SHAMELESS WAYNE

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Title page

SHAMELESS WAYNE

A Romance of the last Feud of WAYNE and RATCLIFFE

By
HALLIWELL SUTCLIFFE
Author of "Ricroft of Withens," "A Man of the Moors," *etc.*

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Contents

CHAPTER

I. Once for a Death

II. And Twice for the Slayer's Shrift

III. The Lean Man of Wildwater

IV. On Bog-Hole Brink

V. A Love-tryst

VI. The Brown Dog's Step

VII. The Lean Man's Token

VIII. A Stormy Burial

IX. A Moorside Courtship

X. What Crossed the Garden-Path

XI. How the Ratcliffes Rode Out by Stealth

XII. How They Fared Back to Wildwater

XIII. April Snow

XIV. How Wayne and Ratcliffe Met at Hazel Brigg

XV. Mother-wit

XVI. How Wayne of Marsh Rode up to Bents

XVII. The Dog-dread

XVIII. The Feud-wind Freshens

XIX. How Wayne Kept the Pinfold

XX. How They Waited at the Boundary-Stone

XXI. What Chanced at Wildwater

XXII. And What Chanced at Marsh

XXIII. How Wayne Kept Faith

XXIV. How the Lean Man Fought With Shameless Wayne

XXV. And How He Drank With Him

XXVI. Mistress Wayne Fares up to Wildwater

XXVII. How the Lean Man Forgot the Feud

Shameless Wayne

CHAPTER I
ONCE FOR A DEATH

The little old woman sat up in the belfry tower, knitting a woollen stocking and tolling the death bell with her foot. She took two and seventy stitches between each stroke of the bell, and not the church-clock itself could reckon a minute more truly. Sharp of face she was, the Sexton's wife, and her lips were forever moving in time to the click of her knitting-needles.

"By th' Heart, 'tis little care his wife hed for him," she muttered presently. "Nobbut a poor half-hour o' th' bell, an' him wi' a long, cold journey afore him. Does she think a man's soul can racket up to Heaven at that speed? Mebbe 'tis her pocket she cares for—two-an'-sixpence, an' him a Wayne! One o' th' proud Waynes o' Marsh, an' all, th' best-born folk i' th' moorside. Well, there's men an' there's men, mostly wastrils, but we mud weel hev spared another better nor Anthony Wayne, that we could."

Her voice died down again, though her lips still moved and her needles chattered restlessly. The wind raced over the moor and in at the rusty grating, and twice the Sexton's wife ceased knitting to brush away a cobweb, wind-driven against her cheek.

"An' him to hev no more nor a half-hour's tolling, poor mortal!" she said, breaking a long pause. "What 'ull he do when he gets to th' Gate, an' th' bell hes stopped tolling, an' there's no Christian music to waft him in? But theer! What did I say o' th' wife when Anthony Wayne went an' wedded again—a lass no older nor his own daughter, an' not Marshcotes bred nawther. Nay, there's no mak o' gooid in 't—two-an'-sixpence to buy a man's soul God-speed, there niver war ony gooid i' bringing furriners to Marshcotes. Little, milkblooded wench as she is, not fit to stand up agen a puff o' wind. Well, I've a'most done wi' th' ringing—save I war to gi'e him another half-hour for naught, sin' he war a thowt likelier nor th' rest o' th' men-folk."

The little old woman smiled mirthlessly. For folk accounted her sharp of tongue and hard of heart, and she would never have done as much for any but a Wayne of Marsh House. Silence fell once again on the belfry tower, broken only by the click-click of the needles, the creak of the rope, the subdued thunder of the

bell, the wailing frenzy of the wind as it drove the hailstones against the black old walls.

Eerie as the night was in the belfry, it was wilder yet in the bleak kirkyard without, free to the moor as it was, and full of corners where the wind hid itself to pipe a shriller note than it could compass in the open. The wind, a moon three-quarters full, a sky close packed with rain and sleet, fought hard together; and now the moon gained a moment's victory, shimmering ghostly grey across the wet tombstones; and now the scudding wrack prevailed, hiding the moon outright. The sodden winter leaves were lifted from the mould, and danced to the tune of the raindrops pattering upward from the tombstones.

A figure crossed the moor and halted awhile at the church-yard gate—a slim figure, of a lissom strength and upright carriage which marked her as a Wayne of Marsh House. Like a sapling ash the girl had swayed and bent to the hurricane as she fought her way through the storm; but all that the wind could do it had done, and had left her unbroken—breathless only, and glad of the gate's support for a moment.

The moon drove through the cloud-wrack as she stood there, lighting each shadowed hollow of her face. There was tenderness in her eyes, but tears were drawn like a veil across them; there was softness in the mouth, but pride and resolve hid all save the sterner lines. She turned her head quickly toward the belfry as the clang of the death-bell struck through the storm-din of the larger strife; and then she hid her face in her two strong hands, and sobbed as wildly as ever the wind could do. And after that she went forward, through the gate, up the narrow path, past the great stone, with the iron rings on either side, which hid the burial vault of the Waynes.

"Not there, father! They will never leave you out there for ever," she whispered—"you who were so strong yesterday, so full of the warmth of life. God, God, if You were made after our fashion, as men say, You would raise him from the dead. How the blood dripped, dripped from the little hole in his side. Oh, God, be merciful! Say that the wind has blown my wits away—say that all this is——"

She checked herself. Her passion died out, leaving her bitterly calm as the graves she lingered by.

"Nay, there is no mercy, nor shall be," said she.

"No mercy—no mercy," yelled the wind, as it howled across the moor and in through the kirkyard hedge.

The girl was comforted in some sort, it seemed, by the tempest's devilry. She turned from the vault and moved with a firm step to the foot of the church-tower; one hand had stolen to her girdle, and as the bell's note shuddered down the wind-beats once again, her fingers tightened round the knife-hilt.

"A drear neet for th' owd Maister," the Sexton's wife was crooning to herself, as she knitted her stocking in the belfry tower above. "'Tis a cold journey an' a long he's bound for, an' he'll feel th' lack o' flesh-warmth; ay, poor body! I could hev wished his soul fairer weather."

Up the crooked stair, worn by a half-score generations, passed Nell Wayne, with her brave carriage and her pitiless face. The Sexton's wife dropped a stitch of her knitting as she heard the door open; and her heart went pit-a-pat, for it was a fit night for ghosts.

"Oh, 'tis ye, Mistress, is't?" she grumbled, soon as she saw it was no ghost at all, but just Nell Wayne of Marsh.

The girl looked at her awhile in silence, as if the crabbed figure, working busily with hand and foot by the light of a rush candle, were dear to her at such a time.

"Well, then, what hes brought ye through th' storm?" said the little woman. "I warrant 'tis easier to lig between sheets nor to cross th' moor to-neet."

"There's no ease, Nanny, save in fighting the storm," cried the girl. "Could I rest quiet at Marsh House, think'st thou, knowing what lies there?"

"Nay, for th' wind rapped hard at th' windows an' called ye out; ye war iver th' storm's bairn," said Nanny, chuckling grimly.

"I came to ask thee to give father a longer passing than his wife is like to have seen to. Here is my purse, Nanny—take what thou wilt so long as his soul is cared for."

Ay, there was heart in the Sexton's wife, for all her rough pilgrimage through life. She knew, now for the first time, how deep her love went for this daughter of the Waynes; and even as she pushed away the money, with impatient protest, her voice broke and her eyes filled with tears.

"Dearie," she whispered, coming close to the girl's side and putting a lean arm about her. "Dearie, ye must not look like that. Ye're ower young to let all Hell creep into your face—ower young, I tell ye—an' I should know, seeing I nursed ye fro' being a two-year babby."

"Over young! Nay, a woman can never be over young to learn God's lesson, Nanny. 'Tis fight at our birth—poor woman's sort of struggle, with tears—and fight through the summer days when the very skies strive against the seed-crops that should keep our bodies quick—and fight again, when winter rails at the house walls, trying to batter them in."

"Hev a kindlier thowt o' God," cried the other eagerly—more eagerly, it may be, than her own faith warranted. "Put th' father out o' mind sooin as th' sorrow grows a bit more dumb-like, an' think on a likely man's love an' th' bairns to come."

"What art doing, Nanny? The bell has been silent these five minutes past,"

cried the girl. It was strange to see how grief had altered her—to mark how peremptory and harsh of voice she had grown, how little she seemed to care for aught save for such matters as concerned her father, whose body was lying cold and stiff in the oak-lined hall at Marsh, whose soul was journeying wearily toward an unsubstantial Heaven. Yet the superstition of her folk held her, and the bell's silence was a horror near akin to crime, since it robbed the dead man of whatever cheer the next world held.

The Sexton's wife said nothing at all, but took up her knitting and slid her foot into the loop of the bell-rope. Nell Wayne leaned against the rotting woodwork of the door, and fingered the dagger that lay beneath her cloak, and fancied that every jar of the bell was a blow well driven home. The Sexton's wife glanced shrewdly at her, as if in fear of this still, strenuous mood.

"Better talk to a body, my dear; 'twill drive th' devils out," she said.

As one awakening from a trance, Nell moved forward and laid a hand on the other's shoulder. Her calm was gone; she quivered from head to foot. "Wast talking of love, and bairns to come?" she said. "Love? Ay, to see your lover killed before your eyes. And bairns? Must the mothers rear up the wee things, that never did them harm, to suffer and to curse the God that made them?—Nanny, I know who struck the blow."

The Sexton's wife lifted her face sharply. "Ay, so? 'Twill be gooid news for somebody to hear—your uncle, belike, or one o' th' Long Waynes o' Cranshaw."

"Kinship is well enough, Nanny—but 'twill not carry this last feud. Has Wayne of Marsh no children, that his quarrel needs go abroad to be righted?"

"Ay, he hes childer," said Nanny slowly—"a lass not grown to ripeness, an' four lads ower young to fight, an' another lad who's man enough to drink belly-deep."

"Hush, Nanny! What if Ned be wild as a bog-sprite—he must always be next to father in my heart. He has been from home this se'n-night past, nurse, or he would strike for me. I know he would strike for me. But he may be long a-coming, and this sort of quarrel breeds foulness if 'tis not righted quickly."

The wind was whimpering now, and scarce had strength to win through the grating of the belfry tower. From without, on the side where the Bull tavern backed the kirkyard, there came the sound of noisy revel—a hunting song, half drowned in drunken clamour and applause.

"Yond's your father's eldest-born, I'll warrant," said Nanny, jerking her thumb over her shoulder; "'tis like he's home again, Mistress, for there's no voice like Shameless Wayne's to sing strong liquor down 's throit."

The girl winced. "Let him be Shameless Wayne to the gossips, Nanny; is't thy place to judge him?" she flashed.

"Nawther mine nor yourn, dearie—'tis only that my heart cries out for ye,

being left so lonely-like; an' pity allus crisps my tongue. Shall I slip me dahn to th' Bull, an' whisper i' th' lad's ear? Happen he knaws nowt o' what's chanced at Marsh."

"Nor will know, even if 'tis he, till the morning clears his wits. Hark ye, Nanny, women have done such things aforetime, and my arm is strong."

The little old woman went on with her knitting, and still the bell rope creaked at its wonted intervals; but there was a change in the ringer's face—a brightness of the eye, a quiver of the shrunken body. She read the girl's purpose aright.

"Will it not serve?" went on Nell, slipping her hand from under her cloak and conning the ringer's face eagerly.

Nanny took the dagger, and ran her fingers along its edge, muttering to herself in a curious key. "Who is't?" she asked.

"Dick Ratcliffe. Oh, 'twas a gallant fight! We have killed the Ratcliffes more than once or twice, in the old days before the feud was healed—but we struck fair. Nanny, he struck from behind! It was gathering dusk, and I had just put fresh peats on the fire and turned to the window to look out for father's coming."

"An' hed fetched his snuff-box for him, an' laid it dahn by th' settle-corner, as ye used to do i' th' owd days," murmured Nanny.

"Hush, nurse! Oh, hush! I must not think of—of the old days."

"Ay, but ye mun!" cried the old woman with sudden vehemence. "There's marrow i' th' owd days an' th' owd tales, if ye tak 'em right. See ye, Mistress, ye war a slip of a lassie when th' feud war staunched 'twixt Wayne an' Ratcliffe; but I hed seen th' way on 't, an' I knew, plain as if a body hed comed an' telled me, that 'twould break out again one day. Rest me! There were hate as bitter as th' bog atween 'em."

"And shall be again, nurse," said Nell, in a voice as low as the wind that rustled through the belfry-chamber. The shadow of tradition stole dark across her, and her fingers tightened on the dagger-hilt as if she hid a man's heart under her rounded breasts.

"God willing," croaked the ringer, finishing a row of her knitting and jerking a muffled note of remonstrance from the bell overhead.

"'Tis as father always said, when I used to sit at his knee o' nights and listen to his tales," went on the girl. "There was never honesty or good faith in a Ratcliffe, and when the Waynes held off at last and swore a truce, out of pity for the few Ratcliffes left to kill, father warned his folk what the end would be. And it has begun, Nanny! Their boys are grown men now, and they outnumber us; and they will never rest till they, or we, are blotted out."

"'Twill be them as goes under sod, Mistress; there war niver a foxy breed yet but it war run to earth by honest folk. Hark ye! That's Shameless Wayne's

voice again! Lad, lad, can ye think o' no sterner wark nor yond, while your father ligs ready for his shroud?"

"He does not know, Nanny. How should he know? He has been from home, I tell thee. Nurse, stop knitting and give me thy hands awhile! I thought the weakness in me was killed, and now I could cry like any bairn. I would not tell any but thee, Nanny, but I must ease my heart, and thou'rt staunch as a mother to me. Know'st thou that father's wife—the little shivering thing he brought from the Low Country—has played false to him these months past?"

"I've heard summat o' th' sort; ay, there's been part talk 'bout it up an' dahn th' moor."

"Dick Ratcliffe it was who dishonoured her. He——"

She stopped and left holding Nanny's hands, and began to pace up and down the floor.

Nanny took up her needles, and fixed her eyes on the woollen stocking and waited. "A lass is tricksy handling at such times; best bide an' let her wend her own way; 'twill ease th' poor bairn, I warrant, to talk her fever out," she muttered.

But the girl's fever was of a sort that no speech could cool, and it was gaining on her fast. Already she had forgotten her need of sympathy, and she could think of naught save the picture that had been stamped clear and deep on her brain by the day's wild work.

"'Twas at dusk this afternoon, Nanny," she began afresh. "Father came riding up to the gate on the bay mare, and I was going to meet him, with a kiss for the rider and a coaxing word for the mare, when Dick Ratcliffe came galloping along the cross-road. He checked when he saw father, and swerved into the Marsh bridle-track and then—then, before I could cry out, before I could know him for a Ratcliffe in the gathering dusk, he had drawn his sword, and lifted it, and struck. I ran to help, and father reeled in the saddle. Nurse, I cannot shut out the picture; I cannot——"

"Nor seek to; hold fast to it, Mistress—there's no luck i' forgetting pictures sich as yond. Dick Ratcliffe war off an' away, I warrant, sooin as his blow war struck?"

"Nay, for what could even he fear from one poor girl who had never a weapon to her hand? He watched with a smile on his face while I took father's head in my lap and bent to hear his last hard-won words. 'Nell, tell our kinsmen 'twas a foul blow. Wipe it out, lass; give no quarter.' That was what he said to me, Nanny; and all the while Dick Ratcliffe mocked us, till I got to my feet and cursed him; and then he rode away laughing. And I swore by the Brown Dog that father should not wait long for vengeance."

The little old woman forgot no stroke of the bell; but the knitting fell on her lap, and she lifted a face as stern as Nell's own. "Your father's lass," she cried.

"Put tears behind ye, an' keep your hate as hot as hell-fire, an' let th' sun set on 't ivery neet, an' rise on 't ivery morn, till th' Ratcliffes hev paid their reckoning, three for one. Eh, dearie, if I hed your arms, if I hed a tithe o' your strength, 'tis out I'd go wi' ye this minute to begin the reaping—to begin the reaping."

The wind was fluting eerily about the belfry-chamber. The rushlight made strange shadows up and down the walls, and the cobwebs floated like grey ghosts.

"Hark!" whispered Nell Wayne, bending her ear toward the grating. "Didst hear that voice in the wind, nurse?"

"Ay; 'twas the Brown Dog's howl; he's noan minded to let ye forget, 'twould seem, an' them as once swears by him can niver rest, day or neet."

"'Tis not the first time to-day, Nanny. Thou know'st Barguest Lane that runs behind Marsh House? He bayed there for a long hour this afternoon, and I was sick for father's coming lest ill should have chanced to him. Once for a death, and twice for the slayer's shrift—hast heard the saying, nurse?" There was a grewsome sort of joy in the girl's voice.

"I've heard th' saying, Mistress, an' I've heard Barguest, what some calls th' Guytrash—but niver hev I known th' deathsome beast howl for nowt."

Nell moved quickly to the door; it seemed she had gained resolution from the baying of the spectre hound. "Why am I loitering here, Nanny?" she cried. "The Brown Dog calls, and I must go. Father will lie lighter if——"

"Where are ye wending? There's naught to be done till morning dawns," said the Sexton's wife.

"Is there not? Straight to Dick Ratcliffe's I'm going, nurse—he will open the door to me—and I shall look him in the face, Nanny, and strike while he is mocking at my helplessness—and there will be father's dead strength behind the blow, because he trusted me to right the quarrel."

She drew her cloak close about her, stayed to bid Lucy ring the bell till midnight, then went swiftly down the stair, heedless of the smooth worn steps that threatened to spoil her errand before she had well started. The wind, whistling keen through the graveyard trees, drove new life into her; she quickened her steps as the moor showed white through the hedge at the top, for she was thinking of Dick Ratcliffe, and of the short three miles that lay between them.

The moon was out again, scudding fast as the wind itself behind a tattered trail of clouds. At the turn of the path she all but ran against a brawny, straight-shouldered fellow, who was crossing the graveyard from the Cranshaw side.

"Why, Rolf, is't thou?" cried Nell, standing off from him a little and lifting a white face to the moonlight.

"Ay, Nell. What in God's name art doing here on a wild night like this?" Wayne of Cranshaw spoke harshly, but his eyes, as they roved about his cousin's face, were full of tenderness.

"I came to see that—that father was cared for.—Rolf, hast not heard what chanced at Marsh this afternoon?"

"I have heard of it, a half hour since, and was coming to see if I could aid thee in aught. Nell, lass, 'tis a rough blow for thee, this."

He was minded to set his arms about her, but she put him away. "Not to-night, I cannot bear it, dear," she pleaded.

Loverlike, his face grew clouded. "I had thought to comfort thee a little, Nell."

"Nay, Rolf, I would not have thee take it hardly," she whispered, laying a quick hand on his sleeve. "Thou know'st I loved thee—yesterday. To-morrow I shall love thee; but to-night is father's. When Dick Ratcliffe of Wildwater has paid his price, come to me, for I shall need thee, dear."

"Dick Ratcliffe? What is this talk of paying a price, child? Was't Ratcliffe that did it?"

"Ay, and from behind. And they will say 'twas done for the feud's sake; and 'twill be the blackest lie that ever a Ratcliffe told. 'Twas done for fear, Rolf. The woman that father brought home a year agone, the woman I tried to call mother, could not keep true for one poor twelve-month; she met Dick Ratcliffe by stealth in the orchard, and father chanced on them there, and Ratcliffe fled like a hare across the pasture-field, leaving the woman to brave it out. Father swore to kill him, the first fair chance of fight that offered; and he knew it; and he saved himself by a treacherous sword-cut."

"'Tis my right, Nell," said Wayne of Cranshaw, gravely.

She shook her head. It was as bitter to rob a man of honour as of his precedence in fight; yet she could not grant him this. "Thine, if any man's," she said. "But father left the right to me, and before the dawn comes up cold above Wildwater I shall have eased thee of the task."

They stood there in silence. Rolf Wayne was eager to forbid the enterprise, yet fearful of crossing the girl's wild mood at such a time; and no words came to him. And she, for her part, was listening to the gaining shouts of revelry that came from the tavern just below; her brother's voice, thick with wine and reckless jollity, was loudest of all, and she could no longer doubt that Shameless Wayne was there, bettering the reputation that was given him by all the countryside. Wayne of Cranshaw heard it, and looked at the girl, and "Nell," said he, "could not Ned keep sober just for this one night?"

She did not answer, but drew her cloak about her, shivering.

"How the bell shudders, Rolf," she said, as the deep note rang out again and lost itself among the wind-beats.

"Was it thy thought, or his wife's, to bid the bell be rung?" asked Wayne.

The girl laughed harshly. "Hers, Rolf—because she was afraid of meeting

father beyond the grave. She hopes for Heaven, this little, lying wisp of windle-straw; and so she paid for a half-hour of the bell, knowing that 'twas all too short a passing for a man's soul and thinking to keep father on this side of the Gates. 'Twas a trim device, my faith!"

"And like her, Nell; 'tis just a trick of Mistress Wayne's to rob him at the last, as she robbed him through that year of marriage. If such as she win into Heaven, pray God that thou, and I, and all honest folk, burn everlastingly."

The girl began to move up to the moor—slowly, for even now the man's will bore hardly on her, and she sought, in a queer, half-hearted way, his leave to go and do what must be done at Wildwater. "Rolf—let me go—I am armed, and—and 'twill not take me long," she faltered.

He gripped her arm roughly. "Thou shalt not; I forbid thee," he said.

The plain compulsion angered her. "Forbid? When wedlock has shackled me, Wayne of Cranshaw, 'twill be time for thee to play the bully.—Rolf," she went on, pleading again, "I swore by the Brown Dog, and even now I heard him in the wind."

"Pish! Leave Barguests to the farm-hinds that come home too full of liquor and think every good dog's note a boggart's cry. I say, the feud is mine, and mine it shall be."

"Dost grudge it even to me? When summer was tender with the moorside, Rolf, how oft a day didst tell me that naught was too much to give? But winter chills a man's love-vows, and thou grudgest it."

"I grudge the danger—for that is doubled, lass, when a maid fights with a man, as thou would'st fight with Ratcliffe of Wildwater. Hark ye, Nell! Thy journey might be the worst sort of disaster. At the best it would be fruitless, for he is like to have taken Mistress Wayne and fled to the Low Country, where dalliance, they say, goes free of punishment and fair feud is reckoned lawless."

"Rolf, I never dreamed that could be!" she cried, dismayed. "Would he not wait one night, think'st thou? Not one little night, to give me time——"

"He is gone by this, if I know his spirit. There, lass! Let me take thee safe home to Marsh, and rest sure that Ratcliffe is beyond thy reach or mine."

Wayne of Cranshaw, scarce believing his own tale, meant to cross to Wildwater soon as he had turned Nell from her purpose; but while he spoke, there came a sudden clattering of horse-hoofs, and after that a jingling of reins and a gruff call for liquor, as the two horses pulled up sharp in front of the tavern doorway.

The one thought leaped into the girl's mind and into Wayne's of Cranshaw.

"Rolf," she cried, "what if he be coming to us? What if Ratcliffe and my stepmother have put off flight an hour too long?"

"It may be so—ay, it may be so," muttered Wayne, as they moved over the

wet gravestones toward the tavern.

The moonlight showed them a cumbrous post-chaise, and harnessed to it a pair of bays, smoking from the rough, up-hill scramble. A postillion stood at the leader's head, holding a horn of old October in one hand and cursing the untoward weather as he blew the froth from off the top.

"We knew the Ratcliffe spirit, and we knew thy father's wife," said Wayne bitterly, pointing to the chaise. "I warrant we shall not need hunt our fox to-night, Nell."

"Is there no doubt, think ye? Rolf, I feared we had lost the chance," muttered Nell, clutching at her dagger.

But he caught her wrist. "Lass," he said, so tenderly that the tears came unbidden to her eyes, "what is thine is mine hereafter, and I will take the blows for my share of the burden. A bargain, Nell, between us; if he come to-night, the fight is mine; if he fail, then I will let thee go and seek him."

She turned for a backward look at the Wayne vault, hidden by its flat, iron-ringed stone; and she wondered if her father would like Rolf to strike the blow, in place of the daughter who had loved him through the years of trouble.

"They will lift that stone in three days' time," she muttered aimlessly; "and we shall see the last of father, and know that the worms are making merry with his flesh. It seems hard, for he was a better man than any in the moorside—save thou."

And then the "save thou" brought back her womanishness for a space; and she fell to sobbing in his arms; and the churchyard gate, up above them, began to grumble on its hinges.

Wayne of Cranshaw put her from him and his hand went to his belt. "Have they taken the foot-road across the moor?" he whispered. "Ned Ratcliffe was never the man to do aught but slink, and slink, until needs must that he move into sight of honest men.—Nell, for shame's sake, give me the right."

"Ay, take it—but make no mistake, dear—clean through his heart—can I trust thee?"

The gate clashed to. The wind roved in and out among the graves. The passing bell boomed out its challenge, and was dumb for a long minute. Wayne of Cranshaw laughed soberly.

The Sexton's wife, meanwhile, went on with her knitting, click-clack, up in the belfry-tower. The bell swayed back and forth, bent on its work of mercy. A great white owl was driven through the window-grating, putting out the rush-light as it blundered across the chamber.

"Good-hap to this devil's weather. Good-hap to the lassie's arm," croaked

the ringer, and picked up a stick she had dropped.

CHAPTER II
AND TWICE FOR THE SLAYER'S SHRIFT

Dick Ratcliffe passed through the kirkyard-gate, with Wayne's wife of Marsh clinging close to his arm.

"Need we have crossed the graveyard?" said the woman, stopping with one hand on the gate. Dainty of figure she was, with a face all milk and roses; and her tongue lisped baby-fashion, refusing the round speech of the uplands.

"Ay, need we!" cried Ratcliffe, half surlily. "How know we that the feud-call has not gone round, to carry the Waynes on the old trail of vengeance? As 'tis, we have driven it over late, thanks to thy doublings, Margaret. Come, yond passing-bell should warn thee how the time slips by."

But she kept a tight hold on the gate, and looked down the wet path toward where the Wayne vault-stone stared blue and cold at the cold moon. "'Tis uncanny," she whispered, shivering. "Know'st thou 'tis his bell, Dick, that rings for our journey? I dare not pass the vault down yonder—-it stares at me, as if I had killed him—Dick, 'twas not I that killed him—why should the stone look up and curse me.

"Pish! Art unstrung, Meg. The vault-stone is as dead—as Wayne of Marsh. Come away, I tell thee; I can hear the rattle of harness-gear, and the chaise will be waiting tor us at the tavern doorway. I sent a horseman to Saxilton for it two hours agone, and it must be here by now."

Mistress Wayne left clinging to the gate; but still she could not move forward. "I dread it so! The storm, and the wildness, and—and the graves. Dick, 'tis too good to be true that we should win free of this cruel moor! Ever since I came here, I have feared and hated it—and now its arms are closing round me—I can feel them, Dick, as if they had bone and muscle—-"

Ratcliffe of Wildwater laughed noisily, for his own spirits were yielding to the touch of time and circumstance, and he strove to lighten them. "Shalt never see the moor again, sweetheart, nor I either. 'Tis Saxilton first, and after that a swift ride to some nook of the valleys where they have never heard of Waynes and feud."

"Will they be long in driving us to Saxilton?"

"Nay, for the road is good and the cattle good. What a baby 'tis to tremble so, just when we are free."

A few steps forward she made, then stopped and seemed like to fall. "I *dare* not pass the vault," she whispered.

He put his arm about her roughly and forced her lagging feet down the path. "The vault cannot kill," he growled, "but there are those waiting across the moor who carry more than women's fancies in their hands. Will thy fears be less, thou fool, if I am set on by a half score of the Waynes and killed before thy eyes?"

Weak as a bog-reed to catch the infection of each new wind, she bent to his own fear, and hurried on, and all but forgot the vault that stared at her from the corner of the path where the broken yew-trees shivered in the wind.

"Would we were safe in Saxilton," she wailed. "Hurry! Oh, let us hurry—they will take thee, Dick—–"

She stopped on the sudden, for a brawny figure stood at the bend of the path, blocking the way. Mistress Wayne shrank back behind her lover, and her step-daughter crept further under the yew shadows, watching Dick Ratcliffe's face go drawn and grey.

"Good-even, Ratcliffe of Wildwater. Whither away?" said Rolf Wayne, with bitter gaiety.

"To a place that is free of Waynes, God curse them," answered Ratcliffe, striving to put a bold face on the matter.

"That is a true word, I warrant, for Hell holds none of our breed.—See you, Ratcliffe the thief, I could have killed you like an adder, as you slew a better man awhile since; but, being a Wayne, I have a trick of asking for fair fight. Ye may win to Saxilton, ye two, but 'twill be at the sword's point."

Dick Ratcliffe eyed his enemy this way and that, seeking occasion for a foul blow; but none showed itself, for Wayne's sword was bare to the wind, and his eye never wandered from the other's face.

"When I fear you, you shall know of it," said Ratcliffe, drawing his own blade, grudgingly.

"Come to yond vault-stone, then, for 'tis a right merry spot for such a fight as ours. You know whose body it will cover before the moon is old? What, faltering, Ratcliffe?"

"Not I; but the time fits ill, and 'tis cold for Mistress Wayne here."

"Your thoughts were ever kind toward women, but Mistress Wayne must wait one little moment longer. Not faltering? Well, then, I wronged you; 'twas your backward glance that put me in mind of a driven hare."

Mistress Wayne ran forward and threw her arms about her lover. "Don't fight, Dick; he will kill thee, kill thee," she pleaded. "I want to get away from this

ghostly place—it frightens me, I tell thee, and Saxilton is a far journey, and the night wears late. Dick, I will not let thee fight."

"Ay, Mistress, he will fight, since there is no chance of escape left him. You will fight, Ratcliffe of Wildwater, will you not?"

Nell Wayne, standing in the shadows, grew furious with impatience; nor could she understand why Rolf kept his temper in such grim check, unless it were that Ratcliffe needed to be whipped into the duel.

"You will fight?" repeated Wayne, anger fretting at his voice.

"To the death, curse you," muttered Ratcliffe, and moved slowly up toward the stone.

"That is well. You are a better man than you showed yourself once in the Marsh orchard—and Mistress Wayne here has cause to be proud of a lover who does not run away a second time, leaving her to meet the danger."

Mistress Wayne glanced desperately from side to side in search of aid, and her eyes fell on Nell's figure, standing half out of the yew shadows now.

"God pity us! 'Tis Nell," she cried.

The girl came out from the shadows and stood at her stepmother's side. "Could you not wait for one whole day?" said she. "You are very quick to make your pleasures sure. Father scarce cold, and your lover's blade scarce wiped—truly, you loved my father well!"

"'Twas not my fault—I—child, your hands hurt me—how dare you treat me so?" stammered Mistress Wayne. For the girl, passion-driven for the moment, had gripped the dainty light-of-love by the shoulders and nigh riven the breath out of her.

"How dare I?" she flashed. "Keep quiet, Mistress, lest I dwell over-much on the wrong you did to father."

"But, Helen, I am your mother. Let me go, child; let me go, I say. They shall not fight."

"Mother, say you? Mother sleeps under the stone yonder. The world has been hard to me, Mistress, but it never made you kith of mine."

Mistress Wayne began to whimper, and Nell, losing her hold with a sort of hard disdain, fixed her eyes on the swordsmen, standing on the vault-stone and eyeing each other steadfastly, their sword-blades catching blue-grey glances from the moon. For Wayne of Cranshaw had been moving backward all the while, not daring to turn his face from Dick Ratcliffe lest a foul thrust in the back should end the matter. Yet Ratcliffe still held off, nor would he plant his forefoot squarely in position; and Nell, fearful lest he should refuse combat at the eleventh hour, and knowing that Rolf would never strike down a man except in fight, so taunted and stung and whipped the laggard with her tongue that his heart grew bold with fury.

The old slyness of his race was with Ratcliffe still; he made a feint of withdrawing altogether from the stone, then leaped at Wayne with a mighty cry. But Wayne was ready for the stroke, and he warded off the down-sweeping blade which bade fair to split his skull in two; his adversary reeled backward, driven by the return force of his own wild blow, and Rolf had but to strike where it pleased him to settle the issue once and for all.

But Wayne of Cranshaw misliked cold butchery, and Ratcliffe's debt was over-heavy to allow of such prompt settlement. He waited, point to ground, until the other had gained his balance; and then he made at him; and the fight waxed grim and hot. The wind sank low to a murmur; the vaultstone, shining wet, reflected their every movement, of body and of bared right arm. There was none of the nicety of fence; parry and cut it was, cut and parry, till the light danced off like water from their blades, till the women's ears were tingling with the music of live steel. And all the while the minute bell kept thundering its message across the kirkyard and over the rolling moor above; it rang for Wayne of Marsh, and it hovered between the sword-cuts that were to settle whether Wayne of Cranshaw gave his kinsman a peaceful shroud.

Wayne's wife was all a-tremble, like a foolish aspen tree; now this she murmured, and now that, until she was like to kill her lover, woman's fashion, by sheer interference of her tongue. But Wayne's daughter stood with a face of scorn, saying no word, making no motion—watching, always watching, with certainty that Rolf would end the struggle soon. At another time she would have feared for Rolf; but to-night was the dead man's, and she was deaf to love or fear or pity. Nay, the very justice of the cause seemed to have determined the issue before the fight began.

"Ah, 'tis sweet, 'tis sweet!" whispered the girl, and caught her breath as Wayne's sword-edge sliced a crimson pathway down the other's cheek.

Shameless Wayne, meanwhile, had finished his spell of drinking at the tavern just below. His step was unsteady and his eyes red-ripe with liquor as he moved down the passage with intent to cross the moor to Marsh. Jonas Feather, the host, came out of his kitchen on hearing the lad's step, and put a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Mun I saddle your mare, Maister Wayne?" he said.

"God, I'd clean forgotten the mare!" laughed Shameless Wayne.

"Did I ride hither, Jonas the fool? Well, then I'll not ride home again; rot me if I don't cross the moor afoot, to steady me. There's no horse like a man's own legs, when the world spins round and round him."

"Best bide here, an' wend home to-morn—ay, ye'd best bide here," said Jonas, with a line of perplexity across his big red forehead.

"What, to swell thy bill? Go to, thou crafty rogue—they'll be naming thee

kin to the Ratcliffes of Wildwater soon, if thou goest playing fox-tricks with thy neighbours."

"Your bill wi' me is lang enow as 'tis, Maister, an' a full belly craves no meat," the host retorted drily. "Willun't ye hearken to what I tried to tell ye when first ye came here to-neet? Willun't ye be telled 'at your father ligs as cold as Wildwater Pool, wi' a Ratcliffe sword-cut i' his back? 'Tis noan decent 'at one i' your upside down frame o' body should go to a house o' death, bawling a thieves' song, likely, by way o' burying dirge."

Shameless Wayne thrust both hands deep into his pockets, and leaned against the wall, and laughed till the tears ran down his comely face. "Wilt never let the jest be, Jonas?" he stammered. "Because I've not been home these days past, and am returning thither full to the brim, thou think'st to scare me with a tale like yond?—And all the folk in the parlour are leagued with thee, thou ruffian," he went on, with a drunkard's cunning in his eyes. "When I first came in, they set their faces grim as Death's fiddle-head, and nudged each the other, and muttered, 'Ay, ay,' like mourners at a lyke-wake, when thou said'st that the old man was dead."

"Willun't ye be telled?" cried Jonas, groaning at his own impotence to drive the truth home. "Willun't ye fettle up your wits this once, an' hearken to one 'at hes a care for th' Waynes o' Marsh?"

"Naught will strengthen me till I have slept off thy liquor, Jonas—unless 'twere the chill look of the kirkyard as I pass through," said Shameless Wayne, blundering merrily down the passage.

"For th' love o' God, lad, bide where ye are this neet!" cried Jonas. But his guest was already out on the cobblestones that fronted the inn doorway.

Shameless Wayne came to a sudden halt as he gained the lower gate of the graveyard. For the minute bell, driving its deep note through the fumes that hugged his brain, carried a plainer message to the lad than any words of Jonas Feather had done.

"There's somebody dead," he muttered, staring vaguely at the belfry-tower. "Is't—is't father? Did yond old fool talk plain truth, when all the while I thought he jested?" he went on after a moment's pause. And then he tried to laugh, and swaggered up the path, and vowed that the bell was leagued with Jonas in this daft effort to make a laughing stock of him throughout the moorside.

But another sound greeted him from the far side of the yew-trees—the clash of steel, and the hungry, breathless cries of men who were fighting to the topmost of their strength. His step grew soberer; he turned the bend in the path noiselessly, and saw what was doing on the vault-stone. He stood stock-still, and his face was smooth and empty while the wine fumes cleared enough to let him understand the meaning of all this.

And then the meaning took him full, and the anguish in his eyes was strange and terrible to see.

Ratcliffe of Wildwater, meanwhile, maddened by the swordcut that had slit his cheek, made a sudden onslaught on his foe; and Rolf escaped the blade by a bare half-inch; and Ratcliffe stumbled once again, pressed by his own idle blow. Mistress Wayne sprang forward, eager to save the craven who had snared her fancy; but Nell gripped her by the arms, and forced her back, and whispered, "Strike!" But neither of the women had leisure to mark that a loose-limbed lad, with a face as old as sorrow, and a hand that played never-restingly with his sword hilt, had swelled the number of those who watched the fight.

Twice Shameless Wayne made as if to join the fray, and twice he held back, while Ratcliffe recovered in the nick of time and warded desperately—while Rolf's blade pried in and out, seeking a place to strike.

"Oh God, that I could claim the right!" muttered the lad, half drawing his sword again.

"Nell, save him! Your lover will listen to you—the night wears late and dreary—we want to reach Saxilton," pleaded Mistress Wayne.

Not a word spoke the girl. Not a word spoke the wind, shuddering into the corners of the graveyard for dread. But the laboured breathing of the men sounded loud as a cry almost in the quiet place. Ratcliffe, for all his coward's heart, was a cunning swordsman enough when need compelled, and now, his first panic lost, he was settling to a steadier effort.

"Remember!" cried the girl, as she saw her cousin give back a pace.

Wayne of Cranshaw regained his lost ground, and swung his blade up to the blue-black sky; there was a rough jag of steel, the clatter of a sword on the hollow vault-stone, a groan from Ratcliffe of Wildwater?

"Save him, Nell!" wailed Mistress Wayne, like a child repeating a lesson learned by rote.

"Save him? See—see—he strikes—drive home, Rolf!—A brave stroke!"

Wayne of Marsh was righted now, and his kinsman wiped his blade at leisure on his coat-sleeve. Nell came to him and drew down his rough head and kissed him on the mouth; the little wisp of a woman knelt by her lover's side, and tried to stop the blood with a dainty cambric kerchief, and talked to Ratcliffe of Wildwater as if her word were greater than God's own, to bring a dead man back to life.

A deep voice broke in upon them. "Remember was the word thou said'st, Nell," cried Shameless Wayne. "Christ knows there will be no forgetfulness for me."

Nell Wayne looked at her brother for awhile, not knowing what her thoughts were toward him. And then she shrank from him with plain disgust. Up

in the belfry yonder she had pleaded excuses for Shameless Wayne when another talked his good name away; but she had no pity for him now.

"Thou com'st in a late hour, Ned," she said coldly.

"I come in a late hour, lass," he answered, still in the same deep voice that was older than his years; "and they will noise it up and down that Wayne's son of Marsh sat drinking with clowns in a wayside tavern while another robbed him of the feud. Well, the long years lie behind, and neither thou nor I can better them."

A shaft of pity touched the girl. "I loved thee once, Ned—why could'st not—nay, 'tis behind thee, as thou say'st, and—and thou'lt never be aught but Shameless Wayne henceforth."

The frail woman looked up from handling her lover's body, and there was witless curiosity in her face. "Who is't stands there, and who has robbed him?" she asked. Then with a little laugh, "Why, 'tis Ned—to think I should not know my own step-son.—Ned, come hither! Your sister is cruel, and she has well-nigh killed me with those slender hands of hers—but you will be kinder, Ned, and I want you to staunch the bleeding—see how the vault-stone reddens—hurry, dear, for if the blood once drips into the vault, the stain can never be washed out—never, never be washed out."

"You are right, Mistress," said Shameless Wayne, smiling queerly at her from across the stone. "Though one kills every other Ratcliffe that fouls the air, the stain will never be washed clean."

Wayne of Cranshaw put a kindly hand on him. "Take heart, lad," he muttered. "The next blow shall be thine, and the next after that—and there's no man in Marshcotes or Ling Crag that dares call thee coward."

"But all may name me fool," finished the lad quietly;—"Take Nell home, Rolf. She'll suffer thy company better than mine just now."

But Nell was strung to the storm's pitch still. "'Tis not done yet!" she cried. "I thought that one life would pay—and what is Dick Ratcliffe now? Is that thankless lump of clay to square the reckoning, dross for gold? Nay, there is more to be done. Listen, Rolf! We will send round the feud-call, and rouse our kinsfolk."

"Ay, will we—but not to-night, dear lass."

"To-night! Rolf! It must be to-night. No quarter said father with his last breath, and God forgive me if I rest before the whole tale is told."

"Nay! 'Tis home and a quiet pillow for thee. Come, Nell! Thou know'st thy strength will scarce carry thee to Marsh."

Still she refused, though she was shivering as with ague. "No quarter. Wilt not swear it, Rolf?"

"I swear it here, Nell, by any vow that binds a man—and by the same token I swear to carry thee to-night by force to Marsh, if so thou wilt not come of thy own free will. Are the Ratcliffes salt-and-snow, that they should melt away

before the dawn?"

"Wilt not help me, Ned?" broke in Mistress Wayne. Her baby-voice was soft and pleading as she turned to her step-son. "The stain is spreading—I dare not let it run to the edge—there is a little crack down one side of the stone, and the blood will never be wiped off if once it drips on to the vault-floor."

The lad did not answer Mistress Wayne's wanderings this time; and his sister, glancing round at him with the old impulse of resentment, saw that Shameless Wayne was sobbing as men sob once only in their learning of life's lesson. Over-strained Nell was already, and the fierceness died clean out of her. She crept to her brother's side, and pulled his hands down from before his face, and "Ned," said she, "would God I could forgive thee."

He pointed up the path with a gesture that Wayne of Cranshaw understood. "I'll follow you in a while—leave me to it," he said.

"Poor lad! He'll take it hardly, I fear," said Rolf, as he and Nell went through the graveyard wicket and out into the moor, where the hail nestled white beneath the heather and the far hills touched the cloud-banks.

Shameless Wayne stood looking down at his step-mother, who still sat fondling her lover's body. There was no hatred of her in his face, though yesterday he would have railed upon her for a wanton; nay, there was a sort of pity in his glance, when at last he drew near to her and touched her arm.

"Life has been over-strong for you, eh, little bairn?" he said. "Well, we're both dishonoured, so there's none need grumble if I take you with me; shalt never lack shelter while Marsh House has a roof."

"Oh, I cannot come," said Mistress Wayne; "I have to get to Saxilton before dawn—I am waiting till the wound is healed and the blood stops dripping, dripping—oh, no, I shall not come with you—what would Dick say if he woke and found me gone?"

Entreaty the lad tried, and rough command; but naught would move her, and when at last he tried to carry her from the spot by force, she cried so that for pity's sake he had to let her be.

"Well, there's enough to be seen to as 'tis; may be she will come home of herself if I leave her to it," he muttered, and went quickly down to the tavern-door.

Jonas Feather was standing on the threshold, his head bent toward the graveyard. "What, Maister, is't you— What, lad, ye're sobered!" he cried, as Shameless Wayne pushed past him.

"Ay, I found somewhat up yonder that was like to sober me. I'm going to saddle the mare, Jonas—she will be needed soon, I fancy."

"Sit ye dahn, Maister, sit ye dahn. I'll see to th' mare.—There's been a fight, I'm thinking? I could hev liked to see't, that I could, but they'll tell ye what once chanced to a man 'at crossed a Wayne an' Ratcliffe at sich a time—an' I'm fain of

a whole skin myseln."

But Shameless Wayne was down the passage and out into the stable-yard behind. Jonas looked after him, and shook his head.

"I nobbut once see'd drink so leave a chap all i' a minute," he said, "an' it takes a bigger shock nor sich a young 'un as yond hes shoulder-width to stand. There's ill days i' store for th' lad, I sadly fear."

At the stroke of twelve, the Sexton's wife came down the belfry steps. Her right foot was numb with tolling the bell, and her fingers ached with the knitting; yet she had no thought of such matters as she stepped out into the moonlit burial place, for she was wondering how Nell Wayne had fared at Wildwater.

"Her father's lass—ay, ivery bone of her," she muttered. "Hes she killed him by now—hes she struck——"

The sound of a cradle-song, chanted in a sweet, low voice, came from above. The little old woman stopped her mumbling, and shuffled up the path, and came to where Mistress Wayne sat, with her lover's head on her lap and one baby hand pressed close against his breast.

Nanny touched her on the shoulder. "A death for a death," said she; "yet, not with all your tears to help, will Dick Ratcliffe be a fit exchange for th' Maister. 'Twill need a score sich as him, or ye, to pay th' price."

"He is sleeping. Hush! You will waken him, and 'tis early yet to start for Saxilton," said Mistress Wayne, lifting her childish face.

The little old woman quailed, and crossed herself, as she saw the light in the other's eyes. "She's fairy-kist! God save us," she muttered, as she hobbled down the path.

CHAPTER III

THE LEAN MAN OF WILDWATER

The Sexton's wife was afraid of no man that stepped; but ghosts, and fairies, and the mad folk who shared communion with the spirits, touched a bare nerve of dread. And so she stopped midway down the graveyard path, and turned, and went back to where Mistress Wayne was cowering above her lover's body. It was not that the Sexton's wife had any wish to help this woman, who had smirched the honour of the Waynes, but that she feared the disaster which refusal of such help might bring.

"She's fairy-kist," she muttered for the twentieth time, looking down at the frail figure. "God or the devil looks to such, they say an' I mun do th' best for her, I reckon."

"Ay, 'tis cold, 'tis bitter cold, and Dick will surely never come," said Mistress Wayne, getting to her feet and glancing fearfully across the kirkyard.

"Not to-night, Mistress. Ye'd best wend home wi' me, an' search for him to-morn," put in the Sexton's wife.

Mistress Wayne did not answer for awhile; she was watching the moonlight glance freakish, cold and wan, from out the purple-yellow of the clouds—was listening to the curlew-wail that thrilled across the stark, dim moor. And, slowly, as she stood there, the closed door of her mind seemed to swing back a little, letting the sense of outward things creep in. It was a dream, then, that Dick was coming to take her safe into shelter of the valleys; this was the moor that closed her in—the moor, whose face had frightened her, whose storms had chilled her to the bone, through all the brief months of her wedlock with Wayne of Marsh. She gazed and gazed into the moon-dusk, with still face and rounded, panic-stricken eyes; and from the dusk strange shapes stole out and mouthed at her.

This for a long moment—and then she ran like a scared child to the little old woman's arms, and hid her face, and entreated protection from that wilderness which had grown a live, malignant presence to her.

"Give me house-walls about me—give me light, and warmth—Mary Mother, hark how the night-birds wail, and scream, and mock me," she cried, with sobs between each panting plea.

The Sexton's wife, not understanding how any one should fear the moor to which she had lived bedfellow these five-and-sixty years, was yet quick to snatch the opportunity. It would never do to leave this witless body to the night-rain and the cold, and who knew how soon she might fall again upon her lover's body and again refuse to quit the spot?

"Come wi' me," she muttered, putting an arm about Mistress Wayne and hurrying her across the gravestones.

"Where wilt take me?" cried the other, half halting on the sudden. "Not—not to Marsh House, where Wayne lies and haunts me with that still look of reproach?"

"Not to Marsh, Mistress—nay, not to Marsh. See ye, 'tis but a step, and there'll be a handful o' fire for ye—an' walls to keep th' cold out——"

"Then, we'll hurry, will we not? Quick, quick! The shadows are laughing at us—and the owl on the church steeple yonder hoots loud in mockery. Oh, let us hurry, hurry!"

"Well, then, we're here. Whisht, Mistress, for there's naught ye need to fear," cried Nanny, halting at the door of the cottage which stood just across the

road.

The Sexton, Luke Witherlee, was smoking his pipe in the ingle-nook and hugging the last embers of the peat-fire. A thin, small-bodied man, with parchment cheeks, crow's-footed, and a weakish mouth, and eyes that were oddly compact of fire and dreaminess. He glanced up as the goodwife entered, and let his pipe fall on the hearthstone when he saw what manner of guest she had brought back with her.

"Nay, Luke, muffle thy tongue, an' axe no questions," said Nanny, in a tone that showed who was master of the Sexton's household. "This poor body wants a lodging, an' so we mun lie hard, me an' thee, for this one neet. What, ye're minded to make friends, are ye, Mistress?" she broke off, surprised to see her guest, after a doubtful glance at Witherlee, go up to him and lay her slim hand in his own earth-crusted palm.

"An' welcome to ye, Mistress," said the Sexton quietly. "We've nowt so mich to gi'e—but sich as 'tis, 'tis yourn."

Mistress Wayne forgot her terror now that the stout walls of the cottage shut out the whimpering goblins of the moor. She sat her down by the Sexton's side, and looked into his face, and saw a something there—something friendly, quiet and tender—which soothed her mood. And he, for his part, seemed full at home with her, though he fought shy at most times of the gently-born.

"Good-hap," muttered Nanny, "to think there should be fellowship 'twixt Witherlee and her! Well, I allus did say Witherlee war ower full o' dreams to be a proper man, an' happen they understand one t' other, being both on th' edge o' t' other world, i' a way o' speaking."

Nanny stood open-mouthed awhile, regarding the strange pair; then hobbled to the three-cornered cupboard that stood in the far corner of the kitchen, and reached down cheese and butter and a loaf of oaten bread. To and fro she went, restless and alert as when she sat in the belfry-tower and sent Wayne's death-dirge shuddering out across the moor. Mistress Wayne was talking with the Sexton now—childish talk, that simmed the old man's eyes a little—and Nanny as she went from cupboard to table and back again, laying the rude supper, kept glancing at them with a wonderment that was half disdain.

"Will ye be pleased to sup, Mistress," she said, when all was ready. "Th' fare is like yond moor that frights ye so, rough and wholesome; but I doubt ye're sadly faint for lack o' belly-timber, and poor meat is better nor none at all, they say."

Mistress Wayne shook her head, with a bairn's impatience, and tightened her hold of the Sexton's hand. "I'm not hungry, I thank thee—not hungry at all," she murmured.

But Nanny would take no denial, and at length she coaxed her visitor to

break her fast.

"That's likelier," growled the little old woman, as she threw fresh peats on the fire. "Victuals is a rare stay-by when sorrow's to be met. Now, Mistress, warm yourseln a bit, an' then I'll see ye safe between sheets."

The peat-warmth, following her long exposure to the wind, set Mistress Wayne a-nodding; and the Sexton, seeing how closely sleep had bound her in his web, took her in his arms with a strength of gentleness that was all his own, and carried her to the bed-chamber above, and left her safe in Nanny's care.

"She slumbers like a year-old babby," said Nanny, coming down again, by and by.

"Oh, ay? Well, she looked fair worn out ai' weariness. What ails her?" answered Witherlee, filling his pipe afresh and watching Nanny's shadow go creeping up the wall as she stepped in front of the rushlight burning on the table.

"Tha's heard nowt, I'm thinking, o' what chanced i' th' kirkyard?"

"Nay, I've heard nowt. I've been dozing, like, by th' ingle, an' niver a sound I heard save th' death-bell tha wen ringing for Wayne o' Marsh. Ay, it seemed i' tune wi' my thowts, did th' bell, for I war thinking o' th' owd feud 'twixt Wayne an' Ratcliffe. 'Tis mony a year sin' that war staunched, lass, but I can see 'em fight fair as if 'twere yesterday."

"Trust thee to doze! I wonder whiles what thou hast to show for thyseln, Luke Witherlee, that I do, while th' wife is ringing her arm off," snapped Nanny, her temper sharpened by the long day's work and sorrow.

"Show for myseln?" said he, with a sort of weary patience. "Nowt—save that I can plank a grave better nor ony Sexton fro' this to Lancashire. An' that's summat i' these times, for we shall see what we shall see now Wayne o' Marsh is killed. Ay, for sure; there'll be need of a good grave-digger i' Marshcotes parish.—What's been agate, like, i' th' kirkyard? I knew there war summat bahn to happen for I heard th' death-watch as plain as noonday."

"Why, Dick Ratcliffe war for carrying off yond little Mistress Wayne—her as sleeps so shameless-peaceful aboon stairs—an' Rolf Wayne o' Cranshaw met them fair i' th' kirkyard."

The Sexton roused himself, and his eyes lost their dreaminess.

"Did they fight, lass?" he cried.

"Hark to him! Give him a hint o' blood-letting, an' he's as wick as ony scoprel."

"It's i' th' blood, lass, and 'twill out at th' first taste o' blows," said Witherlee, with a shamefaced glance at his wife. "I'm not mich of a man myseln, but I aye loved a fight, an' that's plain truth."

"Well, tha'd hev seen one, I reckon, if tha'd been where Wayne o' Cranshaw war to-neet," retorted Nanny grimly. "I missed it myseln, for I war ringing th' bell;

but when I came out into th' graveyard, there war Dick Ratcliffe stretched on th' vault-stone, an' Mistress Wayne greeting aboon his body. An' a rare job I had, my sakes, to get her safe within doors."

"They fought at th' vault-stone, did they?" murmured Witherlee. "Where did they stand, Nanny? An' who strake first? An' how did t'other counter?" His voice, smooth and gentle, was ill in keeping with the brightness of his eyes, the restless movement of his hands.

"How should I tell thee? I see'd nowt o' th' fight, being thrang wi' other wark."

"That's a pity, now. I allus like to hev th' ins an' outs of a fight fixed fair i' my head, so I can go ower it all again when sitting by th' hearthstone o' nights. Well, well, we shall see summat, lass, afore so varry long."

The little old woman twisted her mouth askew. "Luke," said she, "tha'rt at thy owd tricks again. Tha breeds visions an' such-like stuff as fast as a cat breeds kitlings, an' they run all on th' days when Waynes killed Ratcliffes at ivery crossroad, when ivery fair day war like a pig-killing."

"There's sorrow goes wi' fighting, an' there's mony a gooid life spilt," said the Sexton, "but 'tis sweet for a man's stomach, for all that, an' th' lads grow up likelier for 't. Look at yond Shameless Wayne, now—wod he be th' racketty ride-th'-moo'in he is if he hed to carry his life i' his hand fro' morn to neet?"

"He'd hev no life to carry, most like," retorted Nanny. "He'd do wi' mending, would th' lad; but there's a mony other men-folk i' like case, an' I could do wi' all on ye better if ye war made all ower again. An' I'll thank ye, Witherlee, to say nowt agen Shameless Wayne i' my hearing, for I'll listen to nowt but gooid of him. There's more i' him, let me tell thee, nor thee or onybody hes found out yet."

The Sexton set flint to steel and lit his pipe afresh; and a smile lurked fugitive about his mouth. "Well, if there's owt behind his shamelessness, he'll hev his chance o' showing it," he said. "Th' feud 'ull be up, Nanny, by and by. Last neet Dick Ratcliffe war killed—that's to mak even deaths on one side an' on t' other. To-morn likely or th' next day after, another Wayne 'ull be fund stretched stark by some roadside; an' that 'ull be Nicholas Ratcliffe's way o' saying, 'Come on, lad's, an' fight it out.' Ay, I've seen th' feud get agate afore this, an' I know th' way on 't."

"Then tha should think shame to let thy een brighten so. If tha'd seen th' face o' yond lass o' Waynes, when she came up to me while I war ringing i' th' belfry-tower a while back—if tha'd seen th' poor bairn's eyes wild for lack o' th' tears that wouldn't come—tha'd sing to a different tune, Luke Witherlee, that tha wod, about this sword-fighting an' pistoling. Nay, I've no patience wi' thee. Lig thee down on th' settle, Luke, an' get to sleep. I've a long day afore me to-morn."

The little old woman settled herself as comfortably as might be in her rocking-chair, turning her back on Witherlee, and shutting her eyes in token that she had said her last word for the night. But the Sexton still sat on, his pipe-bowl in the hollow of one hand, his eyes upon the grey-red ashes of the peats. Old and gnarled his body was, and shrunken his face; but he was thinking of the fights to come and the heart of him was lusty as a boy's.

Only once did Nanny break the silence. "I cannot thoyle to thin' o' th' way yond little body aboon stairs is sleeping," she said, half rousing herself. "She's no light sins to carry, an' wakefulness wod hev shown a likelier sperrit."

"Live an' let live, lass," said Witherlee gently; "an' when Mistress Wayne hes fund her wits again, 'twill be time to cry out on her for her sins."

"Tha'rt ower tender for this rough world. I allus telled thee so," murmured the little old woman.

Soon she was breathing in the sharp, stifled fashion that told the Sexton she was hard asleep. And he, too, began to nod, with softer thoughts than fight to give him company—thoughts of the frail woman who had claimed his hospitality, the little fairy-kist wanton who seemed so full in sympathy with his dreamings.

"Good or bad, God keep the little body," he whispered in his sleep.

Silence crept shadowy from the corners of the room—the silence, compact of rustling undersounds, that seems full of tragedies half lost yet unforgotten. The little sounds grew big, the big ones thunderous. The eight-day clock on the right hand of the chimney-piece ticked weightily, with grave disregard of everything save Time's slow passing. Nanny's harsh breathing crossed her goodman's softer snore. And now a rat floundered in the rafters overhead; and now the spiders in the walls began their clear and eerie ticking—*tick-tick*, *tick-tick*, like the swinging of an elfin pendulum. Once in a while an owl hooted, or the long-drawn wailing of a peewit sounded from the moor without. The night, in this cottage-kitchen, was endless, ghoulish and unrestful; and the slumbering folk on chair and settle served but to heighten the unrestfulness.

Witherlee turned in his sleep, and lifted his eyelids for a moment, and heard the spiders ticking in the wall. "Yond is th' death-tick," he muttered drowsily. "Lord save us, there'll be blows afore th' moon wears old."

Again the fret of little sounds fell over the cottage—over the living-room, and over the bed-chamber above where Mistress Wayne was tricking a brief spell of sleep from fate. But her sleep was neither so lasting nor so light as Nanny Witherlee had named it, and dawn was scarce greying over the moor-reaches when she waked.

Full of a sense of disaster, confused and rudderless, she rose and went to the window and looked out across the graves. And the dawn was a pitiful thing, that came to touch her sorrows into life. Where was she? And why should the

grave stones, set toward the brightening East, show red as blood? She could not tell—only, that some one was waiting to carry her far from these dreadful places of the moor. Someone was waiting for her—that was the one surety she had. But where?

She smiled on the sudden, and clapped her slender, blue-veined hands together. "Why, yes," she lisped, "'tis Dick Ratcliffe who waits for me—strange that I cannot see him in the graveyard. We should have met there, he and I." She stopped and knit her little brows. "Dick lives at Wildwater," she went on slowly. "How if I seek him out, and reproach him that he did not wait? Yes, yes, I'll go to Wildwater—we have far to go to-day, and I must hurry."

She picked up her wearing-gear and eyed it questioningly; then donned it quickly, stole down the stair, and stood, finger on lip, regarding the Sexton and his wife.

"If they should waken, they would never let me go," she murmured. "I must tread softly—very softly."

"'Tis th' death-tick, an' there'll be fight afore th' new moon's in her cradle," muttered the Sexton in his sleep.

Mistress Wayne, startled by his voice, ran fast across the floor, and lifted the latch, and went out into the gathering dawn. A moment only she halted in the lane, then turned to her right hand and went up toward the moor with hurried steps. She must reach Wildwater—and Wildwater, she knew lay somewhere up among the moors.

Up and up she went, past naked pasture-land and lank, rough-furrowed fields. She passed a shepherd tending the ewes which had lambed in the inclement weather—one of the Marsh shepherds, who wondered sorely to see his late master's wife come up the moors in such guise and at such an hour.

"I want to get to Wildwater; some one is waiting for me there, and we have far to go, and I cannot find the way," she said, drawing near to the shepherd, yet keeping a watchful eye on him, and ready, like some wild thing of the moor, to take flight at the first hint of danger.

The shepherd eyed her queerly. "Ye want Wildwater, Mistress? Well, 'tis a fairish step fro' here to there—though yond bridle-track will land ye straight to th' door-stun, if ye follow it far enough. Are ye forced to wend thither, if I mud axe a plain question?"

"Oh, yes, I have a friend there who waits my coming. He'll be angry if I fail him."

"'Tis no good house to visit," said the shepherd, scratching his head in dire perplexity. "Have a thowt, Mistress, o' them that live theer."

"My lover dwells there. Is not that enough?" she answered gravely, and went her way.

Up and up, till she gained the wildest of the moor, where eagles nested and the goshawk soared. Up and up, until she stood beside Wildwater Pool, and looked across its stagnant waters, and saw the long house of the Ratcliffes frown beetle-browed upon her from amid the waste of ling. And half she feared; and half she gladdened, thinking what welcome her lover held in store for her; but when she neared the gate and felt the swart defiance of the house, she halted.

Between Ling Crag and Bouldsworth Hill it stood, this house of the Wildwater Ratcliffes. Above it were the wind-swept wastes of heath; below, the lean acres which bygone Ratcliffes had wrested from the clutches of the moor. Yet the dip of the hills sheltered it a little and the garden was trim-kept adding, if need were, the last touch of desolation to the homestead. A rambling house, shouldering roughly at the one end a group of laithes and mistals; above the narrow latticed windows the eaves hung sullenly, and the stone porch without the door offered at the best a cold welcome, and at the worst defiance. Over the porch was a motto, deep chiselled in the blackened stone.

"We hate, we strike," said the house to the outside world, and the motto, though it matched well the temper of each generation of the Waynes, suited none of the stock so well as old Nicholas Ratcliffe, known through the moorside as the Lean Man of Wildwater.

Below the wan strip of intake, an upland tarn showed its sullen, unreflecting face to the sky. Nor curlew nor moor-fowl was ever known to haunt the rushes that fringed Wildwater Pool, no fish ever rose from its waters; and men said that God had cursed the pool, since a winter's night, nigh on a hundred years agone, when a Ratcliffe had tempted a Wayne to sup with him in amity and had thereafter thrown his body to the waters. But Nicholas Ratcliffe loved the tarn, as he loved the storms that broke over the naked hills and the wild deeds that had made his fathers a terror and a scourge; and the sons and grandsons who grew up about him he trained to the rough logic of tradition. Brave the Lean Man was, and crafty as a stoat; wiry of body, lank-jawed of face; and the hair stood up from his crown a rusty grey, like stubble when the first frost has nipped it.

Old Nicholas sat in the hall this morning, in the carved oaken chair that stood over against the lang-settle. Robert, his eldest-born, sat opposite, and three other of the grandsons were at table still, finishing a breakfast of mutton-pasty and ham and oaten-bread, washed down with nut-brown ale. For the hall, running a quarter the length of the house and all its width, was the chief living chamber, where the indoors business of the day was gone through; a cool and pleasant chamber in summer heat, but in winter the winds piped through and through it, driving the women-folk for warmth to the more cosy parlour. The Lean Man had been cradled in cold winds, and it pleased him to see as little as might be of the women; for women were rather a cumbrous necessity than a joy

to Nicholas Ratcliffe. "Thy son should be safe off with Mistress Wayne by now," said Nicholas to his eldest-born.

"Likely. 'Tis all the lad is good for, curse him! Dick was ever the weakling of the breed."

"Aye, but there's a use for weaklings, when all is said," chuckled the old man. "They fear dishonour worse than aught that can chance to them, these Waynes, and when first I learned that Dick was playing kiss-i'-the-dark with yon milk-faced wife of Wayne's, I gave him rope enough to strangle the Marsh pride."

"He starts well!" laughed one of the youngsters from the breakfast board.

"He starts well," said the Lean Man. "First to make a cuckold of the husband, and then to run him through—he's half a Ratcliffe, this shiftless Dick-o'-lanthorn, after all."

"Why did you let him go with the wench, father?" put in Robert. "Dick can wield a sword if he's forced to it, and scabbards will need to be empty in a while."

"Pish! We can spare one arm, I warrant, and 'twas sweet to cry Wayne's wife up and down the country-side for what she is. The lad will wed her soon as they get free of Marshcotes, she thinks—but I know different; and 'twill eat the heart out of the Waynes to know—what, Janet! Thou look'st scared as a moor-tit," he broke off, as a trim lassie came in through the parlour door and stood at the elbow of his chair.

Janet Ratcliffe, the youngest of all the Wildwater clan, was the only one among them who could touch the old man's heart; some said it was because she was the comeliest of the women, and others vowed it was that her raven hair had caught her grandfather's fancy by contrast with the ruddy colouring and freckled cheeks that nearly every other Ratcliffe in the moorside boasted. But sure it was that whenever the Lean Man's brittle temper had to be tried, Janet was sent as tale-bearer.

"There's one would speak with you, grandfather," said the girl, coming to the elbow of his chair.

"Then bid him enter. Any man can come into Wildwater—'tis for us to say whether we let them out again."

"Nay, but 'tis a—a woman, sir. I found her wandering up and down the garden, plucking the daisies and singing to herself."

"By the Lord, we do not have so queer a guest every day! Let her come in, Janet, and we'll give her the bottoms of the ale-flagons if her song be a good one."

"But, sir—she bears a name that is not welcome here—and she talks so wildly that I fear her wits are gone."

"What name?" snarled the old man.

"She is wife to Wayne of Marsh—and her clothes are dripping—and she

speaks all in riddles——"

Nicholas laughed grimly. "Bring her to me," he said—"though, 'tis no new thing, my faith, to talk to a Wayne who is scant of wit."

"There's something untoward in this," muttered Robert. "What should she want at Wildwater, if Dick's plans had not miscarried?"

"Why, he grew weary of her, belike, 'twixt here and Saxilton, and set her down by the wayside. Thou know'st the lad's fancies—they go as fast as they come in that addle-pate of his. By the Heart, what have we here?" Old Nicholas stopped, and pointed to the doorway; and the lads who were at breakfast let fall their knives with a clatter on the board.

And in truth Mistress Wayne was a wild and sorry spectacle enough, and one to hold a man in doubt whether he should shrink from her or laugh outright. "Where is the Lean Man of Wildwater? I want a word with him," she said, and looked blankly round the hall.

Nicholas Ratcliffe smiled cruelly upon her, and, "Mistress," said he, "I fear the last night's storm has used you ill. *I* am the Lean Man you ask for. What would you?"

She carried a half-dozen daisies in her hand, plucked from the Wildwater garden, and these she held out to Nicholas with a pretty air of confidence. "I was weaving daisy-chains—red daisies, that grew out of a great vault-stone—and while I wove them my lover fell asleep."

"'Twas a poor lover to sleep at such a time. I'd none of him were I as fair as you," said Nicholas, with the same air of mock-courtesy.

"And the rain came down—red, like the daisies—and spread and spread over the stone—and dripped and dripped on to Wayne's cold forehead as he lay below——"

"They've not buried him yet, Mistress," laughed one of the youngsters.

"Oh, but they have, sir!" she answered, turning her great blue eyes on him. "They put him on to one of those little shelves that Sexton Witherlee showed me once—and then they covered him with a flat stone, with rings on it, because they knew that was the only way to hold him back from haunting me. But he doesn't heed the stone, and I want Dick—I want my lover, who is so big and strong, to wake and stand between Wayne's ghost and me."

Nicholas Ratcliffe watched every pitiful turn of speech and gesture, and laughed to himself as he drew her on. "So your lover sleeps, Mistress?" he said, softly.

"Yes, amongst the red daisies. And I could not wake him, though I tried my hardest. And, oh, sir, will you tell him that we shall never be in time, never be in time, unless he does not soon bestir himself?"

"I'll tell him, never fear. Robert, what dost make of it? Is't not as I told thee,

a night's wandering among the bogs has turned her wits?"

"There's more in it; what is this tale of blood?" muttered Robert. "God, yes, and her bosom is stained with something of a deeper dye than rain."

"The wind moaned so in the heather, all the long night," wailed the woman, "and I was cold, and hungry, and sadly frightened. Why will he not wake? Two little corpse-candles are fluttering over the marsh—how they shine, like the dead man's eyes! There was Wayne lying there at Marsh, and they said they had closed his eyes—but I knew, I knew! His eyes burned—and wherever I moved they followed me—sir, will you not bid my lover wake?"

She turned from the old man suddenly, her wandering fancy caught by the beat of horse-hoofs up the road. "That is the post-chaise, come to carry us to Saxilton," she said.

"To be sure," cried Nicholas. "The chaise is to carry you and Dick to Saxilton. When will you be wedded, Mistress?"

"Oh, soon, very soon. And then, I think, I shall not fear Wayne of Marsh at all—his ghost cannot come between man and wife, can it? See, see!" she cried, running to the window. "A horse! But there's no post-chaise with it—how is that?"

The rider dismounted at the door and entered; and his likeness to Nicholas of the weasel face was plainer now than it had been when he talked with the Sexton in Marshcotes graveyard. Mistress Wayne ran up to him and put both hands on his shoulders, and laughed a little, roguishly.

"Did not my lover bid you bring a chaise?" she said.

Red Ratcliffe stared at her. "Your lover?—Ah, now I know you, Mistress. Well, no, he gave me no commands, for the best of reasons."

"I know," she said carelessly, moving to the window again. "He sleeps, and 'tis unkind of him when there is so great need for haste. Well-away, but I must keep watch at the window, or the chaise will pass us by."

"Dick was slain yesternight, grandfather," said the horseman, with a keen glance at Nicholas.

"Slain, was he?" snarled the Lean Man, "whose hand went to the slaying?"

"One of the Long Waynes of Cranshaw met him in the kirkyard and ran a sword through him. I had it just now from a farm-hand as I rode across the moor, and I turned back to tell you of it. Shameless Wayne was drinking at the time, they tell me."

"Well, we can spare fool Dick, my grandson, though I say it, and 'twill give us the chance of feud we've hungered for these years past. And Shameless Wayne was drinking, was he? He lost his chance of fighting his father's quarrel? That's bonnie news, lad, and news to be spread far and wide about the moor. 'Twill damp their pride, I warrant."

"And the feud will be up again," growled Red Ratcliffe, with a glance at Janet.

"Ay, they all but cut us off once, these Waynes, but kindness bade them let us breed; and now our turn has come; and Marsh House, that used to grow so thick with them, holds only four tender lads and a half-man who sinks his wits deeper every day in the wine-barrel. By the Heart, we shall live healthier at Wildwater when yonder sword is fleshed again and the moor is cleared of Waynes!"

He pointed to a great two-handled sword that hung above the mantel—a weapon, too heavy for these lighter-armed days, which had hung idle since the quarrel between Wayne and Ratcliffe was last healed.

Janet, who had been listening pale and woe-begone from the door, went still of face when Shameless Wayne was spoken of. "Poor Ned! He will take it hard," she murmured.

Again Red Ratcliffe glanced at her. "Till the moor is cleaned of Waynes," he echoed.

"Cleaned?" echoed the mad woman, turning from the window suddenly and facing the Lean Man. "Nay, 'twill never be cleaned, for it dripped down, right down to the vault-floor underneath."

Nicholas, weary of mocking her, pointed a forefinger at the door. "Get ye gone, Mistress; there is neither room nor welcome for you here," he said.

"But, sir," began Janet, "she is beside her wits; it were shame——"

"Peace, child! If ever I hear one of my house pleading for a Wayne, by God, they shall feel the rough side of my hand."

Mistress Wayne stood halting in childish perplexity. "What would you, sir? I cannot go till Dick wakes up. What if he woke and found that I had gone?"

"We'd send him after you," snapped Nicholas, "for ye were the fittest couple ever I set eyes on. Go, baby, and wander up and down the moor, and tell all the folk you meet how you robbed Wayne of Marsh of honour."

"Wayne of Marsh?" she whispered, glancing over her shoulder and into every corner of the room. "Is he here, then? Here, too, when I thought I had got away from those great, staring eyes of his!"

"He's close behind you, Mistress. Run, lest he hold you by the throat!" laughed one of the youngsters, throwing wide the door for her.

A panic seized her, and without word or backward glance she ran out into the courtyard. Janet made as if to follow, for pity's sake, but the Lean Man called her back peremptorily.

"Does he not know," murmured the girl, "that 'tis madness to deal harshly with the fairy-kist? And she so pitiful, too, poor weakling."

"I go a-hunting, lads, soon as dinner is off the board," said Nicholas, stretch-

ing his legs before the peats.

Janet forgot her care of Mistress Wayne; for she knew that tone of the Lean Man's, and mistrusted it.

"Do we ride with you, father?" asked Robert from across the hearth.

"Not one of you. By the Dog, do ye think I would let any younger man rob me of the first blow? Ride in when that is struck, and welcome—but pest take whichever of you tries to tap Wayne blood before to-morrow."

"And what of the dead man, sir?" put in Red Ratcliffe. "Dick's body lies in the Bull tavern at Marshcotes, so they told me."

"Go thou to Marshcotes, lad, and see that he's brought up to Wildwater. Ay, ride off at once; 'tis unmeet that even the weakling of our folk should lie stark within a wayside tavern."

"And there'll be the grave to see to," said Red Ratcliffe, getting to his feet.

"More than one, haply," laughed the Lean Man. "They say that Sextons love to see a Ratcliffe go a-hunting, and——"

He stopped, remembering Janet, and stole a glance at her. "There, lass," he said, with rough tenderness, "'tis men's talk, this, and it whitens thy bonnie cheek. Go to thy spinning-wheel till dinner-time."

"We are short of flax, grandfather. I—I—I cannot spin," she faltered, not moving from the elbow of his chair. For his threats touched Shameless Wayne, and she was loth to go out of ear-shot while he was in mood to tell them what his purpose was.

"Go, child," he said curtly, pointing to the parlour door.

She went reluctantly, and Red Ratcliffe followed her a moment later, on pretext of fetching some matter that was needful to his ride to Marshcotes.

"So, Janet, thou didst want to hear the Lean Man's purpose?" he said, closing the door behind him and leaning carelessly against its panels.

"Whatever I wished or did not wish, cousin, I lacked no speech of thine," she answered, turning her head away.

"Neither dost thou lack flax, though thou wast ready to swear as much awhile since," said Red Ratcliffe drily, pointing to where her spinning-wheel stood in the window-niche, the flax hanging loose on the distaff.

She crossed impatiently to the door, and would have left him, but he checked her with a rough laugh.

"Wast over eager, cousin, to hear the Lean Man's purpose toward Wayne of Marsh," he said. "Say, is it true—what they whisper up and down the countryside—that thou wert friendly to this Wayne the Shameless?"

"And if I were, sir, what is't to thee?" she flashed, turning round to him.

"What is't to me? Shall I tell thee again, girl, that I've sworn to wed thee?"

"And shall I answer again that I will wed thee when apple-trees grow——?"

"The Lean Man has bidden me prosper with my suit."

"I shall persuade him otherwise."

"Wilt thou?" he snarled. "Even if I tell him what gossip has to say of thee and Shameless Wayne?"

Her face took that firmness that mention of Wayne's name never failed to bring there. "Thou *darest* not tell him," she said; "for then thou would'st be sure I would never look thy way again."

The shaft aimed true, for Red Ratcliffe's passion for his cousin had grown to fever-heat during these latter days. Finding no answer, he watched her go out by the door that led to the garden; and then he turned on his heel and passed through the hall, meaning to saddle his horse forthwith and ride down to Marshcotes on his errand.

"The Lean Man is right," he muttered, as he went out. "'Tis time that this Wayne of Marsh was out of harm's way."

His hand was already on the door-latch when old Nicholas himself, still seated by the hearth, detained him, though a while since he had bidden him make all speed to Marshcotes.

"I've a word for thy ear, lad," said the Lean Man. "Come sit beside me and tell me whether 'tis well planned or no."

For a half hour they sat there, the young rogue and the old, their lean faces and red heads pressed close together. And now the Lean Man let a chuckle escape, and again Red Ratcliffe would fetch a crack of laughter.

"By the Mass, sir, your wits keep sharp!" cried the younger, raising his voice on the sudden. "The plan goes bonnily as wedding bells. First, to go hunting——"

"Hush, fool, there's Janet in the room behind," snapped the Lean Man; "and she has less liking for sword-music than her bravery warrants."

"Janet is out of hearing. I saw her go down the garden-path just now."

"Well, 'tis time thou wast off and about this business. Bring back Dick's body, and forget not to ply old Witherlee with questions when thou'rt seeing him about the grave. He's a poor fool, is Sexton Witherlee, and he'll tell thee all we want to know as soft as butter."

Janet, soon as her cousin was gone, slipped out into the garden—budding with spring leafage, yet cold for all that with memory of the storm just over-past—and sought the lane that led up to the pasture-fields. This wooing of Red Ratcliffe's was growing irksome to her, backed as it was by the Lean Man's favour; nor had she guessed till now that any shared the secret of her love for Shameless Wayne. Yet for all her own troubles, she found leisure to think kindly of the mad woman, who had come in such piteous plight to Wildwater and had been turned away by so rude a storm of jests and harshness. Where was Mistress Wayne now, she wondered?

Shading her eyes against the sunlight, which was fitful, chill and dazzling, she looked for the frail woman. At first she could see nothing save the bare green of scanty herbage, the swart lines of wall, the dark, straight hollows running up the fields to mark where the plough had once on a time furrowed the hard face of the land. Then she made out a little figure, moving up toward where the topmost field curved nakedly across the steel-blue sky.

A great compassion held the girl as she watched Mistress Wayne clamber up the hill and turn at the summit and move along the sky-edge, her frailty showing pitilessly clear against the empty space behind her. The wrath of God held no place in the calculations of the Ratcliffes; but Janet had learned awe of the self-same storm-winds that had taught cruelty to her folk, and she trembled now to think that they had turned a want-wit—one of God's own people, according to the moorside superstition—into the heart of the pathless and bog-riddled heath.

"Come back!" she cried, running up the fields. "Come back! You cannot cross the marshes out beyond there!"

Mistress Wayne looked down after the cry had been twice repeated, and stopped a moment; then hurried forward faster than before. Janet quickened pace, fear gaining on her lest the other should be lost to view. The flying figure above moved with a lagging step now, and Janet overtook her at the wall-side which divided moor and field.

"You will not take me back, not take me back?" pleaded Mistress Wayne, shrinking close against the wall.

"I would see you safe to the lower ground, Mistress. Where would you go?"

The kindliness in Janet's voice wrought a sudden change in Mistress Wayne. She forgot her dread of the eyes which had haunted her throughout the night, and awoke to a keen sense of her present misery. "I will go home," she said—"home to Marsh House. I am faint, and very hungry. They gave me milk and a piece of oaten bread at a farmstead on the moor, but that is a long, long while ago—longer than I could tell you—is the way far to Marsh?"

"Not far," said Janet, and then, not knowing how else to find her a place of shelter, she took the little woman by the hand and led her down the moor until they reached the rough brack, cut from the solid peat and flanked on either hand by clumps of bilberry, which led to Marshcotes; and further toward Marsh House she would have gone with her, had not a glance at the sun told her that she could scarce get back to Wildwater before the dinner-hour.

"The road lies straight to Marshcotes," she said, stopping and pointing down the highway.

"Will you not come all the way with me?" pleaded Mistress Wayne, nestling closer to the girl's side.

"I cannot, Mistress. Grandfather may have lacked me as 'tis, and I dare not

overstay the dinner-hour, lest he should guess what errand has brought me out of doors."

"No," said the other, simply, "he would not like thee to go gathering red-eyed daisies from the stone— Why, now, I know my way," she broke off, a light of recognition stealing into her empty face. "Yonder is Withens on the hill, and over there is Marshcotes; and there's a field-path, is there not, that takes me out of the high-road down to Marsh—an odd little path, all full of rounded pebbles, that creeps down the hill so craftily because it fears the steepness? Oh, yes, I know the way to Marsh."

"Fare ye well," said Janet, softly, with the tears close behind her voice. "Go home to Marsh, Mistress, and God give you friends there."

She watched the little figure move down the road, stopping here and there to pluck a spray of rusted heather or a half-opened wild flower from the banks on either hand, until the shoulder of the peat-rise hid her. Fierce in hatred or in love was Janet, like all her folk, and her pity for Mistress Wayne had grown already to a sort of hard defiance of those who could wrong so frail a creature.

"'Tis such as Red Ratcliffe who think it sport to mock the weaklings," she said, turning sharp about for Wildwater. "He would be very brave, I doubt, were he to meet yond little body on the moor—had she no men folk with her."

But Red Ratcliffe came too late to cross Mistress Wayne's path, though he was riding out of the Wildwater gates at the moment, bent on seeing to the disposal of the body which lay in the Marshcotes tavern. As Janet was half toward home, he passed her at the gallop, but an ugly smile was all his greeting and he went by without once slackening pace. The girl misliked his silence; it was his way to bluster with her at each new opportunity, and a score of shapeless fears went with her as she hurried back to bear her grandfather company at dinner. What was old Nicholas planning when he had sent her out of hall this morning? Bloodshed and unrest were in the air; the whole wide moor seemed throbbing with an undernote of tumult, and Shameless Wayne had but the one life to lose. *But the one life to lose*—the thought maddened her. Real danger, danger that stood before her in the road and spoke its purpose plainly, she could meet unflinchingly; but the perils that waited on Wayne's steps were formless and unnumbered. She would not think of them, and to ease her mind she turned again to thoughts of Red Ratcliffe, his mad passion, his cruelty and unruliness.

"Christ, how I hate him—how I hate him!" she cried between set teeth, as she passed through the Wildwater gates.

Red Ratcliffe, meanwhile, was riding hot and fast. His cousin's scorn, of which he had had full measure earlier in the day, flicked him on the raw all down the road to Marshcotes; and his thoughts dwelt less on the brother for whom he was going to order a grave than on the fierce, quick-witted lass whom he

had sworn to wed. He was in no good mood, accordingly, when he reached Marshcotes and drew rein at the Sexton's door.

The Sexton's wife, hearing the sound of horse-hoofs on the road without, hobbled to the window and thrust her face between the plants that lined the sill. Her eyes went hard and her mouth turned downward as she saw who was her visitor. She was in no better mood, indeed, than Red Ratcliffe himself; for she had been up betimes after her long ringing of the death-bell, and the hundred-and-one bits of housework she had got through had not been lightened by the discovery of Mistress Wayne's flight. It was no welcome hospitality that she had given to Wayne's faithless wife; but it was hospitality for all that, and it troubled the old woman no little that her guest should have wandered, none knew whither. So tart her mood was, indeed, that the Sexton had long since been driven forth of doors by the goodwife's tongue, and had taken refuge in the graveyard which was working-ground and home in one to the gentle man of dreams.

"Is Witherlee in the house?" cried Ratcliffe, catching sight of Nanny's face between the window-plants.

The little old woman came to the door and stood there, arms akimbo. "He isn't," she answered, looking steadfastly at the horse's ears.

