, and she had chosen her gowns by instinct, without conscious thought about the matter.

“I was wearing the lilac one when he liked me first,” she said, with a low, happy laugh. “Perhaps, when he comes to-day, he will like to see me wearing it.”

Beyond the open window, where the fields sloped in green hollows to the edge of Garth village, the birds could not be quiet. Ousel-cocks were calling to their mates. Thrustles were whistling, piping, singing, the full flood

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of their melody let loose; and, like practised singers, they could afford to play strange antics with their voices. Up and down the scale the speckled songsters ran; and now they whistled "come out"; and again they called, with pretence of great sobriety, "There's love a-waiting, love's a-waiting; love and his lile lass." On the roof-tops starlings cheeped, until they could bear the thrushes' rivalry no longer, and began to mimic them in cracked and foolish notes.

First love was harbouring with Priscilla. She was in tune with the birds and the leafing land, and she had to put a hand on the bosom of her lilac gown, because the gladness of the day went almost beyond bearing.

For once, she was earlier abroad than her father, who had allowed himself another hour of bed after yesterday's hardship in the fields. Before it was time to set his breakfast on the board and pour out his tea for him, she had done a score of little things about the house, and in the dairy, and in the croft above the house where the fowls were up betimes.

"Am going up the fields, father," she said, as she cleared the table after breakfast.

"Right, lile lass! Maids must saunter time and time i' spring. Wholesome, too, I say — and I warrant ye've your day's work trimly in your hands already."

"Was down an hour before you, father," she put in playfully.

"Ay, old bones are lazy bones. Shame on me, Cilla, lass, to break my fast at half after seven in the morning. Ye'll not tell David?" he added, with the boisterous slyness that his daughter understood so well.

"I'm not likely to," she said demurely, and went upstairs to doff her apron and to don a hat.

Here, again, the earlier trouble beset her. What head-

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gear should she choose? To be sure, she did not look to meet Reuben in the fields; but he might ride in for a talk with her father — might be in the croft among the hens and turkeys, or in the paddock, or in the house-place when she returned. She wanted Reuben to approve her when they met.

She made her choice at last, and Yeoman Hirst, just going out to see that his men were at their work, turned for a look at her as she came down the stair.

“ Bless me, ye grow bonnier, Cilla!” he cried, with a muffled roar of true affection. “ Tuts! ’Twill be a blithe lad that tempts ye to share house with him.”

Cilla answered nothing, but nodded gravely at Yeoman Hirst and went out by the door that opened on the garden. Up the young, green pastures she went, carrying first love with her. All things to-day were big with self-importance; and she, who had thought but little of herself till now, wondered if she would be always fair in Reuben’s eyes. She trusted so; for Gaunt seemed worth the best that she could bring him.

One deep regret she had, to temper the new gladness. She was holding a secret from her father, and the knowledge, just as it had done last night, brought a sense of shame to her from time to time. In the background, too, was another shadow — that of David the Smith, with his abiding care for her. But the day was not one for shadow except such as the sun and the breeze between them chased across the pastures. The world would not let Priscilla be out of mood with it; the reek of the drying grass, on which late dewdrops lingered still, the clamour of the birds, the restless pushing up toward the light of winter’s hidden shoots — all was a conspiracy against repinings or backward glances.

By the mossy lane past Brow-Top Ings she went, and

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wild-strawberry blooms, white and starry, peeped out at her from hidden nooks. Sometimes loitering, sometimes moving quickly, as if her thoughts outpaced her, she found the highest fields at last and saw the dark face of the moor above her. Not caring where she went, and obeying any whim, she climbed a fence or two and was free of the open heath. Here, too, spring's advance was plainly marked, though it needs a subtler study to perceive it here than in the lower lands.

Priscilla had no thought of foreign countries now. Garth, whose face she knew — Garth, the familiar and well-trying — was full of mysteries, delights, surprises. Could she have ever thought, she wondered, that Reuben Gaunt had painted fairer lands for her than this in which she lived?

She lifted her head on the sudden, hearing a pad of hoofs across the peaty ground. Gaunt's horse, weary of his freedom already and finding himself lost on the edge of an alien moor, was searching for his master. Cilla was the first human being he had seen since Widow Mathewson loosed his bridle and sent him wide across the heath; so now he came, with mincing steps across the broken ground, and laid his muzzle in her hand, and asked for guidance.

Cilla knew the horse; it was the best in Garth, indeed, and known to folk less interested than she in Reuben. Out from the blue sky and the sunshine fear came suddenly to Priscilla of the Good Intent. Apart from love of his master, there is always something of portent and foreboding when a riderless horse comes fawning at one's hand.

"Where is the master?" cried Priscilla, soothing his muzzle with a hand that trembled.

The cob tossed his head. That was the question he

had brought to Cilla, trusting that in her wisdom she would give him a plain answer. She had none, it seemed, and presently, growing restless again, he shook his head free and cantered off.

Cilla watched him take wide circuits, slacken to a trot, then to a walk. He was snuffing the ground like a hound on trail, and last of all he seemed to find a clue, for he turned down the moor along a narrow track, found the gate open at the bottom and trotted out of sight. The girl turned, and wandered as aimlessly about the moor as the horse had done; she was sure that Reuben was lying somewhere in the heather, thrown and badly hurt, and unable to help himself.

What had she said to her father not long ago? That snow might follow all this April weather. And now she recalled the words, recalled the cold sense of foreboding that had accompanied them.

Tired and out of breath she halted to look about her. Again, like the horse, she sought for help — sought dumbly for it — when her own instincts were at fault.

“Good day to ye now. Te-he! Rare weather for the time o’ year,” came a voice at her elbow.

“Why, Billy, Billy, you startled me!”

“Wouldn’t do that — nay, not for a pipeful o’ baccy,” said Billy the Fool. “’Tis this way, as a body’s body might strive to put that same into plainish speech. I’d been peeping into a nest here, and a lile nest there, right up the pastures; and Fool Billy got to the moor, he did, and fancied he’d see if the peewits were a-laying on yond ancient ground o’ theirs up by Butter-grass Bogs. Then I sees ye — and, durn th’ odd button that’s left on my coat, Miss Priscilla, if I thought twice again o’ the peewits.”

Billy was always the courtier with Miss Good Intent;

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but she was too tired, too anxious, to give him more than a wan smile.

"Help me to find Mr. Gaunt," she said. "His horse came to me just now, Billy, with no one in the saddle. He's lying somewhere on the moor, and I cannot find him. You're quick to find missing folk, they say, when they're four-footed — well, find Mr. Gaunt for me."

Cilla did not know her own voice; it was so eager, so impetuous. And she relied — and knew it, she who had been self-dependent until now — upon Billy the Fool.

The lad's face altered. Across the plump and childish flesh stray wrinkles crept, as circles widen on a pool when a stone is thrown into its waters. But Cilla, though she looked at him with frank, steadfast gaze, could not guess what was passing through his mind. So it would be with Billy until the mould lay heavy on his coffin; a love greater than Yeoman Hirst's he had for Cilla, a love greater than David the Smith's; but his thoughts were prisoned up in an unwieldy bulk of flesh, and to the end he would be Billy the Fool, Billy the Well-Beloved, just as the moor about Cilla and himself to-day would always be the moor, telling her secrets to none.

"Well, now," said Billy patiently, "I can find Mr. Reuben Gaunt for ye."

"Is he — is he hurt?"

"Sound as ye or me. Hurt? Not the sort o' man, he, to get into hurt. Slips through and about matters that might hurt him, like a snod trout when ye're a-tickling of his underward parts in Eller Beck."

Cilla did not heed the lad's veiled dislike of Gaunt. She was too glad to know that he was safe to care for aught else.

"Tell me where to find him," she said impatiently.

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"I'll take ye straight to where he is," answered Billy promptly, and set off down the slope.

He led her into the fields below, then to a little dingle, all wooded in with thorns and slim, low hazel-shrubs. Not a word would he speak, though Priscilla asked him many questions by the way.

Gaunt might be safe; but to the girl there was something uncanny in the natural's silence. The wrinkles were graven deeper now in his face, and Cilla, glancing at him now and then, was awed by the look — fixed, inscrutable — in the lad's eyes.

"Chanced on him through coming to see a blackbird's nest o' mine," he said at last, when they were nearing the dingle. "Had just pushed the twigs from together, and peered in, to find the hen-bird off her nest — and I happened, as Billy the Fool might say, to look beyond that same old tree o' thorn, and down below I saw —"

"Yes?" asked the girl, fretting under all this needless mystery.

"What I'll show ye, if so Mr. Reuben Gaunt be still there or thereabouts. Now, step ye pratly, Miss Priscilla, and keep your voice as low as any sparrow chirp; for the mother-bird may well be sitting again, and 'tis ill disturbing mated folk."

Whether it were guile or instinct on Billy's part, none would ever know. He might have taken Cilla to twenty equal vantage grounds from which to look into the hollow; but he made for the thorn bush, saw the bright eyes of the bird watching him, took infinite pains to part the branches a little to the right without disturbing her, then turned to Cilla.

The girl, humouring what she fancied now must be some delusion of the lad's, crept under his outstretched arm and looked down. A strip of broken turf, charred

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with primroses, sloped to the bubbling stream, and at the water's edge, Peggy was sitting with Gaunt's arm about her waist.

Priscilla gave no cry. The stream, the two figures sitting by its rim, quivered and rocked, then circled round about her. The primroses made thin, waving lines of yellow across this evil, daytime vision. Then all was clear again — mercilessly clear — and Gaunt's head was near to Peggy Mathewson's, as last night it had been near to Cilla's.

Priscilla of the Good Intent stepped back. She was pale, but willowy and upright still; out of the generations of the Hirsts that had fathered her, help came to her in the hour of need.

She walked slowly back into the field, Billy following close behind her. Whatever the natural had hoped to do by this exploit, it was plain that, to his own thinking, he had failed. He kept trying to find words, and, finding none, reached out his hands toward Priscilla, with a gesture piteous and helpless.

"Billy, I am troubled," said Cilla, halting suddenly. "No, you are not to come with me this once! I am troubled — and, Billy, I must be alone."

Grave and sweet her voice was, sweet and grave her consideration for the poor fool's feelings when she had need to think only of her own.

The natural watched her cross the pastures; then his face twitched, and the lines came out on it afresh; and, after that, he threw himself on the ground and dug his fingers deep into the turf and cried like a three-year babe. Afterwards he sat up, his face vacant as of old.

"Seems as if Billy the Fool were shut up tight in a prison," he muttered. "Wears what ye might call a band of iron all round his head-piece, like, and he thinks,

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and he thinks, and naught comes on 't. Miss Good Intent's going to cry — and 'tis Fool Billy made her."

Down yonder in the little dingle, Gaunt and Peggy Mathewson were saying good-by. For an hour they had sat by the stream, helpless in each other's hands, as they had always been. Gaunt had once more told her frankly — he had found courage for that — that at all hazards he meant to wed Priscilla.

"Suppose I went and told her what ye'd said to me, and what ye'd looked at me, and all the sorry tale?" cried Peggy, roused from her desperate acquiescence in the gospel that what would be, would be. "Would you fare well, Reuben, with lile Miss Good Intent?"

"Well or ill, I should let you go with your tale. I'll not stand between Priscilla and the truth, if she must have it — but I'll not tell her it myself."

"There again, you're a puzzle, just a puzzle," she said, with a quick return to her old manner. "Spoke like a man just then, ye. Other times ye'll be half a man, or none at all. I've asked ye fifty times, Reuben, but could find myself no nearer an answer yet — what was left out of ye at birth?"

"Seems power to guide myself was left out of me," he answered sharply. "Listen to me, Peggy! I've nothing much behind me to boast of — but I love Hirst's lile lass."

"Ay, so ye said," put in the other drily. "It scarce helps me, Reuben, to hear it twice. For there's my own life, as it happens, as well as yours to reckon with."

Gaunt felt like a man whose feet are caught by the bog. The clean, dry land was near to him; but his feet were chained, and it was hard to pluck them out.

As for Peggy, she was ready to drift into any mood, and past days returned to her with sudden clearness.

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“Do ye mind the day we went to Linsall Fair? ’Twas years ago, Reuben, but I mind it still. You bought a ring off a pedlar, and you set it on my finger. Lord, how it all comes back!” she broke off, looking softly at him, so that her likeness to her mother was altogether lost. “There was a young moon over the fell-top, and folk were dancing on the green; and you put the ring on my finger, and my heart went all soft and shameless. Reuben, you told me —”

“Told you we were wedded; and we laughed. Ay, I remember, Peggy!”

And so they fell to quiet talk of bygone times. Peggy wondered at her weakness, and Gaunt could not fathom the meaning of his newly wakened liking to be with this lass when he should have been at Good Intent.

It was then that Billy the Fool guided Cilla to the thorn-bush where the mother-blackbird sat upon her nest; but neither Gaunt nor Peggy saw the stricken face that watched them for a moment between the twigs, then disappeared.

“Fine-weather days don’t last, somehow,” went on the girl. “We thought the world held no two folk, Reuben, save ye and me? Well, we were fools for our pains.”

“They’re good to look back on now and then, all the same, those days.”

“Oh, where’s the use in your looking back? You feel no warmer in winter-time by thinking of last summer’s heat. *Good to look back on?* ’Tis easy for ye to talk, Reuben!”

Gaunt got to his feet, and helped her up. “Time we were moving, Peggy,” he said curtly — for he was fearing the girl’s despair and tenderness. “Yond horse of mine will be tearing the reins to bits, for I’ve kept him longer tied to a gate-post than he ever was before.”

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"So 'tis good-by?" she said, moving beside him up the stream.

"Ay, for it must be. Bygones are bygones, Peggy."

"True — if ye let 'em be. Never fear, Reuben! I'm as proud as Miss Good Intent, or maybe more so, and I'll not trouble ye. Begin with your good life, lad, and see if ye can carry it! And for all reward I'll ask to see Miss Priscilla's face when a year's gone by and the first bairn has come."

Reuben winced. None in Garth would have given him credit for it; but, weak of purpose as he was, his love for Cilla touched clean, wholesome thoughts that had been stifled long ago. He resented Peggy's easy speech touching his marriage and what might, or might not, come afterwards. The girl knew what was passing in his mind, and laughed — not carelessly, but with the sadness that was rooted deep in all her moods.

"Sorry to hurt ye, Reuben," she said. "You're a delicate sort o' plant, and need a wall 'twixt ye and the wind."

They were silent until Intake Farm was well in sight. Peggy halted in the dip of the fields where the ragged thorn-trees grew. She looked long and hard at Gaunt, and again there was a strange beauty in her face.

"Was going to ask ye for a last kiss, but I'm past that, Reuben. Lad, I wonder will ye ever know the kisses we might have had! I think ye'll waken sometimes in the night, and hunger for what's past your getting any longer. Fratch as we may, we were made each for the other, if your een were open wide enough to see it."

"Peggy, lass," he began, moving nearer to her.

"Nay, Reuben! Over and done with, like a last year's nest. Yond's your way; I'm going wide into the moor, to cool a touch of some daft fever that's come over me."

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Irresolute, and glancing backward often, Reuben went up toward Ghyll Farm. Life, that had seemed so plain last night upon the Garth highroad, was tangled now. The fierce, low passion of the girl — her certainty of heart-break, with little complaining — a shrewd guess that she was right in saying he would wake at night and think of her — these were out of keeping with the primrose lanes of yesterday.

“Tis hard to go straight,” said Gaunt at last, with a shrug of his shoulders, as he reached the paddock of Ghyll Farm.

No horse was tethered to the gate; but over the top bar leaned Widow Mathewson, her brown arms naked to the sunlight and a look of grim derision on her face.

“Seeking a horse, Mr. Gaunt?” she asked, with studied courtesy.

“Yes, I tethered him to the gate here.”

“Oh, ’twill be the one I loosened an hour or so ago. Found him here, when I came from driving sheep across the moorland; and I hadn’t a use for him myself.”

“Thank you,” said Reuben, falling in with the widow’s own quiet tone. “Sensible thing, Mrs. Mathewson, to loose a cob whenever ye find him tied to a gate-post by the bridle.”

“So I thought myself — and, by that token, I slipped the bridle from his mouth and laid it under the wall here. Will ye take it with ye, Mr. Gaunt, or shall Peggy bring it over to Marshlands? We’re simple, and ye’re reckoning to be one o’ the gentry-born nowadays; so I fancy ye’d think it ill demeaned ye, like, to go carrying a horse’s bridle in your hands.”

Gaunt took the bridle, keeping his temper as best he could. Quiet or stormy, Widow Mathewson always cut like hail against his face.

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“Perhaps you’ll tell me where the cob went, the last you saw of him?”

“Up the moor, and seemed to relish his liberty. He may be at Linsall by this time — though I doubt the marshes on that side o’ the heather would stop him — or happen he’s taken t’ other road, and got to Keta’s Well — or — ”

“Then where the devil am I to look for him?” snapped Reuben.

“God knows — which, as I’ve seen life, means always that human folk can’t guess. Where are Peggy’s wits, Mr. Gaunt? God knows again — for bless me if her mother does.”

Reuben went off, the bridle dangling from his arm; and Widow Mathewson turned across the paddock.

“Reckon he’ll have a longish walk before him, any way,” she said. “Beggars don’t ride most times — and neither does Reuben Gaunt to-day.”

Gaunt himself abandoned all thought of seeking the cob. It would reach home, or he would hear of its whereabouts to-morrow. Meanwhile, he was glad of this further respite from his talk with Yeoman Hirst.

“It would be too late, by the time I walked to Good Intent,” he thought. “I’ll ride up about supper-time, and catch John Hirst in his ripe, evening humour.”

When he reached home, his cob was waiting for him on his own lawn. It had jumped the round, grey wall that guarded the highroad, and now, after a morning’s tribulation, was seeking for grass-stalks on the shaven lawn.

Horses and dogs were no harsh judges of Reuben Gaunt; and now, as the cob came whinnying to him, he said to himself with a laugh that it was the first friendly welcome he had had since riding up to Ghyll.

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Priscilla had gone across the fields, carrying first disillusionment now in place of first love — the love that she had buried yonder in the wooded dingle. She felt no anger toward Reuben; it was as if she had seen him die suddenly and without warning, had seen him pass into a dim land of which she had no ken; and the stupor of her grief for him was on her.

For herself, the silver thread was loosened that had bound her to the spring. Sunlight and shadow on the pastures, the rising skynote of the lark, the fretting of the curlews and the plover; she saw and heard them, but could no longer understand their beauty. Between herself and life there was a dead, grey wall; and cowslips nodded vainly to her as she passed, and, when the lambs came frisking toward her, she did not heed them.

She was glad, on reaching Good Intent, to find that her father had finished his early dinner and was out in the fields. Mechanically she set about her duties, forgetting to take food herself; and, like David, she found a certain ease, a certain deadening of pain, in moving forward with her work. When Hirst came in about half after four, she was pale, and her eyes were listless, but she was mistress of herself and ready with a greeting.

“Thou’st overtired thyself, lile lass,” said the farmer, patting her shoulder as he crossed to the big hearth-chair. “Eh, well! Maids will roam i’ the spring, and forget their victuals; and maybe, after all, it does them no great harm.”

A gleam of comfort came to Cilla. She had no secret now from this big-voiced, big-hearted father, who looked for each passing change across her face as a lover might have done. Sad she might be, but she could look at Yeoman Hirst again and feel no shame.

“The spring tires one, father,” she answered quietly.

“Should think it did!” cried the other, settling himself with a pleasant uproar into his chair. “Blanketed in snow one week, and blanketed the next in sunshine. Ne’er heed, lassie; I’m no way for quarrelling myself with all this warmth that’s bringing up the clover fair like a fairy’s trick. Cilla, there’s David coming at five of the clock to help wi’ yond durned turkey-pen. I’m dry, lass, and I won’t deny a measure of ale would hearten up my innards. Let it be the light ale, though; light ale, light hearts, they say in Garth — and, bless me, ye need a lightish heart and a clearish head when it comes to netting off a pen.”

David the Smith, punctual to five — by his favourite clock, the sun — was waiting in the croft when Hirst came out.

“’Evening, David!”

“’Evening, Farmer! And as likely a one as we’ll see this side o’ Michaelmas.”

“Ay — oh, ay. Wind a thought shrewder than it was but nought to matter.”

David pointed to the upper corner of the croft. “Thought ye told me all my stakes were lying where I laid ’em? Why, they’re tight in their places, Farmer, and the skirting-boards all nailed trim and level.”

The other scratched his shaven chin and laughed. “Between you and me, David,” he said, lowering his voice to a confidential bellow, “I didn’t speak quite the truth. Can drive a stake as true as any man, and can nail the boards on trim enough; but, when it comes to netting, my men and me are done, and ’twas that we wanted ye for to-day. It all comes o’ listening to new-fangled notions.”

“Well, now, as for that, I know naught o’ netting myself,” said David, glancing at the plump, white rolls of

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wire. "Always fenced the run with boarding, I. Who brought the notion into Garth?"

"Reuben Gaunt, I fancy; though, if I'd known at first that the notion came from that quarter, there's never a yard o' netting would have come into my lile croft. Well, we've got the job on hand, David, and here my two men are, and we'd best get agate with it, liking it or no."

The farm-hands nodded cheerily to David. "Rum goings on i' Garth," said one. "Would as soon handle a bunch o' thorn-prickles as yond lump o' wire. But Farmer Hirst knows best — oh, ay, he's for knowing what is best."

"And if he doesn't, ye've got to think so," put in the farmer drily. "Here, lads, buckle to."

The men handled the wire gingerly at first, then with the carelessness begotten of a great despair. The uprights — seven feet high — were standing like so many fingers, pointing to the dappled sky; and, because the ground rose sharply toward the further limit of the pen, the upper poles looked down upon their neighbours in the valley.

"We'll begin on the level, like," said Hirst, setting a box of nails on the turf at his feet, and holding his hammer, so David said, "as if he were going to fell a bullock."

The beginning of the work was simple. The three unrolled the wire and got one end of it into its place, while Hirst nailed it fast against the upright. Then they stretched it to the next upright, and so went forward blithely.

"There's naught so much to be feared, after all," cried John Hirst, his voice rousing a sentry-rook that was watching them from the elm-tree in the corner.

"Naught, save sore hands," assented David. "Though I'll own, Farmer, I never met stuff so maidish, and so

crinkly-like to handle, as this same netting. Now, stretch it, lads! There, 'tis all in place for ye, Farmer."

They finished netting the low end of the pen, and turned the corner; but soon the level of the ground grew higher, and, though the poles about them were stationed true in height, the netting would go lower and lower, till it threatened to be merged altogether in the rising ground above. They twisted it, and pulled it out of shape, and talked to it as if it were a bairn to be coaxed into a good temper. Naught served; the upper line of the wire descended constantly, and the look of this late-built turkey-pen was a thing for the soberest man to laugh at.

John Hirst threw down his hammer at last, and kicked the box of nails against the wall, and stood off from his handiwork and looked at it.

"I'm not one to swear at any time," he said, slowly, "but *dang* yond netting. Dang Reuben Gaunt, moreover, who brought newfangled notions into Garth."

The four men retreated to the wall, and sat thereon, glowering at the turkey-pen.

"Daren't trust myself with speech, I," said David. "Should say terrible things o' yond wire-stuff, once I gave leave to my tongue."

"I tell ye what," said Hirst — his farm-men laughed to see his temper go by the board for once — "I tell ye what, David. We'll rive the whole lot down, and build up the pen with good, honest lathes like your father did, and mine. And if any man speaks o' wire-netting in my hearing for a year to come — why, I'll ding him on the lugs."

"Garth's right, after all," murmured one farm-man to the other behind his hand. "Them turkeys will be penned afore, or a lile while after, the next breeding-time."

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“What’s that ye’re saying?” roared Hirst, turning on the whispering pair.

“Nay, naught — just naught at all.”

“Well, ye’d better not say it just now, all the same. David, I fair hate to be beaten by a job! Let’s rive it down, and bundle it into a corner, and have done wi’ it. Garth notions will be good enough for me in future, I warrant ye.”

David, too, was nettled, for it was seldom he went wrong in anything concerned with handicraft. “Comes o’ bringing foreign truck into Garth Valley,” he growled. “Why ye and me should take to handling such outlandish stuff at our time o’ life, Farmer, is more than I can tell.”

The gate of the croft was opened quietly, and Billy the Fool sauntered idly towards them. The natural gave no hint, in look or bearing, of the woful trouble he had caused himself and Cilla up yonder on the brink of the wooded hollow.

“Now, good day, misters all!” was his greeting, as he slouched up, his hands thrust listlessly into the pockets of his ancient trousers. “’Tis what Billy the Fool would call a fine evening for the time o’ year; and yet there’s somewhat cold, and wet, and sharp, blowing up from Easterby Hill.”

“Tuts!” said Yeoman Hirst. “Ye’re as wise as a fox when it’s scenting a hen-house, Billy; but this weather is nailed to the sky, I tell ye, and won’t shift for a brace o’ weeks.”

“Te-he,” answered Billy amicably. “I’m just telling ye what I think myself — what I smell i’ my nostrils, like — but I was never one to guess what my betters were thinking. Now, masters. I’ve been wondering.”

“Tell us, then,” said Hirst.

It was odd that he and David — the two most good-

humoured men in Garth — had lost their tempers utterly to-night, and that it needed Billy's advent to show them the droll side of life again.

"I'm wondering if there is a fill o' baccy among the four o' ye — and maybe a match to kindle a light with. Have been in terrible lonesome parts all day, and nigh forgotten what a pipeful tastes like."

The sun was getting down toward Sharprise Hill now, and the smoke of Billy's pipe rose so that the slanting sunbeams caught it tranquilly, and the gnats, playing in this warmth of spring new-found after the long winter, drifted away in cloudy streams from a scent which they abhorred.

"Ye look terrible low in spirits, all of ye," said Billy, after he was sure that his pipe was drawing well. "I fancied, when I came by just now, I'd never seen four men sitting on a fence and looking so empty, like, of what they lacked."

He had not seemed to look at them until he neared the fence; yet twenty yards away he had known what their mood was.

"Did ye ever handle wire-netting, Billy?" asked Hirst.

"Nay, not that I can call to mind."

"Well, go up to yond turkey-pen, and see the way the netting runs into the hillock, choose what a body does with it; and, if ye can tell us wise folk how to set the durned thing straight, there's another fill o' baccy for you, Billy, and a fill of ale, and another match to light your pipe with."

Billy strolled up to the pen — the rents in his breeches showed the brown flesh through — and seemed not to look at it at all. Then he came back.

"Misters, might a Fool Billy say somewhat to wise folk?" he asked.

"Say on, Billy, lad! Say on."

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“ Well, now, if Fool Billy were going to climb a hill, like, after what ye might call a stretch o’ level walking, he’d sit him down first, would Billy, at th’ hill-foot, and think a deal about it.”

“ Ay, warrant he would! ” chuckled David.

“ Then he’d start fair again for yond up-hill climb. Do the like wi’ your netting, misters? Cut ’un off, says Billy, where he begins to go up hill — cut ’un off as clean as a whistle, and start him fair again.”

David’s practical mind grasped at once that this was the right solution of the difficulty, and he laughed nearly as loud as Yeoman Hirst.

“ Seems there’s only one wise man in Garth! To think of us, Farmer, fuming and fretting, and wasting our time; and Billy strolls up, and looks about him, and sets us straight in a minute. How d’ye do it, Billy, lad? ”

“ Nay, I do naught. I’d be feared to, David! A fear-some thing ’twould be if I’d to work like other-some of ye.”

Like a great general Billy stood by, and watched the progress of the work, when the four men set about their task again. His advice proved sound, and the netting began to climb the hill in an orderly, straight line.

As they worked — the sun lying now, a ball of softened fire, upon the edge of Sharprise Hill — the gate of the croft was opened again, impatiently this time, and Reuben Gaunt came through on horseback. Billy had seen and heard him long before the others had; but he was the only one who did not turn his head about as Gaunt approached.

“ Good day, Mr. Hirst,” said Reuben, not pleased to find David and Billy here, yet striving to cover up his uneasiness.

“ Good day, Mr. Gaunt,” answered Hirst, his face

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grown hard as a bit of limestone grit. "I'll thank ye to close that gate behind ye."

"Why? There are no beasts in the croft."

"I'm not here to argufy. When you find a gate shut, shut it behind ye — that's what I was taught as a lad."

It had been a day of insults for Gaunt, and he longed to snap some hasty answer out and ride away; but his errand robbed him of this slight consolation, and he made the best of an awkward matter.

"Billy, just run and shut that gate," he said.

The natural turned at last, puffing gently at his pipe. "Would oblige ye, I, but 'tis one o' my playtime-days, Mr. Reuben Gaunt. I'd have had dreams to-night if I did any work."

One of Hirst's men ran to shut the gate, and Reuben looked the farmer in the eyes.

"I want a word with you."

"Say it here, then, for I'm throng with work, and this job has to be finished off to-night."

"It can't be said here. 'Tis a matter of private business, Mr. Hirst."

"Well, I can spare ten minutes. David, see that these idle rogues get forrard wi' their work," he added, nodding toward his farm-men as he moved off.

Gaunt dismounted and slipped the bridle through his arm, and the two were half across the croft before Billy found speech.

"Is yond turkey-cock o' yours abroad yet, Farmer, as a body's body might say?" he called.

"Ay," answered Hirst, without turning his head.

"Well, pen the devil up, says Fool Billy. Pen 'un up, Farmer!"

When he had watched Hirst and Reuben Gaunt go

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slowly through the gate at the far end of the croft and up into the pastures, the natural relapsed into his former attitude. "Get forrard, ye three wise folk!" he said, with inscrutable gravity of mien. "We'll have th' old devil wired and boarded in, come to-morrow's morn."

Gaunt found no easy task before him, now that he was alone with Hirst in the upper field. The yeoman, hearty and courteous to gentle and simple alike, could rarely bring himself to be civil toward Reuben. As he put it to himself, John Hirst had a "feeling as if a rat was crawling over his chest when Gaunt of Marshlands was about." The younger man's courage was chilled, moreover, by the open insult Hirst had given him in face of the farmmen.

"Well?" said the farmer, after a long silence.

Reuben Gaunt took the fence, as he had taken many another on hunting-days. "Cilla has said she'll marry me, and I rode down to tell you."

Hirst gasped, then rubbed his eyes, as if he woke from an evil dream and strove to shake it off.

"Say that again," he muttered.

"Cilla has promised to marry me, and I'm going to be better than the Reuben Gaunt you've known."

It was seldom that the yeoman could find a low voice or a harsh one; but now he did, and his big, clean-cut face had in it the look of a man when he meets an enemy in righteous battle and lusts to kill him.

"You're a liar, Gaunt of Marshlands," he said quietly.

Gaunt flushed. "Will you come down to the house, then, and ask Cilla with me there, whether or no I'm a liar?"

"Ay, by God I will! Seems you're a fool, as well as a liar, or you'd never put it to the test. What, my Cilla mate wi' the likes o' ye? Ye've been drinking overmuch

at race-meetings, or somewhat of that sort, to fancy such outlandish nonsense."

"Come to the house with me, and ask Cilla," said the other, obstinately crushing down his spleen. "Is that fair, or isn't it, Mr. Hirst?"

"Fair? There's naught fair when you come by with your slippery ways. But I'll take ye into my house, all the same — for the last time — and I'll set ye face to face with my lass, and we'll shame ye out of Garth, she and me between us."

The wind, that had been quietly veering all day to north of west, blew shrewdly as they went across the croft, at the far end of which Billy was overlooking the work of his three comrades. Hirst did not heed the change of wind; he was warm with faith of his little lass, and hot with anger against Gaunt.

"Come ye in," said Hirst, leading Reuben round to the front door, whereas he would have ushered David in with little ceremony through the outer kitchen. "Come ye in, Mr. Gaunt, and I shall offer ye neither bite nor sup, though that would seem a shameful thing for Good Intent."

"Am needing none," said Reuben. "Seems a queer thing, all the same, that when I come to you with a straight tale —"

"A straight tale?" snapped Hirst. "What about my lass? Lad, ye're crazy to think I don't know your doings five years ago all up and down the countryside. Step in, however, and we'll thrash this business out for good and all."

CHAPTER XII

CILLA was leaning on the window-ledge when she heard her father's footstep in the porch. The house-place was unlit and dim, save for the flickering of a fire that was dying hard in the wide grate; but at the window here there was a soft and tranquil light, half from the gloaming and half from the clouded moon. The geraniums, lined all along the ledge, showed a more chastened red than in the sunlight. Outside, among the lilacs and the hawthorns and the late-leaving copper beeches, the birds were twittering restlessly, and now and then were giving a last, clear challenge to the night.

Priscilla of the Good Intent had been crying quietly. She was stunned no longer, and had gone through a fire of anguish in amongst her usual household business; and now the tears had come, as dew falls on the parched, tired fields. She was glad, when she heard her father's step, that it was dark indoors.

"Why, Cilla, ye're all in darkness here!" cried Hirst, seeing her outlined by the half-light that filtered through the window-space.

"I was idling, father. The day's so sorry to go down the hills, and I was sorry, too, to watch it go."

From a brave stock came Cilla, and her voice was clear and even.

"Ay, but I've brought company, lile lass. I've prom-

ised him neither bite nor sup, but at the least he must have a candle lit here and there about the house-place."

The girl raised her head quickly, and stood back a step or two. It was hard enough to meet her father, but she was not prepared to welcome "company" of any sort. She tried, in the dusk of the room, to see who it was that came, but the guest was hidden by Hirst's bulk.

Not once did she guess that it could be Reuben Gaunt. Had Billy the Fool not led her to the thorn-bush this morning, such a visit would have been natural and looked-for; but Cilla, single-hearted and understanding little of concealment, could not realize that Gaunt, trusting in her ignorance of all concerning Peggy Mathewson, might still come asking Yeoman Hirst for his daughter.

"Will you light the candles, father?" she said hurriedly. "I—I am all in my workaday frock, and I must tidy myself if you bring company."

Hirst would have had the matter settled at once; but, before he could protest, the girl had run lightly up the stair, and her footfall sounded crisply overhead. So he lit the candles, standing in their handsome sticks of Sheffield ware; and he took his place in front of the dying fire, and stood very straight, thrusting his hands under the lapels of his coat.

"Stand where ye like, Mr. Gaunt," he said. "Will not ask ye to sit, for some matters are best settled standing up."

Gaunt moved restlessly about the room, and the silence—broken by the little noise of Cilla's movements overhead—did not help him to a more even frame of mind. But at least, he told himself, he had one ally here—Cilla herself. When she came down, and Yeoman Hirst heard from her own lips that she had plighted troth last night, he could talk to better advantage.

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Cilla did not keep them waiting overlong. She had no need to change her gown, but only to pour water into the ewer, and bathe her face, and bathe it over and over again; for she knew that her father hated all signs of tears, because they weakened him and loosed his steady grip on life.

They heard her at the stair-head, the two men waiting below in enmity and silence; and then they heard the door-sneek rattle, and Cilla stood for a moment, looking across the candle-light to see who the guest might be.

She faltered for a moment, seeing Reuben's eyes fixed eagerly on hers; then she moved to the dresser and leaned against it, one hand pressed tight against the bosom of her dress, as her wont was always when she was troubled.

"*You?*" she said faintly.

That was all; but Hirst, blind in his faith that Priscilla could never stoop to such as Gaunt, interpreted her trouble as sheer disdain.

"Best come to what we've got to say at once, Cilla," he began. "Mr. Gaunt here said just now that you were going to wed him, and I said he was a liar. Which of us was right, lile lass?"

Again Gaunt's spirits fell. He had looked for silence — yes; but for silence of the happy, maidish sort that is afraid to tell its secrets. Priscilla of the Good Intent wore no such look; grave, and delicate, and soft her face was, but her eyes were full of misery.

"You were right, both of you, father," she said at last, "and both wrong. I am not going to marry Mr. Gaunt, but I promised to, yestre'en."

It was hard to say which of the men was more non-plussed. This slim maid, standing with the candle-light upon her face, had robbed them both of sure yet separate faiths.

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"Ye promised, Cilla?" said Hirst, reaching for the snuff-box on the mantel, and taking a pinch for habit's sake.

"Yes, I promised, father. But this morning I walked up by Little Beck Hollow, and I took my promise back."

Gaunt understood at last; and in his heart he cursed Peggy Mathewson, who had led him into this.

The yeoman was hard hit, and hit in his weakest spot; yet he gathered his strength up somehow, and found a weakened echo of his usual laugh.

"Second thoughts run safest, lass. Ye may have been a lile, daft fool yestre'en, but ye are wise to-day. Mr. Gaunt, is there aught more to be said?"

"I fancy not. Good even to you," said Reuben, with a desperate quiet.

"I would like to see Mr. Gaunt to the door, father, and talk with him," said Cilla unexpectedly.

Hirst looked at her, and saw the strong simplicity that hedged her sorrow round from prying eyes. He did not know whether he were wise or foolish — all old landmarks to-night were sundered from him — but he nodded grimly.

"Ye may, Cilla. 'Tis the last time he will come here," he said, forgetting to touch wood when boasting openly.

Gaunt opened the door, and waited for her to pass through into the grey moon-dusk of the porch.

"Cilla," he began, "Cilla, 'twas kind of you —"

"Yes, 'twas kind of me — kind toward the lass I saw you with to-day in Little Beck Hollow. Yestre'en was so much fancy, was it not? Nay, you need not interrupt me. The drive from Keta's Well — the curlews dipping up and down the fields — the smell of violets in the wind that blew about Garth valley — they made us fairy-kist, I think, and we fancied — what did we not fancy, Reuben?"

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Priscilla was self-possessed. The old reserve, half pride, half modesty, had come to her again. She fenced herself about, and Reuben Gaunt knew that the wall was strong.

“ I loved you, Cilla, and I told you so.”

She strove to read his face, here by the light of the clouded moon that shone upon the highway. Women had done as much before Cilla's time, in daylight and in dusk, and had found no answer.

“ Loved me? I do not understand, Reuben. Love is for one and for always, surely; 'tis not a game to play at hop-sotch with, as the children do about Garth street. Reuben! ” she went on, pain and sincerity between them getting the better of her. “ Reuben, I had heard stray talk of you and Peggy Mathewson, and had passed it by, because I do not care for gossip; but I saw to-day that what I'd heard was true — and, Reuben — you needn't fear our last night's fairy-time.”

“ Fear it, Cilla? 'Twas the love-time o' my life. See ye, that other was a tale old and done with, and — ”

“ Old and done with? ” she echoed piteously. “ If the cobwebs had not been blown away, up yonder by the Hollow, I should have been old and done with, to-morrow, or the next day afterwards.”

Since grey old Garth was in the making, it had heard such women's cries; and to-night it listened sleepily, not stirring from its quiet.

“ What d'ye want of me, Cilla? ” he asked, drawing nearer with a caress which she avoided.

“ I want to see you wedded. 'Twas plain to be seen this morning that you were promised to her, Reuben, and last night's forgotten altogether.”

“ Promised to her — what, to Peggy Mathewson? ”

Priscilla would, or could not, realize all that was meant

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by Gaunt's hasty words — the surprise that he should be thought to have meant at any time to marry Widow Mathewson's daughter — the touch of chill contempt in his voice — the acknowledgment that all was "over and done with," and that his wooing up at Intake Farm had been so much idle devilry.

"Yes," the girl answered simply. "What else, Reuben?"

Gaunt knew that he had lost her. Her simplicity, the return of that gentle aloofness which from the first had thwarted and enticed him, the lack of all upbraiding — these, and her trust in his good faith towards Peggy convinced him. Random, full of odd weaknesses and hidden corners where the better man in him took refuge, he was surprised to-night to find how vital Cilla's good opinion was.

Before he could answer, footsteps sounded down the road, and Priscilla turned quickly. "Good night, Reuben," she said. "All was glamour and fairy-webs yestreen. Forget it, soon or late."

She was gone before he could find a last word to say. He watched her go, slim, willowy, the clouded moonlight on her trim, bared head; and then he turned, sick at heart, and went round to the croft to find his horse, and afterwards rode up the highway.

David the Smith and Billy passed him twenty yards or so away from Good Intent. David greeted his enemy coldly, but Billy seemed unaware that anybody shared the highroad with himself and David.

"Surly fools, the two of them!" muttered Gaunt. "Could give any man a greeting, I, at this hour of a warm night."

Priscilla of the Good Intent had reached the porch, and stood there, half in the inner dusk and half in the

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moonlight. She was thinking, not of Reuben Gaunt, but of the night when she had seen David to the door, had bidden farewell to him, and afterwards had called "David—David, come back!" to unheeding ears. She was reaching out again for David's hand-grip, as she always did in time of need.

David himself, as it chanced, had refrained from stepping in at the back door of Good Intent, as his wont had been. He had feared to meet Cilla, lest his resolution to leave Garth should once again grow weak. Yet now, as he glanced at the grey porch in passing, for old affection's sake, he saw Priscilla leaning against one of the two round, limestone pillars that buttressed the porch.

"A fair night for the time o' year, Priscilla," he said, with would-be cheeriness.

"Ay, fair, David. But the wind blows shrewd at times, for all that."

