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ROBERT JARDINE'S WOOING

An Annandale Romance.

THE Black Bull was not an ordinary inn—rather a survival of the wayside house of rest. A wood of pines stretched from the rear down to the river, and the cheerful white front of the house stood out from the gloomy background, beckoning welcome like a human friend.

On each side the porch were benches where the farmers sat on market days exchanging the gossip of the countryside. Indoors the best kitchen was the gathering place.

On a certain March morning a fire of pine logs blazed in the grate, and the side window was thrown open to let the breeze from the pine wood stray in. Contrary to precedent, the hostess of the Black Bull was a spinster. While her father lived she had set aside all offers of marriage, and stood staunchly between the old man and his besetting sin of conviviality till she laid him, honored and lamented, in the kirkyard on the hill.

One suitor had remained persistent, Robert Jardine, of The Willows. His farm was on the Dumfriesshire hill, and he looked down on the Black Bull from its gable windows. But he did not content himself with that. He was a frequent visitor, and Esther Morrison's face took a tinge of pink, and she gave a hasty touch to her smooth hair as she heard his voice in the porch. She was a prim, precise young woman with fixed ideas, and Robert Jardine was easy-going and genial; so, by law of contrasts, they were made for one another. He was a man of few words, and it was enough for him to stand with his back to the fire, stroking his brown beard, and watching Esther. No one would have taken him for a wooer, and yet, in his slow fashion, he was bearing down steadily on the port of matrimony.

"It's real heartsome up yonder the now," he said. "The sole-thorn's a' in bloom in the lane, an' the birdies are singin' and the lambs skippin' in the meadow—it's real heartsome at The Willows."

It was not the first time Esther had heard the charms of The Willows, varied only by the season.

"I wouldn't wonder," she assented. "The country's aye nice in the springtime. Is it a good season for the lambs, Robert?"

"Well, I ha'e seen better. There's a good few o' them dousy enough like, I'm no' so rich the year as I thought to be. Ye see, I was reckonin' on gettin' the house new papered an' painted this spring, but," with a wistful glance at her, "I'm waitin'."

Esther smiled.

"John Robinson was askin' me if you'd a mind to sell the Black Bull. He'd give ye a good price for't." He did not look at her again, for he knew by heart the obstinate upcast of her chin when he mooted this topic.

"An' what for would I sell the Black Bull, Robert Jardine? Folk shouldna be in haste to make changes. They'll be the longer o' ruein' them."

He sighed.

"Well, I must be movin' home, though there's nobody carin' much what road I go. I'm missin' the old mother more every day."

The words touched her. She held out her hand, and it was lost in his.

"Some day, Robert, maybe there will be one to watch for your hame comin'."

His face flushed, and he laid his hands on her shoulder, but she drew back.

"Oh, I'm no sayin' who it will be," she added.

"There's but one woman in the world for me, an' well ye ken that, Esther," he said sternly, and strode away.

The little town among the hills was an uneventful spot, and sensations were rare and precious. One of these was the yearly visit of Signor Jacobi with his circus and menagerie. It was the market day, and crowds stood gaping at the gay procession. In startling contrast with the ladies in velvet and spangles was a monster ape in a cage bringing up the rear. His crafty, old bewrinkled face looked out from between the bars, and he put forth a stealthy hand to seize an inquisitive old farmer's spectacles or snatch a swain's gay necktie. Suddenly, no one could tell how or why, a hubbub arose—shrieks and jostling and scrimmage. The fastenings of the ape's cage had given way, and, with a wild dash for freedom, he bounded, jabbering and chattering, over the heads of the terrified crowd. Signor Jacobi smoked his pipe that afternoon in the porch of the Black Bull. The performance was postponed, while his troupe scattered in quest of the missing member.

"He has the cunning of fifty foxes, has old Jargo," he said. "He has doubled on me more than once; but he turns up when he gets hungry. He's a crafty old boy."

"You'll come with me to the show, Esther?" asked Jardine, who loved a variety entertainment.

"No, no, Robert, I cannot leave the house. I promised the maids to let them go; besides, I have my accounts to make up. I must be bankin' my money."

"You are gettin' to be a rich woman, Esther. I wish The Willows was doin' as well as the Black Bull; sheep farmin' is risky business."

She looked at him anxiously. She knew that his father had been a "waster," and it was uphill work to restore the farm to prosperity; but it was not her way to express sympathy.