"Then where is he? I must have a word with him before I go back to Wildwater."

"Where is he? Where ony honest man is like to be—following his trade." Nanny misliked all Ratcliffes, and she never troubled to hide her feelings from gentle or simple.

"By the Mass, thou'rt shorter of tongue than any woman I've set eyes on yet. Drop thy fooling, woman, for there has news come to Wildwater which sets a keen edge on my temper."

"Ay, marry? Then try th' edge on me—for I'm reckoned hard, and hev blunted more men's tempers nor ye can count years. Witherlee's i' th' kirkyard, if that's what ye're axing. Mebbe ye've met th' Brown Dog on your way across th' moor, an' he's warned ye to be beforehand, like, wi' ordering your grave?"

Ratcliffe scowled as he turned his horse's head. "Recall now that the Sexton's wife is friendly to the Waynes, and makes a boast of it," he said, glancing sharply at her.

A quick retort came to Nanny's tongue, and she hungered to out with it; but, being a prudent body even where the most unruly of her members was in case, answered quietly, "When gentlefolks come to blows," she said, "sich as me an' Witherlee are quiet, an' tak our pickings, an' if we choose sides at all, we lean toward them as gi'es us th' most butter to our bread."

"Stick to that creed, Nanny," said the other, with a rough laugh over his shoulder. "For 'tis apt to go hard at times with friends of the Waynes, and if we

caught thee crossing the scent after the hunt was well up—well, thou hast heard of our kind ways with enemies."

Red Ratcliffe had no sooner disappeared among the graves that stood at the far side of the road, after hitching his horse's bridle to the wicket, than Nanny's neighbour ran in from next door—a big-faced, big-boned woman, who went through life with a keen regard for everybody's business but her own.

"Begow, there's summat agate, an' proper!" cried the big-faced woman, filling the doorway with her breadth. "He war that sharp wi' thee, Nanny, I niver could hev believed. What ailed him to gi'e the yond bit o' warning—an' thee nobbut a bit o' dirt under his feet at most times?"

Nanny eyed her visitor askance, distrusting her for a slattern, yet not sorry for a chance of gossip. "He hes heard tell, I fancy, how mony an' mony a year back I helped th' Waynes o' Marsh to slip fro' th' Ratcliffes' sword-points. An', an' there's more nor one of th' better sort that hes learned to fear Nanny's tongue, an' th' sharp een she has for seeing fox-tricks. Yond Ratcliffe is like as two peas to what th' Lean Man used to be i' his young days—red hair an' all."

"There's red hair an' there's red hair," put in the other, weightily. "Same as there's cheese an' cheese; but there's one sort o' red thatch that niver yet spelt owt but foxiness an' double-dealing."

"That's true, for I've noticed it myseln. Black hair for honest, says I, an' red for a man that'll do owt."

"Leet hair, thin blood—that's what I war telled. Ay, sure, ye can niver trust yond sort o' thatch; an' all th' Ratcliffes hev it, saving Mistress Janet."

"Mistress Janet's is black as sloes, an' she hes a staunch heart of her own to match," broke in Nanny, who rarely stopped to praise. "But then she might be a Wayne, an' I've allus wondered how she came to be born of a Ratcliffe stock. Eh, but I wonder aht yond chap is saying to Witherlee! My man hes getten a closish tongue, Lord be thanked, or he mud easy say summat that wod stick i' Ratcliffe's gizzard."

The Sexton had been pottering up and down the graveyard all this while. And now he had sat him down on the edge of a grave, and filled his pipe and fallen into one of the musing fits which were the chief joy of his life. He was out of place in the world of living men and women, was Witherlee, and he knew it; but here he was at home, and the folk underground were full in sympathy with the dour, clear-sighted philosophy which pick and spade had taught him.

"There's comfort i' a bit o' bacca—though, Lord knows, 'twill be all one, bacca or no bacca, by and by," he muttered, pulling out his tinder-box. "We brought nowt into th' world, an' we tak nowt out, as Parson says at buryings—no, not so mich as an old clay pipe to keep us warm under sod."

His pipe well going, he let his eyes rove through the thin trail of smoke until

they rested on the vault of the Waynes of Marsh. A shadowy smile wrinkled his mouth; he was thinking of what had chanced here not twelve hours agone, and piecing the fight together, stroke by stroke, as he would have it be if it were to be fought out again.

"So thou'rt here, Witherlee! Peste, man, thou sittest so grey and still that I mistook thee for one of thy own gravestones," said Ratcliffe's voice at his elbow.

The Sexton came slowly out of his dreams. "Good-day to ye, Maister. Th' wind blows warm at after last neet's bluster," he said.

"It will blow cold again—after what was done here last night," answered Ratcliffe sourly. "Thou hast heard, I take it, that my brother was done to death here? I am come to bid thee dig a grave for him, the burying will be on Monday, likely."

"'Tis an ill-starred day for a burial, but dead men cannot be choosers. Oh, ay, I'll get th' grave digged reet enough."

"There'll be more work for thee before long," went on Ratcliffe, angered by the air of quiet aloofness which Witherlee assumed when he had scant liking for a man. "There's a saying that a Ratcliffe does not love to sleep alone, and we must find him a bedfellow."

"Well, there's room for a two or three—'specially i' th' Ratcliffe slice o' ground," said the Sexton, waving his hand toward the half-dilled space that underlay the Parsonage.

"Thy jests are dry, old Witherlee," snapped the other.

"Nay, I war none jesting. Cannot ye see that there's room and to spare? Oh, ay, I'll be fain to fill up my bit of a garden yonder—and thankee for th' custom."

Ratcliffe shifted from foot to foot, as if in doubt whether it were worth his while to pick a quarrel with the want-wit fellow; then, thinking better of it, he turned as if to leave.

"One spot is as good as another, I take it?" he said. "And haply thy work will lie nearer the yew-trees here, where the Wayne vault hugs tha causeway. By-the-bye, Sexton, when do they bury Wayne of Marsh?" he asked, with a sly carelessness that was not lost on Witherlee.

"To-morn."

"About noon, will it be?"

"About nooin," answered the Sexton. "Ye'll let th' burying go forrard peaceable-like?" he added, after a pause. His face looked dreamy as ever, nor could an onlooker have guessed that he was eyeing the other narrowly.

Ratcliffe started at the plain question, then laughed. "Of course. Are we wild beasts, thou fool, to stand between any man and decent burial? Look ye, Witherlee, thou hast a dreamer's privilege to ask odd questions, or I would have cracked thee on the mouth for that. What is't to thee whether we do this or that?"

"It's a deal to me," said Witherlee, an odd dignity stiffening his shrivelled body. "There's a place for everything, Maister Ratcliffe, an' all goes i' this world, not by what's done, but by th' place where it's done. If I meet ye on th' oppen high-road, I'll mebbe touch my hat to ye, an' axe no better; if I'm i' th' house, I'll tak a lot o' talk fro' th' wife an' say nowt, for a house is th' woman's, not th' man's; but here i' th' kirkyard I'm my own midden, i' a way o' speaking, and I'll stand interference fro' no man—no, not fro' Parson hisseln, for he's getten th' kirk, an' that's his place. So now ye know, Maister, why I axe if ye'll let th' burying get safely owered wi' afore ye fight—I couldn't thoyle to see outrageous doings amang my quiet folk here; they've addled their rest, poor soul and 'twould be no way seemly to disturb them."

"Thou'rt a thought witless, Sexton, as I've often heard folk say," laughed Ratcliffe.

"Well, I keep different company fro' most folk, and so am like to be a bit queer i' my ways. Have your joke, Maister, an' welcome, so long as ye'll let my work at th' vault here go peaceable to-morn."

"'Twas only thy daft fancy bade thee fear aught else. Put this coin in thy pocket, Witherlee, and let it remind thee there's a grave to be digged come Monday."

"Thankee, an' good-day. I'll none forget th' grave," said Witherlee, holding the coin gingerly between a thumb and forefinger.

"Have they a spare horse at the Bull, think'st thou? I'm going to the tavern now to take the body up to Wildwater, and dead men weigh over-heavy to be carried like maids across one's saddle-crupper."

"Ye'll borrow a horse off Jonas Feather; he bought a fresh one nobbut last week end, I called to mind," said Witherlee. "Lord save us," he added to himself, "to hear him talk so of a corpse that's kin to him! To laugh because his own brother weighs heavier for being dead—nay, they're a mucky breed, these Ratcliffes, an' that's as plain as the kirk-steeply."

The Sexton followed Red Ratcliffe with his eyes as he went down the pathway leading to the tavern; and then he glanced again at the coin in his palm.

"I dursn't say him noy, for fear he'd know how sour he turns me wi' yond weasel-face o' hisn," he went on; "but I don't like th' colour of his brass, for all that, and I'd liefer be without it. What mun I do wi' 't, for it'll fair burn a hole i' my pocket?" His face brightened, and he crossed the graveyard briskly. "I'll tak it to th' wife, that I will," he said; "mebbe she'll tell me what's best to do wi' it."

"Well, did Red Ratcliffe find thee?" asked Nanny, soon as the Sexton showed his face indoors.

"So he's been here, and all, has he?"

"Ay, he came seeking thee—and he threatened what he'd do if he catched me

meddling wi' what no way concerned me. Well, happen there's more concerns me nor Red Ratcliffe has any notion of. Was it just about th' grave he wanted thee, or was there more behind it?"

"There war," said Witherlee, rubbing his hands together. "He came to see about th' grave right enough—but he came most of all to axe me when Wayne o' Marsh war to be buried. He puts his question careless-like, as if he didn't fash hisseln to know one way or t' other; so *I* put a question to him i' my turn—daft-like, so he shouldn't guess th' why of—and I could tell by his way o' answering that they mean to swoop down on th' Waynes to-morn while they're agate wi' th' burying."

"That's so, is't?" said Nanny, with a quick glance at her husband. "I war minded to slip down to Marsh before, but now I shall let nowt stand i' th' gate. They're ower gentle, i' a proud way o' their own, is th' Waynes, and they'll niver think sich a thing could be as blows at burying-time."

"Ay," assented Witherlee, "these well-bred folk is like childer when they've getten foul tricks to deal wi', and they need one o' th' commoner sort to look after 'em."

"I should think they do!—Well, sit thee dahn, Witherlee, or tha'll get no dinner to-day, that tha willun't. Sakes! But I'm bothered still about yond little Mistress Wayne; hast heard owt of her?"

"Nowt. I talked to Hiram Hey as he went up to th' land this morn, but they'd seen nowt of her at Marsh. Porr bairn! I doubt she's come to harm." He wandered restlessly about the kitchen awhile; then, remembering the coin in his palm, he put it down on the extreme edge of the dresser. "I've getten a crown-piece, lass. What mun I do wi' 't?" he said.

"Do? Gi'e it to me, for sure, if tha's no use for't. Sakes, he talks as if a crown-piece was addled ivery day o' th' week."

"Ay, but it war Red Ratcliffe gav it me, an' tha knaws what ill money breeds."

Nanny made straight for the dresser, putting her goodman to one side with a firm hand. "I know what lack o' money breeds, Luke Witherlee," she said, as she dropped the coin in her apron pocket. "'Tis nawther right nor kindly to load a harmless bit o' silver ai' th' sins o' him that owned it, an' I've known good childer come fro' ill parents."

"Not oft," said Witherlee, and fell to on the oven-cake which Nanny had

just set down before him.

CHAPTER IV
ON BOG-HOLE BRINK

The sun was wearing noonward as Shameless Wayne and his sister came out of the Marsh House gates and turned up the pasture-fields that led them to the moor. It was the same morning that had seen the mad woman steal out from Nanny's cottage in search of the rude welcome awaiting her at Wildwater; but to Nell Wayne it seemed that yesterday was pushed far back into the past. Her visit to the belfry, her lust for vengeance, the quick answer to her prayers that had been given, amid rain-murk and the crash of swords, upon the very stone that was to cover Wayne of Marsh—these seemed all far off to the girl this morning, as if another than she had lived through the tempest of last night's passion. Behind them, in the Marsh hall, lay her father, still as when she had left him before the fight; and something of the stillness of the end was in the girl's face, too, as she kept pace with her brother's slow-moving steps.

"There's no rest for me, Nell, indoors yonder," said the lad, turning troubled eyes to the old house.

"Nor for me, nor for any of us, so long as father lies there. Ned, 'tis cruel that we cannot bury our dead clean out of sight soon as the breath has left them. All afternoon our kinsfolk will come, and whisper and pray above the body, and go away—I can see the whole sad ceremony—and we must be there, Ned—and 'twill be bitter hard to remember that the Wayne pride bids neither man nor woman of us show a tearful front to death."

He laughed, bitterly a little and very sadly. "The Wayne pride, Nell! Did not that die with father, think'st thou? Or hast forgotten what thou said'st to me last night at the vault-side?"

The late stress of grief and fight, had left the girl soft of heart; and Ned had ever held a sure place in her love. "Let that go by, dear," she said. "I was distraught, and my tongue went wandering in my own despite."

"Yet thy tongue spoke truth, lass. I shall never be aught but Shameless Wayne henceforth, thou said'st."

"Nay, 'twas but a half truth," she said, eagerly. "There's life before thee, Ned, and swift deeds——"

He put a firm hand on her shoulder and forced her to look him in the face. "Nell, I was drinking in the Bull tavern while the bell tolled for father from the kirk-tower. Say, didst think I *knew* what had chanced at Marsh?"

Again the old note of reproof sounded in Nell's voice. "I told Nanny Witherlee that thou didst not know, and I tried hard to think it, Ned—but how could it be? The gossips at the Bull must have told thee for whom the bell was ringing, for the news had long since spread through Marsh cotes."

"They did tell me," began Shameless Wayne.

"Ah, God!" murmured Nell, confessing how she had clung to the last shred of doubt.

"And I thought they lied. I thought, Nell—'twas the fool drink in me—that Jonas and his cronies were minded to have the laugh of me by this lame tale of how Wayne of Marsh had come by his end. Think, lass! When there was no feud, and naught to give colour to a Ratcliffe sword-stroke—how could a head three-parts gone in liquor believe it true?"

She, too, stopped and sought his eyes. "Ned, thou hast lived wild, but one thing I have never known thee do—thou dost not lie to save thy good repute. Wilt swear to me that thou knew'st naught of what had happened?"

"By the Dog, or by any oath that holds a man," he said, and she knew that he spoke plain truth.

"Why, then, 'twas thy ill fortune, dear, and we'll look clear ahead, thou and I."

"Yet the shame of it will cling, Nell. Wherever my name is spoken, there will some one throw mud at it. Whenever I see one man talking with his fellow, and mark how sudden a silence falls on them at my approach, I shall know that they were sneering at Shameless Wayne, who sat heels on table while his father's soul wailed up and down the moorside crying for vengeance. The Ratcliffes will taunt me with it by and by."

"And the taunt will stiffen thy arm, and blows will wipe out word," she cried, her voice clear and strong again.—"Dear, we have no smooth path to follow, but I give God thanks that 'twas drink, not thou, that played the renegade last night. It would have darkened all my love for thee, Ned, to know thee what I feared—ay, though I had fought it down with all my strength."

Again he laughed mirthlessly. "Art so sure that I shall live sober henceforth?" he said.

"Ay, am I! Dost think I've seen but the one side of thee through all these years? Thou wast alway better than thyself, Ned, and needed only a rough blow to bring thee to thy senses."

He interrupted her, impatiently. "We're growing womanish, and I had harder matters to talk of with thee. I'm four-and-twenty, Nell, and I have thee

and four half-grown lads to fend for."

"What, then? Are the Marsh lands so poor that we need cry for every penny spent, like cottage-folk?" said Nell, her old pride peeping out.

"I had a wakeful night, lass, and things came home to me. A good farmer drives the work forward, and says little about it, and onlookers are apt to forget what fathering the land needs if 'tis to butter any bread."

"But there's Hiram Hey. He has worked at Marsh ever since I remember aught, and surely he will look to everything?"

"Ay, if he has a shrewd hand ever on his shoulder; but if the master plays at work, Hiram will play, too, with the best, soon as the old habit wears——"

Nell could not keep back a smile. "As well set beggars on horseback, Ned, as put thee to farming. Hadst never patience for it, nor liking."

"Liking? Good faith, I loathe the sight of tillage tools, and the greasy stench of sheep, and the slow rearing of crops for every storm to play the wanton with. But must is must, Nell, lass, and naught will alter it.—Look at Marshcotes kirk yonder?" he broke off, pointing over the moor as they gained the hill-crest. "It is broad day now, and 'tis hard to understand how lately there was fight beneath yond grey old tower."

Nell shuddered. "Was it a dream, think'st thou, after all? Just a dream, Ned, born of the moon-rays and the wildness of the night?"

"'Twas no dream, lass, for I carry the marks of it.—God's pity, what can have chanced to Mistress Wayne, I wonder? I left her on the vault last night, after pleading with her vainly to return with me to Marsh; and half toward home I turned again, shamed at the thought of leaving her in such a plight—and she was gone."

"Thou didst plead with her to come back to Marsh?" said Nell, her face hardening. "What place has she at Marsh?"

"The place that any homeless bairn might claim there; and, by the Heart, I'll find her if I can and give her shelter. Fool that I was to leave her there last night! She may have wandered to her death among the moors."

"And I for one would gladden to hear of it," cried the girl. "She brought father to where he is; she made our honour light through all the country-side; 'tis treachery to the dead to pity her."

"We'll not fall out, Nell, thou and I; there are quarrels enough to fight through as it is," said Wayne steadily. "Wilt come to Bog-hole brink with me? The last words ever I heard from father was about yond field; next after thee, I think he doted most on the lean fields he had rescued from the heather, and 'twould please him if we could whisper in his ear at home-going that the work was speeding."

His sister glanced curiously at him, scarce crediting the change that one

night's agony had wrought in this careless lad, nor knowing whether his tenderness or his purposeful, quiet talk of ways and means were more to be wondered at. "Is't safe, Ned?" she asked. "The road to Wildwater crosses over beyond Bog-hole brink, and Nicholas Ratcliffe has a pair of hawk's eyes in his weasel face."

"'Twill be as safe now as ever it will; and who knows but a chance may come to square last night's account?"

She turned and walked beside him up the fields; and, after they had crossed the stile that opened on the moor, she broke silence for the first time. "Ned, what of Janet Ratcliffe?" she said suddenly.

Wayne flushed, and paled again; but his voice was quiet when he spoke. "I have thought that over, too—and—love sickens when it crosses kinship, Nell."

Overjoyed and sorry in a breath, she gave him one of those brief, half-ashamed caresses that rarely passed between them. "Art right, dear," she said—"but God knows what it has meant to thee."

"And I know, lass—and that is all we'll say about it. After all, 'twas hot and sweet enough—but father would have cursed me had he lived to know; and old Nicholas would liefer have drowned Janet in Wildwater Pool than see her wedded to a Wayne. Even thou, lass, didst rail on me when I told thee how it was between us; and thou'rt a woman.—See Bog-hole brink up yonder; that should be Hiram's figure stooping to the spade."

Hiram Hey, indeed, had been busy since early morning at the brink, as befitted the oldest farm-hand of the Waynes. Death might have put an end to the old man's activity, but it was no part of the Marshcotes creed that farming matters should be set aside for even a day because the owner of the land awaited burial. There was always a fresh master to take the old one's place, but the right season for a tillage-job, if once it was let slip by, did not return again. It was high time that this bit of field, intaken from the heather during the open days of winter, should be prepared for its seed-crop of black oats; and Hiram was working, with his wonted easiful swing of arm and downright leisurely tread, at the square heap of peat and lime that stood at the upper corner of the field. His spade, at each downward stroke showed the naked side of the heap, where the alternate layers of black bog-peat and white lime, each a twelve-inch deep or so, climbed one above the other to half a tall man's height; and peat and lime mingled in a grey-black dust as he swung spadeful after spadeful in the waiting cart.

"He'll noan be pleased, willun't th' Maister, 'at he's been called to a better world afore he's seen this field rear its first crop o' oats," muttered Hiram. "Nay, it do seem fair outrageous, like, to wark as he's done to break up a plaguey slice o' land, an' then to dee fair as all's getten ship-shape. A better world he's goan to? I'm hoping as mich—for it 'ud tak him all his time to find a war."

"What art laking at, Hiram?" came a voice from behind.

Hiram put a few more spades-full into his cart before troubling to turn round; then he planted his spade in the ground, firmly and with deliberation, and leaned on it; and last of all he lifted his eyes to the newcomer's face. "Oh, it's thee, is't, Jose? Well?" he said.

"Well?" answered Jose, the same shepherd who earlier in the morning had directed Mistress Wayne to Wildwater.

Neither broke the silence for awhile, for they were fast friends. "Been shepherding like?" ventured Hiram Hey at length.

"Ay. 'Twar a lamb-storm last neet, an' proper, an' I've lossen a two-three ewes through 't already, not to mention lambs. I doubt this lambkin 'ull niver thrive," answered Jose, leaning over the fence and holding a four-days' lamb toward Hiram.

"I doubt it willun't," responded the other, with a critical glance at the thin body and drooping hind-quarters.

"Its mother war carred by th' side on 't, dead as Job, when I gat up to th' Heights this morn, and th' little chap war bleating fair like ony babby. Well, I mun tak it to th' home-farm, an' they'll mebbe rear 't by th' hearthstun.—What's agate wi' thee, Hiram, lad? Tha looks as if tha'd dropped a crown-piece and picked up a ha' penny."

"I war thinking o' th' owd Maister, who ligs below yonder at Marsh. He war a grand un, an' proper. I warrant th' young un 'ull noan be a patch on him."

"That's as th' Lord sends," said the shepherd, shifting the lamb a little to ease his arms; "though why th' new should allus be war nor th' owd, beats me. Tha niver will see th' hopeful side of ony matter, Hiram—no, not if they paid thee for 't. I mind, an' all, that ye hed hard words to say o' him that's goan while he war wick an' aboon-ground."

"Well, that's nobbut right. If ye cannot speak gooid of a man when he's dead, an' noan liable to be puffed up wi' pride at hearing on 't, when can ye let a soft word out, says I?"

"There's a way o' looking at iverything, I allus did say; an' I've knawn a kindly word i' season do more for th' living nor all th' praise i' th' world can iver advantage th' dead."

"Nay," said Hiram, taking up his spade and resting both hands on the top, "nay, I war reared on hard words an' haver-bread, an' they both of 'em stiffen a chap, to my thinking. I doan't knaw that owt iver comed o' buttering your tongue."

"Tha doesn't knaw? Then that's why I'm telling ye. There's th' young Maister, now—him 'at they call Shameless, though I reckon he's cured o' that sin' last neet. He's a chap ye can no way drive, is't Shameless Wayne, but I've knawn him, even i' his owd wild days, go soft i' a minute if ye tried to lead i' stead o'

driving him."

"I doubt th' chap. Whin-bushes carry no cherries, Jose."

"Well, tha wert allus hard on th' lad; but there's marrow i' him, ye mark my words. An' we shall see what he's made on, choose what, now he's getten th' farm on his hands.—Sakes, what is't, Hiram?" he broke off, as a slim figure of a woman, wild-eyed and mud-bedraggled, came down the moor and stood on the far side of the fence watching them in questioning fashion.

"Why, by th' Heart,'tis Mistress Wayne!" cried Hiram. "Begow, I thowt it war a boggart! What mud she be after, think'st 'a, Jose?"

"Nay, I know not—save that she passed me many an hour agone, as I war looking after th' sheep, an' axed th' road to Wildwater. I thowt that she war fairy-kist, and now I'm sure on 't."

"Ay, she's fairy-kist, for sure; ye need only see her een to be sure o' that. Tak that lamb o' thine to her, Jose; I've known mony a sickness dumb and human, cured by a touch o' such poor bodies."

They glanced at Mistress Wayne, expecting speech from her; but she said naught—only stood idly watching them, as if she had some question in her mind and feared to ask it. Surprised he was, and awe-struck, by this second advent of a figure at once so eerie and so pitiful, the shepherd was not minded to lose so plain a chance of profit. The lamb was sick, and he knew as well as Hiram did what healing these mad folk carried in their touch. Eager to thrust his burden against the little woman's hand, he moved up toward the fence; but she took fright at his abruptness, and turned, and raced fleet-footed up the slope.

The shepherd watched her disappear among the furrows of the heath, then looked at Hiram. "What dost mak on 't', lad?" he asked.

"Nay, how should I tell?" said Hiram sourly. "'Twould seem yond skinful o' kiss-me-quick ways—who war niver fit, as I've said mony a time, to be wife to Wayne o' Marsh—has paid a bonnie price for her frolic wi' Dick Ratcliffe o' Wildwater— Lord save us, though," he added, "I mun say no ill o' th' wench, now that she is as she is, for 'tis crixy work to cross sich, so they say."

"She's talked o' seeking her lover up at Wildwater," put in the other, in an awed voice. "Did she find him, I wonder? 'Tis fearful strange, lad Hiram, whichiver way a body looks at it."

"Tha's heard nowt, I'm thinking, of how this same Dick Ratcliffe, that she calls her lover, war killed last neet i' Marshcotes graveyard?"

"What, killed? Think o' that now! An' th' little body trapesing all up and down th' moor, seeking him and reckoning he war up yonder at Wildwater House. Where didst learn it, Hiram?"

Hiram took his spade in hand again and thrust it into the lime—with no immediate intention of resuming work, but as a signal that by and by he would

have given his tongue as much work as was good for it. "Where should I learn it, save at Nanny Witherlee's? I war dahn at Marshcotes this morn, an' says I to myseln, 'Jose, lad,' says I, 'if there's owt fresh about this bad business o' th' Maister's, Nanny 'll know on 't.' An' I war right, for sure; there's niver a mousehole i' ony house but Nanny hes a peep through 't."

"Ay, she knows whether ye've getten feathers or flocks i' your bedding, does Nanny," Hiram agreed, as he patted the heap with the flat of his spade.

"She hed been ringing th' death-bell, seemingly, and when she came out into th' kirkyard— Now, look yonder, Hiram! We're seeing a sect o' company up here this blessed day, for here's th' young Maister hisseln, an' Mistress Nell wi' him. Eh, but they've getten owd faces on young shoulders, hes th' pair on 'em. I'll be wending up to th' farm, lad, wi' this lambkin, for I war aye softish about meeting troubled faces—they do may my een watter so."

The shepherd made off hurriedly along the crest of the field, his eyes turned steadfastly from the path which Shameless Wayne and his sister were climbing; and Hiram watched him sourily.

"Tha'rt right, Jose, when tha names thyseln softish," he growled. "Sakes, if we're bahn to fret ourselns about iverybody's aches an' pains, where mun we stop? Lord be thanked 'at He's gi'en me a heart like a lump o' bog-oak—hard, an' knobby, an' well-soaked i' brine. So th' young Maister's coming i' gooid time, is he, to lord it ower his farm folk? Well, let him come, says I; he'll noan skift me by an inch, willun't th' lad."

Under other circumstances Hiram would have been at work again by now, nor would he have ceased the unhurried swing of leg and arm-muscle, that does so much in a Marshcotes working-day, until dinner or the advent of another gossip gave him fit excuse for resting. But with the young master close behind—come here, doubtless, to spy on him—the case was altered; and there was stubbornness writ plain in every outstanding knob of the old man's body as he fell into the most easiful attitude that long experience could suggest.

"Well, Hiram, how goes the work?" said Shameless Wayne, stopping at the fence.

Hiram glanced carelessly at the young master, then fell to lengthy contemplation of the sky. "Better nor like," he said at last, "seeing I've nobbut my own wits to guide me, now th' owd Maister is goan."

"The new master knows a sight less than the old one did, Hiram."

"Ye're right, I reckon."

"But he's willing to learn, and means to."

"Oh, ay? I've heard that ye can train a sapling, but not at after it's grown to a tree."

"The same old Hiram Hey! Bitter as a dried sloe," growled Shameless

Wayne.

"Sloes is wholesome, choose what; an' I addle too little brass to keep me owt but dry—let alone that I'm no drinker by habit."

The master winced at this last home-thrust, then squared his jaw obstinately. "Hard words plough no fields, Hiram—no, nor lime them either, as is plain to be seen. Thou'rt a week behind with this field."

Hiram glanced edgeways at him, not understanding that two could use his own rough weapons. "A week behind, am I, Maister? An' how should ye come to know whether I'm forrard or behind wi' farm wark?"

Wayne's face softened for a moment. "Because the last word I heard from father was touching this same field—and by that token, Hiram, I'll see that thou gett'st it limed, and sown, and bearing its crop, all in good season, if I have to whip thee up and down the furrows."

His sister laid a hand on his sleeve. "Hush, Ned!" she whispered. "Thou'lt win scant labour from such as Hiram, unless thou bearest a kindlier tongue."

Yet Shameless Wayne, who was counted light of head and judgment, saw more sides to the matter than prudent Mistress Nell; the temper of the moor folk was an open book to him, and he knew that if he were to be master henceforth he must begin as such, or any after-kindness he might show would count for folly with Hiram and his kind.

Hiram Hey was looking steadily at the master now, a hard wonder tempering his obstinacy a little. And so they eyed each other, until the older man's glance faltered, and recovered and fell again to the white spots of lime that littered the peat-mould at his feet.

"Now," said Wayne, "thou hast got thy cart full, Hiram. Give yond chestnut of thine a taste of thy hand, and we'll see if thou hast learned yet to spread a field."

"Hev I learned to spread a field? Me that hes sarved at Marsh, man an' boy, these forty years!" cried Hiram, open-mouthed now.

"Thou hast done good service, too, for father gave his word to that; but whether thou canst spread limed peat—why, that is to be seen yet."

Not a word spoke Hiram, but gave the chestnut one resounding smack with the flat of his hand and fell to work as soberly, as leisurely, as if he had not just been given the hardest nut to crack that ever had come his way. All across the field, as he followed the cart and swung wide spades-full right and left, he was puzzling to find some explanation of this new humour of Shameless Wayne's; but he returned to the heap as wise as he left it, and began stolidly to refill the cart without once looking at the master.

"Nay, I'm beat wi' him," he muttered. "What it means is noan for me to say—but I warrant ony change i' Shameless Wayne is for th' war——"

"Put that sort of work into it, Hiram, and we shall see a good crop yet," called the master drily, and linked his arm through Nell's to help her down the slope.

They had not gone a score yards, and Hiram Hey was still wondering at his powerlessness to give Shameless Wayne "a piece of his mind," when a horseman passed at a foot-pace along the bridle-track above. Beside him walked another horse—a rough-coated bay, that carried a man's body swung across its back. Carelessly fastened the body was, and every now and then, as the nag slipped and stumbled up the rocky slope, the dead man's arms, his head and high-booted legs, made quick nods of protest, as if the journey liked him little.

"Christ guide us, what is this?" cried Nell, aghast at the drear spectacle. And then she looked closer at the on-coming rider, and lost her mawkishness upon the sudden. "'Tis one of the Ratcliffes of Wildwater," she said, with the same passionate tremour in her voice that Nanny Witherlee had heard last night up in the belfry-tower.

"Ay, by his red thatch," muttered Shameless Wayne—"and now he turns his face this way, 'tis he they call Red Ratcliffe—the meanest hound of them all, save him who lies across the saddle-crupper yonder."

"Why, canst see who 'tis?" Nell whispered.

"Ay—thou say'st him last with a sword-blade through his heart."

The horseman had reined in at a stone's-throw from them. "I carried news to Wildwater this morning," he said, glancing from Nell Wayne to her brother.

"Good news or bad, Red Ratcliffe?" answered Wayne in an even voice.

"Why, good. They clapped hands up yonder when I told them what Shameless Wayne was doing while his cousin fought for him."

The lad reddened, but he would show no other sign of hurt. "There are two chances come to every man in his lifetime," he said slowly, "and I have lost but one. Get off your horse, and we'll talk with a weapon that comes handier than the tongue."

Ratcliffe looked down the rough slope of the moor, thinking to ride in at his enemy and strike at vantage; but the ground was full of bog-holes and no horse could cross with safety. "Nay," he answered; "when I fight with you, Wayne of Marsh, there shall be no girl to come between the fight—nor a farm-hind to help thee with his spade."

"You need not fear them, sir," laughed Wayne—"though, now I think of it, old Hiram yonder would be a better match for such bravery as yours."

The other winced, but would not be goaded into fight; and there he showed himself a Ratcliffe—for his race was wont to measure pride by opportunity, and when they fought they did it with cool reckoning of the odds in favour of them.

"Wilt try the issue with my sister, then, if Hiram seems too good for thee?"

mocked Wayne. "She can grip a sword-hilt on occasion, and——"

"She may have need to by and by," snapped Red Ratcliffe, pointing to the dead man with the hand which held the bridle of the second horse. "This morning I carried news to the Lean Man, and now I am bearing proof of it—and weighty proof, 'od rot me, as I found when lifting him to saddle. An eye for an eye, Wayne of Marsh—fare ye well, and remember that an old tree we know of will bear red blossoms by and by."

Wayne made a few steps up the slope, but the horseman was already rising to the trot and pursuit was useless. "Come, Nell," he said; "blows would come easiest, but it seems I've to learn patience all in one hard lesson."

Hiram Hey whetted his hands, soon as he was alone again, and began to fill his cart. And many a slow thought ripened as he worked, though he gave voice to none until Jose the shepherd returned from carrying his lamb to the home farm, and rested his arms as before on the fence, and gave Hiram the "Well?" which prefaced every interval of gossip.

"Begow, but I've learned summat, Jose, sin' tha wert here," said Hiram slowly.

"That's a lot for thee to say, lad. I've thowt, time an' time, 'at ye'd getten nowt left to learn," responded the other, with lazy irony.

"Well, 'tis a rum world, an' thick wi' surprises, for me as for ony other man. Who'd hev thowt, Jose, 'at th' young Maister 'ud up an' gi'e me a talking-to, fair as if he war his father, an' me set to liming a field for th' first time?—I tell thee, I war so capped I hedn't a blessed word to answer him wi'—though I've thowt of a dozen sin' he left."

"Didn't I tell thee?" cried the shepherd, cackling softly and stroking his shaven upper lip. "Didn't I tell thee, Hiram? Eh, lad, I haven't lived to threescore an' three without knowing a sour cherry fro' a sweet."

"Thou'rt ower fond o' th' young Maister; tha allus wert, Jose. What's he getten to show for hisseln?" grumbled Hiram.

"Measure him by his doings, an' he's nowt; but peep at th' innards o' th' lad, an' tha'll find summat different-like. He war a wick un fro' being a babby, war Shameless Wayne, an' wick tha'll find him, Hiram, if fancy leads him to meddle wi' th' farming."

"Theer, I niver reckoned mich o' thy head-piece, Jose; 'twar nobbut th' suddenness of it that capped me so, an' next time I warrant he'll sing to a different tune. He war right, though, about this field, an' 'tis owing to thee, Jose, 'at I'm late wi' 't, coming ivery half-hour as tha dost to break me off th' wark. 'Tis weel to be a shepherd, I allus did say."

"Well, then, I'll swop jobs; I'll tak thine, lad, if tha'll tak mine. Begow, but to say 'at I'm idle i' lambing-time— Theer I'll be wending; 'twill noan do mich

gooid to listen to such fly-by-sky talk of yond."

Hiram let him move a little away; then, "Didst see Red Ratcliffe go riding by to Wildwater a while back?" he called.

"Nay, I war off th' road. Hes he passed, like, while th' Maister war here?" said the shepherd, answering tamely to the lure and resuming his old easiful attitude against the fence.

"I should think he did. An' he stops, does Ratcliffe, an' mocks th' Maister; an' he up an' says, 'Come thee dahn and fight, lad,' says he, meaning th' Maister. But Ratcliffe war flayed—ay, he war flayed—I'm noan saying th' lad didn't show hisseln summat like a man."

The shepherd was silent for awhile. "I tell thee what it is, Hiram," he said presently; "them Ratcliffes hes been thrang this mony a week wi' their plots an' their mucky plans. There's niver a neet goes by now, when we meet at th' tavern, Wildwater hands an' Marsh, but they mak a joke o' Shameless Wayne—an' no rough honest jokes, mind ye, but sour uns——"

"I should like to hear 'em!" snapped Hiram. "I'm noan gi'en to liquor, Jose, as tha knaws; but I've a mind to look in at th' tavern this varry neet, th' first I hear oppen his mouth agen th' young Maister—" he stopped and looked once down the path that Shameless Wayne had taken. "We shall fratch, me an' ye, lad," he said, as he settled to his work again.

"Ay," chuckled Jose, turning away. "An' he'll best thee ivery time. So I'll say good-afternoon, Hiram, an' we'll pray there'll be no more lamb-storms this side o' th' summer."

"We shall fratch," repeated Hiram Hey, and shouted a "gee-yup," to the chestnut.

But the Master was thinking of weightier matters even than his fratching with Hiram Hey. Nell and he had stopped at the parting of the ways this side of Marsh House, and he had glanced queerly at her as he said farewell.

"Where art going, Ned?" she asked.

He paused awhile before replying; then, "I have a tryst to keep with Janet Ratcliffe," he said, in a tone that challenged opposition.

"A tryst to keep?" echoed Nell, lifting her brows. "How long is't, Ned, since thou told'st me that was over and done with once for all?"

"I told thee truth. The tryst was made when we were free to be lovers,—if we would—but now—dost think I'm minded to forget the blow that sent father where he is?"

"Break tryst, Ned?" she pleaded eagerly. "'Tis unsafe, I tell thee, and——"

"And thou fearest a pair of hazel eyes will cloud all else for me?" he finished. "Get home to Marsh, lass—and think something better of my manhood."

"She'll conquer him again," Nell muttered after he had left her. "He is mad

to keep troth with any Ratcliffe. Well-away, why must Ned always run so close a race with dishonour?"

CHAPTER V
A LOVE-TRYST

After seeing Mistress Wayne safe into her road and after meeting Red Ratcliffe by the way, Janet made all speed back to Wildwater, lest her grandfather should miss her from the dinner-table. She turned once again as she reached the wicket-gate; and again she looked along the path by which Red Ratcliffe was crossing the moor to Marshcotes.

"Christ, how I hate him!" she repeated, and put a hand upon the latch, and went quickly up the garden-path.

A haunch of mutton, just taken from the turn-spit, was hissing on the kitchen table as she passed through, and she had scarce time to doff her cloak and smooth her hair a little where the wind had played the ruffler with it, before Nicholas Ratcliffe's voice came from the dining-hall.

"Where's Janet? Od's life, these wenches are always late for trencher-service," he cried.

"Nay, for I'm here with the meat, grandfather," said Janet slipping into the place at the old man's side which was hers more by favour than by right.

"Where hast been, girl?" he asked sharply.

"I wearied of spinning and went out into the fields in search of appetite."

"Well, have a care. The times are going to change soon, and 'twill be well for all Ratcliffe women-folk to keep close to home."

"For fear of Waynes?" cried a lad from the table-foot, mockingly. "I thought, sir, we knew that they were courteous to foolery with all women. Have you not told us as much a score times?"

"Besides, I could not hug the threshold from morn till night; I should die for lack of wind and weather," put in the girl, with a touch of wilfulness that never came amiss to old Nicholas from his favourite one.

"There's truth in that; and I should ill like to see thee go white of cheek, Janet, like yond fool-woman who came to talk with me just now. Have a care, is all I say—and if a Wayne say aight to thee at any time——"

"I do not fear any Wayne that steps," said she, her eyes on her plate, and her

thoughts on a certain spot of the moors where she had promised to keep tryst with Shameless Wayne that very afternoon.

The Lean Man fell into moodiness presently. From time to time he glanced at Robert, his eldest-born, and nodded; and from time to time he gave a laugh that was half a snarl; and Janet, watching his humour narrowly, lost even the pretence of high spirits which she had brought to meat. Her grandfather was planning mischief, as surely as a hawk meant death when it hung motionless above a cowering wild fowl; and the mischief would aim at Shameless Wayne; and she would have more than a love-errand to take her to the moors this afternoon.

Dinner over, old Nicholas called for his horse and buckled his sword-belt on.

"Come, wish me God-speed," he laughed, threading his arm through Janet's.

Janet shrank from him a little, but he was too intent on the matter in hand to notice aight amiss with her. "Wish him God-speed," she thought. "On such an errand? Nay but I'll give God thanks that I made a tryst with Shameless Wayne—the Lean Man will scarce know where to look for him."

"Come, Janet, hast no word? See the black mare, how eager she is to be off. She winds the scent of chase, I doubt."

The girl was silent until her grandfather had gathered the reins into his hand. "Where—where do you ride, sir?" she stammered.

The big bay horse—lean as its master, and every whit as tough—was pawing the courtyard stones impatiently. Old Nicholas swung to saddle, and looked down grimly, at his granddaughter. "A-hunting, as I told thee," he said. "What meat shall I bring back to the Wildwater larder?"

"What you please, sir, so long as it be well come by," she answered, looking him hardily between the eyes.

"It shall be well come by, lass," said the Lean Man, and cantered over the hill-crest.

Not staying to fetch cloak and hood, Janet struck slant-wise across the moor soon as her grandfather was out of sight. Troubles were crowding thick on her. This morning there had been Red Ratcliffe's threats, now there were the Lean Man's. Both aimed against Shameless Wayne, she guessed, for of old their hate had been deeper against the Waynes of Marsh than against any other of their kin. Above the moor-edge a little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, seemed to have come up—the cloud of feud, which one day, the girl knew, would grow to a red thunder-track that covered the whole sky. Yet her step grew freer, her eyes brightened, as she went out and out across the moor, over the gaunt, waste land of peat and bog and green marsh grasses; for the friendship of heath went with her, and each step further into the heart of the solitude was a step toward him. This morning she had been downcast, and even the moor had failed to give her its

wonted cheer; but now that dangers thickened she braced herself to meet them, with a courage that was almost gaiety. What if the Lean Man had gone hunting Shameless Wayne? He would not find him, for he was coming to meet her on the moor here—he was at the tryst this moment, may be—and the road he would take from Marsh was contrary altogether from that followed by her grandfather.

The bog stretched wide before her now, and she had to skirt the nearer edge of it, stepping with cautious foot from tuft to tuft of ling. There was many a dead man lay among the stagnant ooze to left of her; but the cruelty of the heath had no terror for the girl—it was but one quality among the many which had endeared the heath to her. Men's cruelty was mean, with squalor in it, but the larger pitilessness of Nature was understandable to this child of the stormwinds and the rain.

Little by little, as she walked, her mind went over all that had passed between herself and Shameless Wayne since first he set a lover's eyes on her and blurted out his headstrong passion. That was a twelvemonth back, and ever since she had been half betrothed to him—not pledging herself outright, but gleaning a swift joy from meetings that would have brought the Lean Man's vengeance on her had he once surprised a tryst. Sometimes she had been tender with the lad, but oftener she had taunted him with his wild doings up and down the moorside; and all the while she had not guessed how close a hold he was taking of her, nor that his very wildness matched what the moor-storms taught her to look for in a man. It had needed a touch of peril, a sense that life for once was buffeting Careless Wayne, to rouse the woman in her; and now the peril was at hand, and the boy-and-girl love of yesterday showed vague and empty on the sudden.

For a moment she halted at the bog-verge and looked across the heath. The solitude was splendid from edge to edge of the blue-bellied sky—such solitude as dwarfed her pride and made her heart like a little child's for simpleness. Moor-birds were clamorous up above her head, and not a half-league off the black pile of Wynyates Kirk upreared itself, a temple in the wilderness. From marsh to kirk, from wind-ruffled heath to peewits wheeling white-and-black across the sun-rays, the girl's eyes wandered. Proud, she had been, shy with the fierceness of all untamed creatures, and liberty had seemed, till yesterday, a dearer thing than any fool-man's tenderness. But danger had come to Shameless Wayne, danger would sit at meat and walk abroad and sleep with him till he or the Lean Man went under sod; and, knowing this, she knew, too, that liberty had ceased to be a gift worth asking for.

Scarce understanding yet, she turned from the bog-side with a sigh that was half-impatient, and crossed to the kirk which was land-mark and trysting-place in one. They counted the square-towered church at Marshcotes old; yet it was young compared with this rounded pile of stones which was sacred to the

oldest-born of all religions. Hither the hill-lassies came on Mickaelmas Eve to ask if they would be wedded before the year was out, and to glean from the silent stone an answer prompted of desire; here, too, sweethearts half confessed found wit to tell each other what many a summer's field-walk after milking had failed to render clear, and grown men, who had come in jest, had stayed to wonder at the power the old place had to stir a laggard tongue. This Wynyates Kirk, at which Pagan mothers had once worshipped lustily, seemed still to have its message for the moor folk; and the way of a man with a maid, which it had watched for generations out of mind, showed constantly the same.

The compulsion of the past was strong on Janet, as she stood under shadow of the rounded stone and strained her eyes toward the track which should be leading Shameless Wayne to her. She had lived with the wind for comrade and the voices of the heath for bed-fellows; there had been none to keep her mind from Nature's lesson to its children, and here, with the ghosts of long-dead love vows plaining from the heather that hugged the kirk-stone foot, her heart went out once and for all to Shameless Wayne. The spirit of the place quickened in her, telling her that neither kinship nor any reek of feud could come between herself and Wayne; for love was real up here, while pride of family went fluttering like a thistle-seed down the rude pathway of the wind.

"He's a laggard—a laggard!" she cried. "Ah, if he knew what I am keeping from him——"

She stopped, and the wind grew colder, so it seemed. How if the Lean Man had changed his path? How if he had met Wayne by the way and given him that which would render him a laggard till the Trump of Doom? Again she strained her eyes across the peat, and far down the moor she saw a sturdy, loose-limbed figure stride up toward her.

Nearer and nearer the figure came, and the girl laughed low to herself. Standing with one arm on the stone, she looked down at Shameless Wayne and waited. And many a dark matter came clear to her in that moment, as she marked the lines of trouble in his face; nor could she tell which was the stronger—the shyness that knowledge of her self-surrender brought, or the fierce, protective impulse that bade her fight his troubles for him.

"So you've kept tryst, Janet? I scarce looked for it," he said gravely.

"Is it my wont, Ned, to break tryst?" she answered.

"Nay, but last night has changed all—for you and me."

His coldness jarred on her, after her late eagerness toward him.

"Art chill as this rainy sky, Ned," she said. "Is't because I have looked askance at thee of late that thou giv'st me you for the old *thou* of friendship?"

"Nay, but because the friendship is frost-nipped, Janet."

She was silent for a while, fighting the maidish battle of pride with tender-

ness. "That need not be," she said at last. "Was I not like to hold off, Ned, when thou wast so sure of me that thou could'st play the wilding up and down the country-side? So sure of me that, thrice out of four times, a wine-flagon showed more tempting company than I? But thou'rt altered, Ned—I saw it in thy face as thou camest up the moor—and——"

"Hold, lass!" he cried, gripping her arm. "I'll trick no secrets from thee now. Know'st thou I let another fight for me in Marshcotes kirkyard?"

"I heard as much a while back. And what said I to my heart about it, think'st thou?"

"That it matched well with Shameless Wayne."

"That it matched ill with what I would have the man I love to be—Ned, Ned, 'tis I am shameless, for I cannot see thy trouble and keep confession back. It was well enough to flout thee in old days, when thou hadst little need of me—but now—hast never a use for me, dear?"

The world had rolled back from Janet. Her folk were straw in the balance, the brewing quarrel was naught. They were alone, Shameless Wayne and she, with only the quiet, far-reaching moor to watch them; and love was a greater thing by far to her woman's eyes, than any hate of feud could be. Wayne reeled for a moment under a like impulse: he had come here to say farewell to Janet, expecting a little sorrow from her and no more, and she had met him with every tender wildness, of voice and eyes and roundly-moving bosom, that ever set a lad's hot pulses beating. Life was to be an uphill fight henceforth for Shameless Wayne; but here by the kirk-stone, with the peewits shrilling overhead and the low wind whistling in the heather, he was facing the hardest fight of all. Slowly the colour deepened in the girl's face as the moments passed, and still he made no answer and a touch of anger was in her shame, as she sought vainly for the meaning of his mood.

"Lass, why could'st not hold it back? Why could'st not?" he cried hoarsely. "Listen, Janet, there has that chanced at Marsh since yestermorn which has set the Pit of Hell 'twixt thee and me."

"What chanced at Marsh was none of thy doing, nor of mine," she broke in, and would have said more, but the look of Wayne's face, with the tragic lines set deep about his brow and under his eyes, daunted her.

"One of thy folk killed my father in cold blood," he went on, after a silence, "and in hot blood I swore never to ease my fingers of the sword-hilt until the reckoning was paid. Can we lie soft in wedlock, girl, when every dawn will rouse me to the feud? Can we lock arms and kiss, when slain men come from their graves to curse the treachery?"

"Thou art thou, Ned, and I am I. Can kinship alter that?"

"Ay, can it," he cried bitterly, for her stubbornness angered him when he

looked for help from her at this hottest of the fight. "The one part of me is sick for thee, Mistress Janet, while the other loathes thee—ay, loathes thee—because thou art a Ratcliffe.—There, child, forgive me! 'Tis no fault of thine, God knows, and my tongue slips into unmeant cruelties——"

She turned her back on him and leaned her forehead against the stone that had brought many a maid to her undoing or her happiness. Back and forth went her thought; she would not acknowledge how real his struggle was, but told herself that he had flouted her for sake of an idle fancy, that she could never win back what she had given him just now. She looked up at last, and glanced at Shameless Wayne.

"Hast not left me yet?" she said. "'Tis scarce seemly, is't, to pry upon my shame?"

Anger he could have met, but not this tearless sorrow. If Janet could cast kinship to the winds, was he to show himself a laggard? He sprang toward her; and she, seeing his sternness gone, waited and held her breath, not knowing what she feared or what she hoped. And then he stopped, suddenly, as if a hand had clutched at him to hold him back; and without a word he turned and left her.

She watched him go, her arms clasped tight about the stone; and for awhile her heart went empty of all feeling. So quiet the moor was that she could hear the rustle of an eagle, sweeping far overhead toward Conie Crag Ravine, with a lamb in its talons plucked from some outlying upland field. A moor-fowl splashed through the reeds that fringed the marsh to left of her. The peewits wheeled everlastingly in dropping circles, showing white breasts to the sunlight at every backward turn. There was a vague, wandering sound that threaded through all the others—the gnome-like cries and gurgles of water running underground through straitened channels.

She thought of the frail figure which she had lately seen go up the brink-fields, and she asked herself, was she less lonely than mad-witted Mistress Wayne? A storm of passionate self-pity swept over her at the thought; and after that the calm of hopelessness.

Slowly as her passion waned, the girl understood that there was more than an idle lad's caprice underlying all that Shameless Wayne had said. It was no lover's quarrel, this, to be righted at the next tryst. Her folk were the aggressors in this new-born feud; but they were still her folk, and feelings that she scarce realised as yet could cloud her love, she knew, as already they had clouded Wayne's. She glanced at the kirk-stone again and shivered; it had spoken her false when it bade her count all things less than love, and the folk who had whispered soft secrets here—man to maid, and maid to man—were they not dead and buried long since, and their love along with them?

Her pride weakened, too, and she remembered that she had come here to

warn Ned of the danger with which the Lean Man's malice threatened him. Full of pity for herself she had been; but now the pity was all his, as she looked down the winding sheep-track, and told herself that though he humbled her afresh, she would seek speech of him once more and tell him of the Lean Man's purpose. But Wayne was already out of sight and hearing, and she knew that to follow him was useless.

Scarce knowing where she went, she set off wearily across the heath. The moor's harshness was friendly to her mood, and she wandered on and on until, by the time she reached the Wildwater gates again, the sun was sinking into gloaming mist.

Her grandfather was standing by the well-spring in the courtyard as she entered. His back was toward her, and he failed to mark her light step on the flagstones. A vague foreboding seized the girl; creeping closer, she saw the Lean Man stoop to rinse his hands in the clear stream, and a low cry escaped her as she saw that the water reddened as it ran between his fingers.

Nicholas swung round with a frown, and clapped a hand to the breast of his tightly-buttoned coat.

"What art doing here, lass?" he said roughly.

"I—I have been walking——"

"What, so soon after I bade thee keep so close to home?" said Nicholas, wiping his hands furtively on the lappel of his coat.

She answered nothing for awhile. Then, "How went the hunting?" she asked, with a sudden glance at him.

"Bonnily. I've brought home better flesh, Janet, than Wildwater has seen this score years."

Her forboding took clear shape. Had he met Shameless Wayne on his way home from the kirk-stone? What was it that the Lean Man guarded so carefully at his breast? At all costs she must learn if Ned were safe.

"Where did you kill the quarry?" she whispered, and longed to take back the question for fear of the answer she might get.

"Where? Why, on Cranshaw Rigg—'tis on the Long Wayne's land, thou'lt call to mind," chuckled the Lean Man.

"Then—then 'twas not Wayne of Marsh?"

He glanced at her curiously; but it was plain that he shared none of Red Ratcliffe's suspicion touching her tenderness for Wayne.

"Nay, it was not Wayne of Marsh—for the reason that, seek as I would, I could not find the lad," he answered, as he turned to go indoors.

"'Tis not Ned after all," murmured Janet. "Thank God he kept the tryst with

me."

CHAPTER VI
THE BROWN DOG'S STEP

Marsh House lay lower than Wildwater, and it had a softer look with it, though built much after the same pattern so far as roominess and stout building went. The trees grew big about it and a pleasant orchard ran from the garden to the chattering stream; yet was it ghostly, in a quiet fashion of its own, and not all its trees and sheltered garden-nooks could rob it of a certain eeriness, scarce felt but not to be gainsaid. On either hand the gateway two balls of stone had lately topped the uprights; but one of these had fallen and lay unheeded in the courtyard—a quiet and moss-grown mourner, so it seemed, for the lost pride of the Waynes of Marsh. Behind the house, leading up to the sloping shoulder of the moor, ran a narrow, grass-grown way, scarce wide enough to let a horseman through and lined on either hand by grassy banks and lichened walls of sandstone; they called it Barguest lane, and the Spectre Hound who was at once the terror of the moorside and the guardian spirit of the Waynes, was said to roam up and down between the moor and Marsh House whenever trouble was blowing in the wind.

And true it was that at certain times—oftenest when the air was still, and dusk of late evening or dark of night brooded quiet over house and garden—a wild music would sweep down the lane, not crisp and sharp-defined, but softened like the echo of a hound's baying far away. The hardier folk were wont to laugh at Barguest, with a backward turn of the head to make sure he was not close behind them, and these vowed that the Brown Dog of Marsh was no more than the voice of the stream which ran in a straitened channel underneath the road; water had strange tricks of mimicry, they said, when it swept through hollow places, and the deep elfin note that haunted Barguest lane was own brother to many a bubbling cry and groan that they had hearkened to amongst the streamways of the moor. And this son of talk was well enough when treacle posset was simmering on some tap-room hearth; but abroad, and especially if gloaming-tide surprised them within hail of old Marsh House, they found no logic apt enough to meet their terror of the Spectre Hound. As for the Waynes, there were some among them who pretended to disclaim their guardian Dog; yet there was not

one who would oust tradition from his veins—not one who failed to loosen his sword-blade in the scabbard if any told him that Barguest had lately given tongue.

The spirit of the homestead was strong on Shameless Wayne to-night, as he sat alone in the hall, watching the dead and thinking his own remorseful thoughts. All that was left of his father rested, gaunt and still, on the bier in the centre of the hall, where it was laid out in state with candles burning low at head and feet. Mistress Nell and the serving-wenches were all in the back part of the house; the lads had not returned from hawking in the lowland pastures; the last of the day's visitors had bidden the corpse farewell and had gone home again, leaving the new master of Marsh House to watch the closed eyes of his forerunner.

A ray of fading sunlight crept across the hall and rested on the dead man's face, which showed white as the cere-cloth that bound his jaws.

"Father, father!" he cried, laying one hand on the waxen cheek. "Do you know what chanced yesternight? Do you know that I, who should have carried the quarrel, sat drinking your honour and my own away?—God, I could see each Wayne of them all look askance at me to-day, as they came and stood beside you here. And each man was saying to himself, 'There is none of the old breed left at Marsh.' They were right, father—and sometimes, when the candle-shadows play about your face, I seem to see you laughing at thought of Shameless Wayne—laughing to know him for your son."

The sunlight moved from the bier, and up the oak-panelled walls and backward along the ceiling-beams until it vanished outright. Dusk came filtering through the lattices. A low stir of bees sounded from the garden, where corydalis and white arabis had newly opened to the spring. And still Wayne sat on, listening to the thousand voiceless rumours that creep up and down an empty house.

"I cannot wipe out the stain, father," he went on, in a quieter voice; "but I will do all that is left to me—I'll pluck Janet out of my heart—and there shall none say, for all my shamelessness, that I let the land go backward, though in old days you'll remember there was no love spilt 'twixt me and farming matters. But the Wayne lands were always better-tilled than any in the moorside, and 'twould hurt you, father, if I let them grow foul and poor of crop.—Yet, for all that, 'tis easier to swear to hunt out every Ratcliffe from this to Lancashire," he added, with a whimsical straightforwardness which showed that a sense of fellowship with the dead had come to him through long watching by the bier.

And then he let his thoughts drift idly and was near to falling into a doze when he was called to his feet by a tapping at the window. He crossed the floor and the light scarce sufficed to show him his step-mother's face pressed close against the glass.

"Open to me, Ned, open to me," she was crying.

He went to the narrow door that led into the garden and opened it; and Mistress Wayne clung tight to him while he took her to the hearth—keeping her fast in talk the while, lest she should see what lay in the middle of the hall.

"You are cold, little bairn," he said, using the same half-tender, half-scornful name he had given her at the vault-stone yesternight.

"Yes, cold and weary, Ned—so weary! All night I wandered up and down the moor, seeking somebody—but I never found him—and the wind came, and the rain—and all about the moor were prying eyes—and strange birds called out of the darkness, and strange beasts answered them——"

"Well, never heed them. Haply 'twas Shameless Wayne you sought, and he will see that none does you hurt."

She put her face close to his and looked at him fixedly in the deepening gloom. A shaft of flame struck out at her from the hearth and showed a would-be alertness in the babyish eyes. "Yes, yes," she whispered. "I thought it was a lover I was seeking, a lover who had strong arms and tender words—but I was wrong—'twas thee I sought, Ned, all through the weary night—and I want nothing now that I have found thee—and—Ned, wilt keep the ghosties off?"

"Every one, little bairn.—Now, see how stained your gown is with—with rain. I shall not love you at all if you do not run and change it before you come with me to supper."

"Not love me!" she repeated, with a look of doubt.—"Why, then, I'll change my gown thrice every day, because you are kind to me. No one else is kind to me, Ned. The wind buffets me, and rude men turn me forth of doors whenever I cross a threshold—save Sexton Witherlee, who was wondrous kind to me last night. All afternoon, Ned, I wandered about Marsh before I dared come in—I feared you would scowl at me, like the redmen of Wildwater." She turned, and in a moment she was clapping her hands for glee. "Look, look, Ned! Pretty candles—see'st thou how the shadows go playing hide-and-find-me up the walls?"

"They're bad shadows; have naught to do with them," said Shameless Wayne, turning her face to the hearth again and wondering to find what care he had for this frail woman's malady.

But she slipped from his hands, and ran forward to the bier, and was reaching out for one of the candles when its light showed her the pale face of Wayne of Marsh. The sight did not frighten her at all; but she stood mute and still, as if she were trying to understand in dim fashion that once this man had been her husband.

"Would he answer if I spoke to him? No, I think he would not; he looks too stern," Wayne heard her murmur. "I've seen that face—in dreams, long, long ago, it must have been. Perhaps he was my lover—strange that I should seek him all

about the moor, when he was lying so quietly here."

"Come away, little bairn. He has no word for you," said her step-son, wearily.

Mistress Wayne halted a moment, then stooped and kissed the dead man's lips. And then she laughed daintily and rubbed her mouth with one forefinger. "Why does he not care!" she lisped. "His lips are cold as a beggar's welcome, Ned—we'll none of him, will we, thou and I?"

The door behind them opened and Nell Wayne came slowly across the floor until she stood within arm's reach of her step-mother. Scorn was in the girl's face, and a hatred not to be appeased.

"What brings this woman here?" she asked.

Mistress Wayne crept close to her protector. "All are cruel except thou, Ned. Keep her from me—she will turn me out into the cold again."

"Ay, Mistress—to starve of cold and want, if I had my way," said Nell.

Shameless Wayne put one arm about the pleading woman and turned upon his sister hotly. "Canst not see how it is with her?" he cried. "They say that men are hard, but God knows ye women make us seem soft-hearted by the contrast."

"The dead cannot speak, or father yonder would up and cry shame on her," the girl answered, covering the pair of them with a disdainful glance.

"Nay, thou'rt wronging him. Had she been whole of mind, he might have done—but 'twas never father's way to double any blow that fell upon a woman."

"She shall not stay here! 'Tis pollution," cried Nell.

"And I say the poor bairn shall bide here so long as she lacks a home; and *I* am master here, not thou."

His sister stared open-eyed at him. Since last night he had been contrite to the verge of womanishness; but now he showed a sterner glimpse of the Wayne temper than she had looked for in him. She felt wronged and baffled, and for her life could not keep back the stinging answer.

"Ay, thou art master," she said slowly, "and thou beginnest well—first to let another fight for thee, and then to welcome the betrayer with open arms. Small wonder that they call thee Shameless Wayne."

For a breathing-space she thought he would have struck her. But this lad, who until yesterday had never seen need to check his lightest whim, was learning a hard lesson well. He struggled with his pride awhile, and crushed it; and when he spoke his voice was quiet and sad.

"Nell," he said, "'tis no fit place for brawling, and thou art right in what thou say'st of me. But Mistress Wayne shall bide, and not if all our kin cry out on me, will I go back on what I promised."

"I am cold again, and very hungry. Send yond girl away," wailed the little woman.

"Does naught soften thee, lass?" said Wayne, glancing from his sister to the shrinking figure that held so closely fast to him.

"Naught," Nell answered, hard and cold. "The years will pass, and sorrows age, may be—but I shall never lose my hate of her."

"Yet think," he went on patiently. "She cleaves to me, Nell, and thou know'st how the fairy-kist bring luck to those they favour. 'Tis a good omen for the long fight that's coming."

"If pity does not move me, will a country proverb, think'st thou? Have thy way, Ned, since there's none to stay thee—but at the least take thy new friend from the death-room. Thou'lt see father turn and writhe if she stay longer by him, and 'tis my turn to watch the bier."

"Let's begone, little bairn. Haply thou'lt know here to find thy wearing-stuff if I take thee to the old room above," said Shameless Wayne, leading his step-mother to the door.

But Nell was fevered, and would not brook such prompt obedience to her wish. "Where are the lads?" she asked. "Frolicking, belike, when sober sitting within-doors would better have fitted the occasion."

Shameless Wayne turned on the threshold. "I sent them hawking," he answered, the new firmness gaining in his voice. "There's one claim of the dead, lass, and another of the living; and 'tis better they should brace their muscle for the days to come than sit moping over what is past."

"He grows masterful already. The shame has slipped clean off from him," murmured Nell, as she took a pair of snuffers from the mantel and trimmed the death-candles.

Yet Ned had not killed his shame. He was but battling with it, and the effort to show something like a man, in his own eyes at least, rendered his mood at once strangely tender and strangely savage. But he could find naught save tenderness for Mistress Wayne, as they climbed the wide stairway hand-in-hand and went in at the door of what had been his father's bed-chamber—his father's and that of the little woman by his side. She was no longer an unfaithful wife; she was a child, bewildered in the midst of enemies, and she had no friend but him.

Mistress Wayne stood in the middle of the room, fearful a little and asking a mute question of her step-son.

"This shall be thy room. Nay, there's naught to fear!" he said. "Peep into the drawers yonder by and by, and thou'lt find pretty clothes to wear; but thou'rt tired now, and must lie down on the bed. So! Now I'll cover thee snugly up, and bring thee meat. I doubt thou need'st it, bairn."

She was passive in his hands, and fell to crooning happily while he drew a great rug of badgerskin across her. "'Tis pleasant to have friends, and to be warm," she murmured.

"Unless I hasten, thou'lt be asleep before I bring thee supper!" he cried. "Rest quiet, and be sure I'll keep the boggarts from the door."

He went quietly down again, feeling his own troubles lighter for this fresh claim upon his sympathies; nor did he doubt the dead man's view of it, since there was scarce man or woman on the moor who did not hold that madness cancelled all back-reckonings.

"I will see what is to be found in the kitchen; haply the half of a moor-cock would tempt her appetite," he thought, as he turned down the passage.

He was met by his four brothers, just returned from hawking. Their faces were flushed and their sturdy bodies panting with the hard run home.

"We've had rare sport, Ned! Rare sport!" cried the eldest, a lad of sixteen. And then, remembering who lay not far away, cold forever to sport of hawk or hound, he dropped his head shamefacedly.

"It has taken you far, I warrant; for the sun has been down this half-hour past."

"Ay, for at the end of all we fell to flying at magpies down the hedgerows toward Heathley, and yond unbacked eyes of mine at which thou jestest trussed seven. Peep in the kitchen, Ned, and see what game we took. We carried the goshawk, too, and she struck a hare up by Wildwater——"

"What! Ye have been near Wildwater?" cried Shameless Wayne, his face darkening on the sudden.

"Ay, 'twas in one of the Lean Man's fields we struck the hare—and, Ned, we saw such a queer sight up yonder. Just as I was going to cast at a snipe, Ralph here whispered that the Lean Man himself was coming."

"So we hid in the heather," put in Ralph eagerly, "and he passed as close to us, Ned, as thou stand'st to me. He had a great cut across his cheek, and his hands were red, and we could hear him laughing to himself in a way that made us feared."

"When the Lean Man's hands are red, and his throat holds laughter, it means but the one thing," muttered Shameless Wayne. "He has killed his man—God pity one of our kin!—and the feud is out before we looked for it. They'll let the burying get done with—even a Ratcliffe never did less than that; and then 'twill be fast and merry."

"Tush! We were not feared," cried Griff, the eldest. "We could have caught him, Ned, the four of us, if we had had swords to our hands."

Shameless Wayne laughed quietly. "Ye will learn soon to buckle your sword-belts on whenever ye move abroad," he said. "Listen to me, lads. A house with a dead man in it is no healthy place, and so I bade you go out hawking this morning, and kept what I had to tell you until night. Ye've heard of the old feud of Wayne and Ratcliffe?"

"Ay, have we!" said Griff. "Such tales old Nanny Witherlee used to tell us of——"

"Well, 'twill be out again, belike, soon as your father is buried. The Ratcliffes will kill us whenever they get a chance, and we shall kill a Ratcliffe whenever he shows himself within sword-hail. And ye must take your share of it if ye wish to keep whole skins. Griff, thou canst play a shrewdish blade even now; and what ye lack, the four of you, I'll teach you by and by."

"Hawking will show tame after this," cried Griff, his eyes brightening. "Shall I meet the Lean Man one day, think'st thou, Ned?"

"If God spares thee, lad. But no more frolics yet awhile on the Lean Man's land. Ye must keep close to home, and I will teach you cut and thrust until your arms are stiffened."

"Was it a Ratcliffe who killed father?" asked Ralph suddenly. They had no understanding of death, as yet, these youngsters; its sorrow glanced off from them, too vague and dark to oust their lads' relish of a fight.

"Ay—and a Wayne who slew the murderer yesternight."

"Why, then, 'twas thou!" cried Griff. "Old Nanny told us that the eldest-born must always fight the father's enemy. Where didst thrust him, Ned?"

Shameless Wayne grew hot, and the blood flushed red to brow and cheeks. "Go seek your suppers, lads," he said, turning on his heel.

Going to the kitchen, still bent on finding some dainty that would tempt his step-mother, he found Nanny Witherlee, the Sexton's wife, talking hard and fast to one of the maids.

"Th' young Maister 'ull noan deny it me, I tell thee," Nanny was saying.

"Then ask him, Nanny, and he'll tell thee quickly whether or not he will deny thee," said Shameless Wayne from the doorway.

"Sakes, Maister! I war that thrang wi' spache—though 'tis noan a habit o' mine—that I niver heard your step. I've comed up fro' Marshcotes to axe a bit of a kindness, like."

"Thou'lt win it, likely, for I'm in a softish mood," said Wayne, half sneering at himself.

"'Tis that ye'll let me watch th' owd Maister th' neet-time through. I knawed him when he war a young un, an' I knawed him when he wedded th' first wife, an' I nursed ye all fro' babbies. 'Twould be kindly, like, to let me sit by him this last neet of all."

"That was to be my care, Nanny. Dost want me to let a second chance slip by of honouring father?"

"Now, doan't tak things so mich to heart—doan't, lad, there's a dearie—an' I axe your pardon for so miscalling ye, I'm sure, seeing ye've grown out o' nursing-clothes. Ye've getten a tidy handful o' wark afore ye, an' Witherlee says

to me this varry afternooin, 'Nanny,' says he, 'them Ratcliffes is up an' astir like a hornet's nest; I'm hoping th' Waynes 'ull bring swords an' sharp e'en to th' burying, for we can noan on us tell what 'ull chance,' he says. That war what Witherlee said, just i' so many words; an' though he's like a three-legged stool about a house, allus tripping ye up wheniver ye stir, he can do part thinking time an' time, can Witherlee. I war coming to axe ye afore he spoke, for I war fain to see th' last o' th' owd Maister; but I war up i' a brace o' shakes at after he'd gi'en me that notion, for I could see 'at a man wodn't frame to fight varry weel on th' top of a long neet's wakefulness."

Nanny paused for breath, and the young Master took advantage of a break that might not come soon again. "The Ratcliffes will wait till after the burying. There's scant need for aught save wet eyes to-morrow, Nanny," he said.

"Well, that's as it mun be; an' what mun be nowt 'ull alter, so we willun't fash ourselns. But for owd love's sake, Maister, ye'll let me bide by thy father? 'Tis long since I axed owt, big or little, of ye Waynes, an' ye'll noan deny it me, now, will ye?"

Shameless Wayne, as he had said, was in a soft mood, and Nanny's sharp face was so full of entreaty that he saw it would be a bitter blow to her if he denied the boon. "Have it as thou wilt," he said. "Father was always kindly in his thoughts of thee, Nanny, and it may please him better than any watching of mine could do."

Rolf Wayne of Cranshaw, meanwhile, had ridden over to Marsh to see if there were aught that he could do; and Nell, meeting him as he came in at the hall door, gave him a warm welcome, for the late quarrel with her brother had left her sad, and the silence of the death-chamber fostered such sort of misery.

"Rolf, my step-mother has come back, and Ned has welcomed her," she said, after they had talked awhile of this and that in hushed voices.

"What! Mistress Wayne come back?"

"Yes, mad as a marshland hare, with all her old pleading ways so deepened that she has won Ned clean over to her side."

"Fairy-kist, is she?"

"Aye—though, to my thinking, she was always near to it."

"Then, lass, there's no room for anger. Let her be; 'tis ill-luck crossing such, and we have need——"

"An old tale, Rolf!" she broke in stormily. "Ned said as much awhile since—as though, God's pity, there could good luck come of harbouring such as her. There! I am distraught. Wilt watch the bier, Rolf, while I run out and cool my wits a little?"

"The night is over cold. Bide by a warm fireside, and talk thy troubles out to one who cares for thee."

"Nay, I must be alone. Let me go, dear! I tell thee, my head throbs and throbs, and I shall go the way of Mistress Wayne unless thou'lt humour me."

She slipped a cloak about her, checking Rolf's efforts to detain her, and went quietly out into the courtyard. There was a touch of winter in the air, and a touch of spring, and overhead the stars shone dewy. The girl shivered a little, but not for cold, as she crossed into Barguest lane and saw a red moon climbing up above Worm's Hill. Up and down she paced, up and down, thinking of Shameless Wayne, of her step-mother, of everything that vexed and harassed her. Nor did her brain grow cooler for the night's companionship; rather, the silence let stranger fancies in than she would have harboured at any other time or place.

"Ned has such need to be strong, and he has ever been weak as running water," she muttered, and stopped, and wondered that the breeze which blew from the moor-edge down Barguest lane had grown so chill upon the sudden.

Aware of some vague terror, yet acknowledging none, she held her breath and bent her ear toward the lane-top. A sound of pattering footsteps drifted down—they were close beside her now, as the wind brushed her cloak—and now again the footsteps were dying at the far end of the lane. And a whine that was half a growl crept downward in the wake of pattering feet and icy wind.

"'Tis Barguest!" muttered Nell, and raced down the road, and across the courtyard, and into the hall where Wayne of Cranshaw sat watching by the dead.

Her pride was gone now, and the last impulse of defiance. She waited no asking, but put her arms about Rolf's neck and bade him hold her close.

"I heard the Hound's voice in the lane just now," she whispered. "There's trouble coming on us, Rolf—more trouble—I never heard his step go pattering down the road so plain."

"Didst never hear the water try its new trick, thou mean'st. I was a fool to let thee go and nurse thy fancies in such a spot," said her lover roughly. But his eyes had another tale to tell, and across his brow a deep line of foreboding showed itself.

"Fancies go as soon as thought of, and naught comes of them—but when did I hear Barguest in an idle hour?" she said. "Dear, I am ashamed—but—thou canst not hold me close enough—hark. There's something at the door—a whining, Rolf, and the scrape of paws against the oak——"

"Ay, 'tis Barguest," said Nanny Witherlee, stepping soft across the polished boards and resting one hand on the bier.

"There's naught, save a wet wind sobbing through the firs," growled Wayne of Cranshaw.

"Is there not? What say ye to that, Mistress? Ye an' me know Barguest when we hear him, an' 'tis as I said to th' young Maister awhile back. There's sor-

row brewing thick, an' th' Brown Dog hes come to bid ye look to pistol-primings an' th' like. He knaws, poor beast, an' he's scratting at th' door this minute to ease his mind by telling ye."

"Get to bed, Nell," said Wayne of Cranshaw quietly; "when Nanny falls to boggart-talk, and the maid who listens is half mad with sorrow——"

"Tales is tales, Maister Wayne," broke in Nanny, "an' I wod scare no poor less wi' lies at sich a time—but Barguest is more nor a tale, an' I should know, seeing th' years I've bided here at Marsh. I mind th' neet when Mistress Nell's mother war ta'en, ten year agone, it war just th' same—th' Brown Dog came pattering right up to th' door-stun, an'——"

"God rest thee for the daftest fool in Marshcotes," cried Wayne of Cranshaw, as he saw Nell go ashen-grey and all but fall. And then he led the girl out, and helped her to the stair-top.

"There'll be one to watch the bier till dawn?" she asked wearily, as he bade her good-night.

"Trust me to see to that. Never heed old wives' tales, Nell, and keep up heart as best thou canst," he answered, and went down again into the hall.

Nanny was fingering the shroud softly, and scarce glanced up as Wayne approached. "Gooid linen, ivery yard on 't," she muttered, "though I says it as shouldn't. Ay, an' bonnily hemmed a' all. Wayne o' Marsh may lig proud, that he may, an' I war allus sartin sure 'at a man gets a likelier welcome up aboon if he's buried i' gooid linen.—Begow, but his face is none so quiet as I should hev liked to see it; there's summat wick i' th' set on 't, as if he wod right weel like to be up an' cracking Ratcliffe skulls."

"Where is the Master, Nanny?" asked Wayne of Cranshaw, cutting short her musings.

"He war dahnstairs a while back, for I met him as I war coming in here. But mad Mistress Wayne began to call out his name, an' he thinks nowt too mich to do for her nowadays. He'll be gi'eing her another bite an' sup, belike."

"Then who will watch? I was for riding back to Cranshaw, but if there's need of me——"

"Who'll wake? Why, who should wake save Nanny Witherlee? Th' Maister promised I should, for I axed him a while back; so ye needn't fash yourseln about that, Maister."

"Then good-night to thee, Nanny—and—have a care of Mistress Nell, for she is in strange mood to-night. Barguest is well enough for a fireside gossip, nurse, but such talk comes ill when a maid's spirits are low."

Nanny laughed softly, and pointed a lean finger at him as he stood halting near the door. "Ye do weel to mock at Guytrash, Maister, an' ye do weel to give advice to one that's known more sorrow nor ye—but why doan't ye cross th'

threshold?"

Wayne of Cranshaw was ashamed to feel the sweat-drops trickling down his face; but he could not kill the fear that brought them there.

"They say a Cranshaw Wayne fears nowt, man nor devil," went on the Sexton's wife—"but there's one thing 'at maks his heart beat like th' clapper of a bell—an' ye dursn't cross what ligs on th' door-stun."

He put his hand on the door and flung it wide; and the incoming wind drove the flames of the death-candles slant-wise toward the further wall. The moonlight lay quiet and empty on the threshold, and overhead the firs were plaining fitfully. "There's naught lies there," said he with a chill laugh, and went to fetch his horse from stable.

But Nanny's eyes were fixed on the door long after Wayne of Cranshaw had pulled it to behind him—long after she had heard his horse trot up the road—and she seemed to see there more than the candle-light sufficed to show.

"Is there aught I can get thee, Nanny, before I wend to bed?" said Shameless Wayne, entering a half-hour later.

"Nowt, an' thank ye. I've getten company, an' they'll keep me wake, I warrant."

"*They*, say'st thou? God's truth, Nanny, but thy eyes are fain of the doorway yonder!"

"Ay, I've getten th' owd Maister, an' I've getten Barguest. Get ye to bed, Maister, for I tell ye there'll be need o' ye to-morn. Ye're ower late as 'tis."

"Mistress Wayne would have me go and sit by her; she could no way sleep, poor bairn, and it seemed to comfort her to have me at the bedside and to hold my hand. She's sleeping now." He bent over the dead, and whispered something; and when he lifted his face it showed deep lines of purpose clean-chiselled in the youthful features. "Good-night, nurse. God rest thee, and all of us," he said, with unwonted piety.

The candles were guttering in their sockets, and Nanny replaced them soon as the lad's foot had ceased to creak on the stair. All were abed now, save Nanny Witherlee—save Nanny, and the rats behind the wainscoting, and something that scraped restlessly at the stout door of oak.

"Why are they feared o' Barguest?" muttered the Sexton's wife. "He niver yet did hurt to a Wayne or ony friends o' th' Waynes; nay, he's that jealous for their safety 'at he can no way bide still when mischief's brewing. Whisht, lad, whisht! Owd Nanny hearkens, an' she'll mind 'at th' Waynes go armed to th' burial to-morn."

It might be twelve o'clock of that night, while Nanny sat still as the body she watched by, that Shameless Wayne, trying to win sleep from a hard pillow, heard a horseman ride up to the hall door. There were three strokes, as of a

hammer on a nail, and then, before he had well leaped from bed, a voice came from the moonlight under his window.

"Ride hard to Cranshaw Rigg. There's somebody waits thee there, Wayne the Shameless." It was Nicholas Ratcliffe's voice, hard and thin and high-pitched.

Shameless Wayne snatched a pistol from the bed-head, and flung the casement wide, and saw the Lean Man riding hard up Barguest lane. He took a quick aim and pulled the trigger; but old Nicholas rode on, and the moonlight showed him stark on the hilltop as he turned once for a backward look at Marsh.

"So the hunt is up already," said Shameless Wayne, banging to the casement and getting to bed again. "What has the lean rogue left on the door down yonder?—well, we shall see to-morrow," he muttered presently, turning over on his side. "There's naught gained by losing sleep—if only sleep would come."

But sleep did not come yet awhile, and his thoughts wandered to Janet Ratcliffe—Janet, whom he had met to-day upon the moor—Janet, the daughter of that same Lean Man on whom he had just now turned a pistol-muzzle.

Nanny Witherlee, too, had heard the three taps on the door, and the Lean Man's high-pitched voice. "I know weel enough what he's put on th' door," she said, not stirring from her stool at the bier-foot. "Th' owd feud began i' th' same way, an' I mind to this day how th' Maister, who cars so quiet yonder, looked when he came down i' th' morning an' fund th' token that war left nailed to th' oak." Her eyes lit up on the sudden, and a sombre mirth lengthened the thin line of her mouth. "But one thing Nicholas Ratcliffe didn't know, I warrant—that Barguest war ligged on th' door-stun! He crossed th' Brown Dog as he set nail to door, an' a babby could tell what that spells. Sleep ye quiet, Shameless Wayne, for ye'll turn th' spindle that's to weave th' Lean Man's winding-sheet."

CHAPTER VII

THE LEAN MAN'S TOKEN

At dawn of the next day Shameless Wayne awoke from a troubled sleep, with Nicholas Ratcliffe's visit fresh in his mind and a drear foreboding at his heart. He could rest no longer, but hurried into his clothes and went down to the shadowy hall, where the candles still burned and the Sexton's wife still watched the dead.

"Didst hear Nicholas Ratcliffe's voice yesternight?" he said, coming close to Nanny's elbow.

"For sure I did."

"And the tapping on the door? What was he at, think'st thou, Nanny?"

"Oppen th' door, Maister, an' ye'll see. But doan't look to find owt bonnie."

She watched him as he pulled down the latch and stepped into the rainy April dawn. The sun was red above Worm's Hill and its light fell straight upon a man's hand fixed to the upper cross-bar of the door. A broken stone, lying beside the lintel, showed how the Lean Man had driven his nail into the wood. Shameless Wayne fell back a pace or two, his eyes on the grisly token, while Nanny hobbled to the door.

"Ay, I guessed as mich," she said, looking once at the hand and thence to the young Master's face. "Twenty year gone by it war th' same, an' I've heard tell that, long afore I war born or thowt on, th' Lean Man's grandfather rade down to Marsh one neet an' fixed a Wayne's hand to th' door. Do ye mind th' tale, Maister? I telled it when ye war no higher nor my knee."

"I had forgotten it, nurse. Yond is the badge of feud, then? So be it. There'll be sword-play, Nanny, soon as father is well laid to rest."

"Afore, I warrant," said Nanny sharply. "Willun't ye hearken to me, lad, when I tell ye that a devil sits snug behind ivery Ratcliffe muzzle?"

"Save Mistress Janet's," muttered the other, absently.

"Oh, th' wind blows that road, does it? I've thowt as mich, time an' time. Maister, I war aye fond o' ye, an' that ye knaw—gi'e no heed to th' lass, for all her bonnie ways. Ye cannot grow taties i' mucky soil, anor father a right sort o' love on a Ratcliffe."

"Hold thy peace, Nanny! who said I cared for Mistress Ratcliffe?"

"Your face, lad, said it. Theer! I've angered ye, an' ye've enough as 'tis to put up wi'.—I war saying, Maister, that ye'll niver bottom th' meanness of a Ratcliffe, as I can do; an' when ye think 'at they'll respect a dead man ony more nor a wick un, ye're sore mista'en."

"Nay, they're an ill lot—but even the Lean Man would scruple to set on mourners at a grave-side."