"Tuts! We wouldn't be living, if there weren't a shrewd wind to blow all our time o' warmth away," growled David, viewing life darkly, almost tragically, for once. "We'd be dead, Priscilla, and in a bonnier world."

Billy the Fool had gone forward, with a quiet nod toward Cilla and an easy slouch, as if he remembered nothing of the morning; but David halted. In sun or rain, Priscilla was good to look at; to-night, with the moon-glamour on her face and the fret of new-found understanding in her voice, she was something up and above this world, to such as simple David, like the moon in the grey, still sky.

"David, is it true that you are leaving Garth, as father hinted?"

"Ay, 'tis true. Not yet awhile, for a week or two; for my roots are here, ye see, Priscilla, and I'm frightened-

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like to tear 'em out. So I'm telling myself I've a job here and a job there that must be done; and I'm making a few bits o' business that weren't there before; but I'm going from Garth, soon as I've settled my heart into its place."

"Oh, I shall miss you, David!" she said unthinkingly.

David the Smith laughed sadly. "Well, that's somewhat to the good, at any rate. Would be a poor business, eh, if a man could fare out to heathen parts, and never be missed in the old home-place?"

The night, with its clouded moon, its restless wind that rose uncertainly and fell again, was like a mirror to Priscilla's humour. She was impatient of David's quiet acceptance of matters; perhaps, had he stolen now into the porch and lost his diffidence, he would have had no further right, or leave, to go away from Garth. But David had seen what he had seen, and his faith that Cilla meant to marry Reuben Gaunt was as sure as hers had been as regarded Peggy Mathewson.

And so, because guile was far from both of them, David said good night and went his way, while Cilla could scarcely check the impulse to cry once again: "David—David, come back."

She gave a last glance at the street, wondering what her life would be in coming days; then went indoors, to meet her father and go through with all the talk and explanation which she knew awaited her.

The look of the house-place chilled her as she entered. The fire was out. No friendly horn of ale rested at her father's elbow; he was not smoking even, but was sitting with his hands upon his knees, his head a little bent, his shoulders not so square as she was wont to see them. The two candles threw no cheerful light, and they were

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guttering now in the sudden draught that came through the open doorway.

"I'll light the lamp, father," said Cilla, with faint-hearted bustle. "Shame on me—the lamp unlit, and none to draw your ale for you—and—daddy, won't you fill your pipe?"

"Was dreaming, lile Cilla—just dreaming, I. Fill my pipe? To be sure, I'd quite forgotten it. Ay, light the lamp, lile lass; I miss ye, somehow, when ye're not about."

She brought his pipe, his tobacco-box; she lit the lamp, and fetched a measure of ale and set it at his elbow; it took the keen edge from her dreariness to minister to the wants of Yeoman Hirst.

"See ye now, Cilla," he began, puffing fiercely at his pipe, "I want to know a few odd whys and wherefores. Ye know my view of Reuben Gaunt? Is't sober truth that ye were foolish with him yesternight?"

"Yes, father." She was sitting opposite him across the hearth, and her troubled eyes met his without fear or secrecy. "I thought we loved each other, and I promised myself to him."

"God, ye rate yourself cheaper than I do, Cilla! There, lile lass, there! I didn't mean to be harsh! Well, then, what chanced to alter you?"

"I walked up the fields this morning," she said, with hesitation now.

"Ay, I know! What did ye find there? Not one to shift round like a windle-straw, ye."

"What I found is not for you to ask, or me to tell, father," she answered, meeting his glance again. "I can tell you this much—that the gloaming and the moon between them were overstrong for me last night, and the morning's sunlight cured me of my fairy-madness."

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"Cured altogether, lile Cilla?" asked the farmer, after a silence and a shrewd, long look at her.

"Cured altogether — yes," she answered gravely.

"That's good hearing. To tell the truth — and I'm no way hurting ye by saying it now — if Garth Valley were islanded by water, and ye and me and Gaunt were stranded on it — as folk *are* stranded time and time in those outlandish, heathen parts that David is going to, or says he is — why, me and ye, lile lass, would keep to one quarter o' the dry land, and I'd ram my fist into Gaunt's face if he came spying over to our end o' the safe, high country. Couldn't bide him, I, if there weren't another man to talk to in the land."

Priscilla scarcely heard him. Her glamour-tide was over, or seemed to be; David was unrepentant of his forthrightness, and would not see how she was hungering for the word, or the look, or the touch which only he could give.

"Come here to my knee, lass," said Hirst by and by.

She knelt on the patch-work rug, and put her hands on his knee and rested her head on them, looking into the fireless grate. So she had knelt in childhood's days — and afterwards at rare intervals when she and Yeoman Hirst were moved to special tenderness.

"I won't deny my pride's had a fall, and a steepish one," he went on, thinking that his touch upon her hair was gentle.

"So has mine, father; but life must go on, pride in one's way or not."

"Art going to be a lile wise-woman before thy time? Ay, pride tumbles and gets muckied, and ye've to clean it up again wi' patience, as ye clean harness gear. Still, I'm sticking to my pride, Cilla, till they coffin me up, and so are ye; the Hirsts all do, by nature."

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They said nothing for awhile, but between them was the speech of trust and understanding.

"Cilla, lass?" said the yeoman presently.

"Yes, daddy?"

"Wish I knew more about this daft business. Wish ye could tell me, like, just what ye saw up yond green pasture-lands to-day."

"I wish so, too," she answered simply; "but I cannot tell you, father."

John Hirst took a pull at his ale — the first one. "D'ye know what I've been thinking, Cilla?" he said, wiping the froth away from his lips with a kerchief patterned all in blue and white.

"Nay, I could not guess."

"That, if it came to a tussle 'twixt ye and me, I'd fare hard. Ye're so slim to look at, and I could lift ye wi' one hand and think naught on 't — but your will is made out of a piece o' hickory wood, I do believe. Like ye the better for 't, I — though ye mustn't let yourself hear me say as much."

"There's likely to be no quarrel, father — now," said she.

John Hirst sat brooding by the fire, long after Cilla had gone up to bed.

He stepped out of doors, before locking up for the night, and looked at the shrouded moon, and tasted the cold of the whimpering breeze.

"Cilla said somewhat of snow coming, a day or two gone by," he muttered, "and Billy the Fool turned weather prophet, too, to-night. They're apt to be right, Billy and lile Cilla, and there's a snarl and a tremor i' the wind that I should know by now."

He did not confess so much to himself, but the

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superstition of those cradled by the weather was with him, and in the wind's contrariness and spite he heard quiet omens of disaster to himself and those he loved.

CHAPTER XIII

PRISCILLA was not apt to lie awake nights for long. The keen air of the fells, the round of her daily work about the farm, forbade it. Yet, after she had talked with David Blake in the moon-dusk of Garth Street, had talked with her father afterwards beside the hearth, she could not sleep, for shame of the kiss that she had given to Reuben Gaunt, as they walked through fairy-land last night—bitter shame of the scene that Billy the Fool had shown her between the parted twigs of a bush wherein a nesting blackbird sat. She felt a great loneliness, an impulsive longing for the hand of David; she seemed to stand in a wood where all the trees were thick and heavy, and all the wonted tracks were lost.

When at last she fell to sleep, dreams chased her. First, David was laughing at her as he said farewell, and got aboard a ship with big, white sails. Then Reuben Gaunt was sinking in a moorland bog, and lifted his two hands in appeal to her, and she was crossing some stubborn waste of ling to reach him. Cilla of the Good Intent was little used to nightmares, and she was glad when at last the dawn stepped boldly into her room and roused her. Her first thought was of the farm, her second of the silence that lay about the house. The light which came through the casement seemed brighter, colder than a usual April dawn. There was no early challenge of the throstle, no sleepy call of a linnet, and such sounds

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of human life as came from the roadway were strangely muffled.

With a sense of trouble and foreboding Priscilla went to the window, which she had left open to the soft night wind not many hours ago. The low sill was an inch deep in snow. She looked out, and in the white, strong dawn-light saw nothing but whitened branches, whitened mistal-roofs, and flakes that fell persistently. She stood there awhile, watching the storm increase, listening to the wind which, quiet till now, began to whisper round the gables overhead. It was no playful shower, such as often came in late April, waiting only for the midday sun to banish it; yet, knowing the signs of weather as she did, hearing that note in the rising wind whose meaning was plain enough to all country folk, Priscilla felt no surprise. It was fitting. Spring, with its make-believe of primrose banks, and birds that litanied the sunshine, was a dream she had dreamed in company with Reuben Gaunt. That had passed, and hard winter had set in again. She was glad that it was so. Winter was a time of stress and hardship, that left no leisure for dreams. Better the snow than the soft air of an April gloaming, when all the tribes of furred and feathered things went wooing and set the like key-note for more sober human-folk.

Priscilla turned to the ewer, with quick change of mood. She blamed herself for those few moments at the window. There would be real work ready to her hand below stairs before this storm was ended. The chill of the water heartened her, and afterwards she did not halt to choose between the blue gown and the lilac. She donned instead a rough, short-skirted gown of home-spun, and went down to the house-place. Her father was standing in front of the fire, which Susan, the farm

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maid, had newly lit, and the yeoman's face was grave.

"Thought thou wert never coming, lass," he growled, trying to find his usual good temper. "You know there's a lamb-storm blowing up behind all this bonnie snow?"

"Yes, father — yes, I know, I'm ready."

"Ay, but is breakfast? Susan is young, and late — and you are young and late, lile Cilla — you'd do without your breakfasts, both of you, but old folk don't start the day on an empty stomach, lass."

Susan came in at the moment with a dish of steaming bacon, set round about with eggs, and the farmer sat down to it with the impatience of a man who is thinking only of his work and of the need to find sustenance for the day's battle. Cilla poured out the tea for him, brought it to his elbow, ruffled her hand across his thick, grey hair.

"The lambs are needing you, father. Let me come up with you into the fields."

"You? You've work enough, lile lass, when we bring the lamblings down into the fold."

"But not till then, father. Let me go with you. I shall be restless, else."

Hirst had all but finished half the dish of bacon, and three eggs to go with it. He felt ready for the day's work, and, as the way of a true man is, his temper gained in cheeriness.

"I'm like a lover to your whims, lile Cilla. If you're set on coming — well, I've a sort o' fondness for the tread o' your heels beside me. Hark ye! The wind's rising fast, and there's a snarl at the tail on 't. 'Tis a bitter-ish end to spring warmth, this. Don your high boots, lass, and don 'em quickly."

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Cilla went, with the pleasant, quiet obedience which smoothed many a rough road for Yeoman Hirst. She was back again before he had time to grow impatient.

"Now, though I say it, Cilla, ye look workmanlike and trim," roared her father. And he laughed, as good fathers will, with some surprise that he should have reared a bairn so full of comeliness.

"Father, there's work up yonder in the snow," she answered, with a gentle laugh. "You can praise me afterwards."

"That's true," said Hirst soberly. "Praise can always bide like money in a safe-sure bank. Work willun't bide; it never did and it never will, lile Cilla."

The road in front of Good Intent was thick with snow when they went out, for the wind was harrying it as farm dogs chase the roving sheep. Hirst's own dogs, when he whistled them from their shelter under the windward side of a mistal, came trudging to him through a lake of velvety, soft stuff that hindered them.

They went up into the pastures, father and daughter, and it was hard to tell where the ewes lay with their lambs, or where the white hummocks of the snow were lifted by the wind. Hirst's farm-hands, cursing the weather as they followed him, were puzzled to know snow from fleece, and the dogs were full of petulance. The snow came down in wet, big flakes. The wind sobbed and wailed, and rose now and then in sudden gusts, driving the snow-dust savagely across their eyes. And through the wind-gusts, and the sharp, impatient barking of the dogs, there came the wild crying of the sheep, the pitiful and weakling cry of lambs half frozen.

One by one they found the ewes, and it was odd to see how the mothers, not valiant at usual times, daft-wits

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bleating to the empty sky for wits denied them — grew brave and full of strange resource.

If a farm-lad gathered a couple of lambs into his arms — twins, which Farmer Hirst had boasted of last night — the mother would grow manlike for the moment, would seek for a point of vantage and charge him down. When Priscilla — loved by all four-footed folk, and by most of the two-footed kind — when Priscilla gathered a lamb into her arms, to carry it down to the fold, it was the same. There was panic among these bleak-witted ewes; and, like all dreads, it brought out some hidden source of courage.

David the Smith, scenting trouble, came trudging through the snow to help his neighbour. He passed Cilla with a quiet greeting — thinking overmuch of last night's farewell to her in Garth Street — and busied himself at once with rescue of the flock. Simple of mind, strong of body, he set to his task at once, shouldered a ewe that was sick with the cold, and carried her down the pastures and along Garth Street, until he came to the turn of the road that led up to Good Intent. Widow Lister was at her door, as usual, walking up and down in front of her garden-strip, her feet protected from the snow by huge pattens, her eyes opened wide for any chance of gossip. She set her arms akimbo on seeing David, and her tongue was stilled for a moment. Indeed, David, swinging steadily forward under the burden that hung limp across his shoulders, his face full of great purpose and the tranquillity of strength, seemed to fill the snow-set canvas of Garth village.

“Why, David,” said the widow, in an awed voice, “you're marrow to yond print o' the Good Shepherd that's hanging ower my chimbley-piece.”

David halted. The roots of his religion lay deep, and

maybe for that reason he seldom spoke of it. "Oh, whisht, woman!" he said, with a shy, odd air of rebuke. "I'm a plain man o' my hands, with a day's work to do. I'll thank ye not to name me in company with my betters."

"There, now!" put in the widow plaintively. "You're the first man I've come across who fought shy o' praise. You *are* like, David, all the same — the ninety-and-nine you've left, to bring the lost odd 'un in, just the same as in the pictur."

"Ay," answered David, as he moved forward, "but some o' the ninety-and-nine are needing me, too, soon as I've gotten this lile ewe into shelter."

The widow let him make ten paces forward; then, heedless as a child that every halt was so much added to the dead weight on his shoulders, she tripped after him, her pattens moving nimbly through the snow.

"Oh, David! I knew there was summat on my mind."

David turned with weary good nature. "Well, if 'tis as heavy as what I carry on my back, Widow, I'm sorry for ye. What is 't?"

"Nay, 'tis nobbut a bit of a window-fastener that willun't catch. 'Tis such a little job, like, I thought you could slip in, any odd moment you had to spare and mend it for a poor, lone body. When the wind rises o' nights, David, it wakes me fro' my sleep, rattling the window so."

"You and your loneliness!" grumbled David. "Well, I may think of it by and by."

"Oh, and, David —"

But the smith went forward, and laid the ewe in warm quarters, and struck up again into the snow by a track that avoided Widow Lister. Priscilla, meanwhile, had gone far up the brink-fields, in search of any roving sheep that might have been overblown before they could reach

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the lower pastures. It was Cilla's way to seek always after the folk who had strayed.

She found no sheep; but, at the top of the highest brink-field she halted for a moment to look out and up to the face of the bleak high moors. The snow came sparingly now, the wind was falling, and far behind Sharpnose Hill a yellow light crept softly through the snow-clouds.

At the wall-corner where Priscilla stood, three long pasture-fields met at the common drinking-trough — a round, deep pool, fed by a spring which bubbled up from the limestone at the bottom. One field of the three was owned by Gaunt, and he, too, was seeking strayed ewes this morning. They met face to face, he on one side of the pool, Cilla on the other, and they were silent for awhile, embarrassed by their memories of yesterday.

"A fit ending, eh, to sunshine and spring weather?" said Gaunt at last, with bitterness and something near to self-contempt.

Cilla's pride had come to her aid. The wild-rose colour was in her cheeks, but her head was held high, and there was delicate scorn in the frank glance with which she answered Reuben's.

"You are not used to weather, as we stay-at-homes are. It is all in the year's work, Mr. Gaunt. To-morrow, or the next day after, we shall have forgotten there was snow at all — unless we lose any of the lambs."

Gaunt was not slow-witted, and he understood that Cilla had taken firmer ground than he, and meant to stand on it hereafter. There was to be no hint between them, such as he had implied just now, that they had shared a day whose magic both regretted. He began to wonder if her heart had been in the matter at all, and a wayward impulse came to him to piece their broken love-tale together all afresh. Billy the Fool came up the

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field behind them. David, as he carried a couple of lambs to Good Intent, had met him in the roadway, and had suggested that there was rare play-work to be done in helping Farmer Hirst with the sheep.

“ Never found such a game, I,” David had said, with his laugh that shook the hills, “ as setting a daft ewe over your shoulders, or carrying a couple o’ lambkins i’ your arms. The sport might have been made for ye, lad Billy.”

So Billy had sought the pastures; and he chuckled soberly, as he scrunched through the snow, to think “ what a terrible, queer notion David had for lighting on a bit of frolic.”

It was only when he topped the last rise of the field, and saw Gaunt talking to Priscilla across the pool, that his face changed. At times the clouds and the content that sheltered Billy from the realities of life were riven asunder, and it was always the one picture that he saw — a way-worn woman coming with her child to the gate of Marshlands, the harsh refusal at the door. Now, as he went up through the snow, he could recall the bitter cold of that long ago night when his mother and he had sought shelter in the porch-way of a barn. Gaunt’s voice, which was his father’s over again, so Garth folk said, had recalled the past to Billy when earlier in the year he dropped Reuben into a bed of growing nettles. The sight of him now, his closeness to Priscilla, roused, not Billy’s strength, but his will to use it blindly. Before Cilla knew that he was near, he had passed her, had climbed the wall, had put his arms about Gaunt and carried him to the edge of the pool. Hirst himself, or big David, could not have resisted the village fool when his quietness turned to fury; and Gaunt was slight of build.

Priscilla was bewildered by the suddenness of the

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attack; but her habit was to meet emergencies — such as Reuben's disloyalty and the change in April's weather — with the reliance that came from clean living under the clean, steady hills. She saw that Billy was swinging his burden lightly over the pool; and in Billy's face she saw a tumult.

"Billy," she said quietly. "Billy, what are you doing?"

He turned as a dog does when his master whistles, and the evil left him — left him Fool Billy once again, with surprise in his helpless face that he should ever have done amiss. He set Gaunt gently down upon his feet, and Reuben, sick at heart, went through the snow, and round the bend of Little Beck Wood, and out of sight.

Billy climbed the wall, and stood a little behind Cilla, waiting for chastisement.

"What made you do it?" asked Cilla of the Good Intent.

"Well, now, I could no way rightly tell ye." His blue eyes were fixed on hers, with the look which few who cared for dogs or horses could resist. "Seems a sort o' blindness comes on a body when he sees Reuben Gaunt, and I put my head down like a bull and made for him. Terrible weak in the head Billy is."

"But it was all — all so unlike you, Billy. What did you mean to do with — with the man you held in your arms?"

"Do?" he answered, with quiet surprise. "Why, drown him, Miss Cilla, as ye do wi' kittens when they're not wanted, like. Am fond o' kittens, I, but they do get terrible cumbersome at times."

"Oh, lad, go down to David at the forge," said Cilla, with a sudden laugh that was made up of pity and of helplessness. "Go down to David, and tell him I sent

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you to him for guidance. And, Billy, promise me that — lad Billy, for my sake, promise you'll not play with life and death again."

His muddled wits caught the one right appeal. "For your sake, eh?" he asked. There was surrender and question in his blue eyes.

"For my sake — yes, of course. Always for my sake, Billy."

"Te-he!" chuckled Billy. "Will keep that notion right in the middle of my daft head-piece, so I will. Give ye good day, Miss Cilla."

He turned and went down the slope with great cheeriness, taking a bee-line through the snow and breasting the drifts with the strong, unhurried ease that marked his days. Cilla did not know it, but her plea that he should do all things for her sake had made for Billy's happiness. To please her was frolic of the sort he enjoyed at David's forge, but a rarer and more pleasant frolic.

Mrs. Mathewson rented the third of the pastures that clustered round the drinking-pool, and she was leaning over her wall, a still, passionless figure. She had been a looker-on at the struggle between Gaunt and the fool; she was always a looker-on these days, grave, hard of face, a little disdainful of the tumults that beset younger folk. If swayed either way by feeling, she was pleased that Gaunt should be belittled in Priscilla's eyes; in no case could it do him harm to meet with a tumble or two in his erratic course. And yet, in some odd way of her own, she "had a silly weakness, like" for this will-o'-the-wisp who had caused her heartache in the past, and would cause her heartache, doubtless, many times again.

"I've lost no lambs, Miss Priscilla," said the widow, enjoying Cilla's startled backward glance. "Hope ye've

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had the same good luck yourselves down at Good Intent. Oh, to be sure, there's weather, and weather again, and naught but weather, up here on the heights. We've got to put up wi' 't, like ye put up wi' a silly, daft bairn."

"You startled me," said Cilla, meeting Mrs. Mathewson's quiet glance. "Yes — oh, yes, our lambs are all ingathered, or nearly all. I came up here to seek the last two that are missing."

"And found Reuben Gaunt, instead, and a big lad holding him over the pool? Well, they're neither on 'em lambs, an' neither on 'em lions; but are just what ye might call a mixture 'twixt the two."

Harsh this woman might be, but to Cilla she stood just now as something strong and honest, something that had suffered, and stood firm, and been beaten by the weather out of all comely shape.

"I care so little for gossip," she began, moved by a sudden impulse to confide in this woman who was grey and hard as the wall on which she leaned. "Yet it seems to meet you at every turn, and leaves its mark like the fever. Mrs. Mathewson, why should Billy go past himself like this? He's so quiet at usual times — and then he loses himself in fury at sight of Mr. Gaunt. They say, of course —"

"Oh, ay," put in the widow drily; "and they say right once i' a way. They're half-brothers. I should know, for I kept house for Gaunt's father before I was fool enough to marry Mathewson o' Ghyll."

Cilla did not wish to hear the tale, and yet she stood there, irresolute, her face half turned to Mrs. Mathewson's.

"You heard tell o' the night when a stranger-woman came knocking at the door o' Marshlands?" The widow was still regarding Cilla with hard, keen eyes, and

it seemed that she, who kept silence with her neighbours usually, had some purpose behind all this talk. "Well, I was cooking supper for Reuben Gaunt's father at the time, and I mind saying to young Reuben, who was larking i' the kitchen and nigh teasing the life out o' me — he was fourteen or so then, was Reuben — I mind saying to him that it war a night ye couldn't find heart to turn a dog out in. Th' wind war blowing sleet an' hail in sheets agen the window-panes, an' it war crying down the chimbleys till ye could hardly see across th' floor for peat-smoke."

Cilla was listening. She had lost all desire to escape. The widow's gaunt, tall figure, the impassive hardness of her voice as she brought the bygone scene before Priscilla's eyes, were part of the snow and the white stone fences, part of the falling wind that sobbed through every cranny of the walls and ruffled the water of the drinking-pool that divided the two women.

"Th' smoke was making me sneeze and cough, but it warn't that made me so mad wi' 't. It war spoiling th' master's supper, an' his temper war fearful when aught went wrang i' th' house. Well, I needn't hev bothered my head about that, for at that minute there came a rapping at th' front door, an' I ran out into th' hall to see who it war. There war a woman standing there, an' th' wind blew her fair indoors, without a by-your-leave, soon as I lifted th' sneck. She war nigh as bonnie an' slim as ye, Miss Cilla," she went on, after a long glance at the other. "The master was a fairish judge o' women i' that way, I'll own, like his son 'at followed him. She had a bairn wi' her — may be four-year-old — an' she wanted the master; so I called him, after shutting th' door to keep all yond mak' o' wind out."

She paused and looked across the shrouded fields, and

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shivered. Hard as she was, the misery of that night returned to her. Cilla stood waiting silently.

“The master came, an’ looked once at th’ stranger-woman, an’ a sort o’ devil came into his face. Then I knew that one of his black moods was on him; for I was used to the look o’ them. The woman was very pitiful to look at an’ to listen to, an’ she said she war his wife — married by stealth a year after the first mistress died. I believed her, for my part, an’ a woman can tell most times when another woman’s lying. She was plain of her speech, though, and Reuben’s father always had a queer mak o’ pride about him, — must have a ladyish wife at Marshlands, or else hide her i’ the haymow out o’ folk’s sight. That’s Reuben’s way, too.”

Priscilla wondered at the sudden bitterness in her voice, then remembered that this was Peggy’s mother; and the widow knew, it was plain, that she was her daughter’s rival. Tears of pride and humiliation started to the girl’s eyes. It was easier to conquer a secret trouble than an open one.

“Well, to shorten a sad tale,” went on the older woman, after seeing that her taunt had struck home, “Mr. Gaunt turned both mother an’ th’ little lad out into th’ cold; an’ I could have throttled him for ’t, if he’d been a thought less strong. The rest o’ the tale ye know, Miss Cilla. They found the mother dead on the door-stone, an’ Billy the Fool war strong enough to weather the cold — else he’d not have been here at the drinking-pool to-day.”

Cilla gathered her strength again. “Why do you tell me this?” she asked. “I say, with father, that one day’s trouble is enough as it comes, without going back to the old sorrows.”

“Why, lile baby? Because I’ve watched ye an’ Gaunt go lover-like along the pastures, afore this daft snow came.

Because I want to warn ye that Gaunt comes of a bad breed, an' never i' this world could be aught but a will-o'-wispie. Oh, my lass, I've seen a few springs come — but I've seen the end o' such-like nonsense, and I know."

Cilla laughed, and Widow Mathewson, whose outlook on the world was impersonal and cold — save when human weakness broke down the barriers — approved this slim lass in her workaday dress of homespun.

"It was only yesterday that I bade Mr. Gaunt marry where his heart lay," said the girl quietly. "If I had cared for him — after that fashion — should I have been glad when he told me he was marrying Peggy?"

"You were glad?" asked the widow, with suspicion.

"Why not? He is fond of Peggy, and I think that — that he will settle down, as a farmer should —"

"Ay, so I think, too," broke in the widow with sudden feeling. "I made the worst o' that bygone tale, I own, and never told ye that Reuben, on that night when he'd been plaguing me i' the kitchen, crept round into t' hall, listening to the stranger-woman's tale and seeing her driven out into the wind. Well, he waited for his father to go, and then he crept to my side, did th' lad, an' we listened to her as she ligged, crying, just outside th' door. Then he pulled up th' sneck, an' he war lifting her in when old Gaunt came, all thunder and lightning down th' passage. Gaunt locked th' stranger-woman and the lad out o' doors; an' he locked Reuben an' me i' th' big, up-stairs room. 'Twas so we passed the night, Miss Cilla, but I've a soft spot i' my heart for th' lad ever since, spite of his cantrips."

They looked across the pool at each other. They were set about by snow, and moaning of the wind, and white hills shrouded under mists that made their summits level with the sky.

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“What chance had he?” said Cilla. “With such a father — oh, he did well that night! He did well.”

Widow Mathewson turned. “Seems I misjudged ye, Miss Cilla. I niver can trust a bonnie, lile face like yours these days. Oh, ay, he may do well enough for Peggy. Anyway, she’s set her heart on him.”

When Cilla got down to the croft, and reached the mistal, she found David sitting on an upturned box. He had a lamb on his knees, and he was feeding it with milk from a bottle. Billy was standing near, and his face was wide as a rift in the clouds when the sun breaks through.

“I’ve been laughing, Miss Good Intent,” said Billy. “Near cracked my sides, I have. Here’s strong David feeding a babby as if ’twere his own. Te-he! Ye’d never think he was strong at the forge.”

David was shy. This business of saving lambs from the snow had seemed natural and easy until Cilla came. Now he felt clumsy.

“Billy is right,” he said, as he handed the lamb and the bottle to Cilla. “’Tis a woman’s work, this. I was only waiting till ye came.”

Late that night when her work was done and the moon was up above the fells, Cilla unbarred the porch-door and went out into the raised path that protected the strip of garden from the highway. The wind had long since shifted to the south, and quiet Garth looked all like fairy-land. From the green, young twigs of the beeches, across the road, the soft snow fell away, showing leaves half-opened. There was everywhere the sound of gentle splashing — wet snow falling on wet snow — and the fells beyond were clear of mist. The air was full of warmth and scent of violets; for it was Garth’s way to remedy her spring storms with daintiest blandishments.

Cilla was full of her trouble still. It had been easy

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to give up her man in the heat of pride and sacrifice; but she was lonely now. She remembered, as lasses will when they have good fathers, how often Yeoman Hirst had cheered her in bad weather with a hearty, "Oh, 'twill lift, lass, by and by. Be sure 'twill lift. 'Tis only nature for the sun to pop out fro' behind a cloud and take a body by surprise, like."

"Why, yes," she said, with a long glance at the hills. "Father is right. It always lifts — but the waiting-time is hard, just time and time."

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN the sun began to warm the land again, and the sheep were crying up and down the pastures, their lambs beside them, full summer came with a swiftness rarely known in these grey highlands. The lilacs bloomed two weeks before their time. The birds let loose their litanies as if the blue sky and thrust of the green-stuff forward had not been known till now. Folk moved abroad with keen sunlight in their eyes, and in their voices a cheery welcome for their fellows. Even Widow Lister forgot to fidget, forgot her love of gossip with a spice in it, and turned instead to tranquil tending of the garden-strip that fronted her cottage. From the hedgerows and the fields, from the moors that raked up into the blue arch of sky, there rose a quiet, insistent song of peace.

Cilla of the Good Intent met Gaunt by chance these days on the highway, or in half-forgotten bridle-paths that were young when grey old Garth was in the building — and they passed a greeting one to the other, and went their ways. She was puzzled — and so was he, had she guessed the truth — to note the change in him. He was less assured than of old; there was shame and appeal in his eyes when he met her; he seemed to Priscilla like some big, helpless dog that had lost its way and went seeking for its home.

Cilla was true daughter to Yeoman Hirst. She might suffer, but malice went by her like a peevish wind-gust

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that is over and done with as soon as it is past. She wished no ill to Gaunt, though he had spoiled her first dream o' love. She wondered, simply and without over-much repining, that her life had grown so empty, that she no longer cared for the flower-scents and the wood-reek that guarded Garth village like a benediction.

The year wore on to July, and there had been no rain since a light April shower that had followed the snow-storm. The pastures, striding stony limestone hills, grew parched and brown. With August, and no rain from the pitiless blue sky, even the brown of the grass was burnt, and the lightest of warm breezes carried the dust of the brown way. Far up the crests of the hills there was no green to soften the white glare of the limestone. All was pitiless and bare, and lacking any gift of charity. The sun, at usual times a rare and welcome guest, had overstepped his welcome now.

A rumour came to Garth these days, and the farmers, as they rode down the street to market, grew less cheery in their greetings one to another. They knew, each one of them, the danger that lay near to their wives and bairns; and, knowing it, they kept silence, as the way of the hills is when a tempest shakes them.

Their wives heard the rumour, by and by, and there was clatter of tongues along the dust of Garth's grey street. Widow Lister, by gift of nature, talked more shrilly than her sisters, just as she had been the first to bring the news which no folk cared to hear.

"I telled ye so," she whispered, running out to meet Hirst one day as he passed down the street. "The Black Fever has come nigh to Garth, and ye wouldn't take no heed. I'm a lone widow myself, with no one to care for —"

"Oh, ay, but you have!" Hirst's voice was cheery

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still, though it was less boisterous than usual, and behind it there was a hint of sharp reproof. "You've yourself to care for, Widow. That means a lot to ye."

"Now, what do ye mean?"

"I mean this. That folk who have only themselves to think on, they forget to think for others. See you here, Widow, the fever's not reached Garth yet. 'Twill reach it sooner, I warrant ye, if you go scaring timid women as you're scaring 'em each minute o' the day."

"Eh, now, I'm to be scolded, am I?" The widow brushed a few tears away, and looked up into Hirst's face with the timidity which had always served her well. "To be sure, I've no man-body to speak up for me. I mun bear my crosses meekly, for nobody heeds you much once you're lone and widowed."

Hirst's face, with all its jollity and kindliness, was lined deep by hardship, by fight in life's open with such plain foes as weather, peevish soil, and foot-rot that attacked his sheep. The widow's was rosy, plump, unmarked save by such little wrinkles as a baby carries; she had sat by the hearth all her days, sheltered by four walls, and death, when it had come to force her from the fireside warmth to the churchyard and her husband's grave, had been no more than a worry which spoilt her own comfort for awhile. Yet the round, shining face, looking up into his, made Yeoman Hirst uneasy this morning; it put him in the wrong; it made him feel as if he had rebuked a kitten for playing with a ball of wool.

"Well, we're made as we're made, Widow!" he cried, preparing to move on. "I only ask you to listen when I tell ye what a power o' harm ye can do by scaring folk when the fever's close at our doors."

"Yet you're going to Shepston market, same as if Shepston hadn't got fever in every other house."

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“True,” said Hirst, his jaw set firm. “There’s need to go to Shepston, fever or no, if I’m to do right by the farm. There’s no need for stay-at-homes to chatter and wake a sleeping dog.”

Widow Lister watched him go through the white, breathless sunlight, and for once she did not call him back.

“They’re strange, is men,” she thought. “My own man was like Hirst — would run into any sort of danger if he’d a whim for it — yet he’d grow outrageous as a turkey-cock if I set my tongue round a lile, soft bit o’ gossip. Men, they never seem to understand life, poor bodies. Ah, there’s David coming up street. He’s a soft heart, he. I’ll just get him to see what ails yond canary bird o’ mine while he’s passing.”

David, however, was impatient. He listened to the story of the bird’s ailments, but his air was brisk and downright, just as Yeoman Hirst’s had been. A man is apt to carry that air when he knows how close a danger lies to his womenfolk.

“Starve him a bit, Widow. Cosset him less by the hearth, and he’ll come round, same as other men birds. I’ve a bigger job than canaries to see to.”

Again the widow did not pursue him as he strode fiercely up toward Good Intent.

“The fever’s come to Garth a’ready, I’m thinking,” she murmured dolefully. “If David’s lost half o’ the little wits he had, we’ve come to a fine pass.”

David halted when he came to the gate of Good Intent. His face was full of suffering, and for that reason it showed a greater dignity. He unfastened the latch with sudden decision, as if ashamed of his cowardice, and stepped into the cool, grey porch, and stood at the door of the house-place.

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Cilla was standing at the table in the full light of the sun that streamed through the narrow windows, and she was ironing a lilac frock. She had not heard his step.

“Cilla!” he said, in a low voice.

She started, and let the iron fall, and did not heed that it was burning the lilac frock — the gown which, so short a while since as this year’s spring, had pleased Reuben Gaunt. They stood there — David on the threshold, Cilla at the table — and they looked at each other in silence, asking some big question.

“You may come in, David,” she said at last.

He came and stood beside her, took up the iron and set it on its stand, with the instinct of a good workman.

“The lilac gown is burned, Priscilla.”

“It has served its time, David. Did you come to Good Intent just to tell me I was careless with my ironing?”

“No, I didn’t, Cilla.” The smith had grown resolute again. “I came to tell you that I’m sailing Tuesday o’ next week for Canada.”

She was stunned for the moment. David had seen her bonnie since he knew her first, but never bonnie as she was just now, with the sunlight on her drooping head, her fingers plucking at the scissors in her girdle.

“I’ve ta’en time to make up my mind, I own,” he went on stubbornly, “but ’tis made up now. My aunt Joanna, overseas yonder, is a lile bit like Widow Lister — she’s helpless without the goodman she nagged into his grave, and she willun’t take no fro’ me. She’s fonder o’ nephew David these days than ever she was when she had him close under her hand. She wants somewhat done for her, ye see.”

Cilla glanced up at him, then down again. “What — what has made you in such haste to leave, David?”

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"Haste, ye call it? I've been for going ever since April came in, and putting off makes no job easier."

"You'll be glad to leave Garth, and see bigger countries?"

Priscilla could not understand herself. It seemed to her that she wished to hurt David in some way; she was surprised, ashamed, that news of his going should have such power to move her.

"Glad to leave Garth?" echoed David, his blue eyes wide with question. "Never that, lile Cilla. As 'tis, I should never have dreamed o' going, if there'd been you to keep me here."

"Could I keep you, David?"

"Oh, lass, don't play wi' me. I cannot bear it. I'll go easier, all the same, for knowing all is finished between you and Gaunt o' Marshlands."

The iron was cold by this time, but Cilla passed it idly to and fro across the lilac gown. "Yes, all is finished — and — and I'm, oh, so glad, David! So very glad."

In token of it she burst into tears, and David put an arm about her. "Lile lass, lile lass, let me bide i' Garth. See the love I'll give ye — asking so little, Cilla, and giving so much — giving so much, my lass."

Priscilla looked up slowly, and regarded him with a long, steady glance. Life was so great a matter, and she was so weak to cope with it. If David would only give little to her, and ask her to give much in return — if he would be less patient, and more masterful — if he would find some way of taking her perplexities into his hands and riving them to pieces — if he would be devil-may-care for once, as Gaunt had been in the spring — the girl felt, in a helpless way, that then she might bid him stay in Garth.

It was their moment, and they let it pass. David was

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too diffident, seeing the girl here in the sunlight, to brush aside the cobwebs that hindered her true vision. It needed a rude hand to do it, and David's hand was gentle, as the hands of good men are when they are free of smithy-work. Cilla was too unsure of everything to yield to a touch less sure than downright mastery. She waited for him to speak, and found that he was only looking at her — a more honest dog than Gaunt, maybe, but with the same waiting look in his eyes that Gaunt had carried since the jaunty days of spring.

"You are so — so dumb, David," she said impatiently.

"Ay, I was never one to talk much, Cilla. I'm one to feel, for all that. Time and time I fancy I'm a bit like Billy the Fool — loving the dust o' Garth Street when you walk along it, because 'tis you that passes by, yet never finding a word to put to 't."

Cilla's strength was nearly spent. The heat of the pitiless summer, her loneliness since Gaunt had chosen otherwise, the constant peril of the Black Fever brooding round about Garth Village, had sapped her courage. For a moment she was tempted to yield to David's entreaties. He was so sure of himself, so clean of his heart and his hands. She liked and needed him.

She remembered Gaunt, recalled each trivial detail of the day when she had gone by coach to Keta's Well, wearing a maiden heart. She thought of the homeward walk, of the throstle-calls and the keen, young vigour of the spring, while Gaunt stepped beside her, and talked and took her unawares. She shrank in fancy from the kiss that he had given her at the gate.

"No, David, no!" she said. Her eyes were wet, but she did not fear to look him in the face. "I'm not proud of Reuben Gaunt — not proud of him at all — but I'm

glad o' the love I gave him — though — though it died, David."

David the Smith took a long glance at the room — at the plants in the window-sill, at the settle which had found him on many a bygone night passing slow talk and quiet pipe-reek with Yeoman Hirst across the hearth. Then he looked at Cilla, and stood there — strong and good to see, and diffident — and his air was that of a man who steps into a church. It had always been his way when Cilla was in sight.

"Why, then, good-by, lile Cilla," he said abruptly. "There's much to be done, if I'm setting off by Tuesday."

"David! David, you must not go like this — thinking me unfriendly. David, I could never bear to be unfriendly to you."

She had moved to his side, and in perplexity had laid both hands upon his arm.

"You'll not understand," she went on hurriedly. "I shall miss you from Garth. I shall look for you three times a day. The homeland will be emptier, David."

"Then, lass, why willun't ye wed me?"

"I cannot tell. Only — women have no second love to give. Why it should be so, God knows. But so it is, David. I could never feel for you — what I felt for another when we walked by the fieldways home to Garth."

It seemed strange to Cilla that she felt no shame in the confession. She would have shrunk from it at another time; but now it was only of David she thought — of David, who asked for more than she could give him — of David, who asked for honesty, though she longed to keep him here in Garth.

"That's true," he answered quietly. "Neither man nor woman has second love to give. But there's this to say, Cilla. Time and time, when you're alone on the

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moor-top, a will-o'-the-wisp comes 'ticing ye into the marshes. True love is true love, lass, and 'tis steady-like; it doesn't dance like a light-heeled clown at the fair."

Priscilla of the Good Intent was tired, and saw life hidden, as the street of Garth was hidden by the sick, grey dust that cried to the skies for wholesome rain.

"You're thinking of Reuben Gaunt?" she asked wearily.

"Ay, just of Reuben Gaunt — no more, no less." David was watching her eagerly, not as a lover now, but with a dog's look when he sees his mistress running into danger.

Cilla thought again of that spring journey out to Keta's Well and home again. It called to her still, like the song of a laverock up above the pastures when spring is wild about the land. Gaunt's words were in her ear. The kiss she had given him at the gate — the sweet of the growing grass — the surrender, and the glamour of it, and the big lands stretching out before her — Priscilla remembered every moment of that day. She knew that David the Smith was right when he named the glamour a will-o'-the-wisp; but she did not wish to know it; she resisted the knowledge with a curious, headstrong passion that she rarely showed.

"We are to part friends?" she said, in a low, unsteady voice. "You choose a queer way of saying good-by. There was no need to speak of Mr. Gaunt at all, still less to speak ill of him."

"That is not like you, Cilla," David answered quietly.

She was repentant at once, as her way was always. "No, 'tis not like me. You meant it well — but, David, you are clumsy."

Again the longing came to her to keep him here in Garth. The shadow of a great helplessness lay over her,

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and from one moment to the next she did not know her mind.

“David,” she said, by and by, “do you guess what they will say if you leave Garth now, with the fever all about us?”

