THE FARM IN THE HILLS

A TALE OF MYSTERY.

BY FLORENCE WARDEN.

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—The Rev Granville Masson, who is travelling in Wales, writes his brother, Dr. Reginald Masson, that he is about to go on an excursion in the hills with a wild, uncouth, redheaded guide. After this nothing is heard of the clergyman. Dr. Masson goes to Wales, finds the inn from which his brother started and learns that he was going to the house of Mr. Tregaron, owner of Monachlog farm, some six miles distant, under the guidance of a man nicknamed Coch Tal. Reginald starts in the afternoon, and, in his haste without a guide, to make his way in face of a snow storm to Monachlog farm. II.—Perceiving a figure ahead of him, Reginald hastens and comes up with a large, redheaded man, who, on seeing the doctor, shows signs of great terror and darts ahead. Reginald follows, feeling sure that the man is Coch Tal, and, overtaking him, calls him by that name, but the man again eludes him. III.—He pursues the fugitive down a ravine till he arrives at the edge of a cliff, from the bottom of which comes a groan. IV.—Above him he hears a voice calling and, retracing his steps, comes upon a farmer, who conducts him to his house. The man's daughter is ill, and Reginald agrees to attend her. On the farmer's finger Reginald sees a ring that had belonged to his brother. V.—The house and the people in it are mysterious. There are an old woman, the farmer's young son, Tom, and a farmhand called Myrick. Reginald goes to the room of the sick girl, Gwyn, and upon seeing him she is struck with horror. VI and VII.—Reginald sleeps in the kitchen in a chair before the fire. During the night he awakens to find that some one has entered the room and has evidently tried to rob him, suspicion pointing to the farmhand Myrick, who turns out to be Coch Tal, and the farmer turns out to be Mr. Tregaron and the place Monachlog farm. Tregaron tells Reginald that he found the ring on a hillside near by. VIII.—Reginald watches at Gwyn's bedside, and she warns him to leave the place before morning. IX. X and XI.—Everything and everybody about the place is mysterious. The old woman never speaks, but appears to be spying; Coch Tal is moody, while Gwyn is in constant terror. Reginald, seeing Coch Tal climbing a ladder to a loft follows him, corners him in his bedroom and questions him about his missing brother. Coch Tal admits that he was Granville Masson's guide and says that Masson insisted on climbing where it was not safe. He disappeared, and Coch Tal never saw him afterward. XII.—Gwyn recovers and urges Reginald to depart. A heavy fall of snow prevents, and he believes that he will never get out of the place alive. XIII.—While he is with Gwyn, Coch Tal comes to the door. Reginald goes out to him, and Coch Tal shows plainly that he is in love with Gwyn and jealous of Reginald and threatens him in case he does not depart at once. Reginald pacifies him and returns to Gwyn, who discloses that she hates Coch Tal, but evidently fears him. Reginald feels that she possesses the secret of his brother's disappearance. XIV.—Reginald discovers a pit on the place and, while examining it sees the old woman watching him. She gives a satisfied chuckle. XV. and XVI.—Gwyn relapses and acts strangely. Reginald, while watching with her falls asleep. He wakes to find himself bound, a cloth over his head, and ears Gwyn pleading for him. She is telling someone, "He loves me, and I love him, and he is going to marry me." Then Reginald is left alone with her. XVII, XVIII and XIX.—Gwyn does not explain the mystery, but the next days declares that the attack upon him was a trick to frighten him. She does not explain why she had said that she and Reginald were to be married, but declares that such must be the understanding till she can secure his departure, when he will be free. Tregaron congratulates Reginald. Reginald determines to sleep in the loft with Coch Tal. He awakens to find Coch Tal bending over him and asking him to wake up and help him control his desire to kill him. Coch Tal confesses that his enmity is on account of Gwyn, but finally nobly admits that he desires Gwyn's happiness even at the expense of his own.

Masson bowed his head. There was a noble simplicity in the man which made praise of his conduct, of his feelings, an impertinence.

In silence he lay down to rest and listened to the deep sigh which Coch Tal uttered from time to time from his resting place in the corner.

CHAPTER XX.

GWYN HEARS A PROPOSAL.

When Masson awoke next morning, he found himself alone in the loft, Coch Tal having long since descended to his day's work.

The sunlight was already strong, and Masson saw, with a mixed feeling of relief and dread, that there were signs of thaw on the sparkling surface of the snow.