"Trust an owd head, Maister. Witherlee put a plain question to Red Ratcliffe yestermorn; he axed him fair an' square if they meant to let th' burying go by i' peace; an' he telled by th' look o' th' chap 'at they meant to do no sich thing.—Lad, I'll not axe ye to believe, for ye've getten your father's trick o' thinking th' best of ony mon save yourseln; but I will axe ye to humour an owd body's fancy, and to send as quick as may be to your kin at Hillus, an' Cranshaw to bid 'em buckle their sword on afore they come to Marsh."

"When did Marshcotes ever see armed mourners at a graveside?" he said, eyeing her doubtfully. "'Twill wear a queer look, Nanny, if no attack is made."

"It 'ull wear a queerer, my sakes, if they come an' cut ye all i' little pieces.

For owd sake's sake, Maister, promise me ye'll do it. Yond's Simeon stirring at th' back o' th' house; I should know his step by now, for he walks as if one foot war flaired-like to follow t' other. Bid Simeon get hisseln to horseback——"

"I doubt it still, nurse. What if the Lean Man has nailed his token to the door? There's time and to spare, by the Heart, for what will follow."

"Fiddle o' that tale!" cried the Sexton's wife briskly. "If ye choose to lig cold i'stead o' warm, I've ta'en trouble enough wi' ye i' times past, that I hev, to warrant my stepping betwixt ye an' ony sich-like foolishness. An' if ye doan't send Simeon, I'll walk myseln both to Hillus an' to Cranshaw—ay, that I will—Maister, do ye knaw 'at th' Lean Man crossed Barguest last neet as iver war?"

Shameless Wayne shook his head, smiling a little at the old woman's fancy. "How should that be, nurse?" he said.

"Barguest war carred on th' door-stun, fair as if he'd been ony mortal dog; an' while th' Lean Man war agate wi' hammering his nail in, I heard th' hound whimper fit to mak ye cry for pity of him. But Nicholas Ratcliffe niver heard th' poor beast, not he; an' I hugged myseln to think 'at ivery stroke on th' nail-head war a stroke to his own coffin. Ye've getten your chance, Maister, an' I willun't let ye loss it for a lack of a bit o' forethowt."

Insensibly Wayne yielded to the old beliefs; reason might chide him, but he knew in his heart, from that time forward, that he would be even with the Lean Man before the end. What tales had Nanny not told him in childhood, of Barguest and his ways? What musty traditions were not grafted on his growing manhood, of the certain disaster that waited any foeman of the Waynes who crossed the Spectre Hound? Ay, he believed, and his eyes shone clear with the first light of hope that had touched them since he returned two nights ago to the Bull tavern, a sobered and heart-stricken man.

"There's Nell!" cried Wayne on the sudden, pushing Nanny roughly into the house. "For God's sake keep her within-doors, nurse, till I have plucked down yonder trophy."

"Sorrow's a rare un to get folk up betimes; how oft is Mistress Nell astir wi' th' dawn, I wonder?" muttered Nanny, as she returned to the hall, closing the door behind her.

"Good-morrow, nurse," said the girl, crossing the hall and laying her two cold hands in Nanny's. "Art weary, belike, with the long watch?"

The Sexton's wife looked at Nell's white face and red-rimmed eyes, and she could find no heart to answer; she just took the lass in her arms, and kissed her, and comforted her with such little wordless tendernesses as she had used when Nell had been frightened as a bairn.

While they stood thus, still with no speech between them, a horse pulled up at the door, and they could hear the rider's voice strike, deadened a little but

clear, through the stout oaken planks.

"The feud is up, lad! When I rode home last night they had slain one of my folk on Cranshaw Rigg."

"Ay, and the body lacked"—came the voice of Shameless Wayne.

"God's pity! Wrench it down. 'Tis my brother's hand, Ned," broke in the first speaker.

"What is't?" cried Nell, freeing herself from Nanny's arms and turning sharply. "That was Rolf's voice—and Ned is with him—what are they doing, nurse?"

"Niver heed 'em, bairn—they're nobbut——"

"Ay, but thou canst not blind me, Nanny! I know! I dreamed of it the night through—'tis the old token father told me of so oft—'tis a Wayne's hand, nurse! Did I not tell thee Barguest went pad-footed down the lane beside me?"

"Now, whisht ye, mistress! Your sweetheart's safe, as ye can hear, an' he'll be in by an' by—he's coming now, an' ye'll noan want me, dearie, when he's by to comfort ye. I'll waken th' wenches, an' then I mun lig me down awhile, for there's a lot needs seeing to this day."

Nell stood there idly until the old woman's steps were lost among the restless echoes of the house. On a sudden the main door was thrown open, and Shameless Wayne came in alone.

"Why did not Rolf stay?" asked Nell.

"Because I gave him a message for his folk at Cranshaw. Nay, I cannot tell thee what it was; 'twould only scare thee. —Come, Nell! I, too, have to get to saddle, and I fear to leave thee with such misery in thy face. Where are the lads?"

"Abed yet—wearied with their hunting."

"They must not come to the kirkyard. Bid them keep close to home till we return."

"But, Ned, why should they keep away?" the girl began.

He stopped her, with the quiet, forceful air that she was learning to obey. "Because I bid them," he said, and kissed her lightly on the cheek, and went out to the stables.

Nell crossed to the bier, where her father lay heedless of the storm and fret that his death had brought to old Marsh House. She sat her down, and put her face between her hands, and let her thoughts go drifting down the pathway of the years. From time to time the maids came in and busied themselves with setting out the table for the feast that would follow the old master's burial in a few hours' time; but the master's daughter seemed to heed them as little as himself. She thought of her brother, wondering at the change in him, yet doubting that the old wildness would return soon as the first keen smart of shame was softened;

she thought of Mistress Wayne, who was a guest here in the house which she had dishonoured in all men's eyes; and then again she remembered what had chanced in Marshcotes kirkyard, and told herself that surely a twelvemonth had hurried by since she went up to the belfry-tower with a knife close hidden under her cloak.

Not two days ago she had watched the life ebb fast and red from the wound in her father's back, while his murderer looked on and laughed; and now he was ready for the grave; and in between there had seemed no rest from the hurry of events. Dick Ratcliffe had paid his price; one of the Cranshaw Waynes had fallen at the Lean Man's hand; the old feud-token had been nailed over the Marsh doorway; and under all the present misery—the grief and fret and long-drawn-out restlessness that wait on burial—was the overshadowing sense of tragedy to come. To-day they would lay their dead to rest; and then the smouldering embers of the feud would leap to flame; and after that no man nor woman of them all could count a day safe won through till it was done, and men's lives and women's honour would be no more than straws upon the fast-racing stream of chance.

All this went back and forth in the girl's mind, and the feud took on a hundred different shapes each time she thought of it. It was the feud she had heard of since earliest childhood, the feud whose memory was grafted in by many a far-back legend and nearer tale of fight. Often and often in the happier years she had wondered, as a girl will, how the way of it would be if the quarrel broke out afresh: there had been deeds of high courage and glamour of sword-thrust to make her almost love the feud and count it noble; but now that it was on them, now that it hugged the very threshold, naked, terrible and brutish, she understood the reality and lost her dream-visions of the splendour and the majesty of fight. Fight meant gaping wounds, and blood upon the floor, and men going into the shadowy places when they were at the topmost of their strength. God knew that, if the choice were hers, she would cry peace once and for all and let the dead past rest.

Yet her mood changed like the gusty wind that whistled now and then across the chimney-stacks. No sooner had she let that eager prayer for peace escape her, than her hands clenched themselves, and her eyes brightened, and the old vengeance-cry of her people rose hot to her lips. Let bloodshed come, and slaughter—and she would take new heart as one by one the Ratcliffes fell. Never in all the years that they had been together had the likeness between the dead man and his daughter shown more plain than now, as she laid her hand on his and counted his wrongs afresh. The pride of her race, its pitiless sternness when wronged, seemed gathered from the long-dead generations who had fought the Wayne and Ratcliffe fight aforetime; and the hate of the fathers woke again to splendour and to savagery in the slender-supple body of this last daughter of

the line.

She could sit still no longer, but got to her feet and crossed to the garden-door. The house-air stifled her; men fought under the open sky, and for that cause there was friendship in wind and sun and drifting clouds. Something like a prayer—a masterful prayer, and a bitter—rose to the girl's lips as she stood and felt the keen wind in her face.

"Keep warm my hate, Lord God!" she cried.

A light footstep sounded from the hall behind her. She turned and saw little Mistress Wayne bending over her father's body, with the same questioning, roguish air that she had worn last night.

"Wake, wake!" Mistress Wayne was lisping in the dead man's ear. "'Tis my wedding-morn, I tell thee, and all at Marsh must come to see it."

Not touched at all was Nell by the piteousness of the scene. She remembered only what this woman had done, and forgot how hard a penance she was undergoing.

"Get ye gone," she said, clutching her step-mother fiercely by the arm. "Is't not enough that you have killed him, but you must mock him after death?"

Mistress Wayne shrank backward from her touch. "I did but try to wake him, Nell. He would be angered if he missed my bridal-morn."

Nell made no answer, but turned her back on the little woman; and Mistress Wayne crept, softly as she had come, out of the chamber whose guest perplexed her so.

"Her bridal-morn!" cried Nell, as though her father could hear that she was speaking to him. "Is it for malice that she gowns herself in white on such a day, and prates of weddings? Father, why didst go to the Low Country for a wife? She has brought disaster on disaster since the first day she set foot in Marsh."

A new thought came to her, adding its own load to the burden that was already over-heavy for her. Would Ned win free of his passion for Janet Ratcliffe, or would his marriage, too, be ill-fated as his father's? To wed from the Low Country was folly, but marriage between a Ratcliffe and a Wayne would be a crime on which the country-side would up and cry out shame.

And then, in a moment, all the girl's fierceness, her resolution and tearless pride, were lost. God had made her a woman, and like a woman she fell prone across the bier, and wept, and thought neither of vengeance nor of hatred, but of the love that had grown through twenty years of comradeship between the dead man and herself. It was not her father's strength, his sweeping recklessness in fight, that she remembered now; but she recalled his gentleness toward her, his clean and upright courtesy, his generosity to rich and poor among his neighbours.

Marsh House was full of the unrest that goes before a burial, the fruitless wandering to-and-fro which seems to ease the sorrow of the living. The menser-

vants were idling in the courtyard with a subdued sort of noisiness; the maids were still passing and re-passing from the kitchen; and Nanny Witherlee, unable to snatch more than the briefest spell of sleep, came hobbling by and by into the hall.

The old woman stopped on seeing Nell stretched across the bier, and half advanced toward her; then shook her head. "I'll let her be; happen 'twill be best for her to cry her een out," she muttered, and turned down the passage to the kitchen.

Nanny showed different altogether this morning from the quivering, ghost-ridden watcher who had kept so long a vigil with only the dead and strange voices in the wind for company. Then there had been no work to be done, no household cares to rouse the old instincts in her; but now that preparations for the burial feast were going busily forward she slipped naturally into the place which had been hers at Marsh aforetime. Brisk as though she had had a full night's sleep, she fell to doing this and that, rating the maids the while with a keenness that robbed the day of half its sadness for her.

"Now then, ye idle wenches!" she cried, soon as she had crossed the kitchen threshold. "Do ye think gaping at a mutton-pasty 'ull mak it walk to th' dining board? Martha, tha'rt allus mooning ower thy work like a goose wi' a nicked head. An' look at Mary yonder! Standing arms under apron when th' house 'ull soon be full o' hungry folk. An' th' Waynes allus had good appetites, sorrow or no sorrow."

Nanny was setting parsley-sprigs round a dish of neat's tongue all this time; and when this was done she climbed onto the settle and reached down piece after piece of haver-bread that was drying on the creel. The same instinct that had bidden her test the quality of Wayne's winding sheet, while yet she was deep in sorrow for him, was with her now, and her mind was set on leaving no unremembered detail, of wine or meat or ripe October ale, to mar the burial-feast.

"It's weel to do nowt, same as some folk!" she cried, stopping to glance sourly at the progress of the maids. "I don't know what wenches are made on nowadays, that I don't."

"Do nowt, my sakes! When my knees is dibble-double-ways wi' weariness," cried Martha.

"Hoity-toity! I've done as mich before breakfast ivery day o' th' week when I war a lass.—Mary, wilt gi'e me a hand wi' this cheese, or mun I let it fall to th' floor-stuns?"

The maids, run off their feet already, without any help from outside, grew wild with the natter-natter of the Sexton's wife; but awe of her kept any but the briefest snaps of anger from their tongues, and it was a relief to both when the door opened slowly and they saw Hiram Hey standing on the threshold. Clean-

shaven and spruce of body was Hiram, and a certain melancholy drooping of the mouth-corners could not quench his sober gaiety of mien.

"'Tis a sad day, this, for us at Marsh," he said, thrusting his head forward and sniffing the air with unctuous wonder that the women could think of victuals at all at such a time.

Nanny turned quickly. "It willun't be ony brighter for thy coming, Hiram Hey. We want no men-folk here," she cried.

The maids looked from Nanny to the farm-man, and then at each other. There was a stiff breeze always when these two met, and Nanny was apt to find her match at such times.

"Well, now, are ye winning forrard-like?" said Hiram, leaning against the doorway in his idlest attitude.

"Ay, an' no thanks to thee," snapped the Sexton's wife.

"It beats me to know how folk can eat an' drink, an' drink an' eat, when there's a burying. It seems a mockery o' th' dead, that it does—as mich as to say, 'See what it is to be wick, lad; tha'll niver put victuals down thy throat again, same as I'm doing now.' Ay, I've oft thowt it's enough to mak a corpse turn round an' scowl at ye."

"I've seen thee at a burying, Hiram," said the Sexton's wife, quietly, "an' tha can do thy share, I've noticed. It's all talk, an' nowt but, wi' sich as ye. Tha cannot see we're thrang, mebbe?"

His only answer was to shift his shoulder to a more easiful position against the doorway, and Nanny left him to it. At another time she would have had a sharper tongue for Hiram Hey, nor would his own responses have lacked their sting; but the old Master's influence had never been so strong as it was now, and a sense of seemliness—a fear, perhaps, of waking the last sleep of him who lay so near to them—held even the rough tongues of these upland folk in check.

Hiram glanced at Martha, soon as the little old woman had hobbled out to lay fresh dishes in the hall; and Martha answered his glance in a way that showed there was an understanding between them—as indeed there was like to be, seeing that Hiram Hey had been wooing her off and on these two years past.

"Hast been to th' fields this morn?" asked Martha.

"Ay, iver sin' th' sun war up, lass."

"Tha'll be dry, then, Hiram, at after thy morning's work."

"Dry, now? Well, I wodn't say just dry—but that way on a bit. I niver war a drinker myseln, as I telled shepherd Jose nobbut yesterday; but there's a time for iverything, an' if I war to see a quart, say, of October frothing ower th' lip o' th' mug—–"

"Tha'd find a mouth to fit it? Well, an' shall, says I," cried Martha.

Hiram stretched his limbs more lengthily before the peats, as a soothing

gurgle from the pantry told him that Martha was already filling him a measure. She was back again by and by, with a brim-full pewter in her hands.

"Drink, lad Hiram; what wi' work an' sadness, there's need for strong liquor here at Marsh," she said.

The firelight struck with a ruddy, softened sheen on the pewter as Hiram lifted it. He drank slowly, and his face was full of unwonted cheerfulness until he had set down the empty mug beside him.

"Theer! It war gooid, Martha," he murmured sorrowfully, "but I doubt there's nowt mich in it when all's said. Drink is all varry weel, but there's one ower i' th' hall yonder who'll niver warm to liquor again this side o' Judgment. Nay, I'm fair shamed o' myseln to be supping ale while th' owd Maister ligs so cold."

He stopped and eyed the empty pewter; and Martha, reaching across the settle-back, picked up the mug again.

"Tha's getten too soft a heart, Hiram," she said. "Sup while ye can, an' mak th' most on't."

"Nay, nay, I'm no drinker. Plain watter is nigh th' same to me as ale, an' there's no call for thee to fill afresh—leastways, I wodn't say a full quart, tha knows."

But Martha was back again before he had well finished with his protests. "Get done wi' 't, Hiram, afore Nanny comes back," she whispered. "She carries an ill tongue, does Nanny, when she finds life going too easy wi' a body."

"There's queer things bahn to happen," said Hiram presently.

"By th' Heart, I thowt there'd been queer happenings enough of late!"

"The shepherds telled me this morn that th' Ratcliffes is all a-buzz, an' folk are shaking their heads all up an' dahn th' moorsides. Besides, th' owd house here fair rustles, like, as I've known it do afore when trouble war i' store. I tell thee, I can hear th' boggarts creeping wick as scropels fro' roof to cellar."

"Hod thy whisht—do, now, for goodness sake. Tha flairs me," cried Martha, glancing behind her. And then she clutched the farm-man by the arm with sudden terror. "Look yonder, Hiram! Look yonder!" she cried.

Hiram looked and started to his feet. "Begow, I thowt 'twar a right boggart this time," he muttered. "What ails th' little body to move so quiet about a house?"

Mistress Wayne, dressed all in white, with celandines at her breast and fair hair rippling to her waist, had come in from the garden and stood at the open kitchen-door; and she was smiling, carelessly and trustfully, on the frightened maids and on old Hiram.

"'Tis my wedding-morn," she said, "and I've been to talk with the fairies, Martha. They say 'tis well to get the wee folks' blessing for the bairns to come."

Hiram gave her a long glance, then looked away; and an unwonted pity

stirred him. ”Nay, I’ve no sorrow to waste. She’s made herself a nettle-bed, an’ she mun lig on’t,” he muttered.

”Come in, Mistress, come in, an’ warm yourseln a bit; ye’re looking cold and wan, like,” cried Martha, recovering from her fright.

”Oh, no, that is not true. I peeped at myself in the well out there just now, and I thought that I had never seen a happier face. Hiram, thou must come to my wedding, too; wilt thou?”

”Ay, Mistress—ay, I’ll come, choose what.”

She smiled again, and waved her hand, and slipped away into the sunshine that shimmered over the wet flagstones of the yard. And neither Martha nor the farm-men found aught to say to one another for awhile.

”What dost mak of it?” said Hiram Hey at last.

”Nay, I can mak nowt of it. But ’tis a drear start for a burial. Hiram, lad, Marsh is no healthy place just now, an’ I for one could wish to be weel out on’t. It isn’t th’ blood-shed I fear, an’ it isn’t th’ dead man yonder—but it’s th’ ghosts! Tha’rt right when tha says they fair creep fro’ floor to garret.”

A thought crossed Hiram’s mind—no new thought, either, but one that showed livelier than its wont now Martha was in such trouble.

”Tha’d be fain to change dwellings, like?” he ventured, putting a hand on her shoulder and half drawing her toward him.

Martha yielded to his touch, and a puzzled look came over Hiram’s face; he had pondered over this last step for four-and-twenty months, and needed a twelvemonth longer in which to make sure of its wisdom. His doubts were settled, however, by the intrusion of the Sexton’s wife, who stopped on seeing what was afoot and glanced from Hiram to the empty mug.

”So that’s what’s browt thee here, Hiram Hey?” she cried. ”Tha’rt a bonnie un to come talking o’ what’s seemly i’ a house o’ death! First, to drink thyseln dizzy-crazy, an’ then to go prettying wi’ a wench that mud weel by thy own grandchild. Nay, I’ve no patience wi’ thee; tha’rt owd enough to be thinking o’ thy own latter end i’stead o’ fly-by-skying wi’ lasses, an’——”

Hiram for once could find no answer, but stood ruffling the frill of hair under his clean-shaven chin and shifting his feet from side to side.

”I have talked with my cousin, Nanny,” came the Master’s voice from the door.

Nanny turned and saw Shameless Wayne standing there, pale and quiet, with the straight downward rent between his brows which seemed to have been fixed there two nights ago for good and all.

”About th’ burying, Maister?” she queried eagerly.

”Aye. We are to go armed; the word has been sent round.”

”Now God be praised! Ye’re wise to list to what Barguest hes to tell,” said

the Sexton's wife, and forgot to rate the maids, forgot the fifty little household cares that claimed attention.

CHAPTER VIII
A STORMY BURIAL

The Wayne vault lay open to the April sky, and throstles were singing in the stunted trees, as Sexton Witherlee, infirm of step and dreamy of eye, moved softly over the graveyard stones. He stopped when he reached the vault, set down the ladder he was carrying and stood looking at the clean-swept room below.

"'Tis a sweet place, a vault, to my thinking," he muttered. "So trim and peaceable the folk lie, each on his appointed shelf, with never a wrong word betwixt 'em th' twelvemonth through. Ay, 'tis quiet ligging, an' th' storms pass overhead, an' ivery now an' again there's what ye mud call a stir among 'em when a new shelf is filled an' a new neighbour earned. Well, I've seen life a bittock, but I wod swop beds wi' ony o' these, that I wod."

A robin came and perched on the top rung of the ladder, and eyed Sexton Witherlee sideways with a friendliness which long following after the spade had bred.

"What, laddie, dost think I'm delving?" said the Sexton, chuckling feebly. "Nay, there's to be a better burying this morn nor raw earth gives a man. 'Tis bricks an' mortar, robin, an' a leaded coffin for sich as Wayne o' Marsh.—Well, then, bide a bit till I've straightened all up down here, an' then I'll scrat thee up a worm or two for thy dinner."

He reached down one stiffened leg, twisted the ladder from side to side to make sure that it was safe, and began his slow descent into the vault. He passed his hand lightly over the stone doors that hid the shelves—lightly, and as if he loved each separate entry in this Book of Death. And all the while he talked to himself, soft and slow.

"There's old Tom Wayne put to bed there—he war a rum 'un an' proper, they say, though he war dead a hundred year afore my time—an' yond's Ralph Wayne's spot—well, he lived hot an' he lived fast, did Ralph Wayne, an' he died at two-score, an' so saved a mort o' sweating an' unthankfulness. An' now there's th' Maister come to join 'em; I mind burying his wife ten years agone—ten years!—an' him to hev lived wi' all his troubles until now. It 'ull by my turn next,

I'm thinking—th' young 'uns come an' they go, an' it doan't hold to reason that Sexton Witherlee should be spared to bury 'em for iver."

A broom stood in one corner of the vault, fashioned of heather-fagots bound to a stout handle of ash. Witherlee took the broom in his hands, and began to sweep up the rubble that lay about the floor.

"Moiling an' toiling, that's all a man addles by keeping th' life quick i' him. I'm faired shamed o' living when I come among so many decent, quiet bodies—ay, fair shamed," murmured the Sexton, and rested on his broom, and looked up to find a broad face and a sturdy pair of shoulders hanging over the edge of the vault.

"How's trade, Sexton?" said the newcomer.

"Brisk, Jonas, brisk."

"Well, what's one man's meat is another man's poison, i' a manner o' speaking. 'Tis how ye look at things, I reckon, an' there's heads an' tails on ivery good piece o' money. So trade's middling, is't?"

"Oh, ay. Other trades grow slack, but ye cannot do without Sexton Witherlee i' Marshcotes parish. That's what I says to Parson a week come yestermorn. 'Parson,' says I, 'me an' thee hev getten likely trades. Folk allus need prayers, an' they allus need burying. Crops fail time an' time,' I says, 'an' sickness follows at after famine; an' that's money i' a Sexton's breeches pockets,' says I."

"Mebbe tha'rt right, Sexton; but I'd liefer live by putting sound liquor down folk's throats nor be shovelling earth a-top of 'em when they've getten past meat an' drink. But we munnot fratch, for we're near neighbours—me at th' Bull, an' thee i' th' kirkyard hard by, an' each to his own trade, says I, choose who hears me say 't.—'Tis a drear business, this o' th' Maister o' Marsh. Th' burying is fixed for twelve o' th' clock, they tell me."

"Ay, sure; he'll be ligged i' bed here all ship-shape, will th' owd Maister, come a half hour after nooin."

"He's nobbut been laid out two days an' less, hes he? How should that come about, like? 'Tis nobbut decent I allus did say, to give a corpse its full time on th' bier—'specially a gentle-born corpse, that looks for so mich more attention or a common un."

"Nay, I've a fancy that they thowt they mud as weel get th' burying done wi' afore th' Ratcliffes war up to ony o' their tricks. Leastways that war what Nanny telled me, an' she war watching th' body all last neet at Marsh. I've been fettling up a bit, an' pondering a bit, an' going ower th' owd days. Eh, Jonas, but we shall see what we war meant to see afore th' winter comes again."

"What—fighting, dost think?"

"Ay, we shall that. I've getten a tidy-parcel o' Waynes down here, an' I can reckon five o' th' Marsh lot, let alone t' others, that fell by Ratcliffe swords an'

Ratcliffe pistols, an' there's few knows as I do what a power o' hate ligs 'twixt Wildwater an' Marsh. I tell thee, lad, it maks my owd blood warm to think o' th' brave times coming back."

"I can niver stop wondering at thee, Sexton," said Jonas Feather, settling his arms more easifully on his stick. "Tha'rt a little, snipperty chap, as full o' dreaminess as a tummit is full o' waiter; tha's getten th' rheumatiz i' legs an' shoulder-blades, an' ivery winter brings thee browntitus, sure as Christmas. Yet here tha stands, an' I can see thy een fair blaze again when tha talks o' fighting. Hast iver seen owt o' th' sort, or is't just fancy, like?"

The Sexton laughed, a dry and feeble laugh. "I've seen part blood-letting, Jonas; an' ivery neet as I sit i' th' settle after th' day's moil is owered wi', I go backard i' my thowts. Small wonder that I'm gay, like, to think that soon there'll be a fight to butter my bread at ivery meal-time."

"Well, 'tis best for plain chaps like thee an' me, Sexton, to let 'em settle it among theirselns. Poor folk mun live, I allus did say, an' if tha addles a bit by burying, I willun't grudge it thee.—Will th' burying go forrard peaceable-like, dost think?"

"Nay, I couldn't tell thee. Like as not there'll be a fight on th' way fro' Marsh to th' kirkyard here.—Now, Jonas, hod th' stee-top while I clamber up," broke off the Sexton, throwing up his broom and setting one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder. "There's this an' there's that to be looked to, an' it's gone eleven a'ready."

"Sakes, tha doesn't mean it! An' here I stand cracking wi' thee i'stead o' smartening up th' sarving-wenches down at th' Bull yonder.—I'm noan for saying it doan't breed custom, mind ye, Witherlee, this senseless sort o' fratching 'twixt th' gentlefolk. They'll be coming fro' far an' wide to see th' last o' th' owd man, for all th' moorside war varry friendly to him; an' 'tis nobbut fitting 'at them as comes to mourn should be warmed a bit i' th' innards at after th' job is done wi'."

"Well, there's part folk hereabouts who care nowt whether they've getten warm drink or cold or none at all; an' that, mind ye, shows a sight more sense nor us poor shammocky chaps above ground hev to show for ourselns," said Witherlee, as he picked up his broom and cast a lingering glance of affection on his "tidy bits o' graves."

"Shameless Wayne is sobered by this time, I'm thinking," dropped Jonas, walking pace for pace with the Sexton down the path that led to the tool-house.

"He's getten a gooidish heart, hes th' lad, an' this may weel be th' making of him."

"Ay, he left me drunk t' other neet, an' he came back i' a two-three minutes after sober; an' when a man gets skifted out o' liquor so speedy like, he gets a sort o' hatred on 't. Leastways, that's what I've noticed more nor once, an' I reckon

it hods gooid at most times."

The Sexton's robin, seeing the chance of dinner going by in spite of all its shy attempts to claim attention, hopped boldly on to Witherlee's arm.

"Now look at that, Jonas!" he cried, "I thowt I niver forgot a promise, an' here hev I been so thrang wi' talking o' what's past an' what's to come that I war all but going off without gi'eing robin redbreast his bit o' meat. Look at th' little chap! He fair speaks wi' yond wick een o' hisn, an' his feathers is all piked out to show 'at his belly is cold for hunger. Well, it taks all sorts to mak a world, an' I niver did see 'at redbreasts war ony way less to be thowt on nor us bigger folk; both sorts go on two legs, an' both turn their legs toes-uppermost one day, choose how th' wind blows."

"Ay, there isn't much to choose when it comes to th' latter end."

"Well, I'll be bidding thee good-day, Jonas," said the Sexton, turning down to the shed. "I mun put th' broom away, for I doan't like to see more tools about a kirkyard nor need be; an' then I'll turn up a two-three worms for th' robin. He allus looks on at a burying, does redbreast, an' I like to think he'll be well lined i' th' innards—it makes a burying more pleasurable, like."

Jonas, after nodding a farewell to the Sexton, sauntered down to his tavern, his hands in his pockets, as if there were ample time for everything in this world; and, though he would bestir the maids presently with a rough hand and a rougher tongue, he saw no cause to hurry.

"Hast been to hev a look at th' vault, Jonas?" said a farmer from over Wildwater way, who was just going in for a mug of ale as the landlord entered.

"Ay. All's ship-shape, an' as neat as a basket of eggs. We shall see a big stir, I reckon."

"A bigger stir nor ye think for, mebbe," said the other. "What dost mean, lad?"

"Nay, I can't rightly say—only that when I war crossing th' moor ower by Wildwater a while back, I see'd a band o' Ryecollar Ratcliffes come riding up to th' Lean Man's door. Their sword-belts were noan empty, awther, an' they war laughing."

"Laughing, war they? There's a saying that when a Ratcliffe laughs, there'll be wark for th' Sexton. How mony strong wod they be, like?"

"Six or seven, so far as I could reckon 'em up."

"Ay, it looks bad—it looks bad, an' I'm noan for denying it. Owd Witherlee war cracking o' summat o' th' sort, too, not mony minutes sin'. Well, there's none i' th' moorside but what wishes well to th' Waynes, if it come to a tussle—though I wodn't hev th' Lean Man hear me say 't."

The folk were gathering meanwhile in the graveyard. Some came in by the gate at the village end, others by the wicket that opened on the moor. All wore

the air of sober merriment which a burying never fails to bring to the faces of the moor-folk; all clustered about the vault, and chattered like so many magpies, and turned to ask Sexton Witherlee, when he came from feeding his robin, a hundred silly questions as to the disposal of the coffins. These were holiday times for the moorside, and their real sorrow for the sturdy, upright master of Marsh House served only to add a more subtle edge to their enjoyment.

They were festivals for Witherlee likewise; and, though the Sexton held that pride became no man, seeing what he must come to in the end, he always bore himself more youthfully at a burial and looked his fellow-men more squarely in the face. This was his workshop, and it pleased him that his lustier fellows, who were proud of their skill at farming or joinering or the like, should see that he, too, man of dreams as he was, could show a deft hand at his trade.

Gossip grew rife as the knot of sight-seers increased. One would tell a tale of the old days when Waynes and Ratcliffes fought at every cross-road, and another would cap the narrative with one more fearsome. The women talked of the good deeds that Wayne of Marsh had done, of the tidy bit o' brass his coffin had cost, of the mad pranks that Shameless Wayne had played in times past. The children played hide-and-seek among the graves, or crept to the vault-edge and peered down in awed expectation, awaiting they knew not what of such terrors as their mothers had taught them to associate with the dead. The grown lasses came with lavender in their aprons, and sprinkled the vault-floor with the lovesome herb, and sent up a prayer to the unknown and dreadful God who dwelt amid the peat-wastes and the bogs—a prayer that they might escape this last close prison until wedlock had given them bairns, lest the curse of the women who were buried with empty breasts should light on them.

"Th' corpse is coming!" some one cried on the sudden.

The chatter ceased, and all eyes sought the yew-shadowed turning of the pathway. Shameless Wayne, his cousin Rolf and two others carried the coffin at shoulder height. In front walked the Parson, his white hair ruffled by the breeze; behind them followed a score of kinsmen, the Long Waynes of Cranshaw over-topping all the others by a head; and behind these again walked a line of farm-men and of women-servants.

"Good sakes, they've getten swords an' pistols!" muttered one of the on-lookers, as the crowd made a clear lane to the kirk-porch.

"By th' Heart, who iver heard tell o' folk coming armed to a burying!" cried another. "There mun be summat more going forrard nor we've ony notion on. Look at Shameless Wayne! God keep me an' mine fro' seeing sich mortal anguish i' a lad's face again! He looks fair mad wi' grief."

"He's getten cause. Hast noan heard that he war droughen while Nanny Witherlee war ringing for his father? Nay, he's a slow-to-blush un, an' proper,

an' I wonder he's getten grace enough to come sober to th' grave.—Stand back, childer! Willun't ye be telled? Or mun ye bide i' th' gate till they bury ye wi' th' coffin?"

The children shrank back, curiosity killed by fright, and the bearers moved slowly up the path until the grey church hid them. Tongues were loosened again, and Jonas Feather, coming up with the information he had gleaned from the farmer from Wildwater way, was beset by a clamorous knot of folk.

"Ay, I war sure there war summat out o' th' ordinary—see'd th Ryecollar Ratcliffes crossing th' moor, tha says, Jonas?—Well, I mind th' owd days, but there war nowt so outrageous as this shows like to be—theer, hod thy whisht! They're coming fro' th' kirk."

Again a lane was formed, from the porch to the vault where Sexton Witherlee was waiting with his ropes. The wind was at peace, and its soft stir among the budding leaves mingled with song of redbreast and love-pipe of the throstles. A faint odour of lavender crept upward from the vault, suggesting quiet and fragrant hopes for better days to come. Yet the hush that settled over the watching crowd had little rest in it, and it was plain by their laboured breathing, as the coffin was lowered by the creaking ropes, that none looked for a peaceful end to a burial that counted sword and pistol as mourners.

Amongst his kin, grouped thirty strong about the vault with set faces and hands on sword-hilts, Shameless Wayne stood noticeable; for his head was bent and the tears streamed down his cheeks unheeded. Not until now had the lad reckoned the full total of his past misdoings, nor known how shame can eat the manhood out of bravery.

"Dust to dust, ashes to ashes," said the Parson, in the ringing voice that seemed a challenge to grim Death himself.

But another than Death took up the challenge. Swift out of the moor a cry of "Ratcliffe, Ratcliffe!" answered him, and the crowd gave back on the sudden, leaving the thirty-and-one Waynes to turn face about, whipping their swords free of the scabbards. Down through the wicket-gate trooped a score of Ratcliffes, yelling their name-cry as they came. A moment they halted, for they had looked to find the Waynes unarmed; but the Lean Man cursed them forward.

Shameless Wayne looked up at the first cry; his pale face went ruddy, his eyes lit up. It was a welcome intrusion, this, on the sour trend of his thoughts, and he, who had shown most womanish among them, was now the leader of them all.

"A Wayne! In at them, lads! A Wayne, a Wayne!" he called, and leaped at the Lean Man, and sliced his left ear level with the cheek.

Old Nicholas groaned with pain, then forced a laugh and lifted his big two-handled sword above the head of Wayne of Marsh. But the Waynes came pushing

upward from behind, and their leader was thrust against a gravestone on the left hand of the path, while a kinsman took the Lean Man's blow on his own uplifted blade. And after that Wayne mixed with Ratcliffe, and Ratcliffe closed with Wayne, all up and down between the graves, till there was no grass-green footway 'twixt the headstones but was rubbed black under the shifting feet of swordsmen. The crowd fell back for fear, or moved a few steps forward for awe according as the fight swept toward them or away. One against one, or one against two, it was, from the church porch to the field-wall, from the moor-wicket to the Bull; there was no space for a massed fight, and each man sought his special foe and followed him in and out until church-wall, or upreared cross, or spiked hedge of thorn, stopped pursuer and pursued and left no issue but the sword.

Sexton Witherlee found his youth again as he stood just under shelter of the porch, and watched, and rubbed his shrivelled hands together. The old stuff worked in him, and he, who had seen Wayne fight with Ratcliffe more than once, thanked God that the sweetest moil of all had been kept to lighten his last steps to the grave. His eyes went from group to group, from thrust to nimble parry, until the kirkyard held naught for him save the dancing shimmer of grey steel. The cries redoubled, and "Ratcliffe" went in the teeth of "Wayne" all down the pathway of the breeze; yet the Sexton knew, from the snarl that underlay each Ratcliffe voice, from the crisp fury of the Wayne-cry, that the Wildwater folk were going down like windle-straws before their foes. The Ratcliffes took to their pistols then, and hid behind gravestones, and sent red streaks of flame across the mist of whirling steel; but they had no time to reload, and hurry steered their bullets for the most part amiss, and the Waynes, disdaining powder at all times, hunted them from their cover like rats from out a barley-mow. Above all shouts, of onset or of mortal anguish, a lad's voice struck clear into the blue belly of the sky.

"No quarter, Waynes! In at them, and rip from heel to crown!"

Sexton Witherlee moved forward from his porch. "Yond war Shameless Wayne's voice. God, but he's getten th' fighting-fever as hot as iver I see'd a man tak it. Th' Lean Man 'ull carry a sore head back to Wildwater, I'm thinking—if he's spared.—There th' lad is! Sakes, but he's getten his hands as full as they'll hod, an' no mistak!" he broke off, straining his eyes toward the half-filled strip of graveyard beneath the Parsonage which he was wont to call his "bit o' garden." But Nicholas Ratcliffe was ever prudent in his hottest fury, and he saw that the fight was all against his folk. The long night of anguish was over for Wayne's son of Marsh, and the rebound from it had filled his veins with something more like the light fires that played across the boglands than with slow-moving blood; his pace was the wind's pace, and the fury of his onset put life into the sword-arms of each Wayne that heard his lusty battle-cry. Back and further back the Ratcliffes

shrank, till the Lean Man's voice was heard, bidding them retreat fighting to the moor-gate and then escape as best they could.

"No quarter!" came Shameless Wayne's trumpet-note, as he chased them to the nearest wicket.

But pursuit could go no further, for the pursuers were all on foot and a moment saw the Ratcliffes mounted on the horses which they had tethered to the graveyard hedge. Shameless Wayne plucked out his pistol then, and laughed as a yell from one of the retreating redheads followed his quick pulling of the trigger. Then he turned back sharply, for the sound of running feet came up the path; re-entering by the wicket, he was met full by three Ratcliffes, left behind by their fellows in the wild rush for safety.

Wayne never halted, but drove down on them, his sword uplifted; and they, three to one, fell back in panic almost on to the points of the upcoming Waynes.

"Hold off! They're mine," cried Shameless Wayne, waving his folk aside.

Up and down he chased them, and up and down they ran, doubling behind gravestones or running hare-footed across open ground; for this lad, whom they had laughed at as a drunkard and a fool, seemed godlike in his fury. The Waynes held every outlet, and all watched the grim chase silently. And then Shameless Wayne's opportunity came; the three were running altogether now, and one tripped up the other, and Wayne was scarce a sword's length from them.

"I have them—" he began, and lifted his right arm.

But the open vault yawned under them before their brute terror showed where this second danger lay. They reeled at the edge and half recovered, then dropped to the paved floor beneath, where the coffin lay where Witherlee had dropped it at the first onset.

Shameless Wayne, mad with the swift onset and the crash of blows, stood laughing at the edge and beckoned to two of his folk. "Roof them over, and let them rot there," he cried, kicking the ringed vault-stone with his foot.

The crowd shrank back, and even his own people were affrighted by the wild command. None knew—none guessed, save Sexton Witherlee, watching from the porch—what fury of despair, and shame, and bitterness, had gone to the making of this brute mood of the lad's. Nor was he in case to wonder at himself; for the one moment he wished naught in heaven or earth save to see the flat stone ring down on those who would have done honest men to death by treachery.

"Why do ye draw back, ye fools?" he cried. "Is it a time for maidishness, or do ye want——"

"Stay, lad! Thou'lt think better of it in a while," said Rolf Wayne of Cranshaw, touching him on the shoulder.

While he halted, glowering from his folk to the stone, and from the stone to the Ratcliffes who lay, maimed and dumb with terror, over his father's coffin,

a frail little body, robed all in white, stepped quietly to his side.

"'Tis my wedding-day, Ned," she said piteously, "and all the folk have come to mock at me, pretending 'tis a burial. What art doing here? Surely thou'lt come to church and help me find my lover there. Thou hast ever been kind to me when others mocked."

Shameless Wayne was silent for a space; and then, he knew not why, his mood swung round, and grief rushed thick to eyes and throat. He took the shivering woman by the hand, and turned, and led her down the path. "Come home, little bairn; 'tis over late to see thee wed to-day, but by and by we'll see to it," he said.

She went with him quietly, her face brightening as she clung close to his arm. And all the folk crossed themselves, and held their peace, and watched the strange pair go out at the churchyard gate.

"What's to be done with these?" said Wayne of Cranshaw, after a long silence, pointing to the vault.

"They shall not foul a Wayne vault, at any rate," said a kinsman. "Poor hounds! See how they tremble—they're scarce worth the killing. Up with them, lads, and if they can stand at all, we'll set them free to cross to Wildwater."

"Ay, I warrant ye will," murmured Sexton Witherlee, who had moved to the grave-side. "But would the Ratcliffes have done the like to ye in such a case?—Well—pity comes wi' gooid breeding, I reckon, an' 'tis noan for us poorer sort to teach ye better—but these three may live to plague ye yet."

All were gone at last—all save Parson and Sexton, who stood and looked, one at the other first, and afterward across the kirkyard. The sun was silver under grey rain-clouds now; a wet drift of mist came with the westward wind; no throstle sang, but the peewits came wheeling, wheeling, crying, crying, from across the moor, and far up above a sentinel vulture flapped wings and watched the unburied dead who lay with their faces to the rain.

The Sexton had been round the graveyard once again. His battle-glee had left him, and a soft light was in his face as he leaned against a headstone and watched the Parson, who stood as he had left him, his head bent in prayer.

"'Tis a drear day's work, Witherlee," said the Parson, lifting his eyes at last.

"A drear day's wark, Parson—but sweet as honey while it lasted. Praise God there's nobbut one Wayne killed—one o' th' Hill House lot, he is, an' he ligs up by th' wicket yonder. An' praise God, says I, 'at there'll three Ratcliffes niver trouble Marshcotes wi' their tricks again; one of 'em is stretched at th' wall-side there, an' another under th' Parsonage.—I see'd th' stroke that cleft yond last—cleft him fair like a hazel-nut."

The Parson eyed his Sexton gravely, and would have spoken; but Witherlee's soft-moving voice crossed his own before the first word was well out.

"Now, Parson, I can see by th' face on ye that ye wod liefer I read a sarmon nor a frolic i' all this; an' so I do, when I can frame to gi'e my mind to 't. 'Tis noan th' bloodshed itseln 'at pleasures me—for I'm soft wi' pity when I come to see 'em lying cold—but th' blows, Parson! Th' swing o' well-fed thews, an' th' dancing flicker o' live steel, an' a man standing up to death wi' belly-deep laughter i' his throat! I may be wrang, mind ye—there's few as isn't time an' time—but I wod gi'e five years o' life to watch this moil all ower again, and to see Shameless Wayne show how the old breed strikes."

"Vanity, Witherlee—all is vanity, save prayer, and chastening of man's pride. Hast pity for the dead, thou say'st? Ay, but that should sober thy zest in what went before."

"Yet th' pity is war nor t' other, being foolish altogether," said the Sexton reflectively, "for I allus did say 'at there's greener grass, an' sweeter, grows ower a dead man's grave nor under his living feet. But there's a winding-sheet for all, so we munnot complain."

"Soften thy heart, for God's mercy's sake, before the end overtakes thee. Art hard, Witherlee, hard, with never a hope beyond the grave."

"We'll noan' fratch, Parson," said Witherlee slowly. "Ye've learned all fro' Heaven and Hell; but I've learned fro' gooid, strong soil—what me an' ye came fro', an' what we mun go back to i' th' end. It sticks, does kneaded earth, an' when ye've lived husband-to-wife wi' 't i' a manner o' speaking, ye get to look no forrarder."

The Parson sighed. It was but an old argument with a drear new setting. "Earth holds earth—but it cannot hold the soul," he said, wearily a little, and as if foredoomed to plead in vain.

"That's as may be," said Witherlee, in the low, even voice that had likewise been taught him by his trade. "I niver hed no dealings, so to say, wi' th' soul; I've knawn buryings but no risings—save when th' ghosties stir up an' down among th' graves, as they will do time an' time. An' th' ghosts 'ud seem to hev won no further off nor Marshcotes kirkyard."

"Art full of vain superstition, Witherlee. The soul thou doubtest; but ghosts, in which no God-fearing man need believe——"

"Theer!" said Witherlee patiently. "I allus said there niver wod be any sort of argreement 'twixt me an' ye, though we jog on together. Ye live nigh th' kirkyard, Parson, but ye doan't live *in* it, as I've done—ye hevn't learned th' *feel* of a graveyard, or ye'd niver say nay to th' soft-footed ghosties. Why, only last back-end, I mind, I see'd——"

The Parson shivered. "I am sick, Witherlee, with all that has chanced, and my knees are weak under me. I will bid thee good-day, and wish thee a softer heart," he said, moving up the pathway.

"Good-day to ye, Parson. I fear I'm ower owd to mend—but I trust ye'll be no war for this day's moil."

The Sexton watched him go, a weak and bent old figure, until the Parsonage gate closed behind him. Then he sat him down, and filled a pipe, and forgot to feel for his tinder-box as the memories of the day came back to him. The rain was dropping, and the wind was gathering chill.

"Begow, 'tis still an' lonesome, at after all th' racket," he murmured. "Poor Parson! He wodn't gladden a pulse-beat, I'll warrant, if all th' lads i' Marshcotes fell to fighting. Well, there's men like that, just as there's men 'at cannot stomach honest liquor—an' Lord help both sorts, say I.—Well, I mun mak th' most o' th' quiet, for they'll come for yond bodies by an' by.—By th' Heart, how Shameless Wayne cut an' hacked! He'll be a long thorn an' a sharp i' Nicholas Ratcliffe's side, will th' lad. Eh' how he clipped th' Lean Man's ear! God rest him!"

CHAPTER IX
A MOORSIDE COURTSHIP

The last week of March had seen rain, snow and hail; had felt the wind shift from brisk North to snarling Southeast, and from warm, rain-weighted South to an Easterly gale such as nipped the veins in a man's body and daunted the over-hasty green of elderberry and lifted the wet from ploughed fields as speedily as if a July sun had scorched them. From day to day—nay from hour to hour—the farm men had not known whether they would shiver at the hardest work or sweat with the easiest; the moist, untimely heat of one day would plant rheumatism snugly in their joints, and the bitter coldness of the next would weld it in. Nature was dead at heart, it seemed, and whether she showed a dry eye or a tearful, her face wore the dull greyness of despair, as if her thews were too stiffened and too lean with age to rouse themselves for the old labour of bringing buds to leaf, and kine to calving.

And now on a sudden all was changed. The wind blew honest from the West, and even in shadowed corners it kept no knife in waiting for man and beast. The sun shone splendid out of a white-flecked, pearly sky. In the lower lands, blackbird and thrush, starling and wren and linnet, broke into one mighty chorus; and on the moors the grouse called less complainingly one to the other, the larks were boisterous, the eagles showed braver plumage to the sun, the very

moor-tits added a twittering sort of gaiety to the day. A lusty, upstanding, joyous day, which brought old folk to their doors, to ask each other if there were not some churlish sport of March hid under all this bravery—which set the youngsters thinking of their sweethearts, and brought the sheep to lambing in many an upland pasture scarce free'd of winter snow.

But the Lean Man had no eye for the beauty of the day, as he rode through Marshcotes street with Robert, his eldest-born, on the bridle-hand of him. For old Nicholas was thinking how Shameless Wayne, the lad whom he had laughed at and despised, had lately driven the Ratcliffes to hopeless flight. Both horsemen were fully armed, with swords on thigh and pistols in their holsters; and, as they rode, they kept a sharp regard to right and left, lest any of the Waynes should be hidden in ambush. Time and time the Lean Man clapped a hand to his left ear, as if by habit, and his face was no good sight to see as he felt the rounded lump which marked where Wayne's sword-cut—a fortnight old by now—was healing tardily.

"Could we but meet the lad alone in Marshcotes street here," he muttered to his eldest-born.

"Ay, but fortune is no friend to us just now," growled Robert; "and there are those who say he'd match the two of us."

"There are those who say that hawks breed cuckoos. Art thou weakening, Robert, too, because he has won the first poor skirmish?"

"Not I. If I find him in the road, I'll have at him—but meanwhile I am free to think my own thoughts."

"Well, and what are thy thoughts, sirrah?"

"That there's witchery in his sword-arm. I saw him fight in the graveyard, and he was something 'twixt man and devil; ay, he fought as if he had the cursed Dog of Marsh to back him."

The Lean Man gave a laugh—a laugh with little surety in it. "Thou'rt a maid, Robert, to fall soft at such a baby-tale as that," he sneered.

"Yet you have heard of the Dog, sir, and now and then you own to a half belief in him," said Robert, meeting the other's glance fairly. "We have had proof of it aforetime, and—see the woman yonder," he broke off, "moving at us from the corner of the lane. What ails her?"

They had passed the Bull tavern and were nearing the spot where the lane that led to Witherlee's cottage ran into the Ling Crag highway. The Lean Man turning his head impatiently as Robert spoke and following the direction of his finger, saw that the Sexton's wife was standing at the roadside. Nanny was looking through and through him, and the smile on her dry old lips was scarcely one of welcome. At another time Nicholas would have paid no heed to her; but today a small thing had power to touch his spleen, and he pulled up sharp in the

middle of the roadway.

"I'm called Nicholas Ratcliffe, woman, as perchance thou hast forgotten," he said, leaning toward her and half lifting his hairy fist; "and when I see folk mocking me, I am prone to ask them why."

"When I mock ye, Maister, ye're free to strike me, an' not afore," answered Nanny. Her tone was quiet almost to contemptuousness; and the smile that had lately rested on her lips was hiding now behind her shrewd black eyes.

Nicholas looked at her, a touch of approval in his glance; accustomed as he was to browbeat all who met him, this dried-up little body's unconcern in face of threats half tickled and half angered him.

"Hark to her, Robert!" he cried. "Free to strike her, am I? Gad, yes, and with no permission asked, I warrant!"

"An' as for mocking ye," went on Nanny, disregarding his interruption, "what need hev I to step 'twixt ye an' Barguest?"

The Lean Man was accounted hardier than most; yet he started at Nanny's mention of the Dog, following so abruptly on Robert's talk of a moment ago. "Barguest. What has he to do with me?" he cried.

"What hed he to do wi' your folk i' times past? Enough an' to spare, I should reckon. Do ye forget, Nicholas Ratcliffe, how one o' your breed crossed Barguest once on t' threshold of Marsh House? Do ye mind what chanced to him at after?"

Nanny's quiet assurance had in it a quality that daunted the Lean Man. Had she grown fiery in denunciation of his sins toward the Waynes—as in her hotter moments she was wont to do—had she drawn wild pictures of the doom awaiting those who crossed the Dog, Nicholas would have knocked her to the roadway and passed on. But her faith was unwavering; she had no doubt at all that the Lean Man had compassed his own end, and voice and gesture both were such as to convince a man against his will.

He stared at her, a growing terror in his face. "'Tis an old tale, woman, and one we scarce credit nowadays," he stammered.—"Robert, tell her she's a fool—a rank, stark-witted fool—and I a bigger fool to hearken to her."

But Robert was in no case to bolster up his father's dreads. He turned to Nanny sharply. "Where does all this carry us?" he said. "Dost thou mean that one of us has lately crossed the Dog?"

"Ay, marry. What else should I mean?" said the little old woman.

"'Tis a child's tale—a child's tale, I say," broke in Nicholas.

"Well, ye shall try the truth of it by an' by—for ye crossed th' Dog, Nicholas Ratcliffe, when ye came down to nail your token to th' Marsh doorway. I war watching by th' dead man, an' I heard Barguest come whimper-whimper down th' lane; an' then he scratted like a wild thing at th' panels; an' after that he ligged

him down on the door-stun."

Nanny paused a moment, watching how the Lean Man took it.

"Ay, and then?" said Nicholas. He would fain have sounded merry, but his voice came dry and harsh.

"Then a man came riding up o' horseback, an' leaped to ground, an' reached ower th' Brown Dog to nail a man's hand to th' door. An' *ye* war th' horseman, Nicholas Ratcliffe."

Once only the Lean Man glanced at her; then set spurs to his great bay horse and clattered up the street, his son following close behind. At the end of half-a-mile they slackened pace, as if by joint consent; but neither sought the other's eyes.

"What ails thee, fool?" said Nicholas to his eldest-born.

"Naught, sir—'twas not I who fled from a crook-backed beldame," sneered the other.

The Lean Man turned on him, glad of an excuse for bluster. "Thou dar'st to say I fled?" he cried. "Thou, who wast sucking at the breast while I grew old in fight?—There, lad! 'Twas a madness in the blood that fell on us just now. What's Barguest that he should spoil a bonnie plan? Are we not sending Wayne to his last home to-night?"

"We have planned as much," said Robert slowly, "but——"

"Ay, but—and 'but' again in thy teeth. We have him, I tell thee—Red Ratcliffe should be somewhere hereabouts by now, learning what I have sent him out to learn."

"We can learn all that, and yet not use the knowledge right," said Robert sullenly. Even yet he could see Nanny's face, could hear her voice, and he was angered by the fear they bred in him.

"That's as may be," said Nicholas grimly—"but if he brings the news I think he will the devil keep young Wayne of Marsh, for he'll need some such sort of aid.—Who is yond lubberly farm-hind, climbing up the wall this side the road? His slouch is woundily familiar." Like his son, the Lean Man had felt the sting of Nanny's words, though he was minded to make light of it; and no better proof of his humour was needed than the quick ill-tempered eye he had for trifles.

"It looks like Hiram Hey—one of Wayne's folk, and a pesty fellow with his tongue. We've found him more than once cutting peats from the Wildwater land, and more than once we've fallen foul of him."

"Have ye?" said Nicholas quietly. "Well, he did us a service there, may be; and the more peats they coane at Marsh, the better 'twill be for us to-night.—Come, lad; 'tis gallop now, and a truce to that old wife's foolery."

Hiram Hey, meanwhile, was going his leisurely way, glancing curiously at the Lean Man as he went by, but not guessing that he was furnishing him with

food for talk. He slouched along the pasture-fields stopping at every other step to watch the sport of heifers, to note a broken piece of walling, or to berate some luckless farm-lad whom he found at play.

"I wodn't call it a fair day, for we've not done wi' 't yet," he murmured. "Nay, I wodn't call it a fair day, an' that's Gospel, till I see how it behaves itseln. We mud varry weel hev snow afore it wears to neet, or else thunner—or both, likely."

He leaned over a three-barred gate and eyed the long furrows climbing to the hill-crest—sleek furrows, with dust lying grey on the sun-side of the upturned sods. And while he lazied there, a milking-song came clear and crisp from over the wall that hid the High meadow from him.

"That's Martha," he cried, brightening on the sudden. "She sings like ony bird, does th' lass. What should she be doing, I wonder, so far fro' Marsh on a working-day?"

His step had an unwonted briskness in it, his carriage was almost jaunty, as he moved along the wall-side to the stile at the corner. A milk-pail was showing now above the top step of the stile, with a cherry-ripe face and trim, short skirted figure under it. Martha halted on seeing Hiram Hey, and set two round, brown arms to the pail, and lifted it down to the wall; then leaned with one hand on it while she dropped a saucy curtsey.

"It's warm," ventured Hiram, picking up a stone from the grass and throwing it aside.

"Warm? I should reckon it is. Tha'd say so if tha'd carried this pail a-top o' thy head for a mile an' better.—But, Lord, we munnot complain, for 'tis a day i' five-score, this, an' warm as midsummer."

"Thee bide a bittock, as I telled young Maister this morn. 'Spring's come again, Hiram,' says he to me. 'Mebbe,' says I, 'but when a man's lived to my years he learns to believe owt o' th' weather—save gooid sense.' That's what I said, for sure."

"Tha'rt not so thrang as or'nary, seemingly?" said Martha, after a pause.

Hiram glanced at her, as if suspecting mockery. "Nay, I'm allus thrang," he answered, shaking his head in mournful fashion. "I've heard folk say I do nowt just because they've seen me hands-i'-pocket time an' time; but when ye're maister-hand at a farm, there's head-work to be done as weel as body-work."

"To be sure—an' 'tis fearful hard, is head-work."

"Ay, I oft say to shepherd Jose that th' humbler your station i' this life, th' fewer frets ye hev."

"I feel fair pitiful for thee, Hiram," said Martha, glancing softly at him across the pail, "when I see what worries tha hes to put up wi'."

Hiram came a step nearer. "Tha mud weel pity me, lass. 'Tis grand to be

sich chaps as Jose—all body, i' a way o' speaking, an' no head-piece worth naming to come 'twixt victuals an' their appetites.—Martha, lass, I've oft wondered how tha came to be born a wench."

"Would'st hev hed me born a lad?"

"Nay, begow! but tha's getten so mich sense; that's what I mean. It fair caps me—as if I'd fund apples growing on a thistle-top."

Martha had a keen answer on her tongue-tip, but she held it back; for the lads were beginning to pass her by, and it was time she had a goodman. "It's a lot for thee to say, Hiram, is that," she murmured, dropping her eyes. "I iver thowt there war maid i' Marshcotes could come nigh to what *tha* looks for i' a wench."

"Nor I nawther," said Hiram gravely. "I've said to myseln time an' agen that if I war to keep good company till th' end o' my days, I'd hev to live wi' myseln."

"It wod take a good un to be mate to thee."

Hiram half lifted his foot to the bottom step of the stile, then withdrew it. "Go slow, lad," he murmured. "If tha taks it at this flairsome speed, where wilt be by to-morn?"

"I wod tak a varry good un," repeated Martha.

But Hiram had taken fright on the sudden. "I seed th' Lean Man go through Marshcotes a while back," he said, with would-be carelessness.

"Oh, ay? Th' Ratcliffes seem to be up an' about this morn, for I passed Red Ratcliffe i' th' meadow not five minites sin'. Sakes, but he's an ill-favoured un, is Red Ratcliffe! He war for gi'eing me a kiss an' a hug just now, but I let him feel th' wrong side o' my hand i'stead.—An' what did th' Lean Man look like, Hiram, after his fighting o' t' other day?"

"Nay, I niver stopped to axe; but I noticed he looked queerish where he took yond sword-cut a two-week come yesterday. I'm none for praising th' young Maister, not I, seeing he's shameless by name an' shameless by natur—but I take it kindly of him that he sliced th' Lean Man's ear off clean as a tummit-top. There's none i' th' moorside but wishes his head had followed."

"Now whisht, Hiram!" cried Martha. "It's a two-week come yesterday sin' they fought i' th' kirkyard, but I'm sick yet wheniver I call to mind how they came home to Marsh that morn. Th' burial-board war all spread, an' I war agate wi' drawing a jug of October when Nanny Witherlee comes running into th' pantry, as white as a hailstone, an' 'Martha,' say she, 'there'll be a sorry mess on th' hall-floor—an' us to have spent so mich beeswax on't,' says she. 'Why, what's agate?' I says. 'Th' Waynes is back for th' burying-feast,' says Nanny, 'an' they've brought some gaping wounds, my sakes, to sit at meat wi' 'em.'"

"I warrant they did," assented Hiram, "for I see'd 'em myseln."

"Well, I runs a-tip-toe then to th' hall door, an' I screamed out to see th' Waynes standing there. A score or so there mud be, all drinking as if they'd

sweated like brocks at grasscutting; an' there war a queer silence among 'em; an' some war binding arms an' legs, an' th' floor, I tell thee, war more slippy under a body's feet nor ony beeswax warranted."

"Th' Maister went through it without a scratch, for all that, though they say he fought twice for ivery one o' t' others. Ay, his father war like that when th' owd quarrel war agate—allus i' th' front, yet niver taking so mich as a skin-prick till th' time came for him to dee."

"How long ago war that, Hiram? I've heard tell o' th' owd feud, but it mun hev been a long while back."

"Longer nor ye can call to mind, lass. 'Twas a sight o' years back, afore tha wert born or thought of."

Another soft glance from Martha. "I shouldn't hev thought *tha'd* hev remembered it so weel, Hiram," she murmured. "Tha talks as if tha wert owd enough to be a girt-grandfather to sich a little un as me."

Hiram saw his error. "Nay, I'm youngish still, Martha," he put in hastily, with a tell-tale pulling of his hat over the widening patch of forehead that showed beneath the brim. "'Tis hard thinking that thins a body's thatch, an' when I call to mind what a power o' sense I've learned sin' being a lad, I wonder I'm not as bald as a moor-tit's egg. Well, tha mud find younger men nor me, but——"

"I set no store by youngness, Hiram. I allus did say a wise head war th' best thing a man could hev."

"Begow, but tha'rt a shrewd un, Martha, as weel as a bonnie un!" cried Hiram, and checked himself. "Yond's a tidy slice o' land," he said, nodding at the dusty furrows in front of them.

But Martha knew her own mind. "I'd liefer talk about thee, Hiram, that I wod," she said. "Land's theer ony day we want to look at it!"

"Well, now, there's summat i' that," he answered, with a shade of uneasiness in his voice. "Where hast been, like, for th' milk, lass? 'Tisn't every day I find thee stirring so far fro' Marsh."

"I've been to th' High Farm, for sure. What wi' milk for th' new-weaned calves, an' for churning, an' what not, we shouldn't hev hed a sup i' th' house down at Marsh if I hadn't come a-borrowing."

"There's waste somewhere, I'm thinking," said Hiram sadly. "Th' roan cow war niver fuller i' milk nor now, an' yond little dappled beast I bought off Tom o' Dick's o' Windytop is yielding grandly. Nay, nay, there's waste at Marsh! I said how 'twould be when young Maister took hod o' th' reins."

"Waste, is there? I'd like thee to hev a week or two at managing, Hiram; tha'd see how far a score quarts o' milk 'ull go, wi' four growing lads an' th' Maister, an' all ye lubbering farm-folk to feed. But theer! Men niver can thoyle to see owt go i' housekeeping; an' I'll be bidding thee good-day, Hiram, as tha's

getten no likelier sort o' talk nor that."

She made pretence to lift her pail from the top of the stile, and Hiram so far forgot his caution as to put a hand on her dimpled arm.

"Sakes, lass, I wodn't hev thee go!" he cried.

"Then don't thee talk about waste and sich-like foolishness; I thowt tha'd more sense, Hiram, that I did. Nawther is young Maister what tha thinks him, let me tell thee; he's stiffening like a good un an' there's them as says he's getten th' whip-hand o' Hiram Hey already."

"Stiffening, is he?" cried Hiram, whom the jibe stung more keenly because he could not but admit the truth of it. "Well, there's room an' to spare, for he hes as slack a back as iver I clapped een on. But if tha thinks he can best Hiram Hey, Sunday or week-day——"

He stopped and shaded his eyes with both hands as he looked more keenly up the fields. Two figures had topped the crest—one a girl's, the other a man's, loose-built and of a swinging carriage.

"Nay, *I* niver said I thowt as mich," said Martha demurely, not heeding the direction of Hiram's glance. "'Twas shepherd Jose said it yestereen when he stepped down to th' house wi' th' week's lamb."

"What, Jose!" cried the other, with an angry cackle. "He niver had a mind aboon sheep, hedn't Jose, an' sheep is poor wastrels when all's said. So tha lets an owd chap like yond come whispering i' thy ear, dost 'a, Martha?"

"An' who's to say nay to me, I should like to know?" Her voice was combative, but she leaned a little toward Hiram as she spoke, and he all but took the last dire step of all.

Very foolish showed Hiram, as he stood looking at the maid, with caution in one eye and in the other a frank admiration of the comeliness which showed so wholesome and so fresh amid the greenery of field and hedgerow. And all the while he was murmuring, "Go slow, lad, go slow, I tell thee," and his lips were moving shiftlessly to the refrain.

"Thou'rt tongue-tied, Hiram. Who's to say nay to me, I axed thee?" laughed Martha.

Hiram rocked the milk pail gently with one hand, and stared up the new-ploughed furrows of the field ahead of him. "Thy own good sense, lass, should say thee nay," he answered guardedly. "Them as tends sheep, an' nowt but sheep, gets witless as an owd bell-wether; an' if I war a lass I'd as lief wed a turnip on a besom-stick as shepherd Jose."

"If tha wert a lass, Hiram, tha'd die i' spinsterhood, I'm thinking."

Martha's attack was spirited, but she sighed a little as she noted Hiram's far-away regard; his thoughts were with the land, she fancied, when she fain would have brought them nearer home. Yet, as it chanced Hiram Hey was not

thinking of farm-matters at the moment; Martha had her back to the ploughed field, and she could not see that the two figures which had lately topped the rise were coming down the field-side toward the stile. And it was plain now to Hiram that one was Janet Ratcliffe, the other Wayne of Marsh.

"It's queer, is th' way o' things," said Martha presently, loth to go her ways, yet too impatient and too womanly to stand there with no word spoken.

"Oh, ay? Well, things war niver owt but queer," answered Hiram, startled out of his abstraction.

"I war thinking o' th' bloody fight i' th' kirkyard. No more nor a two-week back it war, Hiram, an' here we all are, cooking an' weshing an' churning i' th' owd way, when we'd looked for fearsome doings all up an' down th' moorside."

"A wench would look for 'em; but I could hev telled thee different if tha'd axed me," said Hiram complacently. "Look at yond puffs o' dust that come ivery two-three minutes over th' furrows—dost think even Shameless Wayne could let a seed-time sich as this go by, while he war agate wi' fighting? Nay, nor th' Ratcliffes nawther. We mun all live by th' land, gentle an' simple, an' afore awther Wayne or Ratcliffes can afford to marlake, they'll hev to addle belly-timber."

"There'll nowt o' more come on 't then? Th' Lean Man has been fearful quiet of late, an' there's them as thinks th' fight i' th' graveyard has daunted him for good an' all."

"Daunted him, has it?" rejoined Hiram grimly. "Thee bide till th' oats is sown, an' th' hay won in, an' then tha'll see summat. Th' Lean Man is quiet like, tha says? Well, I've known him quiet afore, an' I've known him busy—an' of th' two I'd liefer see him thrang."

"Tha'r a good un to flair folk, Hiram! Why would'st liefer see him thrang?"

"Why? Because when a Ratcliffe says nowt to nobody, but wends abroad wi' a smug face an' watchful een, same as I've seen 'em do lately, ye may be varry sure he's fashioning slier devil's tricks nor iver.—Red Ratcliffe met thee just now, did he, Martha?"

"I telled thee as mich—he warn't so slow as some folk, Hiram, for he'd no sooner clapped een on me nor he had an arm about my waist."

Again Hiram wavered, and again whispered caution to himself. "He showed some mak o' sense there, Martha—but that's not what I war axing thee. What war he doing, like, when tha first comed up wi' him?"

"Nowt, nobbut mooning up an' down, as if i' search o' somebody."

"Well, he war on Wayne land to start wi', an' that wears a queerish look."

"Sakes, young Maister is nowhere near, I'm hoping!" cried Martha. "Red Ratcliffe carried his pistols, an' a shot from behind a wall wod suit him better nor a stand-up fight."

She still had her back to the ploughed field, and Hiram smiled in sour fash-

ion to think how very near the master was, and what company he was keeping at the moment.

"Thou'rt fearful jealous for th' young Maister," he said. "I'm thinking there's truth i' what they say i' Marshcotes—that Shameless Wayne allus gets th' soft side of a maid."

"An' should do, seeing he's what he is!"

"Well, I wodn't be a bit surprised if he *war* i' th' fields this morn. He's farmed for a week, hes th' Maister, an' he knows so mich about it now that he mun be here, theer an' iverywhere, watching that us younger hands do matters right."

"Tha can mock as tha likes, Hiram Hey, but he'll teach thee summat afore he's done wi' thee. Poor lad, though, I'm fair pitiful for him! He niver rests save when he's abed, an' not oft then, for I can hear him stirring mony a neet at after he'd earned his sleep."

"Thinking of his sins, I reckon," growled Hiram.

"Well, there's some I know that hasn't mouse-pluck enough for sinning. Besides, that's owered wi'. He's stiffening right enough—yet mony's the time I wish him back to th' owd careless days. He niver hes a gay word for us wenches now, an' to see him wi' his brothers ye mud weel think he war a score year older nor he's ony call to be."

Hiram had waited for this moment, chuckling at the overthrow in store for Martha's championship of the master. "Stiffening, is he?" he said, pointing up the field and drawing his lips into a thin curve. "He may be—but he's framing badly for a start."

Martha, turning sharp about, saw the two figures come slowly down the wall-side toward the stile. Wayne's head was bent low to Mistress Janet's, as if he were pleading some urgent cause, and neither seemed to guess that they were watched.

"Well?" said Martha defiantly. "There's nowt wrong i' that, is there? I've known he war soft on Mistress Ratcliffe iver sin' last spring."

Hiram stared at her, aghast that she could look so lightly on a grievous matter; and when he spoke there was honest anger in his voice, distinct from his usual carping tone.

"Nowt wrong?" he said slowly. "What, when a Wayne goes courting a Ratcliffe? I can't picture owt wronger, ony way, seeing what has come between 'em lately an' aforetime."

"Hoity-toity! That's been Mistress Nell's way o' looking at it—but 'tisn't mine. Look at 'em, Hiram, an' say if they don't mak a bonnie couple."

"What's bonniness to do wi' 't? They're a bad stock, root an' branch, is th' Ratcliffes, an' it 'ull be a sore day for Marsh when th' Maister brings sich as yond

to th' owd house. Besides, he has sworn to kill her folk."

"Well, ye cannot cut young hearts i' two wi' kinship, an' that's what I'm telling thee. Mistress Ratcliffe hes nawther father nor brother living, an' them she dwells wi' up at Wildwater are nowt so near to her but what a good lad's love is nearer."

"Hod thy whisht, lass!" cried Hiram on the sudden. "Th' Maister is looking this way at last. Begow, but he mun hev had summat deep to say to her, or he'd have seen us afore this."

Shameless Wayne reddened on seeing the occupants of the stile, and whispered to Janet, and the two of them turned quickly about, taking a cross-line back toward the moor.

"Flaired to be spoken to by honest folk," said Hiram.

"Flaired o' thy sour face, more like," snapped Martha.

Hiram was about to make one of his slow, exasperating responses when he clutched Martha by the arm and again pointed over the stile—not up the ploughed field this time, but across the pasture-land abutting on it.

"We shall know by an' by what Red Ratcliffe has in mind," he muttered; "dost see him yonder, Martha, crossing th' pasture? Ay, an' now he's following 'em up th' wallside."

"So he is. There's no mistaking that red thatch o' hisn—'twill set th' sun afire one bonnie day, I'm thinking. Does he mean to do th' Maister a hurt, think ye, Hiram?"

Hiram stretched himself with the air of a man who has work to do. "He's too far off yet for a pistol-shot; but he's quickening pace a bit, an' Lord knows what he's bent on. I reckon I'll just clamber ower th' wall here, Martha, an' wend down t' other side, and get a word wi' him as if 'twar chance like."

"Tak care o' thyseln, Hiram. There are some of us wod ill like to see harm come to thee."

But Hiram was deaf to blandishments. He had gone far enough for one morning, and, all else apart, he was no whit sorry to slip out of temptation's way.

"There's no telling when a Ratcliffe is about," he said, putting one leg over the low wall, "an' th' Maister is so throttle-deep i' foolishness just now that he's ripe-ready to fall into ony snare that's laid for him. Begow, Martha, but I don't know what th' world wod come to if there war no Hiram Hey to straighten it now and again!"

Martha sighed for the interrupted wooing as she lifted her pail from the stile. Hiram Hey moved surely, it might be, but life seemed short for such masterly painstaking slowness.

"It's war nor driving pigs to market, is getting Hiram to speak plain," she said to herself, setting off for home.—"Tha'll be back to thy dinner, Hiram?" she

added over her shoulder.

"For sure I will. There's more nor dinner to tempt me down to Marsh," he cried, his rashness gaining on him now that he stood on the far side of the wall.

On no point save wedlock, however, did Hiram fail to know his purpose. He might have much to say about the young Master, but he had no mind to see harm come to him; and so he moved with a steady swing across the field, then turned sharp and crossed to the wall behind which Red Ratcliffe was creeping at a point some ten-score yards from the stile. He stopped then and leaned a pair of careless arms over the wall and looked everywhere but at the object of his manoeuvres, whose progress he had guessed to a nicety.

"Why, is't ye, Maister Ratcliffe?" he cried, letting his eyes fall at last on the tall, lean figure that stood not two yards away on the far side of the wall.

Ratcliffe glanced at him, but could not guess whether Hiram's stolid face hid any deeper thought than an idle wish to chatter. "'Tis I, plain enough," he growled.

"Nay, doan't fly at me—on a grand day like this, an' all. I thowt mebbe ye'd stepped on to th' Marsh land just to pick up a two-three wrinkles about farming. 'Tis not oft we're favoured wi' a sight o' ye down here."

"Dost think I need come here to learn any point of tillage?" laughed the other angrily.

"Well, I thowt it showed good sense i' ye. We're a tidy lot at Marsh, so folk say, an' I'm none blaming ye at Wildwater, ye understand for knawing a bit less about farming nor us. Your land's high, for one thing, an' lean as a scraped flint—I warrant it does your een good to see sich lovesome furrows as them, ye're walking ower."

"If speech can earn thee a cracked crown, thou'lt not long go whole of head," snapped Ratcliffe, beginning to move forward.

"Theer, theer! Th' gentry's allus so hot when a plain man strives to talk pleasant like to 'em. But it's live an' let live, I allus did say, an' sich fair spring weather as this hes a trick o' setting my tongue wagging." A sly glance at the other's back told him that Red Ratcliffe must be fetched up sharp if he were to be prevented from following Wayne of Marsh and Janet. "It sets other folk's tongues agate, too, seemingly," he added, glancing toward the hill-crest over which his Master and the girl were disappearing; "they mak a fine couple, doan't they, Maister, him an' Mistress Ratcliffe?"

Ratcliffe faced about. "Palsy take thee!" he cried. "Art thou a fool, only, Hiram Hey, or dost think to jest with thy betters?"

"Nay, I'm nobbut a fool, I reckon," said Hiram, shaking his head mournfully. "I can't say owt to please ye, 'twould seem, choose what, so I'd better hod my whisht. When I see a bonnie lass, an' th' finest lad i' th' moorside beside her—

why, I thowt it could do no harm just to speak on 't, like."

"The finest lad in the moorside?" sneered Ratcliffe. "Since when did Wayne the Shameless earn his new title?"

"What, ye've not heard his praises then? I may hev my own opinion—ivery man hes a right to that—but Marshcotes an' Ling Crag can find nowt too good to say about him nowadays. Oh, ay, they all grant 'at th' Wayne land is th' best on th' moor, an' ots Maister th' handiest chap wi' sword or farming-tools. 'Tis sad, for sure, that there's such bad blood 'twixt ye an' th' Waynes; but this courtship 'ull mebbe cure it.—Nay, now, doan't be so hasty! I speak according to my lights; they may be poor uns, as Blind Tom o' Trawdon says, but they're all I've getten to go by."

Not a muscle of Hiram's face told how he was enjoying this skirmish with his enemy; only an added watchfulness of eye told that he half expected the other to strike him. His Master was out of sight now, and there was so much gained, whatever chanced to himself. But Ratcliffe lost his anger on the sudden, and turned to Hiram with something near to good-nature in his tone.

"Well, thou'rt dry, Hiram, with a shrewd wit of thy own, but I warn thee for thy own sake not to couple any Wayne with Mistress Ratcliffe in thy gossip.—Ay, and that calls another thing to mind; they say ye Wayne folk cut peats on the Wildwater land last summer, and ever since I've been seeking a chance to tell thee we'll have no more of that."

Hiram, wondering what lay under this change of front, answered slowly. "We're no thiefs, Maister; an' if our peat beds lie foot-to-heel wi' yourn, is that to say we'd ower-step th' boundary? Besides, we've no call to; our side o' th' bed yields better peats——"

"Well, I judge by what I'm told, and our farm-folk told us further that ye had carted some of their own peats as they lay up-ended for the drying."

"Begow, that's a likely tale!" cried Hiram, roused at last. "When we worked noon an' neet for a week, cutting an' drying an' carting, to be telled we——"

"There! Thou'rt honest, Hiram, and I'll take thy word for it," laughed Ratcliffe. "So the peats have lasted, have they? Ours are all but done after this cursed winter."

"Now, what's he at?" muttered Hiram. "When th' Ratcliffe breed hatches a civil word, they allus want stiff payment for 't.—Our peats are lasting fine, an' thankee," he said. "'Tis all a matter o' forethought, an' some fowk hesn't mich o' that. Oh, ay, we've getten a shed-full next to th' mistals, let alone th' stack at th' far-side o' th' yard; an' it's April now, so I reckon we shall see th' winter through. Ye niver catch us tripping down at Marsh."

"Not oft," said Ratcliffe, with a crafty smile.—"Faith, though, thy boasting would move better if it had less to carry, Hiram. We're all at fault once in a while,

and I warrant that, if the peats will last, your bedding—bracken and the like,—has fallen short."

"Then ye'll warrant to little purpose," put in Hiram, with triumph, "they lig side by side, th' peats an' th' bedding—an' if ye'll step down an' tak a look at Marsh ye'll find a fairish heap o' both sorts."

He laughed at the humour of the invitation, and Red Ratcliffe followed suit as he turned on his heel.

"Another day, Hiram, and meanwhile I'll take word back to Wildwater, that we've all to learn yet from the wise men who dwell at Marsh."

"Scoff as ye will, ye're varry right there," muttered Hiram, as he too, went his way. "But I'd like to know what made ye frame to speak so civil all at once."

Red Ratcliffe was already moving across the field, with a light step and a face that was full of cunning glee; nor did he slacken pace until, half toward Wildwater, he saw Shameless Wayne parting from Janet at the corner of the crossroads. His face darkened for a moment, then cleared as he watched Shameless Wayne pass down the road to Marsh.

"I've learned two things worth the knowing to-day," he murmured, striding after his cousin, "and both should cut solid ground from under Wayne's feet. God, though, they did not part like lovers! Has Janet's needle-tongue proved oversharp for Shameless Wayne? Ay, it must be so—and now she's full of sorrow for the quarrel, all in a maid's way, and droops like any wayside flower."

Janet turned as his step sounded close behind her; she glanced at the road which Wayne had taken, and then at Red Ratcliffe, but his manner was so open and free of its wonted subtlety that she told herself, with a quick breath of relief, that her secret was safe enough as yet.

"Would'st have company on the road, cousin?" he said lightly.

"I had better company before thou cam'st," she answered lifting her dainty brows.

He stared at her, thinking that she meant, at the bidding of one of her wilder moods, to make frank avowal of her meeting with Shameless Wayne. "Better company? Whose was't?" he snapped.

"Why, sir, my own." There was trouble deep-seated in her eyes, but her tone was light; for she had learned by hard experience to know that only mockery could keep Red Ratcliffe's surly heat of passion in any sort of check.

"Art something less than civil, Janet, to one who loves thee."

"Well, then, why fret thyself with such a thankless Mistress? I'm weary of hearing thee play the lover, and I tell thee so again—for the third time, I think, since yesterday."

"Thou'lt be wearier still before I've done with wooing thee. Hark, Janet; 'tis no light fancy, this——"

"Light or heavy, sir, 'tis all one to me. My thoughts lie off from wedlock."

He stopped and gripped her hands with sudden fury. "By God, if thy love turns to any but me," he cried, "I'll cut the heart out of the man who wins thee."

She pulled her hands away and stepped back a pace or two; and amid all his spleen he could not but admire the fine aloofness of her carriage. Not like a maid at all was she; heaving breast, and bright, watchful eye, and back-thrown head, seemed rather those of some wild thing of the moors, pursued and driven to bay among the wastes where hitherto she had lived out of sight and touch of men.

"So it comes to this, Red Ratcliffe?" she said slowly. "The sorriest fool at Wildwater dares to use force when I refuse him love?"

"'Twas the thought thou might'st love elsewhere that stung me," he muttered, cowed by her fury.

Again a passing doubt crossed her mind—a doubt lest he had reached the cross-roads in time to see her bid farewell to Shameless Wayne. "How should I love elsewhere?" she faltered.

Red Ratcliffe paused, wondering if he should loose his shaft at once, but he thought better of it. Janet was safe under hand at Wildwater for the nonce, and if he bided his time until her mood has less gustiness in it, he might use his knowledge to better purpose.

"Nay, I trust thy pride far enough, and thy fear of the Lean Man, to know thou'lt not wed worse blood than ours," he said softly; "but I'm not the only one at Wildwater that hungers for thee, and there are the Ryecollar Ratcliffes besides."

"And fifty more belike. What then, sir?"

"This—that I'll have thee, girl, if every Ratcliffe of them all says nay," he muttered savagely.

She glanced at him, then turned her back and moved to the far side of the road. "Art a man sometimes in thy words," she said, over her shoulder. "If only thou could'st show deeds to back them—why, I think I'd forgive thee the folly of thy love for its passion's sake. There, cousin! I'm weary o the talk, and my steps will not keep pace with thine to Wildwater."

"Thou askest deeds? Well, thou shalt have them before the week is out," he said, and struck across the moor. At another time he would not have accepted such easiful dismissal; but he knew the game was his now, and there was nothing to be gained by matching his wit with hers through two long miles.

"What ailed me to walk so openly with Wayne of Marsh?" mused Janet, following at her leisure. "I had as lief we were seen by grandfather himself as by yonder spiteful rogue— And all to what end? Wayne is against me, too, though his face cannot hide"—she stopped, and her trouble melted into a low laugh—"cannot hide what I would see there."

Red Ratcliffe did not go straight into the hall as he reached Wildwater. Some dark instinct, begotten of fight and plot and brute passion barely held in check, drew him to the pool that underlay the house. The look of the sullen water, the old stories that were buried in its nether slime, touched a kindred chord in him, and he gleaned a sombre joy from standing at the edge and counting again the dead which tradition gave the pool. He was roused by a touch on his shoulder, and looking round he saw old Nicholas watching him with a grim air of approval.

"It has a speech of its own, eh, lad? And wiser counsel under its speech than most I hear," said Nicholas, pointing to the water.

"Ay, it has hid a Wayne or two aforetime, and it seems to crave more such goodly food. Yet 'tis strange, sir, that Barguest is said to lie here o' nights. 'Tis he, they say, that kills the fish and keeps the moor-fowl from nesting on the banks. What should the guardian of Marsh House do sleeping cheek by jowl with us?"

The Lean Man quailed for a moment, as he had quailed when Nanny Witherlee told him how he had crossed Barguest on the Marsh threshold. But the disquiet passed. "Tush, lad!" he cried. "Leave Waynes to their own old wives' tales, and come to a story with more marrow in 't. Didst learn what I sent thee out to learn?"

Red Ratcliffe lost his brief touch of superstition. "Ay—and that without going nearer than half a league to Marsh. As I was on my way there I chanced on Hiram Hey, and the wry old fool told me all I asked with never a guess at my meaning."

"There's enough, is there?"

"And to spare. I've seen to the hemlock, too, and one of the lads is to go——"

"Hold thy peace!" cried Nicholas, chiding him roughly. "Here's Janet, and she must guess naught of this; 'twould only fright her."

