

Tracy Louis

The House 'Round the Corner



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CHAPTER I

WHEREIN THE HOUSE RECEIVES A NEW TENANT

The train had panted twelve miles up a sinuous valley, halting at three tiny stations on the way; it dwelt so long at the fourth that the occupant of a first-class carriage raised his eyes from the book he was reading. He found the platform packed with country folk, all heading in the same direction. Hitherto, this heedless traveller had been aware of some station-master or porter bawling an unintelligible name; now, his fellow-passengers seemed to know what place this was without being told; moreover, they seemed to be alighting there.

A porter, whose face, hands, and clothing were of one harmonious tint, suggesting that he had been dipped bodily in some brownish dye, and then left to dry in the sun, opened the door.

"Aren't you gettin' out, sir?" he inquired, and his tone implied both surprise and pain.

"Is this Nuttonby?" said the passenger.

"Yes, sir."

"Why this crush of traffic?"

"It's market day, sir."

"Thanks. I didn't expect to see such a crowd. Have you a parcels office, where I can leave some baggage?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hang on to this bag, then. There are three boxes in the van. You'll need a barrow – they're heavy!"

By this time, the man who knew so little of important Nuttonby – which held 3,005 inhabitants in the 1911 census, having increased by two since 1901 – had risen, and was collecting a fisherman's outfit, and some odds and ends of personal belongings. He followed the porter, who, on eyeing the rods and pannier, and with some knowledge of "county" manners, had accepted the stranger as entitled to hold a first-class ticket. Sure enough, the boxes were heavy. The guard had to assist in handling them.

"By gum!" said the porter, when he tried to lift the first on to a trolley.

"Books," explained the traveler.

"I thought mebbe they wuz lead," said the porter.

"Some books have that quality," said the other.

The guard, a reader in his spare time, smiled. The owner of so much solid literature seized a stout leather handle.

"I'll give you a hand," he said, and the porter soon added to his slight store of facts concerning the newcomer. This tall, sparsely-built man in tweeds and a deer-stalker cap was no weakling.

The platform was nearly empty when the porter began to trundle the loaded trolley along its length. A pert youth appeared from nowhere, and cried "Ticket!" firmly, almost threateningly. He was given a first-class ticket from York, and a receipt for excess luggage. The bit of white paste-board startled him. "Thank you, sir," he said. First-class passengers were rare birds at Nuttonby; too late, he knew he ought to have said "Ticket, please!"

The same pert youth, appearing again from nowhere, officiated in the parcels office. He noticed that none of the articles bore a name or initials; they were brand-new; their only railway labels were "York, from King's Cross," and "Nuttonby, from York."

"Book the bag and these small articles separately," he was instructed. "I may want them soon. The boxes may be sent for this afternoon; I don't know yet." He turned to the porter: "Is there a house agent in the town?"

"Yes, sir – two."

"Which is the better – the man with the larger *clientèle*– sorry, I mean with the greater number of houses on his books?"

"Well, sir, Walker an' Son have bin in business here fifty year an' more."

"I'll try Walker. Where's his place?"

"Next door the 'Red Lion,' sir."

Then the youth, anxious to atone, and rather quicker-witted than the brown-hued one, got in a word.

"The 'Red Lion' is halfway up the main street, sir. Turn to your right when you leave here, an' you're there in two minutes."

"I'll show the gentleman," said the porter, who had decided a month ago that this blooming kid was putting on airs. He was as good as his word – or nearly so. A tip of half a crown was stupefying, but he gathered his wits in time to say brokenly at the exit:

"Wu-Wu-Walker's is straight up, sir."

Straight up the stranger went. The wide street was crammed with stalls, farmers' carts, carriers' carts, dog-carts, even a couple of automobiles, for Wednesday, being market day, was also police-court day and Board of Guardians day. He passed unheeded. On Wednesdays, Nuttonby was a metropolis; on any other day in the week he would have drawn dozens of curious eyes, peeping surreptitiously over short curtains, or more candidly in the open. Of course, he was seen by many, since Nuttonby was not so metropolitan that it failed to detect a new face, even on Wednesdays; but his style and appearance were of the gentry; Nuttonby decided that he had strayed in from some "big" house in the district.

Walker & Son, it would seem, were auctioneers, land valuers, and probate estimators as well as house agents. Their office was small, but not retiring. It displayed a well-developed rash of sale posters, inside and out. One, in particular, was heroic in size. It told of a "spacious mansion, with well-timbered park," having been put up for auction – five years earlier. Whiteness of paper and blackness of type suggested that Walker & Son periodically renewed this aristocrat among auction announcements – perhaps to kindle a selling spirit among the landed gentry, a notoriously conservative and hold-tight class.

A young man, seated behind a counter, reading a sporting newspaper, and smoking a cigarette, rose hastily when the caller entered.

"Yes, sir," he said, thereby implying instant readiness to engage in one or all of the firm's activities.

"Are you Mr. Walker?" said the newcomer.

"Yes, sir."

"Ah! I thought you might be the son."

"Well, I am, if it comes to that. Do you want my father?"

Walker, junior, was a Nuttonby "nut" – a sharp young blade who did not tolerate chaff.

"I want to rent a furnished house in or near a quiet country village, where there is some good fishing," was the answer. "Now, you can determine whether I should trouble Mr. Walker, senior, or not?"

"No trouble at all, sir! He'll be here in ten seconds."

Walker, junior, had nearly made the same mistake as the ticket-collecting youth; however, he estimated time correctly. He went out, put his head through the open window of the "Red Lion's" bar-parlor, and shouted: "Dad, you're wanted!" Thus, within ten seconds, the stranger saw the firm!

He repeated his need, and there was a great parade of big-leafed books, while the elder Walker ascertained the prospective client's exact requirements. Whittled down to bare facts, they amounted to this: A house, in a small and remote village, and a trout stream. The absolute seclusion of the village and its diminutive proportions were insisted on, and property after property was rejected, though the Walkers were puzzled to know why.

This distinguished-looking man wished to find a dwelling far removed from any social center. His ideal was a tiny moorland hamlet, miles from the railway, and out of the beaten track of summer visitors. Suddenly, the son cried:

"Elmdale is the very place, dad!"

Dad's face brightened, but clouded again instantly.

"You mean – er – the house 'round the corner?" he said, pursing his lips.

"Yes."

"I'm afraid it wouldn't suit."

"Why not?" put in the stranger. "I rather like the name."

"I didn't mention any name, sir," and Walker, senior, still looked glum.

"You described it as the house 'round the corner – an excellent name. It attracts me. Where is Elmdale?"

The head of the firm pointed to a map of the North Riding hanging above the fireplace.

"Here you are," he said, seizing a pen and running it along the meandering black line of a stream. "Eight miles from Nuttonby, and thousands from every other town – on the edge of the moor – about forty houses in the village – and a first-rate beck, with trout running from four ounces to half a pound – but – "

"But what?"

"The house, sir. You won't like the house."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. It's comfortable enough, and well furnished."

Yet again he hesitated.

"Why, it appears to be, as your son said, the very place."

Walker, senior, smiled drearily. He knew what was coming.

"I can't recommend it, sir, and for this reason. A gentleman named Garth – Mr. Stephen Garth; some sort of professor, I understand – lived there a many years, with his wife and daughter. Nice, quiet people they were, and the young lady was a beauty. No one could make out why they should wish to be buried alive in a hole like Elmdale, but they seemed happy enough. Then, two years since, in this very month of June, Mrs. Garth and the girl drove into Nuttonby in their governess car, and went off by train, sending the trap back by a hired man. Mr. Garth mooned about for a week or two, and then hanged himself one evening alongside a grandfather's clock which stands in the hall. That made a rare stir, I can tell you; since then, no one will look at the Grange, which is its proper name. I need hardly say that the villagers have seen Mr. Garth's ghost many times, particularly in June, because in that month the setting sun throws a peculiar shadow through a stained-glass window on the half landing. Last year I let the place to a Sheffield family who wanted moorland air. My! What a row there was when Mrs. Wilkins heard of the suicide, and, of course, saw the ghost! It was all I could do to stave off an action for damages. 'Never again,' said I. 'If anybody else rents or buys the house, they take the ghost with it.'"

"Is it for sale?"

"Oh, yes! Neither Mrs. Garth nor Miss Marguérite have come near Elmdale since they left. They didn't attend the funeral, and I may add, in confidence, that Messrs. Holloway & Dobb, solicitors in this town, who have charge of their affairs – so far as the ownership of the Grange goes, at any rate – do not know their whereabouts. It is a sad story, sir."

The would-be tenant was apparently unmoved by the story's sadness.

"What kind of house is it?" he inquired.

"Old-fashioned, roomy, with oaken rafters, and a Jacobean grate in the dining-room. Five bedrooms. Fine garden, with its own well, fed by a spring. The kind of seventeenth-century dwelling that would fetch a high rent nowadays if near a town. As it is, I'd be glad to take sixty pounds a year for it, or submit an offer."

"Furnished?"

"Yes, sir, and some decent stuff in it, too. I'm surprised Messrs. Holloway & Dobb don't sell that, anyhow; but I believe they have a sort of order from Mrs. Garth that the property is to be sold as it stands, and not broken up piece-meal."

"Why did you describe it as the house 'round the corner?"

Mr. Walker smiled.

