

THE STORY OF ULLA

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THE STORY OF ULLA

THIS is the story of Ulla the Viking, Ulla the priest! This is the story of Ulla the proud, and Ulla the humble. This is the story each sentence of which falls on the heart of the writer heavy as the hollow moan of breakers on some desolate midnight shore. And the heart of Ulla is that shore, and the pulse of the storm that is over—the storm of the life and the loving—comes distant and sad as he writes, with a melancholy cadence, through the hush of the evening of living.

I am that Viking, I am that priest; and here in my lonely home by the edge of the northern sea I sit by the dim shine of my lamp, while the night-wind sighs without; and across these lean thin hands, these palsied knotted fingers that tremble like the white aspen leaves, lies a fair braid of yellow hair. Long, long it seems since that braid was cut from the head that wore it, long long months of pain and days of regretting have passed

since that strand was cut from its wearer: the salt sea has dimmed it, time has touched its lustre, and the dark stain of blood is upon it, yet as I, the monk Ulla, raise that fair thing again and again to my lips and press it where nought but the sign of the new faith should be pressed,—press it trembling and silently to these cold lips, something of the old love shoots through my shrunken veins, something of the strong passion that once nerved them tingles into those withered fingers that smooth that gleaming toy so tenderly, and a white mist rises to my dull eyes, and my head droops forward, and the little cell seems widening out as wide as life itself; and sad as the sound of the wind amongst pine trees, desolate as the beat of the tireless pulse of the sea upon the rim of the night, comes to my lonely heart the echo of long ago.

.

It was in the time of my master, Halfdan the Black, and I was a Norway jarl, and lived by the white edge of the sea in Baldersund. I was young then, I was scarcely twenty, and had herds, and men, and farms all the way up the wild coast as far as fair Hitteren; and a longship lay in the creek by my homestead; and boarhounds lay on

the rushes by my wild ingle-nook, and my bows and spears lay on the tressels, and a hundred jolly fellows drank from my flowing horns, and carved my meats each day, and were proud to call me lord and leader. Three times as many stocked my yellow harvests, and filled my barns. And I was strong and tall and big of limb, and although I was so young I had already been twice abroad, and had harried across the wide sea in distant Fareyjar and down south to Ljodhus. I had sipped the glorious wine of battle, and watched the red flame of burning thorpe and tower leap up to heaven from my footsteps. Princes had courted me, and scalds had sung,—everything I had, everything that a bold heart could hope for, or a strong hand reach—everything but one: the chair on my left hand still stood empty at the feast; no bright eyes welcomed Ulla returning victorious from a foray; no tall Norway maid tempered with her smooth presence the rude revelry in his fathers' hall, for Ulla was unwed.

Yet was it not for lack of fitting choice, for our maids were straight as young spruces, supple as the green sedges by the tarns, and fair as the spring flowers of the fjelds when the May snow rolls back from them, and many such might I have

had for the asking. Thoralla there was for instance, whose locks were as yellow as the ripe hill barley; and Unn, whose shy blue eyes shone wondrous kindly on her handsome neighbour when they met in shady forest path; and Thyri the slim, whose mother thought the lands of Ulla and their own would march well together; and Thora the smiler, and many another. But I was wild and wayward, and as difficult to net as the free blue hawks that sail along the cliff face in spring-time.

Matters were like this when my master King Halfdan, more easily persuaded, had determined to marry the comely Ragnhild, daughter of Harold Goldbeard; and, everything having been settled by the ambassadors, one day in early summer from all the isles and fjords, and every river town and mountain flat came trooping the Norway lords and chiefs to honour the ceremonial and see the show. By Friga's self that was a day, when all those cavaliers came riding down to the plain by the southern city, and as far as the eye could see, the meadows were aglisten with spear and cuirass and winged helms, and every way was blocked with mighty men in skins and golden armour,—strong sons of Odin with wild blue eyes, keen

features, and yellow hair astream upon their shoulders, and mighty muscles showing beneath their clinking armlets and bands of beaten metal; indeed, that was a day, and I could fill, here as I sit with nothing but the blank rock-wall before me, an hundred pages with the names and deeds of those who came, and every name should sound to you like that of a great and princely brother, and every splendid deed I linked to every name should bring the blush of pride to your cheeks and the pulse of pleasure to your quickening kindred hearts,—but the lamp burns low, and I am no scald, therefore let those warlike shadows pass unchronicled again into the voids of memory from whence they came.

In mid of the plain the king's men had built a hall of rough-hewn pine logs, so long and wide five thousand chiefs could sit to meat within it at once. And every vassal of the king had sent a polished buckler to deck the bride-house, and these were ranged in rows along the roofs and sides, until all those warlike trappings gleamed together with one splendid broad shine that men could see from Akin-fell to the white pools by Flekkerfjord. And every Norway maid had bound

a fillet of green spruce and golden-flower, and these were ranged between the shields until a cloud of soft colour wrapped the palace far and near, and the sweet new pine-smell hung warm and heavy overhead.

Nor was this all. Every jarl and sea lord, every captain and rover who owned a longship or snekja, a skeid, or skuta, had brought them round to the tjord and hauled them up over rollers; and there they stood, those great navies of the Vikings that had paled the cheeks of maids and matrons in twenty lands, their golden names—*Deer of the Surf, Raven of the Wind, Ægir's Steed, Hawk in the Gull's Track, Snake of the Sea*—carved in Runic on each steep rising prow, in two long rows a mile or more in length, with parti-coloured sails all set, and red raiding flag streaming on the wind, and gilt dragon-heads all turned inwards, and jolly crews in bright vestment at their idle ranks of oars, and garlands of flowers about those sides which the white ribbons of the ocean foam were wont alone to deck.

All about the great mid hall were scores of lesser halls; so that where the green grass grew a week ago was now a gay wooden city,—and a thousand troops of horse stood munching Halfdan's hay,

and a thousand stalwart clansmen were quaffing Halfdan's ale, and a thousand tables bent with Halfdan's provender, and a thousand trumpets sounded Halfdan's war-note, and a thousand scalds were singing Halfdan's praises, that day King Halfdan married.

That great prince had chosen me to be amongst his right-hand men, and thus happened that which was the sweet and the bitter, the light and the darkness of my life. King Goldbeard came ashore from his ships early in the morning, and my handsome black-haired master took sweet Ragnhild by the hand, and, at the head of a long procession of princes, chiefs, and ladies, all on foot, marched through the mighty concourse of the shouting people, and up the long lane of dragon-ships into the great hall itself. There the feudatories ranged themselves in gallant rows at the many tressel tables, while the king, and we with him, went on to the further end where stood some oaken benches. These made three sides of a square. On one sat Harold with his peers, on the other, facing him, was Halfdan, and I on his right, and four strong jarls from the corners of his kingdom to flank us. The last bench across the other two was filled by

ladies, and amid them—all in white bride-linen, with a splendid torques of jewels binding the loose folds across her bosom, and a diadem of rough gold in her golden hair—sat the bride.

I scarcely know what followed! I saw the bride-price paid and the bench gifts made on bended knee; I saw the fair and frightened Ragnhild clinging weeping for a minute to her father's neck, and then I saw King Halfdan take her hand, and acknowledge her before all Norway as his wife; the trumpets sounded, and the shout of the people outside came into the hall like the roar of a torrent sounding through the pine woods,—I saw and heard all this but dimly, for Ulla Erlingson himself, the indifferent, the invincible, was on that moment vanquished.

Amongst the fair Dane's maidens on the cross-bench sat an English girl, and such a queen for gentle loveliness never eyes rested on before. She was scarce seventeen years old, but tall and shapely and slim, with a wondrous smooth figure, and her comeliness of limb and outline was set off by a fair clinging robe of the mystic druid green of just such hue as you see hanging, pale and tender, over the strong black fields of the

northern sea when the wet west wind blows at sunset. Her eyes were blue as fairy-flax in summer, and shy and clear, with a veiled light shining somewhere deep down within them; her feet were sandalled with doeskin and white ermine, her middle was belted with a broad zone of pearls and amber beads, none of them smaller than a linnet's egg; and her hair, the crown and consummation of her loveliness, was bound up with a single fillet of red English gold.

And a strand of that hair now, fifty years after, lies before me in the pale flicker of my feeble lamp. The lustre has gone from it, and the dull stain of blood is on it, and it is pale with the kisses of these priestly lips, and bleached by salt sea water,—and I hide my eyes a space from the silent reproach of that sweet toy, for even now I cannot look upon it without throes of heavy grief and sorrow.

But nothing I recked of this then, and before the hungry laughing chieftains had settled down to the marriage feast, before Ragnhild and Gunna—my sweet maid,—and I as flagon-bearer, had once made the circle of the hundred tables and first-filled with pine-bark beer each princely feaster's

flagon, I loved each thing she touched, ay, and the very air she breathed.