Red Ratcliffe moved away as his cousin came up, for he had no wish to make further sport for her yet awhile. "Fright her, poor lambling, would it?" he muttered. "The Lean Man's care for her is wondrous—but what if he knew that I had learned more to-day than ever he sent me out in search of?"

"Come here, Janet," said Nicholas, as the girl halted, doubtful whether he wanted speech of her. "There has been somewhat on my tongue this long while past, and every time I see thee come in from these fond walks of thine, I read two things more clearly."

"And what are they, grandfather?" she said, slipping a coaxing hand into his.

"That the wind gives thee beauty enough to tempt any man—and that there's danger in it so long as we're at feud with the Waynes."

"But that is an old tale, sir," she pouted, "and—and no harm has come to me

as yet."

"The more cause to fear it then, to-morrow, or the next day after. See, lass, I would not deal hardly with thee, but I'll not give way on this one point, plead as thou wilt. There are Ratcliffes in plenty who want thee in wedlock, and 'tis time thou hadst a strong arm about thee. Thou'lt wander less abroad, I warrant, soon as thou hast a goodman."

"But, grandfather, I do not want to——"

"Be quiet, child! And let an older head take better care of thee than thou wilt ever take of thyself. Besides, they are so hot for thee, one and another, that there's danger of a feud among ourselves if the matter is not settled one way or the other. Red Ratcliffe asked me for thee only yesternight."

"If the world held him and me, sir, I would go to the far side of it and leave him the other half," she cried, with childish vehemence.

"Well, well, there are others. I gave him free leave to win thee if he could, and he must do his own pleading now."

They stood by the water-side awhile in silence, the girl in sore fear of what this new mood of her grandfather's might bring, and Nicholas returning to the foolish scrap of goblin-lore with which Red Ratcliffe had just now disquieted him. Do as he would, the Lean Man could not hide from himself that a dread the more potent for its vagueness, had been creeping in on him ever since he learned what had lain on the Marsh doorway when he went to nail his token on the oak. Broad noon as it was now, the light lay heavy on the water, and Nicholas could not keep his eyes from it, nor his mind from the legend that named it the Brown Dog's lair.

"Janet," he said, looking up at her with a light in his keen eyes which she had never yet seen there, "there's a weak link, they say, in every man's chain of life, and it has taken me three-score years to find out mine. This Barguest that they talk of? Dost credit him, lass?"

She glanced quickly at him, puzzled by the vague terror in his voice. "I have lived with the voices of the moor," she answered gravely, "till I can doubt plain flesh and blood more easily than Barguest, and the Sorrowful Woman, and——"

"Pest!" he broke in impatiently. "'Tis fitting a maid should let her fancies stray. But a grown man, Janet? There! The pool breeds more than the one sort of vapour, and we'll stay no longer by it.—Think well, lass, on what I said of wedlock, for thou'lt have to make early choice."

Hiram Hey, meanwhile was sitting beside the kitchen hearth at Marsh, watching Martha clear the board after dinner; for he always dined at the house, thought he slept and took his other meals at the Low Farm. The rest of the serving-folk had gone to this or that occupation, and Hiram was minded to take up his wooing again at the exact spot where he had left it an hour or two earlier.

"I've been thinking o' things, Martha, sin' I saw thee looking so bonnie-like

this morn," he said.

"What sort o' things?" she asked, demurely sweeping the table free of crumbs.

Hiram ruffled the frill of hair under his chin, and smiled with wintry foolishness. "Well, what's wrang for a young un like th' Maister is right enough for a seasoned chap like me. I'm rather backard i' coming forrard, tha sees, but it cam ower me t' other day that I mud varry weel look round an' about me; an' if I could find a wench 'at war all I looked for i' a wench——"

"Ay, what then, Hiram?"

He paused, and shuffled his feet among the heap of farmyard mud which had already fallen from his boots. "Why, there's niver no telling—niver no telling at all," he said, with an air of deep wisdom.

"Sakes, he's a slow un to move, is Hiram," muttered the girl, losing patience at last.

"Well, I mun be seeing after things, I reckon, or there'll be summat getting out o' gear," said Hiram, rising and stretching himself in very leisurely fashion.

"Ay, tha'rt famous thrang," flashed Martha. "Comes moaning an' groaning, does Hiram, at after he'd done his day, an' swears th' wark goes nigh to kill him. An' this is what it comes to most days, I reckon—loitering by stiles, an' talking foolishness to wenches 'at are ower busy to hearken——"

"Nay, lass, nay! I wod liefer we didn't part fratching."

"Well, hast getten owt to say?" she asked, facing him abruptly.

"Say? Well, now, I'm backard i' coming forrard, as I telled thee—but tha'rt as snod-set-up a wench as iver——"

"Thanks for nowt. Good-day, Hiram. Tha'rt backard i' most things, I'm thinking," said Martha, flouncing out into the yard.

Hiram looked after her awhile, then shook his head. "I war right to go slow," he murmured. "Women's allus so hasty, as if they war bahn to dee to-morn, an' all to get done afore their burial.—Well, I mun see to yond tummit seeds, I reckon; but I wod like to know what Red Ratcliffe war up to; summat he'd getten at th' back on his mind, but what it war beats me."

And something Red Ratcliffe had in mind; but what it was, and how nearly it touched those at Marsh, Hiram was not to learn this side the dawn.

CHAPTER X

WHAT CROSSED THE GARDEN-PATH

Shameless Wayne, returning late on the day which had witnessed Hiram Hey's cautious efforts toward wedlock, found his step-mother standing at the courtyard gate, a look of trouble in her face and her eyes fixed on the rounded spur of moor above. Wayne's heart was growing daily harder against the strong, and softer where any sort of weakness was in case; and the mad woman's plight, her frailty and friendlessness, seemed to strike a fresh note of pity in him at each chance meeting.

"What ails thee, little bairn?" he said, slipping from the saddle and coming close to her.

She put one hand into his, with the trustfulness which only he was sure of winning from her. "I have been frightened, Ned. It was to have been my wedding-morn, and I dressed all in white and went to church—and instead of the altar there was a great grave opened, and men fighting all about it—and I could not understand."

"Never try. 'Tis over and done with long since; the grave is shut down tight,—and all your ghosties with it, little one."

"Is it over and done with?" she said.

Her voice was passionless and clear, and Wayne was growing more and more perplexed of late to know what lay beneath these sudden, wandering questions of his step-mother's.

"Ay, 'tis over," he said; "how should it be else? See how the leaves are greening, and tell me who would think of graves on such an April eve as this?"

"The leaves are greening? Nay, thou'rt jesting with me, they're reddening, like the sun up yonder—like the long wisp of sky that trails across the brink-field there. And the graves, too, are red—they keep opening, opening, and I dread to look for fear of what may come from them. Hold both my hands tight, Ned—it should have been my wedding-morn, and a great trouble came, and now I can see no green fields, nor trees, for the red mist that hugs them. Dear, thou'lt not leave me?"

"Nay, I'll not leave thee, little one," began Wayne, and turned as a footstep sounded close behind them.

Hiram Hey, crossing from the mistals, had caught sight of the Master and had stopped to ask for his orders touching the morrow's farm-work—orders which he received day by day with the same grudging, half-scornful air, in token that the new rule liked him little.

"Th' brink-field is sown, an' we're through wi' ploughing them lower fields. What's to be done next, Maister?" he asked with a side glance of curiosity at Mistress Wayne.

Wayne was not minded to think of farming-matters to-night; and Hiram, noting his mood, took a wry sort of pleasure in holding him to the topic.

"I thowt he'd get stalled afore so varry long," said the old man to himself. "Ay, he can't bide to think o' crops to-neet."

He began to rock with one foot the mossy ball that had lain so long under the right-hand pillar of the gateway; and the set of his body spoke of leisure and of obstinacy.

"Well?" he asked at last. "There's marrow i' what ye said to me a while back, Maister. Sleep ower th' next day's wark, an' ye go wi' a ready hand to it i' th' morn."

Wayne, following the motion of Hiram's foot with impatient spleen, tried to bring his mind round to the matter, but could not. His meeting with Janet had left him out of heart and spent with the old struggle between love and kinship.

"Pest take thee, come to me after supper for thy orders," he began. Then, pointing to the stone, "As a start," he added, "thou canst set that ball up on the gateway top. It wears an untidy look, and every day I've meant to tell thee of it."

"Th' gate-ball? Ye'll not know, happen, that it fell on th' varry day your mother died? An' th' owd Maister said 'at it should lig theer, being a sign i' a way o' speaking."

Hiram could always find excuse for evading a troublesome bit of work; but his words brought a stranger light to the Master's face than he had looked to see there. Superstitious at all times, the strained order of these latter days had rendered Wayne well-nigh as full of fancies as the Sexton's wife; the stone here was a sign, and as such he would not tamper with it.

"It shall lie there, Hiram," he said slowly, "until the old Master is avenged on those who slew him. 'Tis a token, haply.—Come, little bairn," he added, turning to his stepmother. "Come with me while I put my horse in stable, and then we'll sup together."

Hiram turned over the ball after Wayne had gone. "Lord save us, there's a power o' fooil's talk wends abroad," he growled. "What hes yond lump o' stone getten to do wi' th' feud? A token, is't? Well, I'm saved a bit o' sweating, so I'll noan fratch about it."

Mistress Wayne followed Ned quietly, as some dumb favourite might have done, and watched him stable his horse, leaning against the doorway the while and prattling of a hundred foolish matters. Then she fell silent for a space, and Shameless Wayne, glancing up, saw that she was crying bitterly. Angered at his own impotence to help her, he spoke more gruffly than his wont.

"Some one has frightened you. Who was 't?" he said.

His peremptoriness seemed to bring back her memory. "'Twas—what call you him?—the man with the hard eyes and the lean face, and one ear clipped level with his cheek. He met me on the road this afternoon——"

"What, Nicholas Ratcliffe?"

"Ratcliffe—yes. He lives in a great drear house above Wildwater Pool, and once—nay, I cannot recall, 'tis so long ago; but I think he was cruel to me when I went to seek my lover. And to-day he stopped me as I tried to pass him by."

Wayne finished rubbing down his horse, then turned quietly. "What said he?" he asked.

"Ned, don't look so stern! It frightens me. And thy voice is hard, too, as it was when I heard thee bid them throw the vault-stone down."

"There are matters that make a man hard, little bairn. Was Nicholas Ratcliffe cruel to you?"

"Oh, so cruel," she said, shivering. "He looked through and through me, Ned, and laughed as I never heard any one laugh before, and asked me where I had found shelter. And when I told him he laughed again, and said that soon there would be none at Marsh to give me shelter. And then——"

"Aye—and then?"

"He—he told me all that he meant to do to thee, Ned; and when I tried to run away he held me by the arm, and hurt me—see! I carry the marks of it."

She lifted her sleeve and held out her arm to him; and he nodded gravely as he saw the red finger-prints clear marked in red upon the dainty flesh.

"He hates thee, Ned," she went on. "Why should he hate thee? I seem to have heard something—nay, it has gone!—what has he against thee, dear?"

Shameless Wayne laughed grimly. "Less than I have against him, bairn. God, could he make sport of such as you?"

"Shall you kill him, Ned?" she asked, looking up suddenly.

He started at the question, voiced in so quiet and babyish a tone. "God willing, little bairn," he said, and was for crossing to the house, but she led him through the wicket that opened on the garden.

"Come see my flowers first, Ned," she pleaded, forgetful altogether of her fright. "There's a clump of daffy-down-dillies opening under the wall, and I bade them keep their eyes open till thou cam'st to say good-night to them.—'Tis summer-time, I think; look at the lady's slipper yonder, and the celandines—Is't not strange there should be so sweet a spot among these dreadful moors? I feel safer here always—as if none could do me hurt while I stayed with the flowers. Ned, wilt not stay here, too? The man with the hard face would never think to look for thee among the flowers, would he?"

"May be not," he answered lightly.—"See, bairn, your daffies have closed their eyes after all; they could not hold up their heads for weariness, I warrant, when they found me so late in coming."

"Shall I wake them, Ned?" she asked, looking gravely from the flowers to his face.

"Nay, let them be till morning, and then I'll have a word with them. 'Tis

supper-time, bairn, and we must not keep Nell waiting."

"Nell does not shrink away from me as she did a little while ago," said Mistress Wayne.

He held his peace, wondering that this elf-like woman should note so many trifling matters that might well have escaped her; and he was glad to think that Nell's heart was softening to the other's helplessness.

Nell was already at table, with the lads and Rolf Wayne of Cranshaw, who had just ridden across to see that all was well at Marsh. The lads were eyeing a saddle of mutton wistfully, and their faces brightened soon as Shameless Wayne took his place at the head of the board.

"Hungry, lads?" he said, with a kindly glance at them. "Well, and should be, after the rare work we've done to-day with sword and spear—Rolf, there'll be four more fighting men at Marsh by and by; these youngsters take to cut and parry like ducks to water."

"Ye'll need more fighting men at Marsh," said Rolf, gravely, and would have said more, but checked himself.

"Likely," said Shameless Wayne, glancing at his brothers. "How fares it with the wounded up at Cranshaw?"

"As well as might be. We took some deepish cuts a fortnight since, and they'll take time to heal."

Mistress Wayne ceased playing with her food, and looked steadfastly at Rolf. "Ratcliffe of Wildwater said 'twould never heal, when he met me on the road; he saw me looking at his ear, I fancy, for he said 'twould never heal till Ned yonder had paid his price for the blow. Ay, but he's hard, hard! I shall hide Ned among the flowers lest they trap him some day on the moors."

Nell, seated next to her, whispered some soothing speech; scorn was in the girl's face yet, but it was plain that compassion was ousting her fierce hatred of her step-mother. Wayne of Cranshaw glanced across at Ned with gloomy wonder. The boys nudged one another, and laughed a little. But Mistress Wayne was already following a fresh fancy, and she paid no heed to the deep pause that followed her speech.

"See the moon peeping through the lattice!" she cried, moving to the door. "It shames the candle-light in here; thou'lt not be angered, Ned, if I slip away to the garden? The fairy-folk come out of the daffy-bells, and they'll miss me sadly if I do not go."

"But, bairn, you've eaten naught."

"Why, how fond thou art! The fairies will not talk to me unless I seek them fasting."

She waved a light hand to him at the door and was gone. Griff, the eldest of the lads, looked after her and then at Shameless Wayne.

"There'll be more than fairies sporting in the moonlight—something plump-bodied and more toothsome," he cried. "The low pasture will be thick with hares; can we go down, Ned, and take the dogs with us?"

Shameless Wayne did not answer just at once; then, "Ay, ye can go," he said, "if ye'll keep to the low lands. The Wildwater hares are friskier, but ye must be content with worse sport. Dost promise, Griff?"

"'Twould be the best sport of all to catch the Lean Man out of doors and set the dogs at him," said Griff, with a laugh.

"Doubtless—but if Wildwater is in your minds, I shall keep you safe at home."

"Well, then, we promise, Ned. Wilt let me have thy dog Rover? There's none at Marsh as quick on a hare's track as he."

"Ned, ought they to go," put in his sister. "'Tis late, and you never know what cover hides a Ratcliffe."

"Pish! We must not coddle growing lads.—Off with you, and if ye take Rover, see that ye bring him back again; I doubt he will not answer to your whistle as he does to mine."

"They're likely lads, and stiff-set-up," said Wayne of Cranshaw, as the four of them raced pell-mell out of the hall. "But thou need'st more than these about thee, Ned."

Shameless Wayne squared his jaw, after a fashion that brought back his father to Nell's mind. "I've said nay once and for all to what thou hast in mind," he answered. "What, leave Marsh and show the white rabbit-scut to Nicholas Ratcliffe?"

"Show that thou hast sense enough to know when the odds are all against thee. I tell thee, ye Marsh Waynes would never learn when to give ground. There's fresh trouble brewing, Ned—and 'tis aimed all at thee."

"How, at me? Has the Lean Man, then, vowed friendship with Cranshaw and with Hill House?"

"Nay, but his hate is hottest against thee. He thought thee a fool, and he found thee somewhat different; and he blames thee altogether for their defeat in the kirkyard."

"How dost learn all this, Rolf?"

"The Lean Man makes a boast of it up and down, and only to-night as I came through Marshcotes, they told me he had sworn to pin thy right hand to thy own door."

"Why, that was what Mistress Wayne said just now," cried Nell. Her eyes were fixed on her brother, and there was grief and something near to terror in them.

"Ay, her wandering talk hit straightish to the truth," said Wayne of Cran-

shaw. "Whether 'twas guess-work on her part, or whether she did meet Nicholas in the road, I cannot say—but any village yokel will tell thee what the Lean Man's purpose is. See, Ned, there are eight of us at Cranshaw; come and bring all thy folk with thee."

Shameless Wayne shook his head, and would have spoken, but the door was burst open suddenly and his brothers stood on the threshold, an unwonted gravity in their mien.

"The dogs are poisoned, Ned," said Griff.

"Poisoned? What, all of them?"

"All. When we went into the courtyard we found Rover stretched by the well, his muzzle half in the water, and his body twisted all out of shape."

"Hemlock," muttered Ned. "'Twas grown on Wildwater soil, I'll warrant."

"Then we went to the kennels, and found the doors open, and all the dogs but one laid here and there. The white bitch was missing, but she has gone to some quiet corner, likely, to die."

"God's curse on them!" cried Shameless Wayne, getting to his feet. "Why should they fight with the poor brutes when they dare not face their master?"

"'Tis but one more argument," said Rolf quietly. "Come to Cranshaw, Ned; it is witless to forego a plain chance of safety."

"Take Nell and the women-folk, if they will go—but the lads and I stay here while there's a roof to the four walls. Dost think I have not smirched the Marsh pride enough in times past?"

"That's done with, Ned; none doubts thee now, and thou'lt lose naught by seeking a safer dwelling."

"The Lean Man wants me. Well, he knows where to find me. Did father play hide-and-seek, leaving the old place to be burned to the ground, when the feud was up aforetime?"

"He stayed—as thou wilt do," said Nell, her pride undaunted by any ebb and flow of danger.

"But, Nell, 'tis stubbornness—'tis folly—" began Wayne of Cranshaw.

"That may be," answered the girl, "but it is Wayne stubbornness, and I was reared on that. I stay, and Ned stays, and with God's help we'll worst the Lean Man yet."

Shameless Wayne crossed to where his sister sat and laid a hand on her shoulder. "We'll worst him yet, Nell," he said, and turned to leave them to their confidences. "Why, where are the lads gone?" he cried, staring at the open door, through which a gentle breeze was blowing.

"They feared to miss their sport if they asked leave a second time," said Rolf, "and so they slipped away while thy back was turned to them."

"Young fools!" muttered Shameless Wayne, as he went out. "Could they not

keep to home when those who strew hemlock privily are within pistol-shot?—I'll walk round the yard and outbuildings, Rolf, and see if aught else has gone amiss."

"Hadst better have company," said Wayne of Cranshaw, moving to his feet.

"Nay. The times are hard for love-making; take thy chance while thou hast it, Rolf, or it may not come again."

Rolf looked after him, and wondered at his bitterness. But Nell, remembering Janet Ratcliffe, knew well enough which way her brother's thoughts were tending, and she sighed impatiently.

"'Tis well to love by kinship," she said.

Rolf missed her meaning, being full of his own fears for her.

"I've loved thee well, dear, and I fear to lose thee," he said, after a silence. "Wilt wed me out of hand and let me take thee safe to Cranshaw?"

"Not yet, Rolf. I cannot." Her voice was low; but he gleaned scant hope even from its tenderness.

"Think," he urged. "It is hard to have waited for the good day—waited through summer heat and winter frost, Nell—and then to see such danger lying on the threshold as may rob me of my right in thee. Thou know'st these Ratcliffe swine; a woman's honour is cheap as a man's life to them. Lass, give me the right to have thee in keeping day and night."

"Some day, Rolf—but not yet."

"Thou hast scant love for me, or none at all," he flashed, pacing moodily up and down the hall.

"That is not true, Rolf, and thou know'st it; but I have love for the old home, too, and love for Ned. I'm young, dear, as years go, but there's none save me to mother them at Marsh. What would Ned do, what would the lads do, if I left them to fight it out alone? And Ned"—she faltered a little—"Ned is very new to repentance, and who knows how the wind would shift if he had none to care for him?"

"He would follow thee to Cranshaw—where I would have him be."

"Nay, but he would not! If he stood alone, without a sword to his hand, he would wait here for what might come."

Still he pleaded with her, and still she held to her resolve. And at last he gave up the struggle.

"None knows what the end will be, but we must win through it somehow," he said.

And then, her object gained, she crept close to his embrace, and, "Rolf," she whispered, "how can Ned fight the Lean Man and all his folk? Is it true that he is the first victim chosen?"

"I fear it, lass."

"But, dear, I cannot bear to lose him! I cannot."

"What, all thy bravery gone? There, hide thy face awhile—the tears will ease thee. There's hope for the lad yet, Nell, for he means to live and he has a ready sword-arm."

Shameless Wayne, meanwhile, had gone the round of the farm-buildings, railing at the wantonness which had bidden the Ratcliffes kill the best hounds in Marshcotes; but beyond the dogs' stiffened bodies he had found no sign of mischief. Restless, and ill-at-ease about the lads' safety, he wandered into the garden in search of the frail little woman who had gone thither to seek the fairies. He said nothing of his troubles nowadays to Nell or to any of his kinsfolk; but Mistress Wayne offered the trusty, unquestioning sympathy that a horse or any other dumb animal might give, and day by day he was growing more prone to drop into confidences when he found himself alone with her, half-smiling at his folly, yet gleaning a sort of consolation from the friendship.

She was standing by the sun-dial when he found her to-night. The moonlight was soft in her neatly ordered hair and flower-like face, and Shameless Wayne thought that surely she was nearer kin to the other world of ghosts than to this workaday earth which had already proved too hard for her.

"Well, were the fairies kind to you?" he asked, leaning against the dial and watching the moon-shadows play across her face.

She pointed to a green ring traced in the blue-white dewdrops that gemmed the lawn. "Yes, they were kind," she said, "I'm friends with them, thou know'st, and they came and danced for me round yonder ring."

"And what has come of them? Did I scare them all away, little bairn?"

"Oh, no," she answered gravely. "They guessed, I think, that I was weary of them, and scampered off before thou camest. Wilt mock me, Ned, if I tell thee something?"

He did not answer—only shook his head and put his arm more closely round her.

"It is all so dark and strange. I seemed to fall asleep long, long ago, and then I woke to a new world—a world of mists and moonlight, Ned, where the human folk move like shadows and only the fairies and the ghosts are real. The fairies claimed me for their own, and I was content until I saw the wee birds nesting and the spring come in. But now I'm hungry, Ned, for something that the fairies cannot give." She stopped; then, "Didst meet thy lady-love to-day?" she asked.

Wayne's eyes went up toward the hills that cradled Wildwater. "Hast a queer touch, bairn, on a man's hidden wounds," he said, after a silence. "Did I meet my lady-love? Nay, but I met one who is playing the will-o'-the-wisp to my feet—one whom I love or loathe. Who told thee, child, that I had seen her?"

"I think it was Hiram Hey; he was telling Nanny when I went into the kitchen how he had seen you cross the moors with her."

"Trust Hiram to pass on the tale!" muttered Wayne.

"Ned, 'tis a drear world, and thou'rt not right to make it harder," said the little woman, turning suddenly to him. "Somewhere, in a far-away land, I once met love and scomed him; and I have lacked him ever since, dear."

He bent toward her eagerly; so grave and full of wit she seemed, and haply she was a better riddle-reader than he during these brief moments when she slipped into touch again with the things of substance. But the light was already pale in her childish eyes, and soon she was laughing carelessly as she traced the moon's shadow on the dial with one slender forefinger.

"See, Ned!" she cried. "It points to mid-day, when all the while we know 'tis long past gloaming. I wouldn't keep so false a time-piece if I were thou; the dandelions make better clocks at seeding-time."

The night was warm, and the moon-shadows of the gable-ends scarce flickered on the grass; but on the sudden a little puff of icy wind came downward from the moors and whimpered dolefully.

"The night wears shrewd, bairn, and we've talked moon-nonsense long enough," said Wayne sharply, turning to go indoors. He was sore that she had lost the thread of reason just when he most needed guidance.

But Mistress Wayne was shivering under a keener wind than ever was bred in the hollow of the sky, and her face was piteous as she followed her companion with her eyes. "Ned, canst not see it?" she stammered.

"See what? The shadows lengthening across your fairy-ring?" he said, impatiently.

"He crept behind thee—he's fawning to thy hand—shake him off, Ned, shake him off! Such a great beast he is——"

Shameless Wayne glanced sharp behind him. "By the Heart, 'tis Barguest she sees!" he muttered.

"Thou canst not help but see him—his coat is brown against thy darker wear—he's pressed close against thee, now, as if he fears for thee."

He could see naught, but there were those who had the second sight, he knew, and the old dreads crept cold about his heart. "Would God the lads were safe indoors," he muttered.

"How if it be thou he comes to warn?" she whispered.

He laughed harshly. "I've over many loads on my shoulders, bairn, to slip them off so lightly; but the lads are young to life yet, and full of heart—'twould be like one of Fortune's twists to send them across the Lean Man's path."

"Hark, Ned, didst hear?" she broke in, as a low whistle sounded through the leafing garden-trees.

Shameless Wayne could not find his manhood all at once; but at last he shook himself free of dread a little. "Ay, I heard some poor hound whimpering—

it has crept away to die, belike, after eating what those cursed Ratcliffes dropped. Come, child! There's naught save ague to be gained by staying among the night dews here."

CHAPTER XI
HOW THE RATCLIFFES RODE OUT BY STEALTH

The moon was crisp and clear over the low pastures when Griff and his brothers went down for the hunting. Wayne of Cranshaw had hit the truth when he said that they feared denial from Shameless Wayne, and so had slipped out quietly while their elders were discussing the old vexed topic as to whether Marsh should be left to its fate.

"Ned will not leave the old place," said Griff, as they crossed the first field.

"Not while he has us to help him to fight," answered Bob, the youngest, drawing himself to as full a height as his fourteen years allowed.

"There's naught in it," grumbled a third. "Ned would not let us go to the kirkyard that day, and there was a merry fight—and now all's as tame as a chushat on the nest. I thought the Lean Man would come down and let us have a spear-thrust at him; but we never see a Ratcliffe now, and 'tis hard after learning so many tricks of fence."

"Bide awhile," answered Griff sagely. "There'll be frolic yet if we can but wait for it. Dost think they poisoned the dogs for naught?"

"For spleen, likely, because Ned worsted them the other day; but if they do no more than that—Griff, 'twould have been rare sport to have gone up to Wildwater to-night."

Griff halted and glanced wistfully at the surly crest of moor above. "Nay; we gave our promise," he said, with manifest reluctance.

"How are we to hunt without the dogs?" put in Rob. "We left all our weapons in hall when we crept out so hastily—Good hap, there goes a fine fat fellow! We're missing the best of the moonlight with all this talk of a Lean Man who never shows his face."

They all four stood and watched the hare swing up the field and over the misty crest; knobby and big and brown the beast showed, and his stride was like the uneasy gallop of a horse whose knees are stiffening.

"We'll miss no more such chances," cried Griff. "There are two dogs at the

Low Farm; let's rouse old Hiram Hey out of his bed and get the loan of them."

Hiram Hey was not abed, as it chanced, but a rushlight was in his hands and his foot on the bottom stair when Griff's masterful rat-tat sounded on the door.

"What's agate?" he growled, opening the door a couple of inches. "Christian folk should be ligged i' bed by now, i'stead o' coming an' scaring peaceable bodies out o' their wits——"

"Thou'st little wit to be scared out of, Hiram," laughed Rob.

The door opened a foot-breadth wider. "Oh, it's ye, is 't? Ay, there's shameless doings now up at Marsh. I' th' owd Maister's days ye'd hev been abed at sunset, that ye wod."

"We carry arms now, and know how to use them; so keep a civil tongue in thy tousled head," said Griff, with a great air of dignity. "We want to borrow thy dogs, Hiram."

"Oh, that's it? Well, how if th' dogs are anot to be hed at ony lad's beck an' call?"

"We'll take them without a by-your-leave in that case. Come, Hiram, the hares are cropping moon-grass so 'twould make thy old mouth water just to see them."

"Let 'em crop for owt I care. What's comed to th' Marsh kennels that ye mud needs go borrowing?"

"Hemlock has come to them, and there's not one left alive."

Hiram Hey whistled softly, and set down his candle and came out into the moonlight. "That's not a bad start for a war finish," he said, turning his head to the low hill which hid the house from him, as if expecting some sound of tumult.

"Well, 'tis done, and we're missing sport the while," said Griff, with a lad's peremptoriness. "I can hear those dogs of thine yelping in the yard yonder. Loose them, Hiram."

Hiram did as he was bid, with many a grumble by the way; then stood and watched the lads go racing over the pastures, the dogs running fast in front of them. "There's bahn to be trouble, choose who hears me say 't," he muttered. "Ay, I knew how 'twould be when I see'd young Maister fly-by-skying wi' yond Ratcliffe wench; 'tis a judgment on him, sure. Ay, 'tis a judgment; an' hard it is that we should be killed i' our beds for sake of a lad's unruliness.—What, th' dogs is gi'eing tongue already? Well, I'd hev liked to see th' sport, if my legs war a thowt less stalled wi' wark."

Hiram had been asleep a good two hours before the chase was over. Pasture after pasture was drawn, the lads' zest waxing keener with each fresh kill, until they had more hares than they could carry.

"Look at the moon, lads! She's nearing Worm's Hill already, and half a

league from home," panted Griff, as he tried to add the last hare to his load.

"Ned will have somewhat to say to this," laughed Rob; "but faith 'twas worth all the scolding he can cram into a week."

"Ay, was it, but we'll put the best foot forward now. Let's leave half the hares under the sheep-hole in the wall yonder, or we shall never get back to Marsh till midnight.—There. They'll keep till morning safe enough, unless some shepherd's dog should nose them."

They set off at a steady trot, stopped at the Low Farm to close the yard gate on their borrowed dogs, and then took a straight course for Marsh. But breath failed them as they neared the homestead; their pace dwindled to a walk, and not even noisy Rob could muster speech of any sort. The moon was out of sight now behind the house, leaving the field that hugged the outbuildings in a grey half-light—a light so puzzling to the eyes that Griff, when he thought he saw the dim figure of a man crossing from the peat-shed to the yard, told himself that fancy was playing tricks with him. But Rob had seen the figure, too, and he clutched his brother's arm.

"What is that moving yonder?" he whispered.

A second figure, and a third, came shadowy-vague through the low doorway of the shed, and Griff could see now that each man carried an armful of peats, or ling, or bracken—he could not tell which. Fetching a compass up the field-side, the four of them turned and crept under shelter of the house, and so on tip-toe across the courtyard till the hall-door showed in front of them. The light was clearer here, though they were hidden altogether in the shadows, and they could see a tall fellow piling a last armful on the heap of ling and bracken that already mounted to the doorway-top.

"They mean to fire the house!" muttered Griff, and felt for his brothers in the dark and drew them about him in a narrow ring.

"There were three of them—what has come to the other two?" whispered Rob.

Griff drew in his breath and nipped the other's arm till he all but cried out with pain. "There are three doors to the house, likewise. Dost not see the plan? They have us housed safe as rattens in a gin, they think, and they mean to block up every door with flames. Hush! Yond lean-bodied rogue is turning his head this way."

The man at the door had finished making his heap, and had turned sideways as if listening for some signal. Griff thought that he had heard them, but a second glance showed him that the man's regard was away from their corner—showed him, too, a lean face, cropped level where the right ear should have been. "'Tis the Lean Man himself!" said Griff. "God, why did we leave our swords indoors—we can do naught—saw ye his pistols and his sword-hilt glinting when he turned?"

"We've got our wish, and by the Heart, we'll lilt at the Lean Man, armed or not armed," answered Rob, his voice threatening to rise above a whisper for very gaiety.

A low call sounded from behind the house; a second answered from the side toward the orchard. The Lean Man whipped flint and steel from his pocket, and struck a quick shower of sparks, and on the instant a roaring stream of fire shot upward from the bracken to the ling, and from the ling to the dark pile of peats.

"'Tis done. Fools that we were to raise no cry," groaned Griff.

Time had been hanging heavily meanwhile with Wayne of Cranshaw and his cousin. Shameless Wayne, when he came in from the garden with his stepmother, found Rolf fixed in his resolve to spend the night at Marsh.

"After what chanced to the dogs," he said, "they may strike to-night as well as any other—and strike they mean to, soon or late. There's no need for me at Cranshaw, and one arm the more here is worth something to thee, Ned, as thy numbers go."

"Yes, stay," said Nell, her eyes dancing bright now that danger showed close at hand—"and if they come, we'll give them a brisker welcome than they look for."

"Well, if ye will have it so; but I doubt there'll be no attack to-night," muttered Shameless Wayne. "They move slowly, the Ratcliffes, and strike when ye least expect them.—A pest to those lads. Do they mean to scour the fields till daybreak?—Nell, get to bed, and see that the little bairn is cared for. She's in one of her eerie moods to-night; thou'lt treat her kindly?"

"As far as I can master kindness toward her. Wilt call me, Ned, if—if ye need another arm to fight?"

"Tut, lass! There'll be no fight. Pay no heed to Rolf when he tries to scare thee. There! Good-night. Give the bairn somewhat to stay her fast, for she ate naught at supper."

"What has Mistress Wayne ever done that Ned's first thought should always be for her? Ah, but I hate her still, though God knows I cannot altogether kill my pity," said Nell to herself as she went up the stair in search of her unwelcome charge.

The two men drew close about the fire after Nell had left them. A flagon of wine stood between them, and an open snuff-box; but the wine stayed untasted, and the box was scarce passed from hand to hand as they stared into the fire, each busy with his own thoughts.

"I fear for those lads, curse them. How if I ride down to the low pastures to make sure that naught has happened to them and to bring them home?" said Shameless Wayne, breaking a long silence.

"What, and leave the house? The lads are safe enough, Ned; 'tis thou, not

they, the Lean Man aims at, and if he comes, 'twill be to Marsh."

"Art right—yet still I would liefer have them behind stout walls at this late hour."

Again they fell into silence. Both had had a long day, the one on foot, the other in the saddle, and presently Rolf was nodding drowsily. Shameless Wayne, glancing at him, wished that he could follow suit; but each time he dozed for a moment some memory came and stirred him into restlessness. He thought of Barguest creeping close beside him in the garden; he wondered what thread of subtle wit ran through the tangled skein of the mad woman's talk; he remembered what she had said to him of his love for Janet Ratcliffe.

"Take love while thou hast it; why make the world a sourer place than 'tis already?—Was not that what she said to me?" he murmured. "Well, she is fairy-kist, and they say that when such give advice 'tis ever safe to follow it. Christ, if I could but take love tight in both my hands, and laugh at kinship.—Nay, though! Like a deep bog it stands 'twixt her and me; and who shall cross so foul a marsh as that?"

He could not rid himself of the feverish round of thought, till at last Janet's face came and smiled at him from every glooming corner of the hall. He got to his feet, and paced the floor; and once he stopped at the wine-flagon and reached out a hand for it.

"Not again," he said, his arm dropping lifeless to his side. "There's no peace along that road when once—God curse the girl! I have said nay, and will say it to the fiftieth time; why should she haunt me like my own shadow?"

He looked at Rolf, slumbering deep by the hearth; and he laughed sourly to think that one man could sleep while another moved heavy-footed with his troubles across the creaking boards. He sat down again, and watched his cousin listlessly; and little by little his own head dropped forward, and his eyes closed, and Janet and he were wandering, a dream boy and dream girl, up by the grey old kirkstone that kept watch over lovers' vows among the rolling wastes of heath.

He stirred uneasily, and Rolf's voice came vaguely to him from across the hearth. "Get up, Ned! The hall is full of smoke—the flames are whistling up the house-side——"

"Where's the little bairn? She must be looked to. Nell has wit enough to save herself," said Shameless Wayne sleepily.

Wayne of Cranshaw shook him to his feet. "They've fired the door! Get out thy sword, Ned, and step warily."

Ned was full awake by now; and as he rushed to the main door, his thoughts were neither of himself nor Nell, but of the house that had weathered fire and flood and tempest through a half-score generations of Waynes.

"The flames sing from without. There's no fire inside as yet. We can save

the old place still," he cried, swinging back the heavy cross-beam that bolted the door.

"Stop, thou fool!" said the other, checking him. "Dost think the trap is not set plain enough, that thou should'st go smoke-blinded on to a Ratcliffe sword-point? We must try the side door leading to the orchard."

But Nell was downstairs by this time, with Mistress Wayne close behind her. "Ned, the kitchen-door's a-blaze, and the orchard door," she gasped—"and see—the oak is beginning to crack yonder, for all its thickness."

Shameless Wayne threw off his cousin's grasp, and drew the staples and turned the cumbrous key. The sweat stood on his forehead, and iron and wood alike were blistering to the touch. He jerked the door wide open, and over the threshold a live, glowing bank of peats fell dumbly on to the floor-boards. He strove to cross into the open, but could not; and athwart the red-blue reek he saw the Lean Man's eyes fixed steadfastly on his.

"God's mercy, this is what Barguest came to tell thee of," said Mistress Wayne, standing ghost-like and strangely undismayed in the lurid light.

"What, thou saw'st him!" cried Nell, her eyes widening with a terror no power of will could stifle. "Ned, keep back! Keep back, I say!— Ah!" as he tried to cross the flames and fell back half-blinded—"thanks to Our Lady that they lit so hot a fire."

The four lads, meanwhile, hidden in their corner of the courtyard, had watched the scene with sick dismay—had heard Ned unbar the door—had seen the Lean Man draw nearer, his bare blade reddened by the fire—had heard him laugh and mutter like a ghoul as he waited till the heat dwindled enough to let Shameless Wayne come through to him. This way and that Griff looked about him, seeking a weapon and finding none, his brain rocking with the thought of all that rested on his shoulders; and then his eyes brightened, and he stepped unheard amid the hissing of the flames, to where the smooth, round stone lay that had lately capped the right pillar of the gateway. A moment more and he was behind the Lean Man; he lifted the stone as high as unformed arms would let him, and hurled it full between Nicholas Ratcliffe's shoulderblades, and dropped him face foremost on to the flaming threshold.

"A Wayne! A Wayne!" he cried, and after him his three brothers took up the ringing call.

The Lean Man put his hand out as he fell, and twisted with a speed incredible till he was free of the flames; and then he scrambled to his feet somehow, and tottered forward.

"On to him, lads," cried Griff, and would have closed with him, but Nicholas rallied, and picked up his fallen sword, and moved backward to the gateway, swinging the steel wide before him. The lads gave back a pace or two, but he

dared not stop to pay them for their night's work; his eyes were dimming, and his right hand loosening on the hilt, and he knew that his course was run if Shameless Wayne should cross the threshold before he found a hiding-place. Griff watched him go, his fingers itching all anew for his unfleshed sword; and just as Nicholas staggered through the gate, the two Ratcliffes who had kept ward at the other doors came running round the corner of the house, ready to close with those who had given the cry. "A Wayne, a Wayne!" They found four lads against them, standing unarmed, and straight, and fearless altogether, in the crimson glow.

"Why, what's this?" said Red Ratcliffe, half halting. "Have these sickling babes driven old Nicholas off?"

"Ay," answered Griff, not budging by one backward step; "and would drive you off, too, ye Ratcliffe redheads, if we had any weapon to our hands."

Red Ratcliffe rapped out an oath and made headlong at the lad. And Shameless Wayne, seeing all this from across the gathering flames, leaped wide across the threshold, and landed on the outskirts of the fire, and cut Red Ratcliffe's blade upward in the nick of time. The other Ratcliffe drove in at him, then, and turned his blade in turn, and the fight waxed swift and keen for one half-moment; then Wayne got shrewdly home, and dropped his man close under the house-wall; and Red Ratcliffe, waiting for no second stroke, had turned and flashed through the gateway toward the moor before Wayne had guessed his purpose.

Shameless Wayne made as if to pursue; but the crackling of the flames behind warned him that there must be no delay if Marsh were to be saved.

"To the mistals, lads. Bring buckets and fill them at the well-spring!" he cried.

Griff and others needed no second bidding, but ran with him across the courtyard and pushed open the mistal-doors. The cows were lying quiet in their stalls; the place was fragrant with their breath, and every now and then there sounded a faint rattling through the gloom as one or other fidgetted sleepily on her chain. Shameless Wayne, dark as it was, knew where to lay hands on the feeding-buckets that were stored here in readiness for the coming summer; and soon he and Griff, and the three youngsters, were dashing water over the blazing threshold of the main door as fast as they could cross to the well and back again. Nell, meanwhile, once she had seen her brother safe through the fire and safe through the quick fight that followed, had found heart again.

"Did I not bid you call me if one more arm were needed?" she cried, with a touch of her old spirit. "See, Rolf, the floor is smouldering now, and the panels are starting from the wall. We must get through the kitchen-door and fetch water from the well behind.—What, has the fire roused thee at last, Martha? Come with us—and thou, Mary."

The maids, who had crept down in fearful expectation of what might meet

them below-stairs, followed cheerfully when they found no worse enemy than fire to meet. The kitchen-door fell inward as they reached it, but there was little danger on this side, for floor and walls were of stone, and the peats could find no fuel. Wayne of Cranshaw stamped out the embers, and they all ran, a bucket in either hand to the well that stood just outside the door, and thence back to the hall; and while those in the courtyard rained water on the one side of the flames, Wayne of Cranshaw and the women-folk on the other side kept down the smouldering fire that threatened every moment to set the hall ablaze from roof to rafters. For a fierce half-hour they worked, Nell bearing her full share of the toil, until the last angry eye of fire was quenched.

"Begow, if last week's wind hed been fly-be-skying up an' dahn, there'd hev been little left o' Marsh; 'tis a mercy th' neet war so still," said Martha, standing in her wonted easiful attitude and looking through the gaping doorway.

"A mercy, say'st 'a?" snapped Mary, whose eyes were on the spears and swords that lined the walls. "A mercy, when there'll be all yond steel to rub bright again to-morn? Sakes, I wodn't hev thowt th' smoke could hev so streaked an' fouled 'em—an' 'twas only yestreen I scoured 'em, too. Well, let them thank th' Lord as thank can, but for me I'll hod my whisht."

Shameless Wayne was likewise looking at the blackened walls, and Rolf saw that same light in his eyes that had been there when he stood at the vault-edge, and bade them bury alive the fallen Ratcliffes. Nell, too, was watching him, and she, who had never before feared him, knew now that there were deeps and under-deeps in her brother's nature which she had yet to plumb.

"What art thinking, Ned?" she asked, laying a timid hand on his sleeve.

"Thinking?" he said slowly. "I'm thinking that Marsh was all but blotted out—and I am learning how I loved the place. Keep guard awhile here, Rolf. I have an errand that will take me to the moors."

"Lad, thou'rt fay!" cried Wayne of Cranshaw, as his cousin moved toward the door. "Dost mean to seek the Lean Man out?"

Shameless Wayne turned and smiled in curious fashion. "Nay, only to leave a message for him on the road 'twixt this and Wildwater."

"Oh, Ned, I know what 'tis!" cried his sister, with sudden intuition. "For God's sake, dear, leave that to the Ratcliffes; it is not—not seemly to tamper with the dead." She pointed across the black remnants of the peats that strewed the threshold, and shuddered knowing what lay so close against the house-wall there.

Wayne flashed round on her, and the four lads, listening awe-struck from the far-end of the hall, shrank further back to hear the clear bitterness of voice he had.

"All shall be seemly henceforth—all, I say! I'll hunt the Lean Man as he hunts me—ay, and his tokens shall be mine. Hark ye, Nell! We're over soft, we

Waynes— Come here, lads," he broke off, beckoning to his brothers.

Griff came and stood before him, the others following slowly. "Yes, Ned?" he asked, breaking a hard silence.

"Ye were fools to stand up to Red Ratcliffe as I saw you do to-night. They would never do the like."

"Was't not well done, then?" said the lad, the corners of his mouth drooping.

Wayne laughed exceeding softly. "Ay, 'twas done as I would have you do it. God rest you, youngsters, and when your turn comes to hold the weapons—strike deep and swift."

He was gone without another word, and Nell looked at Wayne of Cranshaw in search of guidance.

Rolf shook his head. "As well dam Hazel Beck with straws as stop Ned when the black mood is on him," he said.

They heard him stop just outside the door, then clank across the courtyard; and soon the sound of hoof-beats was dying down the chill breeze that rustled from the moors.

Too sick at heart to listen to her cousin's rough words of comfort, Nell wandered up and down the house disconsolately, till at the last her walk brought her to the side-passage leading to the orchard. They had forgotten this third point of attack in their eagerness to save the hall; but here, too, though the door had fallen in, the bare walls and flagged passage had given no hold to the flames, which were burning themselves out harmlessly. Yet the girl went pale as her eyes fell on what the flickering light showed her at the far end of the passage, and she moved forward like one who strives to throw off an evil dream. Crouched above the smouldering wreckage, her hands spread white and slim to the glow, was Mistress Wayne; and she was crooning happily some ballad learned in childhood. She looked up as Nell approached, and smiled, and rubbed her hands gently to and fro across each other.

"Barguest was cold, poor beastie, so he lit a fire to warm himself. Is't not a pretty sight?" she said.

Nell bent to her ear. "What of Ned?" she asked. Her voice was tremulous, beseeching, for she knew that such as these had power to read the future. "What of Ned? Will he come back safe to-night?" she repeated.

"Safe? Why, yes—he's kind to me; how should he come to harm?"

CHAPTER XII

HOW THEY FARED BACK TO WILDWATER

Red Ratcliffe, soon as he had gained the moor, made for the shallow dingle where they had left the horses on their way to Marsh. He found his grandfather standing with one foot in the stirrup, striving vainly to leap to saddle; and he saw that the Lean Man's face was scarred with fire, and his hands red-raw on the reins.

"It has been a hard night for us," said the younger man. The words came dully, with terror unconcealed in them.

Nicholas let his foot trail idly from the stirrup, and stumbled as he faced about; but his eye was hawk-like as ever, and his tone as harsh. "A hard night—ay. There's a long reckoning now 'gainst Shameless Wayne. How comes it that thou rid'st alone?"

"Wayne leaped through the fire and cut Robert down; and I——"

"Fled, I warrant. What, could ye not meet him two to one?"

"There's witchcraft in it," muttered the other sullenly. "Didst see him fight that day in the kirkyard? Well, last night it was the same; he sweeps two blows in for every one of ours, and his steel zags down like lightning before a man's eye can teach his hand to parry. I tell you, some boggart fights for the Waynes of Marsh, and always has done."

The Lean Man nodded quietly. "Ay, is there—for I've seen the boggart.—There, fool, don't stand gaping at me like a farm-hind at a fair! Help me to saddle, for I am—" he paused, and forced a laugh—"I am weary a little with the ride from Wildwater to Marsh. And lead the chestnut by the bridle; we must find him a fresh master, 'twould seem."

Red Ratcliffe helped him up, marvelling to find that Nicholas, who was wont to be active as the best of them, had no spring in his body, no knee-grip when at last his feet were in the stirrups. He stole many a glance at the old man's face as they rode up the moor, and marked a change in it—a palpable change, which he could not understand, but which added a new dread to the heaviness that was already weighing on him.

"Robert is dead, I take it?" said Nicholas, as they passed the square-topped stone that marked one boundary of the Wildwater lands.

"Dead? Ay, for the lad cleft his skull in two clean halves."

Robert was the Lean Man's eldest-born; but if he had any touch of fatherly sorrow for the dead, he would not show it. "'Tis a pity," was all he said; "he had the best hand of all you younger breed.—The miles crawl past, lad, and the thirst of Hell is on me; get thee down and fill thy hat in the stream yonder."

Red Ratcliffe brought the water, and the old man stooped eagerly to it, then glanced behind him on the sudden and stifled a low groan.

"What is't?" cried his grandson. "See, sir, the water's trickling through; there'll be none left unless you drink."

"I—I thought—" stammered Nicholas, and pulled himself together with an effort. "'Twas only a fresh dizziness. There! Fill up again; the water will clear my wits, belike."

He drank greedily, and his knees were firmer on the saddle-flaps when they rode on. "I'll fight the pair of them, God rot them," he mumbled, slipping clumsily to ground as they gained the door of Wildwater.

Janet, hearing them ride under her chamber window, woke from a troubled sleep and ran to open the casement. All day her grandfather had worn the air of grim gaiety which she had learned to fear, and the lateness of his home-coming told her which way his errand had lain.

"They have made a night-attack," she murmured, fumbling blindly with the window-fastening. "And what of Shameless Wayne? If—if aught has chanced to him——"

She wrenched the window open and peered down into the courtyard. The moon, dropping toward the high land that stretched from Wildwater to the four corners of the sky, gave light enough to show her Nicholas and close behind him Red Ratcliffe with the bridle of a riderless horse in his right hand. These were her folk; but the girl's heart leaped at sight of the empty saddle, at the slowness of the Lean Man's movements, for these things told her that defeat had ridden home across the moor with them.

Nicholas, hearing the creak of the casement above, glanced sharply up. "Is't thou, Janet?" he called.

"Ay, grandfather. Have ye—have ye been a-hunting again?"

He fetched a hollow laugh. "Ay, down by Marsh; but the fox slipped cover before we were aware."

She found her courage then, and answered crisply, following the old metaphor. At all hazards she must make them think that her hatred against Wayne of Marsh was equal to their own. "The trickiest fox breaks cover once too oft; ye'll catch him yet," she laughed—"whose saddle goes empty of a rider?"

"Thy Uncle Robert's. Get thee to bed, lass, and use thy woman's trick of prayer."

"To what end shall I use it, sir?" she asked softly. It was easy to play her part of Ratcliffe, now that she knew how things had gone at Marsh.

"Why, to the end of vengeance." The Lean Man's voice rang thin and high with sudden passion. "Pray to the Fiend, girl, or to Our Lady, or to the first that bends an ear to thee—pray that the Waynes——"

He stopped, and Janet saw him shrink as if a shrewd wind had nipped him unawares. And then, without a word, he led his horse across the yard.

Janet still lingered at the casement, watching the moonlight fade away among the grey hollows of the moor. "I will pray," she murmured—"pray that the Waynes may win a rightful quarrel—pray that love may one day conquer kinship, and——"

"Janet!"

She looked down at Red Ratcliffe, standing close to the wall with face upturned to her window. "What is't?" she said coldly.

"Thou know'st as well as I. The times are perilous, and when a man loves he cannot wait.—Listen, Janet! I'm sick with longing for thee."

"The wind blows cold. Canst find no time more fitting for love-idleness?" she said, and shut the casement with a snap.

Red Ratcliffe halted a moment, for the night's work, unmanning him, had loosed his hotter impulses. Panic had held him, and after that dull fear; and now the brute in him rose up.

"Come back, thou wanton!" he cried, so loudly that Nicholas heard him from across the yard.

"Dost think I can wait all night while thou stand'st bleating under a lass's chamber-window?" roared the Lean Man. "Come, fool, and help me stable this nag of mine."

Red Ratcliffe moved away, sullenly, with a bridle in either hand, and found his grandfather leaning heavily against the door-post of the stable.

"Thou'lt have to groom the three of them," said Nicholas, in a failing voice. "That cursed fire has—has tapped my strength a little." He stood upright with a plain effort, and frowned on his grandson, and, "Lad," he said, "what wast saying to Janet just now? I gave thee free leave to win her if thou could'st—but, by the Living Heart, there shall none force her inclination."

"Ay, shall there," muttered the younger man, as he watched Nicholas turn on his heel and falter toward the house. "Red Ratcliffe shall force her inclination, when she hears how much he knows of her meetings with Shameless Wayne; were the Lean Man once to guess, he'd set finger and thumb to Janet's throat, I think, and crush the life out of her, though she's dear as his sword-hand to him.—Peste! How he staggers in the doorway. What if he has got his death-blow down there at Marsh? 'Twill be an ill hour for us when we go leaderless.—The devil's in the wind to-night; it seems to whistle a burial-song," he broke off, gloomily setting himself to rub down the horses.

But the Lean Man, as if bent on refuting his grandson's fears, was down betimes on the morrow. His face and hands were not good to see now that daylight showed each scar on them; but he had regained the most part of his strength, and he ate like one who sees long life before him.

"Where's Janet?" he asked, when breakfast was half through. "Oh, there

thou art, child. What ails thee to come down so late, when thou know'st I need thee as a sauce to every meal?"

All through the night her pity had been for those at Marsh;

but now, as her eyes met and shrank from the Lean Man's scars, as she heard the tenderness of voice which none but she could win from him, the girl came and laid a compassionate hand on his shoulder. "I slept all amiss, sir," she said, "through—through troubling for what chanced last night."

"Well, sit thee down, girl, and never trouble thy head again about so small a matter.—Small? Nay!" he cried with his old power of voice as he glanced round the board. "See these scars, lads—don't fear to take a straight look at them. We're loosening our hold on the Wayne-hate, and these should stiffen you. A scar for a scar; and he that kills Shameless Wayne, by trickery or open fight, shall——"

He paused, searching for some reward that should seem great enough and Red Ratcliffe broke suddenly into the talk.

"Shall have Janet there in marriage," he cried.

Nicholas looked hard at him, and then at Janet, and pondered awhile. The girl's face was white, but she kept her trouble bravely from the old man's glance.

"'Tis well for all maids to have an arm about them now," said Nicholas slowly. "And thou hast played contrips long enough, Janet, with these clumsy-wooing cousins of thine.—Well, so be it. Shameless Wayne is more than the roystering lad we thought him, and if any of you can show wit and strength enough to trap him—why, Janet will have made the best choice among you."

"Is that a bargain, sir?" said Red Ratcliffe, stretching his hand across the board.

The Lean Man took his hand and laughed grimly. "A bargain—but I doubt old Nicholas will be the first among you, now as aforetime. What then, Janet? What if I win my own prize? Why, lass, I'll let none wed thee, but thou shalt play the daughter to me to the end."

All laughed at the grim banter, save Janet, sitting white and cold at her grandfather's side. Once she glanced at Red Ratcliffe, who strove hardily to meet her scorn; and then something of the Lean Man's spirit came to her.

"That shall be a bargain, sir," said she, with a low laugh. "If any kills Shameless Wayne, he shall wed me—but by'r Lady, I think the marriage will not be this year, nor next."

Nicholas half minded to rail at her, thought better of it. "'Twill be within the month, or my word goes for naught; but thou dost well, girl, to mock at them. See Red Ratcliffe glowering at thee there; yet last night he dared not look the Master of Marsh between the eyes."

"I'll look any man between the eyes,—but not when a boggart sits upon his shoulder and strikes for him," growled Red Ratcliffe.

The Lean Man shivered, as if the hall were draughtier than its wont, and rose abruptly. "Come, there's a long day's work to be got through," he said.

All was bustle for awhile, until the men had set out on their usual business of farming or of bringing game home for the larder. The women, after they had gone, stayed to chatter of this and that, and then they, too, went about their work—to the spinning-wheel, the dairy or the kitchen. But Janet, who had always lived apart from the common run of life at Wildwater, stood idly at the wide northward window of the hall, and looked out on the greening waste of moor. "Was not the feud bad enough?" she murmured. "Was there too little stood between Shameless Wayne and me, but this must be added to the rest? God's pity, but they could not have struck at me more cruelly, and Red Ratcliffe knew it when he made the bargain. *To be wedded to him who kills Shameless Wayne*."

She lifted her head suddenly, and it was strange to mark how once again the Lean Man's hardiness showed plainly in her face.

"Nay, but it needs two for any bargain," she cried, and cold steel, even in a maid's hand, can always right a quarrel.

Yet she was full of dread for Shameless Wayne. What chance had he, with the Lean Man's craft and all the strength of Wildwater against him? He would not budge from Marsh, folk said, and he had but four weak lads to help him there. And she could do nothing. Instinctively she looked to the moor for help—the moor, that had been friend and playmate to her through her score years of life. Flat to the cloud-streaked sky it stretched, and the bending heather-tops seemed moving toward her with kindly invitation. Reaching down her cloak from behind the door, she hurried out and turned her back on Wildwater, with its surly stretch of intake, its blackened, frowning gables, its guardian pool. Little by little her step grew firmer; the sky and the wind were close about her, and the fret begotten of house walls slackened with each mile that took her further away from men.

At Marsh there were hills above and sloping fields below; but here the dingle-furrowed flat of bog and peat and heather ended only with the sky—the sky, whose grey and amber cloudlets seemed but an added acreage to the great moor's vastness. Far off the Craven Hills—Sharpas, and Rombald's Moor, and the dark stretch of Rylstone Fell—showed flat as the cloudland and the heath, and the valleys in between were levelled by the mist that filled them up. Only the kirkstone near at hand, and further the round breast of Bouldsworth Hill, stood naked out of the wilderness, and served, like pigmies at a giant's knee, to show the majesty against which they upreared their littleness. A lark soared mote-like in the middle blue, but his song came frail and reedy through the silence; the noise of many waters rose muffled from their jagged streamways, aping a thousand voices of the Heath-Brown Folk who lived beneath the marshes and the heather.

The toil of goblin hammers, working day-long at the gold hid underground was to be heard, the tinkle of the Brown Folk's laughter when they danced, the sobbing fury of their cries as a human foot pressed over-heavily above their peat-roofed dwellings. And sometimes, too, a drear baying came with the wind across the moor, and told that Barguest was speeding on his death-errand.

All this the girl understood, as she did not understand the ways of men and their crabbed round of life. The world-old loneliness, the tragic stillness that was half a sob, were full of intimate speech for her; when the storm-winds whistled, they piped a welcome measure; there was no hour of dark or day out here on the heath that showed her aught but homelike linkliness. The little people of the moor she knew, too, as she knew her own face reflected in a wayside pool—the plump-bodied spiders, the starveling moor-tits, the haunt of snipe and curlew, eagle and hawk and moor-fowl. Scarce a day passed but she read some well-thumbed page of this Book of Life, till now she had learned by heart the two lessons which the wide hill-spaces teach their children—superstition and a rare singleness of passion. The Ratcliffe men-folk lusted after the feud, and their hate was single-minded; Janet, with a man's vigour in her blood and only a maid's way of outlet, had never learned of sun or wind or tempest, that the plain force of passion was created only to be checked. Shame, and halting by the way, were her woman's birthright; but these had lacked a foster-mother, and the resistless teaching of the solitude had made her love for Wayne of Marsh a swift, and terrible, and god-like thing.

Yet her clear outlook upon life had been dulled of late. The moor had still the same unalterable counsel for her, but at Wildwater there had been such constant talk of feud, such a quiet surety on the Lean Man's part that no Ratcliffe could ever stoop to friendship with a Wayne, that insensibly the girl had faltered a little in her purpose. Had Shameless Wayne been of her mind, she would have cared naught for what her folk said; but he, too, had been against her, and, while he angered and perplexed her, he forced her to believe that the blood spilt between the houses would leave its stain forever.

But that was changed now: the bargain made by the Lean Man that morning had killed, once for all, the narrower love of kin; the danger that was coming so near to Wayne of Marsh made her free to be as she would with him—for with it all she knew that, spite of Wayne's would-be coldness, his heart was very surely hers.

She moved to the kirk-stone, and lifted her hands against its weather-wrinkled face, and bared her heart to this living bulk of stone which had learned, century in and century out, the changeless fashion of men's impulses. She had no wild passion now for Shameless Wayne; that was subdued by a fierce and over-mastering mother-love—a love that saw his danger and yearned to snatch

him from it at any cost, a love that knew neither pride nor shade of doubt.

"Thank God, I have no father to Wildwater, nor brother," she murmured, "for I would have taken against them, too, for his sake.—They are so sure of me, grandfather, and Red Ratcliffe, and all of them; I will trick them to tell me all their plans; and each time they come back with empty saddles I will be glad." Her voice deepened. "Ay, I will be glad!" she cried.

Little by little her heaviness slipped off from her. It had been hard to wait idly, expecting each hour to bring her news of Wayne's discomfiture; but now there was work for her to do, and she would strive at every turn to cross her kinsfolk's plans. With a lighter heart than she had known for many a day, she took her farewell of the kirk-stone and swung out across the moor until she reached the lane, soft now with budding thorn-bushes, which led past Wynyates.

And all the way her mind was busy with the long debt that Marsh House owed to Wildwater. The Ratcliffes had been first to strike; they had used treachery, when the Waynes scomed guile of any sort; they were bringing all their heavy weight of odds to bear against this solitary foe who would not move a hair's-breadth from their path. Well, she must use guile, since Wayne of Marsh would not, and she would save him in his own despite.

"I am no Ratcliffe," she cried, turning into the Wildwater bridle track. "I am a Wayne, with less wilful pride than they, and twice their wit to get them out of danger."

The stone which bounded the Ratcliffe lands on the side toward Ling Crag stood on the right hand of her road. Her eyes fell on it absently, and she would have passed it by, but something lying on it caught her glance—something that showed white against the rain-soaked blackness of the stone. She drew near, and for a moment sickened, for the man's hand that lay there was meant for hardier eyes than hers.

Awed she was, but curious too, as she drew near to the stone, wondering what this token, which her grandfather had often told her of, was doing here on the Wildwater land. And then she saw that beside the hand five words were scrawled untidily in chalk. "From Wayne to Ratcliffe—greeting," ran the message.

Janet, bewildered, read and re-read the words, and then their meaning flashed across her mind. Last night they had attacked Shameless Wayne, and he had routed them; and afterward he had cut off the right hand of him whose horse had come back riderless to Wildwater, and had answered the Lean Man after his own fashion. A dauntlessness there was about the message, a disregard of odds, that suited the girl's temper.

"I need not fear for Wayne of Marsh," she said, her eyes brightening. "If he means to hunt the hunters—why, Our Lady fights for all such gallant fools—Yet, shall I leave it there?"

She eyed the token doubtfully and seemed minded to remove it, lest the Lean Man's hate should be fanned to a hotter flame. But something checked her—a touch of Wayne's own recklessness, perhaps, and her new-found faith that victory would be with him in the long run. She turned about, leaving the hand there under the naked sky, and made for home. Almost eager she was to reach Wildwater; she was returning now, not to kinsmen whose battles were her own, but to foes—Waynes' foes and hers—who would tell her the last detail of their plots.

A half-mile nearer Wildwater she chanced on Red Ratcliffe, striding through the heather with a merlin hawk on his wrist, and a brace of hares slung by a leathern thong about his shoulders.

"I've sought thee all the morning," he said, standing across her path.

His face was lowering, and she saw that there was mischief in it. "Hadst better seek hares, and conies, and the like," she answered, pointing to his spoil. "That swells the larder—but, well-away, what use is there in seeking one who's tired of mocking thee?"

"Because there's a touchstone, cousin, that turns mockery to something kindlier."

"To love, thou mean'st?" she laughed disdainfully. "Come to me in a likelier hour, Red Ratcliffe. Shall I love thee more because thou didst run away last night? Shall I be sorry for thee, taking the poor excuse thou gavest for thy cowardice. Thou said'st amiss this morning—the boggart sits, not on Wayne's shoulder, but on thine; and his name is panic."

"Art strangely free with Wayne's name," he sneered. "A man, to look at thee, would think the past night's work had pleased thee well."

"It pleases me at all times to hear of one man fighting three, and daunting them. Wilt ever give me that sort of pleasure, think'st thou?"

Red Ratcliffe was silent for awhile; then, "What dost find to say, Janet, when thou meet'st Shameless Wayne by stealth?" he asked, with a sudden glance at her.

She coloured hotly, and paled again. If he knew what she had thought to be a secret from all at Wildwater, her chance of helping Wayne of Marsh was slight.

"It wears an ugly look," he went on. "Come, I am kin to thee, and have a right to guard thy honour. Wilt tell me what has passed between this rake-the-moon and thee, or must I whisper in the Lean Man's ear how his darling wantons up and down the country-side?"

She would not stoop to plead with him, in whatever jeopardy she might be. "Thou canst tell as much as pleases thee," she flashed, "and I will amend thy story afterward; and if ever thou darest to block my way again——"

Red Ratcliffe had unhooded his hawk too soon, and he made a clumsy effort to atone for the false cast. "Stay, girl! I did not mean to say aught to anger thee.

Promise to wed me before the corn is ripe, and I'll keep a still tongue."

"Promise to wed thee?" said Janet, turning her back on him. "I've promised it already, when thou canst prove thyself a better man than Shameless Wayne. But before the corn is ripe? Nay, I think 'twill be later in the year."

He watched her move a pace or two away. "I'll ask thee once more, when we get back to Wildwater," he said surlily; "and by that time, I fancy, thou'lt have given thought to what the Lean Man's anger is."

He was falling into step beside her, but she would none of him. "Go over the rise yonder," she said, "and it may be thou wilt find something there to give *thee* food for thought."

"I had liefer walk beside thee, sweet, than follow any All-Fool's chase."

"It is no fool's errand, I tell thee. Thou know'st the boundary-stone this side Ling Crag? I passed it just now, and saw a present waiting for thee on the top of it."

He stopped, glancing first at Janet, then down the bridle-track. "A present?" he cried. "What sort of gift should any one leave for the first passer-by to steal?"

"'Tis a curious gift, and one not likely to be stolen," she said. "What is it? Nay, but a gift grows less if one tells of it beforehand and I'll spoil no pleasure for thee."

A sudden fear, the echo of his late panic, touched Red Ratcliffe. "Is—is it Wayne of Marsh who waits there with the present?" he asked, and bit his lips soon as the tell-tale thought was out.

"When Wayne of Marsh wants thee, he will not wait," she said. "Go, sir, and have no fear at all of him whom thou hast sworn to kill before the corn is ripe."

CHAPTER XIII

APRIL SNOW

After a fortnight's softness, with mist winds and child-like trustfulness of breaking apple-blossom, the season had swung back to winter. North to Northwest the wind blew, and its touch was like a stab. The sun, shining day-long out of blue skies, seemed rather a mocking comrade of the wind, for his warmth in shaded corners served only to set a keener edge to the blast that lay in waiting at the next turn. Fields and roads were parched once more, and the dust lay thick as

June.

Even Bet Earnshaw, the idle-bones and by-word of Marshcotes village, had been moved to do a spell of work this morning, by way of driving some sort of warmth into her veins; but habit had proved too strong for her, and toward noon she slipped into the Sexton's cottage next door to learn the current gossip from Nanny Witherlee. The wind was at its coldest up the narrow lane that ran between the graveyard and the cottages, and Bet was fain to throw her brown cotton apron over her head as she ran across the few yards that separated door from door. She found Nanny standing at the table, her sleeves rolled up to her elbow and a delf bowl in front of her.

"Well, Nanny, making dumplings?" she said, lifting a corner of her apron and showing a true slattern's face, big, red and empty of the least line of care.

Nanny looked up, still moving her hands briskly among the contents of the bowl. "Ay, we're allus making summat, us mortals—awther food for our bellies or food for th' daisies ower yonder. Step in, Bet, an' for th' Lord's sake shut yond door to."

"Nay, I'm noan for stopping. There's a lot to be done i' a house, but I war that perished I thowt I'd run across, like, an' see if I could find onybody else as cowd as myseln; there's comfort i' that, I've found. Begow, Nanny, 'tis a wonder we're all alive."

"I reckon it is. That's one o' God's miracles, I says, seeing we're tossed fro' winter to summer an' back again, all while th' clock is striking twelve. They tell me there war th' keenest frost last neet we've hed for a twelvemonth."

"'Tis cruel, cruel," said Bet, moving with her usual zigzag shiftlessness toward the settle and spreading her hands out to the fire. "I war fair capped to see thy man Witherlee crossing to the kirkyard a while back. He's too bone-thin, is Witherlee, to stand up agen a wind like this."

"Ay, he's getten a peffing cough that ye could hear fro' this to Lancashire, but he willun't be telled. He like as he cannot bide still onywhere out o' touch wi' his graves.—How's yond bairn o' thine, Bet?"

"She's nobbut poorly. Th' wind hes nipped her fair as if it hed set finger an' thumb to her innards. Eh, but I fear for th' little un, that I do!"

"What does th' leech say, like?"

"What does leeches say? She mud get weel again, an' she mud dee. As if I couldn't hev telled him as mich myseln. I allus did say there war no brass so easy addled as what them leeches put i' their breeches pockets."

Nanny turned from her baking-bowl. "Leeches is nobbut mortal, same as me an' thee. How should they be ony mak o' use? But there's healing goes wi' them as is fairy-kist, and axe Mistress Wayne to come an touch th' bairn—she'll do more nor all th' leeches 'at iver swopped big words for brass."

"Well, I've thowt on 't mony a time sin' yesterday; but I feared she'd tak it amiss, like, if I axed her. I war aye chary a' th' gentlefolk whether they've getten full wits or none at all."

"I've no call to speak a gooid word for Mistress Wayne, seeing what she did to th' owd Maister; but I will say this, Bet—she's getten no mucky pride about her now. She's that friendly wi' Witherlee they mud hev shared th' same porridge-bowl sin' being babbies, an' I warrant she'll heal that bairn o' thine as sooin as axe her."

"I'll tak thy word for 't, Nanny, that I will; an' th' first chance I get, I'll slip me dahn to Marsh."

"That's like thee!" cried the other sharply. "Th' first chance tha gets! Niver thinking th' little un may dee while tha'rt standing havy-cavy 'twixt will an' willun't.—There's somebody coming up th' loin. Now who mud it be, I wonder?"

Nanny's table stood just underneath the window, lest she should miss any detail of the life that passed her door. She craned her neck forward as the rumble of a cart came up the lane, and Bet the slattern ran to peep behind her shoulder.

"Why, if there isn't Hiram Hey!" cried the Sexton's wife, as the cart pulled up at the door and Hiram's knobby face, pinched now and tightened by the cold, peered in through the dusty glass.

"By th' Heart, his face looks foul enough to break th' window-panes. Eh, eh, he's a rum un, is Hiram. They say i' Marshcotes there's nobbut one can match thee, Nanny, an' that's Hiram Hey."

"They'll say owt i' Marshcotes. What should he be stopping here for, think'st 'a, Bet?"

Hiram ceased peering in at the window and opened the door as guardedly as if he feared an ambush.

"I've brought thee some peats fro' Marsh," he said, letting a stream of cold air in with him.

"Ay, an' tha's brought a mort o' cold air, an' all," cried Nanny.

"Well, th' peats 'ull cure that, willun't they?" retorted Hiram.

Nanny went to the cart and turned over the topmost sods; for in Marshcotes they always looked a gift horse in the mouth. "I allus did say th' young Maister war more thowtful-like nor ony lad I've happened on afore. I war dahn at Marsh yestreen, an' I chanced to say summat about being short o' peats——"

"If nobbut shows his want o' sense," growled Hiram. "We shall be short afore we've done wi' this mucky weather. Just like th' Maister, just! Th' Ratcliffes came a two-week sin', an' wasted th' fuel summat fearful by piling it agen th' doors; an' so, thinks th' Maister, when th' shed is nigh empty he cannot find a better time to go scattering peats all up an' dahn th' moorside."

"They say it war Hiram Hey hisseln that telled Red Ratcliffe where to find

th' peats," put in the Sexton's wife.

"Begow, who telled thee, Nanny? I thowt I'd kept a close mouth on 't."

"Well, news goes wi' th' wind, as they say, an' it's all ower th' parish by now how wise Hiram war fooled by a Ratcliffe."

Hiram moved to the door. "Dang it, I wish folk hed as mich to do as me, an' then they'd hev no time for gossip," he growled.—"Where mun I stack thy peats, Nanny?"

"I' th' cellar-hole, for sure. Where else?—But tha'd mebbe like a sup o' home-brewed, Hiram, afore tha unloads 'em?"

"I doan't care so mich if I do. I'm nowt at drinking myseln, but there's a time for all things, an' 'tis a body's plain duty to keep th' cowd out on a day like this. Gi'e us hod o' them tatie-sacks, Nanny; it'll be th' death o' yond owd hoss if he's left wi' niver a coat to his back."

Hiram was never gentle save with horses; but he covered the thick thewed beast as carefully as if it were an ailing good-wife.

"Tha daft owd fooil!" he muttered with rough tenderness. "'Twould niver do to let thee catch Browntitus, wod it, now?"

"'Tis nowt whether we catch th' 'Titus, seemingly," cried Nanny from within. "I'll get thee thy sup of ale this minute, lad, if tha'll nobbut shut th' door to."

Hiram did as he was bidden, and came and leaned over the lang-settle while he watched Nanny draw the ale from the barrel standing against the dresser. "If this fine spring weather 'ull nobbut skift afore, say th' back-end o' July," he went on, "we may hev crops enough to keep us wick. But I doubt it—ay, I doubt it."

And then, having shot his bolt at the old enemy, he settled himself placidly enough to his mug of home-brewed.

"Well, tha'll be well fund i' peats, Nanny," said Bet the slattern presently.

"It's varry thowtful, like, o' th' Maister," repeated the Sexton's wife, with another glance at the waiting cart.

"Ay, he's thowtful," put in Hiram grimly. "What dost think he did last week? I war so pinched wi' th' cowd, an' th' rheumatiz hed getten hod o' me so, what wi' sweating i' th' sun an' shivering at after i' th' wind, 'at I left a bit o' ploughing i' one o' th' high-fields. But, hoity-toity, that wodn't do for this keen young Maister, that didn't knaw oats fro' wheat a six-month sin'. I war up an' about th' next day; an' when I gets to th' field, thinking I'd look round a bit afore fetching th' plough, what should I find but th' Maister hisseln ploughing——"

"My sakes!" cried Nanny, lifting her floury hands. "They mud weel say i' Marshcotes that summat hes come to th' lad. Did he drive a straight furrow, like?"

"Well, he did," Hiram admitted grudgingly. "Eh, but I war mad! He nobbut

looked at me once, an' he said niver a word, but went up an' dahn th' furrows, up an' dahn, till I could hev clouted him i' th' lugs. That's his way lately; he willun't rate me, or say 'at he wants this doing or wants that—he just taks hod hisseln, an' shames me into doing twice th' wark I did for his father."

"Where did he learn it all? He studied nowt save th' inside of a pewter-pot afore th' trouble began," said Betsy.

"That's what worrits me. I mind that as a lad he war all about th' fields, doing a bit here an' a bit there for sport when th' fancy took him; but he mun be a wick un to frame as he does at jobs nowadays. That's where 'tis; I think nowt on him, I allus hev said, an' he's no business to go farming like an owd hand."

"He's sticking at Marsh, seemingly, spite of all I've dinned at him to go to Cranshaw, where his cousins wod be glad to gi'e him shelter," said Nanny.

Hiram chuckled. "Well, if he stood up agen thy nattering, he mun be a staunch un. An' I will say this for th' lad—he's showing th' right sperrit there. There's none at Marsh but wod hev thowt less on him if he'd turned tail, choose what's to come."

"There's none at Marsh wi' a feather-weight o' wit, then," returned Nanny briskly. "Warn't it enough 'at they nigh burned th' house dahn——"

"A miss is as gooid as a mile. Ye may tak my word for 't, we'll see th' Waynes come a-top when th' moil is sattled. Th' young uns, Maister Griff an' t' others, is stiffening fine, an' all."

"I've heard as mich," said Bet. "They like as they saved th' owd place t' other neet, so I war telled."

"Eh, it war worth a load o' clover to hear how yond lad picked up one o' th' gate-stuns an' skifted th' Lean Man wi' 't. I war i' th' courtyard next morn, an' Shameless Wayne taks th' ball i' his hands an' turns it ower; an' I never see'd ony chap look so pleased-like an' proud as he looks at me. 'Hiram,' says he, "tis a tidy weight to lift, this. I warrant yond lad couldn't do it again in a cool moment.' "Tis a pity he hedn't a bit more strength,' says I, 'an' then he'd hev bruk th' Lean Man his backbone,' I says.—Well, tis a two-week sin' an' better, an' we've heard nowt no more fro' Wildwater. They got a bellyful that neet, I'm thinking."

"Ye can think too sooin, as th' saying is," put in Nanny. "Th' Lean Man is like them crawly hundred-legs 'at ye find i' th' walls—th' more bits ye cut him into, th' more bits there is to wriggle—each wi' bits o' legs of its own, an' all, to carry it into mischief."

"Ay, but they say he wears a daunted look," put in the slattern, stirring the peats with her foot. "Jonas Feather at th' Bull see'd him riding through Marshcotes awhile back, an' he niver stayed for a wet-your-whistle—just rode wi' slouched shoulders, an' a sort o' looseness i' his knees, an' ivery now an' then a speedy backard look ower his shoulders, as if——"

Nanny turned suddenly, a queer smile pinching her thin old face. "As if th' Dog war after him," she finished. "I knew how 'twould be—ay, I knew."

"Well, I niver see'd Barguest myseln, an' I doan't fancy I iver shall," said Hiram drily. "But there's a change come to th' Lean Man, for sure, an' iverybody is beginning to tak notice o' 't. Sometimes he's his old self, an' sometimes he fair dithers—an' by that token he's i' Marshcotes this morn, for I catched a sight of his back as I cam up th' hill."

"I may hev my own opinion o' th' Lean Man," broke in Bet Earnshaw, "but my man Earnshaw hes part work fro' Wildwater this winter, an' there'll mebbe be another spell i' store for him, now 'at there's so mich walling to be done on th' new intaken land."

"Earnshaw get work? Why, whativer would he do wi' 't, if he got it?" cried Hiram, with well-feigned amazement. "He'd drop it, I'm thinking, same as if 'twere a ferret, for fear it 'ud bite him."

"Now, Hiram—" began Bet.

But Hiram looked at her with large and fatherly contempt over the edge of his pewter, and his low deep voice vanquished the other's thinner note. "Well, th' young Maister is weel out o' what chanced to-neet at Marsh," he went on. "Yond bother all came of his marlaking wi' a Ratcliffe wench, an' I said to myseln afore iver th' Ratcliffes come. 'There'll be a judgment follow on sich light ways,' I says."

"A bonnie un tha art to talk," said Nanny. "What's this about thee an' Martha?"

Hiram fidgetted from one foot to the other. "What should there be?" he said.

"Nay, that's for thee to say. It's all ower Marshcotes 'at tha'rt looking after her; an' some says she willun't hev thee, being keen set on shepherd Jose."

"Owd fooil! She's niver looked twice his way—no, nor will do while Hiram Hey stands i' th' forefront of her een."

"Oh, so there's summat in 't, then?" said Nanny sharply.

Hiram, driven to bay, scratched his thinning crown and muttered that he was "allus backard i' coming forrard."

"Begow, there's little Mistress Wayne!" cried Nanny on the sudden as her busy eyes caught sight of a cloaked figure going past her window to the graveyard. "What a day for th' likes o' her to be out o' doors. There's snow coming up wi' th' wind, an' fond as she is to hev her bit of a crack wi' Witherlee, she mud better hev stopped i' th' house to-day. It'll save thee going to Marsh, howsiver, Bet; tha can axe her what tha wants, an' nowt no more about it."

"Tha'rt right, Nanny. I'll watch for her coming back—she willun't be long, I warrant, on sich a day as this. They say she spends a lot o' time i' th' kirkyard,

poor soul."

"Ay, Witherlee an' her is birds of a feather—fuller o' dreams nor life, an' i' touch, so to say, wi' th' ghosties. He tells her tales by th' hour together o' what he's seen i' th' kirkyard; an' she listens like a bairn, saying a word now an' then, but mostly sitting dumb-like wi' her een fixed on his face."

Hiram went to the door and watched Mistress Wayne go through the graveyard wicket; then shook his head soberly. "A man has little left to believe in when he gets to my years," he said, "an' ghosts an' sich like is nowt i' my way; but 'tis gooid for th' young Maister 'at yond poor soul cleaves like a lapdog to him—they bring luck, there's no denying it, to them as they tak a fancy to."

"They bring luck, an' they bring healing," said the Sexton's wife with a glance at her neighbour.

"Now, Nanny," cried the farm-man, setting down his mug. "Dost think I've getten all th' morning to waste on thee an' thy peats? There's nowt like wenches for hindering wark; an' time's like milk—tha cannot pick it up again when 'tis spilled."

"Well, tha canst win forrard," said the Sexton's wife. "There's nobody hindering thee, is there?"

While Hiram settled to the work of unloading the peats and storing them in the roomy cellar that underlay Nanny's cottage, Mistress Wayne was wandering up and down the churchyard in search of Sexton Witherlee. The Sexton came out of his tool-house presently, and his eyes were exceedingly friendly as they fell on the little figure moving through the snowflakes.

"What, Mistress!" he cried. "Ye're noan flaired o' wind an' weather, seemingly."

"Good-morrow, Sexton. I've brought thee the first of the primroses," said Mistress Wayne, drawing a tiny bunch of half-opened buds from under her cloak.

"Now, that's varry kindly o' ye, Mistress, varry kindly," murmured Witherlee, laying the flowers in his open palm. "By th' Heart, but 'tis a queer world these little chaps hes oppened on to; thowt it war spring, they did, wi' winds as soft as butter—an' then, just as they've getten nicely unwrapped, like, th' winter is dahn on 'em again wi' a snarl. Ay, ay, th winter is allus carred behind some corner, like a cat wi' a mouse, ready to pounce on sich frail things as these." He glanced from the primroses to Mistress Wayne, as if she and they came under the one head of frailty.

"They were better gathered, Sexton; I found them in a sheltered nook of the Marsh garden—but oh, 'twas cold even there—they were better gathered, were they not?"

"To be sure, to be sure. We're all better gathered nor standing on our stems, as these quiet bodies under sod could tell ye if they'd getten tongues.—Theer,

Mistress! Ye're shaking like a reed. Come ye wi' me under th' Parsonage yonder, if ye mun bide a bit; 'tis out o' th' wind."

"Oh, yes, 'tis warmer here—much warmer," she said, seating herself on a flat tombstone that stood against the wall and making a pretty motion to the Sexton that he should sit beside her.

The snow fell sparsely out of the blue, and the sun was bright; but overhead the peewits wheeled in narrowing circles, and prophecy of storm was in their cries.

"Tell me," began Mistress Wayne, after a long silence. "The folk sleeping here—if they had tongues, thou said'st, Sexton; have they not, then? I thought—" she stopped, and lifted two puzzled eyes to his.

The Sexton's face grew wrapt, and his voice came dreamily. "Ye thowt—nay, ye knew—that they could frame to talk as weel as me an' ye? An' so they can, Mistress. Hark to th' peewits up aboon us! There's a dead maid's sperrit wakes i' each o' yon drear birds. White breasts they've getten, for maidenhood, an' black cloaks i' sign o' sorrow niver-ending."

The little woman shivered and put her hand more closely into his. "The dead are rested, Sexton? Is't not so?" she whispered.

"Well, men sleep sound, body an' sperrit, i' a general way, an' so do wedded women: 'tis the lassies who died afore wedlock, wanting it that cannot rest; ay, poor bairns, they like as they hunger an' thirst for what they lacked, an' nowt 'ull do for 'em. See ye, Mistress! How th' teewits wheel an' wheel, niver resting. An' hark ye! There's Mary Mother's own wild sorrow i' their screams."

