

Crockett Samuel Rutherford

Deep Moat Grange



Samuel Crockett

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Crockett S. R. Samuel Rutherford

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CHAPTER I

THE EMPTY MAIL GIG

I was only a young fellow when these things began to happen among us, but I remember very well the morning when it first came out about the Bewick carrier. He was postman, too, but had got permission to keep a horse and cart so that he might make a good little bit by fetching parcels and orders from town. Town to us meant East Dene, and Bewick, to which Harry went, lay away to the east among the woods and hills. It was a lonesome place, Bewick, and, indeed, is still, though now they have got a railway coming within eight miles or so. But the mystery of the Moat Wood happened before there was any talk of railways.

Harry Foster was his name – the carrier's, I mean – and a common one enough in Northumberland. Many a ride have I gotten on his cart, which was a light one on springs – blue body, orange shafts, panelled with red, and the shafts lined red. You could tell the cart anywhere. At least any of the Breckonside boys could, quite a mile away. And if it was too far to see the cart, there was no mistaking Dappled Bess, the carrier's horse, which was bright orange colour with white patches, like the circus pony the clown rides. You've seen that pony. They have one like that in every circus that has ever come to our town, and there's few that pass Breckonside – Seager's, and Lord George's, and Bostock's, the Original and the Real Original, both, and in old days, so my father tells me, Wombwell's itself. Oh, a great place for circuses is Breckonside!

I will tell you about it. Breckonside, where I live, is a good big village about ten miles from the big town of East Dene, where there are docks and a floating landing-stage, and a jail – everything modern and up to date – with railways and electricity cars, and a theatre every night almost, and tramcars that you can hang on behind, and mostly everything that makes a boy happy – that is, for a day.

But still, give me Breckonside for steady. Why, there's only one policeman in Breckonside, and he owes my father for his grocer's bill – oh, ever so much! I shall not tell how much, but he knows that I know. More than that, he always tells his wife what he is going to do, and where he is going to go, and she tells Mrs. Robb, her neighbour over the hedge, and Mrs. Robb tells Mrs. Martin, and Mrs. Martin's Tommy tells me, or else I lick him. So we know. We like our policeman in Breckonside. He can make lovely whistles out of bore-tree, and his name is Codling.

You can see the sea from Breckon Hill, which is wooded to the top, only by climbing up a tree. And away to the north, Scotland way, you can make out the hills called Cheviots, like a long, low, blue cloud.

But about the Bewick carrier, Harry Foster, the thing is just this, and it is a Mystery. I saw the red and blue cart come in – the piebald pony lame, and the splashboard all leaves and blood, but no Harry Foster to be seen anywhere.

It was catechism morning, when the school had to go in half an hour earlier, and the Dissenter folk could keep away their children, if they liked; and that always made Mr. Mustard, our schoolmaster, very mad – hopping, indeed. He did not admire Dissenters anyway, at the best of times, because they had voted against him when he wanted to be parochial officer, or something. And it was just gall and squirm wood (as Elsie said) for him to see Ned Tiger, the Wesleyan minister's son, playing "plunkie" and "ringi" with marbles, when he, Henry Powell Mustard, a good Churchman and parish clerk, had to be teaching catechism to half-empty benches. He would glower and rap with his

cane on the desk, and find fault – all the time with an eye on Ned Tiger (his real name was Wheatly) and Ben Overton, who was a Baptist, and Peter McNab and Sandy Auld (who, as you can see by their names, were Presbyterians, and hit anybody who called them Dissenters, being of the Scotch kirk and good fighters).

Mr. Mustard taught us our duty, how to walk humbly in our sphere, and so forth, with a supple cane, and he whipped the girls, too, till I stopped him. But that comes after. He whipped us all that morning, without forgetting one, and at every good shot of Ned Tiger's alley-taw he would scowl worse than ever and discover one more unfortunate to wallop.

Yet he was a good teacher, and made good scholars; kind, too – out of school, that is. But as we only met him *in* school, and with a black frown running across-ways between his eyes, we declined to believe in his kindness of heart, at any price.

"You are my subjects, great and little, bad or good," he used to preach to us. "In Breckonside school only the king, the head of the Church, is greater than I. Like him, I reward the virtuous, and I punish the naughty!"

We thought within us that virtue must be scarce in Breckonside school. For as yet but few of the rewards had come our way. Of punishments there was never any lack, as our skins well knew.

"Some rascals were in my garden last night," said Mr. Mustard, "to the overturning of my potted geraniums. The size of his boot was a number six, like what are sold at Provost Yarrow's shop. I will flog all the boys with number six boots bought at The Shop, unless the culprit confesses. Show boots."

We showed them, putting them, as commanded, on the wooden desks with a clatter that made the ink leap in the dirty bottles. We did that on purpose.

"Quiet, boys, till I compare them," said Mr. Mustard. "Stand out, you – Tommy Bottle – you have on number six!"

Tommy Bottle dug his knuckles into his eyeholes and whined: "Please, sir, I was –"

"Don't answer me, sir!" cried Mr. Mustard; "how dare you? Bring me the long cane!"

"But, please, sir, I –"

"Thomas Bottle, your punishment is doubled!" shouted the master, bringing the pointer down across Tommy's legs, as a kind of "lick and a promise." He needn't. Tommy knew well enough what was coming.

"If you please, Mr. Mustard," I called out, "it was me that sold Tommy's father that pair of boots this morning in my father's shop, so Tommy couldn't have broken your flowerpots last night, with these boots on his feet!"

"Eh, what!" cried the master, turning upon me; "well, Tommy is excused. But the rest –"

The others provided with our sixes were, to wit, Frederick Allen, Widow Allen's boy; Bob Grey, Eben Pringle, and Dorky Cobb – all poor boys.

But before punishment began I put my own before the master's eyes. *They were number sixes.*

"If you punish Fred and Bob and Eben and Dorky, you must whip me, too, Mr. Mustard," I said. "And I shall have to tell my father, and he won't like it, because nobody will come any more to our shop to buy boots, if they are to be punished for it at school!"

I always called him Mr. Mustard, because I was the only boy in the school who dared do it, and I knew he hated it. But, you see, he was afraid of my father. Most people in Breckonside were afraid of my father.

So I got them off at that time; but presently the master welted Bob Grey for making a noise, though he knew perfectly well it was I who had done it. And the lesson was not over before he had got even with the lot of them – Fred and Eben and Dorky and all – except me, of course.

I was always first on my bench; and that was the highest in the school. You see, I wore the best coat, and Mr. Mustard got all his provisions, his stationery, his coals, his bacon from my father's shop; and he was supposed to settle his account once a year. He gave my father a little honey in exchange, when it was the time to draw the sections off from the hives, but he never paid very much money.

So I could stay away from school when I liked, and so long as my father did not find out, no harm ever came. Mr. Mustard never asked a question. He took it for granted that I had been sent somewhere to look after some of my father's little businesses. The boys knew this, and used to get me to take them into school if they were late or had been "kipping" – girls, too, sometimes; though they did not play truant regularly, as we did. It was a good thing in Breckonside to be my father's son.

Just after Scripture reading and catechism, if the vicar did not come to examine us – which was not often – we had half an hour's play, while the "Dissenters" had multiplication table and Troy weight, to keep them aware of themselves. So, while Mr. Mustard was rubbing his spectacles and telling us not to be longer away than half an hour, I took out my quill gun and cut a smart pellet with the end of it out of a slice of potato. Then I cut another with the opposite muzzle, and with my pretty, tiny ramrod I shot it under the desk. It took the end of Mr. Mustard's nose neatly, making a red bull's-eye, for which Freddy Allen was promptly whipped, because his mother was a widow and had no influence with the School Committee.

Now I had promised *my* mother to go to school that day, and not make my father angry again. Well, I had been to school, and had been *dux* of the catechism, which was surely enough glory and honour for one day. So soon, therefore, as we got out I made a rush down the street towards the bridge where was Elsie's house – a little cottage by the bridge end, all covered over with Virginia creeper and roses, though Nancy Edgar, the "outworker" with whom she lived, was quite poor, and the neighbours said it was a disgrace that she should make such a flaunting show, for all the world as if she was rich and could afford to buy plants from a nursery-man. But everything that Nancy had given her, or found thrown out as of no use, seemed to do with her, and grew to a marvel.

"I expect it is because I love them!" she said. But privately I thought it was because of Elsie. She was ever such a nice girl, Elsie Stennis, and I had kept friends with her, steady, ever since she came to Breckonside from Thorsby. For she is a town girl, Elsie, and her father and mother are dead. But no nonsense about her – no love and stuff. She was what they call pretty, too, but not set up about it in the least, the way girls get. You would have liked her just as I did. Nearly every one did – except her grandfather.

Well, when I got to Nance Edgar's cottage, which stands back a bit from the road, with a joiner's yard at one side, and the road to Bewick stretching away on the other, I saw Elsie at the gable window. She had a book in her hand, her finger between the leaves. "Come down, Elsie," I called up to her. "I'm not going to school to-day. Come and see the new greenhouses they are building over at Rushworth Court. I can get you a ride in a dogcart all the way. Our man Jake is going with a cargo of paint. Father has the order."

But Elsie wouldn't. She said that it was all very well for me, who was going to be as rich as ever was, to "kip," but that she meant to learn, even though Mr. Mustard was a brute.

I said that was nonsense, and that I would give her half of all I had. At any rate I urged her to come down now. And just at that moment as I was speaking, she pointed over my shoulder. From the gable window she could see something I could not.

"Do look – what's that?" she cried. And her voice sounded pale.

It was Harry Foster's wagon, and I could see in a minute that something was wrong. Oh, it was easy to see that, even for a boy. My ears sung and I felt suddenly old. But by a sort of instinct I got the piebald pony by the bridle, which was trailing among her forefeet. And I could see she had been down, too. Her knees showed that. Poor Dappled Bess never tried to get away. She had terror in her eye, quite like a human it was. And she seemed to limp with all her feet at once. I was sorry for Bess. She and I were friends, you see. I used to ride her about in our pasture on Sundays, to keep her from feeling lonesome.

But it was Elsie who cried out. She had looked inside the mail cart.

"There's blood!" she gasped. "O Joe!"

She didn't faint just when she was needed to do something, though she did put her hand to her eyes, and, faith, I don't blame her. She came and said very quietly: "I'll take the horse's head, Joe – you look. I can't!"

Then I looked; and just as soon as I put my foot on the step I turned sick. But I didn't let on, being a big fellow and getting on for seventeen. There was a big, darkish pool, sort of half dried, under the seat, and there were cuts that had been made with an axe scattered all about, even on the soaky bottom of the cart. The whip had been cut right off three or four inches above the black japanned holder, and the lash lay over the splashboard of the trap, which was all reddened, too, and half covered with leaves. I saw some flyfisher's hooks stuck in the leather apron. There were no mail bags, no parcels for Bewick Upton – nothing at all in the post trap except what I have told. And it was quite enough for me. I got down, and we all took the road to the police station as quick as the pony could limp. I did this because I knew it was the proper place to go – not because old Silver-buttons Codling was the least good.

And in the crack of a thumb I had the whole village after me – asking questions, and wanting to look. But I kept going on, calling out to the folk to get out of the way.

Then my father came, and I stopped for him, and he looked the trap all over very carefully, as if it were something he was going to take at a valuation.

Then he said out loud: "This is a bad business; this is no accident. It looks to me like murder!" "MURDER!"

The vicar had bustled up. He and my father almost tied for the first place in Breckonside, and so it was a settled thing that if my father thought one thing, the vicar, without any ill feeling, would take the opposite view.

"And why, Mr. Yarrow, why, may I ask? An accident is much more admissible – in this quiet parish. The horse has run away. See how lame he is, and the postman has cut wildly with an axe or other sharp weapon in order to – to – to rid himself of the furious animal – to get loose, in short, a foolish thing to do, I admit, but in such circumstances – I do not see – "

"No, Mr. Alderson, that is just it, you do not see," said my father. "There is this whip handle cut through six inches from the holder; what do you make of that?"

"Well," said the vicar, looking for arguments in defence of his parochial quiet, "there is the lash. There has been an accident, you see. Perhaps poor Harry went suddenly out of his mind. There is insanity in the family. He may have cut himself. That would account for the – the substance of a fluid nature resembling blood, and also for the lash cut from the butt of the whip!"

My father took the stained thong in his fingers. It was curiously braided, plait laid over plait, rather flat than round, and exceedingly neat.

"This is not the lash of Harry Foster's whip," he said. "I ought to know, because I sold him the whip. This is a worked lash, and if I mistake not I know the fingers that wrought that pattern."

CHAPTER II

POACHER DAVIE

There was no more thought of school that day – neither on the part of Mr. Mustard nor of any of his scholars. All the world (but not his wife – by no means his wife) must needs go in search of Harry Foster and his probable murderer. It was the first real mystery ever known in Breckonside.

Now the missing carrier and postman had no open enemies. He was a quiet, middle-aged man who had lived long in the village, a widower without children; no man's foe, not even his own; a steady, trustworthy, kindly man, "and," said Miss Harbishaw, the postmistress, "to be trusted with untold gold," or, what was much more (departmentally), with unsealed mail bags.

The telegraph was no doubt working hard to bring up officers from East Dene, Clifton, and Thorsby, the big towns to the south. Meantime, however, all the male population of Breckonside poured northward. But Elsie and I got away the very first.

