

THE FARM IN THE HILLS

A TALE
OF
MYSTERY.

BY FLORENCE WARDEN.

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Mason hurried down stairs after the farmer, eager and anxious to learn the history of the ring which his host had promised to tell him.

He feared, however, from the indifference with which he had treated the subject that the farmer could have but little to relate. If he had known of a tragedy connected with the fate of its late possessor, he could not have handed the relic so readily, so calmly, to the first man who came to him with a tale about it. On the other hand, it seemed probable that Mason's inquiries would set the farmer thinking and that gratitude for services rendered to his daughter might make him ready to do his best to assist the doctor in his researches into the mystery.



Worn out by fatigue both of mind and body, he sank into a doze.

It was not until after supper was over, however, that Mason got a chance of speaking upon the matter so near to his heart. The old woman had disappeared; had gone up to Gwyn, so the farmer explained. The three men had the meal by themselves. Nothing was said about the appearance of the stranger, whose first appearance had been made so unpropitiously. The farmer and his son both waited upon him, pressed him to do justice to the well spread board and treated him with the utmost deference and courtesy.

There was a fourth place upon the table, which Mason supposed to have been placed for the old woman. However, when supper was half over, the farmer seated his wife and fork for an instant on the table and asked shortly:

"Where's Merrick?"

"Merrick was absent of his words and who seemed also to speak English with difficulty, about the neck."

"I declare," went on the farmer, whose appetite had been so much affected by his anxiety for his daughter that he ate but little, "I'd forgotten all about the fellow. Hasn't he been in?"

"In and out again," answered the old woman. "When he heard—"

"Tom turned his eyes slyly and shyly in the direction of the room and said the more."

The farmer turned to Mason and said:

"To say the great one, to come in when he heard of a stranger being here, sir," said he.

"Another son of yours?" asked the doctor.

"No, sir, but my hand on the farm. He and me and Tom do it. 'Cepting for the help we used to get from poor Gwyn, and an extra hand or two in the lambing season and to get in such poor crops as we have up here. And now, sir, if you please to smoke, will you light up your pipe and take this chair in the corner?"

Supper being over, Tom cleared the table in the same awkward manner in which he had laid it, and then disappeared, with half a loaf of bread in one hand and a heaped-up plate of meat in the other.

"They're pale, those two," said the farmer, jerking his head back in the direction his son had taken, as he went up stairs himself to take another look at his daughter. "They hang together, do Merrick and Tom."

And the farmer shut the door between the kitchen and the washhouse with a nod to Mason which was meant as an apology for leaving him to himself.

Alone, comfortably seated in the large armchair by the glowing fire which was built up of peat and logs, the young doctor stretched out his legs in a momentary bliss of ease of body, a moment's triumph of the frame over the spirit.

Worn out by the long day's climbing and struggling, straining of the eyes and stress of the mind, Reginald Mason sat inert, motionless, with all his faculties benumbed, in a delicious way of peace. For a moment when his desperate anxiety about his daughter's fate was dulled. He sat back with his head on the old red cushion, hearing the roaring and whistling of the wind without listening to it, the beating of the hard snow showers against the window panes and the smacking of the fire as the flames came down the chimney and, making as they fell, reached the glowing logs which lighted the room and warmed the more fiercely for the moisture.

He closed his eyes, and presently, lulled by the warmth, the comfort, worn out by fatigue both of body and mind, he sank into a doze. Without waking he found himself unperceived till he heard a footstep, or rather, it might be said, a footstep, as if he were dying and that the mourners who were to accompany his body to the grave side were bending over him, waiting for the word.

He started up and staggered and looked around him, with the icy great terror on his heart. He knew he had been asleep, and he was at once that his slumber must have lasted some time, for the fire had died down, and he was cold. A great draft of chilly air was blowing in from somewhere, and he perceived that the door in the side wall by which the Tom had gone out had been left ajar. On the clean floor a direct line to and from this door were footprints, still quite wet.

The candles on the mantelpiece had been blown out before they had been blown appreciably lower than they were at supper time. A discovery of what was on the floor beside the door in which he had been sitting were some biscuit crumbs and a fragment of torn envelope.

With quick suspicion Mason thrust his hand into his coat pocket and found that one of his coat pockets which had been the most easily accessible, and pulling out the contents, found that the scrap of paper exactly corresponded with the missing corner of a torn envelope he carried there. He looked at the paper, and he saw that the rest of the pocket contents were some biscuit crumbs and a fragment of torn envelope.

