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BY VIOLET JACOB
(MRS. ARTHUR JACOB)
AUTHOR OF "THE SHEEPSTEALERS,"
"AYTHAN WARING," ETC.

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CHAPTER I

BETHESDA

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BETHESDA

A DULL patter of sheep's hurrying feet came from behind a small knoll that jutted into the track along the mountain. The level plateau was wide and smooth below the towering slopes, and the threads of water crossing it at intervals had laid the underlying rock bare. As the sound neared, a travelling flock came round the knoll, herded thickly together and running before a man on horseback like clouds scudding before a gale. Forty pairs of light-coloured eyes, with their clear black bar of pupil, stared limpidly into space, and the backs of the flock bobbed and heaved as the

hundred and sixty little cloven hoofs set their mark on the earthy places over which they passed.

Heber Moorhouse, pressing hard on their heels, shouted now and again, swinging the rope's end he carried and leaning far out of his saddle as he drove the stragglers in. The rough-coated, weedy-looking pony under him cantered on, stubborn in face and obedient in limb to the rider's hand and balance. 'Black Heber' could bring in his sheep as easily without his dog as with him.

It was nothing in his colouring that had earned him the title by which some spoke of him, for his hair was of the same indefinite shade as that of many of his neighbours, and his eyes were rather light than dark. But they had a fire, on occasion, that suggested dark things even to the ardent and sober Baptist community to which he belonged. Though he was a young man he looked older than his years

by reason of his gauntness and his thin beard. He had sole charge of the flock on a fair-sized sheep farm, and was counted by his employer a responsible, if inconveniently independent, fellow. He was a convinced chapel-goer, rather bigoted and with qualities which made certain wildnesses in him doubly marked by contrast.

He looked wild enough this afternoon, with his battered, wide-brimmed hat and the arm which swung the rope-end showing sharply against the sky. He was a figure which by no stretch of imagination could be supposed to belong to the valley lying below his feet, rich, chequered, and green; its soft luxuriance pertained to another world from that which had given birth to this crude son of action.

The afternoon was wearing on and he was anxious to get the crowd in front of him to its destination in a pen farther along the plateau; when the sheep were off his hands there would be other matters

calling him, and his mind was running on far before the flock.

Meanwhile, as he rode on the mountain turf, a little concourse of people waited about among the trees at the head of the dingle farther on. Where a primitive cart-road plunged through a grove of alders, a two-storied house, scarcely more pretentious than a cottage, stood back from it, facing the passer-by and parted from him by a wide yard. An obliterated signboard, high on the rough-cast wall, showed that the building had formerly been a house of entertainment, while it offered no clue to the device it had once borne, nor suggested the name, "Bethesda," by which it was now known. What gave the place significance was the stream of water which crossed the road on its downward course and dived in among the trees, falling from level to level, and disappearing in the thicket of hazels and undergrowth.

Opposite to the house, but on the farther

side of the way, a paved channel was cut from the stream to a square pool the sides of which were walled by slabs of stone. From this another channel led to the edge of the high ground, but at the present moment it was blocked by a single slab, the removal of which would drain the basin dry. The inlet from the main flow was controlled in like manner, and now both these sluices were closed and more than three feet of water lay in the pool, dark, and spotted with islands of bursting bubbles. A couple of two-wheeled vehicles rested on their shafts in the yard, while the beasts belonging to them, tethered upon the grass, got all they could out of their situation.

As Heber emerged from the outhouse in which he had tied up his pony to approach the pool, two persons were standing apart from the rest, with their backs turned to him, and he went towards a thick place, from which he could see them without

being noticed. The woman was a young, slight creature, soft-eyed, and with a swift gentleness of movement unlike that of the working class to which she belonged. Her clear skin flushed when her companion spoke to her as she stood by him holding a hymn-book and nervously turning its leaves. She had a sensitive mouth and when she looked down her lashes rested in a broad fringe upon her cheek.

The other was a human being of a very different type, a man of ruddy complexion, with white teeth showing in a pleasant smile when he spoke; he was well dressed and had the assured bearing of one who expects well of the world. Moorhouse watched the pair from where he stood in the background of alder stems. It was easy now to see why he was called 'Black Heber.'

As more people arrived at the spot the girl seemed to shrink closer to the man beside her; and when three women went

off alone towards the house, she gave her book into his hand and prepared to follow them.

"It's time now," she said tremulously. "I must go. You'll follow soon, Charles."

"I suppose you must have your way, Catherine," he said.

He looked after her as she disappeared and the door of the old inn closed behind her. Then a dark-coated man held up his hand for silence and the whole assembly went down upon its knees; Heber, too, knelt in his brake of alder. The dark-coated man began to pray aloud.

The prayer had continued a little time when Charles, who was looking eagerly towards the house from under the hand with which he had covered his face, saw the four women emerge again and come across the yard.

They approached slowly, one behind the other, a grey-headed woman first; and there was something in the solemn demeanour

of each that sent Charles Saunders's mind back to the woodcuts of martyrdoms and executions he had seen as a boy in his school history-books. This half-barbarous scene was heightening the barrier which his slightly superior station had raised between himself and Catherine Dennis, though he was to be married to her in a week, and though he believed it to have fallen altogether. He frowned as the prayer ceased and he took his hands from his eyes. So far as he was anything, he was a Baptist by force of parentage and tradition, though the doctrine of total immersion appealed neither to him nor to his family. Nevertheless, he had promised her that he would embrace it practically, and he glanced at the small knot of men who awaited their turn to be baptized and with whom he was to present himself when the women came up from the pool.

The quiet figures stood modestly in a row behind the minister, Catherine and the

grey-haired woman together; the girl's colour was mounting and fading again in her face. She looked over for a moment at her affianced husband, and he could see the exaltation that burned in her eyes, suggesting to him more than ever the idea of martyrdom. That sexless exaltation divided her from him too. He shifted from foot to foot and a smouldering anger was in him. It grew as he noticed that, though the other three wore boots and stockings, she had slipped her feet into a pair of shoes only and her bare ankles could be seen under her stuff petticoat. Heber's eyes, which looked dark indeed, were set on her, and, as Saunders suddenly perceived him among the trees, the anger kindled in him like a flame.

He knew little of the man, scarcely more than that he was Catherine's old lover, and that the two had parted because of some trivial disagreement; but he had once drawn from her the admission that she had

been afraid of Black Heber. Saunders, who worked for a well-to-do cattle-breeding uncle, whom he was eventually to succeed in business, was made of a different stuff from the tall shepherd whose ways were in the hill; and though the two men belonged to the same sect they did not go to the same chapel, for Saunders worshipped in Llangarth, where he and his relation lived and drove their trade. Heber's looks suggested a rebellion against all with which the other held, and the independence that clothed him as a garment irked the richer man; for he had a mortifying certainty that if the other envied him at all, it was on Catherine's account alone. There was annoyance in the thought that Heber Moorhouse would not have exchanged his sheep and his life of exertion and hardship—the cold winter snow and starlight of the mountain, its burning, shadeless summer heats—for the advantages which had placed himself high in the consideration

of Catherine's few friends. Catherine was an orphan and her lot in life that of a maidservant at a humble farm. She had caught Charles's affections in spite of every prejudice he possessed and the fact spoke well for the strength of his feelings.

The minister was beginning the opening line of a hymn. His voice was not strong, but the first sharp note pierced the silence of the trees and threw the murmur of falling water into the background. The sound gathered volume as one and then another of the congregation struck in. Saunders alone was silent; he had a rich voice which agreed with his generous type of looks and he was fond of using it; but he stood dumb in his place as verse after verse rose and fell. It seemed to him as if everything—voices, prayers, the very trees and the air of the early autumn afternoon—was conspiring to make a show of the girl who was his own and who was set

in front of these scores of eyes, conspicuous, with her bare ankles.

As the last words of the hymn died out the minister stepped down into the water. It swirled round his middle, for he was a small man, and lapped against the stone sides of the pool; and the oddness of his appearance as he stood, fully dressed, in the confined space, with only the upper half of him visible, brought a smile to the lips of a few present to whom the sight was strange.

Catherine was the last of the four to descend into the pool, and she paused before entering it to help her grey-headed predecessor up the slope of the bank. The old woman was bewildered from the shock of the immersion, and her teeth chattered as the girl supported her for a moment before her companions led her away to the house. The minister looked after the retreating women with some concern. Every eye was upon Catherine, who had drawn the shawl she wore more tightly about her and stood

waiting for the support of her pastor's hand. For a minute her heart quailed at the coming chill and her lips trembled; then she put forward one white ankle and found herself clinging to the man's sleeve, and up to her waist in the pool. Her grasp loosened as she felt her feet and she joined her hands together while he lifted his voice, calling on God to look down on this woman, His servant, who stood forth to be baptized before the little congregation of the faithful. She did not unclasp her hands as he put one arm round her while he gently forced her backwards with the other; her eyes were closed as the water rose about her throat and over her forehead. Just as she disappeared completely under the surface the minister put his foot on a loose stone on the floor of the paved place and slipped. He regained his balance in a moment, but as Catherine felt his support waver, panic took her, and she made a convulsive effort to rise. The water

gripped at her shawl and the sudden weight almost dragged her down.

She had fastened the heavy covering securely, but it broke loose and floated, half submerged, on the pool. She stood up, pale and terrified, in her white shift and thick petticoat. The linen clung, dripping, to her shoulders and bosom, outlining every curve of her body, and her loosened hair fell in a coil to her elbows. The minister drew the shawl from the water and wrapped it about her.

Saunders had come a few paces nearer, and as she regained the bank the girl could see, even through the streams pouring from her hair, his look of steady rage. She hurried quickly into the house: the tears were mingling with the colder drops that washed her cheeks. She sank down on a chair in the room where the other women were putting on their dry clothes, and sobbed. One of them came to her and began to unfasten her wet shift. A

dry one lay in a corner, with her stockings and the rest of her garments; she sobbed on, heeding no one, for her thoughts were with the angry man outside. She was very timid and she had looked forward to this day as to a day of happiness.

At the brink of the pool the men who were awaiting baptism were taking off their coats and boots and Saunders stood back again as he saw them making their preparations. The wrath which the sight of Catherine's bare ankles and her thinly veiled body had raised turned every instinct in revolt against the rite he had witnessed. His foolish promise to share in it had been given in the glamour of some tender moment and he felt it would be impossible to redeem it. The whole thing disgusted him; he took his religion and its forms more as a matter of course than as a matter of conviction; and baptism by immersion struck him now as an absurdity for a man—a positive indecency for a woman. As

he saw the minister looking towards him he turned away, and went, in a tumult of revulsion, in among the trees. He would have no part with these people.

He felt a wide difference between himself and these men and women of the hillside; and he would take care that his wife should have no more to do with them. She had no relations, fortunately, to beset her with their influence.

He strode over the channel which was the outlet of the pool, his head down, his angry look fixed on the ground. He would have turned his back upon Bethesda, there and then, had he not told Catherine that he would walk home with her to the farm-house at which she served. He knew that most of the congregation was aware of his intention to be baptized to-day, and he could not endure the well-meaning glances of inquiry that followed him. He hated every creature in it.

He reached a large alder whose divided stems rose from a wet place, dark with that touch of the unhallowed which is the charm of alder trees; Heber was leaning against the trunk amid the thick brush of leaves. He was so appropriate a figure to his surroundings that an imaginative person might have been startled. Saunders, who had for the time being forgotten his existence, stopped. He was not imaginative, but Heber—or, rather, the religious aspect of him—stood in his mind for everything he was rebelling against now; for at this moment Charles felt ready to become an infidel. The other aspect of Heber—the one which had been uppermost while he watched the woman he loved from the alder brake—only struck him as the man spoke.

"I thought ye were to go down to the water alongside o' her," he said. "I would ha' done better for her than that."

There was savage contempt in his voice.

"*You!*" exclaimed the other, catching his breath; "*you*, indeed!"

"Yes, I."

"Ah! you scoundrel!" cried Saunders suddenly, "you black scoundrel, hiding there among the trees with your eyes on another man's girl!"

"She won't be yours long," replied Heber.

"No, that she won't!" shouted Saunders, "not if she's going to keep up wi' you folks on the hill! not if she's to make a show of herself and a shame! not if she's to go a different way to heaven from me that's to be her husband! What'll take me there'll take her too, and she shall know it!"

His voice was so loud that many of the congregation were turning in his direction. By this time the minister had come up from the water and was speaking to the newly baptzied persons who were standing about him. Catherine and the three

women waited afar off in the yard of the inn.

Charles controlled himself and his voice dropped. He went off to the house, skirting the limits of the crowd.

"I must be going home now," said the girl nervously, as he joined her.

He made no reply, merely starting off down the road and bidding her come quickly. The people beside the pool had begun to talk and laugh, now that the business that had brought them together was over, and the sound of their loosened tongues made him hurry out of earshot. When they had gone a little way he turned upon Catherine. The fact that she had made no mention of his broken promise showed her to be entirely conscious of his mood.

"You're angry with me," she said as he was about to speak.

"Why did you come out i' the face of all the people without your stockings and without your gown? What took you that

you couldn't be decent and modest like the other women? There were you in your smock for all these gaping fellows to see—good-for-nothing rascals like that Black Heber sneaking there among the trees—damn him! I have no mind for my wife to be a sight for the like of him!"

