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A Comedy of Rustic Life.

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The Threshing-Floor

BY

J. S. FLETCHER

T. FISHER UNWIN

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THE THRESHING-FLOOR

PART THE FIRST

CHAPTER I

MARRIOT entered upon his duties as road-surveyor to the Normancaster Highway Board on the first day of June 1893. He arrived in the town during the previous afternoon, and bestowed his belongings in rooms which had been recommended to him by his predecessor, who had lodged in them for five years and had spoken in high terms of their comfort, and of the capabilities of the landlady, Mrs. Marshall. Then, being a young man of an active and work-loving temperament, he visited his office and made the acquaintance of his clerk, with whom he discussed the necessities and character of the district. He fell into actual work the next morning, when, having received an urgent letter from one Gabriel Challenger, of Abbotsholme, who wrote to the effect that a landslip had occurred on a hillside road in the neighbourhood of his farm, he hired a horse from the livery stables at the Queen's Head and rode

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out to inspect the damage of which his correspondent complained. It was in the course of this ride that Marriot met Brigit Challenger for the first time, and fell in love with her.

Marriot was at that time a man of twenty-five, a fine, lusty, strapping fellow who looked full of life and spirits and of a rare capacity for work. He was tall, well-built, and muscular; his movements were quick and decided; you could not spend five minutes in his company without seeing for yourself that he was ready of thought and prompt of action; there was something of the military man who is also a martinet about him. This much had been noticed by those members of the Highway Board who had formed a deputation to wait upon him and to examine his work at his former post in the Midlands; one or two of them, men of greater discernment than their fellows, had seen still more deeply into the character of their new surveyor, and had informed themselves that he was a young man of great personal ambition. To them it was evident that Marriot would only remain at Normancaster until a still better appointment offered itself, but they were glad to have his services, if only for a year or two, and confident that he would prove a valuable servant.

Marriot's first notion on finding himself in any new place was to arrive as quickly as possible at an accurate geographical sense of its position, and so soon as he had ridden outside Normancaster that morning, he drew rein at an advantageous

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spot and carefully examined his surroundings. He had something of the artist's eye for the effective in scenery, and he said to himself that here were subjects for pictures on every hand. He sat still for some moments, slowly turning his head this way and that, with a keen, relishing, simple enjoyment of the view, and he smiled, as a child might smile at some attractive prospect or object which it saw for the first time.

"It's beautiful!" he said aloud, "just beautiful! That's the right word—beautiful!"

At the head of the richly-wooded valley in which he lingered stood Normancaster, set high on a steep and rocky hill, the quaint outline of its old-world towers and gables dominated by the square and massive keep of its great castle. Round the foot of the hill ran the silver windings of the Swirl, its gleam changing from silver to gold as it drew nearer the bridge on which Marriot had drawn rein; the gold was transformed to silver again as it passed on from him into the recesses of the woods through which his road lay. High overhead the blue of the June sky was broken by the figure of a hawk which hung motionless above a mass of grey rock; in the narrow meadows on either side the river and the road flocks of sheep and herds of cattle were grazing; down the long sloping highway from Normancaster which he had just traversed a carter and his team came slowly, the jingle of the horses' bells sounding musically above the ripple and murmur of the river. Marriot sighed with

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pleasure as he shook his horse's bridle and rode briskly forward.

"There's no doubt that it's a fine country," he said. Then, the professional instinct asserting itself in him, he murmured, "I shall have plenty of bother about keeping this road clear of snow in winter, though; it will drift deeply in this narrow valley."

For the next three miles his route lay through the woods and coppices. All the way the river ran between shelving banks at his side, sometimes breaking into creamy showers of foam and spray as it flung itself over dark masses of shining rock, sometimes widening out into placid stretches of golden-brown wherein the trout lurked lazily under the edge of stones worn smooth by the rolling of autumnal water. Everywhere road and river was flecked by points of sunlight bursting through the thick leafage overhead; here and there on river and road lay broad patches of unchecked light; here and there were wide, cool expanses of shade; in some places the tracery of the overarching leaves and twigs was silhouetted on the whiteness of the road like the pattern on a cloth of fine diaper. All through the woods and over the river hung the atmosphere of a rich and generous springtide. Marriot felt it in the warmth of the sun, the luxuriance of wood and leaf and flower, in the songs of the birds and the never-ceasing hum of insects which came from the undergrowth. The spirit of the morning filled him, and as he rode gaily forward he sang or

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whistled as merrily as the linnets and thrushes that trilled and piped on every side.

The road suddenly turned sharply away from the river and rose steeply up the hillside through a thicker growth of trees. Marriot heard the voice of the Swirl grow fainter and fainter behind him; as it faded into silence he turned in his saddle, and looking back caught a last glimpse of the river winding silvery bright beneath the overhanging alders. The ascent grew more marked and his horse's quick walk slackened. A cool wind stole through the trees as he rose higher and higher, and soon he caught the scent of gorse and heather and bracken. And suddenly the woods came to an end, and he found himself on the edge of moors, high above the valley, with the Swirl flashing in the sun far below him.

Marriot now perceived that the character of the scenery had changed. He could follow the winding of the valley for several miles, and he saw that from this point it was wild and lonely. Its sides were steep, and in places precipitous; out of them here and there cropped great oddly-shaped masses of grey stone; from the brow of each slope stretched away moorlands which gradually approached distant hills. In the far distance the valley appeared to be closed in by a chain of mountains; a small town, of hazy and indefinite outline, lay on rising ground at its head; its distance from him, Marriot decided, must be at least seven miles. Between it and himself he saw but two signs of human life in the valley.

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Some three or four miles away, clustering around a bridge which he made out to be of five arches, stood a village with a church—he saw the sunlight strike clearly on its gilded vane. A mile nearer him, but on the opposite side of the river, was a solitary dwelling, a great grey pile of buildings surrounding a high, partly ruinous tower. The road, to the highest altitude of which he had now climbed by the steep ascent through the woods, fell again to the river from this point—he traced it all the way to the village which stood near the five-arched bridge, and noticed that no byway turned off it in the direction of the solitary mass of buildings on the other side of the river. So far as he could see from that point, there was no other way of reaching this lonely-looking place than by going round by the village and bridge which lay some miles beyond it.

He trotted sharply down the winding road until he was almost abreast of the solitary house which had chiefly attracted his attention. Seen from a nearer point, he perceived that it was a farmstead of considerable size, which had evidently been built out of the ruins of some religious house, parts of which, indeed, were still plainly visible. A high square tower remained perfect save for its battlemented parapet, which had been broken down on two sides of the ruins, and tracery of a great arch rose above the bank of the river; masses of masonry lay in confusion about the house and the orchard. It was not difficult to Marriot, who had some knowledge of archæology, to trace the

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original ground plan of church and cloister. He perceived that the house and farm buildings had been built up out of the original edifice by adapting the latter as far as it was possible to secular requirements; part of the house, in fact, had been brought into existence by a transformation of the choir, and he judged, by the presence of white blinds in the lower storeys of the house, that they were put to use by the modern occupants. The whole place was picturesque and striking, but the loneliness of its situation at the foot of one of the most precipitous cliffs of the valley, its semi-ruinous condition, and the absence of overhanging wood or forest, communicated to it a certain sense of solitude and desolation which struck Marriot strongly.

"That should be Abbotsholme," he said musingly. "The thing is how to reach it from this side?"

He perceived, as he rode slowly along the road, that at a point immediately opposite the farmstead the ground on his side of the valley fell almost precipitously from the highway to the river, which thereabouts seemed to be in a more agitated state than usual. There was no sign of path or ford and none of any bridge; it became evident to him that he would have to go round by the distant village. He measured the distance at a glance, and frowned to think that he must travel at least six miles in order to reach a place into which it seemed possible to throw a stone.

