

# More Tales of the Ridings eBook

## More Tales of the Ridings

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# Page 1

## Melsh Dick

Melsh Dick is the last survivor of our woodland divinities. His pedigree reaches back to the satyrs and dryads of Greek mythology; he claims kinship with the fauns that haunted the groves of leafy Tibur, and he lorded it in the green woods of merry England when

The woodweele sang and wold not cease,  
Sitting upon the spraye,  
Soe lowde he wakened Robin Hood  
In the greenwood where he lay.

But he has long since fallen upon evil days, and it is only in the most secluded regions of the Pennines, where vestiges of primeval forest still remain and where modern civilisation has scarcely penetrated, that he is to be met with to-day. Melsh is a dialect word for unripe, and the popular belief is that Melsh Dick keeps guard over unripe nuts; while “Melsh Dick’ll catch thee, lad” was formerly a threat used to frighten children when they went a-nutting in the hazel-shaws. But we may, perhaps, take a somewhat wider view of this woodland deity and look upon him as the tutelary genius of all the young life of the forest—the callow broods of birds, the litters of foxes and squirrels, and the sapling oaks, hazels, and birches. There was a time when he was looked upon as a genial fairy, who would bring Yule-logs to the farmers on Christmas Eve and direct the woodmen in their tasks of planting and felling; latterly, however, he is said to have grown churlish and malignant. The reckless felling of young trees for fencing and pit-props is supposed to have roused his ill-will, and sinister stories have been told of children who have gone into the woods for acorns or hazel-nuts and have never been seen again.

It was in the Bowland Forest district, which is watered by the Ribble and its tributary becks, that I heard the fullest account of Melsh Dick; and the following story was communicated to me by an old peasant whose forefathers had for generations been woodmen in Bowland Forest. The region where he lived is rich in legend, and not far away is the old market town of Gisburn, where Guy of that ilk fought with Robin Hood, and where, until the middle of the nineteenth century, a herd of the wild cattle of England roamed through the park.

“Fowks tell a mak o’ tales about witches, barguests, an’ sike-like,” Owd Dont began, “but I tak no count o’ all their clash; I reckon nowt o’ tales without they belang my awn family. But what I’s gannin to tell you is what I’ve heerd my mother say, aye scores o’ times; so you’ll know it’s true. A gradely lass were my mother, an’ noan gien to leein’, like some fowks I could name. There’s owd lasses nowadays, gie ’em a sup o’ chatter-watter an’ a butter-shive, an’ they’ll tell you tales that would fotch t’ devil out o’ his den to hark tul ’em.”



After this attack upon the licence of the tea-table, Owd Dont needed a long draught of March ale to regain his composure. I knew that it was worse than useless to attempt to hurry him in his narrative. Leisurely at the start, the pace of his stories quickened considerably as he warmed to his work, and it was not without reason that he had acquired a reputation of being the best story-teller on the long settle of the Ring o' Bells.



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“Twere back-end o’ t’ yeer,” he continued at last, “an’ t’ lads had gone into t’ woods to gether hesel-nuts an’ accorns. There were a two-three big lads amang ’em, but most on ’em were lile uns, an’ yan were lame i’ t’ leg. They called him Doed o’ Billy’s o’ Claypit Lane. Well, t’ lads had gotten a seet o’ nuts, an’ then they set off home as fast as they could gan, for ’twere gettin’ a bit dosky i’ t’ wood. But lile Doed couldn’t keep up wi’ t’ other lads on account o’ his gam leg. So t’ lads kept hollain’ out to him to look sharp an’ skift hissen, or he’d get left behind. So Doed lowped along as fast as he were able, but he couldn’t catch up t’ other lads, choose what he did, an’ all t’ time t’ leet were fadin’ out o’ t’ sky. At lang length he thowt he saw yan o’ t’ lads waitin’ for him under an oak, but when he’d gotten alangside o’ him, he fan’ it were a lad that he’d niver clapped een on afore. He were no bigger nor Doed, but ’twere gey hard to tell how owd he were; and he’d a fearful queer smell about him; ’twere just as though he’d taen t’ juices out o’ all t’ trees o’ t’ wood an’ smeared ’em ower his body. But what capped all were t’ clothes he was donned in; they were covered wi’ green moss, an’ on his heead was a cap o’ red fur.

“Well, when Doed saw him, he was a bit flaid, but t’ lad looked at him friendly-like and says:

“Now then, Doed, wheer ista boun’?”

“I’s boun’ home,’ says Doed, an’ his teeth started ditherin’ wi’ fret.

“Well, I’s gannin thy ways,’ says t’ lad, ’so, if thou likes, thou can coom alang wi’ me. Thou’ll happen not have seen me afore, but I can tell who thou is by t’ way thou favvours thy mother. Thou’ll have heerd tell o’ thy uncle, Ned Bowker, that lives ower by Sally Abbey; he’s my father, so I reckon thou an’ me’s cousins.’

“Now Doed had heerd his mother tell about his Uncle Ned, an’ when t’ lad said that Ned Bowker were his father, he gat a bit aisier in his mind; but for all that he didn’t altogether like t’ looks o’ him. Howiver, they gat agate o’ talkin’, and Doed let on that he were fearful fain o’ squirrels. You see, he kept all nations o’ wild birds an’ wild animals down at his house; he’d linnets an’ nannies i’ cages, and an ark full o’ prickly-back urchins. But he’d niver caught a squirrel; they were ower wick for him, an’ he wanted a squirrel more nor owt else i’ t’ world.

“When Melsh Dick heard that—for o’ course t’ lad was Melsh Dick hissen—he said that if Doed would coom wi’ him, he’d sooin gie him what he wanted. He’d bin climmin’ t’ trees an’ had caught a squirrel an’ putten it i’ t’ basket he’d browt his dinner in.



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“Well, lile Doed hardlins knew what to do. ‘Twere gettin’ lat, an’ there were summat about t’ lad that set him agin him. But then he bethowt him o’ t’ squirrel, an’ t’ squirrel were ower mich for him. So he said to Melsh Dick that he’d gan wi’ him an’ fotch t’ squirrel, but he munnot stop lang, or fowks would consate that he’d lossen his way i’ t’ wood an’ would coom seekin’ him. When Melsh Dick heerd him say that he’d coom wi’ him, his een fair glistened, an’ he set off through t’ wood wi’ lile Doed followin’ after him. T’ wood was full of gert oak-trees, wi’ birks set amang ‘em that had just begun to turn colour. Efter a while they gat to a dub i’ t’ middle o’ t’ wood; ‘twere no bigger nor a duck-pond, but t’ watter was deep, an’ all around t’ dub was a ring o’ espin-trees wi’ their boughs hingin’ ower t’ watter. Eh! ‘twas a grand seet, sure enif, an’ Doed had niver seen owt like it afore. T’ sky had bin owercussen wi’ hen-scrattins an’ filly-tails, but when they gat to t’ dub t’ wind had skifted ‘em, an’ t’ moon were shinin’ ower Pendle Hill way an’ leetin’ up t’ trees and makkin’ t’ watter glisten like silver. Lile Doed were that fain he started clappin’ his hands an’ well-nigh forgat all about Melsh Dick an’ t’ squirrel. Then all on a sudden he gat agate o’ laughin’, for when he saw t’ moon i’ t’ watter he bethowt him o’ a tale his mother had telled him o’ soom daft fowks that had seen t’ moon i’ t’ watter an’ thowt it were a cheese an’ started to rake it out wi’ a hay-rake.

“When Melsh Dick heerd him laughin’, he were fair mad. He thowt Doed were laughin’ at him, an’ what maddens fairies more nor owt else is to think that fowks is girin’ at ‘em. Howiver, he said nowt, but set hissen down anent t’ dub an’ Doed did t’ same. Then they gat agate o’ talkin’, an’ Doed axed Melsh Dick what for he was covered wi’ green moss.

“‘If thou’d to clim’ trees same as I have,’ answered Melsh Dick, ‘thou’d be covered wi’ moss too, I’ll uphod.’

“‘An’ what for doesta wear yon cap o’ red fur\*\*??’

“‘Why sudn’t I wear a fur cap, I’d like to know. My mother maks ‘em o’ squirrel skins, an’ they’re fearful warm i’ winter-time.’

“When lile Doed heerd him tell o’ squirrels, he bethowt him o’ t’ squirrel i’ t’ basket an’ wanted to set farrard.

“‘Bide a bit,’ says Melsh Dick, ‘an’ I’ll show thee more squirrels nor iver thou’s seen i’ all thy life.’

“With that he taks a whistle out of his pocket; ‘twere Just like a penny tin whistle, but ‘twere made o’ t’ rind o’ a wandy esh, an’ Melsh Dick had shapped it hissen wi’ his whittle. Then he put t’ whistle to his mouth an’ started to blow. He blew a two-three notes, an’ sure enif, there was a scufflin’ i’ t’ trees an’ i’ less nor hauf-a-minute there were fower or five squirrels sittin’ on t’ boughs o’ t’ espins. When Doed saw t’ squirrels i’



t' mooinleet, he were fair gloppened. He glowered at 'em, an' they glowered back at him, an' their een were as breet as glow-worms.



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“All t’ while Melsh Dick kept tootlin’ wi’ his whistle an’ t’ squirrels com lowpin’ through t’ trees, while t’ espins round t’ dub were fair wick wi’ ’em. You could hardlins see t’ boughs for t’ squirrels. ’Twere same as if all t’ squirrels i’ Bowland Forest had heerd t’ whistle an’ bin foorced to follow t’ sound. They didn’t mak no babblement, but just set theirsens down on their huggans, pricked up their lugs, cocked their tails ower their rigs, and kept their een fixed on Melsh Dick.

“Well, when Melsh Dick thowt he’d gethered squirrels enew, he started to play a tune, an’ ’twere an uncouth tune an’ all. Soomtimes ’twere like t’ yowlin’ o’ t’ wind i’ t’ chimley, an’ soomtimes ’twere like t’ yammerin’ o’ tewits an’ curlews on t’ moor. But when t’ squirrels heerd t’ tune, they gat theirsens into line alang t’ boughs, an’ there were happen twelve squirrels on ivery bough. Then they gat agate o’ lowpin’; they lowped frae tree to tree, reet round t’ dub, wi’ their tails set straight out behind ’em. They were that close together, ’twere just like a gert coil o’ red rope twinin’ round t’ watter; and all t’ time they kept their faces turned to Melsh Dick, an’ their een were blazin’ like coals o’ fire. Round an’ round they went, as lish as could be, an’ lile Doed just hoddled his breeath an’ glowered at ’em. He’d seen horses lowpin’ in a ring at Slaidburn Fair, but ’twere nowt anent squirrels lowpin’ i’ t’ espins round t’ dub.

“Efter a while Doed thowt that Melsh Dick would sooin give ower playin’ tunes on t’ whistle, but he did nowt o’ t’ sort. He just played faster nor iver, an’ all t’ time he kept yan eye fixed on squirrels an’ yan eye fixed on lile Doed, to see if owt would happen him. An’ t’ faster he played t’ faster lowped t’ squirrels. You see, they were foorced to keep time wi’ t’ whistle. At lang length t’ tune gat to be nobbut a shriek an’ a skreel. Doed had niver heerd sike-like afore; ’twere as though all t’ devils i’ hell had gotten lowse an’ were yammerin’ through t’ sky wi’ a strang wind drivin’ ’em forrard. Eh! ’twere an uncouth sound, and an uncouth seet, too, an’ lile Doed’s teeth started ditherin’ an’ every limb in his body was tremmlin’ like t’ espin leaves on t’ trees round t’ dub. An’ nows an’ thens a gert white ullet would coom fleein’ through t’ boughs, an’ all t’ time there were lile bats flutterin’ about ower t’ watter an’ coomin’ so close agean Doed they ommost brushed his face wi’ their wings.

“Doed was wellnigh flaid to deeth, but for all that he couldn’t tak his een off o’ t’ squirrels; they’d bewitched him, had t’ squirrels. He put his hand to his heead, and it felt as though ’twere twinin’ round an’ round. Now that was just what Melsh Dick wanted, and why he’d set t’ squirrels lowpin’ in a ring. He couldn’t do nowt to Doed so lang as he were maister o’ his senses, but if he was to get fair giddy an’ drop off into a dwam, then, sure enif, Melsh Dick would have him i’ his power and could turn him intul



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a squirrel as he'd turned other lads an' lasses afore. Wae's t' heart! but he were in a parlous state, were lile Doed, but he knew nowt about it for all that. When he felt his heead gettin' mazy, he consated he were fallin' asleep; his een gat that dazed he couldn't see t' squirrels no more, an' he thowt he mun be liggin' i' his bed at home under t' clothes. Then suddenly he bethowt him that he were fallin' asleep without sayin' his prayers. You see, his mother had larnt him a prayer, an' telled him he mun say it to hissien every neet afore he gat into bed. Well, Doed aimed to say his prayer, but t' words had gotten clean out o' his heead. That made him a bit unaisy, for he were a gooid lad an' it hooined him to think that he'd forgotten t' words. All that he could call to mind was an owd nominy that he'd heerd t' lads an' lasses say when they were coomin' home fra schooil. He reckoned 'twere more like a bit o' fun nor a prayer, but all t' same, when he couldn't bethink him o' t' words his mother had larnt him, he started sayin' t' nominy, an' sang out, as loud as he could:

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,  
Bless the bed that I lig on.

"He'd no sooner said t' words when all on a sudden Melsh Dick gav ower playin', t' squirrels gav ower lowpin', t' bats gav ower fleein' across t' dub, t' moon gat behind a gert thunner-cloud, an' t' wood an' t' watter were as black as a bootit. Then there com a scufflin' an' a skrikin' all ower t' wood. T' squirrels started spittin' an' sweerin' like mad, t' ullets yammered an' t' wind yowled, an' there was all maks an' manders o' noises owerheead. Then, efter a minute, t' moon gat clear o' t' thunner-pack, an' Doed glowered around. But there was nowt to be seen nowheer. Melsh Dick was no langer sittin' anent him, an' there was niver a squirrel left i' t' trees; all that he could clap een on was t' espin leaves ditherin' i' t' wind an' t' lile waves o' t' dub wappin' agean t' bank.

