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JANUARY 17, 1907

THE FARMER'S ADVOCATE.

111

standing in the darkness like a body with the spirit fled, he could but contrast this dreary home of his with the bright kitchen and cheery faces he had left.

Entering the house, he groped to the kitchen door and opened it; then struck a match and stood in the doorway peering in.

"Not home, bairn't he?" he muttered, the tiny light above his head. "Wet inside as well as oot by noo, I'll lay. By gum! but 'twas a lucky thing for him I didna get ma hand on him this evenin'. I could ha' killed him." He held the match above his head.

Two yellow eyes, glowing in the darkness like cairngorms, and a small dim figure bunched up in a chair, told him his surmise was wrong. Many a time had he seen his father in such case before, and now he muttered contemptuously:

"Drunk; the leetle swab! Sleepin' it off, I reck'n."

Then he saw his mistake. The hand that hung above the floor twitched and was still again.

There was a clammy silence. A mouse, emboldened by the quiet, scuttled across the hearth. One mighty paw lightly moved; a lightning tap, and the tiny beast lay dead.

Again that hollow stillness: no sound, no movement; only those two unwinking eyes fixed on him immovable.

At length a small voice from the fire-side broke the quiet.

"Drunk—the leetle—swab!"

Again a clammy silence, and a life-long pause.

"I thowt yo' was sleepin'," said David, at length, lamely.

"Ay, so ye said. 'Sleepin' it aff'; I heard ye." Then, still in the same small voice, now quivering imperceptibly, "Wad ye obleege me, sir, by leetin' the lamp? Or, d'ye think Wullie, 'twad be soilin' his dainty fingers? They're mair used, I'm told, to danderin' wi' the bonnie brown hair o' his—"

"I'll not ha' ye talk o' ma Maggie so," interposed the boy passionately.

"His Maggie, mark ye, Wullie—his! I thocht 'twad soon get that far."

"Tak' care, dad! I'll stan' but little more," the boy warned him in choking voice; and began to trim the lamp with trembling fingers.

M'Adam forthwith addressed himself to Red Wull.

"I suppose no man iver had sic a son as him, Wullie. Ye ken what I've done for him, an' ye ken hoo he's repaid it. He's set himsel' agin me; he's misca'd me; he's robbed me o' me Cup; last of all, he struck me—struck me afore them a'. We've toiled for him, you and I, Wullie; we've slaved to keep him in hooose an' hame, an' he's passed his time, the while, in riotous leevin', carousin' at Kenmuir, amusin' himsel' wi' his—"

He broke off short. The lamp was lit, and the strip of paper, pinned on to the table, naked and glaring, caught his eye.

"What's this?" he muttered; and unloosed the nail that clamped it down.

This is what he read:

"Adam Mackadam yer warned to mak' an end to yer Red Wull will be best for him and the Sheep. This is the first yoll have two more the third will be the last—"

It was written in pencil, and the only signature was a dagger, rudely limned in red.

M'Adam read the paper once, twice, thrice. As he slowly assimilated its meaning, the blood faded from his face. He stared at it and still stared, with whitening face and pursed lips. Then he stole a glance at David's broad back.

"What d'ye ken o' this, David?" he asked, at length, in a dry thin voice, reaching forward in his chair.

"O' what?"

"O' this," holding up the slip. "And ye'd obleege me by the truth for once."

David turned, took up the paper, read it, and laughed harshly.

"It's coom to this, has it?" he said, still laughing, and yet with blanching face.

"Ye ken what it means. I daresay ye pit it there; aiblins writ it. Ye'll explain it." The little man spoke in the same small, even voice, and his eyes never moved off his son's face.

"It's plain as day. Ha' ye no heard?"

"I've heard naethin'. . . . I'd like the truth, David, if ye can tell it."

The boy smiled a forced, unnatural

smile, looking from his father to the paper in his hand.

"Yo' shall have it, but yo'll not like it. It's this: Tupper lost a sheep to the Killer last night."

"And what if he did?" The little man rose smoothly to his feet. Each noticed the other's face—dead-white.

"Why, he—lost—it—on— Wheer d'ye think?" He drawled the words out, dwelling almost lovingly on each.

"Where?"

"On—the—Red—Screes."

The crash was coming—inevitable now. David knew it, knew that nothing could avert it, and braced himself to meet it. The smile had fled from his face, and his breath fluttered in his throat like the wind before a thunder-storm.

"What of it?" The little man's voice was calm as a summer sea.

"Why, your Wullie—as I told yo'—was on the Screes last night."

"Go on, David."

"And this," holding up the paper, "tells you that they ken, as I ken noo, as maist o' them ha' kent this mony a day, that your Wullie, Red Wull—the Terror—"

"Go on."

"Is—"

"Yes."

"The Black Killer."

It was spoken.

The frayed string was snapped at last. The little man's hand flashed to the bottle that stood before him.

"Ye—liar!" he shrieked, and threw it with all his strength at the boy's head. David dodged and ducked, and the bottle hurtled over his shoulder.

Crash! it whizzed into the lamp behind, and broke on the wall beyond, its contents trickling down the wall to the floor.

For a moment, darkness. Then the spirits met the lamp's smouldering wick and blazed into flame.

By the sudden light David saw his father on the far side the table, pointing with crooked forefinger. By his side Red Wull was standing alert, hackles up, yellow fangs bared, eyes lurid; and, at his feet, the wee brown mouse lay still and lifeless.

"Oot o' ma hooose! Back to Kenmuir! Back to yer—" The unpardonable word, unmistakable, hovered for a second on his lips like some foul bubble, and never burst.

"No mither this time!" panted David, racing round the table.

"Wullie!"

The Terror leapt to the attack; but David overturned the table as he ran, the blunderbuss crashing to the floor; it fell, opposing a momentary barrier in the dog's path.

"Stan' off, ye—!" screamed the little man, seizing a chair in both hands; "stan' off, or I'll brain ye!"

But David was on him.

"Wullie, Wullie, to me!"

Again the Terror came with a roar like the sea. But David, with a mighty kick catching him full on the jaw, repelled the attack.

Then he gripped his father round the waist and lifted him from the ground. The little man, struggling in those iron arms, screamed, cursed, and battered at the face above him, kicking and biting in his frenzy.

"The Killer! wad ye ken wha's the Killer? Go and ask 'em at Kenmuir? Ask yer—"

David swayed slightly, crushing the body in his arms till it seemed every rib must break; then hurled it from him with all the might of passion. The little man fell with a crash and a groan.

The blaze in the corner flared, flickered, and died. There was hell-black darkness, and silence of the dead.

David stood against the wall, panting, every nerve tightstrung as the hawser of a straining ship.

In the corner lay the body of his father, limp and still; and in the room one other living thing was moving.

He clung close to the wall, pressing it with wet hands. The horror of it all, the darkness, the man in the corner, that moving something, petrified him.

"Feyther!" he whispered.

There was no reply. A chair creaked at an invisible touch. Something was creeping, stealing, crawling closer.

David was afraid.

"Feyther!" he whispered in hoarse agony, "are yo' hurt?"

The words were stifled in his throat. A

(Continued on next page.)

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