Stirring his horse into a trot, Marriot pressed

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forward towards the village. But he had not ridden many yards further when, turning a sudden corner in the road, he came upon a sight which made him tighten the reins with an involuntary jerk that pulled the horse to a standstill. At the corner of a narrow lane, which descended between high gorse-clad banks from the moors above him and cut at a sharp angle into the highway, stood the remains of a wayside cross—a high, broken grey stump, weather-worn and defaced of its original carvings, rising out of a massive block of limestone grit, the corners of which had once been rudely worked and ornamented. At the foot of this relic of a long-dead age sat a figure clothed from head to foot in shapeless black garments, motionless and fixed as the cross which rose above it.

For a moment Marriot thought of the tales he had heard in boyhood of the apparitions of monks and friars who came back to revisit the houses out of which they had been unceremoniously turned, for the figure might have been that of a Dominican absorbed in meditation. But a second glance told him that this was the figure of a woman; and third, of a poor woman, for he noticed the torn and frayed edges of the long black gown and of the thin black shawl which enveloped her shoulders, head, and face, as in a cowl. Marriot wondered at the fixed, rigid attitude of this strange person. The horse, wondering too, snuffed the air with curiosity and stamped a ringing hoof on the hard road, but the woman remained motionless. Marriot

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forced the horse nearer; he wished to see the face hidden under the cowl-like shawl.

As he stopped in front of her the woman lifted her head, which until that moment had been bent towards the ground as if in prayer or reflection. Marriot saw that this was a woman prematurely aged; in her grey hair there still remained strands of raven blackness; there were still traces of a past beauty in her colourless face; her eyes, deeply sunken beneath black brows, were alive with a dull fire. She betrayed no surprise or astonishment at Marriot's presence; his gaze was returned steadily and without resentment or embarrassment. And as he gazed Marriot saw what it was at which the woman had been looking with downcast head when he first caught sight of her—on her lap, clutched tightly in her long, wasted fingers, lay a great coil of shining human hair; as the woman moved, the sun caught it and turned it into a mass of gold.

For a moment these two continued to stare at each other—the young man wondering and curious, the woman apathetic. Marriot felt that he ought to ride on, that he had no right to stare so insistently at a stranger; but he remained fixed in his saddle, and he soon found himself restraining the horse, which was growing impatient. And without wishing to do so he spoke.

"Are—are you ill, mistress?" he asked.

The woman stared at him, half-vacantly. It seemed a long time before her lips moved.

"No," she answered.

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There was a note in her voice which seemed to imply that she wondered why anyone should ask such a question, and Marriot tried in a lame fashion to explain.

"I thought you might have been overcome by the heat," he said. "These hillside roads are trying on a hot day. There's—there's nothing I can do for you?"

She laughed—hard laughter that made Marriot feel uncomfortable.

"Nothing," she replied. "Nothing."

"Well, perhaps you might do something for me," he said pleasantly, turning in his saddle and pointing across the valley with his whip. "Can you tell me if that is Abbotsholme?"

The woman's eyes blazed up with a sudden illumination; she rose quickly from her seat at the foot of the ancient cross, and stood, a tall, thin black figure, looking down upon the sunlit valley below. It seemed to Marriot, regarding her with fresh wonder, that she might be about to lift her hand and utter some curse. But she sat down as suddenly as she had risen, and became as rigid as before.

"That is Abbotsholme," she answered dully.

"Thank you," said Marriot. "That's the place I want, so"—

Before he could bid her good-morning and move away, she rose swiftly from her seat again, and coming close to him laid her hand on his knee and looked earnestly into his face. Marriot felt sure that he was being gazed at by a madwoman; he

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grew uneasy, uncomfortable, but he could not withdraw his eyes. The horse fretted and uttered a faint note of uneasiness.

"What is it, mistress?" asked Marriot, curbing the animal and trying to preserve his own equanimity. "What do you look for or see?"

The woman's hand dropped away from his knee like a dead thing—heavily. Her eyes and face, keen and eager a moment before, grew dull and listless.

"If it had been any good," she said, speaking to herself more than to her hearer, "I'd have laboured with him while there was time, but it's written that naught and nobody can turn the masterful man from his purpose, and we must all go our own ways, rich and poor, high and low, and one thread must twist with another."

She broke off suddenly and turned away up the narrow, high-banked by-lane, walking with swift steps towards a crest of pine trees, into which she disappeared through a gap in the hedge. Marriot, held to the spot against his will, heard her begin to sing; his ears strained themselves for the words—

"This a nighte, this a nighte,
Every nighte and alle;
Fire and fleet and candlelight,
And Christ receive thy saule!
When thou away"—

The sharp, steady beat of a horse's hoofs on the road behind him broke in upon the weird, dirge-like chanting, and Marriot turned with a sense of relief to look at the approaching rider, who was

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coming from the direction of Normancaster at a quick pace. On catching sight of a horseman in the road, the new-comer seemed to slacken his speed involuntarily, and by the time he came up to the wayside cross his horse was advancing at a walking pace. The rider looked at Marriot with some curiosity; the questioning glance called the road-surveyor back to material things and reminded him that there was a chance of acquiring some practical information.

"I beg your pardon," he said politely. "Can you tell me if there is no other way from this point to Abbotsholme yonder than by going round by that bridge which I see in the distance? Is there no ford, or anything of that sort?"

He was asking these questions of a handsome, well-grown lad of eighteen or nineteen years, who rode a smart horse, wore a fashionable riding-suit, and appeared to be full of self-confidence and assurance. He steadied his horse, eyeing Marriot over with a glance in which a certain youthful superciliousness was mingled with equally youthful curiosity.

"Abbotsholme?" he repeated. "Are you going there? To see Mr. Challenger?"

Marriot nodded — these questions seemed superfluous.

"You will have to go round by Granton bridge," answered the lad, "but if you have business with Challenger you are not likely to find him at home at this time—he is much more likely to be found at Highdale."

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"Highdale?" said Marriot. "Where is that?"

The lad lifted his hunting-crop and pointed to the little town lying on the hillside at the head of the valley.

"He is almost certain to be there," he said. "He usually is there in the morning—at the White Hart. But they could tell you at Granton yonder if he has ridden that way—he would be bound to pass through on his way to Highdale."

"Thank you," said Marriot, "I'm much obliged."

"Oh, that's all right," said the lad cheerfully. "It's little use going round to the farm if Challenger is away in the opposite direction. You're the new surveyor, aren't you—Mr. Marriot?"

"I am," answered Marriot, wondering at the question.

"I thought so. I've heard of you from my father—Mr. Warrington."

Marriot recognised the name as that of a prominent townsman of Normancaster, who was Chairman of the Highway Board and a person of consequence. He nodded his head.

"Oh yes!" he said. "Well, Mr. Warrington, I'm obliged to you again. Are you riding my way?"

The lad shook his head and smiled.

"No," he said, "I'm not going further. Good-morning."

Marriot felt that he was dismissed. He replied quietly to the salutation, shook his horse's reins, and rode away towards the village, reflecting upon his morning's adventures. He decided that the

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woman in black was mad, and that young Warrington had a more than sufficient sense of his own importance.

Young Warrington waited until the road-surveyor was well out of sight, then, walking his horse slowly along the road for a short distance, he opened a gate which led into a thin covert that stretched down the hillside to the river. This he descended by means of a narrow bridle-path which finally terminated on the bank of the Swirl immediately in front of Abbotsholme. He crossed the stream by a plainly perceivable ford, and on arriving at the other side trotted sharply over the sloping meadow which stretched between the river and the farmstead. At the gate of the orchard he dismounted, fastened his horse to a ring in the gate-post, and walked quickly towards the house.

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CHAPTER II

WITHIN the farmhouse, in a stone-flagged, stone-vaulted dairy, which had once been a part of the monastic buildings, Brigit Challenger was making butter. She stood at a white table placed beneath the mullioned window, her arms bare to the elbow, her strong young figure gowned in cool white linen. At the opposite end of the table a strapping maid-servant was busily engaged in the same task—pounding and moulding the butter into shape, marking it in fancy patterns with wooden rollers, setting it aside on wooden slats as each pound was finished. In the centre of the dairy a rosy-cheeked, red-armed girl was resolutely turning the handle of a barrel churn; the exercise made her catch her breath sharply from time to time, and at periodical intervals she transferred the handle from one hand to the other. In the wide stone porch which opened out into the fold an old sheep-dog lay curled up, asleep.

