

# Exchange

By Barry Pain

## 1—Doris

There was once a girl-child named Doris who went out skating with her bigger brothers one afternoon over flooded fields in the Fen country. But her brothers played hockey with school-fellows, and Doris skated contentedly enough by herself. She was wearing Bob's skates, which she liked better than her own, and the man had put them on very well indeed. She went from one field through a gap in the hedge into the next, and then on into a third field. There were very few people here, and most of the ice was not swept; all of this was very pleasant to Doris, and made her feel adventurous. It was beautiful, too; and even children unconsciously understand a sunset with those old thin trees trembling black against the crimson disc, and everywhere bits of white brightness on a gray sea of fog. She skated as fast as she could, the wind helping her, feeling strangely and splendidly animated, when quite suddenly . . .

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But this was not the Fen country. This was the north of Yorkshire. She had been here before on a visit to her cousins. Yonder was the top of Winder; she had climbed it on clear days and seen Morecambe Bay flashing in the distance. But it was night now—almost a black night, and it was very cold for Doris to be wandering over those hills alone. She had an irritating sensation that she had to go somewhere before the dawn came, and that she did not know where or why. It was lonely and awesome. "If I only had somebody to speak to, I shouldn't mind it so much," she said to herself. At once she heard a low voice saying, "Doris! Doris!" and she looked round.

In a recess of the ravine which a ghyll had made for itself as it leaped from the cold purity of a hill-top to the warm humanity of a village in the valley—a village no better than it should have been—a small fire of sticks was smouldering. Doris could just see that the person crouched in front of the fire—the person who had called her by her name—was an old, haggard woman, with her chin resting on her knees.

"Tell me, old woman," Doris said almost angrily, "what does this all mean? I was at Lingay Fen skating, and now I am wandering over the Yorkshire hills. It has changed from afternoon to night——"

"It generally does," said the old woman in a chilly, unemphatic way. Doris stamped her foot impatiently. "I mean that it has changed quite suddenly. Just a moment ago, too, I felt quite certain that I had to go somewhere, and I had forgotten where. Now I don't think I have to go anywhere."

"No—you have arrived," said the old woman softly.

At that moment a dry twig burst into flame, and lit up the old woman's face and figure for a second. She was hideous enough; her face was thin and yellow; her cavernous eyes spar-Med to the momentary flicker. Her dress and cloak were torn and faded, but they had been bright scarlet.

“You naturally ask why,” she continued, “because you are young and have not yet learned the uselessness of it. What has just happened to you seems very meaningless and foolish, but it is not more meaningless and foolish than the rest of things. It is all a poor sort of game, you know. Explain? No, I shall not explain; but it was I who brought you here. Sit down by me under the night sky, and watch.”

“No, I will not,” said Doris, and walked away. She took about ten paces away, and then came back again and did the very thing which she said she would not do. She sat down by the old woman, and was a little angry because she could not help doing it. Then she began to grumble at the fire. “That’s not half a fire,” she said; “it just smoulders and makes smoke. I will show you what you ought to do. You put on some fresh sticks—so. Then you put your mouth quite close to the embers, and blow and keep—on—blowing. There!” She had fitted her actions to her words, and now a bright flame leaped out. It shone all over, on her dark hair and dark bright eyes, and on the gray furs of her dress. It shone, too, on the old woman, who was smiling an ugly, half-suppressed smile.

“Doris,” said the old woman, “leave the fire alone. I do not want flame. I only want it to stream forth smoke.”

“But why?”

“See now—there.” The old woman made a downward gesture with both hands, and the flame sank obediently down again, giving place to a quick yield of black smoke. “Look at the smoke, Doris. That is what you have to watch.” There was a little more energy in the old, quavering voice now.

Doris did as she was told; but suddenly she stopped and cried, half-frightened, “There are faces in it!”

