The Night at the Inn

BY

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The Widow Gregg had put by a tidy bit, and there was no one to succeed to it but her only daughter Lucinda. Also there was The Traveller's Friend inn, known through all the dales as a place of honest comfort for man and beast, and stocked from top to bottom with the best of household gear. There was a deal of value in The Traveller's Friend what with old silver and old furniture and wines and spirits in the cellar that no man knew the age of, to say nothing of the widow's stock of jewellery, which included many old things such as watches of the turnip-shaped variety, more curious than beautiful, but with a good deal of gold to their making. Also the widow was suspected of keeping a good deal of money in the house.

The Traveller's Friend stood up alone where the road forks, one road going to Blacklaws, the other to Allendale. It was quite a landmark for a long distance, since no other building was near it. In spring and summer and autumn it had plenty of customers, though even then it was lonely when the customers had gone home and the inn was shut up for the night. No one slept on the premises but Mrs. Gregg and Lucinda. Job Hall, the old ostler, slept in a loft above the stables; but Job was very old, though he would not acknowledge himself past his work. Practically the only protection the two women had at night was Blucher, the old lolloping sheep dog, who roamed about the yard at night and lay in the bar all day, being on friendly terms with the customers. But the dales folk were honest. Mrs. Gregg, who was an intrepid little woman, scouted any thought of danger. She could not bear the idea of giving up the inn, though she talked of doing it and moving into Wharfe, the town which was about a mile and a half away, situated in one of the vales.

There was a certain trouble between Lucinda and her mother. Over beyond Wharfe lay Walter Hardy's farm. Hardys had farmed Sheepcotes for many a year, but of late years there had not been much luck in it. James Hardy had died in debt, and Walter Hardy had saddled himself with the task of clearing his father's name. Every debt was paid in full, or, as he said proudly, he would not have lifted his eyes to Lucinda Gregg but the paying had left him a poor man, with the world to begin on his own account.

He was such a fine, handsome, strapping fellow, besides being so well spoken of by all for his honesty, that it was a wonder Mrs. Gregg could have been so hard to him. Doubtless it was natural jealousy, for Lucinda had been everything to her since her father died, when she was only a wee thing; or perhaps, they had offended her, she being a masterful little woman, by falling in love without her consent. Anyhow, she ignored the attachment between Lucinda and Walter Hardy after the first curt refusal to listen to the young man. She averted her eyes from the little pearl ring which Lucinda wore on her wedding finger. Each was hurt and sore with the other. Loving each other so well they were more cruel from the sense of injury than if there had been no love between them.

Walter Hardy was one of those who had power to make Lucinda a little bit nervous in the isolation of The Traveller's Friend. "I shall never be happy, Lucy," he said, "unless I have my girl safe at Sheepcotes. There is a room for the mother, too, when she is round. Am I to blame her for wishing her Lucy to a stranger? She'll come round, my girl, she'll come round in time; and Sheepcotes'll be a heaven for you and me."

Lucinda loved him the more fondly for his quarrel with her mother. He had never a word of condemnation for the woman who stood the side of the road he was on; he said things of him in her anger Lucinda did not believe. He could afford to forgive her when she called him a liar. Why, there were half a dozen men in Wharfe, to say nothing of the dales, as rich as Lucinda Gregg who would have been willing to marry him. When her letters were brought to him of Mrs. Gregg's doings he only smiled, and prophesied that she would change her mind before long; that the attitude of his took the sting out of the tale-makers' tale-bearing and made nothing to themselves.

The Traveller's Friend was a very lonely place in winter, especially when there was snow, as was bound to happen every year, long or short periods. When the dales were all under snow and hardly a foot could pass the road from morning to evening, when the moon shone over the white expanse there was not a bit of life on it and the inn sign creaking on its post that had once been the ghastly gibbet there was plenty to frighten a girl.

But it was cheerful enough when the doors had been closed for the night, all the shutters shut and a roaring fire on the hearth, and the best of good cheer on the table. But the cloud between mother and daughter spoilt the sense of comfort Lucinda had known from childhood. Lucinda and her mother were shut in together. One thing was certain. She would not leave her mother alone. Better estrangement than open defiance of one who had been kind to her so tenderly since childhood. Even Sheepcotes Farm would not be the heaven Walter talked of if the mother were left cold and hurt and angry. She would come round, surely she would come round in time if they were good and dutiful, she said to herself, cheering her heart with her lover's name. If she had only known it she had the courage to fling her arms round her mother's neck and so gain what she wanted. Mrs. Gregg was sick of the estrangement, ashamed at times of her own unreasonableness and injustice. Only she did not know how to surmount the barrier which had grown up between them. She was obstinate and proud; and she waited for Lucy to begin.