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Trecoed, six weeks ago. My brother has never been heard of since."

He paused, and the farmer, who was listening with vivid interest, uttered an exclamation.

"Do you suspect Merrick, sir, of foul play of any sort?" he asked in a low voice.

"I can scarcely say I did until this afternoon," answered Mason in the same tone. "But I was naturally anxious to find him, to interrogate him, to try to get some information to put me on the track of my brother, alive or dead."

"Yes, yes, of course."

"So I started this morning for this place in order to find and question him, and chance, or rather Providence, helped me to stumble upon the very spot I wished to reach."

"Of course you must see him at once," said the farmer, turning toward the door, but he had hardly reached it when he turned and said in an anxious tone: "You must see him with an open mind, sir, and not think of him because he wouldn't come in to supper. He is a great rough cut as ever was born and shy of strangers always. You mustn't think that looks like guilt. That was only his awkward, country ways."

"I shall think nothing of that," returned Mason readily, "if he is willing to meet me now. But he will not be willing," he paused, while the farmer looked at him earnestly—"for he has met me already this afternoon."

"What?"

"On the road from Trecoed, soon after the snow began to fall. At the first sound of my voice he ran away, and nothing would induce him to turn again and face me."

Mr. Tregaron frowned and presently shook his head. It was clear that this last information had awakened fears

ing had been taken away.

Nevertheless he felt a chill run through his bones at the certain knowledge that some person or persons had come into the room while he slept and had begun an examination of his pockets, which would probably have resulted in robbery if he or they had not been disturbed.

"Robbery! Would they have stopped at that?"

For, putting up his hand to his neck, he found that the white silk muffler, which he had wound about his neck in place of his wet collar, had been untied.

CHAPTER VII.
COCH TAL ADOPTED.

The doctor, now fully aroused and conscious that there were dangers under the shelter he had found quite as great as those he had encountered on the mountain outside, followed the wet footmarks across the floor and opened wide the door to which they led.

At first he could see nothing on the other side of it; it was cold, it was dark, but he knew that he was in the open air. He went back into the kitchen, lit one of the tall candles and carried it out into the cavernous blackness, into a moldy, damp smell, and into a wide, covered space, the floor of which was roughly boarded and partly paved in the rough, old-fashioned manner with broken stones. A storeroom this evidently. There were stacks of wood and peat; there was a built-up mound of roots, partly covered with straw and earth. There was lumber of all sorts besides, giving the place so many nooks and corners and hiding places that Mason knew it would be unwise if not impossible to hunt out the person or persons who, he felt sure, lay hidden there, watching him as he moved.

For he could hear those slight, hardly distinguishable sounds which betray the presence of a living creature in concealment. He looked up and saw that the roof was of rough beams and boards, through which the snow came here and there.

"Any one here?" he asked.

"No voice answered.

He repeated the question in a firmer, almost menacing manner, and then a figure appeared in the doorway behind him.

"No, sir, they're no mine. He recognized in a moment the farmer, who had just entered. He looked up and saw that the roof was of rough beams and boards, through which the snow came here and there.

"Any one here?" he asked.

"No voice answered.

He repeated the question in a firmer, almost menacing manner, and then a figure appeared in the doorway behind him.

"Why, sir, what are you doing in here?" and suspicious which he had not entertained before. He began to walk quickly, with short, rapid steps, up and down the tiled floor, just as he had paced up and down the little tableland outside when Mason first met him.

Suddenly he stopped in the middle of his walk and stared fixedly at the amethyst ring on Mason's finger. Frowning more deeply than before, he presently looked up and met his guest's eyes with the expression of one who has made a new and strange discovery.

"Was he a minister—your brother?" he asked quickly.

"A clergyman, yes, yes!"

"Then I saw him myself," said the farmer, "Merrick brought him up here; nothing would serve but he must see the ruins of the old church—"

"Yes, yes?"

"And so he did. He examined them in every part, and then Merrick set him on his way and left him."

"Left him? Is that what he said? Left him? But then, why should the man be troubled at the sight of me, at the sound of my voice, which evidently recalled my brother to him, if he had only set him on his way safely?"

"Ah! That is more than I can tell you," said Tregaron gravely. "We must ask the man himself."

"He won't tell the truth."

"Why should he not?" retorted the farmer, with some warmth. "I don't care much for the fellow, but I have never found him dishonest. And what motive could he have for telling you lies about your brother?"