“I never try to guess what they’ll say, lass. What I do is enough for me.”

Cilla, still hating this random mood of hers, could not hold back the words. “They’ll say you choose your time for leaving carefully, after thinking about it all these months. They’ll say you are as frightened of the fever as other folk. They’ll say — that you’re a coward, David.”

“They’ll be liars, then, Cilla. I’m a man o’ my hands, lile lass, and I’ve learned a little here and there fro’ my tools. Iron’s stubborn, and needs patience, but there’s luck, somehow, when ye’ve hammered the horseshoe into shape. As for the fever — well, it finds ye, or it doesn’t, and that’s i’ God’s hands. I’m a bit daft, like Billy the Fool. The day’s work is enough for me — Billy calls it play.”

Priscilla looked at him for a moment, as a child looks for a guiding hand. “I — I was wrong to say that, David. No one dare say that you were frightened. David, what ails me that I want to quarrel with my oldest friend?”

“’Tis the heat, Cilla. We’re all wearied out, I reckon. Quarrel wi’ me? You could as well quarrel wi’ yond grandfather’s clock i’ the corner, while ’tis saying *tick-tack* to ye all day long and never changes tune.”

Cilla laughed uneasily. “That is the reason, maybe. I love the old clock, but sometimes — oh, David, I’m weary of its notes sometimes — and yet I should cry my heart out if — if the clock was not ticking in the corner.”

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He should have seen her need of guidance, should have taken her random hint that he might try a change of note — even if his voice were unaccustomed to it and sounded out of tune. But David had made up his mind that morning, after long indecision, and his face was set toward the lonely lands.

“ Best listen to the old clock, for all that, Cilla. It doesn’t go fast, but it goes for a long while. Well, there’s a deal to be done, if I’m to get off by Tuesday o’ next week.”

He took a last glance at Cilla, at the house-place, at the lilac frock that lay on the ironing-board; and without a word he stepped out into the dusty street. And, after he had gone, Priscilla of the Good Intent sat down at the table, and laid her head on it, and sobbed bitterly; but whether the tears were for David, or for herself, she did not know.

David went down the street. He carried a big air; and his face, if sad at all, wore only the dignity of grief, none of its meanness or self-pity.

He found Billy leaning against the door of the forge. Billy, thinking the more because he said so little, had watched the smith go up the street, had divined his errand by the same instinct which befriended him in his comradeship with birds and beasts; and now he knew from one glance at David’s face what was in the doing.

“ You’ll be leaving this right pleasant spot, David the Smith ? ”

David was too accustomed to the other’s intuition to feel surprise. “ Ay, I’m leaving Garth. And, lad, I’ve something to say to ye.”

“ Well, then, have ye a fill o’ baccy, an’ may be a lile match or so to light yond same? Smoke’s a fearful help to a daft body’s head-piece.”

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The smith waited till Billy was drawing tranquil puffs — and indeed no man in Garth knew better how to smoke a pipe with true respect — then put a hand against the smithy wall, and leaned there, a figure of strength and of self-reliance.

“ I shouldn’t like the forge to pass into other hands, Billy. There’s been one o’ my name here since the Year One, or nigh about, and ’twouldn’t be seemly-like, to see another name above the door. Now, see ye, lad, suppose we called it play, ye and me, to set ye here as master-smith? ’Tis ever so much more play-work than blowing bellows, come to think on ’t.”

“ Te-he! ” laughed Billy. “ Am I to play wi’ all your big, fine tools, David? ”

“ Ay, just that. I’ve taught ye the way o’ them, and Dan Foster’s lad from Brow Farm shall come and blow the bellows for you.”

“ Will that be work for Dan Foster’s lad, or play? ”

David caught the other’s meaning, with a quickness that he might well have shown when saying good-by to Cilla. “ Hard work, Billy — grievous hard work, while you’re just playing at making horseshoes, fence-railings, and what not.”

“ And I’m to play at making horseshoes? ” went on Fool Billy, smoking quietly into the face of the stark, blue sky and the heat of the midday sun. “ I’m to play at smithy-work, while Dan Foster’s lad’s sweating hard at bellows-blowing? ”

David nodded as he filled his own pipe and lit it, leaning against the smithy wall. “ It will be rare fun for ye, Billy — the lad working hard as ever he can sweat at the blowing, and ye just pleasuring wi’ making good horseshoes.”

“ It will that! ” said Billy. “ Fancied bellows-blowing

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was pastime, I, but now I see it quite contrary-like. Dan Foster's lad will be Fool Billy, sweating at the bellows, and I shall be master-man. Te-he, David!"

"Ay, te-he!" growled David. "Get the bellows a-blowing, Billy, for there's work needs doing if I'm to get off by Tuesday o' next week."

Billy obeyed. He had little gift of speech, but had the rarer quality of sympathy; and he knew, in his own odd way, how matters stood with the master of the forge.

The smith did not move from his place against the wall until his pipe was smoked out. Then he gave a glance along the dust of Garth in the direction of Good Intent, and went into the forge.

"I've met odd folk and queer happenings i' my time," he said to Billy, who was making the bellows roar; "but the queerest o' the lot is life itself — just life as we're living it, Billy."

Billy answered nothing, but played gently with the bellows. And David worked fiercely at the anvil. And the sick, dusty afternoon wore on, bidding all who had time for idle thoughts to remember how near the Black Fever lay to Garth.

CHAPTER XV

DAVID the Smith caught the morning coach on the Tuesday, though he had all but missed it through remembering a bit of smithy-work that must be finished off before he left for Canada. That was David's way; he would not leave Garth owing the smallest debt to any man, and promises of work to be finished to the hour were always counted debts of honour by David.

There was a little crowd about the Elm Tree Inn, and up above the folks' heads he could see Will, the mail-driver, sitting high on the box-seat of the coach, and showing signs of good-humoured impatience to be off.

"Hi, David!" called the driver, catching sight of the other a hundred yards away. "Ye be i' no hurry to leave Garth, but Will the Driver is. I carry the Queen's letters, and Her Majesty — God bless her — will want to know why I'm late wi' her post-bag."

David was sorrowful enough, but he did not mean to let Garth know it. He held his head high, and did not quicken his steady forward stride.

"Oh, the Queen willun't mind, Will," he answered. "Just tell her it was David the Smith who kept her waiting, and she'll understand."

A shade of perplexity crossed his face as he neared the knot of folk who pressed round the coach. There were apt to be idlers about the inn-front at this hour, since the passing of the mail was the big adventure of each day's

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tranquil round; but this morning there was clearly something unusual on foot.

“What is it?” asked David. “Is there a wedding or a fairing Shepston way, and me not heard of it?”

And then it was brought home to him that he was the centre of the crowd, and he flushed like a great, shy lad to find himself a hero. Their welcome was so spontaneous, their affection so simple and so boisterous, that David's modesty was shocked. David had been accustomed to do his work in Garth, to walk up and down its street with the proud and ready courtesy of a man whose hands are strong and whose heart is clean; and the village had accepted his presence as it accepted the sun when it shone, or the rain when it watered their growing crops. It was only now, at the parting of the ways, that Garth fully understood what it was losing.

Will the Driver gave the folk little time to show their feelings. He had kept the seat beside him on the box for David — if seat it could be called, seeing that most of it was littered by mail-bags picked up from half-a-dozen scattered villages — and he motioned to David to clamber up by the fore-wheel. The crowd would not allow it, though, and lifted him with a “Heave ho! All together, lads!” And David was thankful that the mail-bags broke his fall a little as he was hoisted into his seat.

The hampers were passed up, and small, round butter-baskets, and parcels wrapped clumsily in thick brown paper. Each was a tribute from some one among the villagers who had felt no need till now to express his regard for the smith; and each had a dozen eggs in it, or a spice-loaf, or some other farewell gift of viands, until David broke into a laugh.

“Nay, lads, nay!” he protested. “’Twill take another horse to help pull all these parcels to Shepston —

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let alone a few odd men to help me get through wi' what's inside them."

"Oh, tuts!" roared Farmer Hirst, striving to cover his grief that David had insisted on leaving Garth. "'Tis a long step and a far step fro' Garth to Canada. Ye may varry weel be hungry 'twixt this and there."

"The Queen's waiting," said Will the Driver, as he flicked the mail-bags with the end of his whip.

Cilla slipped from the shelter of her father's shoulders, and came and reached up a hand to David. He could make nothing of the girl's face, for it was both gay and downcast. He felt something slipped into his palm, he heard her bid him a quiet farewell, and she was gone. The team of three started forward, and a shrill cry came to them from behind.

Will the Driver pulled up, as if by instinct — an instinct he despised — and Widow Lister ran panting to the coach. She brought no gift, but then no one would expect such from a widow-body.

"I couldn't let ye go without saying good-by, David," she said, out of breath. "Besides, I want ye to take a message to your aunt Joanna yonder i' Canada. 'Tis fifteen years and a day since she borrowed a saucepan fro' me, and went off at her marriage, and forgot to return it."

"Widow, we're late," said Will, his good temper near to the breaking point.

"Ay, but — David — tell Joanna it isn't as I want the saucepan back — 'tis burned through t' bottom by now, no doubt — but I'm not one to like bearing a grudge all these years. If she'd only say she war sorry, now —"

The driver flicked his team, and the white road slipped behind them, and David had started on the track to Canada.

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For a half-mile Will was silent. Then he spoke, looking steadily at his horses' ears.

"Seems to me that one o' two things is bound to happen," he said. "Either Widow Lister is going to leave the road, or I am. There's not room for the two of us."

He waited for David's answer; and, getting none, went forward with his grievance, not troubling to turn his head.

"A woman that can carry a saucepan grudge for fifteen years—gee up, lass Polly, we've time to make up!—is a woman that cannot help scaring a man. 'Tis not just that," he broke off, still flicking the ears of his team with a gentle, contemplative whip, as if he were casting for trout, "'tis not just that bothers me. 'Tis her durned, queer way o' being out o' breath, and growing plumper on 't every day, an' holding up the mail three days out o' the seven, year in, year out. And the widow allus chooses her three days—days when we chance to be late, I mean."

The dust went by them faster and faster; for Will prided himself on reaching Shepston to the minute, though he hated this overdriving of good cattle.

"The widow's never grown up," he went on, cheerful and happy-go-lucky again, now that he had vented his grievance. "She'll be a bairn o' six years old till she dies. That's her ailment, and that's why we humour her, I reckon. Yet she married a fairish sensible man, and ought to have learned summat by now. Gee up, lass Polly. We've time to make up, I say. She was left a widow too young, maybe."

Another mile went by, broken only by a farm lass who held up the coach like a gentle highwayman; handed a letter and a penny to the driver, and smiled at him. The outlying farmsteads posted their letters in this haphazard way, and neither the driver nor the maid said a word to

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each other; they were too friendly to need words, as it chanced, for Will was pledged to marry her within a month or two.

The next mile passed them, dusty and white. The sun beat down, and there was not a friendly cloud to hide the pitiless blue of the sky. It was no friendly blue, such as pansies wear, when times go hard and the cool, quiet flowers look at a man with eyes of pity; it was a cold light and a hard light, for all its warmth, this never-ending sky that kept the Black Fever close to Garth's borders.

"There's no good news fro' Shepston, David," said Will, by and by. "Every day there's the same tale when I drive in — more folk down wi' fever, and bodies waiting to be buried because the coffiners are feared to go nigh them. I'm tough myself, but I'm getting a lile bit nervous. They never stop talking on 't, ye see, i'stead o' letting it be, and a man can't help thinking o' what's being dinned into his ears by every body he meets. Bless me," he broke off, with a quiet laugh, "I've got that bad I'm finding myself looking at Shepston passengers when they get aboard the mail — looking to see if there's any sure mark of the fever on their faces."

His companion was still silent, and at last it struck Will that something was amiss. He turned his head, and checked his flow of gossip suddenly; he had not seen steady David in this mood before.

A half-mile out from Garth, the smith had opened his right hand, had glanced eagerly to see what parting gift Cilla had left there when she said good-by. He found a sprig of rosemary, and, because he had held it so long in his hot palm, half fearing to look at it, the scent of the herb stole up to him.

It was the scent that drove David's wits astray, that rendered him deaf to Will's chatter, blind to the garish

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road in front of him. It meant so much, now that Garth was left behind; it brought each corner of the old, grey street to mind. He could scent again the wood-reek curling sleepily from chimney-stacks of twenty shapes and sizes, the wallflowers blooming in Widow Lister's strip of garden, the strong, lusty smell of the forge when his hammer rang on red-hot iron. A sickness to return laid hold of him; the rosemary had given its message, and David was fighting with his impulse to get down from the coach and tramp home again to Garth.

Then another thought came to him. Who did not know that rosemary stood for remembrance? There was not a child in Garth but could have told him what the herb's meaning was. In some special way, rosemary had been, time out of mind, the guardian herb of Garth; it grew in every garden; it grew along the street front, wherever a strip of soil had been rescued from the highway. Without rosemary, the village would not know its own face; and Garth folk, when they wished to praise Cilla overmuch behind her back, said that she was just like rosemary.

Did she wish him to return? Had she chosen this maidenly token of a change of mind? Little wonder that David could find no answer; for Cilla herself, in these days of trouble and indecision, could have given him none. Will had talked of the widow, of the fever, and what not; but David had sat with folded arms, watching the road slip by and trying to grasp his purpose, one way or the other.

It was the turning-point of Cilla's life and his; and once again modesty played him an ill turn. He was a big fool, he told himself, to go thinking Cilla would marry a dull, workaday fellow; she was made for daintier wooing than he could give. Oh, ay, to be sure she liked him

well enough, and remembrance meant just that — no more.

“Seems to me ye’re in t’ middle of a day-dream, David,” said the driver, after a long look at him.

David pulled himself together, and his slow, patient smile broke across the firmness of his lips. “I was,” he answered. “And now I’m out o’ the dream, Will. They want no wool-gatherers out in Canada yonder, so they tell me.”

“And ye never heard a word o’ what I said about the Black Fever? ’Tis all varry weel for ye who’re leaving it, but I tell ye I’m glad to get out o’ Shepston every morn, and see the fells looking clean and wholesome-like — though, bless me, I’ve nigh begun to look at their faces, too, to see if there be any mulberry patches on ’em. Mulberry patches, David — Shepston folk won’t let ye forget the fever-signs. Gee up, mare Polly! We’re late, and the Queen’s waiting for us.”

“As for me,” said David, “I look on the fever this way. Ye get it, an’ ye die, or ye don’t get it, and ye live; either way, what’s bound to happen is going to come, and crying won’t mend it.”

“That’s true,” assented the driver cheerily, after due consideration of the point. “Be durned, David, ye’ve a gift o’ common sense. Thought I had the gift, too, till I took to looking for mulberry patches i’ honest people’s faces.”

When they neared Shepston, the smith turned for a last look at the hills raking up into the white-hot limestone glare that beat upon the dale he loved.

“’Tis good-by, I reckon, lile lass Cilla,” was his thought.

Reuben Gaunt had not joined the company that met to give David a farewell at the inn. With all his fickle-

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ness, he was not a liar, and he disdained to make a show of friendship, when he knew that there was open enmity. Instead, he remembered that it was Linsall Fair-day, and he walked up the moor to Ghyll Farm.

Gaunt found the farm-door open, and stepped in. Peggy Mathewson was busy baking bread, and she looked hot and tired. The heat of the kitchen, the smell of the loaves, drove Gaunt into the shelter of the porch again.

"Phew! I thought 'twould be cooler indoors than out, Peggy."

"Did ye? My temper's not cool, to begin with, Reuben — or should I say 'Mr. Gaunt' these days?"

"Reuben, I fancy."

"I like to know. Ye change so often, and your station varies so — now marrying proud little Good Intent, and then again bending down to take notice o' Peggy Mathewson —"

"I've a cure for your temper, Peggy," he said, with an easy laugh. "We'll go to Linsall, and your loaves can wait."

"Why to Linsall?" she asked, with a longing glance at the moor. "Oh, ay, 'tis Fair-day. I've nigh forgotten fairs, and ribbons, and sich-like idleness, since you came home again. What wi' work, an' what wi' trying to keep up wi' your cantrips, Reuben, I'm a busy lass."

He only laughed and switched his leggings with the riding-crop, which from sheer habit he was carrying. The girl's tongue might be bitter, but her eyes told another tale. "Let's away, Peggy. A scamper always does you good. As for the baking —"

"It's finished," she broke in, setting down the last batch of loaves from the oven; "and if it weren't — why, I fancy I shouldn't heed."

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The old recklessness was in her voice, the old longing for light-heartedness, though under it all she knew that there was grief and heaviness. She went up-stairs and was down again before Gaunt had time to grow impatient.

“Shall I shame ye at the Fair?” she demanded, standing frankly for his inspection, her colour heightened, her hands resting on her hips.

Reuben noted the red scarf, the touches of colour which she had added deftly here and there to a dress which had seen many fairs and many weathers. No other lass could have worn such colours. They were gypsyish, bold, reckless, like Peggy herself, and they seemed to add to her beauty and her self-assurance.

“Shame me?” laughed Reuben. “There’ll be eyes for none but ye at Linsall!”

She closed the porch-door behind her and stepped out into the sunlight. “’Twill be enough for me if I keep *your* eyes fro’ roaming for a whole day at a stretch. Eh, well, I’m a fool to go wi’ ye, and mother ’ull wonder what’s gotten me when she comes back fro’ selling eggs i’ Garth. But then she’s used to wondering, is mother,” the girl added, with a sudden, hard wistfulness in her voice; “it seems to come natural to us Mathewsons.”

As they breasted the moor, however, Peggy’s spirits rose. She had a day’s freedom before her — and Reuben’s company — and there was no need to vex herself with the question why he, and he alone, had power to take her natural good sense away.

They followed one of those winding moor-roads, set between low banks of bilberry and ling and wild thyme, which seem ever to hide some swift adventure at the next turning. Peggy, bred in the midst of these wide, sweep-

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ing uplands, had found all her childish fairy-tales, all her make-believe of battle and romance, among the moors. The gypsy wildness in her needed colour, warmth, the speed of strange adventures; as a child, and later as a woman, she had peopled the heath with voices other than the curlew's and the plover's. The countless hollows, bottomed by rank mosses and deep bracken, hid ambushed men; behind each hillock that concealed the track from her, she would look for some figure to come riding down to meet her, and no toil about the farm, no harshness of the workaday life which hemmed her in at Ghyll, had killed this glamour of the heath. It was this need of glamour, maybe, which had bidden her long ago to set her heart on Gaunt; the man's queer eyes, with the look in them of devilry and yet of boyish surprise at life, his irresolution, the very uncertainty from one day to the next whether he would come tame to her hand, or would be wooing elsewhere, all enticed Peggy, as the winding hill-tracks did, that promised some gallant meeting at the next corner — always at the next corner.

To-day she looked neither forward nor behind. She crossed the moor with feet as light as Gaunt's, and he laughed when they reached the top and halted to take breath.

“You're just a wild moor-bird, Peggy.”

“And why not, Reuben; I was hatched in a moor-nest.”

The day's heat had brought its own recompense in a measure, for a haze was creeping up from the heath, softening the glare. The breeze was quick up here, and almost cool. Far down below them they could see Linsall village and its bridge, resting like a small, grey Paradise in the cup of the tall hills.

“You were hatched in the pastures,” went on Widow

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Mathewson's lass, after a silence. "There's a difference always 'twixt moor nestlings and pasture birds."

"Oh, I don't know! I'm fond o' the moor, myself —"

"Ay, fond — fondish, as ye are o' women — but — eh, lad, ye've no love o' the heather, and the smell of a marsh when it yields to your foot and all but gets ye under. 'Tisn't the same to ye, Reuben. Ye've always a back-thought for the pastures, green i' winter an' green i' spring, and never a change. They're snugger, Reuben, and snugness was always to your liking."

Gaunt only laughed, and they ran down the track, hand in hand, till they reached the wall that guarded the in-taken fields. Linsall village was bigger to them now, and they could see that it was thick with folk.

"They'll be dancing on the green to-night?" said Peggy, after they had climbed the wall and were walking soberly down the long, raking field that led them to the Linsall road. "Well, I feel like dancing, Reuben. My feet were never so light under me —"

"Oh, now, be quiet!" muttered Reuben, with a touch of superstition and a passing sense of disquiet. "We're not near a rowan-tree, Peggy, to touch it for luck when we boast."

"We'll risk it, Reuben! I seem to have no wish at all, save just to dance and dance wi' ye on Linsall Green. 'Tis my head, maybe, that's light, and not my heels."

They were on the road now, and Peggy's mood grew lighter still as she saw the booths, the tents, the knots of chattering country-folk that covered Linsall Green. She relished the open admiration shown her as she passed; she welcomed the sly gibes of a few ill-natured and plainer women; for she knew that Reuben would like her better if she were the admitted beauty of the day. This strapping lass with the clear judgment and the capable

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hands whenever life's work had to be done, was in play-time as simple as a child. Gaunt was her good fairy to-day; she loved him with a passionate devotion that surprised her in quieter moments; in all things to-day she wished to please him.

They went into the tavern whose front stretched orderly, and long, and grey, the whole width of the green. Gaunt made her drink red wine with their meal; the taste of it was thin and reedy to Peggy, but she understood vaguely that Reuben thought it a fine thing he was doing. The glass from which she drank it, was shapelier, too, than any she had seen, and she praised the wine, and the meal, and the sunlight that lay white on the white street outside the window.

Peggy laughed quietly as they went out into the glare again. "If I never enjoy a day again," she said, "I mean to take my fill o' this one."

Again Gaunt felt a touch of uneasiness, but shrugged his shoulders, as his way was, and thought no more of it. If he had been bred nearer to the Border, he would have said that Peggy o' Mathewson's was fey; as it was, he wondered that he had played yes-and-no with this girl. Her beauty, her high spirits, the disregard she showed for all admiration but his own, were pleasant to the man. For months he had been playing with his promise to Cilla of the Good Intent that he would marry Peggy. Well, who knew what might happen on this fine day in Linsall?

"Peggy," he said, as they threaded their way across the green, "you need a string of corals round your neck, to set off all the bonnie rest o' you. I saw a necklace as we came past the far booth yonder."

And a wonderful booth it was, this wooden counter set on trestles, with a span of canvas overhead to keep sun

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or rain away. There were toys on it, and flat-irons, and housewives' "find-alls;" there were wooden pipes and clay pipes, and snuff boxes. Betrothal rings, and wedding rings, and teething rings, lay neighbours to packets of simples warranted to remedy many ailments. The whole sum of life — its hopes, its absurdities, its random search after pleasure or after ease from pain — seemed to lie within the narrow confines of the booth.

Gaunt took down one of the coral necklaces, and the woman standing behind the counter gave the pair of them a keen glance.

"How much?" asked Gaunt.

The woman's thoughts were rapid. Were they brother and sister? No! It would have been sixpence in that case. Had he just met with the girl, and was he playing with a fancy? She thought not. That would have meant a shilling. Were they newly-pledged to each other?

"Half a crown," said the woman quietly. "They're the best coral money can buy, and I can only sell 'em so cheap as that because —"

"Oh, y^rs," put in Gaunt drily. "Here's the money. Now, Peggy, let me fasten it on for you — there! I told you 'twas all that was needed to set off the rest o' you."

Peggy felt a touch on her arm, and turned to find a plump rascal, with a pedlar's tray in front of him. His face, a dusky red at all times — what between weather outside inn-walls and warmer cheer within them — was a deeper colour than its wont this morning, though his eyes were quick and roguish, and his spirits gay as ever.

"Ah, now, Peggy o' Mathewson's, come away from the booth," he said. "Mother Lambert there has to pay for her stall, and the keep of a horse to drag it about fro' place to place. Stands to reason her wares are dear to buy. Now, Pedlar Joe is his own pony — carries his

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booth in front of him, i' a manner o' speaking — and can afford to sell things cheap."

"Ay," put in Mother Lambert tartly from behind her booth, "cheap to buy, and dear when ye've got 'em. We all know *your* wares, Pedlar Joe."

The pedlar sighed, and mutely called the high fells to witness that he needed no defence. "Women are that jealous," he observed. Then, with a whimsical glance at Reuben, "Mr. Gaunt, 'tis ye that's brought the Pride o' the Fair to Linsall. Ye'll have to buy her one of these lile scarfs. Peggy's fond o' bright colours, as she's a right to be."

Gaunt laughed as he put his hand in his pocket, for the pedlar was as well-known for twenty miles around as Kilnhope Crag, and he came and went like the wind, a chartered libertine. "Fond of bright colours, is she? Like your face, Joe, I take it. And, by that token, you've been polishing your face a little more than the ordinary."

"Ay, I've been out i' the sun more nor usual," said the other shamelessly. "Wonderful chap, the sun is, for giving good colour to a body's face. Now, Peggy, see this crimson scarf here; for old times' sake, Mr. Gaunt, ye shall have it cheap for three-and-six."

"Say one-and-six," suggested Gaunt lazily.

"Nay," said Joe with dignity. "I may be poor, sir, but I don't go bargaining when there's a lady nigh. Three-and-six I said, and *two-and-six* I stick to."

Peggy and Gaunt moved away, as soon as the bargain was completed, and Pedlar Joe strolled up to the booth. Mother Lambert and he were good friends enough, despite professional rivalry.

"Looks as if Gaunt and wild-bird Peggy might make a match of it, after all?" he hazarded.

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“So that’s Peggy o’ Mathewson’s?” answered the booth-woman. “I’ve not been nigh Linsall for four or five years, as ye know, and the lass was a little ’un then. I’d forgotten her. But Gaunt — there’s no forgetting him. Maybe he’s caught at last. I had the same fancy when I saw ’em step over the green.”

“Maybe,” chuckled the pedlar. “There’s allus a ‘maybe’ when folk mention Reuben Gaunt. Reuben — it means summat like water, if I call to mind — water that’s aye running under the brigg i’stead o’ crossing it to find a bit o’ safe-sure ground?”

Widow Lambert began to arrange her wares afresh. “Ay, like yourself, Joe — just like yourself. A caravan and a horse are steady matters, but a man wi’ a naked pack on his back should go by the name o’ Reuben.”

So then these two, vagrants both, fell into argument. Mother Lambert held the landed view of life, as befitted one who had a caravan and the right to fix her booth on the green for this one day. Pedlar Joe argued nimbly for the honour of his calling, and his views were those of the unlanded folk, coloured through and through by talk of freedom, of leisure in which to snare game — as being no man’s property in special — and of the joys attending one who, day in day out, had only his pack and himself to think of.

The dispute was ended only when Joe caught sight of a country lass, with a pretty face and an air of foolish vanity about her.

“I’ve to sell a scarf to Nancy Wood,” he said, with a confidential wink at the booth-woman. “She’s prattle-some now, and will buy; but she’ll have no heart for ’t once she’s seen Peggy o’ Mathewson’s.”

The pedlar sold his scarf; and the sun got down, half between noon and setting; and still the folk came pouring

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into Linsall. There was little news of the fever on this side of the moor-ridge; and, if there had been news, it would have been disregarded on this day when all the countryside was pledged to merriment.

“You’re blithe, Peggy!” said Gaunt, as they moved about the green together.

“I should be,” she answered, with a heedless laugh. “I’m free for a day — and I’m holding both hands out to catch whatever frolic comes.”

CHAPTER XVI

LINSALL was staid enough throughout the year; but, like Peggy Mathewson, she made the most of her big holiday. The cobbled inn-front, wide as it was, could hold no more farmers' gigs; the stable-yard was full of traps; and those who rode in late on sturdy horses were forced to seek billets for their nags wherever a friendly farmstead offered hospitality.

The bridge, arched like a delicate, grey eyebrow above the peat-brown river, was white with faces which looked constantly toward the inn, as if watching for some spectacle. The Squire was there, and his women-folk, rubbing shoulders with yeomen and their wives; farm-hands pressed close against the stonework of the bridge, and held their bairns to see what was going forward. The Green below was crowded, too, and men were running up the pastures that stepped briskly from the roadway to the moor. Only the road itself, from the fields right down to the inn-front, was clear of onlookers; and the dust of the highway showed hot and white as it made a lane between the folk.

It was time for the fell-race, and there were few dwellers in this land of climbing fields and overtopping hills whose hearts did not beat faster at prospect of the race. Of all their sports it was most in keeping with their daily lives. Each farmer, when he went to call the cattle into mistal, when he ploughed or won the hay-crop, was com-

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Gaunt by a good four inches, and seemed built for this business of capturing the race.

There were five minutes to go before the signal for the start, and Bownas looked Gaunt up and down. Finally, he put out a hand.

"You're Mr. Gaunt? Pleased to run against ye. I've heard o' ye. Better a tough race than a slack one any day."

Gaunt's spirits were rising every moment. He laughed as he took the other's hand. "By the Lord, we'll show them what running means, if they've never known it before."

He was heartened by the murmurs of the crowd behind him. "Gaunt's running to-day," said one, with a hint of hero-worship in his voice. "We'll keep the winner i' our own country yet," said another. The shabby-genteel man's assumption that his bets were in danger had been in itself a tribute to his skill. Sympathy was a spur to Gaunt always, and he felt that the crowd was with him.

"You've to win, Reuben! Make no mistake o' that," murmured Peggy from behind. "I wouldn't have 'ticed ye to run at all, if I hadn't been sure o' your winning."

He turned and looked her in the eyes. "I begin to fancy I shall, Peggy," he said; "but 'tis long odds to put me up at a minute's notice against Bownas of Shap."

"Ready, are ye?" cried the starter. "Ready? Go!"

There was no excitement at the beginning of the race; and this, too, was in keeping with the dales-folk, who liked their pleasures to be long drawn out. It was only the raw youngsters who showed signs of their paces along the dusty line of road; Gaunt and Bownas trotted quietly at the rear, remembering that a good deal of ground had

to slip under their feet before the last swift struggle home.

The haze had lifted now, and the sunlight lay so keen on moor and pasture that those on the bridge, the remotest point of vantage, could see each figure as it climbed the pastures, could follow the men when they gained the darker background of the moor.

Not one of the nine was running now, and three at least were creeping painfully up the breast of the moor.

“Gaunt’s at his old game,” said one of the crowd.

“Ay, he takes it straight as it comes. Sakes, how he sticks to his business!”

It was not then that eagerness began to show itself among the onlookers. Much depended on the down-hill scamper, but more on that stubborn climb up the hill-face which, from below and in the sun-glare, showed steep as a house wall.

Bownas of Shap was playing his old game, too. They could see him turning warily along the dingles, instead of facing the high bluffs. He counted on saving wind and gaining speed, as he had done in other struggles of the kind; but he had not run against Reuben Gaunt before.

The onlookers — and every face now was turned to the moor with fine expectancy — could see Gaunt keeping a straight line for the summit, though now and then he seemed to be pulling himself forward by sheer grip of the tough heather that hindered his feet no less than did the steepness of the moor.

They were lost for awhile, Bownas and Gaunt, in the shadow of the highest ridge. At the ridge-top, pencilled clear against the hard blue of the sky, stood the turning-post and the man who guarded it. Then, out of the shadowed space, Gaunt’s figure showed; he had gone

straight as a gunshot, and, without turn or halt, had reached the flag.

Peggy could not rest quiet in the road below. She had climbed to the brink of the moor by now, and three or four of the crowd had followed her. It was Peggy's day, and she wished it to be full. Gaunt might be this and that, she told herself, her eyes fixed on the moor above; but she would forgive him fickleness and all if she could dance on the green to-night, and know that he was the winner of the race.

"Gaunt climbs like a wildcat," said a tough, old yeoman, standing at Peggy's side.

"Climbs like a man," answered Peggy, and kept her eyes on the hilltop.

Bownas had reached the flag by now, and had turned to follow Gaunt down the moor. From below, Peggy o' Mathewson's could hear the eager uproar of the crowd. None thought of the seven stragglers who followed; it was a race between the homelander and the "foreigner," and Gaunt himself, though the blood was surging in his ears, could hear a stifled echo of the roar that meant good-will to him.

Gaunt had been used to say that he won his races because his wind was a special gift, in token that his legs were short. He needed the gift now; for, out of practice as he was, the straight, unswerving climb had punished him.

Bownas was still following his bent, down-hill as up-hill. He chose the gentler slopes, while Gaunt ran helter-skelter down, straight for the wall that guarded the pastures from the moor.

"The wildcat's won!" shouted the old yeoman at Peggy's ear. "He's a furlong forrarder, and all easy going now."

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A long, brown line of shale lay in Gaunt's path. He would not turn aside, but trusted to his old trick of sliding down it, feet foremost, with the shingle scattering round his knees.

"Oh, be durned!" muttered the yeoman. "'Tis all over wi' Gaunt! Just when he had the race i' his hands, an' all."

Peggy's face was white; for she had seen the runner trip against a stone which did not yield to his foot, as the shale had done. So great was Gaunt's speed that he could not think of checking himself; head over heels he went, and landed on his feet again as if by a miracle. For a second or two he stood dazed by the shock, and Bownas got to within fifty yards of him. Then, shaking himself together and setting his face as hard as a flint, Gaunt started down the moor again.

"He'll break his neck one day at yond job," said the yeoman to Peggy. "Glad he hasn't done as much to-day. Want to see him win, I."

The runners were scaling the wall between moor and pasture now, and Gaunt was a trifle the quicker in getting over. He passed so close to Peggy that she could have touched him.

"Run!" she panted. "Reuben, you have it! You have it, lad!"

He heard her, and so did Bownas o' Shap; and both men raced forward with a quickened sense of rivalry.

It was now that the crowd lost all restraint, save just as was needed to keep a clear path to the inn. From the bridge, and from the green, and from the inn-front—where men were standing on tiptoe in the gigs to get a clearer view—a deafening clamour rose. It was no spasmodic cheering, broken by silences, but a steady, ever-growing roar, like the thunder of a stream when snow

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is loosened from the hills. Never since this yearly battle of the fells first took its place in Linsall's story had such a race been watched. The time between out and home was shorter by five minutes than the fastest record known; but, more than this, there were two men left to fight it out to the end — two men who came with swift, loping strides through the dust of the roadway — two men whose faces at another time would have been terrible to see, so contorted were they with weariness, and desperation, and fierce effort to keep up.

Bownas led by a few feet now, and the onlookers were making frenzied calls to Gaunt to make a last spurt for it. The uproar rose to the hills that hemmed in Linsall village, and it broke against the fells with muffled echo. It was a moment when a man might well prove stronger than himself, and a strange gaiety caught Reuben unawares. There were still two hundred yards to go, and he saw that Bownas was content to keep his lead and was waiting for his last big effort until nearer home. Gaunt could not wait; he gathered all his strength, and glanced past Bownas with sudden speed and crossed the winning-line with an impetus he could not check. The inn doorway was in front of him — otherwise he would have crashed against the wall in his blind rush — and he ran down the long passage, and checked himself when he reached the settle at the far end, and sat with his head between his hands. A darkness and great sickness closed about him for awhile; then he lifted his head, and saw the landlord standing near him with an air of much good-will and some anxiety.

“Bring me something — something in a mug, Jonas,” said Gaunt, with a feeble smile.

Jonas laughed, as he patted the other on the back. “Not just sure whether ye've any inward parts left at all,

Mr. Gaunt? Want to cure that durned, queer feel of emptiness? Oh, bless ye, I know it. I've run i' fell-races before, but niver as ye ran to-day! God bless me, ye've the legs of a deer!"

Peggy had seen from the pasture-fields how Gaunt came home far down below; and, when she reached the village, it was to find the hero of the year being carried shoulder-height by six of the Linsall men. No leader of old, returning from victory through a crowded capital, could have claimed more honour than Reuben Gaunt. Unprepared, to gratify a lass's whim, he had won a contest that would go down in Garth's history so long as there were folk to sit beside the hearth o' nights and tell of it.

Peggy o' Mathewson's had had her wish. A buoyancy, an exultation like Gaunt's own as he covered those last ten score yards, possessed her. It was the woman's pride, unalterable through changing generations, that "her man" had won his battle.

When the evening came, and the sun dropped low over Linsall Moor, and the moon climbed big and round over the shoulder of Harts Fell, the green was full of couples dancing to the tunes of three fiddlers perched on Mother Lambert's empty counter. And Peggy, though the men pressed round her like a swarm of bees, would dance with few but Gaunt.

The scene was fairy-like in its remoteness from the humdrum round of work. The fells on the one side were white and magical; the moor on the other showed a dark jagged line of mystery; and between moor and fell, Linsall village lay steeped in fleecy moonlight, her bridge a slender arch of gossamer that spanned a stream of pearl and blue. There was no sound, save the gentle thud of feet on the grass, the squeak of the fiddles, the

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low tranquil laugh of some country lass as she heard what her lover stooped to tell her in the pauses of the dance.

When Gaunt and Peggy left the green at last, and struck up the pastures toward home, they were followed by much nodding of heads and wagging of tongues.

"Gaunt's not content wi' winning the race, 'twould seem," said one.

"Nay," said another, "he seems like as he's set on winning Peggy o' Mathewson's as well. There'll be life trouble i' that, if the look in her face be aught to go by."

Peggy and her man moved steadily up the field-track, then more quietly when they reached the heath.

"'Twas here you ran so well," said Peggy, her eyes shining with some great, unreasoning happiness.

"'Twas because you asked it," answered Gaunt, slipping her arm through his own as they turned to look down on moonlit Linsall. The faint screech of fiddles reached them, reedy as the breeze that blew fitfully about the heather-stems. She was silent, and Gaunt felt that she was trembling. "Why, what's amiss? Surely you're not cold on such a night?"

"Oh, it is naught, Reuben! I've had my day — as full a one as ever I could wish for — and I'm frightened, somehow, to go back, and begin to churn, and bake, and wash, and tend the fowls."

"I can ease you of all that."

Her eyes were soft, and full of the tenderness which life had tried its best to kill. She seemed about to speak, but checked herself.

"Will you listen, Peggy?"

"Oh, we must hurry, Reuben. Come away over the moor; there's mother wondering all this while whatever can have come to me."

He did not understand her mood, did not understand

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the withdrawal which was at once proud and full of mute appeal. They crossed the moor in a silence broken only by the scuffle of a sheep as they awakened it in passing, by the sudden whirr of a cock grouse as he rose from the ling and went barking *to-bac, to-bac, to-bac* across the moor.

It was Peggy who broke the silence. They had reached the deep glen above Ghyll Farm, and she paused at the rowan-tree which branched across the dancing stream. She had spent long hours under shadow of the rowan before and after she had learned her love for Gaunt; the place was friendly to her, for it was haunted by familiar years.

She stood straight in the moonlight, facing him. The rowan-leaves threw feathery shadows on her face. "Reuben," she said, "what's amiss with us both?"

"Why, naught, lile lass. You want to be free of the churning and the rest? Well, there's Marshlands waiting for ye, if you choose to come as mistress."

"Reuben!"

He could not tell whether sorrow or keen gladness lay underneath the cry. He knew Peggy o' Mathewson's had never moved him as she did to-night.

"Reuben, I'm all lost on the moor," she went on quickly. "I love the peat that ye tread on, and yet I doubt ye. I've seen ye a man to-day, Reuben, and yet I'm wondering whether it can last. The mood's on ye to make me mistress yonder. Ay, but to-morrow? Love goes and comes wi' some folk, but it stays wi' women such as me — make no doubt o' that."

"It will stay with me. Are ye going with the rest o' the flock, lile one — bleating me down, when I try to get my feet on a straight road?"

Peggy o' Mathewson's stood silent. The moonlight,

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dappled by the swaying rowan-leaves, showed a beauty that was scarcely of this world. Like the weather-stained mother who waited for her coming, down yonder at the farm, Peggy had peeped into a bigger life than this.

Suddenly she lost her straightness, and was sobbing in Gaunt's arms. "You'll be good to me, Reuben? 'Tis all or naught wi' me, and you can break my heart, or mend it, just as you please. Oh, I should take shame to talk to ye like this — but I'll come to Marshlands wi' no half-love fro' ye."

Gaunt felt a new warmth, a generous impulse, not only to take this passionate, headstrong lass to Marshlands, but to make her happy there. He told her as much in few words, and the answer touch of her hands as he held them roused something manlier, more robust, in the man's contrary nature.

They stayed awhile under the rowan, and Peggy touched its smooth trunk from time to time.

"I'm happy to-day," she laughed, "just happy, Reuben. And I'm touching rowan-wood while I say it."

There was a light in the kitchen of Ghyll Farm when they came across the croft, and at the porch-door they could see Widow Mathewson, her gaunt figure softened by the moonlight.

"So ye've been wi' Gaunt? I guessed as mich," was the mother's greeting. There was little complaint in her tone, but her usual half-sad, half-bitter acceptance of the day's troubles as they came.

Peggy was not contrite. "I'd finished the baking, mother, and I knew ye'd guess I was off to Linsall Fair. Mother, I never had such a day — and Reuben won the fell-race."

"Ay, he would. Give him a bit o' straight running

for foolishness' sake, an' he's clever; 'tis when ye want him to do summat wi' sense at th' back on 't that Gaunt fails ye — fails ye ivery time."

"I want you to ask me indoors for once," put in Reuben.

