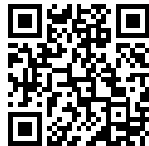

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The Weird
Sisters

James
Blyth

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THE WEIRD SISTERS





SARA AMISS AND BLACKBERRY BANHAM.

The Weir Sisters

[*Frontispiece*

THE WEIRD SISTERS

By

JAMES BLYTH

Author of "A Hazardous Wooing," "The Atonement,"
"A Bid for Loyalty," etc.

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CHAPTER I

THE WITCHES—ONE

ALL through the night the gale had roared about the old marshland hall. All through the night the ping and hiss of the pellets driven by the blizzard, tumbling down the wide old chimney, had warned the young squire, Ben Ryvett, that this was no ordinary March snow squall, but a storm which would be memorable for generations. More than once he had risen from the ingle-nook and peered out through the diamond panes of the mullioned windows to see a whirling wraith, ghastly in the foiled attempts of the gibbous moon to penetrate the clouds. Almost a giant as he was, he realized that it would be madness even on his part to try to venture forth to shoot the maddened, dizzy mallard, teal and smee, whose whirr of wings and frantic cries told the fowler of such a flight of duck as he had never known.

His mother, good old soul, was long since

huddled in bed. Why should he stay up when he knew that even his stamina was unequal to facing that rage of wind and snow shot?

"I'll turn in," he said to himself, as he stroked the head of the great bull mastiff Nelson, whom he had taught to be the finest finder and retriever of any sporting dog he had ever owned, despite the popular belief that neither bulldogs nor mastiffs can be trained to the gun. "If it clears we'll have a look round the shivering mash in the morning, old boy."

The splendid brindled dog thrust his muzzle in his master's palm, and gave one of those cooing soughs which are peculiar to the bull and bull-mastiff breeds.

Ben stroked the dog's head once more, and then tapped at the edge of the panel which covered the wall against the ingle-nook. It was a signal to his man which could be heard in the gun-room, whither Tim O'Shea was wont to make his way after supper in the servants' hall.

Presently Tim entered, garbed in a queer costume, a mixture of that of a groom and of an odd man indoors. Tim was Ben's man, outdoors or indoors, whether in the stables or in the kitchen, and he had the devotion of Sam Weller for a master whom he loved.

Ben nodded to his man when he saw the snub-nosed humorous face peep into the room round the

door. "I'm going to turn in, Tim," he said. "You need not wait up longer."

"And sure, your honour," said Tim, "'Tis little my bed will see of me this night. Had I guessed that Blackberry Banham could have raised all this shivaree because of a bit of a kiss, I'd ha' kept my mouth for my potheen and good luck to ut. By the saints, to think of a bit of a dainty colleen like Blackberry causin' all this for a bit of a kiss which after all was no more than a thry! Well, good night to ye, your honour! I'll be keepin' myself awake by clanin' the guns and such like till the wind fall."

Ben laughed. He knew the Irishman, his groom and handy man, was as superstitious as the marsh villagers themselves. Nay, he, the young squire, would have thought twice and thrice before he ridiculed the powers of old Burntoad Amiss or of that lovely handmaiden of the Black Man commonly called Blackberry because she was dark and sweet but was found to be full of hard pips by those who were too familiar.

Even now, in the twentieth century, there are witches, and the belief in their powers, to be found in the lonely marsh villages of Daneshire, and any sceptic in search of evidence will be amazed at the wealth of proof which will be laid before him in support of the common faith in witchcraft.

- Tim withdrew, and presently Ben extinguished the light in the old oblong room his father had used as a library, and went upstairs to bed, followed by Nelson, the great bull mastiff.

He rose at the first glint of the cold grey light of first dawn, so much brighter than usual because the whole land was overlaid with snow. The silence struck him weirdly, the ineffable silence of a world muted with deep layers of snow. But, as he hastened into his rough warm fowling flannels, he heard the distant crack and crash which told him that the firs in the plantation across the home paddock were being mutilated by the weight of snow on their wide outspread branches. The "c-c-c-ra-a-ack," and then the mighty rustle as of an avalanche, warned him of damage done and to be done amongst his trees, which neither he nor the best of his woodmen could prevent.

He dressed hastily, while Nelson yawned, stretched his great limbs, and prepared to follow his master. The dog fully understood that Ben would not rise so early for nothing. And if he went anywhere where there was hardship or peril to be faced Nelson proudly felt that the master would not go without his loving slave.

"Well, my son," said Ben as he flung his arms through the sleeves of his thickest tweed Daneshire jacket. "There'll be fowl about this morning.

You'll have your work cut out if the snow lies as deep on the mash as it seems to do about here."

Old Nelson gave a throaty chuckle and looked up at his master with both humour and devotion in his fine brown eyes.

In the hall, Bruce and Florrie, the two water spaniels, began to frisk as though impatient to go out. But Ben calmed them. "It's no day for you little dogglums," he said affectionately—for he loved all dogs better than he loved most men—"you must wait till the thow come."

The pretty curly-haired creatures whimpered but understood. They had an understanding master and they were certain that he would not leave them at home without good cause, especially when he had his double-barrelled muzzle-loading eight bore on his shoulder and his powder and shot flasks slung at his belt. Instinct had taught them that without, in the depth of snow, was no place for their short legs. They regretted it, but they knew their master was right.

Let every dog owner know this. Understand your dogs and they will understand you. Bully them, you make a pack of humiliated cowards. Spoil them by indiscriminate solicitude, you make toadies but never sporting dogs. Treat them as rational beings, speak to them as though they understood, and in time they

will understand. And no understanding and no love are like those of a good dog.

Ben did not risk awakening his mother and sister by drawing the mighty bolts of the hall door, but slipped out at the back.

The wind had died at the first dawn. Where Ben stood in his great leathern crotch boots the yard was clear, some eddy having swept the downfall from it. But as he progressed towards the gate leading out of the stable yard into the village road, old Nelson had to leap along, his chest covered by the white powder when he came to earth.

Before Ben reached the village on his way to the Shivering marsh he came to a tiny wattle and daub cottage, nestling at the corner of a plantation, from the chimney of which smoke was already rising.

He was passing it without a glance when he heard a hail, and turning, saw on its doorstep the oldest woman of the district.

Old Sara Amiss, known as "Burntoad," had none of the repellent qualities of many of the ancient rustic dames. Bent she was, her hair white and scanty, her face lined in innumerable creases, her nose and chin very near each other, her bowed figure supported on a long staff of well-seasoned holly. There was a liveliness and kindness about her faded blue eyes which were singularly attractive.

The old dame stood on the humble stone of her threshold, her nondescript dress of black woollen so old that it showed multicoloured in parts, her black lace cap drawn down to her crown by black silken ribbons, her old feet shod in "fancy boots" visible beneath her short skirt which allowed a glimpse of the good red flannel beneath to be seen, and she looked out upon the young man with a lively kindness which took years off her unknown but great age. Even now, when no one but herself knew whether she was a hundred or a hundred and ten years of age (she was known by the next oldest villager to be at least a hundred), she bore herself with a surprising agility, and there were still signs in her lined face of the great beauty which must have been hers when she was young.

"I bid ye good mornin', master," she cried, and her voice was strong, with scarce a senile quaver in it. "I bid ye good mornin'. The blessin' o' God's sun and wind upon ye, master. You who have never wronged maid or wife, man or boy, cow or yow, 'cos the sperrut of the mash is in ye. No slug-a-bed be you. Nor ever was ye. And you're right 'arly to find what's lyin' waitin' for ye! Doan't ye lose no time, for death is huntin' round. Time is more than life to ye now, and to one other. Mind what old Sara tell ye. Sara as bu'nt the Black Man's toad

as put some'at on¹ Snubby Farman's babes. Sara know ye and love ye, and you're the better for it, though ye doan't reckernize the truth. I speckilate you will be wiser soon. But mind ye, Sara know ye, and Sara love ye, and ole Burntoad as they calls me will watch ye agin any sarvant o' the Black Man's as try to mesh ye."

"Good mornin', Sara," cried Ben cheerily. "Thank ye for your good wishes. I know there's many about here who would pay a lot for 'em. But what you mean by your riggermaree of life a-waitin' for me? I don't understand. But I thank ye, Sara, and I'll bring ye a packet o' snuff next time I go to Herringhaven."

"And I'll thank ye for it," replied the old dame. "But 'tain't snuff as I'm thinkin' on now, Master Ben. You doan't quite unnerstand ole Sara's ways. Snuff I like and gin I like. But, Master Ben I can't do 'thout, nor yet the whole willage. There, my dare. That's well as you come by this mornin', for I have a word o' warnin' to say this wery mornin', and you doan't want to put the grin² on me, for I bain't humbuggin' ye a mite. Hark ye now, and mind what I say."

The old dame pranced round in a quaint fashion for a moment, and then seemed to swell to a much

¹ Benitshie.—J.B.

² Ridicule.—J.B.

greater height, and to assume a dignity which was so great that it even held Ben Ryvett in awe for the time. Old Sara pranced round, and at last took her stand with her right foot well out, her huge old holly staff extended. Her voice changed, and from the cracked thin voice of age changed to a richer, more vibrant tone. She waved her staff thrice, north, east and south, the three quarters which she could face without turning. And then she crooned rather than sang—

“ Sara know, Sara know,
Hear her sayin’ afore ye go.
Now the time ha’ come to choose
What to gain and what to lose.
An ye put your pouch afore your love
The way runs even, but never above.
You may spend your life with your treasure trove
And never know what makes life worth while.
An ye put your heart afore your purse,
Troubles will come and troubles worse
Will follow behind, for the Black Man’s curse
Lies heavy on him who scorns his guile.
Would ye riddle the ree by line and verse?
Heart up! What matters the Black Man’s curse
When troubles are gone, and the clouds disperse
In the radiant sun of the loved one’s smile.”

“ Now do you be a-goin’. Doan’t ye pay no regard to Blackberry Banham. She’ll tempt ye, and she’s pratty to see—outside. But she’s spawn o’ the gre’t worm o’ the mash. The Black Man ’ill hev ye body and soul an ye touch her lips wi’ yar’n. You saved

my daughter's daughter's babe from the cold pit o' the Black Man's carr¹ when there worn't no one but you to do it and no one else 'ud ha' wentered in that bottomless pit. She ha' gorn, but I hain't, and I know what ye did, God bless ye. There's that a-waitin' for ye on the rand as you'd run to find an ye knowed on it. Find it and keep it and guard it, and God bless ye both. But you want to mind old Sara's rhymes—nonsense they call 'em! Do you mind 'em bor, my brave squire, and for the sake o' the good and the ruin o' the evil, mind what you're arter along o' Blackberry."

Ben laughed genially. "That's all right, Sara," he said. "Why, I've never spoken to the woman but about twice."

"And tha'ss twice too orfen," said Sara. "But go your ways, and God bless ye."

The old woman raised her staff and traced weird curves in the air.

Despite his Cambridge course Ben felt moved by some eerie sensation of awe as he watched her. He was of marshland blood, he had heard marshland witch stories in his childhood. And he had many and many a time been under the influence of the spirits of the marsh by night when all the upland sleeps and there are only the whispers and cries of the mysterious

¹ A small plantation in marshland.—J.B.

marshlands about. He watched the old woman as his dog Nelson went to her, wagging his tail and evincing every sign of friendliness. He saw the old woman lean down to the ear which the dog seemed to raise to her mouth and saw her lips moving as though she spoke to the "dumb animal."

The dog slobbered his great mouth over her gnarled hands, and there was veneration in his faithful eyes as he looked up at her wonderful old face.

"Why, Nelson!" cried Ben, wondering. "Aren't you coming?"

He saw old Sara stroke the dog's head once, twice and thrice, and then Nelson came bounding to him.

As he turned to go on his way, with Nelson close at heel, he saw old Sara again tracing quaint figures in the air. She nodded and "bopped" to him in farewell, and smiled. It was with a good heart that he pursued his way towards the Shivering Marsh, some quarter of a mile distant from the other end of the village; at the corner of the "carnsa" or causeway leading to which unstable level Blackberry Banham had her dwelling.

CHAPTER II

THE WITCHES—TWO

TH**ERE** were numerous signs of waking in the village by now. Ben hesitated for a moment, and considered whether he should call at Bob Clare's cottage and ask him to accompany him. Bob was the keeper of fish and game on the Cootby estate, and had taught his young master to throw a live bait and use a gun. But Ben decided to go by himself that morning. If there was anything in old Sara's hints it might be best for him to make his way to the Shivering Marsh and on to the denes by himself. And it would be untrue to say that at heart the true-bred son of the marsh was free from belief in the powers of the local witches.

He strode through the village, the snow making his passage noiseless, and he drew near the corner where the carnsa or causeway down to marsh led from the street to the levels. At an angle of the hedge fencing in the last field marshwards Blackberry Ban-

ham dwelt. Many years ago, long before the memory of the oldest inhabitant or his father, Blackberry, or to give her her proper name, Judith Banham's great-great-grandmother, had squatted on the land which was then a corner of a stretch of common. The land was valueless. The squire of Cootby of the time was a Buck about Court. No one thought it worth while to disturb the old woman. And soon she had given such exhibitions of her powers that no one would have dared to attempt to oust her from her plot. She had no difficulty in obtaining sufficient labour and material to run up her wattle and daub hovel, which was even less pretentious than that of old Sara Amiss. And there she had squatted and woven her spells, if tradition did not lie, to the destruction of all those who annoyed her in any way. She was not a "wise woman," a healer, as was old Sara. She and her descendants, who were all female, frankly posed as servants of "The Black man of the Marsh," that is to say as black witches, sealed to the Powers of Evil.

Judith Banham still bore the surname of her grandmother's mother's mother. The male partners or husbands of this curious race had been so negligible that their existence was scarce remembered. The race of witches all bore the name of Banham, and never was more than one child born of the respective unions, and never was that child other than a girl.

To townsmen this may seem bizarre, impossible. To marshland folk eighty years ago, aye, and even now, it was and is a mere matter of course.

Unconsciously Ben Ryvett hastened his thrust of the great crotch boots as he approached Judith's dwelling. He knew there was rather an enmity than a rivalry between old Sara and Blackberry. Sara was known as a white witch, a healer, an antidote to Blackberry's evil spells. Ben did not believe all that, but he was ready to acknowledge that he had known of and seen things which could not be explained as caused by any ordinary agency. Nevertheless, he was loth to regard Blackberry as a daughter of the Black Man, for she was probably the most beautiful young woman in Daneshire, possibly in England.

She was known to be thirty years of age, but she did not look a day over twenty. Confident in her knowledge of her extraordinary voluptuous dark beauty, Blackberry had openly wooed the young squire. But apart from a little harmless trifling he had never succumbed to her fascinations. Never had his lip touched hers, and as he remembered Sara's warning he was glad of it, though in those days a kiss was little more than a handshake is now.

Ben resolutely kept his eyes away from the cottage which he was about to pass and which he knew to contain the lovely Judith. His heart beat a little

faster, and his legs moved with greater vigour. Nelson had crept close to his heels, and although he was forced to leap through the snow, there was an air of fear about the dog even at the moment of his spring.

Ben was almost round the corner into the carnsa when he heard his name called in the rich exquisite contralto which he knew to belong to Judith.

“ I bid ye a white mornin’ arter the black night, my man,” said Judith, standing at her door with her magnificent black hair flung loose so that its glistening screen covered her shoulders and bosom and body and limbs to her knees. “ The sun rise upon ye. And there’s a many as would pay good gold for a blessin’ like that from Judith. Come ye in, bor, and drink a thimbleful o’ cordial o’ my own brewin’. ’Tis ill goin’ to the Shiverin’ Mash on such a morn without a drop o’ warmth in your belly, and I’ll lay a hand o’ glory as you never thought to take aught afore ye left the Hall.”

Blackberry stood smiling at the young squire. She was over the middle height of women, magnificently proportioned, lissome and yet with full curving lines of beauty. Her face, dark as it was, had no trace of Romany in it. It was oval, and well fleshed, the nose small and straight, the eyes very large and of an uncommon and very lovely violet colour. Her complexion was that of olive shot with the ripe damask

of a sun-warmed nectarine ; her ears were small and transparent, her mouth of middle size but so full lipped, especially as regards the under lip, that it looked smaller than it was. If ever a model were needed for Astarte, Blackberry would have been the best any painter or sculptor could have found.

"Come ye in, my man," she said, smiling at the young fellow who had suddenly fallen tongue-tied. "Come ye in, and of your own accord."

She advanced towards the young fellow, and in some strange way she seemed to avoid the snow which lay thick about the roadway. Her gait was queenly and she was the very essence of allurements, her rich dark beauty being accentuated by the purity of the snow-clad land and marshscape.

But, as she approached, a menacing rumble roused Ben from his partial stupor. He looked down startled. Covered in snow nearly to his neck, Nelson was strung to a mighty leap. The hairs on his skull and neck and on so much of his back as could be seen were stiff. The tip of his tail projected comically from the snow. It was as rigid as an iron bar. One could see the great muscles swelling beneath the loose skin of his neck. His head was raised, his ears drawn back, his upper lip curved and his teeth exposed.

"Down, boy," said Ben. "Why, Nelson, you would not hurt a woman."

But the dog paid no heed to him. He kept his splendid eyes, now bloodshot with fury, fixed on the lovely woman who stood before her hovel inviting the young squire to enter.

"He won't hurt me," said Blackberry. "I dare say he can smell my pets Bel and Bub."

Suddenly from some place in her dress a hare and an otter appeared, the former on her right shoulder and the latter on her left. They seemed to grin tauntingly at the great dog as they pressed their soft pelts against the soft skin of their mistress's neck.

"Why!" cried Ben, "how the deuce did you tame that otter? Tame hares are common enough. But an otter! You are a tamer and no mistake!"

"But I can't tame what I fain would," said Judith. "Come ye in, master. Drink a cup o' cordial, stronger than any sperruts you can buy."

"Well, I don't know," replied Ben. "It's a cold morning. But I've got warm pressing through the snow."

He advanced a step. But before he could take a second Nelson leapt forward and turned, rising on his hind legs and pressing his fore feet against his master's breast.

Ben hesitated, and decided. "No," he said, "I won't come in this morning. If I do, I shall be late for the fowl. Thank you all the same, Jude."

Judith looked at him and knew that the dog had beaten her. Well, she could be avenged for that. Also she could bide her time.

"Wait ye," she cried. "Wait ye. I have a word to say to ye, and if you're a wise man you'll hearken. Wait, and let my words stay with ye."

Before Ben could answer, the woman turned thrice widder-shins, her mass of hair floating around her. Then she stopped her gyrations, facing the young squire. And now her face was aglow with the fire of a prophetess.

"The season for choice be a-comin' fast.

Will ye prove a man, or a love-sick calf ?
Will ye hold right tight to the things that last
Or pluck at a wheat-ear and gather chaff ?

A woman or wealth ! Lor ! The one grows old !
Bad-tempered and crotchety, bony and crankful,
But hug to your bosom the good red gold
And you'll allust have some'at for which to be thankful.

A wench's lips may be soft and red,
And warm as the sun on an old brick wall,
But they'll wither and cool till you wish 'em dead,
While the gold in your pouch will outlast 'em all.

Be ready, be ready to make your choice ;
Red gold will give ye a merry life.
A cuckoo can mimic a lover's voice,
But with gold in your pouch you can buy ye a wife."

Ben laughed at the doggerel, which showed that his heart was as yet free from passion. His mother believed that he was all but betrothed to an heiress

of the neighbourhood. But neither Ben nor Marshmallow Wednesloe, the heiress in question, was under any delusion on that point.

So Ben laughed, nodded to the disappointed Judith, and went on his way to the Shivering Marsh.

It was strange, he thought, very strange, that the two village witches should both have warned him that the time of his ordeal was near and have advised him in diametrically different ways. Being young he was more or less vain, and he told himself that Judith's liking for himself had caused her to warn him against love for another.

In that he may have been correct. It is a thing which will never be known.

CHAPTER III

THE JETSAM

BEN strode down the carnsa till he came to the edge of the Shivering Marsh. He knew that it would practically be suicide to attempt to cross that treacherous expanse of rand rather than marsh under the cover of the snowfall. So he took his way along the dyke wall which ran round the marsh and saw that at all events the Fleet dyke had not frozen.

The first suggestion of sunrise was now glinting a yellow pallor over the denes to the east. On the north-eastern point of the marsh a tiny creek narrowed to the Fleet or tidal dyke which ran to the east and south of the quaking fibrous rand. But the tide was feeble here and the water of the Fleet and its tributary dykes was fresh save at the seaward end of the creek. Here, if anywhere, would fowl be found.

Ben walked silently towards the angle where the marsh turned ahead, and as soon as his head rose to visibility from the water in the Fleet round that angle

there came a tremendous splashing and fluttering and a chorus of gabbling "honk, honk, honkas," as a parcel of at least thirty great white birds rose heavily from their feeding.

"Grey lag geese, by Jove," said Ben to Nelson. "Lucky I loaded with number threes."

He waited till he got three heads of the slowly rising geese in a line and then fired his right barrel. The whole three came down in the huddled way of dead birds. Then he got two more heads in a line and fired his left barrel. The nearer bird fell as dead as the first three, but the other, after staggering in its flight as the shot struck it, kept on towards the mouth of the Fleet where it joined the little shallow creek.

"Hang it," said Ben. "I hope it will fall on land."

As he fired, Nelson bounded forward, and before the second barrel had roared out the dog was back with one goose in his mouth and hastening to get another. In less than five minutes four geese had been thrust into Ben's capacious game pockets which lined the inside of his jacket.

"Good old boy," he said to the dog. "That's about enough for the morning. We shan't get another shot. Let's see if we can find the fifth."

All around the marsh the brightening sky was dark with rising and fighting birds, disturbed by the gun-

shots. Geese, mallard, teal and smee swung round and round to get to a height which would make them safe from the peril of the gun, and then flew straight and swift inland towards the other broads and levels.

Bar a chance at a snipe there would be no more sport on the Shivering Marsh.

Ben hastened on towards the denes where he hoped to find his wounded goose.

But Nelson understood the game as well as he did and bounded before him, leaving him at least two hundred yards in the rear before he touched the sandy soil of the denes. And as soon as he had got off the rand he heard the dog's voice lifted in such a howl of appeal as he had never heard before.

"Fetch it here, boy," yelled Ben at the top of his voice, for he could only gather that the goose had fallen in some spot where it was difficult to retrieve it. "Fetch it here."

But still the dog's plaintive howl wailed through the morning air. Again and again he howled, till Ben, hurrying as fast as he could, began to suspect that there was something ahead which was of more importance than a wounded goose.

He had heard that poignant howl before, and then it was the wail of human death.

Ben now ran as hard as he could in the great crotch boots which are so hard even to walk in for any one

who is not used to wearing them. He raced over the edge of the rise of the Denes, where now the tussocks of marum grass were all covered by the downfall, and from the ridge he saw Nelson standing, his forelegs wide, his great neck stretched, his head lifted as though in appeal to heaven, standing beside something dark which lay in a hollow where the vagaries of the wind had brought but little snow.

“Good boy, good boy,” panted Ben, striding down over the uneven hillocks and hollows of the Denes.

And again Nelson lifted his voice and sent out that appeal for help which no one who understands dogs could mistake.

Lying at Nelson’s very feet was the huddled shape of a girl. Ben knelt beside her, raised her head, and felt her heart.

She lived! And then he gasped. Never had he seen a face which appealed to him as this one, this pale, lovely, pitiful face of one who seemed more like a child than a woman, who seemed to be on the very edge of death, and who stormed his heart at sight.

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERY OF JONQUIL

THE figure huddled in the hollow was very small. It wore no head covering, and the clothes upon it were poorly fitted to combat such a storm as that of the previous night. Still, in spite of its fragility, there was life in it, and that life called to Ben with such an appeal as he had never known.

He raised the girl in his arms, and looked at her. It was a tiny face, but every feature was perfect in its piquancy. It was not classic. It was not cold enough for that, for classic features rarely make an appeal to the heart. The raven-wing hair had come loose in her struggles. Her cheeks, pale as egg-shell porcelain, were as fine and dainty. And when, warmed at Ben's bosom, she opened her great golden-brown eyes, it seemed to him that they whispered to him tales of such love, strength and devotion as he had never guessed could exist. She was so frail, such a little thing in his arms. Yet he observed, when he could tear his eyes from her face, that her dress was of rich

material, well made, and there was a gold chain round her neck to which was attached a single brilliant which he could not believe to be a diamond, so huge it was in its plain gold ring setting.

Who was this fairy-like girl? How did she come here, tossed upon the Denes like some bit of jetsam?

Holding her still to his breast, he warmed her with his jacket which he wrapped round her; still pressing her to the warmth of his chest, he turned round, holding her in his arms, and looked about for some evidence of the manner in which she had reached that dangerous and desolate strip of denes.

A few yards up the Fleet dyke from the landward end of the little creek he saw a boat which had stranded at the fall of the tide. It was not a river or broadland boat, but a strongly built ship's boat, similar to those carried aboard the fishing luggers but differing somewhat in line and shape. Had the notorious stretch of shifting sands which made the approach to that part of the coast so perilous claimed another victim for its sucking hunger? For three miles and more the knoll of shifting sands reached its menace to the sea and its protection from the North Sea waves to the shore. Many and many a fishing and coasting craft had perished there. Many and many a wooden skeleton had been merged in the gulping maw of that sandy reef.

A gentle movement in the frail body he held distracted his attention from the boat. Sportsmanlike he had wished to examine the "feetings," or other marks on the snow, in the hope that therefrom he might be able to understand in what manner this lovely castaway had come to such a perilous case. But, at the feel of the slight motion in the living body he held close to him he forgot all else but that he was there to succour the most alluring damosel he had ever seen, the most fragile and the most dainty. Even at that dramatic moment he was not sure that the stranger was more *beautiful* than Marshmallow Wednesloe of Smeeby Hall to whom he was practically affianced.

As he saw the pale exquisite delicacy of the face he supported beneath his chin, his mind, for a moment, harked back, not to Marshmallow, but to the riper and more luscious allurements of Judith Banham. He thrust the recollection from him, as of some dark peril, as of something coarse, unworthy to be remembered in the presence of this pale purity, something which it would be vile to think of while he held this precious piece of jetsam to the warmth of his young manhood.

Again the girl stirred, and this time with more strength in her effort. She was unconsciously trying to recover her consciousness. It was great mother

nature at work influencing the stupefied vigour of a healthy young woman to conquer the menace of death which had brought the end of her existence in this world so close to her.

Ben felt in his pocket for the flask of superb old cognac (which still found its way to the east coast from Nantes without the authority of the revenue) without which he never ventured on to the Shivering Marsh. Holding the girl in one arm, so slight she was, he managed to free the mouth of his flask from the stopper. He poured a few drops between her lips with an infinite tenderness. The spirit was old and soft, but as ardent as molten steel. There was a gasp, a shiver, and again another gasp. And then, as Ben held her to him with the solicitude of a father and the dawning passion of a clean-lived youth who has met the conqueror Love for the first time, she opened those long-fringed lids and looked up at him with a pair of golden-brown eyes which startled him by their beauty and wondering appeal.

"*Traitres!*" she cried feebly, as she struggled more determinedly in Ben's arms. "*Pourquoi donc ne m'avez vous pas tuè?*"

Ben knew no French, but he saw the indignation and abhorrence in her eyes, and it hurt him as nothing had ever yet hurt him before.

"I don't understand," he said. "I found you lying

here, nearly dead. How did you fare to come here, and on such a night as last?"

The girl ceased to struggle and lay passive in the great arms which held her, her eyes wide and wondering, fastened upon the honest blue gleam of encouragement which shone in Ben's look.

"We were wr-r-acked, is it not?" she asked, in good English, but with a French accent which was rather pretty than otherwise. "Wrecked on ze sandbanks. And Achille—eh, eh!—two men rowed me to land in ze boat."

As she spoke her eyes shrank from meeting Ben's. For the first and only time during his knowledge of her the girl evinced signs of confusion.

"And left you here, here, to die?" asked Ben sternly.

"*Mais*—pardon—but per—perhap zey sought I was dead," suggested the girl. "I remember nussing of ze land. I remember myself only of ze boat."

Suddenly a look of alarm troubled the clearness of her golden-brown eyes. She tried to put her hand in the bosom of her gown, but could not owing to the manner in which Ben still held her.

Now indeed she struggled in his arms. "Release me, if you please, sir," she said. "Oh, it is of importance—of grand importance."

Ben let her feet drop gently to the little hollow in

the Denes which the eccentricity of the blizzard had left clear enough of the snow to permit the marum grass to be seen.

Feverishly the girl searched in the sodden bodice of her frock. She turned an agonized glance on Ben. "But ze robe, ze robe of how you say, of *toile vernie*, oily skin, perhaps it is there! And I see it not! Oh, Monsieur, what have you done wiz ze oily skin?"

"There was no oil-skin here when I found you," replied Ben. "You were layin' here as you are, 'thout hat or coat. I thought you were dead. Nelson here found ye first!"

He called to the dog, but Nelson did not respond. He stood apart, his eyes fixed on the girl uneasily. He did not growl or show fear as he had done in the presence of Blackberry Banham, but he was clearly unprepared to greet this stranger as a friend as yet, though, when he had found her lying unconscious, he had followed the noble traditions of his kind and howled forth an appeal for assistance.

"*Les traitres!*" muttered the girl, for the second time.

Her lips quivered as she uttered the word, and, turning a grey tint far more ghastly than her former intense pallor, she was falling in a swoon to the denes when again Ben took her in his arms.

Again he plied her with the contents of his flask,

he chafed her hands, and wrapped her round with his jacket till once more she opened her eyes shudderingly.

“ Ah ! ” she moaned. “ You are good, M’sieur. But oh ! What is it I shall do ? ”

“ Do ? ” cried Ben. “ Why, come home to my mother. I’ll carry you ! ”

“ But ze paper ! ” moaned the girl. “ Ze paper of my father. It is worth souzands ! And zey have robbed me of it. ”

CHAPTER V

NELSON'S WARNING

BEN was about to ask questions concerning this mysterious paper, but he saw that the girl's eyes were again closed; obviously she was in no case to undergo examination, however friendly it might be. The best thing he could do was to get her to Cootby Hall under the care of his mother as speedily as was possible.

He longed to make a careful search for such evidence as the snow might afford. From where he stood he could see a double line of the footfalls of two men running from the hollow in the Denes to and from the boat.

"By the Lord Harry!" he cried, "they must be lying down in the boat! I must carry her close past it on my way back. Nelson, boy," he added, calling to the dog who seemed depressed and sulky, quite unlike himself, "Hi lost! Hi lost!" He pointed to

the rows of footprints, but knew well enough that there would be little scent to be picked up from the snow, which was already beginning to soften and melt.

Nelson understood and ran on ahead towards the boat. If he could pick up no scent he could see the footings as well as his master, and he was quite as intelligent as his master.

Ben, bearing the girl in his arms, with his gun slung round his back by the strap which he had often found useful when both hands were required for his leaping-pole, strode along as swiftly as he could behind the dog. "Quiet, boy," he called out to Nelson, fearing lest he might spring at the men if he found them in the boat, "quiet."

There was no necessity for his caution. Nelson sprang along till he came to the boat, and placed his forefeet on the starboard bow, for the craft had swung round in the ebb as the water pressed against her stern though her bows were high and dry.

Nelson gave one look over the thwarts and turned his great head to his master. His meaning was as plain as though he had spoken. The boat was empty.

Ben verified it when he reached the dyke wall. He looked round for other footmarks. There were none.

Nelson gave a whine and a bark and looked hard across the Fleet, and, following the direction of the dog's gaze with his own eyes, Ben saw that on the

other side of the water the footprints stretched away towards the land.

So far as he could see from the wall the boat was absolutely empty. There was not even a scull, mast, sail, or baling can in her. It was very tantalizing. He longed to follow the track on the marsh across the dyke. He knew that before he could carry the girl to his home and return with men to assist him in his hunt the probability was that the snow would have melted sufficiently to render it almost impossible to follow that track. Nelson would no doubt have swum the dyke and followed it at command. But Ben loved the dog too much to send him after two men who were probably desperate characters; for, from the little reference the girl had made to them, they appeared to have robbed her. Even if they had not done this they must be heartless scoundrels to have left so delicate a creature to her death while they saved their own villainous hides.

There was only one thing to do: to make all haste to the Hall and to return with assistance as quickly as possible.

Ben was a very powerful man. But he needed all his strength and endurance to carry his burden over the Shivering Marsh. The melting snow now clogged his great boots, and as he forced his way along the wall the weight which had seemed so trifling at first

began to assume tremendous proportions. The Shivering Marsh was one of the largest on the level. Nearly a hundred acres in extent its boundaries were as irregular as the outline of Great Britain, and not unlike it in shape. It was unsafe to leave the wall of the Fleet, and that same wall dodged in and out with an inconsequential raggedness which made Ben curse as he staggered along it.

He was all but done when he reached the southern gate of the western end of the great boggy expanse. Here he swept such snow as remained from the top rail and rested his burden upon it as gently as his wearied muscles permitted.

As he steadied the girl, who still appeared to be unconscious, he looked across the marsh to his left. Near the landward end of this lay the small carr or plantation in the midst of which was the fathomless pit, the object of universal superstition to the peasants, from the black depths of which strange pool the fabulous worm of the marsh was said to emerge when in search of prey. And, as Ben's marsh-trained eyes searched with the habitual and automatic keenness of a marshland sportsman, he started. He swept his free hand across his eyes, and looked again.

"Oh, nonsense!" he muttered to himself. "I'm that done I can't see straight. I reckon it's a shadow or something."

For, far off, near the outskirts of the carr, it seemed to him that the snow was marked by a sinuous trail which, so far as might be judged from the distance at which he stood, was as thick as his own body at the waist.

The sun was now risen over the Denes, and its rays were already sufficiently powerful to cause a slight snow haze or quivering mist—a marsh mirage—as the escaping moisture from the melting downfall rose in the windless atmosphere.

“It’s fancy, that’s what it is,” said Ben. “Come on, my beauty. Let’s be getting home-ways.”

There was a way through the level which led him to the Hall without making it necessary to pass through the village. And Ben felt a strange reluctance to carry the stranger past Blackberry Banham’s cottage. So, although it was a little harder going, and a little longer, he chose the marshland route.

He gasped as he reached the gate leading from the Hall paddocks on to the home carnsa. And here again he rested his burden upon the top bar. Then, with set teeth and braced muscles, for indeed he was now very weary, so weary that he told himself it was no wonder that he had imagined he had seen a winding wormlike trail near the carr of ill repute, he staggered along the slight rise of the paddock till he reached the stable yard.

He was white as a sheet now and his breath was coming in great gusts.

So fatigued was he that he did not hear the sound of cheerful whistling, and of the swish of a besom upon the pammments (pavement) of the yard, and he started so that he came nigh to drop the girl when he heard Tim O'Shea's voice close beside him.

"By the saints, Masther Ben," said Tim, crossing himself. "And phwhat are ye bringin' on us at all, at all? Shure you should know better than to pick up any fairy woman ye find in the bog before the sun has rose on the curse of the snow!"

As the groom spoke the girl stirred uneasily in Ben's arms, and the movement was more than his tired muscles could endure. He dropped her feet to the pammments, now swept bare of downfall by the Irishman.

"Hold your noise, man," gasped Ben. "And for God's sake help me in with her. I'm done."

Tim still held back. "Indade, Masther Ben," he objected, "it's unwillin' I'd be to take any part in ut! Oh—h, what will the misthress say, d'ye think! Ochone, ochone!"

"Oh, stop your gabble," said Ben angrily. "Take her feet, I tell you."

"'Tis on your own hid thin, mind ye," protested Tim, throwing down his besom and stooping to lift

the tiny feet which peeped from beneath the sodden serge of the girl's skirt.

Together they bore her to the door leading into the kitchen and servants' hall where Ben knew he would find the best fire in the Hall at that time of the morning.

And as the door was opened and the two men carried the girl within doors Nelson, who had stopped on the swept pammments, raised his great head to the sky and howled pitifully thrice.

"Hark to the wise dog," muttered Tim. "Hark to 'um! May our Lady protect all under this blessed roof from all evil, but shure my heart is heavy within me."

"Hode your n'ise for shame!" said Ellen Grimmer, the stalwart good-natured cook, as she came bustling forward at sight of her young master and his morning find. "Poor lamb, look at her poor white cheeks. Why, she's perished. Leave her to me, Master Ben, and I'll send Jane to ye with the kittle o' hot water, for you look nigh as bad. Leave her to me, and when she've come round I'll let ye know."

Ben nodded. His weariness, now that his task was achieved, was beyond all that he had ever experienced.

"I think she'll come round, Ellen," he said. "Is my mother down yet?"

"Not yet, sir. But you can trust me. I'll bring

her round and learn ye when she's fit to thank ye for herself."

Tim threw one uneasy glance at the girl, now lying outstretched on a couch in the servants' hall, shook his head despondently, and as Ellen opened her mouth to give him another piece of her mind, made his escape into the yard.

And as the cook bent down to succour the stranger again Nelson's howl wailed thrice on the still reeking air of the morning thaw.

Tim patted his head.

"And that's my thought intoirely," he said to the dog. "Come round to the front and I'll let ye into the hall to your own place. I can see ye like the neebourhood of the sthrenger no better than myself. 'Tis the wise dog ye are."

CHAPTER VI

THE STRANGE TRACKS*

BEN made his way to the breakfast-room in which already a bright fire of ash and oak was burning. He sank into the great leathern arm-chair which had been his father's before him, and waited for Jane and the kettle. Presently the plump pretty peasant girl entered, and when she had mixed the restorative of which her young master stood so much in need she drew off the thigh boots which now felt upon Ben's hard-worked legs as though they weighed a ton.

"Thanky," said Ben. "Send Tim in to me."

He knew that he was in no case to venture out again until he had rested thoroughly, and he could see through the window that now that the sun was rising fast the thaw was well set in. If the scoundrels who had deserted the girl on the Denes were to be tracked by their footings there was no time to lose. But Ben flattered himself that even if the expedition he intended to send out in chase was foiled by the thaw, there was no chance of two strange men hiding

themselves in the neighbourhood of Cootby. At that time, in the early thirties of the nineteenth century, a stranger of a foreign nation was as rare in the village as a bittern is nowadays, though the herring fishers and longshore boatmen met sailor-men from overseas often enough.