The three women were all absorbed in their task: none of them spoke. Brigit and the elder maid-servant slapped and smacked the butter into shape zealously as it lay a golden mass in the wooden bowls and on the wooden platters; each smack sounded through the dairy like a pistol-shot.

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From the hollow churn came the slowly-changing sound of the gathering cream as it was dashed from one side to another at each turn of the handle. Above the sharper notes of the butter-makers' implements, shaping the butter like plastic clay, and the deeper swish, swish of the cream in the churn, a blackbird's insistent song sounded clear and shrill through the open window.

The maid-servant making butter at the table made an end of the lump of material in her bowl by rolling up a miniature pat and crowning it with a fanciful design of her own. She dipped her hands in the pan of clean water at her side, wiped them on her apron, and glanced at the girl who was turning the handle of the churn. The girl was feeling the exercise; she panted for breath, and pressed her disengaged hand to her side. The elder woman stepped across, pushed her away, and seizing the handle without stopping its movements, turned it more regularly and vigorously.

"It won't be long now," said the younger girl pantingly. "It's been gathered some time."

The elder woman made no reply; she wound steadily at the churn. Brigit went on transforming the shapeless mass in her bowl into definite patterned and ornamented shapes; she was more leisurely in her movements than her assistant. At last she too finished and turned slowly towards the women and the churn.

"Isn't it done, Hannah?" she asked. "It ought to be—we got the other quick enough."

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"Thereabouts," replied Hannah laconically. She gave the handle a few more steady turns; within the churn the butter fell lumpily from one side to another, and she presently let the handle go. "I think it's done now, Miss Brigit," she said, breathing hard from her exercise. "But we'll soon see."

She drew out the wooden pegs which held the valve of the churn in place, lifted off the linen cloths beneath it, and looked into the cavity. Brigit approached the churn and peered in also: the younger maid hovered near, hands on hips.

It was at this moment that young Warrington came up to the open porch and looked into the dairy. He had found no one in the other parts of the house, and had gone round the buildings until he caught the sound of voices. He stopped on the threshold, staring admiringly at Brigit. He had seen her a thousand times before, but he thought her handsomer every time he saw her.

Brigit was then nearly twenty-one. She was tall, well-proportioned, generously developed, full of activity; the picture of sound, vigorous health. Her thin linen dress revealed alike the grace and the strength of her figure; her bare arms were supple and muscular, but her wrists and hands were slim and pretty, her waist was small, her feet delicately fashioned. She moved gracefully, trod firmly; her glance was quick and direct. Most folk in those regions called her red-headed; her hair, in strict truth, was of a very deep shade of red, and in certain lights it shone like burnished

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copper. She had great masses of it, long, thick, luxuriant, and she wore them piled and coiled above her head in a somewhat quaint fashion which she had invented for herself. However red her hair might be, it went very well with her clear skin, grey eyes, and warm mouth, in all of which there were as many evidences of good spirits and sound health as in her active figure.

The lad standing at the door made an involuntary comparison between Brigit's ripe young beauty and the looks of the two women between whom she stood. The elder maid-servant, a woman of thirty-six or forty, was a hard-featured, shrewd, practical-looking person, who, from her manipulation of the churn and its contents, might be trusted to attend to her business and her own affairs with promptitude and thoroughness. The younger, a country lass of twenty, was not without some rustic charms of a substantial sort, but there were evidences of slyness, pertness, and forwardness about her, and the way in which she hung around her mistress and the elder servant, her hands planted on her plump hips, showed that she was more interested in watching others work than in working herself.

Young Warrington stepped over the sleeping dog into the dairy as Brigit and Hannah finished their inspection of the churn. Brigit's colour deepened as she caught sight of him; Hannah showed no perception of his presence; the younger maid, making pretence of turning aside for a wooden pail, smiled broadly and restrained

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with some difficulty a strong inclination to laugh. The cause of her amusement advanced boldly to the churn and looked into it.

"Finished?" he said easily. "I thought you must all be very busy with something or other —there wasn't a sign of life in any other part of the house. See here, Bid, I've brought you the sitting of bantam's eggs that I promised—I hope they're not smashed."

He produced a cardboard box which he had carried behind him and handed it to Brigit.

"I'd hard work to persuade them into letting me have a sitting," he said.

Brigit laid the box on the dresser and lifted the lid.

"Thank you, Dimmy," she said. "No, they're all right. I'll set the hen with them this morning, when we've finished making up the butter."

"I can make this lot up myself, Miss Brigit," said Hannah, who had already cleared the churn of the second mass of butter. "There's not as much as there was in the first churning."

"No," said Brigit, "I'll help."

"Let me do the rolling," said Dimsdale, seizing one of the wooden rollers. "I know how to do it —all you've got to do is to dip this thing into the water and run it over the top of the butter."

"More than that," said Brigit. "You mustn't press too heavily, nor too lightly, or the pound will have to be made over again. We pride ourselves on our butter, don't we, Hannah?"

"Hannah prides herself on everything she

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does," said Dimsdale gallantly. "Isn't that so, Hannah?"

"I like to see a thing well done, Mr. Dimsdale," said Hannah. "It's no use doing anything unless you do it thoroughly."

"That's so," said Dimsdale, running his roller over a pound of butter which Brigit had just placed on the slat. "There!—isn't that a ripper? Hannah herself couldn't beat that—anybody would be glad to buy that pound of butter just for the marking, and they'd keep it in a glass case to look at."

The younger maid thought this an excellent piece of wit, and giggled loudly into the cavernous depths of the churn, which she was now washing out. Hannah gave her a half-glance of stern disapproval; Dimsdale, taking the giggle as a tribute to his powers, waxed more facetious, and expressed a desire to ornament the sides as well as the tops of the pounds of butter.

"Why not?" he asked, in answer to Brigit's expostulations. "It won't make any difference in the weight, and they'll look all the better."

"Yes, but we never do it that way," said Brigit.

"Time you began, then," retorted Dimsdale, and began to ornament one of the pounds of butter in the fashion suggested. "There, that's a great improvement, isn't it, Hannah?"

"You'd best let me finish, Miss Brigit," said Hannah, eyeing the improvement with much disfavour. "Off you go and set the eggs—I can soon finish this lot."

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Brigit dipped her fingers in the pan of water, dried them on her apron, and taking the latter off hung it on a peg at the end of the dresser. She picked up the box of bantam's eggs.

"They'd better be marked," she said, looking at them speculatively. "Come into the parlour and mark them for me, Dimmy."

Dimsdale followed her out of the dairy by a door that led into the great kitchen. When they were gone Hannah possessed herself of the pound of butter which the lad had ornamented on top and sides and began to remake it.

"Young gentlemen," she said, "are always up to mischief. A pretty lot we should look to send butter marked in that way to Normancaster market!—they'd think we'd taken leave of our senses."

"Why, I'm sure it looks prettier than the other," said the younger girl.

Hannah sniffed loudly.

"A deal you know about it," she remarked. "Get on with your churn, Lizzie, and don't giggle when a young gentleman comes into the dairy."

"Perhaps I do and perhaps I don't," pertly retorted Lizzie, ignoring the last half of Hannah's remark. "And p'raps I know a good deal more than some folk think I know."

"Oh, indeed, and what might that be?" asked Hannah, with some acerbity. "How to make geese into swans, no doubt."

"Never mind!" said Lizzie, tossing her head. "But I'm neither blind nor deaf. And I don't

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pretend, as some folks do, to neither see nor hear."

The elder woman turned from her butter-making and looked at the younger with some anxiety and a not unkindly expression.

"You're only a young thing, my lass," she said, "and you've only been in this place a month—take my advice, and mind your own business. Keep your eyes and your ears for what concerns yourself."

Lizzie made a face at the churn and then put out her tongue at it.

"It never does any good to see too much or to hear too much," said Hannah sententiously. "You mark my words."

Brigit and Dimsdale went past the open window, laughing and talking merrily. Lizzie put her hands on her hips and nodded her head.