“Yes, yes,” said the old woman, almost eagerly; “and there are pictures of the future in it—of the future as it will be unless I alter it this night. I alone can alter it, you know. Are you not glad now that you came?”

“It is something like fortune-telling; did you ever have your fortune told?”

“No, I never did,” replied the old woman. Her smile was very ugly indeed.

“But how shall I know that it’s true?”

“Why, you *do* know.”

That was the strangest part of it. Doris felt certain without having a reason that she could give for it. “Show me my future,” she said breathlessly.

“Watch the smoke, then.”

So she watched, and picture followed picture. At the first of them she made some little exclamation. “Ah!” she cried, “that is a splendid dress; and I *do* like those shoes. I wish I might have long dresses now—I’m sure I’m old enough; and I want to have my hair done up the proper way, but “ She stopped suddenly, because the picture had changed. “I look much prettier in this one,” she said. “I have been dancing, I think, from the dress, and because I seem a little out of breath. There is a man with me, and now he—no, no! I would *not*. I should hate it. That picture cannot be right!” The third picture represented her marriage with great splendor. “Well,” she said, “I do not mind that so much—just standing up and wearing a beautiful veil. But I don’t want to be married at all. I like skating ever so much better.”

There was a faint sound of laughter, muffled and bitter, from the old woman. “You like skating?” she said. “Where are your skates, then, Doris?” Doris looked for them, but

could not find them, and this distressed her. "Oh, what *shall* I do? They were not my skates; they were Bob's."

"Who is Bob?"

"Bob is my smallest brother—ever so much younger than I am; he's my favorite brother, too. He's got red hair, but he's a pretty boy."

"He must be a milksop if he can't skate."

"He *can* skate. He can do the outside edge backward; he skates better than any of my three big brothers."

"Well, well—it's a pity that he's stupid, though."

"Stupid? Do you know why he lent me his skates? Because he was going to write a story this afternoon, and he's going to put me in it. Bob can do almost anything. He's wonderful. When he grows up he'll very likely write a whole hook, he says."

"Look at his future—Bob's future—in the smoke," said the old woman grimly, heaping on more sticks.

Doris looked reluctantly. The pictures came flashing past one after the other. Some she could not altogether understand, for she knew nothing of the vices of young men; but they were vaguely terrible. But even a child could understand the last picture of all. It was awful and vivid. She almost fancied that she could hear the report of the pistol, and the dim thud as the body fell awkwardly on the floor.

"You needn't cry," said the old woman, 'as Doris burst into tears.

"Oh! Bob is so splendid," sobbed Doris. "Don't let it be like that. Do alter it. You don't know him or you would change it. You said you could. I'll give you everything I've got if you'll stop it somehow."

"Will you give me your beauty—your youth—your life?"

"Oh, willingly—everything!"

"I want none of them—none of them," said the old woman fiercely and quickly. "But I want something else. Give it me, and I will alter it as you wish." She stretched out a lean finger and tapped Doris' forehead, and whispered a few words in her ear.

Doris turned white enough, but she nodded assent. "Then it will alter my future, too," she said with a little gasp.

"It will alter the future of everybody in the world—indirectly and in some cases very slightly. But you will give it me?"

"Yes, yes." She paused a moment, and then added a torrent of questions: "Old woman, who are you? Why are you dressed in scarlet? Why did you have me brought here? I should like it to turn out to be a dream. Oh! why do you want it? Why are you so horribly—horribly cruel?"

But the old woman, and the fire, and the great dark hills grew dim and indistinct; and there was no answer.

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The two old men—one with a medical, the other with a military air—came slowly down the broad staircase from the bedrooms without speaking. The little red-headed boy was waiting for them as usual. "Is Doris any better, papa?" he asked eagerly. "Will she live?"

It was no good to keep it from him; he would have to know sooner or later.

“Yes, Bob,” said the colonel, “she will live. But the—the injury to her head has—” He stopped with a gulping sound in his voice. The boy looked up at him wistfully with a scared face.