“Look here, Tim,” said Ben, when the handy man appeared, “I want you to find Bob Clare and take him with you to search the dirty marsh. You’ll find a ship’s boat on the putty at the point of the Shivering Marsh. Bring her up the dyke as far as she will come. Opposite, on the dirty marsh, you ought to find a track of feetings leading landwards. Follow them till you find the two men who made them, and bring them here to me. If the thow has spoilt the track, let Bob put his dogs to seek.”

Tim stood, scratching away at his carrot poll. “May I ask your honour,” he said, “if it has to do wid the quare colleen ye brought out o’ the bog? By the saints if there’s a bond betwixt ’em, I’m——”

“You do as you’re told and don’t play the fool,” said Ben angrily. “Find Bob at once.”

“Shure and he’s in the blessed kitchen at this minnut, sor,” said Tim. “There’s streenge talk in the village, talk that minds me of ould Oireland, talk o’ the bog and of the worrum that teeks its divarsion in the bog, or the Shiverin’ Mash as ye call ut here.”

For a moment Ben thought of that curious mirage he had seen away by the haunted carr. But he had recovered much of his strength both of body and mind, and was now more than ever disposed to regard it purely as an optical illusion.

“There’ll be talk of your leavin’ the Hall if you don’t do as I tell you quick,” said Ben. “Be off with you and come back as soon as you can with the rascals I’ve told you about. If they show fight, you and Bob ought to be able to tackle ‘em. You can take a pistol from the stand or a gun if you prefer it. Bob is sure to have his fowling-piece with him.”

Tim turned a little sulkily and made for the kitchen quarters.

To reassure himself that he was free from local superstition Ben said to himself testily, “The fools will be believing in the ghost of Turkey Cock Hill next ! Lord, what will the Londoners say when they come down to dig the canal through the level if they hear talk of it ! They’ll think we are little better than savages !”

He again filled his glass with steaming hot brandy and water, and lay back, stretching his legs out timorously, to see if they were bound with cramp.

He was a very fine figure of a man as he lay on the old-fashioned sofa in his long white woollen boot stockings and his blue knitted jersey beneath his Daneshire

jacket. Full six feet three in height, he measured fifty inches round his chest and less than forty round his waist. His extremities were as delicate as those of a thoroughbred filly. His feet were small, with high insteps, his hands small for all their muscular power, his wrists and ankles extraordinarily dainty and fine. His features were strong and classic, though a little blunted by the short fleshy nose, the full broad forehead and the strong square chin. His hair was dark, and his deep sea-blue eyes beneath their dark brows and lashes gave that striking effect which is rarely seen save amongst those of Danish blood in the Daneshire marshlands. Anyone looking at him would trust him to reward good for good and evil for evil. Indeed the impression principally to be gathered from his appearance was that he was a man to be implicitly trusted, and anxiously feared if deceit or treachery were practised upon him.

Of old blood, and with nine terms at Cambridge behind him, he still retained the rich vernacular of his native county. In those days the 'Varsity did not mould men to the same pitch of external polish as it does now, and men who had been "up" were not ashamed to use their mother tongue after they had gone down. Encumbered as was the Cootby Hall estate, there was still enough income for him and his mother to keep up an appearance proper to their

position. Nowadays they could not do it upon four times their income. But then marshland squires were content to live on their land and amongst their people, and if his mother longed for a wealthy bride for her son, Ben had no thought of improving his financial position by selling himself in the marriage market, a mart which was open then as now. Marshmallow Wednesloe, whom he intended to marry in good time, was no better off than he. Indeed, her father had left her place of Smeeby Hall rather worse encumbered than was Cootby.

Who was then to tell that within twenty years the coming of the railway was to alter all the old simplicity of the lives of marshland gentry, and for ever?

Ben drank off his hot stimulant, gazed at the fire and fell to thinking of the girl whom he had found upon the denes, and as his thoughts spread wide in his tired brain his eyes closed, and he fell asleep.

He was roused from his slumber by a touch upon his forehead, and he woke to find Marshmallow Wednesloe standing over him smiling.

"Why, Ben!" she cried. "What *have* you been dreaming of? You were tossing your limbs and groaning dreadfully. I thought I'd better wake you."

Ben looked about him with half-dazed eyes. "Did you see them?" he asked.

“ See what, silly ? ” asked the girl, laughing. “ Why, I don’t believe you are properly awake yet ! ”

“ Bel and Bub,” said Ben, sitting up and passing his hand across his hair. “ Look ! ” he added. “ There are their footings ! ”

Outside the window the snow had nearly gone. But in the watery bluish layer which was left the tracks of two different animals could be seen leading away from the Hall.

Marshmallow looked for herself. She was as versed in the lore of the wild life of the locality as was Ben. “ That’s funny ! ” she said. “ They are certainly the footings of a hare and an otter. But whoever heard of such a pair going about together ? Oh, Ben,” she cried, her violet eyes wide with alarm, “ you don’t mean that Blackberry Banham has put anything on ¹ to you ! ”

¹ Marshland for “ bewitched you.”—J. B.

CHAPTER VII

LA CHATELAINE D'HARDELLOT

BEN rose to his feet, towering over Marshmallow, fine girl as she was. "Why, Mallie dear," he said, "you don't believe that!"

"I don't know what to believe, old boy," said the girl. "But tell me. You've had no quarrel with that woman?"

"Lord, no," replied Ben. "I saw her only this morning, and she asked me in to taste some of her special cordial. I didn't go, but she was friendly enough when I left her."

He said nothing of the two rhymed prophecies he had heard. He loved Marshmallow with a cool deliberate love, not quite like that of a brother for a sister, but a love which burned with a steady glow rather than a fierce flame. Such a love indeed as a man might be expected to have for a girl he had known almost all his life, with whom he had been brought up.

To tell of the ridiculous doggerel about heart and brass, love and purse, would have hurt Marshmallow to no purpose.

“I’m glad of that,” replied the girl. “Of course I don’t believe all the village people say about her, but I’ve seen—oh, never mind. I dare say I’ve seen nothing which could not be explained without dragging in witchcraft. But, Ben, what on earth have you been doing, that I should find you asleep at this hour of the morning?”

Ben told her. He told her reluctantly, though he could not understand the reason for his reluctance. He told her of his discovery of the fragile French girl in the hollow in the denes, of her reference to two men whom she accused of robbing her and of the search expedition which he had sent out. And while he was telling the tale Marshmallow seemed strangely uneasy.

“Where is this girl, then?” she asked when he ceased to speak.

Ben was about to reply when Jane entered the room. “If you please, sir,” she said, “the mistress would like you to go to her in the Magnolia room. The furriner have come to her senses like, but she don’t seem to take to the mistress.”

“Very well,” replied Ben. “I’ll come.”

“And I’ll go with you,” said Marshmallow firmly. Then she added, as she preceded him from the room,

"It is really funny, but Blackberry warned me yesterday that a foreign girl was to come into our lives, and the horrid woman seemed to exult in the trouble she foretold for me."

Ben saw that she was upset. "Don't worry about her," he said. Then a sudden impulse impelled him to take the step which he had long decided to take sooner or later, though he believed that Marshmallow understood that he hoped to marry her without any words from him.

"Mallie," said Ben, throwing his arm round her supple waist, "let me have all your worries. You know I love you, old girl, though we've always taken it as understood between us. Will you be my wife, Mallie?"

Marshmallow yielded to the pressure of his clasp and raised her mouth to meet the kiss he was stooping to give her. "Dear Ben," she said. "I think I knew. But I'm glad you've spoken. It has been my hope to be your wife for a long time. You knew it, dear."

The two lovers kissed long and tenderly, and then proceeded on their way upstairs, hand in hand.

Ben gave a sigh of relief. In some way he could not explain he felt the safer for his declaration, he felt as though he had found some ward against an unknown peril. He was very happy, with a serene and peaceful happiness which entirely lacked the

passionate fever of delight which less prosaic lovers feel at the moment of mutual confession.

The Magnolia room was one of the rooms overlooking the Broad to the west of the Hall. It had gained its name from a superb specimen of the flowering tree which covered the wall outside its windows and lifted its too fragrant blossoms to the level of the leaden base of the mullioned windows. It was a long low room, rather dark, odorous with lavender when the luscious scent of the tree outside did not prevail, dainty with stiff chintz, and darkly gleaming where the old mahogany press and tables stood.

On the curtained four-poster bed, now hidden beneath the bedclothes, lay the girl of the denes, and beside her stood the mistress of the Hall, a benign-faced white-haired ample-girdled old dame who had married late and been close on forty when she bore her one child Ben.

“Why, Mallie!” she cried at sight of the girl who entered beside the young squire, “have you come over on such a morning? I’m glad to see you, my dear. Perhaps you may be able to persuade this strange girl to talk. She will say nothing to me, but keeps on demanding to see Monsieur as she *will* insist on calling Ben. I’ve tried to get her to talk, but she simply ignores me.”

"Shall I tell her now?" Marshmallow whispered to Ben.

"No, no," he whispered eagerly in reply. "Not before the stranger."

Ben doubted if his mother would be pleased by the news. Many a time had she thrown out hints that he ought to marry money so as to be able to lift the encumbrances from the Hall estate. And it would be unpleasant if the old lady showed her displeasure before this French waif. Moreover, the young man felt a strange reluctance in mentioning his betrothal in the presence of this fragile dainty girl, who was so unlike the healthy buxom maids of marshland.

Marshmallow stepped forward. "I brought the pair of mules over in the sleigh," she said. "But if the thaw keeps on like this I'm sure I don't know if I shall be able to go back like that."

"Oh, Tim can take you back in one of our traps," suggested the old lady. "But you don't want to leave us till after dinner, do you? Try your hand here. I can do nothing, and it is really not proper for Ben to be in the room while she is in bed, even though his mother is here too."

Marshmallow threw a smiling look at Ben. She knew how strict the old lady was in her notions of correct behaviour between the sexes.

"You run away then, Ben," said his mother, "and

let Mallie see if she can persuade this girl to talk."

But the waif was wide awake and in full possession of her senses.

"Monsieur, Monsieur," she called, "is it that this dame is your mother? She tell me so, but I have been betrayed, so I must hear from you. And oh! Monsieur, one tells me that you apported me for many kilometres to your home! Tell me if this dame is your mother and I may confide in her."

The frail little thing sat up in bed, and Ben caught a glimpse of a neck and arms almost as white as the snow from which he had rescued her, till the act of her rising brought her wealth of dark hair about her, which covered her like a cloak.

"Tell her, Ben, and be gone," said the old lady crossly.

"But no. I will speak to him who guarded me," persisted the girl. "I am no bourgeoisie or paysanne. I am Jeanne Anne Marie Antoinette Caroline Jonquille d'Hardelot, chatelaine du Chateau et forêt d'Hardelot, Comtesse de Boulogne, et Gardienne du Pas de Calais, moi! It would be my title under the—the old *régime*, and by right it is still."

"Another poor French refugee," said the old lady drily. "You had better go, Ben."

The little lady in bed shook her voluminous locks.

"But no," she cried. "I am not poor. With the assistance of Monsieur I can find millions, yes, millions of my own. Bah! Madame, I have enough to make all in this chamber reech! Tell me, Monsieur, is this dame your mother? May I trust to her?"

The girl's mention of her wealth had an immediate effect on the old lady. She considered that there was no doubt that her son's gallant rescue of the waif had inclined the heart of the latter to him in no ordinary way; that, in fact, if he chose to win her he could do so without difficulty. And it had always been her desire that Ben should marry a girl whose money would enable him to release the Cootby estate from its encumbrances and enable him to revive the former splendours of the family of Ryvett.

"Why don't you speak, boy?" she asked her son. "Surely you can tell her I am your mother and to be trusted."

"Of course," stammered Ben. He was no fool, but he was not quick-witted, and the drama of the scene had caught him unawares. "Yes," he said, "this is my mother, and you may trust her as you would me."

The dainty little French girl reached out her hand to the plump fingers which Mrs. Ryvett had laid upon her pillow and took them in her grasp and kissed them.

"Thank you, sir," she said. "I will confide in her now that you have assured me."

She sank back upon her pillow with a look of infinite content.

"But, mother," said Marshmallow, who had long been in the habit of calling the old lady by the title of the woman who had died in her, Marshmallow's, infancy, "what is the need of all this mystery? I don't like it."

"I don't see what you have to do with it, Mallie," retorted the old lady sharply. "This is between this poor girl and my son and myself. I think you, yes, and Ben too, had better leave me alone with her."

"I wish you had told her, Ben," Marshmallow whispered in Ben's ear. "You know what she is."

"Why," cried Ben, "surely you don't distrust me? Me?"

"Of course not, silly," said Mallie. "But you know your mother has always wanted you to marry money, and now this girl has talked a lot of nonsense about what she has which I believe to be a fairy tale, and it——"

"Oh, absurd!" murmured Ben. "Come along. We will leave them."

But by this time the French girl's eyes had fixed on Marshmallow. And there was something in their

golden-brown glow which held the girl fascinated, hypnotized, helpless.

“ And who is zis demoiselle ? ” asked Jeanne Anne Marie Antoinette, etc. “ Is she the *fiancée* of Monsieur, that she persists so much ? ”

Mallie's lips opened to answer in the affirmative. Her heart told her that now was the time to declare her betrothal. But physically she was incapable of speaking the words. In some way she was held in bondage by that golden-brown glow from the bed. “ Betrothed ? ” cried Mrs. Ryvett, laughing. “ Of course not. She is only an old friend who has known my son since they were children together.”

It did not occur to any one present that the question had been an impertinence and the answer an indiscretion.

And then, just as Mrs. Ryvett was about to insist on the departure of Ben and Marshmallow, Jane knocked at the door, and on being bidden to enter came in bearing a tiny casket in her hand.

“ Well, Jane, what is it ? ” asked the mistress of the Hall tersely.

“ Please, mam,” said Jane, “ Blackberry Banham ha' left this here with a message as it was to be give to the furriner who was brought this mornin' time. I was to give it into her own hands.”

The girl held a small box or casket measuring about

six inches by four, with a depth of five inches. It was of some dark seasoned wood, heavily clamped and edged with silver.

"My dear," said Mrs. Ryvett very kindly to her uninvited guest, "I can't call you by your whole name. Tell me how you are usually called—Jeanne, or Anne, or Marie, or what?"

"*Je m'appelle*—I mean I am Jonquille, jonquil is it not? It is so my father called me, *Jonquille*. But *tenez!* Look," she cried, taking the casket from the hand of Jane, who was now close beside the bed. "The *boite* is for me, it is of my race, see, it bears my escutcheon in silver! Oh, my father! It must be of you! You must have left it when you hid the wealth!"

She turned the tiny key in the lock to the casket while Mrs. Ryvett threw meaning glances at her son, who stood uneasily beside Marshmallow. The lid rose to the French girl's touch. She withdrew a paper with writing or marks upon it which she appeared to peruse with understanding. Nevertheless, she shook her head. "Regard you then, Madame," she said, handing it to Mrs. Ryvett. "I cannot read it. Is it some *patois* of your country?"

The old lady looked at the marks, amongst which letters and drawings of common objects were interspersed. But it was meaningless to her.

"No," she said. "I expect it is only some ridiculous nonsense of the wretched woman who pretends to be a witch. Is there nothing else in the box?"

There was another strip of paper on which the written words were plain. "Comfits to cure the stranger. Suck, eat and be well."

The girl displayed the contents beneath the paper. There was a layer of jujube-like cubes, of some gelatinous substance, and, in the centre of these, was a tiny phial of green glass, apparently containing some colourless liquid.

"It is strange," said the girl. "The escutcheon is of my house. I trust the giver. Yet we have a pretty custom in Picardy amongst those of the old *régime*, that the host should first taste of anything his guest eats or drinks. Will you, Monsieur?" she asked, holding out the casket to Ben.

"Don't. Don't, dear," muttered Marshmallow. "I don't like it. Of course this girl can have had nothing to do with the things, but I don't trust Blackberry. Don't touch them."

"Of course," said Mrs. Ryvett, smiling, "I believe the woman Banham has some skill in herbs. The talk of witchcraft is nonsense, but she is skilled in herbs, and she seems to know something of you by sending you the casket with your family arms upon it. You must not pay any attention to all you hear

about this woman, my dear. There *are* no witches. She is only wise in herbal remedies, and that makes the ignorant villagers miscall her."

Mrs. Ryvett was "city bred," as she herself declared, a daughter of an Odinton merchant whom Ben's father had married. There was nothing of the marshland lore or the marshland intuitions about her. She was deaf to the voices of the marsh, blind to the sights which are only given to those natives of the marshland who are born with eyes to see.

Ben had inherited nothing of her character and but little of her physiognomy. He was purely his father's son, and that father had been a true son of the marsh. This, no doubt, was one cause of the disagreements which sometimes arose between him and his mother, though the latter idolized her son and only opposed him when she was convinced that her opposition was for his good.

"Will you not play the taster?" asked the girl, taking one of the transparent cubes from the casket and pouring upon it a drop from the phial, before she proffered the sweetmeat to Ben.

"Come, boy, don't be so absurd," said his mother. "Besides, it is right. She is under your roof, the casket is sent by one of your people. You ought to show that you believe these pretty sweets are harmless by tasting them first yourself."

"Don't, oh don't," begged Marshmallow, so urgently that Mrs. Ryvett heard her.

"You have no right to interfere between my son and me, Marshmallow," said the old lady very angrily. "Had you not better take your sleigh home before all the snow has melted?"

Marshmallow did not reply. She had thrown an indignant glance at the fragile girl in the bed and found her own violet eyes held by the golden-brown gaze which had caught them. For a few moments the marshland girl stood silent, motionless but for a faint shudder which seemed to send a thrill through every nerve in her body. When she withdrew her eyes they wore a strange dullness, a curious vacancy of outlook which was previously unknown to them. And then, without a word of farewell to any one there present Marshmallow withdrew from the Magnolia room.

Perhaps it was still stranger that Ben did not appear to resent this withdrawal of the girl whom he had recently won for his bride. He was now bending over the bed, smiling, while his mother smiled, and taking one of the transparent, greenish, gelatinous cubes from the box which Jonquille held out to him.

As he took the proffered cube and placed it in his mouth the girl poured from the phial upon another cube, and placed the latter upon her tongue. For a

moment the two young people sucked silently at Blackberry's confections and cordial together.

"You should have waited till you had seen if he was the worse for it," said the old lady, laughing, to Jonquille.

"Ah, but I knew," said that dainty damosel, with a pretty nod and smile. "We shall both of us be oh, so much the better!"

"I must say it is very kind of the woman Banham," said the old lady. "I must make it up to her in some way. Perhaps a warm flannel petticoat would be useful to her. At least we must thank her, Ben, if her medicine does this poor young lady good."

"They are very sweet and hot," said Ben, whose eyes were now burning passionately upon the frail girl. "But, by Jove, they are awfully good!"

"But yes," laughed Jonquille. "It is sweet, is it not? And hot? Yes! And I feel my blood flowing quicker as I consume! But oh! it has made me drowsy! So drowsy!" She stretched out her dainty white arms above her head as though in invitation, and Ben shivered where he stood, withstanding with difficulty an intense desire to feel those arms round his neck, to press that pale face to his own. And the old lady, whose thoughts had remained fixed on the girl's reference to the millions which she claimed to possess, nodded her head approvingly.

Let the girl prove that she had those millions and what better wife could Ben find? Her appearance and manner of speech and bearing supported her claim to be of noble French blood. The claim would of course have to be made good. But in the meantime it would be well to encourage any liking between the two young people. And that the liking was already there was evident.

Ben's eyes were burning now, his face aglow. His mother's sense of propriety intervened.

"You had better go now, Ben," she said. "I will watch her while she sleeps, and when she wakes I dare say she will tell me all her story. Brave boy! How strong you must be to have carried her all the way home from the denes! Well, well, perhaps you will have your reward."

Ben stumbled from the room. He did not know what had happened to him. Indeed, he did not realize that he stumbled, but he seemed to lack power over his limbs. Of course it was the reaction of his overstrained muscles.

How lovely, how dainty she was, this waif of the denes! And how her every line of face and form verified her claim to be of noble blood. How enthralling was that golden-brown glow from her glorious eyes!

Ah! if he could win and wear a jewel like this treasure he would indeed be fortunate.

He had entirely forgotten Marshmallow, forgotten that he had taken her in his arms and asked her to be his wife.

And Marshmallow was at that very moment forcing her mules to drag her sleigh through the last of the snow, wondering how she had consented so easily to accept Ben as her husband.

In the Magnolia room Jonquil had closed her eyes with a smile upon her lovely lips, and was apparently sinking into a sweet sleep, while her hostess watched solicitously beside her bed.

In the state records of the Pas de Calais, stored in that beautiful old Chateau d'Hardelot, in a niche of the dungeons, lay a parchment roll, on which was recorded the public accusation of an ancestress of Jonquille in the year 1000 A.D. of practising Black Magic, and if one followed the roll it would appear that each generation of the family of d'Hardelot comprised one woman who was suspected of the black art until the influence of Voltaire and his immediate forerunners destroyed at once superstition and faith in every intellect which was not sufficiently steadfast to resist the fashionable wave of incredulity, of disbelief in anything which could not be explained by the scientists or charlatans of the period.

Jonquille had never seen those written records. But she had the tradition of their story at heart, and she still carried in her bosom certain strips of parchment, one of which had enabled her to decipher Blackberry's missive with ease, and another of which bore formulas and records of experiments which might have come from the library of Gilles de Retz.

Had Ben or his mother had the thought or the desire to make inquiry among the Picardy legends, they would have found that from a date prior to all historical record tradition attributed the black art to one feminine member of the family of d'HardeLOT every generation, while the men of that fine race were all gallant, devoted and brave, and innocent even of knowledge of their women's sorceries.

Inside the western gate, looking out over the forest and lake close by the stone cannon ball which still remains fixed in the ancient wall, a crude inscription may still be made out jagged roughly in the flint and eighth century mortar. The fine old chasseur who is guardian of that splendid castle, in which Henry VIII feasted with Francis I, will point out the scarce decipherable screeD with a chuckle as to the nature of women in general which is essentially French. But only if his confidence and liking be first gained by a show of enthusiasm, surely easy to exhibit in those historic surroundings. The metre and the rhyme

both halt, and I have slightly modernized the spelling.

Sieur, dame,
Brave, infame.
Race galante,
Fille puante,
Race fière
Fille sorcière
Que Dieu nous garde soit notre prière.

CHAPTER VIII

RETURN OF THE SEARCH PARTY

BEN made his way downstairs. His whole being was full of Jonquil. He did not wonder why his mother had not even asked Marshmallow to have her breakfast at the Hall. Many and many a time had the girl driven over in the early hours of a spring or summer morning between "dew snack" and "brek-kust," but never before had she left the house without bite or sup. And it was the very morning on which she had plighted her troth to him. But Ben had forgotten this. His mind was so full of this waif of the denes that it could hold thought of no other girl. Since he had consumed that seductive jujube-like sweetmeat of Blackberry's preparation, moistened with a drop from the tiny phial, he had concentrated his whole being on the stranger. To all appearance he was normal. He rang for breakfast, and ate his roasted snipe on toast, his new-laid eggs and home-cured ham, and drank his home-brewed beer with his usual gusto. Indeed, as he took his meal at nine of

the clock instead of his usual eight he showed more appetite than on an ordinary morning. His exertions and his restoratives and ensuing snooze only seemed to have sharpened his hunger.

Jane looked on his performance with approval, for by her, as by Ellen the cook and Peggy the housemaid, he was both revered as a master and respectfully beloved as a man. And his popularity with the maids was equalled by that of Marshmallow. Every employee on the Cootby Hall estate considered it a settled thing that he would marry the mistress of Smeeby and amalgamate the two estates and their encumbrances: That Marshmallow had driven away without stopping for the morning meal troubled the kitchen folk, and did not tend to the popularity of the "furriner." That their adored young "Master Ben" should become the captive of a "furriner," a waif tossed up on the denes like some foundling brat, was unimaginable by his admiring menials. Already Jonquil was losing the little popularity she had won from Ellen and Jane by reason of her helpless beauty in such pitiable circumstances. And had it not been for the fear with which Blackberry Banham inspired every member of the kitchen, stable or garden staffs, Jane would have refused to carry the casket to the Magnolia room for "this here furriner wench who may be no better'n she should be for all anybardy i' these parts know."

Ben made a magnificent meal, stretched his mighty limbs on a second chair, filled his long clay pipe with the new-fashioned bird's-eye tobacco, then a rarity and a great luxury; and lit up with a cedar-wood spill ignited from the fire. He was no snuff taker and enjoyed the reek of his smouldering tobacco the more.

But he could not rest at ease. He was not troubling himself because his affianced wife had left the Hall abruptly, and without deigning to partake of the Cootby hospitality. But he was all a-thrill with longing to be again in the presence of the delicate-framed French girl, whose foreign accent made her halting English so much more beautiful, he thought, than it sounded in the broad vernacular which all of us who are of true Daneshire marsh blood love beyond all other fashion of speech.

He shifted one leg over the other, and then shifted that other back again. He was about to rise and go up to knock gently at the door of the Magnolia room to ask his mother if he could do aught further. Mrs. Ryvett had eaten her toasted rasher and drunk her cup of rare tea in her guest's room. But it was not this that troubled Ben. More often than not he took his breakfast alone. Something he could not define, something he did not understand, had, as he said to himself, set him "all of a fidget."

He was about to rise from his chair when there came a sound of men's voices talking loudly and eagerly outside.

"I wonder if that's Tim and Bob back," he said, rising and making his way kitchenwards. "I hope they've got those swine."

As he crossed the hall Nelson came to him and snuggled his great head in his hand. "Hang it, don't do that," said Ben angrily. "Here, lie down."

Never before had he spoken to his dog in such a way. Nelson looked up in his face, and walked slowly back to his rug. There was dignity in every one of his four legs as he walked. Then he lay down, shaking his head as a man does in bewilderment.

As Ben opened the door of the servants' hall he heard the voices of Ellen, Jane and Peggie raised in a chorus of "Lord save us! Yew doan't want to fright us, bor. Well, did you ever! God presarve us!" all of which ejaculations faded into a confused mumble as soon as his presence was observed.

There were signs of discomfiture about both the men. Tim was paler than his wont, and Bob Clare looked puzzled, and very serious.

"Well, Bob," said Ben. "Did you find 'em?"

"No, master!" was the reply. "But——! I can't tell ye!"

The man was obviously terribly upset. His voice

stuck in his throat. He almost jibbered with the horror of his recollection.

“What was it, Tim?” Ben asked the Irishman irritably.

“The saints preserve us all, your honour,” stammered Tim O’Shea. “We found the hid of a streenger close by the haunted carr, and the body of um inside the plantin’, white as a fish’s belly; the blood sucked from ut till the flesh was as white and pappy as fresh curds! And——”

“That’s enow on’t,” broke in Bob Clare. “You hadn’t no right to tell o’ the fathomless pit, ’cos yew darsent cross the deek. But look ye here, master. The body lay as Tim say, beside the pit, and afloat on the pit was this here oily.” He flung an oil-skin on the floor with an air of relief at ridding himself of it.

“My God, master!” he continued. “I never did believe afore as that ole wum o’ the mash was anythin’ more than a fairy tale, but what I tell ye is true. We brought the boat back fust, seein’ as I thought the snow would lay long enow to show a track when we got back. And so ta did. We see the feetin’s you told us on. They was slushy, but still clear. Close agin the plantin’ where they led there was another wholly rum track, like I never see afore. That was like as if some un had took a small garden roller, about two foot wide or less, and rolled it wiggly like to the mouth

o' the runnin' deek what flow into the pit and never come out no more. The men's feetin's went two and two to the beginnin' o' that roller track, then one pair on 'em stutted a runnin', and t'other stopped. Under the wall o' the deek I see some'at, and picked it up wi' the crome o' my boat-hook what I had. And as true as I stand here that was the hid of a man, wi' the neck drawed in to a p'int, -sort o' drawed off the rest on him! And that was white! My Gord, that was whiter than the slush the downfall had turned to. I didn't see no cap, but when I crossed the ligger¹ into the plantin' cos' I see some'at floatin' on the top o' the pit, which was this here oily, I see what Tim ha' told ye on. I hooked the oily to me, but I left the rest there. Now, one thing more, master. That there fathomless pit I've seed scores and scores o' times, 'cos that's the best place for snipe in hard weather, and I worn't never afeared on it same as the other folk o' these parts, and that's allust been black and clear. But this mornin'-time that was all thick, like as if some'at had stirred up the bottom what nobody can't find. Well, I rammed my boat-hook down by the side on it, arter I had drawed in the oily, to see if the s'ile o' the side matched the colour o' the water. And when I did it I'll swear some'at stirred down deep. I didn't feel nothin' touch the boat-hook. I

¹ A plank bridge.—J,B.

didn't feel nothin'. But I see from the water as some'at moved, deep, ah! Deeper than us uns will ever know. I hain't watched the face o' the broads for nothin' all my life. I know when there's life deep or shallow under water. And if some'at worn't stirrin' in that pit I'm a tadpole. Now, master, what was it? You know as well as me nothin' won't live in that pit. The snipe on'y drink there 'cos it don't never freeze. What was it? And what was it as drained that fur-rineerin' chap? I never paid no regard to all the jibber-jabber o' the worm o' the mash afore, but I reckon ole Sara Amiss know more than I do arter all, and her talk about it bain't all froth."

More than once at the earlier part of his narration Ben had vainly endeavoured to interrupt the man whom he now saw unnerved for the first time in his life. And now, before he referred to the horrible discovery, he asked, "Did you see no sign of the other man? Did you put the dogs in the carr?"

"He worn't in the carr? Rover and Don hunted it from eend to eend. And t'other side o' the plantin' the thow had been quicker. If there had been feetin's we shouldn't ha' seed'em in the cow mire. I reckon t'other got into the loke and so into Blackberry's carnsa. I ha' axed about, but I hain't heard nothin'. What had I better do consarnin' what we did find, master? D'ye want the crowner to set on it?"

“Have you told any one else of this?” asked Ben.

“Not a word,” replied Bob.

Ben looked round the servants' hall. “Look here, you girls,” he said; “will you promise me not to breathe a word of what you have heard this morning about this body and head to any one, any one at all except among yourselves, any one, I mean, who is not here with us now? I ask you as a favour! I know you will keep your words.”

The three girls agreed readily, and, what was more, were sufficiently devoted to their young master to keep their promise.

“Then, Bob and Tim,” said Ben, “we won't trouble the crowner. We'll hunt this game ourselves. Now where's that oily?” He stooped and picked up the oilskin coat, and swiftly felt in its pockets. There was no paper or anything else within them.

“Ellen,” he said to the cook, “give Bob and Tim a good breakfast, and see here, you chaps, keep here till I come again. I've got to think over this.”

Bob nodded. “If you'll hearken to me, master,” he said, “you'll have a hearin' wi' ole Sara Amis fust thing. How's the young woman as you carried home?”

Ben turned angrily. He hated to hear his keeper, old friend though he was, refer to Jonquil as “the young woman.” But he realized that it would be

absurd to show displeasure. "She's come round nicely," he said. "And I fancy that thing you found was one of the men who deserted her on the denes."

"Sarve him right if he was," said Bob heartily. "No man hadn't ought to leave a wench to die in the downfall like that."

But Tim crossed himself and did not concur verbally with the keeper's opinion. The superstitious Irishman had had his fears that the colleen brought from the bog before sun high brought misfortune with her. He would have given much had his master failed to find the deserted girl on the denes.

A thought struck Ben as he was about to leave the servants' hall. "You didn't leave the—the things lying about where every one could see 'em, I suppose," he said.

"They're hid," replied Bob Clare solemnly. "I can find 'em if any one want me to. But to tell you the truth, master, I doan't hanker arter seein' 'em agin or tarnin' on 'em up."

Ben nodded thoughtfully. The story was an amazing one. Of course he knew the legend of the worm of the marsh, but although he was not without a secret disposition to believe that there might be something in old Sara's and Blackberry's open claims to be possessed of abnormal powers as white and black witches respectively, he had always considered the

legend of the "gre't worm o' the mash" as purely a fabulous myth. Yet now Bob Clare came with this extraordinary yarn! Could it really be that some horrible eel or snake-like monster dwelt in the unfathomable depths of the pit in the haunted wood?

In those days books and short stories had not been written to make the name of "elemental" or "prehistoric reptilian" familiar to the public. And Ben was able to think over what he had heard without being confused by the imaginative theories of either modern spook-mongers or of genuine scientists. He was puzzled all the same, and the only conclusion he could come to was to investigate the place for himself, and, with a half-shamefaced surrender to superstition, to sound old Sara on the subject if he was unable to find any explanation by himself.

CHAPTER IX

A SHORT DISCOURSE ON WITCHCRAFT

BEN returned to the breakfast-room, poured himself out another tankard of home brewed, lit a fresh pipe and sat down to think. Many problems offered themselves for his solution.

Was the oily which Bob Clare had found on the surface of the fathomless pit that which Jonquil had lost? What was the nature of the article the loss of which had so greatly perturbed her, the possession of which she seemed to think necessary to enable her to recover the treasure of which she had spoken?

Was the ghastly mutilated thing, which the search expedition had found, the body of one of the two men who had rowed the ship's boat ashore? If so, or if not for that matter, what had become of the other man? That a stranger and a Frenchman could wander at his ease about Cootby village without being observed by some of the natives was impossible. Had Tim and Bob pushed their inquiries into the village?

On the whole he rather hoped they had not, for he did not wish to arouse any excitement concerning Jonquil beyond that which was inevitable. It seemed, however, clear that if even one of the two men had escaped from the marsh on to the carnsas or high roads, he must have been observed, or been secreted by one of the villagers? Then there was the extraordinary incident of Blackberry's call at the Hall with the casket for Jonquil which bore the arms of her French family fashioned upon it in silver.

How did Blackberry know that Jonquil had been found on the denes and brought to the Hall, and how could she possibly guess that the stranger was entitled to bear the arms on the casket? Nay, how could Blackberry have become possessed of that same mysterious casket?

Ben tried to worry out the answers to the riddles, but without avail. Nay, as he reclined there, his legs outstretched, his pipe glowing faintly to his lazy puffs, he ceased to concern himself with all these wonders. His veins began to throb with longing for the dainty girl upstairs. He could still feel the curious tang of the phial-moistened jujube upon his palate. But he did not attribute his new fever of love for this unknown waif to that. How should he? As the tang grew stronger instead of weaker by the lapse of time from his tasting that weird confection he wondered why

he had asked Marshmallow to be his wife. His mother did not wish him to marry her. He had always been "good chums" with her, but he had never greatly desired that particular intimate relation which is meant by taking a woman to wife. He forgot that he seemed to be impelled to seek some definite bond with the girl in order to save him from some indefinite peril which his nerves thrilled to feel. He only knew that he had been a fool, as he believed at the time, to propose marriage to Marshmallow. What if she had always expected him to marry her? What if he had always coolly intended to ask her to share his life? What were all these impertinent details in comparison with this fever of longing which he now felt unmanning him, this passionate adoration of the bit of helpless salvage which he had all but killed himself to rescue. "Jon-gee!" she called herself. Jonquil was of course the English of that. Jonquil and Marshmallow. Well, who could hesitate to say which was the fairer of these flowers. The Jonquil was ineffably sweet to see and to smell, almost intoxicating in its tropical lusciousness of perfume. But the marshmallow. The plant was hardy, the panicles of rosy flowers pretty enough. And of course every one knew of the use the wise women made of its roots, the marshmallow tea and marshmallow gum with which coughs were cured and all chest complaints soothed. But it was common-

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place, a mere marshland wild plant, with medical properties. Just like Mallie Wednesloe! She was rosy, stout, healthy, no doubt very wholesome. But commonplace. What was there, thought Ben under the spell which held him in thrall, in that gallant daughter of his native country to compare with the fascination of Jonquil, that rare hothouse bloom. For, as Ben thought of those fairylike features, those wonderful golden-brown eyes, that momentary vision of snow-white neck and arms all belonging to the waif of the denes, he began to resent the name of Jonquil. Some rarer blossom should have been her godmother, gardenia, or tuberose, or even one of those extraordinary orchids of which Ben had heard, but which he had never seen. To him the wild orchids of marsh and common bore common and familiar names. He was no botanist and would never have understood that "Lady's locks" or "Bee blossom" were relatives of the hothouse plants of which he had heard such incredible stories from his seedsman and nurseryman at Odinton.

He shifted his legs. Why was it he could not lie still. Ever since he had eaten that infernal sticky "cushy" he had been uneasy.

He had never heard the story of Tristan and Isolde, and if he had he would have laughed at the love potion as a fairy tale,

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And here I should like to record that I hold no brief either for or against the claims made by the wise women of marshland, or rather the claims made for them by the villagers, for never have I encountered a marshland witch who was garrulous of her powers. That many women are in possession of herbal secrets which have descended to them from generation to generation for countless decades I am assured. That many of their simple teas and confections, their unguents and their lotions are more potent in remedial effect than any drug contained in the pharmacopœia I do believe on impeccable evidence, and that when these weird survivals of the past die out there will be many invaluable secrets of vegetable therapeutics lost I am positive ; for never will they surrender the knowledge handed down to them for centuries to any one but a female of their own blood devoted to the life which it is weekly becoming more difficult for them to lead.

Whether what are commonly known as love philtres, love potions, are or ever were of efficacy by means of home-made drugs associated with suggestion and hypnosis I cannot say. But that the belief in such potions and in the powers of both black and white witches is still prevalent in the Daneshire marshlands I can conscientiously attest. Even that incubator of disbelief and vulgar incredulity, the county council

school curriculum, has not yet been able to eradicate the fear of and trust in the daughters of the "white ghost" and the servants of "The Black Man o' the Mash."

And in the early thirties of the nineteenth century the belief in the powers of these strange women was almost universal in the villages which lay along the drained levels.

I have risked becoming tedious to my readers on this point, which no doubt most of them, in their consciousness of a first-class education and their scorn of anything beyond their trained understanding, will consider mere charlatanism, because I want those who are able to sympathize with the men and women whose experiences are touched on in this record of marshland life nigh a hundred years ago to see with the eyes and hear with the ears of the marshland folk of that period. No doubt we are all of us superior to such superstitions now, especially when we are not out upon the marsh on a moonless night with the marshland murmurs and whispers all about us. In Ben Ryvett's time it was the rule and not the exception to believe in what I will call witchcraft for want of a better definition.