Catherine looked up at him with an agonised face.

"I was ashamed of you—that's what I was," continued he, "and I'll have no more of it! I tell you to be done with all these common folk that can't get baptized without making a parade and a show of themselves. I wonder that an honest old grandmother like the woman beside you should let you go out of the house like that."

"But my shawl came off," protested Catherine, who was now crying bitterly; "the water pulled it away from me."

"And where was your gown that should have kept you decent?"

"I've only got one," sobbed the girl,

"an' I was afraid to spoil it; I've been pinching an' saving to buy my wedding dress, and there's only this one to my back. Mrs. Job lent me her shawl that I mightn't spoil what I've got."

Charles hardly knew what to say. In his heart he really acquitted Catherine of the immodest behaviour with which he had charged her, but his humour demanded an outlet. What really wrung his withers was his smarting sense of the gulf between himself and the community from which he was taking a wife. His origin was no higher than that of the people whose voices he could still hear as they chatted round the precincts of Bethesda, but his uncle's business had led him into a more sophisticated class, and he had identified himself passionately with it. In this access of contempt and wrath he had been stung into positive fury by the meeting with Heber Moorhouse; for he was a jealous man, and the thought that the girl he loved had

been the promised wife of such an one as Black Heber was more than he could bear. It had almost made him hate Catherine.

They walked on in silence. She turned her face from him and wept on; and Saunders's sense of justice was beginning to be touched—as the sense of justice in in the weak so often is—not by the actual rights of the matter, but by his own sentiments. He grew a little less furious. By the time they neared their destination he put out his hand and drew her closer to him.

"There, there," he said, speaking more gently, "we'll say no more about it. You'll have more than one gown, I'll go bail, when we're man an' wife."

Catherine Dennis's existence had been dependent upon the will of others ever since she could remember and no thought of rebellion against her lover's unreasonableness came to her. A so-called aunt had brought her up and at her death she had gone into service; she had never had

any choice in her course of life until 'Black Heber' had found his way into it. Even the quarrel which parted them had been the work of a third person, and Catherine had suffered and wept in secret and been barely consoled by those who never ceased telling her that he was a wild fellow and that she was well rid of him.

Only one person had taken a different line, and that was Mrs. Job Williams who lived near Pencoed Chapel, on the lower slope of the Black Mountain.

"Mrs. Job," as she was called by her neighbours, was a sharp-featured, middle-aged matron, whose absolute ascendency over her husband had made him almost a negligible quantity with his acquaintance. Her own personality was so marked, and the impression she made upon the minds of her neighbours so keen, that it was considered a lucky thing for Catherine Dennis, tossed about, as she was, to have found anchorage in 'Mrs. Job's' goodwill. Her

mission was to keep the little Baptist Chapel of Pencoed in order, and she lived in a cottage beside the green track connecting that place with the more frequented ways along the hill. She was a fervent Baptist and it was owing to her that Catherine had been brought into the community. Only her feeling of responsibility for the girl's soul had prevented her from turning her angular back upon her when Heber arrived one evening at her door, and she discovered that the two had parted; she had wrestled sorely with herself in her determination to keep friendly with Catherine, and that responsibility was probably the one thing that could have enabled her to do so. The girl was impressionable and excitable; she was determined that it should not be her fault if the lamb she had brought into the fold wandered back into the Church. She it was who had influenced Catherine to persuade Saunders to be rebaptized in Bethesda pool. Mrs. Job's heart was hot

within her, for she liked the shepherd more than she did most people. She had no child and the lonely visions that came to her of the son she might have borne wore the face of Black Heber.

And now Catherine's wedding was only a few days off. It was to take place at an early hour in the morning and she was to sleep at Mrs. Job's house on the preceding night. But though her prospects were so good and though she was leaving a life of hard work for one of comparative ease; though Charles's wrath had cooled during their long walk, she stood at the gate of the farm looking after him with a downcast heart. She had expected to be so happy, but it had been a day of tears. He had not said a word about his broken promise, and she had not found courage to speak of it.

CHAPTER II

A NIGHT OF STARS

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A NIGHT OF STARS

On the night before Catherine Dennis's wedding the spangled sky spread, still and cloudless, above Pencoed Chapel. The plain squareness of the house of worship, and the treeless stretch surrounding it and Mrs. Job's cottage hard by, looked all the plainer for the white points of light that burned in remote solemnity over the mountain. The building, but for the one insignificant dwelling, was, as it were, the solitary feature in a bare world; and the starlight on the grey walls gave them an even greater austerity than they had by day.

In the moonless night the gravestones

round the chapel, having no shadows to throw them into relief, were merged into general neutrality with the grass. The sharpest things in earth or heaven were the angles of Cassiopeia's Chair, high among the constellations, which seemed not to look down on the sleep-bound world but to be turning from it, consciously aloof in their unwavering detachment; a sight to affect some not at all; to oppress some by the comparison of infinitude with their own individualities; to raise others, by that very comparison, to the height of ecstasy—the dim foreknowledge of what that true sense of proportion must be which swallows the individual into the immutable and divine.

At the back of Mrs. Job's house the small barn, which had been made habitable as a lodging for travelling preachers, contained a single light; and Mrs. Job, whose eye had caught the glimmer, crossed the intervening space in the darkness and pushed the door open. Catherine Dennis

rose from her knees at the bedside and faced her, startled, with parted lips. Though it was late she had not undressed, and, for a girl on the eve of her wedding to a man she was supposed to love, her look was curious. Perhaps she stood in awe of the morrow and of the changes it must bring. There was an air of tension hanging over the bare little room with its scanty, rough furnishings. Catherine's hat lay on the bed ; it was as if she had touched nothing, displaced nothing, since she entered the place ; only the depressions made by her elbows on the bedcover were so deep they looked like dark pools in the coarse white material.

She confronted Mrs. Job with the face of one caught in some evil act. The woman's sharp eyes took in every detail of the scene. She indulged in no useless comment, for it was not her way.

" Well," said she, as though waiting for Catherine to speak.

"I couldn't rest—I don't think I can sleep," said the girl.

"Ah, you've made your bed and you must lie on it," said Mrs. Job grimly.

There was a pause.

"You've made a bed that'll be hard," she continued, "not for your body but your soul. You've taken a man that may give you down to lie on an' trouble to wake to."

She seated herself bolt upright upon the single chair the room contained. In the candlelight her thin, sharp nose looked sharper.

"You'll be goin' back to the Church next," she added conclusively.

"But Charles is a Baptist," said Catherine.

"A Baptist? A Baptist?" cried the other; "he's nothin'—not him—but a lukewarm Christian. And you who might have been married to Heber!"

She looked at the girl as though she were dust beneath her feet; she could not

understand her. She had never yet mentioned Black Heber's name to the harassed little bride-elect; but she seemed likely to make up for that omission now.

"*That* was a man," she went on, "not a soft, blow-hot-an'-cold fellow that could behave to ye like Saunders behaved at Bethesda! Heber's a man of his word, an' you broke your word to him, an' Saunders broke his word to you; yes, an' will again too. If he can't keep faith wi' his sweetheart what'll he do with his wife?"

"But he's a very good-living man," began Catherine.

"That may be," cried Mrs. Job, raising her voice; "but there's no religion in him! He don't care for nothin' but his cattle an' his money an' his buyin' an' sellin' an' layin' up riches. What's the use o' that when his heart's proud before God an' the truth's not in him? Maybe ye'll live to find it out, girl. An' when ye do, don't come to me. Don't tell me I didn't warn ye. This

is a sad night for ye, Catherine Dennis, an' to-morrow may be a sadder day, if I'm not mistaken.

"But I've warned ye," she said, rising; "an' may be the Lord robbed ye o' your sleep this night that I might bring home the warning."

She lifted the latch and paused on the threshold, looking back into the room like some ominous, uncouth shadow between Catherine and the star-set night outside. Her steps were audible crossing the space between the barn and her own house, and the bang of the door, and the loud scrape of the key as she locked it, had a suggestive finality that awed the listener sitting alone with the guttering candle.

Catherine remained crouched where she was; she did not go to bed, for her body seemed as numb and frozen as her heart. The sound of the shutting door brought home the truth that another door had closed for good and all; though Mrs. Job

befriended her still and was giving her the hospitality of her roof on this last night of her girlhood, she was as much cut off from her as if she had openly declared herself an enemy. Catherine understood that. She felt herself lost, somehow, in the incalculable ways of life; she knew herself to be timid and irresolute to an absolutely fatal degree and she clung all the more to any hand that was stretched forward.

She wondered why she had parted from Heber Moorhouse; for, in spite of the half-hearted fear with which his uncommon personality and decided doings inspired her, she had liked him better than Saunders. He might look like an outlaw, but he was an honest man. Why had she listened to her mistress at the farm when she told her nobody but a born fool would refuse Charles Saunders? Heber was a proud man, she knew; an unforgiving one, she believed. No doubt he hated her now and Mrs. Job was turning away from her for ever. She

remembered Charles's bitter words and heavy-browed rage on the way home from Bethesda. She had seen a new Charles that day. Was that the man she was to live with the rest of her life, and for whose sake she was parting with her old ways and her old friends? He had said a good deal to her about the home he was going to give her and enumerated its comforts and glories many times; and she had listened with pleasure and looked forward to the realisation of his pictures; but now she did so no more. These things were untried, terrible, full of pitfalls. And worse than any vision she could raise, or any misgiving about her betrothed, was the half-superstitious belief growing on her that she was doing wrong.

Catherine's fears had been worked on as much by Mrs. Job's grim appearance and the menace in her voice as by any words she had said. She was dazed and weary, so weary that the effort of undressing was

too much for her slackened will. There was no clock in the barn to tell her how the hours went by, or how many lay between her and to-morrow's fate. It seemed that everything had passed out of her control and that she could only be still, a sad, helpless heap, her hands clasped round her knees and her head bowed on the footboard of the wooden bedstead. And this was the eve of her wedding!

She did not know how long she had stayed there when there was a sound outside which made her sit upright to listen. Before she could collect her wits, a smart, short rap fell upon the door and a hand passed over the outside of it as though groping for the latch.

Despairing fear seized Catherine. She did not move nor answer and her heart bounded in her as though it would beat her side to pieces. As the knock sounded again she hid her face in her palms. When she looked up the door was open, and a

tall figure stood on the threshold, with a star looking over either shoulder out of the patch of fathomless sky framed in the doorway.

She could not even scream as Heber Moorhouse strode towards her, but she was aware of a horse which stood outside and the warm contact of a man's hands as they closed over her own.

"I've come for ye, Catherine," he said, drawing her to her feet.

She tried to free her hands, but he held them fast.

"Saunders shan't have ye," he went on. "When he comes to Pencoed in the morning there'll be nobody to meet him but Mrs. Job. You're coming with me."

"I can't—I can't—" she exclaimed desperately.

"He shan't have you," said Heber again, as if he had not heard her. "D'ye think I've ridden all this way for nothing?"

"It's too late. There's nought to be done now," cried the girl. "Go—go, Heber. Let me be! Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?"

"You'll do what I bid you. Come, Catherine; it's best done first as last. I've got a cloak for you there on the saddle."

The horse moved outside, and the sound sent Black Heber to the door. All was as still as death, and he turned back.

"There's no time to lose," said he. "Come, be a good girl."

As he spoke an imperceptible stir of air flicked at the candle-flame and its shine struck on the gold ring with a device of clasped hands on Catherine's finger. He took her almost roughly by the wrist.

"Take that off," he said; "you'll need it no more."

She shook her head.

"Take it off," he repeated again, standing over her.

She hesitated and then obeyed.

It looked as though the action had decided her fate. He took the ring from her and laid it on the table.

"Saunders 'll find it there safe," he observed, smiling, "and it's all he'll find."

He drew her outside to the high doorstep, and, taking the cloak from the strap on the saddle, he put it round her. She was as passive as if the loss of her ring had mesmerised her. She felt destiny slipping from her hold and the relief from its weight was well-nigh grateful to her in her bewilderment. But she was being forced to do a terrible thing, and she could not even tell whether or no it was against her will. If only Mrs. Job would come back and either bid her go with this man or save her from him!

It was not Heber's mountain pony that waited outside, but a big, dark horse, seeming colossal to Catherine in the uncertainty of the night. While she stood on the step he leaped into the saddle.

"Now," said he, "put your foot on mine and come."

She drew back, a last protest on her lips; as it left them he leaned down and gripped her by both arms.

"Step up," he said.

The stone slab she stood on was a fair height above the level of the horse's feet, and, as she set her foot upon the shepherd's boot, he swung her up in front of him and turned the beast's head from the barn. She gave a cry, clinging to him as they moved forward, and his arm tightened round her, drawing her close.

"I won't let ye drop, my dear," said he: "no fear o' that, Catherine. We're going to Talgwynne."

"To Talgwynne?"

"To my father's house. Nobody'll meddle with us there and we'll leave it man and wife before long."

As they crossed the yard and turned the corner of Mrs. Job's house stillness lay on

the world round them as the tide lies on the sands. But it was a strange thing that when they were a few yards distant on the green road past Pencoed Chapel, a latch was raised softly in the cottage.