Three brief days we spent in happy nearness, I finding she was the daughter of an English prince, one of those lordlings whose lands we pillaged, who had sent the maiden over under the care of a surly churl, her uncle, with a woman-gift to Ragnhild in order to enlist that great lady's friendly mediation. The first day I spent haunting the maiden's footsteps, a prey to such fits of hot hopefulness and cold despair as I thought surely no other man had ever suffered hitherto. The second day we had sports and contests, and plucking up heart of grace I threw Offar the Dane in a wrestling bout, and hurled my spear on the first try sheer through the great iron shield old Langaness of Iceland had hung for us to cast at. Ay! and under the eyes of Queen Ragnhild and all her court I spread the great sail on my longship and urged the rowers and burst through the jostling ranks of my compeers, and sailed round the fjord and back ahead of any, and won a prize and laid it on fair Gunna's knees.

And the third day!—between the rising of the sun and the setting of it I had met the maiden

amongst the pines by the lonely shore, and had poured my heart to her with such eloquence as surely Frigga's self gave me, and she had blushed and sighed, and told me how wide apart were our kindred and how hostile our countries, and that it could never be,—and then had blushed again and dropped a tear and slid her hand into my own; and thus Ulla was happy, happy with an incredible happiness, happy beyond expectation and knowledge.

Sweet was the breath of the pines that afternoon, pleasant the distant murmur of the sea upon the hollow rocks; soft the carpet of felted mosses, and fair the nodding flowers that fringed our path.

On the next morning I went to the tent where she lodged by the sullen old churl her uncle, and it was empty! The pennon was gone from in front; the red-haired sentinels were gone; the benches were empty and deserted; the doors were open, and, sick at heart and fearful, I turned to one who stood near and asked where was the barbarian envoy, and where the fair white girl who had come with him. Heavy as lead fell the answer on my ears. "The stranger had quarrelled last night at the feast—had struck and been struck

by a hill chieftain, and in a moment of drunken fury had ordered out his ships, had taken the white maid from her couch, and, scarcely giving her time to slip on cloak and sandals, had gone down to the strand, and cursing everything Norwegian, launched on to the black midnight sea and sailed away through the darkness to the land of the strangers."

Bitter was my grief and disappointment! For half a day I ran up and down the shore distracted, rage and chagrin alternately mastering my soul. Then I bethought me of my longship, and had her dragged to the shore; whence swift as a white seamew before a squall I fled out to sea, crossing over the rough water to beat up and down the English coast for a week, hoping to see them; and when that hope was vain, back I came disconsolate to the Viking's cliffs and sailed for many days about the islands, asking at every town from rocky Jar to merchant Nidaros whether a ship of the foreigners, with a white maid and red-haired men on board, had put in there, getting laughed at for my pains; and so I came back empty-handed and empty-hearted at last to my own homestead.

Very weary were the days and months that

followed. The sunshine had gone out of the world, and I shunned my jolly comrades; the light laughter of the Norway maids was bitter to me. I hated my hawks and my wolf-dogs; no longer I fed my sleek horses; my weapons rusted on their hooks; my lendir-men, unreprieved, pillaged my stocks and barns; and day and night I hung disconsolate over the remembrance of my loss.

.

Ten years had passed; I had forayed north and south, asking with ever lessening hope for news of her I sought from captives and merchants, but one and all shook their heads and could tell me nothing. In many a bloody fray on the English shore and sack of thorpe or castle I had borne her image in my mind, hoping to find her likeness somewhere. Thus I say ten years had passed, and presently still another spring came round; we had eaten all our winter provisions, and were weary of last year's concubines, and rusty with basking by winter fires, and yearnful for the breath of the free ocean or the yet dearer breath of adventure, and so one day I went down to the strand where my good ship lay hauled up and tented over against the storm or snow, to see the

work that Skaun the carpenter, and Vedrey of the brushes, had done upon her. And as I walked about and about that gallant hulk my blood took a new colour, beating a quicker measure than it had done for long while; the winter sloth dropped from me, and the hunger of the rover for quest and danger was born anew in my heart. A better *skeid* never was steered by a sea-king's son, I thought. Her sides were blue,—blue as winter's ice in the shadows of June,—right up from the water-edge to the high gunwale, while inside, the Trondhjem forest oak was scoured as white as a maiden's linen. The tall mast in the centre was slim and straight as an arrow, and on either side were rowlock-holes for sixty oars. A lovely ship indeed, and cunning Vedrey had varnished her until her clinker sides shone like the back of a new-caught salmon, and had carved and gilded every oar-hole with a golden scroll of twisting serpents, and here and there and everywhere had been at work so deftly that it was a day's wonder to explore the workings of the loving zeal wherewith he had adorned that vessel from glittering stem to stern. And Skaun had seen to every peg and sinew that laced her shapely sides; he had been aft and forward: above, below; had

scraped the oars and set new seats for rowers, and caulked afresh each seam with red cow-hair and rosin,—oh, a lovely ship indeed, and in my pride surely I thought such a one never stood on mortal slips before; once more I would venture a cast with fortune, and in a burst of pleasure, and such life as had lain asleep too long within my heart, I vowed there and then to start on a foray before three days were over. And, hot in the revulsion of my feelings, I set Skaun and Vedrey running here and there as they had never run before, and collected some of the lazy *bondi* villains who had basked in my porch and snored by my pine-wood fire all through the snow and frost, and made them work as they had not worked for many a day.

Under our busy hands the beautiful winter hulk put on her war gear and blossomed like a summer tree. We fetched out her sixty great oars, "Feet of the *Sea Wolf*," of ash (four men sat at each), and strapped them into their painted rowlock-holes. Then we slung in the landing-boats, and set the great rudder aft on the starboard: we put the black leather tent on board, and under it the *hudfat* sleeping-bags to shield me and my jolly pillagers from the gentle English rain. We shipped the

landing planks,—many were the white feet of captive girls we hoped would tread them,—and a hundred stout rollers in case our longship needed to be beached. Then we put in the arms chest and filled it to the brim with glistening swords and axes, praying all the time to Odin that their shine might be dimmed ere we returned; we put the brass kettles on board, and the provisions, and barrels of water with little lids. Next we set up the tall mast that shone in its winter coat of bear's grease, and was so red and straight, and hoisted to the spar the broad square-sail "Cloak of the Wind." It was the great Jarl Rand of Viskerdal, my foster-brother, who gave me that sheet, and it was coloured blue and white, and made of woollen stuff as soft as silk. Lastly of all the glistening dragon-head was put upon the prow, and the warriors' shields—black and yellow, each overlapping each—were set along the bulwarks, and there, flashing in the sun with a hundred colours, beautiful and complete from stem to stern, my sea-bride sat shining on the ways!

So hard had we worked that at the dawn of the second day from my vow we were ready, and half the valley came to see us off. All went well with

the launching, and in a few minutes after the props were knocked away we slid out into the fjord and floated true and straight, and at the same instant my five score fighting men set up the hymn to Odin, the sail was spread, and all the long oars began to dip, swift and strong, into the merry water that ran rippling by us. Loudly, loudly I prayed from my place by the high tiller to the three Fatal Sisters who live beneath the ash Yggdrasil that they would send me this time to the arms of my love dead or alive, and loudly, loudly to this moment I bewail me that my prayer was granted.

We crept out by the green island of Thymnæs, where the white sheep were feeding to the water's edge, and past Goddo on our right and the long black shore of Bommelo on the left, and so by many a green oeland out into the spray and fresh salt wind went joyfully lurching the old *Sea Wolf*, the frothy pillow of the foam glittering under her prow, and behind the green wall of the Norway pines, and the grey rocks, and the sweet sea surge that tumbled for ever at their feet and threw its white arms up as though, lover-like, it would enlace its silver fingers with the green hair of the nodding branches overhead. Down went our gallant shore,

down peak, and pine, and point, and as the great black bosom of our mother-sea opened to us her firstling sons, proudly we turned our faces westward, and each eye grew bright at thought of the plunder to come, and each heart beat high as we smelt the incense of fight in the strong breath of the ocean. Oh ! but I was proud, as, my hand on the pulsing tiller that throbbed under the racing surges not less loudly than my heart, I stood by the high stern and led the wild free song to Odin wherewith my gallant company mocked the waves, —proud ! oh, the salt spray rises again in these old eyes of mine but to remember the fierce wine of life that usurped my blood and flew here and there in my young veins that day ; this cold mind of mine burns again but to recall the ecstasy of the unfettered passions that then beset me—but to think for an ungodly minute on those splendid vistas of unbridled lust, and cruelty, and rapine which danced before my soul.

Well ! it is over, and I do wrong even to remember. No more the salt wind takes the war-song of Ulla, like a herald of death, to the land of the strangers ; no more for him is the joyful rattle of the ranged shields clattering on his vessel's

side as she stoops to the steep blue valleys of the midland sea ; no more the old Viking's plough shall turn that frothy furrow he did once delight in ; no more the lovely smoke of burning thorpes shall leap from Ulla's torch to Odin's footstool ; no more his stern heart shall melt to pleasure as his vessel staggers homeward through the yeast and spume, and every swirl of the cold, dark water spinning enviously against her labouring side tells of rich plunder hid within.

It is over for me, but it was a noble frenzy while it lasted. All that noon of our setting out we plunged before a favouring wind across the salt water, and by the second evening the waves began to wear another colour as the sea shoaled up to the British shore. At the same time, the breeze gave out with the sun, and we took to our sweeps ; and, all night long under the starlight, the *Sea Wolf* crept silently and secretly in to the land.