I wanted her to stay at home, but she would not. She would be more frightened alone in that house by the Bridge End, she said, than with me. So as I could not refuse Elsie many things, of course she had to have permission to come. Besides, she would have come at any rate, permission or no permission. It was difficult to be even with Elsie. So I was very gracious and let her.

As soon as we were clear of the village and across the bridge, Elsie and I came out upon Brom Common. This is a rare place for Saturdays at all times of the year, but specially in autumn, because of the brambles that grow there. Now it was all green and yellow with gorse bushes. Artists painted it, coming all the way from East Dene and Thorsby to do it. And Elsie and I found it good to bird-nest in. There were two roads across the waste. One to the left struck off just past Elsie's cottage, and the other went to the right; that was the road which Harry Foster must have taken the night before. He had no calls to make on the way. The letters for that district would be delivered by the walking post carriers going to Bewick Upton, and taking the farms and houses on their way.

"Let's take the short cut – you know – the footpath over Moor Clint," said Elsie, pointing with her finger to a long low heathery ridge through which the grey stone peeped. A pale grey thing, like a piece of twine, wimpled up it and ducked over the top.

"Very likely," I cried, "and miss anything that is on the road."

"We shan't miss anything," she said, giving me a look of disdain; "don't you remember the leaves in the cart? Where do you suppose they came from?"

I had not thought of that. Yes, of course, there was nothing of that sort on the Bewick Upton road nearer than Sparhawk Wood, where the big Moat Forest throws a spur across the Bewick road. On the left-hand road it was quite different. There were trees nearly all the way, right from the Bridge End of Breckonside. But then, as official postman, Harry Foster had his route marked out for him, and there was nothing to take him toward the left – indeed, nothing but farms and trout streams all the way to the Cheviots.

So, like dogs on a live scent, Elsie and I stretched across the moor by the Moor Clint footpath as fast as our legs would carry us. The rest of the search parties from the village kept to the road, going slowly and searching minutely. But I was sure that Elsie was right, and that whatever there was to find would lie beyond the array of dark-green fir trees which stood like an army across our path.

It was kind of quaky, too, I admit, going along, getting nearer and nearer all the time. For, when you came to think about it, there might be a murderer any where about there, waiting for you. But Elsie did not seem to mind. Elsie always knew just what to do, and wasn't at all backward about telling a fellow, either.

I forget if I have ever told you what Elsie Stennis was like. Well, nothing very particular at that time – only a tallish slip of a girl, who walked like a boy, a first-rate whistler, and a good jumper

at a ditch. She always had her hair tied behind her head with a blue ribbon, and then falling all in a mess about her shoulders. It wouldn't stop still, but blew out every way with the wind, and was such a nuisance. I would have had it cut off, but Elsie wouldn't. It was yellowy coloured.

In spite of this, Elsie was a first-rate companion, nearly as good as a boy, and just no trouble at all. Indeed, I generally did what she said, not because I didn't know as well, but because it kept her in a better temper. Her temper was like kindling wood, and I hate being bothered, unless, of course, it is something serious.

You mustn't think we were so very brave going off like that to find out about Harry Foster. Only, you see, we had always lived in the country, and didn't think that any one could run faster than we could. In town I was scared out of my life lest I should slip in front of a tramcar, and even Elsie went pale the first time she went on one of the ferry steamers. But in the country we were all right.

Well, nothing happened till we got to the edge of Sparhawk Wood, where we came to the road again, the road along which poor Harry had come with his load of letters and parcels very early that morning, and where, no doubt, the village people were even then searching for his body. I do not deny that when we felt our feet on its smooth, white dust we went a bit slower, Elsie and I. So would you. We didn't really mind, of course, but just we went slower. And we saw to it that the back track was clear. Elsie picked up her skirts. She was a good runner – better than I was. She said, after, she would have waited for me, but – well, no matter.

We saw the long road like a gray ribbon laid across the brown and yellow moor. There was nobody there – no black heap, nothing. Before us we could not see far. The highway took a turn and plunged into Sparhawk Wood very suddenlike, and got dark and gloomy. We stood on the stile a while in the sunshine – I don't know why, and presently we got an awful start. For Elsie declared, and stuck to it, that she saw something move among some bracken down by the burnside.

I got ready to run. Perhaps I had even started, when Elsie called me back.

"It is only Davie Elshiner, the night poacher," she cried. "I can see the patch on the left knee of his trousers. Nance Edgar sewed it on. I saw her."

And as neither of us were in the least afraid of Davie Elshiner, alive, dead, asleep, awake, drunk, sober, or in any intermediate state, we hailed him. But he did not answer our shouts. So we went to look. And as we went I said to Elsie, "What if he has been a witness to the deed and they have killed him, too!"

"Come on," she said, grabbing me, "let's see, any way – we can't stop now!"

"*But suppose they should kill us!*" I could hardly get the words out. I was not frightened, only I seemed to lose my voice. Funny, wasn't it? Elsie hushed me down quick, and said, nastily, that if I was afraid I could take her hand or go home to nursie.

Afraid! Me afraid! Likely! Would I have been there if I had been afraid? But it was Davie, right enough, and we were both relieved. He had a good backful of fish, regular preserved water beauties that never could have been got except in the Duke's pools on the Bram Burn. They were all done up in fern leaves, as nice as ninepence, and as freckly as Fred Allen's nose. But Davie had stopped by the way after catching them. A flask and the remains of a loaf told why.

"Davie," said Elsie, shaking him; "wake up, man, we have something to ask you!"

Davie opened his eyes. He was dazed, not so much at the bright sun and the heather – he was used to that – but at seeing us. And he looked all round about him to take his bearings.

"What are you doing so far from home?" he asked, sitting up on his elbow. "The dominie will thrash you!"

"Davie," said Elsie, "did you see Harry Foster this morning?"

Davie laughed with a funny chuckle he had, but which sounded awful just then. "Aye," he said, "I was in his cart, lassie. He gied me a lift to kirk or market – I will not be telling you which!"

"Davie," I said, "tell us. This is no joke. Harry Foster is very likely murdered, and all the Queen's mail bags stolen. A lot of money, too, they were sending from the bank in East Dene to the new branch in Bewick."

I knew that because I had heard my father say so.

Never did I see a man so struck as Davie. His face changed. The smirk went out of it and it got gray, with the blue watery eyes sticking out like gooseberries.

"Then if I cannot prove myself innocent," he gasped, "they will hang me!"

"But you are innocent?" I asked eagerly.

"Ow, aye, I'm innocent enough," he said, "but can I prove it? That's the question. There's a deal of folk, gameys and landlords, that has a pick at poor Davie for the odd snare he sets and the big trout he catches. They'll nail this on him. And I gave Harry two – three flies newly busked," he added hoarsely, "did you hear?.."

"Yes," said I, "I saw them. They were stuck in the leather apron."

Davie the poacher raised his hand in a discouraged way to his throat, and caressed it, feeling it all over like a doctor.

"I'm feared ye are no worth thrippens!" he said.

CHAPTER III

THE BAILIFF OF DEEP MOAT GRANGE

Elsie and I cheered him. We would do what we could, which truly was not much. But I promised for my father, whose arm was long in Breckonside, reaching even to East Dene. But the poacher shook his head.

"They will get poor Davie. They will put it on him – yes, for sure!" he repeated. And from this melancholy conclusion he was not to be moved. He offered to accompany us, however, on our search. And we were glad of that, because we were quite sure of his innocence, and in such a case the difference between three and two is very marked. Two – you want to get close and rub shoulders. Three – you scatter and look the hedges.

We advised the old poacher to hide his fish under the bank, but, with strong good sense, he refused.

"They are Davie's only chance," he said, "there is just a possibility that there's an *aw-li-bi* in Davie's basket. He has caught so many of the Duke's trouts since three this morning that they may think he could not have had the time to make away with a man as well!"

As we went he told us how the post carrier had got his mail bags from Miss Harbishaw, the postmistress, on the stroke of three that morning – "a fearful sight in a mustard-coloured flannel dressing gown" – Davie described her. He himself had stood on the other side of the mail cart, well in the shadow.

"Did Miss Harbishaw see you?" Elsie asked.

"Well," said the poacher, "I would not just make so bold as to say. She might have seen my legs, mixed up with Bess's piebald stockings. But I kept fairly quiet, not wanting her to spot the fishing basket on my back."

Davie was not stupid, and he saw clearly enough that it was the best thing he could do if Harry Foster were really dead, to go and help look for his murderer. So he came along with us, telling us of the talk he had had with the carrier in his cart.

"I was telling stories, and we were wonderful merry!" he admitted.

"How far did you go with him?" we asked.

"To where the road dives into the wood like a rabbit!" he answered. "Here!" he cried, suddenly throwing up his hand.

And there, plain enough to be seen, were the marks of Davie's boot heels as he had leaped upon the bank from the post gig.

"Then I crossed the dyke and went down to the waterside."

From that point, as you may suppose, we followed carefully the marks of the wheels. The pony had been going no faster than a walk. The tracks were deeply impressed, and as it was damper under the trees, you could even see where Piebald Bess had been sparing her lame foot, which, of course, she would not have the chance of doing when pushed to a trot.

Then Davie came to a halt, Elsie just behind him. There was nothing particular, only the ground was pawed and cut about in little crescent discs, as if a horse had got wearied standing and wanted to get on. Then beyond that the wheel ruts were much deeper than before.

"He has talked to somebody, he has taken other passengers here," cried Davie, "and I never heard them – fool that I was – thinking of nothing but the Duke's silly trout in the burn yonder."

Without speaking we followed on, till the Brom Water, slow, deep, and still, lay before us. It was strictly preserved, and we boys dared not visit it for fear of the fishery watchers and keepers, who were up to all sorts of tricks to catch us. Only old hands like Davie dared such a thing, and even they chose their time.

The road went across a bridge, a high-arched, old-fashioned structure, which I liked coming over in our light cart, because of the curious "hunch" it gave you as if you were on a swing. And close in by the bridge and on the near side of it, we came at last on what we had come out to look for – the signs of a struggle, the wheel tracks confused and partly up on the bank, the traces of many feet, very indistinct owing to the hard, dry ground, and (what took all our eyes) a dark irregular patch on the left side of the road, which had filled and overflowed the deep furrow of a track.

It did not need any doctor's certificate to tell us that that was blood, and we knew very well that we stood where poor Harry Foster had been foully dealt with. But of the carrier himself we could see nothing. The pony had bounded ahead at full speed, and for Davie's sake we thought it best not to go farther. Because the people who were coming along the Breckonside road might easily cover over the tracks or destroy them, crowding to see.

So we went to meet the first of them at the place where Davie Elshiner had wished his benefactor a good morning and jumped on the bank, with the last jest on his lips. We were just in time. Codling, our fat policeman, was there, and he took up Davie on the spot, warning him that all he might say would be used against him.

"I don't care," said Davie. "I will tell all I know, and that's little enough – more shame to me for going after trouts with poor Harry so near his end."

The village men scattered to search the wood and the waterside, finding nothing but sundry "stances" where the angler had stood while fishing, and the nook in which he had slept among the bracken, with the marks of our feet as we went toward him from the stile.

We started off home without making any more discoveries, and as we went Elsie pointed up to the firs above our heads.

"What sort of leaves were in the cart when we saw it?" she asked me suddenly.

"Some kind of big, broad leaves – oak, I think," I answered, for indeed, I had paid no very great attention.

"Well," she said, "will you please tell me where big, broad leaves came from in Spar hawk Wood?"

And then I saw how true it was – the thing that she meant to say. There were only tall Scotch firs in the Sparhawk, and not a low-growing tree or one with a leaf upon it! Only pine needles and fir cones.

"We will come back in the morning," I said to Elsie, "and see what we can find. Piebald Bess never came back this road!"

"As, indeed, we might have seen before this by the single tracks," she added. And, indeed, it was no great discovery after all. But old Codling and the village men just took it for granted, and as many of the farmers and even my father came in conveyances there was soon no lack of tracks all over the road.

But Elsie and I kept our counsel and made tryst for the morning. It is terrible to get bitten with the wanting to find out things. The more you know the more you want to know.

Next morning it was still and clear, with a promise of heat. Elsie had asked Nance Edgar if she could go, but I had dispensed with asking my father. Indeed, so long as he was assured that I was the cleverest boy in school, and at the top of the topmost class, he did not trouble much about me, having other things on his mind. And Mr. Mustard was always ready to tell him all that. Besides it was true. I was not so clever as Elsie, and I did not pretend to be. But I could lick everybody in Breckonside school into fits, and the master was cowed of my father. I think he would have let me sit on his tall hat!

This morning was a Friday, as I remember, and there were plenty of men searching the moor, prowling about the woods, some with picks and shovels, some just with their hands in their pockets. They were looking for Harry Foster. The East Dene police, too, were all about the edges of Sparhawk Wood, as important as if they knew all about it but wouldn't tell. One of them, posted by the big, black patch to keep people off, first told us to go back, and then asked where we were going.

Elsie merely told him that so far as she knew the road went further – on to Bewick Upton, in fact. "Are you the kids that came across the moor and found this – and the prisoner?"

To make him civil we told him we were, but that Davie Elshiner was surely innocent and would not harm a fly.