That winter the dales were deep in snow nearly all the month of January, and hardly anyone came near The Traveller's Friend. After a time even Mrs. Gregg moped a little. She was so accustomed to provide meals for travellers and sound, honest drink as well. Now a piece of beef in the larder lasted a week. There was no call to be planning and cooking as she had been used to do all her years at The Traveller's Friend. Time hung a bit heavy on her hands. She set the maids to cleaning the house from top to bottom. When it was all done—when every bit of silver shone white, when every bit of glass twinkled and all the brasses winked, when you could have eaten your dinner off the floor of any room in the house, as the saying is—she began to twiddle her thumbs and feel how hard idleness was.

It was just that morning, with more snow coming, that Margery Dill, one of the two maids of the inn, came shouting in a great excitement that a big motor-car was ploughing its way up the road to the inn. All of a sudden the inn was in a commotion. Mrs. Gregg awaited the travellers, smiling on the threshold, when their motor stopped at the inn door. Behind her there was a pleasant glimpse of a roaring wood fire and the shining of all the brass and pewter pots, with the polished brown surface of a great cask that held old Burton looking most invitingly over her shoulder.

The travellers came in stamping and blowing, more like bears than men. They were famished with cold and starving. They had never been so pleased in their lives as when they spied The Traveller's Friend standing up against the sky, its chimneys smoking.

Mrs. Gregg had often entertained gentlefolk at The Traveller's Friend. Before they were out of their bearskins and goggles she said to herself that here were no gentlefolk, but more likely their servants. And a hideous pair at that.

Out of their disfiguring attire they revealed themselves as no better. Indeed, a worse-looking pair could not well be imagined. One fellow was tall and broad, with a bloated red face and a wicked eye, which rested on the women-folk unpleasantly—or so Lucinda thought. The other was short and pale, with a thick nose and a muddy, unwholesome colour. To add to his ill-looks he squinted abominably.

However, if they were not gentlefolk they ordered like gentlefolk. They would have the best the house afforded. While Margery and Ellen Dill killed a couple of chickens and Mrs. Gregg got out the home-cured bacon, and went down to the cellar for a bottle of old port, the two men, after thawing at the fire, suggested that they would like to see the bedrooms of the inn, with a view of making a stay there on their way back from a house which they said they were going to visit. It was a big house in the next county, not so far away that Lucinda had not heard of it. She thought to herself that his lordship was not particular about the quality of his guests if they were, indeed, on their way to Longmere.

She did not like being of their company for even those few minutes during which they went from room to room of the bedrooms. They were on for talking with her, especially the red-faced one, but she gave them scant encouragement.

With one room, which was called the Blue Room, they expressed themselves as being highly pleased. Well they might be, Lucinda thought with a curl of her lip, seeing how many fine folk had been pleased to sleep there. It was a long, low room, with a four-poster bed curtained in a blue and silver damask and three windows overlooking a fine stretch of moorland. Outside the road ran only a little less white than the snowy expanse of country. The room was furnished handsomely in old mahogany. There was a huge grate; when a fire was lit in it and the blue and silver curtains were drawn across the windows it was a room the King himself might not have disdained to sleep in.

The pair expressed themselves highly pleased with all they saw. They at once engaged the Blue Room from that very night, as they might be stopped by snow on their journey and have to return. In any case, they might be looked for in four or five days' time. The Blue Room was for the bigger of the two, whom his comrade called Jack. The little room at the side of it, with the white and green chintz hangings, had taken the fancy of the other who bespoke it.

Mrs. Gregg liked the pair no better than her daughter, but would not confess as much even to herself. Indeed, when the bigger one pulled out a Bank of England note and paid in advance for the two rooms as well as for their entertainment, she felt obliged to believe that they were gentlemen, in some of their ways at all events.

The back of the motor was loaded up with several articles of luggage, chief among them a very large, long trunk. Almost at the last moment the big motorist, after a discussion with his companion, decided to leave this as well as some other things behind so as to make the car as light as possible.

They rejected help from any of the women with great gallantry, and carried the trunk upstairs themselves, having something of a struggle with it because of its weight on the steep staircase, which, fortunately, was no great height. With some of the lighter luggage heaped about it it was left in the middle of the Blue Room. Mrs. Gregg, who was very particular about such matters, saw for herself that it was locked. She did not want her servants to have temptation put in their way.

The dusk had fallen before the travellers left the inn. Soon after they had gone Margery and Ellen Dill put on their stout men's boots and tramped off to their home in the village. Job, whose rheumatism was worse than usual in this bitter weather, had his tea, and having fed the horses for the night shuffled off to his bed above the stables.

With nightfall an intense quietness seemed to settle over the inn and the surrounding country. The sense of loneliness and stillness seemed to intensify as the evening wore on. Even the horses did not stamp their feet and rattle their chains in the stable as they usually did. A bleak wind had sprung up which increased the cold and made the signpost outside rattle and creak as though it carried one of its old burdens.