In the grey of the morning that followed, a haze grew up ; and under the curtain of the white sea-mist, that lay soft and heavy as wool on the gently rocking sea, we heard the grind of the waves beating on the dim Northumbrian shore. We approached

as close as we dared, and then waited for the sun, rolling an idle hour or two on the smooth, long heave of the swell; and, in dead silence, listening to the chatter of the wildfowl and the laugh of the kittiwake on the unseen cliffs, or the chafe and creak of an oar now and then in the rowlocks, and the hiss of the water swirling gently against our sides. So still lay the *Sea Wolf* in the shadow of the morning mist, that the shy grebes and speckled divers came paddling all about her and stared with eyes bead black with wonder to see the silver mist turn on a sudden into a painted hulk with ranked oars, and great damp sail aflag against the ruddy mast, and golden dragon-head sniffing the chill morning air aloft, and grim warriors, leaning on battle-axe and spear, crowding her deck. And strange fish swam lapping round, and the swift gannet's white pinions stirred Halfdan's listless flag, as she swept unheeding by through the milky haze; no man amongst us spoke, until on a sudden the curling wavelets in the east sparkled with liquid fire, the hanging shroud of whiteness flushed with a yellow radiance, a strange bright light shone through the green-crested waves; and as the free, sweet breath of the morning drifted down upon

us, and each man drank of it deep and silently, the curtain of the night was lifted, and the yellow feet of the sun came striding over the black plains of the restless northern sea.

Silent and deep we laughed with pleasure, and my grim brave fellows shook the mist-beads from their tawny lips, then, muttering a prayer to Odin, again the white water fretted under the stern of our ship, and the long slow dip of the oars fell with a pleasant sound on the calm of the morning. Round under the rugged knees of great cliffs crept the *Wolf*, so secret and swift that the speckled loons stood agape in rows to watch the golden dragon-head go dipping by their lonely eyries, and the blue pigeon on her cavern shelf astride of her white eggs sat wonder-struck and forgot to fly;—thus we went across the mouth of lonely bays, and under grassy headlands, and down big bights fringed with endless barren meadows, and past fair estuaries where rank fields of westral crops were all awaste between neglected woodlands, and southward constantly for many an hour, but nothing could we see to sack or burn! Noon came and went, and the warm sweat glazed the sinewy fore-arms of

my gallant rowers, until at last I saw them begin to turn their bronze faces over their hither shoulders and angrily scan the ruined shore and swear deep between their strong white teeth,—swear at the Dane who had swept this fair country so clean, swear at Biorn Grimsar, and Hakonson the avaricious, and Inge the bloody, and Guthorn of Hagbard who had pillaged here last autumn and wiped out maid and matron, croft and castle, and left nothing for any honest Viking who came after them. Ay! it was sad we thought to see so sweet country so void of life, and we pulled on southward for many miles, looking now on the sunny shore made by nature to be rich and happy, and yet with nothing on it to burn or plunder; and then turning sadly to our piles of bloodless swords and battle-axes, our empty treasure-boxes and untenanted rows of iron fetters for the white ankles of fair British girls. We had rowed on like this, cursing Biorn, and Inge, and Hakonson, all the morning, and had seen nothing but the blackened ruins of a few villages upon the hillside, when, slipping by one lonely promontory, we saw upon the rocks a mad old woman, sad-eyed and lean and pinched, sole remnant of some pillaged English

hamlet, who knew us for what we were upon the instant as she gathered her poor harvest on the beach, and leapt upon a rock and cursed us fiercely out of the black reservoir of her despair and hatred—cursed us for pirates and tyrants,—asked where were the two yellow-haired girls we stole ten years ago? where her two tall sons? where her husband and her kin?—and tossed her tangled locks upon the wind, and yelled, and cried, until, as we crept by, Thoralf of Visund took a javelin from the heap upon the deck and mocked her,—“Where! you foul old sea hag? where,—why, down in hell,—go there and look!”—and as he spoke the javelin flew, and, too true, struck its mark and pierced deep into the old crone’s withered bosom, and with a scream of surprise and deathless hatred she spun round upon her heels and grinned, and staggered, and then plunged headlong into the sea at her feet; and as we passed her crimson blood was spreading in a great red pool upon the dark heave of the smooth flowing surf.

I know not whether it were true, as some amongst my comrades thought, that that thin old blood spilt so would bring us luck, but presently it is true enough we had another sign, for a raven came

flying off from the land and circled round us and fell into our wake behind, and as the black wings of Odin's friend and messenger went flapping overhead a new spirit was born in my fierce crew, they stretched their hands to heaven and shouted with one voice a verse from out the raven war-song, then down they went and with new courage stretched them to their oars until the red Viking flag streamed bravely out astern, and the shields rattled joyfully, and the water lay in a white streak along the low-dipping gunwale of the old *Sea Wolf*. Cape and bay and headland slipped by; we had come into a better peopled country, when on a sudden a Dane who kept our fore-watch slapped his hand upon his thigh and cried, "A burgh! a burgh! and not yet plundered," and there, following the point of his eager finger, we saw, three miles away, a strong hall upon a rocky promontory, with trees and meads about it green and fair, and sheep upon the hills, and clustering huts below all sweet and peaceful, and a little harbour,—everything indeed that could glad a Viking heart; and, truly grateful, we thanked the bird that had brought us fortune, and pulled into a little creek to wait for nightfall.

All the afternoon the longship lay out of sight in that little cavern-bay with the cliffs, green tasselled with hanging grasses, nearly meeting overhead, and below the smooth swell of the water heaving the long tangles of sea grass and weeds, and idly reflecting the stern faces and golden mail of that grim crew on board lying about upon the decks, or hanging over the loaded bulwark to watch the shining fishes at play deep down below;—who would have thought that pretty shadow listlessly rolling there on the heave of the wave was bent on such an errand? It was so still, as we lay screened in the cove, that you could hear the larks singing to themselves high up in the blue over the cliff grass, and the bubble and play of the water in the crevices of the rocks all round us; it was so still that presently this monotony grew wearisome to my fierce and heated spirit, I chafed and turned, and impatiently watched the sun which seemed as though it would never set, until at last a happy idea entered into my head—I would go and spy this burgh we were to plunder; see how big and strong it was, how many men held it, and how much profit we were like to come by in the venture. With

this fancy in my mind, I roused my handsome sleeping fellows, who, at my voice, stretched their great limbs where they had lain sleeping on the rowers' benches, or turned their eyes from gazing on the shining sea to look on one another, and laugh and say, "Ulla is mad! young Ulla Erlingson is wholly mad!" But I pointed out how the madness would vantage us—how greatly it would help us to know the lie and nature of the hold, how I could disguise myself so that my mother should not know me, and learn and see all I could and be back again with them, safe and sound—"or, by dangling on a gibbet above the highest roof, give them something new to fight for," as Sarp of Reyrr said, —before the twilight fell.

Like the brave fellows that they were, the bold fancy pleased them, and forthwith I was disguised as a ragged outcast with slouch hat and sorry coat, and dirty gartered legs, with worn wolfskin sandals, my yellow hair was knotted up and hidden in my cap, my face was daubed grey and lean with ash and mud, and with a little paint good Vedrey put a sore or two upon my naked arms such as might come by want and long travel, and, with a touch or two of red and green, made to look most hideously

new a long-healed wound or two I had upon my bosom. I seemed when it was done so miserable and lean, and put so pitiful a whine into my voice, and leant so heavy on my long ash staff that all my jolly Vikings fell a-laughing, and laughed so loud they hushed the drooning of the blue pigeon brooding on her nest, and started the shaggy, green-eyed sea crows from their rocky pinnacles a mile away, and then they rowed me to a landing, and with jest and sage advice sent me on my dangerous errand.

It was a sweet place that English burgh! Even now, long years after, I, old and wrinkled, still dream in winter nights of the warm incense of that afternoon, and how the grateful sun drew fragrantness from out the earth, and how sweet the yellow meadow flowers did smell about it, and how the apples blossomed on the hanger; and then across my evening vision even now there comes the black reek of its burning thatch, and the hot steam of the blood in the hall by the banquet tables—ay, I conjure again all these years after in restless slumber the shine of its many roofs a-basking in the April sun, the blue-eyed merry children rolling in frolic sport about the grassy court, the twittering

love songs of the new-come swallows on the roof ridge; and then athwart my sleep the black column of avenging smoke leaps to the starlit midnight sky, the cruel tongues of leaping crimson flame spring up, and the fierce gasping cry of stricken men, the piercing shriek of women, and the low wail of butchered little ones affright my old and frightened ears!

Ay, it seemed a sweet place, that untouched, ancient English citadel, as I hobbled out from the hazels, and, humble and decrepit as became me, craved its hospitality.

All inland, stretching away into the dim blue distance, lay fertile fields and woods, shining greener than any other woods can shine, with brooks and streams between them flashing in the light, and splendid herds enough to feast an army for a year knee deep in many-coloured grasses, and then all this richness swept round by the shore of a little crescent bay to here where on a gently rising promontory the Prince's castle stood. It stood upon the very topmost flat of the hill, and was approached from below by a rough track fashioned of beams laid side by side, which circled up through the gorse and fern to its outer fence.