And, as the tread of the dark horse died away, Mrs. Job, like Sarah in the Scriptures, stood behind the door and laughed.

Black Heber set his face to the open stretches below the mountain. Above, treading the paths of the sky, the planets wheeled on their way towards morning; the constellations had turned a little. The night, as it approached its zenith, had lightened under the dominance of the shining groups with their myriad companions.

Catherine was so slight that the double weight made small difference to the animal which carried the pair. Heber's strong clasp held her firmly in front of him in the large country saddle, and as she grew more accus-

tomed to the horse's movements she sat more upright, looking into the darkness. To her eyes it was darkness positive, though to her discarded but inalienable lover, with his keen shepherd's sight and his familiarity with every rood of the ground in all aspects and circumstances of weather, season, and hour, it was only comparative. It struck her that she would not have felt so secure with Charles under like conditions, though he considered himself a finer horseman and though he was such a well-appointed figure when he rode into the market-town on his sleek hackney. She would hardly have been a woman had the thought not given her pleasure. They turned towards the hill as the track opened into unconfined wideness. They had spoken little and no caress had passed between the reunited couple; Heber had not so much as kissed the woman in his arms. His attention was centred on the dark course he was steering, or fixed on landmarks only visible to his practised

gaze. Nothing moved upon the hill-slopes rising on their left hand to bank themselves against the stars.

The horse was a fast walker and they had kept to a foot's pace the whole way. All at once a stone, loosened perhaps from its bed on a higher level by the foot of some grazing sheep, came rolling down the hill-side. They could hear it coming almost from the start of its downward career, though in the darkness it was impossible to guess at what point it might cross their way. The horse cocked his ears and sidled, and Heber shortened his rein, holding the girl as in a vice.

The thing bounded across their path, a dim, shapeless, momentary flash of grey on its irresponsible journey from nowhere to nowhere, and the startled beast planted his forefeet and would have turned but for Heber's strong hand and the grip of his knees. As she felt the swerve, Catherine threw her arms round the rider with a sob

of terror and clung to him with her face buried in his shoulder.

Then it was as if madness had entered into Black Heber with her clasp and the close pressure of her cheek; and the mountain air that blew on his forehead stung him with its associations of freedom, and space, and action. He gave a shout that rang against the slopes and sent the horse forward at a gallop.

They rushed on through the night; in the starlight the animal took his way safely along the smooth turf. There was no obstacle and no rough ground in the whole of the stretch before them. Wild exultation filled Heber, and his right arm was wound round the slight creature, who was as a child in his hold. As long as they galloped thus, so long, he knew, she would cling to him; there was room in his mind for nothing but the insane desire to race on for ever with the hill air smiting his face and her arms about him. No,

indeed, Saunders should not have her! He laughed aloud to think of his discovery in the morning.

It was well enough for him to laugh, and gallop, and exult, and to give free play to the spirit of madness that the events of the night had awakened in his wild heart, but Catherine was almost fainting. She had lost all power of speech and could only strain her trembling body convulsively to him; her breath was coming in sobs, stifled by the contact of his coat. At every moment she thought to be dashed into the night-stricken void through which they were rushing. The wind of their pace tore at her hair and was cold on her neck. The echoes of their flying hoof-beats were flung back from the hill.

They raced on. They were nearing the end of the mountain when Heber pulled up and she ventured to raise her head and turn her cramped limbs. She was shaking all over. "Put me down," she entreated;

but she could scarcely finish her sentence for the kisses with which he was covering her lips, her cheeks, the loosened hair upon her brow. Saunders had never kissed her like that. She dared not struggle, for the last half-mile had worn her out and she was afraid of falling; she could only pray to be allowed to walk.

He set her upon the ground at last, and dismounted beside her. It was some time before he could persuade her that she must go forward if she did not want to spend the night upon the hills. She was completely unnerved, and when she finally suffered him to put her in the saddle he led the horse on, walking at its head. She sat with her knee crooked on the saddle-tree, her white face drooping with fatigue; two great plaits of hair were falling to her waist.

The appalling complications that life can weave round its victims had never been brought home to her so forcibly before:

she was too tired and frightened even to think of the end of this crazy journey or of what would be its results; she was adrift and cut off from every one but the wild man who walked in front with his hand on the bridle. Her back ached and she was bewildered and cold.

They plodded on till they had left the hill behind and were on the road. Two o'clock was striking from the tower of Talgwynne church as they entered the little town, and the sound rang over the empty street. Heber stopped at a door in a by-lane, and bidding Catherine remain on horseback, he flung a handful of small stones against an upper window. The casement was opened with some caution and a head was thrust out. Catherine started as she heard a woman speak.

"It's me," said Heber; "let me in."

Before he had ended his request the head was withdrawn, and in a few minutes the door opened like a yawning mouth in the

whitewashed wall. The woman ran back for a light. Black Heber lifted Catherine from the saddle, and she followed him in.

The striking of matches came from an adjacent room, and, when the light flared up, the girl found herself looking into a flagged kitchen from which emanated the faint warmth of a half-dead fire. The woman who had admitted them was bending over the lamp she was lighting, with its chimney, which she had taken off, in her hand; she replaced it, screwing up the wick, and turned to Heber.

Her expression as she caught sight of the girl behind him was singular, and she neither came forward nor spoke a word, but stood looking at the shepherd, her reddish hair taking a redder glow from the lamp. The colour ran up to her face and remained in a bright spot on each of her high cheek-bones. Faint lines about her mouth and jaw showed that she had passed her freshest youth, though her full figure and

unfaded eyes held all the attraction of womanhood in the mid-thirties. She had hurried on a few clothes, but her bodice was carelessly fastened and strained across her full bosom. When she turned her attention to Catherine she seemed to be looking down at her from a height.

"Here's my girl, Catherine Dennis," said Heber shortly. "Ye'll not refuse her a bed to-night, Susannah."

There was a tentative ring through his words which Catherine had not heard before.

"There's no bed but mine," said the other.

"She's dead tired," added Heber. "Where's father?"

"Asleep," answered Susannah. "It's nigh on morning."

Without more ado he turned, leaving the women together, and mounted the stair outside the kitchen door.

The elder of the two pushed forward

a chair with grudging hospitality and motioned to the unexpected guest to take it. Catherine drew near to what warmth there was left; she had been meek enough through all Heber's vagaries, but there was something in her companion's manner that stirred her blood, and her spirit was rising. Susannah threw some wood upon the red embers in the grate and raked the bottom bar. Then she stood with one hand on her hip, regarding Catherine, until the silence became so irksome that the girl felt herself forced to speak.

"I'll stay here by the fire," she said. "I don't need a bed."

The other had made no offer of sharing her own with the stranger, but the bare idea of being alone with Susannah in the dark frightened Catherine. The tacit antagonism between them was stronger with each breath they drew.

For a few minutes the sound of voices continued overhead and was heard through

the ceiling, and then the shepherd came down again. He went up to Catherine and took her hand.

"You'll stay here," said he, "an' I'll go home wi' the horse. I'll settle wi' them at the farm and be back in a day or two, an' the minister 'll do the rest. Give me a kiss, Catherine."

Had she wished to refuse him, the intuitive knowledge that the other woman would gladly have disputed her claim on Heber made her consent. He kissed her heartily.

"What did uncle say?" demanded Susannah, watching the pair with her defiant eyes.

Heber laughed. "Never you mind, my dear. You take care o' my girl, and I'll tell you when I come back."

He went out, followed by Susannah, and mounted the horse. Susannah shut the house door and locked it behind him.

Then she stole upstairs without returning to the kitchen and leaned out of her window

till long after he had turned the corner of the bylane. She did not want to sleep when at last she lay down; but it was no concern for the chilled and lonely guest at the hearth below that kept her waking.

Catherine sat on by the fire, so tired that the silence fallen on the house with the shutting of Susannah's window was a relief. She was aching, and her limbs felt the strain of that gallop along the edge of the hill. Surely there never was a woman so hard driven by the caprices of contrary winds as she; never a bride who was to watch the dawning of her expected wedding-day in such an untoward plight. Above her head enmity—there was small doubt of that—and now Heber was miles away. He had appeared, only to drag her from the beaten path to the altar and to disappear again, leaving her stranded. Though, even now, she did not actually regret Saunders, her soul was overwhelmed by the things she had heard about the shepherd before

the breaking of her troth with him. People had called him "a wild man," shaking their heads, but she had never been able to reconcile the accusation with his strict principles and religious zeal. Out of chapel and in it he was not the same man, though no one had yet made any definite allegation against him. Labels play a large part in the imagination of youth and she was young enough to be desperately impressed by discrepancies and contradictions. Her association with him had been short, and ran smoothly till its breaking, but she had learnt little about men from it. Until their quiet courtship had begun, her lot had been entirely with women. Her mistress had not given her much latitude, and Heber had been seldom to the farm; their walks to and from Pencoed chapel on Sundays had been almost the only meetings of the engaged pair. The man who had dismounted at the door of Mrs. Job's barn and whirled her, terrified, through the starlight, could not

have existed in those untroubled Sabbaths. He could not be the same person as the Heber she had known. She did not suspect that, though he had always existed, she had never seen him. A like puzzle had dismayed her in Saunders ; the same chameleon-like habit of turning, under new circumstances, into a different being. Her simple philosophy and experience had given her nothing with which to meet these problems.

She had sat some time when there was a movement above and a step came quietly down the stairs. Catherine straightened herself, her eyes dilating as Susannah entered. She carried no light, but the intermittent flame in the grate played on her, alternately hiding and revealing her face. She sat down at the table, leaning her elbow on it, and her companion did not need the sudden illumination starting from the fire to make her aware of her expression.

" I've heard about you," said Susannah.

Catherine turned away her head. It seemed to her that her best refuge was in silence.

"There's not much Heber hides from me," continued the other; "it isn't for nothing he comes back to his father's house time and again as he do. He's reckoned a good son, is Heber."

The sly scorn of her laugh ran like an electric current through the kitchen.

"I mind when he parted wi' you," she went on. "He come back to me. I knew he'd come. 'That's over, my dear,' says he, 'an' over for good an' all, too. A false woman's better found out before the ring's on her hand.' An' false you are, too," added Susannah loudly—"to Heber first and to Saunders last."

"But here I am all the same," rejoined Catherine, her spirit roused where another woman was concerned.

Susannah laughed again.

"Well, why not?" she cried; "no one

knows better nor me *why* you're here. Heber's not one to let the paying of his debts slip out of his mind. 'Saunders shall never have her,' says he. 'I'll be even wi' Saunders.' And like enough he'll be even wi' you, too, Catherine Dennis. Are you goin' to stop here waitin' for him? Maybe you'll have to wait longer than you think."

Defiance died out of the girl's face, and a chill went to her heart as this new and dreadful idea reached her. Through the darkness Susannah heard the catch of her breath. She rose, and coming close to Catherine, she knelt down and thrust a stick from the bundle lying in the chimney-corner between the bars. She crouched, devouring the other with her fierce look as the fire blazed up.

"It's not a white-faced thing like you that's the match for a man like him," she added.

Her companion watched her, fascinated. She felt small and poor in the presence of

Susannah's bold womanhood. The angles which the wear of life and work had begun to accentuate strengthened, by contrast, her untamed generosity of line. Her red lips were drawn back a little from her even teeth, and her hair, tousled by contact with her pillow, burned in hotter colours in the glow which came from the grate.

She had repelled Catherine so completely, that only at this moment did she strike her as a creature of possible attraction, something more than a mere sordid, sexless influence. But, with the warm light and some undercurrent in Susannah's voice and talk, there came to the younger woman a new view of her companion. This throb of revelation was still quick in her when Susannah spoke again.

"Yes, you may wait," she said slowly; "you may sit and wait—and you'll know something more at the end nor you do now. Have I lived here for nigh upon three years under the old man's roof for nothin'? Is

Heber my own cousin for nothin'? D'ye think because I haven't got a white face an' soft ways that no man has ever looked at me? D'ye believe that when Heber comes home it's uncle that he comes for?"

She rose to her feet, and as she did so she shook her head, and her rolled-up hair fell and hung below her waist. She picked up the horn comb that clattered down upon the hearthstone.

"Look!" she cried, holding out the tangled mass. Her arm was at full stretch, and as the ends of hair slipped away from between palm and fingers, the sleeve of her coarse night-smock slipped back too and her thick, round arm showed through the sleeve as a patch of the white moon through the drifting of dusky cloud.

It began to dawn on Catherine that she was more than the sport of her own evil luck; she was a pawn in the hands of Heber and of this strange woman, who was making her, in spite of herself, feel her almost

brutal fascination. What could she do in such a trap? Even she, with her timid, simple experiences, could guess that Susannah loved her cousin, and her heart quailed at the bitter thought which was assuming a certainty; it was revenge only that had prompted the shepherd to snatch her from the man who had supplanted him, while she had supposed, in her folly, that he loved her still; it was a double revenge that Black Heber was wreaking on herself and on Saunders. The blood ran to her face as she remembered his kisses at the end of their headlong ride. He had but sought to make her humiliation more complete. How meekly she had followed him out of the door at Pencoed! She had distrusted herself all her life; and now she must despise herself too, as she sat, a deluded fool, in front of Susannah, who knew all, and was mocking her because of the knowledge.