"Doed was well-nigh starved to deeath wi' cowl an' hunger, an' t' poor lad started roarin' same as if his heart would breek. But he'd sense enif to shout for help, an' efter a while there com an answer. His father an' t' lads frae t' village had bin seekin' him all ower t' wood, and at last they fan him an' hugged him home an' put him to bed. 'Twere a lang while afore he were better, an' choose what fowks said, he'd niver set foot i' t' wood agean without he'd a bit o' witchwood i' his pocket, cut frae a rowan-tree on St Helen's Day."

## Two Letters

Annie was busy at the washtub, and it was her mother, who had come to live with her and her baby while her husband was at the Front, that answered the postman's knock and brought in the parcel.



“Annie, here’s a parcil thro’ France. It’ll be thy Jim that’s sent it. I can tell his writin’ onywhere, though his hand do seem a bit shaky like.”

“What’s he sendin’ naa, I’d like to know?” asked Annie, in a tone of real or feigned indifference. “He’s allus wearin’ his brass on all maks o’ oddments that he’s fun i’ them mucky trenches, or bowt off uther lads. Nay, tha can oppen it thisen, muther; my hands is all covered wi’ suds.”



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Annie's mother undid the parcel and took out a large German helmet, but it somehow failed to arouse much enthusiasm on the part of either mother or daughter. Jim had already gone far towards converting his wife's kitchen into an arsenal, and, as Annie said, "there was no end o' wark sidin' things away an' fettlin' up t' place."

At the bottom of the helmet was an envelope addressed to "Mrs Annie Akroyd, 7 Nineveh Lane, Leeds," and the mother handed it to her daughter.

"I'm ower thrang to read it naa," said Annie; "it'll hae to wait while I've finished weshin'."

"Eh! but tha'll want to know how thy Jim's gettin' on. Happen he'll be havin' short leave sooin. I'll read it to thee misen."

She opened the envelope and began to read the letter. It ran as follows:—

"Dear Annie,—I hope this finds you well, as it leaves me at present. I'm sendin' thee a helmet that I took off a German that I com across i' one o' them gert sump-hoils that t' Jack Johnsons maks i' t' grund. He were a fearful big gobslotch, so I reckon t' helmet will do to wesh aar Jimmy in. When he gets a bit owder, he can laik at sodgers wi' it.

"I've coom aat o' t' trenches an' am enjoyin' a rest-cure behind t' lines; so don't thou worry thisen abaat me. I'm champion, an' I've nowt to do but eyt an' sleep an' write a two-three letters when I've a mind to; and what caps all is that I'm paid for doin' on it. There's a lass here that said shoo'd write this here letter for me; but I'd noan have her mellin' on t' job, though shoo were a bonny lass an' all——"

"What mak o' lass is you?" interrupted Annie. "If he's bin takkin' up wi' one o' them French lasses, he'll get a bit o' my mind when he cooms back. He've allus bin fearful fain o' t' lasses, has Jim, an' I've telled him more nor once I'd have no more on't. An' them Frenchies is nasty good-for-nowts, I'll warrant. They want a few o' their toppins pulled."

Here she paused, and the rest of her wrath was vented on the clothes in the tub. Her mother continued to read aloud:

"Mind you let me know if Leeds beats Barnsla i' t' Midland Section next Setterday. It'll be a long while afore I clap eyes on a paper aat here, an' I've putten a bit o' brass on Leeds winnin' t' game. An' tell my father he mun tak my linnit daan to t' Spotted Duck for t' next singin' competition. He's a tidy singer is Bobby, if he's nobbut properly looked efter. Tha mun mesh up a bit o' white o' egg wi' his linseed; there's nowt like white o' egg for makkin' linnets sing——"

Once again Annie broke in upon the perusal of the letter. "Eh! but t' lad's fair daft. All he thinks on is footbball an' linnit matches. White o' egg for linnits, is it! I'd have him know



that eggs cost brass nah-a-days. Why don't he 'tend to his feightin' an' get a stripe like Sarah Worsnop's lad ower t' way?"

"Whisht a bit!" exclaimed her mother, "while I've gotten to t' end o' t' letter. Eh! but he do write bad; t' words is fair tum'lin' ower one anuther."

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“I was in a bit o’ a mullock,” Private James Akroyd’s letter went on, “t’ last time we were i’ t’ trenches; ’twern’t mich to tell abaat, but ’twere hot while it lasted. There’s lads says I’m baan to get a V.C. But don’t thou hark tul ’em; V.C.’s are noan for t’ likes o’ me.

“Jim.”

“Is that all?” asked Annie, as her mother folded up the letter. “Don’t he want to know how mony teeth aar Jimmy’s gotten, or owt abaat t’ pot-dogs I bowt i’ t’ markit.”

“Nay, that’s all,” replied her mother, “without there’s summat else i’ t’ helmet.” As she spoke she searched the helmet, and soon produced another letter. It also was addressed to “Mrs Annie Akroyd,” but in a woman’s hand. She opened the envelope and proceeded to read it aloud.

“Dear Mrs Akroyd,—You will have received a telegram from the War Office telling you of your husband’s death——”

As she heard the dreadful tidings, Annie turned deadly pale for a moment; then the blood rushed streaming back, till face and neck were crimson.

“It’s a lee,” she shouted, “a wicked lee. I ain’t gotten no tillygram, an’ he said he were well an’ enjoyin’ a rest-cure.”

Then she snatched the letter from her mother’s trembling hands and, with swimming eyes, read it to herself. It had been written by the hospital nurse, and continued as follows:—

“He was terribly wounded when he was brought here, but I cannot tell you how splendid he was. All his thoughts were of you and your little boy, and he would write to you himself, though I wanted him to give me the pencil and paper. He said that if he didn’t write himself, you would know that something was wrong with him.

“The Colonel came here specially to see him, and he told me that he should certainly recommend him for the V.C. Your husband was a brave man and did brave things; he gave his life to save another’s. He was wounded with shrapnel in the head and spine as he was crossing No Man’s Land. The officer to whom he was attached as orderly had been hit in one of the shell-holes, and your husband crawled out of his trench in full view of the enemy’s line, and brought him back. It was on the return journey that he received his wounds. The officer is safe, and will recover.

“Great as your sorrow must be, I hope you will be cheered by the thought that your husband laid down his life for you and me and all of us. If the V.C. is granted, you will have to go to Buckingham Palace to receive it, and I am sure the King would like you to take your little boy with you.



“Yours in truest sympathy,

“Nurse Goodwin.”

When Annie had finished the letter she let it fall, and, staggering to a seat, flung her hands, still wet and bleached with the labours of the washtub, upon the table; then, burying her face in them she sobbed her heart out.

“I don’t want no V.C.,” she exclaimed at last, between her sobs. “I want my Jim!”



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### A Miracle

Sam Ineson and Jerry Coggill were seasoned soldiers long before the Palestine campaign began. They had spent two winters in the trenches of France and Flanders, and when the news reached them that their battalion had been chosen to reinforce General Allenby's army in Egypt, they took it as a compliment. Pestilence, murder, and sudden death might be in store for them, but they would at any rate escape trench warfare, with all its attendant horrors and discomforts. Their comrades at divisional head-quarters gave them a good send-off. "Remember us to Pharaoh," they said, "and you can send us a few mummies for Christmas; they'll do for mascots."

The two soldiers, who were Yorkshire farmers' sons, and knew every inch of the Craven country, from Malham Cove to Kilnsey Crag, had joined the Egyptian army just as it was preparing to cross the desert on its way to the Holy Land. They had taken part in the great victory at Beersheba, and then, driving the Turks before them over the mountains of Judea, had finally stormed the fortifications of Hebron. Elated by their success, their hope was that their battalion would be allowed to press forward at once so that they might spend Christmas Day in Jerusalem. In this they were disappointed. Other battalions were chosen for this proud undertaking, and when General Allenby entered the Holy City in triumph Sam and Jerry were still in the neighbourhood of Hebron, engaged in repairing the fortifications and restoring order.

At last the command came to advance. They were, however, to proceed in small parties, and to share in an enveloping movement among the hills. Small detachments of Turkish soldiers were known to be lurking among the limestone terraces between Hebron and Jerusalem, and their duty was to break these up by means of guerrilla warfare, and prevent surprise attacks descending at night from the hills on to the army's communication lines.

The two Yorkshiremen, accustomed all their lives to the shepherding of Swaledale ewes among their native moors, were well qualified for this task. The limestone hills of Judea bear a striking resemblance to the Craven highlands, and Sam and Jerry had a practised eye for hiding-places among the rocks, as well as for the narrow sheep-tracks which lead from one limestone terrace to another. In the course of the next fortnight they rounded up many bands of ragged Turkish soldiers, and were steadily driving the rest before them in a northerly direction. By 24th December they were within five miles of Jerusalem, and the hope that they might yet reach their goal on Christmas Day came back once more to their minds.

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But it was not to be. The morning of the 24th found them near the source of one of the many wadies which, after the rains of November and December, rush in torrents through the boulder-strewn valleys, and empty themselves into the Dead Sea. The morning broke clear, but, as the day advanced, a thick mist descended from the hills and made progress difficult. But the ardour of the men, now that the goal was almost in sight, was such that it was impossible to hold them back. In small pickets they climbed the steep hill-sides, penetrated through the groves of olive, fig and pomegranate trees which clothe the successive tiers of limestone terraces, and reached the high plateau above. But at every step upwards the hill-mist grew thicker, and, in spite of all attempts to keep together, the pickets of soldiers became split up. When four o'clock arrived, Sam and Jerry found themselves alone on the hills and completely ignorant of their bearings. The short winter day was drawing to a close, and they were in danger of being benighted among the Judean uplands on Christmas Eve. They determined to make a descent to the point from which they had started in the morning, but, after an hour's wandering in the mist, found themselves no nearer their goal. Darkness was now creeping swiftly upon them, and they realised the dangers of a fall over one of the terraced cliffs.

"We're fair bet," said Jerry at last. "There'll be nea Chrissamas dinner for us to-morn i' Jerusalem, I reckon."

"Thou's reight," replied Sam; "we sall hae to bide here while t' mist lifts, an' do t' best we can for wersels. Bully-beef an' biscuit is what we'll git for wer dinners, an' there'll be nea sittin' ower t' fire at efter, watchin' t' Yule-clog burn, an' eytin' spice-loaf an' cheese."

"Nivver mind, lad, we've had a cappin' time sin we set out on t' march to Jerusalem, an' if we wasn't here we'd happen be up to wer oxters i' Flanders muck."

"Aye, we've noan done sae badly," Sam Ineson agreed, "and we sall hae summat to crack about when we git back to Wharfedale, choose how. Thou'll hae to tak a Sunday schooil class at Gerston, Jerry, an' tell t' lads all about Solomon's pools, where we caught them Turks, an' t' tomb o' t' Prophet Samuel anent Hebron."

"Nay, I reckon t' lang settle at t' Anglers' Arms will be more i' my line. But we're noan through wi' t' job yet awhile."

After this conversation, uttered in whispers, for fear lest their presence should be disclosed to any Turks lurking in the neighbourhood, the two soldiers took shelter under the lee of a limestone crag, drew their overcoats tightly around them, and proceeded to eat their rations. The prospect of spending a night on the uplands of Judea in a driving mist did not dismay them. They had fared worse many a night in France and Flanders, and also knew what it was to be benighted on the Yorkshire moors. Moreover, they were tired after their wanderings among the hills, and it was not long before they fell fast asleep.



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Jerry was awakened after a while by a familiar sound close to his ear. He drew himself up and listened, then burst into a laugh, and roused his fellow.

“Eh! Sam,” he said, “thou mun wakken up. We reckon we’re sodgers; we’re nowt o’ t’ sort; sure enough, we’re nobbut shipperd lads.”

Sam sat up and listened. The sound of a sheep’s cough close at hand met his ear, and, straining his eyes, he saw a whole flock of sheep browsing the short grass around him.

“That caps iverything I’ve heeard tell on,” he exclaimed. “Chrissamas Eve an’ two shipperd lads frae Wharfedale keepin’ watch ower their flock by neet i’ t’ Holy Land. An’ accordin’ to what Sergeant said, Bethlehem sud not be sae vara far away frae here.”

The situation in which the two shepherds found themselves touched their imaginations, and they ceased to regret that they were in danger of missing a Christmas Day at Jerusalem. They listened to the sheep for a time, until the cry of a jackal startled the animals, and the flock dispersed. Then the two soldiers fell asleep once more.

Shortly before midnight they awoke with a sudden start. A strange light gleamed in their faces, and the mist had almost vanished. The hill-sides and the sky above were bathed in a pearly light, while almost immediately above them they beheld a city, as it were let down from heaven and suspended in mid-air, beset with domes and minarets that flashed like jewels in the marvellous radiance that flooded all space.

“A miracle! A miracle!” Sam Ineson exclaimed, in awe-struck tones, and then held his breath, for a familiar song broke upon his ears. From the sky, or from the battlements of the aerial city, he knew not which, there rang forth the great Nativity hymn:

While shepherds watched their flocks by night,  
All seated on the ground,  
The Angel of the Lord came down,  
And glory shone around.

Jerry Coggill looked into the face of Sam Ineson and saw there an expression of trance-like rapture. As though moved by a common impulse, the two soldiers sprang to attention, saluted, and, when the hymn ceased, fell on their knees in prayer. Then the mist closed on them again, the city among the clouds was hidden from view, and the sky lost its translucence. But sleep was no longer possible for the soldiers. They were as men who had seen the invisible; it was as though heaven had descended upon them and the glory of the new-born King had gleamed in their eyes, and they were filled with a holy awe.

Next morning the mist had cleared, and the miracle was explained. The spot which they had chosen for their resting-place was at the foot of the great scarp of limestone upon

which stands the city of Bethlehem, two thousand five hundred feet above the sea. The city had passed, without the shedding of a drop of blood, into the hands of General Allenby, and the soldiers stationed there, inspired by the associations

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of the place and the Christmas season, had left their barracks shortly before midnight, and, proceeding to the officers' quarters, had greeted them with a hymn. And the Christmas moon, rising high above the mountains of Gilead and Moab, had found for a short space of time an opening in the curtain of mist and had poured down its light upon the hills of Judea, making the city of Bethlehem seem to the rapt minds of the two Yorkshire dalesmen as though it had been the city of the living God let down from heaven.