"It would be a blind and a deaf man that couldn't see or hear what was going on there, Hannah Coulson!" she said. "And that you're aware of, as well as I am."

"It's no concern of mine," replied Hannah. "And it's none of yours, my lass. While you're in this house, Lizzie Braithwaite, keep your eyes closed and your mouth shut—it'll be the worse for you if you don't."

Lizzie Braithwaite made no reply. She continued to clean out the churn, and Hannah rapidly finished her work with the butter. When she had set the last pound aside on its slat she went into the great kitchen, remarking that she must arrange about dinner. The younger maid, left alone, made

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another face at the closed kitchen door, and then, as if carrying out some notion which she had recently formed, she whipped off her apron, threw it aside, and ran out through the porch into the fold. The old sheep-dog, roused by her rapid exit, rose to his feet, looked after her, yawned, wagged his tail feebly, and lay down to sleep again.

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CHAPTER III

THE hen to whose care the bantam eggs were to be confided had been sitting on a pot egg for three days in a lonely corner of the hayloft. Brigit and Dimsdale turned her out of her nest unceremoniously and placed the eggs in it, the marked side uppermost. The hen went back, spread her feathers, and settled herself with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"She'll do now," said Brigit, regarding her with meditative eyes. "She was just mad to sit."

"Yes," said Dimsdale. He slipped his arm round Brigit's waist and drew her to him caressingly. She turned her face to him readily; they kissed each other, laughing between the kisses.

Within a moment Brigit's laughter had a note of teasing merriment in it. She had conceived a rare notion of playing a practical joke on Dimsdale. She started away from his arm and pointed a finger to the arch of the roof above them. "Look, Dimmy," she said, "there's a house-martin's nest on the beam there—do you see it?"

Dimsdale looked up, and saw nothing. He shook his head.

"I see nothing but cobwebs," he said. "Where?"

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"There—don't you see? Crane your neck more."

Dimsdale tilted his head back as far as he could —his throat, loosely confined in a hunting scarf, stretched until a convenient hollow appeared in it. With the speed of a monkey Brigit snatched up a handful of the loose hay-seed lying on the floor at their feet and thrust it into the opening between Dimsdale's neck and his scarf. He screamed as if a hundred needles had been forced into his skin. Brigit clapped her hands and laughed.

"Confound you, Bid!" said Dimsdale, trying to tear the irritating particles out of his throat. "I'll pay you out for that—I'll roll you head first into the hay now!"

Brigit shrieked and started for the door. Dimsdale, with an adroit movement, tripped her up. They fell, rolling over each other, into the loosely piled hay, struggling like a couple of young tigers.

Suddenly Brigit, with a vigorous thrust of her muscular arms, flung Dimsdale aside and jumped to her feet. He too rose, slowly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I heard somebody laugh," she answered.

"Nonsense! Couldn't have been," he said.

"I did, all the same."

They looked at each other questioningly.

She began to pick the loose bits of hay out of her dress.

"What a mess to be in!" she said at last. "Here, let's get out of this. Go into the orchard, Dimmy, and I'll bring you some ale. I'm going into the house."

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She ran across to the hayloft door, opened it, and slipped out into the fold. The boy, left alone, frowned at the walls and rafters and finally made for the door. The pot egg which they had taken from the sitting hen lay on the floor where Brigit had thrown it. Dimsdale kicked it savagely against the wall, and smashed it into a thousand fragments. Then he burst into hearty laughter, and went chuckling and laughing towards the orchard.

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CHAPTER IV

LIZZIE BRAITHWAITE dashed back into the dairy as suddenly as she had dashed out of it. Hannah, who had gone back there to give her younger assistant an order, glanced sharply at her as she entered. The girl's face was flushed, her eyes bright with excitement; she was laughing half hysterically. She dropped into a chair, panting, and she looked at Hannah with a glance in which defiance and cunning were mingled.

"Where have you been, Lizzie?" said Hannah sharply. "Where have you been, I say?"

Lizzie nodded her head two or three times. She got up and put on her apron. Hannah noticed that her fingers were trembling. She seized the girl by the shoulder and shook her.

"Where have you been?" she said again. "Do you hear, girl?"

"Never you mind, Hannah Coulson," said Lizzie, shaking herself free, "and keep your hands to yourself. I know where I've been, and what I've seen too."

Hannah caught her breath; her right hand went suddenly to her side as if a sudden pain had struck her.

"Seen?" she said. "Seen?"

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Lizzie jerked her head.

"They're ready enough to say anything if a poor girl has a bit of fun," she said sneeringly, "but they're no better themselves, these fine young madams, when it comes to it. Not they!"

"Hold your tongue!" said Hannah, in a fierce whisper, as she looked fearfully at the open doors and windows. "Hold your tongue, girl!"

"Hold yours!" retorted Lizzie impudently.

Hannah stood, hands on hips, watching the girl's flushed face. She was as certain of what had happened as that she stood in the dairy; her brain was whirling with the possibilities of what might result from Lizzie's newly-acquired knowledge. She drew a long breath and tried to speak.

"Lizzie," she began, "listen to"—

A quick step in the great kitchen interrupted her. Brigit's voice sounded.

"Hannah!"

"Yes, Miss Brigit."

"Where's the key of the cellar? I want a glass of ale for Mr. Dimsdale."

Hannah drew a key from her pocket and went slowly into the great kitchen with it. Brigit, calm and composed, was taking a jug from the china cupboard. Hannah looked at her steadily as she took the key and wondered at her self-possession.

"Shall I get it for you, Miss Brigit?" she said.

"No, thank you, Hannah," Brigit replied. "I'll get it myself."

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She turned out of the kitchen into a long stone passage, and walked steadily towards the beer-cellar at its farther extremity. Hannah gazed after her until Brigit had placed the key in the lock; then, suddenly making up her mind, she followed her and stepped into the cellar as her young mistress placed the jug under the tap of one of the ale casks.

"Miss Brigit," she said.

Brigit looked up in the gloom of the cellar. She saw that Hannah knew, and she felt the blood rush hotly to her cheeks. But she gazed unflinchingly and frankly into the old servant's face, and her voice was clear and steady when she spoke.

"Yes, Hannah?" she said.

"Miss Brigit, Lizzie's been watching you and Mr. Dimsdale. She slipped out when my back was turned."

Brigit turned the tap of the barrel: the ale ran out into the jug with a musical tinkling.

"I thought so," she said quietly.

Hannah waited a second or two, thinking.

"She'll not keep her tongue still, Miss Brigit," she said. "She'll talk."

"Will she?" said Brigit.

She stood there watching the ale run into the jug, and to the elder woman, eyeing her anxiously, it seemed that she might be thinking of some plan of action. But she suddenly turned to Hannah and fixed a look of deep scrutiny upon the woman's troubled face.

"Hannah," she said.

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"Yes, Miss Brigit."

"Did you know of it?"

Hannah shook her head slowly.

"No, miss, but"—

"You suspected it?"

"Yes, miss, this long time. But it—it was not my business. And—no one that knows them dares to interfere with a Challenger."

Brigit turned the key and picked up the jug.

"No," she said. "Well—it is so: I thought you knew. It—it's in the blood: it's in all of us. That with the women—and this," she glanced at the jug, "this with the men. Do you think I don't know what they say of us—that there never was a woman amongst us that was virtuous or a man that was sober?"

Hannah made no reply. They moved out of the cellar together. Brigit locked the door and gave Hannah the key.

"She'll talk, Miss Brigit," said Hannah hopelessly. "She's that sort."

"I'll speak to her," said Brigit.

She set the jug of ale down on the kitchen table and walked into the dairy. Lizzie Braithwaite was washing out the churn; at her young mistress's entrance she looked up, and at Brigit's direct glance her eyes shifted away uneasily.

"Lizzie," said Brigit, "you've been following and watching me."

Lizzie made no reply. Hannah, standing by in great anxiety, saw Brigit's eyes suddenly flash and her lips assume a straight line, and she began

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to tremble, for she knew the hot Challenger temper well by long and bitter experience.

"Answer," said Brigit, more calmly than ever.

