

*The Farmer's Story*  
by Mary Kyle Dallas

“Seen you sit on the fence, sir, writing in that little book. I thought perhaps you might be writing poetry. A good many folks come down here of a summer and make poetry about the sheep and the moon. Peggy reads ’em out to me in the paper, and the stories, too, sir. Do *you* write stories? Yes? Well, that’s a gift. If I had it I think I could make one about what has happened to me. Peggy says it could be done.

“Now, it’s all plain sailing, nothing out of the common; but I wasn’t always a well-to-do old farmer. Once I was a farmers boy—a hand, —with nothing of my own but a stout heart, and strong limbs and good health.

“Many’s the night, when the stars were in the sky. I used to go out to the great pasture where the sheep browsed all the day, and sit and think thoughts I had no words for, and make beautiful pictures for myself in my mind—not fine ones, sir. This is what I used to see the oftenest: A little cottage with a wide fire-place, such as they had in my day. A dresser with a row of delf upon it, four chairs and a table of white pine. When I had these I was to marry Peggy Grey. But when I should have them, and she her white wedding-gown and the house linen, neither of us knew.

“She put her sixpence into a red earthen savings bank, and I kept mine in an old glove. For two years we were waiting and hoping and were not much nearer than at first. Sometimes I felt down-hearted. Sometimes her little letters were a bit sad. And just as I sat in the meadow I knew she sat before her kitchen fire in the house where she lived in service. Simple folks we were, but, we had hearts, and felt, perhaps, as deeply as greater folks might.

“My master, the farmer, was a close man. He squeezed as much work out of his hands as possible. But it was a steady place, and he paid all he promised; so I [stayed], never thinking what trouble staying would bring me to—trouble that never would have come but for Mark Hulker. A good-for-nothing fellow he was, a disgrace to the rest of us, and he cheated the master and left his work undone. So after hours master sent me at his stint, and, it being indoor work, I kept at it all night. The old man liked that, and set me a new task every night. All the better for me, I thought, he would pay me extra, and what was weariness to me if it brought me nearer to my Peggy. So I counted the hours’ work as so many shillings. But when Saturday night came he gave me just my week’s work.

“‘Master,’ said I, ‘I’ve worked over hours every night, you forget that?’

“‘I hire you by the week,’ he said. ‘I’ll give no more than one week’s wages. So, if you don’t like it, there are plenty of strong lads to be had, if you are growing lazy. Then he turned his back on me, and Mark laughed. That angered me, and words fell from my lips. We had a quarrel, master and I, and I called him a ‘niggardly old rascal;’ and with that he dismissed me from his service.

“‘At dawn you go,’ he said. ‘You’ve worked [today], and have a right to your bed at night, but at dawn you go.’

“I marched out of the room, with words I never should have used, and up to my garret, and threw myself on my bed. But I did not mean to stay to be turned out. At midnight I rose softly, made up a bundle, and climbed out of a window. I cut my hands with the glass of a broken pane and the blood dropped down upon my clothes. But I was too angry to feel the pain; and I bound up the wound with a handkerchief. Then I trudged on, meaning to look for work the next day. So I did, but found none. Then the thought struck me to make my [way] to—and see Peggy. It would be a comfort to me whatever came. So I turned my steps in that direction, and kept on until night fell. Then, faint and weary, I lay down under some bushes and fell asleep.

“Out of that sleep I was aroused by a shout and a clutch of strong hands. Men stood before me. One shouted my name. They held me fast and bound me.

“I struggled, but it was no use. Numbers were against my single strength.

“‘What are you? Robbers? I’ve nothing worth the taking,’ I said at last; and when standing still, I saw faces I knew about me—those of the farmhands at my old master’s.

“‘You know well what we want, Jack Marlome,’ said one. ‘If he did speak an ill-word at last, he was a good man in the main, and you’d worked for him three years. You might have answered him as you liked, but to try to murder him was too horrible. We didn’t think it of you, Jack—we didn’t think it.’

“‘Murder!’ I cried. ‘Is old master murdered? Why lay it to me? I swear I never hurt him.’

“‘If he is not quite dead it’s none of your fault,’ cried one man. ‘Don’t perjure yourself—look at the blood on your clothes.’

“The blood [everyone saw] was in blots [and smeared] all over my vest. I felt my heart [turn] sick when I took heed of it.

“‘Master will clear me,’ I said.

“‘He says it was you,’ said one of the men. ‘At least, he nodded yes, when we asked him if you did it.’

“‘Then old master was not right in his mind,’ I said. ‘He’d never be against me.’

“After that I heard the whole. Master had paid the men and dismissed Mark. He had only said, ‘All right; I am tired of work,’ and had eaten breakfast there, and left in sight of all. But I was gone; and then they found that master, who was always up at cock-crow, did not rise at nine, they opened his door and found him on the floor senseless—they thought dead, at first. He had been robbed of his pocket-book, a watch, and an old-fashioned pin he always [wore] in his neckerchief—the painted head of a lady set around with what he used to tell us were pearls—an ornament older than his grandmother.