“Don’t, colonel,” said the doctor; “you’d better leave it to me. I will tell the boy.”

## 2—MAJOR GUNNICAL

Nobody ever denied in my presence that Major Gunnical was a capital shot and a good fellow. He went straight, and it was always imputed to him for righteousness. But the other day the only man of the world with whom I am acquainted accused the major of want of taste, and based his accusation on the fact that he took the liberty of dying in the country-house of a friend, not having been invited for that purpose. I might have pointed out that Major Gunnical knew Sir Charles quite well enough to take a liberty which would have been unpardonable in a casual guest; I might have added that it was one of those accidents which may happen to any man, and that it was unintentional and unforeseen on the major’s part. But I prefer to give the facts of the case, which seem to me to explain everything.

On the evening which opened the night of his death, Major Gunnical had gone upstairs to dress sooner than the rest of them. He stood in his bedroom with his back to the fire, well knowing that if the back be warm the whole body is warm also. He was half-afraid that he had caught a chill, and chills affected him. There was nothing in his appearance to tell you that his heart was wrong. His body was large and muscular, and he looked a strong man.

His hair had only just begun to get a little gray. His complexion was pale, but it had been tanned by hot suns and seemed clear and healthy. His eyes were thoughtful gray eyes—quite out of keeping with the active look of the man. His best point was his simple directness; he could do right things, even when they were not easy, without thinking of them at the time or afterward. His worst point was his temper, which broke loose occasionally. At the present moment he was thinking about himself, which was not a usual occurrence with Major Gunnical, and his thoughts were depressing; so he tried to dismiss them. “It’s all nervousness and too much tobacco,” he thought to himself; “but I will go up to town to-morrow and let old Peterson prescribe for me. I shall be all right in a day—probably only liver—no exercise, thanks to this cursed frost. Oh, yes, it’s just liver—nothing else.”

He paused once when he was fastening his collar, and said slowly and distinctly, “Damn presentiments.” But he was not able to shake off a feeling of quietness: a desire to be at peace with men and a tendency to look at the sad side of things. When he got downstairs he found only one man already in the drawing-room—a man called Kenneth, who wrote. Now there was a certain disagreement between Kenneth and the major. In the smoking-room the night before, the major had expressed his sincere admiration for a certain story of soldier life by a new writer, and Kenneth had explained to him that his admiration was wrong, because the story was not at all well constructed.

“I own,” he had said, “that it takes a critic to see the faults of the technique.” This was a little vain of Kenneth. “Yes,” said the major hotly, “and it takes a *man* to feel the merits of the story.” This was a little rude of the major, for Kenneth was obviously an

effeminate person. Kenneth put up his eye-glasses and looked at the major curiously. "Don't be so damnably affected," said the major. Then Sir Charles had interposed lazily.

Consequently, when the major entered the drawing-room Kenneth at once began to assume more dignity than Providence had made him able to carry easily. The major walked up to him and held out one hand. "Look here, Kenneth," he said, "I'm an old fool, and always thinking I know another man's business as well as my own. I'd no right to question your opinion last night and make an angry ass of myself. I'm sorry." Kenneth's dignity came down heavily, and he took the major's hand at once. For a fortnight he loved him, and then he told publicly the story of how he had gone to the major and forced him to apologize. Forthere is a combination of imagination and vanity which nothing—not even kindness—can kill.

The major was very dull at dinner, but when his host's two children came in afterward, they seemed to find him very satisfactory. The major loved children. He did not stop very long in the smoking-room that night. He wanted badly to be alone.

For some time after he had gone to bed he lay awake thinking. Maude, his host's elder daughter, reminded him in appearance of his own niece Doris. It seemed hard that Maude should be so bright and happy, and that Doris—owing to a skating accident—should be condemned to lose all her brightness, and her flow of talk, and her power to understand. Yet Doris never seemed actually unhappy; her eyes were vacant, as if the light behind them had gone out, but she did not seem to be suffering. During the first part of her illness she had babbled about some woman, an old woman dressed in scarlet, who frightened her.