Lizzie maintained an obstinate silence, affecting to be very busy with the churn. The signs of a coming storm increased quickly in Brigit's face.

"Do you hear me?" she said. "Answer."

Lizzie frowned.

"There's no call for me to say aught," she murmured. "I shall say what I like and when I like."

"Listen," said Brigit. "Say one word about me to anyone, and I'll thrash you till you can't stand."

"No, you won't!" retorted Lizzie. "The law's as much for me as it is for you, and I'll dare you to lay a finger on me. And I'll say what I please for you or anybody else. You dare to touch me!"

"Take care, now, and hold your tongue—it'll be the worse for you if you don't," said Brigit, still watching her intently.

"I'll not hold my tongue for you or anybody," answered the girl. "I didn't come here to be made a slave of and ordered about. I'm as good as you are any day—and a deal better, for that matter."

"So you won't hold your tongue?" asked Brigit, very quietly.

"I shall do as I like," answered Lizzie, with a sneer. "It's my own."

Brigit drew a deep breath. Hannah, seeing that the storm was about to burst, murmured some entreaty and laid her hand on Brigit's arm. Brigit

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shook it off with a twist of her elbow. She looked at Lizzie.

"Very well," she said. "Then I'll thrash you for spying."

She lifted her hand as she spoke and seized a dog-whip that hung from a hook on the wall, and she gave it a preliminary crack that sounded like a pistol-shot in the vaulted dairy.

"Miss Brigit!" said Hannah. "Don't."

"Get away, Hannah," said Brigit. "Now then, I'll give you five seconds."

Lizzie retreated behind the churn.

"You dare to touch me, and I'll have the law of you," she said.

"One," said Brigit.

"I'll summons you if you strike me!"

"Two."

"An' I'll have you up, too, Hannah Coulson, if you stand there and see it done. I'll have you both up—I'll"—

"Miss Brigit!" said Hannah entreatingly. "Lizzie, say you'll hold your tongue. Miss Brigit, don't hit her!"

"Three," said Brigit.

"There's other folks knows beside me," said Lizzie, beginning to sob. "Ask Quaker Jacob if he hasn't seen her goings-on? He knows. And I'll not be hit."

"Four," said Brigit.

Hannah threw out her hands in despair and fled into the kitchen. The girl behind the churn sobbed and expostulated, staring at Brigit as if fascinated

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by the deadly passion in her eyes. She began to dance, first on one leg, then on the other.

"Five," said Brigit. "Now then, you *shall* have it."

The long, lithe whip came curling round the girl's arms and shoulders like a sudden flame of bitterly-biting fire, and the crack of it mingled with the first scream of rage and pain which Lizzie set up. A second lash made her leap wildly in the air; at the third she howled like a wild beast and made a desperate dash at her assailant. Brigit laughed. As the girl came on she caught her adroitly by the throat, and holding her at arm's length, thrashed her to her heart's content.

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CHAPTER V

DIMSDALE, lounging, hands in pockets and cigarette in mouth, in an old arbour in the garden, thought Brigit a long time in coming to him. When she at last appeared, carrying the ale and a glass, he looked at her interrogatively. In spite of her recent outburst she was calm again, save for a slight flush on her cheeks and a dangerous sparkle in her eyes. Her hand, as she poured out the ale, was steady enough.

"Well?" said Dimsdale. "Did you find anything out?"

Brigit produced a stick of chocolate from her pocket, stripped the silver paper from it, and bit a large piece off with her strong white teeth. With the sweetmeat bulging out her cheek she nodded.

"Um," she said. "It was that little beast, Lizzie Braithwaite. I thought she was sly—she looked it."

"Damn!" said Dimsdale. He took a sip at the ale, and holding the glass up to the light, looked critically at the colour. "That's in grand condition, Bid," he observed, with the air of a connoisseur.

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Brigit laughed—there was something like a sneer in the laugh.

"Anything in the way of drink is always in grand condition at Abbotsholme," she said. "If we were without meat we should never be without drink."

"Well," said Dimsdale, ignoring this observation, "what did you do?"

"Do?"

"About the girl?"

"I gave her a sound thrashing with Denys's dog-whip," answered Brigit. "She'll not forget it as long as she lives."

"What a devil you are, Bid!" he exclaimed. "Now she'll go and tell it all over."

"Naturally," said Brigit. "That was just why I thrashed her in advance. And I don't care. We care for nothing, we Challengers—neither God, nor devil, nor man. It's our way—it's in us."

"That's all very well," said Dimsdale. "But what about me? Where does the girl come from? —she'll be telling her friends."

"She's gone off to do that now," said Brigit, with calm unconcern. "She's running across the fields towards Granton, bent on telling everybody. Of course, it's all up."

Dimsdale started to his feet. His expression was one of fear and anxiety.

"If my people get to know of it," he said, "I don't know what'll happen — they're so awfully particular. Hang it, Bid, couldn't you have talked the girl over, bribed her, or something?"

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Brigit bit off more chocolate, stowed the lump in her cheek, and looked at Dimsdale with speculative eyes. And presently she laughed.

"What do you laugh like that for?" the lad said, half-angrily, half-suspiciously. "And what are you looking at me in that way for with your eyes half shut?"

"I was thinking," said Brigit. "Thinking what a brave little boy you are! Also that you are just like the little boy who, if he does get a tart given to him, likes to run away and hide while he is eating it. What will happen when your mamma hears of your naughtiness—will you be put to bed—or will she whip you?"

"Damn it, shut up!" he snapped out. "It's no laughing matter."

Brigit yawned.

"I wish I knew a real man," she said. "I'm wasted on mere boys."

Dimsdale gave her a queer look. He drank his ale, got up, and fidgeted.

"Which way did you say that confounded girl had gone?" he asked.

"I said to Granton," replied Brigit.

"Then I'm going after her," he said. "If I can't do anything else I'll bribe her to silence. She mustn't be allowed to blab all that—I'd be ruined. I'm off."

"Go, little baby boy," said Brigit tauntingly.

He went away towards his horse without another word, and Brigit remained sitting in the arbour,

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munching the chocolate. Suddenly her cheeks grew hot and scarlet, and a dull glow stole into her eyes—she had remembered that Lizzie had mentioned old Jacob as having knowledge of his young mistress's goings-on.

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CHAPTER VI

As Brigit sat there, thinking, an image of the past came up before her, conjured into existence by the thought of old Jacob. She remembered herself as a very young girl, motherless, almost companionless, living a strange life with her self-willed, violent-natured, heavy-drinking father and her already degenerate brother, and with none to turn to but Hannah Coulson and Jacob Garthen. She remembered how she used to follow Jacob all over the farm; how he used to show her where the birds' nests were in spring and tell her tales by the kitchen fire in winter; how, when she was still younger, he used to carry her in his arms or on his shoulder when she felt tired on some longer excursion than usual; how he made simple toys for her to play with, and ashen whistles wherewith to summon the sheep-dogs. They had been close companions, she as a child and he as an old man. She remembered, with a strange feeling of regret and longing which almost frightened her, that when they went walking in the woods to look for birds or squirrels she used to slip her hand in his, and liked—she could remember the feeling still—to feel the hard, toil-worn palm that closed over hers so gently. And all that seemed very far away.

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Of late she had given way to the impulses of her nature, and the old, simple pleasures had slipped from her. Her cheeks grew hotter as she thought of what Lizzie had blurted out in her rage.

"I wish — I wish Jacob hadn't known!" she said.

She got up presently, and passing through the garden and the house entered the fold and made her way to the byre, where Jacob Garthen spent the greater part of his time. There was a little outhouse close by it furnished with a grindstone whereat he ground various tools and implements in use on the farm, and she expected to find him there now. She wanted to see him, to speak to him there and then, but she did not know why—it was some impulse.

She heard no sound as she drew near to the little outhouse, though she knew that Jacob usually whistled or sang when he was there—the top half of its divided door was open, and she crept up to it on tiptoe and looked in. Jacob was kneeling behind the grindstone, his eyes closed, his hands tightly clasped before him, and his uplifted face was strenuous and worn with inward striving. And on his rugged, weather-beaten cheeks Brigit saw tears.