The town was very quiet next evening; every one who could afford it was at the circus. The side windows of the best kitchen were wide open, and the spring breeze wafted the muslin curtains inward. Esther sat at a table with the contents of a leather bag spread before her—a heap of sovereigns glittered in the light from the pine logs. She lifted the gold in her fingers, counting it with a pleased expression. She had a self-satisfied conviction that success like hers must be the reward of a good church-goer and an upright woman. She had no fear to be alone in the house with so much money, for thieves were rare in Annandale. There was a rustling sound among the shrubs at the window, but she did not hear it. The bell of the outer door jingled, and, gathering the coins into the bag, she set it on a shelf and went out. It was old Mr. Meldrum, a frequenter of the inn; he was an elder of the kirk, and he gave her his opinion at length on "playactin' an' a' sic devices o' Sawtan." As he was leaving her she heard hasty footsteps run down the passage to the kitchen, and at the door she met Robert Jardine. He was flurried and breathless.

"I'm late for the show, Esther; you won't come? Well, I brought you a posy to keep you from feelin' lonesome."

He patted her shoulder and rushed out. The kitchen was filled with fragrance from a bunch of violets on the table. She buried her face in their cool, purple beauty.

"He's a faithful soul, Robert Jardine," she said to herself. "A body might do worse than take him at his word—some day."

She turned to take the bag and lock it up in the safe. It was gone! Two of the sovereigns lay on the floor. A hasty hand had snatched the bag and dropped them out. She saw it all in a dreadful vision, and the hand she saw was Robert Jardine's! It all flashed in grim detail on her limited brain. His hints of losses, his flurried air. There was a mortgage on The Willows; perhaps the interest was not ready. He knew she could never charge her father's friend and her own with theft. And so she thought bitterly he had robbed a lonely woman. She paced the room wringing her hands. The pine logs were dying into ashes, and the air was chill. She closed the window, picking up her overturned worktable. Robert Jardine a thief! And this was the end of it all. She never knew till then how strongly she had cherished the thought of a love-lit home and little children round her knee. No, she could never marry a thief. But, surely, it had been a sudden impulse; he would come back and explain. She would lend him all he needed. She heard the servants' voices at the rear. The show was over. The farmers' springcarts flew past, the east wind sighed through the pines. She listened for the rapid hoof-beats of Robert's chestnut. Yes, there he comes—slower; he is going to stop. No; he passes on. She buries her face in her hands, and, like a dirge of lost love, comes the murmur of the river flowing down from Eriestane Brae. Then she started up, and seizing the violets—his sweet gift—she flung them into the fire, piling fresh logs upon them, and watching them writhe and squirm like living things.

But when the maids came in she was calm, and none of them guessed that their mistress had touched the borderland of tragedy that night.

A week passed, in which she did not see Robert Jardine. She said nothing of her loss; it would be her secret—and his. She heard among the gossips in the porch that he had gone to Glasgow, and that he was making some improvements on the farm.

"He'll be takin' hame his wife some o' thae days, Miss Esther," said old Mrs. Burrows, the matchmaker of the town. "An' she'll no can say him nay. It's lang he has waited, an' it's a guid fairm, The Willows; an' he's a gey decent lad, Robert Jardine."

Esther smiled at her.

He came on market day, but there was a crowd in the porch, and the benches were filled with smokers. She did not see him till afternoon. He took his usual stand on the hearth, and looked around.

"Your violets will be withered by now?" he said. "I'll bring you fresh ones. They're fine the now down the bank where mother planted them, an' the daffy down dillies, as Molly calls them, are comin' out, in the long meadow. You're fond o' flowers, Esther? They're real heartsome."

"Yes," she answered coldly. "I'm for takin' in more ground at the rear an' plantin' a flower garden.

He stared blankly at her.

"You're what? An' what for would you lay out money for other folk that way, Esther? The Willows will be ready for you, an' what's to hinder the weddin'? I'm wearyin' for ye."

She looked straight in his eyes. How could he meet her glance and know he had robbed her?

"There'll be no weddin' for me, Robert Jardine," she said. "You'll have to seek your wife elsewhere."

He started forward to grasp her hand, but she pushed him back.

"No word more shall cross my lips; but well you know I can never marry you—now."

"Never marry me? An' what for, do you think, I have been toilin' a' these years if it wasna to make a home for you? An' now you say you can never marry me."

He stood before her, his face working with emotion.