Getting out upon that track I walked up the hill, secretly noting as I went each bush and stone of vantage, and soon came to the first sweep of outer stockade. This was a great circle of pointed timbers sloping forwards over a ditch from the crest of a tall earthen rampart,—strong fence indeed, and one that twenty men might hold against an hundred. I entered through the open gate of this, and right in front rose another rampart and another palisade that made me sigh to look on; I had to walk half round the grassy flat between these two before I found a gate to pass the second timbers. But the latter entrance gained, it made me master of the place. Those two tall fences, strong in oaken timbers, massy gates, and iron rivets, shut in the whole hill-top, of which the outer boundary was the sheer cliffs that dropped steep down into the sea below. And all this space was full of sheds and buildings; and huts and houses, and granaries for corn, and stacks of fodder for the beasts, and corn for soldiers, and here a thrashing-floor, and there a well with rope and bucket, yonder a row of ovens and a drinking-trough, and much else. Then came a grassy green, and next, along the verge, a little aloof from all, the Prince's house.

A fine wide house, it stood upon the crag, with terraces and courts, doors and windows, strong stone outer walls and timbered arches—a goodly place indeed, with the sun shining on it, a gold wind-cock twirling above, red fish-tail tiles upon the roofs, brass studs upon the doors, and a colonnade round it with wide projecting eaves supported by unsmoothed pillars of oak, to which solid oak logs made steps all round. Lastly, behind this was the strong place of the fort, a tall, rough tower of solid masonry rising sheer into the air on the very verge of the cliff from the more peaceful dwelling-places around, and grim and windowless, frowning down two hundred feet into the white surge that broke and thundered far below.

As I entered this burgh a few children were playing about upon the grass, and some women were grinding corn in a stone mill at one place, while at another, a young and fair serving-maid was spinning flax upon the steps of the chief's house. A dog or two lay basking in the sun, and as they saw me and fell a-barking, the damsel stopped her spinning, the corn-mill came to a stop under the hands of the old crones, and the little ones fled to cover like a flock of startled partridges.

But I looked harmless enough, a ragged fellow there by the gate, gaunt and humble; and presently, seeing they were reassured, I advanced slowly and begged of the younger woman, in the meanest whine my wit could master, a drink of milk and an oaten cake to stay my hunger. That fair foreigner got up and took me into the hall—and a splendid hall it was—and put me at the servants' tressel; then, calling some others, set milk and bread before me. So I ate and drank and all the time kept counting the golden plates and ewers on the master's distant table, and scanning his weapons or costly furs hung round the hall, and thinking how much my ship could carry home. Ay, and as each fair damsel filled my horn and platter, asking me in gentle civility the while of my home and wayfaring, little did she know that I was wondering how much she would fetch at the slave-stakes in Trondhjem market-place, or whether she would scream much that night or no. Indeed those comely, red-haired English maidens were so civil, that had they not been barbarians, and thus to us what the hinds of the valley are to the hill wolves, and the speckled salmon to the grey ospreys, I might

almost have rued that red night's work that was at hand. But as things were I should have blushed as soon to think myself compassionate as coward, and thus I laughed and chatted with them, and while I finished my bowl learnt of those incautious women tongues that all the men were away inland; that the women and children from all round came in and the palisades were closed at nightfall, and saving some half dozen herds there were to be no men in the burgh that night. I learnt that their master had a fair daughter, though I saw her not, as she was then spinning with her maidens in the turret; that the master was wondrous rich, but old and feeble; and thus, having learned all I hoped for, with a last quick look round the place I rose to go. As I turned one gentle maid put a silver penny, that she had taken from a little store in the corner of her thread box, into my hand. "Farewell," she said, "old man, and may the good God guide you—it ever grieves my heart to see one poor and hungry." And that penny was put out at good interest; for that very night, when the burgh was burning, I saved her from the brief wooing of Vidkun the Rough, and leading her to the fosse, showed her the coin, and, pointing to the dark shade of

the thickets, let her go free and unharmed. Thus I rejoined my comrades and told them all I had seen.

It was just at dusk that evening; the western sky was streaked with crimson and black, the white mist was lying in thin wreaths along the purple river meadows, the landrails were croaking in the fern and the nightjars churning on the oak, the little stars were twinkling in the smooth heaven, and the pale crescent of the moon was adrip upon the sea, when a thin curl of smoke rose from the thatch of a hut in the fishing village below the burgh. A minute after a bright tongue of flame shot up, and a cry of alarm rose from inside the stockades. "Surely some careless housewife had let an ember fall amongst the thatch," they thought, and the great oak gates creaked upon their hinges, and out to the extinguishing rushed in their loose sheepskin cloaks two luckless herds. As they crossed the portal, an arrow sped across the grass, and plunging deep into the chest of the foremost, he bounded half his height into the air, then fell with a heavy thud into the fern, and went rolling, and kicking, and screaming down the hillside. At the same minute an unseen hand from behind, with a single

sweep of a good Norway axe, severed the head of the other from his body as he stood glaring after his comrade; and now the starlight was twinkling on the weapons and mail of hurrying Norsemen, and while the fierce cry of "Odin!" "Odin!" went up to the black sky, and the dusky crows, startled from their roosting-places, flapped dismally about between the stars, a low long wail of fear and terror rose from the hundred corners of that doomed citadel.

And the game was ours from the beginning. Numerous and strong, fierce and thirsty as bloodhounds on the trail, we raced for the open gates, and carried the first one, and swept round the way between under the unguarded palisades, where a dozen men might have held us at bay; and so to the inner portal, where we stabbed a brave old crone who tried to shut it in our face, and there the place had fallen—the wolves were in the fold.

And wild work we made of it! As we gained the entrance, the English chieftain rushed out of the mid-door of his hall in his night-wear, for he had already gone to his bed, a naked sword in his hand, and by his side a fair young boy with curly yellow hair. By Thor! I would not have been the

wild-fowl on the neighbouring marsh when that comely lad was hungry. He shot so close and straight, although the light was poor for shooting, that had there been a dozen such it would have gone badly indeed with us. At the first shaft he pierced Kolbiorn through the wrist, and at the second wounded stalwart Sveinke in the thigh; then he shot one in the throat and another in the stomach, and kept us all at bay until his last arrow was spent, and then died far down on the haft of bloody Dagson's bare spear, like the fierce young cub he was. As for the other, although he was stout enough of heart, yet his limbs were lean and old, and my merry fellows made short work with him, and he lay in the moonlight as they left him, pale and bloody across his threshold, all the evening.

Then we shut the gates to keep the screaming women in, and lit a stake or two to give us light, and so fell on. But why should I try to tell you all we did that evening? why should I try to picture the wild fierce hell of lust, and cruelty, and rapine that raged that night within those grassy shambles, under the mild, white starlight? An I had a hundred pens I could not tell each

incident as it befell, and if I did you might not care to listen! If I had a hundred pens I could scarce recount how one by one we first dragged the men from their hiding-places, and how some of them fought desperately, while some submitted sullenly, but whichever way it was we killed them. Or how the women screamed and struggled in the arms of the sea rovers, and cried for mercy, and tore the yellow beards of their new, grimly laughing masters, and were sent down to Hades, the old and lean ones; and how the others—the pale, fair girls, with fear-bright eyes, and long, loose hair and bare feet, all in their torn, dishevelled night-gear,—were bound hand and foot, and lashed to the pillars in the dining-hall; or how the little ones moaned and wailed, and hid behind the heaps of dead, and strove to wake, with timid petulance, those who would never wake again, or, often with their cherished playthings locked tight in their arms, crept into wondrous corners and hid from us—ask me no smaller detail, for I could surfeit you with horrors until compassion dimmed your eyes and stayed your reading.

For an hour the place was full of the guttural

shouts of men and the shrieks of women, the scream of the maiden and cry of the mother losing her little one, the wail of the captive, and the moan of the dying down in the shadows; and men ran here and there, struggling with white shrouded forms, or dragging by heel or hair strange shapes into dusky corners; and the fires blazed and the sparks fell, and then, presently, because there were no more to kill, the noise died down until silence reigned, broken only by the laughing and shouting of my men, and thus we gathered in the hall, relit the lamps, brushed off the remnants of the evening supper, and laid out for ourselves all the best that we could put our hands on. And fierce wild revelry my fellows made of it. The hot blood of rapine and pillage had got into their veins, and they added to it the strong, abundant drink from that British chieftain's hiding-places until they were more like a tawny handsome band of furies than mortal men,—Gods! I think I never brought such a crew of devils to that shore before! They made the rafters ring with their wild pagan hymns, they danced and shouted, and eat and drank, while the pale captive girls stood huddling in the shadows or waited trembling on them; and the wine and ale

went streaming down the floor amongst the blood and litter, and the torches flared, and the dogs howled outside,—oh, it was a strange wild scene, and went on all the night-time.

It must have been near the grey dawn; half the maidens lay swooning upon the floor between weariness and terror, and half the rovers were drunk as swine; when they fetched in the dead chieftain, setting him pale and bloody in his chair, and putting a cup into his hand, while the ribaldest fellow there made a song and sung it to him; then, next, a cry arose—who started it I know not, but may God forgive him!—for the English franklin's daughter! We had not seen her, she was not amongst the captives; and now a hundred buxom fellows were on foot, hunting with torch and lamp high and low, in every crack and corner of the burgh, to find her. Unhappy damsel, they hunted futilely everywhere until they came to the small round tower on the cliff verge; there the strong oak door was barred and shut from within, and a wild yell of drunken pleasure told their quarry was at bay.