The widow looked at him curiously. Without emotion, as if she were counting up her egg money and finding the total right, she realized that there was a change for the better in him. His tone was grave, and he had lost his light, come-and-go air altogether.

"As ye please," she answered, stepping aside to let him pass. "'Tis so late now for us early-to-bed folk that a bit later willun't signify."

In grim silence she brought cake and elderberry wine from the corner cupboard and set them on the table. Whether a guest was a welcome one or no, he must not leave without a show of hospitality.

"Just help yourself, Mr. Gaunt," she said, with a certain stateliness that was no way out of keeping with her rough gown and weather-stained, tired face.

"Oh, by and by," he said. Peggy and he were standing on either side the hearth, and Widow Mathewson saw the confident, warm glances that passed between them. "We've something to tell you, Mrs. Mathewson. Peggy was pleased with my running, maybe — or perhaps she saw I was fondish of her — anyway, she has promised to come down to Marshlands as mistress there."

Mrs. Mathewson began to stride up and down the floor. It was her way — the man's way — when deeply moved. Folly, disaster, she had looked for whenever Gaunt had crossed their path; she was not prepared for honesty.

"See ye," she cried fiercely, turning to meet Gaunt's eyes, "are ye meaning this? I tell ye, we're proud,

bitter-proud, up here at Ghyll. I've no man to look after Peggy — th' one I lost would have been littlish use even if he'd lived — but I was not built after a gentle pattern, Reuben Gaunt. If ye're planning some fresh bit o' devilry, I'll bid ye keep clear o' my hands. They're strong hands — when I care to use 'em."

Reuben was at his ease for once in the widow's presence. This new sense of honesty was a gentler, and yet a stronger feeling than he had known since childhood.

"Tis this way," he said quietly. "We happen to want one another, and we're bent on getting one another."

"Ay, ye're bent on it," said the widow drily, not taking her eyes from Reuben's face. "You're bent on it to-night. The full moon glamours folk, so they say. Will ye be bent on it to-morrow?"

"Mother, you're hard on Reuben!" broke in Peggy.

"No harder than he's been on me, these years and years past. Are ye playing wi' my lass, or are ye not? She's all I have, mind."

Gaunt would take no offence. His spirits were high, and that curious sense of well-doing was with him still. "I shall be getting things to rights at Marshlands to-morrow. A house that has had no mistress all these years will need setting straight. After that, Peggy has only to choose the day when she'll come to it."

The widow's face softened a little, but she did not spare him. "Very well," she said, her fine, keen eyes reading every line of his face. "Ay, very well indeed, Reuben Gaunt, if ye can hold to th' same mind two days running. When I see Peggy wedded I shall believe 'at Peggy's wedded. Good night to ye. I'm fair clemmed wi' all th' day's work, while ye two were gadding ower to Linsall Fair."

Peggy went with Gaunt to the gate of the croft. "Ne'er

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heed mother," she whispered. "'Tis her way, Reuben. She'll soften to ye by and by."

"I heed naught, lass, so long as ye're lying lile and soft i' my two arms. What a fool I've been all these years — what a fool!"

He was swept away by his passion, by the girl's free, reckless beauty and reckless tenderness. He pictured her down yonder in the lonely house at Marshlands. The liberty he had cherished — liberty to come and go as he listed, like the wind — was shorn of all attraction. There would be warmth and well-doing about his house, and ties to keep him safe from wandering.

They stood looking down the moor. The moon outlined each smooth ridge; her light was nestled in the misty vagueness of the hollows; away and away to the grey-blue of the silent sky she touched the land with witchery. And Peggy sighed.

"Why, lass, you're shivering," said Gaunt, roused from his dreams of what might be.

"Oh, a goose walked over my grave," she answered lightly. "A silly goose, Reuben, to choose just to-day for wandering."

She did not tell him that she feared the day's happiness, feared lest all should be changed when she woke on the morrow. Hardship was more easy to believe in, after all, and in her experience it followed pleasure always.

They watched the moor; and the tenderness, the mute, uncomplaining sorrow of the land, came close to Peggy, as to one who had known the heath from childhood.

"Reuben," she sobbed, "if only ye had one mind in a day, instead of fifty — or if only I could care for ye less —"

"Best care for me more instead of less," laughed

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Reuben. "I've no heed, myself, for geese walking over a grave."

"It was silly, I own. There, ye've had kisses enough and to last —"

"Until to-morrow?"

"Well — maybe — if ye come not too early, while I'm milking the cows — or not overlate, when the house will need looking to, after all the work I've given mother to-day. There, Reuben — oh, there and there, if ye must better one good kiss. Good night, Reuben."

Gaunt swung down the moor. The moon stood silver-gold in the middle of the blue sky. A sheep got up beneath his feet. He startled a grouse from its bed among the heather. Far down below him he could see a light set like a little star above the porch of Marshlands.

"They're used to late home-comings o' nights," he laughed. "There'll be fewer such when Peggy comes to Marshlands."

CHAPTER XVII

WHATEVER doubt Widow Mathewson might have of Gaunt's constancy, he himself felt none. On the morning after Linsall Fair he summoned his housekeeper, told her that Marshlands was to have a mistress at last, and gave orders that the disused parlour, full of faded hangings and rusty furniture unrenewed since his mother came here as a bride, should be turned out in readiness for the purchases he meant to make this week in Shepston. The best bedroom, disused, too, was to be treated in like fashion. Now that his mind had found an anchorage, Reuben was eager, businesslike, impatient of delays.

His housekeeper said little; but she smiled often when his back was turned, and shook her head with the foreboding that was her only luxury.

"He's like a lad going off to buy a gun, or a rod, or some such make o' toy," was her thought. "Oh, ay, he's keen-set on t' notion, but it winnun't last no more than a week. Niver met a man to tire as soon as the master."

Gaunt did not tire, however. He was to and fro between Ghyll Farm and Marshlands every other day, and in between was journeying to Shepston, with Peggy beside him in the smart, high-wheeled gig which was known by sight to all the dales-folk.

Widow Mathewson said little these days, save to

grumble that Peggy left her three parts of the work to do; but at last she was losing her distrust of Gaunt. His gaiety appealed to her, for she had known little of it in her time; his forgetfulness of all past differences between them was generous, though she only half admitted it; above all, her headstrong lass showed likely to settle down at last, with a decent roof above her and the right to show that pride which was ingrained in her.

"Maybe he's as well as another man," she would mutter, as she nursed her pipe by the hearth and waited for Peggy to return, "though that's saying little enough. Come to think on 't, there's so few worth choosing that a lass is a'most bound to make a lile fool of herseln when it comes to marriage."

They were to be married at the end of two months. That was the utmost Mrs. Mathewson would grant when Reuben pressed for an earlier day.

"If your fancy lasts for two months, it'll maybe last longer," she said drily, in answer to Gaunt's pleading. "My lass shall be thrown at no man's head, Reuben, least of all at yours."

To Peggy the waiting time seemed short. Her child's dreams up among the winding peat-ways of the moor, her woman's yielding to the glamour of this first and last romance which Gaunt embodied, were of the same fibre.

One day — it was a week after Linsall Fair — he did not take her with him to Shepston. He had a fancy to buy a chestnut mare he knew of, and keep it as a wedding gift for her, letting her find it unexpectedly in the stable when he brought her home to Marshlands. She could ride bareback already; he would teach her afterwards to sit a side-saddle.

Between Garth and Shepston he came face to face

with Cilla round a bend of the dusty road, and pulled his horse up.

"You have heard the news?" he asked, feeling oddly ill at ease.

"I hear so little. It is not father's way nor mine."

Cilla's glance rested quietly on him, and she stood a little straighter than her wont, with an air of withdrawal. "If 'tis the fever you mean, of course we've heard of it. They talk of nothing else these days in Garth."

"It was not the fever I meant. Do you remember that you asked me months ago to do something? We were standing at the porch-door at Good Intent."

Cilla flushed, and moved a pace or two away. "Yes, I remember. It was you, Mr. Gaunt, who seemed to have forgotten."

"We're to be married in October," he said bluntly.

For a moment she hesitated, then held out her hand. "I wish you well — indeed, I wish you both well. Though we hear so little gossip, they told me Peggy was queen o' the fair at Linsall. She deserved to be, I think."

With a smile and a bend of the head in token of farewell, she had left him. He turned in the saddle to watch her go down the road, with her light, easy step, then plucked his horse into a trot. He was out of temper with the day, though he had begun it light-heartedly enough. His old infirmity had returned to him at sight of Priscilla; with the best will in the world to be loyal, he was bewildered by the grace and fragrance which Cilla had brought along this dusty road. His vanity was hurt, moreover; there had been no sign of regret or sorrow in Cilla's voice; her friendliness and her unconcern were harder to bear than any of Widow Mathewson's downright attacks had been.

Priscilla moved more slowly once she was out of sight.

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She was lingering in fancy through that day of spring when she and Gaunt had gone to Keta's Well. And she laughed at herself because the tears in her eyes were very near falling. Why should she grieve because he had done what she asked of him? Since Keta's Well and all the folly of the spring there had been the merciless heat, the ruined hay-crop, the fever that had not entered Garth as yet, though the shadow of it lay constantly about the village.

"Ah, now, there's enough that is real to be thought of," was Cilla's way of meeting the fresh heartache. "Father would tell me, I'm sure, that 'tis no time at all to be playing with dreams and fancies."

Billy the Fool stood at the forge door as she passed—Billy, with the air of great business and importance which had come to him since David left him in sole charge of the forge.

"Morning, Miss Good Intent!" he said, saluting gravely. "Terrible days for pleasuring, now that David's left me master smith." He nodded toward the inside of the smithy, and a tranquil grin broke across his face. "Dan Foster's lad is blowing bellows in yonder. Te-he! I just told him to get the fire all a-glowing an' a-crackling, an' the lile chap's doing on 't! 'Tis wonderful how some folk do sweat while others go playing."

"Then what will you play at to-day?" asked Cilla, her smile made up of rue and rosemary.

"Well, there's two score iron palings waiting to be hammered into shape, like, and Fool Billy reckons he'll make a start at yond same, he will. Niver knew before what 'twas to have all this wonderful lot of play to get through with. David will laugh when he comes back. He always did say I was a queerish terrible chap when I settled to my play."

Priscilla was apt to search deeper into life since the troubled days arrived. She looked now at Billy, and remembered the scene last April at time of rescuing the lambs; she recalled the struggle at the edge of the pool, and Widow Mathewson's tale of what had happened long ago at Marshlands; she sought in Billy's face, as older folk had done, for some answer to the riddle of his character. She found no answer. Unhurried, skilled at his work so long as a comrade named it play, his blue, trusting eyes looked into hers, and, if they held a secret, kept it well.

He looked again to see if Dan Foster's lad were plying the bellows within doors; then, by force of habit, he drew out a blackened pipe, and as quietly replaced it.

"There now!" he chuckled. "What wi' all this play about, I forgot my manners. Fancied ye had a fill o' baccy on ye, and maybe a match to go wi' that same baccy. Te-he, but Billy's a fool!"

"Not so big i' that way as he looks," came a voice that went roaming down Garth street like pleasant thunder. "What, ye're keeping Billy from his playtime? Shame on ye, Cilla."

"Nay, she's not keeping me," said Billy, taking Hirst's open pouch. "Dan Foster's lad is doing all the work these days, ye understand, and 'twould make your sides split to see him working at th' old bellows."

"We're not all as lucky as you," said the yeoman, as he handed a match to Billy. "Most of us have no play — and, by that token, I'm bringing a horse to be shod to-morrow."

Billy lit his pipe, and drew quiet puffs before he answered. "Well now, Mr. Hirst, I'm right set on shoeing a horse to-morrow. After I've done wi' yond iron palings, and after I've slept for a night in green-field's bed, as a

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body might say, I'll be ready for ye. 'Tis rare fun shoeing a lile horse, wi' a daft lad doing all the bellows' work for ye."

Hirst passed on with a cheery laugh, and linked his arm in Cilla's as they went up to Good Intent.

"Billy is like good pasture-land," he said, with a backward glance at the forge. "Soft on the crust, and firm underneath. Oh, ay, David did well to leave Fool Billy in his place."

But Cilla did not answer. Her thoughts were half with David, who had left Garth when she needed him, and half with Reuben Gaunt, who hoped to keep a promise made to her.

Reuben himself drove to Shepston; and he tried to get rid of the wish that Cilla had not crossed his path to-day — Cilla, with her witchcraft of dainty thoughts and comely living — Cilla, whose gift in life was to make folk see glamour in unexpected corners.

Shepston was busy when he reached the town. He stabled his horse at the Norton Cross tavern, and walked down the High Street in search of the mare he meant to get for Peggy. Half down the street he heard himself hailed by name, and turned. He saw Mother Lambert's weather-beaten face, standing behind her stall as she had stood on the green at Linsall Fair.

"Morning," said Gaunt, with the heedless nod of old acquaintance.

He was passing on, but she checked him. "I saw ye last at Linsall, Mr. Gaunt. D'ye mind the pedlar there?"

"Why, yes." He was impatient, and anxious to move forward. "I bought a fairing from him, and his face, I fancied, was more fiery with drink than usual."

Mother Lambert looked gravely at him across the trumpery wares that covered her stall.

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“Best speak no ill o’ the dead, sir. The pedlar’s dead — dead o’ the fever three days ago. It was fever that mottled his face, an’ he said to me as he stood on the green after ye’d bought your fairing for Peggy o’ Mathewson’s — he owned, he did, that he couldn’t feel just hisseln, like, though he meant to plod on and be merry.”

Gaunt’s face was white. He had no thought of Cilla now, but remembered only the lass who had watched him win a race, the lass who had been tender to his failings and buoyant in her love for him.

“Are you speaking truth?” he asked.

“Well, yes. I mostly do, save when I’ve wares to sell; and business, Mr. Gaunt, is another basket of eggs, as the saying goes.”

“I’ve laughed at the fever-dread till now,” he said, after a troubled silence. “For myself, I take chances of that sort of thing as they come; but ’tis different when there’s a doubt that Peggy may have caught it. Surely you’ve to come closer to it, and stay longer with it, than we did that day at Linsall?”

“What, for harm to come on ’t? Nay! I’ve seen plenty o’ fever i’ my time, an’ I tell ye that kerchief ye bought for Peggy o’ Mathewson’s was enough in itself to gi’e it to her. Poor Peggy! They allus said — those ’at were jealous — that her liking for bright colours would bring her to grief one day.”

Mother Lambert nodded sagely after Gaunt had left her. She had lived a hard, roving life, had long since learned to look at her neighbours with eyes unclouded by overmuch feeling; and she told herself now, with a quiet, impersonal wonder, that there was a real change in the man.

“Did ye see Reuben Gaunt go down street just

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now?" she asked a crony, who came from a neighbouring stall for gossip.

"Ay. Straight-set-up, as usual, and a bonnie lile figure to catch a lass's fancy. There's never much change in Gaunt."

"Well, now, there is a change, and that's th' odd part on 't. He's learned to think for another first, 'stead of himself, and that means a deal. Eh, but men are bothersome cattle! Ye think ye know 'em, right to th' back o' their minds, an' all of a sudden they turn just contrary-like."

Gaunt bought the mare for Peggy, and gave orders that it should be sent that day to Marshlands; but he had little heart either in the bargaining or the purchase. As he walked up the High Street toward the inn again, a hearse was moving slowly to the churchyard which fronted and looked down upon the road. They told him that only one day of the last fifteen had passed without a burial, and some days there had been three or four. It was brought home to him at last that the Black Fever was no boggart invented by mothers to frighten wayward bairns; he saw the scourge now as it really was, as a pestilence unlike all others, save the plague which many hundred years ago, folk said, had destroyed whole villages, and had made thriving townships into wasted hamlets.

Indeed, the fever, in a less degree, had that power to weaken men by terror which the plague had had long since. It was market-day, and a busy day, along the High Street; but uneasiness and gloom showed plainly on all but the most reckless faces, and farmer-men, ashamed of a weakness they could not control, would glance at farmer-men, seeking for the telltale patches of mulberry-red which spelled infection.

Gaunt opened his lungs to the breeze when he was clear

of Shepston. He knew that there was danger to himself, but had dismissed the thought; his cowardice was all for Peggy. He was glad to be out among clean fields again, with the open road in front of him, and none to talk of the fever.

He walked straight up to Ghyll Farm after reaching home, and Peggy was standing at the gate of the croft, looking down the moor. She half looked for him, and for that reason had fastened the crimson handkerchief round her throat; she had tied and untied it before her cracked mirror, with the honest coquetry which a woman finds when she knows that one man only has a claim on it.

Reuben saw the scarf, as soon almost as he caught sight of the waiting figure. The sunlight, stark and dry as the fields it had scorched, caught the warm colour of the kerchief.

"You look tired, Reuben," said Peggy o' Mathewson's, after a quiet glance at his face.

"Well, yes," he answered carelessly. "It was a hot drive into Shepston, and the fools would talk of nothing but their fever. I begin to think they're proud of it, Peggy."

"They've got used to it, you see," said the girl, with something of her mother's tart knowledge of the world. "'Tis queer, Reuben, how soon ye get used to a thing, even if 'tis bad, and seem to miss it when it goes."

He scarcely heard her. His eyes were fixed on the crimson scarf, and she smiled happily as she followed his glance.

"Yes, I'm wearing your gift, lad. Mother chided me just now — said 'twas no sort o' fancy-stuff to wear, when there were cattle needed milking by and by. I said you'd given it me at Linsall Fair and the lile, soft beasts would milk no worse because I wore it."

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Gaunt, though he did not know it, had caught something of the panic that troubled all the folk of Shepston. "At the back of his mind," as he put it to himself, he was sure that Peggy would catch no harm from the scarf at this late day; the harm was done already, or not done; yet he could not rest so long as she was wearing it.

"Peggy," he said, "I want that kerchief you're wearing."

Peggy o' Mathewson's laughed, though her eyes were full of disquiet. "Best buy another, Reuben, if you're fooling me again. I'll not let this one go to some lile fool who's turned her blue eyes on ye and made geese seem swans."

So then he told her — the sun lay low down to Wind-over Crag by this time — that Pedlar Joe had the fever on him when he sold the kerchief; and again she laughed.

"Is that all, Reuben? I thought 'twas worse." She looked down the moor, and into his face again; and her voice was soft with trouble. "Reuben, 'tis ill when ye doubt the man ye care for. I never cared, save for you; but you —"

Gaunt forgot the scarf, forgot the sickness and the hearse and the great distrust that had peopled the High Street at Shepston.

"Well?" he asked. "What is amiss, then, if we're both of the same mind? Peggy, I've been fearing for you all the way home from market; I ought to take shame that a parcel of Shepston folk can scare me."

Down below in Garth, Billy had done with his day's play at the forge, and had wandered out into what he named his green-field's bed. He made up the pastures and out into the open moor; and here, in a little hollow deep with heather, he lay down, turned twice or thrice

till he had made a lair for himself, and breathed a sigh of sheer content.

“ ’Tis a right queer matter to be born daft-witted,” he said to himself. “ There’s folk sleeping in Garth yonder at this minute ’twixt four hot walls, and no breath o’ air to help them. Only Fool Billy knows, ’twould seem, what a terrible soft bed a body’s body can find right up at the top o’ the world.”

He lay there on his back, and watched the stars, the waning moon whose colour was ivory tinged with saffron, the quiet blue of the sky. The wise folk spoke of the moor as a lonely place, where none could sleep without fear of the ghosts that were known to haunt it. To Billy it was home. If grouse were lying near him in the heather, they were friends; if the old dog-fox from Sharprise Wood chose this track for purposes connected with his larder, Billy was well acquainted with him; as for ghosts, there was only one that troubled him, and this had no dwelling among the marshes and the ling.

CHAPTER XVIII

PEGGY'S high spirits did not forsake her as the time for her wedding drew near. Gaunt was eager, with a dash of haste and recklessness about the matter that appealed to her gipsy temper.

She knew that poor fools down in the valley were sick with the heat and the fever-dread; for herself, she lived on the cooler moor, and a glance at its clean acres, a touch of its heather-wind, were enough to banish all thought of fever like an unclean ghost that had no place here on the hill-tops. She did not know that a part at least of Gaunt's haste was due to Priscilla of the Good Intent. Since the day when Cilla had met him on the Shepston Road, Reuben had found the old disquiet return. Like his father before him, he had an instinct toward a wife who was comely of speech and manner; he needed, as Mrs. Mathewson had said bitterly in time of April snow, "a ladyish mistress for Marshlands." Do as he would these days, Gaunt saw constantly the picture of Cilla in her lilac frock. She would fit the old house as the well-ordered ivy which grew along its front. Her voice would sound cool and low under the dark rafter-beams. There would be flowers about the house again, and the spinet would awaken to life under Cilla's fingers.

Reuben was tormented by that picture, and each detail of it grew clearer as the days went by. The man was to be pitied, maybe, for he had the gift of fancy, and at times

it bred in him a strange irresolution. The one instinct in him longed for an orderly home, a settled purpose in life; the other took him to the open lands, where such as Peggy Mathewson, and the pedlar-folk, and the poachers, lived free from all convention. Each attracted him, and he had not once been taught, during his heedless and un-governed boyhood, that it was idle to pursue two whims at once.

Peggy, keen-sighted as she was, had no inkling of Gaunt's weakness. He was eager, lover-like, full of plans for doing this and that about the house to make it ready for her. Even Widow Mathewson, though she looked for it, saw no hesitancy, no sign of withdrawal as the weeks drew on; and, in her own wry fashion, she was proud of Reuben, as a mother is proud of a weakling son when he shows stray glimpses of true manhood. It was little satisfaction to her, or none at all, that Peggy would be mistress of the biggest farm in Garth, would be wife to one of a yeoman breed so old that the Gaunts were counted as a sort of gentry among their farm-neighbours. The widow had her own pride of station, and not for a moment would she admit that her lass "was bettering herself" by marriage; she was simply glad that the girl, if she must needs set her heart on Reuben, was likely to be treated well.

For Peggy there was no shadow lying over these weeks. She had prayed, in her haphazard way, that there should be no break following the glamoured day at Linsall Fair; and her prayer was granted. It seemed strange to her that she had ever found hard words for Reuben. He was strong, and tender, and considerate; he asked only for a speedy wedding, and Peggy chided her mother because the widow was obstinate in her resolve.

"Nay, lass," Mrs. Mathewson would say. "Ye've

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bided long for Reuben, and 'tis a lile bidding-time enough I've set him, surely. There's no daughter o' mine going to come pretty-come-quick to his call, just at the minute he cares to whistle."

And Peggy would laugh, and tell herself that she was in no great haste for wedlock, after all. She asked for nothing beyond the present happiness. Strong at the churn, clear of vision, quick to see shortcomings in her neighbours, Peggy o' Mathewson's had yielded altogether to her love for Gaunt. He had put cobwebs over her eyes, as the Garth folk said; for she heard the fairies sing, when at nights she went up to the beck that trickled under the rowans, and looked down at the lights of Marshlands, and pictured Reuben there.

Towards the end of the waiting-time, Gaunt rode up to Ghyll and told them that he had to be away in the Midlands for a week. His father, in one of the buying fits that came on him at times, had bought property down there, and he had to look to it.

"'Twill be a wedding-gift for you, Peggy," he said at parting.

"My lad, I want no wedding-gifts. If ye must go, ye must go, an' good luck to ye; but, Reuben, never talk o' gifts. The red kerchief ye bought me at the Fair was enough for me — that, and what ye whispered on the home-way walk."

They were standing at the moor's edge, and peace was stealing up from the hollows. After the sun's heat and the weariness, the dusk had laid gentle fingers on the land. There was no limit to the heath, seen by this magical, soft light. Sharprise, crimson and gold and purple where the last of the sunset caught his crest, seemed to bound it on one side; but Peggy, looking out with practised eyes, could see further hills, and hills

beyond, each putting on its nightcap of saffron haze. Light scents, stifled by the sun, began to creep abroad. It was a gloaming such as few could see without a quickened sense of the big life behind all frets and worries of the long day's business.

For Peggy o' Mathewson's it was home. These darkening hollows, the rough, winding ridges reaching out to the spaces where, in some heathen way of worship, she always sought her God, the cool, faint smell of the bracken, and the ling, were all that spelled life and freedom for Peggy. The gloaming's quiet, Gaunt's nearness, softened her reckless spirits, but could not check her laughter.

"Oh, Reuben, I am daft!" she said, putting both hands into his. "Thought I could hold my own, I, and I'm thinking only o' ye. Will ye come back, or will ye not—and are ye true, or are ye not—and all such moonshine nonsense. Reuben, I've been happy these last days. Ye wouldn't spoil it all?"

"Not lightly," said Reuben, as he kissed her good-by, and went down the moor.

The next day Peggy was listless and out of heart. She fancied the heat ailed her, though until now she had been careless of all extremes of weather. Widow Mathewson noticed the change, as she smoked her pipe by the hearth that night.

"Lile lass," she said, "ye're fretting for Reuben."

Peggy shivered, and crept nearer the peat fire. "Oh, I'm thinking all o' ghosts, mother. He has to be away, and the fool I am to be needing him so, and there's many a mile 'twixt this and his home-coming."

The widow smiled, but her face was full of compassion. "I loved your father i' that way, Peggy. He was niver

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much to lean on, but I missed him sorely when he went down kirkyard lane."

"You're sneering at Reuben again, mother." The girl's temper was frayed to-day and broken at the edges.

"Nay, nay. I begin to think Reuben's stauncher than your father iver war. Happen ye've come to your own, Peggy, for a man as can win a fell-race o' the Linsall sort has summat behind it all. Ye'll shape him by and by. Oh, ay, ye'll shape him. Men are all like a blunt bit o' millstone grit; they need a chisel, they."

Peggy o' Mathewson's crept nearer still to the peats. The light of the one lamp shone on the pewter and the delftware that was Ghyll's special pride, and the fire-glow played bo-peep in corners of the living-room.

"I scarce feel like a bride, mother," said Peggy, after a long silence.

"Tuts!" answered Widow Mathewson. "Few maidens do. Ye talk as if there were no modesty left i' the world."

"I'm so cold. All day it has been like a goose walking ower my grave— just as I said to Reuben when we walked fro' Linsall Fair."

The widow was easy in her mind to-night. Her hidden liking for Gaunt need not be checked so much in future; only she knew how bitterly she would miss Peggy in and about the house; but she knew, too, that it was idle or worse, to keep her lass from a home of her own. A glance at the girl's face, white and pinched, might have startled Widow Mathewson; but she smoked her pipe, and looked into the grate, and hugged her self-content as a luxury seldom found at Ghyll.

"Fiddle-me-ree," she answered, with pleasant tartness. "Th' only geese as are walking abroad, to my knowledge, are ye an' Reuben— an' he's a gander."

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Oh, lass, Peggy, I've it all by heart! Niver sich a one i' the world as your man; an' ye know his shortcomings plain as your own face in a pool; an' ye throw bits o' pebble into th' pool, just to stir his proper likeness into pleasanter shape; an' ye call it loving the lad. Lord o' mercy, there's been many a woman at yond pool-edge afore your time, and will be after. I war there myseln once. 'Tis only nature."

Peggy got up and went out through the porch, and stood looking out and away across the moor.

"I war there myseln once," repeated Widow Mathewson, with a tolerant smile. "I munnot forget what 'twas like — just the wee, lile fairies dancing, an' witchcraft over the moor."

She knocked her pipe out on the grate, and youth touched her brown, scarred face for a moment.

"Good sakes," she murmured, "I'd like to be young again like that — cobwebs about my eyes or no. Better be a blithesome fool at two-and-twenty than a wiser one at sixty."

Five days later Gaunt returned to Garth. He came by the morning mail-coach, and sat by Will the Driver's side, and asked as many questions regarding the health of Garth folk as if he had been absent for a year.

"Oh, they've 'scaped fever right enough," said Will, trying to answer all his questions at once. "They're a bit scared still, but forgetting all such rubbish. Widow Lister's hale and hearty — ay, just a shade too hale and hearty. Billy is laking at the forge, an' doing as much real work as David did, an' willun't take a penny for 't. Has 'made a box, he, an' tells all folk to put their silly money in through the slit and let it bide there till David comes again. He has no use for money, he — lile, wise lad as he is."

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“And Widow Mathewson?” asked Gaunt.

Driver Will knew well enough what news the other was seeking; it was common knowledge now that Peggy o’ Mathewson’s and Gaunt had been “asked” three times at church. For that reason Will concealed his knowledge, as if it were a crime, and affected a fine ignorance as he flicked his team with the whip.

“Oh, she’s well enough, or was a few days since. Have not seen Peggy or th’ widow since Monday last. Terrible home-bird folk, both on ’em. I liken ’em always i’ my mind to a brace o’ nesting grouse, so shy an’ fierce an’ prideful as they are.”

Gaunt asked for no more news until the coach rounded the curve that brought him within two miles of Garth.

“And Miss Priscilla?”

The driver gave him a shrewd, hasty glance. “Oh, well enough. She never alters — a breath o’ rosemary along the dusty road. Wish I’d been born a lile thought higher in station, and could cast my eyes that way. There never were two made like Miss Good Intent. And there she is, by that token, walking just ahead.”

“You can put me down,” said Gaunt.

Driver Will wasted little time in stopping and in starting off again. He greeted Priscilla with a friendly, courteous salute when a moment later he passed her on the road; and then he touched his horses’ ears with a gentle whip that spoke of deep reflection on his part. Will had leisure for reflection during those long drives between Shepston and the remote hamlet that ended his twenty-mile journey, and it was second nature to him now to piece together the life stories of those who dwelt along the road.

“It must feel odd to be one o’ Mr. Gaunt’s sort,” he was thinking. “I mind yond day i’ spring when they

drove out wi' me, sweet as kiss-me-quicks, to Keta's Well. I mind the way they came home again — she with the clover-pink in her cheeks, and Gaunt with a queer look in his eyes I'd not seen there before. Get along, Captain, or they'll take ye for a tramp. Gee-up! And now he's come home to wed Peggy o' Mathewson's; and I fancied, when he was seeking news just now, 'twas Peggy he war asking for, until — well, until he named Miss Good Intent. Eh, well — get along, Captain! The Queen doesn't wait for her mails while such as ye catch a sleep along the road."

Gaunt had overtaken Cilla long ago, and she had turned to meet his greeting with the clover-pink in her cheeks that Will the Driver had thought of.

"Will you come to my wedding?" he asked, ill at ease after his journey south, and all the brave thoughts that had kept him company on the northward road.

Priscilla laughed. It was the Garth way, when trouble must be met. "You have asked me, Reuben — and father, too; of course we shall be at the kirk."

They walked side by side in silence until the grey gable of Good Intent showed near at hand. Reuben could not take his eyes from the girl's face, and presently she looked up, embarrassed by a feeling of shame and unrest for which she could find no reason.

"I wish you both well," she said, halting at the gate.

The voice was not Cilla's; it was hesitating, cold. A random impulse took Gaunt unawares.

"Cilla," he began eagerly.

She withdrew, and her coldness disappeared. She was self-reliant again, full of a dainty, half-mocking rebuke that would not stoop to anger.

"Good-by," she said. "They call you running water, Reuben, but I've better hopes of you."

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Reuben stayed a moment, watching her, until the house-porch hid her. For once he was troubled by the knowledge of his own weakness. An hour ago he had been full of his wedding plans, full of his early scamper out to Garth by the mail. Peggy did not expect him until late afternoon, and he had looked forward, with a boy's zest, to the surprise of a morning visit to Ghyll. It was Thursday, and Peggy would be busy at the churn; he would help her at the work; Widow Mathewson would have her gibe, half tart, half friendly, when she put her head round the door of the dairy and found him "doing real work for once in a long journey." That was the picture he had seen — until he overtook Priscilla on the road.

Gaunt set his face toward the moor and made his way up to Ghyll; but the brightness of the picture had gone. He blamed himself for that moment's treason with Cilla; it seemed an ill beginning for his wedding. The day was hot and garish, too, and the fierce summer had set its mark on the pastures and the hedgerows. Such leaves as were left unshrivelled showed lifeless and drab, and never a bird sang. Thirst was walking like a spectre through the land, side by side with the heat. The fields were gaping wide, entreating rain. Even the yarrow flowers liking a lean and scanty soil, carried drooping heads. The sheep stood staring up into the sky, for they were tired of cropping grass that was tough and lifeless as ill-won hay.

When he reached the moor, Gaunt looked for Ghyll Farm. Its roof was set in the middle of waving lines of heat-haze, and no life stirred about the house. Fancy had played Reuben many a surly trick, but it helped him now to brace himself for coming trouble. Dalliance in sheltered Garth was forgotten; he knew that ill news

awaited him, and went forward, preparing himself to meet it. With all his faults, Gaunt was apt to meet an open danger in the face.

Mrs. Mathewson, from the window of Peggy's bedroom, had seen him come up the moor, and ran down and out into the croft. She found him opening the gate.

"Don't come nigh, Reuben," she cried. "I tell you, don't come nigh."

Her strong, lean arms were stretched towards him, motioning him away; there was trouble in her face, and her eyes had the look which tired folk wear when they have been awake throughout the night.

He thought at first that her old distrust of him had returned and laughed. "I'm not to be kept away from Ghyll these days, mother. Peggy is pledged to marry me next week, and 'tis overlate for you to say no to that."

As he came nearer Widow Mathewson withdrew. Gaunt could make nothing of the look she gave him — tragical, and full of pity, and weary beyond all belief.

"Ye'll not come in," she said sharply.

"And why shouldn't I?"

"Oh, Reuben, Reuben, the fever's come to Ghyll. Peggy ligs yonder i' her bed, and her face is ill to look at. Ye'll catch it, too, if ye come nigh the house — for me 'tis no matter — I'm ower-old to care."

Gaunt paused for a moment, shocked by the news. Then he crossed the garden-strip, and stood beside her in the porch.

"Mother," he said quietly, "it seems we've to know one another better. D'ye think I'm feared o' the fever, if Peggy has caught it?"

She stood away from him. In the hour of fear she could not rid herself of this habit of denying all courage in a man.

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"Fever means little to me," she said drily. "I'm over and done with, Reuben, and care niver at all whether I lig me down or no. But ye're young, lad —"

"And a coward," broke in Reuben.

She glanced again at his face. "Well, no," she said. "I was wrong there, and I own it. But, Reuben — there's one i' five lives on to tell on 't if they catch the fever."

"Then Peggy must be the one, that's all, mother. We'll save her yet between us."

He had no thought of himself. His face, after he had heard her news, was softened, yet full of quiet strength. The widow felt a grudging admiration for this man, with whom she had fought so bitterly in days gone by; she looked again at his trim, healthy body, at the young health in his face, and she was filled with pity.

"Reuben, lad, go back ower th' moor," she said, peremptorily. "If one's to die, there's lile use killing two. I tell ye," she broke off, with a touch of her old bitterness, "the fever takes no more count o' Mr. Gaunt o' Marshlands than it does o' plain Peggy Mathewson. 'Tis not just a risk ye're taking; 'tis as near to certain as aught i' this life can be that ye'll catch it, an' die on 't, an' no more o' Gaunt o' Marshlands."

"Well, there's not much to boast of as it is. If you put it that way, I'm risking little."

Widow Mathewson, though she and Peggy had lived high up above the peopled villages, had a sure instinct for truth or meanness in her fellows. She could detect no sign of cowardice under Gaunt's quiet acceptance of his destiny. There was no bluster, covering a weak purpose. He meant to share Peggy's trouble.

"Reuben, there's few i' Garth would be so daft," she said, still guarding the porch. "Think while! I've

known what the fever means longer than ye could know it. Thirty year back it came to Garth, an' good men o' their hands — good men o' their lives, too, an' honest — dared not come nigh a house that had the white cross on it."

"My father used to tell of it." Reuben was indifferent, as if it were no time to listen to bygone tales. He was thinking of Peggy, lying helpless in the up-stairs room.

"Did he tell you that the coffiners were found missing, when they were needed to see bodies buried decently fro' end to end o' Garth? Did he tell ye that men who'd faced storm on th' moor, an' danger o' most sorts, sat shivering by their fires, an' dursn't stir a finger to help stricken folk? Oh, Reuben, lad, 'tis no game o' kiss me by the stream, this, and naught to bother ye after."

"Never said it was, mother," said Gaunt drily. "I'm here to see we do our best for Peggy."

The widow understood, somehow, that Reuben the despised was her master in this time of stress. Weak as running water he might be afterwards, when better days arrived; but now he had the strength of many a likelier man. Her good man had been weak in all days, fair or foul, and memory of him had hindered her outlook upon Gaunt.

She stood in silence for awhile, her spare height framed against the entry to this house of sickness. Far down the reaches of the moor, a tired haze lay, and prayed for rain; from the blue of the weary sky the sun shone fiercely. Again the mother-pity came to Widow Mathewson. For herself, it did not matter; she could tend Peggy, and could die if her time had come, and no tears wasted; but Gaunt had no need to die just yet. She guarded the grey old porch as men, in the lawless times, had fought for their wives and bairns at this same door.

“ ’Tis the waiting-time will trouble ye, Reuben,” she said, in a matter of fact, quiet voice. “ Th’ men are cowards when th’ fever comes, for that reason. If they could know i’ a day or so whether they’d caught it or no, they’d niver heed the danger, like. Women are used to waiting, and they’re bolder at these times.”

“ I’m coming in, mother.”

“ Nay, think ower it, lad! Think ower it! There’ll be six weeks o’ waiting afore iver ye know whether ye’ve caught th’ fever. Six weeks, Reuben! Plenty o’ men wouldn’t wait as long for a maid that was bonnie and well.”

Reuben took her by the arms, and made a way for himself. “ There, mother, ’tis done now, I take it. Lucky I told them down at Marshlands that I might or might not be home to-day. They’ll not sit up for me to-night, and to-morrow I must get a message down somehow.”

Mrs. Mathewson and Gaunt stood facing each other in the living-room. If there had been enmity between them, they did not remember it; a grave silence held between them, for each knew that death lay very near, not to Peggy only, but to themselves.

“ There’s still a chance to go back, Reuben,” she said at last. “ Ye may or may not have caught it by stepping into t’ house, and ye need say naught to nobody; but, if ye once go up into th’ chamber — an’ I see your eyes on th’ stair-door — there’ll be no return for ye.”

A troubled moaning sounded from the room above, and Gaunt laid a hand on the sneck of the staircase door. “ Maybe ’twould ease the lass if she knew I was near,” he said gently.

“ She willun’t know, she’s ower far gone, I tell ye! Reuben, my lad, have just a thought for yourseln.”

He glanced at her, with his curious, new look of gravity

and self-effacement, and went up the stair. The widow heard his step on the boards overhead, then a startled cry. She knew what the cry meant. The Peggy who had watched him win the fell-race, who had danced on Linsall Green, was not the lass who lay on the bed up there; for the fever laid ugly hands on the faces of its victims, and on their minds its hold was still more cruel. There were no wild outbursts of delirium, followed by intervals of sanity and hope; there was only the low, helpless muttering, the sluggish apathy, the denial of all power or will to find healing from any human ministry.

Widow Mathewson paced up and down the living-room with her manlike strides; and by and by she heard Gaunt pacing up and down the floor above. It was Gaunt's hour of bitterness, the first hour of his heedless life that had found him ready to hearken to his lesson. If he had dealt ill with Peggy o' Mathewson's in times past, he was paying something of the penalty now. It was not so much the bodily change in her that shocked and terrified him; it was the knowledge, brought suddenly home to him, that she did not care whether he stood at her bedside or not, that likely she would never care again in this world. The incessant moaning maddened him; it seemed to tell of an anguish that was beyond reach of his help. He could not believe that Peggy herself felt nothing, knew nothing — that it was he, in full vigour of mind and body, who suffered for her, just by looking on.

He came down the stone stairway at last, and the widow ceased her restless walk. She looked at his face. It was white and stern, but there was no trace of personal fear on it.

“It was as well I came,” he said.

“As well you came,” she echoed. “You say that after — after going in yond up-stairs room?”

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"Yes, mother. You may be tough, but 'twould drive ye mad to live alone with what's in the house here. Mother, is there naught at all we can do to ease her?" he broke off.

"Ay, but not mich. I'm skilled enough i' nursing-work, so far as that goes. But t' fever shoves a body aside, an' willun't let nursing have its say."

For the first time she let weakness overcome her. Her tears were few, but full of passionate relief; and they were a tribute to the sense that, for once in her stormy life, she had a man about her in time of need.

Gaunt patted her gently on the shoulder. All the hidden liking between the oddly-assorted pair was patent to them both.

"That's better!" he said. "Wish Peggy up yonder could cry like that. 'Twould do her a power o' good."

Toward gloaming of that day, as Reuben stood at the window after one of his fruitless visits to the room above, he saw a lad come up the slope of the moor. He ran out across the croft, and shouted to the lad. Already he had learned the instinct of all who had seen the fever close — the instinct to cry, like a leper of old, that none must come too near.

The lad ceased whistling, and halted in surprise; for Reuben, though he did not know it, was waving his arms like one far gone in drink or madness.

"I war nobbut stepping up for a sitting of eggs fro' th' widow. Miss Cilla o' Good Intent telled me to come," he said, half blubbering. "'Twas promised, yond clutch of eggs, an' Miss Good Intent wants t' chickens reared i' good time for the winter."