When people have been a long time in learning some elementary truth, the lesson,

once made plain, takes complete hold of them. Catherine had never yet attempted to act for herself and now she saw that she must awake from her passiveness and free herself, once and for all, from the web in which she was taken. As she looked at Susannah she pierced beyond her into a new sequence of ideas. She had been hunted into a corner because she had been too ready to run. All the people she had known were so much stronger than she was that she had given up her own will to theirs without a struggle. Her mistress at the farm, Mrs. Job, Heber, and now Susannah ; none of these suffered themselves to be dragged about by circumstances and by others as she had done. She was having hard measure from them all and it was time that, independently of them all, she should choose her own life. Only intense physical exhaustion kept her from running out of the house, yet again, into the night, where she might be alone with her biting mortifica-

tion. The same roof should not shelter herself and Susannah.

Perhaps a shade of pity smote the elder woman at the sight of her white cheeks and her heavy eyes, dark with weariness. She took her by the shoulder.

"There," she said, "come you in here and lie down or you'll be dead afore morning."

She opened a door and pushed her into a tiny room in which the flicker from the kitchen fire showed the outline of a mattress on the floor. Susannah bade her lie down while she fetched a covering and she obeyed; she would have liked to rebel, but her fatigue was too great. When the elder woman left her she lay still for a space, her one thought of escape. Then she slept, worn out; to-morrow—somehow—she would begin the world for herself.

CHAPTER III

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On the second morning after Heber and Catherine disturbed the sleeping house, Talgwynne was also shaken out of its accustomed quiet by its half-yearly horse-fair. But for the usual market this was the little town's one explosion of business and pleasure; sheep and cattle changed hands every week within sound of the clock on the square church tower in larger or smaller quantities, but it was only in spring and autumn that mountain ponies, hackneys, and carthorses enlivened the place by their transitory presence.

On these occasions the west side of the town was by far its most cheerful point,

for the road sprawled out into the country, and, for a flat quarter of a mile, was set apart as a show-ground by those who had horses to sell. A rough fringe of grass on either side of the way was the rallying place of the solid, who came to buy; the idle, who came to look on; and the light-minded, who would assemble to jeer and to goad unskilful horsemen with taunts and advice. After mid-day the roadsides would be strewn with hats, wisps of straw, broken clay pipes and the persons of those who had already succumbed to the pleasures of the fair.

To Heber's father, crippled by rheumatism and well on in years, this gathering was not a thing to be missed, for it was his one link with the world as he had known it all the days of his life. The stream on which he had plied in youth and manhood had taken an outward bend, as it does for the very aged, and had left him on that sad, isolated piece of shore which is the

last resting-place for their living feet. But Talgwynne fair could still give him the faces of a few old cronies and the wry pleasure he could still experience at the sight of younger men compulsorily parting company with their saddles.

He sat on a log, sheltered from the fresh wind by the hedge at his back, with Susannah, to whom both horses and riders were interesting, beside him. Though old Moorhouse was remarkable by reason of his stature, which years and rheumatism had only slightly disguised, and his niece, because of a vivid, indefinable something, which arrested both male and female eyes, the couple was too ordinary a sight to attract notice from regular haunters of the fair, and only a few strangers let their minds wander from business to glance at them. The interest of most people appeared to be centred in a prosperous-looking man whose face was unfamiliar to Susannah, as he loitered with a knot of farmers standing by

their gigs on the grass. So many glances followed him that she remarked on it to a lad who was watching him with a half-curious grin and an elbow which jogged the ribs of a neighbouring friend.

"That's him—Charles Saunders," replied the young fellow; "come to look for 'is wench, a' s'pose. You be a bit behind the times, missus."

The two friends went off into the victorious crow which is the yokel's recognition of another's discomfiture.

Susannah checked the exclamation on her tongue; there was hardly any one in the world at that moment who interested her so much, and she rose and pressed forward a little to get a better view of Charles, whom she had never seen. As she surveyed him she wavered between her sense of his inferiority to Heber as a masculine creature, and her surprise that Catherine should have attracted so important a suitor. She edged nearer to the group in which

he stood, but the passing and repassing of animals, and the varied sounds of the fair, prevented her from hearing anything that was said by himself or by his companions. Business was getting brisker as the sun climbed the sky, and it was evident that Saunders and his friends were waiting for a horse to be trotted out from the crowd choking the road at the entrance to the town.

She stood lost in contemplation of Catherine's jilted bridegroom. So many things were surging in her mind that the shouts along the road were unheeded, and she only realised, when a hand pulled her back to the grass, that a horse was almost upon her.

Roars of laughter were gathering density, like a snowball on its career, and for an instant she imagined herself and her threatened mishap to be their cause. A wrathful flush was on her cheek and it was only on the beast's return journey that the redoubled merriment undeceived her.

Every one was standing back to have a fuller view of the passing horseman. He was a long, elderly man, whose appearance and demeanour made the horse under him a mere adjunct to himself and commerce a secondary matter. The lightning trot that formed his charger's chief qualification was of such incredible swiftness that he had gone by almost before the onlookers knew what had happened. In order that this should not degenerate into a canter, the rider had laid himself forward on the leggy creature's neck, and was firmly grasping its ears, from between which his own face, crowned by a pot hat and framed in streaming whiskers, stared into futurity. Behind him, the bellying skirts of an old greatcoat flew high above tail and crupper and a gale of laughter ran alongside him as he went, hanging in his wake like rubbish in the draught of an express train.

Susannah had some humour, but it was

of that unreliable sort which flies from its owner at a personal touch, and not even the passage of such a figure across her vision could divert her eyes from Saunders. It did not escape her observation that, though he opened his mouth and shouted with the rest of the world, he shut it again quickly; and that, while his companions closed in on the road to get a last view of the horseman as he disappeared into the town, he alone kept his place. It was clear that he was pre-occupied; and the sullen uneasiness of his expression when he was separated from his friends told the woman who watched him something of his mind.

As the day went on, and horse after horse was led or ridden out for the benefit of the farmers, old Moorhouse's stiff limbs were growing uneasy on his log and he summoned his niece and began to move homeward. Susannah was obliged to go with him, but she determined to return

when she had left him within safe distance of his own door; for she had spread his midday bread and cheese on the kitchen table before leaving the house, and there were possibilities waiting for her in Talgwynne of which she had not dreamed as she set out for the fair. By hook or by crook, she meant to have a word with Saunders.

Her uncle moved slowly, and the crowd made it so difficult for them to get on, that they were forced to take the most devious way to avoid it. Though she did not enter the house, it was almost an hour before she found herself in the town and once more in the middle of the throng. There was no sign of Saunders, and she guessed that he was still on the road; but she stayed where she was, keeping as much as possible in the background and shunning those acquaintances whom she saw. She told herself that he must return to fetch his horse, for she knew, by his splashed

leggings and the whip under his arm, that he had ridden to the fair. There would be a better chance of attracting his attention quietly in the hurly-burly than on the open road.

She was standing in the shadow of a doorway when at last she saw him and observed a greater geniality on his face. He was flushed, and his hat sat at a more cheerful angle; and though his assured and steady manner of threading the maze of people held him above all suspicion of being drunk, Susannah suspected that he had been bolstering his fallen spirits in the popular way. She edged again into the moving mass of humanity and soon found herself close to him. He seemed to be searching for some person, for it was nearly impossible to catch his eye. She plucked him boldly by the sleeve.

Saunders turned round at once. She was as completely unknown to him as he had been to her a few hours ago; but, thanks

to a couple of visits to the Hand of Friendship, his downhearted uneasiness had given way to a more venturesome outlook on the world. Though Susannah wore a plain black jacket and an unsuggestive hat, both of which had seen better days, there was in her appearance that demand for attention from the other sex which certain women carry with them wherever they go and however they are clothed. Her direct eyes challenged those of Charles, which now had a roving expression absent from them in the morning.

"Well, my dear," said he easily.

"What'll you give me for a bit o' news?" asked Susannah, answering his look in kind. Her hand was still on his arm and she gave it a little shake.

Saunders smiled. He did not quite know what to say in reply, nor what turn he wished the situation to take; it seemed to have several possibilities.

"It's good news, too," continued she,

"and maybe I'll give it you for nothin.' You've been used very bad, Mr. Saunders."

Charles's countenance changed. The certainty that he was a marked man had dogged him all day. He had come to Talgwynne very unwillingly, because his uncle, who wanted a horse, and whom he could not afford to disoblige, had sent him to the fair to look for something suitable. He had read in every face how completely his misfortunes were public property, though the Hand of Friendship had helped to put his humiliation from him for a little while. Every one he met knew how he had arrived at Pencoed on his wedding morning to find himself there on a fool's errand. No living creature had seen Catherine go; and all that he or any one had been able to drag from Mrs. Job was the admission that she had heard a horse pass her cottage long after she was snug in bed. She had risen and stared into the darkness, but, seeing nothing, had returned to her rest.

As for the girl, she had bidden her good-night, leaving her safe in the barn, hours before.

Charles had cursed and stormed. Heber came to his mind even before he heard his detested name upon the lips of the best man, who spoke his suggestion boldly. But there was no clue, no trace; nothing but the marks of horse's feet printed about Mrs. Job's barn-door and crossing the yard, only to lose themselves on the hard turf of the mountain. While to every one possessed of the rudiments of good sense, these were proofs of the shepherd's complicity, Heber was quietly at his business at the farm. The best man, whose curiosity, draped in the cloak of friendship for Saunders, urged him to the place, brought back this news. But there was no sign of Catherine.

The sting of wounded pride was so sharp on Charles that the idea of a search for the lost woman was far from him, and he

was loud in his resolve not to stir an inch in pursuit. Had he been able to injure Heber he would have done so willingly, but Catherine should go free. She had proved herself no fit wife for a man of his sort, and it was not for him to take her back at a gift—not now. His tongue moved with unclean freedom as he made known his opinion.

"Yes, you've been used shameful, but you'll have the laugh o' them yet, and I'll help you to get it, if you'll listen to me," continued Susannah. "I can tell you that much. Come you out of the crowd a bit. We can't speak private enough here."

Charles looked round suspiciously, first on the elbowing mass and then on the unknown woman at his side; not far off he saw one of the farmers with whom he had been in company that morning. Certainly it would not do to discuss his affairs in such publicity. Had his head been perfectly clear he might not have been

minded to discuss them at all, but as it was, the mixture of sympathy and knowingness in Susannah's voice had its effect. If she had been a man he would have shaken her off, cursing her for her impudence; but he liked women, and there was something about this one that impressed him and took his fancy too. As he hesitated his name was shouted across the way.

"Here! let me go—I must be off!" he exclaimed, turning from her. "There's a horse coming out for me to see."

The friend who had hailed him shouted again.

"There's a man just come who'll fetch him out for you," he called, his hands trumpet-wise about his mouth; "you go up the road, Charlie, and he'll bring him along!"

Saunders looked round for Susannah, but she was no longer beside him and was already pushing her way on the pavement towards the western entrance to the town

He followed, more slowly, and found her waiting where the houses ended. She was panting a little. She fell into step with him, and together they made for the place where old Moorhouse had sat earlier in the day.

"Here's my news," said Susannah. "*I know where Catherine Dennis is.*"

"I don't care a damn where she is, not I!" burst out Charles. "She's with Heber Moorhouse that's been sneakin' after her these months past! That's no news to me."

His companion paid no heed to the string of adjectives with which he prefixed the shepherd's name.

"That she's not," replied she, with finality.

"Don't tell me lies!" cried Saunders, hurrying on as though to get rid of her, "what's the use of that? *I* don't want to know what's come of her; another man's leavings are no good to the likes of me!

Heber's got her now, and he can keep her, an' welcome too."

"He's not got her, I tell you! And he won't neither, if you're any kind of a man."

Charles cast a searching look upon her, stopping in the middle of the road. His face was a little more flushed than when they started.

"You mind me, Mr. Saunders," said Susannah, stopping too and planting herself in front of him. "The night afore the wedding Heber brought her to our house 'an knocked me out o' my bed to let him in. As white as a sheet she was, for he'd ridden with her the whole way from Pencoed, an' she was fit to lie down and die on the floor. I was sorry for the poor thing; that I was. He left her there without so much as a word, and she sat like a ghost by the fire until I made her lie down an' sleep. I give her my own bed to lie in, Mr. Saunders. She were

that afraid of Heber she couldn't rest for shakin' an' tremblin', an' it was easy enough to see she'd come sore against her will. It was that old witch at Pencoed Chapel that turned her out—she's always been a friend o' Heber's, has Mrs. Job; and between her and Heber, what could the poor thing do?"

The puzzled astonishment on Charles's face grew as she unfolded her blending of lies, facts, and half truths.

"And there she is, and Heber's to come back for her as soon as he can."

"What's Heber got to do with you?" interrupted Charles, pushing his hat back on his forehead. "Who are you? What the devil have you got to do with me either?"

"I'm his own cousin," replied Susannah, "I live in his father's house."

"You come and take her away," continued she, dropping her voice and coming closer; "she frettin' sore for you, Mr.

Saunders. She dursn't go back to Mrs. Job, an' she hasn't got a penny piece in her pocket. Heber knows that well enough, and he's no fear but she's safe till he comes."