"I'm no great things, maybe, but I'm your faithful lover, Esther, an' you're not goin' to throw me over in the face o' a' the neighbors. It's not as if we were strangers; you ken me lang enough."

"Ay, fine I ken you, Robert," she said drily. "I woul maybe be a happier woman this day if I didna."

"I'm hanged if I can make out wha you're drivin' at," he retorted in anger. "Will ye speak straight, an' tell me why you're thorwin' me over? You're mair glib wi' the speech than me."

"I have nothing to say if you have not. I cannot help what the neighbors think. I do not mean to marry you."

"So be it, then. You'll be fashed wi' me nae mair. Ye can spier me when ye want me back," he said, flinging out. She watched him mounting his spring cart, and unwilling tears clouded her sight.

Snow fell late that year, checking the promise of spring, and the hedges, instead of whitening with hawthorn buds, were weighted with a pallid burden. There was much gossip over the cessation of Robert Jardine's wooing, for every one was interested in the love story of the mistress of the Black Bull.

Esther's heart was heavy, and as the snow began to thaw she turned her thoughts to the garden she meant to lay out to the edge of the pine trees. She kilted up her skirts and made her walk over the heaps of last year's leaves. In a hollow something red caught her eye. Stooping over it she saw that it was a scarlet jacket with gay brass buttons. She took a branch and cleared the snow away. Some bulky thing lay beneath. A shudder seized her; it looked like a human body. Had some poor creature perished in the snow? There was a heap of bones under the scarlet cloth. Again a shudder seized her, though she was not a nervous woman. She swept away the last remnant of snow, and there lay bare a ghastly object—the gigantic skeleton of the lost ape!

She was turning away to make known her discovery, when something stopped her. This time it was the glitter of gold. Under the fleshless fingers was a leather bag. Some of its contents lay on the earth. Conquering her repulsion, she withdrew the bag and gathered up the coins. It was her lost property.

A sudden faintness seized her; she remembered in a flash the open window, the overturned work-table. To think that she had held Robert Jardine for a thief and lost him!

She concealed the bag under her cloak. No one had known of her loss; none need know of its recovery. She went in by the back kitchen; the servants were whispering together in a group.

"Haud yer tongue, she'll hear ye. Wha's gaun tae tell her?" some one said.

"What is it?" she asked sharply. She turned to her old Irish cook, whose ruddy face had grown pale. "Speak, Betty; what is wrong?"

"They're sayin', mistress, that Mr. Jardine has broke his neck or somethin'," Biddy blurted out. "But I wudn't be afther heedin' thim if I was you. It'll not be a word av thruth'll be in't at all, at all."

But she did not hear the attempt at comfort; it seemed to her she had always known how the story would end. The servants looked in silent pity at her white, set face as she passed out of the kitchen. She locked the bag in the safe, and set out for The Willows. It was a long walk, but she felt the need of action. As she ascended the hill she could hear the bleating of the sheep in the fields of The Willows. She had never guessed till now how strong a hold this place had on her affections as her future home. A sallow, dark-browed woman opened the door.

"Eh, it's no' yersel', Miss Morrison?" she drily asked. "Ay, the maister's hed a sair come down. The doctor says he's no' to be disturbed by naebody."

"Then he is not——".

"Na, na, he's no' deid, though there's them that hasna been carin' muckle what cam' tae him."

She stood blocking up the door, but Esther pushed past her.

"I'm going to him, Molly," she said.

"Weel, he's in the auld mistress's chaumber, but I'll no' tak' the responsibility——"

Esther went softly along the corridor, and opened the door. A sunbeam struck through a corner of the blind, but the room looked bare and chilly. His bandaged head rested on the pillow; his face was ghastly, but his eyes turned on her with a look of glad surprise.

"Why, Esther!" he said.

"Hush, don't speak, Robert. I heard you were hurt, and I came to you."

"Ay, I had a near shave. Prince woudn't take the dyke. I've been a bit reckless this while. Nobody cared, ye see, Esther." His brow contracted in pain, and he stopped.

"Yes, dear, I cared," she whispered, stooping over him. A crimson blush crept over her face and neck, and she kissed him on the mouth. Never in all his long wooing had he ventured to kiss her. Surely he must be dreaming now!

"You mind what you said to me. If I wanted you I must spier you. Get better, dear, for my sake, and then you will let me come home to you."