### Tales of a grandmother

#### I. The Tree of Knowledge

I spent a certain portion of every year in a village of Upper Wharfedale, where I made many friends among the farm folk. Among these I give pride of place to Martha Hessletine.

Martha Hessletine was always known in the village as Grannie. She was everybody's Grannie. Crippled with rheumatism, she had kept to her bed for years, and there she held levees, with all the dignity of bearing that one might expect from a French princess in the days of the *grand monarque*. The village children would pay her a visit on their way home from afternoon school, and of an evening her kitchen hearth, near to which her bed was always placed by day, was the Parliament House for all the neighbouring farms. What Grannie did not know of the life of the village and the dale was certainly not worth knowing.

Grannie's one luxury was a good fire. A fire, she used to say, gave you three things in one—warmth, and light, and company. Usually she burnt coal, but when the peats, which had been cut and dried on the moors in June, were brought down to the farms on sledges, her neighbours would often send her as a present a barrow-load of them. These would last her for a long time, and the pungent, aromatic smell of the burning turf would greet one long before her kitchen door was reached.

I was sitting by her fireside one evening, and it was of the peat that she was speaking.

"We allus used to burn peats on our farm," she said, "and varra warm they were of a winter neet. We'd no kitchen range i' yon days, but a gert oppen fireplace, wheer thou could look up the chimley and see the stars shining of a frosty neet."

"But doesn't a peat fire give off a terrible lot of ash?" I asked.



“Aye, it does that,” she replied, “but we used to like the ash; we could roast taties in’t, and many’s the time we’ve sat i’ the ingle-nook and made our supper o’ taties and buttermilk.”

So her thoughts wandered back to bygone times, while I, not wishing to interrupt her, had taken the poker in my hand and with it was tracing geometrical figures in the peat-ash on the hearthstone. So absorbed was I in my circles and pentagons that I did not notice that Grannie had stopped short in her story, and was taking a lively interest in what I was doing. It was with no little surprise, therefore, that I suddenly heard her exclaim, in a voice of half-suppressed terror: “What is thou doing that for?” and turning round, I was startled to see on her usually placid face the look of a hunted animal.



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Touched with regret for what I had done, and yet unable to understand why it had moved her so deeply, I asked what was troubling her mind. For a few moments she was silent, and then, in a more tranquil voice, replied: "I can't bear to see anybody laiking wi' ashes."

"Why, what does it matter?" I asked, and, in the hope that I might help her to regain her composure I began to make fun of her superstitious fancies. But Grannie refused to be laughed out of her beliefs.

"It's not superstition at all," were her words; "it's bitter truth, and I've proved it misen, to my cost."

Seeing how disturbed she was in her mind I tried to change the subject, but she would not let me. For about half-a-minute she was silent, lost in thought, her grey eyes taking on a steeliness which I had not seen in them before. Then she turned to me and asked: "Has thou iver heerd tell o' ash-riddling?"

"Of course I have," I replied. "Everybody knows what it is to riddle ashes."

"Aye, but ash-riddling on the hearthstone, the neet afore St Mark's Day?"

Here was something unfamiliar, and I readily confessed my ignorance. It was evident, too, that Grannie's mind could only find relief by disburdening itself of the weight which lay upon it, so I no longer attempted to direct her thoughts into a new channel.

"It was 1870," she began, "the year o' the Franco-German War, that I first heerd tell o' ash-riddling, and it came about this way. My man's father, Owd Jerry, as fowks called him, were living wi' us then; he was a widower, and well-nigh eighty year owd. He'd been a despert good farmer in his time, but he'd gotten owd and rheumatic, and his temper were noan o' the best. He were as touchous as a sick barn, if aught went wrang wi' him. Well, one day i' lambing-time, he were warr nor he'd iver been afore; he knew that I were thrang wi' all maks o' wark, but nowt that I could do for him were reet. So at last, when I'd fmished my milking i' the mistal, I got him to bed, and then I sat misen down by the fire and had a reet good roar. I were tired to death, and wished that I'd niver been born. Iverything had gone agee that day: butter wouldn't coom, Snowball had kicked over the pail while I was milking her, and, atop o' all that, there was grandfather wi' his fratching ways.

"I were sat covered ower the fire, wi' my face buried in my hands, when my man came in and axed what were wrang wi' me. At first I wouldn't tell him, but enow he dragged it all out o' me, and in the end I was glad on 't. But he nobbut laughed when I told him about Owd Jerry, and he said he'd allus been like that wi' women fowks; 'twere his way o' getting what he wanted. I got my dander up at that, and said he'd have to get shut o' his fratching if he lived wi' us."



“I reckon he’ll noan mend his ways,’ said Mike, ‘now he’s close on eighty.’ So I said if that were the case it would be a good thing for the peace o’ the family when he were putten under grund. Yon were gaumless words, and bitter did I rue iver having spokken ’em. But Mike nobbut laughed at what I said. “Putten under grund!’ said he. ‘Nay, father will live while he’s ninety, or happen a hunderd; he’s as tough as a yak-stowp.’



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“He'll do nowt o' the sort,' I answered; 'and he wi' a hoast in his thropple like a badly cow. I sudn't be surprised if he were dead by Chrissamas.'

“We can soon tell if there's ony truth in what thou says,' replied Mike. 'It will be Ash-Riddling Day come next Friday, and then we can find out for wersens if Owd Jerry's boun' to dee afore the year's out.'

“What does thou mean?' I axed.

“Why, lass, wheer has thou been brought up if thou's niver heerd tell o' Ash-Riddling Day? What a thing it is to wed a foreigner! If thou'd been bred and born in Wharfedale thou'd have no need to axe about Ash-Riddling Day.'

Well, I set no count on his fleering at fowks that hadn't been brought up in his dale, for I was wanting to know what he meant.

“What thou's gotten to do,' he said, 'is to tak the peat-rake afore thou goes to bed and rake the ashes out o' the fire and spread 'em all ower the hearthstone. Then thou can go to bed, and next morning, if there's to be a death in the family in the next twel-month the foot-step o' the lad or lass that has to dee will be stamped on the ash.'

“When he'd finished his tale I gave out that I reckoned it nobbut blether, but I minded all the same; and that neet, when I were i' bed, I couldn't give ower thinking o' what he'd said, and I made up my mind that I'd set the peat-ash on the hearthstone come Thursday neet. Next morning I thought different, but all the same I couldn't get shut o' the temptation. Ay, 'twere a temptation o' the deevil, sure enough; he were ticing me to eat o' the Tree o' Knowledge, same as he ticed Eve i' the garden. So I said: 'Get thee behind me, Satan,' and I kept him behind me all that day. But when it got dark, and I'd putten the childer to bed, he came forrad, and the ticing got stronger and stronger. It wasn't that I wanted Owd Jerry to dee, but I were mad to see if there was ony truth in the tale that Mike had told.

“Well, Tuesday passed, and Wednesday passed, and Thursday came. I said no more about the ash-riddling to Mike, and I reckon he'd forgotten all about it. But that day Owd Jerry were warr nor iver. He set up his fratching at breakfast acause his porridge was burnt, and kept at it all day. Nowt that I did for him were reet; if I filled his pipe, he said I'd putten salt in his baccy, and if I went out to feed the cauves, he told me I left the doors oppen, and wanted to give him his death o' cowd. Evening came at last, and by nine o'clock I were left alone i' the kitchen. Owd Jerry were i' bed, and the childer too, all except Amos, our eldest barn, and he had set off wi' his father to look after the lambing yowes, and wouldn't be back while eleven o'clock. He was a good lad was Amos, and the only one o' the family that favvoured me; the rest on 'em took after their father. So I sat misen down on a stool and glowered into the fire, and wrastled wi' the deevil same as Jacob wrastled wi' the angel. And the whole fire seemed to be full o' lile



deevils that were shooting out their tongues at me; and the sparks were the souls of the damned i' hell that tried to lowp up the chimley out o' the deevils' road. But the lile deevils would lowp after 'em, and lap 'em up wi' their tongues o' flame and set 'em i' the fire agean.



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“At last I couldn’t thole it no longer. Ash-riddling or no ash-riddling, I said, I’m boun’ to bed, and upstairs I went. Well, I lay i’ bed happen three-quarters of an hour, and sure enough, the ticement began to wark i’ my head stronger and stronger. At lang length I crept downstairs agean i’ my stocking feet into the kitchen. All was whisht as the grave, and the fire was by now nearly out, so that there were no flame-deevils to freeten me. So I took the riddle that I’d gotten ready afore and began to riddle the ash all ower the hearthstone. The stone were hot, but I were cowl as an ice-shackle, and I felt the goose-flesh creeping all ower my body. When I’d riddled all the ash I made it snod wi’ the peat-rake, and then, more dead nor wick, I crept back into bed and waited while Mike and Amos came home.

“They got back about eleven, and then I thought, they’ll happen see what I’ve done. But they didn’t, for they’d putten out the lantern in the stable, and I’d brought the can’le up wi’ me into the cham’er. I heerd ‘em stumbling about i’ the kitchen, and then they came up to bed, and Mike began talking to me about the lambs i’ the croft, and I knew he’d niver set een on the ash-riddling. He soon fell asleep, and after a while I dozed off too, and dreamt I were murdering Owd Jerry i’ the staggarth. As soon as cockleet came, I wakkened up and crept downstairs, quiet-like, so as not to-wakken Mike or the childer. And there on the hearthstone were the ashes, and reet i’ the middle on ‘em the prent of a man’s clog.

“It were Jerry’s clog as plain as life. When I saw it I went all of a didder, and thought I sud ha’ fainted’ for all that I’d dreamt about murdering Owd Jerry came back into my mind. But I drave a pin into my arm to rouse misen, and took the besom and swept up the ashes and lit the fire. After I’d mashed misen a cup o’ tea I felt better, and got agate wi’ the housewark. But, by the mass! it was a dree day for me, was yon. Ivery time I heerd the owd man hoast I thought he were boun’ to dee. But he was better that day nor he’d been for a long while, and he kept mending all the time. I couldn’t forget, howiver, what I’d done, and the thought of how I’d yielded to the devil’s ticement made me more patient and gentle wi’ Jerry nor iver I’d been afore.

“Spring set in and the birds came back frae beyont the sea, swallows and yallow wagtails and sandpipers; the meadows were breet wi’ paigles, and the childer gethered bluebells and lilies o’ the valley i’ the woods for Whissuntide, and iverything went on same as afore. We had a good lambing time, and a good hay harvest at efter. I kept Jerry under my eye all the while, and nowt went wrang wi’ him. He’d get about the farm wi’ the dogs, a bit waffy on his legs, mebbe, but his appetite kept good, and he’d ommost lossen his hoast. He fratched and threaped same as usual if owt went wrang wi’ his meals, or if the childer made ower mich racket i’ the house, but it took



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a vast o' care off my mind to think that he could get about and go down to 'The Craven Heifer' for his forenoon drinkings, same as he'd allus done sin first I came into Wharfedale as Mike's bride. And when back-end set in and we'd salved the sheep wi' butter and tar to keep the winter rain out on 'em, still Owd Jerry kept wick and cobby, and there were days, aye, and weeks too, when I forgot what I'd done on Ash-Riddling Day. And when I thought about it, it didn't flay me like it used to do; for I said to misen, 'I'll keep Owd Jerry alive ovver next St Mark's Day, choose how.' So I knitted him a muffler for his throat and lined his weskit wi' flannen; I brewed him hot drinks made out o' herbs I'd gethered i' the hedgerows i' summertime, and rubbed his chest wi' a mixture o' saim frae the pig-killing, and honey frae the bee-skeps. Eh! mon, but it were gey hard to get the owd man to sup the herb tea and to let me rub him. He reckoned I wanted to puzzum him same as if he were a ratton, and when I'd putten the saim and honey on his chest he said I'd lapped him up i' fly-papers. But I set no count on his nattering so long as I could keep him alive.

"Chrissamas came at last, and New Year set in wi' frost and snow. The grouse came down frae the moors and the rabbits fair played Hamlet about the farms: they were that pined wi' hunger, they began to eat the bark off the ashes and thorn bushes i' the hedges. I did all I could to keep Owd Jerry frae the public-house while the storm lasted, but he would toddle down ivery morning for his glass o' yal, and, of course, he got his hoast back agean i' his throple. All the same, I wouldn't give in. I counted the days while St Mark's Day, and tewed and rived and better rived to keep him out o' his coffin. But it was weary wark, and I got no thanks frae Jerry for all I was doing for him.

"At lang length St Mark's Eve came round, and a wild day it was, and no mistake. There had been deep snow on the moors two days afore, and after the snow had come rain. It was a bad lambing time, and Mike and Amos were about the farm all day and most o' the neet, looking after the lambs that had lossen their yowes. Owd Jerry had threaped shameful the day afore; the weather had been that bad he'd not been able to go down to 'The Craven Heifer.'

"When I'd gotten out o' bed, and looked out o' the windey it were still lashing wi' rain, and I said to misen, I'll keep Jerry i' bed to-day. If I can keep him alive to-day I sal have won, and Jerry can do what he likes wi' hissien to-morrow. So I hugged up his breakfast to his chamer and told him I'd leet a fire for him there, and I'd get Harry Spink to come and sit wi' him and keep him company. But Jerry wouldn't bide i' bed, not for nobody; he'd set his mind on going down to the public, and a wilful man mun have his way, choose what fowks say. So off he set, wi' the rain teeming down all the time, and the beck getting higher and higher wi' the spate.



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“Eh, deary me! What I had to thole that day! I was flaid that if he had a drop too mich he’d happen lose his footing on the plank-bridge at the town-end, and then the spate would tak him off his feet and drown him. I offered to walk wi’ him down to the public and bide wi’ him while he wanted to come back; but he said he reckoned he were owd enough to do wi’out a nuss-maid and told me to mind my own business. Well, twelve o’clock came, and when I saw Owd Jerry coming back to his dinner I were that fain I could have kissed him, though he’d a five-days’ beard on his face.