Gaunt saw now that it was Dan Foster's lad, whose delight, like that of bigger men-folk, was to run errands for Priscilla when he was not blowing the bellows for Fool Billy at the forge.

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"Bide where ye are!" he called sharply. "I want you to go back to Marshlands, and tell them I shall not be home for weeks. Have you got that message into your head, Dan?"

"Ay," said the lad, recovering from his bewilderment.

"And then go to Good Intent, and tell Miss Cilla that for God's sake she is not to come nor send to Ghyll here." Gaunt, with a backward thought of Peggy lying in the up-stairs room, was ashamed of his eagerness that Cilla should be saved. "You'll not forget, Dan?"

"No," said the boy, his native curiosity conquering the last trace of fear. "No, I'll not forget, Mr. Gaunt; but what mun I say is t' reason, like, that Miss Good Intent can't get her eggs? She's main set on getting that clutch, she is, an' she'll fancy it war me as disappointed her."

Gaunt laughed harshly. "The reason? Tell her that the fever's come to Ghyll."

Like a wounded rabbit the lad sought cover. To him the fever meant all that was terrible, mysterious; he had heard his elders talk of it these months past beside the hearth; he feared that, even at this distance and with the clean breath of the heath between himself and Ghyll, he might be overtaken by the pestilence. Gaunt watched him run far down the moor, and turn the shoulder of a hillock, and then he went indoors again. Mrs. Mathewson was sitting by the hearth.

"I've sent word to Marshlands," he said, taking a seat in the settle-corner, as if the widow and he were friends of long standing. "They'll not look for me till I come home again; and meanwhile the farm and all that will be cared for."

The widow lifted her head and looked at Gaunt with the keen glance which, until to-day, he had found dis-

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concerting. No anxiety, no brooding instinct of disaster, could check the tongue of this woman who had seen life's soft illusions leave her one by one.

"You're not likely to reach home again, Reuben."

"Likely not," he answered, feeling for his pipe and filling it with careful fingers. "There's few would miss me, come to think of it, save you and Peggy."

"I'd miss ye, Reuben Gaunt?" she snapped, with a tired effort to resist her new outlook on the man.

"Yes, you, mother. D'ye hear Peggy moaning up above us? 'Twas time that I, or another, came to help ye to bear it."

Widow Mathewson reached out for her black clay pipe, and took a bit of live peat from the fire, and lit the half-filled bowl. "We mun as weel smoke in company, Reuben," she said.

They smoked in friendship for awhile.

"Gaunt," said the widow suddenly, "d'ye know what fear means or what death means, or are ye a likelier lad than I thought ye?"

"I know what death means, mother," said Reuben, as he moved from the settle-corner to stir the peat-fire into life. "I've learned to-day."

Again a silence fell between them. Then the widow lit her pipe afresh, and her voice was gentler than Gaunt had known it hitherto.

"You've fooled a good few women i' your time, Reuben; but I fancy ye're not by way o' fooling now."

"No," said Gaunt, "I'm not by way of fooling now."

Outside there was no breath of ease to hint that rain might come to-morrow, or the next day after that. In the red of a stagnant sunset the day had ceased, and night brought only a sultry heat that taxed man's endurance to the breaking point.

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“Reuben,” said Widow Mathewson, “I wish th’ wind would ding the house-door down, if only to stifle yond moaning up above us. She’s all I’ve got, an’ I can do naught at all.”

“Bide and see, mother. All’s not over yet. There, let me fill your pipe again for you, mother. ’Twill never do to let you go handling an empty bowl.”

Their vigil had begun. Widow Mathewson stole quiet glances now and then at the other’s face. She was wondering if the fever had been sent, after all, to make a man of Gaunt of Marshlands.

CHAPTER XIX

DAN FOSTER'S lad lost no time in delivering Gaunt's message at Marshlands. Fright lent speed to his legs, and he was glad to pass on his terror to older folk, with a boy's faith that they would be able, in their wisdom, to relieve him of it.

He got little comfort, however, from Gaunt's house-keeper. Her face was scared as his own, and she half-closed the door against him.

"'Tis just like a trick o' yond Mathewsons," she snapped. "Keep themselves apart, they, and reckon to wear a mucky sort o' pride o' their own. Contrairy folk, I allus did say; and now they've brought fever into Garth. Oh, ay, 'tis like 'em."

With that she closed the door outright on Dan Foster's lad, just as her master had done upon the stranger woman long ago. She and old Gaunt suffered from terror of different kinds, but the result in action was the same.

The lad whimpered afresh, just as Billy the Fool had done in that same long ago, as he found himself lonely in the cutting wind. Then he set off again for Good Intent. Miss Cilla would be there; and there was healing wherever Miss Cilla was.

He found her throwing corn to her pigeons.

"Where is your clutch of eggs, Dan?" she asked, looking at the empty basket on his arm.

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A boy who has had one rebuff fears twenty afterwards to follow, and Dan kept his distance.

"Please, Mr. Gaunt wouldn't let me come nigh."

"Why, Dan?"

"I dursn't tell."

Cilla came to the gate of the croft. "You're no coward, Dan. Never say 'daren't' again in my hearing."

"They've fever up at Ghyll," he said, and turned half about, as if expecting to be driven away.

Priscilla lost her courage, as Dan Foster's lad had done, but her excuse was cowardice for another. Personal fear she had none; and throughout the long reign of terror, whenever her father had gone in dread of fever at times, Cilla had never yielded to panic. She had met the danger as she had faced the heart-sickness which Gaunt had caused her in the spring; for Cilla's slimness, the charm which all acknowledged, were made up of strength, not weakness.

"Tell me, Dan — tell me quickly — is it at Ghyll the fever is? It is not Mr. Gaunt who has it? That cannot be, for I saw him only a few hours since."

"Nay," the lad answered bluntly. "Mr. Gaunt he hasn't got it yet, but he'll have it soon, I reckon. Seems he's helping up yonder at Ghyll. Said he wouldn't be home for weeks, he did, and bade me carry a message for him to Marshlands."

"Lord help us!" broke in Widow Lister's soft, kittenish voice. "I said 'twould come, an' what's a poor widow-body to do if she catches it, and her living all by her lone without chick nor child to help her."

The widow had a keen scent for disaster. She had seen Dan come down the road with a look of fright, had followed him, and now was standing close to Cilla's elbow. As of old, her first thought was for herself; that was why,

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as she stood in the sunlight, no line or wrinkle showed on her babyish face, though other women of her age would have earned such marks of righteousness long since.

Cilla turned, and her smile was quick and eager. She was glad just now for a respite from her thoughts. "Lord help other folk, Mrs. Lister," she answered briskly. "Have you ever tried that medicine?"

The widow sighed and her eyes sought the ground meekly. "Chit of a girl," she was thinking, "to go lecturing me. As if I didn't spend all my days i' worriting about other folks' troubles. Am always the first, I, to find troubles out. But, then, she doesn't know what the fever means, the lile, daft lass."

Dan had taken a look at the sun, his only timepiece, and had grown alert on the sudden.

"Will bid you good day, Miss Cilla," he said, touching his cap. "'Tis five of the clock, or thereabouts, an' I promised Billy the Fool to bellows-blow for him. He gets terrible short i' the temper, does Billy, if I'm not there to a minute."

Widow Lister followed him down the road. "Oh, Dan, my lad!" she called after him. "Tell Billy he's never mended my bit of a window-fastener yet. David promised to do it, an' went overseas; then Billy said he'd do the job; but men are all of a pattern, so 'twould seem."

Cilla watched the two of them out of sight. Well as she knew the widow, there was something unexpected, ludicrous almost, in her remembrance of the window-fastener. The fever had come to Ghyll, it might steal down to Garth before the month was out; yet Widow Lister, in the midst of childish fright, could remember that David had left one job undone when he set sail for Canada.

"What's amiss, lile lass?" asked her father, coming down the highway and seeing the troubled look on her face.

"Oh, nothing, father. The day has been overwarm, and I'm feeling it, maybe —"

"Now, don't go blaming the weather," roared Yeoman Hirst, admitting all the parish into his confidence. "Weather comes, and it goes. There needs be more than that to shake you, Cilla."

She told her news and Yeoman Hirst stood very still for a moment. He was afraid, and he was conquering his fear.

"'Twas bound to reach us soon or late," he said, in a steady voice. "Fancied it might leave bonnie Garth alone, but 'twas not to be. We mun just look it straight i' the face, lass, an' get on with our day's work as if naught had happened."

Cilla put an arm through her father's. There was something vastly clean, and strong, and childlike in the yeoman's faith; he was a man to lean upon, as Widow Mathewson would have put it.

"It's at Ghyll, you say?" went on the farmer, after a pause. "Which of the two has caught it—the mother, or Peggy?"

"Dan didn't say. He was so scared, poor lad, that he seemed glad to be rid of his message and away. But Reuben Gaunt is there and means to bide."

Hirst's temper was ruffled by his fear and the need to check it, as a strong man's way is. "Can understand his being there — but, as for biding, Gaunt was never one to bide two minutes i' one place, 'specially if there happened to be danger to his durned, soft body."

"You're wrong, father." Cilla's voice was warm in defence of the man who had slighted her. "He may be

this and that, but not a coward. If he'd found all well at Ghyll, he might have roamed abroad; as it was, he stayed."

"Oh, the snod ways o' reasoning ye women have!" growled Hirst. "Dan brought false news, if he said Gaunt stayed in a fever-house. I wouldn't do it myself, lass, and I should reckon myself a prudent man for taking to my heels. There, there! I never could bear to wrangle, least of all wi' ye, Cilla. Come away in, and get my tea ready. I'm drouthy and dry, like the roads that clem ye up wi' dust these days."

At Ghyll, up on the lonely moor, the hot day ended in weariness and hardship. Widow Mathewson had crept often up the stair, to see if she could help her lass. Now she and Reuben were smoking together beside the hearth. If courage needed proof, these two were finding the best gift of life — bravery won from fear. The fever was no fanciful scourge, to be tempted by encouragement into building foul nests about a house. It came like a sword that did not kill with a clean blade at once, but hacked its victims with a blunt rusty edge until the end came; and strength or weakness of the folk who met it mattered little, as with other plagues.

The widow and Reuben Gaunt smoked tranquilly by the hearth; and the quiet, hot silence lay about two folk who were learning to approve each other. The woman, after the moorland fashion, was passing the time with tales of the last visitation. It seemed to give her some relief, just as the sleepy fire of peats served, in some odd way, to cheer the sultriness which it intensified.

"Ye were in your cradle then," she said, "an' knew naught on 't, though it carried your mother off. Reuben, if ye ever want to know what flimsy stuff we're made of, high and low, good 'uns an' bad — ye've got to look on at

a fever-time. Th' fear seems more catching than th' fever itseln, an' always th' big, hearty men catches it worst. Oh, the sights that come back to mind! Thirty-and-four year ago it war, and all comes back as plain as Peggy's moanings up aboon us yonder."

Gaunt saw that it eased her to talk of olden days. The man had grown gentle, considerate. He was full of this new experience of thinking for others, rather than himself.

"Tell me about them, mother," he said.

"Oh, there's no use i' telling. Ye need to have seen it — as ye will do, happen, if ye're spared — to know the muckiness o' fright. Ivery house war a island to itseln. Men who'd faced bulls run mad at Shepston market-day, men who'd risked crossing the bogland at dark o' neet, to bring comfort to a friend, — where were they, Reuben? Hugging their own firesides. Not a drop o' milk could the poorer sort get — and milk was needed, ye'll be sure, i' the stricken cottages — for a watch was kept at th' farm-gate, an' they were fended off afore they could bring their pitchers nigh."

The widow talked of things she had seen long ago with clear unfrightened eyes. She would pause to light her pipe, and then would fall into a friendly silence, taking up the tale again at leisure. For she knew that, however it went with Peggy, there would be time and to spare for talk with Reuben.

"I've heard young folks shiver an' shake when small-pox was so much as named. Bless ye, I've seen worse nor small-pox. It may spoil your face — an' what day of a hard life doesn't help to spoil your looks? — but there's a chance of living on. There's the rub, lad! 'Tis when ye set folk face to face wi' what's all but certain death,

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that ye know what they're made of. There's rum i' the cupboard, Reuben. I'm forgetting what manners I iver had."

"No, and thank you, mother. Not just to-night."

The widow got up and set glasses and a bottle on the table, and took down the kettle from the crane hanging over the peat-fire.

"Don't you go too far wi' godliness all at once, Reuben," she said, with a flash of her old tartness. "Ye're not going to save Peggy by keeping a drop o' liquor out o' ye, but happen ye'll let the fever in by playing the miser that way."

Gaunt had been right when he said that the widow could never have borne her loneliness without a man to help her. Already she was gentler than he had known her. She jested about the measure of rum she shared with him, saying that he led her into bad ways. She had found that interval of peace which sometimes comes to folk in the bitterest of their trouble; and those who have lived long, and suffered long, say that it is God's breathing-space, granted to brave folk lest their courage fail them at the pinch.

Down at Garth, the stars lay tranquil over David's forge. Dan Foster's lad was sweating at the bellows, while Billy the Fool played at getting the day's work done. Billy had finished the last of the job, when soon afterwards Yeoman Hirst came by, and, seeing the fire-glow across the road, stepped in to ask if his fence-rails were ready for the morrow.

"Te-he!" chuckled Billy. "Said they'd be done right fair in time, I did, and Billy keeps his word. Ye'd have nigh split your sides, Yeoman, to see Dan yonder a-blowing and a-blowing till I fancied he was going to burst his lile self and the bellows, too. You're stepping up to

Good Intent? Well, now, I'll stretch my legs a bit, I will, after all this marlaking."

He walked in silence beside Hirst, after accepting his customary match and pipeful of tobacco. It was not till they had reached Good Intent that the workings of the natural's mind showed plainly.

"Dan tells me fever's come to Ghyll," he said, in the low, dispassionate voice which was always a sign, to those who knew him, of some troubled reaching-out to his blurred past.

"Ay, but don't you go fearing it, lad Billy. 'Twould never hurt such as ye."

"Was thinking of Mr. Gaunt, I. Dan says he's up yonder. Now, 'twould be terrible pranksome if he happened to die on 't himself. There'd be such a clearing o' the air, as a body might say."

Hirst, little as he cared for Reuben Gaunt, was shocked by the quietness with which Billy uttered the wish. This lad, who was peaceable and kindly of face as Garth street itself, was asking a terrible punishment for his one enemy.

"Oh, tuts, lad!" said the yeoman, patting him roughly on the shoulder. "We don't pray fever on any man, surely, whether we like him or no."

"Well, now, I don't pray fever. Couldn't if I were minded to. I just think long o' what I want — as hard as my daft wits can be driven, Yeoman — and then I bide till it comes."

Yeoman Hirst had no insight into the by-ways of prayer; he said his own on Sabbaths, while Billy was roaming wide across the moors, and he said them with the simple faith that was a part of his dealings with this and with the next world. He was nonplussed, for the natural at these times was self-possessed, and his quiet statements, as of fact, unsettled wiser men.

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"Come in, lad," said Hirst, pushing the other into the porchway. "I'll tell Cilla to draw ye a sup of home-brewed ale, and we'll talk o' likelier things than fever."

"Thank ye, but nay," said Billy, after a pause. "I've a mind to shut down the forge, and then get home to bed among the heather. Terrible chap is Billy for playing all day, like. Then he needs his snug bed under sky-blankets, Yeoman. I'll be bidding ye good night, I. There's a laverock calls me up with the dawn, and he'll miss me if I oversleep myself."

"Cilla, is Billy a fool, or are ye and me?" asked Hirst, coming into the living-room and finding Priscilla tending the geraniums that lined the window-sill.

"Ye and me, father," answered Cilla, with a queer little laugh. "I was thinking o' Reuben Gaunt when you came in, and that was foolishness, you've always told me."

Hirst settled himself in the hooded chair and stirred the peat-fire into a warmth that was no way needed. "So was Fool Billy. He wished the fever might take him up yonder at Ghyll."

Cilla had been thinking her own thoughts; and she came and stood by the hearth, one hand on the mantel with its tea canisters and its china dogs. Through the heat, and the work of the farm, and the fever-dread, Priscilla was still the coolest and the bravest thing in Garth. She had something about her at all times of that starlight strength and constancy which Fool Billy courted as he slept among the heather-beds.

"I've wished better things for Reuben," she said. "I was thinking, when you stepped in, father, that he's done what few in Garth would do."

"Won a fell-race, eh? To be sure, there's summat i' doing that; but, Cilla, there's harder races i' this life, and ye're daft to think o' Reuben."

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“ Oh, father no! It was more than the fell-race I was thinking of. From what Dan said, he is staying at Ghyll. You need have no doubt of that, as you had this morning. How many would have done as much — how many, of all the folk we know? To run a race, father, and hear them clapping hands, and know your feet are going nimble underneath ye — that seems easy, and soon over, win it or lose it — but to wait beside a fever-bed — ”

Hirst stirred uneasily in his chair. “ Now, Cilla, you’re letting fancy play the dangment with you, same as Gaunt always did. Fancies are well enough, lass, but I’m for the day’s work, and beef and ale in between to prop up all the chancy-come-quick notions.”

“ Reuben is for the day’s work,” said Cilla quietly. “ A harder working day than I’ve had yet.”

Hirst reached for his pipe and sat in silence. Priscilla rested both hands lightly on the mantel, and stooped to the smouldering peats, and saw fire-pictures there. All her love for Gaunt had found resurrection. The shame that had followed the green, soft ways of spring went out and away from her. If he could run with the best of those who ran at Linsall Fair, if afterwards he could face the quietness of that dread which few met bravely, he had shown courage of two kinds. His faults — were they not all on the surface? He had found little chance as yet to show his strength.

It was so that Cilla went excusing him; and presently, as she looked deeper into the peats, she grew angry with herself for thinking that excuse of any kind was needed. She remembered Widow Mathewson’s tale, her picture of Reuben’s motherless, untended boyhood. Her heart went out to him; and suddenly she flushed with keen dismay. Under all other thoughts was the question whether it were Peggy who had caught the fever. She had

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come near to making a dream picture of what might follow if Gaunt were free — if Gaunt were free —

She checked herself. "Father, there's nothing so idle as thoughts," she said, standing straight to her comely height, and seeking wisdom from the other's bigness and look of well-being. "'Tis time I got to bed, if I'm to be fit for any work in the morning. Good night, father."

She lingered on the last words, and Hirst, who was no fool so far as observation went, laughed quietly over his pipe when she had gone.

"She's tender, she, with the old man," he muttered. "Bless me, if the lile fool hasn't been thinking o' Gaunt again. I know that note i' her voice. She had it i' spring, and it put me in mind of a blackbird's when she's all about building her nest. Well, I've known queer cattle i' my time, but the queerest of all is women. I like 'em, for all that."

He tried to banish Gaunt from his thoughts, as a man of no account, and could not. Like Cilla, he was just — and for that reason was laughed at now and then by his neighbours — and he knew that Gaunt, if it were true that he had stayed by choice at Ghyll, was a better man to-day than he.

"Mind ye, I don't believe the tale," he said stubbornly, stirring the peats with needless vigour. "Dan Foster's lad is like others — light o' feet, and light o' thought. He brought a wrong tale down to Garth; but we shall know, I reckon, by the morning."

Cilla, in her room above, was less anxious to get to bed betimes than she had seemed. She leaned at the open casement, and watched the half moon ride the sky. Not a breath of air came from the steaming night; it was cooler within doors than without. The apple-tree whose branches had lit the window-panes with tender green in spring,

showed dry and drooping leaves; its sickly fruit lay shrivelled, asking only for a breeze to come and snap the withered stalks. Even the hills, ranging out and out across the clearness of the night, suggested weariness instead of strength. It was weather to help no man's crops; but the fever throve on it.

Cilla had no thought of heat. She had returned to the cool days of spring, when Gaunt had made her feel the beauty of this land which she had known from childhood. She cared less for the man, maybe, than for the glamour he had brought her; and each proof that he was strong, was proof, too, that the glamour had not lied to her.

When at last she got to bed, it was only to fall asleep and dream of Keta's Well, and of saunters by the stream, and softer golds and deeper crimsons than she had ever seen in the skies at Garth, until Reuben came to teach her what the homeland meant.

Once she stirred in her sleep. "David, dreams cannot last," she murmured. "You know they cannot. David, come home again to Garth!"

Then afterwards she dreamed quiet thoughts of Reuben; and they were wandering up the streamway that led to Keta's Well.

CHAPTER XX

AT ten of the next morning Widow Mathewson crept down the stairway at Ghyll Farm. Gaunt had snatched what sleep he could on the settle in the living-room.

“You’re needed, Reuben,” she said, touching him on the shoulder.

He was on his feet at once; and to the widow it was restful to find a man who answered so quickly to the call of need.

“Well?” he asked, rubbing his eyes.

“She’s all but gone. I thought, like, ye might care —”

He went up the stair and she followed him. Gaunt, in days past, had needed the whip across his back; he found it now. There was no lifting of Peggy’s eyes to his, no word to bridge the passage. He took her hands in his, but they were dumb. There was a stifled breath, as of one who seeks for air in an overcrowded room and that was all. Peggy o’ Mathewson’s had gone out along the black, hot fever-road.

The widow looked at Gaunt, and pushed him gently from the room. “Poor lad,” was all she said. “’Tis one more trouble added to the peck for me — but ye’re not used to it.”

Gaunt went out through the porch, and across to the gate of the croft, and stood there, leaning over the top

bar, just as Peggy had when she said good-by to him. A great stillness lay over the lands; there was no movement of bird, or sheep, or cattle; no breeze stirred, and the sun, stark in the everlasting blue, seemed the one unwearied thing in nature.

A stillness lay, too, over Reuben Gaunt. He was groping toward the future. A few days since, Peggy had kissed him at the gate here, had bidden him return as quickly as he could. After that there was silence. Though he had seen her, watched beside her bed, no word had passed between them. Not a sign of recognition had come to soften the blow. He could only recall the girl's vigour, her glowing health, and contrast them with what lay behind him at the farm.

Gradually the numbness left him, and the first sharp sense of grief intruded. He dwelt unduly on the ugliness and horror of Peggy's death, as though they mattered, now that the soul had passed. He thought, in a vague, haphazard fashion, of many ways in which he might have dealt better with her. He had a senseless longing to have back that day at Linsall Fair, when he had tempted her to meet the fever. They might have chosen twenty other roads than that to Linsall. Mrs. Mathewson, with her creed that was old and pagan as the moor itself, would have told him that he was not to blame in this — that the road to Linsall Fair was planned out before ever Peggy lay in her cradle.

Gaunt had known pain of body; but this anguish that grew keener every moment was new to him. He had no knowledge of the way to meet it, and such ignorance makes all men cowardly.

He had lost all sense of time, until a glance at the sun showed that it was lying over Dingle Nook. He had spent two hours here at the gate, it seemed. Again he blamed

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himself, and thought of Widow Mathewson, and went back to the farm.

She met him at the door. " 'Twas kind o' ye, Reuben, to leave me to my work; but, then, ye're always kind these days."

" Thought I had left you in the lurch, mother."

" Nay! There was summat to be done, and ye'd have been i' the way."

They looked at each other, the man who had suffered and the woman who had suffered much. On their faces was that light, steady, quiet and full of wonder, which touches those who have just stood near to death.

" Have you been — " he began, with quick intuition, and could not put his question into words.

" Ay, getting th' poor lass ready." The widow's lips trembled. She reached out for Gaunt's hand impulsively. " I should have been readying her for her wedding instead, Reuben! Oh, my lad, 'tis a queer make o' business, this o' living and dying — but 'specially the living."

Gaunt knew that he was needed, and answered the call. " There, mother, you're not left alone."

The words were few, but the tone of them gave new strength to Mrs. Mathewson. " You can call me mother often — never too often; it's only fro' your lips I shall iver hear the name again."

Throughout the watch which these two had shared, no moment had been so full of unexpected tenderness. The widow was leaning on Reuben as on a trusted son, and he was standing to her — not in promise, but in deed — as a stay-by in her latter years. The grip of his hands helped her to face what had to come; the steady ring of his voice relieved a solitude whose silence might otherwise have broken down her spirit.

" I must get word down to the coffiner at Garth," said

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Reuben, knowing how the thought of work to be done would steady Mrs. Mathewson. "I'll look for a farm-lad to pass up the fields, and shout to him."

"Nay, but ye willun't! I've planned it all out i' my mind these last two hours. Nathan, the coffiner, wouldn't come within a mile o' Ghyll; I know Nathan, an' he's frightened o' smaller things nor fever. See ye, Reuben! She was always full o' fancies, an' often she'd say to me, sitting beside the hearth o' nights, 'Mother,' she'd say, 'if ever I happen to die, like, I'd like to be buried clean i' the peat, not down i' a wet churchyard.' She lived lonely, ye see, like myseln, an' I fancy she'd no liking for many neighbours, even i' th' kirkyard."

Reuben was ill at ease. He had made no pretence of godliness in years past, but at a time such as this old memories revived.

"Mother, you'd have the parson — you'll laugh at me, maybe — but surely you'd have the parson say a prayer above her?"

Widow Mathewson had always been fearless in her outlook, whether it were true or false, and she did not yield. "I don't laugh at ye, lad, but such softnesses were never meant for Peggy and me. 'Tis all very weel i' the tamer lands, but not up here. She lived as she lived, an' she died as she died, and naught alters that. God rest her soul, say I — but that's as she made her bed i' this life. Reuben," she went on, abandoning all her hardness again, "I've done a deal o' thinking about religion i' my time, an' never come much nearer aught. Ye might tell me that Peggy did as weel i' this life as could be expected of a body? Now, there, I'm growing old, or I'd not give way to whimsies. Reach down my pipe for me, Reuben; 'baccy alwus helps me to get right sides up wi' the world again."

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Gaunt, the ne'er-do-weel, felt an odd thrill of comfort in ministering to this hard-faced woman who depended on him. He filled her pipe for her, and he lit a spill at the fire.

"That's better," she said, drawing long puffs of smoke. "There's a deal to be done, and there was never use i' blinking work. For myseln, it matters naught either way; but for ye, Reuben — well, 'tis best to get fever out of a house as quick as may be. It wouldn't help a living soul if silly Nathan stepped up and caught th' fever, or if parson came, and he's one o' the few i' Garth who would. Parson is staunch, for all he thinks me heathenish. Ye've faced a good deal, Reuben; surely, ye'll help me to keep fever out o' Garth?"

Gaunt moved uneasily about the room. He would have had another kind of burial, but there was no gain-saying the other's wisdom. The village, so far, had escaped contagion; his own feelings must stand aside, surely, when measured by the terrible price which Garth might have to pay for them.

"We have no right to do aught else," he said, turning to meet the widow's glance. "See, mother, she always had a liking for the spot where the rowan hangs over the stream. I've been thinking she might wish to be laid there."

The widow nodded. "Get to your work, Reuben," was all she said. "It doesn't do to sit idle at such-like times."

Something near to peace came to Gaunt when he reached the little ghyll and stood watching the stream, all but dry now, trickle down the rocky slope under the rowan. It seemed that, after all, Peggy would sleep more soundly in her own homeland than in another place.

The peat lay soft and deep almost down to the edge of

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the stream, and there was little trouble in the digging. With a touch of that fugitive poetry which was part of the man, he conquered his horror of the work. He told himself that she would like to have the stream-song close beside her, day and night. Death would not be a sleep and a forgetting, but a sleep that remembered all the pleasant moorland haunts. And the rowan-leaves would shelter her from heat in summer, and in wintertime the peat would lie between Peggy and the wildest storms that blew.

Fancies crowded round Reuben, as he worked in the pitiless heat. It was well that they came to his relief, for stancher men than he might have yielded, without shame, to the misery of this task.

He looked up at last, and dashed the sweat from his eyes. The grave was ready. The heat-waves, running from end to end of the open moor, danced giddily before him; he felt the body-sickness which had caught him at the end of the fell-race which had ended with an over-moor walk home, and a halt under the rowan here while Peggy and he talked of their coming marriage.

When he recovered, and could see the moor again in proper outline, he saw Billy the Fool standing on the spur of rising ground behind. Billy's face showed no trace of feeling; he stood motionless as some stone landmark reared to guide travellers across the heath.

"Digging a grave, Mr. Gaunt?" he said quietly.

Reuben was too deep in sorrow to be startled. He had not known that there was a looker-on while he worked, and Billy was the last of all Garth folk he would have wished to see just now; but it mattered little.

"Yes, digging a grave, Billy." His voice was tired. "I would not come overnear, if I were you, for there's fever come to Ghyll."

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“Te-he!” answered Billy gravely. “Fever doesn’t take lile fools such as me. ’Tis the sensible, wise folk, such as ye, Mr. Gaunt, that it takes a fancy to.”

He was not afraid. So much was sure. But he turned, and went down the moor with his easy, loping strides; and Reuben wondered for a moment, in the midst of his weariness, what Billy was doing here.

Billy could have given him no answer. He had heard of the trouble at Ghyll, and instinct had brought him up the moor to learn if it were Gaunt who was likely to die. Instinct took him, now that he had seen Reuben alive and well, down to the forge where much work awaited him.

Gaunt forgot that he had come. He went heavily across the strip of moor to Ghyll, leaving his spade at the graveside.

They were strong of body, Widow Mathewson and he, and it was only a little way from the farm to the rowan-tree. When all was done, and the kindly peat lay smooth above Gaunt’s first dream of wedlock, a curlew came flapping down the moor, and paused above the rowan-tree, and wheeled about it in wide circles. Sometimes it drew nearer, and sometimes it roamed wide; but it did not leave them, and its wail was piteous.

The widow’s face was drawn and lined, as Gaunt’s was, but she held herself bravely, and her voice was quiet.

“Happen the curlew’s her parson, Reuben. Would she be happier, think ye, down yonder i’ Garth kirk-yard?”

“’Tis strange, mother. I’ve heard few birds call since I came to Ghyll, and now —”

“Strange? There’s naught stranger than life, Reuben — than life, and what we’ve put to bed under th’ rowan-tree. Folk get mazed wi’ chatter, seems to me, down i’ the valleys;

they fancy life's made up o' gossip, an' borrowing tin kettles one fro' t' other, an' quarrelling when one here an' there has burned th' bottom through."

The curlew drew nearer to them, wheeled above their heads. Its cry was Ishmael's, and the undertone of it was loneliness.

"Yond's Peggy's mate," said the widow. "She was allus a wild bird, she, and she never would have settled down at Marshlands. Reuben, lad, cannot ye comfort yourself wi' that thought?"

He smiled gravely. "Had I no wildness, then?" he asked. "That used to be your trouble, surely, in the old days."

"Ay, but 'twas a different sort o' wildness. See yond curlew. 'Twill go down to th' lowlands to feed, Reuben, an' to have a frolic, like; but tell it that it's got to bide there for life, and 'twould die o' homesickness. Oh, it's hard to say it, an' harder to believe it, but maybe all's for th' best."

She turned for a last look at the grave; then, with a firmer tread than Gaunt's, she moved down the moor. As they reached the croft, they saw a burly horseman unfastening the gate with his crop.

"Nay, doctor, if ye please!" cried the widow, lifting a warning hand.

"Oh, I know you've fever in the house," he said impatiently. "That's why I came. I only heard of it an hour since, as I passed through Garth. How's the patient?"

"Past your caring for — but thank ye all th' same, doctor."

"Oh, bless me — Peggy dead? I can't believe it. Mrs. Mathewson, I wish to God I'd heard the news sooner. I might have saved her."

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"I fancy not. She niver had th' look o' one as war going to mend, an' I've seen many a case i' my time. Now, doctor, turn about. There's the rest o' the dale to think of, an' ye'll not better aught by seeking risks."

She told him of the burial, of Reuben's help, of their resolve to save Garth, so far as their own endurance went, from the scourge that lay so close about it. She spoke of these matters as of such usual tasks as cattle-milking or taking corn to the poultry-yard; there was no sense of heroism behind her quiet statement of the facts.

The doctor ceased fumbling with the rusty gate-catch. "I always thought you had sense enough for three, and now I know it. Of course, I should be a fool — a bit of a knave, too — to go in when there's nothing to be done."

Widow Mathewson could not restrain the pride — grim enough, but clean and honest — which had given her strength to meet the years of trouble. There was no malice in her tone, no unfriendliness. "They allus said i' Garth that we kept ourselves to ourselves up here. Well, we did while we were i' health, doctor; tell them we'll do no less, now we're i' trouble."

The doctor nodded, gave a quick inquiring glance at Reuben from under his shaggy eyebrows, and rode forward along the ridge of the moor.

"I must notify the death for them," he thought, as he jogged along. "They'll never think of the need for it, so I must. Well, I've not seen the lass, and it will be irregular, to be sure; but Lord knows they ask few questions when it's a fever case. Soonest hidden away out of sight, the better folk are pleased these days."

Then he fell to thinking of Reuben Gaunt. Mrs. Mathewson had made it plain that Reuben entered the farm with knowledge of the danger, and that he chose to stay rather than leave her friendless. The doctor,

during his years of rough intercourse with many people, had found less courage in the face of death than he cared to admit; he himself was as hardened against fear, as he was against exposure and fatigue, and he grew impatient when weaker men showed signs of panic.

“He knew what it meant when he stepped into Ghyll,” he muttered. “Well, well, I’ve been mistaken in Gaunt, it seems.”

At the end of his day’s round he was riding slowly down the village — his stout ‘nag as wearied with the heat as himself — when he met Cilla of the Good Intent, and reined up.

“You’re the only cool thing I’ve seen to-day,” he declared, with bluff gallantry. “Bless me, Cilla, how d’ye contrive it? I was never one to flatter, but you put me in mind of a spring flower peeping out of a hedgerow. It is not spring, child, and primroses are over for this year, and the heat, I tell you, is appalling.”

He wagged his head fiercely, but Cilla only laughed; and the laugh was cool and dainty as her person. Then suddenly her face clouded.

“We ought not to be jesting, doctor. Indeed we ought not. I cannot keep my thoughts away from those poor folk up at Ghyll.”

The doctor halted, irresolute for once. He knew more of the history of the countryside than even Will the Driver did, and now he remembered many rumours, earlier in the year, that Gaunt would carry off Priscilla after all the rest of Garth had failed. He had been sorry to hear the news then; but his feelings had changed since morning.

“Best tell you at once,” he said, “for you’re bound to hear it soon or late. Peggy o’ Mathewson’s died this morning.”

He regretted his impulsiveness, when he saw Cilla move

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unsteadily across the road, and rest her hand on his saddle, as if she could not stand without support. He should have let another break the news that Gaunt was free, so he told himself.

Cilla's pride was of different texture from Widow Mathewson's; but it was as strong in its own way, and it did not fail her when need came. She was pale, and her eyes were overbright, but she stood upright again and looked the doctor in the face.

"Tell me," she said, "did Mr. Gaunt go there — and did he stay in the house — of his own free will?"

"What else should have kept him, lassie? I had all the tale from Mrs. Mathewson, and I tell you she's lucky to have such a man about her. Pride may be fine enough, Cilla, but not when you're alone in a house, with one death to cry over and another — your own — to look forward to."

Cilla's face clouded again. "Is — is the risk so great as they would have us believe?"

"Well, maybe not; there's always hope — always hope, Cilla. And there are two of them to help keep the boggarts away."

Yet Cilla knew that the old doctor took a grave view of the matter; his praise of Gaunt, praise such as he rarely gave, was proof that he thought Reuben guilty of foolhardiness. All Garth would learn now that its judgment of Gaunt had been wrong; but there would be little use in that, if he died in proving it.

Then suddenly she thought of Peggy, and pity drove away her selfishness. She recalled the fine, careless swing of the gipsy figure, as "Mathewson's lass" had passed her on the moors or going to market. There seemed something harsh, uncalled-for, in the passing of so brave a soul. And it was she who had persuaded Reuben to be

true to a promise earlier than she could claim, in those near yet far-off days of spring.

Priscilla returned, tired out, to Good Intent. The world of Garth might be small, but the girl's heart was big as the limits of human compassion and human searching after happiness. The two instincts were so mingled, since hearing the doctor's news, that Cilla could not disentangle them.

"Come ye in, now," said her father, who was smoking the after-work pipe of evening, which was the sweetest of the day to him.

"Ye're looking bothered, like. It all comes o' gadding about i' this heat overmuch. Grown men can bear it, but not lile hazel saplings such as ye."

Cilla only smiled, and went up to her own room. She could not bear to talk just now even with Yeoman Hirst, the best of all her friends.

"Let a maid alone when she wears that look," Hirst muttered sagely. "I was never much of a hand at tackling whimsies. I'd liefer have a thorn-hedge any day."

The doctor, meanwhile, had passed down Garth street. He was thinking mainly of the good meal and the ease that he had earned, and he frowned as he saw Widow Lister watering her strip of garden-front. He knew the little woman by heart, and indeed reined up before she had darted into the roadway.

"Oh, doctor, I've been trying to catch ye these two days back," she said.

"Well? D'ye want to consult me? Shouldn't say much ailed you, by the plump look o' your cheeks."

The widow simpered a little, and cast down her eyes. "'Tisn't what ails me, doctor; 'tis what might ail me."

"Now, now!" The other was impatient, but like all men he was weak in face of the little body's helplessness.

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"I'll be getting home, Mrs. Lister. What might ail you, only heaven in its wisdom knows. Let me get supper and an hour's smoke until the ailment reaches you; then call me in. I've had nothing since a bite of bread and cheese at noon."

"Ay, but 'tis th' fever; ye munnot jest about it. Bide a wee while, doctor. A few minutes more will mak' lile difference to ye."

"Won't they?" growled the doctor to himself. "It's just those odd wasted minutes at the day's end, little fool, that break a man up, come to reckon the total at a year's end."

But he waited with some show of patience, and listened to this woman who had scarcely had an ache, or done a day's hard work in all her life.

"'Tis this way, ye see, doctor. I'm not like folk who have cheerful company about me all my time. When I sit by my lone self o' nights, I've allus the dread o' fever for company, and I take it to my lone bed wi' me. What I want to know is this — suppose I passed a tramping-man i' the road, as I did awhile since, an' suppose he looked as if he was sickening, like, an' suppose —"

The doctor cut her short. "Now I catch your drift. You want to know how long 'twill be before the mulberry spots come out," he said, with a cheerfulness that shocked Widow Lister. "Something between a week and a fortnight; but I shouldn't be troubled, Widow. Fever doesn't take the plump little women; it has overmuch respect for 'em."

"Is that truth, doctor?"

"Ay, as true as that I'm due home for supper. Good night to you. She'll have another worrit before to-morrow's ended," he added, as he jogged down the street. "There's a use for the widow of course — there's a use

for everything created — but it puzzles a man at times to find out what 'tis.”

At Ghyll the sleepy dusk had settled into slumber. The day had been tired with its own heat, and the night was wearier still. Gaunt had stretched himself on the long settle, after seeing the widow go up to bed. He slept with that death-in-life which comes from sheer exhaustion, and did not hear Mrs. Mathewson creep, like a thief, down her own stair, did not know that the sneck of the door was lifted quietly.

The widow passed up through the croft and into the moor. The new moon, a sickle of silver-grey, lay over the rowan-tree. Mrs. Mathewson, from old habit, curtseyed to it seven times, not knowing that she did so. Then she sought the ghyll, and the stream that was too little and too dry to be heard at all if the faintest breeze had stirred about the heath.

Gaunt had wondered at the widow's strength throughout the day. It was well that he did not see her in her weakness now. All restraint was gone, as she knelt by the grave that was not a day old as yet.

“Peggy, my lass! Peggy, ye're all I have i' this world. Reuben's staunch, I know, an' I'm fond o' the lad, but 'tis ye I want — 'tis ye.”

The weakness of the strong, when at last they are compelled to yield to it, takes its own revenge. Mrs. Mathewson was bewildered, helpless. Then a blind fury seized her, and she cried out on God because He had robbed her, who had so little, of the one thing she prized. And then there came a darkness, a reaching out for help, such as Gaunt had known not long ago at the gate of the croft.

After that, a counterfeit of peace stole over her. She was on the borderland between this world and another,

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and she seemed to reach across and take the girl's hands in her own.

"Ye've strayed, lile lass. Come away back wi' me to Ghyll," she said, grasping the new hope. "Ah, now, ye'd come — surely ye'd come if your old mother asked ye."

Throughout the night she lay beside the grave, sleeping fitfully at times, but oftener lying awake, listening to the trickle of the stream and watching the Milky Way that streaked the sky with jewelled dust. For these few hours she had let weakness have its way with her; but, when the pink fingers of the dawn began to touch the hills, she rose. Old habit taught her that the day was meant for work. She was dizzy; her limbs trembled under her; grief had left her stricken in soul and body. She must conquer the trouble, that was all, as she had done at many a long-past dawn.

There had been no freshness, no movement of the breeze, through the night hours; but now the moor seemed to breathe at last, as a little wind got up and rustled lightly among the heather. Not the fingers only, but the broad hands of the dawn were on the hills. The pink lights had deepened into crimson, and stretched like beacon fires across the eastern moor. The grey darkness receded from the dingles. Out to the west, a sky of tenderest sapphire brushed the rough edges of the heath.

