

THE SMUGGLERS

He touched his finger lightly to the spot and discovered the cause.

His lip, pricked by the gipsy's wooden needle, had recommenced to bleed.

In love! Emphatically no. Only all Galloway, including even the few scattered towns, scented of spring sweetness. Along every green bank was a riot of pale yellow, broom and gorse and primrose, dotted in the ditches with the deeper orange of buttercups. Higher up among the hills the fine first leaves quivered on the hazel. The larch trailed its sticky roses, and to the very tops of the hill the heather was sprouting green.

The birds? Yes, of course, the birds were behaving (or misbehaving) as they always do at this season of the year. A breath of folly, eye-brightening, heart-dancing folly, breathed over all the southlands from Nith to that wild North Water across which by night shines the steady ray of Donaghadee lighthouse, and in this amorous atmosphere Paul Wester lived, breathed, and for the first time had his being.

The twilight came, as it seemed, far too quickly. Naphtha flares were kindled down on the noisy Fairgreen. Paul, drawn irresistibly that way, saw his girl of the cave waving one merrily about her head. He turned bitterly on his heel and with an eye on the lighted room where his uncle was working edged silently round till he came abreast the stable, through the door of which he could hear the restless hoofs of Glenkens clicking against the sides of his stall as he fidgeted at his headrope.

Paul went in, and assuring himself that the little horse had eaten his oats and was now biting nervously at the wood of his stall, he undid the rope and led him by the mane into their only loose-box, the door of which had a key. This Paul secured, and put the key in his pocket. It was a simple lock and a poor protection enough, but somehow for the moment, the touch of the cold iron gave Paul confidence.

But as he stood there in the stillness of the dim