“They found nothing about me of course; but the quarrel and the cut hand made the case hard against me. The master dying, as they thought him, had been able to speak at odd times; and said

that to the best of his belief, I was his assailant. It was dark, to be sure, but in the struggle he felt that man wore a cap, and I was the only hand who had anything but a straw hat. Besides he came from the inner passage and down the stairs, and did not break in through door or window as a burglar would have done. And I was the only missing member of the household. So I lay in prison with this awful charge upon me, until they knew whether master would live or die; and my greatest grief was for Peggy.

“Keep it from her,’ I begged them, ‘until [sic].’

“And they were kind and did it, and her letters were sent to me in prison. It was a weary time, and the one drop of comfort in it came with those letters. I had had five from her when, at the end of one came this:

“DEAR JACK: I never hide anything from you, and not to boast of my conquests, a thing I’d never do, but just to let you know that I keep no secrets to myself. I must tell you what has happened.

“Our master has hired a man, a lazy fellow, that I disliked at first sight, Mark Hulker by name, and what should he do but take a notion to me, or pretend to do so, trying his best to sit up after work hours, and following me about [whenever] I go [on] holiday. Then he tries to make me like him by telling me how rich he is. Four hundred dollars he has laid by, he says, and has a gold watch like a gentleman. The other Sunday I was dressed for church, and up he walks.

“‘Why, Peggy,’ says he, ‘you’ve no pin to your collar.’ “Said I, ‘I can’t afford money for finery.’

“Then says he, ‘Now how lucky it is that I’ve [something] to give you,’ and he pulls a pin from his pocket.

“Jack, I couldn’t help looking at it. It was a lady’s portrait, with hair all white—though she was so young—like an old woman’s. He said it was powdered as they did it in old times; and a pink dress—and all about tiny stones—and no bigger than a silver quarter, altogether. How he came by such a thing, goodness knows! But of course I wouldn’t have it. Says he: ‘Now do take it, Peggy. I want to keep company with you, and now you know the truth.’

“So says I: ‘I want neither your company nor your presents, and please remember that hereafter.’

“It was rough, I know, but I hate him so. And I was none too rude, for [he] bothers me yet as much as ever. Though you know if he were ever so good and handsome I am always your own Peggy, and think no one else.”

“When I read that, you could have knocked me down with a feather. The pin was the one the old farmer had lost, I knew, and it was Mark who was the thief, and who tried to murder him.

“I sent for the lawyer who was to take my side, and who had all along believed me innocent. I gave him the letter.

“‘It’s old master’s pin,’ I said. ‘What shall I do, sir?’

“And he said—‘you can do nothing, my poor fellow, but wait and hope. I have a clue now and I’ll follow it.’

“Then he went away and afterwards I heard what he did. He went down to the place where Peggy lived, and took her out of danger of eaves-droppers and told her all that happened. The brave girl trembled and wept, but she spoke out.

“‘He’s innocent,’ she said, ‘I’d not believe him guilty if an angel told me [he] was.’ “And the lawyer said, out of his heart, though she was but a serving lass:

“‘He’s worthy of you, Peggy Gray, I do believe, and that is saying a good deal.’

“Then he asked her about the pin, and the two had a long talk. It ended in Peggy bursting into tears, and promising to do anything and everything he asked if he would but tell me why she did it.

“He told me afterwards, and it was hard work for little Peggy with her honest heart. Bless her. She turned herself around and made a different creature of herself, and she tried to make Mark Hulker think she had been coquetting all the while, and—oh, how she cried when she told me that she let him kiss her, and put his arm about her waist. But she gained her end by it. One night my good old lawyer and two other men were shut up in the pantry with Peggy’s master, and she dressed in her best waiting for Mark Hulker.

“That night she had promised Mark to take his pin, and if he proved he had the money he bragged of, to promise to marry him, and Mark came as merry as could be, and a little worse for liquor.

“‘Now, lass,’ said he, ‘a promise is a promise. There’s the money to count and the watch to look at and the pin to wear.’

“‘We’ll have you, my fine fellow,’ said a voice, and there and then they arrested him: for the money and the watch and the pin were old master’s; and one who knew, his son James, was there with the detectives.

“He gave up all hope from that minute and confessed everything. How he had made up his mind to rob old master that evening before he was dismissed. How he had seen me climb out of the window; and so dressed in clothes like mine, he made his plans to throw suspicion upon me.

“My Peggy brought me the good news first; brought it into my cell, and threw herself, weeping, into my arms crying out, ‘You’re free, darling; free and clear, thank heaven.’

“They did not hang Mark; for Master, after awhile, got better, and in the end, quite well. But they punished him for the robbery and for something he had done of the same kind before he ever came to master.

“And as for the old man, when he was well, he was so sorry for the charge he had made against me, though he had honestly believed me guilty, as I well knew, that he made me a present of a little farm, and stocked it for me. And the wife Peggy her outfit; and here we are as happy as the

sheep in the meadow yonder, or the bees in the hive hard by. And when we hear talk of books and plays, Peggy says to me: 'Jack if they only knew our story, they'd make one of it, I'm very sure;' and as they say you're a writer, why tell it to you, sir."

*The New York Ledger*, March 28, 1868

*The Corrector* [Sag Harbor, NY], August 20, 1870

*Oxford Democrat* [Paris, ME], September 19, 1871