And, after all, evidence may be found of the work of witchcraft to this day which would be enough in a court of law to prove a murder.

I do not go so far as to say that I personally believe

in witchcraft. But I own that my careful investigations made when I was living among the marshland peasants as one of themselves, an experience which only my marshland blood enabled me to enjoy, changed my point of view. From being a frank disbeliever in anything appertaining to abnormal powers possessed by the so-called witches, I am now content to be an inquirer with an open mind,

And when one considers that it is beyond all doubt that there are herbal remedies among the secrets of the marsh women, and that suggestion has become an admitted scientific fact, it may be as well to hesitate before condemning all the stories of witchcraft, whether in the East Anglian marshlands or on the Devon moors, as mere fables without any foundation whatever.

But after all, what we have to concern ourselves with now is not whether Burntoad Sara's or Blackberry's spells were effective or not, but what result came from them, and the local belief in them, to affect the lives of our characters.

CHAPTER X

THE ORIGIN OF THE TREASURE

IRRITATED by his continued fidgetiness, Ben went to the cellar and drew himself a mighty tankard of strong old home-brewed ale. Many a time had he quaffed the dark brown liquor and found comfort in it. Nor did he fail to obtain relief on this occasion. Though he had recovered from the worst of his exertion, no doubt both his muscles and his nerves were still suffering from the tremendous strain imposed upon them by his early morning adventure. The strong old ale first soothed his worried nerves, and then sent a delicious sense of slumberous relaxation over him. He drained the great tankard, and, with a sigh of intense relief, stretched his mighty thews and limbs out upon the noble old-fashioned double-ended couch which occupied half the southern wall of the breakfast-room, and was softly and warmly padded with pelts of otter, vole, stoat, polecat, and the small but pretty skins of

the mole. A rug made of these pelts cunningly stitched together, over a great tick of home-spun calico stuffed with down and breast feathers of innumerable waterfowl and farm-bred geese, made a resting-place no weary emperor would have disdained.

Ben lay out at his full length and presently fell sound asleep.

A little before noon Mrs. Ryvett opened the door of the breakfast-room. Seeing her son sleeping peacefully she closed it again noiselessly and approached him. As she drew near the couch beneath the window something outside attracted her attention by its movement. She looked quickly through the lattice, but was too late to see whatever it was which had attracted her. She had a vague impression of a swarthy hairy face, and that was all. And as she seated herself beside her son she laughed. "I shall be imagining ghosts next," she said. "It is all the silly talk about here."

Nevertheless, she rose from her seat and, placing her face close to the window panes, looked down at the border along the outside wall from which rose the Magnolia, Jasmin, Clematis, Wistaria and Gloire de Dijon which covered the southern wall.

In the milky bluish layer, fast disappearing, which was all that was left of the snow, and that only because the spread of the Magnolia and Wistaria and the shade of a great cedar opposite the window prevented the

sun from exercising his full strength on that yard or two of dug land, there were two boat-shaped impressions which might or might not be the imprints of two large curiously shod human feet. Mary Ryvett was a matter-of-fact woman. She gave another searching look through the window, and then reseated herself. "One of the men's feet when they were clearing the window of snow," she assured herself. "I wish Ben would wake. The girl won't tell me where the treasure is hidden. I don't believe she knows, but she seems to think that Ben may help her to find out."

Ben stirred in his sleep. His lips opened. "Jonquil," he muttered. A smile of infinite tenderness softened his features for a moment, and then they resumed the sternness which their shape naturally imparted in a state of unconscious repose.

The mother's eyes brightened. "Good," she murmured. "I was afraid he had spoken to that Wednesloe girl by the look on both their faces when they came into the room upstairs. Good. Oh! If this French girl's fortune is not all moonshine, *what* a thing it would be for Ben and for Cootby! Is she deceiving us? I don't believe it. I am sure that at all events she really believes that there is a treasure to be found, and that Ben can help her to find it; and if I still have the use of the two eyes in my head I'm a silly old woman if she is not ready to fall in love with him!"

Again she sat silent for a few moments. But Mary Ryvett was one of those stalwart women who cannot understand slumber in the hours of sun high during health. Ben had been tired. Of course he had been tired in carrying even so slight a girl as the French maiden so far and over such treacherous marsh. But he had already slept once and awoke. It was absurd that a man of his health and strength should again go to sleep at high noon. She would wake him. She could not endure any further delay now that the girl upstairs had mentioned her hopes of treasure, and hinted that with Ben's assistance she believed she might be able to find her fortune, though she had lost the written record of its hiding-place.

Mrs. Ryvett placed her hand on her son's forehead. "Come," she said. "Wake up, Ben. It is nearly dinner-time."

The man opened his eyes at once, and sighed. "I'm glad you woke me, mother," he said. "I had a most infernal idea, dream, or whatever you call it. Hang that Bob Clare!"

Mrs. Ryvett took no interest in Bob Clare or in anything associated with sport. She passed by Ben's grumble as if he had not uttered it. "Come, boy," she said. "Brush your hair and make yourself tidy. Mamselle Dardelow wants to see you. She says you can find her fortune for her,"

Ben was clear awake at this. He rose, looked in the great Georgian mirror over the open fire-place, and smoothed his curly dark hair. He still wore his blue knitted jersey and Daneshire jacket and the breeches over which he had pulled the long white boot stockings before venturing out into the snow. But he was man enough to reckon little of his apparel. He looked clean and healthy, and that satisfied him. His mother gave a glance at him, thought for a moment and decided that he had nothing in his wardrobe or clothes press which set off his manly comeliness better than the rough costume he wore.

“You go on, mother,” said Ben. “I’ll be up in a minute.”

He wanted a moment’s thought by himself before he came into Jonquil’s presence again. Dimly he remembered his exchange of truth with Marshmallow that very morning. Sharply and with a biting distinctness he remembered the intolerable allurements of this French girl who had not yet been in his life eight hours.

His heart beat the quicker as he thought of her, and again he tasted the sweet pungent flavour of Black-berry’s confection and philtre.

Before he followed his mother upstairs he made his way to the servants’ hall and asked the cook if she could lay her hand on the oilskin which Bob Clare had

rescued from the fathomless pit. He carried it on his arm when he knocked at the door of the Magnolia room.

Jonquil was now risen from bed, and was lying on the chintz-covered sofa against the window, dressed in some raiment which her hostess had provided, the outer portion of which consisted of a ruby-coloured woollen dressing-gown. Her magnificent hair was loose and flowing over her shoulders till it spread over her knees. Her face was still pale, but there was a suggestion of apple blossom pink in her skin which made her complexion a delight.

“Better?” asked Ben heartily, and feeling as if his voice desecrated a temple of feminine delicacy. “That’s good.”

Certainly Jonquil was better. There was a glint of mischief in her eyes as she looked at her preserver, of mischief tempered with a sincere tenderness.

“I have to thank you, Monsieur,” she said, “that I am at all. Ah!” she cried as she caught a sight of the oily. “*Ze toile vernie! Ze oily skin! Have you cherched, sought, in ze poches? But no, I am sure I had ze paper here,*” she touched her bosom as she spoke.

“There was nothing in the pockets,” replied Ben. “It was found floating on—on a pond, a deep pond.”

“Ah!” again ejaculated the girl. “*Ze mare sans*

fond! Or as was ewrote on ze paper, ze bottomless pool. Have ze *traitres* found it? But no, I believe it not. Zey know no Engleesh, and it was ewrote in your so *difficile langue*, language. Ze men? You have zem?"

Ben avoided the subject of the men, and the girl's suggestion that she might have been forestalled worried him for a moment till he remembered Bob's ghastly description of what he had found. Surely after witnessing such a horror, however it came about, the surviving rascal, if he had survived, would not persevere in any search near the place where his companion had met with such a dreadful fate. He placed more reliance on this than on Jonquil's statement, or rather suggestion, that the men did not understand sufficient English to be able to read whatever there might have been written on the missing piece of paper. Having regard to the way in which they had treated their female companion, it seemed probable that they had been influenced by a knowledge of the treasure, and at all events a belief that they would be able to locate it. But, after the awful death of one of them—! However, the sooner he learnt what Jonquil had to tell the sooner he would be able to ascertain if the hiding-place (if hiding-place there were) had been rifled or not.

"I don't think you need trouble about the men," he said. "Come—oh, what am I to call you,

Mamselle? Jonquil seems too familiar. Mamselle Dardelow, or Lady Dardelow, or the Honourable Mamselle!" He laughed. "Do tell me what I may call you?" he said, leaning forward. There was tenderness and solicitude beaming from his honest blue eyes. The huge man seemed restrained by a mighty rein which held him in thrall. Jonquil looked at him full in the eyes and again there was a glint of humour tempered by tenderness in her lovely golden-brown eyes.

"You save my life," she said. "You carry me kilos and kilos in your poor arms across the *marais* so dangerous! And your muzzer is to me like ze muzzer I do not remember. Assuredly you may call me what you desire. Jonquille if you will, or Marie."

"Call her Jonquil, dear," urged his mother. "I think it is a pretty name, and she is right, quite right, in saying it is absurd to be conventional when you have saved her life."

The girl reached out her hand which projected some inches of a dainty white forearm from the dressing-gown. Ben took the fingers in his great paw and handled them as gently as though they were egg-shell porcelain. Trembling a little and with a flush on his face which made him more handsome than ever, he raised the little hand to his lips and kissed the knuckles.

Jonquil received his courtesy with a sublime

equanimity. She made no attempt at all to withdraw her hand from his grasp.

Mary Ryvett, her mind fixed on this treasure in which her optimism fully trusted, looked on with bland approval.

Just for a fraction of a second the noble pure face of Marshmallow interfered with Ben's delight in caressing this dainty piece of jetsam. But it was gone as soon as come. And again he felt the tang of the peculiar flavour of Blackberry Banham's sweetmeat.

"If you know ze *mare sans fond*, ze pool wizout depth."

"You mean without bottom, dear, don't you?" asked Mary Ryvett.

"Ah, yes. Ze bottomless pool, is zat it? *Bon!* Well, if zere is but one in ze *voisinage* it must be ze one. For why I will speak you more tardy. I remember ze writing zough it is lost. I go with you to ze pool and we find ze *diamants* or ze place where zey are hided. And *non!* I do not sink zat even if ze *traitres* have found ze paper zey can comprehend. My fazer gave me ze secret word to—to open ze lock of ze secret. Zey have it not, zough zey must sink zat zey had."

"You must take her as soon as she is strong enough, Ben," said Mrs. Ryvett with determination. "Some one might come across it by accident. I wouldn't trust that Banham woman further than I could see her.

Of course her witchcraft is all nonsense. But she is shrewd, and if those villains found their way to her cottage she may be able to pump them for her own benefit."

"Ah!" cried Jonquil. "But zat is ze woman who sent me ze *boite*! She will not steal me! Oh I know! Zere is moch I have to tell you when I have ze jewels. Ze woman who sent me ze *boite* is friend, not enemy."

"Oh," said Mary Ryvett drily. How funny this foreign girl was to trust a woman she had never seen because she had sent her a box with her family arms upon it. It was a curious coincidence, no doubt. But that was all, and she, Mary Ryvett, would be sorry to trust Blackberry with a sixpenny bit on such grounds as those.

"I do not comprehend, me," continued the stranger; "how zis *paysanne* of your village knew that I was here, or how she had ze *boite* of my *parents*. But," and Ben thought he saw a mischievous gleam in the girl's eyes, "I can imagine! Ze woman is, you say, sirty years old. Maybe I understand, and maybe you will understand when I have told you ze *histoire*."

Mary Ryvett coughed. She was only too ready to accept this French waif as an heiress of the French noblesse provided she could prove that she could bring to her husband sufficient fortune to lift the mortgages from the Cootby Hall estate. And the mother was

eager. Of late she had believed that the relations between Ben and Marshmallow Wednesloe were growing warmer than those old terms of camaraderie which had existed between them since they were children together. The mother had nothing against Marshmallow save that she was as impoverished by the extravagance of her forbears as was Ben, and that she had now and then shown a spirit of independence, as indication that she was able to think for herself to some purpose. The city-bred woman did not look forward pleasurably to accepting a daughter-in-law who would not only be the mistress of the Hall theoretically, but very practically. Marshmallow would be able to insist upon her rights. But this fragile little French girl, this romantic and apparently superstitious offshoot of the old French noblesse, surely there would be no difficulty in persuading her that it was both her duty and her policy to yield the first place in the Hall to Mrs. Ryvett!

And although Mary Ryvett would have been highly indignant had any one suggested to her that she was even more superstitious than Jonquil, she was undoubtedly swayed by her hopes to such an extent that she converted them into practical certainties only needing a little time to be proved.

But, she told herself, she knew and despised the incredulity of the neighbourhood in all "sensible

things." For her part she would have liked to see Ben and Jonquil pledged to each other then and there. She had no suspicion that the fortune claimed by the stranger might be merely fabulous. But she knew that if the story of any such betrothal were to get abroad before Jonquil had justified her claims, all the marshland squires, and especially their women folk, would ridicule that assumption of superiority of breeding and intelligence which she, Mary Ryvett, had always claimed because she was "city bred." And, being "city bred," she was never, to the day of her death, able to understand that in the eyes of the real country and marshland folk she was an object of more or less contemptuous indulgence because, being "city bred," she could not be expected to have the intelligence or the knowledge of the country people.

What a triumph it would be over these ignorant bumpkins, as she considered her neighbours to be, if Ben were to marry untold wealth and a daughter of the Comte de Boulogne!

"Well, my dear," she said to the girl, "at all events it would be as well if you tried to tell my son as much as you can so that he may be able to decide if he has any idea where the hiding-place of your fortune is. Perhaps Judith Banham is as friendly as you think, but you say yourself that two men rowed you ashore and robbed you of a paper which contained informa-

tion as to the hiding-place, and unless Ben is quick they may forestall him."

The girl, looking exquisitely alluring in her *négligé* as she lay on the sofa, smiled queerly. "I do not sink so," she said. "But you have reason. I will tell Monsieur ze *histoire*, and zen he will do as he sinks best."

"Oh!" cried Mary Ryvett eagerly, 'don't keep calling him Monsieur. It is not as if you had met him in the ordinary way. Call him Ben, and let him call you Marie or Jonquil."

"It is as he please," said the girl, with a tender look at the splendid son of the marsh. "Weel you call me Marie or Jonquille, Ben? Do I say it raight?" she asked with a most fascinating laugh.

"Quite right, my 'dear," Mrs. Ryvett assured her.

Ben had been fidgeting. Every moment he was becoming more infatuated with this girl. But his mother's too obvious encouragement annoyed him. His mother's name was Mary. "I will call you Jonquil, if I may," he stammered.

"Hang it," he said to himself, "why on earth is it that whenever I look at her she seems to draw the very soul from my body and I again taste the tang of that sweetmeat of Blackberry's. I'm beginning to hate the sickly taste of it, though there is certainly a

sharp bite to the flavour which is anything but sickly. But why is it that I seem to lose all control over myself when I look at the girl. I can't even remember what Mallie is like when I let my eyes dwell on her. And I asked Mallie to marry me not long ago! Or is it my fancy?"

He could not have sworn that he had accepted and given troth with Marshinallow. In some strange way his recollection of her had become vague, misty. On the other hand the fragile pale girl before him filled him with the power of her personality, and gave the impression of being as full of vital force as a twanging harp string is of vibration.

"But certainly, you call me what you desire," said Jonquil. "You have given me life. May you not name me as gives you pleasure?"

"That's right," said Mrs. Ryvett, who was becoming hungry for this story of the hidden fortune. "And now, dear, tell Ben about it all."

"Ze fortune," said Jonquil, coming to the point with admirable promptness, "is my fazer's jewels, and ze jewels of nearly all ze noble families of ze Pas de Calais, wiz which my fazer came here in ze peace year 1803, after such dangers of moving zem from ze Chateau d'Hardelot as it would occupy hours to recount. But I will first tell of ze place where zey should be."

“And quite right, too,” said Mary Ryvett, settling herself down to listen.

There was a knock at the door. “Please, mam,” said Jane, entering, “dinner’s ready, and Ellen have cooked one o’ the youngest o’ the geese as master shot this mornin’.”

“Then we will leave the story till after dinner,” said Mrs. Ryvett. “Now come along, dear. Ben will not mind your dress, and it is nice and warm in the dining-room.”

Ben left the women to follow. He strode to his room and splashed water over himself. Then he went down to dinner.

CHAPTER XI

MARSHMALLOW AND BURNTOAD

WHEN Marshmallow Wednesloe left Cootby Hall on her sleigh drive back to her own home there was none of the exhilaration of a newly betrothed maiden about her. It was not only that she had been vexed by Mrs. Ryvett: that was nothing unusual. She knew that the old lady wished her son to marry money, and she knew too well that in this respect she could not meet the requirements which the present mistress of Cootby Hall demanded for its future mistress. But it was not the known antagonism of her lover's mother which troubled her. She was used to that whenever the old lady took it into her head that the old brotherly and sisterly relations between her and Ben were changing to something warmer. It was something indefinite, something which she could not even describe to herself, which made her charming face serious, and which took the brightness from it which was nearly always to be found there when she

was driving her favourite pair of mules or engaged in some other outdoor occupation which she loved.

The snow of the night's blizzard was rapidly dissolving in the warmth of the risen sun, and she began to fear lest she should find her runners dragging on mud instead of snow before she entered her own gates. As she swung round the corner near Burntoad Amiss's cottage she came on a bad patch, where the draw of the wind had laid little snow even during the sharpest of the storm.

She pulled the mules to a walk, and considered seriously whether it would not be better to put up her pair and the sleigh at old John Constable's, the village innkeeper, and walk home.

What was it that had changed Ben so much? Why had he asked her to be his wife in what seemed to be the hurry of fear? She knew Ben so well that she was certain that it was not his love for her alone which had caused him to speak that morning. That he loved her with a strong and honest passion she felt assured, for she loved him in the same way. Why then had he seemed so hurried, so uneasy, so unlike himself when he had, at last, asked her to be his wife? That he would ask her sooner or later she had been certain for months, if not for years. And she fully realized that but for their easy-going intimacy, their continual association, and, she believed, their mutual

confidence that when the word was spoken it would be all-sufficient, the man she loved fondly would long ago have declared his love as a lover, and not merely shown instances of it in a quasi fraternal manner.

What had changed all this? Naturally her thoughts flew to this stranger girl whom Ben had saved from death upon the snow-clad denes that very morning. But surely, she thought, he could not have been influenced so strongly by a girl he had only seen for the first time a few hours ago as to be affected in his manner to her, and indeed his whole bearing!

As she let the mules drag her through the "slush" near Burntoad Amiss's cottage she saw the old woman emerge, and hold up her withered arms as though to stay her passage.

A touch on the reins brought the mules to a standstill.

"Good morning, Sara," said the girl. "All well?"

"Come ye down, come ye down," said the old woman. "You and me ha' got to have a hearin'. There's trouble abroad, mischievous trouble and all. That Blackberry ha' been a weavin' her spells, an' that'll take me more than my own spells to beat her. When it come to this, my dear, there's on'y one spell for me: the spell o' the Lord and His righteousness! That's where Blackberry and her like make the mistake. They may call the Black Man up, they may

let their succubs¹ play the spy, but God is over the Black Man, and when all is said and done God will send the Black Man where he belong if you ax Him. That was all settled years and years ago. And the Black Man got be't, and allust will be. It's on'y when white witches same as me depend on their charms alone in the pride o' their hearts and doan't ax Him Who alone can beat the Black Man that them warmin' can work their evil way. Come ye in, come ye in, my pratty, if so be as you care more for Master Ben than for a brother, as I know ye do. You and me will beat their contrivances. But on'y by the help o' my l'arnin' and the help o' the Master of All."

The old woman's words were so solemn, and her manner so impressive, that Marshmallow obeyed without hesitation. •

"Lave your mules croppin' the hidge, me dear," said Burntoad. "I've enow cunnin' to promise as they won't stir. And come ye in for the sake of your love and of the power of Good over Bad."

Marshmallow passed her hand across her forehead as she entered the hovel. Was she ill? She had sensed something abnormal at Cootby Hall. And now she knew that she was under bondage to this strange

¹ Probably this was Sara's plural of "succubus," the familiar animal with which students of witch-lore will be acquainted.—J.B.

old woman. She had never interested herself greatly in the local superstitions. Her stable, her poultry yard, and even her gun—for she was a good shot and a keen sportswoman—had kept her occupied. Her old Aunt Sabina, with whom she lived, was a cantankerous old maid who kept her temper lively, so that she had no need to kill time by investigating the curious tales of wizardry which now and then came to her incredulous ears. She was well educated for a country lady. And a well-educated girl or woman is nearly always more incredulous of superstition, save her own private and personal superstitions, than is a man. Marshmallow would not have passed under a ladder for a ten pound note, badly as she might have wanted it. She would not have commenced any enterprise upon a Friday, she would not have sewn on any button or hook and eye, however essential to the costume she desired to wear, upon a Sunday. But she did not believe in witchcraft. It was rather because Burntoad Amis was an old woman against whom she had heard nothing, and because the old woman's appearance was so appealing, than because she had any faith in her occult powers, that she left her sleigh and accompanied the white witch within her hovel.

No sooner were the two women, one very old and the other in the pride of her youthful vigour, within the four walls of the hovel than old Sara seemed to

her guest to assume a power and a dignity which was amazing, and which Marshmallow was quite unable to resist.

“Set ye there, set ye there,” said the old woman.

She took the girl by the hand and led her to a humble three-legged stool, which seemed to be home-made, so rough was it in fashion, with the bark still on its legs and the seat apparently the untrimmed cross section of a fir trunk. Strangely bewildered, and conscious that she was not mistress of herself, Marshmallow allowed the old woman to seat her on the rough wood. Once seated she looked round her with eyes which saw what she had never seen before and which she was never to see again. It seemed to her that indistinct white wraiths flitted about the hovel, kind eyes gleaming from formless faces, an air of comfort and soothing sweeping from their vague passage. She felt as though in a dream, a peaceful and delightful dream, so holy and serene did the atmosphere of that sordid hut appear. Then the old woman took a crooked knife from her breast, and, holding the knife in one hand, held Marshmallow's left hand in the other. Faintly, somewhat as a chant sung in church sounds to the passers-by in the road outside, Marshmallow heard the old woman rhyme her doggerel.

“Set ye there, set ye there,
A drop o' your blood and a wisp o' your hair,

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A mossel o' skin or a mossel o' bone
I must have if ye want to possess your own.
There's danger to tackle, and evil to beat.
But set ye there, on the three-legged seat
And I'll change the stool for a cushioned throne.
Set ye still, set ye still,
And I'll learn ye as good is stronger'n ill.
Though Blackberry's succubs may scab your skin.
A stranger ha' come from a foreign land,
A stranger whose hand 'ill be Blackberry's hand,
The Black Man's wench, with the Black Man's sin.
Have faith, have faith, for the Black Man's power
Is only strong at an unwatched hour,
And the Great White Christ is the Lord of all.
Have faith in the old wife's will to help.
Have faith, and you'll hear the succubs yelp
As their master yelped at his mighty fall."

The incantation, rough and uncouth as it was, soothed Marshmallow into a kind of semi-consciousness. She saw and felt old Sara prick her wrist with the point of her strangely-shaped knife, saw her gather a drop or two of her blood in a tiny porcelain saucer, saw and felt the touch of the knife when it cut through a tiny wisp of her glowing hair, and then sliced off a tiny fragment of skin from the ball of her thumb, and saw the old woman steep the strands of hair in the blood.

And it all seemed natural to her. It was not till Sara had left the room and returned that Marshmallow really recovered her normal keen intelligence. And

then what had happened seemed so vague and uncertain that she did not like to refer to it.

Once more she passed her hand across her forehead.

“ I’ve been queer, I think,” she said a little unsteadily. “ Will you give me a glass of water, Mrs. Amiss ? ”

Old Sara raised the girl’s eyelids and peered for a second into the lovely blue eyes. Then she again left the room and presently returned with an antique silver-clamped horn, in which she offered a colourless liquid, like water, to her guest.

Marshmallow took the horn and drained its contents. At once she revived, and smiled upon her hostess. “ Thank you very much,” she said. “ I cannot understand why I came over so queer at your door. You’ve been very good to me.”

“ Go,” said Sara, “ with the blessin’ of all good things upon ye. Go, and trust to old Sara to see ye have your rights for all the foreign woman and the Black Man’s tricks. Go. And if ever you’re in sorrow or puzzlement come to me. You and me have got to fight for our own. God bless ye, and the spirits o’ the mash, the good spirits who guide the lost through the bog of the shivering rands, and the voices of the night which sing of God and the White Christ, protect ye. You shall have your will and see your enemies at your feet. But, mind ye! A quiet tongue is a gift o’

good. A blabbin' tongue bring mischief. God bless ye, and trust to old Sara. The screen of the Lord cover ye!"

Marshmallow had risen and was now at the threshold. As old Sara sang, rather than said, the last words, she swung her arms in a quaint movement, not unlike that of a man spreading a cast net upon the water. She gave one more gesture of dismissal, and then at last Marshmallow felt entirely free. A little bewildered, but certainly more cheerful than when she had pulled up her mules at the call of the old woman, she entered her sleigh again and chirruped to the mules to proceed.

As she passed Blackberry Banham's cottage she saw the dark and dangerous beauty hasten out to intercept her. She saw the woman try to range herself in front of the mules, and saw her foiled by some impalpable, some invisible force which seemed to hold the witch back. And as the sleigh drew nearer Marshmallow was conscious of a warm soothing ring of air about her, and of some inexplicable and unseen presence which encouraged her, and enabled her to resist a certain impulse to stop and speak with Blackberry who strove to attract her. What were all these mysteries? As she passed beyond the carnsa against Blackberry's hut the air again seemed the ordinary damp cold air of a marshland thaw.

“ I can't be well,” said Marshmallow to herself. “ It must be liver or something.”

But as she drove homeward, she knew well that it was no physical disorder which had aroused such strange emotions in her, and before she reached home she was converted sufficiently to a belief that old Sara had helped her more that morning than she knew, and to thank God and His angels and ministers for having that morning preserved her from some great peril.

CHAPTER XII

THE KEEPER'S ENTERPRISE

WHEN Bob Clare and Tim O'Shea left Ben to digest their narrative as best he might, the former asked Tim to accompany him to his cottage, where he lived alone with his son, young Bob.

Tim hesitated. "I doubt the masher may want me," he said.

The old keeper grinned. "He won't want nothin' bar sleep for the next twenty-four hours," said he. "He don't know yet what a doin' he've had, but he'll l'arn sune as he set and rest."

"Shure you should know the masher best," said Tim. "You've sarved him since he was but a bit of a boy. I'll trust ye, Bob."

So the two men left the precincts of the Hall and made their way to the cosy cottage at the woodland end of the village which had been the residence of the head keeper of the Cootby estate for generations.

Bob was very serious, his usual bright expression

shadowed by some secret thought. With an Irishman's understanding Tim said nothing as he followed the keeper to his home. The events of the morning had influenced the superstitious Irishman even more than they had Bob, and he felt that he was in a world of mystery from which he would be very glad to escape.

"D'ye know what?" said Bob, when the two men had seated themselves in the cottage and the father had satisfied himself that his son was somewhere about his duties in the plantations, "I fancy as some one is putting the grin onto the master. I don't believe as that French wench was left there long, where he found her, nor yet I don't believe as that thing what I found was one o' the men she say come with her. I doubt that's a decoy, bor. Now if you be the man I believe ye to be you'll watch agin the plantin' with me to-night. I don't like the idee no more than you do. But I bain't a-goin' to be frightened o' doin' my duty 'cos o' rum funny tales. I never see a ghost yet for all the hours I ha' been out on the mash or in the carrs and plantin's at night. Nor yet I never see no mark like we see nigh the haunted plantin' afore to-day. Mister! I doubt there's rum doin's, and my 'sperience tell me rum doin's mean poachin'. Will ye stand a watch wi' me to-night agin the haunted plantin'?"

Tim hesitated. But he had a scapulary in which he had great faith, and, like all those who have real faith

in their religious creed, he was supported by the belief that good would conquer evil.

"If it's for the mather I won't be denyin' ye," he said at last. "But to spake the truth, the comin' o' this streenge colleen fears me. By the saints, Bob, did ye see through her fairy face, or did she seem as lovely to you as I doubt she seem to the young mather?"

"I had no proper sight of her," replied the keeper. "But d'ye mean as she wears two faces? One fair and one foul? If so, we'd best ax Sara Amiss for help. I know Sara well, and she is allust agin the sarvants o' the Black Man o' the Mash."

"Now there ye go again," protested Tim. "Ye speak o' things I know nothin' about. We've the divil's canthrips and their pishogues and the like in ould Oireland. And the wise women and all. Is ut that ye mean as Misthress Amiss is a fairy woman o' the good spirit? If so, begob I'm wid ye."

"Listen, then," said Bob. "I have my doubts of all this witch business. But I saw one thing. There was a trail from the haunted plantin' to Blackberry's home! And a trail of two men, though the one of them had tried to hide it by steppin' in the feetin's of the t'other. I didn't tell the young master 'cos I knowed he wanted rest. But if you're man enow we'll take a spell at the haunted plantin' to-night and

¶

see if there's any confoozledum a-goin' there. If we see aught as pass the doin's of man, we'll have a hearin' wi' Sara Amiss. But mind ye. A quiet tongue mean good sport."

Tim nodded and again applied himself to the demi-john of spirits which Bob had placed upon the table.

It was not till between the lights, when Ben had learnt that he would have to wait in vain for his mother or his guest to come down to the dining-room, the guest having been seized with a fresh attack of weakness, that Bob and Tim made their way stealthily through a wood at the back of the keeper's cottage, a ride through which led to an entrance to the marsh gate not far from the fathomless pool.

The fathomless pool itself was within the guardianship of the keeper, and the carr surrounding it was a favourite haunt of wild pheasants. But hitherto Bob had given little care to watching it. The local superstition was so strong that no villager was likely to risk the danger of the occult myth for the sake of a pheasant or two.

The pool was no vast expanse of water. It was round, and not more in diameter than forty feet. It was a still black pool, in a cluster of ground-ash, alder and willow, and connected with a "running dyke" which edged the plantation. The tradition which gave it an evil name had descended from generation to

generation from a time beyond the memory of man. So far as Ben and Bob Clare had seen and heard the pool was only remarkable in that it did not freeze during the sharpest weather. Even when the Fleet dyke was two inches thick with ice the surface of the pool remained as liquid and as blackly lucent as in the heat of August. But the keeper and the young squire attributed this to the fact that the dyke which fed it from the western side of the plantation was a running dyke, that is to say one fed by some subsoil brook, and poured forth its stream too fast to allow the stagnancy of frost to quell its flow. There was the point too that the pool was shut in by overbranching boughs of ash and willow, which kept the fall of the frost from its surface. Every one who knows anything of gardening knows that the slightest protection overhead will save garden produce from the frost. Nevertheless, the superstition concerning the fathomless pool, and the popular belief that once, if not in the nineteenth century, it had formed the home of the traditional "worm of the mash," rendered that black-surfaced still pool a region of some awe both to master and man. As to its repute of being bottomless, there were legends that many and many a rope had been tied together, the end of the combined lengths weighted with a mighty weight, and the latter lowered into the pool without finding a resting-place. And this was true, as

Ben knew. He had taken his pike rod and a great length of oiled silk line wound on his home-made reel to the pool, and with a four ounce plummet had tried to find the bottom without avail. But never, till the finding of the French waif upon the denes, had any one of the present or past two generations suggested that there was evidence that the "gre't worm o' the mash"—that legendary bogey of marshland—had its dwelling-place in that deep pit. That it was reputed to dwell in the dark depths was a matter of common superstition. But never before had there been seen such a trail on the snow, or such evidence of some ghastly horror in the plantation as had been provided in connexion with the finding of Jonquil in the hollow of the denes.

Blackberry Banham had used the threat of "the worm of the mash" over and over again. The villagers had come to consider it as metaphorical. The existence of such a horrible prehistoric thing was not realized nor credited. Yet what did the discoveries which Bob Clare and Tim O'Shea had made mean?

Of the two men Tim was certainly the more afraid. An Irishman, or Kelt, is always liable to be daunted by the legendary lore of the Unknown. Bob Clare was superstitious so far as the spirits of the marsh or the powers of the marsh witches were concerned. But he could not believe that within his land, his planta-

tions over which he had ward and guard, there could be any living thing with which he was unacquainted. This belief had already started him to wonder what was the meaning of the horror that he had found. There had been no identification of the ghastly face as that of one of the men who had rowed the French stranger to shore. Nor, if Jonquil had identified that horrible white drained face, as that of one of her companions, would Bob have believed her, though Tim O'Shea might have been more credulous. Bob was a hard-headed man, accustomed to observe wild life and the signs of wild life. Had Sara Amis assured him that something uncanny dwelt in the fathomless pit he might have believed her, but he would certainly have taken steps to verify her statement. Had Blackberry Banham warned him of the same fact he would have attributed that beautiful woman's words to some evil intention, some wickedness which she meant to work. Bob, as I have already said, was no fool. He was not a hide-bound materialist, ready to ridicule the claims of supernormal powers of Sara and Blackberry without disproving them in some definite way. Indeed, he believed that Sara and Blackberry both had powers which he could not understand and did not wish to understand. With that sort of thing, that incorporate, mysterious danger or protection, he had nothing to do. But if there was indeed some

bodily creature, however dangerous or abnormal, at large within the woods, the fields or the marshlands over which he was keeper, it was his duty to track it down and annihilate it. Why, it might destroy his pheasants, to say nothing of the young water-hen or home-bred mallard which loved to frequent the running dyke which fed the mysterious pool.

That the young of wild-fowl should not be warned by nature of some ghastly peril as they swam in the running dyke or even on the pool itself was no argument to him against the possibility of the existence of this legendary worm of the mash in the pool. For he knew how innocently the little fluffy young of all water-fowl would swim across a mere or a broad wherein lurked the great five or six pound eels, or the twenty pound pike, which would take the little downy things at a mouthful.

“ You’ll come then,” he said to Tim. “ I’d rayther ha’ you than my son Bobby, ’cos he fare too curious like. You ha’ seed what I ha’ seed this mornin’. I reckon as you and me will set and watch that there plantin’ to-night.”

Tim O’Shea was not happy in his consent. But he consented.

“ I’ll just run to the Hall and ask if the young mas-ther requires me again this day,” he said, “ and then I’ll be back wid ye. But Clare, man, have ye ever a

scapulary or charrum against the evil wan? By the saints, you would not find me watchin' where we saw what we saw this mornin' onless I had a scapulary which my mother gived me!"

"You won't leave me, my boy," said Bob Clare. "I've left word at the Hall that you'll be workin' with me this night. And the young master won't expect ye. What's more, he won't want ye. All he'll want to-night is sleep. D'ye know what he did? I'm a strong man. But I couldn't ha' carried that wench acrost the Shiverin' Mash even on the wall, with my crotch boots on and through a yard o' snow in parts. He's his father over again is the squire, God bless him, and if he mate as he should wi' Miss Mallie o' Smeeby, I reckon his chillen will be the strongest in England. For look at her! Don't she breathe health and strength? Aye! and a woman's love and all! D'ye hear, Tim. Whatever else we do, we ha' got to show up this Franch mawther as what I reckon she be! Did ye see how the master looked when he spook on her! Well, for one I bain't a-goin' to see her mated wi' him, and onless I'm a fule and can't tell a coot from a water-hin, I'll see he keep his faith where ta should be, and that's with Miss Mallie o' Smeeby."

"But you're sure in haste," said Tim. "The ould misthress is makin' a queen and what not of the French lady! 'Twas Jane as tould me, and ye know Jane

would not be lyin' to me! Would ye cross your mistress?"

"Mistress!" cried Bob Clare. "I hain't no mistress! What would I be if I had a mistress, me, a keeper, the son of a keeper, the son of a keeper of the Ryvetts since Oliver reigned! If you follow the mistress you're no good to me and I can do without ye. I've only one to look up to and obey, and he's mistress and master too and that's the young squire, and if he's bewitched, as Ellen cook said he is, 'tis my work to get him out of it, and I reckon as Sara Amiss will help me there. Now are you a-comin' wi' me for the young squire's sake or aren't ye? I don't want no woman's man wi' me. I'd rayther go aloan. But if you're your master's man I'd be glad of ye! If that Jane ha' got over ye to be the mistress's man agin the master I don't want none of ye, so there ye have it."

"Be jabbers!" cried Tim, laughing, "but 'tis excited ye are about nothin'. I'm the young squire's man, and I only tould ye what I'd heard. As for the French colleen, bad cess to her! Then I'd betther not go back for supper!"

"Supper!" cried Bob. "Why there's a couple of rarbutts and a young goose, one o' them as the master shot but didn't find this mornin', a-stewin' away with a leash o' water-rail and two couple o' hornpie with some inguns and sallary out o' my own garden, and a

quarter peck o' taters a-stewin' with 'em, set on a slow fire afore I see ye at the Hall; what more d'ye want? If it's liquor, I've got some o' the same old smuggled rum as the young master hev, and I'll put my hoam-brewed agin the Hall's any day o' the week. Supper? What more d'ye want?"

Tim smiled. He was not quite easy; but he saw that he could not get out of his adventure without setting up a suspicion of cowardice in the keeper's mind. And this he could not bear to do. Of all the men round about Bob Clare had been the most friendly to the Irishman, since Ben had brought the latter home from a horse fair at Odinton, charmed by his manner of treating the horses under his charge. The village as a whole had regarded him with as much suspicion as it was now ready to evince towards Jonquil. But Bob Clare had seen the real sportsman under the strange exterior (to him) of the Irishman, and had been friendly with him from the first. Tim O'Shea, despite his Keltic fears of the occult, could not bear to let his friend believe he was a coward.

Also Bob's description of his mighty supper simmering on the hob stirred the imagination and the appetite of the son of the Irish western boglands.

