

Waiting for the Tide.

A Christmas Episode. By Lucy Hardy.



ALONE farm-house on the bleak Cornish seaboard would scarcely appear the most cheerful locale in which to spend Christmas, but I had elected to spend my last year's Yuletide there. I lighted upon Gradle Farm in the course of an autumn sketching expedition, and found my quarters so comfortable and the coast scenery in the neighborhood so attractive that I lingered on month after month, daily finding fresh subjects for my pencil, daily reluctant to say "good-bye" to my kindly, humble hostess. So December 24th, 1908, found me still a lodger at the farm. I had been there so long as to be considered "almost one of the family," as the kindly mistress of the house remarked, and to be invited on the cheerless winter evenings to forsake the dignified solitude of the little "parlor," especially consecrated to my use, and to join the household in the roomy, cosy old kitchen, where we sat beside the glowing hearth with its snug chimney-corner recesses, and roasted nuts and potatoes amid the embers, and listened to marvellous legends and ghost stories, of which Mrs. Tregarth possessed an inexhaustible store. The farm household consisted of this good dame, her son, a quiet young man about twenty-eight, who worked harder than any paid laborer on the farm, and a bonnie dark-eyed lassie, some fourteen years old, Jenny Wilson, Mrs. Tregarth's only grandchild. I had not long been at the farm before I heard the story of a domestic sorrow. Mrs. Tregarth's only daughter, a beautiful and spoiled girl, had run away from her home some fifteen years before with a young man of higher rank than her own, who was visiting the neighborhood on a vacation tour. Horace Wilson's flatteries had fairly turned the head of pretty, giddy Molly Tregarth, and she eloped with him on the very eve of her marriage with a steady, respectable young fisherman, who had been "queer" ever since, so the neighbors said, living a hermit's life in the neat cottage he had once furnished for his bride; and save to attend the services at the local Methodist chapel (where he himself occasionally "held forth" to the admiration of the listeners), eschewing the society of his kind.

"Poor Joel, 'a do feel for him," remarked Mrs. Tregarth; "he drops in here sometimes for an evening and sits and looks, and looks at our Jenny—as is her mother's very image—and then he'll just give a bitter sigh and walk out. The poor fellow seems so 'mazed like, that I often wonder if he don't take Jenny for her mother over again. Well, anyway, Joel has all his brains for his fishing work, and when he holds forth, which he do sometimes at the chapel, it's grand to hear him."

And, indeed, sauntering past the little "Zion" one Sunday evening, I had halted without to listen to the rough eloquence of the fisherman, whose tall figure was familiar to me as that of an occasional "dropper-in" at the farm; although since I had been a guest there his visits had been of the rarest, "for Joel he can't abide strangers," Mrs. Tregarth had explained; and remembering what havoc "a stranger" had once made of poor Joel's hopes, I accepted the explanation and bore with patience the scowls with which the fisherman surveyed me if he found me in the farmhouse kitchen.

About seven years after her daughter's luckless marriage, Mrs. Tregarth received the news that Molly was dead, leaving one child, a girl; and the selfish father was only too glad to rid himself of the charge of the little one by consigning her to the care of her humble kinsfolk. He readily sent the child to the Cornish farmhouse and then disappeared from the Tregarths' ken; and Mrs. Tregarth was thankful that he had gone so and thus enabled her to keep

her darling's child as her own. Little Jenny had grown up into a bonny, winsome maiden, adored by grandmother and uncle. The little girl and I were great friends, and I was almost as much grieved as were her own relatives when, about a fortnight before Christmas, Jenny was taken seriously ill—so ill as to cause grave anxiety. The child rallied again, but a relapse occurred upon Christmas Eve. Young Tregarth had gone to spend the evening with some neighbors at a distance, and when Mrs. Tregarth came to me in floods of tears to announce that "the little maid be took worse than ever," the invalid, her grandmother, a small serving maid, and myself were the only inmates of the house. My offer to go at once for the doctor was gratefully accepted by Mrs. Tregarth, so I hastily wrapped up and started on the three miles walk.