Thus thinking, the major fell asleep. It was long past midnight when he opened his eyes and saw a figure of a woman standing on the hearth-rug, and stretching yellow hands like claws toward the remnant of the fire. It startled him, but he did not want to wake up the rest of the house.

"What are you doing in my room?" he said in a rapid whisper.

The old woman turned round. He could hardly see her face, but the flicker of the fire showed him that she was dressed in rags of faded scarlet. Her voice was very gentle and low.

"Awake? Are you awake? I made a little noise to wake you on purpose. But generally they go on sleeping when I come. I am the scarlet woman of whom Doris spoke. She has been taken."

"Dead? A merciful deliverance."

"No, she is not delivered yet. She has to go through life again in a lower form before she is delivered. I hate her. I will see that she is unhappy again before she is delivered."

"Why does this all seem real instead of seeming fantastic and absurd—as it ought to?"

"Because it *is* real; but they always ask me that, all those who see me. Doris shall become a caged bird, I think—one of those who are driven nearly mad by captivity and yet are so strong that they die slowly."

"You can't do that," said the major quickly.

"You know I can, and you know I shall," replied the old woman in the same soft whisper. "I need not argue, or prove, or do anything of that kind. When I speak men *know* that all is as I say; but they do not often hear me, because they are nearly always asleep when I come."

"Where is Doris now

"She waits in dreamland, where nothing is real, until I get my opportunity, and she is born once more, and caught, and caged, and tortured."

As she said this she seemed to grow a little more excited; and, as if in sympathy with her, the fire suddenly burned up more brightly, and showed her horrible, lean face, and deep, leering eyes.

"That's cruel," said the major. "And what shall I be when I die?"

"You will not have a bad time," she said, grinning. "You shall be a dear little white lamb that lives an hour and then is delivered. You will die to-night, by the way. But Doris shall beat her heart out against bars, because I hate her. You will see one another in dreamland, while you are waiting until I get the two right opportunities."

An idea occurred to the major. "Change us, Doris and myself."

The old woman trembled with agitation, and her voice rose shrilly. "I will not! I will not!" she cried.

But something bright and sure, like a steady light, seemed to fill the man's mind. "But you will—you cannot help it," he answered very quietly.

The old woman strode quickly across the room, her face aflame with rage, and touched him on the heart. He fell backward, and did not speak any more.

"I must always come when they are asleep in future," said the old woman, as she went back to the fire. "It is too much to risk—I have lost by Doris and this man." There was a long pause. "But I will torture him even more than I would have tortured Doris," she whispered gently to the fire.

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Two months afterward a white lamb was born, in a sheltered place, on a grassy fell. And in an hour it died.

And on the same day a certain bird-catcher, resident in Whitechapel, went out early and had luck.

### 3—DORIS IN THE HEREAFTER

The release had come at last. To Doris it was an exquisite release; the years spent in darkness were over; the short, mystical period which followed her death was over; her spirit went out into the moonlit night—white, naked, beautiful. She could remember but little consciously of her earth-life. She had suffered—she could recollect that, and she had spoken with a grim woman—an old woman dressed in rags of faded scarlet. She did not recollect what had been said, but she knew that it had been the beginning of the darkness which had fallen on her mind. Of her death she knew nothing; of a short strange time after her death she knew a little, dimly and vaguely.