A great wave of feeling, that seemed to well up from some hitherto untouched spring in her heart, suddenly broke loose and flooded the girl's whole being. With something between a sob and a laugh she burst in upon the old man, flung herself on her knees at his side, and throwing her arms

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round his neck, drew his head against her breast and passionately kissed away the tears from his cheeks.

"Oh, Jacob!" she cried. "'Tis I—I who've made you cry. Isn't it—isn't it? Oh, Jacob, and I wouldn't hurt you for worlds."

She strained him to her as fiercely as if he had been a fondly-cherished lover, and she shook him in her vehemence, still kissing away the tears.

"It was I," she repeated. "I've hurt you—I! Oh!"

The old man got up from his knees—Brigit remained kneeling, clinging to one of his hands and looking earnestly into his face. The hot flush had almost gone from her own, but her eyes were troubled and full of tears and her mouth trembled as if she were about to break into passionate weeping. Jacob laid his free hand gently on her head, and looked down at her with eyes full of sorrowful tenderness.

"Ay, my little gell," he said, "but it's not the first time thee's made old Jacob cry."

Brigit uttered a little moan; her eyes fell before his, and she dropped her head and leaned it against him. The old man's hand stroked her hair tremblingly.

"I was praying to the Lord for thee, bairn," he said simply. "Thee's giving thyself up to bad ways—thee's in danger of becoming a light woman. And if thee goes on in that way thee'll be ruined, soul and body."

The old man's voice was very grave in spite of

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its kindness, and there was a note of dignity and authority in it which cut Brigit like a knife.

"Don't have no more to do with yon wicked lad," Jacob went on. "He's bad and worthless. Send him away, bairn—never speak to him more. He's bad."

Brigit's eyes swept his face in a flash of childlike candour.

"But I'm bad too," she said. "We're a bad lot, we Challengers. Everybody knows it—everybody says it. It's in us, it's in our blood—it's fate or a curse, or something. Look at father—look at Denys. It's hopeless. I'm not good—I've never been good since I was seventeen."

"Hush, bairn, hush! It's blasphemy before the Lord to say that His creatures are bad through fate or curses. It's in man's and woman's own power to save their souls or ruin them," said Jacob sternly. "Pull up, bairn, pull up before it's too late—thee's young yet, and repentance is easier in the young than in the old. Be a brave lass and face the truth, and make up thy mind to be a good woman."

"But they say that's impossible in a Challenger," she sighed. The sigh changed suddenly to a laugh. "I should be the first," she said half-whimsically. "And I'm not good."

Jacob dropped with a weary sigh into an old chair which stood near the bench on which the tools and implements were set out. He put his arm round the girl's shoulder, and lifting her face with his hand looked steadily into her eyes. Brigit looked back at him fearlessly, candidly.

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"My poor lass," he said, "thee's had little chance, for it's a wild, lawless, proud family is thine, and there's been naught but bad examples set before thee. But thee wert a loving child in the days when old Jacob used to take thee with him up and down, and thee'st got a warm heart. Don't throw away thy womanhood on badness! Doesn't thee want to be a good woman, my pretty? an' thee so bonny and handsome!"

Brigit looked down at the old man's hand, and began to stroke it with the tips of her fingers. Her eyes wandered from his fingers to his face; once or twice her lips parted as if she were going to speak, but no words came. A strange look, as of a hungry soul, came into her eyes, and the old man saw and understood it. He laid his hand gently on her head.

"The Lord help thee, my bairn," he said fervently.

Brigit rose from her knees. She pushed the hair away from her forehead with a gesture peculiar to herself, and then, without further remark, she bent down and kissed the old man's cheek and pressed his hand. Turning abruptly away, she left the outhouse and recrossed the fold. As she emerged from it she saw Marriot ride into the paddock and approach the farmstead.

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CHAPTER VII

MARRIOT and Brigit met at the porch which gave entrance to the front part of the house. She had paused there, looking expectantly at the stranger. He rode slowly up the paddock, dismounted at a few yards distance from her, and came forward, lifting his hat. The two gazed at each other steadily, narrowly. Brigit's eyes were still moist and bright, her cheeks still flushed from the memories of the morning. As Marriot gazed at her her colour rose, and he, noting her beauty and the ripe strength of her womanhood as quick eyes note the dominant features of a fine picture that is suddenly thrust before them, felt a sharp impelling thrill of admiration flash through him. She, observing him as shrewdly, was conscious of his physical and mental strength—she gazed at his athletic figure, determined face, and steady eyes with an instinctive appreciation of their meaning.

Brigit spoke first.

"Mr. Marriot?" she said inquiringly.

"Yes," answered Marriot, surprised to find himself known. "Miss Challenger, I presume?"

Brigit nodded, still examining him closely.

"Yes," she said. "My father left a message for you. He has gone over the hills, and will be home

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again at one o'clock, when dinner will be ready. You are to stay until then and dine with us. After that he will show you the landslip."

Marriot smiled at the peremptory fashion in which Brigit delivered this message. She might have been an aide-de-camp announcing a brigadier's orders to the commanding officer of a battalion. He drew out his watch.

"That's very kind of your father, Miss Challenger," he said. "But it's now only twelve o'clock, and my time is valuable. Couldn't I ride after your father? I've already spent all the morning in searching for him. Young Mr. Warrington, whom I met on the high road up there, nearly two hours ago, told me that I should be sure to find Mr. Challenger at the White Hart at Highdale, and I rode there, but got no news of him."

Brigit laughed.

"You can't ride after him," she said, "because I couldn't possibly give you any precise direction—he's on the fells. And, beside, he said you must stop."

Marriot laughed pleasantly.

"Must, eh?" he said. "Is—is Mr. Challenger's word law in these parts?"

"It is at Abbotsholme, at any rate," replied Brigit.

Marriot looked at her narrowly, and smiled.

"And suppose—suppose I wouldn't stop?" he said.

"In that case," answered Brigit resignedly, "I should have to pay for it."

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"You!"

"Yes, I. Because, you see, he intrusted me with the order, and therefore naturally expects me to see it carried out."

Marriot's eyebrows went up.

"And—and if you didn't carry out the order?" he asked. "What then?"

Brigit shrugged her shoulders.

"It depends upon his mood," she answered. "It's never wise to cross a Challenger. Perhaps he would box my ears, perhaps give me a cut with his riding-whip. Who can tell?"

Marriot nodded his head.

"In that case," he said slowly, "I had better comply with Mr. Challenger's wishes."

"Much better," said Brigit. "Give me your horse."

She seized the horse's bridle as she spoke, and Marriot, mechanically releasing it, watched her firm steps and graceful movements as she led the animal across the paddock to the door of the fold. Then she called loudly—

"Jacob! Here! Quick!"

The old man, hearing this urgent summons, came hurrying from his little outhouse across the fold. Brigit handed the horse to him.

"Put this gentleman's horse up, Jacob, and give it a feed," she commanded. Turning back to Marriot, she motioned him towards the porch. "Come in, Mr. Marriot," she said. "You must be tired after riding so long."

Marriot followed her through the porch into a

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great stone hall which had originally been the refectory of the abbey and was now converted into use as a family living-room. Brigit pointed him to a seat.

"What will you drink?" she asked in a casual, off-hand fashion which showed him that the question was one which was constantly on her lips. "Ale—gin—whisky—brandy—which?"

"None of them, thank you," answered Marriot, smiling. "I'm a teetotaller."

Brigit, who had been glancing at the spirit decanters on the sideboard, faced sharply round on him. Her eyebrows drew together and her lips parted in astonishment.

"A teetotaller?" she said. "You don't drink anything?"

"None of those things, at any rate," he replied, still smiling. "Is that so very wonderful, Miss Challenger?"

"It is to me," answered Brigit. "I never met a man who didn't drink—good heavens, no! They all do who come here. And you look such a strong man too."

Marriot laughed heartily.