Mistress Wayne watched the birds glance white and black across the sun-rays. A score of them there might be, but each followed its own path, lonely, untiring, inconsolable. A strange light came into the little woman's eyes, and after it a cloud of tears; like the voice of fellow-captives, in life's prison-house, the plover's cry struck home to her, disentangling memory from phantasy. Still as the graveyard stones she sat, and the Sexton, stealing a glance at her, knew that this woman stood, like himself, on the thin edge of life, seeing both worlds yet finding a resting-place in neither.

"Will they never find peace, those white-breasted ghosts up yonder?" she whispered. "Is there no God to take pity on them? Sexton, is there no God in Heaven?"

"I've heard tell on Him," said Witherlee slowly, "but I niver hed speech nor sign fro' Him. Th' slim ghosts I knaw, an' th' solid look o' grave-planking I knaw—but I'm dim, Mistress, dim, when ye axe me of owt else. Nay, I've heard th' teewits fret iver sin' I war out o' th' cradle, an' they're fretting still; an' when there comes a fresh Sexton to Marshcotes—I'll be th' first to mak him sweat at grave-digging, likely—why, there'll be teewits wheeling still aboon his head."

Her eyes were lifted piteously to his. "'Tis that keeps them sleeping—to die before wedlock, and never to feel a bairn's mouth soft against their own. I shall be one of them soon, Sexton—very soon; it was to have been my wedding-day—" she passed a hand across her forehead, striving to pick up the thread that seemed for ever slipping from her grasp.

"Happen—happen there's a God hid somewhere," said Witherlee, in the tone of one who tells a fairy-story to a child. "I reckon, if there be, He'll look thy way, Mistress, afore so long. Tak heart, an'—"

The clue was coming nearer to her. "Nay, there's no God up there, Sexton," she broke in. "I left Him—years ago, surely—down in the sweet valley-lands. There were woods, and streams, and kine knee-deep among the swaying grasses; and the winds were warm, Sexton, and God was very kind. I was happy then, I think—but some one came and took me away—nay, it has gone again!" She paused and looked wistfully across the hills.

"I've heard o' th' Low Country," murmured Witherlee. "They say there's more warmth an' ease dahn there, but th' fowk is nobbut frail-like wi' it all, I fancy. Ay, an' I war telled, by one 'at hed been i' them furrin parts an' come back to Marshcotes, that th' meadow-grass there, for all it grows so thick, is rank an' noan so sweet as our hard-won crops up here. Well, well, there's some mun live lower nor Marshcotes, just as there's some mun carry weakly bodies their lives through."

Mistress Wayne did not hear him. Her eyes were still on the field climbing far-off to the sky, with their black walls and the white lines of snow that lay on the windward side of them. "It was like that, Sexton, when first I came here," she went on presently, pointing with her finger. "Naught but black walls, and white drifts of snow, and drear houses that seemed to scowl at you each time you crossed the threshold. And the people were all so rough and hard, and fierce—they frightened me—Sexton, shall I never again get down to the meadows and the nightingales and the sweetbriar hedges under which the violets grow?"

"To be sure ye will, sooin as th' weather 'ull let ye travel," said Witherlee kindly.—"An' now ye've stayed still long enough, Mistress, an' th' snaw is coming dahn i' earnest this time. Mebbe ye'll step inside wi' me till it's owered wi', an' Nanny shall mak ye a sup o' summat warm."

Hiram Hey, meanwhile, had just finished stacking Nanny's peats for her, and was beginning to back his horse down the narrow lane, when there came such a fury of wind and snow together that he was fain to shelter in the doorway.

"Look out o' window, Nanny," he cried, "for ye'll noan see th' like again for a week o' years. Sun an' wind—an' th' dust so thick among th' snowflakes 'at it turns 'em grey. By th' Heart, I nobbut once see'd dust an' snaw so thick together, an' that war a score year back, on th' varry day when th' Ratcliffes first set on th'

Waynes as they war riding back fro' Saxilton market. Ay, 'tis a sign as sure as I stand here wi' th' wind cutting me to th' bone."

"April snow," muttered Bet the slattern. "They say it means drear happenings."

"'Tis a fearsome sight, whativer it bodes," said Nanny, peeping from under Hiram's arm.—"Here's Witherlee been driven home by it, an' it taks a lot to skift him, I tell ye. What, an' he's bringing th' little fairy-kist un, an' all? Well, she's paid a stiffish price, poor bairn, an' it's noan for me to grudge her shelter."

Hiram, after a curt nod to Witherlee, went to his horse's head. "There'll be enough to fill Nanny's kitchen without me, I'm thinking," he muttered; "an' I niver could bide so many women all dickering together—nay, begow, I'd liefer hev snow an' dust an' all th' winds i' th' sky."

A horseman came trotting round the bend of the street, and shouted to Hiram to cease backing his horse and leave him room to pass. But the farm-man could be as deaf as a stone when it suited his purpose; he had seen the rust-grey head and lean body of the horseman, and he kept on his way, backing the cart more slowly than was needful until he gained the open high-road.

The Lean Man was holding his big bay horse on the curb and scarce could keep him in. "Art deaf, fellow?" he snapped, swinging the butt of his riding whip toward the other's head.

Hiram went quietly to the other side of his horse and looked across at the Lean Man of Wildwater. "My hearing is noan what it war, Maister. War it ye shouting to me up th' loin?"

"Ay, was it. Dost think I'm minded on such a day as this, to stand shivering at the lane-end while thou block'st the way?—So, 'tis thou, is it?" he broke off, with a sharper glance at Hiram. "I thought that slouch of thine was woundily familiar. Art minded to boast of the great store of peats ye have at Marsh, as thou didst not long since to my grandson?"

Hiram winced, for it was bitter to him still to think how easily Red Ratcliffe had outwitted him, and Nanny's late banter had rubbed an old wound raw. "We've fewer peats, Maister," he said slowly—"but th' owd house stands, I've noticed. Ay, 'tis proof agen fire an' sword, they say."

Old Nicholas could make nothing of the farm-man's stolid front. "Cherish that belief, and teach it to thy Master," he said.

"Nay, he needs no teaching. He knaws, weel as I can tell him, that a Brown Dog ligs on th' threshold, an'——"

The Lean Man loosed the curb on a sudden and rode into the snowstorm that blew dusty up the lane.

"I thowt he wodn't stay to hear no more," said Hiram to his horse. "Get on, old lad, an' if we find Shameless Wayne at Marsh, we'll tell him what we said to

Nicholas Weasel-toppin. He's flaired is th' Lean Man—flaired."

Bet the slattern had moved to the cottage-door soon as she saw Mistress Wayne come through the churchyard gate with Witherlee.

"There's summat I want to axe of ye, Mistress," she said, twisting an apron-corner in her feckless hands. "I've getten a little un as is like to dee o' th' Brown Titus, an' I thowt mebbe ye'd step in next door here an' gi'e th' bairn a touch o' your hand—they like as they pike up, so to say, when they feel a softer hand on 'em nor us that wark for our bread hev getten."

The same half-troubled, half-eager look came into Mistress Wayne's face as when she had lately talked with the Sexton of children and the childless women. Cold as she was, and anxious for the warmth of the peat fire which showed through Nanny's open door, she turned on the threshold.

"If 'twill comfort the child, I'll come with thee and gladly," she said.

"Ay, an' ye'll cure her, Mistress," put in Witherlee, with quiet assurance.

"Why do all the folk come running to me, Sexton, when their friends are sick?" asked Mistress Wayne. "I am so weak and can do nothing for them, and yet—" She stopped and clutched the old man. "Look who rides toward us!" she cried, shrinking behind Bet's bulky figure. "His face is scarred as if hot iron had played across it, and he lacks an ear. I know him, Sexton; he was cruel to me once—but where? 'Tis long ago, and I forget."

"Th' Lean Man, begow!" muttered Nanny. "Hiram said he war i' Marsh-cotes, but I niver thowt he'd foul my door-stun wi' his face.—Ay, he looks daunted a bit; he's not half th' man he war a two-week sin'," she added, eyeing the horse-man narrowly and not guessing that Hiram Hey himself had added his straw to the sum of the Lean Man's burden.

Nicholas, seeing the women grouped round the door, drew rein and snapped his words out as he always did when talking to the country-folk—a habit that had earned him a good half of their ill-concealed dislike.

"Where is thy man Earnshaw? I want him," he said, frowning down on Bet.

"Earnshaw, Maister? I'm sure I cannot tell ye. He's hed no wark these two weeks past, an' happen he gets into loosish ways when——"

"Well, tell him from me that we're short of hands for the walling beyond Wildwater, and the sooner he can come with a stiff back to the work, the better I shall be suited. If he knows of half-a-dozen other stout fellows, he can bring them with him." He was turning away when his eyes fell on little Mistress Wayne, shrinking close behind Bet Earnshaw. "Oh, is it you, Mistress?" he cried. "What brings you out of doors on such a day? Marry, the wind will mistake you for a bit of thistle-down unless you have a care."

"I—I am going to heal a sick child," stammered Mistress Wayne. Still she could not remember when she had last seen this grim-faced man, nor in what

way he had shown her cruelty; but instinctively she feared that he would do her some fresh hurt.

Nicholas laughed mightily. "By the Mass, so there's healing in your touch? Would I had known that the other night, when your kin at Marsh planted these pretty love-tokens on my face." He pointed to the scarce-healed scars. "Come, now, that should bolster the Wayne pride—to have a wise woman in the family to set against a foolish master."

The Sexton's wife dared not look at him, lest he should see how she itched to set her hands about his throat; but her voice confessed as much. "'Tis easy to scoff, Maister, when ye've no clouds across your sun, an' there's a mony doubts nowadays. Ay, there's them as doubts Barguest even—afore he's crossed their path." She shot a sideways glance at him, and saw that she had aimed true.

"He has never crossed mine, woman, so I'll be on the doubting side yet awhile," he answered, after a silence.

"Well, ye'll know best; but ye've crossed Barguest, if he's noan crossed ye, an' they say it's mich like wedlock, is crossing th' Brown Dog—him an' ye till death do ye part. But theer! I've telled ye as mich afore, an' happen I'm full o' fancies, for ye say ye've niver seen him sin' that neet."

Nicholas Ratcliffe wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his sleeve, and gave one quick glance behind him. Whichever way he turned, it seemed he could not rid him of these folk who talked of Barguest.

"Devil take thee!" he cried. "There's no such thing—and if there were I'd fight him with a dozen Waynes to back him. Get to your healing, Mistress Wayne; you are fit company for Nanny Witherlee."

Mistress Wayne eyed him doubtfully. "No such thing as Barguest?" she said gravely. "Sir, I have seen him—just before the fires were lit about the Marsh doorways, it was, and I was in the garden with Ned, and the Brown Dog came and fawned on him,—his coat was shaggy—brown against Ned's clothes. And he whimpered so; and I think it was because he was cold and in trouble that he lit a fire to warm himself."

The Lean Man's anger melted; something awesome there was about this woman's quiet recountal that compelled belief. "You—you saw him?" he whispered. Then his old spirit quelled the rising terror, and he gripped the saddle afresh with his knees. "Tell him from me then, since you're friendly to him," he sneered, jerking the snaffle, "tell him that Nicholas Ratcliffe fears neither ghost nor man, and if Barguest cares to visit him at Wildwater—" The rest was drowned by the clatter of his horse's feet as he galloped down the lane.

"Neither ghost nor man?" echoed Nanny. "Ye're th' far side o' th' truth, there, Maister. I niver heard that ye feared man born o' woman—but ony one can see that Barguest hes getten his teeth in."

"Sakes, 'tis fearsome talk; I wish tha'd hod thy whisht, Nanny, that I do," twittered Bet Earnshaw.

But Nanny was no bustling housewife now, with a ready hand for whatever was to be done and a ready tongue to answer any speech; she was the same dream-eyed woman who had rung the bell for Wayne of Marsh, who had watched Wayne's body the night through and listened to the speech of other worlds.

"Mistress, ye've getten th' second-sight," she said softly, putting an arm about Mistress Wayne. "God rest ye, for ye'll stand 'twixt Shameless Wayne and trouble one day. Mistress Nell has done it, an' I've done it, an' so will ye, sooin or late; an' yourn 'ull be th' greatest help of all, for ye've seen th' Dog, while we've nobbut heard th' patter of his feet."

CHAPTER XIV

HOW WAYNE AND RATCLIFFE MET AT HAZEL BRIGG

The days had gone heavily for Janet since the Lean Man made his bargain with the Ratcliffe men-folk. Fear for Shameless Wayne mingled with the dread that she would be forced into hasty wedlock with one of her cousins; and each day that passed brought nearer home to her the grim irony which had set Wayne's life as the price of her own hand. Then, too, she had no trust in Red Ratcliffe, now that he knew her secret, and scarce a day passed but he pressed his suit home with threats of telling all to old Nicholas Ratcliffe.

Trouble, indeed, seemed closing in on Wildwater during those bitter days of sun and snow and northeast winds, which, if they had dealt hardly with the low-lying lands, had swept over these upland wastes with swift and pitiless ferocity. The Lean Man was failing, body and mind, in some strange way which the girl could not understand: for a day or two he would be hard and keen as ever, and then, suddenly as if he had been stricken by some unseen blade, the life would go out of him, and he would watch his own shadow fearfully, shunning the eyes of his kin until the fit had passed. Janet was fond of her grandfather, so far as she could reconcile such fondness with her love for Shameless Wayne, and it added the last touch of disquiet to see him under the spell of what she could not but name witchcraft. Once he had come home from Marshcotes—the same day it was which had brought him across Mistress Wayne's path as she went to heal Bet Earnshaw's child—and his eyes had met Janet's with a dumb appeal for

sympathy. He had all but made confession to her then touching this spell which lay upon him; but the mood had passed, as others had passed before it, and the days wore on, from storm to calm, from calm to full break of spring, without a word from him that could give her any clue to the nature of his sickness.

This morning, as they sat at breakfast, Nicholas was in gay spirits and very full of what must be done here and done there about the land. "Spring's here at last, and we must make the most of it, lads," he cried. "Did Earnshaw bring any men with him to do the walling?"

"Ay, sir, he brought six as shiftless as himself," laughed Red Ratcliffe.

"Well, there's a cure for shiftlessness, and I'll ride that way this morning.—Janet, 'tis a twelve-month and a day since we had plovers' eggs for breakfast, and they'll be breeding now. Thou art fond of wandering abroad to no purpose; wilt take as kindly to it if I bid thee carry a basket on thy arm?"

"Just as kindly, grandfather," said Janet, well pleased to see him in a mood so cheery; "and if my old cunning serves me, I'll bring you home a well-filled basket."

"I'll warrant thou wilt, though it takes a nimble wit to match the tricksy mother-birds.—By the Heart, this springtime gets even into old blood, methinks; let's be off, lads, for we've wasted enough of a grand morning, and there's a deal to be got through before nightfall."

"Both here and on Wayne's farm. Ay, 'tis a busy time for the moorside," said Red Ratcliffe, glancing at Nicholas as they rose from table.

The Lean Man frowned him down, but Janet had caught the glance, and she misliked her cousin's tone. She welcomed Red Ratcliffe, accordingly, with less than her wonted coldness when he followed her into the courtyard a short while afterward, for she was bent on learning what lay behind his talk of Wayne's farm.

"Thou'rt quick to set off, cousin," he said. "Tell me, do the plovers nest at Marsh House, that thou showest so eager to seek their eggs?"

"I know little of Marsh House, sir, and my way lies contrary across the moor."

"Why, then, thou wilt be glad of a companion. Say, shall I come with thee, pretty Janet?"

"If it pleases thee," she answered.

He sought for mockery in her face, but, finding a half encouragement there, he fell into step beside her. Then, not understanding the slant ways of women, he must needs think that all was his for the asking, if only he put a bold front on it.

"Janet," he said, "I knew thou'd'st weary of this feather-headed rogue from Marsh. Put thy hand in mine and say 'yea' to a plain question, and I'll think no

more of jealousy."

"Many thanks, cousin. Thou wooest, methinks, as a ploughboy would. *Whoa*, he cries to his team, or *gee-up*, and being used to have his horses obey him, he thinks women have as little wit."

"He holds the whip, girl, as I do, and so is sure of them. Hark ye, I'm tired of this, and I will have thy answer. Flout me again, and I tell the Lean Man what I know."

Her anger, never quiet when Red Ratcliffe was at her elbow, broke into sudden flame. "Tell him, and have done with it. I care not," she cried, forgetting that she had meant to wheedle him into telling her what she wished to know.

"Hast never seen the Lean Man's anger, that thou talk'st so glibly of it? Pish! Thou'rt a child. If I were so much as to hint that Shameless Wayne met thee by stealth, grandfather would—kill thee, I think."

"That is true, cousin, he would go near to kill me," she said, standing straight and proud with her eyes on his. "And why should I fear that at his hands which I would compass myself rather than be wife to such as thou?"

"Who fathered thee, I wonder?" he sneered. "No Ratcliffe, I'll wager, or thou would'st have died of shame long since to let one of the Wayne hounds foul thee with his touch."

"Wayne of Marsh, cousin, is a better fighter, and of a more cleanly courtesy than thou," said she, with a hard laugh. "No wonder the thought of him is bitter—the carrion crow likes not the eagle, does it?"

He turned on her, his hand uplifted, but she eluded him. And then he let slip, in the heat of jealousy what prudence would have checked.

"The carrion-crow, for all that, will be bosom comrade to him before long," he cried. "'Twas pleasant to see the Lean Man so full of cheeriness? But what did it mean, girl? Why, that he saw a way to snare thy fool of Marsh."

For a moment she faltered; but her pride in Wayne of Marsh, which was comrade always to her love for him, steadied her fear of coming evil. "Ye have hatched plans aforetime," she answered quietly—"at the burial in Marshcotes kirkyard, and when ye got fire to help cold steel at Marsh. And Red Ratcliffe, if I recall, fled each time that Wayne showed a sword-point to him."

His freckled, wind-raw face was ill to look upon, and in among his speech the wildest curses of the hillside slipped and stumbled. "I fled from the Brown Boggart, not from Wayne—but the Dog will sleep one day, and then 'twill be my turn, man to man.—Ay, I'll tell thee just what is afoot, and thou shall have that to give thee courage when the Lean Man rails at thee. Suppose Wayne has a farm called Bents close up to Wildwater? Suppose old Nicholas, passing yester-even, saw that the storms had riven half the roof-slates off, and twitted the farmer with Wayne's slovenliness?"

"'Twould not be like grandfather to pass without such raillery. Ay, sir, go on."

Janet was watching him narrowly, letting his unclean oaths drift past her, and hearkening only to what lay under them. And he, eager to wound her at any cost, went blindly on.

"Suppose the farmer, all in the way of those who have dealings with the young Master just as Hiram Hey did when I tried the same trick on him, and telling Nicholas that Shameless Wayne himself was coming up this week to see to the mending of the roof?"

"On what day does he come?" asked Janet softly.

"I'll tell thee that after we've met him on the road—and, as thou'rt kindly toward him, I'll bring thee back some pretty love-token. What shall it be, Janet—a drabbled lock of hair, or——"

"They name thee cruel, cousin—but I think thou hast been very kind just now," she interposed.

"God's faith, art witless altogether?" he cried, dumbfounded by her hardiness.

"Nay, for I've learned what will serve one I love. Get thee back to Wildwater, cousin, with thy tale-bearing. 'Tis thou and I now, a man against a maid, and the thought of fighting thee is physic to my blood."

He saw now into what folly he had been betrayed. She would seek out Shameless Wayne, and one more attempt to rid them of their enemy would be defeated.

"Thou'lt not—not dare to warn him," he stammered.

"Shall I not? Those that they hang at the gibbets, I've heard—down in the peaceful lands where gibbets are—had as lief be hung for a herd of oxen as for one poor sheep. Grandfather can do no more than kill me—well, I'll give him greater cause."

He stood irresolute while the girl moved up the path. Eager as he was to carry her back forthwith to Wildwater, he knew that any show of force would serve only to deepen the girl's hate of him.

"She's passing dear to the Lean Man, too," he muttered. "He'll be loath to turn against her as it is—and 'twould only discredit the tale I have to tell him if I used force. Well, let her go. Haply she will not set eyes on Shameless Wayne."

Yet twice he started in pursuit; and when at last she had dipped over the nearest hill-crest, his bitterness would not be held in check.

"I offered her honest love, and she refused it," he cried, kicking the peat up with his heel in senseless frenzy. "God curse her, she shall not wed Wayne of Marsh till thistle-tops grow wheat."

But Janet, swinging free across the moor, was strangely light of heart. The

deceit that had lain between herself and Nicholas was to be lifted once for all, whatever might be the upshot, and there was no longer any secret by force of which Red Ratcliffe could press his suit. Not for a moment did she doubt that her cousin would fulfil his threat; the Lean Man's wrath she regarded as awaiting her already at Wildwater, and she had learned not to underrate its fury. But by some means she would fight them, for her own sake and for Shameless Wayne's; and she came of a stock to whom battle had ever been what the wind was to the storm-birds who hovered the year about the chimney-stacks of Wildwater.

She would go straight down to Marsh, she told herself, and ask for its Master. The servants would wonder, doubtless, and the moorside gossip would be fed by the strange tale of how a daughter of the Ratcliffes had come to seek her people's enemy; but what did gossips matter now that she had declared open warfare with her folk? There was a grim reckoning for her at Wildwater, and she did not shrink from it for her own sake; but Shameless Wayne must be kept out of danger's way, and see him she must before returning if he had to be sought from Marsh to Cranshaw.

Janet laughed on the sudden, as she crossed the rough stretch of moor that lay this side of Withens. She was to see Shameless Wayne before the sun went down, and to do him a last service; and the lark's song overhead found a blithe answer in her heart. Then, too, the moor was in joyous mood, and no upland tarn ever reflected the sky's face more faithfully than Janet echoed the shifting humours of this big-little world of hers. No year went by but she learned all afresh how rare and bewildering a thing was springtime on the moor; so warm it was, so full of a thousand clean-cut scents, of wind and peat, of ling and standing waters. The bilberries, with their green and crimson leaves, lay bushy to the sunlight, which shone reflected in tints of amethyst or ruby, pearl or daintiest saffron. The crowberries, which had shown a surly green the winter through, put on new livery, and all down their serried stems the brown-red blossoms peeped. A stray bee loitered down the wind, and cloudlets lay like snow above the blue edge of the heath.

It was the time of year when Janet ceased looking across the endless spaces of the moor, and turned her eyes to the lesser miracles that showed at every step. Month after month the waste had shown itself a giant of awful majesty, whose breath was storm, whose heart was pitiless; and now—lo, this moor was full of little housewife's cares, cleaning her floors of last year's litter, suckling her young like any human mother, neglecting no hidden corner where blade or flower was thirsting for her milk.

Past Robin Hood's Well the girl went, and across the beck, and over the moor this side of Withens; and as she went she thought that surely Wayne of Marsh must lose a little of his sternness under such skies as these. Nay, she

smiled as she looked toward the far-off brink of moor under which Marsh House lay hidden.

"If not for myself, he'll love me for my news, may be," she said, and smiled again as she thought of what might chance when she knocked at the door of the Marsh House and asked for Shameless Wayne. How if his sister Nell should open to her and ask her business? Once already they had met, she and Nell, since the feud broke out; and Nell had taunted her with outright bitterness; and they had not parted till deep wounds had been given and received on either side.

"Were she to open to me," murmured Janet, "she would rive a spear down from the walls and thrust me out, for fear another than she should help Ned into safety. Well, I must risk that, too—but I had liefer meet the Lean Man than this same Mistress Nell. Love is jealous, they say—but for madness it is naught to this quiet, sisterly affection."

The peewits screamed about her, and the empty basket was still swinging on her arm; and now and then from very habit, she cast a glance about her in search of the eggs which she had promised to bring back to Wildwater. But Marsh was in her mind, and with each mile her stride grew longer, her carriage firmer. She was to see Ned, and after that she would let come what would. Soon she came in sight of Hill House standing bluff on the further slope of Hazel Dene, and a song rose unbidden to her lips; for Hill House held kinsmen of her lover's, and it was scarce more than half a league from Marsh.

Janet was nearer to the truth than perchance she guessed; for Nell's love of her brother, the slow growth of years of thwarted hopes and bitter self-denial, was firm as the rock on which Marsh House was built. He had been a ruffler and a drunkard, so wild that his name had grown a by-word among folk who were not easily moved by any usual excesses of the gentry; he had all but killed the last spark of love and trust in her; and now, just when he had cast off old ways, and had stood up, a man, before scorn and intimate, hourly danger and the slow round of farm-work which he loathed—now, it seemed that all was to go for naught because of his love for one of the accursed folk who dwelt at Wildwater. Jealous she would have been of any wife, but it was shame unspeakable to think that Janet might ever take her place at Marsh; and she was full of the matter this morning as she and Shameless Wayne walked up the fields together.

"Ned," she cried, breaking an uneasy silence, "dost recall how once I asked thee about Mistress Ratcliffe? Thou said'st then it was a folly laid aside, yet now——"

"Well, now?" he said, in a hard voice.

"I have heard that not long since thou wast with her on the moor, stooping more closely to her ear than friendship alone warranted."

"'Twas Hiram Hey told thee as much? He's the wise sort of fool who must

hunt out the wrong side to every trivial matter."

"Nay, it is common gossip by this time. I had it from Nanny Witherlee, who has loved us well enough, Ned, thee and me, to allow of freedom in her speech. She is of my mind, too—that the last and worst disaster would fall on Marsh if——"

"If the clouds dropped, or the sun shone bright at midnight?" he broke in stormily. "I have told thee, Nell, that there is naught between us now—can be naught. Dost want to hear me swear it?"

"Yet thou lov'st her," she said, with the keen glance of jealousy.

"Ay, as I love the good life in my veins," he answered, his voice deepening. "But what of that? Even life must go, soon or late; am I a woman, to think love the one thing that must not be crushed?"

"'Tis the one thing that none can lay plans against. Hark ye, Ned! Mistress Ratcliffe met thee by chance, I take it, and ye talked awhile together and then passed on. Thou wilt meet her again—to-morrow—and some trick of speech or eye will sweep thee off thy feet—and thou'lt wonder, having played with steel, that the sharp edge cuts thee to the bone."

He flushed, and would not meet her glance. "If chance sends her across my path, I can help it as little as if a dozen of her kinsmen met me by the way—and, faith, the latter would prove more hazardous, I fancy. Shut thy mind to it once for all, Nell; I love her, and she's naught to me, and there we'll leave the riddle."

Never until now had Nell complained, nor touched on her old devotion to him; but his open confession, twice repeated, jarred on her beyond endurance. "I've a right to speak, Ned," she cried. "I loved thee before this wanton crossed thy path; I have cared for thy comfort in fifty little ways thou know'st naught of. When father was hard on thee for thy wildness——"

"I know, lass, I know," he muttered, his anger chilled. For remorse never slept so sound with Wayne of Marsh but that the lightest touch could wake it.

"And later, when Rolf pleaded hard with me to wed him—he quarrelled with me but yesterday about it—I would not go, because thou hadst need of me at Marsh. See, Ned, I've been sorry and glad with thee—I've given up more, to keep thee out of wildness, than I shall ever tell. Is all to go for naught, because a woman beckons lightly to thee from across the moor?"

"I have told thee," he said, and left her without another word.

Old habit claimed her now. "Ned!" she called. "If thou must go to Hill House, promise thou'lt stray no further afield after thou hast done thy business there. The Ratcliffes are itching to be at thee, and——"

"I'll go no further," he answered over his shoulder; "and as for the Ratcliffes—they know how many Waynes are sheltered by Hill House; 'tis no likely hunting-ground for them."

His mood was bitter as he crossed the brigg below Smithbank Farm and climbed the narrow stile that opened on to Hazel Dene. Nell had said hard things of Mistress Ratcliffe, and not all her care for him could wipe out the memory. Was Janet to be named wanton, because she had been born at Wildwater? It was unjust. Little by little her beauty took shape before him, to back his pleading with weightier arguments than his own poor wit could furnish; and all the while that same resistless breath of spring was blowing on him which up above was lightening Janet's feet across the heath.

There was a throstle in every thorn-bush and a merle on every alder, each singing hard against the other in harmony with the note of the south wind through the rush and the tinkle of water over smooth-worn stones. The corn-mill was busy with the hum of toil as he passed, and along the little strip of garden-path the miller's wife was teaching her first-born child to walk.

Wayne halted a moment and let his eyes dwell on the tender frolic of it all; then sighed impatiently and pushed up the stream side till he reached the moor. To the right the bare fields stretched to the sky, catching a shadowed softness from the sunlight; to the left, Hill House glowered down upon the dark cleft that nursed the waterfall.

"Ay, this picture has more truth in 't than yonder idleness of spring below," he muttered, watching a hawk glance down on molten wing and lift a screaming moor-tit in its beak.

On the sudden a clear voice came over the swell of the brinkfield up above, singing a moorland ballad of love and battle—a voice that had something of the throstle's nesting-note in it. Shameless Wayne, shading his eyes with both hands, looked up the hill and saw a well-known figure standing clear against the sky. He started forward eagerly; but his face was dark again as he waited at the little brigg of stone until Janet reached the further margin of the stream; and she, seeing him, halted at the far side of the brigg, under the rowan that waved its feathery shadows to and fro above the sun-flecked waters. But still Wayne gave no greeting, though his eyes were fain of her.

"I give thee good-day," she faltered, chilled by his silence. "Wilt not tell me, Ned, that 'tis well-met by Hazel Brigg?"

Wayne looked across at her, and his face showed harsher than his thoughts. "Ay—wert thou a Wayne, or I a Ratcliffe, girl," he said.

Janet had learned to know this mood of his; at their last meeting—the same which Red Ratcliffe and Hiram the farm-man had surprised—he had met her with the same stubborn front. Then she had given way to her impatience; but this morning she was minded to be soft toward him, knowing the danger he was in and eager at all costs to save him from it.

"What ails thee, Ned?" she asked, after they had looked each at the other

across the stream.

"Why, life, I think," he answered, with a hard laugh. "To take the stoniest road, and all the while to know one's self a fool for 't——"

"I had thought life somewhat sweeter than its wont to-day," she broke in, obstinate as himself in her own fashion. "The sun shines, and the larks sing——"

"But the feud-cries are louder still, and not if all the larks in heaven tried to sing them down would it be otherwise." Cold his voice was, with only a deeper note in it now and then to show how sorely it was fretting him to stand his ground.

"Art minded, I see, to take up the tale just where we left it on the moor when last we met," cried Janet, with a flash of scorn.

"Does the tale go lighter, Janet, for what has been added to it since we met? Thy folk came down to Marsh, and one of them did not go back again."

"Thou didst not bid him come—nor I wish him God-speed on his errand," said Janet, with a last effort to persuade him.

But Wayne made no answer—only stood there with a line cut deep between his brows and his face moulded beyond hope of change, it seemed, to an obstinacy that was almost surly.

"Nay, he was heartless," said Janet to herself. How often had she crossed the moor, full of the same eagerness that had come with her to-day? And he had always offered her less than she had brought him. Of old, some late debauch had dulled his welcome; and nowadays he met her with a sternness that was harder still to bear. Headstrong, with her strength and her need of happiness at flood, the girl could see but the one issue; it was Wayne and she, here on the quiet moor, and she would brook no interference from without.

"He's heartless," she repeated, and set one foot on the narrow bridge.

Wayne of Marsh stood at the further end, not moving to make way for her. And Janet, had she glanced at him, might have read indecision plainly in his face.

"Let me pass," she said, cold as himself. "The brigg, I take it, was built for all the moorside, and even a Ratcliffe is free to cross by it."

For answer he stood more squarely across her path. "I'll not let thee go!" he cried. Then, as if asking her help against himself, "Janet," he said, laying a hand on her shoulder, "I have killed three of thy folk, and the Ratcliffes in times past have slain more of mine than the fingers of both hands could count. Thou'rt free to pass, and—I was a fool to block thy way."

She looked him fairly in the face. "If thou hadst not killed when it was thy right, should I have thought the better of thee for it?" she asked.

Again Wayne did not answer. He wanted no wayward riddles of the sort that women give a man; temptation pressed more and more on him at each of these chance meetings, and it was bitter hard to fight it down. Janet, misreading

his silence, moved down the path; but Wayne did not follow, and soon she faltered in her walk. Angered and ashamed she was, but she could not forget the errand that had brought her here; if she left Ned now without the warning she had come to give, his death would lie at her door. He was harsh now, and would turn a deaf ear to any warning; well, she must humour him until his mood showed likelier.

"Canst tell me, Ned, where best to search for plovers' eggs?" she asked, turning about and touching the basket on her arm to show its purpose. "They are so fond of the eggs at Wildwater, thou know'st, and I have been seeking all across Ling Crag Moor for them."

Wayne smiled despite himself. So like a child she was on the sudden, so earnest touching a light matter; and yet awhile since she had tempted him with storm and subtlety and all her woman's weapons.

"Fond of them, are they, at Wildwater?" he cried. "My faith, Janet, 'tis a pretty reason to give a Wayne of Marsh.— Come, then, for as it chances I can help thee in thy search. The Hill House folk showed me their nesting place but yesterday, and it lies at a stone's-throw above us yonder." He did not wait for her, but turned to climb the slope as if he guided her unwillingly.

Janet followed him up the spur of moor that backed Hill House; and still she would not remember the Lean Man, nor what awaited her at Wildwater; her mind was set wholly upon winning Ned from this black mood of his, that he might hearken to her warning. The climb grew steeper, and Wayne, with tardy courtesy, took the girl's hand to help her up the slippery clumps of bilberry.

"What brings thee so near to a Wayne homestead?" he asked, pointing to the grim front of the house above.

"Why should I fear? Our men folk fight, but none ever heard of one of your name waging war upon a woman."

"That is a true word," muttered Wayne, and would have said more, but checked himself.

"But the Ratcliffes have no such good repute? Nay! I know what was on thy tongue, Ned." Her face grew clouded, and a sudden, bitter cry escaped her. "Would God, dear lad, that it were different!" she cried.

Wayne's grasp tightened on her hand as he drew her half toward him. "There's a quaking bog, Janet, lies 'twixt what a man would and what he will," he cried. "God's life, girl, why must we always look askance at happiness?"

The words were forced from him, and under them was such a ring of passion as Janet had hungered for during many a long day of misery and dread that she had lately spent at Wildwater. This was a glimpse of the Ned she loved—hot, and eager, and rebellious. She had given all to him—shame and love of kin; and she was justified, whatever followed after. She would force him to tell her the secret that showed plain enough in eyes and voice; and then, if his sternness came

again, she would not heed it.

"*We* have no feud, Ned, thou and I," she said, in the voice that once before the quarrel ripened, he had been free to hearken to.

For a moment he wavered, looking down at her. Behind her a sweep of blue leaned to the shoulders of the heath. The throstle's note came low and mellow from below, and in the sun's eye larks were singing wildly. Slim, warm and sweet she stood, a Ratcliffe and a maid.

Shameless Wayne had fought this battle once before, and thought to have killed desire; yet the struggle when he had met her by the kirk-stone, weeks ago, was but the beginning of an uphill road. It was as Nell had said, not an hour since, and this thing called love had fifty ways of ambush for a man.

"Hark ye, Janet," he said at last. "There shall no feud stand between us; 'twas of their making, and I love thy little finger better——"

He freed her on the sudden; his eyes went out far across the moor, and into them there leaped a fierceness and a dread.

"Ned, what is't?" she cried.

"What is't? I saw dead Wayne of Marsh come up the slope, with blood on his wearing-gear and sorrow on his face."

"Hush, for Our Lady's sake! Hush——"

"There 'twas a fancy, girl," he said, huskily. "We'll think no more on 't.—Here is the nesting-ground; and, see, I all but trode on the first pair of eggs."

She answered nothing but stooped for the blue-white eggs that lay on the bare ground at her feet. Each welcomed the excuse for silence, and each went gravely forward with the search. But neither the tragic thought of the dead master of Marsh, nor yet Ned's chill withdrawal from her glance, could make Janet less than glad that she had come to Hazel Brigg. He loved her, and by and by she would carry back the knowledge to lighten her footsteps home to Wildwater.

Overhead the mother-birds were wheeling—crying piteously each time that one or other of the searchers stopped to a fresh nest, yet striving all the while to lure them from this strip of heath that held a year's hopes for them. Birds and beasts were always sure of friendliness from Janet, and something in the plovers' screams touched a soft chord in her.

"They have a human sort of wit, Ned," she murmured, stopping to watch them when the basket was three-quarters filled. "See how they coax, and make feint, and do all to persuade us that their nests lie otherwhere. 'Tis pity we should rob them, when all is said."

Wayne was looking at her with his old bitter smile; for he had been thinking, not of love, but of the father who called him from the grave to gird his loins for the fights to come.

"Wilt take this basket to the Lean Man, Janet, and say that Shameless

Wayne sends greeting with it?" he said.

"'Twould be a fairer token than thy last."

"Why, what dost thou know of tokens? They did not tell thee, surely?"

"I was the first to chance on it—the hand that lay on the boundary-stone, with thy greeting scrawled beside it."

He came and put his hand on hers, half tenderly. "It was no sight for thee. God knows I never thought a maid's eyes would light on it."

Janet, bewildered by the ebb and flow of feeling, could not withstand this touch of kindliness. She read his trouble with new understanding, and for the first time she realised how at each step she had made the struggle harder for him. Her pride in him took clear shape on the sudden. Nay, in this moment she loved the very stubbornness that held her from him. He had fought her as he had fought her kinsfolk, and he had won. One by one her doubts grew clearer; her folk were Waynes, as they had not been until now; and some day she would prove to him that she was as little a Ratcliffe as any who dwelt at Cranshaw or at Marsh. All this passed through her mind, in hurried, half-formed fashion; and then she needs must tell him of it.

"Speech has been hindered, Ned, between us," she said, "and we know not when another chance may come. I'll tell thee now what I have wished to tell thee many a long day past. Thou art one, and they are many; and it stirs my blood, Ned, to see the gallant fight thou'rt making."

Wayne tried to check her but she did not heed him.

"Once in the kirkyard and once at Marsh—and even the Ratcliffes say thou'rt something between man and devil when a sword is in thy hand. Hold fast, Ned, and strike keen, and thou'lt have the last word yet in this ill-matched quarrel."

"Nay, the pitcher goes once too oft to the well, Janet.—And as for the attack on Marsh, 'twas none of my doing that we beat them off. If the lads had not returned in good hour from the hunting, it would have been the Lean Man's turn."

She was silent awhile, thinking of what Red Ratcliffe had confessed to her this morning. *The pitcher goes once too oft to the well*—ay, there was truth in the hard old proverb.

"Ned," she cried, looking up on the sudden, "do not go to Bents Farm this week."

"Not go to Bent's? How didst learn I meant to ride up there at all?"

"Red Ratcliffe told me this morning. Ned, I'll not let thee go! They learned of thy coming from the farmer, and some plot is laid—I know not what—to meet thee by the way."

She stopped, for Wayne's face was darker than she had ever seen it, and

there was anger in his voice—anger against her, who had sought only to rescue him from treachery. Thwarted, driven back upon herself, she forgot that Wayne's temper was sharpened to a knife-edge by his long struggle with desire. He stood defenceless between love and hate, and the knowledge of his weakness maddened him.

"What is your folk's is yours, Janet," he cried, "and what is my folk's is mine; and the Waynes must fall lower before they hearken to what a Ratcliffe has to tell them of her kinsmen's plans."

Her eyes were wide with amazement, and anger, and a hard sort of contempt. "That is the Wayne pride," she said—"what they call honour, but what their neighbours call stark folly. Nay! I know what is in thy mind. Women have no hold on the niceties of honour, thou would'st say—but I tell thee, Wayne of Marsh, if thou'rt to fight this through like a man, not like a want-wit babe, thou'lt have to use the Lean Man's weapons. What are scruples when life—life, Ned, the one thing that we're sure of——"

"The Wayne pride may be folly," he broke on stormily, "but it has kept Marsh House standing for three hundred years, and I seek no better."

"Then thou'lt not be warned?"

"I shall ride to Bents Farm on Thursday, as I had in mind to."

"And wilt thou take none with thee?"

"I meant to take none, and I'll not shift from my path by a hair's-breadth."

"Fool, fool!" she cried, casting about for some fresh turn of pleading that might weigh with him. "It is told now—I cannot recall my warning, Ned; at least make such use thou canst of it."

"Hast lived so long with the storms, Janet," said he, smiling gravely, "that thou hast learnt naught of Fate? What will be, will be, girl, and if I'm to die by a Ratcliffe blade in three days' time—why, 'tis settled; if not, thy warning still goes for naught."

Stung by his disdain, she ceased pleading, and allowed her own right pride to have its say. "So be it; but I would have thee know this before I leave thee. There's somewhat hangs on the taking of thy life—somewhat that touches my welfare nearly."

"What is't?" he asked, eyeing her curiously.

"'Twould not advantage thee to know.—And so farewell, Ned, and God give thee a better wit."

Shameless Wayne had no struggle now with his love for this slim, passionate girl; with the first hint of battle his mind had swung back to what had been all in all to him since he swore above his father's body never to rest until the Ratcliffes had paid their price. She was a Ratcliffe, and she had dared to bid him slink out of touch of danger; and the good-bye that had seemed agony not long

ago, was easy now, as he watched her go up the brink-field without a thought to call her back for one last hopeless word—the word for lack of which her step went heavy up the slope.

"I can do naught for him," she murmured, not turning as she topped the rise. "Is there one other as fond as he in the whole world, to see a plain pitfall and ride hot-foot over it?"

She cared not a whit for what the Lean Man might have in store for her. She would make a straight confession to him and thereafter face him without dread—nay, with a sort of gladness, since his first hot impulse might earn her a release from that terrible bargain which had pledged her to the slayer of Wayne of Marsh. Then she fell into a storm of anger against Wayne, that his stubbornness had forbidden him to save himself and her; and after that a sense of utter loneliness came over her, and she lay down in the heather and sobbed without restraint.

But neither tears nor anger stayed with her for long, and her courage came slowly back after she had picked up her basket again and turned her face to Wildwater. Wayne of Marsh showed helpless as a child, and the old instinct to protect him gained on her. His strength of arm was nothing unless he had some friend to match the guile against which his uprightness was powerless. What could she do?

Her thoughts ran quickly now. She was full of feints as the peewits that had lately tried to decoy her from their nests. For her own sake she would have been glad to let the Lean Man know all; but there was Ned to think of, and by some means she must hide the truth. Her eyes brightened on the sudden, and she moved with a brisker step.

"I told Red Ratcliffe I would fight him," she cried eagerly, "and may be I shall worst him yet.—But to lie?—Ned, Ned, I'm glad thou dost not guess how deep my love for thee has gone. *To lie*? Well, 'twill be nearly truth if told for his sake. He goes on Thursday, does he, to Bents Farm? Well, there's three days 'twixt now and then."

CHAPTER XV
MOTHER-WIT

The Lean Man and Red Ratcliffe were standing in the courtyard at Wildwater, and Nicholas was regarding his grandson with cold displeasure.

"Thy tale hangs ill together, lad," he said, "and I'll not believe a word of it till Janet has told me her side of the matter. What, one of our breed go meeting one of *them* by stealth? By the Heart, if thou hast let jealousy——"

"But, sir, I saw them; they were as close as I am to you, and his words were honeyed if his low voice and earnest look were aught to go by."

"Well, there's no more to be said. 'Tis beyond belief, and I had rather saddle thee with a lie than Janet with such wantonness.—Peste! Where is the girl? She should be back by now, unless her search has taken her further afield than a handful of plovers' eggs is worth."

"Haply she is with Wayne of Marsh, sir," said the other softly.

The Lean Man pointed through the open gate. "Is she, then?" he snarled. "The next time thou dost hazard a guess of that sort, be sure the maid is not in sight already. Now, lad, I'll front thee with her straight, and we'll plumb the bottom of this matter."

Janet saw them while she was two-score yards away, and her heart sank for the moment. Her plan seemed harder of fulfilment now that she was all but face to face with the Lean Man. But she carried herself bravely, and crossed the open with a firm step, and held her basket out to Nicholas with a curtsey.

"Here are the eggs, sir. Have I not done well?" she said.

"Put them down, girl," said Nicholas, and paused, afraid to ask the question which might kill his love for her.

Janet was quick to take advantage of his hesitation. "I've done more than rob the peewits this morning, grandfather," she went on, with a glance at Red Ratcliffe. "Whom did I meet, think ye, above the Hill House waterfall?"

A foreboding seized the younger man; for her glance said plainly that she had no fear of what he might have told his grandfather.

"Whom, lass? Come, tell me quick," said Nicholas.

"Why, Shameless Wayne—and learned somewhat from him which he little thought might prove of service to you."

"Shameless Wayne? What led thee to Shameless Wayne?" cried Nicholas.

"Nay, what led *him* to talk to me? 'Tis not the first time, either. Not long ago, as I was crossing the fields this side of Marshcotes, he stopped me by the way, and made much of some little acquaintance which once there was between us."

Nicholas shot a glance of triumph at Red Ratcliffe, and one of doubt at Janet. "Thou should'st have passed him by," he said.

"What can a maid do, grandfather, when the man is headstrong and she is out of call of help? He"—she lifted her brows disdainfully,—"he dared to make hot love to me that day; and again this morning as I was gathering eggs, he——"

The Lean Man fetched an oath. "So the lad is not content, 'twould seem,"

he muttered; "it is not enough to kill three of us and to flaunt my son's hand in the public view, but he must—see, child, he means thee no good by this, and I was right when I bade thee keep to home awhile."

"But, a murrain on 't, the girl was willing!" cried Red Ratcliffe, aghast to find the Lean Man's anger diverted so swiftly from Janet to Wayne of Marsh. "What didst say to me this morning, Janet, when I met thee on the moor?"

"What I say to thee now, cousin—that thou'rt the meanest of all my kin, and the one least likely to catch any woman's fancy—that thou may'st threaten, and bully, and play the tale-bearer, and yet not win me in the end."

"'Tis plain to see I bred thee, lass," laughed Nicholas, putting a kindly hand on her shoulder.—"As for thee, Red Ratcliffe, I gave thee free leave to say thy say to Janet, but not to force her will."

"Then, sir, you would liefer see her wedded to Wayne of Marsh than to me?" broke in the other hotly. "They call *him* Shameless, but by the Mass this girl would hold the title with better credit. See how she stands there, with an open front and a clear eye, and all the while she knows——"

"Sir, my cousin has gone through it all before," said Janet, deftly taking up the talk as Red Ratcliffe paused for very anger. "I said nay to him this morning; and he turned and snarled on me, vowing he would tell you how I met Shameless Wayne willingly by stealth. Has he done so, or was he still finding wit enough to carry the tale through when I came up?"

"I said the tale went lame," muttered Nicholas; "ay, I knew there could be naught in 't."

"Did he tell you, sir," went on Janet merrily, "did he tell you that Wayne of Marsh was whispering love-tales in my ear, and that I was listening with greedy relish? He threatened so to do; because, forsooth, he had asked me a plain question, and my answer liked him little."

Red Ratcliffe had made many a useless effort to claim a hearing, but he could see by the Lean Man's face that the tide was running all against him.

"He thought I should be feared of you, grandfather!" cried Janet, laughing softly. "He thought I should not dare to come with a straight tale to you as he came with a crooked."

Nicholas, eager beforehand to keep his trust in the girl unshaken, let his last doubts fall off from him. "Thou wast right, child, to trust me," he said. "This fool here got his word in first, and if thou hadst not told me of thy meeting with Wayne before ever I twitted thee with it—why, I might well have believed that which would have gone nigh to break my heart."

For a moment the girl's eyes clouded and she could not look him in the face. He was so kind to her, so ready to take her part at all times; and she was rewarding his trust in sorry fashion. But that passed as she remembered the Lean

Man's cruelty, his guile, his resolve to do Shameless Wayne to death by any sort of treachery. Was it a time to stand on scruples, when she was fighting, not for her own life, but for another's? Again her mother-love for Wayne swept over her, touching her fancy with a sense of fine issues that were to be compassed, here and now, by her own unaided wit.

"I said, sir, that I was powerless to keep Wayne of Marsh from walking with me," she went on, her voice gaining depth and subtlety as she made forward with the tale that had been shaping itself in her mind all through the long walk home from Hill House; "but I could at the least make him pay for his ill manners in curious coin. *He* to dare offer marriage to a Ratcliffe! My cheeks were red with shame, as if another man had offered less than marriage; but I would not let him see it. I lured him on, I played with him, I learned all that he had done, or was doing, or was about to do."

"God rest thee, lass!" cried the Lean Man, with a boisterous laugh. "Who says thou'rt more or less than a very Ratcliffe? Thou didst lead the poor fool on, then, with a trail of honey? By the Dog, I never loved thee half as well as now.—What, Ratcliffe the Red, thou lookest moody! The old man was not fond enough to stomach any wild tale thou didst bring to him?—Well, girl, what didst learn from Wayne?"

"That he was going to Bents Farm, to see that some repairs were rightly done."

"Ay, it tallies," murmured Nicholas.—"Go on, Janet; we knew as much as that."

"But did you know, sir, that Wayne had somehow learned your purpose? He was to have gone on Thursday——"

"Did he tell thee that, or was it I?" broke in Red Ratcliffe. "Hark ye, grandfather! I let slip to her this morning the tale of what we meant to do, and she uses it now for her own ends."

"Peace, sirrah! I have a long account to square with thee, and a quiet tongue may keep thee from adding to the reckoning. Didst let the tale slip? The more fool thou, when I had bidden thee speak of it to no man. Haply 'twas from thee that Wayne of Marsh learned what we have in mind?"

"It matters little, as it chances, whether Wayne knows or not," said Janet. "He will go on Friday, sir, at noon, instead of on Thursday; for he told me as much, laughing to think how easily he could outwit you."

"Haply the last laugh will be mine," said Nicholas grimly. "Didst learn how many of his folk he meant to bring with him? Being warned, he will not go alone, I warrant."

"Nay, he professed to be a match for any four of you," answered the girl, a spice of the Ratcliffe devilry leading her to garnish her story with needless detail,

"but for prudence sake, he said, he would take some two or three with him."

"A match for any four?" muttered the Lean Man. "I'll keep that word in mind when Wayne fares up to Bents. Ay, by the Rood I will let none but myself cross swords with him. Three of my folk I'll take, to equal his, and none shall say that Wayne of Marsh fought against odds when he was slain on the road to Bents Farm."

Janet shuddered to hear her grandfather talk of Wayne's death, as of a fact already well accomplished; glancing at the Lean Man's height and wiry frame, remembering the skill he had in wielding that dread two-handled sword of his, she felt that Wayne of Marsh, for all his lusty youth, would find a match in Nicholas Ratcliffe. And then she laughed her fears away; for was she not sending the slayers on the veriest Jack-o'-lanthorn errand that ever led men into the bogs?

"Take the men with you, sir, for Wayne can be tricky as yourself," she said gravely. "By Our Lady, I think he'll not fare back again from Bents to Marsh."

"Hast a shrewd head on thy pretty shoulders. Gad, yes, thou'rt crafty! Who is't thou callest to mind, girl? Some one out of the musty Book that Parson reads from on the Sabbath. Delilah, was it not, who fooled the long-haired fighter and clipped his locks for him as if he were a sheep at shearing-time?"

"And he could not fight at all, sir, after the shearing was done. 'Tis a good fable," laughed Janet.

"Ay, but how if she is clipping a Ratcliffe poll the while, and fools us into thinking that Wayne's locks, not ours, are underneath the shears?" snapped Red Ratcliffe.

The Lean Man, good-humoured almost now that his quarry was well in view, turned and looked his grandson up and down. "It would take a clever lass, methinks, to clip that rusty head of thine; as well reap a stubble-field for corn," he sneered.—"There! The work speeds merrily, and a little jest suffices for a big laugh. Janet, come draw me a measure of wine, and we'll pledge thy mother-wit."

He moved across the courtyard, and Red Ratcliffe, stepping to Janet's side, laid a hand on her cloak. "I asked this morn who fathered thee," he whispered. "Well, now I know. The devil got thee, and thou'lt not shame him. The game is thine so far—but by the Lord I'll make thee smart when fortune shifts her favours."

"What, dost not believe my story?" she answered, with demure wonder. "Well, go on Thursday, then, if thou doubtest——"

"Nay. He will not go to Bents Farm on Thursday, for thou hast warned him; nor will he go on Friday, since thou tellest us so glibly the place and hour. But we'll wait each day for him until he comes."

"The Lean Man will not wait with you, save on the Friday."

An ugly scrowl crossed the other's face. "The Lean Man ages fast; we must learn to strike while he is hanging on every lying word of thine," he said, and left

her.

Janet halted on the threshold before following Nicholas indoors.

"Ay, even such as he can call me liar," she muttered, looking out across the heath as if for guidance. "Sorrow of women, why must we always stoop to feints and trickeries? Why cannot we fight as men fight——"

The peewits were wheeling over the sky-rimmed moor, and Janet, watching them, bethought her once again how they had used the self-same trickery to save their unhatched young. Instinctively she felt their world was hers, their teaching hers, and what was right for the wild things of the heath was right for her.

"And I have saved Wayne of Marsh. God be thanked for it," she cried with sudden fervour, and went to bring the Lean Man the cup which was to pledge her mother-wit.

CHAPTER XVI

HOW WAYNE OF MARSH RODE UP TO BENTS

The sun was nearing the top of his climb, and his rays were kindly with Mistress Wayne as she sat by the waterside in Hazel Dene and filled her lap with flowers and green lush grasses. Here a clump of primroses nestled close to the water's edge, and there a hazel-bush waved its catkins finger-like over the peat-brown water, dusting the wavelets with finest saffron pollen. Above, in the sloping fields, lambs bleated after the wethers, and kine chewed lazily the cud of sweet new grass. All was tender frolic, as if a month ago no snow had filled the hollows of the trees where now were nests, as if no bitter wind had whistled downward from the moor, chilling the bud within its sheath and the sap in well-turned limbs of ash and oak.

Mistress Wayne ceased playing with her flowers, and fell to dreaming. She was the one still thing among all the quivering eagerness of leaves and water, birds and hovering flies and glancing fish. For the storms that had chilled and frightened her were over, and with the spring her mind seemed to be loosing, one by one, its winter bonds. Old memories stirred in her and clamoured for release; new desires awakened, and with them a fresh load of doubts and fears; she sat, helpless and inert, and strove with all her might to unravel the threads which one night's tragedy had tangled.

"Ah, it is sweet—sweet," she murmured. "I was a child once—a child—and

they gave me love—both hands they gave me full of love—and it was always spring, I think, with warmth like this and song of birds. But I'm old now; older than anybody knows, and sad. I think it is because I did some one a great wrong. What was it? Down in the meadows, when he came and tried to kill me with his hard grey eyes—the eyes that stared at me afterward from the bier. Nay, he could not forgive me, even in death—I think he knew that I had never loved him."

For a moment longer she struggled with memory; then her face grew empty as of old, and she picked up her flowers and fell to talking babe-talk to them. But her witless moods held lighter sway nowadays; reason was coming slowly back, and day by day her mind returned more often from childishness into the piteous strife of sanity. She got to her feet soon, and threw the flowers from her, and looked with troubled eyes toward Marshcotes.

"I might go and find Sexton Witherlee," she said, halting with one finger on her lip; "he is so wise, and he may tell me what I want to learn. Yes, I must find the Sexton."

A crackling of twigs came from up the Dene, and turning affrightedly she saw Shameless Wayne striding along the narrow path.

"Why, little bairn, what art doing here?" he cried, as she ran to him with hands outstretched in welcome.

"Thinking, Ned—always thinking. I want to remember—oh, I want to remember—but the thoughts will never stay still enough for me to put my hand on them. I have been trying to catch the little fish in the stream yonder, and it was just the same; they stayed till I had all but caught them, and then they glanced and flickered, flickered and glanced, until I could not see them for the splashes which they made."

"Bide awhile, bairn," he said kindly; "thy thoughts will come tame to hand one day, never fear."

"Art going home, Ned?" she said, after a silence. "I was crossing to Marshcotes kirkyard, but if thou'lt come into the fields with me, and talk, I'll ask naught better."

"I'm going to Marsh, but only to get to saddle and be off again. Better talk to the Sexton this morning, and I'll walk with thee after dinner.—Nay! Never look so downcast. 'Tis only that there's work to be done up at Bents Farm, and I shall scarce get there and back as 'tis by dinner-time."

Again the puzzled look, which told that she was doubtful lest this returning memory of hers were leading her astray. "I thought, Ned—I thought thou hadst gone there yesterday? Well-away, the days slip past, and sometimes I forget to count them; was it not Thursday yesterday—and Friday today—and what comes after?" Her eyes filled with tears. "It is so hard, dear, to forget and to know that all the world is pitying me."

"Tush, bairn! Thou canst remember nigh as well as any of us now. And thou'rt right about Bents Farm; I should have gone there yestermorn, but was prevented. There! Find out yond friendly Sexton of thine, and show him how this fair spring weather is warming thee back to memory."

"Thou'lt not forget to walk with me after dinner?" she said.

"Not I.—The stream's over-wide for thee, is't? Well, that is soon reckoned with."

Laughing, he picked her up and leaped across the babbling water; then set her down, and turned to wave farewell as he swung round the corner of the path.

"Half her wits have come home from wandering. What when they return altogether?" he muttered. "Nay, she had better be as the bairns are. Our wits do naught for us save teach us that life rings cracked and hollow as a broken bell.—I could swear the sun moves at racing-speed," he broke off, glancing toward the south. "'Twas well I told them to set dinner back a full two hours."

The Lean Man, standing in the Wildwater courtyard, was likewise looking toward the south, as he rated three of his kinsfolk into the saddle.

"Ye lie-abed, hounds!" he roared. "Does Wayne of Marsh come riding to meet us every day, that ye mean to let noon go by? Up with the stirrup-cup, Janet, and I'll drain it once again to an errand that is all of thy making."

"'Tis scarce past the time for wild geese, sir," put in Red Ratcliffe drily, "and Janet knew it, methinks, when she sent us on this chase."

"Marry, why should'st doubt Wayne's coming?" snapped Nicholas. "But thou wast so from thy birth, lad, so I'll not rate thee for thy clownishness."

"I doubt for reasons that I'll tell you afterward," said the other, nettled by his comrades' laughter.

"What, when I return with Wayne's head at my saddle-flap?"

"If mares build nests, and lay gold eggs in them, we shall bring back Wayne's head to-day," growled Red Ratcliffe, and pricked his horse forward out of reach of further gibes.

"The young cockerels crow while the old birds fill their crops," laughed Nicholas. "Forward, lads, and mind well that none is to lay hand on Shameless Wayne till I have done with him."

Janet watched them move up into the moor, their figures, riding one behind the other, dark against the white, wind-hurried clouds.

"A fair journey, sirs!" she cried, soon as they were out of eyeshot. "A fair journey, and fair tempers when ye come back from slaying Wayne of Marsh."

Dangers were waiting in plenty for Ned, she knew; but it was enough that he was safe from the peril of the moment, and her heart sang blithely as she told herself that, but for her aid, the Lean Man would have gone to meet him yesterday—and would have found him. What she should say when they returned

from their bootless errand, she knew not, nor whether her grandfather would suspect the truth of all the tale she had told him when he found one flaw in it. It did not matter; some way she would coax him back to good humour, as she had done four days ago.

Restless in her gaiety, which had a certain fierceness in it, she wandered up and down the house, and out into the garden, and thence to the stables in search of her favourite roan mare. The roan had been ailing lately, and this morning she turned a sadly lack-lustre eye on Janet in answer to the girl's caresses.

"'Tis time a leech looked to thee," said Janet, stroking the beast's muzzle. "Yet it is thankless of thee, when all is said, after the pains I've taken. I all but lost the fingers of one hand awhile since in giving thee a ball, and thou'rt not a whit the better for it. Well, we must see if Earnshaw, yond idle rogue from Marshcotes, can do thee any good; he's cunning at horse-physic, so they say."

Glad of the excuse for a scamper, but finding none of the farm-hands about the yard, she saddled the mare that stood in the next stall, led her to the horsing-steps that stood this side the gateway, and soon was galloping over the heather as if the chestnut had no knees to be broken, nor she a neck to lose. And half the way her thoughts were of the Ratcliffes, riding to meet a foe who would not come; and half the way she thought of Wayne's splendid doggedness, when she had met him at Hazel Brigg, and he had turned a deaf ear to her warning.

Mistress Wayne, meanwhile, had found the Sexton at work on a new grave and had enticed him to the flat stone which had grown to be their seat on all occasions when they foregathered for a chat. Thinner than ever was the Sexton, as if the past winter had dried the little flesh that had once made shift to clothe his bones; his eyes were dreamier, but the old kindliness was in them as they rested on this frail comrade who listened with such goodwill to all his thrice-told tales of fight and fairies, of Barguest and the Brown Folk.

"Ay, they live under th' kirkyard, do th' Brown Folk, as weel as farther out across th' moor," Witherlee was saying. "They're deepish down, but time an' time, when I'm nearing th' bottom of a grave, I can hear 'em curse an' cry at me, for they like as they cannot bide mortal men to come anigh 'em."

"Art thou never afraid of them, Sexton?" asked Mistress Wayne, her wide, questioning eyes on his.

"Nay, I niver get ony harm, as I knaw on, fro' th' little chaps,—though I do shiver whiles, for their curses is summat flairsome to hearken to. Howsiver, curses break no bones, as th' saying is, so I just let 'em clicker, an' I win forrard wi' my digging."

The little woman shivered. "They are cruel, these Brown Folk. They snatch children from the cradle, and carry them down and down, deep under the peat, to work the gold for them. I like the slim ghosties better. Sexton, talk to me of

them,—the ghosts of those who lie asleep here; thou hast seen such often?"

"Ay," said the Sexton softly. "I've learned th' feel an' th' speech an' th' throb o' th' kirkyard, Mistress, till I'm friends wi' ivery sleeper of 'em all. Lord Christ, how sweet it is to sit here on a summer's eve, wi' th' moon new-risen ower kirk an' graves—to feel this feckless body o' mine crumple an' shrink, while th' inward fire grows fierce, and bright, and steady. 'Tis then th' ghosties come and slip their thin hands into mine; for th' naked souls o' men are friendly, and 'tis only our lumpish shroud of clay that frights th' sperrits from us. Ay, there's scant room, I'm thinking, for us poor mortals, what wi' Brown Folk below, an' White Folk up aboon."

"Once thou said'st 'twas only the unwed lassies walked. Is it so, Sexton?"

"Nay, there's men-folk, too. I say to myseln, small wonder that th' ghosties stir up and down, time an' time, when them as lig under sod fall to thinking o' th' unquiet things that hev happened just aboon their heads. Look ye, Mistress, how black yond kirk-tower looks at us; 'twas there a Wayne fought, in an older day, agen Anthony Ratcliffe wi' five other Ratcliffes to back him—fought wi' his back to th' tower-wall, and killed four out o' th' six that made agen him, an' sore wounded Anthony an' another. Ay, an' ye mind how Shameless Wayne took toll a while back i' this same spot? An' how Dick Ratcliffe paid his reckoning on th' vault-stone yonder?"

Mistress Wayne shrank from the Sexton as if he had struck her. "Dick Ratcliffe—Dick—what should I know of him?" she murmured. Again the still intensity of face, as she sought the key to that dim past of hers.

But the Sexton was deep in his own reverie; he was thinking, not of the woman to whom Dick Ratcliffe had given an unclean love, but of the new feud that had come to gladden these latter days.

"Is not th' place like to be restless, wi' sich as these lying bedfellows?" he went on, nodding his head in greeting at the lettered stones. "Ay, restless as I am restless, heving followed my trade, through sun an' gloaming an' mid-winter midnight, amang th' wild folk that niver found peace till they came on their last journey to Marshcotes kirkyard.—Theer, theer, Mistress!" he broke off, as the little woman's cry broke sharply into his musings and half awoke him. "I flair ye, but ye need think nowt on 't; an owd chap mun hev his spell o' dithering in an' out amang th' fierce owd tales that tangle and trip up th' one t' other. Yet I praise God that, after all these weak new days, young Wayne o' Marsh hes shown th' owd stuff a-working."

"Sexton, Sexton!" The woman's eyes, fixed on the vault-stone below, were sane now, and her voice not like at all to the childish pipe which Witherlee had grown to love. "I have tried so hard to understand—and now I know—and would God I could forget again."

Witherlee made as if to put an arm about her, so wishful of comfort she seemed; but he withdrew, feeling that her grief was over-terrible for such rough consolation as he had to offer. Instead, he filled his pipe and lit it, and waited till she found more to tell him.

They rested so for a long while, with only the song of birds and the moan of a rainy breeze to break the silence. Then,

"I see it all, Sexton," she said quietly—"the evening when Wayne of Marsh, my husband, found me with my lover in the orchard—Wayne's death—the flight with Dick Ratcliffe of Wildwater. We gained the wicket up above there—we could hear the harness rattling of the chaise that was to carry us to safety—and then—" She stopped and hid her face awhile.

"'Tis ower an' done wi' long sin'," murmured the Sexton; "ower an' done wi,' Mistress."

"'Twill never be over and done with. Dick was killed—but I—I was not given death, only a merciful little spell of sleep."

"Nay, I wish th' poor body wod cry her een out," thought the Sexton, watching the bright eyes and tragic face. "I niver held wi' a crying woman myseln, but I could thoyle tears better nor this stark, dry grief o' hers."

But Mistress Wayne was far from tears as yet. A great load was on her heart, crushing the misery inward; it was long before she could shake off the least part of it, but at last—after the Sexton had waited with a patience that was all his own—she crept nearer to him, and laid a hand on his, and began to talk with a quiet and settled gravity.

"I was not at all to blame, Sexton," she said. "I think, if he knew all, even dead Wayne of Marsh might look with pity on me. I was so young when he brought me out of the sweet, warm South up into these dreary mountain-tops—so young, and the folk here were so harsh, and I hated them when they mocked me for my foreign ways. Wayne was kind, so far as he knew how to be, but I feared him—feared his sternness, and his hard dark face. The storms that only brought him ruder health were killing me, and the wind at nights, as it moaned about the chimney-stacks, was like a dirge. And Nell could not forgive me for coming a second wife to Marsh. I had no friend at all, save Shameless Wayne; they despised him as a drunkard and a reveller, but I never had aught but kindness and goodwill from him. Sexton, was it not hard——"

Witherlee did not answer. His glance, roving to the far side of the graveyard, had fallen on his goodwife, who was nearing him with a brisk, decided step; and he, who feared no ghost that ever walked light-footed through the grasses, shrank from the tongue which was wont to fall like a flail on him.

"Ay, I said how 'twould be!" cried Nanny, while still a score yards off. "Frittering thy time away, while th' wife is wearing herseln bone-thin for thee. Here

th' dinner hes been cooked this half-hour, an' th' dumplings as cold as Christmas, an' I allus did say th' most worritsome trick a man could hev war coming late to his victuals."

"I'm coming, fast as legs 'ull tak me," said Witherlee, scrambling to his feet. "An' as for th' dumplings—I'd as lief hev 'em cold as warm; it's all one when they've gone down a body's throat."

"Hearken to him! All one, says he—he'll be telling me next there's nowt to choose 'twixt to-day an' yesterday. Is't all one whether *tha*'rt warm, or cold as one o' yond coffin-chaps under sod?—Ay, an' now there's Earnshaw coming. Well, well, if him an' thee once get together, there'll nowt less than a thunder-storm skift ye, an' that I'll warrant."

Earnshaw, coming up from the Bull tavern, met them as they turned the corner of the pathway. His hands were thrust deep into his pockets, and he wore his usual air of shiftless cheeriness.

"Blowing rain, I fancy," said Earnshaw, standing square across the path.

"Blowing fiddlesticks," snapped Nanny, who was in one of her worst fratching moods. "Get out o' th' gate, Earnshaw, an' let busier folk pass by. It's weel to be thee, or Witherlee here—nowt to do save put hands i' pockets, an' tak 'em out again."

"Nay, now, tha'rt allus so bustling, Nanny. Tak life at a fair, easy pace, say I, an' ye'll noan need Witherlee's pick an' shovel this side o' three-score years an' ten. Hast heard th' news, like?"

The Sexton's wife could not resist that simple query. "News? What's agate?" she said, half turning about.

"Why, th' Wildwater farm-lads is getting past all. There's no day goes by now, so Hiram Hey telled me, but what they come to words or blows wi' th' Marsh lot. It means summat: like master, like man, an' I warrant they've ta'en example fro' th' Lean Man hisseln. What mak o' chance lies Shameless Wayne, that's what I want to knaw?"

"Tha wert up at Wildwater thyseln awhile back?" said the Sexton, still with one eye on his wife.

"Ay, for sure. I war in an' amang 'em while I war doing yond walling job for th' Lean Man; an' they war allus clevering then about what th' Ratcliffes war bahn to do, an' allus striving to pick a quarrel wi' ony o' th' Marsh lads 'at came handy. I tak no sides myseln——"

"I'll warrant tha doesn't. He'd nearly as lief wark as fight, wod slack-back Earnshaw," put in Nanny.

"Well," cried Witherlee, "yond lad at Marsh is making as grand a fight as ony Wayne that's gone afore him, an' we're all fain, I reckon, to see him win i' th' end.—What say ye, Mistress?" he broke off, turning to the little woman who

sat apart, hearkening to their gossip but taking no share in it.

"He will win, Sexton," she answered quietly. "Dost doubt it?"

Nanny softened for a moment, as she, too, glanced at Mistress Wayne. "Not wi' ye beside him. By th' Heart, Mistress, but I'd be flaired for Shameless Wayne if he'd no friend sich as ye to keep him fro' ill hap."

"Nay, I can do naught—save sit with hands in lap sometimes, and read the future, and see Ned moving safe through bloodshed and through glint of swords."

"Do nowt?" echoed the Sexton's wife. "Ye said as mich when Bet Earnshaw axed ye to go an' touch her bairn. Did ye do nowt that day, Mistress, or is it thanks to ye that th' little un mended fro' th' minute ye set hand on her?"

"'Tis something that goes out of me—I know not what," murmured the little woman. "It is strange, is it not, that such as I should have the gift of healing when wise men have failed?"

"Book-learning never cured a cough, as they say i' Marshcotes," put in Nanny.—"Who's that at th' moor-gate? Why, if it isn't Mistress Ratcliffe herseln! My sakes, it's a full kirkyard this morn. What mud she be after, think ye? She's hitching her horse to th' gate-post, mark ye—an' now she's coming down wi' that long, lad-like stride o' hers, as if she war varry full o' some business.—I'd rarely like to know what brings her so far afield."

Janet stopped on seeing the chattering group of rustics, with Mistress Wayne sitting quiet and motionless behind them; then, finding that Earnshaw was among the gossips, the girl went down to him. The Sexton's wife eyed her narrowly as she approached, and nodded her head with a gesture which said, more plainly than words could have done, that beauty and a free carriage were dust in the balance when weighed against the damning fact that she was born a Ratcliffe.

"Earnshaw, I want thee to come and doctor that roan mare of mine," said Janet.

"Doan't axe him to do owt he could call wark, Mistress," cried Nanny, missing no opportunity to gibe. "Call it laking, an' he'll come like a hare; but reckon it's wark, an' ye may whistle a twelve-month for him."

"Thee hod thy whisht, Nanny," Earnshaw interposed. "If there's a horse to be physicked, Mistress Ratcliffe hes come to th' right man, choose who hears me say 't."

"There's them as says tha wert born i' a stable, Earnshaw, an' I can weel believe it; bred an' born, I reckon, for tha'd walk further to see a horse nor to sup a quart of ale—an' that's saying a deal. Now, Witherlee, art coming, or shall I hev to sweep thee indoors wi' a besom?"

Nanny, her temper no wise improved on learning that Janet's errand promised so little mystery, carried off Witherlee without more ado. Earnshaw

could find no good excuse to linger after he had discussed the roan mare's ailments with Janet; and he, too, passed up the graveyard and out at the top gate. The girl was about to follow him and ride home again, when Mistress Wayne called to her.

"Come hither, Mistress. I have somewhat to say to thee," she cried, motioning the girl to the seat beside her.

Janet, who had last seen her, a wind-driven waif, come wailing into the Wildwater hall, was startled by the change in her—by the wild grief in her blue eyes, and the resolution in her baby face. Without a word she took the proffered seat, wondering what Mistress Wayne could find to say to her.

"I saw you come in at the wicket, and I knew you," said the other presently. "It is so strange, girl; all has come back to me in a wave, and I remember faces—dead faces, some of them; and some again are living, and beautiful like yours. I want to talk with you of Ned—him they call Shameless Wayne."

Janet glanced at her in surprise. A faint colour crept over her brow. "You—you know, then?" she murmured.

"Yes, I know. Often—in the days when I could only half understand—Ned talked of you to me; and I recall now that, before the troubles came, you used to meet him up by the kirk-stone. Dear, I cannot let you both go into the pitiless marshes, as I have done. He loves you——"

"Ay, a little less than he loves his pride," said Janet bitterly.

"Some day he will love you more." She clutched the girl's arm eagerly. "None knows but I how bitter the struggle has been for him. He is mad, mad, to let good love slip from him while he grasps at shadows. *I* had a man's love once, girl, and I threw it aside, and—God pity all who let the gift go by."

Tears were crowding thick to the eyes of Mistress Wayne—warm, heart-healing tears which had been denied her until now. A sudden compassion seized Janet, and under the pity a gladness that Wayne of Marsh had found the struggle bitter as she could have wished it.

"He loves me, say you? Say it again, Mistress; 'tis the pleasantest speech I've heard these long days past," cried the girl.

"He is wearying for you—wearying for you. Hark ye, dear! I cannot let you drift apart. Come with me back to Marsh, and I'll make all smooth between you—ay, though Ned strives with all his might against us."

Janet smiled and shook her head. "That is a little more, methinks, than the most love-sick maid would do. Bring him to me, and I will welcome him——"

"Nay, life is so short, so very short. See, I'm but a child yet, and impatient, and all my heart is set on giving Ned his happiness, because he cared for me when there was none else to befriend me. I'm sure 'twill all come right: Ned has gone riding up the moor, but he'll be home by now, and we can——"

"Up the moor, say ye?" cried Janet, with sudden misgiving. "Which road took he, Mistress?"

"To Bents Farm, I think he said. He was to have gone yesterday, but was hindered."

Janet sprang to her feet and stood looking down on Mistress Wayne. This, then, was the end of her wise scheme; this was the fruit of all her care for him. And in her recklessness she had bidden the Lean Man take three other Ratcliffes to meet him by the way.

"What is't?" asked Mistress Wayne, wonderingly.

"What is't?" cried Janet, with a hard laugh. "Naught, Mistress—save that I've murdered one who was dearer to me than my own body."

Turning, she ran up the path, and out at the wicket, and tugged at her horse's bridle, which she had fastened to the gate-post, so hard that it broke between her hands. And fast as they galloped across the moor, toward Bents Farm, the pace seemed sluggish when measured by her thoughts. Was it too late? Was Wayne already lying face to sky, with lids close-shut over the eyes that would see neither sky nor moor again? Nay, it should not be, it must not be.

Gallop. She would ride into the thick of them, and somehow pluck him from between their blades; they dared not strike a woman, one of their own kin, and while she held them off Wayne might compass his escape. Yet she knew it was too late, and again the picture came before her, clear in its every detail, of the quiet body and the upturned face that would be lying somewhere on this same road to Bents. Each turn of the way was a hell to her, because of what might lie beyond, each turning safely past was heaven. *Gallop.* There was yet time.

She neared the dip of Hoylus Slack and heard the sound of hoof-beats in the hollow. It was done, then; the strain was over, and there was no room for hope. Was this Red Ratcliffe, come to bear news to Marsh that its Master was dead? If so, she would gallop her horse against his, and snatch for his weapon as they fell together. The horseman was half up the hill now, and a great cry broke from her as she saw the blunt, rugged face with the kerchief tied across the brow. Pulling her beast back almost on to his haunches, she stood and waited till the horseman topped the rise and came to a sudden halt at sight of her.

"Ned, Ned, art safe?" she cried, reining in close beside him.

Wayne of Marsh eyed her soberly. "Safe? Ay. Wilt sorrow or be glad of it, Mistress Janet?"

"Cease mockery!" she pleaded. "See, I would think shame to confess it at another time, but all the way from Marshcotes I have sickened at thought of—God's pity, Ned, what might have chanced!"

"Well, enough has chanced, I fancy, for one morning's work. If a ripped forehead, that scarce will let me see for bleeding through the kerchief——"

"Stoop, Ned. Thou hast tied it ill, and my fingers are better at the work."

She was glad of the least labour she could do for him; he might be churlish, he might accept her service as if it were a penance, but he was safe, and free to treat her as he would. Shrinking a little when the bandage was loosened, she glanced at the wound and noted its discoloured look.

"Bide awhile," she said, slipping to the ground. "Thou'lt have trouble with it, Ned, unless I lay fresh peat on it to drive out the bad humours."

"'Twill heal of itself; I would not trouble thee," he muttered. It was a nice, bewildering point of honour to Wayne of Marsh, this acceptance of aid from Ratcliffe hands, and he spoke with scant civility.

But Janet was back already with a handful of the warm red mould, and she bade him get down from saddle that she might the better fasten on the bandage.

"Now tell me. How didst come through it, Ned?" she asked, tying a second knot in the kerchief.

"That is what I cannot tell thee. They met me, four of them, where the road is narrow up by Dead Lad's Rigg."

"Ay, four of them. God give me shame," murmured Janet.

"I heard the Lean Man bid them stand aside and leave us to it, and after that I knew no more till he and I were lunging each at the other. He knocked my sword up at the last, and lifted his own blade to strike——"

"Yes, yes, go on. What then, Ned?"

"Nay, I told thee I could give no right answer. Just as I had given all up—with a thought, it may be, of one who had been forbidden—the Lean Man's arm dropped to his side, and he sprang back in the saddle, all but unseating himself."

"But, Ned, I cannot credit it. Didst thou make no movement to drive him back?"

"None, for 'twas all done in a flash, and he might have split my skull in two if he had brought down that great blade of his."

"Was there naught, then, to occasion it?"

"Naught that I could see, yet he backed as if the fiend were at his throat. His own folk were no less puzzled than I, but his terror ran out to them and held them; and when I made at him afresh not one rode forward."

"Didst—didst not kill him?" she said. Any but the Lean Man he might slay, but her grandfather—nay, she could not brook that when faced so suddenly with the chance of it.

"I did not," answered Wayne grimly—"for the reason that he fled."

Again she stared at him. "*Fled*? Grandfather fled, say'st thou?"

"Did I not say that there was Ratcliffe pride in thee? Ay, plain in thy voice, and in thy little faith that the Lean Man could flee. Yet so it is, Janet; and I made after him almost to the gates of Wildwater; and if his had not been the better

horse—–"

"Then whence came this ugly gash of thine? 'Tis all a puzzle, Ned, and my late fear for thee has dulled my wits, I think."

"Why, his folk came after me in half-hearted fashion, and I had to ride through the three of them when I turned back for Wildwater. I took this cut in passing, and he who gave it me will go lame for the rest of a short life; and then they, too, made off, daunted by the old man's panic, and I was left to wonder what goblin had come between Nicholas Ratcliffe's blade and me."

"He has been strange of late—ever since the night when he came down to burn thee out of Marsh. Some illness has taken him; it was the fire that did it, may be, when he fell face foremost into it."

They stood awhile, neither breaking the strained silence. Then Janet touched the bandage lightly, and smoothed it a little over the close-cropped hair, and, "Ned," she whispered, "thou said'st something just now. *With a thought of one who had been forbidden.* Who was it, Ned?"

Very grave he was; not rough now, nor uncivil, but sad with the sadness that old hatreds, formed before his birth, had woven for him.

"Who should it be but thou, Janet? I told myself in that one moment how well I loved thee—and I was glad. And then some strange thing warded death from me—and, see, the feud stands gaunt as ever between us two."

The reaction from her late dread was stealing over Janet fast, and with it there came the memory of how she had brought him into this desperate hazard, from which a miracle alone had saved him.

"Ned," she cried, "who bade the Lean Man take three of his folk against thee, think'st thou? Who told them thou would'st ride to Bents Farm to-day?"

"Red Ratcliffe, at a venture."

"Nay, it was I. Thinking to keep thee safe, I said thou would'st go to Bents to-day instead of yestermorn. So thy wound, Ned, was all of my giving, and—why dost not hate me for it?" she finished, with a passion that ended in a storm of tears.

Wayne set both arms about her then, and strove to comfort her; angry he had seen her, and scornful, but this sudden grief, so little like her, and so unexpected, loosed all the harshness that he was wont to set between them as a barrier when they met.

"Nay, Janet, never cry because of what might have chanced and did not," he whispered. "'Twas no fault of thine, lass, that I went to Bents to-day."

A sour face showed over the wall that bounded the left hand of the highway, and presently a pair of wide shoulders followed as Hiram Hey began to climb over into the road.

"What in the Dog's name art doing here, Hiram?" cried his Master, starting

guiltily away from Mistress Janet.

"Nay, I like as I hed to look after some beasts i' th' High Pasture. 'Tis fine weather, Maister—but a thowt past mating-time, I should hev said."

"Thy ears are big, Hiram, but my hands will cover them."

"Now, look ye! It hes been a failing o' mine wi' th' gentry iver sin' I war a lad; I may speak as civil as ye please, an' I get looks as black as Marshcotes steeple. An' all th' while I war nobbut thinking o' two fond stock-doves that I fund nesting a three-week late up i' Little John's wood."

Janet waited for no more, but beckoned Wayne to lift her to the saddle and touched the roan mare with her whip.

"Is there danger for thee at Wildwater?" he whispered, clutching her bridle. "If there be—I tell thee I'll not let thee go."

"Danger? Nay, if thou hadst failed to go to Bents, there might have been; but now they'll think I warned them in good faith."

"But what of the bargain, Janet? The last time we met thou told'st me of some bargain, made by the Lean Man, which touched thy welfare."

She paused, eager to toll him all; but a second glance showed her that he was in no fit state just now to have more troubles thrust on him. Even the effort of lifting her to saddle had blanched his face; the cloth was reddening, too, about his forehead, and he swayed a little as he held her rein. She must find a better time to tell him; for if he learned what that grim bargain was which pledged her to his murderer, he would run headlong against her folk, weak as he was, and find himself outmatched.

"The bargain was of little consequence," she said. "There was a price named for my hand—but such a price as none at Wildwater, I think, will ever claim. There, Ned! Let go my bridle, for that hind of yours is watching all we do."

Still he was not satisfied; but his hand slackened for a moment on the rein, and Janet started forward at the trot. Once she turned, at the bend of the road, and waved to him; and then the moor seemed emptied of its sunlight on the sudden.

Wayne stood looking up the highway long after she had gone, and turned at last to find Hiram's quiet grey eyes upon him.

"Well, Hiram? What art thinking of?" he said, with something between wrath and grudging laughter in his voice.

