

# THE FARM IN THE HILLS

BY FLORENCE WARDEN.  
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OF A TALE OF MYSTERY.

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which was quite dark, lighted a candle and sat down, not to sleep again, but to think over the fresh developments of the night. Who were the perpetrators of the outrage upon him? That question, narrow as were the limits within which it could be answered, was as difficult to solve as ever. He had heard and seen nothing to help him to any further knowledge than that, more than one person had been concerned in it. The probabilities were, he thought, in favor of the belief that the attack upon him had been made by the lad Tom and Coeh Tal, with the connivance if not the actual assistance of the old woman.

That Reginald had had a hand in it could scarcely be doubted. The farmer's conduct throughout had been straightforward, while the manner of the other three persons toward himself had been uniformly suspicious and bad. That their object had been murder he could not doubt. What plunder he could not be likely to yield worth such a crime? That was the mystery. Surely some other motive must be sought, and this, he thought, could hardly be other than jealousy on the part of Coeh Tal or her least Mason should find out the truth concerning his brother's fate.

Here again there was a mystery. Reginald had not carried on his person other much money or such property of value, certainly, but booty for which to run the risks attendant upon murder. As for Gwyn, he could not think of her without a softening of the heart, a glow of gratitude and admiration. That this girl had sacrificed her own comfort, her own rest, during the two or three nights, he was now convinced beyond a doubt. She had feared some such outrage as that of which he had been made a victim and had conceived the idea of protecting him by keeping him within the range of her own watchful eyes. To do this she had resigned herself to the hardships of the highest to recover.

It was she who had been the watcher and he who had been the watched during those nights when they had all been trapped by the inconsistency between her own feelings and her own duty. He had to go to bed, but he listened and made little observations as he could. He heard, he spoke, the piercing cry of Coeh Tal fired upon him with a penetrating shrewdness which seemed to suggest that the huge, red-headed man of the mountains guessed more than Reginald himself did.

Or was it that he knew more? It was not until supper time that he had a chance of speaking again to Gwyn alone. He had been working hard out of doors all day, and she kept out of his way when he entered the house at mealtimes. But he happened to enter the kitchen before the other men, and as he did so he met Gwyn coming down stairs. "Where will you sleep tonight?" she asked abruptly, in a tone which betrayed that this question had been troubling her.

Mason hesitated. Then a thought struck him. "In the loft with Merrick, if he'll let me," he answered at last. But Gwyn was startled by the proposal. "No, no," said she, "you must not do that." "You will never think of anything better than that," said he gently. "Give me an acknowledged enemy rather than a treacherous friend."

"You mean to say that you mean by a treacherous friend?" "I mean no one in particular," answered Mason. "But Merrick is the worst of them."

When at last he found his voice, it was very subdued, very earnest. "I know," said he, "that I am in a house which is haunted by the presence of a noble, heroic woman. At those words a long shivering sigh went through her frame and seemed to convulse her. He glanced anxiously at her and saw that her face was radiant with a strange joy that two tears were glistening in her eyes. "Thank you," said she simply in a low voice. "Thank you for your kindness. But what you are good enough to do for me does not alter what you think of me."

She stopped, her voice shaking, her lips trembling. Mason then spoke in the same deep, respectful manner. "If I am not mistaken, you may have to tell me about any one," said he. "In the meantime you must remember that you are not strong yet, that you must—must get some rest." She sprang up, and he saw that she was pale. "But you?" said she. "What will you do? Where will you go? I—I—She stopped, drew a long breath and went on in a tone which she tried vainly to make composed and indifferent. "Of course you will be quite safe."

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peating it from Coeh Tal's speech, as the huge mountainer stepped back and glared at him with glowing eyes. Arouned thus suddenly, Mason, who had fallen into a sound and dreamless sleep, almost thought for the moment that it was some emissary from the sulphurous regions of evil who threatened these threatening words in his ear. The next moment, coming to himself, and remembering the facts of his position, how stretched his limbs, almost with unconcern, under the very nose of his antagonist.

"Tom!" said he at last, in a voice which was still sleepy, still weary, looking as he spoke straight in to the angry eyes of the other man. "Tom!" said he, "I'm absolutely without means of defense if you choose to attack me. I've had such a pretty flume of it since I've been in this hole of a place that, upon my word, I don't much care whether you knock out my brains or not."

And with those words he sat down on a wooden packing case which served her valiant complaints of pain and weakness. What could he do to gratify the girl for her splendid conduct, her unselfish care? His heart beat quickly and his eyes grew moist as he thought of it. And then he heard a heavy tread in the room over his head and knew that the farmer and his son were getting up. It was 5 o'clock and still dark. But before many minutes were over the floor opened, and the old woman came in with sticks and paper to light the fire.

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