"That's as may be," said the policeman; "what did he say when you woke him?"

We told the man that Davie was afraid of being suspected, having been last seen with the missing man, also how he was sure that because he was a known poacher people would not believe him.

"Aye," said the policeman, nodding his head dreadfully wisely, "indeed, he was right to say that. Ah, a bad conscience is our best friend! It is indeed!" And everything we could say in favour of Davie seemed just to tell against him, so that we had to be content with saying that he was the person least likely to do such a thing, because he would certainly be suspected, and that they might as well suspect us.

This last remark seemed to impress the policeman, who pulled out a fat notebook and solemnly jotted it down before our eyes.

"It's a good rule in our business," he said slowly, "to suspect the least likely persons. Thank you very much for your interesting communication – thank you very much, indeed!"

"Ah, you're dotty!" I called out to him in a sudden fume of anger, and left him standing there and slowly buckling up the flap of the inside pocket in which he had stowed away his precious notebook.

Now I am not going to pretend that Elsie and I found anything very grand that day, for we didn't. But at any rate we knew for certain how Dappled Bess came home, and where the leaves came from. It was all simple enough and quite natural. The poor beast had got a fright by the bridge on the Bewick road. She turned off it, therefore, as soon as she could. We found the wheel tracks leading away to the left along a rough moor track. The cart had been going fast, evidently empty or at least very lightly laden. For there was little depth to the impression even in fairly mossy places, but the rocks and stones were bumped and scarred with the iron tire as the wagon rebounded from side to side.

We soon found ourselves making for the highway, which is known in our parts as the Old Military Road. It goes into Scotland to a place called Longtown, and beyond that, they say, to Edinburgh and Glasgow. But that I only knew from hearsay. At any rate it was old, and so were the woods all about it. Centuries old they were, and the fine old house among them was called Deep Moat Grange. It stood right in the middle, and had always been inhabited by rich folk. But, only a few years before, my father had done it all up for old Mr. Stennis, whom they called the Golden Farmer, because of the great deal of money he had made farming and dealing in cattle. He was living there now, and for that matter was Elsie's very own grandfather. We called him the Unnatural, because he would have nothing to do with her – all because of something her mother had done long ago, before Elsie was so much as born. But he was a lusty old cock bird, and being rich was much respected. He bred first-rate sporting terriers that brought in a power of money, my father said. We knew all about him, too, that is as much as any one knew, because Nance Edgar sometimes worked there by favour of the farm bailiff, Mr. Simon Ball.

Elsie and I were standing at the turn of the road looking at the tracks of the wheels which Harry Foster's cart had made in the grass, when who should come up but the very man, Mr. Ball, the bailiff at Deep Moat Grange.

He knew me, which was nothing extraordinary. They say I am the image of what my father was at my age, and, of course, everybody knows him. If they don't, he tells them, and sees if he can do business with them.

Well, Mr. Ball came up and asked us what we were looking at, and when we had told him, he blurted out all in a gabble that he had seen the blue and red cart with the piebald mare come tearing over the moor road yesterday morning. He had been in the little "lantern" above the drying-room at the corn mill, which is so high that you can see over the tree tops and look right out on the moor. He thought it was a runaway, but when he had time to run down to the end of the avenue, he could

only see it like a little square dab rocking and lurching from one side of the road to the other, and scraping trees and bushes like all possessed.

"And has nobody come to tell you that poor Harry Foster is murdered?" I said.

"I heard the men in the yard talking about some such suspicion," he said quite calmly, "but nobody has been here. You see, Master Yarrow, our old gov'nor, Mr. Stennis, has been up in London for three days seeing his lawyer, and he don't like folk coming about the Grange when he is from home!"

"So I have heard," said I, "and he keeps some fine dogs there, too, to see that they don't."

For my father had refused to deliver Mr. Stennis' goods, except at Mr. Ball's house, which was on the main road, and no tearing dogs kept.

"Very like – very like," said Mr. Ball hastily; "and who may this fine young lady be – your sister? She seems to favour you, sir."

"Elsie Stennis," says I, "and if she had her rights you know very well what she would be! Your young mistress!"

"Elsie Stennis?" he gasped, "not poor Bell's daughter – and Robin's?"

"The same!"

"Bell and Robin Stennis – I mind them well. But where, how – "

The bailiff stopped, all thrown out of gear, much more affected, indeed, than when it was a question of Harry Foster's death.

"Well," he went on at last, "it's perhaps as well not asking. I might blurt things out. But I hope – I may say that I pray – that the day may come when you shall have your rights, young lady, and I shall see yon crew sent about their business to a madhouse. That's the fit place for such as they! There they go. I must be off. They will be at their processioning again, and Mr. Stennis will never forgive me if they come to a mischief or go off the premises!"

We did not know then what he was talking about, but we could hear over the green tree tops the sound of a cornet playing a marching tune, and marvellously well, too.

CHAPTER IV

THE GOLDEN FARMER

But that same night we got the full story, so far as she knew it, from Nance Edgar. It did not help us any in finding out what had become of poor Harry the carrier and his mail bags, but because it involved Elsie's father and mother I will admit that it interested me nearly as much.

Nance Edgar was a weather-beaten woman of about fifty. She had lived nearly all her life in the fields, and was tanned like a leather schoolbag for carrying books. She was kindly, but you never could have told it on her. Only I knew because she had been kind to Elsie.

Afterwards I found out that often she would go supperless to bed that Elsie might have something to eat when she came home from school.

But when Nance Edgar talked it was with the curious kind of quiet I have noticed about the speech of gentlefolks. The other field workers said that she kept herself to herself. But in the furrow, or on the rig, she was kind to young ones or feeble folk who were not up to their work. So Nance, in spite of her aloofness, was not at all unpopular. She always had work, too, because she could be trusted with anything.

So that very night I said to Elsie: "Let's have it out with Nance about your people. Your grandfather is as rich as can be. There may be money in it, and my father says you should never let that go a-begging. Besides you ought to know about your father and mother. It is only respectable if you are asked."

"Oh, I know all that," said Elsie, mightily unmoved, "my mother married her cousin and her father was angry. She ran away. My grandfather can keep his old money. Who wants it? Not I! I am happier with Nance."

This was very well, but if Elsie was not curious, I was. So I cooed and besought round Nance Edgar that night, till at last she told us everything in her little kitchen, after the tea dishes had been washed up and the coal fire was beginning to catch – the flame paying bo-peep with the bars, and every now and then coming brightly out in a triumphant jet of light, unexpected like a cuckoo clock, shining on Elsie's yellow hair and Nance's calm, tired face as she told us the story —

"Breckonside was not a big place twenty years ago (she said), even less than it is now, but there is one house that is a-wanting. That was your grandfather's house, Elsie, him they call the Golden Farmer, that lives now at the Grange in Deep Moat Hollow.

"It was up yonder beyond the church, and in the summer mornings the tombstones were blithe to see, glinting rosy-coloured with the dew on them, and the long, well-nourished grass hiding the inscriptions. Now you may go up the burnside to the turn of the road where the kirkburn runs bonnie and clear down the hill. The heather and the breckon grow there together, and that they say gave its name to the village – Breckonside. At any rate, there where stood your grandfather's cottage – he was a poor man then – ye will see a kind of knowe or hillock, greener than the rest. But of the house not one stone is left upon another. The kindly mould is over all. The hemlock and the foxglove, what we used to call 'bloody fingers,' grow tall and red where lovers whispered cannily by the ingle nook, and of all that well-set garden plot where Hobby the Miser – that is now Mr. Howard Stennis – grew his weaving lint and dibbled his cabbages, only a single lilac bush looks over the corner of the broken-down dyke as you pass by!

"But at that time it was a heartsome spot. I mind it well; I was young mysel'." (Here Nance Edgar sighed and was silent awhile, looking at the pouting bo-peep of the little blue flames between the hearth bars.) "A-well, youth comes and youth goes, but at the last the greensward covers it like Miser Hobby's cottage.

"Long they dwelt there, Miser Stennis and his daughter Bell. She had the name of being bonnie to look on in her young days, and many a lover would fain have hung up his hat behind the kitchen door and taken his seat at Hobby Stennis's table as his son-in-law.

"But Hobby was a far-seeing carle and a plain-spoken. He had but one word for all such.

"'When I hae a felt want for ony sons-in-law I will put a notice in Editor Drake's weekly screed, or hae it intimated in the parish kirk!'

"There were ill reports even then about the miser. Lights were seen wandering up the hillsides above the cottage when the nights were mirk and unkindly. Hobby would be found far from home with a basket gathering simples and medical plants – that is, by his way of it. So he grew to be counted a wizard, and had the name of money which is so useful to a man in some ways, but more than all else makes the folk jealous, too.

"It was less than natural that Hobby should always have the best lint wherewith to weave the flowered tablecovers by which he made his fame. Why should he have early potatoes a clear fortnight before the rest of the Breckonsiders? But chiefly it was the ill-will about money that bred bad blood. Over the door of the parish church of Breckonside they had printed the motto, 'We serve the Lord.' But the right words should have been, 'We envy and grieve at the good of our neighbour.' For when the men thought of Miser Stennis's money bags they could have felled him, and when the women saw Bell Stennis's bonnie face smiling over her braw mantle, they set to work and bethought them what lie they could tell about her. All except me, and I was always by her side, as near as might be, loving her more than my own flesh and blood. And Bell told me all that was in her heart, because you see we had been at school together, sitting side by side on the same bench and sharing the same apple and toffee stick.

"So I was the only soul that knew it beforehand, when Bonnie Bell suddenly took matters into her own hand and gave Miser Hobby a son-in-law he had never bargained for – a first cousin of her own, an ensign in a marching regiment. The two foolish ones ran to Gretna to get married – I with them in the coach. But I had to tramp it back on my own feet, with Miser Hobby's malediction on my head as well as on theirs. You see he had spent money on the young fellow's commission hoping to get him out of the road, as soon as he suspected what was in the wind between Bell and him.

"But the regiment stayed on in Longtown just over the borders, and nearly every day Frank Stennis and a company would come through the countryside with feathers waving bravely in their bonnets, drawing in the silly young by the glint of their accoutrements, or wiling them to list by the merry noise of the pipe and drum that went before them and set the pulses jumping even in weak women's hearts.

"But after Bell took the road to Gretna, and the white cat by the Breckonside was left lonely, the miser never uttered word, but sat with shut mouth at the weaving of the wonderful flowered napery, the secret of which he alone possessed. And if he could not weave himself a new daughter with all his skill, at least he kept himself so busy that he seldom minded the one he had lost.

"And then he took to leaving his weaving, which nobody could do as well as he, and trying a new trade – that of cattle dealing and droving. At least, so it was said. At any rate Laird Stennis would shut up the cottage, and the sound of the weary shuttle would cease by the waterside. He would be seen riding to every market, cattle mart, horse fair, lamb sale, wool sale, displenishing-roup within fifty mile, his shoulders bent weaver fashion and his thin shanks legged in untanned leather.

"But what was the wonder of the folk of Breckonside to see Laird Stennis, who could hardly abide his own kith and kin, suddenly bring a great stalwart colt of a ne'er-do-well, Jeremy Orrin by name, home to his house. For the creature was hardly held accountable for his actions. He had once killed a man in a brawl at a fair and been tried for his life, but had gotten off as being half an idiot, or what the folk about the south of the Cheviots called a 'natural.'

"The two of them brawled together, and drank and carried on to be the scandal of the place, till something happened – it was never known what – but Miser Stennis was laid up with a crack in

his skull, and the Mad Jeremy tended him, gentle and tender as a mother they said. But so fierce with any one else that none, even the doctor, ventured near the cottage.

"Still your mother's name was never mentioned, and when others spoke to him of his daughter he would look round for fear of Daft Jeremy, who was jealous of her they said.

"And your father – well, I misdoubt me that he was no better than he should be. And my poor Bell had but a sorrowful time of it, following the regiment, and at last left behind when they embarked for the Indies. Then her father sent her word that having made her bed she might lie on it. She had no rights on him or on his money.

"So a year or two slipped by, and maybe another five or six to the back of that, and still no word of Bell. When, true as I am telling ye, who but Bell brought back word of herself. Faith, and it was strange word! I mind it clear as yesterday, for it was me, Nance Edgar, that am this day old and done, who gat the first glint of her.

"It was a fine summer morn, early in June, and the clouds in the sky to the east were just the colour of the first brier rosebuds in the hedge by the roadside. I came up the brae like a Untie and as free o' care, for my heart was light in those good days. There stood the cot of Breckonside before me, shining white in the sun. For the miser, though he spared most other things, never was a sparer of good whitewash. I was just beginning to listen for the *click-clack* of Hobby's shuttle, when down by the waterside methought I saw a ferlie.

"Fegs, I said to myself that surely the old times had come back again, and that the wee folk were disporting themselves once more in broad daylight. For, on the grass by the burn a bonnie bit bairn ran hither and thither waving its hands and laughing to the heavens for very gladness. The night had been calm, a 'gossamer night,' as the gipsy folk call it, and from hedge to hemlock, and from lowly bracken to tall Queen o' the Meadow, the silver threads were stretched taut like the cordage of some sea-going ship. The dew shone silver clear on ilka silken strand, and the blobs o' it were like pearls and diamonds in the morning sun.