"Shure!" he said, with the delicious melodious brogue which has given the greatest cross-examiner who ever practised at the English Bar many and many

a verdict, "I'll do as ye say. And if we worruk to defait the schaymes of this French leedy, 'tis the better I'll be playseed. For shure she gives me the quakes in my internals, and for all her deenty feece I'd like to put the torch of the witch of Kilkee to her."

"And what's that?" asked Bob, now ready to be even more friendly with the Irishman, since he had thrown himself body and soul into his, the keeper's, schemes.

"Och!" said Tim, with a succulent draught of the magnificent rum which his host had produced, "'tis but a tale of the fairies! The witch's torch was naught more than the look of a true man or woman wid the insight in um. Under that the loveliness, such as 'twas, of an evil woman, feeded away, and the rale thing appeared. And, begob, there's tales o' women feemed for miles for their charrums who fell flat dead in ugliness and wrinkled age under that seem torch. But you'll understand, Bob, that I'm tellin' ye the silly tales of my native land!"

"Ah!" said Bob Clare thoughtfully. "So you've got the same notion as I have."

But he did not pursue the subject, and presently as the light faded, he lit a couple of rush wick lights, and served out the stew.

I should like to discourse on that stew. Even at the end of the nineteenth century I have tasted one

compounded of the same ingredients. But the story craves for action, and I must content myself with declaring that, manlike, Tim O'Shea was the more ready to follow the lead of the keeper after that magnificent meal than he was before. There are many more delicate dishes than that of the keeper's stew. But to a hungry man, with a palate, the combination of flavours with the grand abundance of the supply rendered the meal one to be thought of apart, one to be remembered throughout life, by a man who had a tongue to taste, a palate to criticize, an appetite to enjoy, and teeth to crush the exquisite and innumerable flavours of the real marshland pottage.

It was a little after eight o'clock, and not yet dark in the glow of the set sun from the north-west over the levels, when Tim O'Shea and his host Bob Clare went arm in arm towards the gate of Tammiss's farm which led to the marsh bordered by the running dyke feeding the fathomless pit. Both men had supped well and, according to rustic belief, "settled" their great intake of food by copious draughts of overproof rum, only diluted sufficiently by hot water to "take off the chill." Bob was entirely sober. He was a man of cast iron mental strength. Spirits or alcohol in any imaginable quantities had no effect on his steely constitution save, perhaps, to make him the readier of apprehension, the quicker to hear the whirra, whirra of a fowl's

wing or the faint pad of a hare's footing. He felt that he was now at his best, strung to concert pitch, alert, and eager to expose what he really believed to be an attempt to work on the superstitions of the village folk, including his master.

Tim took his full meal and his stimulant differently. He was now ready to see all the fairies in the world, to hear all the banshees which had ever screeched in the wilds of Clare, Antrim or Connaught. And he was garrulously affectionate, and of a courage which would have made him encounter the great worm of the marsh, if it existed, with his bare hands.

Bob was alarmed by his irresponsible excitement. "Mind this," he said. "You must keep your mouth shut till I call ye, unless ye are in fear of your own life. I doubt we shan't see or hear nothin'. But one can't tell what the Black Man is up to in these parts. Even old Sara can't tell. She can on'y gi'e ye a medsun or what I may call a sort o' screen agin his tricks. Don't you imagine as I believe all what I say. But that's possible. And what's possible may hap. Now then, here be the plantin'. Set ye there, outside, agin that whitethorn bush as grow alone on the fudder side of the deek which feed the pit. Set ye there. There's a mask o' ellum as I put there for settin' on when I wanted to watch the home-bred snipe from Tammis's home mash. I'm a-goin' inside, and if ye hear me

shout, well, I'd like ye to come along to me, but I doubt you'll cut and run."

"I'll swear by the faith o' my mother, by the strength of Saint Pathrick, and by my hope to save my own soul, that if ye call to me I'll go to ye! By our Leedy, man, d'ye think I'm a coward! Let me tell ye——"

"Hush," whispered Bob, well pleased. "I knowed what you'd say. Don't fret yerself. And now, watch, watch, watch, for what the fall o' the night may bring. And mind ye this. I don't hold as what we found this mornin' had aught to do with what's in the pool. That—but that don't sigerfy now. Set ye there, where I told ye, and watch and listen. Aye, and smell."

CHAPTER XIII

HORRORS PILED HIGH

THE night was very still. The gale which had accompanied the blizzard of the previous night had died long ago, and the temperature had risen with extraordinary rapidity. Even now the sun was down there was little cold to be felt. The dank reek of the molten snow and of the usual marshland rank emanations from the dykes and undrained bogs filmed the darkening air with mist. But Tim was used to the misty rankness of a bog. What he was not used to was the feeling of imminent peril which assailed him as soon as Bob Clare had crossed the "ligger" leading over the running dyke into the plantation by a path which touched the very edge of the fathomless pit. That Bob had taken upon himself the more venturous part Tim realized. But he hated to think that there was any danger at all. If it had been a matter of a broken head or of a free fight for the honour of his master, no one would have been more

delighted than Tim at the prospect of using his shillelagh, which he had brought with him as well as the fowling piece and pistol with which Bob had supplied him.

Bob disappeared in the black shadow of the trees about the pool. Tim began to attempt to make himself as much at ease as might be upon the fighting seat of which the keeper had spoken.

“Now,” thought Tim, left to himself, “what was it he did mean? He has no faith in fairy magic! He told me so. He even seems to doubt what he saw himself—pah!” (the man spat in the running dyke) “’twas ill to belave in at all, at all, but there it was wid the sthreenge marruks upon ut, wid the—but the Mother of God help me! I can’t bear to think upon ut! And now he goes to the heart of the pleece whence they say the thing that made that quare thrack upon the snow lives! The saints help him, the Saviour help him, our Blessed Mother of God help him.”

The Irishman’s faith helped him, as genuine faith in God always helps man or woman, of whatever creed they may be. Tim O’Shea believed in banshees and witches in ould Oireland, in Pishogues, and evil spirits, and in the personal maleficence of the Father of Evil. But he also believed that his God had beaten Satan once and would always beat him. By faith and

prayer to the Virgin and Her Babe, to the Saints and to the Father and Lord of the Saints the Irishman believed that the contrivances of the devil's servants could be neutralized. And his faith had supported him in many a dangerous place, as sincere faith has always supported all those of mankind who are not too proud to believe that they are not yet quite on an equality with God. If only man, in the twentieth century, could realize some of the truths which were accepted generally in the seventeenth and eighteenth he would be the happier and the more hopeful for his belief. With the faith in witchcraft and other evil and occult things, the faith in the powers above such superstitions has died too prevalently. It is doubtful if the modern disbelief in the occult exhibition of the powers of evil by the servants of evil is worth the disbelief in the powers of good. But for the most primitive survivals of old times in wild places like the Daneshire marshlands or the Devonshire moors the fear of witches and of all supernormal evil influences would be dead within Great Britain.

Is it not the fact, that with the surrender of faith in the powers of evil the faith in the powers of good has also become feeble. I write and feel mostly for the people I know and love, the people of the Daneshire, or Norfolk and Suffolk villages. When their faith in witchcraft was virile, and poignant, their

faith in God was far greater than it is now. Let those who wish to ridicule all the rustic beliefs in the powers of the Black Man of the Marsh, powers which there are many among the country folk to affirm by the authority of their own senses, be careful lest in destroying the rural fear of the devil's servants they destroy with equal or greater ease the belief in God, in the powers of good which has been so pertinent a factor in Daneshire life since Cromwell's Ironsides spread their sincerity. What right have we people who call ourselves educated, and flatter ourselves that we know something of modern science, to disturb the old belief of the country-side in the traditional fight between the powers of good and evil? No doubt there are many worthy persons fully convinced of the predominance of the powers of good who will object to this interpellation in my story of a hundred years ago. Let them, for I give them credit for all sincerity, hesitate before they destroy a belief in the power of the black witch, lest they destroy belief in all things but the visible and material. A villager will be happy with his pittance, and his belief in the local witch's charms, and his faith in God and in the merciful and kindly Son of God. But touch his belief in one respect, and you risk touching it in others. Take away his or your or my belief in the supernatural (if you can), and you will find that those

who have been weak enough to listen to your teaching will be prepared to shed belief in anything but the practical.

And remember that whether Darwinism is true or not, it is not to be understood of the multitude. To understand scientific formulæ of the Universe and life, one must have a scientific mind. For the county council school public to assimilate the truths of evolution is impossible. The result of the attempt to digest the indigestible fare among such people is simply to give them dyspepsia for all diet more nutritious than that of dry and sapless materialism. The scientist who watches biological marvels through his microscope, who is at a loss to distinguish where animal and vegetable life begin and end, is ready enough to acknowledge the Supreme Power, the Origin of Life. But tell the rural believer that witchcraft is scientifically impossible (which no true scientist would ever tell the trusting folk) and you will start a doubt in their muddled brains whether Godcraft is more possible than witchcraft. Town sceptics, of course, are beneath notice and impossible of persuasion, because they are satisfied that they know all, that there is no devil, no God, and therefore no witches either black or white. Such are beyond the pale. But those who retain the old creed, superstition, what you like to call it, are still devout in their faith in God and His Son. If

they accept witchcraft with their other faith, is it not better to leave them in their faith than possibly to disturb all by attempting to neutralize some part? And after all, what right has any one to attack the faith of these people who have seen what they have seen and heard what they have heard? If the manifestations of the divine power and of the old adversary of that power are still to be found in rustic places, ought we not rather to envy those dear country folk who are so favoured than to ridicule them by the fatuous and irrational negation which seems to spring inevitably from surroundings of bricks and mortar.

No doubt Tim O'Shea would have considered all this, I fear, tedious excursion as entirely unnecessary. He believed in the powers of both good and evil. And because of his belief he squatted a little timorously in the shelter of the whitethorn tree.

The stir of the night life of the wild things began to murmur round the Irishman. He was strange to a motionless vigil on the marshland at night. At his home, in County Clare, he would have been avoided as a dangerous person had he been known to spend an hour or two after dark on the bogs of the land. He was a cunning finder of snipe or wild fowl by day, a good sportsman all round before the hour between the lights. But he was not used to a watch in lonely places at night, before the moon got up. In this

respect he was a far weaker and more timid guard than Bob Clare, who was accustomed to both marsh, broad and woodland at all hours of dark or light.

Overhead came the whirra, whirra of flying fowl, and Tim's nerves shook at the eerie sound of it. "Faith," he said to himself, "aye, ut's the cryin' of lost sows, poor things, 'tis I would wish thim to spake more frindly. Br-r-r! But it's lonesome settin' here and watchin' the dark hour fall. God be wid me for sayin' them worruds! 'Tis onchancy to name the dark hour at all, at all."

He would have given much to call out to ask if Bob was all well and within hearing. But he had been enjoined to observe the strictest silence, and the plain straight honesty and strength of the keeper had bound the more emotional Kelt to obedience.

"Begob," he muttered to himself. "'Tis I that wish we had buried what we found a bit farther into the bog."

The moon was gibbous and would not rise for full three hours. The marsh mist had risen, and had swathed all about the watcher with the haze of rising moisture. A water-vole sprang into the running dyke at Tim's very feet, and startled him. From the pools of water left towards the centre of the marsh by the melted downfall of snow came the cucker, cucker and faint splash of feeding mallard. Overhead now

shrilled the plaintive whistles of curlew. A stealthy long-bodied short-legged shape slid, almost invisible, from the blackberry clump at the edge of the plantation on the farther side of the dyke and noiselessly dived into the water. A cry like that of a child wailed from the thicket, and the female otter followed her mate to the running water.

“Br-r-r,” again shuddered Tim. “’Tis a fearsome place. Playse the pigs that there’s more lies than truth consarnin’ the thing what’s said to live in the pool.”

He took out his black dudheen and looked at it pitifully. “Shure,” he muttered, “’twas the ould divil himself who put it into Bob’s head as I was not to light my dudheen ! Phwhat’s that ? ”

He gasped as the sound of a light thud came to his ears. The noise was faint, yet thud is the only word for it. It was like the noise a booted man might make in stumbling on the fibrous alluvial of the marsh.

Tim feared nothing human. He knew how to tackle a man, and when he had grasped the fact that the sound which had startled him resembled the stamp of a man’s stumble he plucked up courage, and peered through the mist with his keen Irish eyes. *

A dark shadow, its outlines indistinct in the darkness and haze, loomed for an instant from the landward side, followed almost immediately by another shorter

shadow. Tim slunk down behind the whitethorn.

“*N’y a personne,*” came in a murmur to the Irishman’s strained and uncomprehending sense of hearing. “*Allons !*”

“Speak English, man,” answered a rich, sweet voice which Tim recognized. “I don’t understand your jibberish if I *am* the daughter of a Frenchman.”

“I say zere is no person,” murmured the voice which had first spoken. “If Alphonse is as free from derangement on ze uzzer side it is all raight.”

“It must be,” said the woman’s voice. “The keel boat comes before dawn. You and Alfongs must be away in her with the things before sunrise. I tell ye there’s danger. That old Sara is busyin’ herself, and though the fools at the Hall are gulled by Marie, it ain’t safe when that old devil is botherin’ her head about what bain’t her concern.”

A low whistle now came faintly, apparently from the other side of the plantation. “That’s Alfongs,” said the woman’s voice. “Let’s get into the plantin’ and seek the wire.”

Tim had received no orders from Bob Clare as to what he was to do in the event of seeing any one. But he guessed that Bob was neither far off nor asleep, and that he had heard the speakers as plainly as himself. He had assumed the position of leader of the expedition. Let him determine what should be done.

Tim heard the ligger over the dyke first sough as the weight of one who trod upon it pressed its near end into the mud and its centre on to the surface of the water. He peered through the branches and twigs of the whitethorn, but it was now so dark and the mist was so heavy that he imagined rather than saw two dim shapes pass from the nearer wall of the dyke to the farther. And still Bob Clare gave no sign.

Again the whistle sounded, and this time it was nearer, and presently the voices of two men were heard murmuring with that of the woman whom Tim knew to be Blackberry Banham.

“Opray, opray,” thought Tim. “What is ut? I doubt it’s French and mean cursin’ more like than prayin’.”

“Yes,” he heard Blackberry say, “if the paper’s right it should be somewhere near here.”

And then on the silence of the night, which had been emphasized rather than broken by the murmured talk of the three new-comers, there rose a shriek and a shout so fraught with horror and dread that the Irishman crossed himself and shuddered down in his hiding-place behind the whitethorn. “The Saints be wid me,” he prayed! “Phwhat is ut at all, at all?”

For with the terrified outcry there came a sound of surging water, and a wave swept from the pool out

into the dyke till the latter rose high and overflowed to the verge of Tim's hiding-place.

"The worm!" cried Blackberry. "The worm o' the mash! Bear Belzebug look arter your own!"

"*Sacr-r-ré*," cursed one of the men. "Run, *courez vite*, I have ze tin on ze wire! *Grand Dieu!* I see it!"

There came the sound of a blow, and a further bitter oath from the Frenchman. "*Je l'ai*——"

"Oh, speak sense!" yelled Blackberry as she rushed across the ligger. "Speak sense so as I can understand now if ever you did. It's comin'! Lord and Master of Evil, don't let one o' your sarvants interfere with another!"

"I tell you zat somesing have knocked it from my 'and!" shouted one of the men as two more shapes hurtled rather than ran from the plantation over the ligger. "I have *laissaid* it fall! *Non d'un nom!* I have *laissaid* it, letted it fall. *Ventre bleu!*"

"Pick it up, you fool, and hurry," came Blackberry's voice, now faint in the distance.

"I pick up nossin," snarled the man's voice. "Run, run, Alphonse. Dieu! Did you sense it's odour? Aughr!"

The sound of heavy boots thundering over the turf beat upon the night like blows from a mallet upon leather.

Then came another swirl of the water, and a cold, indescribable, ghastly stench. Tim could bear no more. He sprang up from his hiding-place and called aloud. "Bob! Bob!" he cried.

"Shut your row, you fool," came Bob's voice with a chuckle. "The old wum o' the mash ha' done us a good turn, hain't it? What was it? Never you mind, and stop your yellin'. Them fools will hear ye if you keep on. Blarm! They wholly had a fright!"

The mere sound of his friend's accents had assuaged the Irishman's worst tremors. But he still shook with terror as he stood against the near end of the ligger and tried to peer through the darkness, the mist and the thick undergrowth into the haunted plantation. And then, as he was waiting to meet his friend, he heard the latter cry in alarm, "Why, blarm! There *be* a some'at! My booby trap never made that stench!"

Once more there came a great swerve of water, and the wave of the swell ran audibly down the dyke, hissing amongst the sedge and rushes, and again the horrible reek of some pestilential dank vault or mortuary caused the Irishman's gorge to gulp with nausea.

And even as he swore that he would remain no longer, a man came vaulting over the dyke with his leaping pole, seemingly too hurried to waste time by

crossing the ligger, and, catching Tim by the arm, Bob Clare rushed him off across the marsh.

“Golly!” gasped the keeper! “That’s wholly a rum un. What ta was as come arter I’d sprung my booby trap the dear Lord alone know. But,” and he gave a grim chuckle, as he spoke, “I got what those warmin’ were arter, and that’s some’at.” He hesitated a moment. “Did ye see aught?” he asked his friend.

“I saw two men and Blackberry Banham, and I heard ’em,” replied Tim.

“Nothin’ more?”

“No. But, Bob, what was that stink?”

“Here, hold you on,” said Bob firmly. “I was sillary scared at fust. But I’m not goin’ to be frightened of doin’ my duty by a dozen ole worms o’ the mash. I never see nothin’ but a sort o’ greasy grey thing in the pool, a squirmin’ like, or so that appared to me, but that was that dark I can’t be sure o’ nothin’. I had fixed up some’at to frighten them warmin, an old bit o’ sail cloth tied to a line which made all that rumblecumstumble at fust. And I’d chucked in some’at as I knowed worn’t w’ilets. That set them warmin’ a runnin’. But what come arter beat me! I’d got my sail cloth ashore when that last swoosh come, and though my packet o’ surprise worn’t azackly w’ilets as I tōde ye, it worn’t nothin’ like the stench as I nosed while I was a-puttin’ what I tooked from them

thieves into my game pocket! Here! I bain't a-goin' to run away from my own plantin', where there's more wild pheasants neest than in any other plantin' on the shoot. What's more, we're a-goin' wrong for the gate. I'm a-goin' back. Got your gun, bor?"

"Oh, Bob, I can't go back," urged Tim. "I can't go back to that stench again. I didn't see so much as you, only the swoosh of the water."

"Here," said Bob, drawing a flask from his pocket, "take a pull at that, and see if your caps are dry on the nipples. I know you're loaded wi' B.B. shot. So'm I. Come you back and let's see if I'm shanny¹ or not. I did fare to think as I see some'at greeny-grey and greasy a-squirmin'. But I reckon that was imageration! If not, the more reason for goin' back. Why that might fright all the hens out o' the plantin'."

Tim had taken a good swig at the rum and now felt emboldened. He saw that his twelve bore was all right, fitted two fresh caps upon the nipples, and, after another swig, made no further protest against the proposed return to the haunted plantation.

Bob took his eight bore from his back, where he had slung it on its band while he used his leaping pole, thrust the handle of the latter into the soft marsh, and inhaled a deep breath. "Wait you a min't," he said. "Now them warmin ha' goned I can show my lantern."

¹ Daneshire for insane, crazy.—J. B.

He took a small bull's-eye lantern from one of his capacious pockets in the inner lining of his coat, and thrust back the dark shutter. The lamp was already lit, and when he had turned up the wick it threw a steady and bright beam on to the enshrouding mist.

With firm steps Bob led the way back to the ligger, and flung his light across to the surface of the pool. But the mist was too thick for him to see farther than the dyke itself. He hesitated for the fraction of a second, and gave a shaky chuckle.

"Ta bain't azackly what I call jolly oh," he said. "But it's got to be doned."

He strode across the ligger, followed by Tim, in whom the rum was still warm and stimulating.

There were still traces of the horrible stench which had turned the Irishman's gorge, and the cause of which was as unknown to the keeper as it was to his friend. But the surface of the pool lay still and untroubled. Bob threw the shaft of light from his bull's-eye lantern round him. Suddenly he shouted, "Look, see! What's that?"

It seemed to Tim as if he caught sight of some formless thing amidst the thicket, some round striped mass which palpitated. Bob let the lantern fall and its gleam was quenched in the tussocks of grass. Yet from that shapeless thing emanated a sickly

greenish glow of light. "Oh, my God!" moaned Bob. He raised the butt of his gun to his shoulder and fired twice at the ghostly glare. The roar of the shots thundered amongst the trees. The green light flickered for a moment, and before the smoke of the powder had dispersed, died out. Bob recovered his lantern, and found that it was still alight. Silently he thrust his way through the undergrowth to the place where he had seen, or thought he had seen, that striped, formless monstrosity, from which the green glow of radiance seemed to rise.

The marks of his heavy charges of B.B. shot were visible on the tree-trunks, amidst the broad leaves of the marshland weeds, and the splash of the lead showed grey upon a large flint which bulged up through the grass. But of anything else, of any striped and palpitating monstrosity, there was no sign.

Bob swore under his breath, while the more devout Irishman was returning thanks to his patron saint for an escape from he knew not what.

"I can't ha' missed," said Bob. "I can't. Did you see a streaky-lookin' lump o' somethin' quiverin' like, or didn't ye?"

Tim told, in trembling accents, what he had fancied he saw.

"Tha'ss what I see," said Bob. "And I can't ha' missed! Blarm my ole heart alive, I should think it

was some o' that Blackberry's cantrips if she hadn't been so frightened herself by my booby trap. But that bain't nothin' to do wi' her, I'll lay ye a penny."

Again he passed over and across the spot where he had sent his two charges of shot. "They come straight enow," he said. "I mind I had this ellum bole in line, and here ta be, shot to bits! Well, that's a masterpiece, and that's a fact!"

He paused. Then a thought seemed to strike him. "Come you on, bor," he said. "Lor', bless my heart alive, I'd ought to ha' thought on it afore! Specially as we know now as them two furriners won't nayther on 'em kilt. Come you on and stir your stumps."

He hurried the bewildered Irishman over the ligger, and pressed forward over the marsh towards the Hall. On his way he picked up his leaping pole and gave it to Tim to carry. "I'd better have my gun handy," he said, "and I reckon I know more about shootin' in this light or dark than what you do, though I don't deny as you can bring 'em down wery pratty between the lights. But I've shot at a sound in the dark afore now, and you hain't so far as I know, and I may ha' to shoot at a sound agin to-night! Lor', blarm my stupid old hid, not to ha' thought on it before."

He hurried on, at a pace which was half a run and half a stumbling walk.

"What is it?" asked Tim, keeping up easily with

his more weighty companion. "What is it you are afraid of?"

"The boat," replied Bob, hurrying still faster. "You know or you don't as there's a way from the Fleet into the broad, and from the broad into the river! Lord, if Blackberry ha' tode them warmin, I doubt that'll be gone."

"I heard her say something about a keel boat," said the Irishman.

"Then that'll be Roger Hansell's boat, the willain," cried Bob. "Lor', they'd all got it planned wery pretty. But I ha' got what they found, and the Lord know if they'll dust to stay hereabouts, or not to try to get it back. I'm afeared they're off, and if they've took the boat, whatever will the master say?"

By this time the two men had come to the firmer going of the wall of the running dyke which divided the dirty marsh they were on from the Shivering Marsh. Now Bob broke into a lumbering run, and Tim sped after him.

When they came to the gate against which Bob had fastened the painter of the ship's boat that morning, he found that his suspicions were justified. The boat was gone, and from the evidence which his skilled sight could pick up even in the murk of darkness and mist, he divined that she had been shoved along in the direction of the broad.

“It’s too late,” he said, with a hearty curse. “We shan’t never pick ’em up now. Old Sara is the only chance. But she must wait till mornin’-time. Sleep I must, or I shall be fit for nowt come to-morrow, and I doubt there’ll be enow work for both on us.”

Bob’s last words, as he extinguished the rushlight in his cottage before lying down fully dressed to take the rest he needed, were to Tim, who was also reclining on a heap of dry sedge covered with pelts, on the other side of the fire. “If my boy Bob come in and you’re wakin’, tell him not to ondress. There’ll be work for all of us uns and arly. Did ye see that glimmer o’ light at Blackberry’s cottage? If so be she hain’t gone with ’em she’ll play the mischief here. Mind and tell my boy Bob, bor, and good sleep to ye!”

Very soon the two men were snoring a duet, and in the dreams of each was a flying boat, thrust along by the frantic arms of two men. Where the difference in their dreams lay was that while to Bob’s dreaming vision the faces of the two men were blank, featureless, indistinguishable, to Tim they were distinct, one being a coarse, brutal bludgeon-like mass of seared and scarred flesh and skin, a ghastly white with angry blotches of vivid red in horrible spots, a wide pale and thin-lipped mouth, open to show yellow teeth gapped in several places, pale blue eyes, the whites bloodshot, rusty red bristly hair on head and chin alone, with a

scarlet wen the size of a turkey's egg on the neck under the left ear, one of those bestial faces which are alone seen amongst the most villainous types of Frenchmen, and the other a clean-cut sharp dark face, large fiery black eyes, a small black moustache, a small and well-shaped but sensual-lipped mouth—in brief, the face of a handsome scoundrel of the Midi.

It was first dawn before young Bob entered his father's cottage. He took a light from the fire of the great logs burning in a red glow on the great fire stones in the ingle, and with the insouciance of his race and training looked about him before speaking. When he saw the face of Tim O'Shea he chuckled maliciously. The young man had been less ready than his father to welcome so great a stranger of blood and birthplace as Tim to his intimacy. He had always resented the power of the Irishman in the Cootby stables, though he knew that he himself could never be employed about horses, of which he knew nothing.

He kicked Tim gently in the ribs. "Hi," he said, "I reckon you'd best rouse up. I passed by the Hall on my way home, and I see the stable doors was open. Maybe you left 'em open, for old Job coachman leave the lockin' up to you. Anyways they're open now. But I reckon you've got your hosses tethered!"

Tim, roused from an uneasy sleep, the dreams of which have already been described, sat up suddenly

and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. "And would ye mind tellin' it all over again," he said. "Shure I thought ye said the steeble door was open as I locked up myself. Am I still dr'amin', or are ye havin' your jokes wid me?"

"I reckon you won't find it no joke if any of the squire's hosses have been stole," said young Bob with a grin. "You can dream what ye like. But ye won't dream the stable doors shut unless Blackberry or old Sara help ye! Why, ye fule, doan't ye hear what I say. The door of the Hall stable is open. Ta bain't my work, or I'd have give a look in. I thought as ole Job left ye to see to the lockin' up."

Tim leapt from his comfortable if primitive bed. "You mane ut?" he asked, for he knew that young Bob had no liking for him and was as likely as not to play a practical joke upon him.

"Garh!" grunted young Bob with an expectoration. "Mind your own trouble, look arter your own stable, and—and find your own hosses," he added in a moment of instinctive knowledge, "if any ha' been stoled! Why, faa'er, faa'er!" the young man said, shaking his father by the shoulder, "wake up! That's past fust dawn, and from what I ha' seed ta bain't safe to leave the home covers unwatched for half an hour."

Bob grunted as he shuffled from under his coverings.

“What d’ye mean?” he asked. “D’ye mean as you see poachers and didn’t dare to take ’em, but had to wake up the old man to do your work! If that’s what you mane I’ll ax the young squire for a better underkeeper than what I seem to ha’ gart. Spake up, Bob bor. You can’t mane that.”

And now the young keeper showed some signs of hesitancy. He was not afraid to bluff Tim O’Shea, whom he always regarded as a “furriner,” but he dared not tell aught but the truth to his father because he knew that that wily guardian of fur and feather would promptly see through any deceit.

“Ta bain’t much,” the young man said sulkily. “But I heard a rare old gallopin’ noise from the Hall as I was a-comin’ home, so I took a look round the Hall grounds. And—he! he! he! Mister Tim Shea Oh’s stable’door was wide. I didn’t look inside to see what hosses was left, for how should a pore underkeeper know what hosses Mister Timothy Sheeh had to comb and groom and pet. But I come home here as quick as I could, and I never thought to find as the man responsible for the hosses at the Hall would be a-takin’ of his ease here along o’ you, father! He! he! he! I hope as he’ll be able to satisfy the young master if he find the best of the hosses ha’ strayed durin’ the night.”

By this time old Bob Clare was as anxious as his

guest. And he was furious with his son. "You young devil!" he cried. "You saw that and didn't hurry home to tell me! Did ye roust up the Hall? Did ye do aught to warn any one that there was hoss thieves or other thieves about! If not I'll deal wi' ye later on. I hain't t'roshed ye for the last year or two, but I reckon I'll learn you who's master here yet. Come on, Tim. I'll see about this cub later. You and me ha' got more to do."

He roused and made ready to go out. Suddenly he felt about in his pockets.

"Did I give you what I knocked out o' the man's hand larse night?" he asked Tim anxiously.

"Sure ye know, but I never set eyes on that seem," replied Tim. "Ye tould me you'd picked up some-thing as ye knocked out of one o' the blayguards' hands, but I never came so far as to see ut."

"So I thought," said the head keeper.

He felt swiftly through the clothes he wore, the same as he had worn on the dirty marsh and in the haunted plantation on the previous night. Then he hurried into the scullery at the back where he kept his guns and game bags. Presently he returned, and his face was rippling in uneasy wrinkles. "I to'de ye I'd knocked some'at out of one of the men's hands?" he asked, with an anxiety almost pathetic.

"Shure and ye did," replied Tim. "And I remem-

ber I heard the knock of ut! I remember I heard the phut of the phwhack as ye hit um. And ye said as it was a bit of a box like. But ye never gave it to me, nor even showed it to me. I didn't see the shape of ut."

The head keeper stood silent for a moment. Such a man as he is never knocked out of time. But he had met with a disaster which appalled him. From the first words he had heard of the mystery of the foundling on the denes, and of such hints as came through Jane and Ellen of a hidden treasure, he had been inclined to believe in the existence of that hidden treasure and of some record of its whereabouts. He had made strange discoveries in his life, had seen old deserted barns found filled with smuggled tobacco and ankers of smuggled spirits worth hundreds of pounds. He had seen a scrap of paper betray the hiding-place of a smuggler's cairn worth thousands. And he believed that the box, or whatever it was, he had knocked out of the hand of the stranger in the haunted plantation would contain treasure, or a description of the hiding-place of treasure, which would enable the young squire to get out of the financial difficulties of which Bob Clare was fully cognisant. Never for a moment did the keeper think to profit for himself. In those days, even when the cutting of the canal close by Cootby Broad was bringing the influence of

town scoundrels to the loyal and honest country, the feudal loyalty of villagers who had been cared for as feudal friends and dependents was stronger than the love of "brass." No Cootby villager would have sold his master for thirty pieces of silver at that time, if we put Blackberry Banham aside. And even she would not have been bribed by any ordinary offer to betray the young squire of her hamlet.

"I had it," said Bob. "I brought it home. There was a length o' wire to it. I mind I had it in my pocket when I laid me down to sleep. Where is it, Tim? I know I hadn't ought to ask ye, but you was alone wi' me in the cottage larse night. Have ye seen it? Have ye got it? For God's sake, if ye have, hand it over, or I shall be shamed for allust!"

The Irishman's face coloured high. "And," he said, with more brogue than he was wont to use, "mee I teek ut that you, you meek the suggestion that I have stoolen whatever it was from your pockut while ye slept? Is that what ye mane, Mither Clare, and the neem of my own Oirish county, too! I'll never belayve ut."

"Of course not," cried Bob, convinced by the Irishman's manner that not even by way of a practical joke had he touched the thing which had been knocked from the hand of the frightened stranger on the night before.

“ But where can it be ? ”

Tim was now alert and interested. Young Bob stood apart, hotting water for his dew snack. The boy paid little attention to his father and his father's guest. Really, he did not consider it of any great importance that he had seen the stable door at the Hall open. He had not his father's intuition and experience, and had not troubled to seek what the footings and tracks on the moist soil might have told him. Youth cannot help its ignorance. But it might sometimes be less unconscious of it, less insolently confident that the mere fact of youth must counter-balance the experience and the loving patience of age.

“ We didn't bolt or lock the door,” said Bob the elder at last ! “ My God, Tim, d'ye think that any one, anything, could ha' come and stole it while we slept ? ”

“ For sure I had quare drames,” said Tim.

Young Bob laughed. “ If you've come to the dreams,” he said, “ it might be as well if I went to the Hall and told the master.”

“ Set ye where ye are, boy,” ordered the father angrily. “ You take too much upon yourself. You've a lot to learn yet. Why, you fool, I saw you springin' with Blackberry Banham last week, and then for you to set up as a know all ! ”

“ Why shouldn't I ? ” cried young Bob furiously.

“ Judith, and I’ll thank ye not to call her Blackberry, is the finest wench in the village! And she’s no older than myself. Why shouldn’t I take up with her? ”

Bob the father was about to break out into a furious tirade against the black witch when he caught Tim’s eye upon him. Though he was confident that on the marsh or in the woodlands he was Tim’s superior in every way, he had a lurking suspicion that the Irishman was wiler in the ways of the world than he. Moreover, he was thrown off his balance by this defiance of his son, his son who had never before permitted himself to possess an opinion of his own in opposition to his father. Tim might be able to explain this wonderful change in young Bob. But he, Bob the elder, could not, and he obeyed the orders in the groom’s eyes and let his son’s impertinence pass without comment.

“ There’s no reason at all, at all,” said Tim. “ Sure your father doesn’t mean that there is. But I’d ask ye wan thing. Was all the steeble doors open, or only the wan that led to the hosses? And did ye see any sign of a thief at all.”

Young Bob was soothed by the Irishman’s tactful manner of smoothing over the Blackberry obstruction. In his heart the young keeper knew that a month previously he would have been as ready to accuse Blackberry Banham of all sorts of black magic as his

father. Now he was under the magic of her sexual charm. He did not understand how this magic worked. Nor did he attempt to explain the change which had come over his opinion of the woman within the last few weeks, nay, few days, as he knew better than any one else.

He had seen her near the Hall, but not within the grounds. There could be no harm in saying that he had seen her as she was returning home after one of her moonlight expeditions in search of herbs which all Daneshire would understand to be necessary for the therapeutic value of those medicinal teas and jellies for which she was nearly as famous as old Sara.

"There wasn't nobody anigh," he said angrily, with a look at his father which made the old man seek for the stick with which he used to thrash his youngster, "but Judith Banham, who was a-goin' home arter gatherin' herbs under the failin' moon, and I don't reckon as she had aught to do with stealin' hosses, do you, bor?"

He laughed in his confidence of the witch's innocence. Poor boy! Many and many a villager had trusted that servant of the Black Man as honestly and as fatally.

"Did ye look for feetin's?" asked the father.
"Did ye look inside the stables to see if all was right?"

"I hadn't no affairs with the stables. I ha' said

so a'ready," replied young Bob. "If Tim here had found me messin' about he would ha' been the fust to ax what I was arter. Ain't that the fact?"

Tim nodded. He saw that it was no time for controversy. He wanted to get to his stables as soon as he could and he wanted to take the elder Clare with him.

"I think," said Tim, "that I'll go and see to the steebles. Perhaps," and here he gave a wink at the elder Clare, "we may find what's missin' there!"

Old Bob, startled, looked keenly at Tim. "Did ye hear any one come in larse night?" he whispered, seeing that his friend did not desire that the son should be taken into the confidence of the elders.

"I did not. I slept that sound a sow might ha' farrowed by me side and me know nothin'," replied Tim, with a metaphor from his early days. "But," he added, "the door was open. Ye say you're sure as you brought the box inside when we come, and the box didn't lave by itself. Then there's the tale of the stable door. Begob, I must see to 'um now and at wance. If the thing was took from you while we both slept it was took by them as were in the plantee-tion, or—and mind this—by the sthrongest part av um, and that was a woman. If the thing is stole, Blackberry stole ut under our noses while we slept. By St. Pathrick, av she did, what a colleen it is!"

The Irishman's eyes twinkled in admiration. As

he had said, if, after the experience on the dirty marsh and near the fathomless pool, the woman had brought herself to the pitch of entering the keeper's hut and stealing what he had taken from one of her confederates, "what a woman" indeed!

"I can't find it," repeated Bob. "Whatever shall I say to the master. He've spoke to me about what the foreign mawther want, and this must be it. I had it and I lost it."

"Ye simpleton!" urged Tim. "Lave it to me. I know the young mather, and his moods. At the right time I'll tell him all. Till then kape a quiet tongue and a wary eye. I'm off to look at my steebles, and I'd thank ye to come wid me. There'll be no one movin' at the Hall yet, for which praise be to the saints!"

"But don't you see, man," objected old Bob, "that if the same man who robbed us of the tin box or whatever it was have stolen the hosses he'll be out of our reach by sunrise."

"Blackberry stole the thing, whatever it was, and I'll make a bet wid ye that she won't leave her home," said Tim. "I've seen the ways of fairy women bad and good in the ould cuntry, and if Blackberry leave the nearness to the Hall yet ye can call me a sinseless choild o' throuble! That I shall be in any case," he added, as he remembered his open stable. "For the sake of the Mother of God, Bob, come wid me

to see afther my hosses ! And," the Irishman added, with his mouth close to the ear of the keeper, so that young Bob could not hear, " kape a sharp oye out for feetin's, both outside your own door and in the steeble yard at the Hall. And ye may get the laugh of your son yet."

The keeper brightened up, though he was sore at the loss of the box or tin package which he had been so proud to secure on the previous night. " If I can put the grin onto young Bob that'll be as good as a quart of my own old rum," he said.

And Tim, with the soft rich comfort of that brown liqueur still upon his palate, understood how great was the hazard to his friend.

" If ye can't find a hoss left," said young Bob from the cottage scullery as his father and Tim stepped towards the exit, " I dare say ole Sara Amiss will lend ye her dickey ! She's a angel, she is ! She can give her dickey wings and all and set all the rest on us a kneelin' and a prayin' to her. You go and ax old Sara."

" That's Blackberry," murmured Bob, as the two men went out into the village street. " The boy never spoke like that before."

" Sure but I know ut," replied Tim with a chuckle. " Well, we'll pluck that Blackberry, fruit, pips, leaves and all, before we've done wid her."