She was free, and it was enough for her. It seemed to her that she still kept the body which had been called Doris during its earth-life, but that now it was light as the air, stronger than before, and far more beautiful. She stood, a childish figure, graceful and erect, on a shred of dark cloud which a steady night wind blew past the hill-tops and over the valley. Below her she could see the flooded river, angry with its old stone bridges, crying itself to sleep in long, still reaches, with the mists rising white all about it. She saw, too, much that the living do not see. In a lonely cottage, low and roughly built, some

young spring flowers had just died; she saw their souls—their fragrance, as she had been used to call it—pass upward; and as they passed they changed and became a handful of ghost-lilies in the garden-land of dreams. And all night long she went on her way, seeing beautiful things. She could never be tired any more; and the rain and the dew did not hurt her; and the cold wind did not seem cold to her. And when the morning came, a little baby breeze came up to her with a message. It was so young and forgetful that it had not got the exact words of the message. But it remembered the drift of it. “He said you were to go and look for sorrows,” it whispered in her ear. It lingered for a moment, playing with her hair, and then it went down below and tried to blow a dandelion clock. And not being strong enough, it sat down and sulked; for it had not yet learned that the only things worth doing are the things one cannot do.

Then Doris went on about her work, very happy, singing little songs that she remembered. And first of all she went to a great house where a proud and beautiful lady lived. But the proud lady sat huddled up and quite undignified in her own room, crying till her nose was red and she was not pleasant to see. And all because some one or other—I think it was her husband—was dead, and was going to be forever happy! Doris laughed contemptuously, and passed on.

She next went to a nursery where there was a little freckled girl with sandy hair. And the little girl was unhappy because of a bad accident to a ninepenny doll, which was her most intimate friend. There was a small hole in the doll’s neck and a possible escape of sawdust. It was only by holding the doll wrong way up and shaking it that you could make the sawdust come out; and the little girl did not want the sawdust to come out at all, for it caused her agony when it came out; and yet she held the doll upside down and shook it. For this was the kind of girl that, when she grows up, becomes a woman. Doris was sorry for her, and whispered in her ear, “You had better get a little piece of stamp-paper and stick it over the hole in the doll’s neck—but it won’t last long.” The child thought Doris was a beautiful idea, and went radiantly to the study and opened the despatch-box. There was no stamp-paper. There was one penny stamp, and she knew that it was wicked to take it. So she compromised—which was feminine of her—and tore the stamp in two and only took half of it. Then she went back to the nursery, and fixed the half-stamp as Doris had suggested. Doris, who had watched her, was horrified. “You ought not to have taken that stamp,” she said to her. “You had better confess what you have done, and say that you do not wish to tell a lie.” Then the little girl supposed Doris was conscience—for, of course, Doris was invisible—and did not think quite so much of her. Neither did she confess. Doris was not very unhappy about it, knowing that children are always forgiven and occasionally forgotten.

She saw many other sorrows and she thought very little of them. People, she perceived, always exaggerated the importance of death, and money, and love. Yet she saw a wind—a venomous wind—snap the stalk of the very loveliest daffodil, and nobody wore black clothes for it, or had sherry-and-biscuits, or showed any of the signs of sorrow. She had only been for a few hours in the Hereafter, and yet she already felt herself to be out of touch with humanity.

And it happened that she came to a great dirty city, and she stopped where a cage of wicker-work was hung outside a grimy shop in a grimy street. There were several things in the cage: a yellow glass for water with no water in it; a blue glass for seed with no seed in it; something which had once been a turf and now looked like a badly cooked brick;

and something which panted on the floor of the cage in the corner—it was all that was left of a bird, a soaring bird that loved the upper air and the sunlight, but was now reduced to plain dying and high thinking. Now none of the other sorrowful persons had seen Doris; but the bird saw her and called to her, but she did not understand the language. She went into the shop and whispered to the man in charge, “Your bird outside wants attention; it’s ill.”

“Bless my soul! and I gave a shilling for it!” So he took the bird some water and something to eat which was not good for it. The bird chirped. “It knows me and loves me already,” said the man. It was really saying, “Would you kindly wring my neck, and end this?”

“I am sorry for it,” said Doris, as she passed on. “I am glad I was never a pet.” She would have been more sorry if she had known all the history of that bird.