If the thaw continued, the way back to Trecoed and thence to civilization would soon be open. But the thought of the changed course of life which this might inaugurate was not one of unmixed joy to the doctor.

For with his admiration and liking for Gwyn Tregaron there mingled no feeling strong enough to be called love. It was gratitude alone which prompted him to the resolution he had come to of asking her to be his wife.

So, having made up his mind, he sought and found an opportunity of speaking to the girl. When they met at breakfast, he saw, now that Coch Tal had opened his eyes, certain signs in Gwyn which went far to confirm what the peasant had said. There was a restlessness, a nervousness in the girl's manner, a shy, timid look in her eyes when they met his, which made it impossible to doubt that there was more than mere friendliness toward him in her heart.

He came upon her suddenly, and she started and blushed.

"You mustn't work too hard just at first," said he kindly. "Remember, you have not got your strength back yet, and you don't want to be ill again."

"No," said she. "I—I don't want to be ill again."

She looked as if she wanted to say something more, but finally she turned away in silence. He followed her across the room.

"Gwyn," said he very gently, "will you be sorry when your doctor goes? Will you miss your sweetheart?"

If he had been in any doubt of the state of her feelings toward him, he was at once put in possession of the whole truth. This question, put to her suddenly, brought up to the surface out of the depths of her heart the hidden reserves of passionate affection which she had believed safe in their hiding place. She flashed upon him one look of startled emotion and then, turning abruptly away, hung her head without reply.

"Gwyn," said he, "will you be my wife?"

The girl looked up at once, trembling from head to foot.

"What!" she whispered breathlessly. And there shone for a moment in her

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black eyes a radiant look of happiness such as no man could have witnessed unmoved. "What! Do you mean it? You?"

"Indeed I do, Gwyn. I mean [illegible] in my power to make you happy."

Still she [illegible] as if under some spell, quite [illegible] and breathing quickly. A [illegible] seemed to frame her face and [illegible] at that moment more exquisitely beautiful than that of any woman he had ever seen. After a pause of some seconds Masson put out his right hand and gently raised hers to his lips. And, tender as the action was, perhaps the quick intelligence of the love stricken girl detected in the touch something which told her of the difference between his feelings toward her and hers toward him. However that may be, after a lapse of another moment she gave a long sigh and then drew away her hand sharply, with a laugh which grated a little on his ear.

"Doctor," said she sharply, "you are very good, very good, and I thank you. But no. We won't spoil it. You are my sweetheart," and again her voice quivered on the word, "while you stay here, but when you go, and that will be soon now, very soon, you and I will be both as free as air."

"But if I don't want to be free, Gwyn?" persisted Masson with all loverlike ardor.

The girl flashed upon him a proud, searching look.

"But you do!" cried she quickly.

There was a moment's silence, then it was she who spoke again:

"I'm not ungrateful, doctor. I don't deny that if I was in your rank of life that—that I'd give you a different answer."

"But surely that is my business," interrupted Masson quickly. "If I, understanding all the circumstances just as well as you do"—

"But I doubt if you do," said she quickly. "I doubt if a man, even a clever man like you, can understand and see it all as well as even a simple sort of a woman. Anyhow, I've made up my mind, and I beg you not to say any more about it, because I don't deny it's a temptation for me." She tried to laugh a little. "But as it's a temptation I don't mean to yield to, and as I know what's best for me as well as you, why, talking would only make it worse for me to bear."

"But, Gwyn, I don't understand you quite." She shook her head gently and smiled. He went on, "You are not happy here, I know."

She raised her hand quickly to stop him, evidently fearing what he might be going to say.

"I am not very happy," said she. "I don't deny that. But my going away wouldn't make me any happier. I should always be worrying about those I had left"—

"And you don't think you would be happy enough as my wife to forget your worries?"

After a short pause she answered in a low voice:

"No. Because I feel the differences between you and me and between my friends and my ways and yours more than you can do just now. You don't see me with open eyes just yet, sir, because of all the circumstances of your seeing me first. You can't see that I'm only just a farmer's daughter, with the ways of my own class, which are not the ways of yours. I don't know whether I could ever do right in a new life, and I know you'd have to go through a deal on my account at first. Oh, I know it; I know it! And so, if you please, sir, we'll say no more about it, but stick to our bargain. And you're my sweetheart"—she flushed as she uttered the word—"while you're here, but you're free and I'm free as soon as you reach the bottom of the hill."