Mason was silent, but his looks betrayed the thoughts which were in his mind.

Tregaron looked at him intently with his keen black eyes.

"He never set finger on him for harm, that I'll swear," said he earnestly. "What should he do it for? Folks don't carry much of value about them when they go on the tramp among the mountains, and Merrick's been going on as ever since that time. If he'd robbed your brother, he would have gone on the tramp, and we should have noticed something. Don't you see, sir?"

Before he answered Mason happened to catch sight of the ring on his hand.

"You're promised," said he, "to tell me how you came by this."

"I found it about half a mile from here at the foot of a steep bit of rock in the side of one of the hills," replied the farmer. "It was covered with mud, and I shouldn't have seen it, but I slipped on it and looked down."

"When was that?" asked Mason.

"A matter of three or four weeks back now, sir."

"You didn't remember having seen it on my brother's hand?"

"I hadn't seen it, sir. I should have remembered it if I had, being so uncommon to look at. The gentleman wore gloves, I fancy."

Mason nodded and was silent.

"I can take you to the place where I found the ring, and you can search about as much as you like, but there was no sign of any accident there, I'm certain. Finding this thing made me keep my eyes open, you may be sure."

"If I could see this Merrick," cried Mason abruptly.

"Sir, to be sure you can. I'll go and have him out," said the farmer promptly. "I must just get my lantern, for it's some little way off. He sleeps in a loft over the cowhouse. And don't be afraid, sir; we'll find out the truth of this for you, however dark it may be and however hard we have to work to get it for the sake of what you're going to do for my little girl."

As he spoke the little man put his hand up to Mason's shoulder and looked up into his face with his keen black eyes moist with feeling.

"Thank you, thank you a thousand times," said Mason heartily.

Then the farmer wrung his hand warmly and in silence, and taking up a lantern from the corner of the dresser, he lit it, put on his coat and hat and disappeared into the darkness of the outhouse, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER VIII.
OWEN TREGARON'S WARNING.

Reginald Mason stood beside the fire when Tregaron had left him, with his brain alert, but his heart sore with misgivings.

This Coch Tal, Merrick or whatever he called himself could tell him all that he wanted to know about Granville's fate, that was certain. What was equally certain was that he had some reason for hiding his

brother's fate. How could the guilt otherwise seem to be undoubtedly his brought home to him?

Mason's first fear was that Coch Tal would take the farmer's questions as a warning and that he would at once find means to escape. And at this thought he ran to the door of the outhouse, eager to follow Tregaron and to stop the fugitive. But although he was able to stumble across the rough, lumbered floor and to open the outer door by which the farmer had passed out, he was at once without a lantern he could not attempt to find the traces of his host's footsteps.

The snow was still falling thickly, in small, hard flakes that stung the flesh, while the wind, which seemed to play round the ruins of every side, roaring round the stout walls and whistling between the stone shafts of the broken windows, whirled little clouds of dry, powdery, snowlike showers of spray against the sides of the farmhouse and blinded him so completely that his eyes could perceive nothing more definite than big, blurred, dark masses of what he knew to be walls on every side.

He turned back, forced into retreat, and reflecting as he did so that even Coch Tal, hardy mountaineer that he was, would hardly dare to venture forth on such a night, a gust of wind bore men's voices to his ears. He could distinguish no words, but he fancied that the tones he heard were those of fierce reproach and of answering sullen stolidity.

In another minute, the voices having in the meantime died down or been borne away by the wind, two figures came suddenly upon him, and Mr. Tregaron's voice urged him to go in.

Mason and the two others got back across the floor of the outhouse and stood, in a few seconds' time, within the kitchen. There Mason saw, to his great disappointment, that the farmer's companion was not Coch Tal, but the lad Tom, whose face wore a sullen, forbidding frown.

"He has gone away!" exclaimed Mason at once, with excitement.

"Who? Merrick?" said Mason.

"The farmer, with a decided shake of the head. 'He knows better than to leave the shelter of a sound roof on a night like this.'"

"Take me to him. I want to see him now—a man," said Mason.

"Ain't the farmer took his head."

"I won't do that," said he. "Give the poor fellow a chance to collect his wits. He was awful upset by what I said to him." Mason frowned. "Oh, don't be afraid of him. He has no thought of getting away. You shall see him in the morning. There's my daughter to think about now. If you're going to watch, sir, you had better go up, or would you like a sleep first?"

[CONTINUED.]

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