"That was for my son's benefit, sir," he explained. "The Elmdale cottages are clustered together on the roadside. The Grange stands above them, at one end, and a few yards up a road leading to the moor. It commands a fine view, too," he added regretfully.

"I'll take it," said the stranger.

Walker, junior, looked jubilant, but his father's years had weakened confidence in mankind. Many a good let was lost ere the agreement was signed and this one was beset by special difficulties.

"If you give me your name and address, I'll consult Messrs. Holloway & Dobb – " he began, and was probably more astonished than he would care to confess by the would-be tenant's emphatic interruption —

"Is this property to let, or is it not?"

"Yes, sir. Haven't I said so?"

"Very well! I offer you a quarter's rent, payable to you or your son when I have looked at the place. As a matter of form, I would like one of you to accompany me to Elmdale at once, because I must inquire into the fishing. I suppose you can hire a conveyance of sorts to take us there? Of course, in any event, I shall pay your fee for the journey. My name is Robert Armathwaite. I am a stranger in this part of Yorkshire, but if you, or Messrs. Holloway & Dobb, care to call at the local bank, say, in three days' time, you will be satisfied as to my financial standing. I'll sign an agreement for a yearly tenancy, terminable thereafter by three months' written notice, when I pay the first installment of the rent. As the place is furnished, you will probably stipulate for payment in advance throughout. I fancy you can draw up such an agreement in half an hour, and, if there is an inventory, it should be checked and initialed when we visit the house. Does that arrangement suit you?"

The Walkers were prosperous and pompous, but they knew when to sink their pomposity.

"Yes, sir, it *can* be done," agreed the elder man.

"Thank you. Which is the leading bank here?"

Walker, senior, indicated a building directly opposite.

"I'll have a word with the manager," said Mr. Armathwaite. "If I'm here in half an hour, will you have a carriage waiting?"

"A dog-cart, sir. My own. My son will attend to you."

"Excellent. Evidently, your firm understands business."

And Mr. Armathwaite went out.

The Walkers watched as he crossed the road, and entered the bank. Their side of the street being higher than the other, they could see, above the frosted lower half of the bank's window, that he approached the counter, and was ushered into the manager's private room.

"What d'ye make of it, dad?" inquired the "nut," forgetting his importance in the absorbing interest of the moment.

"Dad" tickled his bald scalp with the handle of the pen.

"Tell you what," he said solemnly. "Some houses have an attraction for queer folk. Whoever built the Grange where it is must have been daft. The people who lived there when I was a young

man were a bit touched. Mr. Garth was mad, we know, an' Mrs. Wilkins was the silliest woman I ever met. Now comes this one."

"*He* looks all right."

"You never can tell. At any rate, we'll take his money, and welcome. I asked sixty, but wouldn't have sneezed at forty. Neither would Holloway & Dobb; they've some costs to collect since the Wilkins' affair. Go and get the trap ready. And mind you, Jim, no hanky-panky."

The youthful Walker winked.

"You leave that to me," he said. "What about the fee – will he stand a guinea?"

"You might try it, at any rate."

At the appointed time, half-past eleven o'clock, Mr. Armathwaite came, carrying a large parcel wrapped in brown paper. He cast an appreciative eye at a wiry cob, put the parcel in the back of the waiting dog-cart, and climbed to the seat beside the younger Walker, now attired *de rigueur* for the country.

"Will you kindly call at the railway station?" he said.

The request was unexpected, but the driver nodded, and showed some skill in turning through the congeries of vehicles which crowded the street.

At the station, the bag and other small articles were withdrawn from the parcels office, and deposited beside the package in brown paper. James Walker was mystified, but said nothing. Returning through the main street, he answered a few questions concerning local matters, and, once in the open country, grew voluble under the influence of a first-rate Havana proffered by his companion. Men of his type often estimate their fellows by a tobacco standard, and Walker privately appraised the cigar as "worth a bob, at the lowest figure." From that instant, Mr. Robert Armathwaite and Mr. James Walker took up their relative positions without demur on the part of either.

Oddly enough, seeing that the newcomer had expressed his dislike for society, he listened with interest to bits of gossip concerning the owners of the various estates passed on the way. He was specially keen on names, even inquiring as to what families one titled landowner was connected with by marriage. Then, as to the fishing, could the Walkers arrange that for him?

Forgetting his 'cuteness, Walker settled the point off-hand.

"You had better deal with the matter yourself, sir," he said. "There'll be no difficulty. Nearly all the Elmdale farms are freeholds, most of 'em with common rights on the moor. Why, when one of 'em changes hands, the buyer has the right to take over all the sheep footed on the seller's part of the moor. P'raps you don't know what 'footed' means. Sheep will always go back to the place where they were raised, and the habit is useful when they stray over an open moorland. So, you see, all you have to do is to get permission from two or three farmers, and you can fish for miles."

He tried to talk of the Garths, particularly of the pretty daughter, but his hearer's attention wandered; obviously, information as to the ways and habits of the local yeomanry was more to Mr. Armathwaite's taste than a "nut's" gushing about a good-looking girl.

Within an hour, after five miles of fair roadway and two of a switchback, mostly rising, Walker pointed with his whip to a thin line of red-tiled houses, here and there a thatched roof among them, nestling at the foot of a gill, or ravine, which pierced the side of a gaunt moorland. Above the hamlet, at the eastern end, rose an old-fashioned stone house, square, with a portico in the center, and a high-pitched roof of stone slabs.

"There's Elmdale," he said, "and that's the Grange. Looks a god-forsaken hole, doesn't it, sir?"

"If you pay heed to the real meanings of words, no place on earth merits that description," said Mr. Armathwaite.

Walker was no whit abashed.

"Well, no," he grinned.

"I ought to have asked sooner, but have you brought any keys?"

The agent instinct warned the other that his choice of an adjective had been unwise in more ways than one.

"That's all right, sir," he said cheerfully. "The keys are kept in the village – at Mrs. Jackson's. She's a useful old body. If you want a housekeeper, she and her daughter would suit you down to the ground."

Little more was said until the steaming pony was pulled up in front of a thatched cottage. Seen thus intimately, and in the blaze of a June sun, Elmdale suggested coziness. Each house, no matter what its size, had a garden in front and an orchard behind. Long, narrow pastures ran steeply up to the moor, and cattle and sheep were grazing in them. There were crops on the lower land. For all its remoteness, Elmdale faced south, and its earth was fertile.

Armathwaite sat in the dog-cart while James Walker ran up the strip of flower-laden garden, and peered in through a low doorway. In later days, the singular fact was borne in on Armathwaite that had his companion adopted any other method of making known his business – had he, for instance, shouted to Mrs. Jackson or her daughter, Betty, and asked for the keys of the Grange – the whole course of his subsequent life would unquestionably have been altered. A loose stone under the foot of an emperor's horse may change the map of the world. In this instance, a remarkable, and, in some respects, unique series of events arose solely from the fact that Walker, junior, was of active habit, and alighted from the vehicle in preference to announcing his wishes for others to hear; because Betty Jackson, at that moment, was plucking gooseberries in the back garden, and knew nothing of what was going on until a country maid's belated wit failed completely to stem the tide of circumstance.

Armathwaite caught scraps of a brief but seemingly heated argument going on inside the cottage. It was couched in the Yorkshire dialect, which he understood, to some extent, but could not speak. Then Walker, a gallant figure in straw hat, gray coat, red waistcoat with gilded buttons, breeches and gaiters and brown boots, strutted into sight. He was red-faced and laughing, and a bundle of keys jingled in one hand.

"Mrs. Jackson's as bad as any of 'em," he cried, springing to his seat and taking the reins from a clip on the dash-board. "Made such a to-do about anyone looking over the house. Asked if you'd heard of the ghost, too. And, blow me, if she didn't pretend she'd mislaid the keys! We wouldn't have got 'em for a deuce of a time if I hadn't twigged 'em hanging on a nail, and grabbed 'em. Then she gave me my name for nothing, I can assure you."

"Yet you recommended her for the post of housekeeper," said Armathwaite, smiling.

"Yes, sir. She's a rare good cook, and tidy, too. Can't make out what's come over her. She was fair scared to death."

Walker's statement as to Mrs. Jackson's behavior was by no means highly colored. Before he reached the dog-cart, the old woman had hurried into the back garden.

"Betty!" she shrilled. "Betty, where are you?"

A head in a poke-bonnet rose above a clump of tall gooseberry bushes, and a voice answered:

"Yes, mother, what is it?"

"Run, girl, run! What's to be done? Mr. Walker has brought a man to look at the house."

"What house?"

"The Grange, to be sure."

"Oh, mother!"

Betty ran quickly enough now. She was a strongly-built, apple-cheeked lass; but there was a glint of fear in her eyes, and the faces of both mother and daughter had gone gray under the tan of moor air and much work in the open.

"Whatever can we do?" cried Mrs. Jackson, with the hopeless distress of a woman overwhelmed by some unforeseen and tragic occurrence. "That impudent young Walker came and snatched at the keys before I could stop him. And they've gone there, the pair of 'em! There they are now – halfway up the hill."

All this, of course, was couched in "broad Yorkshire," which, however, need not enter into the record. The two gazed at the men in the dog-cart, who were partly visible above a yew hedge, since the by-road in which the Grange was situated turned up the hill by the gable of Mrs. Jackson's cottage.