What was it that made me just then so sick of all that revelry and sat like a blank foreboding

on my soul? I know not, but I turned and, weary of the glare and tumult, slowly left the burgh and walked down to the beach where lay my ship, just as the men were making a tall mound of sticks and heath and timbers about the door of the doomed tower that held the unhappy princess.

Climbing on board, I gave orders to those who had stood by the *Wolf* to make all ready for the sea, then threw myself down, listless, strangely sad, and chilly as one in ague, by my place at the tiller, to await the coming of the pillagers. And presently, one by one the sons of the creek came reeling down the path, singing as they stumbled down the darkness, and carrying bundles, and bags, and furs, and cups, and weapons in sheaves, and dragging faltering slaves, and surly snarling dogs in leashes; and so at last, when they were all on board but one,—that one came running down the path, and before he had got half to us the burgh was all illumined with a rosy light, and looking up we saw that laughing villain had fired it in twenty places, and not only the dwelling-places, but also the great mound of fuel his friends had built against the tower door.

Up came our anchor, and out we lurched upon the waves once more. We set the sail and drifted slowly down under the cliff where stood the castle, and as we came the fire raged furiously, until, when we were below that beetling brow, we were sailing on a heaving molten sea of blood, and all our spars and cordage were shining copper red, and all the upturned faces of the Vikings were flushed and hectic in the shine,—and then—oh, how can I write it!—just as we came the nearest a tall woman form stepped frantic out on top of the tower and clasped her hands across her eyes, and hid her face and wept. And I—oh, the fiercest, strangest gust of agony and joy sprang up within my heart!—I gasped and glared, and, all forgetting the strangeness of it in the horror of that moment, dropped the tiller, and, leaping to the clanking bulwarks, stared another moment, and then out of my deepest heart, out of the hot inspiration of my very soul, burst a fierce wild cry of “Gunna!”

And in an instant that white form stooping forward, and, staring down terror-dazed at us, saw me by the shrouds as I stood limned in gold with all my ship against the black setting of the night, and gazed down steadfastly upon me for a minute,

clapped her hands upon her bosom and stretched them wildly to me; and above the hissing of the flame, and the thud of the white surf upon the rocks, I heard her cry "Ulla! Ulla!"

And now the strength of twenty jarls was in my heart. I tossed off as though they were baby fingers the strong grip of the two stout fellows who thought to stay me, and in a minute was in the surf, and striking out bravely for the land. The great frothy billows of the tide boiled for a space under my chin, and now I was deep down in a humming black sea valley, and anon mast-high upon a curling crest of spume; and then, all in the black shadow of the cliff, the black water seemed to dissolve into a hell of ghostly chaos and white thunder, and my feet touched the pebbly bottom. I landed somehow, but how only the pale Norns can tell, and scrambled up a sheep track the boldest of my men had said in daylight was impossible, came to the palisades, and scrambled over them, and rolled into the fort on top of two mangled bodies, and up again, and now in the golden sheen of the fire rushed to the great hall.

There in his chair of state was the dead chief just as my robbers had left him, with mouth wide

open and fixed eyes staring grimly down his hall, and golden wine-cup clenched within his fingers and bloody night-gear wrapped about him, while on his face the streaks of pain and anger twitching with a hideous mockery of life, as the smoke curled and the flames went soaring overhead in rosy eddies. To right and left was wild disorder, tables overturned and benches cast about, broken flagons and squandered victuals, bent swords and cleft targets, and costly stuffs pulled into shreds, and dead men asprawl upon their faces, and blood, and dirt, and litter; and over all the fire was humming its fierce song as it mounted from point to point in the roof, and shed great burning flakes and embers on us below. But nothing I cared for blood and litter, but with a foot of wind and a heart hotter than the flames above rushed through the banquet-place, and brushing rudely by the scowling king, got out to the inner court and so reached the portal of the tower.

Over a red path of cinders I flew, and with my bare hand cast the flame-rotten doorway into red ruins, and up the twining oaken steps I raced, scarce noticing that they fell to ashes as I passed; and in another moment, in a moment

of many mingled feelings, I was out upon the burning parapet, and there upon her knees, leaning against the outer walls, and seeming asleep, was the white maid whose fair face had haunted my forest path and shone upon me through the drift and reek of ten years' storm and battle.

Down I went upon one knee, and, deep strong love and gentle compunction welling up in my heart, took the maiden's head upon my shoulder and her hand in mine, and in a minute she gave a great shivering gasp of pain and fear, and opened her eyes and looked up. By sweet Skulla herself! it was nearly worth the interval of pain to see the glad light of pleasure that was lit within them as they met mine, to feel the warm clasp of her hand, and to know unspoken that her heart was one with mine and our troth unbroken. It was a happy moment but all too brief, for as I knelt and framed the hot words of love and courage, and drew her sweet yielding form into my bosom, and rained my long-garnered kisses on her dear pale face, I felt the oaken platform whereon we stood heave and tremble, and with a gasp I looked about and saw the cruel flame had gnawed through every joist beam upon that turret, and the

whole platform whereon we stood was crackling and blistered and hanging by a thread, while down below, hungry for its fall, was the great roaring, seething funnel of the inner tower. "Gunna!" I cried; "my own! there is but one way,—look! look! the stairs are gone, the platform rocks,—and down below, the courtyard is cruel hard. Gunna, my life! come,—quick!—there, so, and hide your face deep down into my wolfskin folds!"—and as she fled to me and leapt into my arms, I hid her face in my cloak and stepped off on to the narrow rim of cracked and ragged parapet just as the platform fell into ruins and went thundering down into the yellow and crimson cauldron below.

For one grim minute I poised myself upon that narrow, giddy shell of blackened wall with the howling flame roaring behind and the dark vortex of the sea thundering in dim dreadfulness two hundred feet below upon the other, then, wrapping my sweet burden still closer to my bosom and muttering between my set teeth, "now for green Baldersund, or Valhalla!" leapt bravely out into the night.

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This is all! This is the story of Ulla the Viking, Ulla the priest. The lamp wavers to its ending; the ink is dry.

When the clansmen picked us up the maid was dead, and so was the light and the loving of Ulla. For three days we staggered back across the melancholy ridge and furrow of the black north sea, and then we buried her here, under a grassy mound, by the white lip of the ocean in Balder-sund. And grief dull and abiding sat in my heart, and no one assuaged it.

At last, after many years, there came one bare-footed, a cross and a staff in his hands, from over seas and whispered comfort. He poured the unction of the new faith into my heart and the baptismal water on my head, and bid me forget and arise anew. And I took the cowl of him, learning to read and write, and built me a hut by the green mound I loved, and strove by penance and privation to do as I was bid.

But can I forget, can the sharp thong and the mean fare purge the hot, free, loving spirit in my blood? At times it shakes off the shackles of sweet insipidness, and then I—I, old Ulla Er-lingson—go forth into the night, and while the pale

ghost-fire plays upon the dark summit of my mound,
and the black sea booms in the black night distance,
go out upon that dear shrouding turf, and cast my-
self upon my face, and tear my white hair and
beard, and mock the wild gossip of the wind and
waves with my still wilder grief!

THE VENGEANCE OF DUNGARVAN

CHAPTER I

JOHN HACKETT, of Dungarvan, made a mistake that sunny afternoon in 1630, when he bore into the green courtyard of the O'Driscoll's castle, which looks down upon the pleasant Irish south coast town of Baltimore, the news of her lover's death to Margaret O'Driscoll. Like many another cunning rogue, he made a mistake on the threshold of the black game he was playing, having in it the germ of a disappointment which brought about his ultimate defeat, and drove him to the elaboration of a plot conceived by a mind cruel and bloody, and carried out in its maturity with remorseless determination.

Hackett himself was an angular, lantern-jawed man of fifty, with a clean-shaved, wrinkled face; an eagle nose, twinkling black eyes set close together, dark grizzled hair that hung down in uneven strands upon his shoulders, and, backed by the wide

black hat he always wore, made his naturally pale face seem many shades paler still. Added to the uncouthness of his appearance, he had a secret way about him, a stealthiness of approach that was infinitely dispossessing. On the mountain roads he kept the shady side, and walked or rode his grey pony through the short ling with such instinctive secrecy that children playing amongst the brambles screamed and fled as the black horseman on the silent steed passed without a warning sound through their midst, the hill sheep scrambled in a startled herd across the pastures when Hackett was afoot, and in the town honest folk stopped their chatter and drew back to their doors, as, without a footfall or a whisper they could swear, without a smile or a look to right or left, his long loose cloak held close against his breast, and his keen, hard eyes aglitter in that pale lean face of his, the stern Dungarvan agent came from the shadows, and, surly and morose, passed on down the street as secret and impenetrable as ever.

The bright Celtic nature shrank from that grim reserve. That he was severe and rapacious they knew to their bitter cost, and from their fear grew darker fancies. He had been abroad, he had strange

languages and dreadful arts it was thought. He had trafficked with the Moor in an age when the cheek of Christendom blanched to hear even the mention of that name, and now and then they said he wrote long missives in unknown character, and far out at sea where he went, forsooth! to fish, he met prowling southern vessels, and held long conclave with their captains.