And with these words, with a pretty glow in her proud face, she left him abruptly, going out through the washhouse before he could stop her.

Then he was free! And she was free! He stretched his arms and prepared to go out to his work, when he was startled by a slight noise in the outhouse, which betrayed that there had been a listener to their conversation.

He was on the alert in a moment, for he knew that there was a new danger to himself in the possibility of their compact becoming known.

Who was the eavesdropper?

CHAPTER XXI.

FAREWELL TO THE FARM.

Masson crossed the kitchen floor very softly and opened the outhouse door. But there was no one there. The place was so large, so dark, there were so many hiding places among the lumber, so many pitfalls besides the old well that he dared not make a very exhaustive survey. He went back again into the kitchen, however, with the definite impression that some one had been in there listening to his conversation with Gwyn and that the eavesdropper, whoever it was, had found a way of egress.

The belief was a disturbing one. Masson knew that in the belief of the household he was engaged to Gwyn, that he was going to marry her and take her away with him lay his safety. And he was therefore not surprised when the girl made a pretext for detaining him after dinner to whisper in his ear that he must try to get away without delay.

He was startled by her earnestness.

"Some one overheard us this morning?" said he abruptly.

"Yes. And you must go at once. There must be no more delay. I don't say the journey will be without danger, but it is worth the risk—any risk. There will be light for nearly three hours, and by that time you will have got out of the hills if you have any luck. The road to the bottom of the hill is clear now, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, you must start then and get away as quickly as you can. The others are on the hill yonder, making a way up to the rest of the sheep. Go now, at once, before they miss you."

As she spoke she thrust out her hand, and he took it in his. Before he could utter a word in his turn, however, the door was opened briskly, and the farmer's cheerful voice cried:

"Hi, doctor, we've been looking for you. Come and lend a hand. We must push on up hill before dusk comes."

"I'd been asking the doctor to go down the hill, father, into the valley to see whether there's a way up to Thomas' yet," said she. "We're running rather short of provisions, and I know Mrs. Thomas can help us. Make haste, doctor, and don't be long," she went on, turning to him with a warning frown which her father did not see. "Get down the hill and look along the valley to the left. If you see men at work a little distance off, cutting their way toward you, signal to them and tell them I would be glad to know whether they can let me have a side of bacon."

She hurried the doctor out, helping him on with his overcoat and muffler and giving him when she could a warning glance to urge him quickly on his way. Then she opened the front door, which had now been freed from snow, and let him out, with a smile and a nod. Her father was standing behind her, just inside the doorway.

Farmer Tregaron's eyes were fixed upon him all the time with a look which Masson thought suspicious, curious. Under this fire nothing in the nature of a tender parting from Gwyn was possible. He would have offered his hand for one last clasp, but her own arms were held rigidly behind her back, and although there was a strange look of yearning and sadness in her black eyes her lips uttered no word.

"Goodby, then," muttered Masson in a muffled voice.

"Goodby, doctor, for the present," returned she Ludly.

And as if fearful lest he should by some word or action or look betray the understanding there was between them she shut the door.

Masson sped on his way down the hill with a tumult of strange feelings raging in his heart. He could not believe that he had seen Gwyn's face for the last time; that the deliverance from prison, for which he had been longing, had come at last and brought nothing but soreness and regret with it.

As he crossed the stone incumbered plain in front of the farmhouse and began the descent of the hill by the narrow cutting through the deep snowdrifts which he had helped to make he was torn with regrets and longings, with remorse and distress, in which his admiration and reverence for Gwyn struggled with his self reproach on his brother's account.

Had he not wasted his time up there and the opportunity which he should never have again of finding out what

"A nasty place, this," said Masson.

had become of poor Granville? Should he not have made still greater efforts than he had done to discover the truth of his brother's disappearance?

And again, ought he not to have insisted more strongly than he had done upon his wish to make Gwyn his wife? What would become of the girl, the noble girl, who had so unselfishly watched over him and sacrificed her own desires of happiness to her belief that she was acting for the best for him in refusing his offer? He knew that she was miserable in her life; that there were terrible secrets of the strange household to which she belonged which must lie with tenfold weight upon her own innocent soul.

These considerations caused his heart to bleed and his steps to lag, until by the time he reached the bottom of the hill and had to face the plunge into the snow of the valley he had almost made up his mind to turn back again and to approach her with a more resolute front and with a more impassioned prayer that she would become his wife.