"Oh, mother!" said the girl, in awe-stricken accents, "why didn't you hide 'em?"

"How was I to hide 'em? I was knocked all of a heap. Who'd have thought of anyone coming here to-day, of all days in the year?"

"Who's that with him?" Betty almost sobbed.

"The man who's going over the house, of course."

"Oh, dear! If only I'd known! I'd have taken the keys and gone with them."

"What good would that have done?"

"I might have humbugged them into waiting a minute or two. I'd have thought of some excuse. But don't worry too much, mother. Maybe they'll give the least little look round, and come away again."

"And maybe they won't," cried Mrs. Jackson angrily, for she was recovering from her fright, and her daughter's implied reproach was irritating. "I did my best, and it can't be helped now, no matter what happens. Run after them, Betty, and offer to help. You may manage something, even now."

The girl needed no second bidding. She was through the cottage and out in the road in a jiffy. But she had lost a minute or more already, and the sturdy galloway was climbing a steep hill quickly. When she reached a garden gate to which the reins were tied, the front door of the Grange stood open, and the visitors were inside.

"Oh, dear!" she breathed, in a heart-broken way. "Oh, dear! If only mother had called me sooner! Now, it's too late! And I promised that no one should know. Well, I must do my best. Just a bit of luck, and I may pull things straight yet!"

CHAPTER II

SHOWING HOW EVEN A HOUSE MAY HAVE A WAY OF ITS OWN

While Walker was fiddling with the lock, not being quite sure as to the right key, Armathwaite had eyed the southern landscape. Elmdale was six hundred feet above sea level, and the Grange stood fully a hundred feet higher than the village, so a far-flung panorama of tillage, pasture, and woodland provided a delightful picture on that glorious June day. To the north, he knew, stretched miles of wild moor, and the heather began where the spacious garden ended. A glance at the map in the Walkers' office had shown that this bleak waste was crossed by mere tracks, marked in the dotted lines which motorists abhor. Indeed, the very road leading to the house was not macadamized beyond the gate; two years of disuse had converted even the stone-covered portion into a sort of meadow, because grass, the sulkiest of vegetables in a well-tended lawn, will grow luxuriantly on a granite wall if left alone.

Truly, Elmdale seemed to be at the end of the world – the world of Yorkshire, at any rate – and Robert Armathwaite found its aspect pleasing. A lock clicked; he turned, and entered a domain he was now fully resolved to make his own.

"Well, I'm blest!" said Walker, speaking in a surprised way; "anyone 'ud think the place hadn't been empty an hour, let alone two years, not countin' Mrs. Wilkins's couple of nights. I wonder who left these clothes, and hats, and things!"

He had good reason for a certain stare of bewilderment.

The door, which was stoutly built, with a pane of sheet glass in the upper half, opened straight into a spacious, oak-paneled hall. Left and right were a dining-room and a drawing-room, each containing two windows. Behind the dining-room a wide staircase gave access to the upper floors, and a flood of rich and variously-tinted light from a long arched window glowed on the dark panels below, and glistened on the polished mahogany case of a grandfather's clock which faced the foot of the stairs. The wall opposite the entrance was pierced by a half-open door, through which could be seen laden bookshelves reaching up eight feet or more. Another door, beyond the stairway, showed the only possible means of approach to the kitchen and domestic offices.

There were no pictures in the hall, but some antique plates and dishes of blue china were ranged on a shelf above the wainscot, and a narrow table and four straight-backed chairs, all of oak, were in tasteful keeping with the surroundings. On each side of the dining-room door were double rows of hooks, and on these hung the garments which had caught the agent's eye.

A bowler hat, a frayed panama, a cap, a couple of overcoats, even a lady's hat and mackintosh, lent an air of occupancy to the house, which was not diminished by the presence of several sticks and umbrellas in a couple of Chinese porcelain stands. Walker took down the panama. It was dust-laden, and the inner band of leather had a clammy feeling. He replaced it hastily.

"That's the Professor's," he said, trying to speak unconcernedly. "I remember seeing him in it, many a time."

Armathwaite noticed the action, and was aware of a peculiar *timbre* in Walker's voice.

"Now, suppose we lay that ghost, and have done with it," he said quietly. "Where did my worthy and retrospective landlord hang himself?"

"There," said Walker, indicating a solitary hook screwed through the china shelf near the clock. "That bronze thing," pointing to a Burmese gong lying on the floor, "used to hang there. He took it down, tied the rope to the hook, and kicked a chair away... If you come here," and he advanced a few paces, "you'll see why a ghost appears."

"Mr. Walker," bleated someone timidly.

Mr. Walker unquestionably jumped, and quite as unquestionably swore, even when he recognized Betty Jackson, standing in the porch.

"Well, what is it?" he cried gruffly, hoping his companion has missed that display of nerves.

"Please, sir, mother thought –" began the girl; but the startled "nut" was annoyed, and showed it.

"I don't care what your mother thinks," he shouted. "Refusing me the keys, indeed! What next? I've a good mind to report her to Messrs. Holloway & Dobb."

"But, sir, she only wanted to make the house a bit more tidy. It's dusty and stuffy. If you gentlemen would be kind enough to wait in the garden five minutes, I'd open up the rooms, and raise a window here and there."

Betty, tearful and repentant, had entered the hall in her eagerness to serve. Walker weakened; he had a soft spot in his heart for girls.

"No matter now," he said. "We shan't be here long. This gentleman is just going to look round and see if the place suits him."

"The best bedroom is all upside down," she persisted. "If you'd give me three minutes –"

"Run away and play, and don't bother us," he answered off-handedly. "As I was about to say, Mr. Armathwaite, someone in the old days put stained glass in that window on the landing. You'll notice it shows a knight in black armor – Edward, the Black Prince, it's believed to be – and, when the sun sets in the nor' west, it casts a strong shadow on the paneling beside the clock. Of course, it can be seen from the porch, and it accounts for this silly story about the ghost –"

"Oh!" screamed the girl. "Why talk of such horrid things? There's no ghost!"

Her cry was so unexpectedly shrill that Walker yielded to an anger almost as loud-voiced.

"Confound you!" he stormed at her; "take yourself off! One more word from you, and your mother loses her job."

Armathwaite looked into the girl's troubled face and saw there a fear, a foreboding, which were very real, if not to be accounted for readily.

"Kindly leave us," he said. "If I want Mrs. Jackson, or you, I'll call at the cottage."

There was an air of authority about Mr. Armathwaite that disconcerted Betty more than Walker's bluster. She went out and closed the front door. The agent ran and opened it again. The girl was standing on the path, clear of the porch, and gazing wistfully at the house.

"Will you mind your own business?" he grumbled. "The deuce take it, what's come to you to-day? You and your mother seem half crazy."

"We don't like folk to see the place at its worst," she said, rather defiantly.

"You're doing your best to turn Mr. Armathwaite against it, *I* should think," was the angry comment. "Now, don't touch this door again, and clear out, d'ye hear?"

Betty flushed. She was distressed, but dales' blood boils quickly when subjected to the fire of contumely.

"I haven't asked such a favor," she said. "And you might keep a civil tongue in your head."

Walker sniffed his annoyance. But why bandy words with this aggressive young woman? He swung on his heel.

"Sorry you should have met with such a queer reception, Mr. Armathwaite," he said. "I can't account for it. I really can't. Perhaps Mrs. Jackson feels hurt that I didn't let her know you were coming, but –"

"Never mind Mrs. Jackson or her daughter," said Armathwaite placidly. "I'll soon settle matters with them. Now, you have an inventory, I believe? Suppose we start here."

"Then you've decided to take the house, sir?"

"Yes, two hours ago, in Nuttonby."

"I wish all our clients were like you," laughed Walker. "You know what you want and see that you get it... Well, sir, as it happens, the inventory begins with the hall. I'll read, and you might note the items, stopping me if there's any doubt."

The agent rattled through his task, but was pulled up several times in dining-room and drawing-room, when a picture or two, some Sheffield plate, and various bits of china were missing. Black doubt seized the sharp Walker when this had happened for the fourth time. In all, there were seven disappearances, and, in each instance, the article was old and fairly valuable. Country villages, he reflected, were ransacked nowadays by collectors of curios. When opportunity served, he and Mrs. Jackson would have some earnest words.

But surprise and relief came in the discovery of the seven; they were piled, with a number of books, on a table in the library.

"I suppose some kind of spring cleaning is going on," he said sheepishly. "Now the cat is out of the bag. Why the deuce didn't Betty say so, and have done with it!"

"I imagine she was trying to tell us something of the sort," smiled the other unconcernedly. "Surely we have not got to check the titles of all these books?"

"No, sir. They're lumped together – about eight hundred volumes."

Armathwaite surveyed the shelves with the eye of a reader.

"That must be nearly right," he said, after a little pause. "I must not get mine mixed with my predecessor's. I've brought nearly two hundred myself."

Walker thought of the brown paper parcel, which seemed to have a certain solidity, but said nothing. In the first place, if eight hundred books occupied so much space, a quarter of that number would fit in no ordinary sheet of brown paper. Secondly, Mr. Armathwaite's manner did not invite unnecessary questions. The kitchen and scullery were soon dealt with. There was coal in a cellar, and a supply of wood, and a number of lamps drew attention to some tins of oil.