"*I* don't want her!" he exclaimed again; "she's gone and disgraced herself, woman."

"You can pay him back in his own coin," urged Susannah, as if she had not heard his last words, "you've got a finer chance o' that than any man ever had before. You found the nest empty yourself——"

She paused and broke into a laugh, which made his hot face grow hotter.

"Come you, Mr. Saunders," she went on; "be a man. When it's too late you'll be sorry there's anybody alive can laugh at you for gettin' the worst of it like you've done. My! the talk I've heard this morning! You're too well known in these parts for a thing like that to pass off easy."

Had there been no Hand of Friend-

ship in Talgwynne, Susannah might merely have succeeded in irritating Charles without producing any effect ; his brain was muddled, though in a slight degree, by what he had drunk, and he was in that unbraced humour in which rapid changes of mind are possible. But he was annoyed too, and his vanity, which had been so bitterly assailed, was as likely to turn him in one direction as in another. The two had come to a standstill, when the beat of hoofs made them look back.

The expected horse was emerging from between the houses in a series of capers and pig-jumps that promised the man on its back an interesting ride. Saunders had examined it in the fair, but, as the small boy in charge had orders not to mount himself, the owner, a very old man, had been obliged to look round for some one with pretensions to horsemanship before the young, excitable animal could be trotted out for Charles to see. Though every-

body was not minded for the responsibility, the difficulty had been overcome at last. While Saunders watched the approaching rider, Susannah broke into an exclamation, and, running towards a gap in the hedge, concealed herself behind the trunk of a tree, which grew upon the bank.

"Afraid of horses, are ye?" called Saunders jeeringly, after her.

Susannah feared very few things; but she had sharp sight, and the man on the horse was Heber.

As the fact dawned on Charles his expression changed. He stood at the road-side, thrusting his hands into his pockets and feeling as though he would choke.

Heber had been too much occupied, hand and eye, to observe Susannah, but, as he drew near, the other man thought he could see a look of triumph on his face. The shepherd had induced the horse to be quiet and the creature trotted collectedly,

a fine, strong, short-legged bay with a blaze and two white stockings. But Saunders had no eye for its paces, for the wrath he felt at the sight of Heber overcame him, business instincts and all. For any heed that Heber took of him he might have been a signpost or a milestone. Moorhouse turned back about fifty yards farther on and came by again at a canter. This time Saunders imagined that he was smiling.

"Take him away! I don't want to see him again!" he roared after the retreating man.

Heber turned in his saddle and looked back. Charles was sure of the smile now.

"Go on! take him away, I tell you!" he yelled, waving his arm. He could almost have pelted him from the nearest stone-heap. Heber rode quietly on into the town.

The moment that he was out of sight,

Susannah came from behind the tree, her eyes shining.

"Come with me—now—this minute!" she cried. "There's no time to lose! Another half hour and it'll be too late. He's sure to come to the house as soon as his business is done. I'd no notion he was to be at the fair."

"You might have guessed it," said Saunders roughly.

"He told me, no more nor the night he came with Catherine, that none o' them were to be down from the farm."

They set out together without another word. The sight of the shepherd had done more to make up Charles's mind than all Susannah's arguments and persuasions. She had escaped so narrowly from being seen by Heber in Charles's company that she now piloted her companion to the cottage through the same quiet ways she had traversed in the morning with her uncle.

She entered the house and disappeared

into the kitchen, leaving Saunders in the passage. He stood waiting there like a keeper who has just put his ferret down a rabbit-hole in a warren. In concert with Susannah's tones he could hear the gruff quaver of the old man, and he listened impatiently for Catherine's voice. His agitation was great, for might not the next footfall in the by-street outside be Heber's tread? At last, getting no summons, he pushed in.

Susannah was facing him, silent. Old Moorhouse, sitting at the hearth, took his pipe out of his mouth.

"Her be gone," said he; "her be'ant here. When I come from the fair her were gone."

The spark of excitement in his face had developed, for a moment, some latent likeness to his son. It struck Charles Saunders like a blow, and he turned round, slamming the door, and went out into the street.

He never doubted that Heber had forestalled him again. It wanted but this to put the crown on his injuries, the fool's cap on his pride! With some vague, whirling idea of seeking the man who had played him the same trick twice, he made through the unfamiliar outskirts for the centre of the town, his head down, looking neither to right nor left; and, because he did not know his way, he took the exact course by which Susannah had brought him. Had he gone straight towards the market-place he would have met Heber hurrying to his father's door. Unexpectedly, and at a moment's notice, the shepherd had been sent to the fair by his employer, and his native thoroughness had forbidden him to seek Catherine before his business was despatched. He had been asked as a favour to trot out the horse just as he was starting for the cottage; and now, having delivered the beast again to the boy in charge, he was making up for the delay

with a zest that his meeting with Saunders had done nothing to lessen. Charles had scarcely been gone five minutes when Heber's hand was on the latch.

Susannah had persuaded her uncle to go upstairs and rest upon his bed; she had not told him that Heber was in the town, and she had her own reasons for hoping that father and son would not meet.

Heber entered and looked round.

"Where is she?" he asked blankly.

"Gone," said Susannah.

"*Gone?*" cried he.

The woman could scarcely hide the smile that touched her mouth.

"Charles Saunders was here," she said. "They're gone."

For one moment the shepherd stood dumb. Then he also turned and rushed out of the house.

CHAPTER IV

ACTION

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CHAPTER IV

ACTION

It was almost noon on the day before Talgwynne fair when Catherine Dennis opened her eyes; she tried to sit up, but her head ached so unpleasantly that she sank back at once and lay still. Her body and limbs were so stiff that it was a torment to move, and when Susannah came in and offered her food she could scarcely eat, though she had tasted nothing for the last eighteen hours. When her own resolve to escape returned to her mind, she knew herself to be, for the time being at least, quite incapable of carrying it out.

The milk, with a plate of bread, had been left on the floor beside her mattress, and

she forced herself to eat and drink, knowing that she must collect what strength she could muster if her feet were to carry her away from the cottage and out of Talgwynne. To go to-day was out of the question, but she determined to take any chance she could get of slipping off unnoticed on the morrow.

She had no plans beyond her settled desire to turn her back on her own humiliation and on Susannah, who had brought it home to her. She would hide herself wherever she could, or tramp the roads as a beggar sooner than be obliged to accept the grudging hospitality of Heber's cousin. The idea of waiting under those scornful eyes for the man who might never come was worse than destitution—worse than the workhouse. As the day wore on and she was able to get up and sit by the fireside at old Moorhouse's invitation, she formed a vague scheme of crossing the Wye and trying for shelter and employment in one

of the villages over the Radnorshire border. She could get no speech of the old man, for Susannah was never out of the kitchen and would hear every word she said to him, every question she put. There was a faded glimmer of amusement in his look, too, as it rested on her—his son's dupe. She was more and more certain of her own part. Her only wish was never again to meet any one she had known; but the first problem of escape was beset with such great difficulty that she could hardly see beyond it. She knew that Susannah would let her go willingly, but she wished nobody to know so much as the direction of her own road to oblivion. Black Heber had forsaken her, but it was just possible that Saunders might be upon her track. She had not a tear for Saunders, though even now, amid the stress of mortified pain, her heart swelled as she thought of the shepherd. Perhaps —perhaps he loved her yet, in spite of all Susannah had said. Her eyes filled. But

she could not risk it and wait; her pride, once roused, had scourged her so cruelly that it had terrified her into slavery.

From the talk of uncle and niece she learned that Talgwynne fair would take place next day and that both were going to it. That should be her chance. She would profess herself too tired to accompany them, should they invite her to do so, and as soon as they should be safely gone she would make her venture. She had never been in the little town, but her country eye knew the points of the compass and the direction in which the river Wye ran. She would trust to luck and to what sagacity she had in finding her way. Talgwynne lay high, and if she followed the fall of the ground, with her face towards the river, which she had seen daily from Pencoed, she would find her bearings and be able, when she reached the Brecon high road, to ask her way to the bridge at Losbury village, over which she would get into

Radnorshire. The day passed slowly and she went early to her mattress in the little room. That prison should not contain her much longer.

The fair was in full swing next morning as she closed the door behind her and hurried along the by-street. The whole world had been drawn as one man to the centre of attraction, and she scarcely met a living creature until she was far into the country. She knew her direction well, once she was out of Talgwynne, for the Black Mountain was a landmark by which it was easy to guide herself. She could see the identical smooth stretch on which she had galloped with Heber Moorhouse, and she was soon in a lane which she felt sure must bring her down upon the high road. Stiff and weary as she still was, she pressed on with no goal but Losbury bridge and nothing but chance as a friend. Chance only stood between her and destitution.

She plodded on for some time, knowing

that she could not long keep to the beaten tracks and remain unseen; soon the dispersing fair would pour men, women and animals along every road and lane. The sound of some one following her on horseback made Catherine's heart jump into her mouth. She rushed on and climbed over a gate, which was fortunately only a few paces in front, and concealed herself behind the hedge, crouching and peering between the leaves like some frightened animal. She held her breath as Charles Saunders rode past her hiding-place at the hurrying nondescript pace of one whose prudence forbids him to trot downhill while his feelings will not allow him to walk.

Saunders had lost his flushed appearance; he was pale now and his head was perfectly clear. As he had not fallen in with Heber while on his way from Moorhouse's cottage, he was firmly persuaded that the shepherd had returned for Catherine before he reached it with Susannah. Though the

buying and selling had not abated, and the fair would rage on for another couple of hours, he shook the dust of Talgwynne off his feet, embittered by his own folly in listening to the impudent woman who had made him forget what was due to himself and led him into fresh ignominy and defeat. His enmity against the shepherd was more keen than ever. His lips closed and unclosed as though in speech with his rival.

As the sound of his going died away, the girl raised herself and looked over the gate at his retreating figure. She felt as if she never wished to see a man again. They were creatures moved by some hidden spring that she could not divine nor understand—she, who stood perplexed on the outskirts of life. Passion and jealousy and the deep workings, set astir by womankind, of that primæval combat of male with male were unlearned lessons.

She rose and pursued her way along the fields, afraid to return to the lane, and

resolving afresh, since she had seen Charles, not to venture out upon the high-road till dusk. Then she reflected that her pocket was empty and that when dusk came her prospects would be no better. Her goal was Losbury bridge; but she would have to travel some way on the other side of it before she reached the village she had in her mind. There was a post office there, she knew, for she had once been in it, and she meant to ask the post-mistress if there was anybody in the place who needed a girl to do servant's work. It was a forlorn hope, but Catherine had burned her boats; and, with the pathetic trustfulness of youth, she did not believe that the world would let her starve. For a coward, she had grown bold indeed.

The foregoing day had poured with rain, and the grass was wet and heavy. She was so determined to keep far from all thoroughfares that she was obliged to go many times out of the straight line. She

pushed her way through hedges and thickets and found herself, when the afternoon was well advanced, in sight of the road. Her feet were soaked, her boots coated with mud; and her skirts were soaked too, for a smart shower had caught her in the open. The skies had become overcast, and she shivered as she sat resting in the seclusion of a hollow.

Tears began to roll down her cheeks; excitement and wounded pride and the novelty of a definite object had kept her up; but at last these guides and supporters were losing their hold and her heart was sinking in the face of the cheerless outlook. Her teeth chattered and her head felt like lead. When she got up she was shaking so much that she had to lean against a tree. She dared not think of the miles between her and that little village over Losbury bridge, and she could not afford to await the falling of the light as she had meant to do before trusting herself to the

open road. Down below her was yet one more pasture, and then she must emerge on the highway and take her chance of meeting some wayfarer who might recognise her. She plodded on, thinking less of that risk than of the increasing misery of dragging herself forward. A climb down a steep hedge-grown bank would bring her out not fifty yards from the whitewashed walls of a toll-house. Half a mile east of it was Losbury bridge, spanning a reach of the river above the flat, green meadows.

She looked up and down the road as she stood on the bank and bent back the strong suckers in the gap she had chosen; there was not a human creature within sight. A white milestone was on the hither side of the white toll and the white gates which barred the way. The window stared towards her up the vacant thoroughfare after the sleepless, vigilant fashion of toll-house windows. She began to scramble down, clinging to the tough whips of hazel; there

was a cluster of nuts just by her shoulder, and she paused to gather it. She was not hungry, but she might be hungry yet and thankful for so much as a few filberts. As she turned, stretching out her disengaged hand, her foot went from under her. She was not the only person who had made a passage through that gap, and the wet mud had been trodden into a slide by some one else's heel. The springy bough flew upwards, tearing itself from her grasp as she slipped and fell.

She lay at the roadside with one foot doubled beneath her. Movement brought a feeling of such deathly sickness that she raised her head only to drop it again on the moss of the bank. She felt sure that her leg must be broken, and, not daring to stir, forgot all but the black, imminent fear of pain; the moment's despair was enough for her without the additional bewilderment of looking further.

She gathered her wits again to consider

how long it might be before some one passed, and she prayed for the sound of human approach as earnestly as she dreaded it. But for the distant bark of a dog, the encompassing rural life might have been extinct and she herself in the desert of Sahara.