Widow Mathewson, again from habit, halted to look at the glory of her homeland. She scarcely knew that the well-known pageant was spread out before her; but she gathered heart again, and went bravely down to Ghyll. She walked with a man's stride, a man's straight back, and none would have guessed that she was a broken woman, asking no more than to keep her pride until the end.

Gaunt, too, was astir soon after dawn. He stepped out on tiptoe, glad that the widow slept so long, and fearing to awaken her. They met in the mistal-yard.

"Why, mother, I fancied you were sleeping," said Reuben.

"Fancies are well enough for night-time, Reuben, but they don't last long after dawn. I stretched i' my sleep, I did, an' I saw th' light twinkling on the panes, an' I be-thought me like, that th' farm work needed looking to. So I stepped down an' out."

"You might have waked me."

"Nay, ye were sleeping oversound. Mathewson was niver much of a man, but even he was snappish when I wakened him from his sleep."

It was in this way that she chose to meet the future. There would be no more stolen vigils under the rowan-tree, no undermining of her courage. With a sudden gust of feeling, she understood that Gaunt was the only living hope she had to rest upon — and there was danger to him.

"Reuben," she said gravely, "th' long watch has begun. The days will seem long i' passing afore we know we're safe."

"We'll weather them, never fear. Best not think of to-morrow at all, but get on with our work."

The widow glanced at him with keen scrutiny. "There's a deal o' sense hidden somewhere about ye, Reuben. Seems ye've been feared to let it peep out till now."

CHAPTER XXI

NEITHER Gaunt nor Widow Mathewson was prepared for the quiet and temperate beauty that crept into their waiting-time at Ghyll. If Gaunt had neglected his farm work in old days, it was through idleness, not from lack of knowledge. Acquaintance with all details of field and stable had been bred in him, and the widow watched him go about the usual round of work with growing wonder.

“A hired man would have done half as much i’ the day, and done it badly,” she said, finding him milking the cows one evening.

“Oh, ’tis only the old proverb, mother, the master man always works the better if he has the will. ’Tis not often that he has the will, ye see.”

She watched him persuade the last of the cows to be friendly with the milking pail, listened awhile to the pleasant splash-splash of the milk. “Reuben,” she said, with a touch of jealousy, “yond’s the sauciest beast o’ them all, and ye seem to have her at a word. She wouldn’t let any but me milk her — not even Peggy, though she’d deft hands at the udders. And, Reuben, ye’re doing too much. Leave some bit o’ work for me to do, lest I get thinking o’ what’s past and done with.”

“We’ll share and share alike,” said Gaunt, looking over shoulder from his seat on the milking-stool.

“Some folk have queer notions o’ sharing. I tell ye, I’ve not been so idle o’ my hands sin’ I war a girl.”

“All the better, mother. You’ve earned a rest by this time, while I — perhaps I’ve earned a spell of work,” he broke off, with something of the widow’s own grim humour.

The busy needs of the farm were already helping these two to forget their burden. To Gaunt it seemed strange, profane almost, that sorrow for the dead should give place to workaday anxieties; to the widow, who was older in experience, it was plain that such work brought with it the gift of healing.

All the routine at Ghyll was interrupted. It had thrived on its trade in milk, and cheeses, and butter. Now Widow Mathewson, and Gaunt, and the three pigs fattening in the sty at the far side of the mistal, were left to drink what they could of milk that once had supplied half Garth’s needs; the rest, save what was needed for their own week’s butter-making, had to be poured out into the parched and thirsty croft.

“It seems a waste,” said Gaunt at night, after they had filled the bowl in the dairy, and fed the pigs, and stood watching the rest of the milk run down the croft in a narrow stream.

“That’s the good farmer cropping out again in ye, Reuben. Of course ’tis wasteful, but there’s a deal of waste i’ life, as I’ve found it. ’Tis one o’ the things we hev to put up with, like. Was never good at a riddle, I; parson down yonder, maybe, could tell us why bairns are crying out i’ Garth for this milk we’re spilling — milk their mothers willun’t fetch, or send for, though I’d no way risk letting them have it, if they came.”

Reuben watched the streamlet die down, a dirty white across the sun-scorched brown of the grass. Then he linked his arm in hers, and drew her toward the farm, and

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set her down in the hooded chair by the hearth while he found her pipe for her.

“Good sakes!” said the widow softly. “To be waited on at my time o’ life, and by ye of all men, Reuben.”

“That’s the queerness of things again,” he answered, lighting his own pipe.

In other days there had been between them the silence of would-be enmity; now there was that lack of speech which friends use when they wish to talk together. Once Gaunt stirred the peats with his foot, and glanced at the widow’s face when the fire-glow lit it.

“Seeking for signs o’ fever, Reuben?” she asked drily, turning her sharp old eyes to his.

“Well, yes, I was, as you’ve caught me at it. I should miss you, if — if aught happened, mother.”

“Naught happens to me, Reuben lad, save wear and tear. Would ye say that again — that ye’d miss me, if I went out along Peggy’s road?”

“There’s none else to care for me since Peggy died. I’d had little care, and little love, i’ my short life, mother; that’s why they call me ‘running-water’ maybe.”

Her memory went back to the days when she had been housekeeper to Reuben’s father. She recalled the hard-riding, hard-drinking master who had reared his son to the like gospel. She remembered the night when Billy the Fool was brought to Marshlands, and was afterwards turned out into the cold to answer for the sins of other folk. Many a bygone incident of Reuben’s boyhood stole out from those corners of the mind, which hide things half forgotten. And again she told herself, as she had told Priscilla on a day of April snow, that Reuben Gaunt had his father to thank for Marshlands and the money, but for no other chance in life.

“Reuben,” she said, blowing quiet puffs of smoke

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across the hearth, "have ye no thought for yourself these days? Naught matters much for me either way, but fear o' death comes natural to younger folk."

"There's you and the farm to think of, mother. That's enough to carry me forward."

Then he led her on to talk of olden times, for he had learned already that this was her surest road to peace. He mixed her rum and milk, and set it down on the ledge at the right hand of the hooded chair, and coaxed a smile from her and a crisp assurance, that "living wi' ne'er-doweels was sure to bring ye into loosish ways." She talked of Peggy's childhood, recounted a score of escapades, with a mother's pitiful and tender regard for detail. She spoke of her husband, and laughed slyly at his weaknesses. It is in this way that bereaved folk find shelter sometimes, for their little hour, from the bleak face of death.

"Mathewson war as he war made," she finished, "an' I munnot say naught agen them as has gone — but he war shammocky, Reuben. If it war no bigger job than sticking a row o' peas, he war shammocky still. He'd start th' job after breakfast, and put in happen a dozen sticks; then he's sit on th' wall, an' light his pipe, an' look at what he'd done till I came out, an' flicked him off o' th' wall-top; and somewhere about nightfall, if I war lucky and could get away fro' my work often enough to stir him up, he'd have finished yond row o' peas. Then he'd step indoors, an' draw hisseln a mug of ale, an' say he'd allus known there was naught like good, honest work for making a body enjoy his sup o' beer. Poor Mathewson! He war made as he war made, an' he niver varied mich. Now, Peggy was a different breed —"

And Gaunt listened to her praise of Peggy, putting in a word here, or a question there, till it was bedtime. The widow rose at last, and took a rush candle from the mantel.

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“ Well, we’d best be getting to sleep, Reuben. Ye’ll lig on th’ settle, as on other nights? I’ve had many a watch-dog i’ my time, lad, but ye’re th’ best o’ th’ lot, I fancy. I sleep sounder when I know that you’re below stairs.”

There was affection in the glance she gave him; and Reuben, when he lay down to sleep an hour later, found no ill dreams to trouble him.

Yet these two had not been open the one with the other. The widow had concealed her visit to the grave, three nights ago. Gaunt had concealed the dread that beset him through the daytime.

The dread awoke with him the next morning, and dogged his footsteps as he went across the croft. It kept close beside him until noon, when he came home across the burned-up fields in search of dinner. He had known no fear until Peggy died. There had been the hope that she would recover, the need of constant listening for a call to the bedside. Hope and the urgent need were gone, and life for its own sake was sweet again to Gaunt. Fever, and the all but certain death, had grown to the shape of Barguest, the brown dog.

He halted now at the gate where Peggy had kissed him for the last time. He looked at the sun, set high in a sky of blue that had no soul behind it — a sky as hard as beaten metal that seemed to press upon the earth and keep in the suffocating heat. If ever a man prayed for rain, Gaunt prayed for it now with a whole heart. He sought for one wisp of cloud to break the fierce monotony of blue; there was none. Each undulation of the hill-tops showed strangely clear, as if cut by a keen-edged knife. The silence was unbearable.

Gaunt’s courage, when he chose to enter Ghyll and share its dangers, was child’s play to the pluck that now was asked of him. There was no longer any warmth of

impulse, of zest in sacrifice for its own fine sake; fear had reached him, and the shelterless heat weakened every effort at resistance, till there were times when dread merged into outright panic and set him trembling like a child. He would recover, win back his manhood with the dogged perseverance that had won him the fell-race; then, and not before, he would seek out the widow, and day by day she found him stronger, more considerate, more bent on naming her "mother" and on proving himself a real son.

This morning, as he leaned over the gate and searched for rain-clouds, he went through one of these battles with despair. When it was nearly ended, and the colour was returning to his face, the doctor's big, fiddle-head nag came up the slope, and Gaunt started when the rider's voice broke the silence.

"What news, Mr. Gaunt?" he asked, reining in and giving Reuben a quick, professional glance.

"No news," Gaunt answered, with a touch of dry humour. "We're penned like birds in a cage, doctor, and have nothing to listen to, save this cursed stillness. If you could give us a promise of rain, now —"

"Well, I can help you there," put in the other briskly. "I ought to have learned something from the weather by this time, for I've been plagued enough by it. The hot spell is nearly done with; and now you may call me a fool for prophesying in face of such a sky as that."

It was curious to see how eagerly Reuben caught at the hope. This conspiracy of sun and stark, blue sky against him had grown to be in sober fact a menace; a few more days of the strain, and fear might give an easy inroad to the fever.

"There's not a sign of it," he said, anxious to have his word disproved.

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“Wait till you’ve had twenty years more of this queer climate, Mr. Gaunt, and then you may be just beginning to know it. I’ve seen a dozen little signs of rain as I came up the moor, but I trust more to what old Lamach of High Farm calls a feeling in his bones.”

Gaunt remembered the doctor’s reputation as a weather seer. “I hope to God you’re in the right, doctor.”

“Of course I’m in the right! ’Tis a habit of mine. Only a fool puts himself in the wrong. I’m right, too — under Providence, of course, d’ye understand — in saying that you and the widow will win through. Tough, both of you — not cowards — plenty of fresh air inside your bodies. Oh, ye’ll weather it. Well, good day, Mr. Gaunt. I’ve a long round before me.”

Gaunt would not let him go just yet. It was a relief to exchange any sort of talk with another man. “We’ve noticed that you ride past the gate once every day, doctor, since you knew fever had come.”

“What of that?” said the other testily.

“Only that ’tis kindly of you. We’re a bit lonesome, I own, though we make the best of it.”

“Never heard such nonsense! Doctoring is my trade, Mr. Gaunt, not riding up and down the country doing good works. I leave those and the credit of ’em to the Parson. I’m no poacher. I’ve a bothersome case two miles further on, and this is my shortest cut.”

Gaunt knew that there was no short cut in this direction, except to the empty moor. He knew that the doctor lengthened his round each day to halt for a word at the gate, and to learn if his services were needed. “Which farm are you bound for, then?” he asked, with gentle banter.

“Which farm? Good day, Mr. Gaunt, good day. I’m too busy a man to answer idle questions.”

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Gaunt went slowly up to the house, feeling more at peace with this world of heat and toil, and martyrdom. The doctor's boast had not been idly made, for instinct was apt to lead him right. He had been right in thinking that they needed physic here at Ghyll. It was no physic carried in his pocket, to be taken three times a day and put on the shelf after a dose or two had been swallowed; it was the medicine carried by all men who have faced life in the open, that of forward hope and a call to look up to the hill-tops rather than down to the misty valleys.

"The doctor has ridden by again," said Reuben, as he stepped into the living-room to find dinner waiting for him. "I had a talk with him."

"Ay, 'tis his way," answered the widow. "If aught happens, like to ye or me, he'll not ride by. He'll walk in, Reuben, same as ye did when Peggy war ta'en wi' th' fever. Men are terrible folk for pranks, an' so I allus said. Now, ye'll sit down, an' eat what I set before ye. A roast o' mutton, Reuben, done to a turn. It's fool's policy to keep your body underfed at these times."

Of all the details that hampered Widow Mathewson and Gaunt, none pressed on them more heavily than this need to sit at meat together. The reek of the hot joint, the loss of appetite engendered by the long, persistent drought, made such a meal seem loathsome. Each ate for the other's sake, and maybe the meat, for that reason, helped them to go forward.

"Niver smoked so mich i' my life," said the widow, reaching up for her pipe after dinner. "I've no knowledge o' the lad that first brought 'baccy into Garth, but he did a service to us weak, human folk. Fill up your mug, Reuben, and come and sit i' th' front o' th' fire,

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an' talk to a body, like. I'm fair clemmed wi' weariness."

At dusk of the same day the doctor finished his round and rode into Garth. It happened, as it had happened for three days past, that Priscilla was loitering in the roadway fronting Good Intent; it was a habit of hers, and the doctor guessed her motive, and responded to it, with the quiet, charitable humour that marked all his dealings with the dalesfolk.

"I'm in rare good humour, Miss Cilla," he said, drawing rein. "D'ye see those bits of fleecy clouds coming up across the moon?"

"I had not looked at the sky," she answered absently. "It is ever the same these days, and one grows tired of it."

"Ay, but 'twill not be the same when you wake tomorrow. I was up at Ghyll this morning —"

"Yes," put in Cilla, with sudden interest.

"And I pitted my weather lore against Gaunt's. He said it couldn't rain if it tried, and I said it was bound to."

He saw Cilla's hand go to her heart for a moment, saw the brightness creep into her face. He had known all along that she needed to be told that Gaunt, so far, was well, and it had pleased him to wrap up the news in this talk about the weather.

"They — they are both well at Ghyll?" she asked.

"As sound as can be. I've an interest in those two, Miss Cilla. They deserve to come through it all, and somehow I fancy that they will."

"They say the chances are against it —"

"Oh, they say a good deal of nonsense, time and time. There's naught like pluck for winning a fight. Good night to ye, and pray that I miss Widow Lister as I ride by. Three days ago she was afraid of fever; this morning

she caught me on the outward journey and, 'Doctor,' she said, 'I've caught a chill that may well bring me to my grave.' I laughed — as I do, Miss Cilla, in season or out, and 'you're lucky,' I said. 'If I could find a touch o' chill under this brazen sky, I'd be glad of the relief, and so would my sweating horse.' Good night again, little Cilla. Gaunt's not going to die just yet, and I begin to think he might be worth your taking one day."

Cilla listened to the pitapat of hoofs as it grew fainter and fainter down the dusty road. The doctor had earned his right-of-way to folk's hearts after many an up-hill climb, and his power to help his neighbours was not limited to their bodies' needs. Whenever he felt that death was certain, he told his patient bluntly that the next world, not this, was his concern. While there was doubt, he thrust down his throat, willy-nilly, the physic of hope and sweetened the draught, so far as he could, with some racy, village jest.

"There's a good man goes down Garth Street," thought Cilla, following the other's sturdy figure as it disappeared among the shadows.

The moon lay young, slender as a sickle, over the parched lands of Garth. Cilla herself, as she stood in the roadway, looked cool and slender, too, in her white gown, though she was full of strange disquiet. Her modesty had taken fright. It was well enough to be anxious for Reuben's safety, well enough to seek news of him as often as she could; but she knew that it was more than friendship, this restless eagerness for news. And Peggy o' Mathewson's should have been a bride by now; and the peat was scarcely smoothed above her grave.

Cilla, for all her daintiness, her love of clean thinking and clean doing, was human as her neighbours, and subject to those gusts of warm and reckless feeling which are

apt to scatter the habits of a lifetime. If she had been told of another who waited, as she had done, for news of a bridegroom widowed before his wedding-day, she would have thought lightly of her. Yet she could only picture Reuben up at the lonely, hill-top farm; could only pray for his safety and know that her prayers came from a warmer heart than she ought to carry.

She turned instinctively to Good Intent. Her father would be sitting by the hearth, big of his body, big in charity. She would step in, and have a talk with him.

The yeoman was sitting in his chair, as she had pictured him. But his pipe lay cold in his hand, and he motioned her to a seat in the settle-corner opposite.

"Cilla, I've had a talk or two with the doctor," he began.

She waited, suppressing a quiet laugh that he, too, had gone out for stolen interviews with the lay priest of Garth.

"It seems Gaunt chose to go in to Ghyll Farm and to stay there. He knew what it meant before he crossed the doorstone. I wouldn't believe it, until the doctor told me it was so."

"Yes, father."

"Well, be durned if I'd have done it."

"Oh, yes; oh, indeed, you would have done it, father; 'tis the sort of call you'd have answered, but it was not asked of you."

"Fiddle-de-dee," said the yeoman. "Black Fever would always scare me. Give me a runaway horse, and I'll handle the reins — but the fever — 'tis a waiting game, like Cilla, and I could never play such. I've a sort of envy, like, for men who can."

Priscilla lit a spill for his pipe. She filled his glass for him, and set it by his side. And then she waited.

"Seems I've treated Gaunt amiss," said her father by and by.

"All folk do in Garth."

"Ay, they did; but I was down i' Shepston to-day, and they had the news, and folk were puzzled. They fancied that Gaunt was better nor like — in fact, Cilla, they seemed minded to turn their faces about and overdo their praising of him."

Cilla spread her hands to the peat-glow, and her face was full of tenderness. "I told you so i' the spring, father, but you would not listen."

The yeoman was uneasy. Praise was due to Gaunt, and yet he distrusted the man. "He comes of a bad breed, Cilla, and I'm farmer enough to know that ye don't rear good stock from such."

Cilla was quiet, but eager. "We all know his father's story — but what of his mother? Has she no say in the matter?"

"Why, yes, she was well enough, and a long way too good for old Gaunt; but she died when Reuben was a bairn. She never had a chance to better his wild upbringing."

And then, at last, after an uneasy silence, the yeoman got to the heart of the matter. His fondness for Cilla was embarrassing at times; it gave him too keen an insight into any change of mood in her, and he had guessed the secret of this restlessness which had fallen on her since the news of fever came from Ghyll.

"Lile lass," he said, "I've been thinking a deal to-night, and I wish more than ever that ye'd persuaded David the Smith to stay on i' Garth. Whether ye wouldn't have him, or whether his big hulking shyness stood up between the two o' ye and wouldn't let him ask ye, 'tis not for me to say; but I'm more than ever sorry, lass, as things have turned out."

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“Why, father?” A delicate colour had crept into Cilla’s face, but there was that steady light in her eyes which the yeoman feared.

“Well, Reuben is free to go wandering again —”

“No, no!” Her treason to the dead seemed baser than it had in the silence of the road outside. This outspoken hint of it from another showed all its meanness to the girl’s sensitive fancy. “No, father! We must not talk of such — of such foolishness. Reuben may be dead before the month is out.”

“Well, yes,” said Hirst, soberly. “Maybe I spoke out o’ season, Cilla. There, lass! Gaunt has done what I dursn’t, and I’m shamed to own to it, and I’m hoping he’ll come through it, as he deserves.”

So then Cilla came and sat at his knee, for the intimacy between these two was full of understanding. Her father was quick to blame himself for the few ungenerous thoughts that came his way, and she knew how hard it was for him at any time to speak well of Reuben Gaunt.

“And not only that,” she went on. “Reuben may be this or that, father — but he has seen Peggy o’ Mathewson’s die, and he has helped to bury her, so the doctor tells me, and — and, father, I think we ought to leave him with his thoughts; they’ll be sad ones.”

Cilla was diffident, as a good woman is when she must run counter to a well-loved father. The yeoman looked at her for a moment, then laid down his pipe and lifted her to the arm of his big chair.

“Seems to me I’m a child i’ your hands at times, Cilla. Oh, ye’re right, lile lass. There were better and bigger men than Gaunt i’ Shepston to-day, but not one o’ them has done what he did — not to my knowledge.”

The sickle moon climbed up that night till it lay over Ghyll Farm, that sheltered tired folk who slept. It lay,

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too, over the rowan that sheltered one whose weariness was over and done with. On the moor, where the thin stream trickled down, whispering a prayer of peace to Peggy as it passed her grave, there was the keen breath of life again. First, the moon was shrouded; then clouds as grey and slight as gossamer came drifting up the breeze; and after that a little wind got up, piping thin and high like a plover tired with the long day's flight.

It was very still on the moor, save for the soft, insistent crying of the wind. A wayfarer, had he been crossing the untilled acres, might have heard God walking in this sweet and untamed wilderness. The wind, slight as it was, was full of perseverance, and it began now to shepherd running vanguards of the mist across the heath.

At three of the morning there was neither moon nor sky to be seen. A wide sheet of mist, wet to the touch, hid every landmark of the moor, which, until an hour ago, had shown plainly all its jagged hillocks, its raking hill-top lines. And dawn, when it came, could do no more than thread the mist-banks through with tints of silver-grey.

Gaunt, soon after daybreak, woke from his sleep on the long settle, with instinctive knowledge that another day's glare had to be faced, and crossed to the window. At first he thought himself mistaken in the hour, so dark the room was. Then he unbarred the door, and went out into the mist. He felt its fingers wet about his face and hands; he drew deep breaths of it, as men drink in the first spring warmth after a hard winter. Then he laughed, not knowing why, and leaned against the house-wall, and was glad to rest awhile, with this sense of peace and freedom sheltering him closely as the mist itself.

The physical relief, the sense of damp and freshness after long heat, were part only of a deeper change. His

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fever-dread had left him; he no longer felt the wearing need to hold his courage tightly, step by step through the day's up-hill climb, lest it fail him at the pinch.

"Oh, God be thanked," he murmured, and went in-doors, and called up the stone stairway: "Mother, I've news for you!"

The widow had slept later than her wont, but she was awake in a moment. "What is it, Reuben?" she answered, fearing disaster always when an urgent summons came.

"The blessed rain is coming. We'll have cloudy skies again."

"Now, there's a ha-porth o' nonsense to fetch a body out of her bed with," grumbled the other. "'Tisn't dawn, Reuben, surely; winter-dark, I call it."

"Come down and see, mother."

She was soon at the porch-door beside him, and Gaunt, watching her face, could see the lines of strain grow softer, as if the moist air had filled their hollows in with kindly fingers. They stood there, the two of them, as if they could never have too much of the grey, cool air; and the heat of the past weeks, as they looked back upon it from this sanctuary, seemed like that of the burning, fiery furnace which both remembered from teachings of a far-off childhood.

There was nothing fanciful about this change of theirs from fear to strength. Bred in a country which knows more of cloudy skies than blue, they needed rain after long abstention from it; and the mist was a sure herald of grace to come.

"'Tis queer how the weather has ye at a word, Reuben," said the widow presently. "I'm keen-set already for my breakfast, an' that's more nor I could say honestly for a week o' days."

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She would not have the door closed while they fried the rashers and the eggs, though the mist stole in and lay like smoke about the room.

"Now, don't ye go shutting the door against a friend," she said, when Reuben made a movement to close it. "I'm only too thankful, lad, to have the right smell o' food i' my nostrils once again."

Later that day — a little past noon — the mist found its proper shape and fell in drops as quiet and as persistent as the breeze that pushed it forward. By sundown it was raining steadily, and, for the first time since their watch began, these two slept with no dreams to trouble them.

When Gaunt woke late the next morning, the rain was lapping at the windows still, with a gentle, greedy patience that promised more to come. The clouds were lifting when he went out into the croft, and there was a blur of sunshine through the rain. The thirsty ground sucked in the moisture, and asked for more, and still showed riven cracks as dry as the molten heaven of two days ago; and from the pastures a ground mist rose, as thick and smoky as the reek from the smithy down at Garth when Fool Billy's fire was being coaxed into a blaze.

Out of the rain, and the under moisture that reached up above his horse's hocks, the doctor came to Ghyll.

"All well, Mr. Gaunt?" he asked, with a note of strict routine in his voice.

"Better for this God-sent weather, doctor."

"Oh, that's your v view, is it? I'm wet to the skin, and am like to be wetter before I've done. This quiet sort of rain goes deeper than your quick-come, quick-go storms. Still, it will clear the air, maybe, and you'll remember that I prophesied it? Mr. Gaunt," he broke off, with one of his sudden glances, as if he were probing

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a patient with the knife, "d'ye feel any lassitude; well, to put it plainly, d'ye feel the world is slipping from under you, like a crazy, limestone wall when you try to climb it?"

"Well, no," said Gaunt, the new hope and the fresh colour showing in his cheeks. "I did, till the rain came; and I was as near to fright as ever I've been in my life; but that's all gone. Mrs. Mathewson has taken heart, too."

The doctor looked him over once more. "I'm not here to play Providence," he said, with an air of quiet relief. "This horse of mine, with his fiddle-head, could never carry so heavy a burden as Providence; but I think, Mr. Gaunt, you may let me take word to Marshlands that they can begin to get ready for you, air the sheets and dust the rooms, and all the nonsense women like."

"I shall be needed here for awhile," said Reuben.

"That's as you please."

The two men stood looking at each other with great friendliness, though in years past their intercourse, on the doctor's side at least, had had more than a touch of chill in it. Gaunt had not given that side of the matter a thought; yet these weeks at Ghyll had divided, like a deep gulf, the old days and the new; whatever lightness he showed in future, his neighbours would look behind it, and would see a stricken farmstead instead, and a man entering it of his own free will to succour others. The folk of Garth were slow, maybe, to form new opinions of men, or crops, or weather; but in the long run they were just, and they did not forget.

The doctor read a good deal in Reuben's face just now. There was a light of happiness in it — unquestioning, childlike happiness, dimmed just a little by awe and some bewilderment. He had seen the look often when one or other of his patients had lain near to death and had lived

on to watch another spring spread magic fingers over a world that now was doubly sweet to them.

“’Tis not so easy to die as I thought,” said Reuben, breaking the silence unexpectedly. “You never know how fond you are of being chained to this daft world, until — well, till you begin to listen for the snapping of the chains.”

“I’d be sorry to leave it myself,” said the doctor, with his big, heathen laugh. “They work me to death, and I’ve seldom an hour to call my own, and first I’m baked with sun-heat, and then I’m chilled by this mist-rain ye’re so fond of, till I scarce know whether I’m dead or alive, but, bless ye, Mr. Gaunt, there’s some queer sort of joy in life, after all. Besides,” he added, with his own grim pleasantry, “there’s a certain doubt as to what comes after.”

“There is,” murmured Gaunt, though he would have been slow to confess as much at another time. “I fancy ’twas the doubt troubled me, when I looked up at the sky, and felt the brazen heat.”

“Just my feeling,” said the other cheerily. “It might be hotter out Beyond — or again it might be damper — I never liked extremes.”

Again there fell a silence between them, and still the doctor lingered for the sake of lingering, and because he knew that Gaunt was weak after long strain and needed a man’s chatter in his ears.

“Undoubtedly I’m a lost soul,” he went on. “Widow Lister told me as much last night, when she caught me riding home, and got me to poultice a boil the size of a pin-head, and then gave me a sermon because I hadn’t the fear o’ the Lord in me. ‘If I’d as much fear of the Lord, Widow, as you have of your body,’ I said, ‘they’d count me righteous in Garth.’”

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Reuben laughed. He knew Widow Lister, and the doctor's racy tongue had brought the picture clearly to his mind. And somehow neither wished to get on with the business of the day, for each knew at last that, in their separate ways, they had faced adversity with some show of courage.

"I've a weakness for Widow Mathewson myself; I'd the same feeling for poor Peggy," said the doctor presently. "I begin to have the like feeling for you, Mr. Gaunt."

"What sort of feeling, doctor?"

"Well, a 'birds-of-a-feather' feeling. We're up on the same moor-top, we. There's little of the heathen in me, I've seen too much of human sorrow to feel aught but fear o' God. But my God's different — yours is, and the widow's is, and poor Peggy's was — and I catch a sight of Him when I'm riding over the moor, Mr. Gaunt, at the end of a long day's work, and the hills get up in front of my fiddle-headed horse, and the wind blows low through the heather, and I listen to the fairies. Oh, we doctor-folk learn a thing or two, when we ride with tired bodies and clear eyes, over the moor-top home to supper."

Gaunt had not been permitted to see this side of the man before; and his surprise showed in his face, perhaps, for the doctor gathered up his reins and laughed shamefacedly.

"No, no, Mr. Gaunt," he said in his gruffest voice, "I'm not going to enter any ministry. Foolish thoughts *will* slip out at times. Now, you mean to stay here awhile longer? I think I'll ride home by way of Marshlands, all the same. Scared as they are, they'll be glad of my news. I shall tell that hulking hind of yours, Peter Wood, to bring you up a change of clothes and linen. It was useless before, but now you can burn all you stand

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up in, and put on something that doesn't carry any memory of the fever with it. You've burned all the sick-room things, by the way — bedding, and hangings, and what not?"

Gaunt nodded. "And whitewashed every corner afterwards. Mrs. Mathewson would have it so."

"Bless me, a couple of sensible folk seem to be living up at Ghyll Farm! All as practical and trim as if I'd had the overlooking of it myself."

"Well, you see, doctor," said the other, with a smile that had no mirth in it, "it was a big job we'd undertaken, and big jobs are worth doing thoroughly, once you take them up. There was no need for us to help Ghyll become a plague spot for the whole of Garth."

"Oh, the world's standing on her head, Mr. Gaunt! The tough old doctor suspected of leanings towards the ministry, and you preaching thoroughness. There, there, I must have my jest. There's no offence, I hope?"

With a cheery nod and a jerk of the reins, the doctor was trotting up the moor, leaving the wholesome crispness of a northwest wind behind him.

At ten of the next morning Reuben heard a shout as he crossed from the mistal-yard. Peter Wood, the hind at Marshlands, stood midway up the croft. He carried a bundle in his arms, and his knees were shaking.

"I dursn't come no farther, sir, I dursn't." The big, ungainly lad was almost blubbering as he stood, a figure of woe, in the drenching sheets of rain. "Doctor said I'd to bring these, an' I've brought 'em, but niver a stride nearer Ghyll will I come. Couldn't, sir, if I tried; my feet willun't let me."

"Nobody asked you to. Set your bundle down, Peter, and I'll fetch it when you've taken your precious body out of harm's way. Is all right with the farm, Peter?"

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“Ay, the farm’s all right, an’ th’ folk in it are all right so far; but —”

“Oh, knock all that nonsense out of your head, lad! You’ll not take fever, if that is what’s troubling you. Tell them I may be home in a week, to stir you all out o’ your laziness, or it may be a fortnight; it depends on whether I’m needed here.”

Peter’s wits were never overstrong, and terror had not sharpened them; yet even he was conscious of a new note in the master’s voice — a note less easy-going than of old, and fuller of authority. The lad glanced down the croft, then up at Reuben, but still held his ground; it was plain that he wished to get as far away from Ghyll as possible, and yet that he was held by some counter fear.

“Is’t true what they say, sir,” he blurted out, “that a body can catch th’ fever by looking at another body as has been nigh it?”

“No,” said Reuben, with a laugh that heartened Peter a little, “it’s a lie. Most fears are lies, my lad, and you can tell them so from me down at Marshlands yonder.”

“Thank ye, sir,” said Peter, laying down his bundle in the wet, and making off with a speed that recalled the haste of Dan Foster’s lad not long ago.

When Gaunt stepped into the farm, carrying his dripping bundle, Widow Mathewson looked up from her baking board.

“What have ye there, Reuben?”

“Clean linen and a change of clothes. It sounds naught much, mother, but, Lord, how I need to get into them! Seems the doctor knew how I’d needed them, for ’twas his thought to send them up.”

The widow laid down her rolling-pin, rubbed some of the flour from her arms, then looked at Gaunt with her

steady, hazel eyes. "That means ye're ready for flitting. Well, I mustn't grumble, though I'll miss you sorely. Life's made up of settlings in an' flittings out, as the throstle said when she watched her fledged brood fly."

"But I'm not flitting, mother, not for a week or two yet." He was touched by the loneliness, the independence and the pride of her appeal. "I'm needed here, ye see — you alone in the house and farm work to be seen to — and, besides, they'd be scared to death at Marshlands if I gave them no time to get used to the notion of my coming back. They'd all be down with fever the next day, or think they were."

"You're a good lad, Reuben," she said, after a pause. "Give me your bundle, and let me set your things to the fire. 'Twill be rheumatiz ye'll catch if ye put them on as they are."

In the afternoon the sun got out for an hour, for the rain was tired of its own vehemence. Gaunt put the clothes, warm and with the peat-smell of the fire on them, under his arm, and went up into the moor, past Peggy's grave, past the little, grey bridge where the harebells were reviving from the drought. Just above the bridge was a loop known to him of old; it had dwindled during the hot months, and the rains had scarcely helped it yet. The land, for all the steady downpour, had not slaked its thirst; and had let only the shallowest of streamlets run off its surface to feed the larger brooks. For all that, the pool was deep enough for a bath, and Gaunt stripped, and plunged into the water.

The glare and misery of the past weeks seemed to yield to this gentle lapping of the peat-brown water. He had done his work rightly, for once in his heedless life, and knew it; and the way of Peggy's death, the squalor and the terror of it, were washed clean by the stream that

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sucked, and laughed, and gurgled round the edges of the pool.

A curlew came and looked at him, as he splashed in the brown water. A burn-trout finned its way upstream in fright when it found a four-limbed monster in its favourite pool. For the rest, he had no company and needed none.

CHAPTER XXII

REUBEN was home again at Marshlands. His house-keeper still watched him carefully when she brought in his meals, and Peter, the farm-lad, stood at least ten feet away when the master came out into the yard to give his orders. Only Michael, the head man about the farm, showed common sense.

"Fever's like a turnip lanthorn," said Michael, a few days after the master's return. "Ye've only to light the bogie, an' set it up i' a dark corner, an' watch 'em running for dear life. Oh, by th' Heart, sir, I'd liefer face it any day as ye did, than go running into my burrow like a rabbit every time a kitty-call sounded over the pastures."

Little by little, however, memory of the panic grew dulled. Ten days of rain, with scarcely an hour's cessation now and then, were followed by exquisite, crisp sunshine, till Yeoman Hirst declared that the face of the land "looked as clean-washed as a babby's." The breeze was sweet and nutty to the smell. Flowers, checked till now by the drought, began to show out of their proper season, while September's natural brood stirred into blossom in every field and hedgerow. It was a season such as puts new heart into men, whether they admit the weather's influence or make pretence of denial.

The fever, too, had spent itself. In Shepston there was a case here and there, at longer and longer intervals, but none further up the dale.

"Oh, I don't want to boast," said Hirst to Cilla, on

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one of these clean autumn evenings, as they watched the sun go down, "but it seems like as if th' fever couldn't bid to touch bonnie Garth. 'Twas afraid to spoil her face, I reckon."

"There, father!" laughed Cilla, with that pleasant linking of her arm in his which was full of comradeship. "I believe ye love Garth village better than any soul that lives in it."

"Well, no," answered the yeoman, his voice rising to a roar of affectionate good-will. "There's ye, Cilla, lass—but Garth runs a good second, I should say."

Cilla was quietly happy these days, though she would admit no reason for it. On every side she heard guarded praise of Reuben; for the doctor, who seldom spoke ill of a man, was fond of spreading good reports abroad when honesty allowed it. It was known now in Garth, not only that Reuben had chosen to go into Ghyll and share its troubles, but that afterwards they had done all they could, he and the widow, to keep the plague from spreading down to the valley.

Priscilla did not ask herself why praise of Reuben was so welcome. She simply let the gold, September days drift by, and sometimes cried o' nights when she thought of Peggy o' Mathewson, sleeping beside the moorland burn. It was Cilla's way to cry for others when her own happiness took shape.

At Marshlands, maybe, the servants, all save Michael, the head man, relished the changed outlook upon Gaunt less than their neighbours did. They found the master more intent on details of the farm and house than he had been; he went roaming, for a day or two, or a week, less often, and they were not free to drive Michael wild with their taunt of: "Well, th' master idles all his time; why shouldn't such as us?"

"The fever's gone to his head, though he thought he'd 'scaped it," said the housekeeper sagely to Rachel, the dairymaid, as she watched the butter-making. "I was allus telled it left its marks on a man, did fever."

She was right. The fever had gone, not only to Reuben's head, but to the heart of the man. He had never been trusted before, as Widow Mathewson had trusted him. He had not been asked — save when he ran the Linsall fell-races so gallantly — whether his courage were sound as his wind. No one had taught him the way of his manhood until the time of stress at Ghyll; but now he was moving with uncertain steps, like a child first finding its feet, along his proper road.

Cilla met him one forenoon on the bridle-path that ran through Raindrift Wood. For once in a way he was on foot, like herself, and not on horseback; and they stood looking at each other, startled by the sudden meeting.

"We — we have heard pleasant things about you, Mr. Gaunt," said the girl, trying to break down their disquiet, "and — and; indeed, we are glad that — that nothing happened to you up at Ghyll."

"I did what was needed, and was glad to be needed," he answered simply. "There was nothing at all to talk about, though you know how folk build up a mole-hill and swear 'tis a mountain."

Cilla glanced quietly at him. He had come out a changed man from the furnace of those weeks at Ghyll. The easy, self-assertive jauntiness was gone; his small affectations of speech and manner were lost; and he spoke and carried himself as a yeoman should. The restless glitter, too, had gone from his grey eyes, and the look in them was of a man who had lately met life face to face. He was thin and haggard; yet Cilla was conscious only of some new strength in him.

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"Tell me of — of Peggy," she said softly. "I was grieved when the news came down to Garth."

"She died without a good-by. That was the hardest thing to bear. If there'd been a half-hour given to us for talk before she went, it would have seemed easier. I was in need of forgiveness, maybe —"

He stopped, and his eyes sought hers gravely. Cilla could feel nothing but a great tenderness, a sudden rush of pity. He was so quiet under punishment, so ready to admit that it was well-deserved.

"You were always fond of seeing fresh places," she said. "Leave Garth for awhile, will you not, until — until the memory of it all grows softened?"

For the first time Gaunt smiled. "I've taken just the opposite notion into my head. Marshlands is a biggish place, and needs a master over it. They will tell you in Garth that it has not known much of a master these last years."

Generous always in compassion, she could not check herself, but laid her hand on his arm impulsively. "Never think that again! They tell different stories of you now in Garth."

"Yes, yes," put in Reuben, with a touch of the weariness that would keep him company for many a day. "They're full of praise I haven't a need for. By and by they'll forget, and I shall be 'Mr. Running-Water' to them once again. 'Tis well to know one's by-name."

"Oh, you must not be bitter! I tell you, they have changed —"

"Just so." His pride was touched in some unexpected way. "They call a fresh fiddle-tune, but are they sure I'll dance to it?"

Cilla liked his stubbornness, liked the gravity which was so far remote from her earlier knowledge of him. They

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said good-by in Raindrift Wood, and Gaunt went slowly home, wondering that Cilla and he could meet, not like lovers who had walked the field-ways when spring was warm and urgent, but like friends who were old and tranquil as this month of gold September.

At Marshlands, only Michael had faith in the master's purpose; the others said that he would tire of farming in a week or two more, because it stood to reason that running water must be gadding off somewhere or another.

Michael's face grew cheerier as the days went on. He saw the master keeping close at home; he saw the dairy-work grow cleaner, the maids and the farm-lads doing a day's work in a day, instead of taking two to it. Michael felt no jealousy. He had always had the farm's interests at heart, and had known that he could not rule the house until the master set his own back to the work of supervision and ceased from wandering.

Reuben went his own way, as he had always done; but the new way, he admitted to himself, rang more crisply underfoot than the old had done. Folk were anxious in Garth village to show him that they knew and understood what he had done at Ghyll; they were met by an easy courtesy that was cold as an east wind, a courtesy that halted for a moment to talk of the weather, and then passed by without a wish for friendship. Reuben was plainly minded not to dance to their new tune as yet, and they liked him the better for it.

He had found self-confidence. His father's history, remembrance of that bitter night, when, a lad of fifteen, he had seen Billy and his mother driven out into the wind, had haunted him persistently, had lain always in the background of his thoughts. He had grown used to the belief that his by-name fitted him well enough, that he was infirm of will and must be so to the end. There was no

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claim upon him, save the farm's; and that claim had been too abstract and impersonal until now to move his fancy.

"'Twill not last," he would think, coming home at nightfall from some journey over the pastures. "But at the worst, it can do no harm, and keeps me busy."

As the days went by, he grew more full of wonder at the change in himself. Little by little the lands, and the smaller of the farms, and his own big house of Marshlands, crept into his heart, as a child might creep to the knee of a lonely man and bring him soft companionship. He had neither wife nor child of his own; and, lacking these, a man's best solace is love of the acres left him by many generations.

It was no 'prentice hand he turned to farming matters, after all. The routine of it he knew by training; but the instinct toward it lay deeper than one man's life could ever sound. And the faces of the lazy hinds grew longer day by day, and Michael went whistling about his work.