“When dinner were ower Mike told our Amos that he mun fetch in the stirks that were out on the moors on the far side o’ Wharfe. The weather were that bad he doubted they’d come to no good if they were out all neet. So Amos set off about half-past two, and, efter I’d wshed up and sided away I sat misen down i’ the ingle-nook and mended the stockings. And there was Owd Jerry set on the lang-settle anent me. There was no sign on his face of a deeing man, but ivery minute the load on my mind grew heavier. Eh, man, but it were a queer game the deevil played wi’ me that day, a queer, mocking game that I’ll niver forget so lang as there’s breath left i’ my body. Leastways that’s what I thought at the time, but I’ve learnt by now that it weren’t the deevil; it was the Almighty punishin’ me for eatin’ o’ the Tree o’ Knowledge.

“Fower o’clock came, and I got tea ready. The childer came back frae school, and then Mike came, and the first thing he axed was if Amos had gotten back wi’ the stirks. So I said: ‘No, he’s noan gotten back yet awhile.’ My mind were so taen up wi’ Owd Jerry and the ash-riddling that I’d forgotten that Amos was away on the other side o’ Wharfe. So Mike for all he was weet to the skin, set off to look for Amos. I gave Owd Jerry and the childer their tea, but I wouldn’t sit down wi’ ’em misen, but kept going to the windey to see if Mike and Amos were coming wi’ the stirks. I looked out, happen six or seven times, and there was nobody on the road; but at last I set een on Mike and other lads frae the farms round about. They were carrying somebody on a hurdle.”

For a moment Grannie interrupted her story to wipe away the tears that were now rolling down her cheeks. In a flash I realised what was to be the tragic close of her tale, and I tried to spare her the details. But she refused to be spared, and, forcing back the tears, went on to the bitter end.

“Aye, aye, thou’ll happen have guessed who was on the hurdle. It was Amos; he’d lossen his footing on the stepping-stones going across Wharfe, and the spate had carried him downstream and drowned him. It wasn’t Jerry’s clog-print on the ashes, it was Amos’s; and the Lord had taen away my eldest barn frae me because I’d etten o’ the Tree o’ Knowledge.”

## II. Janet’s Cove



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Grannie's reputation as a story-teller was readily acknowledged by the children of our village. When they had trudged back from school which was held in a village two miles away, tea was always ready for them. But tea in their own kitchens was accounted a dull repast. If the weather was fine they carried their "shives" of bread and dripping, or bread and treacle, into the road in front of their houses and ate them in the intervals between "Here come three dukes a-riding," "Wallflowers, wallflowers, growing up so high," and "Poor Roger is dead and laid in his grave." But in winter, or when the weather was bad, they made it their custom to take their teas to Grannie's fireside and demand a story as accompaniment to their frugal meal. The young voices of the children brightened Grannie's life, and the hour of story-telling round the fire was for her like a golden sunset following upon a day of gloom.

The stories which she told to the children were usually concerned with her own childhood. She had always been of an imaginative turn of mind and the doings of her early life, seen through the long-drawn vistas of the years, had become suffused with iridescent colours. They had gathered to themselves romance as a wall overhung by trees gathers to itself moss and fern and lichen.

"Tell you a tale," she would say. "Ay, but, honey-barns, I reckon you'll have heerd all my tales lang sin. No? Well then, did I iver tell you t' tale o' Janet's Cove?"

"Ay, thou's telled us yon last week," Kester Laycock, the spokesman of the party of listeners, would reply; "but thou mun tell it agean."

There was diplomacy as well as truth in Kester's words when he said that Grannie had told them the story of Janet's Cove the preceding week. The truth was that she had told them that tale every week since winter set in, but nothing could stale its freshness for them. Besides, did not Grannie introduce surprising variations of narrative every time she told it, so that it never seemed quite the same story?

"Janet's Cove" was a story of the birds, and Grannie's knowledge of the life and habits of birds seemed wonderful to them. Crippled with rheumatism as she was, and unable to move from her bed, she nevertheless watched for the return of the spring and autumn migrants with all the eagerness of the born naturalist. She offered the children money if they would bring her the first tidings of the arrival of birds in the dale. There was always a halfpenny underneath the geranium pot in the window-sill for the child whose eye caught sight of the first swallow, redstart or sandpiper; or whose ear first recognised the clarion call of the cuckoo, or the evening "bleat" of the nightjar on the bracken-mantled fells at the end of May. Or, if the season were autumn, the children were told to watch for the arrival of the woodcock and the earliest flock of Norwegian fieldfares. Under Grannie's tuition more than one generation in the village had learnt to take an interest in the movements of migrants in the dale, and that was why the story of Janet and the birds never failed to charm the ears of the children gathered round the kitchen hearth.



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“Now then,” Grannie would begin, “if I’m boun’ to tell you t’ tale o’ Janet’s Cove, you mun set yoursels down an’ be whisht. Tak a seat at t’ top o’ bag o’ provand, Kester; Betty and Will can hug chairs to t’ fire, and lile Joe Moon mun sit on t’ end o’ t’ bed.”

Such was Grannie’s arrangement of the seats, while to me, the visitor, was assigned the “lang-settle” on the other side of the fireplace. It was a coign of vantage which I shared with the ancestral copper warming-pan, and from it I could see the whole group. Grannie, bent half-double with rheumatism, was propped up in her bed, with the children grouped around her. She wore, as usual, her white mutch cap and grey shawl. Mittens covered her wrists, and her fingers, painfully swollen with chalk-stones, plied her knitting-needles. Her face was sunken in the cheeks and round her mouth, but her large brown eyes, still full of animation, broad forehead, and high-arched brows gave dignity and even beauty to her pale countenance. On the fire the porridge was warming for the calves’ supper, while suspended from the wooden ceiling was the “bread-flake,” a hurdle-shaped structure across the bars of which hung the pieces of oatcake which were eaten with buttermilk at supper.

“Well, I’ve happen telled you afore,” Grannie began, “that when I were a lile lass I lived up Malham way. My father had a farm close agen Gordale Scar. Eh! but it’s a fearful queer country is yon! Gert nabs o’ rock on all sides wheer nobbut goats can clim, an’ becks flowin’ undergrund an’ then bubblin’ up i’ t’ crofts an’ meadows. On t’ other side frae our steading were a cove that fowks called Janet’s Cove. They telled all maks an’ manders o’ tales about t’ cove an’ reckoned it were plagued wi’ boggards. But they couldn’t keep me out o’ t’ cove for all that; ’twere t’ bonniest spot i’ t’ dale, an’ I nivver gat stalled o’ ramlin’ about by t’ watter-side an’ amang t’ rowans. There were a watterfall i’ t’ cove, wi’ a dark cave behind it, an’ ’twere all owerhung wi’ eshes an’ hazels.

“One neet I were sittin’ up for my father while fower o’clock i’ t’ morn. ‘Twere t’ day afore Easter Sunday an’ my father were despert thrang wi’ t’ lambin’ ewes. He hadn’t taen off his shoes an’ stockins for more nor a week. He’d doze a bit i’ his chair by t’ fire, an’ then he’d wakken up an’ leet t’ lantern’ an’ gan out to see if aught ailed t’ sheep. He let me bide up for company, an’ so as I could warm him a sup o’ tea ower t’ fire. But when t’ gran’father’s clock strake fower he said I mun away to my bed. He’d tak a turn round t’ croft, an’ then he’d set off wi’ his budget to t’ mistal to milk t’ cows. But I didn’t want to gan to bed. I’d bin sleepin’ off an’ on all t’ neet, an’ I weren’t feelin’ a lile bit tired. So when my father had set off I went to t’ door an’ looked out. My song! but ’twere a grand neet. T’ moon were just turned full, an’ were leetin’ up all t’ scars an’ plats o’ meadow; t’ becks were just like silver an’ t’ owd yew-trees that grow on t’ face o’ t’ scar had lang shadows as black as pick. I stood theer on t’ door-sill for mebbe five minutes an’ then I said to misel, I’ll just run down as far as Janet’s Cove afore I gan to bed.’ It were a bit cowl, so I lapped my shawl around my head an’ set off.



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“Twere nobbut a two-three minutes’ walk, an’ afore vara lang I were sittin’ anent t’ rocks, an’ t’ mooin were glisterin’ through t’ esh-trees on to t’ watter. Efter a while I felt a bit sleepy; ‘twere t’ nippy air, an’ mebbe t’ seet o’ t’ fallin’ watter dazed my een. Onygates, I fell asleep an’ slept for better pairt of an hour. When I wakkened t’ mooin were well-nigh settin’, an’ I could see that t’ cockleet were coomin’ away i’ t’ east. So I reckoned I’d get back to my bed. But just then I saw summat movin’ about on t’ other side o’ t’ beck. At first I thowt it were nobbut a sheep, but when I’d keeked at it a bit langer I knew it weren’t a sheep at all; ‘twere a lass o’ about t’ same size as misel.”

At this point in the story alertness of mind was depicted on the face of every listener. Joe Moon’s tongue, as agile as a lizard’s, had up to now been revolving like a windmill round the lower half of his face, questing after treacly crumbs which had adhered to his cheeks; but at the mention of the girl by the waterfall it ceased from its labours, and the tightly closed mouth and straining eyes showed that he was not losing a word.

“Queerest thing about t’ lass were this,” Grannie continued, “shoo were nakt, as nakt as ony hen-egg, an’ that at five o’clock on a frosty April morn. Eh! but it made me dither to see her stannin’ theer wi’ niver a shift to her back. Well, I crept close to t’ gert stone an’ kept my een on her. First of all shoo crept down to t’ watter an’ put her feet intul it, an’ gat agate o’ splashin’ t’ watter all ower her, just like a bird weshin’ itsel i’ t’ beck. Then shoo climmed up to t’ top o’ t’ nab that were hingin’ ower t’ fall an’ let t’ watter flow all ower her face an’ showders. I could see her lish body shinin’ through t’ watter an’ her yallow hair streamin’ out on both sides of her head. Efter a while shoo climmed on to a rock i’ t’ beck below t’ fall an’ gat howd o’ t’ bough of an esh. Shoo brak off t’ bough an’ shaped it into a sort o’ a wand an’ started wavin’ it i’ t’ air.

“Now I ought to have telled you that up to now iverything i’ t’ cove were as whisht as t’ grave. I could hear t’ cocks crowin’ up at our house, but all t’ wild birds were roostin’ i’ t’ boughs or on t’ grund. But no sooiner did t’ lass wave her wand ower her head than t’ larks started singin’. T’ meadows an’ cow-pasturs were full o’ sleepin’ larks, an’ then, all on a sudden, t’ sky were fair wick wi’ em. I harkened tul ‘em, ay, an’ t’ lass harkened an’ all, an’ kept wavin’ t’ wand aboon her head. I doubted ‘twere t’ lass that had wakkened t’ larks an’ gotten ‘em to sing so canty. Efter a while shoo lowered t’ wand a bit an’ pointed to t’ moors, an’ then, by t’ Mess! curlews gat agate o’ singin.’ Soom fowks reckons that t’ song o’ t’ curlew is dreesom an’ yonderly, but I love to harken to it i’ t’ springtime when t’ birds cooms back to t’ moors frae t’ sea. An’ so did t’ lass. When shoo heerd t’ curlews shoo started laughin’ an’ dashed t’ watter about wi’ her foot.



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“An’ all t’ while shoo kept beatin’ t’ time to t’ song o’ t’ birds wi’ her wand. Soomtimes shoo pointed to t’ curlews aboon t’ moor; then, sudden-like, shoo lowered t’ wand, while it were pointin’ into t’ hazel shaws an’ rowan bushes by t’ beck-side; and afore I knew what were happening t’ blackbirds wakkened up an’ started whistlin’ like mad. I niver heerd sich a shoutin’ afore. It were fair deafenin’, just as if there were a blackbird in ivery bush alang t’ beck. They kept at it for happen fower or five minutes, an’ then t’ lass made a fresh motion wi’ t’ wand. What’s coomin’ next, I wondered, an’ afore I’d done wonderin’, sure enough, t’ robins gat agate an’ tried to shout down t’ blackbirds an’ all. You see I’d niver noticed afore that when t’ birds start singin’ i’ t’ morn they keep to a reg’lar order. It’s just like a procession i’ t’ church. First cooms t’ choir lads i’ their supplices, an’ happen a peppermint ball i’ their mouths; then t’ choir men, tenors and basses; then t’ curate, keekin’ alang t’ pews to see if squire’s lasses are lookin’ at him, an’ at lang length cooms t’ vicar hissien. Well, it’s just t’ same wi’ t’ birds. Skylarks wakkens up first, then curlews, then blackbirds, robins, throstles. You’ll niver hear a throstle i’ front o’ a robin, nor a robin i’ front o’ a blackbird. They mind what’s menseful same as fowks do. At efter, mebbe cuckoo will begin to shout, an’ close behind him will coom t’ spinks an’ pipits an’ lile tits. Eh, deary me! but I’ve clean forgotten most pairt o’ what I’ve larnt misel about t’ birds. They do iverything as reg’lar as if ’twere clockwork.

“I wonder if you childer can tell me what is t’ bird that ligs abed langest?”

There was silence for a moment or two, and then Kester Laycock suggested rooks.

“Nay,” answered Grannie, “rooks are not what I sud call early risers, but they’re not t’ last birds up, not by a lang way. T’ last bird to wakken up an’ t’ first bird to gan to bed is t’ house-sparrow. An idle taistrill is t’ sparrow, wi’ nowther sense nor mense in his head. But theer, barns, I’m gettin’ off t’ track o’ my story o’ Janet an’ t’ way shoo wakkened up t’ birds wi’ her wand.