At last she was able to look up. Her leg could still move, she found, and she got herself into a less cramped position. Timidly she touched her ankle; it was already swollen, but, if it was not really broken, she might try to get as far as the toll. With the help of the tangled growth on the bank, she drew herself until she sat upright, and saw that a short, broad figure was standing in front of the gate contemplating her in an attitude suggesting interest, suspicion, and the power to deal forcibly with anything. The woman—if woman it were—stood, sharply outlined against the white bars, feet planted wide apart, arms akimbo, and head at an attentive and purposeful angle. Catherine raised

herself on one arm and called as loudly as she could, then, as a twinge of pain shot through her foot, she lay back once more against the bank.

A minute afterwards she raised her eyes to a round, snub-nosed face within a yard of her own. It was surmounted by a man's felt hat, secured in its place by a piece of twine which was tied in a careful bow under the chin. The loops of the bow were drawn to exact evenness and the long ends hung down over a person shaped much like a beehive. The notion that she had never seen any one wearing so many clothes wandered across the girl's dazed brain.

"By Pharaoh! I thought ye was market-peart!" exclaimed a voice whose depth, coming from a petticoated being, made Catherine start. "Watchin' ye, I were, to see how soon ye'd plump down again, once ye was up."

"I've hurt my foot," said the girl, with a catch in her breath—"maybe it's broken."

"It's the 'edge that's broken," observed the other, looking up into the gap. "Where d'ye come from?"

"Talgwynne," replied Catherine, the zealous caution of her day forgotten.

"Talgwynne?" shouted her companion. "There's a good many'll copy ye comin' from Talgwynne! Elijah Jones o' the Bush went by in 'is cart not an hour since, singin' like a bird, an' Mrs. Jones oldin' 'im so as 'e couldn't be sprawlin' over the 'orse's tail. 'E'd been out three times between this and the last turnin', so her told me. 'By Pharaoh'! says I, '*I'd* larrup 'im'! When 'e 'eard that 'e was nigh out o' the cart an' over the dashboard again."

"But I'm afeared my ankle's broken," said Catherine irrelevantly.

Her face was so grey and pinched that the woman's suspicions changed to concern; she put a stout arm under her and managed to raise her till she stood upright.

"Try if ye can't 'obble," said she, as they stood clinging together.

The girl obeyed and found that by resting her whole weight on her companion's shoulder she could move forward, and the two set off towards the toll as best they could. It was painful work, but relief at the discovery that her bones were whole gave Catherine courage, and her white lips were taking a little colour as they neared the house. Above the conspicuous window was a black board which displayed in white lettering, '*Maria Cockshow, Tollkeeper*'; and as Catherine saw it she remembered hearing that a tollkeeper's widow from Herefordshire, of whose looks and dealings rumour had strange tales, was in charge of one of the gates near Losbury. It was, presumably, on the shoulder of this person that she now leaned.

At their approach a white, smooth-haired dog of dubious ancestry burst from regions behind the toll, and with the indecent

instinct of low breeding for the disastrous and unusual, set about its aggravation by a storm of high-pitched barks. Catherine almost fell as Mrs. Cockshow ducked down without warning, and, snatching up a stone from the road, sent it thundering against the dog's ribs.

"That'll 'elp ye 'ome!" said she, as the animal dived with a yell under the lowest bar of the gate.

There was a shed behind the house, with a considerable patch of garden; and the honest smell of the manure-heap proclaimed the neighbourhood of live stock to instructed noses. The dog was waiting for the two women at the door with his tail tucked in. His senseless face and the horrid length of leg that raised his body high above the ground did not suggest youth, and reminded the observer less of a puppy than of a foolish person on stilts. He followed, unabashed, but without raising his tail, as Catherine and Mrs. Cockshow entered. A

person skilful to notice could have gained some clue to the toll-woman's character from his demeanour; for even this vulgar creature might be supposed to know his world.

CHAPTER V

PENCOED

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PENCOED

As Heber's appearance at her door in search of Catherine convinced Susannah that the girl had fled alone, she longed to rush after his rival and tell him of her discovery. She had not doubted that Catherine was with the shepherd. The moment she realised that there was still a chance of bringing Saunders and the truant together, her spirits, which had been dashed to the earth on finding the bird flown, rose again, and she cast about for some means of communicating with Charles. Her only anxiety was lest the two men should meet in the town and the shepherd learn how she had deceived him. She could but trust to chance to

prevent that; and, had she known it, chance had proved kind, for Charles went straight to the Hand of Friendship, and, mounting his horse without a word to anybody, set his angry face homewards. In the course of the harassed evening which followed, Susannah made up her mind to write to him.

Most people thought it a curious thing that Susannah's destiny seemed to have nothing better in store than attendance upon a half-crippled old man. But most people scarcely realise as a truth that, to the accomplishment of any end, no matter how obvious or how commonplace, there is required a procession of acquiescent circumstances which would make the observer giddy, could he see it. Any human being who meets a stranger in the road has only to think of the chain of chances—each of which has fulfilled itself—to be forged before that meeting can be brought about, and of the one link whose lack would be

the undoing of the whole. We speak of 'the hour and the man' as though they were the only ingredients of fate, and as if their simultaneous appearance were all that was needed. But the hour may come and the man with it, and some untoward arrangement of detail may triumph over both.

Everything had gone smoothly with Susannah but the one detail of her own temperament. She had grasped life with both hands, caring no whit how much good others got out of it and thinking only of the passing day. She could not remember the time when masculine eyes had not followed her, and now, though her sun had passed its zenith, they followed her still. It was nearly three years since she had arrived to keep house for her uncle and so been thrown against her cousin Heber. Though few men had come to close quarters with her disturbing personality without feeling its influence, the shepherd, unlike others in

this as in most of his ways, had treated her with the plain friendliness he might have shown to a man. Perhaps it was this that made Susannah feel for him what she had never felt for the many who had courted her and whom she had looked upon as mere pleasant accessories of life.

She was not a woman given to recognising failure under any circumstances; where a man was concerned, never. Heber had touched her imagination—and she had more of it than is given to most women of her class—and her heart too. She would bring him to her yet, she promised herself. There was a power in her that hard work and a cramped life had not been able to destroy. The consciousness of femininity in a working woman, should it be alive when its necessary function of attracting a mate and securing a home is accomplished, seldom survives the birth of her first child. Susannah Moorhouse had neither mate nor child; but it is possible that, had she gone through the

ordeal of acquiring both, that consciousness would have endured, damaged, perhaps, but living still. There were some large qualities in her and persistence was one of them, though its roots were in her settled belief in herself. She meant to employ every means to attain her desire. She sought no witch and brewed no potion, though superstition still lurked in the crevices of the country and one or two aged people professed themselves able to heal cattle and to deal with scalds, unrequited affection and other human difficulties, by the mild charms they practised.

But Susannah's trust was in none of these; she knew herself to stand, by virtue of some indefinable quality, in a different relationship to men from that of the women about her. She would draw the man of her choice to her by that unnamed force which she knew herself to possess and which she had put forth so often in idleness. It was no wonder that her neighbours, shrewish

spinsters and toiling mothers of families, had not a good word for her; the gulf between them was so great.

Though Heber's engagement to Catherine was a staggering blow to her, its breaking came soon enough to give her courage again. Nay, there was a fatalism in her that had, perhaps, preserved her from superstition by taking superstition's place; and it suggested to her mind, preoccupied as it was with one idea, that larger powers than her own were playing into her hands. When she heard that Charles Saunders was to marry the girl she had never seen, and was more than ever curious to see, she resolved to possess her soul in patience. She smiled, standing before the cheap square of looking-glass that hung on her wall. There were lines in the face before her to which she would fain have been blind, but there were other things too. And all comes to him who waits. She meant to wait—not passively, but intelligently. Then Black

Heber had brought the girl he loved, and, with the miraculous blindness of manhood, had given her into the charge of the woman who loved him.

If Susannah's views of life were more enterprising than those of her neighbours her education had not differed from theirs, so it was a laborious business to her to write a letter. She went through a good deal of mental exercise before she lost sight of it in the maw of the local postman's bag.

"MISTER SAUNDERS, Sir," she had begun:

"I take the liberty of writing these few lines. Mister Saunders you may spose Catherine Dennis is gone with Heber, but not she. He nows no more nor you where shes gone. She run from here for fere of him sir, if you look you will find her yet.

"No more from your welwisher,

"SUSANNAH MOORHOUSE."

Whether or no she expected an answer to this letter, she hoped for one; and when some days passed and brought no sign from Charles, she began to grow restless. Heber

had not returned, though, hitherto, he had always contrived to pay a weekly visit to his father, if but for five minutes. He was the old man's favourite son and the only one of four brothers who lived within reach.

The uncertainty as to what was going on began to prey upon Susannah's nerves. Events which meant so much to her had run quickly enough of late to make inaction doubly unbearable; and, if she could not see Saunders, she must at least see her cousin. Pencoed Chapel was the only place in which she was sure of meeting him, and she informed her uncle that she meant to go there on the following Sunday.

The distance from Talgwynne put walking out of the question; but she descended from the farm gig in which an acquaintance had driven her as near to Pencoed as wheels could go, to make the rest of her way on foot. She had been obliged to start early to reach the chapel in time for the meeting, and as she neared it the sound

of singing came to her on the wind. She paused outside the door; looking stealthily in, and seeing the tall figure of Black Heber, she slipped noiselessly into a seat.

The little, box-like building was half full of men and women; elderly people, for the most part, in dark-coloured clothes. The windows, which were small, with diamond leaded panes set low in the walls, let in an even light on their subdued homeliness.

Apart from them, at a table covered with faded red cloth, was the same man who had baptized Catherine in the pool at Bethesda.

The hymn was a long one and the singers were well embarked on it; the predominance of men in the gathering gave it a fulness and strength of sound; and, as it was one immensely popular in the district, its solemn rhythm and swaying time were marred by no uncertainties. Heber stood in a line with Susannah, by the opposite wall, head and shoulders above the other

worshippers, his eyes fixed on his book. She could hear his strong, melodious voice separately, fervent, and steady; and she listened to it as a person by a river's side will listen to the tune of one particular eddy in the full underlying rush of water.

It was easy to see, here in the quietness of the chapel, how much more of youth there was in the man than in the impression he gave to others. He was little over thirty and the lines on his face were not lines of care, but the marks traced by exposure and hard exercise. His eyes were the narrowed eyes of men who look over long distances in rigorous weathers, and if his thin beard hid jaw and chin, the outline of his chest and shoulders was sharp and young. Now and again he would look up, throwing back his head as he sent a note from his expanded lungs into the swell of the hymn. The words that floated out round her had neither interest nor meaning for Susannah; for her there was only a

single person, a single voice, under that roof. They had reached the last lines:

"Ye men of God, lift up your souls,
Nor halt with failing breath;
Yet one more stream before us rolls,
The dark blue flood of death.

Across its waves our pathway lies,
The hosts go on before;
And Zion's city meets our eyes
Set on the other shore."

As the singing ceased, Heber shut his book and looked round like one awakened, straight at Susannah. The act was so spontaneous that neither he nor the woman, whose gaze was fixed on him, had time to return from the widely separated regions in which their respective souls roamed.

In that instant there was revealed to the shepherd the thing that he had never suspected. Perhaps the feelings roused by the strenuous, half-militant spirit of the hymn and the beat of its swinging music had lighted the whole range of his imagination;

perhaps the shock of the contrast between that seen by his inner and his outer vision quickened it; in any case, the passion in Susannah's face shot its message across the chapel and he stood stock still while the rest of the congregation sat down. Then he thought of his cousin and Catherine as he had seen them that night in the kitchen at Talgwynne, and the blood ran hot to his tanned face.

Black Heber was not vain; he had no time for vanity, had it been in him; nevertheless, Susannah's look pierced to his inactive, remote self-consciousness. He resumed his seat, feeling as if a rough hand had taken him by the collar. When a man without vanity loves a woman as much as he loved Catherine Dennis, the unasked favour of another is only a gyve to be shaken off. Unreturned love must be worn either as a fetter or as a decoration; and though there are many men whose pride it is to go through life decked out in the

cheap jewellery of the affections, the shepherd was not one of them. Had he found time to think of such things they would have irritated him. He did not care for ornaments; he only cared for freedom and for getting what he wanted. Though he believed himself to have lost Catherine for good and all, his freedom remained; and he felt now as though Susannah menaced it.

The religious emotion that had such a hold upon his character was gone for the time being and during the rest of the meeting he followed what was going on mechanically, his mind struggling with problems that took him far from the place in which he sat and the sermon to which his ears were deaf. He was nothing if not shrewd, and he was groping on the edge of a new suspicion. He was perplexed and disturbed, for the two facts of Susannah's love for him—almost incredible as he found that love—and Catherine's flight from her house struck

him as pregnant ones when taken together. He remembered his cousin's odd want of cordiality when she received the girl. He resolved to evade her, if he could, when his neighbours dispersed.

Mrs. Job, who was in chapel, was occupied with his affairs too. It was some time since she had seen the shepherd; and the last sign she had had of him was the sound of his horse's tread on the night when he had ridden from Pencoed with Catherine. Though she had no acquaintance with Susannah, she knew her by sight and was one of the few who had observed her stealing into the place of worship. It did not take her long to make the discovery that the stranger had come neither to pray, nor to listen, nor to sing.