It was soon after Cilla's meeting with him in Raindrift Wood that she was caught by Widow Lister, passing down Garth's highway.

"Oh, good day, Miss Cilla," she said briskly. "Ye look lile an' bonnie, if a plain cottage-body might say so without offence. See my bit of a garden here, an' how the rain has watered it."

Cilla halted, as all good-natured people did who accepted Widow Lister as a load added by habit to the day's work. She praised the snapdragons, the asters, the marigolds, which, thanks to constant watering through the drought, reared gallant heads to the quiet September sunlight. Then she waited, knowing that this was the prelude to some plea for help, or to some need for gossip.

"I hear queer news o' Mr. Gaunt these days," said the

widow, with a stolen glance at Cilla. "They tell me he's a changed man, since he was daft enough to step into Ghyll when he hadn't any need to."

"Man enough, you meant?" put in Cilla quietly.

"Ay, well, 'twas like him, anyway, to go seeking a spot where trouble was, an' then to run his head straight into 't — though, of course," she added with a sigh of demure resignation, "'tis not for me to judge my betters."

Cilla smiled impatiently, for it was useless to be angry with this woman who eluded censure as she had eluded all life's sharp edges. "Then why judge them, Mrs. Lister?" she asked briskly.

"Oh, I only say what I hear, and I niver have no faith myseln i' sudden conversions. When my man war alive, I war most frightened when he had his serious, sober fits on him. I knew he'd break out worse nor iver when he made a fresh start for th' Elm Tree Inn. Mr. Gaunt, ye see, is as God made him — an' his father's training no way bettered a poor job — an' that's where 'tis."

Cilla turned after a farewell that was colder than her wont, and saw the widow stooping tranquilly over her flower-beds. Mrs. Lister, indeed, seemed the incarnation of peaceful Garth — a trim, little figure tending a trim, little garden-patch that fronted the roadway, with the sun finding auburn streaks in the smooth, well-ordered hair that should have shown a grey patch or two by now. And, in spite of herself, Priscilla smiled; the widow was so gentle a wasp to look at, and yet her sting was always at Garth's service.

Fever and the dread which had made strong farmer-men ashamed, grew half-forgotten by the village as September neared its end. Gaunt still overlooked the work at Marshlands, still wondered that this love o' land grew dearer to him day by day. And sometimes he met Cilla in

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the fields, or on the roadway; and their friendship was quiet and sunny as the light that lay about the hazel copses.

He was often up at Ghyll these days, and Widow Mathewson's smile, when she met him in the doorway, or saw him coming across the croft, was his reward. She was doing the farm work alone, stubborn in her pride of isolation. Reuben helped her so far as he could, but he had bigger lands to see to; and one quiet noontide he walked up, with a strapping farm-lad at his side.

"Who's this ye've brought, Reuben?" said the widow, standing stiff at her own porch.

"Only a lazy hound I can't lick into shape, mother. Teach him to help you about the farm, and send him back as soon as you've trained him. He can be spared from Marshlands, now there's less to be done about the fields."

"Nay, now, Reuben — I'm not one to go borrowing — I war niver that sort — an' I'm used to work."

"The lad has his orders — from me," said Reuben. "See that he does his full share of the work, mother, and a little over."

Mrs. Mathewson, to her surprise, found herself yielding to this new air of Gaunt's, half persuasive and half masterful. Indeed, she was beginning more and more to lean on him, and would tell herself, as she smoked by the hearth at nights, that she had earned a little luxury, maybe, in her old age. This morning she was slow to yield. The work was too much for one pair of hands, and she was "bone-weary;" but better work till she dropped than let it be said that they had needed outside help at Ghyll.

At last she consented grudgingly. "'Tis only a loan o' th' lad, mind ye," she hastened to assure him. "I suppose I mun hire one soon, like it or no; 'specially now they begin to ask for milk again down i' Garth. They ask

i' a whisper, though," she added, with her old, tart humour. "A shout would bring fever out of its kennel, so they fancy still."

So the farm-lad was left at Ghyll; and the look on his face was laughable to watch when Reuben left him to the mercies of Widow Mathewson. The master might be harder these days than of old; but the widow's hardness, and the strength of her fist to back it if need be, were renowned throughout the dale.

September passed, and still the clear, gold magic made Paradise of fields and copse. It was now that magic walked across the fells. The dalesfolk had seen the mystery in other years, but never as they saw it now; for no man could remember such a spell of drought; and such a fall of rain to follow it.

The pastures, sloping to the blue and amber sky, had been smoking hot before the rain came; the first day's moisture had been lost, for it was turned to the steam which men had named a ground-mist. The second day's fall had been lapped up, greedily as a cat laps milk, and the third day's, too, had gone to feed the soil. It was only on the fourth day that the streams had begun to brawl and chatter, as if they had claimed all the mercy of the skies. Like most folk who make noise, the brooks were spreading an empty boast abroad; they were idlers for the most part, dawdling down a field-way here, a glen there, until some miller stayed their course and bade them turn his mill-wheel for him; but it was the thrifty, working pastures that caught the first fruits, and turned them to good uses.

Gaunt, as he rode about his lands, could see the miracle take shape before his eyes. Sharp Fell, away to the southwest, had been as grey-brown as a hazelnut, withered before it comes to ripeness; now it showed a tinge of green, and each day the green lay deeper, richer across the

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burnt-up pastures. He had watched this uprising of the grass in far-off countries when the wet season followed extreme heat; but never before in Garth.

Yeoman Hirst overtook him one of these days, when both were riding to Shepston market. "Seems there's going to be a hay-crop, after all, though a lile bit late in the year," he laughed, pointing to the pastures with his switch. "They say Garth weather's queer, but I niver yet made hay at Kirstmas-time."

"Let's say there'll be good grazing by and by, and that's something to be thankful for, before the winter drives the beasts indoors."

Gaunt was shy of his fellow men, remembering past coldness; but with Cilla's father he was himself. The yeoman's big, hearty outlook on the world inspired confidence in all who met him; his friendship, not to be bought at a price, was counted a privilege; moreover, he was master of the house that sheltered Cilla.

They rode into Shepston together, and stabled at the same inn; and Hirst, before he went about his business, turned to Reuben.

"We might as well jog home in company, we," he said. "What time d'ye start out for Garth?"

"Four o' the clock, or thereabouts."

"Well, we can meet here, then. I shall have done by that time and a lonely ride does no man good, they say."

They rode home together through the enchanted land. Old tradition told of witchcraft here in Strathgarth Dale. Witchcraft there was, of a kindly sort, and it came from the hills that raked the sky, the hollows that caught the farewell music of the day, and softened it, and went unwillingly to bed, to dream of fairies' songs. The farmers who lived in amongst this glamour said little about it; they were scarcely conscious that they saw it, for they

seldom asked themselves any question that intruded into the day's work; but the beauty of their hills and hollows, the music of their gloaming, were as real an influence in their lives as the breath o' God that stirred their acres into life.

"A grand evening," was all that Yeoman Hirst found to say.

"Ay, grand," Reuben answered.

They came to the door of Good Intent. "Ye'll step in, and drink a cup o' tea?" said Hirst.

Gaunt was taken by surprise. He hesitated, and flushed hotly as he recalled his last visit to Good Intent and the end of it. "Thank you, but I must be getting home," he answered quietly.

The yeoman looked him in the face, and his smile broadened. "Now, Mr. Gaunt, I know what ye're thinking of. Bygones are bygones, surely, if we'll let them be. Say I was wrong if ye like, though I shouldn't like to own to it. Step in, step in!"

Reuben could not fight against this bluff, hearty courtesy. The yeoman whistled a farm-lad round to take their horses, then broke into the house with a tread that shook the rafters. Cilla looked up from the table which she was laying for tea.

"I've brought a guest wi' me, lile lass," he said, with a genial roar. "He was a bit loth to enter, till I persuaded him he'd find a welcome."

Priscilla was startled, and could not check the sudden flush of pleasure with which she greeted Reuben. All three were silent and ill at ease for a moment. The yeoman, seeing the look that passed between them, wondered if he had done well, after all, to bring Gaunt under his roof.

"The kettle is boiling, father," said Cilla, quietly

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putting an end to their constraint. "See the cracknels I've baked for you to-day —"

Hirst interrupted her by taking one of the crisp bits of pastry between a thumb and forefinger. "I always had a soft tooth for sweetstuff," he said. "Mr. Gaunt, there's your seat. Cilla, don't be long in mashing the tea; we're a thirsty couple after the ride from Shepston."

When tea was over, and they settled round the hearth, Gaunt felt a sense of well-being and content for which there seemed to be no clear reason. So many details went to the making of his comfort — Cilla's face, as she sat half in the firelight, half in the dancing shadows — the yeoman's ready laugh — even the lingering scent of buttered toast which carried homely memories with it. He had a bigger house at Marshlands, but had never found this fireside glamour there; and always, as they talked, he kept glancing toward Cilla, wondering that so slim a lass could bring so much peace about a hearth.

Hirst followed him out when at last he got to saddle. "First visits mean second ones, eh?" he said. "Step in any time ye're passing Good Intent, and good night to ye, Mr. Gaunt."

He listened to the hoof beats as they grew fainter up the road; then he went indoors with a sigh, and sat him down in the hooded chair, and beckoned Cilla to his knee.

"We're most of us as big fools as we look, and some of us bigger," he said. "Ye're wondering why I asked Gaunt to the farm. Well, 'twas to pay a debt, if you must have the truth. I've reckoned it up all ways, Cilla, and I've fought agen it, but I like to be just — when I can. I've been hard on the lad, and he went where I wouldn't have gone if I'd been paid i' gold for 't." His face broke into broad wrinkles, full of charity and humour. "Ye see, lile Cilla, a father's never i' the wrong to his lass —"

'twouldn't do to own up to 't — but when I see Gaunt framing like a farmer, and settling down to th' only good work God ever put into man's hands — well, I war not exactly i' the wrong, ye understand, but happen I mis-judged him, like."

It was pleasant to Cilla, this sitting at her father's knee and listening while the big, child's heart of the man found voice. She understood the battle with his pride, the surrender to a finer impulse.

"Not that he's fit for ye —"

"Father, 'tis early days to talk of that," she broke in, with sudden fright.

"Ay, and early days are best, if ye want to get your land ready for a good crop to follow. Mind ye, Cilla, I've an old dislike of the man."

"Or of his father?" asked Cilla shrewdly.

"Well, both, maybe; but I'm talking of to-morrow, not o' yesterday. I saw the look that passed between ye when Gaunt came in, and I've seen other glances o' the kind. Now, sit down, lass. I've earned a fairly plain glimpse o' life, after trying for five-and-fifty years to get a lile bit nearer to 't. If ye wed Gaunt, I shall be lone and sorry, but I'll make the best of a bad job."

"Father, cannot you understand that Peggy is scarce buried yet?" she murmured, afraid of herself and of all things.

He met her glance frankly, for he had something in his mind, and meant to find speech for it. It was in times of stress that Hirst showed all the common sense and strength that underlay his boisterous good-humour.

"Buried is hidden, as they say, and that's what I'm telling ye. It's the lesson men have to learn as lads — and women after they've had a bairn or two."

Cilla sat looking into the peat-fire. "Well, then,

father?" she asked by and by. "What is it you want to say?"

"Just this, my lass," said Hirst, blurring it out like a school lad. "When I asked Gaunt to come in, it was because I owed him a debt, like, and wanted to pay it. When I asked him at the door to come a second time, 'twas for a different reason."

"Yes, father," said Cilla, still looking at the peats.

"Ye're bound to meet each other, ye two, and I'd rather ye met here — well, as often as in the pastures or the bridle-ways. I think ye're a fool for your heartache, Cilla, but I'd liefer watch Reuben courting ye under my roof than the sky's."

Cilla flushed, and her voice was piteous. "We've no thought of that kind, father; we're friendly, he and I, and I'm sorry for his trouble — there is no more than that."

"Ay, ye're friendly, and ye're sorry; and I should know by this time, Cilla, what that means between a man and a maid. Get me my pipe, lass, and say good night, and think ower what I've said."

Gaunt, meanwhile, rode slowly home to Marshlands. The moon was softening all the outlines of the hills, and owls were calling here and there, making the silence of the land more friendly, if that were needed.

The man was bewildered by the peace of it all — peace of the hearth at Good Intent, with Cilla dainty and her father full of comradeship — peace of the night, that was cool and fragrant, and at ease. He had stood too near, till now, to the drought and trouble of the days at Ghyll to meet well-being without distrust. Whenever a cool breeze had met him, with a touch of moisture in it, he had recalled the heat and the naked furnace-sky that had shut the moorland in while Widow Mathewson and he held out against the adversary. Whenever an owl had

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called, he had started, thinking Peggy o' Mathewson's was waking from her fever and needed him in a little up-stairs room.

All was changed to-night. The soft, September scents were abroad, quiet ghosts that promised immortality to the summer which had seemed to die; the clouds about the moon were light as thistle-down; the two at Good Intent, father and daughter, had given him a new hold on life.

He did not know it — men seldom grasp at once these hands reached out to them from the bigger sky above — but he rode down to Marshlands a likelier man to-night, a man more brave to meet the future. All that he could think of, as he slipped from saddle, and gave the reins to a farm-lad, and went indoors, was the peace that lay about Good Intent. Cilla's clean, homely daintiness, like lavender; her father's uprightness, and the smell of honest cattle and good horses about him; the peat-glow stealing ruddy across the yellow candle-light at Good Intent and tricking the grave rows of pewter, china and delft mugs into a show of warmth; these fireside matters were full of meaning to him.

When he went up to bed, and opened his window to the September night, it was the same tale. A throstle was whistling a note or two, as if getting ready for the spring.

"Silly lad, yond throstle," was Reuben's thought. "Thinks he's going to find a mate to-morrow, and then set to work nest-building. Summer's dead, I reckon, and there's a lile, cold snap o' winter to come before he builds his nest."

Outside the house at Marshlands, as Gaunt went to sleep, Billy the Fool watched the darkened windows. He was not homeless, because he had the open air about him, and a bed all ready in the crisp dry bracken up above. He

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had no lack of friends; the birds and the four-footed folk saw to that. Yet to-night he was restless and ill at ease.

“Billy could never sort out his thoughts, like,” as his neighbours said of him; but he could feel, and could remember, and his griefs and joys, because they were instinctive, were poignant and keen.

To-night he did not grudge Gaunt his house, his cosy bed, his riches; he pitied him for such barren wealth. It was Cilla's welfare that troubled him. Whenever he was free of his “play” at the smithy, he had shadowed these two of late, always with the sense that harm might come to Cilla if she were unprotected in Gaunt's company. At the lad's heart to-night, as he stood under Reuben's window, were rage and pity for the scene ended long ago at Marshlands here. He saw Reuben's father send his mother out from the grey porch on his left — the porch, whose limestone white and lichen grey were limned clearly by the light of the full moon — and he heard her sobs as she leaned against the closed door of the house. He could not disentangle the dead Gaunt from the living, and Reuben was a standing menace, answering for his father's sins.

Billy, at this moment, was a menace, and one not fanciful at all. He was content to wait till dawn, to watch for Gaunt's coming out from the grey porch. He knew his strength, and meant to use it.

A bridle-way ran close to the Marshlands fence, and the doctor, riding home from a late round, glanced at the moonlit front of the house. He saw Billy's fat hulk, and from long experience knew that there was danger in the set of the man's figure, his big head lifted to the casement up above.

“Give ye good e'en, Billy,” he said, reining up. “You're growing fond of Reuben Gaunt, it seems.”

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Billy turned with his accustomed quiet. "Not just so fond; rather t' other way, doctor, as a body's body might say."

"Well, then, come catch my stirrup, Billy, and 'twill be play for ye to ride home beside me."

Fool Billy paused, as a dog does when he is divided between duty to his pleasure and duty to his master. It was the word "play" that enticed him, as the doctor knew it would. He laughed abroad to the blue-grey face of the moonlight, and vaulted the fence and clutched a stirrup. The madness had gone from him, and left him a child again.

"Well, then," he said, "well, then, doctor, and as a body might say, I was always one for playing."

The exquisite, cool night lay like God's blessing over the Strathgarth lands. Gaunt, too sound asleep to hear the doctor's voice, or Billy's slow answer, dreamed quietly of Cilla in her lilac frock — of Cilla, who carried scent o' lilac with her, summertide or winter. There was no memory troubled him to-night of Peggy, and a grave high up the moor-face which he himself had dug for her; nor would he ever know, unless the doctor lost his habit of keeping his own counsel, how near the shadow of death had come to-night to Marshlands.

CHAPTER XXIII

WIDOW MATHEWSON, up at Ghyll Farm, was prepared to find Reuben's visits grow fewer and fewer, until they ceased altogether.

"Stands to reason," she told herself, with her half grim, half humorous outlook upon life, "stands to reason he'll slacken now, when there's no Peggy to 'tice him up the moor. 'Tis no way likely he'll come for th' pleasure of seeing my wry face."

Her judgment was wrong for once. Through the gold September days and the russet glory of October, Reuben snatched every opportunity to ride or walk to Ghyll. He persuaded Mrs. Mathewson to replace his own farm-hind lent to her, and sorely needed now in the busy life at Marshlands, with a steady, hard-working man-of-all-jobs of his own choosing. He helped her with the ingathering of the bracken. He took pains to set the new man in his place at once; to teach him that his work here was to save the mistress every trouble. All this Gaunt did, and more, though he could ill spare the time; and in between he would steal to the little glen and the rowan-tree that sheltered the stream and Peggy's grave of peat.

The widow could not read his motive in all this, and he himself at no time halted to probe into his methods. Remorse for his light playing with the love that Peggy had given him, pity for her end, self-condemnation because he missed her so little, however hard he tried to feel the de-

gency of grief, all played their part in urging him to come often up to Ghyll. But there was more than this. Those weeks of heat and fever had taught him to see life with clearer eyes, to understand the worth of the affection shown him, in a grim, half ashamed fashion, by the lonely woman who had nothing else except her farm to love.

"Seems I've gotten a son in my old age," she said drily, when Gaunt had taken some special pains on her behalf one morning of November.

"Shouldn't wonder, mother," he answered cheerily.

"Well, now, there's a daft thing for a tough old woman to be doing. Seems scarce modest, Reuben — almost flighty-like —"

She broke off with a laugh. Her clear, brave eyes were twinkling with mischief, with a spice of that wholesome devilry which no healthy woman loses till her death.

"How does your man-of-all-jobs frame?" asked Gaunt.

"Oh, as well as men ever do — naught to boast of at the best."

"Then I'll give him a piece of my mind before I ride down."

"Nay, that you won't! The lad's well enough, Reuben. His big fault, if I must own to 't, is that he willun't let me do my share o' the work. 'Tis all the grand lady he's making me, and I was never reared to idleness. Shall be furnishing a parlour, I, if all this mak o' nonsense goes on, and sitting wi' a bit of fancy-work i' my lazy lap, and thinking how many ailments I've gotten, like Widow Lister down at Garth."

Gaunt rode home that day, as on many others, with a pleasant memory of Mrs. Mathewson's laughter, the smoothing of the deeper lines about her face, the power he had of drawing her mind away from griefs buried long ago.

This luxury of bringing comfort to other folk was grow-

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ing dearer to him. It had been left to him to find out, unaided, that he had the gift; he had had no help when first he blundered into the knowledge. He was the stronger now for this lack of aid, and a quiet, yet buoyant confidence was replacing his old, haphazard jauntiness.

He was often at Good Intent, when work about the farm was done and he had leisure to stroll down for a pipe with Yeoman Hirst. Cilla would move about the house at these times, doing little, needless work of setting things to rights against the morrow; or she would sit beside the hearth, and intercept grave glances from Reuben — glances which she answered with the same look of question and of hope. It was their waiting-time, just as it was waiting-time for the frozen pastures; spring would have to step in before they found the answer to their riddle.

“Gaunt grows shapelier,” the yeoman would say, after one of these fireside evenings.

And Cilla would laugh. “He was always shapely enough,” she would reply demurely.

“Oh, ay! I was not thinking o’ come-kiss-me-quick shapeliness, and all that light make o’ moonshine. He’s showing his true breed at last, and I’m glad. His father — well, he’s under sod, and I oughtn’t to say it, but he was as near the devil’s likeness as I’ve seen yet. ’Twas a pity, lile Cilla, for the Gaunts go back to Norman William or thereabouts, and there have been few black sheep i’ the flock. Now, get to bed wi’ your fancies, lass. I’ve said as much as a cautious man ever dare say i’ praise o’ Wastrel Reuben; but I’ve seen your daft looks — yours and his across the hearth, all as if there’s never been a couple wanted to wed before — and you must gang your own gait, for Lord help the man who tries to stop ye, slim as ye are.”

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Exhausted by his eloquence, Hirst would reach out for his mug of ale, and Cilla would go softly up the stair, with shame in her cheeks and peace at her heart. She would lean at the open window, not knowing that the night wind blew cold, and would see new beauties in the moonlit street, the moonlit, hazy fields beyond.

It was to be the bitterest winter known for fifty years in Strathgarth. Yet, when December came, and the frost strengthened its grip, and all the land began to wear a pinched and sullen look, Gaunt felt the warmth of life increase. He lost his dogged recollection of former slights when meeting his neighbours at market or along the high-ways, just as they had long been willing to admit that their settled judgment of a man might, for once, be wrong. They heard his laugh less often now, but it was heartier when it came, and one they liked to hear. By gradual stages he was settling into his true position as master of the biggest and the oldest farm in Garth.

Hard work was asked of him that winter. Before Christmas there was a three days' snow that drifted over every sheep ungathered from the higher lands. When his own ewes were recovered — and he took more than his share of a labour asking great patience and endurance — he made his way as best he could to Ghyll Farm, getting along by the wall-tops mostly, to see how Widow Mathewson was faring.

He found her helping the man to clear the last fall of snow away from the space between the house-front and the well; her cheeks were ruddy, and her voice rang crisp and almost merry, when she saw Reuben struggling through the croft.

“ Bless me, but this has been what parson would call a visitation!” she cried. “ ’Tis sweeping we’ve been, an’ sweeping all ower again an hour or two after; we’d have

lost our way to the well-spring if we hadn't. It was kind o' ye to come, Reuben. You'd no easy journey, I reckon, up th' moor. It must hev been like climbing a feather bed set on end."

"So it was, mother, when the walls didn't help me; but I'd a fancy you might need me."

"Now had ye?" said the widow crisply. She was always apt to lose ten years of her sorrow when fighting one day's inclement weather. "Because o' my sheep all overblown up the moor? Ye should never waste pity, Reuben; there's little enough about, and 'tis precious, like."

"You have them safe, then?"

"Safe? I learned farming while ye were i' your cradle, and that means I learned weather, too. We'd a lile soft spell o' warmth last week? And ye never dreamed it meant snow to come?"

"I didn't," Gaunt admitted. "I fancied an open spell was coming."

"And you bred i' Strathgarth, and to know so little of her whimsies! That's how she fools ye every winter — a bout o' cold that starves the marrow i' your bones, and then a week o' softness just to 'tice ye on. Oh, I'm old to Strathgarth, lad; and soon as ever the warm snap came, I says to lad Michael here: 'Michael,' I says, 'we'll gather the ewes under shelter.' And Michael, being young and a man, and a bit daft, says 'no.' And I says 'yes,' and had to threaten to clout his lugs before he found persuasion. A few folk find religion, Reuben; but 'tis persuasion finds the many."

Michael, the man-of-all-jobs, had been standing discreetly in the rear. The bravest folk had a trick of standing out of the widow's reach. And suddenly he gave a great, loutish laugh.

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“ ’Tis this way, Mr. Gaunt,” he explained, with some show of haste. “ Couldn’t help laughing, I. You told me, first you found me a job here, I was to look after missus. Well, durned if I haven’t a fancy, like, that the boot’s on t’ other leg. *She’s looking after me*, and I can’t help myself. But she’s good at the weather, she is, I own,” he added reflectively. “ She’s saved me a lot o’ trouble, all through ingathering them ewes afore she’d right or sense in thinking it war going to snow.”

“ There’s the shippin to be cleared, soon as ye’ve done idling wi’ your broom, Michael,” said the widow. “ Ye’ll take cold, in this weather, lad; if ye don’t bustle about a bit.”

Michael slouched off shamefacedly; and Mrs. Mathewson, as she made Gaunt welcome in the living-room, surprised him by her cheeriness. It was only when he stood at the porch, to find his way down the moor again — through hazard of the snowdrifts, as he had come — that the widow reached out to him for help. She had gathered in her sheep; she was wise enough to know the look of the sky, and the way of a Strathgarth winter; but she was lonely and forlorn, for all that.

“ Reuben,” she said, gently, “ the snow’s three feet or more over Peggy’s grave. It has drifted into the little glen, and the rowan-tree’s half hidden. I can’t thole the thought o’ my lass lying up yonder i’ the cold.”

“ Snow covers warm, mother, so they say.”

“ Ay, so they say; but I can’t believe it, when I see th’ glen. I could bear it better when th’ days were soft and pleasant, and maybe a throstle whistling i’ the rowan, or a starling plucking at the berries just ower Peggy’s head; it seemed friendly-like — Reuben, I war never one for prayer,” she broke off, with sudden passion, “ but I tell ye I’ve worn my knees raw wi’ asking God to gi’e me back my

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lass. There war no answer; stands to reason there couldn't be. One silly old woman bleating like a ewe that's lost her lamb, bleating right up into th' big, empty sky, Reuben, and thinking she'd get an answer. "Twould be enough to make me laugh, if I didn't cry, instead."

Gaunt was dismayed by this glimpse allowed him of the strong, tireless tragedy underlying the woman's mask of tartness and half humorous self-control. And the widow, seeing his trouble, passed a hand across her eyes; her smile was like a break of sunlight, that can brighten the wintry fields but not thaw them.

"Though to be sure, 'tis outrageous for a tough old bit of bog-thorn like me to be reckoning to have feelings o' my own. Why, 'tis near as foolish as to find a son i' my old age — a son all ready-made, so to say, like Moses in the bulrushes. Ye'd best be getting down to the moor, for it wouldn't do to let dark overtake ye. Good-by, Reuben; ye're a good lad to me these days."

She left him abruptly to have her cry out indoors and get done with it. Gaunt watched her out of sight, then turned the shoulder of the farmstead and made his way, not down but up the moor. The track to Peggy's grave was marked plainly by Widow Mathewson's big, manlike boots.

There was something strangely sad and lonely in this path of sorrow, in the look of the regular, deep footprints, limned sharply, even to the impress of the nails, by the bitter, east wind frost. There was something lonelier still in the look of the glen above, which now lay almost level with the moor. The upper branches of the rowan were all that broke the white, unending spaces, reaching out to a grey-black sky that showed dirty by contrast with the virgin white beneath.

Gaunt understood how hard it was to believe the

country saying that "snow covers warm." An incongruous memory came to him of the evening, little more than four months ago, when Peggy and he had crossed from Linsall Fair, and had been glad of the rowan's shelter, the cool tinkle-tinkle of the stream, after the parched heat of the uplands. He saw the girl's look of splendid vigour and high spirits, the light in her eyes, as he stooped to kiss her and she reached up her lips with reckless zest in life and laughed: "Yes, Reuben, with a will and a half, if only because you won the fell-race to-day." He could see the red scarf at her breast, setting off, as she knew well enough, her gipsy beauty. He could feel his heart beat with eagerness as he asked her to marry him, thinking, in the moment's overmastering passion, that he could be faithful to any but Priscilla of the Good Intent.

And this was the end of it all. The stream frozen down to the pebbles that lined its bed; three feet of snow lay over the spot where they had kissed in the cool of a summer's evening; and Peggy — Peggy, with her gipsy eyes, and her flaunting, crimson scarf and her wild, unstinting love for him — lay under a shroud of the moor's making.

There comes an end to a man's power to feel further grief, at these times of martyrdom self-imposed. The wise God has seen to that. Reuben turned at last, his shoulders bent, and went down the track which Peggy's mother had made for him. Then he made his way home, as he had come, along the wall-tops, or across the higher spits of land which the wind had cleared, or by any way that served. His housekeeper, when he came into the house at dusk, said to herself that he looked like a broken man, and wondered at the cause.

As for Reuben, he was no way broken. The fierce, cold wind of remorse and grief for others had bent him level with the ground, but could not break him; for a man's

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character rides always high, as the stars do, above the moment's weather. To-morrow he would take up his work, with a still firmer hand, maybe, than before; to-morrow he would find his way again to Ghyll, enticed there by a face not young at all, a face on which grief and weather between them had traced strange patterns. There was real tenderness at the heart of this man who had shown so many faces to the world, and Widow Mathewson had chosen a good son, after all, on whom to lean.

At dusk of the same day, as Gaunt was dragging his tired feet through the drift that lay between the road and his own garden fence, the evening mail came into Garth. Instead of three horses, there were four, and they were sending clouds of steam down the tracks of the frosty wind. Will the Driver pulled up at the cottage which served Garth as post-office and shop of all trades. His hands were chilled stiff as the beads of foam on the harness, but his laugh was warm as ever when Daniel, the postmaster, came out from selling a penn'orth of toffee to receive Her Majesty's mail.

"Not snowed up yet?" asked Daniel, shivering a little in the wind.

"No. No, Daniel. Not just yet. You're the ninety-and-ninth that has asked me that question along the road, and I'm fair tired of answering. We've kept a way open somehow, but durned if we can hold out against another fall. Gee-up, Captain! Your hoofs are balled under with snow, and my hands and feet are as cold as a jilted lass, but Her Majesty wouldn't like us to be much later than we are already. Gee-up, Captain!"

His cattle were getting fairly under way by the time he reached Widow Lister's door. He had hoped for once to escape the plump little woman whose only business in life was to stop busy men on the highway; yet he pulled

up, with weary deference to habit, as he saw her lying in wait.

“So you’re not snowed in yet?” she asked.

Her slanting glance, over-coy for her years, the sleek, well-fed look of the woman, found the secret corner where Will kept his temper hidden. “You’re the hundredth,” he snapped, “and I knew I’d find the last straw nigh your door, or thereabouts. Seems to me you keep a stack of such-like straws. What is it, Widow? We’re late, and Captain is as cross as ever I saw a horse in my long time of driving.”

“Nay, ’tis the Captain’s master that’s cross. Shame on ye, Will, to be grumbling at such weather as God sends. Who are we to grumble?”

Will waited in exasperation. The widow was “nimble as a weathercock,” as he put it to himself, “and could always place a right-thinking man in the wrong.”

“What is it now?” he repeated.

“Oh, don’t be getting impatient. I only asked if ye were snowed up, or not. Surely a civil body can ask a civil question.”

“Well, I shouldn’t be here if I was, but to-morrow I may be,” he added, with cheerful malice. “I doubt, as it is, if I can get as far as Keta’s Well to-night. The drifts were six feet high up the road, so they tell me.”

“There now! If ever I want a thing, and must have it, there’s sure to be a cross. Ay, just another cross. Widows, living lonely like and helpless, were meant to bear ’em, I reckon. I was going to ask you to bring —”

For the first time in the history of Will, he did not wait for a wayside command. His feet and hands were half frozen; that mattered little; but his horses were in risk of catching a chill.

“Gee-up, Captain,” he said. “I’ll bring it, bird cage,

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or eight-day clock, or what not, Widow, when the weather's a shade milder."

Cilla heard the running shuffle of hoofs on frozen snow as the mail went past Good Intent. She was sitting in the firelight, and Hirst, just returned from bringing sheep down to the fold, was dozing by the hearth.

"There's the mail, father. 'Tis time we had a letter between us, surely."

"Eh, lile lass?" he asked, rousing himself, as he always did, at the sound of Cilla's voice.

"The mail has just passed. I was thinking a letter of some kind would be welcome."

"Were ye, now? I could have understood that better if — well, if somebody had been away fro' Garth instead of biding at home."

Cilla winced under her father's jovial pleasantry. She knew that he referred to Gaunt, and during these days of waiting and uncertainty she was sensitive to the least hint that they were free to care for each other.

"Oh, it is only that news from outside is pleasant, father, when the snow shuts us in for so long together."

"Well, ye've got your wish," said Hirst, rising lazily as a knock sounded on the outer door of the porch. "That's Harry the Post, if I know a knock when I hear it."

Cilla waited with a pleasant feeling of expectancy, as her father opened the door.

"Evening!" came Postman Harry's gruff voice. "Just a lile letter fro' Canada. 'Twill be fro' David, as I said to myseln soon as ever I saw the writing and the mark. I'll step in, after my round's finished, and hear what news he g'ies ye."

This easy handling of the mail's privacy, was one of Garth's usual customs, and Hirst assented. "Ay, step in,

Harry. News and a cup o' summat warm — ye'll need it, with all the snow ye've got to trudge through."

"All i' the year's work! I'll be glad to hear news o' David, I own. Terrible pitiful thing, as I says to Daniel just now while sorting my mail — terrible daft thing to think of a steady, straight set-up Garth man choosing to waste his time i' them furrin parts. Garth's good enough for me, though plague take her weather. Well, I must be trudging."

Cilla was standing at the table, a puzzled frown on her face. She scarcely heard Harry's chatter. The wished-for letter had come; it happened to be from David; and her only feeling was one of indifference. It had been different not many months since in the early weeks of her shame and loneliness, after bidding Reuben keep faith with Peggy o' Mathewson's. She had welcomed the first letter from Canada, had read and reread it, had taken courage from the strength underlying David's crude sentences and simple penmanship. She had needed him then. And now?

"Art in a day-dream, lass," roared Hirst, tearing the letter open as he came in again. "Here's news from an old friend o' yours. Sit down by the hearth, Cilla, and let's see what's doing out i' Canada."

Hirst read the scrawled pages with some difficulty, laid them down on the settle, and glanced across at Cilla.

"There's news with a vengeance. David's coming home i' the spring."

"So soon?" asked Cilla, with sudden disquiet. "It seems a far journey for so short a stay."

"So he thinks, too. He's never what you would call bitter, isn't lad David, but he comes near to 't this time. His aunt Joanna, it seems, has found a man to her liking, and is going to be wed before long. She wants David

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about her till the wedding-day — trust Joanna for that — but not a minute later. The only thing David finds pleasant in the business is his longing to be home in Garth again.”

Cilla’s interest was roused, as it always was by injustice. “But, father, she might have thought of that before sending in such haste for David. It was not as if she asked him to step across to the next parish. He left his work here, to —”

“But Joanna never did think, save for herself. Bless me, I can see her smile and her easeful way of asking other folk to do her work — just such another as Widow Lister. Ye can’t argue about such women, Cilla; ye can only laugh, as ye would at a babby. So David’s coming home! Well! ’tis good news, say I. What say ye, Cilla?” he added, with a shrewd glance across the hearth.

“Of course, father. Who would not be glad to see him again? He’s so kind, and steady, and ready to help everybody foolishly.”

“Just so,” said the yeoman, with a laugh that was half a sigh. “He’s all that never i’ this world could tempt a lass. Male birds should wear brighter colours, eh? Read what he says there,” he added, reaching out for the letter, and putting his finger on the scrawled postscript.

Cilla read the few words, then sat with the letter in her lap. The message was so brief, so clumsily put in its dumb appeal; yet it brought a sudden rush of tears to the girl’s eyes.

“Tell Cilla” — she could almost hear the man’s slow voice speaking to her from away in Canada — “tell Cilla I’ve seen a deal that she used to want to see, what she called ‘all beyond Garth hills.’ I can tell her about strange lands now, if I can bring my slow tongue to it.

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Maybe she'll find me polished up a bit, not just so sleepy, like. And anyway, if she's free, it stands to sense I haven't changed, any more than I've altered i' my wish to see Garth village again."

That was all; but the message brought many memories to Priscilla. It painted for her every joy, and heartache, each bewilderment, that had followed Reuben Gaunt's return to Garth last spring. She remembered how Reuben had first caught her fancy by talk of "all beyond Garth hills"; she recalled David's dogged persistence in his faith that the old homeland was better than the new countries he had never seen, his jealousy of Gaunt's glib speech and wider experience. So much had been possible to David then, if only he had known it; he could have pitted his strength and sturdiness against the other's debonair persuasiveness; he might have appealed to the trust and comradeship that had held between them since the days when she was a lass in pinafores, and David a hulking lad of twenty who had eyes for no one else.

Yet Cilla knew that it could never have been. In some instinctive way, without thinking it in so many words, she knew that David was not meant to have a wife of his own and — and all that followed, if God willed. Looking into the sleepy peat-glow, Cilla sat aloof for a moment from her own perplexities. She saw David clearly, as we seldom find opportunity or leisure to view our neighbours, saw him with the grey, soft light of renunciation about him. It was David who had made Billy the Fool a working member of the busy hive at Garth, simply by persuading him that work was play. It was David who had mended Widow Lister's clocks, and bird cages, and window-fasteners, long after the patience of other men had been exhausted. It was David who loved

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Garth, and all Garth's ways, and all Garth's frets and whimsies, who had gone overseas to help a kinswoman in fanciful distress.

Cilla turned to the letter, and read the postscript again; and she was surprised when her father, rising with great noise from the hooded chair opposite, told her she was crying. He patted her roughly on her head, as if she were a sheep-dog, and stamped up and down the room, and returned to ask her what was the matter.

"Nothing, father, nothing. I'm tired of this snow, maybe —"

"Well, then, I'll just go and tell Garth folk that David's coming back. They'll like to hear it," said Hirst, who, like all men, had a secret cupboard where he hid his one, favourite cowardice. "Could never abide tears myself, like Cilla. Live and let live, I allus did say. Men were made for work, and they'd best leave women alone while tears are brewing up."

Widow Lister was patrolling her door-front when he went by. "There's luck for a body," muttered Hirst, ruefully, as he caught sight of the plump little figure. "Enjoying a walk i' the snow?" he asked, as he went by. "Well, I've had enough of it myself, trapesing all up and down the pastures since dawn."

"A lone body must do something," answered the widow plaintively. "I get weary-like o' my thoughts, sitting wi' the firelight only for company."

"I dare say, I dare say," assented Hirst, his big, foolish heart melted at once by this deftly suggested picture of the lonely hearth. "Cilla must come in oftener, to chat wi' ye at nights."

"Or perhaps ye'd find time now and then to step in yourself?" murmured the other, her eyes lifted "kitten-soft" to his in the moonlight. "There's something in

the way a man sits in his chair an' the smell of his pipe smoke that's cheering to a body."

Hirst was as free from vanity as most hearty, well-set-up men, but he had felt more than one doubt of the widow's friendliness in years gone by; and to-night he took a hasty step or two away from her, like a bird that sees the snare being set. "Why, yes!" he roared. "To be sure, I'll step in some night, and bring Cilla with me — and bring Cilla with me. Ye'll have David back in Garth, too, in the spring."

"I'm glad of that," said the widow. "There's that little job still waiting to be done, and it's rankled a bit, as I told ye; and now I can give him a piece o' my mind."

"Humph," growled Hirst, as he moved down the street. "Good night to ye. I'd thought ye might like to see David back for his own sake, not for what he can do for ye."

As he neared the forge, a broad shaft of crimson lay across the blue-white, moonlit road, a vivid splash of colour that flickered in long, waving lines.

"So Billy's at play. Never knew such a lad for playing early and playing late. He'll be glad o' my news, I reckon," thought Hirst, as he moved to the smithy door and stood looking in.

Dan Foster's lad was busy at the bellows, and Billy was standing at his anvil. He looked a huge, heroic figure as he brought the hammer down, his arms thick and brawny, his head throwing out a fantastic shadow of itself on the wall behind. A cheerful scent came from within the forge, an odour made up of red-hot iron, and fire heat, and hoof parings from recent shoeing. The yeoman would know that smell of Garth forge, bringing memories of other days with it, if you set him blindfold, after years of absence, at the door. The contrast, too,

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between the nipping frost one side the threshold, the royal warmth on the other, was pleasant, like a spring day found unexpectedly at Christmas time.

“ Billy, my lad, David comes back with the spring,” said Hirst, his natural voice striking easily across the uproar of the bellows and the anvil.

Billy, as befitted one who was short of wit, went on with the work in hand and finished it before he turned about. He was none of your wise fellows who drop a tool at the first hint of gossip, and afterwards return reluctantly to the unfinished job.

“ Te-he! There’ll be terrible pranksome doings when David comes back,” said Billy, leaning on his hammer. “ He’s like the swallows in a manner of speaking, this same man David — off for the winter, and home when Garth has got nicely warmed up again. When will he be coming, like? The first swallow’s nest I mind last year began a-building when the ousel hatched out her clutch of five up in Winnybrook Wood. Seems a long while to wait,” he added, glancing at the ribbon of firelit snow across the highway.

“ Oh, ’twill soon pass. Time does for busy folk,” said Hirst, warming his hands at the smithy fire and thinking, with some compunction, of the daughter he had left at Good Intent “ to have her cry out, like.”

Billy was silent for awhile, his massiveness and air of detachment from the world suggesting some impersonal figure of destiny. Then suddenly, as his way was, he returned to extreme childishness.

“ David will be bringing a lile pipeful o’ baccy; and, if he can no way find a match, I’ve got the fire to light it at right soon.”