“You see shoo allus knew whose turn sud coom next, an’ wheer ivery sort o’ bird was roostin’. One minute shoo pointed t’ stick to t’ top o’ t’ trees, an’ then I heerd ‘Caw! Caw!’ Then shoo’d bring t’ jackdaws out o’ their holes i’ t’ rocks, an’ next minute shoo were pointin’ to t’ mossy roots o’ t’ trees hingin’ ower t’ beck, while a Jenny wren would hop out an’ sing as though he were fit to brust hissien. An’ all t’ time it were gettin’ leeter an’ leeter, an’ I could see that t’ sun were shinin’ on’ t’ cliffs aboon Malham, though Janet’s Cove were still i’ t’ shade. I knew my mother would sooin be seekin’ me i’ my cham’er, an’ I started wonderin’ what shoo’d say when shoo fan’ t’ bed empty. I gat a bit flaid when I thowt o’ that, but I couldn’t tak my een off t’ lass wi’ t’ wand. I were fair bewitched wi’ her, an’ I doubt that if shoo’d pointed at me I sud hae started singin’ ‘Here coom three dukes a-rid in’.’



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“Howiver, shoo niver clapped een on me wheer I was sittin’ behind t’ stone. Shoo were thrang wi’ t’ birds were Janet, an’ gettin’ more excited ivery minute. By now t’ din were fair deafenin’; I’d niver heerd aught like it afore, nor yet sin: without it were when my man took me down to Keighley, Christmas afore we were wed, an’ I heerd t’ lads and t’ lasses singin’ t’ Hallelujah Chorus i’ t’ Methody chapil. When I saw t’ conductor-lad wi’ t’ stick in his hand callin’ up t’ trebles an’ basses an’ tother sets o’ singers, Marry! I bethowt me o’ Janet an’ t’ birds i’ t’ cove, an’ I brast out a-laughin’ while fowks thowt I were daft.

“But theer, barns, I mun get forrad wi’ my tale, or your mothers will be coomin’ seekin’ you afore I’m through wi’ it. By now ommost all t’ birds i’ t’ cove were wakkened up an’ were singin’ their cantiest. I looked up, an’ t’ sun had gotten clean ower t’ top o’ t’ fell, an’ were shinin’ straight down into t’ cove. Ay, an’ Janet saw t’ sun too, an’ when it were like a gert gowden ball at top o’ t’ hill, shoo pointed her wand at t’ sun an’ started dancin’ aboon t’ watterfall. I looked at her and then I looked at t’ sun, an’, Honey-fathers! if t’ owd sun weren’t dancin’ too. I rubbed my een to finnd out if I’d made ony mistak, but, sure enough, theer were t’ lile nakt lass an’ t’ owd sun aboon t’ breast o’ t’ fell dancin’ togither like mad. Then, all on a sudden, I bethowt me it were Easter Sunday, and how I’d heerd fowks say that t’ sun allus dances on Easter mornin’.”

At this point I could not forbear interrupting Grannie to ask her whether she had ever heard of a poem called *A Ballad upon a Wedding*. She said she had not, so I quoted to her Suckling’s well-known lines:

Her feet beneath her petticoat,  
Like little mice, stole in and out,  
As if they feared the light.  
But O! she dances such a way,  
No sun upon an Easter day  
Is half so fine a sight.

Grannie listened attentively and seemed to think that the heroine of the poem was the fairy that wakened the birds in Janet’s Cove.

“T’ lad that wrote yon verses has gotten it wrang,” she said. “Shoo hadn’t no petticoat on her. T’ lass were nakt frae top to toe. Well, when shoo’d bin dancin’ a while shoo seemed to forget all about t’ birds. Shoo let her wand drop and climmed down t’ fall. Then shoo set hersel on a rock behind t’ fall an’ clapped her hands an’ laughed. I looked at her an’ I saw t’ bonniest seet I’ve iver set een on.

“You see by now t’ sun had gotten high up i’ t’ sky, an’ were shinin’ straight up t’ beck on to t’ fall. There had bin a bit o’ flood t’ day afore, an’ t’ watter were throwin’ up spray wheer it fell on to t’ rocks below t’ fall. An’ theer, plain as life, were a rainbow stretched



across t' fall, an' Janet sittin' on t' rock reet i' t' middle o' t' bow wi' all t' colours o' t'  
bowgreen an' yallow an' blue—shinin' on her hair.

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“Efter that I fair lost count o’ t’ time. I sat theer, lapped i’ my shawl, an’ glowered at Janet, an’ t’ sun, an’ t’ watterfall, while at lang length I heerd soombody callin’ me. ‘Twere my father, an’ then I knew that fowks had missed me up at t’ farm an’ were seekin’ me amang t’ crofts. Wi’ that I gat up an’ ran same as if I’d bin a rabbit; an’ theer were my father, stood on t’ brig betwixt our house an’ t’ cove, shoutin’ ‘Martha!’ as loud as iver he could.”

“Did he give thee a hazelin’ for bidin’ out so late?” asked Kester, with a wealth of personal experience to draw upon.

Grannie was somewhat taken aback by the pertinent question, but she was too clever to give herself away. “What’s that thou says about a hazelin’, Kester? Look at t’ clock. It’s time thou was gettin’ alang home, or mebbe there will be a hazelin’ for thee.”

## The Potato and the Pig

### A Fable for Allotment-Holders

Abe Ingham was a Horsforth allotment-holder. He talked allotments all day and dreamed of them all night. Before the war cricket had been his hobby, and he was a familiar figure at County and Council matches for twelve miles round. Now he never mentioned the game; he had exchanged old gods for new, and his homage was no longer paid to George Hirst or Wilfred Rhodes, but to Arran Chief, Yorkshire Hero, and Ailsa Craig. He took his gardening very seriously, and called it “feightin’ t’ Germans.” If you asked him when the war would be won he pleaded ignorance; but if you asked him where it would be won, his answer invariably was: “On t’ tatie-patches at Horsforth.” He still nursed his grievances, for pet grievances are not yet included in the tax on luxuries, but these were no longer suffragettes and lawyers, but slugs, “mawks,” and “mowdiewarps.” In a word, Ingham was one of the many Englishmen whom four years of war conditions have re-created. He was slimmer and more agile than in 1914, and of the “owd Abe” of pre-war times all that remained was his love of tall stories. I was privileged to listen to one of the tallest of these one evening, after he had paid a visit of inspection to my garden and was smoking a pipe with me under my lime-tree.

“Fowks tell queer tales ’bout ’lotments,” he began, “but I reckon they’re nobbut blether anent t’ tale that I could tell o’ what happened me last year.”

“What was that, Abe?” I asked. “Did you find a magpie’s nest in your Jerusalem artichokes or half-crowns in the hearts of your pickling cabbages?”

“None o’ your fleerin’,” he replied. “What I’m tellin’ you is t’ truth, or if it isn’t truth it’s a parable, and I reckon a parable’s Bible truth. It were gettin’ on towards back-end, and I’d bin diggin’ potatoes while I were in a fair sweat wi’ t’ heat. So I reckoned I’d just sit



down for a bit on t' bench I'd made an' rest misen. Efter a while I gat agate once more, an' I'd ommost finished my row of potatoes when my fork gat howd o' summat big. At first I thowt it were happen a gert stone that I'd left i' t' grund, but it were nowt o' sort. 'Twere a potato, sure enough, but I'd niver set eyes on owt like it afore, nor thee either. 'Twere bigger nor my heead; nay, 'twere bigger nor a foot-ball."



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“Somebody wanted to have a bit of fun with you, Abe,” I interrupted, “and had buried a vegetable-marrow in your potato-patch.”

“Nay, it were a potato reight enough, an’ I were fair capped when I’d gotten howd on it wi’ my two hands. ‘I’ll show this to Sam Holroyd,’ I said to misen. He were chuff, were Sam, ‘cause he’d gotten six pund o’ potatoes off o’ one root; I reckoned I’d gotten six pund off o’ one potato. Well, I were glowerin’ at t’ potato when a lad com up that I’d niver seen afore. He were a young lad by his size, but he’d an owdish look i’ his face, an’ he says to me: ‘What’s yon?’

“Thou may well axe that,’ I answered. ‘It’s a potato.’

“‘What arta boun to do wi’ it?’ he axed.

“‘Nay,’ I said, ‘I reckon I’ll take it to t’ Flower Show an’ get first prize.’

“‘Thou mun do nowt o’ t’ sort,’ said t’ lad; ‘thou mun bury it.’

“‘Bury it! What for sud I bury it, I’d like to know?’

“‘Thou mon bury it i’ t’ grund an’ see what it grows intul.’

“Well, I reckoned there might be some sense in what t’ lad said, for if I could raise a seck o’ seed potatoes like yon I’d sooin’ mak my fortune. But then I bethowt me o’ t’ time o’ t’ yeer, and I said:

“‘But wheer’s t’ sense o’ settin’ a potato at t’ back-end?’

“‘Thou’ll not have to wait so lang to see what cooms on ‘t,’ he replied, and then he turned on his heel an’ left me standin’ theer.

“Well, I reckoned it were a fooil’s trick, but all t’ same I put t’ potato back into t’ grund, an’ went home. That neet it started rainin’ an’ it kept at it off an’ on for well-nigh a week, an’ I couldn’t get down to my ‘lotment nohow. But all t’ time I couldn’t tak my mind off o’ t’ lad that had made me bury my potato. He’d green eyes, an’ I could niver get shut o’ them eyes choose what I were doin’. Well, after a while it faired up, and I set off for my garden. When I gat nigh I were fair capped. I’d set t’ potato at t’ top-side o’ t’ ‘lotment, and theer, just wheer I’d set it, were a pig-sty, wi’ a pig inside it fit to kill. I were that flustered you could ha’ knocked me down wi’ a feather. I looked at t’ sty, and then at t’ pig, an’ then I felt t’ pig, an’ he were reight fat. An’ when I’d felt t’ pig I turned round to see if t’ ‘lotment were fairly mine, and theer stood t’ lad that had telled me to bury t’ potato.

“‘Well,’ he says, ‘is owt wrang wi’ t’ pig?’



“Nay, there’s nowt wrang wi’ t’ pig, but how did he get here?’

“He’ll happen have coom out o’ that potato thou set i’ t’ grund last week,’ and he looked at me wi’ them green eyes an’ started ginnin’. ‘But thou mun bury t’ pig same as thou buried t’ potato.’

“Bury t’ pig!’ I said. ‘I’d sooiner bury t’ missus ony day. We’ve bin short o’ ham an’ collops o’ bacon all t’ summer, an’ if there’s one thing I like better nor another it’s a bit o’ fried ham to my tea.’



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“Nay, thou mun bury t’ pig, an’ do without thy bit o’ bacon,” he says, and there was summat i’ t’ way he gave his orders that fair bet me. I went all o’ a dither, while I hardly knew if I were standin’ on my heels or my heead. But t’ lad were as cool as a cucumber all t’ while; he folded his arms an’ looked at me wi’ his green eyes, an’ just said nowt. Eh! but ‘twere gey hard to mak’ up my mind what to do. I looked at t’ pig, an’ if iver I’ve seen a pig axin’ to have his life spared it were yon; but then I looked at t’ lad, an’ his eyes were as hard as two grunstones; there was no gettin’ round t’ lad, I could see. So at lang length I gav’ in. I killed t’ pig and I buried him same as I’d buried t’ potato.

“When I gat home I said nowt to t’ missus about t’ pig, for I couldn’t let on that I’d buried it; shoo’d have reckoned I were a bigger foil nor shoo took me for. Shoo gav me a sup o’ poddish for my supper, an’ all t’ time I were eytin’ it I kept thinkin’ o’ t’ fried ham that I’d missed, an’ I were fair mad wi’ misen. I went to bed, but I couldn’t get to sleep nohow. You see, I’d bin plagued wi’ mowdiewarps up i’ t’ ‘lotment; they’d scatted up my spring onions an’ played Hamlet wi’ my curly greens. An’ then all of a sudden I bethowt me that t’ mowdiewarps would be sure to find t’ pig an’ mak quick-sticks o’ him afore t’ mornin’. Eh! I gat that mad wi’ thinkin’ on it that I couldn’t bide i’ bed no longer. I gat up ‘thout wakkin’ t’ missus, an’ I crept downstairs i’ my stockin’ feet, an’ went to t’ coil-house wheer I kept my spade. I were boun to dig up t’ pig an’ bring him home afore t’ mowdiewarps sud find him. But when I’d oppened coil-house door, what sud I see but a pair o’ green eyes glowerin’ at me out o’ t’ darkness. I were that flaid I didn’t know what to do. I dursn’t set hand to t’ spade, an’ efter a minute I crept back to bed wi’ them green eyes followin’ me, an’ burnin’ hoils i’ my back same as if they’d bin two red-hot coils. Sooin as cockleet com, I gat up, dressed misen an’ set off for t’ ‘lotment, ‘an by t’ Mess! what does ta reckon was t’ first thing I saw?”

“Had the pig come to life again?” I asked in wonder.

“Nay, ‘twere better nor that,” replied Abe. “I’ t’ spot wheer I’d buried t’ pig an’ buried t’ potato afore that, somebody had belt a house, ay, an’ belt it all i’ one neet. It had sprung up like a mushroom. So I went up to t’ house an’ looked in at t’ windey, an’ by Gow! but it were my house an’ all.”

“How did you know that it was your house?” I asked.

“Well, you see,” Abe rejoined, “I could tell by t’ furnitur that were in it. There was our kitchen-table that I’d bowt at t’ sale when t’ missus an’ me were wed, an’ t’ owd rockin’-chair set agean t’ fire; ay, an’ t’ pot-dogs on t’ chimley-piece an’ my father’s an’ muther’s buryin’-cards framed on t’ walls; ‘twere all plain as life.”

“So the lad with the green eyes had carried away your house in the night and set it down on your allotment?”