"How much for this lot?" inquired the would-be tenant.

"Nothing," said Walker, in a sudden fit of generosity. "These stores were left by Mrs. Wilkins, and lost sight of during the row. My, what a bother she raised!"

"Yet there is no ghost; we have Betty's word for it. Now – the bedrooms."

The "best" bedroom – that in the south-east angle – was certainly not in disorder. Indeed, it looked fresher and cleaner than any of the others; the bed was spotless; even the window-sill had been dusted recently.

"Of course," said the agent, "those two silly women have been tidying things up a bit for the season. I'm getting the hang of things by degrees. They're afraid I might think it should have been done sooner."

"Probably," agreed Armathwaite, who, however, held a somewhat different view. The girl was not afraid of Mr. James Walker. Of whom, then, or of what? If the inquiry interested him he would find out.

The remaining bedrooms held at least one year's dust.

A box-room, lumber-room, and servant's bedroom occupied the second floor. In the ceiling of a small lobby there was a trap-door.

"That leads to a space beneath the roof," said Walker. "By the way, there ought to be a ladder. It's gone."

Being, as has been seen, of active habit, he brought a chair from the bedroom, stood on it, pushed up the flap, and peered into the semi-obscurity of a triangular, rafter-lined attic, lighted only by a tiny square of glass cemented into one of the flat stone slabs of the roof.

"Oh, here it is," he announced. "Shall I pull it out?"

"No, thanks," said Armathwaite. "I don't suppose I shall mount so high again during my tenancy."

The younger man closed the trap, and, as it had been unfastened previously, shot a bolt into its socket.

"Well, that ends it," he said, brushing some grime off his hands. "If you care to stroll through the garden you'll find plenty of fruit coming on. This should be a good year for apples and plums,

I'm told. It's too late to raise any potatoes or vegetables, but the village will supply plenty of table stuff, and cheap, too."

"Let me see," mused Armathwaite aloud. "Fifteen pounds rent, and, say, two guineas for your fee, and another guinea for the conveyance – eighteen pounds three shillings in all. Let us adjourn to the library, and I'll pay you, sign the agreement, and initial the inventory. Then I need not detain you any longer, Mr. Walker."

The agent looked blank, as well he might. He was flustered, too, by the terms offered for his valuable services.

"You don't mean that you're going to stay here straightaway, sir?" he cried.

"Yes. I came prepared for immediate occupation. That is why I brought my bag, and some groceries."

"Groceries!"

Walker was so astonished that he could only repeat the word.

"That parcel, you know. I'm an old campaigner – that is, I have much experience of camping out, under far less pleasant conditions than in a delightful house in a Yorkshire village. I shall be quite happy here."

"But there's a kind of an inn not far off; you'll come and have a snack there with me, sir?" was all that Walker could find to say at the moment.

"I'm much obliged to you, but I may not stir out again to-day. Shall we go down?"

They descended the stairs, which creaked loudly under their feet. Walker was puzzled to understand a cool customer of the Armathwaite type. He had never heard of a tenancy being entered into with such promptitude, yet there was no point in the stranger's behavior which he could fix on as definitely eccentric, or even unusual. The man evidently knew his own mind, and, if he paid up, the philosophy of Walker, senior, fitted the case admirably.

Still it was a slightly dazed Son who pocketed fifteen pounds in notes and three guineas in coin, and gave receipts for these sums, and exchanged copies of an agreement, and handed over the keys.

"Take another cigar," said the new tenant, bidding him good-bye at the front door, when bag and parcel had been brought in and dumped on the hall table. "Oh, there is one other small matter. I left three boxes at Nuttonby Station. Here is the voucher. Can you get some carter or farmer to bring them here, to-day or to-morrow? I'll pay him well for his trouble. They're rather heavy – books, mostly."

Conscious of a subdued feeling which he was wholly unable to explain, Walker took the cigar and the printed slip, raised his hat – an action which vexed him when he recalled it subsequently – and strolled down to the gate and the waiting dog-cart. Rattling the reins to let the pony know that he would stand no nonsense, he turned the corner on one wheel, and gave not the slightest heed to Betty Jackson's frantic efforts to attract his attention. Without slackening pace at the Fox and Hounds Inn, he whisked into the Nuttonby road, but pulled up on the crest of the first hill.

Looking back at Elmdale, lying snug and content in the blazing sunshine of early afternoon, he gazed at the Grange during a full minute. The front door was closed. So far as he could make out, no tall figure was sauntering in garden or orchard. Then he felt in his breeches pocket, to make sure, by the touch of notes and gold, that he was not dreaming.

"Well, I'm jiggered, if this isn't a rum go!" he muttered, and chirruped the pony into a trot again.

In the meantime, Mr. Robert Armathwaite had watched his hurried departure, in the first instance from the porch and subsequently from one of the windows in the dining-room.

"Perhaps I've made a mistake," he communed, with an amused smile, when he noted the momentary stopping of the dog-cart outside the village. "I've puzzled that young sprig, and I might have avoided that. Not that it matters a great deal. His father will inquire at the bank about my financial standing, and the pair of them will put me down as a well-to-do lunatic. Maybe they will prove right. Who can tell? At any rate, I've not felt so content with my lot since I left India. Now for some bread and cheese, and a thorough survey of my domain."

He unpacked the brown paper parcel on the kitchen table, and thereby proved himself at least well skilled as a caterer. Bacon, flour, bread, tea, coffee, sugar – all manner of simple domestic stores were there. He had, in fact, gone into a grocer's shop in Nuttonby, produced a written list, and asked that the articles named therein should be of the best quality and got ready at once.

While munching a frugal meal he bethought himself of the water supply. Unlocking the back door, he found the well, and drew a bucket of water, which was excellent in quality, and by no means suffering from disuse; indeed, he learnt later that the Jacksons and other cottagers took their supply from that source.

After a stroll round the garden and orchard – noting the laden gooseberry and currant bushes in the one, and several varieties of apples, pears, plums, and cherries in the other – he went back to the house. Going upstairs, he took possession of the "best" room, and distributed the contents of the bag among various drawers and on a dressing-table. A large wardrobe contained some feminine garments, old, but of good quality, and he left them undisturbed. Examining the bed, he found the sheets scrupulously clean and well-aired. To all seeming, they had been put there that very day, and he believed that the Jackson family meant to accommodate some friend in the Grange for the night, which reasonable surmise explained Betty Jackson's anxiety lest any hint of the project should reach the agent's ears.

"It's too bad if I've contrived to upset their plans," he mused. "They're welcome to any other room, for all that I care, and I'll tell them so if I come across either of them this evening."

Nevertheless, meaning to be lord of his own realm, he locked the doors, both back and front, when he went for a ramble over the moors. He was willing to fall in with any hospitable arrangement the caretakers might have in view, but they must consult him, and he refused to have either of them prowling about the house in his absence.

He followed the moorland road for some miles, meeting no one, and seeing no living creature save hundreds of black-faced sheep. Not even a grouse scurried across the heather, for June is the nesting season, and the parent birds lie close. Noting the watershed, he found the source of the beck which brawled through Elmdale, and tracked it back to the village. It was alive with trout and grayling, and his fingers itched for a rod. He regretted now that he had not obtained the names of some of the riparian landowners from Walker, but realized that the village inn would soon yield all the information he needed, and probably contain some of the farmers in person that evening.

He reached his new abode, however, somewhat later than he had intended, approaching it from the east, which afforded not only a new point of view, but enabled him to detect Mrs. Jackson and Betty in a series of manoeuvres which were distinctly mysterious when taken into account with their earlier attitude.

Obviously, when he emerged from the depths of the tree-lined gill, and first caught sight of the house, mother and daughter had just quitted the front door, presumably after knocking, and failing to obtain an answer. Betty ran out into the road, and gazed up towards the moor. Apparently satisfied by her scrutiny of that bare upland she hurried to the rear of the premises, and reappeared, carrying a gardener's ladder, which she placed against the wall. Giving a rapid glance in the direction of the village, she mounted the ladder. It was rather short, and she was in some danger of falling, but, by clinging to a creeper, she managed to reach a sufficient height that she could peer into the bedroom in which Armathwaite had spread his belongings.

She descended again swiftly, took away the ladder, and returned to her mother. Both women eyed the upper windows anxiously, and, as the outcome of some talk, Betty went to the gate a second time, and looked along the bold curve of the moorland road. She shook her head. Her mother joined her, and the two went to their cottage.

Armathwaite smiled, and resolved to keep his knowledge of the Jacksons' behavior to himself. He did not wish to quarrel with the women, who would be useful in many ways. In a day or two, when

he had won their confidence, they would doubtless explain their queer proceedings; most likely, the explanation would prove so simple that it would never occur to a suspicious mind.

Having waited to fill his pipe, he entered the village, and walked up the narrow path to Mrs. Jackson's abode. He was met at the door by Betty. She seemed to be rather alarmed by the visit, yet pleased to see him.

"Can we do anything for you, sir?" she said. "Mother and I went to the house a while ago, but you were out."

In the oblique Yorkshire way she had partly told the reason of the visit. Mrs. Jackson, too, came and stood near her daughter, and it was curious to note the underlook of alarm, of poignant anxiety, in both faces.