"And aye the longer I stood the wilder the bairn ran and skipped lightfoot as a fairy herself. 'Bonnie – bonnie – oh, bonnie!' she cried, clapping her hands and laughing, 'see mither, mither, are they no unco bonnie?'

"Then, by the side of the beck, as if, being wearied with travel, she had set her down to take a drink of the caller burn water, I saw a woman sit. She was beneath a bush of hazel, and her head was resting tired-like on her hand. So, being back there in the shadow, I had not noticed her at the first, being taken up, as was small wonder, with the sight of that bonnie yellow-haired bairn flichtering here and there like a butterfly in the sun.

"Then the wee lass saw me and ran whatever she could to me. She took my hand and syne looked up in my face as trustful-like as if she ha' kenned me all her days.

"'Here woman,' she cried, 'come and wake my minnie to me, for I canna. She winna hearken when her wee Elsie speaks to her.'

"Hand in hand we went up to the poor thing, and even as I went a great fear gripped me by the heart. For the woman sat still, even when my step must have sounded in her ear. I laid my hand on her, and, as I am a living woman, she was clay cauld. The bairn looked ever up into my face.

"'Can you no waken my mither, either?' she said wistfully.

"'No,' said I. 'No, my puir, wee lassie!' For truth to tell, I kenned not what to say.

"'Will minnie never waken?' she asked again, bright as a button.

"'I fear not, bonnie lassie,' said I, and the tear was in my eye.

"Then the elf clapped her hands and danced like a yellow butterfly over the lea.

"'Then she willna greet any more! She willna be hungry any more. She will never need bite o' meat nor thread o' claes for ever and ever mair.' She lilted the words almost as if she had been singing a tune. 'She will be richt pleased, my minnie. For, oh, she grat sair and often! She carried me in her arms till her ain feet were hurted and she could gang nae farther. Late yestreen she sat

doon here to wash them, and I sat, too, and after that she cuddled me in her airms. Are ye no richt glad for my minnie?"

"I telled her that I was glad, for naught less would satisfy her, though even as I spak the words the sob rose in my throat.

"And as we stood there, looking at the woman sitting with her face on her hands, what should happen but that the auld miser should come hirpling to the door, and there, too, looking over his shoulder, was Daft Jeremy, that the village bairns were wont to cry at and call the 'Mounster.'

"'What hae ye there, Nance Edgar?' the old man cried, shaking his stick at me; 'keep away from my door with your doxies and changeling bairns.'"

"But I was civil to him for his age's sake, and also because of the witless man that was looking over his shoulder. For it is not good to cross such as the Lord has smitten in their understanding, and so do my own folk never.

"'It is a woman, Laird Stennis,' quoth I, 'that hath set herself down to die by your burnside.'

"'Die,' cried he, with a queer scream most like a frightened hen flying down off the baulks, 'what word is that to speak? A woman dead by my burnside – what richt had she there? Who has taken such a liberty with Hobby Stennis?'

"'Nay, that you can come and see for yourself,' said I, a little nettled at the carle's hardness of heart. So the auld miser, bent and stiff, came hirpling barehead down the path, and behind him, looking most uncanny, danced Daft Jeremy, combing his hair with a weaver's heckle and muttering to himself. The morning sunshine fell fair on this strange couple, and when she saw him the little maid let go my hand and ran to Laird Stennis. She would have taken his hand, but he pushed her off. Whereat, she being affronted, the witch caught at his stick and pulled it away from him before he could resist. Then she gat astride and played horses with it on the green grass of the burnside dell. It was like an incantation.

"But without heeding her the old man went to the woman, and, lifting up her head, looked steadfastly in her face.

"'God in his heaven be merciful,' he cried, 'it is my daughter Bell!'

"Then the 'mounster' laughed loud and long, and wrapping his 'heckle' in a wisp of paper, he played a tune upon it with his mouth, dancing round and crying, 'There's her right for ye – ye said she hadna a right, Laird Stennis! Ye were that hard ye refused the woman room to die at your dykeside. But Bell has come hame to claim her own. Coffin and clay – coffin and clay! Sax foot of clean kirkyard sods! Faith, I wish a' Daft Jeremy's enemies had the same, nae mair and nae less. But it's as weel as it is, Laird Stennis – for Jeremy cannot be doing with grown women about the noose o' Breckonside. And it's him that has the say now, ye ken!'

"But the old man answered nothing, good or ill. He only stood and looked down at his daughter, muttering to himself words that sounded like 'Bell has comed hame... My bairn has comed back to me at the last!'

"So in time the miser buried his daughter decently, and took the little lass hame to him to bring up. But when this came to be talked of in the countryside, there was a well-to-do woman in Dumfries toon, a Mistress Comly or Comline, that was some kin to Bell Stennis through her mother, and when she heard o' the bit bairn shut up in that lonesome house with only a miser and a daft man, she had heart pity on her, and as soon as she had shut her shop one Saturday afternoon, off she set to Breckonside in a pony cart that she used to bring her goods up from the port quay.

"It was but a coldrife welcome she gat at the white house of Breckonside, but sorrow a bit Margaret Comline cared for that. She tied up her sonsy beast, that was, like herself, fat as pats of butter, to the yettpost of the miser's garden. And when he came to the door himself, she did not take a couple of minutes in telling the auld runt her business, plump and plain.

"'I hae comed to ask ye to put away that daft man,' she said, 'and get a decent woman for a house-keeper, Laird Stennis.'

"'Meanin' yourself, Margar't Comline,' interrupted the miser, with a cunning smirk. He had shut the door in her face, and was conducting negotiations through a crack.

"'Me be your housekeeper!' cried the visitor, 'me that is a ratepayer and a well-considered indweller in the burgh o' Dumfries. Man, I would not cross your doorstep though ye were Provost. But I hear that ye hae this bit bairn in the hoose, and a lassie bairn, too (that's full cousin's daughter to myself). I have come to tell ye that it is neither Christian nor decent to bring up the wee thing but and ben wi' a kenned ill-doer like Daft Jeremy, that has twice been tried for his life for the shedding of blood!'

"From behind the closed inner door of the cothouse there came a high-pitched angry cry that garred the very blood run chill as ice in Margaret Comline's veins. I mean that the thought of it did afterwards. For at the time she just looked about her to see that Donald, her pony, was not far away, and that the road was clear to the light market cart in case that she had to make a break for it. She had eke a sturdy staff in her hand, that the loons of the port kenned bravely the weight of.

"It was the voice of the man-wanting-wit, crying out to be at her, that she heard.

"'She has ta'en from me my guid name,' his words reached her through the very stone and lime of the house, 'and she wad take the bonnie siller oot of the black chest that you and Jeremy keep so carefully. Gie the woman the bit lassie bairn, Laird Stennis, and let her travel. For less will not serve her, and forbye a bairn is only an expense and an eating up o' good meat in any man's house!'

"And while the din was at its height in the cot, there came a sound to Mistress Comline's ear that garred her kind heart loup within her. It was like the whimpering of a bairn that is ill used and dares not cry out loud. And with that she for gat her fear of the strange fool, Daft Jeremy, and with her naked hands she shook the door of the cothouse of Breckonside till the iron stinchel clattered in its ring.

"'The magistrates o' Dumfries shall ken o' this or I am a day aulder!' she cried in to them. 'Gie me the lassie or the preventive men shall hear of the barrels ye hae hidden in the yard. Supervisor Imrie shall be here and search every inch high and low if ye lay as much as a finger on the innocent bairn!'

"And even as she cried out threatenings and shook the stout oaken door so that the leaves almost fell asunder, Margaret Comline heard a noise behind her, and whipped about quickly with her heart in her mouth, for she thought it was Daft Jeremy come out to slay her.

"But instead it was the wee lass herself that had escaped by a kind of a miracle through the window of the 'aumry' or pantry closet. For Laird Stennis had it closed with a board, grudging the expense of glass. The lass was greeting and laughing at the same time, feared to the marrow of her bits of bones, but yet crouse withal. Mistress Comline marvelled to see her.

"'I hae left the stead of my teeth in his hand, I wot!' she said, as Mistress Comline helped her into the light cart at the roadside.

"'And see what I brought with me,' she added as they drove away. It was a shagreen leather pocketbook like those which well-to-do farmers carry, or rich English drovers that come to the cattle trysts to buy for the English market. And Mistress Comline, struck with fear lest she should be taken for a thief, would have turned back, but that at that very moment, out of the door of the cot, there burst a terrifying figure – even Daft Jeremy himself, a great flesher's knife uplifted in his hand. He was scraiching out words without meaning, and looked so fleysome that the decent woman e'en slipped the shagreen purse into her reticule basket and laid whiplash to Donald till that pampered beast must have thought that the punishment of all his sins had overtaken him at once.

"The 'mounster' pursued after them with these and such like affrighting outcries to the very entering in of Longtown. And never had Margaret Comline, decent woman, been so glad to recognize Her Majesty's authority as when she saw Supervisor Imrie with two-three of his men come riding up from the Brig-End and out upon the green grass of the Terreggles Braes. But she said nothing, only

gave them a good day in passing, and bade them 'beware o' the puir "naiteral," Daft Jeremy, that was in one o' his fits o' anger that day!"

"'Sic a fierce craitur should be in the Towbooth. He is a danger to the lieges,' said Supervisor Imrie, adding more cautiously, 'That is, were it no that he would be a cess on the burgh and pairish!'"

"When Mistress Comline gat to her own door she first delivered Donald into the hands of her serving prentice, Robin Carmorie, as stout and blythe a lad as ever walked the Plainstanes. But the wee lass she took by the hand up to her own chamber, and there she stripped her to the skin and washed her and put fine raiment on her, new from the shop – aye, and did not rest from her labours till she had gathered every auld rag that she found on her and committed them to the flames, as if they had been art and part in the wizardry of Laird Stennis, her grandfather, and the coming ill-repute of the white cothouse on the brae-face of Breckonside.

"But, fearing she knew not clearly what, she sealed the shagreen pocket-book up in a clean white wrapper and laid it aside in her drawer, saying to herself, 'If this be honestly come by the laird is no the man to forget to ca' in for his ain. And if no – " Here a shake of the head and a shrewd smile intimated that the contents of the pocket-book might one day be useful to its finder, little Elsie Comline, as she was now to be named.

"'And wha has a better richt!' the shopkeeper would add, perhaps to salve her conscience in the matter.

"But, indeed, it was but seldom, the pocket-book once safe in the drawer, that she thought about the matter at all. For Margaret Comline was a busy woman of affairs, having under her serving lassies and prentice loons, a shop on the ground floor of a house in the Vennel, and a well-patronized stall in the market. All day she went to and fro, busily commending her goods and reproving her underlings with equal earnestness and point. Sunday and Saturday the wrinkle was never off her brow. Like Martha in the Scripture, she was careful and troubled about many things. She read but seldom, and when she did her memory retained not long the imprint of what she read. So that our young monkey, Elsie, being fresh from the mischief-making of the grammar school, where she was drilled with a class of boys, used to shift the marker of woven silk back ten pages or so in the godly book over which her foster mother fell asleep on Sabbath afternoons. By which means Mistress Comline was induced to peruse the same improving passage at least fifty times in the course of a year, yet without once discovering, or for a moment suspecting the fact.

"For all that, she saw to it that Elsie did her nightly school tasks, recommending the master to 'palmie' her well if she should ever come to school unprepared. But, being a quick and ready learner, the young lass needed the less encouragement of that kind.

"As she grew older, too, Elsie would upon occasions serve a customer in the shop, though Margaret Comline never allowed her to stand on the street among the babble of tongues at the market stalls. In a little time she could distinguish the hanks of yarn and thread, the webs of wincey, and bolts of linen as well as her mistress, and was counted a shrewd and capable hand at a bargain before she was fifteen.

"All this time her grandfather, the old miser Hobby, lived on in the little white house up among the fir-woods of Breckonside, growing ever harder and richer, at least according to the clashes of the country folk. By day, and sometimes far into the night, the click of his shuttle was never silent, and, being an old man, it was thought a marvel how he could sit so long at his loom. And still Daft Jeremy abode with him and filled his pirns. Sometimes the 'naiteral' would sit on the dyke top at the end of the cottage and laugh at the farmers as they rode by, crying names and unco words after them, so that many shunned to pass that way in the gloaming, for fear of the half-witted, strong creature that mopped and mowed and danced at the lonely gable end. And they were of excellent judgment who did so.

"For Riddick of Langbarns disappeared frae the face o' the earth, being last seen within half a mile of Laird Stennis's loaning, and, less than a month after that, Lang Hutchins, who came to

Longtown with all his gains frae a year's trading padded inside his coat, so folks said, started out of Longtown at dusk and was never seen in Breckonside again. There were those who began to whisper fearsome things about the innocent-appearing white cot at the top of the Lang Wood o' Breckonside.

"Yet there were others again, and they a stout-hearted majority, who scoffed, and told how Riddick had been seen in market carrying more than his load of whisky, and that as for Lang Hutchins, had he not dared his Maker that very day to strike him dead if he spoke not the truth – all that heard him well knowing that even as he uplifted his hand he lied in his throat.

"Nor was Elsie wholly forgotten by her only near of kin. Twice or thrice a year there came from the cottage a web of fine cloth, woven as only Laird Stennis could weave it, with the inscription written plainly thereon, 'To be sold for the benefit of the upkeep of my granddaughter, Elsie Stennis.'