"Strong!" he said. "Ah—and so I am. I'm a bit foolishly vain of my strength—I'm afraid I rather boast of it sometimes. I've won—oh, I don't know how many prizes at athletic meetings for running, jumping, hammer-throwing, and I'm a bit of a hand at boxing too. Strong! Oh yes, I'm strong enough—it's just because I don't drink that I am strong."

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"All the same," said Brigit, "you're the first man I ever met who didn't. Our men—my father and brother—oh!"

Marriot made no reply to this burst of confidence. He looked away from her while it was being made, but presently he looked back and smiled.

"I didn't say I don't drink anything," he said. "I should be very glad indeed of a glass of milk."

Brigit hastened out of the stone hall towards the kitchen. Marriot, who had looked at nothing but her while she remained in his presence, now turned his attention to his surroundings, which he examined with great interest and curiosity. The stone hall was of considerable size—his experienced eye estimated it to measure forty by twenty feet. To his great surprise, it still retained many features of its original arrangement and condition. The vaulted and decorated roof remained as in ancient times; the wainscoting, dark with age, was still in excellent preservation; at the east end, above the site where the *mensa major*, or high table for the superior, had stood, the *Majestas*, or picture of our Lord in glory, faded in colour, but plainly discernible, still decorated the wall; while at the other end were still placed the three great presses, stoutly clamped with iron, wherein the plate, linen, salt-cellars, and table requirements had been kept by the refectorarian and his assistants. On the side opposite to the great entrance was a gallery, set high in the wall, and reached by steep flights of stairs at either end. Its stout oaken balusters and railings, like the wainscoting below, were

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black with age, but they were still apparently as sound and strong as ever, and Marriot formed the opinion, after a critical inspection of the whole place, that there had been no interval of any appreciable extent between the expulsion of the monks and the incoming of lay tenants.

Of the modern furnishing of this ancient apartment Marriot made a less careful examination, but he perceived, with the quick eye of a man who has trained himself to see things at a glance, that there was little about it that was not quaint and old-fashioned. There were oak chests, oak tables, oak benches and chairs; the upholstery of the chairs was faded, worn, much darned and patched. In an old press there were many old books in leather and parchment bindings—of new books, newspapers, magazines, he saw no sign. Here and there on the panelling of the wainscot hung family portraits, chiefly of men with red beards, high foreheads, and blue eyes set close together; there were also two or three of women, and in one he fancied that he detected some resemblance to Brigit. Over the great fireplace there were rows upon rows of heavy brass candlesticks, highly burnished and polished—indeed, everything in the hall was in that scrupulous condition of cleanliness which suggests house-proudness carried to almost too great an extent. And that someone possessed a love of flowers was evidenced by the presence here and there of china vases filled with roses of many varieties whose odour hung thick and heavy in the summer air.

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Brigit came back carrying a pitcher and a glass. She pulled a little table near Marriot's chair and set them at his side.

"It is good milk," she said; "the best, they say, in these parts. We send a lot of it into Normancaster every night and morning."

Marriot thanked her, and drank. She watched him with amused eyes.

"It's funny to see a big strong man drinking milk!" she said.

"I wonder if you imitate Queen Elizabeth's example," he said, looking at her with some speculation. "She drank ale for breakfast."

"I?" said Brigit. "No; I'm like you—I never drink anything of that sort. Not I, indeed—I see too much of that in my folk."

"This is a fine old hall," said Marriot, steering away from personal subjects. "And there is so much in it that really is old. More than old—ancient."

Brigit glanced almost indifferently at the familiar surroundings thus warmly praised by a stranger.

"Yes," she said. "There's not much, if anything, that's new in the house. I never remember anything new being brought into it—except a new patent churn, or a cream separator, or something of that sort. It's an old house, and old things, and an old family—we've been here ever since they turned the monks out."

"That," said Marriot, looking around him, "I can quite believe."

"They say," she went on, "that this room is

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haunted. I've never seen or heard anything, and I don't think I believe in it. But my father does. And Denys too—my brother. They believe it, like children."

Marriot looked at her questioningly.

"What is it?" he asked. "An apparition?"

Brigit nodded and pointed to a cross cut in the stone floor at the foot of one of the steep stairways which led up to the gallery.

"Do you see that cross?" she said. "Well, this is how the story goes: when the monks were turned out by—Henry the Eighth, wasn't it?—their house and lands were given to an ancestor of ours, Rufus Challenger. I think he must have been like the rest of us—very bad-tempered, and not very fond of being contradicted or thwarted. The last abbot, and one or two of his monks, wouldn't turn out, so Rufus Challenger came here himself to turn them out with his own hands. He came across the old abbot at the end of the gallery there, and he seized him by the throat and flung him down the stairs. You see how steep they are? —well, the old man fell on his head, just where the cross is cut, and broke his neck. It is his ghost, they say, that haunts the place. It's said that he appears to every Challenger who is goin g to diea violent death. And if that's true," she concluded, with an enigmatical smile which puzzled Marriot, "he must have made a good many appearances."

"Are there so many violent deaths in the family record, then?" Marriot inquired.

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"Pretty middling," she answered carelessly. "They say that the family has been under a curse ever since Rufus Challenger threw the abbot downstairs and killed him, and it's certain that all the men have lived wildly and recklessly. Some have died in duels, some have broken their necks in riding like madmen over the fells, some have been drowned, one at least was hanged at York for murder. A nice lot, weren't they?"

"It's a weird story, certainly," said Marriot, without directly replying to Brigit's question. He rose and walked over to one of the windows which commanded a view of the valley and the Swirl. "But this is a weird country, I think—full of romance and so on. When I was coming along the high road up there this morning, I heard a woman singing what I took to be some old countryside ballad, and it made my flesh creep. Let's see now —how did it go. Something like this, I think—

'This a nighte, this a nighte,
This a nighte and alle.'"

Brigit interrupted him with a quick gesture of recognition. She had taken a seat at the table on which the jug of milk stood, and had propped her elbows on it and dropped her rounded chin upon her folded hands. She nodded her head across the hall at Marriot.

"Oh yes," she said. "That's the Lyke Wake Dirge—I've heard it sung more than once. It is weird."

"Can you sing it?" asked Marriot.

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She shook her head.

"No," she answered, "because I can't sing. But I can say it. Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes," he said. "I would like to."

He sat down opposite the table, with his back to the light, and folding his arms watched her intently. She, reciting the dirge, kept her eyes, dreamy and inscrutable, fixed on his until she had finished.

"This a nighte, this a nighte,
Every nighte and alle;
Fire and fleet and candle-light,
And Christe receive thy saule.

When thou from hence away art past,
Every nighte and alle;
To Whinny Moor thou comes at last,
And Christe receive thy saule.

If ever thou gave either hosen or shoon,
Every nighte and alle;
Sit thee down and put them on,
And Christe receive thy saule.

But if hosen or shoon thou never gave neean,
Every nighte and alle;
The Whinnes shall prick thee to the bare beean,
And Christe receive thy saule.

From Whinny Moor when thou may passe,
Every nighte and alle;
To Brig o' Dread thou comes at last,
And Christe receive thy saule.

From Brig o' Dread when thou art paste,
Every nighte and alle;
To Purgatory fire thou comes at laste,
And Christe receive thy saule.

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If ever thou gave either meat or drinke,
  Every nighte and alle;
The fire shall never make thee shrinke,
  And Christe receive thy saule.

But if meat nor drink thou never gave neean,
  Every nighte and alle;
The fire shall burn thee to the bare beean,
  And Christe receive thy saule."

"Have you never heard that before?" asked Brigit. "It is well known in the Dales and all over the North Riding."

"I am from the Midlands," answered Marriot. "I have never lived in Yorkshire. It's a ghostly, weird thing; it—it suggests so much. Do you know much more of that sort of thing, Miss Challenger?"

"Oh, I know lots of old weird tales, and ballads, and country stories. Our cowman, old Jacob Garthen, though he's a Quaker, and a very religious man, knows a lot of countryside legends and fairy tales, and he used to tell them to me when I was little. He"—

Brigit suddenly stopped and rose to her feet in an attitude of expectancy. She moved away to one of the windows and looked out into the paddock.