"I wish to make your acquaintance, and to inquire about milk, butter, and eggs," he said pleasantly. "Mr. Walker suggested that you might be willing to attend to household matters, and that would take a burden off my mind."

"We'll be pleased to do it, and reasonable, too, sir," said Mrs. Jackson promptly.

"Very well. Come and see me in the morning. Meanwhile, can you arrange for a quart of milk, a pound of butter, and a few eggs to be sent in immediately?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said both together, and the expression of relief in the one face was mirrored in the other.

"You'll be wanting something cooked now, sir?" went on the older woman, with a new cheerfulness of tone, and Armathwaite would have been a far less capable student of human nature than he was had he failed to see that a much desired entry to the house was now regarded as an assured thing. Suddenly he made up his mind to solve the enigma, whatever it might be, since the theory of a spare bed being in request did not seem to fit the case.

"No," he said carelessly, treating the proposal as of slight import, one way or the other. "I wish to be alone this evening. But you can come in early to-morrow. Isn't there a spare key?"

"Yes, sir," broke in the girl, for her mother was utterly nonplussed again. "It's on the bunch with the others."

He produced the keys from his pocket, and saw that there were two alike.

"One of these?" he inquired, meeting the girl's eyes in a steady glance. Then he was sure of his ground. She was so excited that she could hardly answer. He gave her the key, ascertained that she would bring the milk and the rest in a few minutes, and left the two women staring after him.

Betty was as good as her word. She made no attempt to prolong her stay, but deposited her purchases on the hall-table, and promised that she or her mother would come about seven in the morning.

"Will you need to be called, sir?" she inquired, as an afterthought.

"Well, yes. I'm a sound sleeper," he assured her gravely.

The statement was true, but it required qualification. A man who had slept many a night under conditions that demanded instant wakefulness if any sinister sound threatened his very existence, did not rank in the class of sound sleepers known to quiet Elmdale.

Thereafter he cooked a meal of eggs and bacon, tea and toast, smoked, rambled in the garden, read, thought a good deal, and went to bed.

The light in his room was extinguished soon after ten o'clock. About half-past eleven, little more than twelve hours from the time he had first heard of "the house 'round the corner," he was aroused by a loud crash in the hall. He was up in an instant, laughing at the success of a booby trap compacted of the Burmese gong, some thread, and a piece of wood set as a trigger. His feet were not on the floor before the front door banged, and, hurrying to the window, he saw Betty Jackson flying down the path for dear life. He could not be mistaken. In that northern latitude a midsummer night is never wholly dark. He not only recognized the girl, but could note her heaving shoulders as she sobbed hysterically in her flight.

"I'm sorry if you're badly scared, my country maid, but you asked for it," he said aloud. "Now I think I'll be left to undisturbed slumber till seven o'clock."

Therein he erred. He had not quitted the window, being held by the solemn beauty of the gray landscape, ere a heavy thud, and then another, and yet a third, reached his ears. He might not have localized the first, but its successors came unmistakably from the attic. After a few seconds, the three knocks were repeated, and now he adjudged them to the precise bounds of the trap-door.

Slipping an automatic pistol into the pocket of his pyjama suit – merely as a precaution against the unforeseen, though he was a man devoid of fear, he took an electric torch from a drawer, but knew better than to bring it into use until its glare would disconcert others – not himself. He thrust his bare feet into slippers, unlocked the bedroom door, and passed out on to the landing.

"Now to unveil Isis!" he thought, as he felt for the first step of the upward stairway. It needed one of steel nerve and fine courage to creep about a strange house in the dark – a house where ill deeds had been done, and in which their memories lurked – but Robert Armathwaite had gone through experiences which reduced the present adventure to the proportions of a somewhat startling prank, closely akin to the success of the stratagem which had routed Betty Jackson.

And, as he mounted the stairs, keeping close to the wall, and thus preventing the old boards from creaking, again came those ominous knocks, louder, more insistent; but whether threatening or merely clamorous he could not decide – yet.

CHAPTER III

A MIDNIGHT SEANCE

Armathwaite had a foot on the upper landing when a stifled sob reached his ears, and a determined, almost angry, stamping or hammering shook the trap-door. One element, then, of the mystery attached to this reputedly ghost-ridden house was about to be dispelled. When James Walker shot the bolt which rendered the door as unyielding as the stout rafters which incased it, he had unwittingly imprisoned someone in the attic loft; and the someone, tiring of imprisonment, was making loud demand for release. Moreover, Betty Jackson was in the secret. She knew of the intruder's presence, but had not learnt the particular mode of concealment adopted – hence her renewed efforts to gain admission, her use of the ladder, and her somewhat daring visit during the dead hours of the night.

Now, Armathwaite scouted the notion of a couple of village women like Mrs. Jackson and her daughter being in league with midnight robbers, or worse. Even if some thievery was in prospect, they could not possibly have arranged that certain unknown miscreants should hide beneath the roof, since the arrival of Walker with an unexpected tenant was evidently the last thing they had dreamed of.

Therefore, smiling at the humor of the incident, he had to simulate a sternness he was far from feeling when he cried:

"Stop making that noise! Who are you, and how did you come to get yourself locked in in this way?"

"Please let me out!" came the muffled reply. "I'll explain everything – I will, indeed!"

Thereupon, Armathwaite was more surprised than ever. The appeal, though tearful and husky, was precisely opposite in character to that which he anticipated. He looked for gruff entreaty in the accents of the country of broad acres. What he actually heard was a cultured voice, a voice with a singularly soft and musical enunciation, and its note was of complaint rather than petition.

"All right!" he cried, hardly suppressing a laugh. "I'll bring a chair and draw the bolt. I suppose you can lower the ladder yourself?"

"Of course I can – I drew it up!"

Again, the answer did not fit in with the conditions. But Armathwaite secured the same chair which Walker had used, pressed the button of the electric torch, and, having forced the bolt out of its socket, raised the door a few inches.

"Catch hold!" he said. "I'll show you a light."

The door was lifted, and he glimpsed a beardless face peering from the inner void. He sprang to the floor, put the chair on one side, and awaited developments. Soon the ladder appeared, and was adjusted. Then came two neat but strong brown brogues, with slim-ankled black stockings to match, and the turned-up ends of a pair of gray, flannel trousers. The owner of these articles of attire sat for an instant on the edge of the trap, as though reluctant to descend further, and Armathwaite noticed, to his very great bewilderment, that the black stockings were of silk.

"Will you kindly promise not to grab my legs as I come down?" said the voice.

"I have not the slightest desire to grab your legs, or your neck, for that matter, if you behave yourself," said Armathwaite.

"You don't understand, of course," came the curiously dignified protest; "but I am not misbehaving myself, and have no intention of so doing. This ridiculous thing would not have happened if that silly young fop had not fastened the trap-door. I can't imagine why he did it. It was no business of his, at any rate. And may I ask who *you* are?"

"I'll answer all polite inquiries, and, it may be, put a few on my own account, when you favor me with a closer view," said Armathwaite, not without a tinge of sarcasm in his politeness.

"Oh, this is too stupid for words!" was the petulant reply, and the speaker swung into sight. The ladder was tilted steeply, and the steps were narrow. Apparently, the young gentleman in a gray flannel suit who materialized in this manner preferred to gaze at his rescuer rather than adopt the safer method of descent which involved a momentary turning of his back. Possibly, too, he was more nervous than his remarks betokened, for he was yet some distance from the floor when the lowermost foot slipped, and he fell. The toe of the other foot caught in a rung, and he was thrown violently into Armathwaite's arms, who, to save him from pitching headlong downstairs, had to clutch him with some force, whereupon the torch dropped, and the two were enfolded by a pall of darkness that seemed to have an actual quality of tangibility.

"Oh!" shrieked the youth, now thoroughly frightened, "please don't hurt me! I haven't done anything wrong. I haven't really!"

Armathwaite's senses were steeped in the very essence of wonderment; he knew now that he was clasping a woman to his breast, hugging her most energetically, too, and the knowledge was at once disconcerting and irritating. But he had acquired the faculty long ago of remaining impassive in circumstances calling for rigid self-control, so he merely said, with curt reassurance:

"If you'll not make such a row, and stand still, I'll find that confounded torch and shed a light on the situation."

He stooped, and groped on the floor, being aware that the girl was panting with ill-repressed alarm the while. Luckily, his fingers soon closed on the nickel cylinder, and the almost overwhelming gloom was banished.

"Do you think you can manage to walk downstairs without stumbling, or shall I hold your arm?" he inquired, and the somewhat taunting question, no less than his obvious disregard of his companion's terror, supplied a needed tonic.

"The ladder was steep and slippery," she said tremulously. "The stairs offer no difficulty, so I can dispense with your assistance, thanks."

Certainly this young person's way of expressing herself differed in every essential from her distinctly agitated state. She was not yet aware of the innate chivalry of the man in refraining from thrusting the torch close to her face and staring at her, but already her panic was subsiding, and she turned and hurried away so quickly that Armathwaite thought she meant to escape.

"Just one moment!" he said, though not making the least effort to detain her otherwise. "Are there any more of you up here?"

His sheer unconcern could not fail to lessen her agitation still further, and she halted on the next landing.

"What do you mean?" she cried. Despite her qualms, she still maintained a curious attitude of defiance, as if she, and not the house's lawful tenant, had most cause to feel aggrieved.