"After his accident, which nobody could explain and, indeed, few dared to ask about, Laird Stennis took a disgust at the Weaver's Cot by the burnside. He got his miserly money out, and with it he bought the estate of Deep Moat Hollow, that had been in the market for long – and they say that he got it for a song, the late owner's need being great and money terrible scarce. Then he and Daft Jeremy removed thither, and they had Jeremy's sister, a queer old maid (madder, they said, than himself), to keep house for the pair of them. Then the Laird Stennis rode ever the more to market and tryst, and waxed ever the richer, laying field to field, as is forbidden in the Holy Book. Then good Mrs. Comline died, and, though I was no better than a field worker, I posted off to Dumfries, and took ye home to dwell with me in this house which is my very own. All for fear that your grandfather would claim you and take you to bide in the same house as Mad Jeremy and his sisters. Oh, yes, there are more of them, and, indeed, by what I can see and hear the place is like an asylum. Such antics were never heard tell of, and the poor creatures going dressed like zanies out of a booth at the Thorsby wakes."

Then we both cried out to Nance to know if she had seen these strange people, and to tell us what they were like.

"Seen them? Of course," she answered. "Do not I work there week in, week out for Bailiff Ball, who is a good man and honest in his payments."

"Tell us about Daft Jeremy," we said, both speaking together, in a fashion we had.

"Jeremy Orrin," said Nance, thoughtfully, giving the fire a poke with her clog; "well, at times the creature is fairly sensible. They say he will talk of wonders he has seen on the deep, and in foreign parts – evil deeds and worse talk that makes the blood run cold to listen. To look at – oh, he is a wild-looking fellow, with long black hair all any way under his broad bonnet – something between a gipsy and a black-corked minstrel at a fair."

"And his sister?"

"Oh," said Nance shortly, "I know little of her. She is old enough to be the mother of the lot, and if any of them have any sense it is Aphra Orrin – or Miss Orrin, as Mr. Stennis makes all call her. She is sixty, if she is a day. But she plays with her brood of antic lunatics all about the gardens, singing and making a mock of religion. Grown women they all are, but like so many scarecrows in their dress. Laird Stennis, they say, wanted their sister to send them to a home for such like. But she would not, and Jeremy was against it, too, so there they bide, a disgrace to all the countryside, though harmless enough, God knows."

Then Elsie's eyes met mine. We nodded as Nance finished her tale. Both of us knew that we meant to go and see for ourselves to-morrow what mysteries were contained within the Deep Moat in the Grange Hollow.

CHAPTER V

WE MEET DAFT JEREMY

The next morning, bright and early, Elsie and I were up and out. Indeed, I was throwing up stones at her window when she was already dressed and out in the little back garden feeding the hens. Of course I know I should have tried to dissuade Elsie from going on such an errand. But I knew that would only make her all the keener to go. And, indeed, once she had taken a thing in her head she would go through with it in spite of everything.

Poor Harry Foster and his fate was always in the background of my mind. But not so much, as I could see, in Elsie's. Now I like my father well enough, as fathers go. He is a grocer, not at all mysterious, but makes lots of money. Now if, instead, he were the Red Rover of the Seas – well, bless me if I would give twopence to find out about him.

But of course Elsie is different. She always was different from every one else, and now she was keen as a terrier at a rat hole to find out all about the Stennises, and the queer crew that was battenning on her grandfather, old Hobby, the Golden Farmer of Deep Moat Hollow.

Before I saw her, Elsie had made Nance's breakfast, shared it, and seen her off to her work. Nance was in great demand. She could act as foreman or grieve on occasion, and people who wanted their work quickly done, like my father, used often to give Nance as much as a shilling a day extra for coming to them.

I don't think either of us had much thought of finding out about poor lost Harry Foster. How could we, with all those city detectives, from East Dene and Thorsby, even (they whispered) from Scotland Yard itself, ranging everywhere like pointer dogs over the heather?

Indeed we were almost like dogs on a scent ourselves, so keen were we to see with our eyes the mysterious Grange and all the queer folk there. I hardly think we would have turned aside to look at Harry Foster himself, had he been lying in his last bloody sleep, as plain as in a waxwork. But we were not tried. Nothing of the kind happened.

As we went across the moor, every low spiky arch of bramble and tuft of gorse was shining and sparkling. The wren and the gowdspink were preening themselves and shaking off the dews that fell on their feathers as they fussed to and fro about their nesting business. Then we dived into Sparhawk Wood, and came out again on the country cross-road along which Bailiff Ball had seen Dappled Bess plunging madly with her empty cart. The Brom Water flowed still as a canal on our left, down towards the Moat Pond. It was certainly heartsumer to be out under the sky and the crying whaups, with the blue Cheviots looking over the tree tops, than in Grange Longwood, where somebody might be watching you from behind every bush and you none the wiser.

But before we came to the Bridge End, where we had found the marks of the struggle that first morning, Elsie had an idea that if we struck across the road and kept round the edge of the Brom Water, we would escape the bailiff's cottage and stand a good chance of seeing Deep Moat Grange without being discovered by anybody.

When we got there it was only about six in the morning, and eerie enough in the gloomy bits, where you could not see a handsbreadth of sky, and nasty things, which you told yourself were only rabbits, would keep moving and rustling in the undergrowth.

I would have been glad to go back even then, because after all, it was silly. Just imagine – mad folks, and murderers, maybe, skulking in coverts! I am as brave as anybody when all is open and I have a chance to run. I am too old to believe in ghosts, of course; but for all that there are queer things to be seen in old green droopy woods like that of Deep Moat Hollow. The trees whisper and seem to know such a lot. After about an hour I get shivers down my back.

But it was no use arguing with Elsie. She went on first, and I guarded the rear – that being the most dangerous position. And I did it well, for I declare I got crick in the neck just with looking over my shoulder.

So we crept and crept, foot by foot, looking and testing everything. And it was as well. Because, quite without warning, the thick bushes ceased, and there we were on the edge of a deep trench with very black water at the bottom. The sides were steep and green with grass. But on the other bank all was green and yellow, with spreading lawns and Lent lilies growing, and a woman in a short skirt, coming and going among them, with a gardening spade in her hand.

Somehow I knew at once that that was Daft Jeremy's elder sister, Aphra Orrin, the one who was not so mad as the others, and kept house for Elsie's grandfather.

She came quite near. We could have tossed a dog biscuit to her feet – could, that is – somehow, I didn't want to. It might have startled the poor lady, and besides I hate making oneself conspicuous.

Over the lily patches and the flower beds we got glimpses of a red-tiled house, low and old, all overgrown with ivy about the gables and porches. It had small windows with criss-cross panes, and smoke was coming out of one of the chimneys, though it was yet so early. That I took to be the kitchen of Deep Moat Grange.

The canal seemed to go all the way round, and to join on to the pond which we could see glimmering beyond the house, looking gray through a fringe of willows.

The place was nested in woods and water, like a dabchick's nest, yet for all that comfortable and fair to see with its lawns and greenery set about it. I looked at Elsie to see if she was feared. But not she. Instead, there was a queer, eager look, and her eyes kept glittering, as if you could have struck a match at them. Then all at once it struck me that Elsie was going to be pretty; but I resolved to say nothing about that for the present.

It was thinking about her mother that did it, I expect. And that is a funny thing, too. For I care about my mother, and sometimes look eager, like Elsie; but it is when I tease her to tell me what we are going to have for dinner. Elsie was different. She said "S-h-h-h-!" whenever I moved; and once, when a stick cracked underfoot, turned and gave me a look, which would have speaned a foal.

"You fidgety worm —*can't* you be quiet," that look said.

We went on watching the house and the woman watering the flower beds. Nance had told us that the old housekeeper always did that herself. No hireling was allowed to put a spade in the soil of the Grange garden. Very soon we had proof that she was quite mad. The Lent lilies grew about in great clumps, flourishing strong and high – a brave show. The gaunt old woman waved the rose of her watering can over each with a kind of ritual, like what I have since seen the priests use in Catholic churches. Then she knelt down and prayed – yes, prayed to the lilies. Actually I saw her – and so did Elsie.

But that was not all. Out of the house there came a company of three other women, one behind the other. They had their hair down their backs, and long cloaks with gold and silver patches covered them. Each was carrying something narrow and black in her arms. At first they were too far away for us to see clearly, but as they came nearer, I gasped and caught at Elsie's hand. The long black things were little, tiny coffins, neatly modelled, and covered with black cloth all complete with fringe, name-plates, and cords. A little to the side, capering and dancing, flinging his legs high in the air, and blowing a merry marching tune on a soldier's clarionet, pranced Daft Jeremy. Every now and then he would stop blowing to give the brass instrument a shake. Then he would laugh and egg on the women with the coffins to dance also. But they went along quite peaceably, keeping their countenances wonderfully, and making quaint signs with their hands. They marched round and round, the idiot laughing and blowing while the elder woman with the gardening spud went on praying, paying no attention whatever to them, till they came to a rude altar, just two upright posts and a stone laid across them, quite at the end of the garden, opposite to where we were.

Upon this they laid the coffins down, and the women-creatures kneeled. But the monster with the clarionet leaped up between the coffins nimbly as a jackanapes, crossed his legs, and began to play.

Now I cannot tell whether it was because of the little elevation on the crossbar of the altar which enabled him to spot us, or if I moved; but in another instant Mad Jeremy seemed to spring down, swift and unexpected, and before we could move, he had jerked out a big "gully" knife, and rushed to the canal bank, leaped into the middle, driving the black scum of the water every way, and almost before we could think he was upon us.

The madman made for me first with the big knife uplifted, and but for my ducking and running in, there would have been an end of me on the spot. We fell, and his weapon now being in his way, he let go, and I felt the grip of immense hands about my neck. That had almost been my last memory on earth. For though Elsie had seized the knife and was about to kill the madman, it would have been too late so far as I was concerned.

But out of the undergrowth, as if he had been watching, came a little quick-tripping old man, bow-backed and wizened, who called, "Jeremy! Jeremy!" in a high, piping key.

At the sound the madman lifted himself up from my neck, as if moved by a spring, and stood before the little man smiling and sucking his thumb – for all the world like a child caught stealing sugar.

The little old man pointed to the moat. "Go back as you came!" he said.

The "mounster" threw himself into the black water without a complaint. I saw him come out on the opposite side dripping, and with long threads of green scum trailing about him. He never looked round once, but made for the house.

Then the little old man turned fiercely upon Elsie and me, with a kind of cold hateful sneer on his face.

"And now, my pretties," he said, "what may you be seeking in Deep Moat Hollow?"

CHAPTER VI

THICKER THAN WATER

Now I do not deny that I was frightened out of my life by the sudden appearing of the Golden Farmer. But it was different with Elsie. Perhaps it ran in the blood. For, though most people in Breckonside were feared of my father and his long arm, I am not – no, nor ever could be. And so, in that moment of panic, it was given to Elsie to be able to speak serenely to her grandfather.

Yet I could see that the little man was all in a fume of anger, and kept it badly down, too.

"What are the two of you doing here?" he cried, dancing about and shaking his stick at us. "Where do you belong, and what ill purpose fetched ye to Deep Moat Grange?"

"One question at a time," said Elsie, standing quietly before him, with one thumb tucked in a leather strap about her waist. "'Who are we?' say you. I will tell you, grandfather – "

"Grandfather – !"

You should have seen the little wizened man jump at the word.

"Grandfather!" he repeated in a kind of skirl, or scream, as of a bagpipe. "Ye are no blood kin of mine – !"

"Am I no?" said Elsie. "I am Bell Stennis's daughter, and a daughter, too, of one Ensign Stennis, a British officer – "

"A devil – a black devil," cried the wizened little man, shaking his stick, as it were, at the four winds of heaven; "bride-bed or bairn-cot, shroud or bier, I have no word to say to any connected with Bell Stennis or the man that she counted her husband – !"

"Except to give her a decent burial, as ye did," said Elsie. "I have seen her name on the stone in Breckonside churchyard, and the space for your own beneath – !"

"Any one with eyes might have seen as much. But surely I am not expected to own you for a granddaughter just because ye have looked over the cemetery wall!"

"Neither have you a right to be angry because Joe Yarrow and I look across the ditch at the flower beds of Deep Moat Grange – "

There appeared to be some hidden sting in this saying of Elsie's. For a moment the old man looked perfectly murderous. But he quickly recovered himself.

"Faith," he cried, "but it would have been telling your mother, if indeed she be my daughter Bell – if she had had the gift o' the gab like you! But that's no proof. I have ever been a silent man myself!"

"Maybe you had need, grandfather!" cried Elsie merrily, as if it were all a joke, even when I knew that our lives hung, of a certainty, in the balance between his goodwill and his anger at our intrusion. Certainly, however, Elsie had a curious power over the old man, and instead of getting angry, he actually laughed, a queer, crackling laugh, caught perhaps from living so long among mad folk. I have heard doctors out of lunatic asylums laugh like that. There is nothing so catching as crack-brainedness. A lot of people have it at Breckonside – maybe because the East Dene Asylum is so near. Perhaps not.