"Haden't you better go by the road-way, sir?" Mrs. Tregarth called after me.

"And add on nearly a mile to the way? No; on a bright, clear night like this the cliff path is safe enough," and I strode along, making for the path which skirted along the edge of the cliffs—a dangerous track, perhaps, on a snowy or misty night, but safe enough now, with the moonlight gleaming brightly upon the sea and shore, and lighting up the large white stones which were placed along the path at intervals to serve as guides to the traveller in less favorable weather. I hurried along, too anxious to reach my destination to pause to note the beauty of the quiet scene around, when I heard footsteps behind me. Thinking it might be a messenger from the farm, I turned my head and beheld Joel the fisherman.

"Good evening!" I said; but the man vouchsafed no reply to my remark, pulled his hat down further over his eyes, and strode along by me in gloomy silence.

"You will be sorry to hear that your little friend Jenny Wilson is worse this evening, and that I am on the road to fetch the doctor," I said, feeling the silence becoming oppressive.

The man did not answer for a moment, then suddenly turned and faced me with outstretched arms. "Have you yet repented of your sins?" he asked, fiercely.

It was an extraordinary question; but I remembered the man's reputation as a local preacher, and imagined that his mind was possibly still running upon some recent "revival" service. So I made some commonplace reply, and attempted to walk on; but Joel still barred the way.

"Have you yet repented, I ask you?" he said, in stern, hoarse tones; "because, if not, your time for it is short!"

A sudden thrill of terror seized me, as I recognized that I was alone, upon a solitary Cornish cliff, miles away from any human habitation, with a man who was palpably of unsound mind. I remembered Mrs. Tregarth had described Joel as "queer" at times; and now, as the man stood towering before me, a tall, powerful figure, with outspread arms and wild eyes, there was no question of his absolute insanity.

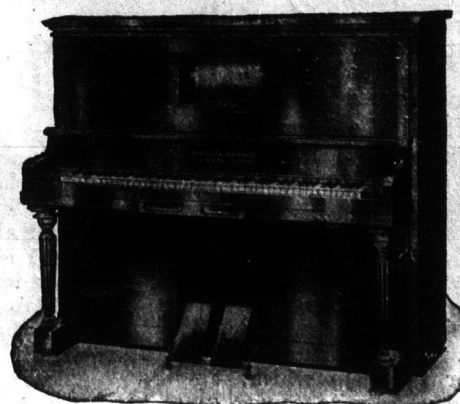
"You are delaying me on my journey for the doctor, and I am sure you would not wish to do that, for Jenny's sake," I said gently.

Joel burst into a hoarse, mocking laugh. "For Jenny's sake! Jenny as they call my Molly now! But I know her, and I know you, Horace Wilson, though you fancy I do not; you have come back here again to ruin my darling, body and soul, as you did once before."

"He takes me for his old rival," I thought, with a thrill of terror.

"See here!" went on the man, clutching my arm. "I have for years longed and prayed that you should be delivered into my hands, and my prayer is granted to-night. Look!" and he pointed to the surging billows below; "in another moment or two you will be lying beneath those waves!"

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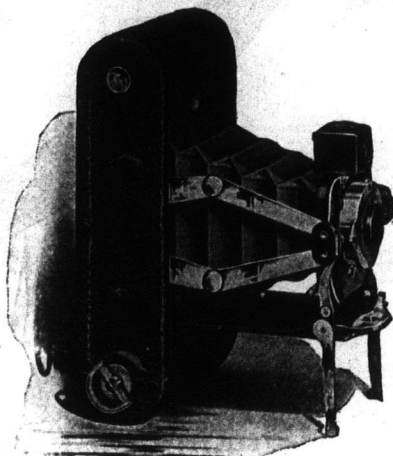
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