The only consideration which formed a check upon this inclination was the vague belief he had that her own brother and grandmother had been in some way connected with his brother's death. But then again appearances seemed to be so much stronger against Coch Tal, the gulde, than against the old woman and her grandson that this suspicion could scarcely be considered strong enough to influence his action. And this was especially the case in view of the fact that Gwyn herself had made no suggestion, either by word or manner, of there being such an obstacle as this between them.

So when he reached the bottom of the hill Masson turned to retrace his footsteps, after having glanced down the valley and up again and seen no sign of another human being. The way to Trecoed did indeed seem to be open to him, for he could see the path on the opposite hill, which the sliding masses of snow had left free. Even with this prospect of escape in sight the thought of Gwyn made him turn back.

And as he did so his heart gave an odd leap within him, for, standing a few feet from him and evidently on his track, was David Tregaron, the farmer.

The men looked at each other for a moment in silence. Tregaron had been taken by surprise, for there was on his face a scowl which it had not worn on their last meeting and which he instantly tried to exchange for a smile. Masson, on his side, was considerably disturbed to find that he had been followed. The farmer spoke first.

"I thought," he began, "that you mightn't be able to find your way up again so easy as you had thought to, sir. It's still slippery up here and not altogether safe."

Masson heard or fancied he heard in these words something more than a warning—a kind of threat.

"Thank you," said he coldly. "I can find my way about better than you think."

Even if he had wished to go forward on his way to Trecoed he saw that to carry out such a plan in the face of what would be determined opposition was impossible. Tregaron was armed with a huge ax for one thing, and in his position above the other to aim a fatal blow at the doctor below would have been easy enough, and in the second place if Masson had attempted to escape and to trust to his heels he would have had no chance against the man who knew every chink and cranny of the hills and of the valley between.

He at once, therefore, began to reascend the hill, while the farmer waited for him, and then dropped a few steps behind.

"We are getting on nicely, sir," went on Tregaron in as buoyant a tone as usual, "with the snow clearing. If you'll come up with me I can show you just what we've got to do. The last of the sheep will be reached by tomorrow, if things go on as well as this."

He took Masson across the little tableland in a different direction from that by which he had come. Instead of going near the farmhouse, they went round by the south side of the old church walls and up the smooth slope where Masson had already been with Coch Tal.

Masson, who for the first time had begun to feel some mistrust of the farmer's motives toward him, took care to keep by his side and not to allow Tregaron to drop behind him. He remembered the cleft in the hillside toward which they were bending their steps, and he resolved to be on his guard against accidents at that perilous point. As, by good fortune, he knew exactly when to look out for it, he managed to drop behind in his turn as the farmer and he reached the opening, and just as he took the backward step he was shocked to see on Tregaron's face a look which betrayed a hostile feeling in every line of the eagle face.

At that moment Masson felt a sick horror at his position. How was he, unused to the mountain life, to the steep paths and unexpected precipices and chasms, to hope to escape from the hardy hill born farmer, whom he now knew to be his enemy?

"A nasty place, this," said Masson at last, with a glance down toward the chasm they had reached.

The farmer, who was a step in advance, laughed shortly.

"You've been here before, then?"

"Yes."

Tregaron wheeled around briskly.

"And have you been up the rock to Pen Uchaf," asked he abruptly, "that looks straight down into Llyn Foel?"

"No. This is as far as I've been."

"Come along, then. I'll show you a sight you won't forget."

If Masson could have declined the invitation, he would have done so, but the tone in which it was given made it rather a command than a request, so he went on, keeping to the farmer's side or a step or two behind and evading all attempts, real or fancied, on the farmer's part to make him go first.

They branched off sharply to the right, walking alongside the chasm until they reached a point where it could be crossed without dimculty in the stride. After this the ascent became much steeper, although, owing to the nature of the ground and its comparatively sheltered position, they found it less incumbered by snow than the other parts of the mountain.

As they got higher the way became more difficult. Here the patches of bare rocks were frequent, and these dark gray slabs were slippery and steep, so that the short winter afternoon had begun to darken toward evening by the time they reached the top.

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To be continued.

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"Yes."

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"Yes."

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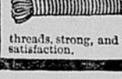

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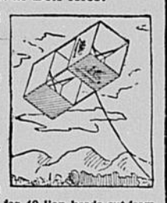

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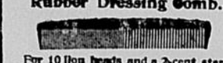

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