Mrs. Gregg was busy over her accounts and the writing of some business letters. She kept all her affairs in her own hands, and had never allowed Lucinda to know much about them. The girl knew vaguely that her mother kept a good deal of money in the house. She was no great lover of banks, and invested all her money in Consols, travelling, perhaps, once a year to York to arrange for their purchase—between-whiles being her own banker.

Lucinda read a book, without much enjoyment. There was certain needlework she was engaged on over which she smiled and dreamt, but not in her mother's sight, although the mother more than suspected the growth of that pretty snow-white, be-ribboned trousseau.

It might have been about eight o'clock that the girl remembered old Blucher. Poor old chap, he had made unfriendly demonstrations against the motorists earlier in the day and had been chained up. They had forgotten to set him free again.

She was so oppressed by the loneliness that she felt Blucher's company would be a comfort. Without speaking to her mother she slipped across the yard, leaving the kitchen door ajar, to the dog's kennel. He did not come out to greet her as usual.

With a vague alarm she stooped down and felt for the dog. He was there, asleep. She shook him, and had a sudden sense of his rigidity and the odd stiffness of the hair. With a little cry she fled back to the house.

She was so absorbed in the discovery she had made that she hardly noticed something like a dim light that showed between the drawn curtains of the Blue Room. Later on, when she had time to think of it, she said to herself that it was the moon—of course it was the moon. It was shining straight on to the window.

With the shock of the dumb friend's death upon her she flung herself into her mother's arms. While she sobbed out her story the mother's hand moved caressingly over the silken hair, as often it had done before. The frost was melted between them. With their arms about each other they went out to the kennel again, carrying a lantern. Yes, poor Blucher was dead and already stiff. He must have been dead some hours.

Poor old Blucher! Well, he was very old and the cold was intense. They blamed themselves for having forgotten to bring him into the house. Mother and daughter cried together for the friend's loss; but after a few tears Mrs. Gregg resolutely brightened up.

"If you'd only come to me before and flung your two arms about my neck, Lucy, it might happen I wouldn't have been so hard to you because of Walter Hardy. All the world praises the lad. I won't stand out against you and him any more. I'll sell the inn and come and live in Wharfe, where I'll be near you and see you as often as you want me to."

Lucinda hugged her rapturously.

"As though we would let you go to Wharfe! Why, we've talked it all over; we knew you'd come round. Walter always said you would. We've fixed on your room even. It looks out on the sunniest corner, where the beehives stand in a row by the mignonette beds. Mother, do you think it would be happy without you?"

After all it was a lovely evening, with the blessedness of reconciliation upon them. Only now and again Lucinda remembered the poor stark frozen friend in the kennel and her tears began to flow; but not for long. To-morrow Walter was to be sent for. She was at liberty to bring out the hidden trousseau, to work upon it, to display to her mother's eyes those feats of fine sewing.

The evening passed so happily that they forgot to be afraid. About eleven o'clock they took their candles and went upstairs; but Lucy stayed so long in her mother's room, talking while she brushed out her long chestnut hair by the fire, that it was midnight before the last good-night was said.

Her room was at the extreme end of the corridor. As she hurried along, shivering at the cold of the night, she was pulled up suddenly at the door of the Blue Room. She had heard a sound like the click of a lock—or fancied she had. At the same moment she remembered the light she had imagined between the curtains.

She opened the door softly and peeped in. The full moon was on the three windows now. Where it pierced between the curtains it lay in three broad shining shafts on the floor.

One shaft crossed the big trunk the motorists had left in the middle of the room. Was it possible she smelt tobacco? She stared at the trunk fascinated. Then she saw the lid begin to lift.

She never knew why she did it. She might have gone outside and turned the key in the lock, which would not have been much defence, for the locks were old and easily broken. What she did was to launch herself at the trunk and spring upon it. She felt the lid go down with a sharp click. Then she screamed wildly. She was so busy screaming that she heard nothing, although she felt the trunk-lid lifted against her weight. The door opened and Mrs. Gregg came flying in. She asked no questions—indeed, it would have been of no use, for Lucinda was incapable of answering any. Instead of wasting her breath she sat down her candle and came and joined Lucinda on the trunk.

Now, Mrs. Gregg weighed twelve stone and Lucinda nine. A man lying on his back in a trunk cannot do much against twenty-one stone. They sat hard, feeling now and again something of an upheaval beneath them, and screaming in concert, with a forlorn sense that they might have to scream long enough till anyone came, unless it might be the man's confederates.

But before the terror of that could spring upon them a third person arrived on the scene. The whole thing had taken, indeed, but a very few minutes. The new arrival was Walter Hardy.