" Good," replied Bob.

CHAPTER XIV

STRANGE DOINGS BY NIGHT

SLEEPY as Ben still was when he sought his bed, the night did not pass without incident for him. The gibbous moon was up when he woke, with a feeling of uneasiness for which he could not account. He got out of bed and looked out into the night. "About two," he said to himself, "by the look of the sky. Hullo! What's that?"

His quick ears had caught a faint rustle outside in the corridor. His bedroom was the end one along the passage which led from the gallery round the hall on the south-west side of the house, and was separated from the Magnolia room which had been allotted to Jonquil by two other good-sized bedrooms, both of which were now unoccupied. Mrs. Ryvett slept in the room next the gallery on the farther side of the Magnolia room, so that it was strange to hear any sound of movement outside his, Ben's, room at such an hour.

He strode to his door and opened it very gently, taking the precaution to deny himself a light save such as came through his window from the moon now that he had raised his window blind.

The corridor was very dark, but Ben fancied he saw something white to his right, that is to say in the direction of the gallery.

He stood motionless, forgetting that although the corridor was so dark his head was visible in the light from the window which glowed very faintly from behind him.

He fancied that he heard the cautious closing of a door, and he was no longer able to see or fancy he saw that something white. His naked feet made no sound on the carpet of the corridor as he left his room and made his way towards his mother's quarters. He reached the gallery at the end of the passage, and found himself no wiser than when he had commenced his nocturnal stroll.

Not a thing had he seen, not another sound had he heard. All the doors he passed were closed.

"It must have been something outside the window," he muttered to himself. "But my ears don't often play me tricks like that."

He hesitated, peered over the railing of the gallery down into the hall, and now heard the steady tick tock of the great grandfather's clock which stood

close to the hall door. But for the regular beat of the time-piece the house was silent.

Still he was not at ease, still he could not feel certain that his eyes and ears had deceived him. He was so used to peering through darkness when fowl were late in their evening flight that he could not put aside a belief that he had seen something white when first he opened his bedroom door. For a moment his heart beat quicker. There were more than one ghost story about the old place, though he had never seen any apparition, nor, so far as he knew, had his mother. Could it be true that the story of the girl in a white wedding dress who haunted the house was something more than the result of a frightened servant's imagination?

Could he have seen his mother? Had she paid a nocturnal visit to her guest to see if she was sleeping and in need of nothing? Ben tapped gently at his mother's door, and opened it.

The old lady always kept a rushlight burning on her washing-stand in one of those curious perforated cylinders which are still to be found in curiosity shops or in the houses of collectors of antiques. The light the contrivance gave was dim and uncertain, but it was enough to enable him to see that his mother was in bed and apparently asleep. It could not have been she, then. Even as he looked at the old lady

the latter opened her eyes and recognized him. "Why, Ben," she said, "what is the matter?"

"Have you been out in the corridor seeing after our guest, mother?" asked Ben. "I thought I heard some one in the passage, and when I opened my door to see, I fancied I caught sight of something white which disappeared immediately. I can't hear or see anything now?"

"Hand me my dressing-gown," said the old dame, hoisting herself up on her pillows, "and wait for me outside my door. Perhaps that girl wants something and did not know where to find me, though I told her which was my room before I left her for the night. I'm afraid she is in for an illness, boy. She came over very queer after you left us before dinner. I'll go and see if she is all right."

Ben retired to the corridor and again strained his ears for some sound, but in vain. Through his own open door the faint light of the moon threw an eerie luminous shaft across the passage, and it would have been easy enough for him to see any one or anything of measurable size between him and the light. There was nothing.

Presently Mrs. Ryvett emerged from her room, carrying her rushlight in her hand. "Wait outside, dear," she said. "I may want you to fetch me something or to rouse up one of the maids."

She entered the Magnolia room, her carpet slippers making no noise as she stepped upon the bare boards at the threshold. Soon she returned and beckoned to Ben. "There's no harm in it," she said, with a smile. "Just come in and see how lovely she looks. Oh, Ben, if only she finds her treasure, what a wife she would make for you. If it's as large as she thinks you could free the place from all the mortgages, and you wouldn't have to let those canal people come over the rands to the west of 'the broad.'"

Jonquil looked very childish ; her fair skin and her tiny features seemed more youthful now that her great eyes were closed. To all appearance she was asleep.

"I don't think she has moved since I left her," continued Mrs. Ryvett, while Ben was digesting her words and wondering why it was that this stranger should allure him more than Marshmallow. He knew Marshmallow's virtues, and appreciated them. She was courageous, frank, absolutely honest, a good sportswoman, a fine horsewoman, able to handle a boat almost as well as he himself, a capital comrade, one of the finest-looking girls in Daneshire, and he knew that she loved him, or she would never have returned his kisses as she had done. And, as he remembered the look of her, the sound of her voice, and her tenderness, the face of the girl on the bed suddenly

appeared livid, ghastly, old to him, and an aura of evil seemed to emanate from her.

At that very moment there came the sound of a low whistle from without.

“Why,” said Mrs. Ryvett, looking towards the window, “who opened the window? I am sure I left it closed. I did not think it safe to let in the night air while she was so weak, when the whole place reeks with melted snow. She cannot have opened it herself—and yet she must have. For I am sure none of the maids went into her room after I had left her for the night.”

Again the low whistle sounded, and Ben strode swiftly to the open window and looked out.

A hundred yards distant the home ham of the broad glistened where the staithe cut through the trees. Between the water and the terrace stretched an even area of grass. On the grass, not ten yards from the walls of the house, was a woman's form, and Ben recognized it for Blackberry's. She was making passes with her hands, waving her arms in intricate curves when first he saw her. Her face was uplifted and turned towards the window through which he was looking. She saw him, and at once her right arm was thrust out rigid, her hand pointing directly at him. He could hear some rhythmical words come from her, though he could not distinguish them, and

again his whole soul felt drawn by an overwhelming passion for the girl in the bed.

He could not move. He felt himself bound by some hypnotic spell. And then, from the direction of the Hall, another woman's shape appeared, bent, and white-haired, but apparently as full of vigour as Blackberry. At once Blackberry turned on the new-comer, and there was the menace of murder in the ferocity of her raised arms and the spring of her body. But before the younger woman could touch the old one the latter, too, raised her hands and flung them forward as though projecting some missile at her opponent. Blackberry cowered back, cowered farther and farther from the old woman whom Ben now saw to be Sara Amiss.

The spell which had held him had snapped at the first appearance of Sara, but he could not take his eyes from the two weird women out there in the moonlight.

He could see that Sara was insisting upon something, while Blackberry was doing her utmost to refuse. At length the old woman drew a mighty cross in the air with her right hand, while with her left she pointed down. With a vile oath Blackberry flung something at the old woman's feet, and still cursing, turned and sped from view.

Old Sara stooped and picked the object up. She

straightened her back and looked up at the window. "Take it and keep it," she said, as she flung the thing up to Ben, who caught it as it dropped through the window. "'Tis as much yours as hern. Take it and keep it, and be true to the maid who love ye true. But ware, oh, ware, bor, for old Sara can't allust guard ye.

"Keep the casket, right or wrong,
Never heed where it belong.
Be ye careful what ye eat,
Deadly p'ison may be sweet.
Blackberry's no babe to beat."

The strange old woman "bopped" her rustic farewell, and went off without waiting to be thanked.

"Why!" came a voice from the bed, "zat must be my fazer's *boite*."

"My dear, how you startled me!" gasped Mrs. Ryvett.

Ben was holding a box of tin or of thin steel in his hand to which a bit of wire was attached. He held it close to the rushlight and saw certain marks upon it which with some difficulty he made out to be a rough engraving of arms similar to that on the box of jujubes which Blackberry had sent.

"Yes," he said, handing it to his mother. "You must give it to her, mother." He prepared to leave the room with an apology to the girl for his presence. But she called after him. "You 'ave save me from

some peril, is it not, *M'sieur*?" she cried. "Once again you save me! How shall I make payment? Poor little me?"

For the moment Ben was free from the allurements which Jonquil sometimes seemed able to exercise over him. He did not like surrendering the box after old Sara's words. His mother's eyes were not so long sighted as they had been, and she had seen nothing of the encounter on the grass between the black witch and the white, nor had she heard old Sara's doggerel.

So she handed the box to her guest without hesitation.

"Perhaps," she said affectionately, "now you have got this, it will be rich little you, my dear. Ben—why, the boy has gone. And I will go, too. Is there anything you want, my dear? You are really feeling better, I hope?"

"I sank you, yes, but still oh, so sleepy," was the reply.

The girl closed her eyes again, and after a last look at her, Mrs. Ryvett closed the window and returned to her own room.

For a girl so sleepy as she had professed to be Jonquil's next proceeding was strange. She sprang lightly from her bed and made her way to the window, which she reopened. She looked round carefully, but

apparently did not see what she sought. "*Blague!*" she muttered. "Did he see me in ze corridor? *Beste* take ze old woman. But for her I should have spoken wiz my seester and prayed her to tell ze men to rid me of zat uzzer woman he love. Ah! I hope zat no one weel come yet teel ze old woman and him are sleep again."

She threw a covering over her shoulders and sat down to watch. For over an hour she sat, in spite of the cold and the reek from the snowy slush outside, as wide awake as needs be. Then a man's shape loomed out on the grass. The moon was now below the trees to the south-west, and he waved something white as though afraid lest he should not be seen. Jonquil, however, had seen him before he gave his signal. She bent out of the window, and there was a murmured conversation between the two for a minute or so.

It was an hour after that that the sound of galloping horses attracted the notice of young Bob Clare.

CHAPTER XV

MYSTERY ON MYSTERY

BEN was aroused again by the sound of sturdy blows upon the front door of the Hall. "Begad!" he grumbled to himself, "I don't know what's come over the place. I used to complain that it was too quiet. Ever since I found this French girl on the denes there has been nothing but upsets! What is it now?"

He leapt from his bed and dressed himself rapidly in the clothes he usually chose for his morning flight shooting. Before he had drawn on his knee boots in the gun-room, for there was no longer any necessity for the great crotch boots, the thundering and shouting at the hall door were renewed, and it was in no placid humour that the young squire angrily withdrew the hammered iron bolts and turned the great key in the old wards.

"Shure, your honour, and are ye safe and well?" was Tim O'Shea's greeting. The Irishman was

readier with his words than Bob Clare, and the latter thrust him aside. Bob was not going to have any "furriner" interfering between him and his master at such a crisis in the affairs of the Hall; though the disaster had occurred at the stables, Tim's proper concern, and not in the coverts or on the broad or private dykes.

"That's like this, Master Ben," said the old keeper, approaching his subject warily, as is the fashion of his kind, "some warmin ha' been and brook into the stables and stole two hosses. But wuss 'an that."

"For God's sake," cried Ben, "tell me plainly what has happened. Shut up, Tim. You imagine too much. Now, Bob. Tell me all about it from the beginning to the end."

"But, masther dear," objected Tim, "the while he's tellin' ye the rapscallions will ha' made off wi' Hood and Rodney. And, wid the exception of Calder, they're the best in the stable."

"Shut up, I tell you," said Ben angrily. "I must know the truth before I do anything."

The young squire's brain was awchirl with the suspicion that the theft of the horses was not disconnected with the strange events of the past night. He was beginning to regard the girl he had picked up on the denes as something maleficent, something which had brought trouble into his quiet life. Yet

when he was in her presence sometimes he felt that he would give the world to make her his own. He did not understand that the mystic influences of Blackberry and Jonquil were fighting with those which old Sara Amiss could exert, that his life was, in fact, a chess board on which the two women, the representatives of black and white witchcraft, were playing out their game.

I would beg the reader to remember that in the thirties of the nineteenth century the marshland regions of Daneshire were much as they had been three hundred years previously; that the old superstitions, the old manners and beliefs, and the old inexplicable powers, had remained but little changed for at least three centuries. The railway had not yet reached the district, and even the new canal which was being cut to shorten the river-water traffic between Herringhaven and Trawlhaven and Odinton was still a good four miles from Cootby Broad.

To this day the carr which I have called the haunted plantation holds the pool which is locally reputed to be bottomless, and not three years ago I heard a marshman describing some curious striped writhing thing which had alarmed him at night on the "dam" which runs hard by the haunted pool. The marshfolk do not even know the name of "elementals," of those curious, perhaps purely mythical, inhuman beings of

which Mr. O'Donnell and certain fiction specialists in the uncanny have so much to say nowadays. But frankly, if it were possible to credit the existence of these horrible beings without the evidence of personal experience, the stories of the village folk in the neighbourhood of the haunted plantation would go far to establish belief.

And to this day there are weird crones to be found in the marshland villages who are credited by their neighbours with powers belonging to both black and white magic. This story is not pure imagination, but based on traditions and on beliefs which still obtain in the marshlands of my beloved native county, and to deny the possibility of which in those marshlands is, to-day, only to invite the contemptuous ridicule of the marshfolk.

“That’s like this here, master,” said Bob. “Now dee yew wait yar turn, bor,” he said to Tim, who with Keltic excitement fidgeted under the squire’s order that he should be silent. “That’s like this here. Arter what yew tode me yesterday and what I seed myself, I took Tim here along o’ me to watch at the haunted plantin’. There worn’t much snow left, on’y a little titty patch now and agin where the sun hadn’t strook all day, and that was a-meltin’ fast ’cos that had tarned mild. Tim hid hissself unner the gre’t ole whitethorn agin the ligger. I went inside the carr,

and set myself down on the ole ash stump not ten yard off the pit. Well, bor, some 'un come. Some 'un come to the pit and drawed some'at out. I let him dew't. And then he wholly set up a hollerin', and run by me. I strook at him and knocked a tin box out o' his hand with a bit o' wire tied to it. And he run off along o' some other man. I couldn't see 'em clarely, 'cos the moon were below the trees. I didn't like to shute, and they was too quick for me and Tim, and wha'ss more, I heered some'at ahind me, and that's an ockud place, ye know. I doubt my son Bob wouldn't ha' goned inside that there plantin' for five pound by night. Well, I heard some'at a brooshin', and I turned and see a nasty green light a-shinin' which made my bull's-eye o' no account, and then I see some'at a-squirmin', some'at striped, a sort o' wormy thing as sent the shivers all over me. I didn't see no head, no' nothin' but a slimy sort o' striped, bladdery lump, and I bain't a-goin' to say as I hadn't had enow on it. But I let fly two barrels o' B.B. shot out o' my eight bore, and 'strut, there worn't nothin' there no longer! Well, master, I'd had enow on it. Yew can go and look there by night, if ye like. If I go to pick up my game I'm a-goin' in God's good daylight. I runned across the ligger and Tim he runned wi' me home, but I kep' the box all right and tight. We uns slep' sound, and I didn't lock the

door, 'cos I never do. Well, when-I wook up fust dawn-time that there box was gone. And then my son Bob, he come in and say the stable door at the Hall was open and he'd heerd hosses a-gallopin' on the road out Smeeby way. So Tim and me, we come round sune as quick, and tha'ss a fact as the stable door was open, and Tim say as two o' your best hosses is stole. That's all I ha' got to——"

Ben felt a chill at his heart. The story which the keeper had told with no great display of concern seemed the more eerie because of the plain manner of its narration. The worm of the marsh was, of course, a local tradition reaching back beyond the memory of man. But no one had ever claimed to have seen the thing. Now there was that strange track on the snow which he himself had noticed and attributed to some quaint mirage of the snow, and there was Bob Clare's story of the formless, striped shape at which he had fired. Still further was the tale of the tin box, which Ben could not doubt was the same box as that which had been thrown to him through the window of the Magnolia room when he and his mother had entered that room to see to the welfare of their guest. And it was not the woman who threw it, Sara Amiss, who had brought it. Blackberry brought it, and Ben felt that it was Blackberry's intention to give it to Jonquil. But how had Blackberry known that

Jonquil would be expecting it? And had she been expecting it? Was that vision of something white in the corridor mere fancy, or had Jonquil been prowling about for some unknown purpose. What was the relation between Jonquil and the notorious, if beautiful, black witch? Was the stranger deceiving him and his mother? Had she come here for some fell purpose? The whole thing was a mystery. For the moment Ben was free of the charm which Blackberry and Jonquil had placed upon him.

He no longer felt the tang of that sweet stuff which he had tasted beside Jonquil's bedside from the casket which Blackberry had sent. He sensed some vileness about this guest of the Hall, some horrible evil. And just then the features of Marshmallow and her magnificent proportions recurred to his memory like some holy ikon, some talisman which might shield him and his from all ill. He thanked God that he had asked her to be his wife. He thanked God that he had heard her confession of love for him. He would avoid this dangerous, sprite-like dark French girl as he would avoid the devil. And then a fear crept over him, and he was forced to say to himself that he would avoid her—if he could.

"All you have to say?" he cried, in sudden anger. "And enough, too? What were you doing, Tim, that you did not lock the stable doors? And what were

you doing, Bob, that you let the box be stolen from you? You, who used to be the finest poacher in the marshlands till your father begged mine to take ye on as underkeeper? You to have a box stolen from you in your sleep?"

Tim O'Shea began to scratch one foot against another, but the Daneshire man stood his ground and looked his master proudly in his face. "May be, master," he said, "you've never been overtired from your work. I was about your work all day yesterday and till late at night. Here I am. If ye like to tell me and my son to go, we'll go, willin' and welcome. But I never thought to hear a Ryvett tell a Clare to get off his land."

"No, no," said Ben, "I didn't mean that, Bob. I reckon I'm flustered this mornin'. But what shall we do? Has any one any idea where the horses have been taken?"

Bob was about to break out into curses at his son when he remembered that if he told what the young fool had done, how he had neglected his obvious duty in order to "put the grin onto" Tim, the probability was that the younger Clare would lose his berth even if the father were retained. So he held his tongue as to his son's delinquencies. "I've tracked their feetin's far as I could," he said. "But the roads are so slushy that the prints don't hold. They started out

Smeeby way, two on 'em. But whether they turned off or not, or where they rid to, I couldn't say."

The house was now awaking, for the sun was risen on a misty morning, and sounds of housework came from the kitchen quarters.

Ben longed for his mother's advice. He knew that the old lady had no skill in marshland lore, and that her one desire was to see him wedded to some girl who would bring him sufficient wealth to enable him to clear off the encumbrances on the Cootby estate. But he wanted to hear her opinion of Jonquil, to hear how that young stranger bore herself that morning. He could not thrust from him the notion that all these troubles which had come upon his quiet life so suddenly were associated with this girl whom, he believed, he had rescued from death on the denes on the farther side of the Shivering Marsh.

He was beginning to believe that he had seen her in the corridor. Yet, if that were so, she must have shammed sleep when his mother entered her room. And why should she sham anything, unless she had some unavowable purpose for remaining at the Hall?

"Go into the kitchen," he said to his men, "and get some brekkust. I'll send for you when I want you again. Don't leave the Hall, either of you."

He determined to seek his mother, whether she were yet up and about or not. She was usually an early

riser, but her night's rest had been disturbed and she might sleep later that morning.

However, as he placed his foot on the first stair of the great oaken stairway to the gallery he saw Mrs. Ryvett coming down.

"There's been the deuce and all to pay during the night, mother," he said. "Some one has broken into the stables and stolen Hood and Rodney. And it seems that that box which was thrown through the window of the Magnolia room last night was first taken by old Bob from some man in the haunted plantation, and then stolen by some one from him when he was asleep. I know you didn't see anything of what happened outside last night, and you must have wondered how I got that box. But there was a regular turn up out there between old Sara Amis and Blackberry Banham, and the old woman got the best of it and threw the box to me. The whole thing is too much for me, mother. I don't know what we are doing or what has brought all this bother to Cootby."

"Why, my dear," said the old lady, "did you think that Marshmallow Wednesloe would sit still while you made love to another girl. I knew she was jealous yesterday when she saw this charming French girl."

"Oh, look here, mother," said Ben angrily, "that won't do. You know as well as I do that Mallie

would do nothing to worry me. Why, it was only yesterday that she promised to be my wife."

His excitement caused by his mother's monstrous suggestion impelled him to betray the secret which he had not intended yet to let her know of. He saw his mistake as his mother's face grew grey and wrinkled, almost as old and venomous as that of old Sara Amis when she was pitting her powers against those of some servant of the Black Man. But it was too late now to withdraw. Moreover, at the moment he suspected Jonquil. He believed that she was engaged in some dark plot against him. But it would be useless to try to make his mother see eye to eye with him. Jonquil had spoken of vast riches, and had now been placed in possession of something which she had already declared would enable her to find those riches. It would be futile to try to influence Mrs. Ryvett against her guest till she had discovered that the latter's claims to fortune were mere decoys.

"But that was before she had seen Jonquil," said the old lady, smiling with a most irritating air of superior understanding.

"Never mind that now, mother," replied Ben. "Have you seen the strange girl this morning? How does she seem?"

"I don't like the look of her at all," replied Mrs. Ryvett. "She begs me to send for a wise woman,

a young wise woman, she says. She keeps on moaning as if she were in pain, and she hardly seems in her proper senses."

"She was bright enough last night when that box came through the window," said Ben, frowning.

"Perhaps she did too much, poor child," urged Mrs. Ryvett. "She ought not to have disturbed herself after her weakness of the afternoon."

"Damme!" thought Ben to himself, "I believe she was spry enough to be about that corridor after something, I don't know what, when we all believed her to be asleep and ill in her bed. I believe she is mixed up with all these surprises. But it won't do any good to let mother know, for she'll warn her of my suspicions, and anything I may do ought to be kept from her. I'll see old Sara to-day, hanged if I won't."

Aloud he said to his mother, "If she seems no better I think we ought to call in Doctor Grimmer. There is only one wise woman hereabouts who is young, and that is Blackberry Banham, and you'll admit that she is not a person we can ask to give advice."

"Why not? They say she is very clever with herbs," put in the mother. "As for all this black witchcraft and servants of the Black Man, I hear so much about in these savage parts, I don't believe a word of it. Why should we not ask Blackberry to come?"

“ Well,” said Ben, driven to extremities, “ if you *will* have it, the woman made open love to me yesterday morning as I was going down to mash ; or, if she did not quite do that, she meant to.”

“ You should not be so vain, boy,” remarked his mother. “ I believe you think that every woman for miles round is in love with you.”

“ That’s enough, mother,” said Ben, very angry. “ I’m master of this place, and I won’t have Judith Banham under the roof, and what’s more, if this stranger girl is to remain here and seems no better this morning, I insist on sending for Doctor Grimmer.”

Mrs. Ryvett knew when her son was in earnest, and ceased to fight against his mood. Certainly it might be better to have a doctor’s advice. She herself had no belief in these rustic wise women—how could she, being “ city bred ” ?—but it would be as well to bring the doctor into the patient’s presence without warning her that he was expected. Jonquil had been so eager in her demand to see some village herbalist—“ We have so many in my country,” she had explained, “ and zey are better zan ze docteurs ”—that it might do her harm to tell her that a properly qualified medical man was to examine her condition.

“ Soon as Tim has done his brekkust,” said Ben, “ I’ll send him off on Pansy—she’s the fastest mare we’ve got. And in the meantime, mother, I wish

you'd watch the girl. Frankly, I don't believe she is as queer as she pretends!"

His mother burst out into an irritating, sneering laugh.

"But why not? Do you think she is another victim of your charms? She was very grateful, I know, and a lot you seem to care for her gratitude. My dear boy, I only wish she may have fallen in love with you, and may find her jewels, as she now says she is sure to do! I hope that then you would soon show Marshmallow that you were not to be humbugged by her any longer."

"I won't have you name Mallie," replied Ben furiously. "See here, mother. Keep an eye on this Jonquee girl or I'll ask old Sara Amiss to nurse her."

"I'll watch her for your sake, dear," said his mother to propitiate him. "But pray don't have that horrible old woman in the house."

Ben grunted and watched his mother make her way upstairs again. Then he went into the breakfast-room and rang furiously for breakfast. "Send Tim to me as soon as he has done," he said, when Jane entered.

Jane smiled. "He's finished some time, sir," she said. "He is a-cleanin' the knives for me now."

"Hang it!" muttered Ben to himself, "what a household!"

Everything now seemed to him unimportant except the elucidation of this mystery which had come to shadow the Hall. When Tim entered he said, "I want you to saddle Pansy at once, Tim, and ride over to Dr. Grimmer at Smeeby. Ask him to come here as soon as he can. By the way, you might as well ask if anything has been seen about Smeeby of our horses."

Tim nodded. "I'll do your honour's biddin'," he said, "but there'll be no signs of the hosses at Smeeby. 'Twill need the word of a fairy woman to find 'em."

At this moment young Bob Clare came blustering into the room without taking the trouble to knock. "The devil's in it," he said. "The fast lugs'l boat ha been stole from the boothouse, shoved under the bridge between our broad and Smeeby, and so far as I can make out quanted down the muck-fleet into the tide."

Ben flung himself into his chair as Jane brought in a mass of smoking perch, eels and bacon. "Well," he said, "with such watchers as I've got I reckon I ought to be thankful as I've got the Hall left."

CHAPTER XVI

BEN'S SUSPICIONS

BEN made a very poor breakfast for him. He had sent Tim off for the local pill roller, dismissed young Bob with a very large flea in his ear, and he was still extremely irritated by the recent interference with his normally placid life. He would ride over to Smeeby during the day and see if Marshmallow could soothe him. The girl was so wholesome, so apparently removed from all these mysterious bothers which had come upon him within little more than twenty-four hours!

He was drinking his second tankard of noble brown old home-brewed when Jane again made her appearance in the breakfast-room.

"Please sir," said the maid, who, girl-like, was beginning to enjoy all the stir and excitement and the accompanying tittle-tattle of the recent events, "the mistress would be glad if you would go up to the Magnolia room sune as you've done."

Ben gulped down the last of his home-brewed, and coarsely, but very naturally, smacked his lips.

"All right," he said, "I'll go now."

The door of the Magnolia room was half open when he reached it, and he heard his mother's voice say, "Come in, Ben, I'm here."

He went in and his eyes at once sought the pillow. Resting upon the down-filled cushion lay the face of a girl who seemed as free of all evil as a new-born babe. Jonquil's eyes were closed.

The young man missed the magnetism of them. But there was something about her apparent helplessness which appealed to his chivalry. It was impossible to look on her as she lay there, with her most dainty and beautiful features pale as the linen on which they rested, the fascination of her superb eyes suggested by the long fringe of dark lashes, the exquisite mouth closed, yet with the lips giving an impression that they were about to open, and realize that a few moments ago he had associated her with the trickeries of the horse-stealers and the men who had fled from the haunted plantation. Her right hand lay outside the quilt, resting on two caskets, one of which was Blackberry's gift, the other the thin steel air-tight box which, if Bob Clare's tale were true, must have been struck from the hand of some thief or poacher close to the fabled home of the worm of the marsh.

“Hus-s-sh!” whispered his mother, “Isn’t she beautiful? And look here, Ben.”

His mother stooped and from beneath the valance of the bed brought up a leathern wallet. This she opened, and before her son’s astounded eyes she poured forth on the floor such a glittering heap of jewels of all rays and tints that they looked like the flashing shifting colours in a kaleidoscope.

“But how did she find them?” asked Ben, with some show of acumen. “She had not got them when I caught the casket last night. She cannot have found them in the house since then.”

“I don’t know,” replied his mother. “She was asleep, really asleep, I’m sure, when I came in this morning, and I don’t believe she has woke since. I saw a string peeping out from the valance and pulled up this satchel. Now, Ben, if you love your mother and are man enough to do your duty you will take advantage of the fancy which I am sure this dear girl has taken for you. You can’t say she has been immodest. There has been nothing in her words or deeds to betray her fancy.”

“Humph!” thought Ben to himself. “As if I couldn’t see she was making up to me, though mother pooh-poohed the notion just now.”

“And,” continued the old lady, “here is enough to lift the mortgages three times over and more. Oh, Ben

dear, do have a little common sense and make the most of the chance God gave you of saving her life. She thinks a terrible lot of that, I know, from what she has said to me. She says that there is not one man in a thousand who would have tried to carry her across the Shivering Marsh yesterday morning, and not one in ten thousand who could have if he tried. She seems to worship physical strength and courage. Do, my dear boy, remember what you owe your mother and your race. Marshmallow is all very well in her commonplace way. But you cannot compare her with this flower of girls! Besides, there is the wealth, the chance of getting back the estate to its former prosperity. You owe it to your people, to the villagers for miles round, to do your best to win this treasure. She is of noble French blood. Where could you find so splendid a bride?"

Suddenly the old dame remembered that her son had been strangely influenced by those greenish jujube-like sweets sent by Blackberry. Mrs. Ryvett had never troubled her somewhat dense-celled brain to wonder how the black witch could have offered her gift so opportunely, how she could have known that Jonquil had been taken to the Hall so early in the day. But she believed in what she saw, or thought she saw, and she had certainly seen, or believed she had seen, an added tenderness in her son's manner

towards his salvage after he had eaten one of those green tablets. Of course, she thought it was all nonsense to believe that there was any such thing as a love philtre or love "cushy."¹ Still, like all persons who pride themselves on their freedom from superstition, she thought that there might be something in—the—well, the coincidence. She could not offer one of these strange sweetmeats to her son now. He would probably refuse it since he seemed in so obstinate a mood this morning, but she would see what she could do at dinner-time to combine one or two of these things with his food. He was fond of a gipsy stew, a pottage of all sorts of game and meat, wild fowl and vegetables. There should be one for dinner, and in his portion there should be one or two of the green jujubes, if Jonquil consented to assist in the joke, or if she remained too unwell to protest.

While the silly city-bred old lady was still chuckling to herself over her preposterous scheme Jonquil opened her eyes.

"M'sieur," she sighed. "Ah! But it is good of you to come to see me! I feel so safe with you! And it was you who gave me *ze boite!*"

Mrs. Ryvett, who had returned the glittering jewels to their bag, gently thrust the satchel again beneath the shelter of the valance with her foot.

¹ Daneshire for sweetmeat.—J. B.

"My dear," she said, "are you feeling stronger? You still look so weak."

Jonquil was searching Ben's face for signs of love, but found none. It was no time, she felt, to appeal to him by her personal allurements. For some reason or other he was steeled against her charms for the time. How foolish she was, she told herself. Why had she taken all the trouble to win the love of this man? She had recovered the treasure of which she was in search without his love, which she had in the first place wooed because she believed that only by making him her husband or her slave would she be able to find those jewels. Why should she not now take the goods the gods or the devil had given her and leave the Hall quietly with her booty? It would be her safest course. It was no longer necessary for her to win him from Marshmallow. She had found the jewels with greater ease than she had anticipated. Why could she not be satisfied by gaining what she had in fact come over to steal? And then her heart told her that when the young squire succoured her upon the denes he had won it. A woman can never be trusted to carry out a scheme against a man until she has met the man and proved to be impervious to his manly attraction. And Jonquil now knew that she had been far from impervious. That although she had only known Ben a little longer than the twenty-

four hours that make a day, she could never again be happy unless she won him for her own. Hatred for Marshmallow surged in her bosom.

She was thankful that she had given her orders to her two French accomplices during the night before she had found the jewels. For although she had originally intended to use Ben as a means to put her in possession of the treasure, she now knew that she would sacrifice all the treasure to be able to call the young squire of Cootby her own. And she, too, was the daughter of generations of women who dealt in magic; for there were and are French witches as well as British. Her relations with Blackberry were not known to her hosts, but she and Judith Banham were well aware of them, and Jonquil was certain that she could trust Judith to co-operate with her in the future as eagerly as she had already done. Of Sara Amiss's existence she knew nothing. She believed that Blackberry was the only woman in the neighbourhood who played tricks with the abnormal. And she took courage because she felt confident that she and Blackberry would prove more than a match for all the skill and craft which could be arrayed against them. Moreover, she knew that she had won her foolish old hostess to her interests. Surely she would be able to win Ben, especially if her agents, Alphonse and his partner, were successful in performing the task she had imposed

upon them. She did not know that her find of jewels had already been discovered by her hostess. For an hour or two she had been really overcome by a sleep which was all the more heavy because of her secret activity in the night. But, as she was waking, she had heard Mrs. Ryvett's advice to her son, and she took courage from it. With a Latin's familiarity with the sudden freaks of passion she accepted her love for Ben as a matter of course. And from the moment when she awoke in all truth to find his eyes upon her as she lay with her hand upon the two caskets, she determined to win his love at all cost. Her wooing of him had now become not a part of a game, a mere incident of her plot, but a vital interest in her life. And she was ardent as red coals, and determined as a bulldog. Every weapon in her power she would use to drive the recollection of Marshmallow from the mind of the man she loved. And from what she had seen when they were both in her presence together on the previous day she did not think it would be difficult. She failed to realize that British people are less demonstrative than those of Latin extraction, and that though the mutual attitude of Ben and Marshmallow had suggested coldness, it might only be the screen of a more lasting flame than any that could arise from her quicker blazing fuel.

For a moment she hesitated. Was it, she wondered,

time to show that she had recovered from her exhaustion, such as it was, of the previous day? Or would she play her hand better by still pretending to be too ill to rise from her bed?

She glanced at Mrs. Ryvett and then at Ben.

The old lady nodded. "I think you had better leave Jonquil with me for a little, dear," she said to her son. "If she is strong enough you will see her down to dinner."

"Eef not," murmured Jonquil, with a world of tenderness in her eyes, "you weel come and see me again wiz Madame zis afternoon, is it not?" she begged with her fervent look; and she was very lovely.

No man of Ben's temperament could have seen that appealing glance from such glorious eyes without being moved by it. "Of course," he replied, wondering what had come over his rather prim and precise mother to encourage these bedroom interviews. "But I hope you will feel well enough to come down."

CHAPTER XVII

COLD STEEL

AS Ben turned and left the room the sound of horses cantering up the drive along the soft snow-saturated gravel hastened his going. Could it be that Hood and Rodney had been found and returned?

When he reached the hall door his face clouded. There was no sign of Hood or Rodney, but Marshmallow was there, looking magnificent in her habit, and her beaver, with Jack Harvey, the handsomest young fellow in East Daneshire, by her side. The Smeeby groom was a full hundred yards in the rear. Evidently he thought his mistress did not wish him to ride too close to her and the cavalier whom she had met on her ride to Cootby.

“Hullo, Ben,” cried the genial girl, her eyes dwelling tenderly upon the man she loved, and wishing to show him that she did not repent her surrender of the previous day. “How is the fair mystery? And what is all this I hear about your stables being burgled, and

a ghost shot in the haunted plantation ! My dear boy, I'm full of curiosity."

She prepared to dismount and Ben stepped forward to help her down. But before he could reach the side of her horse Jack Harvey had swung himself off and stood beside her, smiling up at her, and holding his arms out. She slipped from her saddle into Harvey's hold, shook out her habit and turned to Ben. He was sulky. Of all the neighbouring youths of his own station he loathed Harvey the worst. He was an Oxford man, but there was more than the traditional dislike between Oxford and Cambridge in Ben's loathing of the handsome Spanish-looking fellow who had accompanied Marshmallow to Cootby. Ben knew him for a lethargic aspirant to Marshmallow's hand. He, Harvey, was far richer than Ben, had seen far more of London and the world, had indeed on more than one occasion so aired his pretensions to superiority over the bluff young squire, that the latter had desired to see who was the better man, face to face and fist to fist ; he, or this lithe slim spark, who was suspected of being connected with a gang of smugglers and river pirates. Duelling was never popular in Daneshire. If the country squires had a disagreement which needed fighting out they took their cudgels for cudgel play, or their fists for honest boxing, and sweetened bad blood without shedding it more

than came from a crack of the sponce or a smash on the nose. But Ben felt that to offer such an encounter to Harvey would be to invite ridicule and a suggestion that the rapier or the pistol must be the weapon of arbitrament between gentlemen. It was not from fear that Ben objected to either of these lethal weapons, but because his fine manhood regarded them both as cowardly. He would not have put up his fists against a man who was not his match unless the latter provoked him to it. He could use the foil with brilliant skill, and was a dead shot with any sort of fire-arm. But he considered that to settle civilian quarrels by means which might cause the death of either combatant was worse than childish. However, his patience had its limit, as will be seen.

"Why, Ben dear," said Mallie, smiling in his eyes, "how glum you look. You are not worrying about the horses, are you! They are sure to be found, you know. No one could get off with them from Tenchby Island."

"Oh, I'm all right, Mallie," replied the man. "But there's rum things goin' on. You'd best ask mother to tell you. You'll be thinkin' I'm afeared next!"

Mallie gave him a reproachful glance, but seeing that he was looking sullenly at Jack Harvey her pride decided her to leave him to work off his evident ill-humour on a man, rather than on her. She knew

that she was worthy of better treatment. The courtesy, nay, the homage paid her by the young fellow who had already made such havoc amongst the hearts of the maidens of Tenchby Island, if report were true, assured her that she was justified in considering herself at least Ben's equal. Yet he chose to treat her, she thought, as a naughty child.

"Oh, very well," she said, "I'll go in."

"She's up in the Magnolia room," he said, "with Miss Dardelow!"

"Ah! the *demoiselle d'Hardelot*," said Mallie thoughtfully. "I suppose the poor thing is still too unnerved to come downstairs." She spoke a little scornfully. She felt angry, spiteful. She had left the Hall in a bad humour on the previous day, and now returned to it eager to prove to her lover that she had been sincere in owning her love for him. She had hoped for an open recognition of their betrothal, and been met by sullenness, almost rudeness. And she had done nothing to deserve such treatment. If any one were to blame it was Ben. For certainly on the previous day he had shown symptoms of being fascinated by the French girl. And she was unaware that he had told his mother that morning that he and she, Mallie, had agreed to marry. Still she knew her Ben, she believed, and that he was as true a lover and as staunch a friend as she herself.

"I'll go up, then," she said coldly. "I won't trouble Jane."

"Well, Ryvett," drawled Harvey, "got a man to take the nags to the stables, or have your men and stables been stolen as well as your horses! Lord! The place must be bewitched! He! he!"

Harvey was undeniably an irritating man to a stalwart young country squire. Ben turned on him. "Oh," said Ben, "I'm sorry. I forget that you might not be strong enough on your pins to go round to the stables yourself. Hi," he shouted, "Tom, Bill, are you there?"