"I see," said old Mr. Stennis, "that you have upon your body day-linen of my weaving. That is a waste. I only weave now to amuse myself, and sometimes for the great of the land – because no one can weave like Hobby Stennis. Therefore the webs I have sent that old wretch Mrs. Comline in the town of Dumfries, and now yearly to Nance at the bridge-end, ought to have been put carefully away, and not cut up to make fal-lals for a daft hempie of your age! Nance ought to know better. She is old enough and ugly enough for that!"

"Then if I am your daughter's daughter, as I see you admit," said Elsie, taking his words as an admission, "let us go across and view the bonnie flowers over yonder, the bedded tulips, the Lent lilies, and all the flowers of the spring."

Then, for the first time the old man had a look of fear, almost of revolt.

"Lassie," he cried, "ye have no knowledge of what you ask. Bide where you are, and go your way backward from this side of the moat."

He bent toward us as if whispering, though he had no need, all being clear behind and around us for a long way on every side.

"There are folk that are not canny on yon side of the moat!" he said, with the same curious shrinking look over his shoulder. "I can hardly manage them myself!"

"Nonsense," said Elsie, "take us across, and be done with it. Is it not your own land, your own flowers, and I your nearest of kin?"

"Aye," said the old man, shaking his head, "it will be true enough. Ye mind me of Bell's mother – my wife that was. God rest her soul – and her tongue! Ye are never a Stennis. And High Heaven pity the man that is going to run away with you, as I did with your grandam!"

Elsie indicated me with her thumb.

"Joe is," she said coolly.

The Golden Farmer turned and looked me over from head to foot, and I own that with the thought of all we had seen and all that we might yet see, I shook like a leaf. I never had Elsie's assurance, or, more properly, cheek, but followed obediently, and I must own that generally it came out all right when I did as Elsie told me.

"Then I pity him," quoth her grandfather, grimly; "but since you will, follow me."

And he led the way, first to the tree where he had tethered his beast, and afterwards to the narrow wooden bridge, like a drawbridge in chivalry books, which spans the oily black water of the moat.

I came behind with Elsie. All the time I kept putting my hand on her arm to stop her. For I believed that we should never, never cross that bridge again. If Elsie had no fear of her grandfather, I had! And besides, there was Jeremy Orrin with his big knife. Such at least was the idea that kept recurring to my disturbed brain. I could see him swimming the moat with it yet, wild to get at us. There were also the mad sisters, and all the linked terrors of Deep Moat Grange.

But not the least bit of notice did Elsie take. She shook my hand off her arm, and told me that if I was afraid I could go back to the school green and play marbles with the little boys.

So of course I said no more, but came meekly behind Elsie, and she followed her grandfather. He was leading his horse, that lifted its feet gingerly at the crossing of the wooden bridge, not liking the noise, as horses are wont to do on gangways of ships and when they lead them into trucks at railway stations.

In another minute Elsie and I stood within the Moat. And turning round, what was my horror to see the bridge rising slowly into the air behind me, and in a little house at the side, bent double over a wheel, I caught sight of the "mounster," Jeremy Orrin, with a grin on his face and all his dark ringlets shaking and dancing.

As we went past he set his head out and called these words after us:

"Rats in a trap!" he cried, "rats in a trap!"

And I can tell you that I for one felt just as he said.

But Elsie followed her grandfather step for step and took no notice. You would have thought she was the crowned queen of the place.

CHAPTER VII

FAMILY DISCIPLINE

As nobody had seen Deep Moat Grange since it had been taken over by Mr. Hobby Stennis and the crew he had gathered about him, it may be as well to describe it as I saw it – now that it is swept from off the face of the earth.

The old, many-gabled, brick-built house was ivy-covered – in poor repair, but clean. Curious-looking, stocking-shaped contrivances cowed the chimneys, or such of them as were used. The Grange was set so deep in the woods that when the wind blew with any violence, and apparently from any quarter, it raced and gusted and whirled down the chimneys so as to blow the faggots out on the hearths.

But without and within the house, it was anything but dirty. That is, so far as I – no great judge, mayhap – could make out. At times Jeremy Orrin, who now followed us, laughing and jeering, could work like a demon, clearing up some debris. And Mr. Stennis kept poking his nose here and there into the outhouses and cart sheds with a curious, dithering thrill of apprehension, not at all like a master coming back to his own house, or looking if his servants' work were well performed. Still, if he looked for dirt, he found none. No, nor anything else – except in the great barn, empty of everything (for the horse's oats and bedding were kept in the stable). Here Mr. Stennis, tripping along with his tread of a frightened hen, lifted a huge curtain of corn sacks, thick and heavy, made after the pattern of those at church doors abroad, and we went in.

As soon as we stood on the beaten floor of hard earth, we could not take our eyes from what we beheld at the upper end. There was a kind of altar, rudely shaped, with a table and a cross, all as if hewn with an axe out of live wood, and painted black. On the table were the little black coffins, each small as baby's toys, which we had seen the mad women carry through the garden. Each of these had now a candle burning upon it. But the central light, a little larger than the rest, was protected about the flame by a curious contrivance made of red paper glued upon bits of stick which gave it (from where we stood) the appearance of a crimson lantern.

For the first time, I think Elsie was now a little frightened. And no wonder, for suddenly we saw something appear in the dark of the big empty barn, amid a curious pervading smell that I took to be incense, but which might have been cockroaches. I liked bravely for Elsie to feel like that. For she had been just all too secure and cock-a-hoop up till now.

What we saw was a row of kneeling figures singing a strange wordless chant, something between the wind in a score of keyholes and distant dog kennels on a moon-light night. At any rate, it tried the little girl's stomach. Because, quite suddenly she pitched forward on my shoulder and cried: "O Joe, get me out of this!"

Then the next moment, just like thrusting a stick into a wasp's byke, each of the black kneeling figures had snatched her candle and made after us.

I don't know what might have happened. To me it was like a nightmare till we found ourselves in the open courtyard again. This had seemed creepy enough to me before. But now it was just like our own back green, as homelike and as pleasant, with the open air and the waving woods and all.

Within the barn we heard elricht squeaks and cries, like those of bats. But outside the door, holding the heavy curtain back, so that we could get out easily, stood a tall, masculine woman with gray, smoothly brushed hair, dressed in a black blouse and skirt that had something under them which looked like the haircloth covering of the chairs in our second best parlour at home – the kind my father sits in and smokes over his books and cash-box. She was the woman with the short skirt we had seen watering the lilies when we looked across the black and oily moat.

"This is Miss Orrin, my housekeeper," said Elsie's grandfather automatically.

"Aphra Orrin!" said the lady, with a prim intonation, tossing her head like one hurt in her pride, "one who hath been raised up to be a mother to the orphan and the shelterless, to avenge the witless and those at whom fools make a mock! *Be quiet, you there!*"

She sent the door of the barn clashing into its place with her foot, and with the click of the well-oiled wards the screeching behind it redoubled.

The tall woman sighed and folded her arms across her breast. There was a certain weary dignity about her, and at first I could not believe that she was really out of her mind, as all in Breckonside averred. "They are worse than usual to-day," she said, with a careless nod of the head in the direction of the barn, "but that will teach them. They shall stay there till I come and fetch them out! No food for such as they!"

She turned about and called hurriedly: "Jeremy! Jeremy!"

Then the big black man with the ringlets, the onyx eyes and gipsy's skin, came bounding toward us. He seemed to arrive from the direction of the moat, but from much farther round and nearer to the house than the bridge by which we had crossed. He was grinning and holding his hands behind him, like a child who fears to be punished. I soon noticed that he was far more afraid of his sister than he had been of Mr. Stennis and his riding whip.

"Show your hands!" The tall woman spoke in a tone of command. Jeremy stood grinning before her. Then quite suddenly he began to cry. Big tears rolled down his face.

"I haven't – I haven't, indeed, Aphra!" he whimpered. "I have only been sailing boats on the moat! Indeed, I have!"

"*Show your hands!*"

She spoke so shortly that the great, cleanly built powerful giant fairly quaked before her.

"I will – I will!" he repeated. "Yes, Aphra!"

And all the time he was evidently rubbing them together as hard as he could. I could see his shoulders and elbows working. Then the tall woman, losing all patience, snatched at his arms and pulled the hands sharply forward. The marks of earth between the fingers and about the nails were obvious. But Jeremy still continued to rub off the little pellets of mould, raising his fingers and looking at them with an air of surprise, as if he wondered how in the world the dirt had got there.

"You have been digging again!" cried Miss Orrin; "this is the third time, and you are well aware of the penalty!"

"Oh, no, no!" cried the big man, catching her by the skirt, which she swept away from him, the tears fairly rolling down his cheeks. "Whip me, if you like, Aphra, but – "

"Go and shut yourself up in the dark hole," she said firmly; "see you shut the door tight. I shall come round and lock it after a little!"

The great lout went away *boo-hooing* like a "soft" schoolboy whom a sturdier comrade has sent home provided with something substantial to tell his mother. Anything more unlike the idea which we, in common with all Breckonside, had formed of the dreaded "mounster" of the Moat Grange, could not well be imagined.

Then his sister turned to us, and in the most conventional way possible she asked us to go into the house "to drink a dish of tea!"

It was hardly the hour for this, but our long morning's jaunt in the open air and varied excitements had not at all taken away our appetites. We were literally as hungry as hunters.

I think, if Elsie and I had kept all our wits about us, that we should have refused such an invitation. But children often do very bold things through sheer thoughtlessness and curiosity. And we were little more than children, for all our age.

But it all turned out well for us – indeed, even better than that. We had supped so full of surprises that day, that at this point I think hardly anything would have sufficed us or come up to our demands! Perhaps an introduction to a company of sheeted ghosts, or an invitation to take afternoon tea with blood-boltered Banquo, might have filled the bill of our expectation.

As it fell out, nothing was ever more dull and orderly, Miss Orrin showed us into a neatly arranged parlour, with the usual stuffy smell from unopened windows. She left us a minute alone to examine the knick-knacks, while she went elsewhere, doubtless to arrange matters with her erring brother Jeremy. We were still in the dark as to the crime he had committed, and, each remaining seated on the edge of a chair, looked about us curiously, with our ears at a permanent full cock.

Miss Orrin had pulled up the blinds, and through them we could see the wide green lawn, broken here and there by the dense plots of lilies, which almost formed groves in some places. The parlour was a large room, covered with faded yellow paper, bearing traces of a blue flower, perhaps wreaths of forget-me-nots, but all so faint that it was only a strong imagination which could again body them forth. The furniture was chiefly of old black oak, with an extraordinary number of chests with various ornamental work round the walls. These had been covered, presumably by Miss Orrin, with bright-coloured chintz of a salmon-pink edged with frills and furbelows which somehow cheapened the high, antique mantelpiece, the quaint corner cupboards, and the tall, high-backed open chairs ranged at equal intervals about the room.

I am not sure if I have described all this aright. For, indeed, the vague stuffy smell took us by the throats. Both Elsie and I were glad when Mr. Stennis came back and bustled about, sniffing, growling, and opening windows and doors.

One of these, that to the left of the wide fireplace, gave into a small room full of curious wooden machinery to which our eyes were instantly attracted.

"The old weaver's hand does not forget its cunning – the trade by which he made his siller!" said Mr. Stennis, with a faint shadow of a smile, the first we had seen cross his anxious face.

He showed us beautiful pieces of ornamental fabric, upon one of which he was at present engaged, and even entered into a long explanation as to his methods of working. Finally he sat down before the intricate spider's web, and with a skilled click and wheeze sent the shuttle flying for our benefit. I stood back a good way, but Elsie remained close beside him. And I could not have believed it, if I had not seen it – how in the joy of work the "laird" died out of the man, and the little bow-backed weaver came again plain to the eye.

I turned about, conscious of some unknown interruption. There was a faint creaking of the door, and through it I could see Miss Orrin, a tray with tea dishes in her hands, glaring speechlessly at Elsie. The young girl had laid an unconscious hand on her grandfather's arm. She was asking him to explain something in the manipulation. But on the face of the woman who stood without, watching, I surprised cold Death, and as it were, Hell following after.

I felt that we had no real business in that house, neither Elsie nor I, and that the sooner I got her safe back to Nance Edgar's, the better pleased I should be. But Elsie was a difficult girl to shift till she took it into her own head. Then with a beaming smile Miss Orrin came into the parlour and began to lay the cloth.

"Ye will be hungry, bairns," she said, with a curious nervous laugh, which reminded us unpleasantly of her sisters.

"Yes!" we answered together. But somehow I wasn't. The hunger had left me.

CHAPTER VIII

MISS APHRA'S CURATE

We had scarcely started our tea, and hunger was still keen upon Elsie, when there came a noise of calling, quite different from the howling of mad folk, or the mocking laughter or ugly whine of Jeremy. Miss Orrin poured out tea with a kind of grim *aplomb*. If I had been afraid that she meant to poison us – or at least Elsie, I was soon undeceived. The amount of tea that she poured down her own throat was astonishing in the extreme. There were, however, certainly several sorts of cake that she would not allow her master, Mr. Stennis, to touch, on pretext of indigestion, but which she pressed upon us. And it was all that I could do, by kicking her shins beneath the table, to keep Elsie from accepting.

I managed it all right, though. They might have been as harmless as my father's acid drops. But after all there was only one Elsie, and I was not going to run any risks.