"Exactly what I said. Were you alone in that attic?"

"Of course I was. What a question!"

"A natural one, from my point of view. I was sound asleep, when your ally, Betty Jackson, kicked up a din in the hall, and you began pounding on the trap-door."

"Poor Betty! Is she here? Betty! Betty!"

Leaning over the banisters, she peered into the blackness beneath. There was a glimmer of spectral light here, for a late-rising moon was adding to the silvery brightness of a perfect night, and some of its radiance was piercing the stained glass. Armathwaite noted her action with increasing bewilderment.

"Betty fled as though she were pursued by seven devils," he said, when no other answer came to her cry. "I guessed at some mischief being afoot, so planned a surprise for anyone crossing the hall without my knowledge. No matter what her earlier opinions, Betty believes in that ghost now."

"Ghost! What ghost? There is no ghost here. Do you think to scare me with a bogey, like a naughty child?"

They were descending the broad stairs of the lower flight together, and Armathwaite had stolen one glance at the lissom young figure. He was minded to smile at a cunningly-hidden safety pin which kept a broad-brimmed fisherman's hat of heather mixture cloth in position so that the girl's hair was concealed. The coat hung rather loosely on slender shoulders, but the disguise was fairly effective in other respects, and the masquerader moved with an easy grace that betokened a good walker.

"I have not occupied the house many hours, but I have come to the conclusion that it harbors certain strange fantasies," he said, taking the lead, and stopping to break a thread stretched across the foot of the stairs. "We'll find a lamp and matches in the dining-room," he added. "Suppose we go there and discuss matters?"

"Isn't it rather late? Whatever time is it?" was the hesitating comment.

"And aren't you rather hungry?" he replied, ignoring both questions.

"I'm simply ravenous. I haven't eaten a morsel since six o'clock this morning."

"I can offer you bread and butter and milk. Shall I boil you some eggs?"

"If you mention food again, I shall drop. Please, what time is it?"

"Nearly midnight."

"Oh, I must be going! I must, really. The Jacksons will find me something to eat."

"You're going into that room, and, unless I have your promise to remain there, you'll accompany me to the kitchen. Which is it to be – a comfortable chair, with a lamp, or a compulsory prowl through kitchen and larder?"

"I'll sit down, please," came the slow admission. "I'm very tired, and rather done up. I walked miles and miles this morning, and the long hours up there in the dark were horrid."

Without another word Armathwaite threw open the dining-room door, and lighted the lamp which he had left on the table. The girl sank wearily into an arm-chair; her action was a tacit acceptance of his terms. Somehow, he was convinced that she would not take advantage of his absence and slip out through the front door, which Betty Jackson had assuredly not waited to lock.

Among the kitchen utensils he had found a small oil-stove in working order. In a surprisingly short time, therefore, he was back in the dining-room with a laden tray.

"Do you like your eggs soft-boiled, medium, or hard?" he inquired, treating an extraordinary episode with a nonchalance which betokened either a temperament wholly devoid of emotion or a career crowded with uncommon experiences.

"Need I eat eggs at all?" said the girl. "I'm sure, Mrs. Jackson –"

"Do you want to rouse the village?"

"No; anything but that."

"Then I must point out that the one cottage in Elmdale whose inmates will be deaf and dumb at this moment is Mrs. Jackson's. Both mother and daughter are quaking because of the possible consequences of an attempt to enter this house at an hour which no person could choose for a legitimate purpose. Eat and drink, therefore. We'll deal with the Jacksons subsequently. No, don't begin by a long draught of milk. It is tempting, but harmful if taken in that way. Try some bread and butter. Now, two eggs. Oh, dash it! I've forgotten an egg-spoon, and I don't know where such things are kept. I'll go and hunt for them."

"Don't trouble. Lend me that electric lamp – how useful it is! – and I'll bring one in a minute."

By this time Armathwaite had seen that his captive was a remarkably pretty girl. Male attire supplies the severest test of feminine beauty, since form and feature are deprived of adventitious aids; but a small, oval face, two pouting lips, a finely-modeled nose, brilliant brown eyes, swept by long curved lashes, and a smooth forehead, rising above arched and well-marked eyebrows, needed no art of milliner or dressmaker to enhance their charms. She was fairly tall, too – though dwarfed by Armathwaite's six feet and an inch of height in his slippered feet – and admirably proportioned, if slender and lithe. Evidently, she thought he had not penetrated her disguise, and was momentarily becoming more self-possessed. Again, she had some explanation of her presence in the house which

could not fail of acceptance, and did not scruple, therefore, to display a close acquaintance with its arrangements denied to one who admittedly had taken up his abode there only that day.

The man listened to her quick, confident steps going to the kitchen, heard the rattle of a drawer in an antique dresser which stood there, and, with an emphatic gesture, seemed to appeal to the gods ere he bent over the stove to see if the water was yet a-boil.

The girl might be hungry, but feminine curiosity proved stronger than the urgent claims of an empty stomach. She went into the larder, and undoubtedly eyed the new tenant's stores. She implied as much when she re-entered the dining-room.

"Boiled eggs require pepper and salt," she explained. "You've got so many little paper bags that I didn't dare rummage among them, so I've secured a cruet which was left here when my – when the people who used to live here went away. The salt may be a bit damp, but the pepper should be all right."

Without more ado she tackled a slice of bread, breaking it into small pieces, and buttering each piece separately before munching it.

"Some wise person said in a newspaper the other day that one ought to give every mouthful of bread three hundred bites," she went on. "I wonder if he ever fasted eighteen hours before practicing his own precept. I'm afraid I wouldn't believe him if he said he did."

"People who study their digestion generally die young," said Armathwaite drily.

"Oh, I don't agree with you in that," she retorted. "My dad is great on food theories. He knows all about proteins and carbohydrates; he can tell you to a fourth decimal the caloric value of an egg; and *he's* a phenomenally healthy person. By the way, how are those eggs coming on?"

"Try this one. I think the water has been boiling three minutes!"

Armathwaite spoke calmly enough, but a stoutly-built edifice of circumstantial evidence had just crumbled in ruins about his ears. He was persuaded that, for some reason best known to herself, Miss Margu rite Garth had adopted this freakish method of revisiting her old home. Such a thesis made all things plausible. It explained her singularly self-contained pose, her knowledge of the house's contents, her wish to remain hidden from prying eyes, and, last but not least, it brought the peculiar conduct of the Jackson family into a commonplace category, for the two women would be governed by a clannish feeling which is almost as powerful in rural Yorkshire as in Scotland. A girl who had lived nearly all her life in the village would be looked on as a native. She might appeal confidently for their help and connivance in such a matter.

But this girl's father was alive, and Margu rite Garth's father had been in a suicide's grave two years. Who, then, was the audacious young lady now assuring him that he could boil eggs admirably? He was puzzled anew, almost piqued, because he flattered himself on a faculty for guessing accurately at the contents of a good many closed pages in a human document after a glance at the outer cover and its endorsement. He was spurred to fresh endeavor. He wanted to solve this riddle before its baffling intricacies were made plain by the all-satisfying statement which his companion obviously had it in mind to give.

"Won't you remove your hat?" he said, thinking to perplex her by a mischievous request.

"No, thanks," she said blithely. "I'll just demolish this second egg. Then I'll tell you why I am here, and awaken Mrs. Jackson, no matter what her neighbors may think. But, why wait? I can eat and talk – put the facts in an eggshell, so to speak. My relatives own this house. Mr. Garth has long wanted a few books and knick-knacks, and I've come to get them. Some are collected already on the library table; the remainder I'll gather in the morning, with your permission. But I don't wish my visit to be known to others than Mrs. Jackson and Betty, and that is why I retreated to the loft when you and Mr. Walker arrived. It was a bother that anyone should select this day in particular to visit the property; but I imagined you would go away in an hour or so. Even when that vain young person, James Walker, locked me in, I believed Betty would come and release me after your departure. Besides, I wouldn't for worlds have let Walker see me. I – er – dislike him too much."

Armathwaite allowed to pass without comment her real motive for refusing to meet sharp-eyed James Walker; but again the problem of her identity called insistently for solution. If she was not Marguérite Garth, who on earth was she?

"Let me understand," he began. "The owner, and former occupant, of this house, was Mr. Stephen Garth?"

"Is," she corrected. "It remains his property, though he is living elsewhere."

Armathwaite so far forgot himself as to whistle softly between his teeth. And, indeed, such momentary impoliteness might be excused by his bewilderment. If Stephen Garth, who had owned and occupied the Grange, was still living, who was the man whose ghost had excited Elmdale, and driven back to prosaic Sheffield a certain Mrs. Wilkins, of nervous disposition and excitable habit?

"Ah!" he said judicially. "Messrs. Walker & Son, of Nuttonby, are his agents and Messrs. Holloway & Dobb, also of Nuttonby, his solicitors?"

"I suppose so," said the girl, deep in the second egg.

"But I understood that Mr. Stephen Garth had only one child, a daughter."

"Isn't he allowed to have a nephew, or an assorted lot of cousins?"

"Such contingencies are permissible, but they don't meet the present case."

"Why not?"

"Because, my dear young lady, anyone with half an eye in their head could see that you are a girl masquerading in a man's clothes. Now, who are you? I am entitled to ask. I have certain legal rights as the tenant of this house during the forthcoming three months, and as you have broken the law in more ways than you imagine, perhaps, I want to be enlightened before I condone your various offenses."