"What a voice!" sneered Harvey. "I envy you your lungs, you know, Ryvett. But," he added dangerously, "I think you are less loud—er—when you shout. I'm not accustomed to having my legs called my pins, or to having doubts thrown upon their strength. D'you understand?"

The Oxford exquisite thrust his dark, clean-cut, handsome face close to that of the bluff Daneshire-bred squire. There was not an inch between their respective heights. Yet any one would have guessed that Ben weighed at least two stone more than the other.

"You don't often honour me with a call," said Ben, staring frankly into the almond-shaped black eyes of the other. "Had I guessed you were coming I'd have had a horse block for you and a boy to lead your horse."

“ I find the block here, thank you,” retorted Harvey, with a bow, “ most useful, but a little slow in adapting its position to the needs of a lady.”

There had been ill blood brewing between these two men for some time. Only on last market day at Odinton the two had come very near a quarrel. Harvey hated Ben for his honesty and strength. He had no wish to marry Marshmallow. She was too poor to be his bride. But he would have liked to make her his toy to spite Ben, to whom she had been relegated by popular opinion for the last year or two. It was this that had made him change his direction when he met her cantering to Cootby that morning, this and a desire to quarrel with Ben. Harvey had lost heavily at cards on the previous evening, and felt like “ taking it out of some one.” And he knew no one whom he could goad so deliciously as he could this man, whom he regarded as a country bumpkin. A certain class of Oxford men to this day makes similar mistakes.

Tom, the Smeeby groom, who had taken his mount direct to the stables, as he was accustomed to do when accompanying his mistress to Cootby, came running up, and soon led the two horses away to the stalls.

“ Now,” said Ben, turning on his visitor, “ I know in a way you are my guest——”

"Unwillingly, believe me," said Harvey. "I only came with the fair Marshmallow to see she received ordinary assistance to dismount. And, as you saw, my presence was necessary."

"That's all right, then," replied Ben, his mouth set very firm. "I have had enough. Perhaps you have not. That may make it enough."

He smote the other across the mouth with the back of his hand, smote him lightly as he thought, but the momentum of his great arm was enough to send Harvey staggering back.

"You lout!" cried the latter, "I'll have your blood for that."

"Hush," said Ben, "you need not peal the church bells about it. Come into my room. You can choose your own rapier or foil, and we'll have a bit of play in the clearing by the broad. I suppose you are in earnest and don't insist on waiting for a set piece, with seconds and doctor and all that flapdoodle, do you?"

In truth Harvey did expect some such set piece. But Ben's scorn stirred him in his venomous temper.

"If you have a rapier or a foil which is worthy of a gentleman's hand," he said, "I will do you the honour of killing you at once."

"Good," said Ben. "We'll leave a note on my table to say that we are going to have a contest of

skill, and that if either gets damaged it is an accident. See ? ”

Harvey, confident in his skill with foil or rapier, a skill which he had perfected by lessons from the first masters in Oxford, London and Paris, was glad to fall in with this plan. He had no doubt that he would stretch this great lout upon his own grass, and after that he could choose his own course as regards Marsh-mallow. That he could win the girl he did not doubt for a moment.

“ I hope you are as steady with your sword as with your wit,” he sneered in reply. “ If so, we shall have a pretty bit of play.”

Ben said no more, but led the way into his den. He pointed to a stand of arms whereon were half a dozen foils and two pairs of superb Italian rapiers. “ Take your choice,” he said. “ You have ridden some miles this morning. Would you care for wine or cognac ? ”

“ Well,” drawled Harvey, “ as it will not be in good taste on my part to wait for refreshment after—after our amusement, and I may find it advisable to ride even farther than my own home, I think perhaps a glass of Burgundy—but probably you do not know the wine. Cognac will do.”

Ben strode from the room, foolishly leaving his enemy alone with the foils and rapiers. Presently he

returned with a cobwebbed bottle of *Romanée Conti* and one glass.

"As I do not drink with you," he said, "perhaps you may like to draw the cork yourself. I believe you cur enough to suspect a man of hoccussing your liquor under these circumstances. You probably possess a kerchief with which you can wipe out the goblet, if you fear lest there be any poison in it."

Harvey's face went white, but he showed no other sign of the rage he felt at this lout's (as he thought Ben to be) calm assumption of superiority of breeding.

"Thank you," he said. He scrupulously wiped out the glass, took up the bottle and examined the seal and the neck carefully. "Seems all right," he said casually. "But," he added, "the tip of a corkscrew may—well, you know. And I have not one with me." He took the poker from the fire-place, and with a swift blow knocked the neck of the bottle from its shoulders.

"Begad," he said, "the aroma is really fine."

He poured out a glassful with a steady hand and drank it. "My compliments," he said. "I have tasted no finer glass of Burgundy in my life." For just an instant he was weak enough to throw a glance at the stand of arms. But he immediately withdrew his eyes.

"There they are," said Ben, noticing his swift look. "Take your choice."

Harvey took one of a pair, the blades of which were perhaps half an inch longer than those of the others. He flourished it a moment. "Quite well balanced," he said. "When you have taken the other I am ready."

Ben smiled. He had indeed left Harvey alone with the swords, but he had not forgotten the possibilities. He took the other of the pair in his hand and glanced at the point where the blade met the haft. He said nothing, but smiled grimly and tossed the rapier aside. He had seen that the steel had been tampered with. He chose another rapier at random. "I am ready," he said.

Harvey had turned a little green as Ben examined the rapier, but he bluffed. "Why, man!" he said, "that blade is a good half-inch shorter than mine."

"I'll chance that," replied Ben. "Somehow I don't fancy the other." Then, as he saw that Harvey was again about to protest, he said savagely, "You swine, do you think I did not suspect that you might tamper with the rapier, do you think I am such a fool as not to see that you have tampered with it so that strong pressure might smash the steel. Go on, you swine, or by gum I'll kill you where you stand, though clean steel is too good for you. But wait. Here are pens, ink and paper. Write what we agreed and I will sign after you."

Harvey rapidly drew up a statement in the terms understood, and the two men signed their names to it. Ben's sprawling signature looked strong, if clumsy, beneath Harvey's finicking handwriting. The paper was folded and sealed and left upon the writing-table, bearing no address. "We don't want to be disturbed—till we've done," said Ben grimly.

"You wouldn't like to say good bye to your mother," suggested Harvey, opening the door and passing out towards the hall.

But Ben had had enough of his insolence. With a great push of his hand he thrust the lighter man headlong out through the hall door. "To your right," he said.

He urged his man along till they came to the woodland fringing the broad. Through a ride they passed, and along it till a clearing some forty feet in diameter lay before them. It was carpeted with even springy turf, sodden with the recent snowfall, but level, and equal for both the men. Towards the broad the grass reached to the rush-covered rand.

Ben tossed his coat and vest on to the lower limb of a fir, and rolled up the right sleeve of his shirt.

Harvey now began to feel a little daunted. He did not like the relentlessness of his man, the apparent sense of security which Ben showed. Still he trusted

to his own skill. He knew that strength could rarely avail against skill in a contest with rapiers.

Presently the two men stood opposite each other, sword in hand.

"We will omit the salute," said Ben, bringing his steel to the horizontal, and immediately the blades clashed.

At once Harvey knew that his adversary would take more beating than he had thought. The feel of Ben's wrist betrayed the immense strength of it. Still there were tricks, and the nicety of fence of which he, Harvey, was the master, should surely enable him to beat this great provincial.

He disengaged, made three or four feints, and lunged.

Ben had not moved his sword-arm. The lunging steel was met by a blade which seemed immovable. Ben as yet made no attempt to attack. He remained solely on the defensive. Time and time again Harvey disengaged, feinted, lunged, and was again met by that rigid bar of thin steel. Even the extra half-inch of blade he had, so important as a rule, gave him no advantage. There was no fancy play in Ben's fencing. He simply covered his body with his blade, and stood, almost motionless, smiling sardonically on the leaping figure which grew wearier and less confident at every attack.

"Come, come," said Ben at last. "Is this all they have taught you in Lunnon and Paris?"

Infuriated by the banter, Harvey again disengaged, withdrew a pace or two, and then hurled himself at the stolid figure which seemed to mock him.

Ben's blade met the other with its usual pertinacious ease, but this time instead of permitting Harvey to follow his lunge past his body unharmed, he used every ounce of strength in his powerful wrist, and deflected the attacking sword a good foot from its line. Instantly he withdrew the shorter rapier, and before Harvey could recover his balance, Ben lunged, and thrust his sword neatly through the left shoulder of the dandy.

Already weary, the wound was enough for Harvey. With a gasp of pain he sank to the ground.

Ben withdrew his sword as his opponent fell, and wiped it carefully on a handful of grass. Then he went to the fir on which his jacket was hanging, took a whistle from its pockets and blew a shrill blast upon it. In less than five minutes old Bob Clare was seen on the broad paddling in his duck punt towards the clearing. "Here, Bob," cried Ben, as he stooped and tied his kerchief as a pad over Harvey's wound, with a length of spunyarn he took from his jacket pocket, "just take this ass to the boat-house, bind him up and row him home. You know his place on

the river. Give him a drink of your rum at the boat-house. I'll send your horse home when I can spare a man," Ben said to the defeated swordsman, who was now, and indeed had always been, fully conscious. "I've spared your life this time, but remember this, if ever I hear that you have spoken to Miss Wednesloe again or have been within two miles of her house or mine I'll kill you. Take my advice and clear out of the country. We don't want fools such as you."

Old Bob grinned. He knew better than to ask any questions, and Harvey was too thoroughly cowed and shamed to speak. "Get on your legs, you pore thing," said Bob, lifting the wounded man to his feet. "Lord! a pin-prick like that ought to brisk ye up. Come on, do."

And Harvey, with Bob's arm passed through his right and sound arm, hobbled along ridiculously till Bob hoisted him into the punt.

"Do he want a darctor, master?" asked the old keeper, before he cast off from the rand.

"Goodness knows," said Ben. "He can send one of his own men if he wants one. I'm sure I've done all for him he can expect."

"That you have, I reckon," laughed Bob. "And a tidy bit more and all. Hech! hech! hech! Lay you still, bor, or you'll be opsettin' on us, and you'll niver swim far with that wounded showlder, and I bain't

likely to help ye, seein' as the eels want drawin' to this side o' the ham away from the mallard's neestin'-place t'other side. Hech! hech! hech!"

Bob had hardly paddled the length of the punt from shore when Marshmallow's voice was heard crying excitedly, "Ben, Ben, where are you? Oh, Ben, what are you doing?"

"All right, old girl," replied Ben, whose temper was now sweeter than it had been for some time. "I'm coming."

But Marshmallow ran at the top of her speed and caught him before he had emerged from the timber. She flung herself into his arms. "Oh, Ben!" she cried, "you've been fighting! I know you have, you bad boy! Where is Mr. Harvey?"

"Oh," said Ben, with a laugh, "if you want him I'll call back old Bob. Harvey felt a little tired, so I've asked Bob to row him home to his place on the river, you know."

"You know I don't want him. I want you. Oh, Ben, why were you so nasty? And your mother is worse! What have I done, dear, that she should be so cross with me! You must tell her to-day that I belong to you! Do, Ben."

"I told her this morning, sweetheart," said Ben, his whole heart now swelling with love for this superb girl, who gave herself to him so gallantly, so frankly,

and so honestly. For the moment he abhorred the thought of Jonquil and her jewels. Poor or not, Mallie was the bride for him.

“ Never mind, darling,” he continued, “ she is jealous, I expect ; all mothers are when a son chooses a-wife, you know ! ”

“ I do wish that French girl had not come, though,” said Marshmallow. “ Ben, you won’t let her win you away from me. Promise you won’t. I can’t understand her. She seems to know so much about the place, and yet she’s never been here before. I’m sure there is something strange about her.”

“ Never mind, dear. Come in to dinner,” said Ben. “ The little exercise I’ve had has given me a rare appetite.”

“ You’re not hurt, not a tiny wee bit ? ” asked the girl, making the excuse of her anxiety to pet and fondle him. “ And you have not killed him ! ”

“ I will if you like,” laughed Ben.

“ No, you bloodthirsty boy ! But I’m glad you’ve put him in his place. I—I thought perhaps you would if I let him come here.”

“ You scheming piece of mischief,” said Ben, entirely happy. “ He’s all right. Only a prick. By the way, I’d better fetch our playthings : the wet grass won’t improve them ! ”

“ No,” urged Mallie, “ I’ll get them. I know what

they are. You naughty boy, I saw the rapiers missing from your stand and I guessed what had happened. But oh ! if you had been hurt ! And, you know, he is supposed to be awfully good with the foils."

She thrust her lover from her and ran back. Ben let her do her will. He loved to see her courage and honesty, and when she returned bearing the two rapiers he took her in his arms and kissed her fondly. "Dearest," he said, "I vote we get married soon."

Even as he spoke his mother's voice came across the grass. "Benjamin !" she called (and she never called him Benjamin unless she was in a temper), "come here at once. Doctor Grimmer has come."

CHAPTER XVIII

MEDICAL ADVICE

“**B**EN, dear,” said Mallie, looking at her lover with a smile, “I don’t think I’ll stay to dinner to-day. Look at your mother’s expression !”

The old lady wore her sourest look as she saw Marshmallow advancing with Ben. “Make haste,” she cried ; “the doctor is waiting and wishes to see you before he goes upstairs.”

“What the deuce does he want to see me about ?” said Ben sulkily. “I’m not ill.”

“I expect he wants to hear in what condition you found Jonquil,” replied the old dame, primming her lips. “I’m sorry I can’t ask you to stay, Marshmallow,” she added ; “but you will understand that we are very anxious, and a visitor never feels comfortable in a house where there is illness.”

“Oh, I say, mother,” protested Ben, “Mallie can’t be called a visitor.”

"I can't discuss that now with either of you," retorted the avaricious lady. "I'm sure Marshmallow would be more comfortable at home."

"You see, dear," whispered Mallie, "I'd better go."

"It's preposterous," replied Ben, but speaking in too low a voice for his mother to hear him. "I told her this morning that you had done me the honour to consent to be my wife. It is sheer obstinacy on mother's part. Besides, I don't like the idea of your riding home alone. Things seem all upside down since I found this girl. I wish the dickens I'd never taken my gun out yesterday morning!"

"Oh, Ben!" cried Mallie. "The poor girl might have died."

"I'm not so sure of that," grumbled Ben. "But I say, Mallie, let me ride home with you if you *will* go."

"I've got Tom, you know," replied Mallie. "Why, Ben, I've ridden home with him to guard me from the perils of the country roads hundreds of times."

"That may be," said Ben, "but somehow I don't like the idea to-day."

"There is no good in making a rumpus, dear," said Mallie, pressing her lover's hand. "You will have quite enough to do to persuade your mother to accept me as your wife as it is. Please let me have my way to-day."

At this point Mrs. Ryvett, who had retired inside

the Hall to await her son's coming, reappeared on the terrace.

"All right, mother," cried Ben impatiently, "I'm coming."

"I say, Mallie," he added under his breath, "I shall go over to you to-morrow either by road or water. Have you told your aunt yet?"

Mallie laughed gently. "Not yet," she replied. "Oh, Ben, if only we could get your mother to tell her!" "Wouldn't there be wigs on the green, as your Tim would say?"

Ben chuckled. The two lovers were still standing at the foot of the stone steps leading up to the terrace, and Mrs. Ryvett could endure in silence no longer.

"If you are not coming, Ben," she cried, "say so, and I'll tell the doctor."

"There, run along, dear," urged Mallie, giving Ben a tender little push. "I'll find my way round to the stables myself. I shall see you to-morrow, shan't I?"

"You shall," said Ben, with decision. "And I say, Mallie, no need to mention my little affair with that cur Harvey, see?"

"Very well; but remember, he is a spiteful man, and they say he is mixed up with a dangerous gang of keelboat men and smugglers. You will take care that he doesn't catch you off your guard."

"He won't be fit to do much for a week or so,"

chuckled Ben. "Good-bye, darling. I shall worry till I see you again."

He gave a quick glance round and saw that they were unobserved. Then he bent and kissed his sweetheart on the lips. "I love you," he said.

"I hoped you did do, you know," laughed Mallie, returning his kiss. "Good-bye, and be careful."

She ran swiftly along, past the end of the terrace, and made her way to the stables. Presently Ben heard the cloppety, cloppety, clop of her horse and her groom's as they cantered along the "slushy" drive.

In the Hall, standing with his back to the great open fire-place, with Nelson sniffing at his legs, stood a short stout man, snub-nosed, ginger-haired, with mutton-chop whiskers, and little pigs' eyes of pale blue. It was the general practitioner of Tenchby Island. He held a large silver snuff-box in his hand, open, and was solacing himself with mighty pinches. The front of his waistcoat and his upper lip were brown with the pungent powder.

"Well, my young friend," said Grimmer, in a sleek, oily voice, "so you've been playing the rescuing hero! What! Ahum! Ah! I remember when I should have been the same! Lord, squire! to think of what I could do when I was your age. I was never quite so big a man as you" (the plump little fellow barely reached Ben's shoulder, though he always stood on tiptoe when

he was near a tall man), "but, begad! I believe I was as strong! Dear, dear me. I remember——" He proffered his box to Ben, who declined to take a pinch with a shake of the head.

"Right you are, doctor," answered Ben impatiently. "My mother tells me you want to see me before you go up to your patient. I don't know what I can tell you."

"Nor do I, my boy," said the little doctor with a familiarity which Ben resented. In those days the apothecary surgeon and the lawyer ranked about the same as the agent of a large estate, or maybe a little lower in the scale. Grimmer had lost more than one patient among the old county families because of his familiarity. He would not have dared to treat Mrs. Ryvett otherwise than with a subservience more or less cringing, but he had brought Ben into the world, and thought that he might behave with more freedom to him. Ben did not quite reciprocate this notion.

"Nor do I. You may not be able to tell me much, but you can do something for me, all the same. Pity you don't take snuff—excellent prophylactic. I'm not so young as I was. I am on the wrong side of forty, you know."

Ben laughed. "Will you ever see sixty again, doctor?" he asked.

"Well, well, I suppose it is foolish to try to deceive

you about my age. You may be right, my boy, but I don't look it! What! I don't look it!"

His fat red face did not truly show his age. He might well pass for fifty. Like many ginger-haired men who do themselves well but not too well, he bore his years easily.

"My dear sir," said Ben impatiently, "I'll say you don't look thirty if you'll hurry up and tell me what I can do for you."

"Easy, easy, my young friend," said the doctor. "Never be impatient. That is the secret of my youthful appearance. I assure you that the other day Mrs. Slater—he! he! You know the fascinating little widow who has taken old Thurston's house at Burgh St. Olave's, eh, you dog! he! he! Well, she said, 'Doctor, I believe you are younger than me!' 'Pon my word, she did. And she gave me a look! Well, you know! And I've been a widower now for eleven years! What!"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, do tell me what I can do for you," pleaded Ben. The garrulousness of the incompetent little ass always got on the young man's nerves, and these were already a bit ragged from his morning's experiences.

"Well, I'm not so young as I was, and I brought my cob over at a gallop, and, to tell you the truth, I feel a little faint. Perhaps——"

Ben rang the bell with a pull that nearly smashed the long cord. "Bring in the three-pint tankard full of old ale, and some slices of cold goose," he said when Jane had answered the summons.

"My dear squire!" cried the doctor, holding up his hands in pretended dismay, "three pints! Ah! No doubt you mean to assist me."

"Not I," replied Ben. "It will steady you, doctor. I know you like our home-brewed."

"A coomb of barley to the cask! Who wouldn't!" cried the doctor. "Ah! Now that is something like. That is better than all the stuff in the pharmacopœia for a strong man! What!"

He seated himself before the tray which Jane had brought in loaded with the mighty pewter and a plate full of goose and stuffing, and he "wired in" as though he had fasted for twenty-four hours. "Women don't understand these things," he said between mouthfuls; "that is why I told your esteemed mother that I wished to see you before I saw the patient. She would have given me a glass of sherry and a biscuit! Sherry! A biscuit! No wonder you can carry young women across marshes, if this is how you keep up your strength! By the way, I had a queer patient this morning—a Frenchman, a stout, dangerous-looking dark-faced fellow who spoke English badly. He'd had a nasty kick from a horse. I gave him a doing

with my embrocation, you know. He'll be right in twelve hours. Now there is not another medical man in Daneshire who could have cured him so quickly! I'll say that for myself." He ate as he talked and his speech was punctuated by "gobble, gobble, gobble."

At last he had cleared the plate, and drained the last drop of the three-pint tankard. Most men would have been staggered a bit by those three pints of beer as strong as Trinity Audit, but little Grimmer's eyes were only brighter, his bearing a little more pompous, his speech a little more emphatic, his pinches of snuff a little more generous.

He wiped his lips on a huge yellow bandana, blotched with the brown powder. "Now," he said, "I feel ready for half a dozen patients. If you are not careful I shall cut you out. Hay? Ho! ho! ho! Sure you won't try my mixture? It can't be equalled out of the metropolis."

He bustled from the room, when Ben had again refused the snuff. "I know the way, I know the way," he called out over his shoulder to Ben. "Take my advice, my medical advice. Follow the prescription I have just exhibited for myself."

"Good lord!" groaned Ben, with a gasp of relief, as he closed the door the little man had left open. "I think I'd rather die than have my life saved by that fellow! Poof!"

He sought his pipe for comfort—he had never liked snuff, and was considered coarse by the provincial dandies because he preferred what was then considered to be the dirtier habit—and turned his steps in the direction of the gun-room. “Lord!” he said to himself, “I wonder if that French patient that little ass mentioned could have been one of the rascals who stole my horses! I must ask Grimmer when he comes down if he knows where the man is staying. But what’s the use? He always makes such a hullabaloo about professional secrecy. He wouldn’t tell me.”

The little doctor, feeling very self-important, and regretting that he had not a leg to amputate or some more serious work to perform than to prescribe for a hysterical girl—for so he had diagnosed the case from what he had heard from Mrs. Ryvett, toddled up to the corridor, and knocked at the door of the Magnolia room. Mrs. Ryvett had preceded him here. She did not wish to meet Ben when he came in. She feared lest she might say something which would make him seriously angry, and when Ben was really angry not even his mother cared to be the object of his wrath.

“Come in, doctor,” said she, and the doctor went in.

“I cannot understand the case at all,” said Mrs. Ryvett, who like most provincial elderly dowagers believed that she was as good a physician as any apothecary or as any village wise woman. “Sometimes

she seems quite well, only rather weak, and then again she becomes com—com—comatose." The old lady pronounced this word with some pride.

"Ah, dear me, dear me," said the little man, assuming his best bedside manner and stooping over the lovely face which lay with closed eyes upon the pillow.

He took the frail wrist in his, and withdrew his great gold timepiece from his fob. He wore the cord breeches and grey worsted stockings which men of his profession whose practice necessitated riding to their patients through miry country lanes found convenient. His gaiters he had discarded below stairs. Riding boots were considered unprofessional when visiting patients.

His coarse red fingers looked as though they desecrated the fair white skin which they touched.

"A-hum," he coughed. "A-hum!" He fixed his eyes upon some mark he saw beneath the collar of his patient's night-dress. "Ahum," he coughed a third time.

Jonquil opened her eyes, and with a rapid movement pulled her collar higher round her neck. "Ah!" she cried, "how he—he *sent*, what you say smell ze *bière* et ze *tabac*! But who is zis, Madame? Ah! he ees not delicate! Non! I like him not! If you please let him go away."

"Excited," suggested Grimmer. "Not quite normal.

Fancies things! Mamwawsel," he said, with a gallant attempt to pronounce the French word, "let me see your tongue, let me," he repeated, but in a manner which he considered might be more intelligible to the foreign lady, "let me your tongue see seel voo play."

He threw a proud glance at Mrs. Ryvett. He was a man of wide education he! A foreign tongue was child's play to him.

"Zere is nussing ze matter wis my tongue," said Jonquil angrily. "Ah, you 'ave drink moch *bière*! Non! Eet is not *propre* for a demoiselle's chamber. Please weel you go away?"

"Poor thing. Poor thing," said Grimmer, aside to Mrs. Ryvett. "Hardly knows what she is saying now." Then he said in a louder voice: "I am a doctor, docture, maidsang. Comprong? Show me ze so charming tongue. Eet weel assist me to make you well. Comprong!"

This was a stupendous effort for him. He threw another and much more challenging glance of pride at Mrs. Ryvett. Yet his brow was furrowed, and he had the appearance of a man who was incredulous rather than puzzled.

"Weel you go eef I do?" asked Jonquil.

"Anything to soothe them. Anything, you understand," murmured the doctor in Mrs. Ryvett's ear.

"Really," thought the old lady, "it is too bad of Ben. He ought not to have given him beer just as he was coming up. The girl is right. He does——"

"Of course I weel," said Grimmer.

Jonquil opened her pretty lips and projected an inch of tongue. Grimmer bent down a little eagerly. "Ah," he said. "And how do you feel? Of course you do not wish to get up." His eyes sought for the mark he had seen, but it was now covered.

"But yais, I do. I am go to rise when you have gone. You 'ave promise to go if I show you my tongue. Oh, madame, please see zat he go queek."

Grimmer now looked genuinely both puzzled and incredulous. He took the girl's right eyelid in his forefinger and thumb, and lifted it, peering closely at her eye. "You weel hurt yourself eef you keep not quiet," he said, confident that his broken English was more intelligible to his patient than his normal language. Jonquil had already discovered this for herself. She looked extremely angry, and there was that in the eye he was inspecting which impelled the little doctor to let go his hold promptly.

Jonquil raised herself on her pillow, looked round and saw the basin in which Mrs. Ryvett had brought her up some strong *bouillon*, and snatched it. She poised the vessel above her head. "Eef you go not," she said, "I weel srow zis at you strong."

"Hush, my dear," urged Mrs. Ryvett, trying to take the basin from the girl, but in vain.

"I weel," repeated Jonquil.

"It is not wise to excite them," murmured Grimmer, speaking of Jonquil as though she were one of a tribe. "I will go. I will send you a cooling mixture, a little sedative, and——"

"Un, two, sree," Jonquil began to count, with the basin still poised threateningly in her hand.

"Begad! she means it," said Grimmer hurriedly. "I will speak to you outside if you will allow it," he said to Mrs. Ryvett. "It will be quite safe to leave her. Quite."

"*Quatre*," said Jonquil, and the basin flew straight at Grimmer's head. He ducked swiftly, and escaped with a light blow on the top of his skull. The basin ricocheted off that hard surface and fell at the farther end of the room, unbroken.

Grimmer made a bolt for it, and Mrs. Ryvett, after an admonitory shake of her head at the rebellious patient, followed him.

Grimmer trotted downstairs, without waiting to permit Mrs. Ryvett to precede him. He rubbed the top of his cranium as he trotted. In the breakfast-room he waited for the old lady, who kept him waiting but a few seconds. She was endeavouring to smoothe a smile from her face as she entered. Had Marshmallow

conducted herself as Jonquil had behaved, Mrs. Ryvett would have abused her for being a violent, ill-mannered, unladylike hoyden ; but Jonquil, with her bag of jewels, was privileged.

The old lady had little sense of humour, but she occasionally smiled at some form of practical joke, and in the case of Jonquil she was inclined to regard the use of her basin as a missile as a practical joke.

“ I hope she did not hurt you, doctor,” she said.

“ No, no,” replied Grimmer, still rubbing the apex of his cranium, “ nothing to speak of, but, my dear lady, you ought to have a professional nurse. She’s—she’s dangerous.”

“ Oh no, she’s not,” argued Mrs. Ryvett complacently. “ She was annoyed with you, you know. She did not wish to see a man doctor, but to have a wise woman—Judith Banham, I believe, she wished for. Of course I could not consent to that. She’s a spirited little thing, isn’t she ? But tell me, doctor, what is the matter with her ? ”

“ Mad, my dear lady ; mad as a March hare ! ” said Grimmer firmly. “ It is almost my duty to certify her. Of course the hysteria may pass under the influence of the sedative I will send. Er—how old did she say she was ? ”

“ She has not mentioned her age,” replied the old

lady. "I should think, by putting two and two together, that she must be about twenty."

"Ah," said Grimmer thoughtfully. "Yes, she is quite that. Has she given you any proofs of the claim I understand she makes of being of the French noblesse? Her manners are hardly—er—what we have read of that class."

"Seriously though, doctor," said Mrs. Ryvett, ignoring Grimmer's last question, "is there anything really wrong with her? I mean, is she actually ill?"

"If you ask me," said Grimmer spitefully, "if she is not mad, she is as well as you or me. Her pulse was strong and even, her tongue—well, her tongue was curious, but there were no symptoms of illness I could discover. If you give her the mixture as directed on the bottle—Great Scot! what's that?"

Jonquil, attired in the dressing-gown which Mrs. Ryvett had lent her, and with a pair of carpet slippers three sizes too big for her dainty feet, and scarce concealing the purity of their whiteness, had silently stolen into the room. "Weel you go?" she asked, her eyes glaring venomously at the man.

"My dear Jonquil," said Mrs. Ryvett, flushing with annoyance, but afraid to show her vexation lest the girl should take offence and insist on leaving the Hall, "you will catch your death of cold. Please go up to bed at once and wait for me. If you really feel well

enough to come down I will help you to dress. You see, my dear, it is not usual for—for a guest to—to ask any one who has been invited to call by her hostess to go. No doubt the French custom is different.”

“ Eef he go not, I go,” said Jonquil. “ Oh, Madame, why for did you not send for ze *sorcière*, ze wise woman Judit’ ? Zis man, he is *saoul*, as ze Normans call it, he is drink too moch ze *bière*. Ah ! You go ! ”

She was evidently looking round for some new missile. “ I’ll go. I’ll go,” said Grimmer. “ Do not trouble to come, Mrs. Ryvett,” he said, “ I’ll get my gaiters myself. If you will send one of your men to my house this afternoon I will give him what I promised. Yes, yes,” he cried, almost in a yell, as Jonquil advanced upon him, “ I’m going.” And he literally ran from the room.

“ Vat he tell you of me ? ” asked the girl anxiously of Mrs. Ryvett. “ Vat he tell you ? ”

“ I’ll not say a word till you are covered up in bed,” said the old lady with a kind of heavy playfulness. “ Oh, Jonquil, what a naughty girl you are ! But he did smell of beer, did he not ? It was Ben’s fault. He ought not to have given him any before he had seen you. You must scold him.”

Instantly the girl’s eyes softened. “ But no,” she said gently. “ *M’sieur* Ben, ’e save my life. I weel not scold ’eem. I love ’eem,”

“What?” cried Mrs. Ryvett.

“I say I love ’em,” said Jonquil blandly. “I make eem *épouser* me, marry me, eef you do not oppose.”

“My dear!” cried the old lady, “you *are*—but I won’t say a word to you till you have gone back to bed. Then as soon as I have seen the doctor off I will go up and help you to dress.”

“*Non!*” cried Jonquil, stamping her little foot so that it nearly came out of its slipper. “Eef you go after ’em, I weel go, too. I like ’em not. ’E tell you *mensonges*, lies of me! ’E say I am demented. ’E lie. ’E smell so of *bière* I was seek! Oh, Madame, come wiz me, I implore! I weel be oh, so good, and you weel arrange zat my Ben eat anuzzer of Judit’s bonbons? Zey are good for ’em and for me. I love ’em, and you are ’is muzzer. I love you *aussi*. Please.”

She threw her dainty arms round the old lady’s neck, arms which emerged from the great flannel sleeves of the dressing-gown, and which pressed soft and warm about the old neck.

“Really,” thought Mrs. Ryvett, “the child is of an affectionate nature, but I always thought that French girls were not supposed to know the meaning of love before they were married! Still, I can’t be vexed with her! Oh! If only she can succeed in making that silly boy Ben see how much more desir-

able a wife she would make than that great hoyden Marshinallow, I shan't mind the rapidity with which she has lost her heart to him. No doubt she feels he saved her life, and that it ought to be his to do as he likes with. A very pretty feeling, too, I think. Dear child."

As she ruminated thus she allowed herself to be drawn across the carpet to the door.

"You weel come wiz me, *ma mère*," said Jonquil. "Oh, sank you."

"But wait," said Mrs. Ryvett, smiling. "I must see Ben is not about in the hall. We have to cross the hall, you know, to get to the stairway. Of course you know. You rash child. Why, he might have seen you in that costume!"

"Do I no look pretty, zen?" asked Jonquil, opening her great eyes and letting their golden brown radiance envelop the old lady. "Would 'e not love me in zis robe?"

"You don't understand," replied Mrs. Ryvett helplessly. "It would not be correct, proper, for him to see you in such—dear me, the word is on the tip of my tongue—in such dishabilly?"

"*Ohè!*" laughed Jonquil saucily. "Zat make nussing. He weel be my *mari* eef you not oppose. Zen what does it import?"

Mrs. Ryvett gave up the attempt to teach her guest

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the prunes and prisms of British convention. "Well, well," she said, "I would rather have you like this than too stiff and formal, for I know Ben hates stiffness and formality. Come along, my dear, the coast is clear! Why, I've made a rhyme. Some good luck is coming to us!"

And taking the girl round the waist, the old lady led her towards the great hall stairway.

The old lady had been genuinely moved by the feel of the soft warm arms round her neck and beneath her generous double chin. Her heart really warmed to this waif. It was thenceforth not only the satchel of jewels which made the girl desirable as a daughter-in-law.

The jewels! And Jonquil must have left them there, beneath the valance! Heaven grant that they were still safe! And the worst of it was, she could not ask, because she had not yet been told that they had been found!

She hurried the girl up to her room on the pretence that she must get into bed and get thoroughly warm as quickly as possible, and before she would be allowed to dress. And as the old lady tucked in the sheets and counterpane she gave a surreptitious kick beneath the valance.

Thank God, she thought, the satchel was still there!

CHAPTER XIX

BEN DISGRACES HIMSELF

THE dinner-hour at Cootby was at that period of time three o'clock. And by then Jonquil was attired as well as Mrs. Ryvett's ingenuity was able to compass. The clothes which the girl had worn when she had been found upon the denes had been discarded, and until a dressmaker from the nearest town, Herringhaven, had been summoned to the Hall, Jonquil must needs put up with such phantasies of dress as her hostess could contrive. The result only served to exhibit her beauty to a greater degree, to prove that her personal charms were independent of any outside elaboration.

Ben, who had been steeling his heart against the waif he had, as all believed, saved from death, was astonished at the picture she presented when he entered the dining-room at the summons of the great Chinese gong which had been his father's pride.

“ Ah ! M’sieur Ben ! ” cried the girl, tripping forward to him, and taking his hand in hers. “ Eet is good to sank you again.” She raised the hand she held to her lips and kissed it.

“ I say, you know,” stammered Ben, “ don’t do that. I—I’m very pleased to—to have helped. Hullo, mother,” he added, as Jane brought in the dishes, and placed a special entrée before him, “ what’s this ? Smells good ? ”

“ You must ask Jonquil,” said his mother, looking well pleased. “ She insisted on my taking her to the kitchen so that she could prepare you one of the dishes of her own country. I told her she was not strong enough, but she worried me till I consented.”

“ I can do so leetle,” said Jonquil, looking at Ben with a perfect assumption of an air of timidity, “ but I have ze art of ze *cuisine*. Taste, M’sieur, and see ! ”

“ Oh, I say, you know,” protested Ben, looking with some disfavour on the smoking dish before him, “ I’m not going to eat all this by myself.”

“ But yes. But yes. I made eet for you. Ah ! you would not do me hurt in ze heart. You are too kind for zat, I am sure, or you would not have fatigued yourself for me as you deed.”

Still Ben looked doubtfully at the rich sauce before him.

“ Eef you please, M’sieur,” said Jonquil, “ ze docteur

seem to sink zere is somesing wrong wis my eye. *Madame mère* see nussing; weel you look?"

She rose from her seat, while Jane looked on astounded at such manners "at meal times," and advanced to the head of the table where Ben was seated. "Please look," she urged.

She took the lid of her right eye in her hand and bent to him. Ben was compelled to look her full in the eyes. And, as he did so, he felt a strange inability to refuse her anything. A warmth suffused him, and a sense of extraordinary well-being. It must have been two or three seconds before he was able to withdraw his gaze from the golden brown spell which held him. He felt an insane desire to take this girl in his arms and kiss her. And when at last he was able to withdraw his look he had no regret, only a sense of hazy bewilderment.

"You know it is very kind of you," he said, and his voice sounded strange in his ears. The savour of the dish attacked him. It was appetizing.

"At all events you will let me give you some?" he asked.

"But yes," cried Jonquil joyously. "You did taste ze bonbons which your *sorcière* sent. Eet is just that I taste ze *plat* zat I prepare for you."

Ben served the entrée.

In Daneshire Halls at that time there was no con-

ventional arrangement of courses. The squires of the Halls and their dames did not consider themselves to be barbarians because they did not commence with *hors d'œuvres*, continue with soup, and so on through the regulation routine of the table. Moreover, although "broth" is and was a popular dish on the poorest tables, the well-to-do did not regard soup as an essential. To this day the country soups are atrocious. There was nothing strange to Ben, or even to the "city bred" dowager, in commencing a three o'clock dinner with an entrée.

Jonquil threw a triumphant glance at Mrs. Ryvett as she saw Ben help himself liberally after his mother had refused the dish in favour of a saddle of home-bred and marsh-fed mutton from a five-year-old sheep of the famous Ryvett black-faced stock.

Ben ate, and appreciated. His eyes dwelt on the girl more and more eagerly. "I did not know," he said, "that we were to have the honour of your presence. You will excuse me while I go down to the cellar. French cookery such as this deserves French wine to go with it."

"Ah!" cried Jonquil, delighted, to her hostess, as Ben left the room with the cellar keys in his hand; "but he is as gallant as he is strong! I love 'em!"

"My dear!" cried Mrs. Ryvett, scandalized. "Jane," she said to the wide-eyed servant, "you can

leave the room. We will help ourselves. I will ring when you are wanted."

"My dear!" again said the old lady, "you should never say such things before a servant!"

"Pschut!" laughed Jonquil. "*Ze bonne, ze servant, make nussing to me! I would declare to all ze ones I love 'eem. And you weel see now, ma mère, zat 'e will say 'e love me all at ze hour, I weesh to say vezzy soon.*"

Mrs. Ryvett's face was flushed. This girl was entirely beyond her experience. But she had the jewels, and she seemed an affectionate little thing. No doubt French girls were different from English, but she had always imagined that they were different by being more backward in showing their preference. No one could call Jonquil backward.