"Nowt so mich, Maister. 'Twould be a poor farmer as 'ud frame to sow Hawkhill Bog wi' wheat; that war all I hed i' mind. Soil's soil, choose how ye tak it, an' ye cannot alter th' natur on 't. Theer! My thowts do run on farming till I've getten no room seemingly for owt else; an' I niver axed ye how ye came by this red coxcomb o' yourn."

Wayne glanced over Hiram's question as he put his foot in the stirrup. He

read the old fellow's meaning clear enough, and it angered him that his love for Janet should be hinted at under cover of this slow farming-talk.

"Soil's soil, Hiram," he said, "and I had as lief sow corn on yond stone wall as look for any crop of kindliness from that dried heart of thine."

"Begow, he knows nowt about me an' Martha," chuckled Hiram, as his Master rode down the highway. "My heart's as soft as butter nowadays; but I wodn't let young Maister guess it.—Martha, now. I believe i' going slow, an' that's gospel, but I'm getting flaired she'll slip me. There's shepherd Jose, th' owd fooil, dangling at her apron-strings, an' I'd be main sorry to see a lass like Martha so senseless as to wed him just for spite.—Well, Martha's noan a Ratcliffe, thanks be, an' that's more nor th' Maister can say o' yond leetsome wench fro' Wildwater. She'll bring him trouble yet, as sure as I shall mow th' Low Meadow by and by."

CHAPTER XVII
THE DOG-DREAD

A soft wind was fluttering from the edge of dark. The moon lay like a silver sickle over Dead Lad's Rigg, watching the fading banners of the sunset go down beneath the dark red-purple of the heath. No bird piped, save the ever-moaning curlew; the reeds whispered one to another, nodding their sleepy heads together; the voice of waters distant and of waters near at hand sobbed drearily. Over all was the masterful silence of the sky, that dread and mighty stillness of the star-spaces where the hill-gods stretched tired limbs and slumbered. Full of infinite sweets was the breeze, and the scent of heather mingled with the damp, heart-saddening odour of marsh-weeds and of bog-mosses.

The Lean Man, prone in the heather with his eyes on the dying sunset, felt every subtle influence of the hour. His life's grand failure had been compassed, the first and last deep terror had laid its grip on him; the wide moor, which had spoken of freedom once, was narrowed now to a prison, whose walls of sky were creeping close and closer in upon him. Man-like, he clothed his own dead passions—his love of fight, his pitiless lust for vengeance—with all the majesty of larger nature; man-like, he thought the moor's face darkened for his own tragedy, that even the curlews thrilled with something of his own intimate and tearless sorrow. What was this ghoul that had come, naught out of nothing-

ness, and chilled the life-blood in him? It was a phantom, yet a hard reality—a thing of unclean vapours, yet stronger than if it had plied a giant's sword with more than a giant's strength of arm.

Near must all men come, once in their lifetime, to that deep horror of brain and heart when they stand, less and greater than their manhood, at the gulf-edge which lies between them and the space that fathered them. The Lean Man was peering over the gulf to-night, and the soul of him was naked to the moor-wind. No groan, no little muttered protest escaped him; for throat and lips were powerless, and the body that they served stood far off from Nicholas Ratcliffe.

"The night wears late, grandfather. Will you not come home to Wildwater?" said a low voice at his side.

He did not hear till the words had been twice repeated; then, starting as if a rude hand had wakened him from sleep, he began to moisten dry lips with a tongue as dry.

"Janet, what brings thee here?" he said hoarsely.

"Care for you, sir. You have been out of health, and I feared to leave you so late on the moor lest sickness——"

He laughed brokenly. "Sickness—ay. I have been—not well. 'Twas rightly spoken, girl."

His mood changed presently. The nearness of this girl, who alone had touched his heart to deep and selfless love; the drear sympathy of the gloaming heath; the swift and over-powering need of fellowship; all made for the confession which he had kept close locked these many days.

"Sit thee down beside me, Janet. Thou'lt take no hurt from the warm night. There, lass. And let me put an arm about thee—so. God's life, how real thou art, after the boggart-company I've kept of late."

Her cheeks burned at thought of the poor requital she had given his love; but she would not remember Wayne of Marsh, and she waited, her grey eyes pitiful on his, until he should find words to ease his trouble.

"We'll start far back, Janet," he said, slowly, "in the old days before my father, or his father's father before him, had seen the light. Ratcliffes were at feud then with Waynes, and both were busy sowing the crop which generation after generation was to reap. The tale is old to thee, but thou'lt not grudge to hear it all again?"

"Not that tale to-night, grandfather—any tale save that," pleaded the girl.

But Nicholas did not hear her. "The tale," he went on, "is of how one Anthony Ratcliffe, dwelling at Wildwater, rode down to Marsh to slay Rupert Wayne. He found there only Wayne's young wife, and asked where her goodman was. She would not answer; so Anthony Ratcliffe bade his men heat a sword-blade in the fire till it was white, and had the lady of Marsh stripped mother-

naked, and marked a broad red scar all down her body between each question and each refusal of an answer. But she would not tell where Wayne had gone—not till she heard the steel hiss for the fifth time on her tender flesh. And then she told that he was riding home over Ludworth Slack; and they left her dying of her wounds."

"Hush, grandfather! I cannot bear it. Hark to the rushes yonder—and the curlews—they've heard your tale, methinks."

"'Tis grim, lass, but what I have to tell thee is grimmer still, so bide in patience. They got to horse again, Anthony Ratcliffe and his men, and they met Wayne of Marsh on the road, riding home with his favourite hound for company. They made at him, and the hound sprang straight and true at Anthony's throat"—the Lean Man halted a moment and wiped the sweat-drops from his forehead—"and nipped the life out of him. One of his folk thrust a spear then through the dog's heart, and the rest fell upon Wayne of Marsh and slew him."

Janet thought of another Wayne of Marsh who had lately been met in just such a fashion up by Dead Lad's Rigg. "Go on, grandfather," she whispered, in an awe-stricken voice.

"Mark well the end of the old tale, girl. A company of Wayne's kinsfolk, riding near to Ludworth Slack soon after the Ratcliffes had set off again for home, heard a hound's baying from across the moor; they followed and the baying went on before them till they reached the spot where Wayne lay dead—and beside him Anthony Ratcliffe, with teeth-marks at his throat—and, a little way off, Wayne's hound, fast stiffening."

The girl had heard the tale not once nor twice before; but it came with a new force to-night, for every mention of the hound brought a spasm of mortal anguish to the Lean Man's face, and in a flash she guessed his secret.

"The hound was dead, mark ye," went on Nicholas, as if compelled to dwell on details that he loathed; "yet the baying never ceased. No round and honest bay it was, but ghostly, wild and long-drawn-out; and it would not let them stay there, but took them on and on until they saw the Ratcliffes far up ahead of them, climbing the hill toward Wildwater. They galloped with a will then, and overtook them at a score yards from the courtyard gate, and left but one alive, who won into safety after desperate hazard."

The moon was silver-gold now and her rays fell coldly on the Lean Man's head, on his twitching mouth and haunted eyes. The curlews never rested from complaint, and the note of many waters seemed, to the girl's strained fancy, the voice of the hound who had bayed, long centuries ago, on Ludworth Slack.

"The one left alive took on the Wildwater line," said Nicholas, after a long pause; "but he had the Dog-dread till he died, and his children had it after him, and his children's children. For he, too, had heard the dead hound baying up the

moor, and its note was branded on his heart."

"And that is Barguest, grandfather," said Janet, creeping closer to him.

"That, lass, is Barguest. That is why the Marsh folk take *Wayne and the Dog* for their cry. The hound that slew old Anthony has dwelt with the Waynes ever since; no peril comes nigh them, but he must warn them of it: and sometimes he—" The Lean Man stopped, and put a hand to his throat, and glanced at the fingers as if he looked for blood on them.

She gathered a little courage from his lack of it. "The tale is old as yonder hills, and Barguest walks in legends only. Is it not so?" she said, but with a tremour in her voice.

"I said as much, Janet, for nigh on three-score years. I cast out the old dead fears, and laughed at the Waynes and their guardian hound—and thou see'st to what I have come at last. It began when I nailed the hand above the Marsh doorway; when Nanny Witherlee—God curse her—told me I had crossed Barguest on the threshold. Still I laughed, though she has the second-sight, they say; but the fear even then ran chill through me. Thou know'st the rest, girl—how I have fought it, and cast it off, and been conquered in the end. But none knows—not even thou, dear lass—what sweat of terror has dripped from me by nights."

"I have guessed," she answered softly, "and have grieved for you more than ever I told you of."

He was quiet for a space; then rose and began to walk up and down the heather; and after that he dropped sullenly again to Janet's side. "Not long since I met Shameless Wayne on Dead Lad's Rigg, and fought with him," he went on. "I all but had him—my blade was lifted high to strike—and then—out of the empty moor a great brown hound leaped up at me. His jaws were running crimson froth, and his teeth shone white as sun on snow, and he bayed—once—and then he had me by the throat."

"Sir, 'twas your fancy! I tell you, it was fancy," cried Janet wildly. "Did Wayne see it, or Red Ratcliffe, or——"

"None saw it save I. Dost mind the tale of how my father died, Janet? For dread of the Dog. 'Tis the eldest-born that sees it always, and none beside.—Hark ye, he's baying across the marshland yonder! Fly, girl—fly, I tell thee, lest he set his seal on thee in passing."

She stifled her own dread and pleaded with him—quietly, sanely, with the tender forcefulness that only her kind can compass. He grew quieter by and by, and set himself with something of his old force of will to tell the tale to its end.

"I shall never shake it off again, Janet," he said. "Each day it has a new sort of dread in waiting for me. Sometimes I am athirst and dare not drink—the sound of water is frenzy to my wits——"

"Have any of the Wildwater dogs turned on you of late?" she asked, with

a sudden glance at him.

"Nay, lass! There's no key to the trouble there."

"Are you sure, sir? You recall how one of the farm-dogs ran mad a year ago, and a farm-hand, trying to kill him, was bitten on the arm—and again on the hand as he tried to snatch a hair as a cure against the mad-sickness? He, too feared water——"

"Ay, and died of a sickness of the body, plain to be felt and known. But what of me, girl? 'Tis a mind-sickness, this—a dumb, soft-stepping, noiseless thing that flees if one stands up to it, only to come back, and snarl, and grin, the moment the heart fails for weariness. Come, we'll get us home, Janet. It has eased me a little to tell thee of it—haply thou'lt help me make a last big fight."

"God willing, sir," she murmured, as she turned to walk beside him.

Once only he broke silence on the way to Wildwater. Stopping, he bared his throat to the moonlight, and bade her look well at it, and watched with anxious eyes as she obeyed.

"Canst—canst see the teeth-marks there?" he whispered.

"'Tis smooth, sir, without a scratch on 't."

"Pass thy hand over—lightly. I can feel the deep wound burn and sting—surely thy fingers can feel the pit."

"There is no wound, grandfather—no wound at all."

He drew his breath again, and laughed, and, "Tell me again, dear lass," he said, "that it is fancy—naught but fancy."

"It is altogether fancy," she answered.

"Art tricking me?" he said with sudden suspicion. "Let me see thy fingers, lass—the fingers that touched my throat."

She held her hand out to him. "There's no stain on them, sir. Have I not told you?" she cried, striving to keep the terror from her voice as best she could.

"Why, no," he whispered; "no stain at all. And yet——"

And after that they spoke no word until Wildwater gates showed dark in front of them.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FEUD-WIND FRESHENS

It was high summer now on Marshcotes Moor. Everywhere the farm-folk were

full of the busy idleness which comes when ploughing and sowing are over and the crops are not yet ready for the scythe or sickle. The lads found time to go a-courting in shaded lanes or up by the grey old kirk-stone; their elders did much leaning over three-barred gates, with snuff between a thumb and forefinger, while they talked of hay-harvest, of the swelling of corn-husks in the ear, of the feud which had been so hot in the spring and which now seemed like to die for want of fuel.

For a strange thing had chanced at Wildwater. The Lean Man, once dauntless, had grown full of some unnamed terror; and, though his arm seemed strong as ever and his body full of vigour, his brain was sapless and inert. His folk came to him with fresh plans for slaying Wayne of Marsh; and he turned a haunted eye on them, and said that naught could kill the lad. The cloud which had hung over Marsh House had settled now on Wildwater, and even the hot youngsters were chilled by a sense of doom. If the Lean Man had given up hope, they said, what chance had they of snaring Shameless Wayne?

And so the days went on, and the feud slumbered, and Janet was torn between sorrow for her grandfather and gladness that his malady left Wayne free from ambush or attack. Each day, indeed, seemed to bring fresh trouble in its train; for Red Ratcliffe, dumbfounded as he had been when their errand to Bents Farm had proved no wild-goose chase, was yet distrustful of his cousin. She had spoken a true word that day, and they had met Wayne; but there was some devilry hid under it, and haply she knew enough of the Black Art which had saved her lover to be sure no harm could come to him. Laugh at superstition as he might, Red Ratcliffe had not been cradled in the winds and reared among the grim wastes of heath for naught; he and his fellows were slow to acknowledge witchcraft and the boggarts that stepped in moorside tales, but the seed, once planted, found a rich soil and a deep in which to come to leaf. Little by little he was growing to believe that Janet was the cause of each discomfiture at Wayne's hands; and, while he let no chance pass of railing on her for a witch, he uttered many a scarce-veiled threat that soon he would throw all to the winds and hold her without leave of the Lean Man or the Parson.

As for Shameless Wayne, he had ceased to wonder that no fresh attack was made on him. He would die when Fate ordained, and nothing could alter that; but the farm-work, meanwhile, at which he laboured as distastefully and keenly as of old, was going grandly forward, and not sour Hiram Hey himself could say that the land had gone backward since he took the charge of it. Janet had been right when she named pride his strongest passion; and even his love for her, self-thwarted, could not rob him of a certain sober joy in raising crops in face of Ratcliffe sword-points and the keen-toothed winds. It was all uphill nowadays for Wayne of Marsh; and each new difficulty overcome gave him hard and sure

content such as no wild frolic of his earlier days had brought.

Yet the summer bore hardly on him when he thought of Janet. No farm-hind but was free to couple with his mate; only the Master, it seemed, was doomed to go lonely through these spendthrift days of sun and warm south winds and ripening meadow-grass.

"Art gloomy, Ned, of late. Is it because the Ratcliffes scruple to come down and fight with thee?" said his sister, as they sat in hall one evening and watched the stir of bees among the roses that clambered up the window-panes.

"Nay, for I am always fighting one of them—and never more than after a week's idleness."

Her voice grew cold. "'Tis time thou didst turn from that—and time Marsh had a mistress. Are there no maids, save one, about the moorside?"

"None for me, nor ever will be. Besides, Marsh has its mistress; thou'rt not going to leave us, Nell?"

"By and by I must. Rolf is getting out of hand, and will take the old excuse no longer. Faith, I begin to think he loves me very dearly, for every day he thwarts me more and more."

"Thy place is with him, after all, and I'm a fool to think to keep thee here forever.—Where are the lads, Nell? Hunting still, I'll warrant."

"Ay. They are restless since they fought the Lean Man; each morning they seem to start earlier for the chase, and sundown rarely sees them home again."

"Well, it is making men of them. They are learning a shrewd turn of fence, too, and when their time comes they will know how to parry Ratcliffe cuts.—We wash the sheep to-morrow, Nell; wilt ride with me and watch the scene? If a red sunset be aught to go by, we shall have a cloudless day."

"To-morrow I cannot. 'Tis churning-day, Ned, and the butter is always streaked when I leave those want-wit maids alone with it."

"It is better that thou should'st not go," said Wayne, after a pause. "I was a fool to speak of it, Nell, for the washing-pools lie over close to Wildwater, and 'twould be unsafe for women-folk."

"Unsafe?" she echoed, with a quick glance at him. "Then 'tis unsafe for thee, Ned, and I'll not have thee go to the washing at all."

"That is folly, lass. I have a sword, and I carry less risks than a maid would.—A rare holiday the men would have, my faith, if I left them to wash the sheep at their own good pleasure."

"Take the lads with thee, then, if thou must go."

"I promised them they should go hawking until dinner-time, and after that they must come up; but why spoil a morning's pastime for them?"

"The old tales fret at times," she answered gravely, "and to-night I'm sad a little, Ned, like thee. The washing-pools lie near to Wildwater, as thou say'st,

and thou know'st how Waynes and Ratcliffes first fell out."

"Tut! If I give heed to women's fancies, when shall I find an hour to move abroad in? The Ratcliffes have got their fill for a good while to come, and they'll keep well on the far side of the pools, I warrant. What, Mistress? Thy wanderings have brought thee supperless indoors," he broke off, as his step-mother opened the door softly and set down a basket of marsh-marigolds among the dishes and platters that cumbered the great dining-table.

Nell rose with no word of greeting and left them; and Mistress Wayne, glancing in troubled fashion after her, crossed to the window and leaned against it.

"I had better have stayed as I was, Ned," she said, smiling gravely. "Nell was growing kind—but that has passed now I have found my wits again."

He winced; for he knew that he, too, had felt less kindliness toward her since her helplessness had gone. Looking at her now, frail against the mullioned casement, he could not but remember that it was she, in her right mind as she was now, who had fouled the good fame of his house.

"Ay, and *thou* hast a touch of her aloofness, too," she went on. "I can read it in thy face, Ned.—Listen. I've had in mind to tell thee something these days past, but have never found the words for it. I wronged thy father—but not as deeply as thou think'st. Ned! Canst not think what it meant to me—the dreariness, the cold, the hardness of this moorland life? And when Dick Ratcliffe came, and promised to take me out of it——"

"See, Mistress, there's naught to be gained by going over the old ground," he interrupted harshly.

"But, Ned, there is much to be gained. Am I so rich in friends that I can let one as staunch as thou go lightly? Thou'rt midway between hate and love of me, I know, and if—Ned, if I were to tell thee I was less to blame—" She stopped and eyed him wistfully.

It was not in Shameless Wayne to resist this sort of pleading from one who had shared with him the bitter months of disfavour and remorse. They had been comrades in adversity, he and she; and was he to turn on her now because she could no longer claim pity for her witlessness?

"Thou need'st tell me naught, little bairn," he said.

"Ah, but I need! I was dying, Ned—dying for lack of warmth. And Dick Ratcliffe promised to take me into shelter; and I clutched at the chance greedily, as a prisoner would if one came and offered him liberty. But the wrong that Wayne fancied of me, when he found us in the orchard, I had never thought to do—never, dear. I was a child, and loved Ratcliffe because he showed me a way out of trouble; and I meant to go away with him because—how shall I tell thee, so as to make thee credit it? I had not a thought of—Ned, I was not wicked, only

tired—tired, till I had no eyes to see the straight road, nor heart to follow it. I was hungering for warmth; the ghosts were so busy all about Marsh House, and I wanted the happy valleys, out of reach of the curlew-cries and the shuddering midnight winds."

Wayne put an arm about her. "It was worth telling, bairn," he said quietly, "and father would lie quieter if he knew that his honour had not gone so far astray."

"Thou'lt still keep a friend to me?" she whispered.

The gloom settled more heavily upon his face. "Thou talk'st as if I were thy judge," he said. "'Twas only in seeming thou didst the worst wrong to father—but what of me? Did I look so carefully to his honour? Or was it his own eldest-born who darkened his last days, who made his name a by-word up and down the country-side, who drank while a kinsman fought the vengeance-fight for him? Not if I work to my life's end to wipe off the stain, will it come clean."

"'Tis cleansed already, Ned, twice over cleansed—and there's one waiting who will give thee thanks for it. I met her not long since in the kirkyard, and I never saw love so plain on a maid's face." Her voice was eager, and the words came fast, as if she had given long thought to the matter.

"Mistress Ratcliffe, thou mean'st?" said Wayne, after a silence. "What ails thee, bairn, to be so hot for this unlikely wedding?"

"Because she is straight and strong, and full of care for thee; because, when an ill chance led me once to Wildwater, it was she who took pity on me and showed me a safe road to Marsh. Ned, she is the one wife in the world for thee; why wilt thou cling to the old troubles?"

He shook his head. "The troubles are new that stand 'twixt Janet and myself—and any day may bring forth more of them."

"Thy folk will be her folk, if thou'lt take her," she broke in eagerly. "She lives among rough men—there's danger every hour for her."

Mistress Wayne had struck the right note at last. Half willing as he was to be convinced, and imbued with the sense that the fairy-kist could give no wrong advice, he would yet have held obstinately to his old path. But he took fire at the suggestion that there was danger to the girl at Wildwater. Now and then a passing fear of it had crossed his own self-poised outlook on the situation; but a hint of it from another roused all his smouldering jealousy and passion.

"Danger? Of what?" he cried.

But Mistress Wayne had no time to answer; for the door opened on the sudden and the four lads came tumbling into hall, piling the fruits of their long day's sport in a heap against the wall.

"A rare day we've had, Ned!" cried Griff. "Ay, we're late for supper, but thou'lt not grudge it when thou see'st how many other suppers we've brought

home to larder."

Wayne looked at the heap of grouse and snipe, conies and hares and moor-cock. "Well, fall to, lads," he laughed, "and I'll save my scolding till ye're primed against it.—Are ye still bent on hawking to-morrow, after this full day's sport?"

"Ay, are we!" cried Griff. "We're but the keener set to have another day of it."

"Then go; but mind ye come straight up to the washing-pool after dinner. 'Tis time ye learned the ways of farming."

The youngsters made wry faces at this as they settled themselves to the mutton-pasty.

"We met the Lean Man again to-day," said one presently, in between two goodly mouthfuls.

"And what said he to you?"

"Naught. He wore as broken a look as ever I saw, and when we rode at him with a shout——"

"Lads, lads, fight men less skilled at sword-play than the Lean Man," put in Shameless Wayne, smiling the while at their spirit.

"But he fled from us, Ned—minding the night, I warrant, when we took him in the back with yond stone ball. Yet they say he's always like that now; Nanny Witherlee tells me he sees the Dog at the side of every Wayne among us, and flees from that, not from us."

"Nanny is a fond old wife, with more tales on her tongue-tip than hairs on her thinning thatch."

"Yet—dost mind what I saw, too, that night in the garden?" said Mistress Wayne. "Brown, blunt-headed—I can see him yet, Ned, as he fawned against thy side."

Wayne did not answer, though he paled a little, and soon he made excuse to leave them.

"Where art going, Ned? We've fifty tales to tell thee of the day's sport," cried Griff.

"But have I idleness enough to listen, ye careless rascals?" laughed Wayne from the door. "I must see Hiram Hey and make all ready against to-morrow's work."

"Thou'lt not find him, for he was going into the Friendly Inn with shepherd Jose as we passed through Ling Crag."

"Was he?" growled the other. "Hiram is a poor drinker by his own showing, and a man with no spare time on his hands—but he has worn many a tavern threshold bare, I'll warrant, since he first learned to set lips to pewter."

And, indeed, Hiram wore a leisurely air enough at the moment. Stretched at his ease on the wide lang-settle of the Friendly Inn, he was handling a mug of

home-brewed and watching the crumbling faces in the peat-fire, while shepherd Jose talked idly to him from the window.

"There's somebody got four gooid legs under him," said Jose, as the racket of horse-hoofs came up the road.

"Ay, by th' sound. Who is't, Jose?" answered Hiram lazily.

"Why, Mistress Janet fro' Wildwater. She's a tidy seat i' th' saddle, hes th' lass," said the shepherd, pressing his face closer to the glass to see the last of her.

"A wench can hev a tidy seat i' th' saddle, an' yet be leet as thistle-down."

"Ay, but she hes a snod way wi' her, an' all. I've thowt, whiles, she hed more o' th' free, stand-up look o' th' Waynes about her nor her breed warrants."

"Well, there's some say that, if wishes war doings, she'd hev a Wayne name to her back," said Hiram, shifting to an easier posture.

"Nowt o' th' sort!" put in the shepherd warmly. "Th' young Maister may hev been a wild-rake, an' he may be wilful i' farming-matters an' sich—but he'd niver foul th' owd name by gi'eing it to a Ratcliffe."

"That's as may be. But young blood's young blood, an' she's winsome to look at, as nawther thee nor me can deny."

"There war summat betwixt 'em, now I call to mind, afore this last brew o' trouble war malted. I've heard tell o' their meeting i' th' owd days up by th' kirk-stone when they thowt nobody war looking. But that's owered wi'. Tha doesn't fancy there could be owt o' th' sort now, Hiram?—Theer, get thy mug filled up, lad, for tha needs a sup o' strong drink to brace thee for th' long day's sheep-weshing to-morn."

"I'll hev my mug filled, Jose, lad—though I'm no drinker—an' I'll keep my thowts about th' Maister an' th' Wildwater lass to myseln. But I've seen what I've seen—ay, not a three week sin'—an' if iver tha hears 'at two folk are courting on th' sly, doan't thee say I didn't tell thee on 't, that's all."

"What didst see, like, a three week sin'?" asked Jose the shepherd, his head tilted gossip-wise to one side.

"Nay, I war niver one to spread tales abroad, not I. But it warn't a mile fro' where I'm sitting now, on th' varry road 'at runs past th' tavern here, that I happened on two folk standing fair i' th' middle o' th' highway. An' one war fearful like the Maister, an' t' other warn't so different fro' Mistress Ratcliffe; an' they war hugging one another summat fearful."

"Now, come, Hiram! Gossip's gossip, but I'll noan believe that sort o' talk about th' Maister."

"That's as it pleases thee, lad. I nobbut said 'at th' couple I saw war like as two peas to him an' Mistress Janet. Ay, an' they'd getten dahn fro' their hosses, an' she war crying like a gooid un i' his arms. Well, 'tis as Nanny Witherlee is allus saying, I fear me—if a blackberry's nobbut out o' reach, ye'll find all th' lads

i' th' parish itching for 't."

"Well, I mun tak thy word for owt to do wi' courting," said the shepherd drily. "Tha'rt framing to learn nowadays thyseln, so they tell me."

"An' what about thee?" cried Hiram, roused from the tranquil gaiety which his bit of gossip afforded him. "I'd think shame, if my hair war as white as thine, Jose, to turn sheep's eyes on a young wench like Martha."

Jose chuckled, as if he could tell much but would not, and Hiram Hey grew more and more disquieted as he wondered if, after all, he had gone too slow with the first and last great courtship of his life.

While Hiram sat nursing his mug, and while the shepherd kept a quizzing eye upon his moodiness, the inn door was thrown open and three rough-headed fellows stamped noisily into the bar. "It smells foul," said one, stopping at sight of Hiram and the shepherd, and holding his nostrils between a dirt-stained thumb and forefinger.

"Ay," said another, "it's th' Wayne smell—ye can wind 'em like foxes wheriver ye leet on their trail."

"Yond's Wildwater talk," said Hiram to the shepherd, not shifting his position on the settle. "They're reared on wind up yonder, an' it gets into their tongues, like."

"Thee shut thy mouth, Hiram Hey; tha'rt ower owd to gi'e lip-sauce to lusty folk," said the foremost of the Wildwater trio, coming to the back of the settle and leaning threateningly over the old man.

Hiram lifted himself slowly into a sitting-posture. "There's *breed* i' us owd uns," he said; "th' race weakened by th' time it got to sich as thee."

"We'll see about that," said his assailant, and stooped quickly, his hands toward Hiram's throat.

But Hiram shot out his arms with unlooked-for vigour, and gripped his man under the arm-pits, and pulled him like a kitten over the high back of the lang-settle. Then he got to his feet, still hugging the other close, and gave a steady swing, and landed him clean over his left shoulder on to the sanded floor-stones.

"If awther o' ye others hes owt to say, I'm noan stalled yet," said Hiram, dropping to his seat again.

The fallen man did not move for a space; and then he clapped a hand to one knee with an oath. "There's summat broken," he groaned.

"Likely," put in Hiram Hey. "I've hed chaps mell on me afore, an' it mostly ends th' same way."

The two who were still unhurt helped their comrade to the door, and turned for a sour look at Hiram. "Turn an' turn about," said one; "there's summat i' bottle for all ye Wayne chaps, an' I'll look to thee myseln, Hiram Hey, when th' chance comes."

"Summat i' bottle, is there?" said the shepherd, after they had gone. "Th' Lean Man hes been fearful quiet lately; I feared he war hatching weasel-eggs. Ay, an' his men hev been quiet, an' all; 'tis mony a week sin' we hed ony sort o' moil wi' 'em."

"Well, I'm stalled o' wondering what's to happen next," said Hiram, yawning with great content. "I war all a-shiver when th' feud first broke out, an' ivery day I looked to be shotten at th' least, if not sliced up wi' a sword at after. But th' days jog on somehow, an' there's nowt mich comes to cross th' farm-wark."

"Yond war a shrewd lift o' thine, Hiram," said the shepherd presently, seating himself at the other side of the hearth.

"I learned to lift, lad, when I war a young un; an' ye doan't loss that sort o' trick so easy. 'Tis weel enough for these lads to be all for fighting wi' their fists—but let me get to grips wi' a man when he means mischief, say I, an' he'll noan do me mich harm.—Now, Jose, art bahn to get another mug-full? I'm fain o' laziness to-neet, an' I could weel sup another quart, though I'm nowt mich at drinking myseln."

Janet, meanwhile, had ridden straight home to Wildwater after passing the window of the Friendly Inn, and had encountered Red Ratcliffe as she led her horse round to stable.

"Dost ride from Marsh?" he sneered, blocking the stable-door.

"From seeing a better man than thou? Nay. I have no dealings with Wayne of Marsh."

"Thou'lt have no chance of such dealings by and by."

"Indeed?" Lifting her brows a little, but disdaining to ask his leave to pass the door. "Indeed, Ratcliffe the Red? I thought—it might have been but fancy—that somehow thou didst shirk talk with Wayne of Marsh?"

"The Lean Man does—but there's younger blood than his to carry on the feud. We're sick of waiting for the call that never comes, and soon we mean to show Nicholas that what he has not wit to compass, we can."

"So eager to clinch the bargain?" she mocked. "Should I make thee a good wife, think'st thou?—There, take him to stall thyself," she added, putting the bridle into his hand. "I *know* thou canst stable a horse, if thou hast scant knowledge of how to woo a maid."

"'Tis a knowledge I may gather by and by—and thou shall teach me," he

answered, meeting her eye with more than his accustomed boldness.

CHAPTER XIX
HOW WAYNE KEPT THE PINFOLD

The marshland beyond Robin Hood's Well was noisy this morning with the shouts of men, the sharp, impatient bark of dogs, the shrill bleating of sheep. A warm, lush-hearted day of June it was, with a yellow sun rising clear of the flaked strips of cloud that hung about the middle blue of heaven, and a low wind shaking the budding heather-tips and wrinkling the surface of standing pools; just such a day as fitted a sheep-washing, for wind and sun together would be quick to dry the fleeces.

The washing-pools stood a few yards away from the stream that ran through Goblin Ghyll, and were no more than deepish holes dug out of the peat, bottomed and walled with sandstone blocks and rendered water-tight in a measure by lumps of marl worked in between the fissures of the stones. A narrow channel, fitted with a sluice-gate at the upper end, connected the streamway with the pools. On the right hand of each pool was a walled enclosure, into which the flocks were driven from the moor; on the left, a similar pinfold received the sheep as they were washed, and kept them penned there until each batch was ready to be driven off by its own shepherd.

Altogether, what with vigour of the sun-rays, and leisurely haste of loose-limbed shepherd folk, and brisk to-and-froing of excited dogs, the scene was a stirring one, contrasting strangely with the eerie hush which was wont to hang over this land of marsh and peat. Hiram Hey was there, his old heart warmed by the abuse, commands and ridicule which he dispensed with a free tongue to all comers. Jose the shepherd was there, with a kindly eye and a word in season for each particular member of his flock. There were other shepherds, too, from outlying portions of the Wayne lands, and thick-thewed farm-lads, and youngsters no more than elbow-high who, under pretence of helping to collect the flocks from off the moor, tried sorely the tempers of the blunt-headed, sagacious sheep-dogs, whose manoeuvres were thrice out of four times defeated by the interference.

"Well, Hiram, hast getten owt to say agen th' weather?" said Jose, splashing into the pool.

Hiram grasped the first of the ewes securely by its fleece, and half pushed,

half pulled it to the brink. "Owt to say agen th' weather? I should think I hev!" he cried.

"I thowt as mich, lad. Trust thee to hev thy grumbles, choose what," panted the other, as he took the sheep bodily into his arms and plunged it under water.

"'Tis varry weel for ye poor herding folk to thank th' Lord for all this power of sun. But us as hes likelier wark—tilling, tha knaws, an' sich like—it fair breaks a body's heart, that it does. There's yond Low Meadow war bahn to yield th' bonniest crop o' hay iver tha set een on, if we'd nobbut hed a sup o' rain; an' now 'tis brown as a penny-piece—ay, fair dried i' th' sap, it is. But ye poor, shammocky sheep-drivers think there's nowt save ewes an' tups i' th' world."

"Poor, are we, say'st 'a?" snapped the shepherd who was working alongside Jose in the pool.

"Ay, poor as rattens," answered Hiram. "I allus did say a sheep war th' gaumless-est thing 'at iver went on four legs."

"There's folk more gaumless goes on two," put in Jose; "an' tha's getten a lob-sided view o' sheep, Hiram Hey; tha's all for beasts, an' hosses, an' pigs, an' tha willun't see 'at sheep are that full o' sense——"

The shepherd got no further with his speech; for the ewe which was being pushed toward the brink took a wild leap on the sudden, and landed fair into his arms before he had got his feet well planted on the bottom; and sheep and man went under the grey greasiness that covered the surface of the pool.

"Ay, they're sensible chaps, is sheep," said Hiram drily, while he watched the shepherd rub the water out of eyes and hair. "A beast now—nay, I'm thinking a calf wod hev hed more wit nor that."

"Well, an' wodn't tha knock dahn ony chap that framed to souse thee?" retorted Jose, undaunted still. "'Tis nobbut one more proof o' their sperrit.—Theer, lass, theer! Jose noan wants to wrangle wi' thee—theer, my bonnie—" His voice dropped into inarticulate murmurs as he took a fresh hold of the sheep and fell to rubbing her wool with a long arm and a knotty.

"Will th' young Maister be coming up, think ye?" asked a farm-hand by and by.

"He will that, if I knaw him," said Hiram grimly. "He telled me last forenooin he war coming to see 'at ye all kept to it.—Now, lads, will ye frame, or mun I come an' skift ye wi' my foot? I niver see'd sich a shammocky, loose-set lot o' folk i' all my days. Tom o' Thorntop, get them ewes penned, dost hear? Seems tha'd like to keep me ut laking all th' day while tha maks shift to stir thyseln."

The work went steadily forward, and soon the pinfolds on the far side of each of the two pools were all but full of ewes, shivering in their snowy fleeces. Neither did jest and banter flag, nor the gruff oaths of the shepherds as they gathered their flocks together under Hiram's wide-reaching eye.

"We mun hev a bit o' dinner i' a while," said Jose at last; "I'm as dry as a peck o' hay-seeds."

"I'll warrant," growled Hiram, and for sheer contrariness went off to see that a new flock was penned ready for the washing.

He gave a glance at the sun as he turned, and another across the sweep of peatland. "Begow, but it's bahn to be a warm un, is th' day, afore we've done wi' it," he muttered. "Th' heat-waves fair dance again ower Wildwater way. An' yond grass i' th' Low Meadow 'ull be drying as if ye'd clapped it i' an oven.—What, there's more coming to wesh sheep, is there? They'll hev to bide, I'm thinking, for a tidy while."

"What's agate ower yonder, Hiram?" called one of the shepherds. "Tha's getten thy een on summat, by th' look on ye."

"There's a big lot o' sheep coming, though they're ower far off for me to tell who belongs 'em," said Hiram, shading his eyes with both hands.

Two or three left work and crowded about him. The flock came nearer, followed by a press of men on foot and men on horseback.

"By th' Heart!" cried one. "They're Wildwater sheep, yond; I can see th' red owning-mark on their backs."

"Ay. Lonks they are, if my een's gooid for owt," said Hiram.

No man looked at his neighbour, and none spoke of those who rode behind the sheep, though the red-headed horsemen, sword on thigh, were twice as plain to be seen as the breed of sheep they brought to washing. Silently Hiram and his fellows returned to work; silently the Ratcliffes rode forward to the pinfold walls, while their farm-folk followed with the sheep.

Red Ratcliffe peered over the wall-top of the nearer pin-fold, and affected vast surprise at sight of the busy stir within. "What is this, lads?" he cried, turning to his kinsfolk.

"'Twould seem there's more than one has marked how fair a washing day it is," answered another, showing a like surprise. "They're not content with one pool, either, but must use them both."

"Whose sheep should they be, think ye? They're sadly lean, once they are rubbed free of dirt," went on Red Ratcliffe, who seemed to be the leader of the band.

"Nay, if there's aught poor in breed, father it on a Wayne," said the other.

Red Ratcliffe fixed his eyes on Hiram Hey, who was watching the pool with that daft air of simplicity which was his staunchest weapon in times of peril.

"We want to wash our sheep," said Ratcliffe.

Hiram lifted his head. "Oh, ay? Well, we shall noan keep ye long—say till six o' th' afternooin," he answered, and resumed his contemplation of the pool.

"Six of the afternoon? 'Tis easy to be seen, sirrah, that thou hast a taste for

jesting," said Red Ratcliffe.

"We've scant time for jests, Maister, an' I'm telling ye plain truth. Ay, we'll be done by six o' th' clock, for sure—or mebbe a two-three minutes afore, if these feckless shepherds 'ull bestir theirselns. Jose, what dost tha think?"

"Think?" echoed Jose, rubbing hard and fast at the fleece of an old bell-wether. "Well, mebbe we shall win through by half-after five—but there's niver no telling."

Red Ratcliffe curbed his temper; for he had known many moor folk in his time, and this trick of "shamming gaumless" was no new one to him. He changed his key accordingly, seeing that his own rough banter would stand no chance against Hiram's subtler wit.

"Clear the pens of yond murrain-rotted ewes; we've some whole-bodied sheep to wash," he said peremptorily.

"Clear th' pens?" said Hiram, scratching his head. "Well, we're framing to clear 'em, fast as iver we can. An' as for th' ewes—there's been no murrain among Wayne sheep these five year past."

"Cease fooling, thou lousy dotard! Dost think we've come all the way from Wildwater only to go back again because we find a handful of yokels, belonging to God-know-whom, fouling the water of the pond?"

"Honest muck fouls no pools, an' I thowt onybody wod hev knawn we belonged to Wayne o' Marsh. Ay, for ye allowed as mich a while back—seeing, I warrant, what well-set-up chaps we war."

"Begow, that's th' first we've heard on 't fro' owd Hiram," muttered Jose the shepherd, chuckling soberly as he dipped another ewe.

"Ay," went on Hiram placidly, "there's none denies 'at th' Wayne farm-folk can best ony others i' th' moorside."

"Tha lees, Hiram Hey! Man for man, ye're childer to us as warks at Wildwater," cried one of the Ratcliffe yokels, gathering courage from the armed force about him.

"Settle that quarrel as best pleases you," cried Red Ratcliffe sharply; "meanwhile 'tis work, not talk, and if yonder pool is not cleared by the time I've counted ten—well, there'll be more than sheep dipped in it."

Hiram looked at him with a puzzled air. "Theer!" he said. "Th' gentry mun allus hev their little jests, an' I'll laugh wi' th' best, Maister Ratcliffe, when I find myseln a thowt less thrang. But orders is orders, th' world ower, an' when young Maister says 'at a thing's getten to be done, it's getten to be done."

"Where is your Master?" snapped the other. "'Tis a poor farmer lies abed while his hinds play."

Hiram's glance was a quick one this time, quenched under his rough grey eyebrows as soon as given. "So ye thowt he'd be here this morn?" he said. "Nay,

he's noan a lie-abed, isn't th' Maister, but he's getten summat else to do."

"Has he? And what might that be?" said Red Ratcliffe softly.

"Shall I tell him?" muttered Hiram, half audibly. Then, after a pause of seeming doubt, "He's cutting grass i' th' Low Meadow," he said.

"Cutting grass at this time of year?"

"Ay, for sure. Wildwater land ligs cold, an' ye're late wi' crops up yonder; but th' grass lower dahn is running so to seed that it war no use letting it bide a day longer. It 'ull be poor hay as 'tis, an' all along o' this unchristian weather."

"So he'll not come to the sheep-washing?" broke in Red Ratcliffe, with a glance at his fellows.

"I've telled ye so," said Hiram, "an' telling ye twice willun't better a straight tale."

"I'm thinking Hiram hes a soft spot i' his heart for young Maister; I've niver knawn him tell so thick a lee afore," muttered shepherd Jose, as he went forward with his work.

Red Ratcliffe, looking down the streamway and wondering whether it were worth while to insist on his claim to the pool, laughed suddenly and jerked his bridle-hand in the direction of a horseman who had turned the bend of the track below and jumped the stream.

"Shameless Wayne will come to the washing after all," he said, and waited, stiff and quiet in the saddle, till Wayne of Marsh should cross the half-mile that intervened.

"I war mista'en, seemingly. Th' Maister mun hev crossed straight fro' th' grass-cutting," said Hiram, putting a bold face on it to hide a sinking heart.

The old man turned his back on the Ratcliffes, and his face to the upcoming horseman, whose head was thrust low upon his shoulders as if some gloomy trend of thought were dulling him to all sights and sounds of this fair June day.

"I framed weel, an' I could do no more," he said to himself; "but sakes, why couldn't he hev bided a while longer? Th' Ratcliffes 'ud hev been off to th' Low Meadow i' a twinkling, if I knaw owt.—What's to be done, like? He's a wick un to fight, is th' Maister, but there's seven o' these clever Dicks fro' Wildwater, an' that's longish odds."

Hiram stood for awhile, puzzled and ill-at-ease, watching his master draw slowly nearer to the pools; and then his face brightened on the sudden as he shuffled across to where two shepherd lads were talking affrightedly together.

"Set your dogs on a two-three sheep, an' drive 'em downhill, an' reckon to follow 'em," he whispered. "Then ye'll meet Maister—an' a word i' his lug may save him fro' a deal. An' waste no time, for there's none to be lessen."

The lads, catching the spirit of it, had already got their dogs to work when Red Ratcliffe's voice brought them to a sudden halt; for Ratcliffe, mistrusting

fellows of Hiram's kidney, had marked his whispering and guessed its purpose.

"Come back, ye farm louts!" he cried, and turned to Hiram with a sneer. "Art fullish of wit, thou think'st? Dost mind how once before we matched wits, thou and I?"

"I mind," said Hiram. "'Twas when I told ye where th' Marsh peats war stored—but ye didn't burn mich wi' 'em, Maister, if I call to mind."

Red Ratcliffe laughed at the retort; for his eyes were on the horseman down below, and his mood was almost playful now that his prey seemed like to come so tame to hand.

"I'm flaired for th' Maister this time, that I am," muttered Hiram, as he, too, glanced down the slope; "but being flaired niver saved onybody fro' a bull's horns, as th' saying is, so I mun just bide still an' keep my een oppen."

The Ratcliffes passed a smile and a jest one to the other as they saw Shameless Wayne draw near and marked the heavy gloom that rested on him; for it pleased them that the man they loathed should have bitterness for his portion during the few moments he had yet to live.

Wayne did not glance up the moor until he had ridden within ten-score yards of them. He half drew rein on seeing the seven red-headed horsemen waiting for him on the hill-crest; and Red Ratcliffe, thinking he meant to turn about, was just calling his kinsmen to pursue when he saw Wayne drive home his spurs and ride straight up to meet them.

"Bide where ye are," said Red Ratcliffe then. "He's courteous as ever, this fool of Marsh, and would not trouble us to gallop after him."

"'Tis like him; he war allus obstinate as death, an' wod be if th' Lord o' Hell stood up agen him," groaned Jose the shepherd, as he left the water and joined the knot of farm-folk who stood aloof, expectant, and doubtful for their own safety and the Master's.

"I give you good-day, Wayne of Marsh," called Red Ratcliffe.

"I shall fare neither better nor worse for the same. What would you?" answered Wayne, halting at thrice a sword's-length from the group.

"Why, we would wash our sheep, and yonder rough-tongued hind of thine refused us. So, said I, as I saw you riding up the slope, 'We'll ask the Master's leave, and of his courtesy he'll grant it.'"

Shameless Wayne would never stoop to the Ratcliffe frippery of speech. "My courtesy takes no account of such as ye," he answered bluntly.

"Think awhile!" went on the other gently. "These pools were made for Waynes and Ratcliffes both in the days before there was bad blood between us. 'Tis our right as well as yours to use it when we will."

"And when we will. First come, first served.—Come, lads, ye're loitering, and half the sheep are yet unwashed," he broke off, turning to the farm-men.

Red Ratcliffe's face darkened. "The old wives say, Wayne of Marsh, that the first feud sprang up at this very spot, because it chanced that the Marsh and the Wildwater ewes came on the same day to the washing. I would have no lad's blood on my hands, for my part, so bear the old tale in mind, and give us room."

Wayne had his sword loose all this time, and his eyes, even when they seemed to rove, were never far from Red Ratcliffe's movements. "Your talk, sir, wearies me," he said. "Ye mean to strike, seven against one.—Well, strike! I'm waiting for you, with a thought of what chanced once in Marshcotes kirkyard to keep my blood warm."

The Ratcliffes were daunted a little by the downright, sturdy fashion of the man; and for a moment they hung back, remembering how Wayne of Marsh had met them time and again with witchcraft and with resistless swordplay. One looked at another, seeking denial of the folly which could credit Wayne with power to match the seven of them.

"Where is the Lean Man to-day? 'Tis strange he comes not to the sheep-washing," said Wayne of Marsh, as still they halted.

"He would not trouble," snarled Red Ratcliffe. "'Twas butchery, he said, for a man of his years to fight with such a callow strippling."

Wayne smiled with maddening coolness. "That is a lie, Ratcliffe the Red. He dared not come. The last I saw of him, he was riding hard—with my sword-point all but in his back. Well? Am I to wait till nightfall for you, or are ye, too, minded to turn tail?"

Stung by the taunt, Red Ratcliffe spurred forward on the sudden, and his comrades followed with a yell; and even sour Hiram Hey sent up a half-shamed prayer that the Master might come through this desperate pass with safety. Hiram, as a practical man and one who dealt chiefly with what he could see and handle, was wont to use prayer as the last resource of all; and his furtive appeal was witness that he saw no hope of rescue—no hope of respite, even—for his Master.

But Jose the shepherd had not been idle during that brief pause between Wayne's challenge and the onset of the Ratcliffes. He had watched Hiram's attempt to send a warning down the slope; and while the storm grew ripe for breaking, he bethought him that there were those about Wayne of Marsh who might yet serve him at a pinch. To one hand of the Ratcliffes were the ewes, ten-score or so, which they had brought to give colour to their quarrel; about the shepherd's knees were his two dogs, the canniest brutes in the moorside. A few calls from Jose, in a tongue that they had learned in puppyhood, a sly pointing of his finger at the Ratcliffe sheep, and the dogs rushed in among the huddled, bleating mass. The sheep were for making off across the moor, but Jose the shepherd shouted clear above the feud-cries of the Ratcliffes, and worked his dogs as surely as if

this were no more than the usual business of the day; in a moment the flock was headed, turned, driven straight across the strip of moor that lay between Wayne and his adversaries.

Quickly done it was, and featly; and just as the Ratcliffes swept on to the attack, the ewes ran pell-mell in between their horses' feet. The dogs, wild with their sport, followed after and snapped, now at the sheep, now at the legs of the bewildered horses. Two of the Wildwater folk were unhorsed forthwith; three others were all but out of saddle, and needed all their wits to keep their beasts in hand; and Shameless Wayne, watching the turmoil from the hillock where he stood firm to meet the onset, laughed grimly as he jerked the curb hard down upon his own beast's jaw.

"I thowt 'twould unsettle 'em a bittock," murmured Jose the shepherd, stroking his chin contentedly while he watched the ewes driven further down the hill, leaving clear room between his Master and the rearing horses of the Ratcliffes.

"Dang me, why didn't I think on 't myseln!" cried Hiram Hey. "It war plain as dayleet, an' yond owd fooil Jose 'ull mak a lot of his cleverness when next he goes speering after Martha. Ay, I know him!—That's th' style, Maister!" he broke off, with a sudden, rousing shout. "In at 'em, an' skift 'em afore they've fund their seats again."

Wayne had seen his chance, and taken it; and now he was riding full tilt at the enemy, over the pair of fallen horsemen. Red Ratcliffe cut at him in passing, and missed; the rest were overbusy with their horses to do more than raise a clumsy guard; Wayne galloped clean through them, swirling his blade to the right hand and the left, and in a breathing-space, so it seemed to Hiram and the shepherd, the free moor and safety lay before him.

"Now, God be thanked, he's through, is th' lad!" cried Hiram. "Lord Harry, he swoops an' scampers fair like a storm-wind out o' th' North."

But Wayne would not take the plain road of flight; partly his blood was up, and partly he feared for the safety of his farm-hinds if he left them to play the scapegoat to these red-headed gentry. He wheeled about, and the discomfited horsemen, seeing him bear down a second time, were mute with wonder. But their fury was keen sharpened now; they glanced at the two fallen riders, trampled beneath Wayne's hoofs; they heard one of their comrades cursing at a wound that Wayne had given him as he rode through; a moment only they halted for surprise, and then, with a deafening yell of *Ratcliffe!* they closed in a ring about him.

"Five to one now. Come, the odds lessen fast," cried Wayne, as he pulled up and seemed to wait their onset.

But he knew that flight was hopeless if he let the full company attack him

front and rear. One glance he snatched at the open moor behind, and one at the walled enclosure where the sheep had lately been herded for the washing.

"God's life, I'll trick them yet," he muttered, and reined sharp about, outwitting them, and rode hard as hoofs could kick up the peat toward the shelter of the walls.

"Is he a Jack-o'-Lanthorn, this fool from Marsh?" growled Red Ratcliffe, foiled a second time.

He thought that Wayne was trusting to his horsemanship, that he would double and retreat and glance sideways each time they made at him in force, hoping to get a blow in as occasion offered. But Wayne of Marsh had no such idle play in mind; he was seeking only for sure ground on which to stand and meet them one by one. He had marked the opening in the pinfold through which the sheep were driven, and he knew that, if he could once gain the wall, the battle would narrow to a run of single contests.

They saw his aim too late; and as Red Ratcliffe swerved and swooped on him, Wayne backed his horse with its flanks inside the pinfold. He had four stout walls behind him now; the uprights of the gateway were no more than saddle-high, and above them he had free space for arm and sword-swing. It was one against five still—but each of the five must wait his turn, and each must fare alone against the blade which, to the Ratcliffe fancy, was a live, malignant thing in the hand of this witch-guarded lad of Marsh.

Again the red-heads fell back, while the Marsh farm-folk, roused by the Master's pluck, sent up a ringing cheer. And Shameless Wayne, who had chafed under long weeks of farming, laughed merrily to feel his sword-hilt grafted to his hot right hand again, to know that he had cut off retreat and that five skilled swordsmen were at hand to give him battle.

"God rest you, sirs. Wayne and the Dog are waiting," he cried, and laughed anew to mark how they shrank from the old battle-cry.

But Red Ratcliffe, seeing his brave scheme like to go the way of other schemes as promising, lost doubts and shrinking on the sudden. Man to man, he was Wayne's equal, and this time he would settle old scores—would go back to the Lean Man with his tale, and claim Janet as the fruit of victory. A thought of the girl's beauty ran across his mind, a swift, unholy sense that it would be sweeter to take her thus, unwilling and by force, than if she had consented to his wooing; and the thought steadied heart and nerve, while it lent him fierce new strength. No cry he gave, but made straight at Wayne and cut across his head-guard. Wayne shot his blade up, withdrew it, and thrust keenly forward; and Ratcliffe parried; and after that the fight ran hot and swift.

Steel met steel; the blades hissed, and purred, and shivered; up and down, in and out, the blue-grey lightning ran. The men's breath came hard, their eyes

were red with prophecy of blood; their faces, that in peace showed many a subtle difference of breeding and of courtesy, were strangely like now, set to a strained fierceness, the veins upstanding tight as knotted whipcord. Sons of the naked Adam, they fought with gladdening fury; and the naked beast in them rose up and snarled between clenched, gleaming teeth. Their very horses—that are full as men of niceties overlaid by breeding—went back to their old savagery, and bit one at the other, and added their shrill cries to the men's raucous belly-breaths.

The farm-folk held their breath and watched. The Ratcliffes, clustered in a little knot, followed each steel-ripple, each cut and counter-cut, and forgot for the moment to take sides from very love of swordsmanship. And then Wayne knocked the other's blade high up in air, and would have had him through the breast had Red Ratcliffe not jerked his left hand on the curb and dragged his horse round into safety. Wayne could not pursue, even had he been minded to leave his shelter, for another Ratcliffe was on him now, offering fight as stubborn as the first.

"My breath will fail," thought Wayne, and redoubled the swiftness of his blows, and cut his man deep through the rib-bones.

But there were three left yet, and Red Ratcliffe, smarting under his defeat, had brought guile to help him where force had failed. While the sword-din began afresh, and again Wayne settled to the desperate conflict, Red Ratcliffe got to ground, picked up the sword that had been ripped from out his grasp, and crept softly to the far edge of the pinfold.

"'Tis child's play, after all," he thought. "Lord, how the rogue fights, with never a thought that he can be taken in the rear."

Wayne—forcing the battle with all his might, lest breath should fail—could get no nearer to his man as yet; and meanwhile Red Ratcliffe had gained the wall behind him and was throwing one leg over.

"He cannot keep it up, can't th' lad," murmured Hiram Hey. "Sakes, I've a mind to run in myseln an' do summat—though I mun be crazy to think on 't.—Hallo, what's agate wi' Red Ratcliffe? He looks pleased-like, an' he's getten off his horse. Oh, that's it, is't? Well, I can do a bit o' summat, happen, after all."

Hiram moved briskly up to the pinfold and reached the hinder wall just as Red Ratcliffe was climbing over it; he set a pair of arms about his middle, as he had done to one of the Wildwater farm-folk not long ago, and put his muscle into the lift, and brought his enemy with a thud on to the peat five yards away.

"Fair play's a jewel ye've niver learned th' price on at Wildwater," he said quietly. "Ye war for sticking th' Maister i' th' back, as ye could no way meet him i' front? Well, there's two opinions about ivery matter, an' mine's th' reet un this time, I'm thinking. 'Twar a Providence, it war, that yond hind o' thine came in to th' Friendly tavern yesterneet; he braced me fine for hoicking feather-weights

ower my shoulder, like."

The shepherds looked at Hiram, and then at Red Ratcliffe, who was lifting himself in dazed sort to a sitting posture; it was plain they needed but the one word to close round and stamp the life out of this treacherous hound who could aim to strike from behind when Wayne had proved his match in open fight. But Hiram had an old grievance to straighten—a grievance that had rankled ever since Red Ratcliffe interrupted his courtship on a long-dead day of spring—and he paid no heed to his comrades' meaning glances.

"So, Maister; ye fooiled me once on a time, as ye called to mind just now—an' now I've fooiled ye," said Hiram, stroking his frill of beard and watching Red Ratcliffe's lowering face.

"And, by Wayne's cursed Dog, the third time shall pay for all," snapped the other, making a second effort to stand upright.

"Mebbe, but I'm fain to hev squared th' reckoning, choose what comes. Ay, it war grand, warn't it, to get Hiram Hey to tell ye how mich ling an' bracken there war at Marsh, an' th' varry spot it war stored in? Ye went home fetching a rare crack o' laughter, I'll be bound, an' ye came that varry neet to mak use o' what I telled ye. What, ye're dizzy sick? An' I'm laughing. An' that's how th' world allus wags wi' them as thinks to best Hiram Hey."

Red Ratcliffe shook off his dizziness, and snatched a dagger from his belt. "Thou foul-mouthed sot, I'll teach thee to set thyself against thy betters," he cried.

Hiram stood, sturdy and stiff; he knew there was little chance for him, but still he hoped to come to grips with his assailant and crush his ribs in before he could compass a clean stroke with the dagger. He feared the upshot not at all, and even as he waited he smiled in his old sour fashion to think that he had settled his own private cause of quarrel with Red Ratcliffe. The wind, freshening from the west, brought up a sound of shouting with it; but Hiram had no eyes for what was chancing on the far side of the pinfold.

"Begow, I shall niver be wedded now to Martha," he thought; "a chap *can* go too slow, 'twould seem. Ay, well, I shall be saved a power o' worry, doubtless, an' wedlock's noan all cakes an' ale, they say. But, lord, I'd right weel hev liked to try it for myseln."

The fight at the pinfold was waxing keener all the while; but Shameless Wayne was hard-pressed now, and the first twinges of arm-tiredness were cramping his strokes a little. Yet his laugh rang deep as ever, and the sweetness of each stroke was doubled, since each must be near his last. One thought only held him, and that was a thought of pride—pride that he would die in the mid-day open, righting the old Wayne battle.

"He gives, he gives!" cried one of the two horsemen who were left to take their turn.

"Does he give?" panted Wayne, and made the quick cross-cut, following a straight lunge, which his father had taught him long ago.

The stroke told, and his opponent's bridle-arm dropped heavy to his side; but still he fought on, and still his comrades watched, eager to take his place the moment he fell back. Then Wayne was touched on the neck, and again on the side, just as Red Ratcliffe roused himself to leap on Hiram Hey.

Shameless Wayne in front, and Hiram, with whom he had waged many a stubborn contest, on the far side of the pinfold—it seemed that master and man would go out of life together, each dauntless, each proud in his own hard way, each ready, doubtless, to turn on the further shore of Death and take up some interrupted quarrel touching farm-matters—yet each dying because he had stayed to save the other when flight had been full easy.

Shepherd Jose, not caring to see such matters as he knew must follow, turned a pair of dim eyes down the slope, and started, and clutched his neighbour by the arm.

"In time—by th' Heart, in time!" he cried.

As if in answer to him, a swift, clear shout came up the moor, over the sun-bright sweep of ling.

"*Wayne and the Dog.* Hold to it, Ned! Hold to it."

Wayne knew the boyish voices, and his heart leaped, but he dared not let his eyes wander until the cry had been thrice repeated, until his adversary had given back for dread of the new foe. Red Ratcliffe, at the same moment, stopped half toward Hiram Hey, turning his eyes on the upcoming horsemen; then he raced for his horse, and sprang to saddle, and joined his hesitating band of comrades.

"Begow, that's a let-off, an' proper," said Hiram Hey, scarce comprehending yet that he was safe.

For a moment a silence as of night held the Ratcliffes, while they watched the four Wayne lads charge gaily up the slope, plucking their swords free of the scabbard as they rode.

"On to them; they'll break at the first onset," muttered Red Ratcliffe, and galloped down to meet them.

For the first time Shameless Wayne's heart grew soft and his nerve weak. They were over young, these lads who had been left to his care, to fight with grown men; what if one of them were slain in saving the life he had gladly given up a while since? But that passed; breathing again, he felt new strength in his arm, and as he crashed headlong in at the rear of the down-sweeping band, he swore that this thing should not be.

"Wayne and the Dog!" cried Griff, as he made at the foremost Ratcliffe.

"Wayne and the Dog!" roared Ned from the rear, and cleft the nearest Ratcliffe through the skull. And even as he wrenched his blade free, he laughed

to mark with what elderly and sober glee these youngsters waged their maiden battle.

Front and rear the Ratcliffes were taken. Confused, hard pressed on every side, their blows grew wilder and more flurried. But still they held to it, and Wayne's four brothers had cause to thank the hard, monotonous hours they had spent in learning tricks of fence.

All was changed on the sudden. There had been quick breathing of striving swordsmen, and quiet, deep breaths of silent watchers—a quiet which Hiram Hey's conflict at the far side of the pinfold had scarce ruffled. But now it seemed as if Bedlam had let loose a second strife of tongues. The farm-men, maddened by the sight of blows, ran in at one another and fought for Wildwater or for Marsh. The dogs played Merry-Andrew with the sheep, and scattered them wide across the moor, and still pursued them. Cries of men, bleating of bewildered ewes, wild barking of dogs a-holydaying—and then, clear above all, Griff's shrill cry, "They flee, they free!"—and after that three flying horsemen steering a zig-zag course through sheep and dogs and wrestling farm-folk.

And over all was the splendour of the mid-day sun, the wind among the ling, the deep, unalterable silence that lies forever at the moor's heart, whether men live or die, whether they fight or drink in peace together. Only the plover heeded the swift fight, and screamed their plaudits to the victors.

CHAPTER XX

HOW THEY WAITED AT THE BOUNDARY-STONE

Red Ratcliffe, and the two who had come through the fight with him, checked their headlong gallop when at last the pursuit died far in their wake. Their shoulders were bunched forward, their heads downcast; and not till the surly pile of Wildwater showed half a league from them across the moor did they break silence.

"There'll be a queer welcome for us from the Lean Man," said one.

"Ay, he'll shake off his palsy when we come to him with the tale of four men left behind us," answered Red Ratcliffe gloomily. "Lord, how his lip will curl! And his eyes will prick one like a sword-point, cold and bright and grey. And he'll flay our tempers raw with gibes."

"Still, there's but one of the four killed outright; and when those boggart-

shielded Waynes have left, we can return to help the wounded. They'll not butcher them, think'st thou?"

"Nay," sneered the third; "'tis part of their foul pride to play the woman after victory. Like as not they'll set them on some grassy hillock, with a wall to shield the sun from them, and give them drink, and nurse them into health against the next fight."

"Nay, a month ago they would have done as much; but now? I doubt it," said Red Ratcliffe. "We've roughened Wayne at last, and I never knew what flint there was under his courteous softness till I crossed blades with him just now."

"And yond four lads have had their first taste of blood. I've known boys do at such times what hardened men would shrink from."

"Well, they will kill the wounded, or they will not. 'Tis done by this time, and we can have no say in it," put in Red Ratcliffe. "Od's life, lads, I relish the look of Wildwater less the nearer we approach it," he added, reining in his horse.

"What brought the lads up? Had they winded our approach, or was it just the old Wayne luck?" said one of his comrades, halting likewise. "Marry, there'll be an empty house at Marsh. What if we ride down before the Master's coming and fire the dwelling from roof to cellar?"

Red Ratcliffe glanced quickly at him. "There's time for it, if we ride at once," he muttered; "and something we must do for shame's sake."

"There'll be his sister there," said another, with a laugh; "trim Mistress Nell, who gives us such open scorn whenever we cross her path. She shall take scorn for scorn, full measure, if I get within reach of her mouth. Come, lads, let's do it! Burn them out, and carry the girl to Wildwater."

A craftiness crept into Red Ratcliffe's face—a craftiness that showed him an apt pupil of the Lean Man's. "We'll waste no time on burning, lest Wayne and his cursed Dog come back while yet we're gathering fuel," he broke in. "But we'll ride down and snatch the girl, and take her up to Wildwater. Ay, and we'll lay no rough hand on her till Wayne has learned her capture."

They nodded eagerly. "We shall save our credit yet. By the Heart, not Nicholas himself could have hatched a bonnier plot," they cried.

"Ay, the game is ours," went on Red Ratcliffe slowly, as they turned and rode at the trot for Marsh. "Those four ill-gotten youngsters have saved him, he thinks—but he shall find that they have killed him twice over by leaving Marsh unguarded.—The fool shall die once in his body and once in the pride that's meat and bread to him. Hark ye! We'll send down word that his sister is held at Wildwater, and he will come galloping up and batter at the gates, all in his hot way, with never a care of danger. We'll take him alive, and bring our dainty Mistress Nell into the room where he lies bound—and there's a sure way then, methinks, of racking his brain to madness before we pay him, wound for wound,

for what he's done to us."

His fellows drew back a little for a moment; the cool, stark devilry of the plot shamed even them, who had dwelt with the Lean Man and never hitherto found cause to blush. Then the thought of their defeat returned on them, and their hearts hardened, and they offered no word of protest or denial.

From time to time, as they rode, the leader of the enterprise laughed quietly; from time to time he thought of some fresh subtlety whereby Wayne's anguish would be sharpened; but not until they had covered half the road to Marsh did he break silence. A little figure of a woman, with corn-bright hair and delicate, round face, was standing in the roadway, shading her eyes to look across the moor.

"'Tis the mad woman they keep at Marsh," said Red Ratcliffe lightly. "We aimed once before at the Wayne honour through their women. The omen speeds our journey."

Mistress Wayne started as they came up with her, and turned to fly, but saw the folly of it. Keeping her place, she eyed them with the watchful, mute entreaty of a bird held fast within the fowler's net. Something in her helplessness suggested to Red Ratcliffe that he might find a use for her; the weak, to his mind, were fashioned by a kindly Providence to fetch and carry for the strong, and haply this mad creature might aid him to get Nell Wayne to Wildwater. Turning the fancy over in his mind, he stopped to question her.

"Well, pretty light-of-love? What wast gazing at so earnestly when we came up?" he asked.

She answered quietly, with a touch of frightened dignity in her voice. "I heard the sound of cries and shouting far across the heath awhile since, and I feared there was trouble to my friends."

"A right fear, too. There *has* been trouble, and your friends have just learned a bloody lesson from us, Mistress," said Red Ratcliffe, for mere zest in seeing her wince.

"Oh, sir, they are not slain? Tell me that they are safe.—Nell was right," she went on, talking fast as if to herself; "she would send her brothers to help him at the washing-pools instead of hawking.—Why did we let him ride alone so near to Wildwater?—They reached the pools too late.—Ah, God! and the one friend I had is gone." Again she turned her eyes full on Red Ratcliffe. "Is he dead, sir?" she asked wearily.

A sudden thought came to him. "Not dead, Mistress, but dying fast," he answered. "Thou know'st the boundary-stone over yonder, where once he laid a Ratcliffe hand in mockery? Well, we met him there not long since as he rode to the sheep-washing, and I thrust him through the side.—Peace, woman! Thou may'st help him yet to a little ease before he dies."

"Yes, yes, I will go to him. At the boundary-stone, you said——"

"'Tis not thou he cries for, but his sister. See ye, we're hard folk, and take a hard vengeance, but now that Wayne has paid his price we do not grudge him such a light request—and were, indeed, riding down to bid his sister come to him."

She passed a hand across her eyes, while Ratcliffe's fellows glanced at him with frank amazement.

"'Twas Nell, not I, he asked for?" she said. "Are you sure, sir, that my name did not pass his lips?"

"Sure, quite sure. Pish! We've taken trouble enough, and now we'll leave thee to it. Go thyself if it pleases thee—but thou'lt rob the dying of his last wish if thou dost not hurry straight to Marsh and bring his sister to the boundary-stone."

She halted a moment, then went with slow steps down the highway. And he who rode on Ratcliffe's left turned questioningly to him.

"What fool's game is this?" he asked.

"Nay, 'tis a wise man's game, thou dullard. I tell thee, Wayne may come straight home to Marsh, and meet us; we'll run no hazard that can be escaped. Nay, by God! This little want-wit will do our work for us, and bring Mistress Nell three parts of the way without our lifting hand or foot—and think how that will lighten one of our saddle-cruppers. We have Wayne safe, I tell thee, and we'll risk naught."

Mistress Wayne was out of sight now, carrying a heart that was heavier for the knowledge that Ned had no thought of her in his last hour. A strange jealousy had wakened in her; why should it be Nell, not she, who was to soothe him at the last? She had loved him, surely, better than any friend he had—and now it was Nell, Nell only, whom he wanted. Well, she would bring her.

Not for the first time did this frail woman wonder bitterly why she had been doomed to return to her right mind; yet never, amid all the remorse that had followed her awakening, had she felt one half the numbing sense of loneliness that went with her now.

"He is gone," she repeated for the twentieth time, as she went over Worm's Hill, and down Barguest Lane, and in at the Marsh gateway.

Hiram Hey, meanwhile, had returned from pursuit of the Ratcliffe farm-folk to find that his betters likewise had given up the chase as hopeless. The four lads, indeed, would have ridden to the gates of Wildwater had not Shameless Wayne compelled them to turn back; and now they were gathered round the washing pool, chattering like magpies, while the yokels straggled back in twos and threes, and the dogs returned to their masters with frolic in one eye and shamed expectancy of rebuke in the other. The moor was dotted white with sheep, some standing in bewildered groups, some browsing on the butter-grass that grew at the fringes of the bogs. Wayne of Marsh was eyeing his brothers

with a fatherly sort of care, seeking for wounds on them before he dressed his own.

"What, not a scratch on you?" he asked in wonder.

Griff bared his left arm with ill-concealed pride and showed a deepish cut. "'Tis no more than a scratch, Ned. I took it from Red Ratcliffe," he laughed.

And then his brothers, not to be outdone, showed many a trivial scar, which they had gleaned amid the give-and-take of blows.

"Thank God, it is no worse," said Wayne huskily. "I should never have found heart, lads, to go back to Nell if one among you had been lost.—There! Wash them in the stream, and dust them well with peat—and, faith, I'll join you, for my own hurts begin to prick."

The streamway all about the pools was fouled by the trampling of dogs and sheep, of farm-men and rough-ridden horses, and the brothers moved further up the stream to find clean water for their wounds. As they passed the far side of the pinfold, their eyes fell upon the fallen Ratcliffes, unheeded until now in the turmoil. One was dead, his skull splintered by a hoof-stroke; the other three lay with their faces to the pitiless sun, and groaned.

Wayne was harder than of yore; yet he could not let them lie there in their agony until the sun, festering their wounds, had made them ready for the corbie-crows already circling overhead. He stood awhile, looking down on them; and one, less crippled than his fellows, rose on his elbow and spat on him.

"Let me kill him, Ned—let me kill him!" cried Griff, in a voice that was like a man's for depth.

Ned glanced at this youngster's face, and he remembered what his own blood-lust had been when he fought his first great battle in Marshcotes kirkyard, and bade them roof three fallen Ratcliffes over with the vault-stone. For it was as Red Ratcliffe had said; the fight was hot still in this lad, and he shrank from naught.

Wayne set a hand on Griff's shoulder and forced him toward the stream. "Ay, lad, I know," he said quietly; "but thou'lt think better of it in awhile.—Set these rogues under shade of yonder bank," he broke off, turning to the shepherds; "take their daggers from them first, for they have a shrewd way of repaying kindness; and then look ye to their hurts."

"We've hed a fullish day, Maister, I reckon," said Hiram Hey, going up the stream beside them and standing with his arms behind his back while he watched the brothers bind each other's wounds.

"Ay," said the Master grimly, "and 'twill be work till sundown, Hiram, if we're to make up for time lost."

Hiram opened his mouth wide. "What? Ye mean to get forrard wi' th' sheep-weshing? At after what we've gone through?"

Wayne nodded. "The lads here have come to learn how farm-work goes," he said; "and would'st thou teach them only how to idle through a summer's afternoon?"

"Nay, it beats me. Nay, your father war nowt, just now at all, to what ye are," murmured Hiram, scratching his rough head.—"Isn't it a tempting o' Providence, like, to wark i'stead o' giving praise that ye've come safe through all?" he added, under a happy inspiration.

Wayne laughed. "Work is praise, Hiram, as thou told'st me once, I mind, when I was idling as a lad. See how thy old lessons stick to me." He turned to Jose the shepherd. "Get yond Wildwater sheep gathered," he said; "they'll stray back to their own pastures if thou'rt not quick with them. And when the day's work is over, bring them to the Low Farm, and we'll put a Wayne owning-mark on their backs—for, by the Rood, I think we've won them fairly."

"Lord, Lord, I may be no drinker—but I could sup two quarts of ale, an' niver tak two breaths," said Hiram Hey forlornly.

Again Wayne laughed as he clapped him on the back. "Come to Marsh, Hiram—and all of you—at supper-time to-night; and ye shall have old October till ye swim, to drink to these stiff lads who plucked us out of trouble."

"That's sense—ay, he talks sense at last, does th' Maister," murmured Hiram. Then, bethinking him that it would never do, for his credit's sake, to show himself in anything more backward than the Master, he began forthwith to rate the farm-hands with something of his old-time vigour.

And soon the pinfolds on either hand were full again of bleating sheep, and Jose and his brother shepherds were scrubbing hard in each of the two pools, and a chance passer-by could not have told, save for broken faces here and there, that a half-hour since these leisurely moving folk had been fighting hand-to-hand for the honour of their house.

And so it chanced that Wayne, who might have been saved many a heart-ache had he ridden straight home to Marsh, as any man less obstinate would have done, was still at the washing-pool when his step-mother got back to Marsh. She had found Nell at the spinning-wheel, and had told her tale; and the girl had sat motionless for awhile, her head bowed over the yellow flax, her hands clenched tight together.

"You are our evil angel, Mistress," she said, looking up at last. "Since first you set foot on our threshold, disaster has followed on disaster. But for you father would be alive—"

"Nell, spare me! Do I not know, do I not know?"

But Nell was pitiless. The news so rudely broken to her had brought a twelvemonth's hidden bitterness to the front, and she would not check it. "But for you the feud would have slept itself away—but for you Ned would be sitting

at table yonder.—Mistress, how dared you come first to tell me of it?—Nay, hold your tears, for pity's sake; they'll bring no lives back."

The girl rose, and would have gone out, but her step-mother stood in front of her, lifting up her hands in piteous entreaty.

"Nell, I want—I want to go with you; I loved him, too, and I think he'll be glad to see me at the last—if—if he's not dead by this."

"*You* want to go with me? My faith, I'll seek other company, or go alone," flashed Nell, and left her there.

Mistress Wayne had found a certain fluttering courage nowadays; see Ned she would and claim a farewell from him, without leave from Nell. The girl would not share her company; but the road was free to her—the road that led to the Wildwater boundary-stone. She waited only for a moment, then followed Nell whose figure she could see boldly outlined against the sweep of still, blue sky that lay across the top of Barguest Lane.

"I have brought disaster to them; yes, 'tis very true," she mused all along the bare white road.

The girl had far outstripped her by this time; but she caught sight of her again, a long mile ahead, as Nell topped the hill at whose feet the boundary-stone was set. Full of eagerness to know the worst, Mistress Wayne quickened pace, though her feet ached and her head throbbed painfully. It seemed this ling-bordered stretch of road would never end.

She gained the hill-top where she had last seen Nell, and glanced down in terror-stricken search of the body lying in the hollow; but naught met her eyes, save an empty road winding into empty space. Nor did a nearer view dispel the mystery: the boundary-stone stood gaunt, flat-topped and black, in the hot sunlight; the sand of the roadway was disordered as if a plunging horse had scattered it with hoof-play; but that was all.

Where was Ned? He lay beside the boundary-stone, those evil folk from Wildwater had told her. Yet there was no blood upon the ground, nor the least sign to tell her that a man had been done to death here. Nell, too, was gone, completely as if the road had yielded, bog-like, to her tread and closed about her. Only the sad cries of moor-birds broke the stillness—these, and the far-off echo of horse-hoofs pounding over a stony track.

Mistress Wayne sat her down at the roadside, among the budding heather. A great faintness stole over her; she felt her new-found hold on life slipping from her grasp. What had chanced to Wayne? Where was Nell? Was this some fresh delusion, nursed by the sun-heat and her hurried walk? She could not tell—only, she knew that the grey line of road was circling round her, that the sky seemed closing in.

"I—brought—disaster," she murmured, and let her head fall back among the

heather.

CHAPTER XXI
WHAT CHANCED AT WILDWATER

The Lean Man was sunning himself in the garden at Wildwater, and Janet, sitting beside him, wondered afresh to see the dumb air he had, as of one who had crept from the trampling life of men and had no thought to return to it.

"The old trouble has left you, sir, to-day. Is it not so?" she said gently, chafing his cold hands in hers.

"Ay, it has left me, girl, for a little while. But the sun has no warmth in it, and the bees' hum sounds dead and hollow. Look ye, Janet, this is not summer at all; 'tis like an old man stammering love-vows and wondering why they sound so cold.—Are our folk hunting to-day?"

"Some of them have gone to wash the sheep. They said they would be home betimes, but the afternoon wears on."

"If I were young again, lass! Sorrow of women, if only I were young again!" broke in the Lean Man. "To hunt the fox, and see the sheep come white and bleating from the pool, and feel the old gladness in it all." He fell back moodily into his seat. "A man has his day," he muttered, "and mine is over."

He raised his eyes languidly as the garden gate opened and Red Ratcliffe and his two companions came laughing through.

"We've news, sir, for you," cried Red Ratcliffe.

The Lean Man looked them up and down, and smiled with something of his old keenness, as he saw the stains of fight on them. "Ay, I can believe it," he said. "Bonnie news, I fancy, of Wayne and of those who thought to crush him when Nicholas Ratcliffe had failed. A wounded bridle-arm, a matter of two bloody cheek-cuts, and thy right thigh, lad, dripping through the cloth. Ye make a gallant band."

"'Tis true, sir, he worsted us in fight," said Red Ratcliffe, sulkily.

The blood came back to Janet's face. "Again he shows the stronger hand," she murmured. "Who says that Wayne of Marsh is unfit to have a maid's heart in keeping?"

"He worsted you," said the Lean Man to his grandsons; "is that why ye came with laughter in your throats, and mouths a-grin as if a man had ploughed

a furrow 'cross them?"

"Nay, but because we used our wits when swords failed us, and trapped Wayne's sister; she is in the house now, safe under lock and key."

The Lean Man roused himself. "A good stroke, lads!" he cried, slapping his thigh. "She's in the house, ye say? Then take me to her."

"You had best go armed to talk with her," laughed he whose cheek was cut; "shame will out, sir, and I took these wounds, not from Wayne, but from the she-devil I carried hither on my crupper."

"Good lass!" chuckled old Nicholas. "I like that sort of temper. She carries a dagger, then, to help keep up the feud?"

"She snatched my own from its sheath, and pricked me twice before I guessed her purpose. And all because I stooped my face to kiss her."

"'Tis just what thou'd'st have done, Janet; eh, lass? Methinks thou'lt pair with this hot wench from Marsh," said the Lean Man, laying a jesting hand on the girl's shoulder.

"We shall pair ill, I fear," she answered coldly,—"as for the dagger-stroke—I should have aimed nearer the heart, grandfather," she added, glancing hardily at Red Ratcliffe.

"Thy aim for a man's heart is always very sure," her cousin answered, meeting her glance good-humouredly.

"Tut-tut! Thou'rt indifferent clumsy as a wooer, lad—but, by the Lord, thou hast a head for scheming. What, then? We've got the lass, and Wayne will follow."

"That was my thought, sir. We'll let him bide awhile—till sundown, say—and then, just as his anxiousness on Mistress Nell's behalf is getting past bearing, we will send word that she is here, with a broad hint or so of what will chance to her before the dawn——"

"Ay, ay," broke in the Lean Man, "and he'll come, if I know him, as if his horse were shod with wind; and I'll brace my stiffened sinews once again; and an old sore shall be cured for good and all."

"Will the Brown Dog carry its master through this pass, think ye?" cried Red Ratcliffe boastfully.

The Lean Man's eagerness died swift as it had come. His hard lips shrank into senile curves. The dulness of a great terror clouded his hawk-bright eyes.

"The Dog? The Dog?" he mumbled, at the end of a long silence. "Ay, thou fool, 'twill conquer as aforetime. Useless, useless, I tell thee! The girl is here—well, he will find a way to rescue her."

"But, sir, this is folly! What can he do with a score men waiting here for him?"

"What he did at Dead Lad's Rigg—what he did to-day at the sheep-washing—what he and his cursed hound would do, if ye, and I, and fifty times

our numbers, fenced him round with steel."

"Go, cousins. Grandfather is—is faint again. The fit will pass if ye leave him to it," said Janet, jealous always lest they should guess the secret which only she and Nicholas shared.

The younger men glanced meaningly one at the other as they moved off. "Old brains breed maggots," muttered one.

"And so will Wayne before the month is old," answered Red Ratcliffe brutally, turning for a last malicious glance at Janet.

He saw that the girl was following him with fearless, inscrutable eyes. A shadow of doubt crossed his triumph, and he cursed the boastfulness that had led him to tell his plans so openly in hearing of one who was well affected toward Shameless Wayne.

The Lean Man sat on, his head between his hands, his feet working shiftlessly among the last year's leaves that still cumbered the neglected garden. "Not by skill of sword, nor yet by guile," he was saying, over and over. "We must go with the stream now—'tis useless striving—yet, by the Red Heart, I shall turn nightly in my grave if Wayne goes quick above ground after I am dead."

Janet crept softly over the strip of lawn without rousing him, and went through the wicket that opened on the pasture-fields. Nell Wayne was here, then, and in peril—Mistress Nell, who had railed on her as a light woman because she had gained the love of Shameless Wayne, who had flouted her as if she were mud beneath her feet. A savage joy burned in the girl's heart for a moment; but after it there came the memory of Red Ratcliffe's words; and it seemed a poor thing to humble Nell if Wayne were to pay a better price for it. Could she do naught to help him?

She smiled in self-derision. The last time she had sought to help Wayne, she had all but compassed his undoing. Yet how could she rest idle, knowing what was to come? As of old, she turned to the moor for help, and walked the heather feverishly; and not till the sun was lowering fast toward Dead Lad's Rigg did she return to Wildwater.

Nicholas and Red Ratcliffe were in hall together, the younger man full of talk, the other taciturn and hopeless.

"The messenger has gone, sir," Red Ratcliffe was saying; "Wayne will be here before long—rouse yourself, for we're growing to lose heart at sight of you."

"Give me the key of the room where Mistress Nell is prisoned. I want to speak with her," said Janet, coming boldly up to them.

"A likely request, cousin! The key lies safe in my pocket, and there 'twill stay."

"When Janet asks aught, thou'lt give it her, thou cross-mannered whelp," put in the Lean Man sharply. A lack of courtesy toward his chosen one could

rouse him even yet.

Red Ratcliffe hesitated, then gave way to the old habit of obedience; but, as Janet took the key and crossed to the passage leading to Nell's prison, he followed her.

"I'll stay this side the door while thou hast speech of her," he said, with an ugly smile.

"As it pleases thee," she answered, opening the door and closing it behind her.

She had meant to set the captive free, at any hazard to herself; but she was prepared to find her scheme thwarted in some such way, and she had a likelier plan ready framed against the failure of the first. It was not needful now to have speech at all of Nell; but lest suspicion should fall more darkly on her than it need she must go in.

The room was low and small, lighted by a single narrow window that showed a sweep of purpling moor. Nell Wayne was sitting at the casement, her eyes fixed hungrily on the freedom that was almost within touch of her hand; she sprang to her feet as the door opened, and turned at bay; and when she saw who stood before her the fierceness deepened in her eyes and straight-set figure.

For a moment they stood and looked at one another; and no Wayne had ever crossed sword more hotly with a Ratcliffe than these two women of either house crossed glances. For theirs was no chance feud, bred by a quarrel as to precedence in sheep-washing; it was the age-old feud that lies heart-deep between woman and woman, the feud that hisses into flame whenever love for the one man blows on the smouldering fire.

"You come to mock me, doubtless," said Nell at last.