The girl was holding a glass of milk to her lips, and drank slowly until the glass was emptied; but her eyes met Armathwaite's over the rim, and they were dilated with apprehension, for a heedless prank was spreading into realms she had never dreamed of.

"Does it really matter who I am?" she managed to say quietly, though there was a pitiful flutter in her voice, and the hand which replaced the tumbler on the table shook perceptibly.

"Yes, it matters a great deal," he said. With a generosity that was now beginning to dawn on her, he averted his gaze, and scrutinized a colored print on the wall.

"But why?" she persisted.

"Because I am convinced that you are Mr. Stephen Garth's daughter."

She drew a deep breath, and he was aware instantly that she was hovering on the verge of candid confession. She moved uneasily, propped her elbows on the table, and concealed some part of her features by placing her clenched fists against her cheeks.

"Well, what if I am?" she said at last, with a touch of the earlier defiance in her voice.

"Are you? Please answer outright."

"Yes."

"And your father is alive?"

"Of course he is!"

"Mother, too?"

"Yes."

"Do they know you are here?"

"No. For some reason, they have taken a dislike to Elmdale, and hardly ever mention it, or the Grange, for that matter. Yet my poor old dad is such a creature of habit that he is always missing something – a book, a favorite picture, a bit of china, and I schemed to come here, pack a few of the articles he most values, and have them sent to our cottage in Cornwall. Once they're there, they couldn't very well be sent back, could they? But as my people have forbidden me ever to speak of or come near Elmdale, I didn't quite know how to manage it, until I hit on the notion of impersonating Percy Whittaker, the brother of a friend with whom I have been staying in Cheshire. Percy would do anything for me, but there was no sense in sending him, was there? He would be sure to bungle things

awfully, so I borrowed his togs, and traveled all night to a station on the other side of the moor – and nobody – thought – I was – a girl – except you – and Betty, of course. She – knew me – at once."

"For goodness' sake, don't cry. I believe you – every word. But did you travel from Cheshire in that rig-out?"

"No, oh, no! I wore a mackintosh, and a lady's hat. They're hanging in the hall. I took them off while crossing the moor."

"A mackintosh!"

"Yes. Don't be horrid! I turned up my trousers, of course."

"I'm not being horrid. I want to help you. You walked – how many miles?"

"Fourteen."

"And breakfasted at York?"

"Yes. You see, Betty would have brought me some lunch. Then *you* came."

"The bedroom was prepared for your use, then?"

"Yes. It's my room, really. Dad likes to sleep with his head to the west, and that is where the door is in that room."

"Poor girl! I would have given a good deal that this thing should not have happened. But we must make the best of a bad job. Now, I hope you'll accept my advice. Let me go upstairs and remove the clothes I shall need in the morning. Then you retire there, lock the door, and sleep well till Betty comes."

"Oh, I can't! You are very kind, but I *must* go to Mrs. Jackson now."

She had blushed and paled in alternate seconds. Half rising, she sank back into the chair again; though the table was between them, the wearing of a boy's clothes was not quite so easy a matter as it had seemed earlier. The one thing she did not guess was that this serious-faced man was far more troubled by thoughts of a reputed ghost than by an escapade which now loomed large in her mind.

"I'm half inclined to make you obey me," he said angrily, gazing at her now with fixed and troubled eyes.

"But you've been so good and kind," she almost sobbed. "Why should you be vexed with me now? I've told you the truth, I have, indeed."

"That is precisely the reason why I am sure you ought not to risk arousing the village to-night."

"But I won't. I'll tap at the window. Betty knows I'm here, somewhere, and she'll let me in at once."

Armathwaite was at his wits end to decide on the sanest course. A man less versed than he in the complexities of life would have counseled her retreat to the cottage as the only practicable means of escape from a position bristling with difficulties; but some subtle and intuitive sense warned him that Marguerite Garth should, if possible, leave Elmdale without the knowledge which credited that house with a veritable ghost.

"It's long after midnight," he persisted. "I'll have a snooze in a chair, and meet Betty Jackson before you show up. You can trust me absolutely to explain things to her."

"You forget that she is worrying dreadfully about me. Please let me go!"

"Very well," he said, driven to the half measures he had learnt to detest. "Promise me this – that you'll go straight to bed, and come here for breakfast without any conversation with the Jacksons."

The girl showed her relief, not unmixed with surprise at a strangely-worded stipulation.

"I'll do that," she said, after a little pause.

"Mind you – no talk. Just 'Good-night, I'm dead tired,' and that sort of thing."

"Yes," she agreed again, wonderingly.

"And the same in the morning?"

"I'll do my best."

"Off with you, then! I'll come to the door, and stand there, in case you're challenged by anybody."

"There's little fear of that in Elmdale at this hour," she said, with a new cheerfulness. He turned, ostensibly to pick up the electric torch. She was out in the hall instantly; when he rejoined her she was wearing the mackintosh.

"Good-night!" she said. "Next to dad, you're the nicest man I've ever met, and I don't even know your name."

"I'll introduce myself at breakfast," he growled, extinguishing the torch as he opened the door. He watched her swift run down the curving path to the gate, and heard her footsteps as she hurried into the village street. The night was so still that he knew when she turned into the front garden of the cottage, and he caught the tapping on a window, which, beginning timidly, soon grew more emphatic, perhaps more desperate.

Some minutes passed. He could see the back of the cottage, and no gleam of light shone in any of its tiny windows. Then followed some decided thumping on a door, but the tenement might have been an empty barn for all the response that was forthcoming.

Finally, he was aware of slow feet climbing dejectedly up the hill, and the garden gate creaked.

"I can't make anybody hear," wailed a tearful voice.

Armathwaite was even more surprised than the girl at this dramatic verification of his prophecy, but he availed himself of it as unscrupulously as any Delphic oracle.

"I told you so," he said. "Now, come in and go to bed!"

CHAPTER IV

SHOWING HOW EXPLANATIONS DO NOT ALWAYS EXPLAIN

Though weary and distraught, Marguérite Garth was of too frank a disposition to allow such an extraordinary incident to pass without comment. She halted in the porch by Armathwaite's side, and gazed blankly at the silent cottage.

"You spoke of a ghost," she murmured brokenly. "I'm beginning to think myself that I am bewitched. What can have happened? Why won't Betty or her mother let me in?"

"I'll have much pleasure in clearing up that trivial mystery about eight o'clock in the morning," he said with due gravity, fearing lest any attempt to relieve the situation by a joke might have the disastrous effect often achieved by a would-be humorist when a perplexed woman on the verge of tears is the subject of his wit. "Now, if you'll wait in the dining-room till I collect my garments, you'll be in bed and asleep within five minutes."

He gave her no further opportunity for argument or protestation. Closing and locking the door, he left the key in the lock, whereas, by virtue of the arrangement with Betty Jackson, it had reposed previously on the hall-table. In a few seconds he bustled in with an armful of clothes and a pair of boots. Handing over the torch, he said cheerfully:

"Now, leave everything to me, and you'll be astonished to find how all your woes will vanish by daylight. Good-night, and sleep well!"

Then the girl did a strange thing. She held the torch close to his face, and looked at him unflinchingly.

"I am very fortunate in having met a man like you," she said, and, without another word, turned and mounted the stairs. He waited until the bedroom door closed, and listened for the click of a lock, but listened in vain.

"It would appear that I'm still able to win the confidence of children and dogs," he muttered, smiling grimly. Then he made a pillow of his clothes on a couch beneath the window, and, such was the force of habit, was asleep quite soon. A glint of sunlight reflected from the glass in a picture woke him at four o'clock. After glancing at his watch, he slept again, and was aroused the next time by the crunch of feet on the graveled path outside. He was at the door while Betty Jackson was yet trying to insert the key which she had withdrawn and pocketed overnight.

He admitted her, and said good-humoredly:

"I came downstairs when you ran away from a goblin gong, leaving the door unlocked. I don't suppose we are in danger of burglary in Elmdale, but it is customary to take reasonable precautions."

Betty, who was carrying a jug of milk, flushed till her cheeks resembled a ripe russet apple. Denial was useless, but she tried to wriggle.

"I didn't mean any harm, sir," she said. "I only wanted to have a look around. The house is so upset."

"Put that milk on the dining-room table," he said.

She obeyed, glad that a dreaded ordeal seemed to have ended ere it had well begun. Armathwaite followed, and closed the dining-room door. What he really feared was that she might drop the jug, and that the resultant crash would awaken his guest before Betty and he had engaged in a heart-to-heart talk.

"Now," he said, raising the blind, and flooding the room with clear morning light, "I take you for a sensible girl, Betty."

"I hope I am, sir," she answered shyly.

"Have you quite recovered from your fright?"

"Yes, sir."

She reddened again, thinking she knew what was coming. She could have dealt with Walker, but glib pertness would not avail when this tall stranger's eyes were piercing her very soul. Nevertheless, his tone was gentle and reassuring – at first.

"I was ignorant of the real facts, you see, so I had to defend myself," he said. "I know the truth now. Miss Garth is upstairs and asleep. She heard the commotion caused by the gong, and could not endure the strain and loneliness of that dark garret any longer – "

"Was Miss Meg there – in the loft?" cried Betty, blurting out the first vague thought that occurred to her bemused brain, because those words, "Miss Garth is upstairs and asleep," swamped her understanding with a veritable torrent of significance.

