

OUR STORY TELLER.

The Egg Stealer.

BY ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH.

It wanted less than an hour to high tide when Miss Marty Lear heard her brother's boat grate on the narrow beach below the garden, and set the knives and glasses straight while she listened for the rattle of the garden gate.

When he entered the kitchen and hitched his hat upon the peg against the wall, he did not appear to want any welcome from her. He was a long-jawed man of sixty-five, she a long-jawed woman of sixty-one, and they understood each other, having kept this small and desolate farm together for twenty years—since their father's death.

"Who d'ye reckon I ran against to-day down in Troy?"

Miss Marty said that she had not an idea.

"Why that fellow Amos Trudgeon." he went on.

"Yes?"

"Pears to me you disremembers en—son of Old Jane Trudgeon that used to live 'cross the water, him that stole our eggs long back, when father was livin'."

"I remember."

"I thought you must. Why, you gave evidence, to be sure. Be dashed, now I come to mind, if you wasn't the first to wake us up an' say you heard a man cryin' out down 'pon the mud!"

"Iss, I was."

"An' saved his life, though you did get en two months in jail by it. Up to armpits he was an' not two minutes to live when we hauled en out an' found he'd been stealin' our eggs. He inquired after you today."

"Did he?"

"How's Miss Marty?" says he. "Age in' rapidly," says I. The nerve that some folks have! 'Tis an old tale after all, that feat o' his."

"Two an' forty year, come 17th o' July next. Did he say any more?"

"Wanted to know if you was married."

"Oh!"

Job laid down knife and fork with the edges resting on his plate and looked at his sister. Before he could speak she broke out again:

"He was my lover."

"Mar-ty!"

"I swear to you, Job, here across this table, he was my lover, an' I ruined en. He was the only man, 'cept you an' father, that ever kissed me, an' I betrayed en. An' what's more, he made me."

"Mar!"

"Don't hinder me, Job; it's truth I'm tellin'. His people were a low lot, an' father'd have hid en if he'd known. But we used to meet in the orchard 'most every night. Amos 'ud row across in his boat an' back agen."

"Go on."

"Well, the last night he came over 'twas low tide. I was waitin' for en in the orchard, an' he would have me tell father an' you, an' I wouldn't. I reckon we quarreled over it so long his boat got left high in the mud. Anyways, he left me in wrath, an' I stood there by the gate in the dark longin' for en to come back. But the time went on, an' I didn't hear his oars pullin' away, though listenin' with all my ears."

"An' then I heard a terrible sound, a low sort o' breathin', but fierce, an' somethin' worse—a suck-suckin' o' the mud below—an' ran down. There he

was, above his knees in it, half way between firm ground an' his boat. For all his fightin' he heard me an' whispers out o' the dark:

"Little girl, its got me. Hush! Don't shout!"

"Can't you get out?" I whispered back.

"No, I'm afraid."

"I'll run an' call father an' Job."

"Hush! Be you mazed? Do you want to let 'em know?"

"But it'll kill you, dear, won't it?"

"Likely it will," said he. Then after a while o' battlin' with it he whispers agen: 'Little girl, I don't want to die. Death is a cold end. But I reckon we can manage to save me an, your name as well. Run up to the hen house an' bring me as many eggs as you can find, an' don't ax questions. Be quick. I can keep up for awhile.'

"I didn't know what he meant, but ran for my life. I could tell pretty well how to find a dozen or more in the dark by gropin' about, an' in three minutes had gathered 'em in the lap o' my dress an' run down agen. I could just spy en—a dark blot out on the mud."

"How many?" he asked, his voice hoarse as a rook's."

"About a dozen."

"Toss 'em hear. Don't come too near, an' shy careful, so's I can catch. Quick!"

"I stepped down pretty near to the brim o' the mud an' tossed 'em out to en. Three fell short in my hurry, but the rest he got hold o' somehow."

"That's right. They'll think egg stealin' nateral to a low family like our'n. Now go back to your room, undress an' cry out, sayin' there's a man shoutin' for help down 'pon the mud. When you wave your candle twice in the window, I'll shout like a Trojan."

"An' I did it, Job, for the cruelty in a fearful woman passes knowledge. An' you rescued en, an' he went to jail, for he said 'twas the only way, an' his mother took it as quite reas'nable that her husband's son should take to the bad—'twas the way of all the Trudgeons."

"You needn't look at me like that. I'm past sixty, an' I've done my share o' repentin'."—New York Journal.

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