"*That* would be to mock my own pride, Mistress. I came with quite other thoughts."

"I am honoured that the lady of the house sees fit—in a late hour, perchance—to give welcome to her guest."

"Lower your voice, I beg. There's a pair of sharp ears at the door, and what I have to say will not bear listening to.—Hark ye, Mistress! I am going to pluck you out of this, and quickly."

"How, you? I do not understand—I——"

"Nay, 'tis for no love of you I do it, but because they mean to use you as a lure to bring your brother up to Wildwater."

Nell lost a little of her upright carriage. "Is that why they brought me here?" she asked slowly.

"For that—and with a thought of their own pleasure, doubtless, afterward. Shall I save your brother, Mistress, or will it defile him to owe safety to such as me?"

Nell turned to the window again, and did not answer for a space. Then, "Go," she whispered faintly—"but I would God it had been any one but you."

"And *I* would God I might save him alone, leaving you to nurse your pride in a cold lap. But fate is hard, Mistress, and compels us to travel over the same bridge; 'twould be well to hold your skirts, lest I touch them by the way."

"Go, go! Say I wronged you—say anything, so only you keep Ned out of danger."

Despite herself, Janet could not but mark how little this girl thought of her own safety, how much of the brother who, at worst, had only life to lose. "I shall have to leave you here awhile. Have you no fear?" she asked.

"None, save that Ned will knock at the gates while you stand dallying here."

Janet turned to the door, then faced about, her bitterness craving a last word. "Remember, whether I lose or win, that 'twas all for Ned I did it. I would have seen you shamed, and gladdened at it."

Some hidden softness slipped into the other's voice. She had endured suspense and misery, and now that help had come she weakened at the thought of peril. "Nay," she whispered, "you are a woman as I am, Mistress, and you know, as I know, how frail is the casket in which we keep our jewels. For love of her that bore you, you could never have looked on gladly and seen——"

Janet glanced curiously at her. "You are right," she flashed, taking a dagger from her breast. "Mistress, I would have fought for you, had blows been needful. Take this, and if any troubles you while I'm away—why, you know how to use it. Only, strike for the heart next time, if you are wise."

Red Ratcliffe was walking up and down the passage when she came out. He took the key from her, turned the lock sharply, and scanned her face for some hint of what had passed. For again he was puzzled, as he had been once before when he had suspected Janet's good-faith and had found it justified. Listen as he would, he had not been able to gather the drift of what passed between the girls; yet their voices, low and strained, did not sound like those of friends who talked of each other's safety.

"Well?" he said, putting the key into his pocket and laying a rough hand on Janet as she tried to pass him.

"My answer is to grandfather, sir. What I have said or not said is for wiser ears than thine."

He laughed as a fresh thought came to him. "Gad, Janet, I see it now! This proud wench of Marsh disdained thee as a brother's wife, and thou didst take the chance to turn the tables on her. By the Heart, I believe thou'rt glad we brought her here."

Janet hung her head, as if for shame of being found out. "Suppose I am?" she murmured.—"Yet, cousin, I had liefer thou hadst guessed naught of it."

"Trick a weasel, and then look to hoodwink Red Ratcliffe," cried the other, pleased with his own discernment.—"Where art going, Janet?" he broke off, as she turned to the side-door leading to the fields.

"Where I list, cousin, without leave asked of thee or granted."

"Nay, but I think thou'lt not go out of doors! To hate the sister is one thing—but thou'lt foil us with the brother if once we let thee out of doors."

She thought of slipping past him first, but his bulk filled three parts of the narrow passage; so, curbing her tongue, she made him a little curtsey.

"Thou dost honour me to think I take sides against my folk," she said. "As it chances, I care not so much, after all, to go out, and grandfather will need me. Have I thy permission to go into hall and seek him?"

"One day I'll cut out that little tongue of thine, Janet, and clean it of its mockery. Go and welcome—and may the Lean Man have joy of thee."

He followed her a pace or two, remembering that there were more doors than one which opened on the moor; then stopped with a shrug. He was no match, he knew, for Janet and her grandfather together, and if the girl were bent on going out, she was sure of winning the old man's consent. Besides, Nell Wayne was here, and it would take more than Janet's beauty, if he knew aught, more than her wit and quick resourcefulness, to keep Wayne of Marsh from galloping to the rescue.

Janet found the Lean Man half-sitting, half-lying on the lang-settle, his eyes closed, his head resting in the hollow of one arm. She came and leant over the high back of the settle, and watched him with infinite sadness in her eyes. She knew the meaning of these spells of daytime sleep which were more akin to stupors than to healthy slumber; he had passed a night of terror, wrestling hour by hour with the Brown Dog of Marsh, and now weariness had followed, giving him uneasy dreams in place of fevered wakefulness.

"The Dog—flames of the Pit, he holds me—beat him off, there! Cannot ye see I'm helpless—beat him off, I say—his teeth are in my throat," muttered Nicholas, with closed eyes and tight-clenched lips.

"Grandfather, would I could cleave to you, in loyalty as in love," whispered the girl, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "What can I do, sir?" she went on hurriedly, as if he were awake to hear her. "I loathe myself for going—I should loathe myself if I stayed. Cannot I save Wayne without wronging you? See, sir, you'll gain nothing by his death—bid me go and snatch him from these red folk who are not worthy to be kin to you."

"Wayne will win free—*must* win free—there's naught can pierce that armour," said the Lean Man, stirring in his sleep again.

The girl's face brightened. This chance repetition of the thought that ever lay uppermost in the old man's mind was no chance to her, but an omen. "Wayne

must win free," she echoed, changing the whole meaning of the words by a skilful turn of voice. "Wayne must win free. He has said it, and I will obey."

Crossing the noisy boards on tip-toe, she opened the main-door, sped through it, and was lost amid the flaming sunset glory of the heath.

"Lost, all lost. God of the lightning and the storm, will you not strike Wayne dead for me?" cried the Lean Man, and woke, and gazed about him wonderingly.

CHAPTER XXII
AND WHAT CHANCED AT MARSH

All afternoon the Marsh farm-hands had laboured at the sheep-washing, after their brisk skirmish with the Ratcliffes. There had been but one break in the work, and that was when Shameless Wayne and all his folk crossed to the nearest farm to stay their hunger. Nor would Wayne leave them afterward, though there was little need of him once the work had started again in good earnest. It pleased his mood to share and share alike, despite his wounds, with the unwilling labour he had forced from them; and the sun was going down redly and the rushes whispering their evening dirge when he set off for Marsh.

"Mind that ye bring the Ratcliffe sheep with you; I'd not lose them for the world," he said at parting, and rode light-hearted down the slope, the lads beside him, with a thought that home and a full meal and the sight of women's faces would be passing good.

The hall at Marsh was empty when he went in, after leaving his brothers to put the horses into stable. Man-like, he felt aggrieved that there was none to give him welcome, when he had looked forward to such greeting throughout the journey home. Where was Nell? Or, failing her, surely his step-mother should be at hand somewhere. He went to the garden in search of them, but that was empty too; so he crossed to the kitchen, where he found Martha busy with preparation of the evening meal.

"Where is the Mistress? I can find her nowhere," he said, leaning against the doorway.

Martha looked up from the joint that was turning on the spit, and settled herself into an easiful attitude that suggested a hope of gossip.

"Nay, I cannot tell ye, Maister," she answered. "I've been wondering myseln, for I've niver set een on her sin' afternooin. Mary telled me 'at Mistress

Wayne came in, looking gaumless-like an' flaired, an' a two-three minutes at after Mistress Nell went out wi' her. But nawther one nor t' other hes comed back that I knaw on."

Wayne nodded curtly to Martha and turned on his heel, cutting short her expectation of a pleasant round of doubt and fear and surmise.

"I would they were safe back again," he muttered. "Nell must be fey, to go wandering abroad at this late hour."

A brisk step sounded behind him, as Nanny Witherlee entered by the outer door of the kitchen and hobbled across the rush-strewn flag-stones.

"Good-even, Maister. Is there owt wrang at Marsh?" said the Sexton's wife.

"Why, Nanny, what dost thou here?" cried Wayne. "Lord, nurse, thou wear'st thy eerie look, as if thou wert ringing God-speed to a dead man's soul. What ails thee to cross from Marshcotes after sundown?"

"Nay, I've heard th' wind sobbing all th' day, like a bairn that's lost on th' moor; an' th' wind niver cries like yond save it hes getten gooid cause. So, says I, at after Witherlee an' me hed hed our bit o' supper, I'll step dahn to Marsh, says I, for I cannot bide a minute longer without knawing what's agate."

Wayne kept well in the shadow of the passage, for he shrank from letting Nanny see the marks he carried of the late fight—shrank, too, from showing how prone he was to-night to catch the infection of her ghostly speech. This bent old woman, with her sharp tongue, her outspokenness, her queer, familiar talk of other-worldly things, had never lost her hold upon the Master; she was still the nurse who lang syne had sent him shivering to bed with her tales of wind-speech and of water-speech, of the Dog, and the Sorrowful Woman, and the shrouded shapes that stalked at midnight over kirkyard graves. He had been no more than vaguely troubled hitherto by Nell's absence; but now he feared the worst, for he had never known the Sexton's wife make prophecy of dole for naught.

Nanny stood looking at him all this while—trying to read his face, but baulked by the shadows that clustered thick beyond the fringe of candle-light.

"Well, Maister?" she said softly, as still he did not speak.

"Well, nurse? Dost think I'm still unbreeked, and ready as of old to shiver at thy tales?"

"Then there's nowt wrang at Marsh?"

"What should be wrong?"

"If all goes weel, why do ye stand so quiet there, Maister? An' why do ye hide your face when Nanny talks to ye?"

Wayne forced a laugh as he moved down the passage. "Hunger puts strange fancies in a man," he said, "and 'tis long since I had bite or sup."

Nanny did not follow him, but turned to Martha, who had listened with dismay to all that passed.

"Proud—allus proud," she said. "He niver wod own to feeling flaired, wodn't th' Maister. But I tell thee, lass, there's bahn to be sich happenings as nawther thee nor me hes seen th' like on."

"We've hed happenings enough, Nanny—Lord save us fro' owt but peace, say I."

"Lord save us, says th' wench! As if there war Lord to hearken save th' God that fills th' storm's belly wi' thunder an' wi' leetning. Cannot tha hear, Martha, lass? 'Tis throb, throb—an' ivery cranny o' th' owd walls hes getten a voice toneet.—Hark ye! Th' Maister hes gone out into th' courtyard! An' there's Wayne o' Cranshaw's rough-edged voice. Th' storm is gathering fast, I warrant."

Shameless Wayne, meanwhile, wandering out of doors to see if there were any sign of Nell's return, had found his cousin in the courtyard. Rolf had just ridden over from Cranshaw, and the four lads stood round his horse in an eager knot, telling him of the day's exploits and making off-hand mention of their wounds.

"Why, Ned, has the day borne hardly on thee? Thou look'st out of heart," cried Rolf, as Shameless Wayne came slowly across the courtyard.

Wayne tried to shake off his forebodings. "Nay, 'tis not the day's work troubles me," he said. "We trounced them bonnily, Rolf, and these four rascals would have chased them to the Pit had I not held them in. Griff yonder will be a better swordsman than his teacher before the year is out."

"Thou'rt wounded deepish, by the look of thee. Ned, I'd give a twelvemonth of my life to have fought beside thee at the washing-pools."

Shameless Wayne laughed soberly. "'Twas worth as much.—There, Rolf! Thou'lt have thy chance, I fancy, by and by."

"Then there's to be another battle?" cried Griff eagerly.

"Likely, thou man of blood," said Shameless Wayne, with a would-be lightness that sounded strangely heavy to Rolf's ears.

"What troubles thee?" he asked. "'Tis naught to do with the Ratcliffes, thou say'st?"

"With the Ratcliffes? I'm not so sure, lad. Nell has not come home since dinner, nor Mistress Wayne.—Ah, there's the little bairn at last; haply she can tell us what mad scamper Nell is bent on."

Mistress Wayne was walking down the lane as if she could scarce trail one foot behind the other; but she glanced up as she came through the gate, and her weariness left her on the sudden. One startled cry she gave at sight of her step-son, and then she ran to him with outstretched hands.

"Well, what is it, bairn?" he asked.

"They said thou wast dying, Ned, and I never thought to doubt them. Tell me it is no dream; thou'rt living, dear—yes, yes, thy grasp feels warm and real.

Ah, God be thanked!"

"*They said.* Who troubled to tell lies to thee?" cried Wayne, sore perplexed.

"Three of the Ratcliffes who met me on the moor."

Wayne of Cranshaw looked at his cousin. "Trickery," he muttered.

"Ay, there's trickery somewhere.—Tell us more, bairn, about this ill-timed meeting."

Little by little they drew the whole tale from Mistress Wayne—how they had bidden her bring Nell to the boundary-stone, how Nell had gone, she following; how she had seen her last on the hill-top, and then had found an empty road.

"I swooned, Ned, then," she finished, "and lay so for a long while. And when I came out of it I had no strength to move at first, and I thought the journey down to Marsh would never end."

"I am riding to Wildwater, Ned. Who comes with me?" said Wayne of Cranshaw brusquely.

"All of us," broke in the four lads, with a gaiety ill-matching the occasion.

"Nay, youngsters, ye've done enough for the one day," said Shameless Wayne.—"Let's start forthwith, then, Rolf, and rattle their cursed house about their ears."

"What, two against them all?" cried the little woman, aghast. "Ned, 'twould be throwing thy life away—ride up to Hill House and to Cranshaw first, and get thy folk about thee."

"Mistress Wayne is right," said Rolf, after a pause. "We shall but throw our lives away if we go up alone—and what will chance then to Nell?"

Still Wayne would not yield; the speed of his last battle was in his veins still, and he could not brook delay. And while they stood there, halting between the two courses, a red-headed horseman came at a wary trot down Barguest Lane. The summer dusk was enough to show that he glanced guardedly from side to side and kept a light hold of the reins as if to turn at the first hint of danger. Seeing the gate fast closed, however, he drew rein at the far side of it and peered over into the courtyard. He glanced at the men's belts first, and saw that they were empty of pistols; then turned his horse in readiness for flight.

"God's life the fool is venturesome," muttered Wayne. "What should he want at Marsh?"

"I've a message for thee, Wayne of Marsh," cried the horseman, still fingering the reins uneasily and striving to cover his mistrust with a laugh. For he had liked this mission ill, and only the Lean Man's command had forced him to it.

"A message, have ye?" said Wayne. "Your news is known already. Ride back, you lean-ribbed hound, before we whip you on the road."

The horseman gathered confidence a little from the closed gate. "Soft, fool

Wayne! We hold your sister safe at Wildwater, and the Lean Man, of his courtesy, bade me ride down and ensure you a fair night's rest by telling you what we mean to do with her. She will lie soft to-night——"

The red-head, even while the taunt was on his lips, pulled sharply at the curb. But Wayne of Cranshaw was overquick for him. With a cry that rang up every hollow of the fields, Rolf set his horse at the gate, and landed at the rider's side, and dropped him from the saddle before he guessed that there was danger.

Rolf steadied his horse, then was silent for awhile as he wiped his blade with unhurried carefulness.

"Dost see the plot, Ned?" he asked grimly, with another glance at the fallen horseman.

"Nay, I see only that Nell is in peril all this while—and that the Ratcliffes had need to rid them of a fool, since they sent him here to meet so plain a death."

"He came, this same fool, to taunt thee into going to Wildwater, if I can read the matter—came to make sure that we should do just what thou wast so hot to do just now.—God, Ned! *She shall lie soft to-night*—how the foul words stick——"

"Ned, is there no end to it—no end to it?" broke in Mistress Wayne, clinging tight to his hand and keeping her eyes away from the body lying in the roadway just without.

"Get thee within-doors, bairn; 'tis no fit place for thee."

"Not unless thou'lt come, too. Ned, I'll not have thee ride to Wildwater—keep within shelter while thou canst——"

But her step-son shook off her hand. "Rolf," he said, coming to the gate and trying to read the other's face, "wilt come with me now to Wildwater?"

Wayne of Cranshaw straightened himself in the saddle and gathered the reins with a firmer grip. "Nay, for we'll make sure—we'll go neither by ones nor twos, but take our whole force with us. Hast had supper, Ned? No? Well, thou need'st it if thou'rt to fight a second time to-day; so let the lads go fetch our kin from Hill House. I'll ride to Cranshaw for my folk, and we'll all fare up together."

"Nay, we'll not wait—" began Ned.

But Rolf was already on his road to Cranshaw, and Shameless Wayne, knowing that any other plan was madness, curbed his hot mood as best he might. He would have ridden to Hill House himself, but the lads pleaded so hard to go, and he had such crying need for food to brace him for the coming struggle, that he agreed at last.

"Be off, then, lads," he said. "'Tis a short ride, with no danger by the way, if ye'll promise not to turn aside for any sort of frolic."

They scampered off to the stables to re-saddle their horses; and Wayne, as he watched them go, sighed for the boyish heedlessness which had been his not a twelvemonth ago. Griff's thoughts were all of danger, the thrill and rush

of battle; and his sister's capture, it was plain, was no more to him than a fresh fight, in which the Ratcliffes would again go down before them.

"Ay, if it meant no more!" mused Shameless Wayne, and turned as his step-mother came timidly to his side.

"Come in to supper, dear. Thou need'st it, as Wayne of Cranshaw said," she pleaded, threading her arm through his and coaxing him indoors.

The board was ready spread; but the brave show of pewter, the meats and pasties and piled heaps of haverbread, served only to make the wide, empty hall look drearier, and Wayne would not glance at the slender, high-backed chair which marked Nell's wonted seat at table.

Hunger was killed in him; but he forced himself to eat, since food meant strength to fight Nell's battle by and by. And while he ate, the little woman sat close beside him, watching his every movement, and wishful, so it seemed, to speak of something that lay near her heart.

"Ned," she whispered, finding courage at last, "it was I who sent Nell across the moor to-day; and what she said to me was true—I have brought nothing but disaster on your house since first I came to Marsh. The man who lies outside there, Ned—the man whom your cousin slew—I was feared just now, seeing him dead. But need I be? God knows I would fain lie where he lies now, for then—then, dear, I should bring no more trouble upon those I love. Naught but disaster I've brought——"

"That is not true, bairn," said Wayne gently. "Many a time thou hast brought rest to me when none else could—no, not Nell herself.—Ay, once thou gav'st me hope that there was no such crying shame in loving awry," he added, with sudden bitterness. "What of thy wisdom now, bairn? Shall I woo Mistress Janet while I help tear Wildwater stone from stone?"

"It was no fault of hers, dear. How if she sorrows for Nell as much as thou, or I, or any of us?"

But Wayne would not listen. "How the time crawls!" he muttered, as he pushed his plate away and rose impatiently. "Surely they are here by now. Hark! was not that the courtyard-gate? I left it unbarred against their coming. Didst hear it opened?"

"Ay, I heard it opened—and there's a footstep on the paving-stones."

"Bairn, help me to buckle my sword-belt on again. I know there's luck goes where thy hand has rested."

She helped him eagerly. "It is not all disaster that I bring, then? Thanks for that word, Ned; I needed it," she murmured, chafing her baby fingers against the stiff buckle.

She was still striving with it, and Ned was stooping to help her, when the main door opened, and Janet Ratcliffe stood slender on the threshold, not laugh-

ing, but with an odd merriment lurking in her eyes and about her resolute mouth.

"I have come to our dearest enemy. Make me your captive, Wayne of Marsh," she said.

He sprang back as if she had been less warmly flesh and blood; but Mistress Wayne smiled in her pleased child's fashion as she crept out of sight among the shadows at the far end of the hall.

"You have chosen your time well, Mistress, if a jest is in your mind," said Wayne.

"Nothing further, sir. Your sister is in dire peril; would less have brought me to one who has spurned my warnings oft aforetime?"

He waited, frowning, till she should tell him more.

"Men's wits move like the snail does, methinks," she cried. "Am I less dear at Wildwater than Nell at Marsh? Send up to the Lean Man, sir, and say what dread things you will do to me, and see if he will not exchange his prisoner for yours."

Wayne looked hard at her, doubtful still and bewildered by the heedless devilry of her plan. "You have risked much for the honour of my house," he said slowly.

"Nay, for the honour of a woman who had little deserved the infamy they planned for her."

"But 'tis out of reason! You run too great a hazard, Mistress.—See, our plans are laid, and already the Cranshaw and the Hill House Waynes are on the road hither. Go back while you have time, Mistress."

"I shall not go back, sir, for I know how hopeless are your plans. They have guarded Wildwater securely against attack; and even if you seemed like to force an entry they would make sure—how shall I tell thee, Ned?" she broke off, lapsing to the old familiar speech and turning her eyes shamefacedly from his.

"They would make sure of Nell's dishonour. That is thy meaning, Janet? God's life, that is a true word. Yet—when they learn that this capture was all thy doing, not mine, thou'lt have a rough welcome home to Wildwater?"

"There is always danger for me there," she said, her voice deepening; "but that should not vex thee, surely, Wayne of Marsh?"

Shameless Wayne glanced neither back nor forward now. It seemed as if some hidden chord, frayed by the months of self-denial, had snapped on the sudden; her fearless strength, her man's power to frame a swift stroke of daring and to carry it through, her woman's fierce, unheeding tenderness—all these he understood at last—understood, too, that his love for her, nurtured in rough soil and inclement weather, had come to a hardier growth than pride. Before, he had lacked her, felt the keen need of possession; but now he loved her, and watched the old barriers crumble into unmeaning dust.

"Janet," he said quietly, not moving nearer to her yet, "dost think I care naught what chances to thee?"

"'Twould seem so, Ned. Twice I have told thee of the bargain made between the Lean Man and my cousins——"

"Nay, only hinted at it. What was this bargain, Janet?"

Lower still her voice dropped. "That I should be given to the one who slew thee," she said.

She glanced once at him, and for the first time since leaving Wildwater she felt a touch of fear. For Shameless Wayne had given a cry—a cry such as she had never hearkened to, so deep it was, so brutish in its rage against those who had agreed to this foul bargain. He sprang to her side—she could feel his arms close masterful about her—and then, with some strange instinct of defence, she forced herself away.

"Not that, Ned," she cried. "Is it a fit hour for—for softness?—And see, thou'rt wounded, Ned—and I've had no time to tell thee——"

A dozen feints of speech she would have tried to keep him at arm's-length, but Wayne would none of them.

"There's one wound, lass, of thy own giving, that matters more than all the rest," he said.

"Hush! I'll not listen. There's work to be done—'twill not wait—it is no fit hour, I tell thee."

The last flush of gloaming stained the dark oak walls, the spears and trophies of the chase that hung on them; it lighted, too, the girl's straight figure and bent head, as she shrank against the window—shrank from Wayne, and from the knowledge that her will was broken once for all. Ay, she was conquered, she who had lived her own life heretofore; what if she could hide it from him? Was it too late to escape into the free wilderness where she was mistress of her thoughts and secrets? It had been easy once, when they had met, boy and girl, to pass light love-vows at the kirk-stone; but this was giving all to him, and her pride rebelled, ashamed of its own powerlessness.

But Wayne was not to be held in check. He wooed like a storm-wind, and like a reed she bent to him.

"It is a fit hour," he cried—"and what is to be done will wait, child, till thou hast told me—" He stopped, and lifted her face till she was forced to meet his glance.

"Told thee what, Ned?" she asked, not knowing whether her unwillingness were real or feigned.

"That thou'rt mine altogether—that thy thoughts are mine, and thy body, and thy pride—ay, that I've mastered thee."

Wayne kept her face tight prisoned. She could feel his touch gain fierce-

ness; his voice had a note in it not to be gainsaid.

"Ned, I will not say it—will not—" she faltered.

And then on the sudden she put both arms about his neck, and laid her face to his, and, "Thou art my master—my master, God be thanked," she whispered.

The good-nights of birds came sleepily from the dim garden; there was a stir of laggard bees among the flowers; and pride of summer reigned for its little spell with these storm-driven children of the moor. And frail Mistress Wayne, who had watched, mute and unheeded, from the shadows that seemed scarce more unsubstantial than herself, went out and left them to it.

So for a space; and then a new sound was born of this restless, haunted night. Far off from Barguest Lane there came a shouting of gruff voices, and the sparrows in the eaves awoke to chirp a fitful protest.

Janet turned in Ned's arms and glanced toward the door. "What is't, Ned?" she whispered.

"The Waynes are here," he cried—"and I'll take a lighter heart to Wildwater, Janet, for knowing——"

"But, Ned, thou didst promise not to go," she cried.

"Ay, but I've learned that from thee which makes me doubly set on going. Dost think I could let thee return now to the Lean Man's care?"

"Yes, yes! I tell thee, there's no danger but what I have faced before, and can meet again."

"We were over-happy just now, girl; fate grudges that. Thou shalt not go, I say."

"There! I knew 'twas folly to name thee *master*. Hark how thou usest the whip at the first chance! Is every wish of mine to be thwarted now, to prove thy sovereignty?"

"Nay, for it's sure. But when I hear thee ask to fight my battles——"

"Whose else should I fight, dear lad?" she broke in, with pretty wilfulness. "See, 'tis the first thing I've asked of thee, and I will not take denial. Ride to Wildwater, thou and thy friends, and ye place Nell in peril, as I told thee. Send word that I am here, and she will be brought safely down to Marsh. Ned, try the plan at least! And if it fails, I'll let thee——"

"But what of Nell meanwhile? Each moment lost——"

"I left her my own dagger, and she has given proof already that she can use it. But there's no fear for her, unless ye drive my folk to bay."

The noise without grew louder, and Wayne moved slowly to the door. How could he let Janet go? Yet how could he place Nell in greater jeopardy than need be? It was a hard knot to unravel, but the dogged self-denial of the past months stood him in good stead now.

"Thou shalt go," he said, and went out into the courtyard, wondering how

best to send a message up to Wildwater.

The Waynes had not come yet, however. The shouting he had heard was from the farm-hands, returning in gay spirits to the supper he had promised them. But their jollity had met with a sudden check. The moon was rising over Worm's Hill, and by its light the men were stealing awed glances at the Ratcliffe whom Wayne of Cranshaw had left lying by the gate.

"Nay, begow!" Hiram Hey was saying. "If this doan't beat all. First we mun sheep-wesh; then we mun fight; an' at after that we mun wesh an' wesh till our bodies is squeezed dry o' sweat. An' then, just as we think all's done, th' Maister mun needs go killing fair on th' Marsh door-stuns. We'll hev to whistle for yond supper, lads, ye mark my words."

"Not for long, Hiram," said Wayne lightly. He was anxious to keep Nell's capture secret from all these chattering folk as long as might be.

Hiram, no whit abashed to find the Master standing so unexpectedly at his elbow, thrust his hands still deeper into his pockets.

"Well, I'm hoping not," he said, in his slow way; "for I'm that droughty I scarce know how to bide. Wark's wark, Maister, I've hed as mich fighting as iver I can thoyle i' th' one day."

"Get to the kitchen, all of you, and tell the maids I sent you," cried the Maister, disregarding Hiram's snarls.

"An' th' ale, Maister? October, ye said, if I call to mind—there's no weaker-bodied ale could fill th' hoil I've getten i' my innards."

"Broach a fresh barrel, then," snapped Wayne, "and put thy mouth to the bung-hole if it pleases thee."

"I wonder," said Hiram shrewdly to himself as he slouched off at the head of his fellows. "Th' Maister hes a queerish look, I'm thinking—trouble i' th' forefront of his een, an' behind it a rare gladsomeness. There's a lass in 't, mebbe—his face hes niver caught that fly-by-sky brightness sin' he used to come fro' coorting Mistress Ratcliffe i' his owd wild days."

Shameless Wayne looked up the road to see if his kinsfolk were in sight; then at the retreating backs of the farm-men.

"Hiram! I want a word with thee," he called, following a sudden thought.

"I'll warrant. What did I say?" growled Hiram to himself, as he retraced his steps. "Lord, I wish th' lad's back hed niver stiffened, that I do; it's wark an' nowt but wark sin' he took hod."

"Canst keep a still tongue when 'tis needful?" said Wayne abruptly.

"As weel as most, Maister."

"The Mistress is taken by the Ratcliffes—taken while we were at the washing-pools."

Hiram did not answer for awhile. "Oh, ay? Then we mun get her back

again," he said at last, not showing a trace of his concern.

"And *I* have snatched the Lean Man's grand-daughter in return."

"Now I knaw!" murmured the other. "I said no less wod set that light i' his een.—Well, Maister, an' what are ye bahn to do wi' th' wench, now ye've getten her?"

"I'm going to send her safe to her folk when they bring back Mistress Nell; and I want thee, Hiram, to get word taken somehow up to Wildwater. Thou know'st where to find one of their farm-hands, maybe, or——"

"Ay, that I do; for we fell in wi' one as we war coming dahn th' loin a while back, an' a rare laugh we hed at him. We sent a word ourselns by him to Wildwater, to axe when they'd like next to wesh sheep alongside th' Wayne lads. Let's see, now—he war wending Marshcotes way, an' it's owt to nowt 'at he's i' th' Bull tavern this varry minute."

"I'll ride across, then, and see him; thank thee for the news, Hiram," said the Master briskly.

"Leave that to me, Maister. Kind to kind, an' th' gentry is poor hands at trafficking wi' sich as us. I'll say more to yond chap i' five minutes nor ye'd say i' a twelvemonth—an' he'll tak a straight tale, too, if I knaw owt. What's he to say, like?"

"That we hold Mistress Janet. That if my sister is not here by midnight, we'll pay coin for coin. That they can trust our honour better than we can trust theirs, and the moment Mistress Nell sets foot on the Marsh threshold, my prisoner shall go free likewise. Canst carry all that, Hiram?"

"I'll try—ay, I'll try."

"Then get thee gone, and make the message curt as if it were a sword-thrust."

Hiram had scarce taken the field-track to Marshcotes, when again the clatter of hoofs came down Barguest Lane—hoof-beats, and the ring of many voices. Wayne could hear his Cousin Rolf's voice loud above the rest, and he ran into hall for one last word with Janet before the coming of his folk denied him further speech of her.

He found her sitting by the window, her hands lying idle in her lap as she watched the promise of a moon scarce risen steal through the dimness of the summer's night.

"What art thinking, Janet?" he asked.

"Thinking? Why, that the doubts were all on thy side once—and now they seem all on mine. I, too, have kin to wrong, Ned, and when I think of meeting the Lean Man with guile——"

"He has cared well for thee," said Wayne bitterly. "Small wonder thou think'st kindly of him."

"Ah, but thou know'st naught of the kindly side of him. He has loved me as if—there, Ned! I would not have it otherwise, and I'll not vex thee with the aftermath of self-disdain there'll be."

They could hear the horsemen massing in the courtyard without. They glanced toward the door, then at each other, and Wayne drew the girl closer to him.

"Once more, Janet—wilt let us ride up to Wildwater, and carry it by storm?" he cried.

"Nay! Bring thy folk into hall here, and bide—bide, Ned, I tell thee; 'tis wit, not swords, to-night.—Go! They are knocking at the door. Tell me where the parlour lies, dear lad, and I'll wait there till Nell comes back to take my place."

"To take thy place?" echoed Wayne, and tried still to hold her, though the knocking from without grew more peremptory.

But she slipped from him, and crossed to the further door, and found Nanny Witherlee standing on the threshold. It was plain from the little old woman's face that she had watched the scene, and she made way for Janet with a half curtsey that had a world of mockery in it. The girl went by without a word; but her cheeks tingled with a shame she could not hide. If such as Nanny Witherlee could cry out on her love for Wayne, how would she fare with his own kinsfolk?

"So, Maister—'tis sweet an' hot, belike," said Nanny, meeting Wayne's eyes across the hall. "Ay, but 'tis a downhill road, for all that, and an unchancy."

Wayne answered nothing, but went to the great main door and flung it wide, letting in a stream of light from the moon new risen over Worm's Hill. A trampling crowd of horses, backed by wide-shouldered fellows, filled the courtyard. Griff's voice could be heard, shrill and clear, and Wayne of Cranshaw was stooping to batter on the oak again just as his cousin opened to him.

"We're ready, Ned. Why dost hold back, lad, and keep us shivering here?" cried Rolf.

"Because there's to be no attack just yet. Get down from saddle, friends, and drink a measure with me here in hall."

CHAPTER XXIII
HOW WAYNE KEPT FAITH

Nell Wayne, prisoned close in the little room at Wildwater which looked out

from its narrow, cobwebbed window upon the waste of Ling Crag Moor, watched the sun lower hour by hour—watched him change from white to yellow, from yellow to full sunset red—watched the heath grow gloaming-dim and lighten again at the bidding of the white-faced moon. But still her captors made no sign, and still she was racked with fear lest each moment should bring Ned on a forlorn hope of rescue. The very nearness of the moor, with its far-reaching air of freedom, seemed but an added mockery; yet every now and then she turned anew to the window, and rubbed it freer each time of dust and cobwebs, and looked out eagerly in search of the help that would not come. From time to time she wondered what had chanced to the girl who had made her such fair promises of deliverance; and then she told herself that Janet, after all, had been but mocking her.

"'Tis sharp," she murmured, fingering the dagger which Janet had left with her. "There'll be time, it may be, for two fair strokes—one in Red Ratcliffe's heart and another in my own. Love of the Virgin, do I care so much for life, when all's said? The days have not run so smooth of late that I covet more of them."

A bat, fluttering unclean out of the pregnant night, swept against the window-pane, startling the girl out of her musings. For a moment it hovered there, and the moonlight showed her its dark wings, its evil head and twinkling, star-bright eyes.

"'Tis a vampire," she whispered, crossing herself. "They say the pool breeds such. What if it should break through——"

She lost her fanciful terror and turned sharply to the door; for the Lean Man's voice mingled with Red Ratcliffe's in the passage without, and her brother's name was on their lips.

"I tell you, sir, Wayne loves the girl," said Red Ratcliffe testily; "he had liefer do himself a wanton hurt than Janet, and 'tis a fool's bargain to let Nell Wayne go in exchange for her."

"And I tell thee, puppy, that thou know'st little of Wayne nowadays. We've killed his courtesy, and there's naught he'll stick at—naught. I said he would find a way out—I said 'twas useless striving——"

"And useless it is like to be if we meet him always in this spirit."

"Fool! We have met him all ways—with light hearts and with heavy, with force and guile, with many men and few—Give me the key!" he broke off roughly. "This girl goes scatheless—and for her safer conduct I'll take her down myself to Marsh."

Nell caught her breath as she listened to the voices, raised high in dispute, which spoke to her of safety. Was she mazed with the long confinement, or were the voices real?

"Then you are willing, sir, to accept so curt and uncivil a message as Wayne

sent hither?" went on Red Ratcliffe, sullenly. "You are willing to give them cause for boasting—ay, and to put your own life in their hands by going to Marsh? The messenger we sent returns not—will Wayne do less to you?"

"The messenger is not slain that we know of; he may be drinking in some wayside tavern, for unless he were a very fool his horsemanship would carry him free of Wayne after he had shouted his message, as I bade him, from the lane."

"Well, he comes not back. And you, sir? Is your life of such little moment to us——"

"Thou'rt a babe," broke in the Lean Man. "Some things a Wayne will do for the feud's sake, and some he could not do. He has promised safe conduct, and if I go down with the lass, I shall return in safety. The Waynes—plague rot them!—keep faith, whatever else they do or leave undone."

At a loss still to comprehend the meaning of it, Nell was conscious of a flush of pride. Even their foes, it seemed, gave her folk credit for scrupulous observance of their word—ay, the Lean Man admitted it, steeped as he was in subtlety and lies. But how came this about? Had Janet, in trying to save her been captured by Shameless Wayne? It must be so. A quick thought came to her then, that Ned could not love the girl so madly, after all, if he were willing to make her a cat's-paw with which to outwit his adversaries.

She was still turning the thought over, well pleased with it, when the voices in the passage ceased disputing; the key grated in the lock, and the door moved slowly open.

"Come with me, Mistress Wayne; there's a horse ready saddled to take you down to Marsh," said the Lean Man.

"Sir, am I free? Or is this a fresh trick, to make my case seem harder for a sight of freedom?"

"'Tis no trick. Come, Mistress! Time slips by, and there's one awaiting me at Marsh who's worth fifty such as thou."

His gruffness pleased her, for it rang true; and so, without question or demur, she followed him down the passage and out into the courtyard. He lifted her to the saddle, mounted the big bay that always carried him, and together they rode out in silence across the moor. The moon glanced silver-black across the heather; the gullies were full of whispering winds, alive with the sob and fret of running water; and more than once the Lean Man shivered, as if the night's quiet eeriness weighed heavy on his fears.

"How comes all this?" asked Nell, as they drew near to Barguest Lane.

"Ask your folk that, Mistress. A message came through one of my hinds that Janet was held at Marsh; your safety was matched 'gainst hers; it is no goodwill of mine that has brought you hither.—Yonder is Marsh," he broke off, pointing down the hill. "Lord God, how I hate the fair, quiet look of it!"

"We are honoured by such hate, sir," said Nell.—"Have a care! The road is sadly over-full of stones," she added, as the bay horse stumbled badly.

The dead Ratcliffe had been taken indoors, and neither Nicholas nor his companion had leisure to note the signs of bloodshed that lay this side the closed gate of the courtyard.

"A Ratcliffe! A Ratcliffe!" yelled the Lean Man, with a thought that the old cry would bring them quickly to the gate.

And soon, indeed, there was a rush of feet across the courtyard, a rattle of swords snatched hastily from the scabbard, the hum of many voices.

"Peste! The whole swarm has settled in the Marsh hive," muttered Nicholas, glancing doubtfully at Nell. "Was I a fool, then, to trust to the Wayne honour?"

"No man has ever repented such folly, sir. If you raise the feud-cry to win peaceable entry, can you grumble that they come out armed to welcome you?"

He hesitated, wondering whether to take Nell's bridle and make a dash for safety. But the gates were flung wide open before he could turn, and Shameless Wayne stood bareheaded in the moonlight, a score of his folk behind him. Wayne stopped on seeing the Lean Man alone with Nell, and his sword, half-lifted, fell trailing to the ground.

"Do you come in peace?" he asked.

"I come in peace," answered the Lean Man bitterly. "Give me your captive, Wayne of Marsh, and take your sister."

"Was this your doing, Nicholas Ratcliffe?" went on the other. "Was it you who carried Mistress Nell to Wildwater?"

Nicholas found a sour pleasure in assuming a credit that was not rightly his. "'Twas my doing," he answered hardily. And the Waynes, seeing him stand fearless before the score of them, sent up a low murmur of applause.

"Then mark well the oath I swear. By the Brown Dog, I'll hunt you day and night, and night and day, till I force combat from you. Get ye gone, lean thief, lest I break faith and fall upon you now."

"And if Ned fails, then I'll take on the hunt," cried Rolf Wayne of Cranshaw, stepping forward.

The Lean Man cast a scared glance across the courtyard at mention of the Dog. He could see the wide doorway of the house, dark in the mellow moonlight, and he recalled the hour when he had ridden down to fix the badge of feud above the threshold and had unwittingly crossed Barguest as he drove home the nail. A deadly faintness seized him; but the hated folk were watching him, and he forced the weakness off.

"Hunt when ye will, and where ye will; I shall be ready," he answered, and led Nell's horse with great show of ceremony into the yard, and put the bridle into her brother's hand.—"Now, sir, make good your own half of the bargain."

A shadow crossed Wayne's face, as he turned and moved silently toward the house. Nell would have entered with him, but he checked her roughly.

"I have a word for Mistress Janet's ear," he said.

On a sudden the meaning of her unlooked-for escape grew clear to her. Janet had gone of her own free-will to Marsh, and it needed but a glance at Ned's face to tell her what had followed the girl's coming. The joy of freedom, her gladness in returning to the home she had scarce looked to see again, died out; she was supplanted, and by one whom it was dishonour for a Wayne to touch.

Janet was not in hall, but Wayne found her, after a hurried search, standing at the garden-door, plucking the roses that grew above her head and tearing them to pieces one by one.

"Thou—must go, Janet," he said, touching her on the arm.

"Yes," she answered dully.

"The Lean man is at the gate; he has brought Nell with him."

"Yes, Ned."

"God, lass, how *dare* I let thee out of sight!" he cried, his studied coldness breaking down.

Something of the devil that is in every woman prompted the girl to tempt him. He had mastered her, and even yet she grudged it him; there would be a sort of reprisal in trying his strength to the utmost.

"Keep me, Ned," she whispered. "Keep me, dear, and think no shame to break faith with a Ratcliffe.—Hark, Ned, how soft the garden-breezes are—and the roses; are they not heavy on the air? Let's wander down among them, and talk of the days to come."

Her heart failed her as she saw his agony. He did not glance at her, nor speak, but stood looking straight before him as he put honour in the balance and marvelled that it weighed so light.

"Is that thy wish, girl?" he asked hoarsely.

"Nay, 'tis neither thy wish nor mine," she cried with a troubled laugh. "Forgive me, Ned; I—I tempted thee for wantonness. There! Bid me farewell, dear; 'tis idle to make the parting harder."

As they gained the hall he stopped, and held his arms wide for her. "Once again, Janet—*thy master*," he muttered.

"*My master*—to the end, dear lad. There shall none take thy place, however ill it fares with me; and when need comes, I'll send for thee.—But, Ned, thou'lt promise to do naught rash? Move slowly—and wait till I can come to thee with the best chance of safety."

She slipped from his grasp and ran quickly out, brushing against Nell Wayne as she crossed to the gate.

"Good even to you, Mistress. Shall I offer thanks for the night's work you've

done?" said Nell.

"I should accept none," answered the other, in the same hard voice.

The Waynes opened their ranks to let her pass through, and one offered her a hand to mount by; and just as they were starting, Shameless Wayne came to the Lean Man's crupper, a brimming flagon in his hands.

"You came in peace, and I'll not have it said you lacked any of the usages of peace," said Wayne, holding the flagon up.

"My faith, you traffic in niceties!" muttered the Lean Man. "'Tis the first wine-cup any of your house has offered me these score years past."

"And 'twill be the last, belike, for another score; so drink deep, sir, while you have the chance."

Nicholas turned the flagon upside down with sudden spleen, and watched the stones darken as the wine splashed on to them. "When I drink out of your cup, Wayne of Marsh," he said, "I shall lack wine more than ever I lacked it yet."

They set off, he and Janet, and once only the girl turned for a last look at Wayne.

He watched them ride over the crest of Barguest Lane, and his lips moved to the instinctive cry, "Come back, come back!" And when his kinsfolk presently began to talk of riding home, since there would be no further need of them for that night at least, he did not urge them stay and pledge Nell's safe return. He wished to be alone with the madness that had fallen on him, wished to take counsel how to rive Janet once for all from Wildwater, and marry her, and hold her in despite of his folk and her own.

He stood idly in the courtyard while they got to horse, and Nell, seeing him apart from the rest, came to his side.

"So thou hast let all else go—all save Janet?" she said.

"Ay, I have let all else go," he answered; "and if thou canst say aught against it, Nell, after she has plucked thee out of certain ruin—why, thou'rt less than my thoughts of thee."

"'Tis carrying thankfulness a far way, Ned.—And what of our kin? Will they smile on the match, think ye?"

"They may smile or frown, as best pleases them."

She was about to break into some hot speech, but he checked her. "Sleep on it, Nell; 'tis wiser. There are things said in heat sometimes that can never be forgot.—Well, Rolf, hast come to say thy farewells to Nell? Od's life, I'll make no third at any such parting of maid and man."

"Stay, lad, for I've come to tell thy sister that I'll have no more delays," said Wayne of Cranshaw, "and thou'lt add thy voice to mine, I fancy. Am I to wait and wait for thee, Nell, until every Ratcliffe of them all comes down to carry thee off?"

He had expected the old tale of duties that must keep her yet awhile at Marsh. But she offered no excuse, as she came and put her hand in his.

"There's no place for me now at Marsh," she said; "I'll go with thee, Rolf, at thy own good time."

"No place for thee at Marsh?" he echoed.

"None. Ned is to marry Mistress Ratcliffe by and by, and——"

"Is this true, Ned?" said Wayne of Cranshaw sharply.

"It is true that I've plighted troth with Mistress Ratcliffe; it is false that there is no place for Nell at Marsh," said Shameless Wayne, and turned on his heel.

But that one glance of Rolf's had given him a foretaste of what lay ahead. Nell was implacable; his kin would be implacable; her own folk would do their best to thwart the match.

"They say a Wayne of Marsh loves alway to stand alone," he muttered, as he returned to hall. "Well, I care not who's against me now."

He glanced at the moonlight streaming through the latticed windows, and thought of how Janet had lain there in his arms while they snatched a moment's grace from feud. Then, restless still, he crossed to the garden-door, from over which the roses were dropping white petals in the lap of a slow-stirring breeze. It was here that Janet had stood with the moon-softness in her eyes and had tempted him to sell his honour. He pictured her going up to the moor—up and further up—nearer to the red folk of Wildwater; and the strength which had saved his pride seemed wildest folly now.

Through the garden he went, now harking back to what had passed, now fancying new perils that might be lying in wait for Janet. The kitchen door was open as he drew near; through it he could see the rushlights flickering on the faces of the shepherds as they ate with greedy relish or lifted brimming pewters to their frothy lips.

At another time there would have been song and jest; shepherd Jose would have been to the fore with tales of yesteryear; the women would have laughed more loudly and kept sharper tongues for over-pressing swains. But to-night their merriment was soured by what had gone before it; and, though the Mistress had come back safe to Marsh, they could not forget how nearly she had been dishonoured.

At another time, too, Wayne would have gone amongst them to drink his due measure of October and set the glees a-going; but his heart was not in it, and he held aloof. Leaning idly against the garden-wall, he watched them at their meat, and let their talk drift past him while he asked himself, again and again, what end they would find, Janet and he, to their wind-wild wooing.

Now and then he pushed the matter from him and turned, for lack of better company, to listen to the gossip of his farm-folk. He heard each detail of the

morning's fight described, repeated, and described again, till he wearied of it and half turned to go indoors again. Yet still he dallied.

"Wheer's th' Maister, like? I could right weel like to set een on him," said Jose the shepherd, breaking a long silence.

"Ay, a feast's no feast at all without th' Maister comes to drink his share," cried one of the younger men.—"What, Hiram, mun I pass thee th' jug again? For one that's no drinker tha frames as weel as iver I see'd a man."

Hiram filled his pewter and all but emptied it before he spoke.

"He'll noan show hisseln this side o' th' door to-neet, willun't th' Maister," he said slowly. "He's getten summat softer to think on nor sich poor folk as ye an' me."

Wayne flushed under the moonlight and muttered a low oath; but he would not move away, for the whim took him to hear the worst these yokels had to say.

"Oh, ay?" put in one of the wenches. "What dost mean, Hiram? Tha'rt allus so darksome i' thy speech."

"What should I mean? We knaw by this time, I reckon, what hes chanced. D'ye think snod Mistress Ratcliffe came an' swopped herseln just out o' love for Mistress Nell? Not she; 'twas for love o' Maister hisseln, if I know owt."

"Tha'rt bitter, Hiram," cried Martha. "An' thee to hev fought for him nobbut a few hours gone by!"

Hiram spoke in a tone which Martha had heard more than once before—a grave, troubled voice that had a certain dignity of its own. "I'm bitter, lass, an' tha says right," he went on. "He shaped like a man, did th' Maister, up at th' weshing-pools, an' I warmed to him. But what then? Nanny Witherlee telled me, just afore she gat her back to Marshcotes, that she'd crossed to th' hall a while sin', an' fund th' pair on 'em—nay, it fair roughens me to think on 't."

"Well, an' let 'em do as they've a mind to, poor folk, says I," put in Martha. "She's no Ratcliffe, isn't Mistress Janet, not at th' heart of her."

"She carries th' name, choose what, an' that's enough to mak most on us hod our nostrils tight. Well, he war born shameless, an' shameless he's like to dee."

"I doan't believe it!" cried shepherd Jose, striking his pewter on the table. "That's an owd tale o' thine an' Nanny's, Hiram, but I'm ower fond o' th' Maister myseln to think he'd do owt so shameless-crazy as wed a Ratcliffe. Ay, tha should bite thy tongue off for whispering sich a thing."

Again Wayne lifted his head and looked straight in through the doorway, himself unseen across the moonlit strip of yard which stood between the garden and the kitchen. Hiram's wryness was no more to him than the thistle-burrs which waited for him during any of his usual walks about the fields; but the shepherd's plain kindliness toward him, the shepherd's quiet assurance that there

could be naught 'twixt Janet and himself, touched him to the quick. In vain he mocked himself for hearkening to what such folk as these could find to say of him; he stayed stone-still, his arms upon the rounded garden-wall, and heard them wear the matter threadbare with their talk. And there was not one—save Martha—who augured less than disaster from the match.

"Good hap, my very dogs will turn next and look askance at me," muttered Wayne.

But still he did not move, for he had plumbed the bottom depth of weariness to-night, and it was easier to stay hearkening to distasteful gossip than to turn to the ill company of his own thoughts. Work had succeeded fight and loss of blood; and close after these had followed his anxiety on Nell's behalf, his sudden yielding to the passion that had dogged his path all through the uphill months; then had come the struggle with his honour, the victory that was worse than defeat, and, last of all, the chill glances of those who were his nearest kin. Aged as he had grown of late, his youth was slow to die outright, and the quick ebb and flow of passion had left him weak to bend to the touch of his surroundings; and the chatter of these farm-folk, who condemned him in such frank, straightforward terms, seemed the last straw added to his burden.

They left talking of him by and by, as the ale began to warm them and frolic pressed for outlet. Little by little the Master lost his own cares in watching their rustic comedy played out; from time to time he smiled; and once, when Martha encouraged shepherd Jose too patently at the expense of Hiram, he laughed outright. Heretofore Wayne had been friendly with his servants in his own proud way; but to-night it was borne in upon him how like their betters, after all, were these rough-speeched folk. The same jealousies were theirs, the same under-fret of passion, veiled by banter or rude coquetry; and they, too, reared a score of stumbling-blocks, feigned or real, about the path of wedlock.

The night was wearing late meanwhile, and the farm-folk got to their feet at length and shuffled out by twos and threes—some to return to outlying farms or shepherds' huts far up the moor, others to less distant farms. Martha came to the gate to give them a God-speed, with Hiram Hey beside her, and it was long before the last shout of farewell died echoing up the moor.

Perhaps it was the ale he had drunk; perhaps it was Martha's flouting of him throughout the evening in favour of shepherd Jose; but for one cause or the other Hiram showed less than his wonted hesitation as he drew nearer to her in the moonlit yard. Their faces were turned sideways to the Master, and neither noted his quiet figure leaning against the wall.

"Martha, 'tis a drear house, this, I'm thinking," said Hiram.

"Ay, but it's all the roof I've getten."

"'Tis as full o' dead men's ghosts as it can hod, an' nobbut to-neet there war

one more ligged quiet beside th' gate, as if th' owd place fare went hungering for bloodshed an' sudden death."

"Well, Hiram?"

He pointed down the fields to where, in a snug-sheltered hollow, the gable-end of his own farm climbed up into the moon-mists.

"Yond's a likelier spot, an' quieter, for a wench," he said.

"Sakes, Hiram! Tha'rt noan so backard-like i' coming forrard, when all's said."

Hiram was quiet for a space, and the Master could see a laughable air of doubt steal into his face as he ruffled the frill of hair that framed his smooth-shaved chin.

"An' then," put in Martha softly, "there's even a quieter spot nor yond that mud varry weel be mine for th' axing."

Hiram Hey ceased doubting. "What, dost mean that owd fooil Jose wod like to tak thee to th' wind-riven barn he calls a house?"

"Summat o' th' sort, Hiram—ay, he'd be fain, wod shepherd Jose. An' if th' house be i' a wildish spot—well, 'tis farther out o' harm's way."

"That sattles it. Wilt wed me afore th' corn ripens, lass, an' come to yond snug bigging dahn i' th' hollow?"

"I reckon I will, lad. Why didst not axe me plain afore?"

Then Hiram kissed her, under the left ear; and the Master, forgetting that they did not count upon a listener, laughed outright. Martha turned, with cheeks aflame like the peonies newly-opened in the garden place behind her; and Hiram lost his calmness for the moment.

"Thou dost well, Hiram," said the Master drily. "Love while thou canst, for thou'd'st better make the most of what few years are left thee."

Hiram took the stroke staunchly, knowing it was the return-thrust for many a home-blow he had given Wayne.

"An' so I bed, Maister," he answered, not shifting a muscle of his face—"by wedding one that counts no red folk i' her family."

The Lean Man and Janet had been riding slowly home while Wayne sat listening to the shepherds' gossip; and as they went up Barguest Lane Nicholas had bent toward his grand-daughter with more than his wonted tenderness.

"Janet, girl, 'tis good to know thou'rt safe again," he said. "What would Wildwater be without thee?"

She did not answer, but turned her head away a little; and so they rode on in silence until they reached the open moor. The old man shivered then, and glanced behind with the quick gesture she had learned to know.

"I had forgotten it," he muttered.—"Didst hear aught in the wind, Janet?"

"I heard a moor-bird calling, sir, and the rustle of dry heather-stalks."

"Naught else? No sound, say, of a hound baying down the lane?"

"There's a farm-dog barking at the moon; that is all."

He straightened in the saddle. "To be sure! When a fool is old, he's past praying for, eh, girl? Yet—is yond brown shadow going to fare to Wildwater with us?"

"So long as there's a moon to cast it, sir."

Another silence, while a mile of heath slipped underneath their hoofs.

"They bade me keep Nell Wayne, and let thee take thy chance," said Nicholas presently. "Think of it, Janet! To wake in the morning and have no slip of sunshine like thyself to come down to."

"Grandfather, it—it hurts me to hear you praise me so."

"Why, what ails thee? Cannot I praise the one thing on God's earth that I love, without hurting thee?"

Yes, she must tell him all. All the way up it had been borne in on her that she would let the deceit go no further. She owed no less than frankness to him, and he should have it, though afterward he struck her to the ground. They were alone with the sky and the wind; the hour, the dim-lying spaces of the moor, encouraged confidence. She had chosen her road—but at least she would start fair on it, honest as the man who had her love in keeping. Quietly, without shrinking or appeal, she told him all—how she used to meet Shameless Wayne by stealth, how she had given him warning, how, lastly, she had to-night ridden down to Marsh and surrendered herself into Wayne's hands.

The Lean Man was very quiet when she had finished, and not till they were skirting the dull ooze of Wildwater pool did he break silence. "I had rather have shovelled the earth above thy dead body, girl," he said, checking his horse at the brink.

She watched his face working fantastically as he stared into the water. Mechanically she traced the scars of fire, the lump of discoloured flesh that marked where his right ear had been shorn level with the cheek; and she told herself that Wayne of Marsh was answerable for both. His anger, gathering slowly, was terrible to meet.

"What is't to thee that my heart is broken?" he went on. "I could set finger and thumb to thy throat, girl, but would that heal my own hurts? The care I've given thee, the constant thought—womanish thought—the way I shamed myself by opening to thee all my secret fears." He laughed drily. "Barguest? Methinks thou hast killed him, lass, with a worse sickness. Hark ye! This shall not be. I've sap in my veins yet, and I'll cheat thee of thy lover before I die."

"Sir, is this the love you have for me? What has Wayne ever done that you should not cry 'peace' and let our marriage staunch the feud?"

"What has he done? He has fooled me, beaten me in fight, robbed me of

more than life. Is that naught, or must I fawn on him and thank him for good service rendered in wedding Janet Ratcliffe? Thou hast heard of Sad Man's Luck, girl? It comes to those who have lost all, and it nerves them to strange deeds."

He moved forward, Janet following; and as they waited for the gates to be thrown open, he gave the low, hard laugh which never yet had boded good to man or woman.

"The luck has veered at last," he said quietly. "Wayne will begin to fear for himself, now that he has thee to unman him. His pluck will get tied to thy apron, lass, and he will quaver a little in his sword-strokes—what, did I say thou hadst broken my heart? I lied. Thou hast put new heart in me."

CHAPTER XXIV

HOW THE LEAN MAN FOUGHT WITH SHAMELESS WAYNE

Sexton Witherlee moved unsubstantial among his graves, stopping here to pull up a tuft of weed and there to rub a sprig of lavender or rosemary between his shrivelled fingers. He looked old beyond belief, and the afternoon sun, hot in a sweltering sky, traced crow's feet of sadness across his cheeks, and in among the sunken hollows underneath his eyes.

"What's amiss wi' me?" he murmured. "Here hev I been gay as a throstle all through this God-sent-weather—going about my business wi' a quiet sort o' pleasure i' seeing this little garden-place look so green, like, an' trim-fashioned—so green an' trim—an' now, all i' a minute, I'm sick-like an' sorry. Ay, I could cry like any bairn, an' niver a reason for 't, save it be this thunner-weather that's coming up fro' ower Dead Lad's Rigg.—Well, I mun hev a bit of a smoke, an' see what that 'ull do for me."

He lit his pipe, then fetched a broom from the tool-house and began to sweep the path of the leaves which had fallen, curled and brown, during the long spell of drought. But he desisted soon and sat him down on the nearest grave-stone.

"Nay, I've sweated ower long at helping th' living to bury their dead out o' mind, till now there's no lovesome sight, nor sound, nor smell of sweetbriar, say—but what it leads my crazy thoughts to th' one bourne—th' one bourne—an' that's a blackish hole, measuring six feet by length an' three by breadth. Lord God, I'm stalled, fair stalled! Hevn't I toiled enough at life? An' th' Lord God

knaws how fain I am to be ligging flesh to earth myseln."

He sat silent for a long while, and his favourite robin came and perched on his shoulder, asking him to dig up its evening meal; but Witherlee paid no heed to the bird.

"I reckon it's a sight o' little Mistress Wayne I'm sickening for," he went on presently. "When she war fairy-kist, she niver let day pass without heving her bit of a crack wi' th' Sexton; but now she's fund her wits again—why, she hesn't mich need o' th' likes o' me, seemingly. Eh, but I wod like to hear her butter-soft voice again! There's peace in 't, somehow, to my thinking."

"Oh, tha'rt theer, art 'a?" put in Nanny's voice at his elbow.

"Begow, tha made me jump! What is't, Nanny?"

"Nay, I nobbut came for a two-three sprigs o' rosemary. It grows rare an' sweet i' th' kirkyard here, I call to mind, an' Mistress Nell, 'at I've nursed fro' a babby, is bahn to be wed to-morn to Wayne o' Cranshaw—sakes, how th' days run by!—an' she'll be wanting rosemary to wear ower her heart i' sign o' maidenhood. Well, I'd like to see one who's more a maid, or bonnier, i' all th' parish—an' I'll thank thee, Witherlee, to stir thy legs a bit for fear they'll stiffen for want o' use. What mak o' use is a gooidman, if he willun't stir hisseln to pluck a two-three herbs?"

The Sexton rose with his old habit of obedience, and went to the corner where the rosemary grew, and brought her both hands full.

"'Tis queer, I've often thowt," he said; "we all knaw what mak o' soil grows under foot here—yet out on 't come th' sweetest herbs i' Marshcotes. An' that's a true pictur o' life, as I've fund it through three-score year an' ten."

"What's tha knaw about life?" snapped Nanny. "Death is more i' thy way, an' tha'll be a wise man, Witherlee, sooin as tha comes to join th' ghosties.—Not but what there's sense for once i' what tha says. Sweetness grows i' muck, an' ye can't get beyond that; an' if onybody thinks to say it isn't so, let 'em look at Shameless Wayne, an' set him beside what he war afore th' feud broke out."

"Ay, he's better for th' fighting," put in Witherlee, with something of his wonted zest.

"Fighting? I reckon nowt on 't. All moil, an' mess, an' litter—gaping wounds that drip on to th' floors just when ye've bee's-waxed 'em—women crying their een out, an' lossing so mich time, ower them 'at's goan—'tis mucky soil, I tell thee, Luke. An' yet, begow, it hes bred summat into Shameless Wayne that he niver hed afore."

"They say him an' th' Lean Man is hunting one t' other fro' morn to neet, but allus seem to tak different roads. What's come to th' Lean Man, Nanny? He war daunted a while back, an' now he's keen as ony lad again!"

"Tha doesn't knaw Barguest's ways as I knaw 'em, lad. Th' Dog, when

he's haunted a man nigh out of his senses, hods off for a bit, for sport, like, an' maks him 'at he's marked think th' sickness is all owered wi'—an' then, when he's thinking o' summat else entirely, up th' Brown Beast leaps, snarling fit to mak his blood run cold.—Ay, it's true th' Lean Man is hunting this day, for I met him riding into Marshcotes not a half-hour sin', wi' his een on both sides o' th' road at once, an' his hand set tight on his sword-heft."

"Did he say owt to thee, Nanny? He's noan just friendly to thee, an'——"

"He said nowt to me," broke in Nanny, "but I said a deal to him. I asked if Barguest's hide war as rough, an' his teeth as sharp, as when he fought th' owd feud for th' Waynes. An' he seemed fit to strike me first of all; an' then he sickened; an' at after that he rode forrard, saying nowt nawther one way nor t' other. Well, he minds how his father died, an' his father's father; an' he'll be crazy again by fall o' neet, if I knaw owt. It's th' Dog-days, an' all, an' th' month when dogs run mad is Barguest's holiday, I've noticed."

"Tha mud weel say it's th' Dog-days," said Witherlee, pointing to the moor above. "We shall hev sich a storm as nawther thee nor me hev seen th' like on, Nanny, sin' we war wedded."

From the moor-edge an angry haze was beating up against the wind, and the sun, a round ball that seemed dropping from the steel-blue of the sky above it, was cruel with the earth. Everywhere peatland and tillage-soil—the very graveyard earth—opened parched mouths and cried for drink. But still the sun shone, and only the slow-moving haze told of the rain to come.

"Ay, it 'ull be a staunch un," said Nanny. "Tha'd best come indoors, Witherlee, afore it breaks—for when it does break, buckets willun't hod th' drops, an' tha'll be drenched i' crossing th' kirkyard.—Why, there's Mistress Wayne. If iver I see'd a body choose unlikely times, it's yond little bit o' sugar an' spice."

Witherlee glanced eagerly down the graveyard path. "Now, that's strange," he murmured. "I war nobbut saying afore tha comed, Nanny, that I hedn't bed speech of her this mony a day—an' here she comes. Eh, but she's a sight for sore een, is th' bonnie bairn!"

Nanny's half-religious awe of Mistress Wayne was disappearing now that she had come to her right mind again. "Nay," she grumbled, "I reckon nowt so mich on her. She war bahn to do a deal for th' Maister, so I thowt; but what's comed on 't? Nowt, save 'at she carried a fond tale to Mistress Nell a while back, an' all but brought her into ruin.—Now, lad, art minded to get out o' th' wet that's coming?"

"Nay, I'll step indoors by an' by, for I'm fain of a crack wi' th' little Mistress at all times."

Nanny glanced shrewdly at her husband; something in his voice—a weariness that was at once helpless and resigned—brought an unwonted pity for him to

the front. Impatient she was with him at most times; but under all her fretfulness there was a sure remembrance of the days that had been.

"Luke," she said, laying a hand on his sleeve, "tha'rt nobbut poorly, I fear me. Stop for a word wi' Mistress Wayne, if needs must, but don't stand cracking till tha'rt wet to th' bone."

"Nay, I'll noan stay long, lass—noan stay long," he murmured.

Nanny moved down toward her cottage, and the Sexton, sighing contentedly, gave a good-day to Mistress Wayne while yet she was half up the path.

"Ye've not been nigh me lately, Mistress," he murmured, making room for her on the grave-stone which had grown to be their wonted seat.

"I have been restless, Sexton, and my walks have taken me far a-field. But to-day I'm tired, and full of fancies, and I thought 'twould be pleasant to sit beside thee here and talk."

"To be sure, to be sure. Ye're looking poorly-like, an' all; it 'ull be this heavy weather, for I feel that low i' sperrits myseln——"

"'Tis more than the weather," she interrupted, turning her grave child's eyes on his. "The mists begin to come down again, Sexton, as they did when my lover was killed yonder on the vault-stone. Sometimes I can see men and women as thou see'st them; and then a mist steals over them, and they are only shadows, and the ghosts creep out of the moor, moving real among the unreal men and women."

"That's nobbut th' second-sight," said Witherlee gently. "I've getten it, an' ye've getten it, Mistress, an' we've to pay our price for 't. But it's nowt to fret yourseln about."

"Not when I hear Barguest—Barguest creeping pad-footed down the lane? Sexton, I've heard him every night of late—just at dusk he comes, and if I pay no heed he presses like a cold wind against my skirts. Does it mean trouble for Wayne of Marsh, think'st thou?"

"Hev ye set een on th' Dog?" asked Witherlee sharply.

"Nay, I have but heard him, and felt his touch."

"Then there's danger near Wayne o' Marsh, but nowt no more nor what he'll come through. 'Tis when th' Brown Dog shows hisseln 'at he doubts his power to save th' Maister—he like as he seeks human help then, an' it's time for all as wish well to Marsh to be up an' doing.—Begow, but we'd better be seeking shelter, Mistress."

She followed his glance, and shivered at that look of earth and heaven which they called in Marshcotes the scowl of God. To the west, whence the wind was gathering strength, the sky was a dull, blue-green; from the east a tight-drawn curtain of cloud moved nearer to the sun, which shone with dimmed light and heat unbearable. Light drifts of cloud trailed like brown smoke between

earth and sky. The whole wide land was still, save for quick breaths of suffocation which stirred the summer dust and whipped up the leaves untimely fallen.

"I am frightened, Sexton. Let us go," murmured Mistress Wayne.

"All day I've watched it creeping up," said Witherlee, regarding with rapt eyes the eastern sky. "There's storms as come quick, an' go as lightly—but this un hes nursed its rage a whole long day, an' when it bursts, 'twill be like Heaven tumbling into Hell-pit fire. Ay, I've seen one sich storm, an' it bred bloodshed. See ye, Mistress, th' first rain-drops fall! An' th' streams that are dry this minute 'ull race bank-top high afore an hour is spent. An' them as seeks for tokens need seek no farther."

Beyond the kirkyard hedge a horseman passed, fast riding at the trot.

"What did I tell ye!" cried the Sexton. "Th' storm an' th' Lean Man ride together, an' th' streams that war empty shall be filled."

"He must be hastening from the rain. See, Sexton, he rides as if pursued."

Witherlee remembered Nanny's meeting with Nicholas. "It may be th' rain he's hastening fro'—or it may be summat 'at ye've heard whining, Mistress, when dusk is settling over Barguest Lane," he said.

For a while he stood there, nursing his visions and heedless of the gathering drops; then, seeing how Mistress Wayne was shivering, he came back to workaday matters.

"Come ye wi' me, Mistress," he cried. "Th' drops is falling like crown-pieces.—Good sakes, there's another horseman skifting out of th' wet, or intul 't; who mud it be, like?"

Shameless Wayne, riding up the field-side that ran from the Bull tavern to the moor, looked over and saw his step-mother standing beside the Sexton in the kirkyard.

"The clouds blow up against the wind. There'll be thunder, Witherlee," said Wayne, and would have passed on.

"Well, there's one gooid thing 'ull come on 't, ony way," answered the Sexton. "Th' Lean Man o' Wildwater is like to get wet to th' bone afore he wins across th' moor. An' ye can niver tell but what a wetting may tak a man off—I've knawn mony a——"

Wayne swung his horse round sharply. "The Lean Man! Hast seen him, then?" he cried.

"Not ten minutes agone. He crossed up aboon there at a gooidish trot."

"What, by the moor-track?"

"Nay, his face war set for th' Ling Crag road; he war hurrying, an' wanted better foot-hold for his horse, I reckon, nor th' peat 'ud gi'e him."

Mistress Wayne was at the wall-side now. "Ned, thou'lt not ride after him?" she pleaded. "'Tis Nell's wedding-day to-morrow—she'll think it a drear omen."

But Wayne was already gathering the reins more firmly into his hand. "Nell will want a wedding-gift, little bairn—and, by the Red Heart, I'll bring her one of the choicest.—Sexton, shall I overtake him before he gets within hail of Wildwater?"

"Wi' that mare's belly betwixt your legs, Maister, ye'd catch him six times ower."

Wayne stopped for no more, but touched the mare once with his heels and swung up the field and round the bend of the Ling Crag road. The Sexton looked after him and nodded soberly; and it was strange to see his old eyes brighten, as if at the grave-edge he were turning back to see this one last fight.

"There's more nor one storm brewing; I said as mich," he muttered, and hobbled to the wicket to see the flying trail of dust and rain that marked the rider's headlong course.

The wind rose on the sudden. The rain-drops fell by twos now where lately they had fallen singly. A far rumble of thunder crept dull through the leaden sky-wrack.

"Gallop, thou laggard, gallop!" muttered Wayne to his mare, as Ling Crag village swirled by and the rough track to Wildwater stretched clear ahead.

The village folk came out of their houses as he passed, but they were slow of foot, and all that they reaped for their trouble was the fast-dying beat of horse-hoofs down the wind.

"Wayne, 'tis Shameless Wayne. Who but him carries Judgment-fire i' his hoss's heels?" they said.

Past Blackshaw Hall and through the Conie Crag ravine swept Wayne the Shameless; past the three wells of Robin Hood and Little John and Will Scarlett, and up into the naked moor. The land lay flat to the sky up here, and through the thickening rain-sheets Wayne could see his enemy's lean figure rising and falling to the trot of his lean bay horse. Soon the track crept timorous round the bog, and under foot the water splashed and creamed; but still Wayne plied his mare with tongue and spur. The thunder-throb grew nearer, and muttered all along the murky sky-edge and down the dun moor-fastnesses. Earth and sky, bog and peat and cloud-wrack, were wakeful and at war; the starveling moor-birds fled on down-drooping wings, and from the under-deeps the Brown Folk chattered restlessly.

Wayne's heart was lifted to the storm's pitch as he rode. Ahead was the man who had made a shameful bargain touching Janet, the man who had perilled his sister's honour and warred with malice unceasing against his house. There was but a quarter-mile between them—and now but ten-score yards—yet Wildwater lay over yonder slope.

"Dost crawl, I tell thee, just when I need thy speed. Gallop, thou fool!" he

muttered, then rose in the stirrups and raised a cry that might have roused the slumber of dead men in Marshcotes kirkyard.

The Lean Man checked when he heard the cry, and looked behind; and Wayne lessened by the half the distance between horse and mare.

"Who calls?" yelled Nicholas Ratcliffe.

"Wayne of Marsh. Who else? There are old debts between us, Ratcliffe the Lean."

"On both sides, Wayne the Shameless," cried Nicholas, and turned the big bay's head, and rode straight at his man with heavy sword uplifted.

Between them, while they neared each other, a zag of lightning flashed to earth, and Wayne's cry as he galloped to the shock was drowned in a wild roar of thunder. He took the Lean Man's stroke, and jerked his own sword back; but the mare shied with terror, and his return blow aimed wide, grazing the Lean Man's saddle-pommel as it fell.

"Thou aimest ill, lad. I thought a sword sat better in thy hand," laughed Nicholas, as Wayne brought his mare round once more to the attack.

The Lean Man had found his youth again, and in his heart, too, the storm-wind was singing shrill. Fear of the Dog slipped from him. He warmed to the old joy of hardened muscles and of crafty hand.

"'Tis thou and I now, thou bantling," he cried, plucking the curb as his beast reared its fore-feet to the sweltering sky. "Does the Dog fear the storm, that it comes not up with thee to fight?"

A second flash shot through the rain-sheets, and another roar snapped up the Lean Man's words. Try as their riders would the horses refused obedience to the bit, for each flash and each new burst of thunder whetted the keen edge of their terror. Three times Wayne brought round the mare and strove to force her to the shock; and three times she swerved out of sword's-reach.

"God's life, shall we never get to blows!" roared the Lean Man. "Down, lad, and we'll fight it out on foot."

There was no gully of the moor now but hid a rolling thunder-growl. The streams raced foaming between their dripping banks, and all across the sky ran sinuous lines of blue-red fire, the harbingers of lightning-blasts to come or the aftermath of flashes spent.

Yet neither Wayne nor the Lean Man knew if it were foul weather or fair, save that the rain dimmed their sight a little; for each saw his dearest enemy across the narrow, sword-swept space between them that stood for the whole world. And now one gained the advantage, and now the other, while still they shifted back and forth, treading into great foot-holes the soaked bed of peat on which they stood.

Above, the greater battle—the shock of hurrying clouds close-ranked

against each other, the shriek and whistle of the wind, the down-descending sweat of combat. Below, the lesser battle, with smitten steel for lightning, and hard-won breaths for wind and thunder, and rage as fierce, and monstrous, and unheeding, as any that smote the moor-face raw from yellow east to smouldering, ruddy west.

"I have thee, Wayne!" yelled Nicholas, as he cut down the other's guard and aimed at his left side.

"Nay," answered Wayne, and leaped aside so swiftly that the stroke scarce drew blood.

A keener flash ripped up the belly of the sky as they fell to again, a nearer harshness crackled in the thunder's throat; but naught served to quench the fury of the onset. Like men from the Sky-God's loins they fought, and their faces glowed and dripped.

But Wayne was forcing the battle now, and step by step the Lean Man was falling back for weariness. Harder and harder he pressed on him; there was a moment's pauseless whirr of cut and parry, and it was done. Shameless Wayne, seeing his chance, sprang up on tip-toe and lifted his blade high for the last bone-splittering stroke that is dear to a swordsman's heart as life itself.

And then a strange thing chanced, and a terrible. As his sword was halfway on the upward sweep, Wayne saw, through a blinding lightning-flash, the Lean Man's blade shrink crumpling into a twisted rope of steel and the Lean Man's arm fall like a stone to his side. He checked himself, with a strain that nigh wrenched the muscles of his back in sunder, and lowered his weapon, and cursed like one gone mad because the sky had opened to rob him of his blow.

"Your tale is told, Lean Ratcliffe," he said. "Had the storm so few marks for sport that it must needs rob me in the nick of vengeance?"

The Lean Man tried to move his stricken arm, and his face showed ghostly-grey through the rain sheets while he mowed and mumbled at his impotence. But the old light shone quenchless in his weasel eyes, as he slid his left hand toward his belt, and clutched his dagger, and stumbled forward with the point aimed true for the other's breast. But Wayne had never taken his eyes from him and he warded the stroke in time.

"'Tis an old device of your folk, and one I know," cried the younger man. "Your game is played out, lean thief of Wildwater—God pity me that I lack your own strength to kill a stricken man."

"Curse thee, curse thee!" groaned Nicholas. "Is that not an old Wayne device likewise? Ay, and a mean device, when we would liefer take steel at your hands than quarter. Kill me, thou fool, least it be said I begged quarter of a Wayne."

Wayne eyed him gloomily. "Cease prating! I cannot kill you, and I cannot

leave you to die among these howling moor-sprites. Can you sit in the saddle if I lift you to 't?—Peste, though, the horses have taken to their heals. Can you frame to walk, then?"

The Lean Man made a few steps forward, then stopped and seemed to stumble. "Give me thy hand, Wayne, as far as Wildwater gates. I am weak, and cannot walk alone," he mumbled. "There shall none of my folk do thee hurt—I swear it by the Mass."

Wayne saw through the trick, for he knew from those few forward steps that, though his enemy's sword-arm was sapless as a rotten twig, his legs were firm to carry him. A touch of grim approval crossed his hate. This Lean Man had a grandeur of his own; maimed, defeated, worn with the fiercest battle he had ever fought in his long life of combat, he could yet keep heart to the last and frame a quick stroke of guile when all weapons else had failed him.

"Featly attempted!" cried Wayne of Marsh. "How your folk would swarm about me when you got me to the gates! And in what strange fashion they would keep me safe from hurt. Nay, Lean Man, I know the way the hair curls on the Ratcliffe breed of hound."

The old man was silent, weaving a hundred useless subtleties. And then an exceeding bitter cry escaped him. "God curse thee, youngster! The Dog fights for thee—my very children fight for thee—and now the sky opens to snatch thee out of hurt."

"Nay," answered Wayne, gravely, "for the blow was mine, and you know it."

And so they parted. And the storm howled ravening over the tortured waste.

CHAPTER XXV
AND HOW HE DRANK WITH HIM

It was the morrow of Wayne's fight with Ratcliffe of Wildwater, and he rode with his sister to her wedding. The past day's storm was over, but the clouds hung grey and lowering, spent with the battle, yet waiting to rally by and by for a fresh outburst. The day was scowling on the bride, folk said, and Nell herself would fain have seen one gleam at least of fair-omened sunlight.

"Well, lass, I have brought thee a wedding-gift of the choicest," said Wayne,

as they neared Marshcotes village.

"And what is that, Ned?" Her voice was cold, for she would not forget how Janet Ratcliffe had supplanted her, had driven her into wedlock before she wished for it.

"What is it? Why, the knowledge that the Lean Man has fought his last. I would not tell before, seeing thee so busy with thy bridal-wear—but yestereven we met on Ling Crag Moor, he and I, and fought it out."

The light came back to her eyes. "Didst kill him?" she asked eagerly.

"Nay, for the storm robbed me. I had him, Nell, and just was striking when the lightning snatched my blow."

"'Tis well, Ned. I had liefer thou hadst given the blow—but he is dead, and I'll take that thought to warm me through my bridal."

Wayne eyed her wonderingly, for he had looked for greater softness at such a time. "He is not dead, lass; his sword arm was crumpled—but for the rest, he could make shift to get him home."

"Thou—didst—let him go?" Nell had come to a sudden halt, and her voice was low and passionate.

"God's life, what else could any man have done? Wast bred a Wayne, Nell, or did some Ratcliffe foster-father teach thee to trample on a stricken man?"

"Thou should'st have killed him," she answered, and went slowly forward.

Again Wayne glanced at her. "There's rosemary on thy breast, lass, and thy shape is like a maid's," he said, after a deep silence,—"but, Christ, I sorrow for thy goodman, if thou com'st to thy very bridal with such thoughts."

"Wilt never understand?" she cried impatiently. "Wilt never learn that I wedded the feud, long months ago, when father staggered to the gate and died with his head upon my knees? Sometimes, Ned, it seems I care for naught—naught, I tell thee—save to see the Ratcliffes stricken one by one. And thou could'st have slain their leader, the worst of all of them, and didst not!"

"Nor would do, if I had my chance again," he answered, meeting her eye to eye.

"Ah, God, that I had been born a man-child of the Waynes! That was like thee, Ned, just like thee. Reckless, stubborn, hot for battle—and then, all in a moment, the devil apes helplessness and touches thee to woman's pity. Father was the same, and died for it; he would not kill the last remnant of the Ratcliffes when the chance offered."

"If thou hadst made a comrade of the sword, and learned what it teaches a man's heart," said Wayne quietly, "thou would'st know why father left killing—ay, and why I let the Lean Man go in safety."

She was silent until they had turned the bend of Marchcotes street and saw the kirk-gates standing open for them, with the knot of village folk clustered

round about the tavern. And then she glanced at him—once, with the passion frozen in her eyes.

"Had Mistress Janet naught to do with that?" she asked. "Or was it a thought of her that weakened thy heart at the eleventh hour?"

Wayne jerked his bridle and started at the trot. "Thou lov'st me, lass," was all he said. "Well, thou hast a queer way of showing it.—See, our folk wait for thee just within the gates; and there is Rolf, with as soft a bridegroom's look as ever I saw. For shame's sake, Nell, return him something of the love he's giving thee."

"Love!" she murmured, as they dismounted at the gates. "Well-away, I've naught to do with it, methinks; 'twas hate that cradled me—and if God gives me bairns, I'll rear them to take on the feud where thou hast failed."

It seemed the folk were right when they named the day unchancy; for Nell's hand was cold in her lover's as he led her up the graveyard path, and her mind, disdaining all that waited for her in the present, was wholly set upon that late-winter afternoon when she had watched her father breathe his last. Nor could she shake the memory off when she stood within the kirk and listened to the droning Parson's voice. *Till death do us part*—what meaning had the words? Death walked over noisily abroad in Marshcotes parish to render the vow a hard one either to make or keep; and man and wife need look for such parting every day so long as there were Ratcliffes left to foul the moor.

It was done at last. Rolf and the pale, still girl whom now men named his wife moved down the rush-strewn aisle. Their kinsfolk, with pistols in their belts and swords rattling at their thighs, followed them into the wind-swept, sullen place of graves. And the village folk ceased every now and then from strewing rue and rosemary before the bride, and whispered each to other that twice in the year this kirkyard had seen the Waynes come armed—once to the old Master's burial, and now to his daughter's bridal. Would this end as that had done, they asked? And then they glanced affrightedly toward the moor-wicket, as if they looked for another shout of "Ratcliffe" and another rush of red-heads down the path.

But naught chanced to break the grey quiet that hung over graves and dripping trees. The bridal party got to horse. The landlord of the tavern, according to old usage, brought the loving-cup and lifted it to the bride's lips. And then, still with the same foreboding stillness of the crowd about them, they wound down Marshcotes street.

Shameless Wayne rode with them until they came to the parting of the ways this side of Cranshaw; and then he stopped and took Nell's hand in farewell; and after that he gave Rolf a grip that had friendship in it, and a spice of pity too.

"She is in thy care now, Rolf," he said. "Od's life, Marsh will seem cold

without its mistress."

"'Twill not lack one for long; I trust the new mistress will love Marsh as I have done," said Nell, and Wayne, as he turned about and set off home, knew once for all that no wit of his could ever throw down the barrier that had reared itself between them.

But he had scant time for counting troubles during the weeks that followed. The grass was ready for the scythe in every meadow, and he was busy day-long with the work of getting it cut and ready for the hay-mows. The weather—rainy, with only now and then a day or two of sun between—doubled the labour of hay-winning; for no sooner was it cocked and all but ready for the leading, than the rain came down once more, and again the smoking heaps had to be spread abroad over the sodden fields. The work was ceaseless, and Wayne of Marsh took so tired a head to pillow every night that sleep fell on him before he could hark back to the tangled issues of the feud.

Yet every now and then he found time to stop amid his labours and to tell himself that, spite of all Nell had to say, he was glad to have kept his hand from the Lean Man that day upon the moor. It had been easy to fight with Nicholas Ratcliffe in hot blood; but he had conquered him, and that was enough; and Janet would have given him less than thanks if he had killed the only one among her folk who claimed her love.

Another matter he learned, too, and one that irked him sorely. Heretofore he had gone about the fields with no fear of danger, but rather with a welcome for it; but ever since the night when Janet had come down to Marsh and given herself to him, he had grown tender of his skin—had halted before going out, and had wondered if sundown would find him still unharmed. Some day, perchance, he would confess as much to Janet if she came to need proof of his passion for her; but the knowledge of it was very bitter to him now, and, even as he crushed it down, he mocked himself for feeling it.