"Yes. She hid there when Mr. Walker and I entered the house, and, by the merest chance, she was fastened in. She remained there twelve hours."

"Oh, poor thing! She'd be nearly clemmed to death."

In Yorkshire, "clemmed" means "starved," and "starved" means "perished with cold." Armathwaite could follow many of the vernacular phrases, and this one did not bother him.

"She was hungry, without doubt," he said, "but I did not send her supperless to bed. Now, I have various questions to put before you go to her room, and I want straightforward, honest answers. If I am told the truth, I shall know how to act for the best in Miss Garth's interests; and that is what *you* wish, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, sir! I'm sure none of us had any notion of doing wrong."

"Don't speak so loudly. I want no explanations of your behavior yesterday. It would have been wise had you trusted in me at once, but that was hardly to be expected, seeing that I was a man fallen from the moon... Why didn't you let Miss Garth enter when she knocked at your window and the door last night?"

The girl's eyes opened wide in sheer distress.

"Oh, sir!" she almost whispered; "what time did she come?"

"About midnight."

"There now! I half fancied that such a thing might happen. When I ran home, sir, I was fair scairt, because there *has* been talk of a ghost, and I wasn't too keen about coming in here in the dark. But mother was worried, and wouldn't go to bed. She would have it that Miss Meg had got clear of the house, and was hiding in a shed at the top of the lane. So, after a lot of talk, mother and I went there together. There was a light in the dining-room as we passed, but it had gone out when we came back."

"Solvitur ambulando," muttered the man, smiling at the simple solution of an occurrence which had puzzled him greatly at the time.

"What's that, sir?" demanded Betty.

"Sorry. I was thinking aloud – a bad habit. Those two Latin words mean that your walk to the shed disposes of a difficulty. Now for the next item, Betty. Miss Meg, as you call her, is the young lady who lived here a good many years?"

"She was born here, sir. She and I are nearly of an age – twenty-two, each of us."

"And her father was Mr. Stephen Garth?"

"Yes, sir."

"But isn't he dead?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Dead and buried two years this very month."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. Mother was the first who saw his dead body. She was nearly frightened into a fit."

"Tell me the exact facts."

"Well, sir, Mrs. Garth and Miss Meg went away, all of a sudden. There was no quarrel that we know of, and Mr. Garth himself helped a man to carry out their boxes. They kissed on parting at the gate. I myself heard him saying that he would join them as soon as he had finished some book

he was busy with. He was a great man for writing and studying, and he'd walk ten miles to get some granny's tale about dales ways, and the things people used to do in the old times. But no sooner had they left him than he changed. We all noticed it. He paid off the gardener, and dismissed two maids, and lived here alone. That didn't last long. I used to bring eggs and milk and things, and he'd take them in at the door. He'd talk pleasantly enough, but he looked awful worried. Then, one morning, I couldn't make anybody hear, and I thought he had gone out early. About seven o'clock that evening mother went and knocked, but there was no answer. Next morning it was the same; but when mother and I tried again in the evening, we noticed that the curtain, which can be drawn across the glass top of the door, had been pulled aside. At the inquest they wanted to know if it had been in the same position when we were there before, but we couldn't be certain, though we thought it must have been drawn. Anyhow, mother looked in, and ran away screaming, and I ran after her, not knowing why. In a minute or two she was able to speak, and said she had seen Mr. Garth hanging near the clock. Some men went, and they saw him clearly, and one of them, Mr. Benson, rode to Bellerby for the policeman. He came in about an hour, and broke open the door, and cut poor Mr. Garth down. He had been dead a long time, the doctor said, and the worst thing was that nobody could find Mrs. Garth and Miss Meg. Not that any blame could be laid to them, because Mr. Garth himself said so in a letter addressed 'To the Coroner,' which was laid at the foot of the clock. We have a weekly paper in the cottage, sir, and you can see the whole account there."

"Get that paper, and give it to me privately sometime to-day," said Armathwaite. "Meanwhile, your story is ample for my present purpose. Were you surprised at seeing Miss Garth yesterday?"

"Sir, you could have knocked me down with a feather. And she in a man's clothes, and all. She came over the moor about ten o'clock – "

"Never mind the details now. Did she speak of her father?"

"In a sort of a way, sir."

"Did she give you the impression that he was still living?"

"Now that you mention it, sir, she did, but I couldn't quite understand what she said, and thought, for sure, I was mistaken. It wasn't the kind of thing one might ask questions about – was it, sir?"

"No, indeed. Knowing he had committed suicide, you didn't like to hurt her feelings?"

"That's it, sir, exactly."

"You hadn't much talk, I take it?"

"No, sir. She was all of a shake with excitement, and wanted to be let into the house before anyone else in the village could see her. I was to leave her alone till one o'clock, she said. Then I was to bring her something to eat, and we'd have a long chat. And that's the last I've seen of her, sir."

It has been noted that Armathwaite was no lover of the middle way in dealing with the hazards of existence. In fact, strength of will and inflexibility of purpose had already driven him from place and power to the haven of retirement, which he imagined he would find in Elmdale. He had made up his mind overnight as to the handling of the problem set by Marguérite Garth's presence in her father's house, and he saw no reason now why he should depart from the decision reached then.

"You've been very candid, Betty Jackson," he said, looking steadily into the girl's wondering eyes, "and I mean to be equally outspoken with you. For some cause, which I cannot fathom, and may never inquire into, Miss Garth is not only unaware of any recent death in her family, but is convinced that her father is alive and well. There is a flaw in the argument somewhere, but it is hardly my business, nor yours, to discover the weak spot. Now, I propose that we let the young lady leave Elmdale as happy in her belief, or her ignorance, as she entered it. In plain English, I suggest that neither you, nor I, nor your mother, say one syllable about the suicide of Mr. Stephen Garth. If his daughter believes he is living, we should be hard put to it to convince her that he is dead."

"He *is* dead, sir. I saw him in his coffin," said Betty earnestly.

"I am not disputing your statement. My sole consideration, at this moment, is the happiness of the girl now lying asleep upstairs. Suppose, within the next hour or two, she says something about

the surprise her father will receive when he sees some of the books and other articles she means to send to her present home, are you going to tell her that she is utterly mistaken – that Mr. Garth has been dead and buried – that she is talking like a lunatic?"

"Oh, no, sir! I wouldn't dream of speaking that way to Miss Meg."

"But don't you see, it has to be either one thing or the other. Either you accept her view that her father is alive, or you are constantly acting in a way that must arouse her suspicions. And, if once she begins to question you, what will happen then? You'll be in a ten times more difficult position than if you convince yourself, for the time being, that you were dreaming when you saw some man in a coffin."

"But I wasn't," persisted Betty. "Why, sir, the whole village knows –"

"I'm not doubting your word in the least. The point at issue is this – do you mean to perplex and worry Miss Meg by informing her that her father hanged himself in the hall of this very house two years ago?"

"No, sir. That I don't."

"You promise that?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"I'm glad you've come to my way of thinking. Miss Garth will leave here to-day, or to-morrow, at the latest. Till then, you must keep guard over your tongue. Go now, and tell your mother what I have told you. Make her understand the facts most clearly. If she agrees to help you and me in this matter, she is to come here and take up a housekeeper's duties. I'll pay her and you well for your services, but my instructions must be carried out to the letter. If she refuses, or feels unable, to obey my wishes in this matter, she is not to cross the threshold. Do you understand that fully?"

Armathwaite could be tersely emphatic in speech and manner when he chose. He had taken Betty Jackson into his confidence, but he had also expressed his intentions in a way that left her in no doubt as to the result if any lack of discretion on her part, or her mother's, led to a crisis. He had gauged the situation to a nicety. Mrs. Jackson and her daughter were well disposed towards Marguérite Garth, but there was no harm in stilling their tongues through the forceful medium of self-interest.

When the two came back together within a few minutes he knew that he had swept immediate obstacles from the path. Mrs. Jackson was a shrewd Yorkshire woman, and needed no blare of trumpets to inform her on which side her bread was buttered.

"Good morning, sir," she cried cheerfully. "Betty has told me what you said, and I think you're quite right. What time do you want breakfast, and what'll you have cooked?"

Armathwaite nodded his satisfaction.

"We three will get along famously," he laughed. "Now, Betty, put some water in one of the bedrooms, and, when you call Miss Garth, get my dressing-case, which is on the table, and bring it to me. She will answer your mother's questions about breakfast. Any hour that suits her will suit me. And let us all look as pleasant as though there wasn't such a thing as a ghost within a thousand miles of Elmdale."

The chance phrase reminded him of the elder Walker's words: "Elmdale is eight miles from Nuttonby, and thousands from every other town." Yet, remote as was this moor-edge hamlet, a sordid tragedy had been enacted there. Someone had died in that house under circumstances which called imperatively for a most searching inquiry. A daylight phantom had replaced the grim specter which credulous villagers were wont to see on a summer's eve. Was it his business to exorcise the evil spirit? He did not know. He closed his eyes resolutely to that side of the difficulty. Marguérite Garth must be sent on her way first; then he would make a guarded investigation into the history of the man whom Mrs. Jackson had seen "hanging near the clock."

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