

A Field of Gold

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Jack Field stepped out of his cottage and looked across the fields of Wharfedale, tumbling towards Ilkley in a jigsaw of dry stone walls. Beacon Hill cast its early morning shadow across the valley as though keeping guard, as it had for millennia.

Bolton Abbey lay in the valley bottom, opening the gate to the Dales footpaths, and on the far horizon, bathed in mist, the hills that led to the Lakes.

He filled his lungs with the crisp morning air and gazed at the view which never bored him. He smiled to himself, and thought, life's not too bad. I wonder if they'd have me in the local amateurs or the choral society. It would be good to sing again.

A tractor was chugging towards him. Tom Roberts pulled over.

“Morning Jack, early riser”

“Too good to miss, Tom. I thought I'd go down to the iron bridge and back along the river.”

“Well, just watch it if you come back over the beck; the steps are treacherous with mud.”

“Yes Ok. Hey Tom, who's taken Allbank House, have you heard?”

“A wool merchant from Bradford. His daughter rides. They've got some good horse flesh down there; she competes in the dressage.”

“Ah, so the rink will get used again.”

“Reckon so. You have a good walk, Jack.”

He let in the gear and moved on up the lane.

Jack banged the old ill-fitting door closed, and inserted the huge iron key into the lock.

He smiled as a female voice behind him said, "It's about time you had a new door on there."

"Lydia, this door is a hundred and fifty years old, half the age of the house."

"Yes and I can hear the wind whistling through it on a good day."

"Mm, it is a bit draughty, and like a freezer in January."

"Good job you didn't bring a wife with you." Lydia stopped short, embarrassed, "Oh, sorry Jack."

"It's Ok, four years since now."

"How long have you been here?"

"Twelve months, but I bought it three years before that when Jane died. My friends said I was running away. Pr'aps I was."

"It was derelict, wasn't it?"

"Been empty for thirty years; it was in a bit of a state." he grinned. "It certainly kept me busy, just when I needed it."

"You're alright now though"

"Fine, Lydia. The hurt recedes with every year."

"I suppose"

When you've lived with someone for twenty five years, just sitting there watching them slowly die isn't a great experience."

"No."

“You think you’ll never forget. But you do. Gradually the memory becomes less painful, and the face fades. You begin to smile again,” He paused looking at her. “I’ll get on with my walk Lydia, or I won’t get back until bedtime. I’m going down to the iron bridge at Ben Rhydding and back along the river.”

“That’s a good eight to ten miles; sore feet ahoy”

“Oh, I’ll call in at the Sailor for some liquid refreshment, before the last push up the hillside.”

“Be careful as you pass Bill Priors; his bees will be out and we don’t want you with a nasty sting.”

Jack laughed and set off for Ilkley and Ben Rhydding.

Lydia watched him stride off down the lane. His broad shoulders were squared back and his stride was strong and confident. He’s a different man to a year ago she thought, and there’s a few Ilkley widows I know who’ll be taking a look or two.

“The weather’s holding; I think I’ll have a garden party” A conspiratorial smile lighting her face.

The Sailor was an ancient pub which still had a licence to brew a few barrels a year in its cellar. The ceilings were heavily beamed with oak and supported by trees, lightly trimmed, but could still be growing in that now-extinct forest. The bar was the only concession to modernity. All the walls were lined in oak panelling, darkened with age, and ancient pipe smoke. Jack pushed through and ordered a pint of its potent Sailors Pot.

“Just take it easy with that; it’s a long walk up to Allbanks Jack”

“I’ll roll all the way.”

“Bit difficult, it’s uphill.”

“Bill, I’m told the old farm labourers used to roll out of here, and get to Allbanks in the dark.”

“Yes, and legend has it that old man Thompson used to be braying on their doors at five thirty in the morning to make sure they made starting time.”

“Ah, well. The present old man Thompson sleeps later than me, so my beauty sleep is undisturbed.”

“It was all before my time Jack, before my time.”

An hour later Jack crossed the High St, a little unaccustomed lilt in his gait, and began the footpath climb to Allbanks high on the valley ridge.

He crossed the by-pass, went through the kissing gate, and headed for the stile above the steps leading down to the beck.

He tottered slightly at the top of the ancient stone staircase. Tom was right, the broken stone steps down to the beck forty feet below were muddy, slippery, and polished by three hundred years of wear.

He started down. There was hand rail to hold on to for half the way and then it turned into a prickly Hawthorne hedge; no hand hold there. Jack precariously balanced himself on each step, but one wobbled, and he crashed down to the footbridge hitting his head on the handrail. Easing himself up, he found blood trickling down his forehead.

“Damn,” he muttered to himself, his head spinning, but feeling distinctly more sober.

He scrambled on hands and knees up the other side. He could see the rink across the field and a rider straight-backed, was elegantly practicing dressage moves around the rink.

I only have to get past the rink, he thought, and I'm back on to the road and home.

There was no sign of Tom or his tractor, just a solitary rider moving round and round the rink in sync with his head. Jack stopped and leaned against the fence. The rider stopped and looked down at him.

"My, you look a mess. Where do you live?" a pleasant feminine voice asked.

Jack pointed to Allbank. "The one on the left," he said.

He slid down to the ground, his trousers sloshing into four inches of mud. She dismounted and climbed through the fence.

"Come on, I'll give you hand"

"How come" he gestured to the rink, "no mud?"

"All weather surface."

She took his hand and gently eased him up, placed his arm across her shoulders and heaved him on to his feet. He was facing Beacon Hill which was no longer casting a shadow across the valley, but was tipped with the red of the setting sun, and the low lying pastures were fields of sun cast gold.

Jack's head began to feel woozy again, and he let all his weight rest on her shoulders. Vaguely he thought, goodness this girl's strong.

At the door to his cottage he handed her the big key, "This weighs a ton," she laughed.

"Don't you start; I have enough with Lydia lecturing me on that subject."

Jack hobbled through the door, her shoulders supporting him to a chair, “I might as well make you a cup tea while I’m here; name’s Becky by the way.”

“Jack. Jack Field. Newcomer of this valley, or as they say round here, an Offcumden.”

Becky found her way to the kitchen; the water hitting the kettle bottom sounded like Niagara Falls in flood, and the clinking mugs were as brazen as cymbals in a jazz band in Jacks’ muzzy head. Becky reappeared with two mugs of steaming tea, put them down and plonked down on the sofa.

“Whew! I’ll take this off,” and unstrapped her helmet. She eased her helmet off, and as she removed it a whole field of golden blonde hair fell to her shoulders.

Jack Field gazed at her through hazy eyes, and was lost.

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