Many a black tale was whispered by the evening fires, to which the factor's name came in at the ending. Now some one would tell how, years ago, strong John Croome had flouted Hackett in the public streets; had spit upon and derided him—as, God wot, he had well deserved—and then, dropping his voice until all the listening folk bent down over the glimmer of the low red peat in mid-floor to hear, the narrator would whisper how that same John Croome was found two days after in a peat-hole, dead—stabbed deep into the back; “and in the gaping wound just such a fletcher's knife as old Mort, of Dungarvan, makes and sells, and Hackett always carried.” Another time another would vow the agent's luck was such that surely devils rattled Hackett's dice for him, throwing to his favour—fair or foul! Did

they not remember old Mike Ranstead—how he had the smartest yawl in the bay, and the longest nets, and the best team of horses, and the tallest sons, and the comeliest wife? And did they not recall how he ended a long grudge against Hackett by flogging him one day in the tavern parlour? Oh yes; his auditor remembered. And then the teller would take a pull at his wide brown mug, and seem to question of the good Tudor ale within whether they had forgotten how Mike's ships had sunk thereafter; how his nets, storm-broke, were lost adrift; "how his horses took the murrain; how his wife sickened and died, and two of his sons were killed fighting in Flanders?" And wives and gossips in the ingle-nook would shake their heads over the distaff and the loom, and say modest maids fled home when Hackett went afield; whisper of the blight his shadow had brought to many a hearth and household; whisper and sigh to recall how poor Kathleen Ardtornish died, and beautiful, vain Jennie Capard, and proud, false-played Margaret Kerwan—a dusky-hearted traitor, if one ever breathed.

So the tales spread, widening and gathering strange detail as they passed from lip to lip; and,

little caring for good or bad report, the dreaded factor ruled with a rod of iron, while the sullen, submissive hate of those he ground down in their poverty, smouldered under the surface of their sullen helplessness. And then, one day, when bitter tongues had had nothing new to wag about for many months, the gossips were set talking again, for it was told that Hackett coveted Margaret O'Driscoll, the daughter of the petty thane whose ruined keep looked down from its rocky mound upon the townlet. A sweet and winsome girl she was, ruddy, and white, and active, with a step as light and springy as the green turf of her own hill-sides, and kind, bright Irish eyes, prone to melt with pity or flash at affront or slight with the spirit of her ancient but fallen line, and a mouth rosy and flexible, and a wealth of soft, dark hair, and a skin whiter than the froth upon the mill-stream, and, to back her comeliness, a heart as gentle, and brave, and faithful as ever beat under the cross folds of an island shawl.

And was this sweet wild Irish flower to fall to Black Hackett? It was with a thrill of something like horror the townsmen heard that that winsome girl had come under his evil notice, and they

watched and waited, the women with keen vindictiveness noting his every movement, and the men scowling from street corner and tavern window on the Dungarvan bully, who, by fair means or by foul, would rob "the master" of his daughter, and the town of its sweetest maiden. A wiser man than Hackett would have seen how deep and sullen the hate was growing against him, and hidden the iron hand of tyranny in a velvet glove. But tyrants rarely discern in time, and Hackett took a moody pleasure in the scowls. He smiled his sour, insipid smile to note how well the people hated him, and pressed his suit, until one day he thought the time was ripe, and then put the matter boldly to O'Driscoll's self with all his cunning verbiage. And that bulky Irish princeling of many ancestors and little gear would not even hear him out—he laughed in Hackett's wrinkled face, and told him it was not to be. He would not hear of it though Hackett brought half the country-side for dower—there were twenty worthy reasons against it, each one final, and the least of them all was that the maid was promised by her own accord to young John O'Hara of Bandon a year ago!

Then deep and fiercely Hackett swore he would

not take no for an answer, and there, on that day twelve months hence, he would come again for the maid, and she should follow him, willy-nilly, and thus flung out in a furious passion, and rode away over the hills, so that the Baltimore gossips, who knew all this an hour after it had happened, fondly thought they were truly rid of him.

But in a couple of days he came riding back again, a little more jaundiced about the face, perhaps; a little sterner about the thin, close-set lips, but otherwise in good mood, and made his peace with the lady and her father, shaking hands with young O'Hara, and then presently in a month's time—wonder on wonder!—it became known that Margaret's happy lover was going southward on a voyage with rich merchandise, and it was Hackett who was to fit out and start O'Hara for that fortune, which should enable him to claim the fair Irish maiden's hand, on his returning. He fledged that fortunate youth in gallant style, and sent him forth with something so like generosity, that in the months that followed, a glimmer of goodwill began to dawn amongst the townsmen for their taxman; and some said if O'Hara came safely home, and Hackett stood by his present mood—why then he

was a better man than they had taken him for. But others still shook their heads, and, muttering of wolf and lambs, waited grimly.

And then when half a year had gone by, one afternoon Hackett rode up the cobbled village street of white walls and deep-thatched roofs, where the swallows built amid the gabled fronts, taking his way to the O'Driscoll's keep, and there, his cunning face streaked with traitor grief, told him and the white-faced, broken-hearted girl at his side, that news had come to Dungarvan, telling how O'Hara's ship had been taken three months before by Moorish pirates and robbed and burnt, and all her company—saving one man who had escaped and brought the tidings—were killed, or, what was much the same, captives to the Moslem.

Bitter again burnt up the anger and hatred of the people against that lean purveyor of sorrows, and Baltimore, with a keen suspicion Hackett knew more of this matter than he chose to show, scowled afresh to hear his horsehoofs in her street, and cursed his black shadow. But little that mattered to him. The factor saw the hatred of men and women, and laughed at it in his mirthless way, and, his small eyes ashine with secret triumph

and his pale lips set hard, turned all the bitter skill he had in usury or extortion on them, and while he racked and bullied he renewed his wooing of shrinking, tearful Margaret O'Driscoll, at first insidiously, then, as he thought he prospered, more boldly, and never conquering the girl's open dislike—an aversion deepened by recollection of the fact that it was he who had sent her lover on his fatal quest, it was he who had brought home the luckless news—still hovered about, a grey epitome of her grief, and dogged her footsteps, and strove to dry her tears with his hateful comforting. So things ripened to the final catastrophe.

A few weeks after, and one forenoon, down in the grassy castle-yard of O'Driscoll's keep, encircled by its ragged fringe of crumbling stone walls, and backed by the loopholed front of the main tower, were collected a surging crowd of peasants and fishermen, bare-armed, bare-headed, bare-footed most of them, all shouting and crying angrily in the native tongue, and pointing the finger of hatred against one man, who stood in the centre of the rough circle, with arms folded across his breast, head sunk down upon his shoulders, grey eyes agleam, and teeth uncovered in an angry snarl

like a gaunt dog that the red hill-wolves have bayed between the rocks.

It was Hackett, and over against him were two or three men of better dress than the others, but, like them, blue-eyed and ruddy-haired; while behind them, again, away in the shadow of the tower, where a patch of sapphire sea showed through a gap in the crumbling rampart, and the ranks of yellow wall-flower were dancing their golden heads in the windy sunshine—back there stood Margaret O'Driscoll, weeping on the shoulder of an ancient nurse, who strove in vain to dry the hot, gusty tears that kept welling into the averted face of the Irish girl.

Presently the angry babel quieted for a minute, and then Brian Borgil, the nephew of the absent O'Driscoll, turned, flushed and scowling, from the prisoner in front of him to the tumultuous, motley crowd beyond, and asked of one stalwart kern, "You, Shawn, what has Black Hackett been doing now?" and Shawn, nothing loath, stepped forward, and in hot, fluent Gaelic, with fierce, dramatic gestures and an accusing finger pointed at the culprit, told how he and another, as they worked unobserved on the peat hags, had seen the man

secretly follow fair Margaret down through the birches to the well in the glen, and how some time afterwards they had heard her cry for help, and throwing down their spades had gone to her rescue, and had met the maid "running like a hunted roe, with hair astream and face aflame and dress all torn, and a minute after—hot on the trail, like a stoat after a leveret—Black Hackett of Dungarvan; and how they guessed the cause, and fell upon him, whereupon he pulled a pistol and shot Cogan of Rathsulla through the shoulder," and here the hapless Cogan interrupted with a yell of recollected pain and anger, and all the sympathetic folk about him yelled in tune, and shouted and waved their hands, and over the babble you could hear the invective of their long-stored anger at the flood bursting out in furious curses. "To hell with him!" some one cried. "Are our maids Dungarvan trulls that he should harry them, and our men dogs for him to draw upon?" "And it is not the first time he has brought shame upon us," screamed a shrill woman's voice amid the crowd, "who durst not go o' nights past the pool where Margaret Kerwan drowned herself, who starts and scowls to hear me cry on

Jennie Capard, and the black-haired daughter of Ardtornish?"

"Who stabbed young Michael in the back of Dunkerron?" shouted another.

"Beast! Villain! Traitor agent!" yelled the excited peasants. "Hang him, Brian! Throw him from the tower! It is he brings tax and cess upon us! It is he thieves widows' corn, and takes usury, and steals poor fishers' profits! It is he stands in wait for maids at corners! It is his black shadow on the white cottage wall that is grief in summer and sorrow in winter! Kill him, Master Kill him, strong son of Macgillah!"