The girl let her great burning eyes rest on those of her hostess for a moment, and suddenly the old lady decided that everything was right in the best of all possible worlds!

And, beneath Jonquil's corsage, a certain spot throbbed and throbbed; a spot which had been the birth mark of the women of her family for nine hundred years; a spot which in some members of that family had become nearly atrophied as time lengthened their lives, but which in others grew larger and more raised from the skin; a spot which Jonquil was assured that

Blackberry possessed in its most pronounced form ; the spot which had attracted Grimmer's notice that very morning, and caused him to wrinkle his forehead in half-incredulous perplexity.

" You are content ? " asked Jonquil pleadingly of the old lady.

" My dear child," said Mrs. Ryvett, thinking both of the jewels and of the girl's apparent docility and sweetness of disposition (she had forgotten that the hurling of the basin at poor little Grimmer's head did not suggest docility !), " I am sure you mean no harm."

At this stage Ben reappeared bearing a bottle in each hand. " Burgundy," he said. " Romanè Conti, bottled before I was born. This will bring some colour to your cheeks, Jonquil," he added, boldly looking the girl in the face. " If any wine is worthy of you, this is."

Mrs. Ryvett heard this extravagant compliment with the greatest equanimity. Everything was going as she desired. How could Ben think of marrying that countrified Marshmallow girl when he had such a treasure as this dark little beauty ready to fall into his arms !

" But you have ze French *esprit*, M'sieur," laughed Jonquil. " Eet is good of you to sink so moch of ze poor stranger."

Ben turned to the great three-storied black oak sideboard, and from its top shelf took down three goblets of old Venetian glass, the glowing hues of which would come near to match the wonderful ruby light in the noble fragrant wine.

He poured out three goblets full, and offered one apiece to his guest and his mother. Still standing, he raised his own glass to his lips. "To the Countess of Boulong," he said, and drained the wine.

The goblets were capacious. The three of them had held the entire contents of one of the narrow-shouldered bottles, and although the man had a head impervious to alcohol, the richness and the enormous stimulating properties of the time-matured Burgundy set his blood flowing more swiftly. And, had he known it, it was not only the grand old grape juice which affected him. But Jonquil knew, and she lavished on him now every allurements of which she was mistress.

He fetched another bottle before he again seated himself. "Old wine like this," he said, "can do no one any harm. Why, Jonquil, I believe you are looking the better for what you've had already."

Certainly something had set the girl's eyes aflame, had made her cheeks flush with a delicious warmth, had inspired her with a magic allurements far more intoxicating even than the stimulant stored in darkness and cosiness for half a century.

Ben became voluble. He exchanged quips with Jonquil. He laughed and grew extravagant in his compliments. And Jonquil never rebuked him. Nor did his mother seem less satisfied with this new Ben, this garrulous excited man, whose eyes were now aflame and shooting darts as ardent as Jonquil's.

But, in the kitchen, there was tribulation. Tim had come into the meal he usually took in the servants' hall, and Jane, who had a penchant for the Irishman, ran to him for consolation, while Ellen the cook held up her hands aghast.

"I reckon we've got a daughter o' the Black Man in the house," wailed Jane. "That there furriner have been a-makin' up to the master shameful, and no sooner 'n what he'd left the dinin'-room to go down cellar, she up and said to the missis she loved him! That's as true as God, she did. I never heerd such a shameless trollop in all my born days, and that's a fact."

"The saints preserve us," said Tim, crossing himself. "And phwhere's the wise dog? He's not been hisself at all, at all. Nelson, phwhere are ye?"

The great dog came loafing, as it were, into the servants' hall at the call. He carried both head and tail low. As Tim said, he had not been himself all day. He had not seen the quarrel between his master and Harvey. And when the two men entered the house

and passed through the hall he had paid no attention to them, but remained stretched out on the rug before the open fire-place, sullen, dispirited, half terrified. What ailed him ?

“ Well ! ” cried the cook, as the dog came in, “ I never heard o’ such doin’s. And what did the missus say ? Didn’t she have a hearin’ with her ? Didn’t she tell her to keep her love where ’twas wanted ? ”

“ That she din’t,” replied Jane. “ She looked as playseed as a cat with a saucer full o’ cream, and she tode me to get out and I might come when she rang. I reckon that there furriner’s put some’at onto the whool house ’ceptin us sarvants.”

“ And the wise dog,” cried Tim. “ Nelson, bhoy, the streenge colleen is makin’ love wid your masther. Phwhat d’ye think of ut at all, at all ? ”

And, for the first time since he had uttered his protest when Jonquil was borne within the house, Nelson lifted his mighty head, and howled thrice on a note of infinite despair.

“ There ! What d’ye think o’ that and all ? ” cried Ellen. “ He knows some’at, he do ! Ah ! there’s animals as can tell when there’s trouble comin’. I mind my grannie’s cat, when Blackberry’s mother put the spell on her, mew and mew and mew. The Lord l’arns ’em is my belief.”

“ And indade it’s mine,” said Tim solemnly. “ Jane

mavourneen, if things go on lopsided same as now, phwhat d'ye think of spakin' to ould Burntoad? Sure she's a fairy woman wid the saints upon her side; and she'd do aught for Miss Marshmallow."

"The impidence of this furriner a-comin' here and tryin' to steal the young master away from the proper lady who love him," cried Jane indignantly. "I'd never wish for a better mistress than Miss Marshmallow; but if anything come of the outrageous impidence of this furriner, and the young master make her his wife, I shall give in my nootuss fust thing."

"And soo shall I," said Ellen.

"And tha'ss a fack as I shell tew," said Clara the scullery maid, who entered with a bowl of coleworts.

"Never you mind what we're a-talkin' on, Clara," said Ellen. "A gal like you'd best wait to do as her betters tell her."

Clara, accustomed to being snubbed, seated herself without more words.

"Well, my dears," said Tim, "phwhat d'ye say? Shall I shpake to the fairy woman at once, or wait and see how the worruld wags?"

"I should wait," replied Jane. "Maybe it's only a drop o' the old ale which have made the young master a bit above hisself. I believe he love Miss Marshmallow true, and if you axed old Sara too soon you might do a mint o' mischief!"

"Shure and you're the cliver darlint," said Tim. "But if there's worrud of any weddin's I'll see the fairy woman."

"Yes, yes," agreed the two women.

The dining-room bell rang and Jane departed.

When she returned her face was downcast, but flushed with anger.

"They're a-gettin' thicker and thicker," she proclaimed. "The young master is a-leanin' right over so as his hid a'most come agin the furriner's, and the old missus set there lookin' as if butter wou'n't melt in her mouth! I niver see such doin's! Where's the wild duck, Ellen!"

Nelson had crept close to Tim, of whom he always seemed fond, and laid his great head on the Irishman's knee, looking up at him out of the magnificent dark brown eyes which he had inherited from his bulldog sire. Tim patted him affectionately. "Never moind, ould bhoy," he said; "ye can take no blame to yourself."

But the wise dog knew better. He believed that had he not given tongue when he saw the girl lying in the hollow of the denes his master might not have discovered her. There is many a bulldog and bull mastiff who puzzles over his past and present and regrets and hopes with as keen an understanding as any man. And Nelson was an exceptionally wise dog; for his

master had always treated him like a brother and spoken to him so much that the dog knew more than the mere words he heard—he could even understand the things unsaid, but only thought ; and he had, moreover, that superhuman sense of foreboding which warns some animals of coming disaster.

“ Listen, my dear,” murmured Tim to the dog. “ You and me will kape an eye on the streenger, and we’ll guard the masther, in shpite of hissself. Is ut that ye wish to tell me ? ”

Nelson wagged his tail for the first time since he had entered the servants’ hall, and accepted a titbit of liver which the Irishman proffered him.

Kelts as a rule have a better intuition with regard to the treatment of dogs and horses than Anglo-Saxons, though they are run hard in this respect by the owners of the Scandinavian and true Norse blood who form the finest of the marshland people.

When Jane had taken in the last course the kitchen set itself to a thorough discussion of ways and means whereby to counteract the schemes of the “ furriner.” But the only decision the women and man could come to was to watch the course of events, and if things appeared to be getting dangerous to appeal to old Sara Amiss for her help. Old Sara was well known to be fond of Marshmallow, and although Blackberry was feared for her evil powers, no one doubted that

Sara was the more powerful wielder of magic of the two. It was a comfort to all of them to remember that they could call her in to help whenever they pleased.

In the meantime, in the dining room Ben had grown more and more infatuated with Jonquil. She, evincing no signs of her recent weakness, wooed her host with the lively aptness of her race. She did not play the game of the yearning heart, the disconsolate lady, but she was sprightly, gay, yet ever with a suggestion of ardent devotion for the man who had saved her life. She knew well enough that Mrs. Ryvett had found the jewels, but she said nothing of them because she was not yet prepared to tell the tale of her discovery of their hiding-place. It would be a difficult tale to tell, however skilfully she lied about it, and she desired to have both mother and son completely under her spell before she told it.

The third bottle of Romanée Conti was empty, and the eyes of each one of the three, even including the old mother, were the brighter, the spirits the higher, for their draughts of the noble vintage. Black coffee was almost unknown in rural Daneshire, though tea was sometimes served in the towns, rarely in the country unless "company" were present at a formal "dinner party."

Inspired as she was by her unaccustomed indulgence,

Mrs. Ryvett's elderly limbs began to long for rest, her brain to long for the calm of sleep. Her notions of propriety, of her duties of chaperon, were blunted both by the wine and by her longing to hear that her son had accepted the goods the gods provided, and had taken the love which Jonquil had openly admitted she was ready to proffer.

"You will excuse me if I leave you, my dear," she said to the girl, as she rose from her chair a little heavily. "I like my lie down after dinner. Perhaps you had better come up too, Jonquil; you must be tired after you have been so weak, and have kept us all so merry at dinner."

"But no," cried Jonquil, "I weel not. I weel remain wiz M'sieur eef he will permit."

She played upon the man with her ardent eyes as though to say, "Dare to say you do not wish me to stay with you!" and he, poor fool, grinned with delight. "But you know I could not wish you to leave me," he assured her. Marshmallow was once more forgotten. Formerly he had felt some regret because he had asked her to be his wife. Now he actually had no remembrance of his offer and her acceptance. He did not recollect how they had kissed and spoken of love that morning. He did not recollect how reluctant he had been that she should ride home accompanied only by her groom, or that he had promised to go

over to Smeeby by water or road on the morrow. He only knew that this girl before him was the most delicious piece of femininity he had ever seen. She had more wit, more allurements, more mischievous and harmless tantalization than he had believed it possible for any woman to possess. He longed to take her in his arms and silence those daring lips with kisses, and at the thought that his kisses might be returned his heart leapt and his face grew dark with the flush of his madness.

"Don't let her tire herself, Ben," said his mother, as she passed through the door which Ben was glad to hold open for her egress. "Remember that she has hardly recovered from her shock. And oh! I forgot. Please send Tim or Bill over to Dr. Grimmer to get her medicine."

"All right, mother," said Ben, his heart beating fast at the thought that in two minutes he would be alone with this seductive little French girl.

The mother left the room, and Ben closed the door behind her.

"Me desire no medicine," said Jonquil, with a delightful "*mous.*" "Eet is now ze time for bon bons. Taste zem."

She whipped out Blackberry's present, withdrew one of the jujubes and poured a drop from the tiny phial upon it. She had already mixed some of the strange

conserve with the entrée, with what result who shall say? The wiles of a girl like her, her undoubted powers of hypnotism, and the exhilaration of the Burgundy may have been sufficient to account for Ben's madness. It may be that even Jonquil had no faith in what Blackberry meant for a love-charm; but when the charm was offered as she offered it it was a different thing. With her eyes sparkling with mischief and yet flaming forth a call to his chivalry, she took the end of the cube on which she had dropped the liquid between her teeth and offered him the other. "Taste," she said again. "Eet is so we offer bon-bons to our playmates you call zem in Picardy. Weel you not be my playfellow for—for ze love of me?"

There was no resistance left in the man. He bent his mouth to hers, and took the jujube in his teeth, while she still retained her end between hers. Their faces almost touched, her maddening eyes were blazing into his. He bit the sweet through and swallowed his portion of it, then, in an instant, his lips were on hers and she was in his arms.

"Jonquil, Jonquil," he cried. "I love you. Will you be my wife?"

She thrilled in his embrace, and when she lifted her eyes again to him there were real tears in them. In all truth she loved this man as she had never thought

to love any one. It is vain for critics to complain that she had not known him two days. If there is any proverb which is true, it is true that no one ever loved with such love as Jonquil had to offer and as Ben then felt who loved not at first sight. That such love is not of the kind which Marshmallow felt for Ben or which Ben really felt for Marshmallow is as true. The lifelong devotion based on long acquaintance and mutual respect is more than love. That which had brought Ben to shame was the madness of a woman's fascination. It would be well if throughout the world such infatuation was recognized for what it is. To base a life upon so hazardous a quicksand is to invite inevitable disaster.

But neither Ben nor Jonquil cared for the future at that moment of exaltation.

"My dear, my dear," the girl sobbed, hiding her face now upon the broad chest which throbbed at her touch, "eet is ze desire of my heart. My dear, my dear!"

Probably at the moment the wicked woman's love was of a more divine quality than that of the good man. That she knew her own unworthiness was her misery. For real love will ennoble the most vile, and it was because Ben was a good man that he inspired the nobler love than that which had been inspired by the deceit and trickeries of the French woman.

CHAPTER XX

SARA INTERVENES

THAT same night Ben and Jonquil told Mrs. Ryvett that they were betrothed. The old lady was surprised in a way. She remembered that only that morning Ben had been indignant because she had called Marshmallow a visitor and had openly acted as though it were the truth that he had already engaged himself to marry the lady of Smeeby. But Mrs. Ryvett was wise in her generation. Here was, it was true, something she did not understand, but something which was very much to her taste. She saw that the last thing that it would be advisable to do was to mention her son's declaration that he and Marshmallow were to marry. If he had been fool enough to get involved with Marshmallow let him get out of his dilemma himself. It was strange that he seemed entirely comfortable in his fresh engagement, that he did not appear to have any recollection of

having pledged himself to Marshmallow. But many things were strange just then. The old lady would have dearly liked to refer to the jewels, but she feared that, if she did so, Jonquil might think that she had been influenced by her knowledge that they had been found, in so easily giving her consent to receive the French girl as her daughter-in-law. That it was the truth did not make it any the easier to admit. Although she was "city bred" and prided herself on her freedom from what she called the degrading superstitions of the marshland savages, she was not entirely able to persuade herself that Blackberry's jujubes had not affected her son. Yet why should Blackberry have provided a love spell for Jonquil if it were true, as Ben said, that the woman had an inclination for Ben herself? Then there were the stolen horses and the extraordinary story of Bob Clare and Tim O'Shea of their adventures at the haunted plantation, and the ghastly vision of the striped writhing formless thing which could be only the product of imagination or the legendary worm of the marsh.

But though her head buzzed a little with the puzzles which confronted her, she was too careful of her own comfort and ease to let herself be unduly disturbed.

"I'm sure those diamonds and rubies are real," she said to herself. "I can tell real stones when I see.

them. And if they are they are worth three times as much as it will take to clear off the Cootby mortgages!" There lay her consolation, and there was the reason for her bland acceptance of the developing situation. From this second bewitchment, infatuation, call it what you will, Ben made no immediate recovery. Even after a good night's rest he regained no memory of his true relations with Marshmallow, no recollection that he had promised to go to her that very day. He had no desire to leave the Hall. He rose at his usual early hour, ate a mighty breakfast with his normal appetite, washed it down with his wonted draughts of honest, home-brewed, and then wondered how long it would be before Jonquil made her appearance downstairs.

She did not delay, and Ben spent the day in love-making and in planning a future for himself and his new love in which Marshmallow had no part. He had on the previous afternoon dispatched Tim with Harvey's horse. Had he not done so, so oblivious did he seem of the past, he would probably have wandered into his stables and wondered what horse it was standing in the loose box usually allotted to the horses of visitors.

The day passed in pleasant dalliance for him and Jonquil. Only one incident marred the serenity of their love-making.

As Ben was crossing the hall with Jonquil, on his way to show her the beauties of the broad—for it was a fine, sunny, spring-like day, as though Nature was doing her best to atone for the unseasonable touch of belated winter which had had results of such great moment—he saw Nelson lying in his favourite place on the rug against the ingle-nook. The spell he was under had not killed his love for his dog. He called the latter to him.

“Come along, old son,” he said. “We’re going to the broad. Come and make friends with your future mistress.”

Nelson looked up, but did not attempt to rise. He did not even wag his tail as he was used to do at his master’s voice. He looked up sullenly, and there was a red tinge about his noble brown eyes which was new to him.

“Pat him, darling,” said Ben, not noticing the curious glare in the dog’s eyes.

As soon as the girl stooped with her hand outstretched to touch his head there arose such a deep, thunderous rumble that she withdrew it sharply. But she did not resume her upright attitude. Instead, she bent her face lower and fixed her eyes on those of the dog, the golden-brown lustrous eyes upon the honest brown orbs which were now strangely shot with red.

Nelson cowered for a moment, but, taking his eyes from the gaze which tried to hold him, he rose with every hair on his body and tail as stiff as though it were electrified. His muscles were tense, swelling through his loose skin, his upper lip raised, his teeth bared in a snarl.

“Down, boy ; down, old man. What’s the matter ? ” cried Ben, alarmed. “Quiet, quiet, boy. Don’t you know a friend when you see one ? ”

Nelson looked up in his master’s face, and his muscles relaxed, his mouth closed. If Ben could have read the pathetic message directed to him in those beautiful brown eyes he would have acted differently during the next few days. Or would he ? Was he not so much under the thrall of his dangerous guest that not even the known fidelity and affection of his great dog could have influenced him. But if—if he could have understood the wise dog he would have learnt that Nelson knew a friend well enough, and an enemy too, and that he had no doubt that the woman who had tried to stare him out of countenance, or rather to hold his gaze by hypnosis, was the latter.

For he could only feel the evil in the woman, and not her real passion for her rescuer, as she was pleased to call Ben, which was to enable those who read of her to regard her with some tender pity.

“Why,” said Ben, “I’ve never seen him like that

before, except to Blackberry Banham. He never liked her, any more than I do."

"For what do you not like her, *mon chéri*," asked Jonquil. "She have been vare kind, sending bonbons so delicious?"

Ben passed his hand across his forehead in a dazed way. Why did he not like Blackberry? He could not remember. He looked down into the eyes which were turned on him, and the pure devotion he saw in them drew his mouth down to the lips which invited his kiss. "I don't know," he said dully. Then he brightened. "Never mind her," he said. "Come along, and I will show you the broad. There is an easterly breeze and it will be a soldier's wind for us from end to end. We need not run into the river. Come, dear. The little lugger is still in the home boat-house."

In some corner of his mind he remembered that he had heard something about the new lugger being stolen. What did it matter so long as he had his beloved by his side. Every time he looked in Jonquil's eyes he grew the more devoted to her, the more eager for the day when he should make her his wife.

For three days the time passed for Ben in a kind of dreamy fool's paradise. For three days Jonquil held him thrall to her fure. Mrs. Ryvett was content. She was, it is true, a little worried because the satchel

of jewels had disappeared, and she did not understand why Jonquil had not admitted that she had found her heritage. But the old lady was never an acute analyser. She told herself that she who had found that boundless wealth, as it seemed to the provincial dowager, once, and hidden it again, could find it again when she chose. Perhaps it was some pretty fancy of Jonquil's that Ben should wed her for herself alone, uninfluenced by her riches. She smiled as she thought how like a romantic girl such an idea would be. At all events she had no intention of disturbing the even tenor of the lovers' way by asking questions which might be indiscreet.

Neighbours had called, attracted by the rumours of the fair stranger. But they had all been put off with some excuse, and no one outside the Hall circles but Marshmallow and the doctor had yet seen Jonquil so far as the dowager knew.

Mrs. Ryvett was, of course, not yet a dowager. But she had accepted the fact of her son's imminent marriage with Jonquil so easily that she already called herself by that "nose out of joint" title with a certain satisfaction.

No doubt in these times it may seem absurd that any mother of decent birth and breeding should be prepared to take a girl so much on trust as Mrs. Ryvett had taken Jonquil. But the old lady was not only

influenced by her knowledge of the jewels, and by Jonquil's affectionate deference to her; but by her dislike of the other county families round about. The county people had always looked down on her as the daughter of a town tradesman. In those days, and forty years later, the mark of trade was the mark of the beast to county folk. A farmer who owned his own hundred acres would have scorned to associate with an Odinton manufacturer, worth a couple of hundred thousand pounds. Ben's father had never been forgiven his *mésalliance* with a daughter of the accursed thing and Mrs. Ryvett had many insults to avenge. On her part she despised the lack of refinement and even of education among the county people. Even the young men who had been sent down from Cambridge or Oxford were little more than illiterate. They knew nothing of other countries unless they belonged to that very superior class which sent its heirs on "the grand tour"; and in those cases the heirs usually brought back nothing but new forms of vice, and had no care for the beauties of the lands or the customs of the people they had seen on their tutor-conducted travels. There was, as Sir Roger said, "much to be said on both sides." But from the modern point of view unquestionably Mrs. Ryvett had the best of the argument. She was delighted at the prospect of affronting the local county gentry

by showing her acquiescence in her son's choice of a French girl in preference to any one of the semi-illiterate rural daughters of the county gentry. Marshmallow was neither illiterate, nor given to vapours, nor afflicted with any of the fashionable weaknesses. But Marshmallow had a mind of her own, and Mrs. Ryvett was certain that she would not prove so pliable as Jonquil. Moreover, Marshmallow's estates were almost as heavily mortgaged as Ben's. And here, in Jonquil, the mother found means to affront the county people whom she hated and to obtain her great desire of seeing her son the owner of a fine and unencumbered property. Although, owing to the fact that the great wealth of the Cootby estate lay in its unequalled grazing marshes the wheat land was good, and the squires of the estate had made it a practice for generations to feed their labourers and cottagers from their own land. Thus there was less agitation and distress among the people of Cootby, and indeed of all Tenchby Island, than there was in Kent and in other agricultural districts at this time. But for this generosity to the people the squires of Cootby might have been more prosperous. And Mrs. Ryvett, as a tradesman's daughter, cared little for the peasants, and resented the custom which had impoverished the estate. To be able to see her son clear off all debts and thus be able to lift his head higher almost than any squire of the neigh-

bourhood of at all equal possessions, was the old lady's dream. And she knew that she would never be able to persuade Ben to change the traditions of his family and treat his people as other less scrupulous landowners treated theirs.

All these reasons disposed her to accept Jonquil without such inquiry as most mothers would consider reasonable.

But if Ben and his mother were content with the position, it was otherwise in the servants' hall and the village. Except for Blackberry Banham there was scarcely a cottager but was grumbling that this "furriner" had "put some'at onto young squire." Marshmallow was as beloved on her estate as was Ben on his. Both villages and estates had looked forward to the union of the two kindest landowners on the Island. And now, if the tittle-tattle from the Hall were to be believed, this "furriner," who had come from goodness knew where in a blizzard which was in itself the work of the Black Man, had bewitched Ben. Jane had consulted old Sara, who comforted the girl, and bided her time, her senses alert, her powers prepared.

Marshmallow awaited Ben's coming. At the end of the first day she had told herself that he had been prevented from keeping his promise by some untoward event. At the end of the second her pride was roused. At the end of the third she began to worry, and, girl-

like, to desire to seek comfort or information concerning the man whom she had long loved in her noble, steadfast way with every fibre of her being.

On the fourth day she rode over to see Sara Amiss. The legends and beliefs of the marsh country were bred in her blood and bone, and she believed she could obtain solace if not advice from the white witch. Her groom, honest Tom Brown, a man of close on seventy, accompanied her gladly. He, too, was anxious. He had foregathered over rum grog and tobacco with O'Shea and old Bob Clare at the cottage of the last named, and the three men had shaken their heads despondently. Nelson was with Tim, for of late the dog seemed to dislike to accompany his master who was for ever with Jonquil.

"That's sartain sure," said old Bob, "as the furriner have put a some'at onto him, and my belief is as Blackberry be mixed up in it. There's wholly rum doin's. I ha' watched the haunted plantin', but I hain't seed nowt agin, I ha' sent my son o' nights down broad and river to seek for the bööt what was stool. But he on'y come hoam oncet, and say one o' that keel bööt gang o' Roger Hansell's had took a shot at him and he worn't a-goin' no more. Young warmin. As if a keeper ought to mind a shot or tew. If he worn't my son I'd sune tell the master to get rid on him. I ha' sent him to-night to watch where the river

jine the north river. I doubt them keel bööt chaps ha' got that bööt, and they'll be a-makin' down or up with her suner or later. But what git over me is the young master hain't never mentioned the bööt to me since I tode him on it. I axed him t'other day, yister-day that wuz, if he'd forgot, and he looked at me sort o' dazed like and he said that didn't sigerfy."

"Troth, and I can say the same," said Tim, with a deep draught of his steaming rum. "Two of our best hosses were stolen, as shure's shure, and by St. Pathrick, I belayve as the seem rascallions took thim as took the boat. I said to th' masther but yesterday, bright and early, 'twas, for he still rises wid the sun, ' Phwhat shall I do consarnin' the hosses, your honour? If ye'll give me free lave to take such min as I want and the wise dog wid me I'll find um, or my neem isn't Tim O'Shea.'

"He looked at me like he was fairy overlooked. 'You can do as you wish, Tim,' says he. He didn't seem to teek any pleasure in life at all, at all. My belaif is he's been overlooked by Blackberry or by the strange colleen, for the wise dog has tould me that she's as big a daughter of the Divil as Blackberry herself."

The three men talked and grumbled late into the night, but could only come to one decision. To join their forces to attempt to find those who had stolen

the boat and the horses. They knew nothing of Dr. Grimmer's tale of the foreigner lamed by a kick from a horse, or they might have got on a track sooner than they did. And as for Ben, he had quite forgotten most that had taken place between him and the doctor. Grimmer had sent his mixture, which had been put on one side and ignored, and on his calling again he was told that his patient was out. In a huff the little man returned to his home without mentioning the thing he had seen, the thing which his education and scientific knowledge, such as it was, warned him to discredit, but which his experience of local mysteries forced him to regard. For, in bending over Jonquil at the first, he had seen what was known among the villagers as "the witch's mark"¹ a wart-like growth, of a peculiar character, which the girl carried on her breast.

On the following day Marshmallow rode over to the Cootby village and halted her horse against Burntoad's door.

"Come ye in, come ye in. All good come and go with ye!" cried the old woman before ever the girl had knocked at her door.

"Take the horses to the inn," said Marshmallow to

¹ Vide State Trials, R. v. Rose Cullender and Amy Duny, before Sir Matthew Hale at Ipswich, 1662.

old Tom, "and come back for me 'in half an hour."

"I've been longin' to see ye, my dear," said old Sara, as soon as the girl entered the hovel. "You and me have to jine hands agin the Black Man's trulls if we wish to save the man you love."

"I'm sure I don't love any one," said Marshmallow angrily. "I made a mistake," she admitted, and tears gathered in her eyes.

"Don't ye try to desayve old Sara," said the old woman tenderly. "And mind ye this. Ta bain't the fault of your man. 'Twas on'y last night I axed above about him, or I should ha' drawed ye to me afore. I thought all was well, for even I can't tell things are wrong unless I ax where all is truth."

At this Marshmallow, who was indeed desperate with love and jealousy, let herself be taken to the old woman's withered bosom, where she wept more happily than she had wept for forty-eight hours, though, despite her pride, many of those hours had been spent in tears.

"If he'd only sent me word," she sobbed. "But to promise to come to me, to come to me and take me home with him, to promise that we should soon be wed! And then to leave me without a word, while, if all is true, he is with that foreign girl all day, is too much, Sara."

"Hush, hush, my lamb," soothed the old woman;

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"ta bain't his fault. He bain't hisself. I ote to ha' knowed it afore. Them chumps at the Hall are half shanny or they'd have come and told me afore. I on'y heerd last night when Jane come in, and she's that upset, pore dare, as she say she can't stay onless there's changes. Now it's for you and me to make them changes. Tell me open. Do you love the man or not?"

"You know, Sara," sobbed Mallie. "I can't help loving him. I have tried. I have tried, because I wished to hate him after what I have heard. But I have loved him so long that it is part of my life. Oh, Sara dear, is it true that he cannot help himself. Has that horrible French girl really bewitched him?"

"She and Blackberry between 'em have put him in a proper flumdoozledum," said old Sara. "But doan't ye fret, doan't ye fret. Now I know, I'll sune git him free for ye. The fules, not to come to me afore. Here was I a-brewin' o' broths agin the fight I knowed was comin' without a thought as things had gone so far. Ah, my dear, she has power, that furriner! I reckon she know as much as Blackberry, and some'at more, too, in her own way. But God ha' be't the Black Man oncet for all, and all them as calls on Him to help 'em agin the Black Man will have their will if they do it honest. Bless your pore heart, if them two women was to come here I could blast 'em with

the anger, I could strike 'em dumb and crazy wi' the palsy. And they doan't know it. The powers of good will allust beat the powers o' bad if you'll give 'em a chanst by bein' dacent yourself. Now my old blood is all aglow, I do declare, 'cos I feel the struggle is nigh, and eye for eye old Sara'll try to git them warmin properly! He! he! he! Doan't ye fret, but set ye down. I ha' got a drop o' your blood, a bit of your hair and skin, case I want it, as I may do, for I have a forebodin' as trouble is comin' on ye. You want to be careful. But I doubt it won't save ye if ye be. Howsomedever, I'd like a drop more blood if you'll let me take it. I oan't hu't ye. I took it last when you didn't know nothin', but that's o' more avail if it's took with the will of the one it's took from."

"Of course," said Marshnallow, bravely holding out her arm. "Take what you wish."

The old woman took out the same crock as that in which she had stolen the drop of blood before, and the same razor-edged curving blade. By some process she had kept the former few drops of blood still liquid. Now she skilfully pricked the lobe of the ear of the girl, ignoring the extended arm, and though Mallie had felt no pain, the drops came freely into the crock. Without asking leave the old woman cut another wisp of hair, and another tiny slice of skin. Then, still

without asking, and confident that Mallie would let her do as she liked, she carefully pared three of the longest finger-nails upon the girl's left hand.

All but the blood she placed in another more shallow crock.

"Now," she said, "we doan't want to hev no spies. Set ye still and doan't ye be afeared, whatever ye hear or see. Nothin' can't hurt you."

From a cupboard at the back of the hovel she produced some dried herbs, and some green leaves. The green leaves she steeped in a small gallipot, the dried herbs she placed upon a shallow crock similar to that in which she had deposited Mallie's hair, skin and nail.

On the roughly made but strong oak table, the top of which was a pentagon, she placed an instrument which looked like a dwarf candelabrum. It consisted of four tiny oil lamps, with clear horn for their reservoirs, and with copper tops through which ran wicks of some material strange to the girl. These were swung on a thin rod which ran easily inside a hollow stem of copper. Round the top of the twirling shaft were two strands of fibre, also of some material which Marsh-mallow did not recognize. Sara lit the four wicks from her fire, and, drawing a shawl over the tiny window, darkened the hovel save for the lights from the cressets and the fire.

The girl began to feel eerie, but she had a sense of

intense trust in the old woman, and a curiosity as intense.

"You didn't see no otter nor hare nor other furry thing about when ye come in?" asked Sara.

"Why no," laughed Marshmallow, thinking that the old woman was joking.

"Ah," said Sara, "if there's any sarvants o' Blackberry's or the furriner's hereabouts we'll sune l'arn 'em."

She fixed the crocks, in one of which were the steeped green leaves and in the other the dried herbs, so that they caught the flame from the four cressets. Then she pulled on the fibrous strings so that the cressets revolved positively and widdershins. She bopped and bowed. For a moment she held her hands on high, and then fell to her knees. In this position she remained some seconds, her voice murmuring some prayers or incantations which Marshmallow, now thoroughly interested but not at all afraid, was unable to catch.

Then the old dame rose from her knees with an agility scarce to be expected from a woman of her age, and chanted aloud:—

"Soft pelted succubs¹ wi' dangerous claws,
Where are ye hidin' in cranny or hole?"

¹ Probably this is old Sara's plural of "succubus," the animal familiar of witch lore.—J. B.

What are ye seekin' to surfeit your maws,
Blood of the body, or life of the soul?
Tit-bits for champin' in Be'lzebub's jaws.

Where do ye slink wi' your pit-a-pat paws?
Waitin' till Blackberry gi'e ye your dole.
Hither, come hither, I bid by the laws
O' wizards and witches, which gi'e me control
"O'er rats, hares and otters, toads, hoodies and daws."

From a corner of the hovel came the sound of scratching, followed by the pit-a-patter of scampering feet, and, in the dim light, Marshmallow saw a rat shoot across the floor out of some hole nigh the door. A heavier pad followed, and a lithe long body seemed to squirm its way, cowardly, towards Sara. "Hech! hech! hech!" laughed the old woman, "I knowed some o' her babes had been a-watchin' on me aspectin' you to come. But I didn't know which on 'em. Now I reckon that'll puzzle Master Bel to git out."

She turned savagely on the otter and made half a dozen passes over its writhing body. "You ha' seed naught, you ha' heerd naught, you will kill johnny rat sune is I set ye free."

She signed a huge cross in the air, and bowed her old head humbly. "By my promise to do naught ill, by my oath to follow His will, I pray the Master to help me still."

There was such a solemnity about the old woman's

prayer that Marshmallow found herself praying in concert.

Sara opened her door an inch or two, and the otter ran swiftly out. He disappeared, as Mallie saw, who watched him go, into the hedge on the opposite side of the road, whence immediately came the squeal of a rat. Then there rose upon the broad day the child-like cry of an otter in search of its mate.

Sara bowed her head again. "Master," she said, "I thank Ye. The otter be freed of her spell now. He ha' gone back to his natural life. Now there's on'y Bub the hare, and he hain't been sent here. If he be he's the aisiest to deal with."

"And now, my dear," she said, seating herself on a little wooden three legged stool, or tripod, beside Marshmallow, "you and me can hev a hearin'."

CHAPTER XXI

KIDNAPPED

ON the following morning Ben was out of doors by sunrise. He carried his gun on his shoulder, for Jonquil had expressed her appreciation of the wild fowl she had tasted, and in those days it was not criminal to shoot migrating geese or the little "Scotch fowl" which rarely came to Daneshire till the end of February or beginning of March.

He turned his steps towards the Shivering Marsh for the first time since that momentous morning when he had found Jonquil.

The weather had been fine and spring-like since that extraordinary nocturnal blizzard, which was to be the talk of the marshfolk for generations. The roads had dried considerably. The blackthorn buds were peeping, and even the whitethorn showed a trace of green here and there. The young man strode along buoyantly. He was quite content in his love affair with Jonquil. He did not remember Marshmallow at all, or only as the playfellow of his childhood. He could

recollect other passages in his past life, but he remembered nothing of his courtship of Marshmallow or his first suspicions of Jonquil.

His powerful stride took him along the village at a good pace till he came to the point of the wood where Sara Amiss had her dwelling. Here a scarcely perceptible line had been drawn across the roadway by some sharp-pointed instrument, like a hedge stake. Ben did not notice the thin line till he was about to put his foot over it. And then he found himself stopped by some agency he could not see, or properly feel. He only knew that he could not advance another step. And, as he stood wondering what had come over him, and if he had been smitten with the palsy, old Sara opened her door and came out into the roadway.

“ I bid ye good mornin’, squire,” said she. “ Could ye spare the old woman a min’t. She want to ax ye some’at.”

The spell seemed dispersed by her words, and on its dispersal he forgot it. He said pleasantly that he could spare the old dame all the minutes she wanted.

Sara’s grin was a little grim as she ushered him into her hovel.

Yet there was something triumphant about it, for she knew that she had routed and destroyed the only agencies which Blackberry had sent to watch her on

the previous day. The plan she had explained to Marshmallow had not been betrayed to her enemy. Now, she believed the game was in her own hands, and there should be an end to these evil machinations which were disturbing all the village.

“Set ye down,” she said, when Ben was within her hut. “Set ye down. Wait till I put a light to this here to cook my brekkust.”

She lit the cressets, which have been described in the previous chapter, and a smoky reek arose from the two crocks which were fixed above the oil flames.

“I ha’ made a new cordial,” she said. “Your faa’er was allust a man for my cordials. ‘Likeyours,’ he called ‘em, though what he meant by their bein’ like mine when they was mine I never knowed. And I doubt you’re a chip of the old block !”

Ben felt no inclination to refuse her offer. There was a soothing, pleasant influence about the hovel which filled him with a sense of security and of loving kindness. Sara would have told him it was the breath of the Living Lord. But Sara sometimes spoke in metaphors. Certainly the effect was that of peace and goodwill to men.

Suddenly he felt very sleepy. “Hang it all,” he yawned. “I suppose we were up too late last night. I’m used to go to bed early when I mean to be up for morning flight.”

He felt more and more drowsy, but quite content to rest in the low, deep-seated oaken settle to which his hostess had directed him.

He did not see Sara swaying her arms over his head. He did not hear her murmured words. He did not notice her as she fell on her knees, and, by the straining of her body, seemed to wrestle in prayer with the Divine. When she rose to her feet her face was irradiated with the light which is never seen on the face of evil folk. It was the light from inspiration bestowed from another and a higher sphere than the terrestrial. Hitherto his experiences in marshland magic had been confined to the spells of Blackberry or the hypnotic tricks of Jonquil. Sara had never before given him an exhibition of the inspired prophetess, because never before had she deemed it needful. For she never desecrated the powers vouchsafed to her by using them, save for a worthy and a vital cause.

"Ah, my dear," he heard her say, "you're done up. Drink this. It will do ye more good than aught ye ever drank in your life."

His heaviness lifted, and he saw her standing smiling beside him, a tiny mug of crockery ware in her hand. The liquid it contained was clear and limpid, but faintly tinged with green, like river water flowing over waving water weeds.