"Here's my father," she murmured. "And he's got a tramp with him."

Marriot stepped to her side. Looking out of the window, he saw a tall man mounted on a stout cob advancing towards the house. By his side walked another man, poor, travel-stained, a man out of work, or a tramp, as Brigit had said.

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"Now there will be two guests to dinner!" she exclaimed, glancing at Marriot with one of the enigmatical smiles which he could not understand. "It is one of our ways to entertain any poor man or tramp who comes begging, and they sit as honoured guests at our table. But we are so out of the way here that it is very seldom we are thus visited. I thought I'd tell you that, so that you'd understand. Now you will excuse me—I must see that the dinner preparations are going forward, or there will be a row."

She left the hall quickly, and Marriot sat down again, mystified by the events of the morning, inwardly warmed by the charm and atmosphere of Brigit, and not a little puzzled by the strangeness of his surroundings and the things that he had heard and seen.

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CHAPTER VIII

WHILE Marriot and Brigit were talking in the old refectory, Dimsdale was riding hard across the fields in the direction of Granton, intent on catching Lizzie Braithwaite up before she reached the village. It happened luckily, he said to himself, that he had money about him. That morning his mother had given him twenty pounds wherewith to buy a bicycle on which he had recently set his heart, and it reposed in the form of four brand-new five-pound notes in his waistcoat pocket. Dimsdale at nineteen knew enough of the world to feel sure that one of those notes would keep Lizzie's tongue still for a time at any rate. And, he reflected, the bicycle man would be quite content if he paid him fifteen pounds on account, and would give him a long spell of credit for the balance. Anyway, no news of his carryings-on with Brigit Challenger must reach his father's ears. A cold sweat burst over him at the mere notion, and he pressed his horse faster in pursuit of the fugitive.

Lizzie had run out of the house just as she was. She was in a white heat of passion, fury, and a desire for speedy vengeance. She had ceased sobbing before Brigit had finished thrashing her,

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and as she ran along the cart-track which crossed the fields to Granton, her eyes were tearless and her teeth set hard in her ecstasy of rage and resentment. But after she had run a good mile her breath gave out, she became exhausted, and sinking down on a grass-covered bank, which shut off a thick plantation of young fir and pine from the track, she covered her face with her hands and burst into bitter weeping.

It was here that Dimsdale found her. He saw her before she saw him, and leaping from his horse, he fastened its bridle to a tree, and went gently towards her. Before she knew that he was there he had dropped at her side and slipped one arm round her waist.

"There—there!" he said soothingly. "Don't cry so, Lizzie. I'm sorry—upon my honour, I am. I'd have stopped it if I could. I wish I'd known what she was after. But she's such a temper. Don't cry."

The girl showed no recognition of the fact that Dimsdale was embracing her. With a purely feminine instinct she dropped her head on his shoulder and cried the more. Dimsdale began to stroke her face.

"It was a confounded shame!" he said. "I've told her so—I've told her my mind, I can tell you. Little devil! It's disgraceful."

Lizzie suddenly burst into active life again. With eyes flashing fire, and mouth quivering with indignant passion, she sat up straight at his side and tore off her print bodice, uncovering her

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shoulders, her arms, and her bosom. In her abandonment she would have stripped herself with a sublime unconsciousness.

"Look there!" she said, utterly careless as to whose ears she was addressing herself. "Look there! And I was never struck before—never!"

"By George!" said Dimsdale. "She is a little devil!"

Lizzie's shoulders and arms bore all too plainly the traces of the dog-whip. One lash had curled right round shoulder and left a scarlet line across her bosom, heightening its whiteness. Dimsdale bent his head and kissed it.

"There!" he said. "Let's kiss it better. You believe I'm sorry, don't you, Lizzie?"

Lizzie made no answer. She had no objection at that emotional moment to being kissed and fondled, and there was something of a vague consolation in the fact that she was being kissed by the enemy's lover. She let Dimsdale press his lips to her bosom again, and when he transferred his kisses to her lips she kissed him back.

Dimsdale's essentially wicked young intellect suddenly saw more ways than one of buying Lizzie's silence. He glanced round him—behind them a little wicket gate gave entrance to the thickly-branched plantation. There was no one in sight along the track in either direction.

"See, Lizzie," he said coaxingly. "I want to talk to you—privately. Come into the plantation—somebody might see us here. Come."

Lizzie rose readily. Looking down, she caught

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sight of her uncovered bosom and blushed. Dimsdale affected to take no notice: he rose with assumed unconcern, and strolled lazily towards the gate of the little plantation.

"It wouldn't do for us to be seen talking there," he said over his shoulder. "Come in here under the trees, Lizzie."

He threw open the wicket gate as he spoke. Lizzie, following him closely, slipped through. They disappeared amongst the firs and pines.

When they came out of the plantation half an hour later they paused at the wicket gate and kissed each other.

"You'll not say a word now, Liz?" said Dimsdale.

"No," answered Lizzie, "I shan't—now."

"And you'll meet me on Friday night, at dusk, at Dead Man's Copse?" he said, kissing her again.

"Ye-es," answered Lizzie.

"Well, look—you wait here while I get my horse and ride off to Granton, and then, if the coast's clear, you cut off to the farm," he said. "And don't say a word, whatever she says. I'll make it up to you."

He left her then, and running back to his horse, mounted it and presently rode past her. Lizzie nodded and smiled, still blushing and conscious. When he had gone she slipped out of the plantation and returned slowly towards the farm. Halfway there she drew a five-pound note out of her pocket and looked it carefully over before replacing it.

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"I'll have a new best gown, and a new Sunday hat, and gloves, and happen a parasol, out of that," she said. "And this isn't to be the last, neither."

She walked on with slower steps, thinking, and suddenly she laughed with malicious glee.

"I'll pay you out; my fine lady!" she said. "I'll pay you out!" Then she went on with quicker steps in the direction of the farm.

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CHAPTER IX

GABRIEL CHALLENGER brought his tramp into the house by the front door. He pointed him to a chair in the stone hall.

"There, my friend," he said, "sit you down until the dinner be ready. Then you can eat and drink, and go on your way refreshed."

He turned then to Marriot, who stood on the hearth closely examining Brigit's father. Gabriel Challenger was a tall man, over six feet in height, sparely rather than heavily built, but of a great breadth of shoulder and depth of chest. His face struck Marriot as remarkable. He had a high, very white forehead, and a thick thatch of vivid red hair surmounting it, clipped close and coming to a point in the centre; his eyes, small and very blue, were set close together; his nose was long, sharp, and slightly hooked; his teeth gleamed brilliantly from beneath his moustache, and the moustache and the forked beard which covered his long chin were as red as his hair. Marriot glanced involuntarily from Gabriel Challenger to the old portraits on the wainscoting: between his host's face and those pictured there the resemblance was striking.

Challenger held out his hand.

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"Mr. Marriot," he said. "I am glad to see you I hope I have not taxed your patience too long. But I knew this was your first day in these parts, and on a first day a man is little inclined for work, and so I told my daughter to keep you to dinner. After dinner we will talk of the landslip."

Marriot made no direct reply to these remarks —his own notion of what a new broom should do was in direct contradiction to Challenger's. He shook his host's hand, and observed that it had been a pleasure to ride out into the country on such a fine day.

"It is a fine day, and a warm day, and a thirsty day," said Challenger. "We will drink a glass of ale before dinner—and I am old-fashioned enough, Mr. Marriot, to brew my own ale, and there is no better in England. Brigit—ale!"

But Brigit, from long experience, had anticipated her father's wishes, and she now entered the stone hall bearing a salver on which stood a foaming jug of ale and two glasses. She set it on the table at her father's side. Challenger glanced at it, and then at her.

"What is this?" he said. "Two glasses and three mouths. How now, Brigit?"

"Mr. Marriot," said Brigit calmly, "does not drink ale—he is a teetotaller."

Challenger, unlike his daughter, betrayed no surprise at this announcement. He bowed his head with a species of resignation.

"Indeed," he said. "Well, everyone to his own liking." He turned to the tramp, who sat, staring

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