From where she sat, Susannah's face was perfectly plain to her, and when she saw how her eyes were set on her cousin, and how no movement of his, no turn of the head, no tone of the voice, escaped her, the

devout Mrs. Job ignored her Bible and let her thoughts dwell, unrebuked, upon the pair. What revealed itself to the shepherd revealed itself with a thousandfold more conviction to her. She was not accustomed to take much notice of love at any time; but her warm affection for Heber made her acutely alive to everything that concerned him. While she was assured that Catherine Dennis was not good enough for him, Susannah's air brought revulsion to her Puritan nature. She began to dislike her with all her strength.

Almost at the final words of the final prayer Heber rose from his place and made for the door, and Susannah, who was on her knees with the rest of the assembly, had not courage to follow; for she was hemmed in by a woman and two men, who had entered later than herself, and who knelt immovably by her side. The shepherd gained the doorstep just as the minister's voice ceased, and one or two people looked

up, curious at his unusual haste. He was often the last to go.

He crossed the grass road hurriedly and went to the other side of Mrs. Job's house. From an outsider's point of view the deed was ignominious, but his plain intention was to avoid Susannah, and, as usual, he took the most direct way of doing it. He had meant to spend a little time with his friend, but he left her dwelling behind him and hurried towards the nearest dingle. Beside his distaste for the discovery he had made, the sight of his cousin brought back his trouble afresh.

Susannah and Mrs. Job came out of the chapel at the same moment. The former looked round in search of Heber. He was nowhere to be seen and she wondered if he had gone into her companion's cottage; with that probability in her mind, she bid her good-day, introducing herself as a member of the shepherd's family.

Mrs. Job replied shortly to her greeting

and made no comment on the information. They went across the grass, side by side, and when they had reached the doorstep without any suggestion of hospitality passing between them, the younger woman spoke again.

"Is Heber here?" she asked, nodding towards the walls.

"I'll see," said the other; and with that she entered, leaving her companion outside.

Susannah's lips closed in an angry line; it was evident that she was to get no encouragement. She was ignorant of the reason for this plain hostility; but it only made her more certain that her suspicion was correct and that the shepherd was not far off.

Mrs. Job reappeared, holding the door open to show a portion of her face—no more.

"He be'ant here," she called.

But Susannah was not to be baffled so easily.

"Can ye give me a drink o' water?" she inquired. "It's dry work coming up the hill."

The door was shut on her and she heard the pump working in the yard. Apparently the latch was not to be lifted again, for when Mrs. Job returned she came round the side of the house and handed her the desired drink.

Susannah swallowed the water, feeling as if it would choke her.

"Thank ye," she said.

And, as the elder woman put out her hand to take the empty cup, she dashed it on the ground at their feet. The china flew into shivers on the step.

She went off along the track, leaving the other speechless, and when she had gone a little way she sat down on the turf and looked back. Mrs. Job had gone in and the chapel-goers were dispersing; black figures scattered in retreating groups towards different quarters of the landscape.

Heber was with none of them and no one was going in her own direction. It seemed as if they, with Mrs. Job and the shepherd, were in the conspiracy against her. At last she rose and set out for the place at which she was to find the gig. Her eyes were dry, because she was too furious for tears.

About an hour afterwards Heber's perturbed wanderings came to an end: he approached Pencoed again. It was not only Susannah's demeanour and its suggestion that annoyed him, for, in his heart, he blamed her for having let slip his regained treasure. It was an illogical feeling, because he never doubted that Catherine had gone with Saunders, and gone willingly, repenting the rash step she had taken. He did not overlook the difference between himself and the richer man, though he despised Charles. He had managed to convey news of what had happened to Mrs. Job, and his heart was so sore that he longed for the sympathy

of the uncompromising and undemonstrative person whose partisanship never failed him.

There was a grim explosiveness in Mrs. Job's manner as he entered the house, though she listened patiently while he gave her the history of Talgwynne fair-day. Her husband stole in, anxious for a pipe beside the fire, but she motioned him out; her relentless predominance in the household was a matter of course, and Job departed as humbly as he had come.

"Maybe it's not Saunders as is at the bottom o' this," said she, when the shepherd was silent. "Mind you, Heber, I've got eyes in my head, an' ears too—not so long as some folks, but long enough to hear from here to Talgwynne! Ah! That cousin o' yours be a bit o' stuff to burn yer fingers wi', an' no mistake. I know that!"

Moorhouse frowned and his companion took his frown for a sign of dissent. She raised her sharp nose higher.

"What's wrong wi' her?" he asked.

"Wrong wi' her? She've got her eye on you! An' I've got mine on *her*, an' had in chapel, too. I can see a thing or two, b'lieve me!"

His brows drew still closer together.

"What made ye run out o' chapel like that?" demanded Mrs. Job, coming closer. "It cost me a good chinay cup, that run o' yours did. She just up wi' her hand an' down wi' the cup on the stones an' bruk it to pieces—if it had been my head my lady would ha' been better pleased, her would—askin' me for a drink. A drink indeed! Her wanted to get into the house to see if ye was in it. But her didn't know *me!*"

She gave him no time for comment.

"*I* saw her watchin' ye i' the chapel," she went on, "an' *I* heard o' her walkin' about Talgwynne fair wi' Saunders! Where was ye, Heber, that day?"

"I wasn't no more'n an hour i' the town,"

said he, "an' I'd business to do afore I could get to father's——"

"And Catherine was gone, sure enough, by then," broke in the other; "an' if ye tell me that baggage didn't get rid o' her I won't believe ye, that's all! Her may be wi' Saunders an' her mayn't."

If these new lights were dazzling the shepherd, they showed him his vague suspicions in more definite shape. He stood staring at Mrs. Job as if he could see into her brain. Mentally she travelled faster than he did, but he was following.

"The sooner I get after Susannah the better," he said, as he turned away.

"D'ye think *she'll* tell ye the truth? Go home, ye foondy feller, an' don't be wastin' shoe-leather!" she exclaimed loudly.

He said nothing but the obstinate determination on his face spoke volumes.

After he passed the window a horrible fear shook her.

"You take up wi' that baggage at

Talgwynne, an' I've done wi' you!" she cried after him.

Black Heber never swore; it was against his particular assortment of principles. But his lips moved as he passed out of earshot. He was on the nearest way to Talgwynne, and he knew that he must overtake his cousin if she were on foot; he knew also, from Mrs. Job's story of the broken cup, that she had not started homewards at once. It was not likely that she would tell him the truth, but he had a mad hope of wresting it from her; how, he did not know. At any rate, he might gather something from her bearing. He would be very cautious.

At last he saw her ahead of him. She did not hear his approach on the turf until he was close to her.

Her heart beat tumultuously as they walked on together. She could not understand why he had avoided her only to pursue her afterwards. The silence by

which each was seeking to compel the other's speech was broken by the shepherd.

"You've had no chance to tell me anything, Susannah," he began.

"About Catherine? There's nothing to tell. I'm main sorry for ye, that's all. They were gone when uncle and me got home from the fair."

"How d'ye know she be gone with Saunders? I went from the door like a fool in my haste, but maybe I'm wiser now."

Susannah had provided herself with answers for all emergencies.

"She left a bit o' paper with writing on the kitchen table. '*Charles Saunders is come,*' says she, '*an' I'm gone wi' him.*' No more nor that. Not a word of thanks to me, either."

"What did ye do with it?" exclaimed he, stopping short.

"Burnt it."

Heber made a smothered exclamation.

"But Saunders was at the fair till after-

noon," said he, at the end of a long pause, during which neither had looked at the other.

"I heard that. I s'pose he came back."

To the shepherd's practical mind there were discrepancies of time in Susannah's account that he could not adjust. When he had reached Talgwynne he had found the best part of the fair over; for noon saw business ebb in the little hillside place. His tardy appearance had been hailed with interest, and he was immediately secured to ride a horse for the inspection of a man who, he was told, had been all day in the town. The recollection of these facts sprang up to assort itself very ill with his companion's words. He made up his mind to get to Talgwynne on the first possible chance of absenting himself from his work and to see what he could elicit from his father. He could not tell how far the old man might be in Susannah's confidence. He did not speak of his intention to her,

and it struck him, when he turned to take his way up the hill and they stood within sight of the waiting gig, that she made no suggestion of his coming. It was the first time in his recollection of her that she had seen him without pressing him to come soon.

They had reached a dip in the ground which hid the wayside cottage where the gig with Susannah's friends was drawn up. She had looked for the expression of greater resentment from him, but he had cursed neither fate nor Saunders. He spoke of Catherine's desertion of him almost as if it had happened to some one else. There was no excitement in his manner, even little concern; and, for a man who had so few scruples about strong measures when they suited him, he seemed to accept his defeat with curious calmness. If he had flung away from his father's door with every sign of uncalculating bitterness, he was different now. She told herself with triumph that

he had taken Catherine's measure at last. Perhaps Susannah paid too little heed to those inconsistencies in him which surprised others.

As they parted she held out her hand and looked up at him with half-closed, half-mocking eyes.

"Ah—you'll forget her in time, Heber," she said, her fingers clinging to his as he touched them. She raised her face till it was close to his own.

He thrust her away with one short, frightfully definite word.

When she got into the gig a few minutes afterwards she was as white as a sheet.

CHAPTER VI

CATHERINE OPENS THE GATE

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TEN days had passed since the sturdy widow led her guest across the threshold, and Catherine, with the remains of a badly twisted ankle, was still under her roof. She had been molested by nobody. One of her two lovers supposed her to be with the other; Mrs. Job did not know where she was; and Susannah, equally ignorant, was only interested in knowing where she was not.

The attraction of opposites had done its work between Mrs. Cockshow and her housemate, for the two women were excellent friends. The human-heartedness of the elder one, and her permanent fancy for other people's business, made her deaf

when Catherine began to speak of leaving the place. She was still very lame and the toll-woman was right when she took Pharaoh to witness that to travel on foot would be insanity. Besides which, where was she going to? The question was unanswerable; and finally it was settled between them that the cleaning of the house, the cooking, and the minding of that mob of fowls which dwelt at the bottom of the garden should devolve upon Catherine, indefinitely, in return for her keep.

In this arrangement of Mrs. Cockshow's, convenience and charity, like righteousness and peace, kissed each other. Her whole interest was found outside her own walls; the road was her passion, her world; and those who went up and down on it her pictures, her newspapers, and, very often, her victims. To bandy words with her was the act of a fool; and so well was this understood that the ridicule which her strange appearance evoked when she first

came into residence by the gate had died a natural but by no means lingering death, and gossip had taken its place. This was for the best, because the latter was satisfactory to all, while the former had only been satisfactory to Mrs. Cockshow.

The thing that suited Catherine's patroness best in their arrangement was that the girl could be left in charge of the gate while she went to Llangarth market. She was a woman of some means, who did a small trade in eggs and poultry, and the difficulty of leaving her post on Thursdays had been a weekly annoyance ; for a market day was a foretaste of Paradise to her. She owned a stout, aged pony of her late husband's which she occasionally hired out to her neighbours for odd jobs, and she now looked forward to journeying in comfort to the very fountain-head of gossip. Besides this, it was delightful to her to have under her roof the heroine of an episode of which she had been almost the first to hear. She

had dragged Catherine's secret from her in the early hours of their acquaintance, and thought a great deal more of her companion when she learnt that she had eluded two of the opposite sex.

Mrs. Cockshow did not believe in men. Her own husband had drunk heavily and persistently; and she had had time to visit his sins upon him before he escaped into the next world. She was well acquainted with Charles Saunders, and slightly so with Black Heber, for both had passed through her gate at various times.

"Take care ye don't let the sun go over the 'ill, all the same," she had said to Catherine; for though a despiser of men, she was an advocate of marriage. To her, matrimony, with the whip hand, was the ideal life.

So far, she had kept her tongue quiet on the subject of her guest. Perhaps it pleased her to hug to her heart the gratification of knowing more than any one else; to pet her

knowledge, so to speak, before using it as a boast. Catherine had been kept a prisoner indoors for several days by her ankle, and when she went outside the walls it was only to tend the poultry or to hang out the washing in the garden. Never had so much washing been seen on the toll-house hedges before, though Mrs. Cockshow, to whom soap was not important, eyed the display contemptuously. Her cleanings consisted generally of what the country-side called "a lick and a promise." The toll-house hid Catherine from prying eyes on the road as she went about her business in the garden, and she began to feel secure in her very public retreat.

Between herself and Bungo, the white cur dog, no great friendship existed. The girl was fond of all animals; but her efforts to be on easy terms with this one had been useless, for he persisted in looking with imperishable distrust at her out of his blinking eyes and galloping away whenever

she spoke to him. He would follow her to the garden at a servile distance; but the first words she threw him would send him flying across the cabbage beds, from the safe side of which he would stun her ears with his insane barking. In Mrs. Cockshow, who had hurled enough stones at him to pave a yard, he had implicit trust; but he took each movement of Catherine's hand for a menace.

She had just returned from her hens one morning, with Bungo sneaking in her wake, when she heard Mrs. Cockshow in loud altercation on the road. The shrill, high voice of an old man was contending with that of the widow, and Catherine ran to the window in the upper storey, attracted by the increasing noise. Judging by the part that the word "fourpence" played in the storm, the dispute was about money, and the girl knew the toll-woman well enough to be sure that there could be but one issue to the combat. She smiled,

hearing the baffled fury in the old man's tone, as the gate swung open for the wheels that went grinding through it.