At the sight of the big fellow, with the honest, tender face, both women stopped screaming. He was soon made aware of the state of affairs. Very soon he had fetched a coil of rope from the stables and roped the trunk securely; but it was Mrs. Gregg's happy thought to push the trunk under the four-poster where it just fitted, thus making assurance doubly sure. The first thing she did on being released from her seat on the trunk was to fling her arms about Walter Hardy and kiss him as though he were indeed her son.

The two women waited, the doors securely barricaded, while Walter Hardy went to the village for help. He had barely returned with the village policeman and half a dozen stalwart rustics, before they heard the panting and snorting of the returning motor in the snow.

The motorists knocked at the inn door, apparently expecting it to be opened by a friend. Instead of which, as soon as they were admitted into the dark hall, there was a surprise in store for them, for the whole party within rushed upon them and had them trussed up like chickens in no time. The surprise was too much for them, perhaps, or they were hampered by their motor-coats, for they made a very poor fight. They cut a sorry figure enough as they were laid out side by side on the floor to await the coming of day-break and the police from Wharfe. But their position was enviable beside that of the gentleman who was presently extricated from the trunk, more dead than alive, gasping like a spent fish for air, and utterly unable to make any use of his revolver and the knife with which he was armed. Indeed, the trunk, which had a very ingenious spring lock, opening from the inside, had to be almost smashed to pieces to release him, for he was incapable of helping himself.

The trio proved to be three of the worst criminals known to the police. They must have learnt somehow that it was worth while to rob The Traveller's Friend, and had been prepared to go as far as murder to carry out their project.

As soon as they were safe in the hands of the police and on the road to the lock-up at Wharfe, Mrs. Gregg, Lucinda, and Walter Hardy had a comfortable talk in the bar-parlour. It was arranged that Walter Hardy should take up his residence at The Traveller's Friend till such time as the inn could be disposed of; and the marriage was to be pushed on as quickly as possible.

The young man's timely arrival was explained by the fact that his anxiety about the two women in the lonely inn had brought him out to keep watch over them for at least the worst hours of the night. He had found an easy entrance when he heard Lucinda scream, since the door by which mother and daughter had re-entered the house after their visit to Blucher's kennel was unfastened. In their agitation they had shot the bolt indeed, but had missed the socket. It proved on examination that poor Blucher had been poisoned, so that the two ruffians should find a clear field when they came to join the confederate who by that time they counted would be ready to admit them.

Mrs. Gregg never cared for a lonely situation after the events of that night. Indeed, Sheepcotes Farm proved to be a most stirring and cheerful place, with movement of men and animals, and, in time, children to brighten the old farmhouse.

"The best son-in-law in the world," was her description of Walter Hardy; and she loved to tell the wide-eyed children as well as the grown-up folk the story of the motorists and the man in the box.

FORTY HOUSES RAIDED

Forty homes in Staten Island, New York, have been robbed in the last eighteen months.

A valuable lamp and clock having been stolen from one house, detectives kept watch. They saw a policeman, named Keiper, emerge from the back of the house. At his residence the lamp was found. Hidden all over the house, detectives state, was valuable property taken from Staten Island residences.

Keiper, a mounted patrolman, had been for some months a source of much worry to his superiors. Robberies had been frequent in his district, many of them being reported by himself. Finally Keiper was arrested and held to bail in £16,000.

ARCHDEACON'S SUDDEN DEATH

The Venerable Ernest Frederick Newman, Archdeacon of Plymouth, had attended the Church Assembly in London and was returning with the Bishop of Exeter and other clergy when he was taken seriously ill in the train. On arrival at Queen-street Station, Exeter, he was immediately taken to hospital, where he died soon afterwards. The Bishop of Exeter accompanied him and was with him when he died.

The Archdeacon was born in 1859, and educated at Marlborough, Keble College, Oxford, and Wells Theological College. He was assistant curate at St. Mary's, Reading, from 1884 to 1886, and was chaplain (Additional Curates' Society), Bengal, 1887-88. In the following year he became Chaplain to the Forces, serving successively at the Tower of London, Caterham, South Africa, and Portsmouth. From 1917 to 1920 he was Rural Dean of Tavistock.

THIEF'S LIKING FOR HANDBAGS

Louisa Adelaide Sparkes, aged 33, of Northanger-road, Streatham, London, was sentenced at South-western Court to 12 months' hard labour for stealing 110 handbags and money to the total value of £1,000. Detective-sergeant Foley said that since the beginning of last year Sparkes had visited houses offered for sale and, having gained admission, stole handbags. She had visited a nursing home and music and dancing academies, where she behaved in a similar way. She had obtained a divorce, and had one child, aged six. The excuse she gave was that she committed these thefts for the sake of her child, but a bill for £107 was found in her possession from a Margate hotel, where she had stayed with a man, though not as his wife, and she had been paying for the man everywhere. There was one previous conviction.