She struggled with her shy pride to bring out the words, and they revived him like wine. The deadly depression that had baffled the doctor's skill began to lighten, and the patient revived with the tonic of hope. Esther left the Black Bull to the care of her maids, and nursed her lover back to health.

The doctor rubbed his hands, well pleased. "He's going to do, after all," he said. "But I don't know that I have all the credit of the case. He was bent on slipping through my fingers. Now he wants to get round, and that's half the battle."

* * * * *

When the roses bloomed white among the ivy in the porch of The Willows Esther Jardine came home. John Robinson is the landlord of the Black Bull, and The Willows is more heartsome than ever under the rule of its tidy mistress.

Now and again a memory comes to her of the sinister visitor that almost robbed her of life's treasure of love, and she has learned to be very charitable in her judgments.—Scotch-American.

France's newest prison, eight miles from Paris, is the biggest in the world. It covers half a square mile, has 1824 cells and will contain 2000 prisoners.

WHEN BOBBY GOES A-COURTING.

When Bobby goes a-courting
'Tis a nobby suit he's sporting,
And its blue all dotted brightly with two rows of buttons yellow,
Shining like the stars above him;
Sure, what lass could help but love him
In his haughty stripes and helmet, he is such a naughty fellow?

And it's oh! for dear Bobby just come from the force,
With a smile for his sweetheart, and more, too, of course.
There's a ring in his pocket—sweet boy, let me see.
Now, Bobby, stop teasing—I know it's for me.

When Bobby comes a-swinging
Down the street my heart is singing.
Like a lark at dawn, and always it is "Bobby loves me true!"
And my cheeks they blush unduly,
For, my soul! they're so unruly!
And I tremble and dissemble, for I don't know what to do.

But it's Bobby, sweet Bobby, who know the best way
For arresting such troubles—how, I'll never say!
Now, Bobby, be easy!—You've rumpled my hair!
Sure, lad, you are crazy—not one more! —well, there.

—R. C. Rose.

IN A FACETIOUS VEIN

Mary had a little lamb,
She sold it to the trust.
She's cutting coupons now so fast
Her scissors never rust.

—Judge.

He—"Many a girl wears a sailor hat who can't row a boat." She—"Yes; and many a man wears a silk hat who can't set up a stovepipe."—Chicago News.

It's queer that people who are always railing at the world are nevertheless willing to pay the doctors a fortune to keep them from leaving it in a hurry.—Atlanta Constitution.

Miss Fortysummers—"I had a proposal last night and refused it." Miss Crusher—"You are always thinking of the welfare of others, aren't you, dear?"—Ohio State Journal.

First Reporter—"Our city editor has been discharged for wasting time." Second Reporter—"How?" First Reporter—"Asking the reporters how they got the news."—Town and Country.

Physicians have him in their grip
Whichever way he fares;
He either pays the final debt,
Or else he owes them theirs.

—New York Herald.

"It seems to make Scaddington's wife as mad as a hornet every time he boasts that he began at the foot and worked his way up." "Well, he started in as a bootblack, you know."—Chicago Record-Herald.

"How clean and fresh the landscape looks to-day," said Mrs. Hilland to her husband. "I read something in the paper about detectives scouring the country," explained Mr. Hilland.—Pittsburg Chronicle.

"Come here, Johnnie," called his mother, appearing at the window with a cake of soap and a scrub brush. "Goodby," said Johnnie sorrowfully to his playmate. "I gotter go an' take th' water cure."—Boston Post.

"How many quarts in a gallon?" asked the teacher. "Six," answered the little son of a market man. "No, no, Johnny. Only four." "Huh, I guess I've seen 'em sell enough strawberries to know."—Baltimore American.

Intimate Friend—"The assessor hasn't listed your property at one-tenth of what it is worth? Then why don't you increase your assessment voluntarily?" Millionaire—"I did that last year, and everybody said I was making a grand stand play for popularity."—Chicago Tribune.

"We ought to do something to keep the public reminded that we are remarkable men," said one statesman. "That's so," answered the other. "Let's have a little tilt on the floor of Congress." "Good. Come around to my hotel next Wednesday and we'll rehearse the affront." "Very well. And you come to mine on Wednesday, and we'll run over the apology."—Washington Star.

Velocity of a Rifle Bullet.

It appears that the greatest velocity of a rifle ball is not at the muzzle, but some distance in front. An average of ten shots with the German infantry rifle has shown a muzzle velocity of 2063 feet per second, with a maximum velocity of 2132 feet per second of ten feet from the muzzle.