And so the fierce, plaintive, picturesque testimony of those rude witnesses in that rough court of justice rose in a turbulent medley up to the grey walls above.

Then the judge spoke, his native wrath thinly hampered by his sense of feudal dignity—

"Hound! Is it not enough that you should fill your secret money-bags with the hard-won pence of these my kinsman's people? Is it not enough that you should hector and bully here who stand cap in hand, like the cringing slave you are, yonder before your masters and ours? Is it not enough

that you should be a murrain to our cattle in spring, and disaster to our fleet in winter, and a curse to our streets? Must you, too, be a shame and a sorrow to our hearths? Look!" and pouncing on the unhappy agent as the last reserves of his feudal equity gave out, the furious young Irishman dragged him through the howling crowd to the ragged edge of the battlement. "Look at yonder red bar of rusty iron jutting from the wall," he cried. "It was on that my grandfather hung Hugh MacDermot for the half of your offences, and his father in turn hung Browell the Brave and twenty others. O'Moore of Lockee hung there ten months, and when the crows above had done with him, they cut him down to give the dogs below a chance. Say, people!" cried Borgil, grasping the struggling agent by one strong hand and holding up the other, open palmed, to heaven, "say, is the measure of bitterness full—is the black harvest ripe? Have our maidens sighed and our widows wept enough, say! Shall we do what no one else will do for us, and try if yonder bar will bear yet one more load? Speak, speak!" And, at first low, like the wailing of women, and then stronger, like the wind coming across the hollow ground, and then with one wild

yell of hatred and anger the verdict of the suffering people was given, and Hackett of Dungarvan doomed.

And now all was fierce excitement in the grassy, cobbled courtyard, and while the women hung back, and some half-dozen urchins ran gleefully waving their caps down the hill to tell the startled village that the great factor was to be hung, the men crowded to the ancient battlements and made their scanty preparations. They found a rope in the sheds—a beautiful coil of red “leader,” new got for a herring net, as round and supple as you could wish, and—because there is always one genius in every crowd—out of the surging mass sprang little Haggie Crooked-shank, and in a trice, as though he had been bred to it, he took the tail of the rope, and made a loop two feet long, and took three turns upon the slack, and passed the end down through the turns inside and jerked it tight, and put his foot upon it, and pulled and pulled again, and then, jumping on a block, proudly displayed as sweet and neat a noose as ever stilled the feeble flutterings of a wicked heart. Next light Haggie slipped over the ragged wall, and in dead silence, with all eyes on him, went down by gur-

goyle and crumbling coping to where that stern old symbol of rough justice jutted from the ancient masonry, and crawled out along the rotten iron beam, and, nicely measuring the distance, made the halter fast with a couple of stout knots, then, turning, brought the loop back in his teeth to the courtyard battlements where the eager faces were as thick as head of corn in August.

They dragged the luckless agent to the scarp, screaming and howling hideously, then drowning his yells for mercy and mad ravings of a swift retribution to follow on them with the fierce cries of their long-stored anger, and hustling and pulling, they got him close to the wall that, in strange mockery to the horrible scene of vengeance they were enacting, was hung with the yellow and crimson flowers of summer, and framed the sweet picture of sea and sky beyond. There Hackett fought them like a fury until his clothes were all in ribbons, fought them with horrible oaths and blasphemies, until the cowering women hid their heads beneath their shawls and shrank into the corners. There was no time to bind their victim—it was fierce butcher work which nothing excused but the much they had suffered. They

overpowered him with sheer numbers, they slipped the noose about his neck, and with a fierce yell of scorn, hoisted him shoulder high at last, and bore him struggling so to the nearest gap.

Then up jumped Margaret O'Driscoll, and with a cry of horror and compunction, fled to her kinsman, and "Oh, cousin!" she cried, "it is horrible—horrible like this! Let him live, let me plead for him; I, who have most wrong, of mercy have most right; see how he strains and holds out his hands to you, and knots them together, and implores—oh, cousin, he will not offend again—for my sake!" and then suddenly, with a scream of terror, she dropped her white face upon her kinsman's shoulder and stopped her ears.

Even while she spoke two strong fellows had taken Hackett up, poising him for a moment like a bar, and as the last syllables of gentle pleading left her lips they had swayed for a minute, and then together, with one dreadful send, had tossed the villain out into space! Over he went—over and over, with the spin of that strong impetus, under the stare of the hundred stern, revengeful faces lining the ramparts—over and over—now head up and now heels, with his wretched rags

fluttering from him, and one wild, dying yell rising sharp and keen into the air through the confused shout of the spectators; and then there was a horrible thud, and the rope tightened with a jerk. Surely, surely, Hackett of Dungarvan was fairly ended now!

Out over the battlements eager heads were crowded; the little urchins, bare-headed, clambered up amongst the wall-flowers; the pale women peered irresolute through the gully-holes to see Black Hackett swinging; and then, as the sound of that sickening thud died away, out of the dry throats of those straining executioners, as they peered down into the fosse below, broke a furious cry, and then they were wildly gesticulating, and waving their arms, and running here and there. Hackett of Dungarvan's luck was not yet out. Hackett had escaped! The rope caught under his arm in those mad twirls, and, with a desperate effort, as he fell he got it somehow in his teeth, and when it tightened with a jerk, the rotten mortar up above gave to that desperate strain, out came the stanchion that had hung a score of better villains; out came staples and stone and casing, and in a cloud of rubble and dust and mortar,

in an avalanche of green and grey lichens and disjointed masonry, gallows and gallows'-bird fell crashing into the ling and brambles that choked the ancient ditch below.

It was a sheer steep deep drop of thirty feet or more, and at first the ragged kerns who bent eagerly over the rotten parapet hoped that, if their victim escaped hanging, yet the fall itself would have killed him. Eagerly they bent over, staring with starting eyes and open mouths into the green tangles of briar and fern below. Was he alive? Was he dead? They could scarce fashion the question in a fierce whisper one to another ere in a minute the brambles rustled and parted, and out of them rose a wild head and ragged shoulders, and in another second a horrible ashy face, lean with pain and terror, was turned up in dazed confusion to those who peered above, and Hackett of Dungarvan was staring at them with a dull, vacant stare while the blood and sweat ran down from his forehead in thin streams, and the strong throes of the unspent fear shook him like an ague.

There was no gate on that side—only a long sweep of steep grey wall, and so for a minute

judges and judged glared at one another, and then—the kerns had suffered, and the furious Irish blood was up—on the ears of the hunted man fell the shout of some running round from the rear of the castle to take him again. With a hoarse cry, Hackett staggered to his feet, tore the broken strands of the noose from his swollen neck, and casting it down, scrambled up the bank of the moat. An hundred yards away his grey Irish pony was standing, where he left it, under the lee of a hawthorn bush, with no thought in its placid mind of human hates and passions, and round the far corner of the keep the kerns were streaming, their bare sheath-knives in their hands and their shaggy red hair flying in the wind. All around the wretch saw the sweet green hills in the low rays of the afternoon sun, and yonder was the steed might sweep him to them out of the fangs of this cursed mob of wolves; but he was sick and giddy and weak, he reeled and pitched so like a ship in a cross sea the first few steps he made, that those who, with bated breath, watched from the castle, thought even then he could not escape. Out over the flower-speckled grass staggered the unhappy agent, one

hand stretched before him towards the white form of that patient beast, and the other grasping his burning throat, reeling and tottering and faint and behind him fifty paces, running three steps to his one, were the pursuers. Another moment and he had got the startled pony by the mane, and the foremost of the kerns was not twenty yards away.

Then they who watched upon the wall saw Hackett essay to get upon the beast—and fail. They saw the swiftest-footed runner behind draw his fingers down the white blade of his knife as though he were already wringing red blood from it—they saw Hackett gather himself for one last effort—and the next moment the white pony was galloping out towards the open heather with Hackett—near prone—lying along its back, and the kern's keen Irish blade was hurtling harmlessly through the summer sunshine after them.

Out towards the moors he galloped, and when he came to the top of the first rise and pursuit was already over, and the grey town, lost to him forever, lay basking below in the green arms of the hills, he pulled reign for the first time, and looking back, broke out in a furious, incoherent, spluttering storm of rage and shame, shaking his clenched

fist back at the peaceful village of white fronts, grey thatch, and square red chimney-stacks whence the blue evening smoke was already drifting out in a thin veil over the marsh lands.

“Curse on you, Baltimore! Curse on you! Curse on your foundations and your roof-ridges! Curse on your pavements and hearthstones! Curse on your walls and roofs! Black death walk your streets, and disaster dwell with you! The bitter, bitter curse be yours for this day’s work!”

And so, spending his spleen in savage invective, he presently gave out, and turning once more rode northward along the bleak, unwall’d coast road, with its barren peat mosses on one hand, and long sad beach and streaks of sea-wrack on the other, ambling sullenly along, though each step was agony to his battered limbs and many bruises, his black cloak flapping in the wind, and his long, lean arms thrown out at times, as the wrath and the pain welled up. And sometimes he would stop and shake his fist back at the blue smoke-mist of the village, and shout such bitter curses back at it that the plovers which had settled on the grassy hillocks for the night rose in wheeling flocks against the saffron-sunset sky, circling overhead with plain-

tive cries, and then he would press forward with head again deep down between his shoulders, and blind fury, headlong malice, and wounded pride grinding in his heart.

