

Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

A ROMANCE OF WASTDALE

A. E. W. Mason



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Chapter I



“Mrs. Jackson!”

Mrs. Jackson was feeding her ducks at the beck behind the house. But the kitchen door stood open, and she not only heard her name, but recognised the voice which shouted it.

“It’s Mr. Gordon,” she said to the servant who was with her, and she bustled through the kitchen into the parlour, drying her hands with her apron as she went.

David Gordon stood by the window, looking dreamily out across the fields. He turned as she entered the room, and shook hands with her.

“I have given you a surprise,” he laughed.

“You have, indeed, Mr. Gordon. I never expected to see you again at Wastdale Head. You should have written you were coming.”

And she proceeded to light the fire.

“I didn’t know myself that I was coming until yesterday.”

“It is three years since you were here.”

“Three years,” Gordon repeated slowly. “Yes! I did not realise it until I caught sight of the farm-house again.”

“You will be wanting breakfast?”

“The sooner, the better. I have walked from Boot.”

“Already?”

“It didn’t seem really far;” and a smile broke over his face as he added—

“I heard my marriage bells ringing all the way across Burnmoor.”

Mrs. Jackson retired to the kitchen to prepare breakfast and to ponder over his remark. The result of her reflections was shown in the unusual strength of the tea and in an extra thickness of butter on the toast. She decked the table with an assortment of jams, and carefully closed the door which opened into the lane, although the April sunlight was pouring through it in a warm flood. It seemed as if Gordon had gained an additional value and herself an additional responsibility. She even took a cushion from the sofa and placed it on his chair, and then waited on him while he breakfasted, nodding and smiling a discreet but inquisitive sympathy.

On Gordon, however, her pantomime was lost. His thoughts no longer chimed to marriage bells. For Wastdale, and this farmhouse in particular, were associated in his mind with the recollection of two friends, of whom one was dead in reality, the other dead to him; and always vividly responsive to the impression of the moment, he had stepped back across the interval of the past three years, and now dwelled with a strange sense of loneliness amidst a throng of quickening memories.

The woman, however, got the upper hand in Mrs. Jackson, and she suggested, tentatively—

“Then maybe, Mr. Gordon, you are going to be married?”

“You can omit the ‘maybe,’” he laughed.

“Well, I should never have thought it!” she exclaimed.

“Time brings in his revenges,” said he.

“The way you three gentlemen used to rail at women! Well, there!”

“But, then, they weren’t women. They were Aunt Sallies of our own contriving—mere pasteboard. We were young and we didn’t know.”