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“Nay, ‘twere nowt o’ t’ sort. T’ house wheer I’d bin livin’ were a back-to-back house, facin’ north, so as we niver gat no sun thro’ yeer’s end to yeer’s end. But t’ new house stood all by itsen, wi’ windeys on all sides, an’ a back door oppenin’ into t’ gardin. If there were one thing that t’ missus an’ me had set wer hearts on ‘twere a back-door. We’d never lived i’ a house wi’ a back door, an’ t’ missus had to hing all her weshin’ of a Tuesday across t’ street. Well, I looked round to see if I could clap eyes on t’ lad that had telled me to bury t’ pig, but he were nowheer to be seen. But just then I heerd a buzzin’ sound, an’ I reckoned there mun be a waps somewheer about. An’ a waps it were. He flew round an’ round my heead, allus coomin’ nearer an’ nearer, an’ at lang length he settled hissien reight on t’ top o’ my neb. An’ wi’ that I gav a jump, an’ by Gow! there was I sittin’ on t’ bench in my ‘lotment. I’d fallen asleep, an all that I’d seen o’ t’ potato an’ t’ pig an’ t’ house, ay, an’ t’ lad wi’ green eyes, were nobbut a dream. But t’ waps weren’t a dream, for I’d seen him flee away when I wakkened up.”

“What you’ve told me, Abe, is like a bit of real life,” I said, after a pause. “Most of our dreams in this world turn into wasps, with stings in their tails.”

“Nay,” replied Abe the optimist; “but ‘twere not a proper sort of dream nawther. I’ve thowt a vast about it off an’ on, an’ I reckon ‘twere a dream wi’ a meanin’ tul it. ‘Twere like Pharaoh’s dream o’ t’ fat an’ lean beasts. Happen one day I’ll find a Joseph that’ll tell me what it all means!”

## Coals of Fire

I

A visitor to Holmton, one of the smaller manufacturing towns of the West Riding, on a certain October morning, about the middle of the nineteenth century, might have witnessed a strange sight. It was market-day, and a number of farm people were collected in the market-place, where a brisk trade in cattle, sheep, and dairy produce was being transacted. Suddenly there appeared in their midst a farmer holding the end of a rope, the noose of which was attached, not to a bull, calf or horse, but to the neck of a girl of nineteen. At this strange sight loud shouts were raised on all sides, and a stampede was made to the spot where the man and the girl were standing.

The town was originally merely a centre for the farmers in the neighbouring villages, but within the last fifty years it had seen the establishment of the cloth trade in its midst, and the population had considerably increased. Round about the market-place stone-paved streets had branched off in all directions, and two-storied stone houses had been built, in which the rooms on the ground floor served for kitchen and bedroom, while in the long, low room above hand-loom had been erected, and wool was spun and woven into cloth.

The shouts of the farm people in the market-place at once brought the weavers to their windows and doors. Ever eager for any excitement which should relieve the drab monotony of their lives, they rushed into the streets and elbowed their way to the market-place.



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“What’s up?” asked one of them of a farmer’s man, as he followed the sound of the hubbub.

“It’s Sam Learoyd,” the man replied, “and he wants to know if onybody’s wantin’ to buy his dowter.”

“Black Sam o’ Fieldhead Farm! By Gow! I reckon he’s bin crazed sin his missus left him for t’ barman. But he hasn’t gotten no dowters, nor sons nowther. It’ll be his stepdowter, Mary Whittaker, that he’s browt to market.”

The speakers were now approaching the spot where the father and the haltered stepdaughter were standing. The former, a hard-featured, sullen man of about forty-five, was addressing the crowd. The latter, hiding as much of her face as she could beneath her grey shawl, stood with her hands clasped before her and her eyes fixed on the ground. Mute resignation was written on every line of her face. Whatever indignation or shame she might feel at the degrading situation in which she was placed seemed repressed, either by the humility that comes from long suffering or by a supreme effort of the will, of which the tightly closed lips gave some indication.

The spot chosen by Sam Learoyd for his traffic in human flesh was not without significance. Behind him, and approached by steps, on which the farmers’ wives exposed for sale their baskets of poultry and eggs, stood what was left of the market cross. It was one of those old Saxon crosses of Irish design which may still be seen in some of the towns and villages of England, and are said to mark the spot where the early Christian missionaries, long before the churches were built, preached their gospel of peace and good will to a pagan audience. Close at hand were the stocks, where, until quite recently, the bullies and scolds of the town had been set by their fellow-citizens and subjected to the missiles and taunts of every passer-by. Here, then, between these two symbols—the one of Divine mercy and the other of the vindication of popular justice—Mary Whittaker was exposed for sale.

It took some time for the crowd to realise that Learoyd was in earnest. This sale by public auction of a young woman whom many of the bystanders had known for years seemed little better than a grim jest. Yet most were aware that sales like this had taken place in the town before, and deep down in their minds there survived the old primitive idea that the head of a family had a right to do what he liked with the members of his household. There were muttered protests from the few women and some of the older men who were present, but most of the young men, in whom a sense of chivalry had been blunted by hard labour and penury, found a pleasure in goading the farmer on. No magistrate was at hand to put a stop to the traffic in human life, and the single policeman, realising that he had no written instructions to deal with such a case as this, had discreetly withdrawn himself to the remotest quarter of the town. So Learoyd was left free to conduct his infamous auction.



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“Shoo’s for sale,” he cried, “same as if shoo were a cauf; and shoo goes to t’ highest bidder.” A roar of laughter greeted these words, but nobody had the courage to make a bid. Seeing that purchasers held back, Learoyd after the manner of an auctioneer, proceeded to announce his stepdaughter’s “points.”

“Shoo’s a gradely lass, I tell you, for all shoo looks sae dowly. Shoo can bak an’ shoo can brew, and I’ve taen care that shoo’ll noan speyk while shoo’s spoken to.”

“If shoo can do all that,” asked a bystander, “why doesta want to sell her?”

The farmer eyed the questioner narrowly, and then, in a sullen voice, answered: “I’m sellin’ her because I want to get shut on her. Happen that’ll be reason enough for the likes o’ thee, Timothy.”

After more of this altercation one of the younger men, urged on by his comrades, summoned up courage to make a bid.

“Sithee, I’ll gie thee threepence for her, farmer.”

The girl, hearing the insulting offer that was made, raised her eyes for a moment to glance at the speaker, then shuddered, and, after a pleading look at her stepfather, lowered them again.

Learoyd, taking no notice of the girl, looked the bidder steadily in the face for a moment, in order to discover whether the offer was seriously made, and, apparently satisfied that such was not the case, replied: “I’ll noan sell her for threepence. Shoo’s worth more nor that, let alone the clothes shoo stands in.” But when no further offer was forthcoming he turned again to the speaker and said: “Well, threepence is t’ price o’ a pint o’ beer; mak it a quart an’ t’ lass is thine.”

But the bargainer, seeing that the offer which he made in jest was taken in earnest, slunk away to the rear of the crowd, and it seemed as though the girl would remain unsold. Then it was that a ragged, out-at-heel weaver of diminutive size slowly elbowed his way to the front, and, holding up six pennies, said, with a shamefaced look on his face: “There’s thy brass. I’ll tak t’ lass.”

The farmer eyed him curiously, while the crowd, realising that a serious offer had at last been made, held their breath to see what would follow.

“Sixpence is it,” said Learoyd, “an’ what mak o’ man art thou that want to buy her?”

The weaver made no reply, but the bystanders, to whom the bidder was well known, gave the necessary information.



“It’s Tom Parfitt o’ Mill Lane; he’s lossen his wife a while sin and he’ll happen be wantin’ a lass to look after t’ barns.”

There was something in the shabby dress and down-cast mien of the little weaver that appealed to the farmer’s saturnine humour. He measured with his eye first of all the man, and next the girl; then, slapping his knee with his right hand, exclaimed: “Well, Tom, t’ lass is thine; an’ thou’s gotten her muck-cheap.”

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Without more ado he unloosed the halter from the girl's neck, led her roughly by the arm to where the weaver was standing, pocketed the six pennies, and, followed by a crowd of rowdies, made his way to the nearest inn. Meanwhile the weaver and the girl he had bought were facing each other in silence, neither having the courage to utter a word. Those of the crowd who had not followed Learoyd began a fire of questions, to all of which Parfitt made no reply. At last he turned to the girl, and in as kindly a voice as he could command, said: "Coom thy ways home, lass," and leading the way, with the girl at his heels, strode through the crowd and out of the market-place. A number of people proceeded to follow him, but as they received no answer to all their questions they gradually fell off, and by the time that Parfitt's cottage was reached purchaser and purchase were alone.

Closing the front door behind him the weaver led the girl through the kitchen, where his three young children were playing at cat's cradle, into the adjoining bedroom. Here he left her to herself, and, re-entering the kitchen, got ready a meal of tea and buttered oat-cake, which he sent in to Mary Whittaker by the hands of his eldest child, a girl of seven. Then, without further intrusion on the girl's privacy, he climbed the rickety staircase to the upper chamber and set to work at his loom. Eager to make up for the time he had lost, he worked with energy, but every sound from the rooms below came up through the cracks in the raftered floor. He could hear the voices of the children and, when the loom was silent for a few moments, the half-suppressed sobs of the outraged girl were distinctly audible. These drew tears to his eyes, but he wisely refrained from descending the staircase and attempting to comfort her.

After a time the sobbing ceased, and then one by one the children stole quietly into the bedroom, and a hum of conversation was heard, in which Mary Whittaker was taking her part.

"Arta baan to stop wi' us?" he heard his eldest girl, Annie, ask.

"I don't know," Mary replied. "Happen I'll be goin' back home to-morn."

"I wish thou'd coom an' live wi' us an' mind Jimmy, so as I can help father wi' t' loom," Annie continued.

"Aye, an' thou can laik at cat's cradle wi' me," interposed the younger girl, Ruth.

Jimmy, aged three, was silent, but he climbed into Mary's lap, and, with a grimy finger, made watercourses down her cheeks for the tears that still filled her eyes.

"Give ower, Jimmy, or I'll warm thy jacket," exclaimed Annie, fearful lest the boy should hurt Mary's feelings.

“Nay, let him be,” replied Mary, and wiping the tears from her face she drew Jimmy closer to herself and mothered him.



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A hole in one of the rafters, caused by the dropping out of a knot in the wood, enabled Parfitt to see something of what was going on below, and with a sigh of relief he realised that the worst was now over and that the children had effected what he himself could not have done. When six o'clock came he called to Annie to bring him his tea and light his benzoline lamp. When she appeared he gave orders that the evening meal should be got ready in the kitchen, and that when it was over she should ask Mary to wash Jimmy and put him to bed. Anxiously the weaver listened to the carrying out of his instructions, and when he descended the staircase at half-past seven he found the kitchen neatly tidied up and Mary Whittaker seated at the fireside with the two girls on stools at her feet. Until all the children were in bed he made no attempt to get the girl to tell him her story, but sought by tactful means to win her confidence. At first she shrank from him and cast anxious eyes towards the inner room where the three children were asleep. But the weaver's gentle voice gradually stilled her fears.

"Thou'll be tired, lass," he said at length, "and wantin' to get to bed. Thou can sleep wi' Jimmy in yonder anent t' wall."

A frightened look came into Mary's eyes as she answered: "But that'll be thy bed."

"Nay," replied the weaver, "it'll be thy bed so lang as thou bides wi' me. I'll mak up a bed for misen i' t' kitchen on t' lang-settle."

A grateful expression came over the girl's face, but she made no move in the direction of the inner room. Silence prevailed for some time until the weaver asked: "Is there owt I can do for thee, or owt that thou's gotten to tell me, lass? It's been a dree day for thee, to-day; ay, an' mony a day afore to-day, I reckon."

This reference to the happenings of the morning brought tears to the girl's eyes, and it was some time before she could summon up courage to speak.

"Don't mind me," she said at last; "I'll be better to-morn. But he didn't ought to hae browt shame on me i' t' way he's done. It wasn't my fault mother left him. I'd allus been a gooid lass to him, choose what fowks say."

Step by step the weaver led her on to tell him the story of what had led up to the shameful transaction in the market-place. It was no mere curiosity that moved him, but a realisation that there could be no peace of mind for Mary Whittaker until she had found relief by unburdening her tortured soul. The weaver's gentle ways and tactful bearing were slowly winning her heart, and, painful though the recital of her past history was for her, Parfitt knew that it would bring relief. It was a long story that Mary had to tell. She had little art of narrative, and her endeavours to shield both her mother and stepfather as far as possible from blame impeded the flow of her words. Reduced to plain terms, her story ran as follows:—



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Mary Whittaker was a girl of fourteen when her mother had married Samuel Learoyd. Of her father she knew nothing. He had died when she was a baby. From the first the Learoyds had proved an ill-matched pair. Anne Learoyd, her mother, had been brought up in Leeds, and having been used to all the excitements of life in a big town, found the solitary farm lonesome. Samuel Learoyd, though genial enough at times in the society of his male friends, was capricious. His temper was often sullen, and when in one of his gloomy moods he would spend the whole evening in his farm kitchen in morose silence. This state of mind was in part due to physical infirmity. As a child he had been subject to epileptic fits, and though these grew less frequent as he advanced to manhood, he never entirely shook them off, and during his married life a long spell of gloomy misanthropy would sometimes end in the return of one of these attacks. He was, too, a proud man, and his pride bred in him a morbid sensibility towards any slight, real or fanciful, that was practised on him. He treated his stepdaughter not unkindly, but never accepted any parental responsibility towards her.

Meanwhile Anne Learoyd, finding no congenial society in her own home, spent much of her time in neighbours' houses. Her chief friend was the landlady of the Woolpack Inn, a public-house situated midway between the farm-house and Holmton. Here whole afternoons and evenings were spent, and the work of the farm-house was left in the hands of Mary Whittaker, towards whom her mother had never shown any real affection. Years passed away and the relations between husband and wife grew steadily worse, till at length the crisis came. A new barman was appointed at the Woolpack, a man whom Anne Learoyd had known during her early life in Leeds. Rumour was soon busy with the relations which existed between the barman and the farmer's wife, and after a time suspicious stories reached the ears of Samuel Learoyd. A violent scene between husband and wife took place in the farm kitchen, but, in spite of this, Anne's visits to the public-house continued as before. One afternoon, when her husband was attending a cattle-mart in a neighbouring town, Anne Learoyd, without saying a word to her daughter, left the house and was still absent when her husband returned for supper. Mary Whittaker was at once dispatched to the Woolpack Inn, and, after an hour, returned with the news that her mother was not there and that the barman was also missing. With an oath, Learoyd saddled his mare and rode in all haste to Holmton. Finding no news of the missing couple in the town he made his way to the nearest station, where he found that a man and woman answering to his description had left by train for Liverpool four hours before. Learoyd, his heart raging with fury and wounded pride, followed in pursuit. He arrived at Liverpool in the early hours of the next morning, and, making his way to the docks, discovered that the fugitives had sailed



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at midnight for America. Further pursuit was impossible. He returned home, and late that same evening was found lying dead drunk on the road-side within a hundred yards of the local railway station. He was brought home and put to bed, and next day was seized with a severe fit of epilepsy. For weeks his life was in danger, and when at last he recovered strength of body, his mind remained in a state of moroseness that at times bordered on insanity. He became a fierce hater of women, and the chief victim of his frenzy was his stepdaughter, Mary Whittaker.