There was a distant sound of calling across the moat, and at the noise, Mr. Stennis frowned, an ugly look coming over his face, while on the contrary the sound had a still more extraordinary effect upon Miss Orrin. Her eyes gleamed more softly, losing for a moment their iron-gray expression. Her hands went up instinctively to the thin little corkscrew curls which bobbed at either side of her face.

In ten seconds the fierce, angular old maid looked ten years younger. Love, vanity, self-consciousness – ye are wondrous things.

"If it's that interfering curate from Over Breckonton, I'll throw him into the moat! I'll have the dogs on him," growled Mr. Stennis, "always poking his nose in when he is least wanted!"

Then he turned to his housekeeper, and detecting her busy fingers, he said with a sneer —

"What, prinking again! I see. Only the beneficed clergy have any chance with you, Miss Aphra!"

"Beneficed!" she cried. "Ah! poor lad, I wish he were! If I had my will it would not all go to that lazy vicar, who never does a ha'pworth of good, but rides to hounds and preaches his father's sermons, because he cannot make one for himself."

"Ha!" cried the old man, "be off with you, young ones. Miss Orrin is going to receive spiritual direction and absolution."

The tall old woman started up, her right hand upon the bread knife, as if she could have killed her master with it on the spot.

"Well would it be for you, Hobby Stennis, if you did the like!" she said, restraining herself with difficulty. "But there's Mr. Ablethorpe, and he must not be kept waiting!"

"Of course not, Miss Orrin," said Mr. Stennis sneeringly. "It were a pity indeed that he should – and he come so far to administer spiritual consolation to conscious sinners!"

Then the old woman was roused to fury.

"Sinner am I?" she said, going up and bending her body till her face came within an inch of two of that of the old man, who was seated, pretending to go on with his tea. "Sinner am I? Well, I do not deny it. But at least, if sinner I be, it is that I may find a home and a livelihood for those three poor things, whom God hath bereft of their reason! But as for you – for what do you sin – sin till the sand of the sea could hardly tell the multitude of your crimes, poured from the hand like water, a grain for a sin? For money – yes, for dirty gold! For money which you dare not spend, and for gear which you dare not show! Answer me that! And if sinner I be – I have never heard or read that the Gospel is not for sinners! Do I not need it the more, Hobby Stennis? And the young man is a good young man, and speaks to me of high things – such as I need much, and you more!"

"Have you shown him your Mumbo-Jumbo worship in the barn? Or your sisters, kneeling before the little coffins – all that flummery? You ought to be ashamed – you, Aphra Orrin, you, a woman of sense, and able to know better!"

"And if I told Mr. Ablethorpe all, he would understand," retorted the old maid. "He would understand that those who cannot know God must be content with such a God as they can understand!"

Mr. Stennis laughed, but there was a false ring in his laughter.

"Aye," he said, "doubtless there are a great many things which the good young man, Mr. Ablethorpe, cannot understand. Did you ever, by chance, try to teach him a little gardening?"

"No, and well for you, Hobby Stennis!" cried the woman, still threateningly.

"Well or ill," said the old man, "I go to see these bairns across the bridge and safe on their way home. Then to my weaving! Where is Jeremy?"

"How should I know where Jeremy is – on some of your errands, doubtless!" she cried. "Come, I will let down the drawbridge myself. Also I shall see to it that you offer no indignity to the one honest man who deigns to enter your house."

This quarrel between the two most sane inhabitants of Deep Moat Grange let me deeper into the secrets of that evil dwelling than anything else. At least, so I thought at the time. But I found afterwards that all I thought I knew had but lain on the surface. I had conceited to find Shallow Moat Grange, and lo! the name was no misnomer. The moat was Deep, indeed.

All the same, it was like coming out of a heated room, with many people therein, into the silence and chill of the winter stars, to get one's head outside that abominable house of the Grange. How good to pass by the lily clumps, and feel one's feet on green grass again! It seemed to me that even the dull and sullen moat could be crossed, if you only took it determinedly enough. We had seen Jeremy come over and return, and so surely could we, fleeing (if need were) for our lives.

But there was no need at present. Miss Orrin had thrown a white shawl about her head and shoulders, and drawn a pair of tight silk lacy "mits" over her bony wrists. She made straight for the drawbridge, walking at least ten yards in front of us – apparently that she might get the first word with the fine young man in clerical attire who stood waiting on the further bank.

"I am sorry to have kept you, sir," she said, in a voice which I could not have believed to be hers, had I not seen her lips moving as we arrived; "I will let down the bridge in a moment. Mr. Stennis has been entertaining some relatives of his own, and did not wish to be disturbed."

"I hope that I am not intruding!" called out the young man from the farther bank. "I can easily look in again. It will not be the least trouble, I assure you!"

"Not for the world," cried the old woman hastily; "in a moment the bridge will be down."

And she rushed to the little wheelhouse, to let go the chain with a relieving motion of her foot. And immediately the ponderous affair came clanking to the ground, locking into the pawls at the other side with the pleasant *sloop* of well-oiled machinery.

Then it was our turn to be introduced. Mr. Ablethorpe came across the wood with the firm tread of an athlete. He held out his hand first to Miss Orrin, who bowed over it, as if she would have loved to raise it reverently to her lips.

Then he shook hands with Mr. Stennis, who took the matter cavalierly enough, immediately turning on his heel and going off in the direction of his weaving-room, which had an additional entrance from the front. The young curate was apparently well enough accustomed to such treatment, and thought nothing of it, but Miss Orrin bit her thin lips and looked daggers at the bowed head of the old weaver-farmer as he trudged away.

"Halloo, Joseph Yarrow," said Mr. Ablethorpe lightly, as he ruffled my head with his hand. (I understood well enough to take off my cap to a clergyman.) "Joe Yarrow, I know your father. And I think – yes, I think – " (he put a lot of accent on the *think*) "Master Joseph, you ought to be at school. Shall I tell your father, Joseph? If I did, I make no doubt that he would give you a coat of a few colours, mainly black and blue. Ha! ha!"

But he had that light way with him, which made us quite sure that he would do nothing half so mean as to tell either my father or Mr. Mustard the schoolmaster.

"And who is this young lady?" he said, looking at Elsie, who was tall, and when taken short like that had a kind of "distant" look which made people think she was haughty. But she looked very nice that way – what people call pretty and "chic" (whatever that may be). I could see that Mr. Ablethorpe was interested in her directly. I could have knocked his head off! Cheek, indeed!

"She lives with a poor working woman," said Miss Orrin, who had no doubt noticed the interest as well as I, "one named Nance Edgar, not very far out of Breckonside village. But not in your parish, Mr. Ablethorpe. Will you come this way, Mr. Ablethorpe? There is tea ready for you."

But Mr Ablethorpe had his own time of doing things, and with such a girl as Elsie in front of him, he was not in a hurry.

"Lives with a poor woman, does she? – Nancy – Nancy – what name did you say?" he went on in the tone in which people ask for additional information.

But I was not going to stand this – from Miss Orrin or any one, about my Elsie.

"This is Miss Elsie Stennis," I said, with what of dignity I could compass with my inches, "the only grand daughter of Mr Stennis, the owner of this property."

"But how?" said the young man, looking, as I thought, a little reproachfully at Miss Orrin; "I was not seriously aware that Mr. Stennis had any relatives alive."

"This girl has been represented as the child of his daughter Isabella," said Miss Orrin, "but Mr. Stennis, doubtless for excellent reasons, has never acknowledged her as such!"

"But the church records and the registrar have, though," said I. "You can speak to old Mr. Askew, if you like – he knows!"

"You can go now," said Miss Orrin, with dignity, cutting me short, "and remember that you are not to return till you have received an invitation. Mr. Stennis will overlook your conduct on this occasion, in consideration of your youth and ignorance. But you will know better the next time, and no such excuse will be accepted."

As Mr. Ablethorpe passed me he nodded his blonde curly head at me, twinkled his eye, and said: "Tell your father that I am going to look him up one of these days. I want a subscription for our Organ Fund, but I won't say anything about where I found you – I promise you that."

He looked at Elsie, too, as if he had meant to say something jokingly to her also, but thought better of it. Then he lifted his hat and passed away across the green lawn side by side with Miss Orrin. They wove their way among the clumps of lilies till they were lost to view, and I could see that they were talking earnestly together.

And from the barn, very lonesome across the black water of the moat, came the indignant hooting of the mad sisters still shut up behind the barred door, with the black altar and the little coffins.

CHAPTER IX

ELSIE'S VISITOR

It was a night or two after our first and (for the time being) last visit to Deep Moat Grange. Elsie and I had arrived back at Nance's, our hands and even our arms laden with flowers. For Nance had been at home all day, and so Elsie and I had been taking a holiday – I from lessons, and Elsie from looking after the house. We had gone wandering over the long winny knowes which stretch away to the south, till, from the top of Brom Beacon, one can see the ships crowding into the docks of East Dene and Thorsby, collier and tug and tall sea-going brig, every ship after her kind.

It was a day to be remembered, and as a matter of fact neither of us has forgotten it. We crossed Brom Water where it was as broad as a lake. Our conveyance was a penny flatboat, running on a chain, which chain hauled itself up wet and dripping from the bed of the river. A little farther on we stretched ourselves out on the greensward upon a green knoll above a railway cutting. We talked. We were silent, and listened to the the wind among the leaves and the hum of insects among the lime trees and meadow plants. Mr. Mustard was not at all in our thoughts. Nor yet my father in mine. Only one thing troubled me – the knowledge that in the autumn I must leave Breckonside and go to college. College itself I did not mind about. There was a certain amount of fun in being a student – or so I had always been told. What I really did mind about was leaving Elsie.

It would be – I knew it by instinct – like cutting off a part of my own body to go walking lonely on Saturdays when we had so often loitered in company, thinking that the good days would never cease, wanting nothing better, nothing other than just what we had. Ah! I had a prevision that day that Elsie and I had better make the most of our time during this summer. For the winter would try our friendship.

What I did not foresee was how suddenly Elsie would grow up. Yet she had always done things suddenly – from boxing my ears to deciding to continue her studies at home. She did the latter that very day, and in the evening she announced to Nance that she was not going back to school.

"Very well," said Nance, not in the least surprised. Indeed, with her own limited education, she had often wondered why Elsie had prolonged hers so unnecessarily.

It was pleasant in Nance's cottage by the Bridge End of Breckonside. The house was, as perhaps I have already explained, overwhelmed in a perfect show of creeping flowers, not all of them yet in their full bloom of colour, but always spreading up to the chimneys and throwing abroad reckless tendrils that brushed the face as one entered the little wooden porch.

Nance was busy with the supper dishes, and Elsie had come down after "giving her hair a tidy," as she had been commanded by Nance to do.

"Who do you think has been here the day?" said Nance suddenly.

And I knew in a minute, but Elsie guessed her grandfather.

"The young English minister from Over Breckonton."

"Yes," Nance went on to give details, finding that nobody exclaimed at her news; "as fine an Englisher as ever was, with a bit cambric handkerchief that wad hae been little use to a man wi' a cauld in his heid, and a black cane wi' real silver bands. Extraordinary civil he was, and bode near an hour talkin' to puir auld Nance, and speirin' where ye were, Elsie, and what time ye wad be hame!"

I looked at Elsie. She was busily engaged in tying up some sprays of early heath, which we had gathered on the steep sides of Brom Beacon. She did not seem to be listening. But she heard well enough, as her words proved.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Ralph Ablethorpe! Joe and I met him by chance on the way to my grandfather's the other day."

Now the vixen knew very well that there would be no more question of the "coming of the Englishy minister" after an announcement like that. Nance was all agog to hear of the wonders of Deep Moat Grange, which she had never seen except from the outside, and news of the mad people my lassie's granddad had gathered about him. Small wonder, either! For, indeed, no one had crossed the Moat for years except the High-Church curate, who (as they said) went periodically to "confess" Miss Orrin.

Even such things as coals and provisions were brought by the bailiff to the end of the drawbridge in sacks, and from thence carried across on the back of the powerful Jeremy, the same Jeremy whom we had seen that day weeping like a child.

But it was then that I began first to understand what absence at college might cost me. I looked at Elsie. She was still tying up the little pink bundles of "bell heather," but her face was held down, and there was a little conscious flush upon her cheek. I had never thought it before, and it came on me like a judgment. Elsie was pretty.

I did not exactly wish she hadn't been, but oh, I did wish that nobody had been able to see it but myself!

That English curate, with his curly poll and clear blue eyes, rode me like a nightmare. I resolved to break his head, handsome as it looked – aye, if he were the best man that ever stepped in shoe leather, and had climbed all the mountains in Switzerland and given all that he got for doing it to the poor, as they said he had done. I did not care how good he was. I was desperate at the thought of losing Elsie. Not for love – oh no, thank you. I had more sense than that. But just to go about with, and be my little 'panion, as she had always said she would be, and as I expected her to remain.

But the curate did not let grass grow under his footsteps. It was only two days before he was back again at the little cottage at the Bridge End. Nance had work that day, and if I had not had the sense to play truant he would have found Elsie by herself, as no doubt he expected to do. But I was there seated on the table, swinging my legs.

He began at once saying how sorry he was that Nance was out, and that he had so much enjoyed the talk with her the other day. But under my breath I kept saying, "Liar! Liar!" Because I knew quite well that he was coming of purpose to see Elsie, and the thought gave me catchings of the breath when I thought of going to college. I wasn't jealous a bit, of course, only I couldn't bear to think of any other fellow being friends with Elsie.