The days wore on until at last the hay was all won in, and the farm-folk paused for breath before the corn should be ready for harvesting; and all the while Wayne's friendship with his step-mother grew deeper and more intimate. Often, when his brothers were out with hawks or dogs, she was his only companion at the supper-board; and afterward she would sit beside him while he drank his wine, talking and watching the fire which burned on the great hearth-place the year through. Mistress Wayne showed even frailer than of yore; she clung more closely to Ned, with more of the dumb pleading in her eyes; and his pity deepened as he saw that she was slowly drifting back to witlessness.

Three weeks had passed since the Lean Man had fought with Shameless Wayne, and it was whispered up and down the moorside that Nicholas Ratcliffe was near his end. None knew how the rumour had arisen, but some traced it

to gossip of the Wildwater farm-men; and Earnshaw, who had caught a chance sight of Nicholas on the morning after the storm, vowed that he had never seen a man shrivel so in the space of one short day. Nanny Witherlee had the news from Bet the slattern, and she passed it on in turn to Hiram Hey, who carried it to the Master on the very morning that saw the last of the hay safely housed.

Wayne sat up late after supper that night, turning the news over in his mind and wondering if it were true. Dusk was stealing downward from the moor, but the storm-red of sunset lingered yet, and the ghostliness which crept about Marsh o' nights had more unrest in it than usual, as if the darkness that it craved were falling over slowly. The Master had the old house to himself: Mistress Wayne was in her chamber; the maids were gone to Rushbearing Feast; the four lads, despite the broken weather, had followed the chase all day and were not yet returned.

"So the Lean Man is dying," mused Wayne, his eyes on the slumbering peats. "Ay, there's likelihood in Hiram's gossip. 'Tis a marvel he has lived so long, after the storm that palsied him.—Well, God knows I'd liefer the lightning had done the work than I."

The silence of the house crept softly over him, as he sat on and on, thinking now of Janet, now of his sister, and again of the feud that still lay smouldering until one side or the other should stir it into life again.

A sudden weariness of it came to him. Must they fight everlastingly, till either Waynes or Ratcliffes had been swept from off the moorside? The Lean Man's death would free Janet of the only tie that bound her to Wildwater; would it bring her folk likewise nearer to the thought of friendliness?

"God grant it may," muttered Wayne.

And then he glanced across the hall, toward where his father had lain upon the bier awaiting burial—where he himself had stood and sworn above the body that he would never rest from killing. The tumult of the past months rolled back; he saw again the quiet face of the dead; he felt anew the bitter hate that had informed his vow. Was he to draw back now, because the one sweeping fight had given his stomach food enough? Nay, for his oath held him, now as then; and, now as then, he must be ready at all hours to carry on the old traditions.

While he sat there, his head between his hands, with the peats dropping noiseless into light heaps of ash, the door opened and Mistress Wayne crept into hall. Her hair was loosened; her bare feet peeped from under her night-gear; and a man, to look at her, would have named her the bonniest child that ever stood far off from womanhood. She stood for awhile regarding the quiet figure by the hearth, then came to him and rested both hands lightly on his shoulders.

"Why, bairn, I thought thou wast asleep," said Wayne, starting from his reverie.

"I could not sleep, Ned. Each time I closed my eyes the dreams flocked

round me."

He took her hands in his and drew her gently down. "Dreams? Come tell them to me, little one," he said.

She crept still closer to him, shivering as with cold. "Ned, I saw thy father as he lay in hall here, long ago—saw his still look, and the candle-shadows slanted by the wind across his face."

Her glance, as Wayne's had done, sought the place where the bier had rested; and he wondered why his thoughts and hers should run on the same theme to-night.

"Let the dream rest there, bairn," he said.

She did not heed him, but went on, with wrapt, still face. "And then the dream shifted, Ned, and it was the Lean Man lay there—the Lean Man, with one ear shorn level with the cheek and the dreadful scars upon his face. Ned, 'twas fearsome! For Nicholas Ratcliffe sat him up and scowled at me as he does when he meets me on the moor—as he did when first I went to Wildwater and was turned forth of doors by him. And his hands crept out toward me, Ned, till they closed about my throat; and then I woke; and I could not bear it, Ned, so I came down to thee."

"Never heed such dreams," he whispered soothingly. "Thou'rt over-weary, that is all."

"It may be so—yet they were so real, Ned! So real." Again she glanced across the hall. "Thrice I saw thy father lying there—and once, Ned, thou stood'st beside him, so I thought, and pleaded with him. Thou had'st kept well thy oath, thou said'st; was't not enough?"

Wayne's hand tightened on her own. It was not the first time that she had touched, as with a magic wand, the hidden burden of his thoughts; yet never had she aimed so surely to the mark as now.

"And what said he—what said the dead man on the bier?" he queried eagerly.

"What said he? He opened his eyes, Ned, and looked thee through and through. 'Tis not enough, save all be slain,' he answered, in a voice that was faint as the echo of a bell. 'I weary of it, father,' thou said'st. 'Yet wilt thou keep the vow, though thou think'st 'tis done with,' said the dead man, and closed his eyes. And then—Ned, there was a whimper and a crying at the door, and thy father stirred in sleep, and lifted himself, and cried *Wayne and the Dog*, so clear that it was ringing in my ears when I awoke."

Wayne answered nothing for a space. For not his father only, but his father's fathers, lifted their shrouds and gazed at him—gazed mercilessly and told him that the feud was not his, to be staunched or fought at pleasure, that it was a heritage which he must bear as best he could, passing it on when his turn came

to die.

No buried legend of his house, no musty tale of wrongs suffered and repaid but came back to mind. And Mistress Wayne sat still as destiny beside his knee, and kept her eyes on his. The wind moaned comfortless through the long, empty passages; the garden-shrubs tapped their wet fingers on the window-panes; and the House of Marsh seemed to mutter and to tremble in its sleep.

Wayne roused himself at last, and looked down at the frail, troubled face. "Dreams need not vex us, bairn, when all is said. Fifty such will come in the space of one night, and each carry a contrary tale."

"And then we heed them not; but mine to-night are played all upon the one string, Ned. What should it mean?"

"It means that thou hast lived through some drear months, little one, and the memory of them takes thee at unawares in sleep.—Come, now, fill up my wine-cup for me, and light the candles, for 'tis gloomy here in hall—and then I'll tell thee tales until thou'rt ready for thy bed again."

She was quick at all times to shift her mood to his; and soon her face smoothed itself, her hands ceased moving restlessly, as she lay back against his knee and listened to his voice. Only the softer tales he told her, of the Wayne men and the Wayne women, their loves and the fashion of their wooing. And in the telling he, too, began to lose the discomfort which her dreams had roused.

"Tell me, Ned," she said, looking up on the sudden; "had any of thy folk so strange a wooing as thine?"

"Ay, three generations back. But that tale has a drear ending, bairn, and I'll not tell it thee."

"Often and often I dream of thee and Mistress Janet; sometimes she stands at the far side of Wildwater Pool and bids thee cross to her—and thou goest waist-deep, Ned, to reach her—and then the sun sets red behind the hill and the waters turn to blood."

"Of a truth, little one, thou'rt minded to have me sad to-night," he muttered.

"Nay, not sad!" she pleaded. "There's much that is dark to me, Ned, but one thing I never doubt—that Janet will come safe to thee. Let the waters redden as they will, thou'lt cross to her one day."

"Over her kinsfolk's bodies? Ay, it may be so," said Wayne bitterly.

They both fell silent then, and by and by Wayne looked down and saw that her eyes were closed and her breath came soft and measured. He let her lie so for a while, then took her gently in his arms.

"Poor bairn!" he said. "She's sadly overwrought; I'll take her to her room again before she wakes."

He came down again presently to hall, and threw fresh peats on the fire, and settled himself beside the hearth; for Mistress Wayne had given him fresh

food for thought, and sleep was far from him. This little woman, half witless and altogether weak, had echoed Nell's words of the morning—that, weary of it or no, he must take on the feud. He recalled Nell's look, the quiet and settled hatred that had seemed so ill in keeping with her bridal-morn; and he understood, with the clearness that comes to a man at lonely night-time, how deep the memory of her father's death had gone. *He* had been revelling when the blow was struck on that stormy winter's afternoon, and it had been to him no more than a disastrous tale re-told; but she had seen the blow, had looked into Wayne's dying face, had watched the life ebb out to nothingness. Ay, there was scant wonder that she could not loose her hold upon the quarrel.

And then his mind revolted from such thoughts, and a clear picture came to him of Janet—Janet, as she had stood yonder in the window-niche and named him master. Dead Wayne of Marsh had his claims, and he had looked well to them; but had the living no claims likewise? He had pledged his word to Janet, no less than to his father; and if a chance offered, he would cry peace with the Ratcliffes and be glad. A deep, pitying tenderness for the girl swept over him; he would be good to her—God knew he would be good to her.

He was roused by a sharp call from without, a call that was thrice repeated before he got to his feet and opened the main door.

"Gate, ye Marsh folk, gate!" came a thin, high voice from the far side of the courtyard.

Wayne looked across the moonlit yard and saw Nicholas Ratcliffe, whom he thought to be dying, seated astride his big bay horse and lifting his hand to beat afresh upon the gate. Too startled to feel anger, if anger had been possible after the plight in which he had left his foe at their last meeting, Wayne crossed the yard.

"Your errand?" he asked.

"To drink the wine I spilled on my last visit here," said the Lean Man.

His voice, his bearing, were softened strangely; and Wayne, seeing what weakness underlay his would-be gaiety, felt a touch of something that was almost pity.

"Spilled wine is hard to pick up, sir," he answered; "but if you come to ask for a fresh measure—why, there's none at Marsh will be so churlish as to grudge it you."

He was turning to fetch the cup when the Lean Man called him back. "I could scarce keep my seat for faintness—I'm weaker than I was, as you will guess perchance—and I am fain to rest my limbs. There's a matter to be talked of, too—would it irk you, lad, to let the Marsh roof shelter me a while?"

Still wondering, Wayne drew the bolts of the gate, then glanced to see if Nicholas held dagger or pistol in his hand. But he was unarmed, nor did he

look like one who could use any sort of weapon. As in a dream the younger man helped his guest from the saddle, and noted that he had much ado to stand upright soon as his feet were on the ground.

"Times change," said Nicholas, smiling faintly. "Not long since I forswore your wine—and here I'm craving your arm to help me indoors that I may drink the same."

Wayne was gentler than his wont after his long brooding by the hearth, and again the other's weakness touched his pity. This guest of his, who leaned so heavy on his arm, was an old man, and he, who had brought the bitterness of defeat on him, was young. This guest of his, too, had been kind to Janet in his own rough way.

"Lie on the settle, sir," he said, busying himself after the Lean Man's comfort soon as they had got indoors.

"Well, I've hated this house of Marsh through life—but, sooth, I find its welcome pleasant now the ice is broken.—The wine, lad! Bring me the wine!—I thank you. Shall I give you a toast that will please us both?"

"If you can find such, sir."

"To Janet Ratcliffe, who rules at Marsh and Wildwater," said Nicholas, and drained the cup.

Shameless Wayne leaned against the wall and passed a hand across his eyes. It was more like some fantastic dream-scene, this, than aught else. Had Nicholas, then, learned all that had passed between Janet and himself? Nay, that could not be, since he took it with such friendliness. The riddle was beyond him, and he looked up at last—to find the Lean Man smiling frankly at him.

"There, lad! It puzzles thee, and I'll make no mystery of it. Janet grew shamed of lying to me, and made a straight confession."

"After—after we fought together, sir?"

The other halted a moment; then, "After we fought together," he echoed.—"See, Wayne of Marsh, I'm humbled—by you. I have been scarred by fire and lightning—through you. I despised you when first the feud broke out, thinking you a worthless lad, scarce meet to cross blades with me. Yet you have prevailed; you have made shame my portion——"

"Hold, sir! What is past, is past, and I will not hearken."

"I have cursed you, lad, till, by my life, I think there are no curses left in me. Weakness has stepped in everywhere, and even my hate is lost."

There was no shiftiness about the Lean Man now. His eye met Wayne's with shame in it, but with no trace of guile. And the younger man despised himself that at such a time a doubt should take him unawares.

"Yet 'tis not long since you carried my sister off by deep-laid treachery—ay, and boasted of it when you brought her in exchange for Janet," he said slowly.

"My body was whole then, and my heart hot; and for devilry I lied to you. 'Twas not I, but Red Ratcliffe, who hatched the stratagem.—Lad, lad, if you could read me through, you'd see I'm over broken to lie, or scheme, or fight again." His eyes dimmed, and he bent his scarred face on his breast awhile.

Wayne felt his doubts slip by. Like a dream it was still, but a truer dream than Mistress Wayne's. Only an hour ago she had talked of disaster and bloodshed; and here was the Lean Man, come to give her prophecies the lie. And Nicholas could give him Janet, and peaceful days wherein she and he might watch the old sores heal.

The Lean Man roused himself presently, and tried to smile. "I lack it, Wayne, that hate of mine, when all's said; but 'tis gone, lad—gone altogether."

"As mine is, too," said Wayne in a low voice.

"Is that a true word?" cried the other. "Is't courtesy only bids you say it, or——"

"As I live, I have lost my hate for you. Ay, I could welcome peace if it were offered."

"That is the Wayne spirit, lad—the damned Wayne pity when theirs is the upper hand. Have you no fear of what chanced to your folk aforetime through letting us breed instead of killing us?"

Wayne warmed to the downright sturdiness of the man. "I must leave that to shape itself," he answered.—"But, Janet, sir? What of her?"

"She came with her tale, boy, when I was at the lowest ebb of spirits, thinking on my dead arm and the fights it might have played a part in. She told me her love for you—she pleaded that the long strife should end, that she and you should bind the two houses close in friendship."

"And you consented? You——"

"I, like a fool, consented—and she, like a woman, holds me to the folly. There, lad! A life's enmity is a dear thing to surrender—but Janet has witched it from me. I'm tired, and old, and very near my grave, and peace it shall be henceforth if you're of that mind too."

Shameless Wayne held out his hand, and the Lean Man gripped it with his left; and they looked deep into each other's eyes.

"I have a fancy, lad," said Nicholas presently, "an old man's fancy, and a worthless. You see me here now, and think the end will not be yet; but I know better. Death may come to-day, to-morrow—and, when it comes, I should like full peace to be made above my body. My folk are ready as myself; 'tis only my zeal has kept them to the feud so long. Wilt promise me this much—that thou'lt bring thy kin to my lyke-wake and make peace at the bier-side. Oaths taken at such a time bind men more straitly, I've noticed."

"But, sir, there's no need to talk of death as yet!" cried Wayne, eager to

soothe the old man's trouble.

The other did not heed him. "I've not done much good in my lifetime," he went on, as if talking to himself. "Life's pity, I'm growing womanish, to sorrow over back-reckonings—yet still—'twould please me to bring this one good deed to pass. Wilt promise, lad, to grant my whim?"

"I promise gladly, sir—and trust that the need to keep it lies far off."

"Good lad! Fill up for me again, and then help me back to saddle. There's none but you would have brought me so far from home to-day."

Their hands met again when Nicholas had mounted and was ready to start. A grim humour was twitching at the corners of his mouth.

"What is it, sir?" asked Wayne.

"Nay, I was but thinking we parted in a different fashion when last we met. Fare thee well, lad, and I'll take some sort of love-sick message from thee to one at Wildwater."

Shameless Wayne went back to his seat by the hearth, and leaned his head on his hands, and wondered if all had been indeed a dream. And then his heart rose up in thankfulness, that at last the rough ways were to be made smooth.

"It was a true word I spoke," muttered the Lean Man, as he rode at a foot-pace up the hill. "The strength is dying fast in me—this peace-errand of mine is the last big effort I shall ever make." Again the smile flickered and died at the corners of his mouth.

"The last effort—save one," he added when he gained the top of Barguest Lane.

CHAPTER XXVI

MISTRESS WAYNE FARES UP TO WILDWATER

A week had passed since the Lean Man came down to drink with Shameless Wayne, a week of bitter winds that brought rain and hail from the dark northern edge of moor. July, which should have been at middle splendour, had been flung back to March, for the thunderstorm, fiercer than any that had swept over Marshcotes in the memory of man, had quenched the sun, it seemed, and had harried the warm winds and lighter airs to hopeless flight. The heather, that had been budding fast, bent drearily to the peat and kept its flowers half-sheathed. The corn draggled limp and wet across the upland furrows.

Shameless Wayne, as he sat at meat this morning with his step-mother, turned his eyes from the window and the dripping garden-trees that stood without. Never had his chance of happiness shown clearer than it had done since the Lean Man came to drink the peace-cup with him; yet the weather chilled him with a sense of doom. Do as he would, he could not shake off the influence of moaning wind and black, cloud-cumbered skies.

"I'm a child, to sway so to a capful of cold wind—eh, little bairn?" he said.

The past week had set its mark on Mistress Wayne; her eyes were ringed with sleeplessness, and wore perpetually that haunted look which had been in them when she came from her bed to rid her of perplexing dreams.

"The children are wise sometimes, Ned," she murmured. "They sadden for storm and clap hands when the sun shines—and that is wisdom. Does the sky know naught of what is to come?"

"Nay, for it lifted when I was heaviest, and now that the tangles show like to be unravelled—see, the sky scowls on me."

"But it knows—and when disaster steals abroad it veils its face for sorrow.—Look, Ned, look! There's hail against the window-panes. Dost recall that night when thy—thy father—lay dead in hall here, and they killed Dick Ratcliffe on the vault-stone? 'Twas the edge of winter then, and now 'tis full summer; yet the hail falls, now as then, and the trees sough with the same heartbreak in their voices."

"'Tis just such another day," he muttered, crossing to the window and watching the hail-stones gather on the sill.—"What, then, bairn! Are we to cry because fortune is fairer than the weather? Have I not told thee there's to be peace at last? And Janet Ratcliffe, whom thou wast so eager for me to wed, will be mine soon as——"

"Thou hast told me all that, Ned," she interrupted gravely, "and yet—forgive me—I am sick at heart. Barguest was scratching at my door last night; I cannot rid me of him nowadays. What should the poor beast want with me?"

Wayne turned sharply and looked into his step-mother's face. If the sky's frown had chilled him, how could a word of Barguest fail to move him—Barguest, whose intimate, friendly dealings with his house had grown to be as much a part of Marsh as its walls, its trim-kept garden and lichened mistal-roofs.

"And not the Dog only, Ned," she went on, quietly, "but I saw thee stand on the brink of Wildwater Pool again—thee and Janet—and she cried to thee across the crimson waters like one whose soul is in dire torment."

"God keep us, bairn!" he cried. "Why didst not tell me this before? Did Janet speak in thy dream? Did she say aught of the Lean Man or her folk?"

"Naught; she did but wring her hands, and bid them hasten.—Ned, Ned, where art going?"

"Going? Why, to Wildwater. Red Ratcliffe has taken advantage of the old

man's weakness.—God, bairn! Shall I be in time to save the lass?"

"'Twas no more than a dream, Ned," she stammered, trying to block his way. "I never thought 'twould drive thee up to Wildwater."

"How could it do less?" he answered, putting her from him and buckling on his sword-belt. "I laughed at dreams a while since—but only when they promise peace need we have doubt of them."

She followed him to the door, still piteous with entreaty. "Ned, have a care! The Lean Man is on our side now, but he is only one, and they are many at the grim house on the moor—rough men and cruel, like those who met me once and told me thou wast dying.—Well, then, if thou must go, let me come with thee!"

"Thou, bairn?" he cried. "What should such as thou do up at Wildwater? There, I'll come safe home, never fear; and keep thou close within doors, meanwhile, for thou'rt over-frail to meet these blustering winds."

She stood there at the door until he had saddled his horse and brought it round from stable; and again she sought to keep him from his errand. But he paid no heed to her, and soon she could hear his hoof-beats dying up the lane.

"God guide him safe," she whispered, and held her breath as the wind rose suddenly and set the hall-door creaking on its hinges.

All morning she wandered up and down the passages, afraid of the dreams that had racked her through the night, doubtful if she had done well to give Ned warning, in hourly dread lest some ill news of him should come from Wildwater. All morning the wind sobbed and wailed, as if there would never again be gladness over the cloud-hidden land. And under the wind's note Mistress Wayne could hear the patter-patter of soft feet, ceaseless and unrestful, till for very dread she wrenched the hall door open once again and went into the courtyard. But the footsteps followed her, and once she sprang aside as if some rough farm-dog had brushed her skirts in passing.

Wild the storm was in this sheltered hollow, but on the open moor it was resistless. The wind's voice in the chimney-stacks, piteous at Marsh, was a scream, a shriek, a trumpet call, up at the naked house of Wildwater, and the walls, square to the harshest of the tempest, shook from roof to the rock that bottomed them, as if they grudged shelter to the sick man whom they harboured. For Nicholas Ratcliffe had taken to his bed on the day that followed his ride to Marsh, and he knew that he would never rise from it again.

He had made them move the bed to the window, from which his eyes could range to the far hill-spaces of the heath; and he lay there this morning, listening to the storm and counting the hours that he had yet to live. As the wind raved out of the north, he could see it plough its green-black furrows across the dripping murk that hugged the ling from sky-line to sky-line; and the sight seemed good to him.

"It fits, it fits!" he murmured. "Lord God, how sweet the storm-song is!"

He was dying hard, undaunted to the last. He had feared naught save Barguest through his sixty years of life; and even the dog-dread now was gone—it had as little terror for him as the grave which showed so close ahead. Nay, a grim sort of smile wrinkled his lips as he lay on his side, and gasped for breath, and heard the wild wind drive the Horses of the North across the waste; for he counted his hours, and he thought they would lengthen till dawn of the next day—or may be noon.

"And by then we shall have made peace with Wayne of Marsh, and with his kin," he muttered; "ay, peace—'tis a fair word after all, methinks, though once I cared so little for it."

His eyes were on the open doorway, and they brightened as Janet crossed the stair-head. "Janet!" he called. "I've a word for that pretty ear of thine; come to the bedside, lass."

The girl came softly across the floor and put a hand on his wet forehead. "Can I do aught?" she asked.

"Ay, thou canst do much, girl. Dost recall how I railed at thee when first I heard of thy love for Wayne? And then how I softened to thy pleading? Od's life, I think thou hast bewitched me; for now I'm keener set on peace than ever I was on blows. Hearken, Janet! I rode down to Marsh not long since, as I told thee."

"Ay, sir—and didst drink a cup of wine with Wayne in token that the feud was killed."

"In token that the feud was killed," he echoed, with a sideways glance at her. "And now I cannot die till I have seen the peace fairly sealed, here by my bedside. Would Shameless Wayne bring his folk here to Wildwater, think'st thou, if I made thee my messenger?"

Janet caught his hands in hers. "Would he bring them? Why, sir, he would ask naught better," she cried. "Let me ride down to Marsh forthwith."

"Young blood, young blood!" said the Lean Man, with a laugh that brought the colour to her face. "I warrant the sight of Wayne is worth more to thee than fifty truces, for thou'rt eager as a hind in spring to seek this new-made lover of thine."

"Nay, grandfather," said Janet gravely; "I would do for peace sake all that I would do for love. Peace means life—life to Wayne—is that so slight a matter that I should scruple to ride down to him?"

"Wayne's life is no slight matter," said the other softly. "Get thee down to Marsh, Janet."

The girl grew very tender on the sudden. She had dealt amiss with her grandfather in times past, and he was rewarding her by kindness not to be be-

lieved.

"We shall thank you all our lives for this—all our lives," she cried.

A shadow crossed the Lean Man's face; his hand trembled on the bed-covering; his eyes wandered hither and thither about the room, not meeting Janet's.

"I was so fearful when you learned my love for Wayne," she went on. "I feared you would find a way to kill him, and then that you would leave Red Ratcliffe free to do as he would with me."

"All that was in my mind, lass," said Nicholas, after a long silence. "Nay, if this pesty sickness had not weakened the pride in me—but that is passed. Get thee to Marsh, then, and bid every Wayne in Marshcotes or in Cranshaw come up to drink old sores away.—What, doubtful?" he broke off, as Janet halted half toward the door.

"Not of Ned's coming, sir—but the Waynes of Cranshaw will hold back, suspecting treachery. I saw Ned two days ago, and he told me how his kinsfolk had taken the news of your peace-errand."

The smile played again about the Lean Man's lips. "God's pity, what do they fear from me?" he cried. "Look at me, Janet, and say if I could scare any one—save the crows, haply, when they come a-stealing corn."

"They say that, while Nicholas Ratcliffe lives, there will be bloodshed; they say, sir, that they'll give no ear to talk of peace until—" She checked herself.

"Nay, finish it out, lass! Until I'm under sod, thou would'st have said? So my name holds good even yet? Well-away, 'tis a thought to soften one's pillow, when all is said."

He fell into silence, and Janet, standing by the bedside, saw his rough brows drawn tight together as if the brain were quick yet in his dying body. A vague foreboding seized her; time and again in the past she had seen the Lean Man knit his brows in thought, and some one of his moorside foes had always rued it later in the day.

"So the Cranshaw Waynes carry suspicion of me still?" said Nicholas after awhile. "Art sure, Janet, they will doubt me to the last? Doubt me, when Wayne of Marsh has given his hand, knowing that peace is all I ask for?"

"They have not seen the changed look of you as Wayne of Marsh has done, or they could never doubt." There was a break in Janet's voice, for her foreboding of a moment ago grew shameful when measured by the old man's gentleness.

"Then I must die without seeing what I yearned to see. Well, so be it. Now give me a promise, girl—the last I shall ever ask of thee."

"I promise it beforehand—but it must not be the last. You will live, grandfather——"

"Tush, bairn! A broken jug carries no wine.—God, don't cry so, Janet!

When I was hale, I could never bide the sight of tears; and now they madden me. Listen; when the breath is out of my body, my folk will wake beside the bier. Well, the Waynes must come then if they'll not come while I'm living; death will soften them, lass."

"Grandfather——"

"Peace, I say!—Whenever I die, girl, be it to-day or when it will, do thou take the news to Wayne of Marsh and bid him to the lyke-wake with all his kin. Wilt do this much, Janet?"

"I will do it gladly, sir."

"It may be to-night, Janet. Art prepared?—Yet, Lord, I doubt they will not come! Girl, will they come, think'st thou?"

"Grandfather, what ails you? Is't not enough that you have righted this evil quarrel? You rode down to Marsh, at a time when you had scarce strength to sit the saddle; you showed Ned that he could trust you; you won him to the side of peace. What then? Lie back on your pillow, sir, and rest content."

"Rest? There's no rest," he muttered. "Fears crowd thick about a dying man; fears are carrion crows, girl, that never swoop until a man is past his strength. I fear everything, I tell thee—everything."

"I'll not wait, sir; let me go see Wayne of Marsh this moment—'twill ease thee to know I 'have told him how hour by hour your eagerness for peace grows hotter."

"Ay, go! Have thy mare saddled, and ride with the wind's heels. Tell Wayne to be prepared against my death—the death his folk are watching for. Bid him come to the lyke-wake on peril of his soul, for the curses of the dead are no light load to bear. Bid him in God's name or the devil's——"

His voice tripped for very feverishness; his eyes burned with a sombre fire; there was no doubting that this last whim of his had grown to be an overmastering passion.

"I will persuade him, grandfather, have never a fear of that," said Janet, as she went to do his bidding.

She turned at the door, and saw that he was following her with his eyes; and she stopped for a moment, spellbound by the scene. The wind was raving overhead; the light that filtered through the panes was leaden, streaked with a storm-red; the gurgle of rain, the hiss of hail, came never-ceasing from across the moor; it was as if the earth were riven asunder, and all the waters of the earth were gathering to a head. And there, silent amid the uproar, lay the Lean Man of Wildwater, with the fire-scars on his face, and the red lump that stood for his left ear, and the strained look that comes when the one-half of a man is palsied.

"How drear it is, how drear!" murmured Janet, and looked at the Lean Man again, and saw that a bitter sadness had come into his face—a sadness whose

depth she could not fathom.

"Come back," whispered the Lean Man, beckoning feebly to her.—"Thou hast loved me well, Janet," he went on, as she stooped above him.

"I have loved you well, grandfather—better than ever you knew of."

"But less than Wayne of Marsh—Wayne, who thwarted me at every turn—who—there, lass! What am I saying? That is wiped out, and haply I like him none the worse because he gave shrewd blows. God, to think how fain I am to see thee wed to him—safely wed to him."

He dwelt on the last words, repeating them with a vehemence half grim, half childish. And then he pointed to the door, and not till Janet's footfall sounded on the stair did he break silence.

"The lad has thwarted me, and I forgive him," said the Lean Man slowly. "Janet has played me false, and I make her the messenger of peace. 'Tis fitting; the old hatred was an ill comrade for grey hairs."

And then he lay back, listening to the *spit-spit* of the rain, the falling cadence of the wind. And a smile, as of hardly-won content, played round about his hollow face.

Red Ratcliffe was waiting at the stair-foot when Janet came down into the hall.

"How goes it with the dotard?" he cried.

She made no answer, but brushed past him toward the door.

"Ay, go where thou wilt," sneered Ratcliffe, watching her put on cloak and hood; "so long as the Lean Man lives, I'll lay no finger on thee, for there's a devil in him that only the grave can kill. But what after that?"

"After that, Ratcliffe the Red," she cried, turning suddenly to face him, "after that I shall put my safety in the keeping of one thou know'st."

"Wayne of Marsh, I take it? Shameless Wayne, who drank his own father's quarrel away, who——"

"Who goes abroad with a cry of *Wayne and the Dog*. Hast ever heard the cry, Red Ratcliffe?"

He winced, remembering how often he had fled panic-stricken with the cry behind him; and Janet, turning from him in disdain, crossed to the stables through the misty drizzle that was scattered from the skirts of the late storm.

It might be a half-hour later, as she dipped down the Ling Crag hill, that she met Shameless Wayne galloping hard up the stiff rise. He checked on seeing her and brought his mare on to her haunches.

"I was riding to thee, Janet. What brings thee here? No ill news, is't?" he cried.

"Nay, Ned—save that grandfather is not like to live the day through."

"There's no danger threatens thee?"

"Never less, Ned. Whither wast galloping so hard, and why dost look so tempest-driven?"

"What hast done to me, Janet?" he cried. "I'm full of dreads since winning thee; and just because Mistress Wayne saw thee last night in a vision, I needs must come helter-skelter to learn if thou wast safe."

"If the vision foretold disaster, Ned, methinks it erred—and, by that token, it is well we met, for I have a message to thee."

"What, from Wildwater?"

"Ay. Grandfather, like thee, is full of doubts—but his are a sick man's terrors. His fury I know, and his tenderness—ay, I have seen him panic-stricken, too—but I cannot tell what ails him now. His talk is all of peace between our houses; and yet, when he speaks of my wedding thee, he scarce knows whether to jest or scowl."

"I was a youngster, and chance gave me the better of the fight," said Wayne quietly. "Canst wonder he grudges it a little?"

"It must be so—and, Ned, we've happiness to thank him for. His message was that, soon as he is dead, you are to come with your folk to wake beside the body. My kinsmen are rough, Ned, but they know grandfather's wish, and when ye stand beside the bier with them, be sure the thought of death will soften them to the truce."

"I promised him as much a week since, and I'll keep faith, dear lass—for thy sake, if for no other."

"Yet he fears the Cranshaw Waynes will still hold back. Ned, canst make sure of them? 'Tis his last wish, and I would not have him thwarted.—And now, dear, fare thee well. I dare not be away from Wildwater, lest he be wanting aught, or—lest he die, Ned, without my hand in his."

Wayne turned about. "I'll ride to Hill House now, and then to Cranshaw. They shall come with me, Janet; trust me to persuade them."

"Ned! 'Twill be—'twill be to-night, I think. To look at him, he cannot live through the day."

"Then to-night shall find us ready.—Why, child, what is't?"

She brushed the quick-rising tears away. "Naught—'twas naught—only, Ned, I've no friend in the world but thou when grandfather has gone."

She was gone with that, and Wayne, after seeing her gallop into the mists, turned his mare's head and made across the moor to Hill House, where he told them of the Lean Man's message and the nearness of his end. Some were in favour of the truce, others refused to abandon their settled mistrust of Nicholas Ratcliffe; and last of all they rode with him to Cranshaw, there to take counsel of the Long Waynes. At Cranshaw it was the same; some were on Shameless Wayne's side, others were hot against his plan; and Nell herself was the first to

resist his counsel.

"It seems the Lean Man's dying wish is more to thee than father's," she cried; "but, for my part, I can hear no talk of peace for the cry that rings day-long in my ears. No quarter, Ned—dost mind the cry?"

"We have followed it far enough," he answered. "Has wedlock taught thee so little, Nell, that peace shows not worth the gaining?"

"As I told thee,—neither wedlock nor aught else can wipe one picture out."

"Well, I for one, Nell, am fain to see the end of all this blood-letting," cried her husband.

"And art thou fain," she answered bitterly, "to see him wedded to this Ratcliffe girl?"

"Ay, even that I'd welcome, though 'tis not long since I thought ill of it. But it should help to heal the feud—and, besides, they say she is no Ratcliffe in her honesty."

"Have it as ye will. Mistress Janet is leagued with her kin, doubtless—but men do not believe these matters when their logic is a bonnie face."

"Mistress Janet is well enough; all the moorside has a kindly word for her," put in one of the Waynes of Hill House; "but what if the Lean Man has not done yet with his accursed trickeries?"

"Then we are armed, and in full force," said Shameless Wayne. "Would the Lean Man have bidden all of us to the feast, think'st thou, if he had meant trickery?"

"Ned is right," put in Rolf; "we will go to the lyke-wake, and if the feud is to be staunched above his body, there'll many a wife go happier to bed than she has done since the spring came in."

Nell held out against them still; but they overruled her, and one by one the malcontents agreed to follow the counsel of those they counted as their leaders.

"He'll not last through the day, so Janet told me," said Shameless Wayne. "Best come with me to Marsh forthwith, and wait the messenger."

"So thou'lt marry this daughter of the Ratcliffes?" said Nell, as she stood at the gate and watched her brother get to horse.

"God willing, Nell—and one day thou wilt love her near as much as I."

"Nay, I have done with loving. Ride on, Ned, and if they tell thee I have cared for thee—why, say they lie."

He touched his horse and rode slowly out; and all the way to Marsh his thoughts were busy with this sister's love that would fain have kept him close in prison. It was not the feud only then, that warped her nature. *I have done with loving*, she had said; and dimly he understood that even her husband had no place beside him in her heart.

"Od's life, these women! Who framed them at the start?" he muttered, as

he gained the steep down-hill that led to Marsh.

And then he remembered little Mistress Wayne, and wondered if she had rid her of the needless fears which had driven him out this morning in search of Janet.

But his step-mother had left Marsh House and was already nearing the lane-top that took her to the moors. All morning she had wandered from room to room, from house to courtyard, to see if Ned were coming home. Why had she listened to her dreams, she asked herself? Why told him how Janet had stood on the verge of Wildwater Pool, entreating help? Visions might play her false and had done as much a score of times. Yet—what of Barguest? He at least was real; he at least—

She put her hands against the gate to steady herself, and looked up the lane; for the sound of pattering feet was in her ears once more, and there was a coldness in the wind more shrewd than any that blew off the moors. And not only the sound of feet, and icy, upward moving breeze—for a dun and shaggy-coated hound crept out of the empty road, and swung up toward the heath.

Mistress Wayne halted no longer now. There were many who had heard the Dog in Marshcotes, but none save she to whom he showed himself. It must be as she feared; Ned was in peril at Wildwater, and the Dog was leading her to him. Not once did she halt to ask what service she could render him; it was enough that he was in danger, and that Barguest sought her aid.

The dun mist hugged the moor as she made forward. The clouds were grey as hopelessness, and everywhere the sound of moorland brooks, flushed by the heavy rains, was like a doom-song in her ears. Underfoot the peat oozed black at every step. The further hills were blotted out, the nearer rises showed unsubstantial, wan and ghoulish; the very grouse were wearied into silence. The shaggy-coated beast that had led her here had vanished into the drifting mists; but still she pressed on, her whole mind bent on reaching Wildwater.

She would have been lost at the first mile had she brought reason to help her find the track to Wildwater; but instinct guided her more surely, and presently the black house in the wilderness showed swart among the mists. So dark it looked, so evil, that once she half turned back; but Ned had need of her—and she would go to the house-door and knock, and ask what they had done with him. And if they killed her—well, it would not matter.

On and on she went. And now she had reached the outer-most intake; and now she had crossed the lank grass, and gone through the gate at the top, and reached the bare house-side that looked from its solitary window on to the path which led to the courtyard. Mistress Wayne caught her breath, and stopped, and listened; but the house was still as death. Her resolution faltered; she looked up and down the wall, with the rain-lines shimmering grey from the gable-end to

the rustling weeds at its foot—looked, and saw nothing for awhile—looked, with the absent gaze of those who wander in their sleep, until a shadow crossed the window-pane, a shadow that took substance.

Then there was a crash, the falling of broken glass, and Mistress Wayne had wit neither to scream nor flee. She could but follow the hand that beckoned through the broken pane.

CHAPTER XXVII
HOW THE LEAN MAN FORGOT THE FEUD

Janet, soon as she reached Wildwater after bidding farewell to Shameless Wayne, went up to the Lean Man's room to tell him how she had fulfilled her errand and to see if he were in need of anything. But the sound of voices met her when she gained the stair-head, and she stopped irresolute. The pity that she felt for her grandfather was such as to make her shrink from showing it to the rude eyes of her kinsmen, and she would wait until the Lean Man and she could be alone together.

The door was wide open, and as she turned to go downstairs again Red Ratcliffe's voice sounded harshly across the landing. "By the Heart, sir, we judged you all amiss! We thought the fight was dead in you, and now——"

"Dead? The fight will die, lad, when I do," chuckled the Lean Man. "Tell me, is it not bravely planned?"

Janet crept close to the door, her eyes wide-open with dismay.

"Bravely, sir," went on Red Ratcliffe. "Peste! We have them in the hollow of our hands, and yond Wayne of Marsh will learn, as his father did, whither courteous foolery leads a man. He drank in your tale, then, when you went to him that night at Marsh?"

"Ay, did he; and God knows how I kept my laughter in when I saw him falling into the wonted softness of his race. How could he refuse an old man's plea? How could he be less than courteous when I fetched a tear or so and babbled of my failing strength?"

Janet leaned against the wall, sick and nerveless. The blow had fallen on her like a thunder-bolt, and as yet she could not realise that the Lean Man on his very death-bed was playing so grim a part.

"I would have had them ride up this afternoon," went on Nicholas, "because

I feared to die before the good hour came. But the Waynes of Cranshaw are less guileless, it would seem, than him of Marsh, and they would trust me not a stiver till the breath was cold in me. What, then? Ye shall lay me out in state in the great hall below us, and I will show death that I am ready to play his game before he calls me—ay, but I'll not die, call he never so, before I have sat me up on my bier and cheered you to the fight."

"You'll look so reverend, I warrant, that the sight of you will disarm them altogether," laughed Red Ratcliffe boisterously. "We shall pledge your soul with such sorrow, we Wildwater folk, and they'll be eyeing us so steadfastly, that our blades will be clean through them before they have got hand to hilt. Courage, grandfather! You'll see the end of every Wayne that steps before you leave us."

"If fortune holds. I bade them all to the feast—all, lest one should be lacking from the tally of dead men. Lord God, I must live until the dawn!"

"And Janet was your messenger? A bonnie stroke, to make the stock-dove lure the wild goose into bowshot."

The Lean Man rose from his pillows, and his voice was terrible to hear. "Janet?" he cried. "She played me false, she let my foe wanton with her in sight of all the moorside; she killed my love, I tell thee, and I hate her more than I hate Wayne of Marsh. From the first moment that I learned it, I cursed her by the Dog; and to my last breath I'll curse her. I all but killed her on the first impulse; but then I thought better of it, and planned to tear her heart in two by making her the bait for Wayne—and the plan will carry—the plan will carry, lad!"

"Ay, it will carry, sir. But she must guess naught of it, or by the Mass she'll find a way to warn them. Where is she now?"

Again the feeble, hollow laugh. "With Shameless Wayne, lad, to be sure. I sent her to him, saying I was like to die this night and bidding him be ready for the lyke-wake."

"Christ pity me! It was I who sent him for his kinsfolk," murmured Janet.

She was dazed yet from the shock; the wall against which she leaned seemed to turn round and round her; love, faith and honour, so sure a moment since, were empty phantoms now; nothing was real, save these two evil voices, of the youngster she had hated and the old man she had loved.

"And they'll be fondling one another," cried Red Ratcliffe, after a silence, "and saying how all is made straight for them at last.—Look ye, sir," he broke off fiercely. "I claim Janet after this night's bloody work is done."

"And shalt have her, Red-pate, if for no other reason than that she loathes the sight of thee. Ay, she shall learn the price a Ratcliffe asks when he is thwarted."

The colour was returning to Janet's face. She had been stunned by the first shock of discovery; but now that they threatened—threatened death to Wayne, and worse than death to her whom Wayne had mastered—her face went hard of

purpose as the Lean Man's own. She rallied quickly, stood for a moment with one ear turned toward the door, then moved on tip-toe to the stairs.

"What's that?" she heard Red Ratcliffe say. "Didst hear a footfall on the landing, sir?"

"Not I. Tush, lad, I begin to think thou'rt feared of what's to come."

"I'm feared of naught, save treachery."

"Then why dost grow pale because a puff of wind sets doorways creaking? As for treachery—Janet is at Marsh, I tell thee; she cannot have got there and back by now."

Janet held her breath and started down the steps, slowly, with a thief's tread. One step, two—all was well. But the stones were slippery with the wet mud that Red Ratcliffe had brought up with him from the stable-yard, and at the third step she slipped and would have fallen but for the oaken rail that protected the stairway from the well. There was a pause and then she heard the sound of heavy feet crossing the floor above.

"'Tis Janet, I say! Who else would be spying up and down the steps?" cried Red Ratcliffe, running to the stairhead.

Janet, reckless of another fall, sped down the steps, and on along the gloomy passage. Red Ratcliffe, heedless likewise of his neck, leaped after her. She reached the side-door leading to the orchard, and wrenched the bolts back; but the wood was swollen by the rain, and she could not move it. Red Ratcliffe was close behind her now; she tugged at the heavy door, but still it would not yield, though her fingers bled and the nails were broken half-way down.

"Not again, pretty one!" laughed Red Ratcliffe, as he caught her by the arms.

"Let me go. I—I will not have thee hurt me so."

"Thou'lt have what I think good for thee in future," he answered, tightening his grip until she screamed for pain. "Thou didst hear, doubtless, that the Lean Man gave thee to me just now? Well, 'tis best to show who is master at the start."

"Master!" she cried. "Thou dar'st to call thyself my master?"

The word was like a knife-thrust to the girl. This lewd, red-headed fool to claim the title which belonged to Shameless Wayne! And then she remembered that Wayne's safety and her own depended, not upon passion, but on coolness now. She turned as Red Ratcliffe loosed his hold, and eyed him very softly.

"Cousin," she said, "thou wast wont to prate of thy love for me."

"I'll prove it by and by."

"Nay, prove it now—by gentleness. I only ask a moment's freedom—just to the garden-gate and back again, to cool my feverishness. This house-air stifles me. Cousin, be kind this once, and I will—will love thee for it."

"Thou hast fooled me so oft, lass, that it seems the fondest lie is reckoned deep enough to take me now. How far is't, tell me, from the garden-gate to

Marsh?"

"Wayne is not at Marsh," she broke in. "Why should I want to go there?"

"So thou hast persuaded him to ride to Cranshaw? My thanks for the news, pretty one. The sport speeds better than I hoped for when I found thee returning over-soon from thy errand. Didst meet him by the way, then?"

She rued her hastiness; for she saw by Red Ratcliffe's face that no turn of speech or eye could cozen him; and she had confessed, all for naught, that Shameless Wayne would come to the lyke-wake when they bade him.

"Cousin, let me have speech of grandfather," she said, making a last effort. "I—I can explain all to him——"

"Doubtless," answered the other grimly. "Old liking is hard to kill, Janet, and I would not trust thee with him—nay, not though he hates thee now. Thou would'st be soft with him, letting thy lashes melt upon thy cheeks. God, yes, I can see thee at thy antics!—A murrain on thee!" he broke off. "Is there so little to be done that I must needs stand chattering here? Follow me, girl."

"I will not follow thee," she answered stubbornly.

For answer he set his arms about her and half carried, half dragged her to the little room at the bottom of the passage where once he had prisoned Nell Wayne; then pulled the door to and turned the key sharply in the lock.

Janet, left to herself, gave way utterly. She had no heart to lift herself from the floor, but sat there, her head bowed upon her knees, and pictured what was so soon to follow in the great hall that lay just behind her prison-chamber. And by and by her mind began to wander idly down strange paths of thought, as she recalled each speech and glance of her grandfather's at their last meeting. All that had puzzled her in his air grew clear—the touch of remorse, the look of pity that came into his face at parting. For the one moment he had wavered, remembering his love for her; why had she not known, not guessed what he was planning? For then she might have over-ridden his purpose.

Too late! There was nothing to be done now. The thought maddened her. Springing to her feet, she crossed to the one small window of the room and stood looking out upon the mist-swept greyness of the heath. But there was no chance of escape, for a child could not creep through it—she must wait, then, watching the hours slip ghostly past this strip of moor—watching the dark come stealthily from the sky-edge—listening to the noise of men about the house and knowing the reason of their gaiety.

And she had led Wayne here. In a flash she recalled that other day when she had sought to save him from going to Bents Farm in face of peril; now as then her very care for him had been his undoing. If he were here now—if she could have one poor five minutes with him before the end he would never doubt her love again.

Then she could bear her thoughts no longer, and she threw herself time after time against the door, striving to beat it down. That brought weariness, and welcome pain of body, to her aid, and she sank into a sort of numb heedlessness that yet was nothing kin to sleep.

She was roused by the sound of feet, slow-moving down the stair as if some heavy burden were being carried from an upper room. The house, empty of all furniture save such as the rough needs of their life demanded, re-echoed every sound. Janet could hear the very shuffle of the men's boots as they halted at the stair-foot. Then, slowly, with measured burial-tread, the footfalls came down and down the passage, halted at the rearward door of the hall, made forward again until they sounded close beside the wall of Janet's prison. What were they doing, she asked herself? And then the Lean Man's voice sounded from the other side of the wall, and she understood the grim business that they had on hand.

"Ay, well in the corner, lads," said the Lean Man. "Custom bids me lie in state in the middle of the hall—but I should ill like to cumber fighting-ground. Say, is there room for all of you—ourselves and all the Waynes in Cranshaw and in Marshcotes?"

"Room and to spare, sir," answered Red Ratcliffe. "God rest the builder of the hall for giving it such width."

"Well, remember to strike swift at the word. Fill up your glasses and lift them to the cry, 'In the name of the dead man—peace between Wayne and Ratcliffe.' And then—on to them while they drink, and the dead man on the bier will lift himself to watch."

A subdued hum of laughter followed, broken by the Lean Man's voice.

"I warrant ye found the carrying of me no light work. By the Mass, the sweat drips from under your red thatches like rain from mistal-eaves!"

Janet shuddered to hear his gaiety. This man was dying, and yet by sheer force of hate he was keeping the life in him until—but she dared not think what followed that "until."

"A messenger has gone to bid the Ryecollar Ratcliffes to the wake," said another voice presently.

"'Tis well. And Wayne of Marsh?"

"He will be gladdening at your death by this time, sir; for Ralph here, who rode down to Marsh, as thou badest him, to tell them of thy death——"

"Returns," put in Ralph, "with Wayne's greeting to my kin, and his pledged word that he and his will come to the lyke-wake after sundown."

"Lord Harry, what a night 'twill be!" cried the Lean Man. "Do ye wonder, lads, that I was eager to get me to the bier before I need? I like the feel of it; I like to meet yond dotard death half-way and show him that I have scant respect for him. Death? What is death, when I shall see the sweep of swords on splintering

skulls before I leave? Come, wrap the cere-cloths round me; they'll be softer bedfellows than any wife I ever lay beside."

Janet listened to it all and wondered if her wits were playing her false. This man, who could rest on his own bier and play with the death which was already overwatching him—was he the grandfather she had loved, or some bog-begotten thing that had come from out the moor and claimed his body? It might be so, for strange tales were told of what chanced to men who halted between this world and the next. Again she turned to the window, striving to keep her wits by deadening sense and hearing to what was passing on the other side of the wall. Without, grey clouds were hiding the last edge of sunset, and a grey mist was trailing up the pathway of the wind. Oh, for a moment's freedom! No more—for not the wind itself could race as she would race to warn the Ratcliffes' enemies.

She passed a hand across her eyes, thinking that in sober truth she was going mad at last. For out of the mist-wreaths a figure—a frail figure, with wet, wind-scattered hair—was coming toward the house of Wildwater. Janet, awe-stricken, watched it draw near and nearer yet; and then, with a rush of hope that was almost agony, she saw that it was no phantom, this, but Mistress Wayne of Marsh—Ned's stepmother, and his constant friend. Clenching her fist she drove it through the window-pane with one clean blow.

"Quick! I've a word for you, Mistress Wayne," she stammered, dreading lest one of her folk should come to learn the meaning of the crash.

"Yond is the pretty traitor," she heard Red Ratcliffe say. "Let her break every shred of glass the window holds—not even her slim body can win through the opening."

Mistress Wayne, startled out of the lonely musings that had kept her company across the moor, turned about as if to flee; but terror held her to the spot.

"'Tis I—Janet Ratcliffe—Ned's sweetheart—do you not know me, Mistress?" cried Janet, feverishly.

The little woman drew near a step or two and eyed her gravely. "I remember—yes, you are Janet Ratcliffe—why did you fright me so?" she whimpered.

"Mary Mother, must our safety rest with such a want-wit babe as this," muttered Janet.—"Come closer, Mistress!" she went on peremptorily.

Mistress Wayne obeyed the stronger will, though still she was afraid of she knew not what.

"Go back to Marsh and tell them there is treachery," whispered Janet. "Tell them, if come they will—and Ned, I know, will do no less—that they must come with swords loose in the scabbards. The signal is, 'In the name of the dead man, peace between Wayne and Ratcliffe.' Now, hasten, Mistress—hasten, I tell you, unless you wish to see Ned killed at Wildwater; for see, the sun sinks fast, and

sundown is the time appointed."

Not at once did Mistress Wayne learn her message; she had to repeat it, child-like, over and over until she had it letter-perfect, while all the time Janet could scarce get the words out for impatience. But one thing the little woman understood—.that Barguest had not led her up the moor for naught, that Ned was in instant peril, that only she could save him by hurrying back to Marsh.

Janet watched her, when at last her lesson was well learned, fade ghost-like into the darkening banks of mist. And then she dropped to the floor, and lay there forgetful of the preparations that were afoot behind her in the hall, heedless of the rattle of swords, the interchange of pleasantries between the Lean Man and his folk, the chink of flagons on the lyke-wake board. And afterward she found cause to thank Our Lady for the swoon which gave her so merciful a breathing-space between what had chanced and what was yet to follow.

Mistress Wayne never halted until she had gained the door of Marsh. Shameless Wayne himself answered her knocking; his mind seemed bent on weightier matters for he scarce noticed her after the first quick glance of surprise, but led her into hall, where thirty of his kinsfolk were gathered in chattering knots about the hearth, or in the window-nooks, or round about the supper-table. Griff and the three lads stood together in one corner, whispering and trying the edges of their swords.

"There's no place for trickery, I tell thee," Rolf Wayne of Cranshaw was saying as she entered. "Why should they send a messenger to say that the Lean Man is dead? Why should they press us to go drink in amity above his body?"

"Because they've hatched some pesty stratagem," answered his fellow, whose doubts had reawakened during the suspense of waiting. "They'll find it easier to fight at home than in the open."

"Pish! We've eyes and swords to help us," cried Shameless Wayne, turning sharp round from his step-mother. "If they want peace, they shall have it; and if war, then they shall have that likewise. But 'tis peace, I tell you, for the Lean Man had repented of his hate before he died."

None answered him, for all had turned as Mistress Wayne came in. And Shameless Wayne turned then and scanned her up and down; yet, startled as he was to see her in this plight, he asked her no question, but filled a wine-cup to the brim and set it to her lips.

"Wast ever kind to me, Ned," she whispered brokenly. "None knows, I think, how thou hast watched to give me my least need."

"Thy needs are no great burden for a man's back," he answered, in the old kindly tone that he kept for her alone.—"Does the company fright thee, bairn? Why, then, we'll none of them. Come to the parlour and tell me all thou hast to say."

She shook her head, and stood with one hand in his, and looked from one to another of the swart, sinewy men who kept so mute a watch on her.

"There's treason," she said simply, and stopped till she could gather the scattered items of her message.

Wayne looked at Wayne, but none spoke. The silence that foreruns a storm held one and all of them.

"I—I went to Wildwater—in search of Ned," went on the little woman. "He was long a-coming, and I feared for him."

"Why, what could'st thou have done to help?" muttered Shameless Wayne.

"I did not know—only, that Barguest had called me to thy aid. I crossed the moor, and it was very dreary, and I was frightened. But I saw the Dog go footing it up the lane before me, and I went on—on—until I reached the black house of the Ratcliffes."

Still no word, not a murmur, from the listening group. All eyes were on the little figure by the table, but she stood with clasped hands and far-away regard, as if she were looking at some other scene.

"I passed close to the one end of the house—the end that has a little window looking on the moor—and I grew lonely, so lonely, that I wished to turn and run back home to Marsh. And then I saw a hand beckoning me from behind the window—and there was a crash—and, when I had found my wits again, Janet Ratcliffe was whispering to me through the broken pane. A long tale she told me, and I learned it all by heart, and—nay, it has gone! There's but one word in my ears—and it sings so loudly that I cannot hear the rest."

"What is the word?" asked her step-son gently.

"Treason—treason—treason. But there was more—some—some signal. Oh, what will Janet say when she knows I have forgotten my lesson!"

The strain was over great for her; her face worked piteously, her hands clasped and unclasped each other in the effort to remember. And Shameless Wayne, dumbfounded as he was to know he had been the Lean Man's dupe, knew well that they must humour this poor waif if they were to get her tale from her.

"Come, little bairn," he said, "thou hast told enough. Rest thyself awhile, and never heed the finish of thy tale."

"Oh, but I must! It touches thee so nearly, Ned." Her face cleared on the sudden. "I know now," she went on still with the same grave simplicity. "They have asked you to wake with them in token that the feud is healed. They will fill your goblets and their own, and lift them to the cry, 'In the name of the dead man, peace between Wayne and Ratcliffe.' And then, while ye are drinking, they will kill you with their swords."

The storm was let loose now. The Long Waynes of Cranshaw had their say,

and the Waynes of Hill House; Griff and his brothers watched from their corner, with eager faces that showed how they were spoiling for a fight. The Lean Man's name flew hither and thither through the clamour; none doubted that the plot was his, and they cursed him by the Brown Dog of Marsh.

Shameless Wayne stood aloof from all until the din had lessened; and when at last he spoke his voice was rough and hard.

"Waynes, are ye ready for the lyke-wake? 'Tis time we got to saddle," he said.

"Art mad?" cried one. "Is the warning to go for naught, that we should put our necks into so trim a noose?"

"Let be, Ned. Wildwater is no good drinking-house for us," said another.

"Would'st ride thy luck till it floundered?" snarled a third.

Shameless Wayne beckoned to his four brothers. "Come hither, lads," he said quietly.

They came and ranged themselves about him, facing the noisy throng.

"Will ye ride with me to Wildwater?" he asked.

"Ay, if thou mean'st to fight," answered Griff. And, "Ay, will we!" cried the rest.

"Then saddle.—Who goes with us?" he went on, turning to his kinsfolk.

They glanced at each other, angrily, sheepishly. If Griff and his stripling brothers were fain to follow this bog-o'-lanthorn chase, could they hold back?

"Think twice about it, Ned, and keep thy strength to meet them in the open," said one of the Long Waynes of Cranshaw.

"I go, and the lads go, whoever follows.—Hark ye, Waynes! These swine have fooled us; they have twice broken hospitality—once in drinking with me here, and once in offering us a friendly cup at Wildwater. Will our sword's rest light in the scabbard, think ye, if we hold back for one single day?"

"Ned is right," struck in Wayne of Cranshaw; "and we shall take them at unawares. They count us unprepared. The first blow will be ours."

He crossed to his cousin's side, and others with him; and those who still thought the enterprise foolhardy could not for shame's sake stand aloof.

"Waynes," said Ned grimly, as they clattered to the door, "they think us over-gentle, these Ratcliffes; but to-night, I warrant, we'll be something better than our reputation. *Kill*."

"By the Mass, we shall see fair sport at last!" cried Griff, his face afire with eagerness.

Mistress Wayne laid a hand on Ned's arm as he was following the rest. "I—I want to come with thee," she faltered.

"To come with me?" he cried impatiently. "Thou look'st fitter for thy bed, foolish one."

"Say it is fancy—only take me. I'll not fear the bloodshed—I'll not give one cry—take me, Ned!"

"But, bairn, what should I do with thee?"

"Hast heard what they say in Marshcotes—that I am thy luck, Ned? Thou'lt win to-night if I am near at hand."

He reasoned with her, stormed at her, all to no purpose; for the little woman could be obstinate as himself when she believed that his safety was in case.

"I say thou shalt not come with us," he said. "There's work to be done, bairn, and we want no women-folk to watch."

Yet for all that he would have had her come, for the superstition which he disavowed was quick in him. She was his luck, and he knew it well as she.

"Ned, I never yet asked aught of thee and was refused," she pleaded.

"Hold thy peace, child! I cannot take thee—and I will not."

Her eyes filled with tears; it was as idle, she could see, to turn him from his refusal as to hold him back from Wildwater.

"There! I was harsh with thee. Never heed it, bairn," he said, looking toward the courtyard where already he could hear the fretful pawing of horses, the rattle of scabbards as his folk sprang into the saddle, the gruff cries of the stable-men.

A thought came to him, then. He fingered the dagger at his belt, in absent fashion, and turned to ask Mistress Wayne if the room where Janet was prisoned was easy to be found.

"I could show it to thee if thou would'st take me," she said, with a child's subtlety.

"Wilt make me curse thee, bairn? Where is the room, I say?"

"It—it lies fair on the bridle-way. 'Tis the only chamber on that side the house."

"So Janet learned their secret, and they held her back from warning us," he muttered. "What if the day goes against us? Peste! I never asked myself so mean a question before I had two lives to think for."

"Ned! Where art thou?" cried Rolf from the courtyard. "There's thy mare here, kicking all to splinters because thou wilt not mount her."

But Wayne was already out in the courtyard and had stepped to the roan mare's head. The roan ceased pawing at sight of him, and came and thrust her muzzle close against the master's cheek; and Wayne with one clean vault was in the saddle.

But his step-mother had all the cunning of the fairy-kist. Quick as himself she had followed him into the yard. The flaring torch-light showed her Griff's boyish figure and eager, laughing face on the outskirts of the throng.

"Griff, I must ride with thee to Wildwater," she said, laying a hand on his saddle.

The lad started. He was a little afraid of his step-mother in these latter days, as youngsters are of those they cannot understand.

"Why, Mistress?" he asked bluntly.

"'Tis a whim of mine—nay, 'tis a crying need. Ask no more, Griff; it is for thy brother's sake—and if thou wilt not take me, I'll run beside thy stirrup till I drop."

Puzzled, liking neither to take her nor to refuse a plea so urgent, Griff stooped at last and swung her to his crupper. "The Lord knows how it will fare with you at Wildwater," he muttered, as his brother's call to start rang through the courtyard.

In silence they went up the moor, a score and ten of them. The wind, quiet for awhile, was gathering strength again, and its breath was bitter cold. A blurred round of yellow marked where the moon was fighting with the cloud-wrack over Dead Lad's Rigg. The whole wide moor was dark, and lonely, and afraid. The heather dripped beneath the keen lash of the wind, and over Lostwithens Marsh the blue corpse-candles fluttered.

"Are ye feared, Mistress?" said Griff, stooping to the ear of Mistress Wayne when the journey was half over. His voice was jaunty, but in truth his dread of moor-boggarts was keener for the moment than his zest for the battle that was waiting them up yonder on the stormy hill-crest.

"I fear the moor always, Griff; 'tis pitiless, like those red folk who dwell at Wildwater," whispered Mistress Wayne, clinging more tightly to him.

"Well, there'll be fewer of them by and by, so keep thy courage warm with that."

Nearer and nearer they drew to Wildwater, while Janet Ratcliffe was still kept prisoned in the narrow chamber that overlooked the moor. She had wakened from her swoon in time to hear the last preparations of her folk in the hall behind her, and the Lean Man's voice was in her ears as she lifted her aching head and heavy limbs.

"Do I fit this cursed bier?" he was saying.

"Like a gauntlet, sir," answered Red Ratcliffe.

"Do I look pale enough? Lord knows I need, for the fight to keep old death at bay shows like to break me. Lads, if only my right arm were whole! I'd take my turn with you, 'od rot me, and have one merry sword-cut for my last. What hour is't?"

"'Tis close on ten of the clock. They should be here by now."

"Tie up my chin, then, lest aught be wanting. Poor fools! Poor, courteous fools! To think they come in innocence."

Would the dread farce never end, thought Janet? Or would a hand reach out of the moor—the moor that was her friend—and strike the Lean Man in the midst

of his cool-ordered devilry? But still their voices sounded through her prison-wall. She listened more intently now, for old Nicholas was talking of herself.

"When all is over, bring the girl into hall here—the girl who mocked me and played the harlot with my foes. Spare her no drop of agony; bring her to where Wayne of Marsh lies bloody, and tell her that is the bridal I had set my heart on. God, how deep my hate goes! And"—his voice faltered by a hair's-breadth—"and once I loved her."

He loved her still, thought Janet, and the half-confession touched a strange chord in her. A moment since she had burned with hate of her grandfather; yet now, with the obstinacy of her race, a spark of the old love wakened for this crafty rogue who had spent his last hours in working for her misery. Nay, there was a touch of pride in him, because he kept so staunch a spirit to the end.

"Well, time wags. Tie up my chin, I tell thee, Ratcliffe the Red," said the Lean Man after a lengthy silence.

Janet could hear Red Ratcliffe start forward to do the old man's bidding, could hear the awed laughter that followed. Her fleeting love for him died out. She loathed his treachery, and his impious trafficking with death. Sick at heart she got to her feet and began to pace up and down the room. Had Mistress Wayne carried the message to Marsh House? Or had she faltered by the way? She was so slender a bridge to safety that it seemed she must break down.

The wind whistled through the shattered window, and with it came a spit or two of rain. Janet, her senses sharpened by anxiety, heard the least under-sound that came from the hall, the moor, the moaning chimney-stacks. She started on the sudden and put her ear to the casement. Up the path that skirted the house-side came the faint *slush-slush* of horse-hoofs striking sodden earth.

"They are coming!" she muttered, racked with fear lest her warning had miscarried.

Soon she could see thick shadows crossing the window-space—shadows of men on shadows of horses, outlined against the lesser blackness of the sky beyond. Something struck the ground at her feet; she groped for it and her fingers closed upon a dagger with a curving blade. She knew then that Wayne of Marsh was forewarned—knew, too, the meaning of his quiet message to her. If he should fall he had given her a refuge from dishonour.

Her courage returned. At worst she could die with him; and Wayne's luck in battle did not let her fear the worst. She stood straight in the darkness of her prison, and heard the horsemen turn the corner of the house, and waited.

Wayne of Marsh, meanwhile, led his folk straight in at the Wildwater gates, which stood wide-open in proof that they were welcome guests.

"Now, Mistress, what am I to do with you?" whispered Griff to his step-mother as he pulled up his horse and lifted his frail burden to the ground.

But Mistress Wayne, not answering him, slipped from his side and lost herself amid the darkness. Nor did she know what purpose was in her mind—only, that where Ned was, there must she be also.

Shameless Wayne sprang from the saddle and knocked sharply on the door with a cry of "Ratcliffes, ho! Ratcliffes!"

The door was flung wide. "Welcome, all Waynes who come in peace," cried Red Ratcliffe from the threshold.

"We come to secure peace," said Wayne, and turned in the darkness of the courtyard and whispered, "*kill.*"

The hall was aglow with light as they entered. Candles stood in all the sconces of the walls, on the mantel-shelf, on the great dining-table which was pushed close against the outer wall; and, at the head and foot of the Lean Man's bier, a double row of flames shone yellow on the burial-trappings. Over the mantel were the rude letters of the Ratcliffe motto, *We strike, we kill*; and Wayne of Marsh smiled as his eyes fell on the device which he and his had ridden hither to disprove.

Red Ratcliffe caught the direction of his glance, and touched him lightly on the shoulder. "'Tis but an outworn saying, yond," he cried. "We neither strike nor kill, now that the dead has bequeathed us fairer days."

He beckoned toward the bier, and Wayne and all his folk drew round it in a ring, looking down upon the closed eyes and wax-white face of their old enemy. Until now they had doubted whether the Lean Man were really dead; but doubts vanished as they saw the still look of him and marked how death had lent its own nobility to the scarred weasel-face.

"His last prayer was for an end to our long feud," said Red Ratcliffe, smooth and grave.

"Ay, was it—and he wept that he had not lived to see us friends," cried one of his fellows.

Shameless Wayne kept his eyes on the dead man, for fear his scorn of all this honeyed speech should show too soon; and he thought, as Red Ratcliffe spoke, that a tremour like the first waking of a smile ran up from the cloth that bound the Lean Man's jaws. But he could not tell; the candle-flames were slanting now in the wind that rustled through the open door, and the fantastic shadows thrown by them across the bier might trick the keenest sight.

"'Twas wondrous how quiet an end he had—the old hate clean forgotten," went on Red Ratcliffe.

"May all his kinsfolk have as quiet an end," said Wayne, and sighed impatiently, wondering when the signal for the onset would free him from all this give-and-take of idle talk.

Yet he would not hurry to the goal; for if the Ratcliffes thought to lull him

into security by delay, the self-same logic taught him likewise to be patient. For Shameless Wayne was cool to-night; his aim was not victory alone, and if one Ratcliffe of them all escaped, he would count himself a beaten man.

A silence followed. The Ratcliffes were glancing sideways at each other, as if asking, "When?"—and one of them, stooping to Red Ratcliffe's ear, whispered, "The door! We have forgot to cut off their retreat."

"The night blows shrewd, friends. Let's shut it out," cried Red Ratcliffe boisterously.

He stopped half toward the door, and fetched an oath, then laughed aloud; for there on the threshold stood little Mistress Wayne, shivering from head to foot.

"By the Mass, we entertain a gentle member of your house, friend Wayne," he said. "Enter, Mistress; there's no peace-cup rightly drunk, they say, unless a woman's lips have touched it."

Wayne frowned on her as she stepped timidly into the room and crossed to where he stood. "How com'st thou here?" he asked.

"I could not leave thee—oh, Ned, I could not leave thee," she whispered. "Dear, thou'lt win with me here to watch thee—and—for Our Lady's sake, get done with it, for I'm sick with doubts and fears."

Red Ratcliffe had already shut the door and slipped the bolts into their staples. And Shameless Wayne looked on and nodded; for he, too, was wishful for closed doors. He had taken advantage of the little woman's entry to draw off the Long Waynes of Cranshaw, the Waynes of Hill House, and his four brothers, from the bier;—they had masked themselves, as if by chance, a little apart from the red-headed host of Ratcliffes, and either side looked for awhile at the other, each hiding their sense of the wild humour of the scene.

Red Ratcliffe was smooth and merry as one who dances at a rout. "Od's life," he cried, "what with the wind, and surety that the dead man's ghost walks cold among us, we need strong liquor. Wayne of Marsh, a bumper with you."

The Ratcliffes, following his lead, moved to the table and filled a brimming cup for each one of their guests. And after that they poured measures for themselves; and Janet, listening from the little room behind to all that passed, knew that the time had come for Waynes or Ratcliffes to go under once for all. The instincts of her fighting fathers rose in her; she felt her dagger-edge, there in the darkness of her prison, and yearned to take her part in what was next to chance. But little Mistress Wayne, affrighted by she knew not what, shrank back into the window-niche and prayed.

"Drink, Waynes!" cried Red Ratcliffe on the sudden. "In the name of the dead man, peace between Wayne and Ratcliffe."

The Waynes lifted their goblets high, and ran headlong forward, and dashed

them in the faces of the Ratcliffes while yet their blades were only half free of the scabbards.

"Wayne and the Dog!" the cry rang out, and before the red-heads could wipe the wine-stains and the blood from mouth and eyes, the Waynes were on them.

The fight seemed long to Janet, fingering her dagger and longing for a share in it; but it was swift as the moor-wind screaming round the house of Wildwater. The wind was a tempest now; yet its voice was drowned in the blustering yell of "Wayne! Wayne and the Dog!"—-the cry that had driven the Ratcliffes from many a well-fought field.

They had no chance. Surprised, outwitted, blinded by the wine-cups, they struck at random. But the Waynes aimed true and hard. One by one the Ratcliffes dropped, and still Shameless Wayne lifted the feud-cry of his house. Neither courteous nor soft of heart was Wayne of Marsh this night—nor would be till the work was done.

Ten of the foe were down, and the score and five still left were fighting with their backs against the wall. A lad's laugh broke now and then across the groans, the feud-cries, the hiss of leaping steel; for Griff was young to battle, and the two lives he had claimed had maddened him. Shameless Wayne said naught at all; but *kill* was graven on his face.

The din of battle had wakened even the dead, it seemed; for on a sudden the Lean Man sat him upright on the bier and watched the fight. A flame was in his eyes, and with one shaking hand he strove to wrench the jaw-cloth loose, and could not. His lips moved with a voiceless cry, as if he would fain have cheered his folk to the attack; but speech and body-strength had failed, and only the brain, the quick, scheming brain, was live in him. Yet none marked his agony, none moved to unwrap the grave-cloth from his jaws.

The Ratcliffes, desperate now, made a last sudden effort just as the Waynes were surest of their victory. With one deep-throated yell they leaped to the attack, and drove the foe back with a rush, and rained in their blows as only men do when the grave is hungry for them. Two of the long Waynes of Cranshaw dropped, and one of the Hill House men. It seemed the Wildwater folk might conquer yet by very fury of the forlorn hope they were leading.

"A Ratcliffe! A Ratcliffe!" roared the on-sweeping band.

"Wayne and the Dog!" came the answer—but feebler now and less assured, for three more Waynes were lying face to the ceiling-timbers.

And then a dread thing chanced. For Mistress Wayne, shrinking close into the window-niche and watching the red pathway of the fight, heard a new note cleave through the uproar. The wind was raving overhead; the cries were loud as ever; but deeper than them all was the low whine that sounded from the court-

yard door. She saw no sword-play now, no forward leap or downward crash of men; her gaze was rooted trance-like on the door, and round about her played an ice-cold wind.

Up the long chamber, through the reeking press, a brown and shaggy-coated beast stepped softly—stepped till he reached the Lean Man's bier. But only Mistress Wayne had marked his passing.

She saw the Lean Man cease struggling with the jaw-cloth—saw him turn a haunted face toward the left hand of the bier, while terror glazed his eyes—saw the rough-coated hound set back his shadowy haunches for the spring, and leap, and clutch the Lean Man by the throat.

"God's pity, 'tis the Dog—'tis Barguest!" cried Mistress Wayne.

Her voice, sharp-edged with agony, struck like a sword-thrust into the fight. The Ratcliffes were sweeping all before them; but they stopped for one half moment. Barguest had carried disaster to them always; there was not one of them but dreaded the Brown Hound; and the woman's cry that he was in the room here plucked all the vigour from their sword-arms. The battle was lost and won in that half-moment's pause; for what had daunted the Red Folk had put fresh heart into the Waynes and driven them to the onset with resistless fury.

It was a carnage then. Five Ratcliffes dropped at the first shock, ten at the next onslaught. The rest fled headlong toward the great main door, and tried to open it; but Red Ratcliffe had made the bolts too sure, and they were caught in their own trap. Snarling, they turned at bay, and showed a serried line of faces, lean, vindictive, bright-eyed as the weasel's whom tradition named their ancestor. Those who fell writhed upward from the floor and tried to drive their blades home; and the Waynes, with low, hoarse cries, put each a foot on the skulls of the fallen, and fought on in this wise least the dying, weasel-like to the end, should prove twice as dangerous as those whose limbs were whole.

Janet had followed the battle as best she could. She had heard the feud-calls swell, and weaken, and grow loud again; had heard Mistress Wayne's shrill cry of Barguest. And then her lover's voice rose swift in victory above the growling hum of "Ratcliffe! A Ratcliffe!" And she knew that Wayne of Marsh had wiped his shame clean out at last.

Red Ratcliffe and two others were all who stood upright now, and they were fighting behind a bank of fallen comrades.

"Quarter!" gasped Ratcliffe, full of a fresh stratagem.

"Not again," laughed Wayne. "We courteous fools are out of mood to-night, Red Ratcliffe."

"Quarter! We're defenceless, Wayne. Would'st butcher us?"

"Ay, would I," answered Wayne of Marsh, and cut at Ratcliffe's head-guard, and grazed his scalp as his own blade slid down the other's steel.

"Thou'st made a priest of him!" roared Griff, beside himself with the reek of slaughter. "Look at his bloody tonsure, Ned."

Red Ratcliffe flung his sword in the lad's face, and picked up a dying Ratcliffe in his arms. Fury lent sinew to despair; a moment he staggered under the body, then hurled it full at Shameless Wayne and drove him blundering half across the floor. And then he raced down the pathway he had made, and gained the hinder door, forgotten until now, and clashed it to behind him.

The passage was pitch-dark, with a sharp turn and three unlooked-for steps half down it; and his first thought was to pick off the Waynes who followed as they stumbled in the darkness, and afterward to make good his escape in such rough-ready fashion as the ensuing uproar might suggest. He halted awhile, waiting their coming, while his breath came and went in hard-won sobs; then, as his brain cooled, he bethought him of the narrow, winding passage that branched oft from the one in which he stood and led at one end to a rarely opened door that backed the orchard, at the other to the room where his Cousin Janet lay.

Behind him he could hear the Waynes calling one to another as they blundered out in search of him; some went up the main stairway; others moved cautiously toward him and called to their fellows in hall to bring them candles. He waited for no more, but crept down the narrowed passage, and felt for the door, and had his hand already on the hasp when he remembered Janet. It was his last chance of safety, this, he knew; but, like the greybeard who had schemed his last behind in hall there, he had a desperate courage of his own, and a like remorselessness. Was he to leave Wayne of Marsh to make merry with the maid for whom he had hungered these twelve months past? Nay, for she should share his flight; and Wayne should find the dregs of victory less welcome than he looked for.

His pursuers were moving all about the house; but their thoughts were all of the main doors and plainer ways of escape, and in their hurry they neglected the narrow belt of darkness that marked the opening of the side-passage. Red Ratcliffe laughed softly to himself as he ran to Janet's room; for there was time, and he could yet plant a mortal thrust in Wayne of Marsh.

Janet, with the ring of Wayne's last triumph-shout in her ears, heard steps without her door, and cried, half between tears and laughter, that Ned had come to free her—Ned, who had fought a righteous quarrel to the last bitter end; Ned, who was her master, and the master of her enemies. Ah, God! If he had not saved her from Red Ratcliffe!

The key was turned softly in the lock—too softly, she thought, for an impetuous lover. She put her hands out, felt them prisoned, and with a "Thank Our Lady, Ned, thou'rt safe!" she yielded herself to a hot embrace.

"Ned, take me to the light! I want to see thy face. Is there blood on thee,

dear lad? Nay, I care not, so it be not thine own."

Red Ratcliffe's voice came to her through the darkness. "Ay, there's blood on me, cousin—Wayne blood, that it shall be thy work to cleanse. Meanwhile, the hunt is up— Canst not hear them running hot-foot up and down the house? Come with me, girl, or I'll set thumb and finger to thy throat and drop thee where thou stand'st."

She was helpless in his grasp. Bewildered, not knowing where Ned was, nor why Red Ratcliffe was here unharmed, she let herself be carried down the passage, far as the low door that creaked and groaned as Ratcliffe opened it. The cold wind blew on her from without, and on the sudden her senses cleared. This fool whose love she had laughed at thrice a day had trapped her after all. A few more strides, and they would be free of the moor, and Wayne might seek till morning light and never find her. A few more strides, and it would matter little that Wayne of Marsh had fought his way to the very threshold of possession.

The dawn was yet far off, and the moon was hid, or its light might have shown Red Ratcliffe the smile that played about his cousin's face, as her hand slipped to her breast and returned.

"I'll come with thee, cousin, never fear," she whispered softly, and lifted Wayne's dagger in the gloom.

"Lights! Where are your lights, ye fools?" came Wayne's voice from near at hand. "'Twill be gall and madness to me if this worst ruffian of the band escape."

"There's a darksome passage here. Does it lead to a secret way, think ye?" answered Rolf Wayne of Cranshaw.

"Likely; the wind blows shrewdly down it. Quick with the candles there! And keep your blades drawn, for by the Dog I'll kill the one who lets Red Ratcliffe through."

They gained the open door, and on the threshold Janet Ratcliffe stood, with lips half-parted in a smile, and in her eyes the first tremulous self-loathing that comes to women after they have done man's work.

"Do ye seek Red Ratcliffe, sirs?" she asked.

"Ay, show him me—show him me, I say!" roared Shameless Wayne, too hot for any tenderness toward his mistress.

"He is beside me here— Nay, sheathe your swords; he asks no further service of you."

All crowded round, and Wayne of Marsh shaded his candle with one hand and held it low to the face of him who lay close without the door.

"Through the heart," he muttered; "to think the lass should rob me.—Nay, then, the stroke was good; need I grudge it her?"

An arm was laid on his. "Ned, I am sick; take me out of sight of all these men," said Janet.

One last look he gave at Red Ratcliffe. "All—all—dead Wayne of Marsh need never cry again for vengeance," he muttered.

He put an arm about the girl, and led her down the passage, through the knot of kinsmen who were pressing forward for a sight of Red Ratcliffe's body, and through the scattered Waynes who still were searching for the runaway, not knowing he was dead. These last turned wonderingly at seeing Ned no longer in pursuit, and stopped to wipe the sweat of battle from their faces.

"Hast overta'en him, Ned?" they asked.

"Ay, his sleep is sound," answered Shameless Wayne.—"Get ye across to Cranshaw, friends, and tell my sister that her goodman and myself are safe. And tell her—that I've kept the oath she wots of."

They glanced once at the face of Ned's companion, proud yet for all its weariness; and then they got them out into the courtyard. And after Ned had watched them go, he turned to find Janet leaning faint against the wall.

He touched her on the shoulder. "Courage, lass," he muttered roughly.

Comfort he would have given her, such comfort as a man at such a time may give the maid who loves him; but he dared not let his heart go out to her as yet, for there was that in the wide hall to right of them which overmastered love.

She straightened herself at his touch. "Ned," she cried with sudden fierceness, "'twas for thee I killed him; he meant to take my right in thee."

"I know, lass, I know. But would God I had saved thee the stroke."

"Leave me awhile," she whispered, after a silence. "I must go to the moor—the moor is big, and friendly, and it will understand."

He knew her better than to thwart her mood at such a time, and let her go; but while she was crossing to the door, a frail little woman came out from the hall and moved to meet them.

"What, bairn!" said Wayne gently. "We've fought our troubles through together, thou and I; and there'll be none can break our friendship now, I warrant."

"Blood, blood—see how it drips—oh, hurry, hurry! The stain can never be washed out if once it reaches Wayne of Marsh—he lies under the vault-stone yonder—he stares at me with cruel, unrelenting eyes."

And Wayne knew that she had fallen back to the witlessness of that long-buried night when he had watched his cousin fight above the vault-stone. The crash of blows, the bloodshed and the tumult, had touched the hidden spring in her and made her one again with those piteous-happy folk whom Marshcotes gossips called the fairy-kist.

A great awe fell upon him as he watched the milk-soft face under its loosened cloud of hair, as he hearkened over and over to the happenings of a night that was scarce less terrible than this. That was the night which had re-opened the old feud of Wayne and Ratcliffe but this had killed it once for all.

"Will my lover ever come, think'st thou?" said Mistress Wayne. "The post-chaise has been waiting long—the horses fret—the postillion says we shall never gain Saxilton unless Dick Ratcliffe hastens." She paused, and her mind seemed for a space to grapple with the present. "Didst see Barguest steal into the hall?" she whispered. "He came and couched at the bier-side—and then he sprang—come see the teeth-marks in the Lean Man's throat."

She beckoned them so imperiously that they were drawn against their will into the reeking chamber, and between the still heaps of the slain, and up to the bier whereon Nicholas Ratcliffe lay with death stamped livid on his face. Quietly as if it were a usual office, the little woman turned down the shroud and pointed to the sinewy throat; and Janet's eyes met Wayne's across the body of their foe, while they whispered one to the other that Mistress Wayne saw something here which was denied to any save the fairy-kist.

Wayne of Cranshaw came striding into hall, and after him Griff and his brothers, with a press of Hill House folk behind. But Rolf silenced them when he saw the figures by the bier, and led them quiet out into the night.

"Best leave them to it," he muttered to a kinsman. "'Tis an ill knot to unravel, and God knows how 'twill fare with yond sad pair of lovers."

They stayed there for awhile, Wayne and Janet. The battle-heat went from him; passion was stilled; he stood and went over, one by one, the turmoils that were past—stood, and watched the hate of feud shrink, mean and shamed, into the darkness that had bred it—stood, and wondered to what bitter harvesting the aftermath of feud must come.

And Janet watched him, with the dead man's bulk between them—watched him, and sought for a shaft of hope to cross the gloomy hardness of his face.

Shameless Wayne lifted his head by and by and moved to the door to rid him of the spell. "Come where the wind blows cool, girl. There's a taint in every breath we draw," he cried.

In silence she followed him to the threshold of the great main floor and looked with him across the lone reaches of the wilderness. Dark, wide and wet it stretched. The rains seethed earthward from a shrouded sky. There was no wail of moor-birds, no voice save the sob of the failing wind among the ling.

"Is this our wedding-cheer?" said Janet, meeting his glance at last. "And those in hall there—are they the bridal-guests?"

Wayne answered nothing for a space. And then he gave a cry, and took her to him, so close he seemed to dare each whispering ghost of feud to snatch her from him.

"We never sought the thing that's ended yonder," he whispered hoarsely. "We'll shut it out—we'll—Janet, hast no word for me?"

But the Lean Man, quiet on the bier where he had gibed at death, paid little

heed to them. The feud was stanched between Wayne and Ratcliffe; yet he had never a word to say, of protest or of sorrow. The feud was stanched; yet Mistress Wayne, while she plucked at the dead man's shroud as if to claim his notice, was sobbing piteously.

"My lover waits me at the kirkyard gate," she faltered; "but I dare not pass the vault-stone. Sir, it drips crimson as the sun that lately set behind Wildwater Pool. And hark! There's Barguest whining down the wind."

The rain still fell without. The clouds came thickening up above the house of Wildwater. And far off across the moor a whining, comfortless and long-drawn-out, fluttered on the brink of silence.

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SHAMELESS WAYNE ***

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