She bore his harshness with a Griselda patience, but this seemed only to add provocation to his anger. In her he saw the daughter of the woman who had trodden his pride in the dust, and he marked her out as the object of his vengeance. Finding that bitter words and deeds of cruelty left her seemingly unmoved, his morose and wounded spirit devised other and darker plans of revenge. At first he conceived the idea of driving her penniless from his doors, but, realising that the girl would find no difficulty in obtaining a place as servant on one of the neighbouring farms, he abandoned it as furnishing insufficient satisfaction for his tortured heart. One day he heard how a farmer had some years before ignominiously sold by public auction the wife of whom he had grown tired, and Learoyd gloated over the story with malicious glee. Here was a means of satisfying his vengeance to the full. To his warped imagination it mattered little that Mary Whittaker was entirely innocent of her mother's desertion of him, or that Anne Learoyd, far away in America, would probably never hear of her daughter's shame. Inasmuch as the guilty wife was out of his clutch, he was content with the vicarious sacrifice that he could demand from her daughter.

For some days he brooded over his cruel purpose, and it found ever more favour in his eyes. Market day came and the time was ripe for action. Roughly informing his stepdaughter that she must go with him to market, he left the house with her on foot, carrying a halter in his hand. On the road he brutally informed her of his purpose. A chill of horror seized the girl when she heard the news, but her tears and entreaties, so far from melting his heart, filled him with an unholy joy. As they passed a farm-house on the road Mary screamed out for help, but Learoyd silenced her with a blow on the mouth, and then, leaving the high road, took the path through the fields in order to avoid company. Arriving at the outskirts of the town, he slipped the halter over her head and dragged her through the by-streets to the market-place.

Such was Mary's story as told to the weaver that evening in his cottage. Tom Parfitt was a man of few words, but the tears that rolled down his cheek showed his sympathy. "Poor lass, poor lass" was his frequent comment as he listened to the harrowing details and thought of the agony of the market-place; and when she had ended her tale his voice was broken with sobs.



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“Thou sal niver want for a home, lass, so lang as I can addle a bite an’ a sup wi’ my weyvin’.”

“Happen Learoyd will be wantin’ me back agean when he’s gotten ower things a bit.”

“Then he’ll noan get thee,” and the weaver struck his fist on the table with unusual vehemence. “A wilful man mun have his way, fowks say; an’ I reckon Sam Learoyd has had it; but he’ll noan have it twice ower, if I know owt about justice.”

“But he’s bin sadly tewed wi’ mother leavin’ him an’ all,” replied Mary, “and there’s them fits that he has to contend wi’. If he wants me I mun go. There’s nobody left on t’ farm to fend for him.”

“If he cooms here he’ll find t’ door sparred agean him,” exclaimed Parfitt, in his indignation.

Mary shook her head sadly, but made no reply.

They sat awhile in silence, gazing into the dying fire, and then the girl, with a timid “I thank thee for what thou’s done for me,” withdrew to the inner room and cried herself to sleep. The weaver lit his clay pipe and, bending forwards over the grey ashes of his peat-fire, buried himself in his thoughts till the clock, striking eleven, roused him from his reverie. He slowly rose, placed a cushion on the settle, and without undressing, flung himself on the hard boards and fell asleep.

Days and weeks passed and Mary Whittaker still remained in the weaver’s cottage. The cowed look in her eyes passed gradually away, though it would come back whenever a man’s footfall was heard in the street outside, and a cold fear seized her at the thought that Learoyd was at hand to demand her return to the farm. But he never came, and Mary grew more and more at ease in her new surroundings. The change from the roomy farmstead, with its wide horizons of moors and woods, to the narrow cottage in the sunless back street was a strange one for her. She missed, too, the farm work: the churning of the butter and the feeding of the calves and poultry. But youth was on her side and she soon learnt to adapt herself to her new life. Soon after six in the morning she would mount with Parfitt to the upper room and spin the wool, which he would then weave into cloth. The work was hard, and some of the processes of cleaning the wool were repulsive to her nature at first, but in time she accustomed herself to this as to so much else. It was easy for her gentle nature to win the hearts of the three children; she quickly learnt the duties of a mother, nursed them in their childish ailments, and when the loom was still, joined with them in their games. Six months Tom Parfitt waited to see whether Learoyd would make any attempt to recover the stepdaughter whom he had wronged, and then, as the farmer made no move, he quietly married Mary Whittaker at the Primitive Methodist Chapel.

II

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Years passed away and a gradual change came over the character of the social and economic life of Holmton. The town became linked up by rail with Leeds and Bradford, and in this way it lost its isolation and caught an echo of the ideas and views of life of the people in the big towns. Elementary education was introduced, and the printed book slowly found its way into the weavers' cottages. Most important change of all, the hand-loom gave place to the power-loom. Factories were built by the side of the beck, and while a certain amount of weaving continued to be done by the old people in their cottages, the younger generation sought employment in the mills, and payment for piecework gave way to time-wages. Most of the younger weavers welcomed this change when it was fully understood. They found that the hours of work, though still terribly long, were shorter than those spent by their parents over their hand-looms, and the social intercourse of the mill, where the youths and girls met their equals in age, was deemed preferable to the family labours in the upper story of the cottages. Moreover, if the overseers and foremen in the mills were often brutal, the workers could, at any rate, get away from the atmosphere of the weaving-shed when the hooters sounded at six o'clock in the evening.

When this revolution in industrial life took place Tom Parfitt found himself too old to adapt himself to the change.

"T' hand-loom's gooid enough for me," were his words. "If I went to work i' t' mill I'd feel like givin' up an owd friend, just because he'd grown owd-fashioned. I'll stick to cottage wark, choose-what other fowks may do."

Hearing this decision, his wife at once decided to remain with him; but the three children of Parfitt's former marriage, the youngest of whom was now seventeen, determined to seek work in the factories. The family was thus split up, and the younger generation brought back into the house at night new ideas gained amid the social intercourse of the mill.

Mary Whittaker's position in the town after her marriage to Parfitt was quietly accepted by the community of weavers. They still called her by her maiden name, but there was nothing unusual in that. Often, too, she was referred to as "Mary that was selled for sixpence," but here again, at least as far as the older generation was concerned, no stigma was implied. It was simply a frank statement of fact. With the younger generation, however, who were quicker than their elders in absorbing new ideas and new codes of social convention, "Mary that was selled for sixpence" was a name that aroused curiosity, and sometimes derision. Occasionally Mary's stepdaughters would be twitted about the name at the mill, and their faces would burn as they realised that a dark shadow hung over the woman whom they had been taught to call mother, and who had won their hearts from the day on which she first set foot in their father's house. Once they spoke of the matter to their father, anxious to learn the exact truth from his lips.



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“Aye, I bowt her for sixpence afore I wed her,” he said, looking them steadily in the face, “an’ t’ man that selled her to me said I’d gotten her muck-cheap. Them was t’ truest words he iver spak, an’ shoo would hae been muck-cheap if I’d gien a million pund for her.”

During all the years that Mary Whittaker had spent at Holmton she had not once caught sight of Samuel Learoyd. Fieldhead Farm was only four miles away, but she had never had the courage to go near it. The farmer visited Holmton only on market days, and notlung could ever induce his stepdaughter to go near the scene of her deep humiliation. But though she did not see Learoyd he was never long out of her mind, and through her husband and children she kept herself informed of what was going on at the farm.

After his shameless traffic in the Holmton market-place Learoyd had for some months lived alone. Never a sociable man, he shunned the society of the neighbouring farmers, and they, on their side, resenting his outrageous conduct to his stepdaughter, studiously kept out of his way. Doggedly he set himself to do both the labours of the house and farm, and sought to stifle in hard work the memory of his wife’s desertion of him, together with whatever twinges of remorse may have come to him when he thought of the revenge which he had taken upon her daughter. But as time went on he found it impossible to attend to all his duties. Nothing could induce him to enlist the services of a housekeeper, but he engaged a man, who occupied a two-roomed cottage a hundred yards away from the farm, and helped him in stable and field. But the sullen humour of Learoyd was hard to put up with, and the men who came to him soon sought employment elsewhere. He would engage a servant for the year at the Martinmas hiring, but as soon as the year was up the man would leave, and it became increasingly difficult for the farmer to find a substitute.

“What mak o’ a gaffer is Learoyd?” one labourer would ask of another as they stood together in the Holmton market-place waiting to be hired.

“A dowly, harden-faced mon, an’ gey hard to bide wi’, accordin’ to what all t’ day-tale men is sayin’,” replied the other.

“He looks it,” answered the first. “He’s gotten a face that’s like beer when t’ thunder has turned it to allicker. If I was to live wi’ him I’d want a clothes-horse set betwix’ me an’ him at dinner, or he’d turn my vittles sour i’ my belly.”

“He twilted his wife, did Learoyd, while she ran away wi’ Sam Woodhead at t’ Woolpack, an’ then he selled his dowter for sixpence. He can’t bide women-fowks i’ t’ house.”

“Then he’ll not git me to coom an’ live wi’ him. I’ve swallowed t’ church i’ my last place, but I’m noan baan to swallow t’ steeple at efter.”



Such were the opinions passed on Learoyd by the farm labourers round about Holmton, and it was little wonder that, as the years went by, the condition of his farm grew steadily worse.



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When the Parfitts had been married fifteen years, a strange rumour reached their cottage of a spiritual change that had been wrought in the soul of Samuel Learoyd. It was reported that the farmer had been attending the revival services held in the little Primitive Methodist chapel about a mile away from his farm, that his flinty heart had been melted, and that he had “found the Lord.” The weaver’s family was slow to credit this change, though Mary prayed fervently night and morning that it might be true. Their doubts, however, were set at rest by the circuit steward of the Holmton chapel where they attended service. He had taken part in the revival meetings and related what he had seen.

“Aye, it’s true, sure enough,” he said. “Sam Learoyd’s a changed man. It were t’ local preacher that done it. He gat him on to his knees anent t’ penitential forms at after t’ sarvice, an’ there were a two-three more wi’ him; an’ t’ preacher an’ me wrestled wi’ t’ devil for their souls. I’ve niver seen sich tewin’ o’ t’ spirit sin I becom a Methody. ’Twere a hot neight, and what wi’ t’ heat an’ t’ spiritual exercises, t’ penitents were fair reekin’ an’ sweatin’. We went thro’ one to t’ other and kept pleadin’ wi’ ’em. ‘Tread t’ owd devil under foot,’ says we; ‘think on t’ blood o’ t’ Lamb that weses us thro’ all sin.’ An’ t’ penitents would holla out: ‘I can’t, I can’t: he’s ower strang for me; I’m baan to smoor i’ hell fires.’ But t’ local were stranger nor t’ devil for all that, an’ first one an’ then another on ’em would shout out: ‘I’m saved; I’ve fun’ Him, I’ve fun’ the Lord!’ Then they’d git up an’ walk out o’ t’ room that weak you could hae knocked ’em down wi’ a feather.

“At lang length there was nobbut Sam Learoyd left. He was quieter nor t’ others, but t’ load o’ sins about his heart was as tough as Whangby cheese. So me an’ t’ preacher gat on either side o’ him an’ we prayed an’ better prayed, but all for nowt. So at last Sam got up off his knees, an’ wi’ a despert look on his face, says: ‘Let me be. If I’m baan to find salvation I’ll find it misen.’

“At that we gav ower prayin’, but kept kneelin’ by his side an’ waited for the Lord to saddle t’ job. An’ outside t’ wind were yowlin’ as if it would blow down t’ walls and chimleys. But warr nor t’ yowlin’ o’ t’ wind were t’ groans o’ Sam Learoyd.

“After a while t’ groans gat easier, and then t’ local started singin’ in a low voice, ‘Rock of Ages.’ But Sam would have noan o’ his singin’. So we just waited to see what would happen. Well, after a while t’ groans stopped, an’ Sam lifted up his heead an’ looked round. ‘Arta saved?’ asked t’ local, and Sam answered: ‘I’m convicted o’ sin.’ ‘Praise be to God,’ sang out t’ local, and we gat Sam off his knees and out o’ t’ chapil an’ away home. An’ ivver sin that time Sam’s coom reg’lar to chapil twice on Sundays an’ to t’ weeknight sarvice too.”

“But will it last?” asked Tom Parfitt, whose long experience as a chapel member had taught him the snares of backsliding.

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“Aye, ’twill last,” replied the circuit steward. “Sam’s a changed man: he has gien ower sweerin’, goes no more to t’ public, but bides at home o’ neight an’ sits cowerin’ ower t’ fire readin’ t’ Book.”

The account which the circuit steward gave of the farmer’s conversion was substantially correct, but it did not furnish the whole truth. The character of his life had changed, but his conversion was only half accomplished. In the process known as religious conversion there are usually three well-marked stages: first of all comes conviction of sin, then repentance, and finally a sense of forgiveness and peace. Learoyd attained the first stage in the process that stormy night in the little Methodist chapel. In a dull, blurred way he arrived too at a state of repentance for the evil he had done. But the final stage of pardon and peace remained strange to him, and the chief spiritual effect of his conversion upon him was the attainment of an exquisite agony of soul. His conscience, long dormant, was roused to feverish activity. His sins, which were many, haunted him like demons, and chief among these he accounted, not without reason, the wrong he had done to Mary Whittaker. She came to him in his dreams, and always under the same form. What he saw was a girl, with downcast eyes and supplicating hands, standing at the foot of the Holmton market-cross, with a halter round her neck. Nor was it only in his dreams that he saw her. Sometimes as he led home his horses at nightfall after a day’s ploughmg, the same form, patient and unreproachful, would be seen standing at the open door of the farm waiting to receive him. With a cowed look on his face he would turn away from the house and pass the night in the hayloft.