Obediently he took the crock in his hand and drained its contents. He gasped for an instant, for the liquid was as potent as absolute alcohol, sweeter than any syrup he had ever swallowed, and of a flavour so strange, so suggestive of innumerable herbal savours, that it seemed the most exquisite and most stimulating cordial he had ever tasted.

For a few seconds he sat motionless, enjoying the rare flavours as they chased each other over his palate, tingling internally with the warmth of its potency.

And then, for perhaps half a second, the world was blotted out. He swooned, if a man can be said to swoon while still sitting upright, and when he returns to his senses within a second.

No sooner did he recover his consciousness than he leapt to his feet. "What have I done?" he moaned. "Mallie! My Mallie! Sara, oh tell me, where is Mallie? What have I done? Do I dream that I have been love-making with another woman, a stranger, a woman who frightens me now? You are a wise woman, Sara. Help me, for God's sake."

"It's the only name you can use to call for my help," said the old woman sternly. "Man, Master Ben, what have you done? You've let yourself do what I warned ye against. Don't ye mind what I told ye on the snowy morn when you was on your way with your gun and your wise dog to the Shiverin'

Mash? I warned ye! And the blight of the spells of evil women, of daughters of the Black Man, have made ye forget your troth and your duty! You, the son of my old master, the grandson of the handsome lad I loved when I was young, you I loved as my own grandson. Thank God on your knees I've saved ye in time to prevent a great misfortun'. I say thank God on your knees, for it is owin' to the goodness of God alone as I was able to bring ye to yourself."

And Ben, under the impulse of an irresistible power, fell on his knees for the first time, alas! for some years, and thanked his Maker in a loud voice.

And old Sara wept above him in sheer pride that she had matched good with ill and gained the victory.

"Now," she said, "go ye hoam, rouse up Tim if he bain't about, and bid him go with ye to Smeeby. Ta may be too late a'riddy. My mind tells me there's peril for Marshmallow Wednesloe, and you owe her to save her from what threaten, all on your account, 'cos you ha' been drawn by evil longin's. Never mind your mother. I'll deal with her come the time. Your own true love is in danger. Hurry, man, hurry, or I doubt you'll be too late, for even I cannot foretell when the mischance will fall."

"You mean it," said Ben, who really seemed less

dazed in spite of his extraordinary experiences within the hovel than he had been when going free about his estate for the last four days.

“Hark,” said Sara. “’Tis too late a’riddy. Hark, I hear the n’ise of a gallopin’ hoss. Go ye out into the street and see who ta be.”

The old woman wrung her hands, and began at once to busy herself about certain crocks and strange ingredients, while she renewed the oil of her own preparation which was still burning in the cressets. “I knowed how t’would be,” she moaned. “And now the time o’ great danger ha’ come and I cannot tell how the Lord will choose. Mallie showed pride, a bad, bad fault. But the man was desaiwed. God grant he may find his true happiness arter all. The fule, arter what I told him, to let gold come before the truth of a gal like Mallie. But he was desaiwed. He worn’t hisself. I doubt he’ll ha’ to pay more than he owe.”

Galloping furiously along the empty street came old Tom, Marshmallow’s groom.

At sight of Ben he pulled his horse on to its haunches. “Thank God I ha’ copped ye, sir,” he said. “They ha’ brook into the place at Smeeby and runned off wi’ Miss Marshmallow. I didn’t hear ’em till they was a-gallopin’ off, and then Miss S’bina’s skreeks woke me up right oover the stable. That wuz just about

fust dawn, and the impidence o' the warmin' to dare it arter it got light an all."

"Great Scot!" groaned Ben. "This is all my fault! My fault! I have been mad!" For a moment he sickened at the memory of Jonquil. Yet his recollection of her now was as indistinct as it had been of Marshmallow before he had entered Sara Amiss's hovel.

"Which way did they go?" asked Ben.

"They seemed to go towards the river, sir," said Tom. "I'd ha' follered, but I doubted I couldn't do nothin' by myself. If I'd been twanty year younger I'd ha' gone arter 'em and blarm it. But I knowed you would lose no time, master."

"The river," said Ben thoughtfully. "Can it be that they stole my dinghy some days since with the idea of this? Good Lord! What shall I do? How the deuce am I to find out where they have taken her. The only chance is that they may have run across some poachers, and then it's doubtful if the poachers would tell me, unless they are my own people, and they hardly go so far afield."

"Come yew in, master, agin," he heard Sara's voice behind him. "I knowed some'at o' the kind was bound to hap. My sperrits tode me."

"Then why in thunder did you not warn me?" cried Ben.

Sara looked him full in the face till his eyes fell shamefacedly. "Would you ha' harkened?" asked the old woman sternly. "Would ye e'en ha' let me spake to ye afore I brought ye unner the spell which I could on'y lay acrost my own door-stone?"

Ben made no reply, but his breast heaved heavily, as though he were suffering torment.

"Tell Tom to ride to the Hall," said Sara, "and fetch Tim, and then warn Bob Clare, and get a boat out into the river, the fastest you ha' got. Tim must bring your best hosses. Then come ye in with me."

Ben gave the orders to Tom, who went off at full speed after a look of devout admiration and awe directed towards old Sara.

"And now," said Sara, as she closed her door upon Ben's entrance, "I will show ye I bairn't onprepared."

She took out the crock containing Mallie's blood and the shallower piece of earthenware with the skin, hair and nails spread in it.

"No word be spoke," she said, as she rummaged in her cupboard till she found and brought forth a flat piece of black marble, about eighteen inches square, in the centre of which a shallow basin had been worked out with a diameter of nearly a foot. Into this she poured clear water from a massive ewer which stood beside the centre table.

Again the cressets were set turning, this time with

the two crocks containing the blood, hair and nail and skin taken from Marshmallow, suspended over their flames.

The old woman pulled on the two fibrous strings alternately so that the cressets swung alternately in the positive and in the negative directions. The smoke from the shallow crock reeked through the low hovel, till the scent was like that of a smithy when a horse is being shod.

The old woman raised both her hands on high and clasped them over her head. And while Ben grew fidgety at what he regarded as a useless mummery, even after his experiences that morning, Sara began to intone doggerel in a low, sweet voice which sounded strange coming from her turkey-neck throat and her wrinkled chaps.

“ Burn, burn, as the cressets turn,
Hair and skin in the witch's crock,
Boil, boil on the flaming oil,
Blood o' the maid, till the wards unlock.
Hark, hark, ye sperrits o' dark,
Obey me and you shall be sperrits o' light.
Tell, tell by Saint Peter's spell
Of the second crow of the morning cock.
Tell where she, the lost one, be,
By the blood, and hair, and nail, and skin,
Old Sara stole for the fire control
Of the magic mirror. Begin! Begin! ”

She passed her hands in intricate curves over Ben's

head thrice, and turned her old body six times sunways, not widdershins ¹ (this latter is the turn of black magic), and then spoke peremptorily.

“Peer, peer into the mirror, the pool o’ fair water in the holy stone,” she said. “Haste wi’ ye. Peer.”

The light was very dim, for there were old dimity blinds over the window which had been given the old woman by Ben’s father. And the window itself was of diamond-shaped panes of glass like that of bottle bottoms. But for the four burning cressets and the glow from the fire the hovel was nigh dark. But Ben obeyed. He could not help himself. Had the old woman bidden him to thrust his face in the red embers of the fire he would have done it. He was under her spell.

At first he could distinguish nothing in the smooth surface of the water but the reflection of his own face.

The first change which excited him was the disappearance of that reflection. For a few moments he was looking into the mirror of the water, his face close above it, and no reflection was given back. Then, without any preface of mist, a picture became visible with the rapidity of an over-exposed negative under a too powerful developer.

¹ Vide trial of Agnes Lampson for witchcraft in Scotland, and her confession to King James (afterwards James I of England) in 1591.

Ben gave a cry, and thrust his face closer to the water.

“What d’ye see, what d’ye see? Tell the vision quick to me,” said old Sara. “Keep it in your mind’s eye, remember every stick and stone, every blade o’ grass in it. But tell me what ta be, the vision what ye see.”

And Ben began to speak. “There’s a boat on the river. Mallie is in it, with two, no, three men. Her hands are tied behind her. There is a scarf or shawl wrapped round her mouth. Two of the men are foreign-looking, dark-faced brutes. One of them moves about the boat with difficulty as though he were lame. The third—oh, my God, why did I not strike harder, why did I spare his life, the third is Harvey. Why——”

“Oh, hode your n’ise, do,” cried old Sara testily. “What’s the good o’ yar blarrin’ now! Which way’s the boot a-goin’? D’ye reckernize the reach? Which river, the Fowlfeed, or the north river? Ye fule, can’t ye see that onless ye get ’em afore they get into the tide of the north river they may put the grin on us yet! I can do a deal, but I bain’t the Master of All, and He allust see as fules pay for their folly. Speak, or by the whisperin’ sperrits o’ the mash I’ll shove ye aside and look myself.”

Ben continued: “I know the reach. It is not

more than three miles below the channel from my broad into the Fowlfeed. By pike and eel they're comin' up."

Sara gave a cry of triumph, "I thought so," she cried. "They're a-comin' up to hev a hearin' with the furriner at the Hall. Oh, if on'y I had some'at off one of them furriners, I could show ye the other boot awaitin' this one and where Roger Hansell's gang be! Hain't ye nothin', nothin' at all, off the furriner, or off o' that Harvey?"

Ben's hand searched automatically in the pockets of his Daneshire jacket, and suddenly his face brightened. He remembered that after he had wiped his rapier on a handful of grass to clean it of Harvey's blood he had given it a final polish on his handkerchief, and had been surprised to find that so much stain had come from the steel after he had thoroughly wiped it on grass.

He pulled the handkerchief from his pocket, where it had lain forgotten since the fight, and tendered it to the old woman.

"The red is Harvey's blood," he said.

"Thank the good Lord A'mighty!" cried the witch. "Quick, quick, there bain't no time to lose, though we ha' more than I feared, seein' as they are darin' enow to come upriver to the broad, for to the broad they'll come and on the broad you'll find 'em. Hode your

n'ise," she shrieked, as Ben opened his lips to protest against her theory. " Watch ye now, watch ye now. You know the waters better'n me now, for the reaches ha' changed since I was a gal and knowed reach and p'int, rand and staithe from Cootby to Herrin'haven, and from Herrin'haven to Odinton like the palm o' my hand. Ah! the rivers ha' changed and the silt shallowed the p'ints and the drift o' the tide washed away trees I sought for the white pith of the willow when I was young!"

While she jabbered, as Ben considered, she was busily engaged in performing some tricks with the kerchief stained with Harvey's blood, and presently the cressets again spun merrily round, and the stench of scorched cambric caught Ben by the throat.

" Look, look in the mirror of the water, the true mirror of land and water the Master give us. Look and tell what ye see."

Again Ben saw his own reflection fade, and again he saw a picture flash out upon the still black surface of the water.

" Begad!" he cried. " You're a wonder. There's Roger Hansell, with his grey beard and his black eyes, the handsome old rascal; there's his son, Elijah, weedy and tall as an osier; their keelboat lies at St. Mary's Abbey, at the fork of the rivers, and now I can see, yes, there's a ship's boat, the one I found, I do

believe, at her stern and a couple of hands in her."

"Praise God," said Sara. "I see the game, and ta' bain't too late. Fust, boy, go ye back hoam quick and shut up that furriner wench where she can't get out, or at least see she don't take nothin' from the Hall but the clo'es she stands in. I'll tell ye all about the treasure arter you ha' s'aved the one woman fit for ye! Haste ye. Ah! here they come."

She flung open the door of her hovel as soon as she had blown out the cressets and hidden the curious candelabrum-shaped contrivance. "Understand," she cried to Ben, "let your hosses go. I'll find 'em for ye suner or later. All on ye go back, take your big boat well manned with a planty o' guns and good steel. Let young Bob do a bit o' stalkin' like; he've got heart enow for that." She grinned viciously at the young fellow who had come running up from his father's cottage. "Take ivery man you can find, and bring her back, my bewty, my splendid gal o' the mash, my Marshmallow."

Tim was thundering up leading three horses. Tom rode behind him. Ben, with a word of assurance to Sara, sprang into the saddle of "Calder," his fastest horse, a "rixer," and as he sprang a notion came to him. Surely the safest plan would be to take the boat bearing Harvey, Mallie and the two foreigners, both front and rear. And he could do it if he gave it time

to get up past his lower boathouse. For his lands extended to the river, and he possessed three boathouses: the home house on the broad, the upper river boathouse, at the river end of the passage leading from the broad to the tidal way, and the lower, a good two miles farther down the river. It was from the upper river house that the boat had been stolen, and so far as he knew there was still the stout whaling boat he had bought at Herringhaven two years since at the lower house.

He called old Bob to his side. "Get every man you can," he said, "and fit them up with every gun or pistol you can find about your own place or the Hall. Take a horse for yourself and take any others you need from the land. Don't let there be less than half a dozen of you, for the whale boat is heavy."

"There's a soldier's wind, and fresh," said old Bob. "And she've got her two lugs ready and the masts agin the steppin' wells. Leave it to me, master, and see you to your own part. I see what you're arter, and I reckon that'll wholly do 'em. I speckilate we uns shall do a good mornin's wuck come dinner-time."

Ben nodded, pleased by seeing his intention grasped so swiftly by the skilful old keeper and wily old poacher. He laughed aloud in sheer joy of the adventure. He had no fear lest he should fail to save Marshmallow

now. And he hardly thought of Jonquil or her treasure.

Presently he, young Bob, Tim O'Shea and Tom Brown were galloping towards the Hall to obtain weapons first, and then to proceed to the home boat-house to cut off the stolen lugger from up-river and the broad, while old Bob rallied his forces to bring up the whale boat from below.

And, as the cavalcade dashed through the gates of the home park, who should come leaping towards it but Nelson. The great dog bayed with delight, he leapt up at his master, and alongside Calder, the horse who knew and loved him. For the first time for four days the wise dog was himself again.

And Ben's heart was full at the sight of him and the realization of his truth and insight. For now he began to recollect something of his days of madness. But while his memory returned to him his weakness did not. He remembered Jonquil, but with fear and loathing, as though he had seen the serpent's or fish's tail beneath the beautiful face and bust.

And Jonquil, within doors, was weeping genuine tears, because her arts told her that she had lost the man whom she had learnt to love with all her ardent nature, the man for whom she would have given up evil practices, have surrendered the jewels, have told the truth concerning them, and have endeavoured to

lead a wholesome, virtuous and clean life for the rest of her days, if only she might be his wife.

Tim noticed the procedure of the wise dog, and exulted. Jane, partly anxious concerning Tim, and partly influenced by a female intuition that there had been great changes for the better that morning, watched the cavalcade ride round the stables, and she began to sing about her work. The two water spaniels barked, and played about the hall. And Jonquil heard and knew why. For a period her love turned to bitterness, to hatred she told herself. Should she, she, the daughter of one of the noblest families of the old French noblesse, provide amusement for these boors? Witch she might be, as she knew her half-sister, Blackberry Banham, to be ; but she was of too fine a mould to be set at naught, and dropped like a worn-out glove now that by some means the spells of the Black Man had been counteracted.

With flaming eyes and throbbing heart she prepared herself to follow the man she loved and hated when he should again leave the Hall. In her bosom she hid a pistol she had taken from his stand of arms. In her garter she thrust a dagger which she had found where she had found the satchel of jewels. If these boors thought that she was to be tossed aside and that the play should end as a comedy she would prove them to be in error. Even Mrs. Ryvett would have shud-

dered had she seen the Black Man's light upon his servant's face as she crouched behind the door of the Magnolia room, waiting, waiting to follow Ben as soon as he was off upon the work at which she guessed.

CHAPTER XXII

JONQUIL'S SACRIFICE

BEN gave his men time to snatch some breakfast and choose what arms they liked from the stand in the gunroom. He himself ate heartily of a mould of home-made brawn, and washed it down with a tankard of his favourite home-brewed. He filled a flask from a litre bottle of the oldest cognac in his cellar, and then went out to marshal his forces and ride down to the home boathouse. The stable-boy Bill rode behind Tim O'Shea on the horse's crupper, so that he might bring the mounts back to the stable when the expedition had set out across the broad.

Ben was about to spring into his saddle when his mother appeared. "I *must* speak to you, Ben," she said. "Is it true you are going after Marshmallow Wednesloe? How dare you when——"

"I can't wait to talk to you now, mother," said Ben. "There is not a moment to lose."

The old lady hurried up to him even as he swung

into the saddle, and whispered fiercely, "Are you fool enough to give up all the wealth Jonquil can bring you? Do you think she will marry you if you leave the Hall like this in search of another girl——"

Ben only replied, "Can't wait now. Come on, men," and, lightly pricking Calder with his spurs, he led the cavalcade at a hand gallop towards the boat-house to the west of the little wood which had screened him and Harvey during their fight.

It was a morning of blue sky, with white clouds racing inland from seawards. Young Bob Clare and Ben ran out the boat, stepped her mast, and hooked the gaff of the lug to the halyard. As soon as the four men, Ben, young Bob, Tim and Tom Brown, were aboard and the boat headed to wind, up went the lug, the halyard was belayed, the sheet handled and held, the nose pointed off wind, the boat swung round, and catching the fresh breeze soon surged at a great pace westwards towards the passage which led by a winding channel overhung with leaning willows and ash to the river.

No word was spoken. Tom Brown edged up beside Ben who had the tiller and sheet to look to. "Whereabouts d'ye think they be, master?" he asked. "Surely they oan't be darin' enow to come up open like with my young missis kidnapped as I may say."

"I think they will," replied Ben. "There is no one

about the waters at this time of year except the Clares, and they will feel sure that they will be too strong in numbers for the two Bobs to tackle them. I have a notion what is bringing them this way. Keep a look out shorewards. If you see the French girl coming in our direction let me know. I must watch the boat with this breeze."

There was no chance of Jonquil being descried before they emerged into the river, for the trees were thick on both sides of the channel. But the river ran free and open past one boundary of the park and Jonquil could make her way easily enough to any point of its left bank for quite a quarter of a mile.

But would she? Ben could not but believe that she loved him. Had she given up all hopes of his marrying her? If so, she might try to get away with her plunder. Yet why should she? She could not suspect that either he or his mother would attempt to rob her of her own. It was strange that she had not mentioned that she had found the jewels. Still, he could see no reason why she should desire to take flight. Moreover, how could she know that the two Frenchmen were approaching in a boat with Harvey and Marsh-mallow? And was it likely that she would again place herself in the power of the men who had left her to die on the denes? Yet had they so left her? Since Ben's eyes had been cleared by old Sara he had won

dered whether the whole affair of her appearance on the denes had not been a scheme whereby to get into the Hall. For she must have found the jewels inside the Hall. There had been practically no snow in the ship's boat. And though the girl's dress had appeared to be sopped with wet when he found her, there was no snow upon her.

He thrust the thoughts of her from his mind. His work was to save Marshmallow from her peril, and that she was in peril of the worst kind he felt sure, because of the presence of Harvey in the boat! Oh, why had he not thrust harder or through a more vital spot. No doubt Harvey was unable to use his left arm. But he would have the use of his right, and he had the two French villains to back him. It was lucky that he had not thought it necessary to seek reinforcements from Roger Hansell's keel boat. As it was, the party from the Hall alone would be stronger in numbers and certainly equally well armed, and if, on the appearance of Ben and his men, Harvey fled down river, the latter would be caught between the two rescuing boats and would be hopelessly outnumbered.

He thrust his tiller to starboard as the boat's nose shot out into the river. She swung to port, and for a few minutes righted and sailed slowly under the lee of the woods. Then, when she reached the clear stretch of grass of the Hall park, she heeled over again

and the water foamed about her bows. In the midst of the roar and glug-glug of the bow waves Ben heard the gallop of a horse over grass. He cursed. As he sat his eyes were below the river bank. "Stand up," he ordered young Bob, "and tell me who it is riding."

Young Bob got to his feet, steadying himself with the mast. "That's the furriner," he said. "She's a-gallopin' down river, and young Bill arter her. Lord, how she rides ! straddle and all !"

"Confound it," muttered Ben. "She may warn them before we can come near enough to exchange shots."

Then he wondered how on earth the girl could know that the boat was coming up river. He did not know that almost every night Jonquil had stolen downstairs and colloqued with Blackberry, that it was she who had insisted that the kidnapping of Marshmallow should be no longer delayed, and that she had promised a share of her booty to the two Frenchmen who had brought off the kidnapping. She had not known that the kidnapping was already planned by Harvey with Roger Hansell's gang, but she was well aware that the two Frenchmen were associates of the gang, and had had many discreditable affairs with them. For the Hansell keel boat was the head-quarters of the most dangerous smuggling association on Tenchby Island, and Alphonse and his mate had helped to supply many and many a cargo to old Roger.

If, she thought, she could reach the smugglers' stolen boat and fling them their share of the booty before Ben appeared on the scene the two Frenchmen and Harvey might get away to the keel boat after all, and once there it would be indeed hard to save Marsh-mallow, or to catch the two villainous Frenchmen.

She had hurried to her hiding-place, pocketed what she considered a sufficiency of the jewels without being disturbed by her hostess or any of the servants, had then rushed outdoors and intercepted Bill on his way back to the stables. For a coaxing word Bill had permitted her to mount Calder, and no sooner was she on his back than she flung her leg across the saddle reckless of impropriety, and headed off across the park at full gallop in the direction which she thought would lead her quickest to the smugglers. Bill, with an oath, had sprung upon another horse and followed her, leaving the spare steeds to find their way back to their stalls by themselves. But Bill's mount was no match for Calder, and at every stride Ben's fastest horse drew farther away from the pursuing stable-boy.

Fifty yards ahead of the spot from which young Bob had seen Jonquil racing towards the river, the reach bent almost at right angles towards the Hall. Jonquil had everything in her favour, and when Ben, who was foaming with impatience, swung round to a

close-hauled reach, he saw the boat he sought making for the bank, with Jonquil not fifty yards distant.

The sight of Marshmallow sitting bound and gagged in the stern of the boat scarce a hundred yards ahead, tantalizingly out of shot, infuriated him. He brought his boat to shore with a swoosh, shouted to Tim and young Bob to shove her off and keep on their way, and ran at the top of his speed along the bank, feeling for the caps upon his double-barrel twelve bore as he ran. If needs must he would not hesitate to shoot every man in the enemy's boat in order to save Marshmallow. As for Jonquil—well, she should account for herself or rue the day.

Ben's fleetness of foot was famous throughout all East Daneshire. He was not twenty yards from Jonquil when the latter checked her mount on the edge of the bank, and prepared to hand a package to one of the Frenchmen who stood up to receive it. Even then, had the Frenchmen trusted their associate, Ben might have had to run the risk of firing, or of continuing the pursuit till the whale boat stopped the chase down river.

But the Frenchmen would not leave the bank till they had seen what Jonquil had given them, and the stolen boat was still by the bankside when Ben reached it.

“Down with your sail,” he shouted to Harvey, “and surrender.”

He saw the start of delight which Marshmallow gave at the sound of his voice, for not only her mouth but her eyes had been covered during the sail up the reach along the park.

“Will you have it done now, or wait a bit?” asked Harvey sneeringly. His right hand was busy with something beneath the rug upon his knees. Jonquil saw what it was first, and with a scream she sprang from her horse to ground. Just as the treacherous Harvey discharged the pistol he held at Ben, Jonquil flung herself in front of the man she loved and received the full charge full in her side. “*C'est fini*,” she moaned, as she fell into Ben’s arms.

Before Harvey or the smugglers had recovered from the shock the Hall boat was alongside them. But Harvey was already finished, and his fate decided. The rougher-looking Frenchman, when he saw Jonquil fall back mortally wounded, had raised a loaded bludgeon which lay beside him, and brought it down with a sickening crash on the dandy’s skull. It needed no second look to tell that the man died so suddenly that he could scarcely have felt the blow that killed him.

Still holding Jonquil in his arms, his heart sick with the certainty that she had sacrificed her life to save his, Ben nevertheless retained presence of mind and

a memory of his true love to bid his men release Marshmallow as soon as they had made the Frenchmen safe.

But the latter proved no easy task. At Harvey's death both the dark-faced men sprang to shore, and with only Bill to oppose them, had seized upon the two horses, mounted them, and gone galloping off to the south-east towards the nearest exit from the park.

"*Oh, laissez aller,*" moaned Jonquil. "You veel suffer no more. For my sake, for me, *laissez se sauver.*"

By this time Marshmallow was ashore, and had bent as though to take the wounded girl from Ben's arms.

"*Non, non,*" pleaded Jonquil, "not for vezzy long."

Ben's eyes devoured Marshmallow. "Can you forgive me?" he murmured.

"Hush," whispered Mallie, in reply, "Don't you see the poor girl really loves you. Oh, don't hurt her now, dear." She said the endearing word so faintly that it was inaudible to Jonquil.

Ben was distraught. He longed to take Mallie in his arms, but he felt that he owed it to the girl who had saved his life to treat her with all tenderness while she lived. It seemed to matter little what deceptions she had practised upon him. She had atoned for all.

"Let them go," he said, referring to the Frenchmen,

“Get that sheep hurdle here, take the rugs and cushions out of the boats, and you, Tim, run home as quickly as you can and ride to fetch Dr. Grimmer.”

Jonquil, who had closed her eyes in a sort of ecstasy of content, as she lay in the arms of the man she had come to cheat and stayed to adore, again looked up. There was a faint smile. “’E can do me no ’arm now,” she sighed. “Ah!” and she nestled in the great arms which supported her. “*Que c’est bon, que je suis bien comme ça.*”

She seemed partially comatose when Ben and Tom Brown lifted her to the cushioned hurdle.

Marshmallow was crying without any attempt at concealment when they reached the Hall with their melancholy burden. And Ben tasted salt in his gorge and felt his eyelids burn at the backs of them.

Mrs. Ryvett confronted them in the hall. Her mouth opened as her eyes spat venom at Marshmallow. But Ben said imperatively, “Be quiet, mother. There may be a chance. God grant there is. If she dies, she gave her life for me and for Mallie.”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE EXPLANATION AND END

JONQUIL lived nearly three days. Perhaps had Pasteur and Lister preceded her, her life might have been saved. But it is doubtful, for she showed no desire to survive.

During the hours of her consciousness, little by little she told her story, and as the meaning of it dawned upon her hearers their wonder was tempered with gratitude to Him Whom Sara Amis depended upon as her Master.

Briefly Jonquil's narrative was to the following effect.

Just before the Peace of Amiens her father had collected all the splendid jewels of his own family, and those belonging to several other Picardy nobles, and endeavoured to dispose of them for cash. In some way, of which Jonquil knew nothing, probably through the smugglers who were constantly bringing the French and English shores into communication, the Sieur d'Hardelot and Comte de Boulogne entered into negotiations with Ben Ryvett's father. This stout Daneshire squire was the close friend of Dick Wednesloe of Smeeby, Marshmallow's father, and the

two country gentlemen put their heads together and came to the conclusion that by mortgaging their estates to every penny they would bear, it would be possible for them to offer a price which would satisfy the French nobleman and at the same time procure a magnificent bargain for themselves.

The money was raised, and on the declaration of peace the Comte de Boulogne came across on a fishing lugger from Hardelot and was set ashore not far from the spot where Ben found his daughter.

As it happened both Ryvett and Wednesloe were compelled to be in London at the time, but they had left directions that the money was to be paid by an Odinton lawyer to the Comte in exchange for the jewels.

In what way this was effected will never be known. But it seems certain that the Comte was forced to fly suddenly on the breach of the Peace. The Comte seems to have received his money, and it is unlikely that even a country lawyer would have paid this over without obtaining the jewels in exchange. There is evidence to suggest that the transaction was completed at Cootby Hall. At all events the Comte or the lawyer hid the satchel containing the jewels, and a receipt in the names of Ryvett and Wednesloe for respective amounts which are immaterial, in a secret recess in the walls of the corridor of the old Hall of which, it is to be

presumed, the lawyer was intended to advise his client. The lawyer, one Jonathan Foster, a man of known ability and uprightness, died of a heart attack on his way home from Cootby, and he left no record behind him of the transaction he had just completed. No doubt he intended to make full notes when he got back to his office. To make matters safer the Comte hid the record of the hiding-place in the air-tight steel box which had been found in the fathomless pit attached to the root of a tree with a strong copper wire.

That his relations, during the week or fortnight he was at Trenchby Island, with Judith Banham's mother were of the most intimate nature seems certain. He had given her the silver casket in which the black witch offered her charmed sweetmeats to Jonquil.

The Comte died without guessing that neither Ryvett nor Wednesloe had ever found a single stone of the wealth of jewels for which they had paid and for which they had encumbered their fine properties.

Some months before Jonquil's appearance on the denes a French smuggler, associated with Roger Hansell's ruffianly gang, had made inquiries of Blackberry, and the two became satisfied that the jewels were still hidden in some secret place. The French smuggler was one of the bad characters with whom Jonquil, after the manner of the women of her race, had business relations, and he thought it probable that the

girl might be able to find some record left by her father suggesting where the jewels were hidden.

Jonquil succeeded in finding a reference which went to prove that search in the fathomless pit (indicated in a rough plan) would provide the key to the riddle.

For centuries the ladies of Hardelot had borne the name of trafficking in black magic, just as had Judith Banham's forebears. It would almost seem that there must have been some fatal attraction in witches which attracted the Comte de Boulogne. At all events after his wife's death he seems to have been in love with Judith's mother, who returned his love, during the short period of his stay in England.

Jonquil planned to cross and find the jewels. She knew that they were hidden at Cootby Hall; she knew that the place where they were hidden was indicated in a steel casket sunk in the fathomless pit. It would obviously be necessary for her to get into the Hall as a guest if she desired to lay her hands on the treasure secretly.

She arranged to cross in the smugglers' lugger. The lugger made a good passage, crept inside the sandbanks, and lowered her ship's boat in the smooth water of the little bay into which the Fleet dyke ran. It was a fact that the habits of Ben had been studied, and the French adventurers were looking out for him on that morning after the blizzard, the morning of their landing.

They had not landed till the snow was almost over and the wind had died. By means of a spy-glass Ben's approach had been seen, and the stage was set in the manner with which we are acquainted.

That the fathomless pit was really haunted was never credited by the Comte or the smugglers. Whether it was or not, there can be no doubt that when the Frenchmen paid their nocturnal visit to the pit to get the steel casket they received a terrible fright from something. They had made their quarters with Blackberry, and returned to her after they had been despoiled of their find by their fright and old Bob Clare. It was Blackberry who advised them to steal the horses for future use lest they should be needed for a hurried escape; it was Blackberry who told them to shift the ship's boat to the river so that Roger Hansell's gang could keep it, and to steal the new lugsail dinghy from the Hall river boathouse, because if any river work were necessary the ship's boat would be too clumsy. When Blackberry made her rhymed prophecy to Ben she knew that he would probably find Jonquil on the denes, for she had been advised of the arrival of the lugger. Blackberry stole the casket from old Bob when he was asleep, and went to the Hall with the intention of keeping an arranged appointment with Jonquil. It had been easy enough for Jonquil to indicate by means of her candle in which room

she lay, and her assumption of weakness was to make her host and hostess believe that it was impossible for her to prowl about the house by herself.

But for the love which had sprung up in Jonquil's heart for Ben the scheme might have won through. Hansell's gang were in the secret only to the extent that their aid might be required by their friends the smugglers.

Jonquil's love and Harvey's passion and spite upset everything. Still, but for old Sara there was every chance that Marshmallow would have been spirited away. In that event, and had Jonquil retained her hold over Ben, she would have been happy in his love. For she was confident that when once Marshmallow was removed she would be able to keep Ben Ryvett's love by her own charms and the sincerity of her devotion to him.

That Jonquil was a hypnotist is, I think, beyond doubt. Whether she or Blackberry possessed any supernatural powers is quite another matter. That the villagers believed Blackberry to be skilled in black witchcraft is a certainty. But nowadays a witch is as incredible as a Dodo's nest, except in marshland.

The smugglers made their escape with the share of the jewels Jonquil had handed them. Ben made no determined effort to hunt them down. And Marshmallow was too happy to cause trouble to any one.

With the Frenchmen went Blackberry. The evidence goes to show that she had taken refuge on Roger Hansell's keel boat after old Sara had freed the otter and left the rat a prey to the former. But the hare disappeared, and it may be went with his mistress to France.

There was, of course, a hue and cry after the murderer of Harvey. But it was not pushed. The fact that Harvey had killed Jonquil in his attempt to shoot Ben made his memory too unsavoury for any one to consider that he had suffered wrong. And, like most men of his kind, he had many enemies, but few real friends.

On the fourth day after she had been stricken down Jonquil sank into the unconsciousness that precedes death. Just before she lost her senses her hand felt for Ben's.

"You are good," she whispered in scarcely audible tones. "I do not trouble myself now. It goes well. You weel be reech. And I've made you reech. Kiss me, M'sieur."

And, with a gulp in his throat, Ben bent and kissed her.

She sank immediately into coma, and three hours later passed away quite peacefully.

There is one curious incident to recall. Dr. Grimmer was in the room of death when old Sara, by her own

request, performed the sad duties necessary for the poor body.

As Sara arranged the hair the doctor stooped and raised the death gown. He started. "Why!" he cried, "this is not the same woman I attended before. I'll swear it is not."

"What's wrong now, darctor," said Sara, who held the little man in immense contempt. "What flea's in the bad now?"

"She had a mark, a large mole on her chest, there," said the doctor, pointing to a place where the skin shone fair and white as that of a child.

"Lord save us, and you pretend to be a scholar!" snorted Sara. "How should the Black Man's mark stay on her pore body arter she had given her life for another? Why, ye fule, doan't ye know that by her sacrifice she escaped him? Don't ye know that by givin' her life for another she ha' diddled him out of his bargain. And God bless her, I say, for she had good in her, good as saved her at the eend."

Let that be her epitaph.

Mrs. Ryvett's foolish spite against Mallie could not endure in the face of the discovery that now the houses of Cootby and Smeeby were almost equally wealthy. The junction of the estates has made Ben and Mallie the wealthiest people on Tenchby Island. Soon there was not a charge on the properties, and there was more than

an adequate superfluity to enable the happy young people to assist their labourers and smaller tenants from their full purses.

"Jinny," said Tim O'Shea, one night after the marriage, "the young mather and mistress do my heart good to look at, for all they make my mouth wather. The lodge is wearyin' for some one to live in ut, and the mather say as I may have it if I find a colleen wise enough to be my wife. Will ye be the wise colleen? Here, ask the wise dog. He'll tell ye."

Old Nelson, sweeter tempered, wiser, and happier than ever in his devotion to his master and mistress, and his kindly patronage of the latter, came smiling up and rubbed his barrelling sides against the groom's leg.

"Ask him, mavourneen," said Tim. "Ask him. He'll give ye good advice, for 'tis the wise dog he is."

Jane laughed. She needed no advice from Nelson, and she was almost as fond of Nelson as was Tim. "Well, boy," she said, "tell me. Shall I do well to go to church with this rogue?"

"Shure," protested Tim, "'tis a wise dog, but phwhat should he know of church. Ask him if ye would do well to be my wife. He'll understand that."

"How ridickerlous you be, Tim," laughed Jane. "Nelson, would you advise me to take this man for my man?"

The wise dog looked from the maid to the groom and from the groom to the maid and then again at the groom. Tim showed him surreptitiously a titbit of liver he had kept for the moment.

"Woof!" cried Nelson joyfully, placing his great paws on Tim's knees and slobbering over his cheeks.

"Well, I never," cried Jane. "There, do ha' cone, Tim bor. Here come Ellen."

Old Sara refused to leave her hovel. "I've my raysons," she said to Ben and Mallie, "and I'm as played as played to see yew tew come together arter all. What did I tell ye, bor? Didn't I tell ye that funny ole mornin' time as you should—

"Heart up! What matters the Black Man's curse,
When troubles be gone and the clouds disperse
In the radiant sun of the loved one's smile."

Mrs. Ryvett accepted the situation. But naturally the Hall was no longer a desirable residence for her. She arranged to live with Mallie's old maiden aunt Sabina at Smeeby, and the two old ladies squabbled and abused each other with intense enjoyment. They had one common complaint. They could not get a servant to stay in the house, and even the gardener and coachman had to be changed six times a year until the old maid Sabina suggested that the men folk should be entirely left to Ben, and that provided the carriage and horses were ready when needed, and the coachman

drove skilfully and according to directions, while the gardener kept the house supplied with vegetables and flowers in their seasons, no word of complaint should be made to either of them by either of the two old dames.

There is one more point upon which I am reluctant to touch.

And that is the question of the haunted plantation and the worm of the mash. I have already suggested that if there be such things as elementals the worm of the mash may belong to them. On the other hand in a land of misty atmosphere and of blind superstition the whole thing may be sheer imagination.

The ghastly body that was found was whispered to be that of one of Roger Hansell's gang who had been discovered in some act of treachery and been bled to death in accordance with the pleasing regulations of that society of scoundrels. So there is no reason to associate its discovery with the traditional or fabulous worm.

Nevertheless, on the dam close by, the "striped ole thing" will be reported from time to time until the continual draining of the levels may lift the shadow of superstition from the pit itself, and it is found to be merely a deep pool of water, fed by a "running dyke."

The race of Ryvett has died out. The Halls of Cootby, and Smeeby are mere dilapidated farmhouses,

The Fleet dyke has silted up. The Cootby and Smeeby Broads themselves are too shallow to bear a sailing boat and are overgrown with reeds and bulrushes. The river on which the chase took place is now but a trickle of water.

But still in the villages on the borders of the marshland, which continues to be the finest grazing land in England, counter-parts of both Sara and Blackberry may be found, and the faith in their weird powers is as lively as ever if not quite so general.

Less than ten years ago a substantial publican, a guardian of the poor, a man well thought of in the district, asked me if I thought "anybardy had put anything onto his brother" who had been smitten by paralysis. And it was hard to dissuade him from his belief that a certain old woman had bewitched the poor fellow.

As I have said before, what with hypnotism, suggestion, and a hereditary skill with herbs and fats, witchcraft, to give it its old-time dishonoured name, is so nearly simulated that it is more modest to withhold a curt denial of the possibility of its existence. After all, if there were nothing beyond what we can see, feel, taste, hear and smell we should be poor creatures.

And there is always the witch's heart.

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