"A pint o' fourpences would be no more account to me nor a pint o' ditchwater!" he screamed. "I've *thousands* to leave behind me when I go, I have!"

"An', by Pharaoh, I've got more than that!" cried Mrs. Cockshow at the pitch of her lungs. "I've the world to leave be'ind me when I go!"

Catherine, at her vantage point in the upper window, pulled the curtain aside as the gate closed, only to jump back as though she had been fired at; for Bungo, who had joined his owner and was at the farther side of the road, fell into a frenzy of barking as he heard her movement at the open casement and saw her figure. The eyes of all went upward. The old man in the gig below was Saunders's uncle, and Catherine was looking straight into the upturned face of Charles.

When the gig had rolled on without any action on his part, she breathed again freely. Mrs. Cockshow standing in her favourite spot in the middle of the road, watched the vehicle out of sight, and when a bend hid it she came close under the toll-house walls.

"'E's 'ad enough o' you!" she called up, her broad face all one smile. "Did ye see the bald 'eaded old mawkin sittin' up beside 'im? If the young feller's no better nor 'im, ye did well to give 'im the slip. I've seen the old devil drivin' 'is cattle along this road many a time. A proud look and a 'igh stomach 'e 'as, too; but that don't keep 'im from bastin' their ribs wi' a common stick cut out o' the 'edge—can't spare so much as would buy a decent bit o' ash plant. 'E don't 'ave no cattle-man neither, an' 'im screechin' about 'is thousands! They do say 'e starved 'is wife too. I know them that's seen 'er——"

At this point the widow discovered herself to be shouting up into an empty room;

for Catherine had come out and was standing behind her, with a scared face.

Mrs. Cockshow turned on her.

"Silly wench that ye be!" she exclaimed. "It's better to be sure than sorry. I tell ye 'e 'ates the very sight of ye now, an' no wonder too. Go an' get the dinner. It's nigh upon twelve, and Bungo 'asn't 'ad a bite to-day. Come in, ye whelp!"

The last sentence was addressed, in a murderous tone, to the white dog, who wagged his tail. He took it for a caress.

Mrs. Cockshow arose next morning in her most jovial humour. It was Thursday; and now, for the first time for months, she was dispensing with the services of that neighbour who called to take her eggs to market and was looking forward to carrying them there herself. Catherine also was happy; for the two Saunderses had driven by last evening on their return journey, without so much as a look at the toll-house windows, and she was sure the widow was

right in saying that Charles now hated the sight of her.

She was not afraid that Heber would pass, though she knew that he went on Thursdays to Langarth; for his way thither from the hill farm joined the highroad some way east of the toll. She sighed. Could she see him, while remaining invisible herself, she knew that she would secretly be glad. But, admitting that, she put him from her thoughts with a heightened colour. Since Susannah's plain speaking, she had never let her mind dwell on the shepherd; yet she had learned of late that if her pride had been cruelly handled, her heart had fared little better. She could not think, looking back, how she had ever liked or tolerated Saunders. She was bitter against Black Heber, as well she might be; but she hated him and loved him at the same moment. For the first time, the simple girl was in a terribly complicated state of mind.

Mrs. Cockshow had tied on her late husband's hat with a new piece of twine and loaded her person yet more completely with clothes. Before she climbed into the antiquated side-saddle on her pony's back, she went to the roadside and began to fill the most accessible of her pockets with stones. While so engaged, she directed Catherine, who looked on with astonishment, to shut the gate and tie the animal to it. The girl obeyed, and when the widow approached, bulging more strangely than usual, she helped her to mount. Mrs. Cockshow used the toll bars as a horse-block. Then the egg basket was handed up to her, a switch cut from the hedge, and Catherine was bidden to attend to the needs of passers and to suffer no one to shirk payment. Before the rider was out of sight, Bungo burst with a yell from the toll-house and began to follow, raising a trail of dust as he went.

In one moment Mrs. Cockshow had

turned and the air was one hail of flying stones, while, through the cloud sent up by the sudden facing about of the pony, her arm could be seen whirling above her head like the arm of a mounted drummer through the smoke of battle; and as, in the blinding hurricane of hard metal and abuse, Bungo flew homewards like the greyhound which had evidently been too intimate with his grandmother, Catherine realised as she had never realised before, the infinite forethought of her protectress. She shut the dog into the house and sat down to await her first summons from the public.

Mrs. Cockshow gained Llangarth without further inconvenience. Many looks followed her as she rode up the street; but though there was a smile on most faces, no one addressed her with levity. Having disposed of the pony, she disappeared with her basket into the market-place.

The market had drawn more than one of the actors in our story to Llangarth;

for Charles and his uncle were among those inspecting cattle in the street, and Heber, who had come on horseback to take some sheep to the railway station, was in the town too.

Instead of answering Susannah's letter Saunders had put it into the fire, for he was resolved that the episode of his acquaintance with Catherine Dennis should be closed for good and all. He was ashamed of it now, and felt that he had deserved all he got for meddling with a woman so far beneath him in every possible way. There was some comfort in assuring himself that he was well out of it and that he would take care never to get into such a position again. He felt little resentment against her; not because he was broad-minded or forgiving, but because his rancour was so completely concentrated on Heber that it put everything else out of his head. He would never forgive the smile he had seen on the shepherd's face as he looked back

at him from the saddle on the Talgwynne road. It was constantly in his mind, and he was thinking of it as he came out of the post-office door when his business with the cattle was over. He turned down the street and saw his enemy, who was on his way from the station, coming to meet him.

Heber looked grim and weary as he approached. Since Sunday, when he had parted from Susannah, he had had no chance of leaving his work either to question his father at Talgwynne or to make any other attempt at discovering where Catherine had hidden herself. He did not know what to believe; his doubt of his cousin's truthfulness was strong and his opinion of Mrs. Job's wisdom great. Yet, as he looked back in cold blood at their ride in the dark and at his own roughness, he could not help seeing some likelihood in the girl's return to his rival. He was not accustomed to considering himself from the outside—few primitive men are; but he had thought

a good deal as he went about his business in the solitudes of the mountains; and failure will open new vistas to those who are not eaten up by vanity. Though not given to succumbing to circumstances, Heber was tried by the enforced patience and inaction of the last week and his heart was heavy in him.

If Susannah's letter had produced no effect on Charles, it had given him the keen pleasure of knowing that Heber was made a fool of as well as himself. The whole look of the man as he came to meet him sent the warmth of satisfaction through Saunders, because it suggested to him that he was out of spirits with the world. As the distance lessened between them his own expression proclaimed the feeling; and back again to his mind came the vision of their last meeting and Heber's smile. It was his turn to smile now. He stopped.

"Well, have ye found her yet?" he asked.

The shepherd made no pretence of mis-

understanding him; his methods were too direct for that, and even the engrafted genteelness of Charles's points of view could not blind him to a certain nobility in the coarsely clad, weather-beaten fellow, which struck him at that moment as an additional outrage on himself.

"I know where I won't find her, and that's wi' you," said Heber, at a venture.

Charles was sharp enough to see where a vulnerable point would lie, and the overmastering longing to wound Heber inspired his tongue.

"And that's where you're wrong," said he. "I've got her safe enough, and I'll keep her too—for a bit."

The pupils of the shepherd's eyes seemed to be contracting as Saunders watched his face with an ecstatic sense of the success of his own words.

"If I follow ye till midnight," Heber said, at last, "I'll see whether ye speak truth."

He spoke with a slow, cold emphasis.

Charles was a little disconcerted. Were the other to keep his word he would be likely to prove the falseness of his statement; were he to precede him to his house he would certainly do so. He suspected that Heber knew where he lived.

"You'll have some way to go, then," said he. "A decent man doesn't keep his wench under other folks' noses. If you've a mind to see Catherine, I'll not stop you. I'm going out to see her myself, an' perhaps the sight of the pair of us'll please her."

As he spoke, Saunders's eyes twinkled, for he was due at a village out in the neighbourhood and was going to start almost immediately in the gig. If Moorhouse chose to annoy him by following him, he would let him have the wild-goose chase he deserved for his pains; and as he left the shepherd standing in the street he could hardly keep himself from bursting out laughing. He looked over his shoulder. Heber was a few paces behind.

When Charles entered his house he saw that the shepherd was going to carry out his threat, for he was standing on the pavement watching him from the other side of the way; and as he emerged again to go into the stable behind the dwelling to fetch his gig, he was a little disappointed at finding that Heber had disappeared. But when he had harnessed the cob and was driving out of the yard his cheerfulness returned, for Heber had apparently only gone to get his horse—the same which had carried him and Catherine to Talgwynne—and was waiting for him at the end of the street. Just as Charles was starting, his uncle called after him to stop, as he meant to accompany him; and little as he desired the old man's company at the present juncture, he had no choice but to accept it. He drove out of the town and on to the Brecon road, with the trotting hoofs of the shepherd's horse following steadily with a rhythmic beat that kept exact

pace behind the gig, neither increasing nor slackening.

It was only when they had left Llangarth behind that it occurred to Charles what an egregious fool he had been. When he lured Heber after him he had forgotten that, in order to reach his destination, he would have to pass through Mrs. Cockshow's tollgate.

How he had perpetrated such an imbecility was beyond his understanding. On ordinary occasions he reached the village he was bound for by turning off the highway into a lane on the near side of the gate; but he remembered now that this was under repair and barred, and that he could only proceed by a cart track half a mile beyond the tollhouse. There was nothing for him to do but to put the best face he could on the business and to go forward. It was impossible to turn back because of his uncle's presence beside him; for the old man was not in his confidence, and

Catherine's face at the window yesterday had conveyed nothing to him. He did not know her by sight. He was aware of the trick that his nephew's intended bride had played him, and, because he had never favoured the marriage, he had made some very sour jokes on the subject. As they neared the toll Charles prayed that he might not have the chance of making more.

Still the tireless hoofs beat on behind them. Once he glanced back. Heber was rising and falling mechanically in his stirrups with the swing of the big horse's trot, apparently less interested in him and his gig than in the fields on either side. They went by the mouth of the closed lane. The bars were up and workmen were laying a seemingly interminable drain-pipe along the very middle of it.

As the little white house came in sight Saunders stared earnestly before him for Mrs. Cockshow and felt in his waistcoat pocket for the gate-money. The widow

was usually in the road, but to-day there was no sign of her familiar and unforgettable shape. He drew a sharp breath of annoyance. There would be shouting and waiting and all sorts of untoward delays; possibly a fresh battle between Mrs. Cockshow and his uncle. The latter was muttering already and beginning to look, as he did when excited, like a crazy hen.

Heber sat, immovable and unconcerned, on his horse when they pulled up, and Saunders raised his voice in the customary manner of travellers. The shepherd's money was in his fingers, but when Catherine came out of the tollhouse he almost dropped it into the dust.

For an instant the suspicion that Charles's hateful insinuations were true came to him like a cold blast. The girl hesitated, and then, with a glance at the occupants of the gig, approached him first, holding out her hand for the toll money. He leaned down towards her.

"What be you doing here, Catherine? How be you come here?"

She shrank back. There was suppressed vehemence in his tone.

"Don't be afeared o' me," he exclaimed, "I won't hurt ye, my girl."

"I live wi' Mrs. Cockshow," she faltered. She's at the market."

"Come on, come on, ye slut!" screamed Saunders's uncle. "Am I to wait here all day for you to be sweetheartin' wi' every vagabond feller on the road?"

Heber had dismounted, and as Catherine, bewildered, was about to obey the cattle-breeder, he held her back, He took no notice of the outburst, but he led her up to the side of the gig on which Charles sat.

"Tell me the truth, Catherine," he said, "be you livin' wi' this man or be you not?"

"*Livin'* with him—with *him?*" she exclaimed.

"Yes, you be hussy enough for anything, I'll be bound!" cried the old man's shrill

voice. "Let me go on, I tell 'e; open the gate! Who cares a damn who ye be livin' with?"

"He told me, not an hour back, that he was keepin' you," continued Black Heber, unmoved, pointing at Charles. "Be that true? Answer me, girl."

"It's a lie," cried Catherine, in a shaking voice. "So help me God, it's a lie!"

He loosed his hold on her.

"Open the gate, Catherine," said he quietly. Then he took Charles's cob by the head and looked up at its driver.

"Will ye drive on, like the lyin' cur ye are, or will ye come down now and have it out wi' me?"

"Let my horse go!" screamed the cattle-breeder. "Who be you, ye thief, stopping me an' my nephew in the road?"

Charles bent forward and cut at Heber with his whip.

"Go on, then, if you be afeared," said the shepherd, taking his hand from the bit.

"It's the wisest choice that you've made. And every time ye see me, ye can remember that I know the coward ye are."

"He's forgotten to pay," said Catherine blankly to the shepherd as they watched the gig disappear. "Oh! what'll Mrs. Cockshow say?"

Black Heber made no suggestion. There was only one question just then which interested him, and he could read its answer in Catherine's face.

"I'll tie up the horse and come in wi' you," said he. "Maybe I'd best wait and explain it to her."

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