The effect of all this upon his constitution was what might have been expected. One evening, after a night and day of acutest torment, he fell in an epileptic fit upon the kitchen floor, and was found there next morning by a child from the village who had come to the farm for milk. A doctor was summoned, who brought with him a nurse, and for some days Learoyd’s life hung in the balance. Recovery came at last but the doctor insisted that he must no longer live alone, but must secure the services of an experienced house-keeper. In vain did Learoyd protest against this plan. The medical man remained firm. The nurse would have to leave in a few days and someone else must take her place. The farmer would not stir a finger to find such a person, so that the responsibility rested with the doctor. But all his inquiries availed little. There was no lack of women suitable for the post, but not one of them would undertake it. The memory of the scene in the market-place held them back.



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Then it was that the call came to Mary Whittaker. She must go back to the man that had wronged her. At first the thought struck terror to her heart; all the horror of her ignominy in the market-place came back to her mind and filled her with a loathing sickness. For two days she fought against the promptings of her better nature, but it was a losing battle. At last she broached the subject to her husband. "I mun go back to Learoyd," she said, speaking in those quiet, measured tones which Tom Parfitt had learnt to associate with an inflexible will. Her husband gave her a look in which admiration for her courage was at odds with bitter opposition to the proposal.

"Thou sal do nowt o' t' sort," he said, after a moment's pause. "There's no call for thee to go nigh him after all he's done to thee."

"Nay, but he wants me; t' doctor says he mun have somebody to live wi' him."

"If he wanted thee he'd coom an' seek thee, stubbornly answered Parfitt.

"He'll noan do that. I know Learoyd. He's ower proud to axe a favour thro' anybody, let alone thro' me."

"Then he can dee in his pride. He's gotten shut o' thee for good an' all, an' trodden thee i' t' muck, t' owd Jezebel."

"Nay, don't call him, Tom. Didn't chapel steward say that he was a changed man sin' he took to goin' to t' chapil?"

This was almost the only serious dispute that had disturbed the even tenor of their married life, and it ended in compromise. Mary was to go to the farm, and if Learoyd needed her she was to stay for a month; at the end of that time she would return home. Her husband's offer to accompany her was declined. Instead, she asked him to pay a visit to the doctor and inform him of her plan. The doctor heartily approved of all that Mary Whittaker had taken upon herself to do; he said he would visit his patient in the morning, and if all were going on well would take away the nurse with him in his brougham. Then, as soon as possible after their departure, Mary was to come to the farm and see Learoyd when he was alone.

It was a bright April morning when Mary Whittaker set out on foot for Fieldhead Farm. There had been rain the night before and the whole sky was full of fleecy cumulus clouds, some of which enclosed large patches of blue sky that looked like tranquil polar seas surrounded by hummocks of frozen snow. Now and again a small cloud, at a lower elevation than the rest, would sail gaily across these blue pools, and then be lost to view against the white clouds on the other side. Larks and chaffinches were everywhere in full song, and the sunshine had brought the honey-bees to the palm-willows which, during the last ten days, had changed their flower-buds from silver to gold. As Mary approached the farm she saw the first swallows of the season darting in



tremulous flight across the meadows, and their presence cheered her. They had come back to the farm, like herself, after a period of absence, and a feeling of comradeship with them penetrated to her heart.

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She needed all the cheering that the sights and sounds of nature could give her. As she climbed the hill-side and saw the seventeenth-century farm-house, with its mullioned windows and hood-mouldings, her heart sank within her. The cruel memory of the morning when she had last left it came back to her mind, and the hard look of Learoyd, as he disclosed his purpose to her, made her flinch. She closed her eyes for a moment, as though to shut out the past, and then braced herself for the coming interview. Arrived at the front door, which opened directly into the kitchen, she paused for a moment to summon up her courage, then knocked, and, without waiting, lifted the latch. Learoyd, still too weak to attend to farm duties, was seated in the arm-chair by the fire; in his hands was the family Bible, but he was not reading. Mary was shocked at the change which fifteen years had wrought in him. He was not more than sixty, but he looked at least ten years older, and in his eyes there was the look of a hunted animal. The sullen pride, which was the habitual expression of his face in the old days, had given way to a look of morbid irritability. The farmer looked up from his book as she entered, but, failing to recognise her, asked who she was.

“It’s Mary,” she answered, and advanced towards him.

“Mary!” he exclaimed, and then, realising who Mary was, he shrank from her as though she had been an avenging spirit. The Mary of his dreams, the girl standing in the market-place with a halter round her neck, came back to his mind and deepened the look of terror in his eyes.

“What doesta want wi’ me?” he exclaimed, in a harsh whisper.

“I’ve coom to tak care o’ thee,” Mary replied.

“Thou’s coom to plague me, that’s what thou’s coom for. I know thee. I’ve seen thee o’ neights, aye, an’ i’ t’ daytime too; an’ if it’s revenge thou wants, I tell thee thou’s gotten it already, capital an’ interest, interest an’ capital.”

Mary’s swift intuition afforded her an insight into Learoyd’s mind. She realised that the fangs of remorse were buried in his heart and she determined to remove them at all costs.

“Father,” she said—and it was hard for her to utter the word which even when she was a child had seemed unnatural to her—“let us forget all that’s gone afore. Sufferin’ has coom to both on us, but it has bin warr for thee nor ever it was for me. Let us start agean.”

As she said this she knelt down by the side of his chair and gently stroked his hands and smoothed back the iron-grey locks that had fallen over his eyes. At first he shrank from her touch, but in a little time it soothed his agitation. After all, this was not the Mary Whittaker that he had seen in his dreams, and the soft grey eyes that looked steadily

into his face were different from those downcast eyes in the figure of the haltered girl that haunted him.



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For some minutes Mary and her stepfather remained in this position, and then the former, after imprinting a kiss on Learoyd's forehead, rose softly to her feet and set to work to prepare the dinner. They partook of their meal almost in silence, and then Mary, fetching his hat and stick, led him out of doors into the spring sunshine, encouraged him to pay a visit to the stables, and talked to him about the labours of the farm. His voice was now more natural when he answered her questions, and the frightened look disappeared from his eyes. That night, when she came into his bedroom, in order to smooth his pillow after he had gone to bed, he held her hand for a moment and said: "Thou's a gooid lass, Mary; if I'd wed a lass like thee I'd hae been a different man."

Mary made no answer, but there were tears in her voice when she wished him good-night.

In the days which followed, Mary Whittaker made new advances in the task of winning Learoyd's confidence and stifling the furies of remorse that had gripped his heart. All her quiet patience was needed, for although her progress was sure, there were times when he lapsed, apparently without reason, into his old mood of suspicion and hostility towards her. The doctor, when he came to the farm, was full of hope. He found the farmer's pulse steadier, and saw in him a greater composure of mind. Learoyd spent long hours over his Bible, and it seemed at last as though his religious conversion was to be fully accomplished. Conviction of sin had been followed by contrite repentance, and soon, Mary hoped, he would attain that peace of mind which the sinner experiences when he knows that his sins have been forgiven him.

But when Mary had been a fortnight at the farm a sudden change took place in his demeanour. It was early evening and Learoyd was, as usual, reading his Bible. The chapter before him was the twelfth of Romans, and he read the verses quietly to himself until he came to the last but one: "Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head." As he finished the verse he cast a troubled look at his stepdaughter, who was quietly sewing on the other side of the fire. "Coals o' fire," he muttered under his breath, and the old look of terror came back into his eyes. Mary had never learnt to read, but she saw that the Bible, which before had brought him peace of mind, was now driving a sword into his heart. She tried to comfort him, but the farmer shrank from her, as he had done when she first entered his house, and when she came into his bedroom to say good-night, he screamed out in terror and would not let her come near him. That night the vision of the girl with downcast eyes and supplicating hands, standing in the Holmton market-place, came back to him with all its old haunting power. From the adjoining bedroom Mary heard him groaning and tossing on his pillow, and she felt herself powerless to comfort him. Pity for this tortured soul filled her breast, but it seemed as though all her resources of solace had failed her, and that her mere presence in the house aggravated his suffering.



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Next morning, with tears in her eyes, she told the doctor of the change that had come over his patient. The doctor tried his pulse and looked puzzled. He ordered Learoyd a soothing draught, but it had no effect. All through the day his agony was frightful to witness. He sat with glowering eyes gazing at the verse which had destroyed his peace of mind. Mary tried to take the Bible from him but, with an oath, he refused to give it up. The day was a busy one for her. Learoyd's man-servant had gone with a flock of sheep and lambs to a distant moor, and the duties of feeding the stock and milking the cows fell to her. The farmer preserved a sullen silence while she was in the house, but no sooner was she outside than his muttering began.

"Coals o' fire, aye, that's what shoo's heapin' on me, coals o' hell fire; they're burnin' my heart to a cinder. It's vengeance shoo's after; shoo favours her mother. All women are just t' same. She-devils, that's what they are. Shoo sal have her vengeance, sure enough, an' then mebbe t' coals o' fire will burn her as they're burnin' me." A red-hot cinder fell into the grate as he spoke, and Learoyd gazed at it with curious intentness until it had lost all its glow.

"I'll fotch t' halter out o' t' kist, an' I'll do it," he began once more. "Shoo san't torment me no longer: t' coals o' fire sal be upon her own heead."

Here he lapsed into morose silence, and Mary, re-entering the farm kitchen shortly afterwards, found him, as she had left him, gazing intently into the fire with the Bible open on his knees. She got tea ready, but Learoyd stubbornly refused to eat or drink anything, and when at last ten o'clock came the farmer roused himself from his lethargy and stole off to bed, casting furtive glances at Mary as he passed through the door. She wisely refrained from intruding herself upon him that night, but, climbing the stairs to her bedroom, listened for sounds in the adjoining chamber. She could hear Learoyd muttering to himself, and she noticed that he was quicker in getting into bed than usual. A suspicion crossed her mind that he had not undressed, and this confirmed the idea which she had formed earlier in the evening that some secret purpose was maturing in his mind. Sleep was not to be thought of, and so, without taking off her clothes, she got into bed and listened.

Two hours passed, and all the time she heard Learoyd groaning in his bed. Then he got up, struck a light, and remained still for a moment as though he were listening for any sound that might come from her room. Then she heard him open the door of his bedroom and creep, candle in hand, along the passage. As he passed her door he stopped, and Mary held her breath lest he should discover that she was awake and listening for every sound. Apparently satisfied that she was asleep, the farmer descended the stairs to the kitchen. Mary noiselessly crept out of bed and, lifting the latch of her bedroom door, stood



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in the shadow of the passage and watched every movement of her stepfather in the kitchen below. He had opened the old oak chest by the wall and was fumbling among its contents. At last he found what he was looking for and drew it forth. It was a long rope, and, with a shudder, Mary recognised the halter which had once been round her neck. Her head swam as the thought came to her that Samuel Learoyd was going to sell her again, and groping her way back to her room she locked the door and threw herself on her bed. Anxiously she listened for the farmer's step on the staircase, but it did not come. Instead, she heard him moving about in the kitchen, and then came the sound of the bolts being withdrawn from the front door. A moment later his footsteps were heard on the gravel path. Rousing herself with an effort, she once more unlocked the door and crept to the head of the stairs. Come what may, she resolved to follow her stepfather and discover what were his plans. She made her way down into the kitchen and, without striking a light, moved towards the front door. It was ajar, and, opening it, she stared out into the starry night. All was still, and no sound of Learoyd's footsteps came to her from the farmyard.

Drawing her shawl tightly round her, she stepped out into the darkness. Once she fancied that she heard the farmer muttering to himself in the croft below and the harrowing thought crossed her mind that this was all some cunning plan on his part to lure her out of the house and slip the halter round her neck under cover of night. Her fears counselled her to return to the house and seek shelter from his mad frenzy behind lock and key, but the thought that Learoyd, if seized with a fit while exposed to the chill night air, would certainly meet his death overcame her fears and urged her on.

After more than two hours of fruitless search she returned to the farm, cherishing the hope that her stepfather might have returned too. But the house was empty and the door still stood ajar. Realising that further search in the darkness was unavailing, she waited for the dawn and determined that, as soon as the clock struck four, she would wake up the farm labourer at his cottage and get him to search the moors while she made her way down to Holmton to engage her husband and his son in the task of tracking the fugitive. The dreary night passed at last, the larks burst into song above her head, and the cry of the curlew was heard on the moors. She closed the farm door behind her, roused the hind, and then made her way as swiftly as possible to the town. Here everybody was still asleep, and her footfalls waked echoes in the stone-paved streets. Her nearest way to the weaver's cottage lay through the market-place, and for a moment she hesitated whether she should pass that way or take the more circuitous route by the beck-side. Realising that there was no time to lose, she summoned up all her courage, and, making her way past the church,

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entered the market-place. Her eyes were fixed on the ground, as though to avoid beholding the scene of her humiliation; but the market-cross and the stocks, now that she was within a few yards of them, exerted a strange fascination over her. Do what she might, she could not refrain from gazing upon them once more, and as she did so a cry of horror escaped her. In front of the cross hung the lifeless figure of a man. About his neck was a halter, the other end of which was securely fastened to the broken arms of the cross.

It was Learoyd. The wretched man, tortured by a sense of guilt, and obsessed with the idea that Mary Whittaker's act of sacrifice was a cold-blooded device to shame him and aggravate his misery, had hanged himself, choosing as the scene of his death the spot where, fifteen years before, he had exposed his stepdaughter for sale. In so doing, his warped imagination assured him that the coals of fire which seared his brain would henceforth be poured upon the head of Mary Whittaker.

Such was the end of Samuel Learoyd. If there was stern retribution in his death so was there also malign mockery. The chalice of pardon and peace was filled for him, but before he could raise the cup to his lips a fiendish hand had dashed it to the ground and substituted in its place a draught of venomous hemlock.