The yeoman laughed, rattling the horseshoes on the walls, and handed his pouch to Billy. When the clay pipe

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was loaded, and the quiet puffs of smoke were going up to the blackened rafter-beams, Billy laughed foolishly.

"Seems I'm in a terrible puzzlement, like a hen with an addled egg."

"Are ye, now, and why?"

"Well, soon as ever David comes back wi' the swallows, blessed if he won't want a daft body to go working all at bellows-blowing. Look at Dan Foster's lad, and say by yond same token if bellows-blowing isn't work."

Foster's lad was wiping the sweat from his forehead, and he grinned at them both with friendly acquiescence in Billy's logic.

"That's soon put right," said Hirst. "What's work i' winter, Billy, is play when spring comes in."

The fool smoked the matter over with tranquil disregard of time. "I believe ye," he said at last. "Have watched the birds to some purpose, I. They'll be hopping i' search o' crumbs all winter time, as lean as a bare-boughed tree; but see 'em in spring, wi' the gloss on their wings, and their bonnie, bright eyes, and their calls when they're all by way o' mating, ye'd scarce know which was work, or which play, to these same scatter wits. So David's coming swallow-fashion home, is he, to make me play at bellows' blowing? I'll be glad to see the man's right, proper face again."

Cilla was still sitting by the hearth at Good Intent, and was still thinking of David's letter, of the postscript which she understood so well. She was aware of a childish wonder that the message should have reached her with all its freshness after so long a sea voyage. The man's unswerving loyalty, his dumb acceptance of any treatment she might give him, brought a pang of real suffering. She had no weight of remorse to battle with, as Gaunt had when he thought of the moorland grave; and yet, in spite

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of logic, she blamed herself. Overstrung as she was to-night, she could picture David's return, the pathetic hopefulness that his new power of talking about foreign lands would bring him nearer to his desire, his ignorance that there was any bond between herself and Reuben Gaunt.

"But then, there is none," she would finish weakly, and would find little comfort in the thought, and the tears would fill her eyes once more, because David was so constant, and she so weak to help him.

Cilla of the Good Intent stood in the middle of her own winter-tide, just as Garth village did; and the spring, as Billy had said, would seem long in coming.

CHAPTER XXIV

THERE'S no resisting Strathgarth Dale when her true spring arrives. She has many ambushes, many a sportive deceit, between winter and the breaking of the leaf-buds. It will please her mood to let woodbine leaf in March, to throw a wealth of saffron sunlight into sheltered corners of the fields, so that a man may sit and bask, and tell himself — knowing it a pleasant self-deceit, if he be bred in Strathgarth — that spring this year is coming early and is staying late. The next day a north-west gale will bring sleet and snow with it. And so through April — and half of May, perhaps — the weather teases folk, till their tempers grow brittle, and they hint darkly that it is a fool's job to go on living in such bleak lands.

Then suddenly the real spring comes, and the warm, keen joy of it, the eagerness of nesting birds and growing green stuff, sweep memory of the winter's bitterness away. It is spring and summer in one, this wonder-season that takes hold of Strathgarth Dale. The cattle, from sheer lust of life and liberty, throw foolish heads abroad and chase each other up and down the primrose pastures. Stern men unbend, and frail people grow frolicsome. It is sure, at this season of the leafing trees, that there's no place else in which to live save the long dale of Garth.

On one of these days Gaunt walked up to Ghyll Farm. All up the fields the cowslips curtsied to him, or primroses

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ventured maidish glances from their nooks. The larks rose high, and sang of courage and well-being. The plovers moved sedately, two by two, about the fields, and pretended, each pair of them, that the world did not know them at sight for nesting mates. A score of unconsidered flowers were budding eagerly.

Reuben found Widow Mathewson at the gate of the croft, as if she looked for him.

"I somehow fancied ye'd come, Reuben," she said, with as pleasant a glance of trust and welcome as though she were forty years younger, and he a lover bustling up with spring glamour in his eyes.

"Well, it was this way, mother. You told me your man was to be off for a day's holiday, and I thought there might be an odd job here and there —"

"Just so," put in the other, with a quiet laugh of content. "That's why I knew ye'd be stepping up the fields."

There was a good deal to be done, as it chanced, and it was evening before all was finished. After they had supped together, Mrs. Mathewson led Reuben out into the croft and turned toward the moor.

"We might as well enjoy the cool o' the day, now we've earned it," she said.

Reuben glanced at her inquiringly. Her voice was gentler than he had known it; her shrewd grey eyes were soft and kindly as they met his own. It seemed that spring had touched her weather-beaten life with fingers light and tender.

She was taking the track to Peggy's grave, for all that; and Gaunt wondered why she chose just this one way to-night.

"Oh, I laugh often at you folk who live smothered down in the valley yonder," said the widow, turning for a

glance at the dipping moor, the green pastures, the hills whose jagged tops were ruddy with the afterglow. "When 'tis cold, ye're colder than us; when 'tis hot, ye've never a breath o' clean moor-air to cool ye. I'd have died o' my troubles long since, Reuben, if it hadn't been for the moor."

With curious tenderness, she pointed out to him the landmarks, and named them all. Behind that spur of hill lay Dene hamlet. Just under the pole-star, showing bright green-blue in a strip of sky, stood the little farm where she had lived as a lass when Mathewson came courting her. The points of the compass were so many guides to memory — to memory, which is all the old folk have to warm them when spring calls up the pastures and demands an answer to his insolent, young note.

She almost forgot her errand, in this love she had for the moor and the encircling hills. There was a story to tell of Heyward's lass, who lived just where the pine wood showed dark below them in the evening light; of Daft Will, who lived under Sharprise yonder, and was the wildest and friendliest squire who ever rode the Strathgarth bridle-ways; of Bachelor Royd, who always said that he'd never cared to buy a wife by flattery, because pigs were easier come by and more profitable at the cost of open bargain in the market.

And then she turned to him, still with the smile that smoothed out so many furrows from her tired old face. "All this is old wives' talk!" she said. "I was allus a lile bit daft, like poor Peggy, but it heartens me to talk now and again o' days gone by. Maybe they'd their own share o' crosses an' whimsies, yond old times, but they have a trick o' smelling sweeter than the new days, Reuben."

She grew silent when they reached the glen, but the

peace did not leave her face. It was a pleasant bed, she felt, they had made for Peggy here, now that the snow and the east wind had gone, and the stream was free to sing its litanies. The rowan was in its first leaf, rippling under the least touch of the breeze; from the moor came the strong, eager scent of ling and greening bilberry; above them the stars showed one by one, while all along the western rises a wisp of afterglow lay like a saffron mantle over the sleepy hill-tops.

"Reuben," she said by and by, "I want to talk to ye, and I fancied we could best find words up here. Ye'll need a mistress soon for Marshlands."

Well as Gaunt knew her liking for abrupt, plain speech, he was startled. His thoughts had been all of the past year's heedlessness and tragedy; he could not rid himself of the figure that seemed to stand beside the grave — a radiant ghost, with gipsy eyes and straight, lithe figure, and a crimson kerchief knotted at the breast. There was no looking forward, here where the wind and the sky were quiet, and the still moor watched its dead.

"Nay, not that look, Reuben!" said Mrs. Mathewson, laying a gentle hand on his arm. "I never was one for back reckonings. It's all well enough, while the grief's on ye, to look behind; but there comes a time to look forward."

"It was only last autumn she died, mother."

"Just so, but there's been fire and torment for ye in between — oh, I know, Reuben! — and the clock ticks very slow at such times. Would ye listen once in a way while I talk to ye? There's decency i' grief; and, after that, there's a man's need to look at the track ahead. We're here for this world's business, Reuben, till we die."

He was looking at her with a puzzled question in his eyes, as if she had roused him from some nightmare and

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was telling him that the light of day was sweeping through the windows of his prison.

"After that," went on the other, "well, Peggy's wiser than me by now, for I've no notion o' what happens afterward. We live on, I reckon; though Mathewson, being fond o' sleep at all times, would have it that we never wake up again. I used to tell him that I came of a wiry stock, and knew we were meant, like, to live on — in some sort o' heaven, maybe, seeing what a lot o' t' other place we get i' this life."

There was something clean and vigorous, like a wind from the heath, in this woman's outlook on the life that had harassed her, on the life that was to come. If her faith lay deep and hard to find, her fearlessness and honesty had in them the same massive power that underlay Billy's oddities.

Unconsciously Gaunt yielded to her mood. He had spent himself generously to serve this late-found mother, and it was her turn now to stretch a helping hand to him.

Out of the quiet night, the fragrant moor, there came a quickened sense of motherhood to the woman. Spring leads the younger folk down paths where the valleys shelter primroses and nesting throstles; it leads the old to the higher tracks where the sky and the moor-winds talk of abnegation.

"Reuben, my lad," she said, her harsh voice softened to the lilt of the heather-breeze, "Reuben, ye're too full o' life to live lonely for Peggy's sake. There's Marshlands, too. Have ye never thought that ye needed a son to follow you? Of course you have!"

"Yes," Reuben answered gravely. "Yes, I had thought of that."

"Why, Mathewson was a weakly man enough, but he never did forgive me for bringing a lile lass into the

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world, instead of a lad; and I always sort o' respected him for it, somehow. Stands to sense, Reuben; it's the man's way to want a boy or two, to carry the old name and the old house on. It's i' the blood, and it goes deeper than any kiss-i'-the-coppice love o' women. Oh, I'm old, and I know, and I'm telling ye!" she finished, relapsing into her favourite phrase.

There was pluck in this quiet persuasiveness of the widow's. She had been bitterly jealous on Peggy's behalf, though her girl was long past all feeling of the kind. It had hurt her when now and then she had seen Gaunt and Cilla together in Garth Street, or in the fields, and had read their secret more plainly than they did themselves. Only by hard endeavour, by grasping her love for Reuben, and bringing her sturdy common sense to bear upon his welfare, had she found courage for this talk at Peggy's graveside.

"Besides," she added, after a silence, "it was always Miss Good Intent." For the first time a touch of the old bitterness was in her voice. "What did I tell ye long ago, Reuben? Ye need a ladyish mistress for Marshlands, 'specially now ye're bringing the place into its old shape again. I'll not complain, lad; and, as for Peggy, she ligs very quiet and willun't speak a word."

"We must wait, mother, wait and see what happens afterwards," said Reuben gravely. "We'll not talk of it to-night."

The bitterness left her, and she came nearer and laid a hand on his arm. "Life doesn't wait. 'Tis only death can spare time for that. Just tell yourself old scores are settled handsomely, Reuben, and find yourself a mate."

The starshine and the silence of the moor wrapped the two of them about. The fever-heat of August, the misery and fear, were softened, till they seemed, to Gaunt, if

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not to the widow, part of a tragedy much further off in point of time.

A peewit came straying down the moor, and wheeled and cried about the rowan-tree.

"Hark ye," said Mrs. Mathewson, "there's Peggy's parson come to say a prayer or two above her. He's constant, like, yond bird; she had him so tame, ye'll mind, that he'd eat from her hand, and he never went south this winter, like most of his mates. He just comes drifting down each night, like a lost bairn seeking home, and says his prayers, and then goes lap-winging up the moor again. There, we'll be getting home, Reuben. 'Tis a grand night for two together, if they happen to be spring-time-young; but ye're tired of an old woman's chatter by this time."

When they reached the porch, Gaunt stooped and kissed her awkwardly. Such tokens were rare between them, and his feeling was always one of shyness, as if he feared reproof.

"You've been kind to me to-night, mother," he said.

"Well, I've a right to be. Take a breath o' common sense down fro' the moor to the valley lands, and quit thinking o' last year's nests. Good night, Reuben. I'm fancying lile Miss Cilla will not choose so far wide o' the mark, after all."

She stood at the porch-door long after he had gone. She was jealous no longer on Peggy's behalf. A great weariness had come to her — tiredness of all things under this warm, soft sky, with its stars and its silent peace. She had paid her debt to Gaunt. Her knowledge of all he had done for her, when none but he came up to help her through the fever time, had stood to Widow Mathewson as a debt, and she had always had a liking for meeting creditors.

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Peggy lay under the rowan, with the quiet of the lapping's evensong above her. Reuben was striding down the fields, lusty and long to live. But this woman, standing at the porch, was empty of all courage.

"Spring blows warm to the young," was her thought. "'Tis only right it should — but what of the old, sapless folk?"

She sighed, and laughed at herself the next moment, and answered her own question.

"Not so sapless, after all," she said, in her brisk, tart voice as she turned indoors. "There's a farm to look after, and a lazy farm-lad to get up betimes to-morrow's morn."

Gaunt, meanwhile, had got down the fields as far as the foot-bridge that decides a man whether he shall cross to Garth, or turn to the right and seek the road which leads Marshlands way. Gaunt chose the left-hand track, over the slender arch of stone.

"I'll go by way o' Garth," he said to himself. "The longest way round is pleasant on a night like this."

The longest way round led him past Good Intent, and a big voice sounded from the porch as he neared it.

"Ye'll have a rare fine day for your journey, Cilla," Hirst was saying, taking all the parish into his confidence, though he thought his tone subdued. "I never saw a likelier sundown."

Gaunt stopped. A senseless lover's dread had seized him. Cilla going a journey? Had his hopes been all so much idleness? A journey meant travelling overseas, surely — and David was in Canada — and there had always been a friendship between them.

"Yes, father," he heard Cilla answer. "You always did say I had luck o' the weather when I took a journey."

Gaunt moved forward. The girl's tone was so quietly

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happy that he was sure now of his hasty guess. David was on his way home, so he had understood; but perhaps he had changed his mind at the last moment, had found a profitable farm out yonder, and Cilla was going out to him. He remembered her longing, a year ago, to see what lay beyond Garth hills; it was bitter to recall how eagerly he had prompted her restlessness, had talked of other countries until at last he caught her fancy. And now she was going out to marry David, and it would be the slow-going smith who showed her the strange lands.

The dim, white roads seemed to be slipping away from under Gaunt's feet. He no longer wished to stay for a chat at Good Intent; his one desire was to get away with his misery, and conquer it as best he might.

The yeoman checked him. He and Cilla were sitting on the stone bench just inside the porch, as they had sat for the last hour. It was dusk along the highway, but the porch was darker still, and Hirst, looking out from its shelter, could not mistake the figure striding by so quickly.

"What have we done, then, Mr. Gaunt, that you're i' such a hurry to get past the door?" roared Hirst.

Gaunt laughed, with a constraint that puzzled Cilla. "Well, I've called so often lately that I fancied my welcome might be overstayed."

"Hear him, Cilla! As though every man in the dales didn't know our ways. There's two sort o' folk, Mr. Gaunt. One sort would never set foot on my doorstep, if I could help it. T' other sort can come dawn, or dusk, or middle day, and as often as they please. Now, step forrard, Cilla; we've been idling i' the dark here long enough. Light up indoors, lass, and stir the peats, and set a couple o' glasses out."

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When they followed Cilla in, and stood in the lamp-glow, Reuben looked across at her. "You are going a journey to-morrow?" he asked abruptly.

She did not meet his glance, but stooped to play with the kitten on the hearth. He saw the delicate colour come and go across her cheeks, as it did always when her feelings were touched in any way; and again he guessed that David was the cause.

"Yes. I am going — to Keta's Well," she finished unexpectedly.

One little, upward look she gave him, then went on playing with the kitten. The glance was so full of question, so quiet and yet so near to roguishness, that it bewildered Gaunt. Gradually he felt the ground grow firm under his feet again, as he realized that it was not David, after all, who had tempted her to make a journey. And suddenly he laughed.

"Well, now, durned if I know why you're laughing," said Hirst.

"Cilla tells ye she's going up to Keta's Well, as she goes every spring, to do a few lile oddments o' business for me; and ye seem to fancy it a jest."

"So it is," said Reuben, "the best I've heard for many a day. It was the notion of Miss Cilla doing business for ye that tickled me, somehow," he added hurriedly, seeing the yeoman's half puzzled, half quizzical glance at him.

"'Tis spring has gone to your head, my lad. That's what 'tis. I was like that myself when I was your age. I could laugh at th' first idle thought, or at none at all, soon as ever I heard the cock-throstle whistling to the hen-bird, or saw the first o' the green dappling every hedge-row. Eh, lad," he broke off, reaching for his pipe, "I'd swop my time o' life for yours, if you'd let me. But, then, ye wouldn't. Ye're no fool, eh?"

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When Reuben said good night, no whisper passed between Cilla and himself; but she set out the old, mended lilac frock before she got to bed, and smoothed the folds as if it were a living thing, dear to her from old acquaintance. In her heart she knew that Gaunt would see it on the morrow.

The dawn, when it came cool and fragrant through her open window, found Cilla half awake already. She had dreamed of Ghyll Farm, of fever and penance and disaster; it was good to wake to this clean, real life that called to her from out-of-doors.

She did her work about the house, gave Yeoman Hirst his breakfast, then went up to don the lilac gown.

"Too bonnie to be good," said Widow Lister, as she watched Cilla pass her door a half-hour later. "When we're made for sorrow, and should be humble-like i' face o' death to come, 'tis tempting Providence to wear such a becoming shade o' lilac."

Cilla went down the street, radiant, like the spring, with some happiness that came from within. She was eager, buoyant, and she moved along the grey, old high-road like some tall fairy who had forgotten that the world was tired and humdrum.

Will the Driver came rattling up to the Elm Tree Inn with his team of three, and greeted Cilla with the pleasant air of welcome that she commanded at all times.

"Bless me, but ye've a trick o' tempting spring out from frosty corners," he laughed. "Ye'll be for Keta's Well? I always did say there's one day o' spring that's better than the rest, and that's when I carry Miss Good Intent for a passenger."

In the midst of the bustle attending Garth's busiest moment of the day, while mail-bags were being exchanged, with the gravity befitting an affair of Her Majesty's,

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while parcels were being handed up and down between Will and the chattering knot of folk, Reuben Gaunt came swinging down the street.

Last year he had ridden in; but to-day he was on foot, and he clambered up to the empty seat at Cilla's side as if it were reserved for him. She turned shyly to him as soon as Garth was left behind and the white, sunlit riband of the highway stretched in front of them. "You — you did not say last night that you had business, too, at Keta's Well."

"The same business that brought me here a year ago," he answered soberly. "There's some property I want to own —"

Cilla was looking ahead and his tone misled her. "Surely you have property enough? Marshlands, father always says, is just the right size — big enough to keep a man busy all day and every day, and small enough to walk around it when he finds an idle morning."

"Well, yes. 'Tis a case of Naboth's vineyard, maybe. At any rate, I shall never care much for Marshlands, unless I get this other property to round it off."

Something in his tone made her glance quickly at him, and it was hard to believe that a year of upward struggle lay between the old Reuben and the new. His face was full of boyish mischief. He looked as if he had known never a care in the world, but had lived always in this warmth of the spendthrift, teeming spring. She understood him better in that moment, understood how easy it had been to name him "running-water," because they had given him never a chance, until last year, of proving his mettle. He had proved himself, once for all, and now was a boy again until the next summons came.

Cilla let her own mood run with his. She knew his meaning now, and would not look at him, and could not

trust herself to speak, but the white road, and the green, homely pastures, and the birds that fluttered up the hedgesides in front of the rattling coach, led out, she knew, to the enchanted lands "beyond Garth hills." They lay nearer home, these lands, than Cilla of the Good Intent had guessed.

They were passing Widow Fletcher's now, and Will the Driver turned in his seat as they went by.

"Am having a holiday, I, Mr. Gaunt," he laughed. "I won't say I'm glad, for it wouldn't be seemly; and I can't say I'm grieved, for it wouldn't be true; but the widow, she broke an ankle in trying to catch me up a week ago, just when I'd dodged her for once. Widows are trials, I own, and maybe t' other lile woman at Garth — her sister — may be laid by for awhile with a sprain, or a touch o' rheumatiz, or what not. There's always hope, as the fox said, when he was leaving his tail in the keeper's trap."

Gaunt laughed in answer, and passed the banter which was true coinage here on the open highway; but Cilla, stealing a glance at him, saw that the grave look had returned. He was thinking of a widow up at Ghyll yonder, who had met life from another, and a braver standpoint.

She, too, felt that a chill had touched the warmth and glamour of this drive to Keta's Well, as if the breeze had shifted suddenly from west to east. She remembered the pool where Mrs. Mathewson and she had met while rescuing sheep from April snow, recalled the struggle between Reuben and Billy, and the widow's tale of what had happened long ago at Marshlands. The tale had recurred to her many times during these past weeks, and with it a distrust of Reuben against which she struggled loyally.

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“What are ye thinking of?” he asked, breaking a long silence.

Cilla knew that this distrust would lie between them always, if she did not answer frankly. She was glad he had given her so plain an opening. Hard as it was to speak, it would be harder afterwards, if she let the chance go by; and Cilla was never one to let the bigger evil come, for lack of courage to meet the lesser.

“I was thinking of Billy, and a story I did not want to hear. Reuben, why do you always pass poor Billy as if he were nothing to you?”

“He gives me little chance to do anything else,” said Gaunt, reddening as he met the quiet, questioning glance that would not be denied. “He hates me for some reason.”

“Perhaps he knows — it is hard to tell what the poor lad understands, behind all that foolishness of his — perhaps he knows he’s your half-brother, and that you’ve denied it time and time again. ’Tis your denial troubles me.”

Cilla could be merciless when there was need to reach the truth. She would not let his glance waver; she compelled him to be honest.

“Cilla,” he said at last. “I *had* to deny it. I’ll own to my own shame at any time, but not to my father’s. He may have been this or that, my father; but I’ll lie any day to keep what good name I can for him.”

Will the Driver turned again, and pointed up the fells with his whip.

“You always liked to see the deer, Miss Cilla,” he broke in. The wind of his own fast driving had carried their talk behind him, and he did not know how welcome was the interruption. “They’re browsing yonder near the fell-tops, just to the right o’ the spinney; d’ye see them?”

Cilla sought for the brown specks, far up the pastures that stepped boldly to the sky. These specks of brown stood for the pride of bygone overlords of Strathgarth, in the days when their deer forest stretched out from Shepston to Keta's Well, and a league or two beyond. And Will, whose forefolk, like himself, had lived within the limits of Garth's hills, was proud of their diminished forest's splendour.

"The old stag's fair riotous, so the keeper tells me," went on Will. "He's tame as a cushat the rest o' the year, and will feed fro' your hand; but soon as ever spring comes in, bless me, and saving your presence, Miss Cilla, he's the devil and all with his nasty temper. Gee-up, Captain! We're late," he added, laying a gentle lash across the leader. "We're always late, what with this constant plague o' widows on the road."

Cilla leaned forward, her face between her hands, and watched the road slip past the hedgerows. This man beside her, of all men in the world, had humbled her. He had gone willingly into a house of fever; he, the acknowledged wastrel of the parish, had put his back into the work of making Marshlands what it should be, and had changed the stubborn outlook of his neighbours from dislike to growing friendliness. That was much; but the confession she had wrung from him meant more to this girl whose sense of honour was clean and dainty as an April day. The father had done ill with his own life, and with his son's; yet Reuben had striven to keep what starveling flowers he could in bloom about the old man's grave.

Gaunt waited till she chose to break the silence. He had learned patience last August, as he had learned strength, while he waited on the sun-scorched uplands to know if Peggy o' Mathewson's would live or die. He had learned

further patience while nursing a half-ruined property into new health.

Suddenly Cilla turned to him, and his heart beat faster than ever it had done while winning the great race at Linsall Fair. All that the spring day held of tenderness, of trust and hope and love of life for living's sake, seemed gathered into Cilla's glance. He had won his biggest race of all.

"We'll get down here, Will," he said by and by, as they neared the old green lane that led back to Garth.

"Thought ye were bound for Keta's Well," said the driver, with the dalesman's frank curiosity.

"So we were; but we've changed our minds." Gaunt's laugh was a boy's again. He seemed not to care how soon all Strathgarth knew the meaning of the glance that Cilla had given him. "You've forgotten the old saying, Will; folk are free to change their minds i' the spring, like the weather."

Cilla did not question, but took his hand and slipped lightly to the highway. At another time her father's business up at Keta's Well would have been all-important; but to-day she had forgotten it.

"Humph!" muttered Will, as he drove forward between the lusty hedgerows. "Just a year since last I carried the lile fools as far as Keta's Well. 'Tis a long while, seeing a babby could have told the two o' them what ailed them. Well, I'm not complaining. If Miss Good Intent is half as bonnie wedded as she is single, there's none of us need grumble. Gee-up, Captain! Her Majesty will put up with a lot, but she gets terrible cross if we're late with her mails. Gee-up, lad, or shall I make ye?"

Gaunt had opened the gate, and Cilla and he were loitering down the lane which once had been the highway, but which now was grazed by sheep and cattle. There was a

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curious privacy about this abandoned road, a charm which haunts neglected thoroughfares. The raking fells lay white against the sky on one hand; on the other lambs bleated to their mothers in the sheltered hollows. The birds could not be quiet, and a happy din went up into the sunshine and the warmth. The lark sang "like as if he'd burst his lile throat all to pieces," as Billy put it, and the throstle piped, high and clear, as if he meant to be obeyed, and the curlews were dipping and wailing, wailing and dipping, with their note of everlasting sorrow.

A hare got up from under their feet. A squirrel peeped at them from the bough of a leafing sycamore. Men had been busy once along this green, neglected lane; and the fret of their tired feet had passed, and the mother of us all had chosen this for her quiet house, where birds might nest, and flowers could bloom, and men's insolence was hidden out of sight.

If ever two folk were given the one right day and the one right place for wooing, Gaunt and Cilla were favoured now. The peace of the lane, the eagerness of all the teeming life about them, the very fell-tops, pointing with white fingers to the blue and happy sky, seemed made for them; and Cilla was proving once again the truth of the Garth saying that "Miss Good Intent could always have the Queen's weather for the asking."

A year ago they had trodden the same lane as boy and girl, had kissed, and fancied life held nothing better. They had seen life face to face since then, had lived through long, ugly days that seemed too sordid for romance; yet here was the glamour, walking step by step with them, a glamour that was built, not on the sands of fancy, but on foundations sure as those of the sturdy hills about them. Gaunt turned to look at Cilla. She

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was dainty in her lilac frock. Any man, passing her, would have halted for a second glance at this lass whom Strathgarth summers had treated kindly, whom Strathgarth winters had given a reliance unknown to folk bred amid softer climates. He scarcely knew the face of which he had dreamed of nights; its peace, and its tender, eager beauty, were borrowed from all that lay beyond Garth hills, and from all that lay within them.

They came to the bend of the lane where last year they had met Peggy o' Mathewson's, and Cilla halted for a moment.

"Poor Peggy," she murmured, generous and warm of sympathy as this day of spring that set the world to rights.

"It was never meant to be," said Reuben, with no assurance in his tone, but rather like a child who gropes helplessly for the answer to a riddle.

And Cilla smiled through her tears. "My dear, it was never meant to be. Reuben, there's a lile bird singing at my heart. I can't mistake the song."

"No wonder they called it Fairy's Lane," said Reuben. "I used to laugh at the notion once."

CHAPTER XXV

DAVID the Smith had chosen this same day of spring for his return to Garth, though he had sent no word of his coming to Yeoman Hirst. He remembered the boisterous good-will shown him when he left the old haunts to cross overseas. Because he returned the same single-hearted David who had loved Garth village from his babyhood, he was shy of such another welcome at his home-coming. He would not take the mail from Shepston, the mail which carried Gaunt and Cilla to their betrothal, but walked instead.

He wanted to see the daffodils in bloom, in the crofts and the wayside gardens that bordered the highroad. He wanted to be free of chatter, and to feel his two legs carrying him, as a man's legs should, between the grey, remembered hills. He wanted, most of all, to find Cilla of the Good Intent at home, and to tempt her — God's pity on the man's brave simplicity — with tales of other lands.

At four of the afternoon he came to Garth, and shied, from old habit, when Widow Lister pattered out to meet him.

“Glad to see ye again, David,” she said, coquetting, as she always did, with a hale and well-to-look-at man. “Bless me, what a power o’ heat there must be, yonder over Garth hills. Ye’re freckled and tanned, David. ’Tis good to look at a face like yours; puts one i’ mind o’ sun and hay harvest.”

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"Oh, I'm well enough; but 'tis Garth for me, I reckon, till I'm taken to the kirkyard, and may be afterwards."

The widow's face lengthened, from habit, into grave, forbidding lines. "Afterwards is as ye've done i' this life, David."

"Yes," said David, cheerily. "I'm content to rest on that standby, Widow."

She was silent for awhile, daunted by a strength that was rooted deeper than her shallow soil would ever know.

"Your aunt Joanna has no such fear o' the after life," she said, with sudden triumph. "She borrowed a tin kettle fro' me, did Joanna, and she forgot to return it, like, when she married into a heathen land."

"Ay, she's good at forgetting. But see ye, Widow, I didn't come all this way to talk o' tin kettles. I came to see bonnie Garth, with her face new-washed for spring and all the posies out i' the garden-strips."

With a good-humoured nod he moved on to Good Intent, and found the yeoman leaning over the gate of the seven acre field, watching his lambs with that peculiar air of leisure and detachment from all worry which comes to farmers in and between the bustle of these warm, full-blooded days of spring.

"Have your ewes done well, then?" asked David, as quietly as if he had seen Hirst every day during the past months.

The yeoman turned with a start. "David! Now, ye startled me, I own. I was just thinking o' ye, and reckoning 'twould be all about time for ye to be taking ship-board home; and then your voice came sudden-like; and I fancied it must be your ghost, come to tell us you were drowned at sea. There's the daft fool I've grown, David, since you left Garth!"

"There's not much ghost about me," laughed David, as he gripped the other's hand with old-time strength.

"Well, no, if a grip like a pair o' pincers be aught to go by. Stand ye there, David, and let me take a square look at ye. I've never been better pleased to see a man i' my life."

He walked around his friend, as if he were a specimen of farm stock whose points he was anxious to appraise correctly. Then he gave a great roar of approbation.

"Thought spring was treating me well when the ewes twinned so grandly, and scarce a lamb lost; but there was better to come, 'twould seem. David, ye'll have to stay i' Garth. 'Tis a different place without ye."

David looked around him — at the pastures, full of the music of lambing-time, at the rough-built walls that traced a grey, irregular pattern across the green face of the land, at the spinneys and out-lying barns which were so many landmarks to remembrance. Then he leaned his arms on the gate, and gave a quiet laugh.

"Oh, I'm here to stay," he said. "The months have been years to me out yonder. It will take a lot to 'tice me out o' Strathgarth Dale again."

"So what of all those traveller's tales ye promised Cilla? I tell ye, David, she looks for livelier doings than ever she saw at home."

"Oh, I've tales enough, maybe. 'Tis a different life, but —"

"But naught so much to brag of?" put in Hirst. "There! That's just what I always said."

"The life's well enough for those it suits, but it's over-young for me." David picked up a straw and chewed it with a pleasant sense of leisure. "'Tis this way, if I can get my tongue round a plain meaning. I'm ready to do a day's work with any man; but, when it's done, I

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like old things about me, th' old grindstone at the corner, Widow Lister's bit of a garden-front, with its daisies, and London pride, and lile clumps o' primroses. I want to be near all that my father loved, and his father afore him and back to Flodden Field, or near thereby. Out yonder 'tis naught but looking forrard and hurrying. They'll come to our way o' thinking by and by, when their roots have taken deeper hold; and they'll do more work i' the year, though they tell ye otherwise."

This was the David who had left the homeland. Unwavering in his love for Strathgarth, quick to realize a new phase of life, yet slow to accept it, he returned unspoiled, a little surer of his faith, if that could be, in the righteousness of older lands and older way.

"Your aunt Joanna didn't treat ye very well," said Hirst, after one of the pleasant silences that long ago had helped to make the two men friends. "It puzzles me that ye bear no malice, like."

"She's as God made her, like all of us. There's lile use in going against handiwork o' that sort. She asked me to go, and I went; and, when she hadn't a use for me, I came back." He stooped to pick a fresh straw, and again laughed gently. "'Tis as simple as falling out of a tree, and no back reckonings either way, now I'm free to live i' Garth again."

Hirst was not given to intuition. He thanked his Maker every Sabbath for the past week's mercies, and tended his flocks with cheery zeal throughout the next six days; but insight into the hidden workings of a man's character was rare with him.

He looked at David now — David, whose eyes were blue and honest as the sky that roved over the sloping fields, the rounded hills — and was compelled to understand his comrade. He knew now why Cilla had liked

David well, but could not marry him. The "far" look in David's eyes was that which nature's priests wear — the look that Billy the Fool carried when he watched a pair of nesting throstles — the look of the folk who are content to watch life's business, and to help it forward whenever a chance for kindness meets them at the road corner.

Again the friendly silence fell between them. David returned to mother earth again, and his voice had a wholesome snap in it. "What is Gaunt o' Marshlands doing these days? Running still to waste like water?"

"Well, no. He's found running water has its uses in a thin-soil country, and is tilling his lands with it instead."

"Gaunt tilling his lands? Cuckoo's eggs will be hatching throstles next."

"I thought you said folk were as God made 'em," said Hirst, with a touch of sharpness.

"Aye, but Gaunt's as he made himself. I can't abide the man, and never could."

So Hirst, to his own surprise, found himself defending Reuben. He spoke warmly of his fearlessness at Ghyll, of his plucky fight to win back a good name for his house. Not until met by this dogged opposition of David's, had the yeoman guessed how well he had grown to like Gaunt.

"Let bygones be bygones," he finished. "'Tis not like ye, David, to keep up a grudge like this."

"No, 'tis not like me, and I never felt it for another man; and I won't say I'm proud o' the feeling. But there it is, and there it will have to bide a while longer, seeing I can't get rid on 't."

Hirst, like a wise man, guessed that Cilla was the cause of the ill-feeling, and talked no more of Reuben. He chatted of Garth's doings through the winter, led David

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on to talk of his adventures; but all the while he noted a growing restlessness in his companion. David kept glancing down toward the farm, then up at the pastures, as if in great fear or hope of some intrusion.

"No, she's not at home," said Hirst, with a sly roar of laughter. "The lile lass is faring out at Keta's Well."

David looked shyly at the yeoman, surprised that his secret had been guessed so easily. Then a great loneliness took hold of him, an instinct of trouble and foreboding. He had come straight to Good Intent, not pausing even for a visit to his forge; and there had been one picture in his mind. He would find Cilla, wearing the lilac gown, at the farm. He would see a new light in her eyes after the long absence and the unexpected return. He would find readier speech than of old.

"I've travelled so far," he said, more to himself than to Hirst; "and she's a stay-at-home most days o' the year, and I fancied she'd be about the place just this one day."

"Oh, tuts! She'll be back i' a few hours' time, David. No need to go thinking the end o' the world is coming because a lass is doing some bits o' business for her father."

Hirst, with all his cheeriness, was ill at ease. He knew that this man's dream would not come true; he felt that a hint in time would be kindly, and yet he shrank from giving pain. In his indecision he turned slowly down the croft, and David followed him.

"Why, that's Cilla's voice!" cried the yeoman, halting suddenly. "She's home before her time; and how she's managed it beats me, for the mail isn't due for an hour yet."

And David watched the white highway below, where

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it came out of the shelter of the trees and curved past Good Intent. He felt sick and helpless.

Then he saw her, for the first time in the months that had seemed years in passing. Gaunt and she stepped into the road, as if they owned it and the whole, round world besides. She was wearing the lilac gown, but it had not been donned for David the Smith. They passed out of sight toward the porch of Good Intent; and, because they were looking at each other, they did not see the two men in the croft above.

"Well, you've got your wish," said Hirst, bewildered by the misery in David's face, and trying still to believe in his old creed that all would yet go well with everybody. "We'll step down, David, lad, and Cilla shall give you tea of her own brewing, and —"

"Thank ye," said David heavily, "but I'll be getting down to the forge. That's where my heart will have to bide from now on, and I might as well make a beginning."

The yeoman watched him go. "Oh, bless me," he muttered ruefully, "I do like to see things go right for all. Pity I hadn't two lile Cillas, i'stead o' one, if David's bent on breaking his heart like any raw young lad."

A busy hum sounded from the forge as David neared it. Not many weeks ago the fire-glow had lain across the road, a crimson splash on the white April snow; now it fought for mastery with the clear, hot sunlight. David lifted his head when he heard the rhythmical song of the bellows, as an old fox-hound rouses himself when music of the pack sounds down the wind. The blow had fallen on him mercilessly; but already he felt heartened a little, a very little, by the sturdy light of the forge. He stepped to the doorway, and looked in. Dan Foster's lad was working the bellows, and Billy was playing at smithy

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work. David watched the man's muscles tighten and relax, relax and tighten, as he plied his hammer; and an off thought came to him that the world's work would be better done if more folk played as Billy did.

Billy paused at last to wipe the sweat from his forehead, and turned, and saw David standing in the doorway. There was no surprise in his face. He was content to play through the long winter, until the swallows came to build their nests again in Garth. He knew they would return, and waited patiently; for Billy, as all Garth knew, "was not wise."

"First o' the swallows came yesterday, David," he said, "and blessed if ye haven't followed, quick as ye could scramble. 'Tis good to see ye both."

David was sore at heart. If he had been a woman, he would have leaned against the smithy-wall and sobbed himself into a makeshift peace. As it was, he sought about for some trivial help in need. He found the help in that quiet, persistent thought of others which, perhaps, had lost him Cilla; the wise were apt to think him dull.

He took a pouch from his pocket, and handed it to Billy. When the black clay pipe was charged, he passed a match across. It pleased him to see Billy light it tranquilly upon the anvil, pleased him to watch the slow wreaths of smoke curl among the rafters.

"Your 'baccy always smoked a lile thought sweeter than other folk's," said Billy.

In some muddled way, David understood that the welcome he had looked for, here in Garth, came from this massive, tranquil man whose power of speech was hindered. The warm air of the forge, the smell of it, soothed the fierce pain of David's loss.

Billy the Fool laughed unexpectedly; it was his privilege. He had caught sight of Dan Foster's lad, standing

idle by the bellows with a look of wonderment about his cherry-red face.

“A queer lad, he,” said Billy. “He’s been working ever since you left, he has, while this same fool has had all the fun. ’Tis a terrible pranksome matter, this hammering horseshoes into shape. Ye take a bit o’ hard iron, and it says it will no way budge, however hard ye hit it; and ye say it shall budge; and then it gets into a fearful rage, and spits at ye with its lile, red sparks; and ye go on hammering, just for frolic, like, till bless me, if there hasn’t a horseshoe grown out o’ yond same bit of iron, like a sycamore-leaf fro’ the bud.”

The smith had lit his own pipe, and was listening with something of the old content to Billy’s familiar line of thought. All the fool’s interest in life, trace it deep enough, centred round growth of some kind. It might be growth of the plants under sheltered banks, that caught the first footsteps of the spring, which claimed attention from him; it might be the mother-work of birds when they hatched their eggs in the many nests he over-watched, or the whitening of the pastures when ewes began to drop their lambs; it might be the forging of an iron rail, or the building of a wall; but the instinct at the root of all his pleasures was growth. Untrammelled, as no other man in Garth was, by the frets and small indignities of daily life, Billy had learned insight into the deeper truths. He could write no verses, nor wished to; but he moved through the quiet village life, for all that, a great poet, not of his own dales only, but of the world.

David’s nature was akin to his in many ways, and at times such as this, when Billy let his heart peep out and showed why toil was play to him, the smith was apt to feel a touch of awe, as if he listened to a greater than himself who was talking of eternal verities. The next moment

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Billy would lose his high, abstracted look, and would return to some foolish detail of the world about him. He did so now.

“I’ve your money all ready for ye, David,” he said, going to the far corner of the smithy and reaching down a small, square box from the shelf. “Made the box myself, soon as ever ye left Garth, and made a slit, I did, big enough for money to go through, but not for fingers. Te-he, David! Not for fingers, I reckon.”

David was puzzled as the other jingled the coins as he crossed the floor, and placed his money-box in the smith’s hands. “What is all this, Billy?” he asked.

“Play money,” said the fool impassively. “Ye see, David, I’ve no more use for coins than for pebbles i’ a stream, so I saved ’em up against your home-coming. Charged terrible high prices, I, for shoeing a horse; and folk laughed, and they paid it, they did, because ’twas only Fool Billy; and there’ll be a right proper nest-egg ready for ye, David.”

The tears were in David’s eyes at last. He had gone on a wasted errand to another land, and had returned empty of thanks and pocket; he had come cheerily home, ready to start afresh with strong hands and a clean conscience as his only capital, and had encountered Widow Lister and her anxiety touching a tin kettle borrowed years ago. He had looked down from Hirst’s croft at a strip of sunlit highroad, and had seen a pair of lovers, full of spring’s tender insolence and right-of-way. All had slipped from under his feet, all save Billy the Fool, whose pleasure, like his own, was to give — always to give, asking no return, claiming only a pipeful of tobacco at the day’s end, and a tranquil smoke over the morrow’s gifts to other folk.

David passed a hand across his eyes, and moved to the

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anvil, and took up the hammer. "Ye can run home, lile lad," he said, turning to Dan Foster's lad. "Stay, here's a sixpence for ye to spend on yourself. Billy, 'tis work and play again, as i' the old days. Just bend your back to the bellows."

THE END.

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