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A SON OF RENOWN
By Oswald Wildridge

The Story of a Rich Prodigal



STRANGERS idling through the dale wondered greatly as to who David Branthwaite might be when they chanced to meet him, for he was one of the men who could not be

overlooked. Many were the mistakes the wayfarers made in their efforts to classify him, but, so far as is known, not one of them ever imagined him to be the doctor. If luck was theirs, and the fact was revealed to them by a native, they left the hill-country bearing some strange stories which were apt to make the men of the towns think better of the heart of humanity. They were also given the desire for a word with David Branthwaite and a shake of the hand.

It must be confessed that in many matters of address and conduct the doctor fell short of the standard set up by the profession. We never saw him arrayed in black, save for a burying; his preference in material ran to a serviceable heather-mixture, in cut, the shooting costume met his fancy best; when he made his rounds he drove a horse shaggy as any of the mountain ponies, and we never met him without his dog, the most touzled otter-hound in the country side. It is also on record that when he attended the quality at Dalefoot he addressed them as "Mr." and "Mrs.," and dealt with them in the tongue of the faculty; but among his own people he had a strong liking for the dialect, and probably the happiest hours he knew were those spent by the glowing fire of a farmhouse kitchen when storm and darkness trapped him on the hills. In this way he learned many secrets, was given a glimpse of many skeletons usually hidden behind well-locked cupboard doors, and because he was a strong man and likeable he became a helper in a multitude of cases for whose treatment the lancet and the medicine bottle had no application.

Conversation on these occasions ran in grooves. Andrew Matterson had a taste for politics, and an hour with the doctor and the master of Nephghyll we counted a better thing than a night in the House of Commons; at Sampson Lowther's we had theology that would have greatly astonished the bench of bishops; but up at Grayrigg the talk ever turned on the adventures of Robert Steele, the lad who acquired the secret of money making so completely that while he was still young he had become a man of power.

One day, when Robert was beginning to make a name for himself, David drove five miles out of his way so that he might carry a newspaper to the sheep farm on the shoulder of the Great Howe; afterwards, as soon as they saw him mounting the brow, Jacob and Margaret knew that the doctor had news of their boy for them, and those were never-to-be-forgotten moments for the doctor when he read how "the chair was taken by Mr. Robert Steele," or how "Mr. Robert Steele proposed the adoption of the balance sheet," though the greatest event of all was when he revealed to the old folks the fact that their own son had actually "addressed the Chancellor of the Exchequer on behalf of the deputation."

It was shortly after this that certain suspicions arose in the doctor's mind concerning Robert Steele, and the day after the sheep farmer and his wife completed the greatest exploit

of their lives, a surprise visit to London, he dropped in for a "crack." As a man of observation he discovered at once that the adventure had ended in disaster.

Margaret was clearly ill, Jacob confessed to feeling a "laal bit tired," but the thing that troubled the doctor most of all was that new hardness of their features and their chilling lack of response. Both of the old folks had grown like the rocks that encircle the dale.

London, they explained, was such a wearying place, it lived so quickly and made so much noise; and their weariness was the mark that London had made. Margaret felt terribly sorry for the people who were compelled to earn their bread and butter there, and she was sure that a single day's work in London must be vastly harder than a whole week of sheep-tending in the dale.

Robert? Oh, yes, he was quite well! His house? It was a wonderful house; there were none like it in the dale except the castle at Dalefoot where his lordship lived. Yes, Robert had plenty of servants. Margaret had counted four, and she fancied there were others; and he had silverware that must be worth a fortune, and carpets as soft to the foot as the breast of Great Howe, and pictures that surely the greatest painter-men in the world must have painted. And that was all. They were both very tired, and they would never go to London again.

"And quite right, too," the doctor snapped; "you'd have been better employed if you'd gone to Tom Jenkinson's sale," and in a trice old Jacob and he were discussing the prices which Tom had obtained for his sheep and cattle, this being Branthwaite's way of giving a new turn to an undesirable conversation. He had little doubt as to what had befallen the old couple, and his suspicion became a certainty at the end of a month, when Margaret took to her bed, smitten by a malady for which medicine has no remedy. This was one of Branthwaite's hard cases; setting a bone or battling with a fever was child's play to treating a breaking heart.

"She's beating me herself," he declared, when the time for faithful dealing arrived, and Jacob, my man, I'm not going to hide the truth from you any longer. The mistress is failing, and I'm helpless. As long as a body wants to live, it's one half the battle, but Margaret's just letting her life go by." He laid his hand on the farmer's shoulder and looked him squarely in the face. "Jacob, I'm in the dark—she kens what it is that ails her, and you know it as well. I am not wanting you to tell me anything that belongs to yourselves alone; but as between man and man I'm making it plain to you that mebbe your wife's life is lying in your hands, and if you can name anything that'll rouse her it's her only chance."

They were out in the croft, standing by the doctor's shabby, time-worn gig, and this was Branthwaite's last word. He was never the man to beg for a confidence or to wait for one, but as he placed his foot on the step Jacob Steele laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Bide a minute, doctor," he said; "I'll tell you. You mustn't let her slip. I need her mair than ever. I canna face the loneliness without her. It's for the laddie she's grieving. He was all she lived for; but—he—he's slipped away; the thing that's known as pride has stolen him, and now she's a mother without