But after awhile I began to like the parson better. He had heard that I could bowl more than a bit, and he asked me to make one of the team he was getting up to play the second eleven of East Dene. I took to him more after that, and really he did not talk to Elsie oftener than he did to me. More than that, he did not make me feel in the way.

But it was all no go. From deep down in my heart there kept bobbing up the feeling that somehow I was to lose Elsie, and that this young parson with the curly head would be the cause of it. Of course, I was going on to eighteen, and a big fellow for my age, with a moustache you could see by looking for it. But this was a full-grown man of twenty-four at the least – for all that his shaven face and sort of painted-window hair made him look any age from that of a choir boy to that of a holy angel.

He asked about Elsie's grandfather, saying that he had struggled long and vainly to get him to come to church, or at least to communion, but without success. More than that, he seemed to be keeping Miss Orrin from attending the parish church of Over Breckonton. Miss Orrin, so it seemed, had good instincts – she was well affected toward religion, but something always seemed to hold her back. At a certain point she became silent, and he, Ralph Ablethorpe, could do nothing more with her. This resistance he hoped, however, to overcome one day. It was his duty to study the welfare of every soul in his parish, and also of those wandering and foldless sheep who were cared for by nobody.

I had it on my tongue tip to say that there were many who cared for souls when they were connected with comely bodies, for that was the kind of thing that my father was always saying. He

took himself for an advanced thinker whenever he quarrelled with our vicar, but between times he was as good a conservative as anybody, and stood up for law and order like the chucker-out of a bar-room.

Elsie had not much to say about her people. She never had. But I told him, as I always did any one who asked, that her father had been an army officer, and her mother the only daughter of the Golden Farmer, only that neither the one nor the other of them could stand the old man's ways.

Then the young parson, as I found to be his custom, started in to defend the absent, which is all right when the "absent" is anyway decent.

"Yes," he said, "Mr. Stennis's habits are certainly eccentric. I cannot deny that. But after all he does a lot of good in rather creditable circumstances. He gives shelter to four poor lunatics whom a sisterly love has preserved from the living death of a common asylum."

I told him plainly that I thought it would be much better for themselves, and infinitely so for the countryside, if they were all shut up in the nearest asylum under proper care.

"What do you mean?" says he, rather startled. For I could see by the changing of his countenance that he, too, had seen strange things. As, indeed, he was bound to do, if he kept his eyes open at all, going to Deep Moat Grange as often as he did.

But then, you see, he was a simple sort of young man, and never thought, or at least said, any evil of anybody.

Then he suggested that we would walk home together, and though I had meant to stay at the cottage all day, I actually went. But I soon got him into a hot argument with my father (who could argue the handle off the village pump) about doctrine and sacraments, and things that a boy has to learn about in school till he hates the very name of them. At least, if he has a master like old Mr. Mustard. Then I up and shinned out of the back door as quick as I could, lest father should ask me where I was going, and send me kiting all over the country with one of our delivery vans. I found Elsie looking out of the window and very pensive.

So I told her to her face that she was thinking of that curly-headed curate, and she answered me (as, of course, she would naturally do) that whether she was or wasn't, it was no business of mine.

Then I vowed I would make it my business.

"Then make it!" says she, and turned away very haughty and went and sulked in Nancy's little room, which was off the big kitchen. It was as much as I could do to keep from turning on my heel and walking away, never more to return. But I knew that it was wrong to yield to passion. So I was noble and stopped where I was.

Instead I began to sweep up the cinders about the grate and get everything ready for tea, even to scouring the teapot and things. I used coarse, common powder, and this I moistened by a coarse and familiar method. The act brought Elsie out promptly. Just bounding she was. Mad was no name for it. She called me all the names she could think of, but she didn't sulk any more. I thought she wouldn't. That always fetches her. She knows I do it a-purpose to make her angry, but she can't help it – not one time in a thousand. Elsie is built that way, and from what I have seen quite a lot of women are.

It works far better than taffying up to them, or doing the dreadful humble. Get them spitting mad, and they will love you ever after, or at least for quite a while.

CHAPTER X

THE BROM-WATER MYSTERY

It is wonderful how soon a thing is forgotten, or at least put on a shelf in people's memories. Poor Harry Foster, for example! There was a man now – a man murdered in the discharge of his duty, if ever a man was. And after a month or two another man was travelling the same road with a new mail cart and new sacks of letters, as quiet as water going down a mill-lade. The only difference was that he started a while later in the morning than poor Harry, after it was daylight, in fact, so that the Bewick people had to wait, often till midday, before they got their letters.

And when they made complaint to the Postmaster-General, or some other big-wig, he up and said to them, "You Bewickers, it is open to you to choose one of yourselves to bring up the mails from Breckonside, running the risk of Harry Foster's fate and providing a sufficient guarantee for any loss the post office run by Her Royal High Majesty may sustain."

Something like that he said. But no Bewicker offered. Of course not – why, they had skin creeps at the very thought.

"So," says the post official big-wig, "you Bewick cowards, be good enough to shut up and take your letters when they are sent out to you."

Still there were people who kept thinking about poor Harry for all that. And I was one of them. Elsie did not seem to care so much, or at least so long. Did you never observe that you can't keep a girl long interested in the same thing, unless you keep on telling her all the time how much prettier she is getting to look? But I did not know even that much, not then. I was just mortal green – green as father's spare pasture field after three days' steady rain and one of May sunshine. And, indeed, to tell the truth outright, I thought altogether too much at that time about people, and too little about my Latin and Greek prose, as Mr. Mustard, who was a good classic himself, often told me. He said I should rue it. But I can't say I have ever gone as far as that. Not to date, anyway. Perhaps I may some day, when I start reading Latin to pass the time.

The adventure grew more interesting to me after the policeman and detectives had one by one all cleared off. The affair was "classed," as the French say in their crime books – I learned my French out of these, and a jolly easy way, too – that is, the police were not going to do anything more in the matter, unless something fresh turned up. And it would have to be something mighty fresh, too, to move them. They had all got so sick of the whole business.

There was just one thing that kept me back. That was, I was nearly sure that Elsie's grandfather had something to do with the whole series of crimes of which the death of poor Harry was only the last and the most senseless. Perhaps not Mr. Stennis directly, but somebody about Deep Moat Grange. So, of course, I did not want to bring Elsie into it if I could help it. Because if her grandfather was a murderer, and if all the missing drovers and absconding cattle dealers were laid to his account, and he hanged for it, it would be clearly impossible for Elsie to go on living with Nance Edgar at the Bridge End. And as I was not yet ready to make other arrangements for her (besides being mortally afraid of the curate), I said nothing to any one – least of all to Elsie herself.

I think I had suspected everybody for miles round in turn – from Mr. Codling the policeman to the vicar himself. As for poor Mr. Ball, I had him so completely under observation, and was so sure of his guilt, that when the unfortunate bailiff went out only to fodder the cattle, I followed stealthily in his footsteps, sure that the secret of the mystery lay in the range of cattle sheds or under the pigs' feeding troughs. In the end I only managed to get a welting from father for coming home all muddy from head to foot – and not pleasant mud at that.

But really I did not mind. I was always glad when I got home safe. Now I know that I was taking my life in my hands every minute. Even then I had glimmerings of the fact. The folks of Breckonside

might say, as they always did, that the killing of poor Harry was the work of some chance tramps, who would be far away by the next morning. But putting everything together, just as Sherlock Holmes used to do, I couldn't make it out at all. I had his spirit, but not his luck – no, not by any means his luck.

This, however, was what I made out. Harry had jogged on till he met with some one whom he knew, that is, almost immediately after he parted with Davie Elshiner, the poacher. He had talked, parleyed, and then accepted company. Then some one of these, sitting on the back seat of the dog cart, had covered up his mouth and butchered him most foully. After that no more was to be learned. The light vehicle which had bounded from side to side of the narrow drove-road had certainly been empty. I am no Sherlock Holmes, but my father and I know about horses and local conveyances. And we could see by the rebounding, the one wheel climbing the bank, and the other sinking in the slough, that if any one had been inside – nay any *thing*, the contents of the cart, be they what they would, must have been emptied out.

But Harry, the mail bags, even the parcels for Bewick, had completely disappeared. Nothing except the empty cart and the broad plane-tree leaves were ever seen again. It seemed so simple a thing to trace – a dead body, accounted no easy thing to make away with even professionally, a dozen bags of letters – many with negotiable values, of which the issuing bank had, luckily, reserved the numbers – tobacco in tins, cigarettes in boxes, sweets, sugar in cones, even a Stilton cheese for the old bachelor, Major Templand (retired), who cried out more about the loss of his Welsh rabbit than all the others put together. Clues – there were balls and wads of clues! Only, none of them led anywhere. Neither did the woods, through which there was no track of anything previous to those made by Mr. Stennis's pony the following day. Nothing either way along the road. No, I could put my hand on nothing and nobody. And I gave it up at last, sure nevertheless that it was somewhere about the house of Deep Moat that the solution must be looked for.

And, indeed, some light, such as it was, came from the last quarter from which it could be expected.

Mr. Ablethorpe arrived one fine summer afternoon at our place in Breckonside. I was playing in the backyard, half a dozen dogs tumbling over me. It had been intended that I should go out that afternoon with a van, but somehow one of the men had got back earlier from his morning round, and had been re-dispatched as more trustworthy. Also idleness in a boy was bad enough, but in a man paid weekly wages – insupportable.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Yarrow," cried the curate in his hearty voice, loud but not a bit preachy – I give him that due – "can I have your Joe an hour or two?"

"Have him and keep him, the lazy whelp," cried my father from the back shop, where he was busy writing up his books in his shirt sleeves. Then, laying down his pen where it would not roll over the page (which always roused him to crisply expressed anger), he came out to meet the young curate from the neighbouring parish of Breckonton. Upper or Over Breckonton was still more dependent on my father than my native Breckonside. There were other ways of getting supplies at Breckonside, at least for a time. But Over Breckonton was wholly dependent on my father's vans, carrier's carts, and general delivery of goods.

They shook hands with some heartiness. For though my father had a standing quarrel with both vicars he was always on the best of terms with the curates.

"What might you want him for, Mr. Ablethorpe?"

"Oh," said Mr. Ablethorpe, "the farmers are busy with their moor hay, you see, and I thought if Joe and I –"

"Say no more," cried my father, "you shall have him. And if he does not work like a good 'un, you tell it to me, that's all! I see now why the farmers of your parish call you the 'Hayfork' Minister!"

"Oh, they call me that, do they?" said the curate, not at all disguising his pleasure in the nickname, "well, I'm no great preacher, you know. So it is as well to make oneself of use some way!"

"That's right – that's right," cried my father, "I hope you will put a little of that teaching into the lazy bones of my young whelp. Joe! Ah, Joe, you villain! Come here! Don't skulk!"

As my father did really know where I was (and also because I was an obedient boy with a reverence for the fifth commandment of the Decalogue), I came immediately, greatly to the disappointment of the dogs, who thought themselves in for a good long romp. I found Mr. Ablethorpe explaining to my father that we were just going to call in at Brom Common Farm, to give Caleb Fergusson a lift with his hay – that Caleb was an old man, and would be the better of the assistance of two pairs of sturdy arms. Furthermore, it would keep Joe in training for the next cricket match – Breckonton and District v. Upper Dene Hospital it was.

"I don't know exactly how long we shall be, I tell you frankly," said the curate. "If old Caleb has nearly finished, Joe and I may take a walk before coming home. It won't do to have him getting slack, lying about the yard like this."

"That's all right," said my father, who was aching to get back to his books, and wished nothing better than to have me taken off his hands, "all serene! Don't you fret, Mr. Ablethorpe. Joe will be in good keeping along of you. I wish I could say as much of him always. He is a wandering, good-for-nothing wretch!"

That, you see, was my father's way of talking. He didn't mean anything by it. But the words just flowed naturally from him, and he could no more help abusing me, or, indeed, any of his men, than taking a snooze when sleepy in the afternoon.

The curate, who knew that barking keeps the teeth open and so prevents biting, simply laughed and said, "Well, come along, Joe! You are under my care and authority for this day, at any rate."

As for me, I was glad enough. For, but for Elsie, and the thought of my going to college in the late autumn, I liked Mr. Ablethorpe very well, as, for that matter, did nearly every one who knew him – except his vicar, who did not appreciate a young man being so popular; "stealing the hearts of his congregation from him," as he expressed it.

I was still gladder, because I knew that that afternoon there was not the least chance of seeing Elsie. She had gone up to read Latin and piles of hard books with Miss Martha Mustard, the dominie's sister, who was said to be far more learned even than he. At any rate, though not what you would call "honeysuckle sweet," she had at least a far better temper.

The curate and I set out. It was the selfsame road that Elsie and I had taken earlier in the year, on the May morning when we were the first to look inside poor Harry Foster's blood-stained mail cart.

But now the leaves were turning and drying, already brown at the edges, and splotched with yellow and green along the webbing inside. Soon our feet were on the heather, and I watched the curate to see if he would turn his head to take a look across at the little creeper-hidden cot at the Bridge End, where Elsie was not. But either he was on his guard, or he was as well aware as I myself of her absence. At any rate he never turned his head, but swung along with a jolly hillman's stride which it took me all my pith and length of limb to keep pace with.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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