For an hour he rode like that, until presently, when the pale stars had risen one by one into the evening sky, he suddenly smote his clenched hand fiercely into the other, and peering wickedly here and there, laughed a guttural wicked laugh that broadened soon into a concachinnation of devilish merriment—a dry, cruel peal of black laughter that contorted his lean visage with puckers, and shook his sides, and hung about in the folds of the dim shadow draperies of the night, and came back from the hollows of the hills in mocking echoes that sounded to his heated spirit like grim approval from out of the throats of the darkness. An idea had flashed on Hackett of Dungarvan—a dreadful fancy full of the smell of smoke and new blood, full of the dying screams of shame and agony—a wicked plot, as grateful to his heated lust of vengeance as a cup of clean spring water to a dusty messenger; and he chuckled as it grew out in detail before him, and the spleen and cruelty on his face gave way to glee. He no longer ranted

and fumed under the lash of his rage, but clapped hands upon the neck of his grey pony, and, with an occasional twitch of pain or merriment shaking him now and then, rode on steadily until he presently crossed the last of the low peat hills, and dropped down with the end of the twilight into the little waterside village where he lodged.

Two hours after, unwashed, unfed, his throat bandaged in wet linen, and an earthen jar of spirit at his elbow, Hackett was writing a long letter in Arabic which, when it was done, he signed and sealed with the utmost care, addressing the silk-tied envelope and putting a name upon it that Western Christendom shuddered even to dream of.

CHAPTER II

IT was a warm still evening in June, just twelve months afterwards, and Baltimore, relieved from the incubus of her black agent, had grown rich and happy. Such a good season had not been for many years; the herring-nets were lined each haul with silver, the straggling yellow harvest of the autumn had come to shock heavier and riper than

for twenty reapings, the green meadow grass had been cut three times, each time knee-deep; the brown stacks of winter peat—now Hackett of Dungarvan was away—stood cottage-high upon the hills! And Baltimore was rich. Baltimore had sold her fish and corn and kine, had thatched her houses anew with deep golden rushes, and painted the doorsteps blue, and bought longer, redder nets; and the great morse brooches sparkled again on the shoulders of her comely wives and maidens, and the wooden shoes of the little ones clattered gleefully on the cobbles of the streets. More swallows had come that year to Baltimore, they said, than any year before, and a white stork—certain harbinger of happiness—had built upon her market top!

Never was there such a merry townlet as that which clustered round O'Driscoll's rocky mound that pleasant summer nightfall. The strong, sweet tide of happiness set strong upon her beaches, and every cottage-hearth felt the gladdening touch of it. Surely it was wonderful and sad to see how much difference one man's going could make to any place; but so it was, and Baltimore, rich in love and contentment, at peace with all mankind, wrapped

itself in rosy dreams of lovely to-morrows and slept. The pale primrose twilight on the harbour water deepened into purple and went out; the hazel thickets and the marshy meadows faded back into the shadows of the hills; the faint, fine strands of summer mist, as light as lady's lawn, came in dim procession down from off the mosses, with the soft music of the eddying evening air to marshal, and the deep, drowsy scent of sleeping meadow-flowers for heralding; and the great fabric of the unfathomed sky above was dusted presently with a thousand glittering planets. Below, one by one, the lesser lights in Baltimore went out, until only that lamp burned where pale Margaret O'Driscoll sat and sighed for her dead and distant lover, and then soon that one also faded. The wife's head was on her husband's arm, the babe on its mother's breast; the dogs were slumbering in the shadows down below, and the swallows silent in their nests above. Clearer and clearer burnt out those brilliant saffron stars, and in and out amongst them the velvet bats went flittering, and, save the cry of the heron to its mate upon the distant tarn and the lowing of contented cattle, knee-deep in shadowy thyme and parsley, no sound

broke the Arcadian stillness of that midsummer evening.

Baltimore slept!

Then—it was near two in the morning, and the yellow shine of the moon was coming down aslant off Gabriel and tipping with a pale ghostly light, like a lying dawn, the hummocks of the moor and the stone walls and the cottage-tops; the wind blew fresh in from the water; the rising tide was prattling amongst the green stakes of the jetty; and the first curlew of the morning was calling on Aghadown—then—just at that hour when sleep was deepest and no one watched, two pale forms, two ghostly shadows of sail and mast and long lean hulk, came stealing towards Baltimore up the creek that led in from the open sea beyond. Unhappy, sleeping Baltimore! They came on and on, stealthy and silent, past the salt marshes and creeks and flats, taking shape and form, as they slipped from the darkness, of craft such as had never touched at Baltimore before, with long lateen yards and spritsail aft, high-sterned, with low green sides pierced for tier on tier of sweeps, hued green and white; and dangling from the peak each carried, damp and limp with night dew,

that symbol of cruelty and rapine—the red crescent flag of the Algerian.

The white marsh air swung about them, it parted before their bows and went swirling and eddying to right and left in the last rays of the yellow summer moonlight, the rank, salt herbage sighed and shivered as they slipped by, the long oars dipped silent and slow in the black water; and so at last, out of the night, and the mist, and the moonshine those twin spectres came secretly down upon the town, and under the shadow of her houses, half a stone's-throw from her deserted market-place, they presently ran their iron keels up the slanting beach.

Then, while the lateen yards chafed gently against the masts, and the harbour water swirled and played under their lifting sterns, the rows of oars were drawn back into the hulks, and out of the hatches swarmed in silent confusion a jostling crowd of dusky men, turbaned and shaven, with soft, slippered feet, and swarthy bodies bare to the middle, their many-coloured waistcloths stuck full of deadly things from the cruel smithies of Al Araish and Melillah—daks from Kossur, and shining poniards from Malaga anvils—and, tumbling and scrambling, yet all with the robber instinct

silent as death, they surge up and clamber into the sloping bulwarks of the galleys. Then a whisper goes round amongst them, and from his place at the tiller—fitting guide for such a swarm—comes forward a sombre figure in a long black cloak and broad hat, and as the first gangway plank is run out, he leaps lightly upon it, and, running down, set first foot upon the empty quay of Baltimore. Standing there in a slant of moonlight that comes between two house-tops, he lifts his cap in bitter mockery to the town, and that light shines for an instant on the cunning face, a gleam with pride and vengeance, of Hackett of Dungarvan, the oppressor, the spoiler, who has come to-night to settle some old grudges, and, though he knows it not, make, by one strange chance, restitution, full and complete, to her who of all others he has wronged the most.

Behind him the plunderers pour out from the ships in a silence that makes the whole scene like some horrible ghastly pantomime, dropping over the sides in clusters, and slipping down by every stay and rope until there are two hundred of them in the shadow of the walls, armed to the teeth—as fierce and desperate a crew of ruffians as ever landed on a Christian shore. For a minute

or two, until all is ready, Hackett flits amongst them, urging and counselling; then, while their yellow-slipped captains glide here and there, dividing the Moslem raiders into gangs and blowing up their smouldering torches, he singles out a pair of cut-throat rogues, and, with them close at his heels, runs swift and softly down the sleeping street that leads from the market-place, and still keeping in the shadows and turning and twisting through the alleys—no one knows them better—makes for O'Driscoll's hold.

There is not a sound yet in the dark starlight of the summer morning—not a suspicion of the cruel robbers who lie hidden under the wide cottage-eaves, waiting but one signal-shot to begin their wild revel of blood and pillage—and Hackett creeps unnoticed up the winding path to the Irish chieftain's portal, and entering, close followed by those scoundrel shadows, crosses with a savage grin of pain and shame the green courtyard where the wild justice of the kerns condemned him, thence passing the trustful Irish doors one by one, in a minute is in Margaret's chamber.

The pale shine of the morning steals through the lattices, casting as it comes a faint, soft radiance

into the room, and by that light Hackett steps over to the maiden bed and draws the white curtain. There lies the beautiful Irish girl that he has robbed of life and lover, fast asleep, all in her comely homespun night-gear; her black hair astray over the white pillows, her fair pale face upon her arm, and on her long lashes he sees, as he puts his envious face in the grey twilight close to hers, two shining tears have gathered. For a minute Hackett glowers at her with triumph and love in his eyes, then, like a wolf claiming his quarry, leans a heavy hand upon her shoulder, and as she starts and wakes and stares wildly about, he bends over and laughs.

"Ho! ho! sweetheart! You thought I was more forgetful than I am! But, see, I have come to claim my own with these kind gentlemen behind for groomsmen—nothing on earth parts us now, my pretty. Away in the South I have built you a bower. Thither we fly with the daylight. We will forgive and forget old scores, and take our fill of love and toying."

And so he ran on until Margaret started up with a fierce effort and pressed her fingers to her eyes, and wrung her hands and burst out—

"O Mother of Christ! is this some nightmare—some dreadful madness of my mind? For the love of all the saints, say who you are who stand so grim and dreadful about me! Oh! I am mad! Help, Kathleen! Help, Rhona! or I shall die!"

And the unhappy girl struggled furiously to shake those long, lean fingers from her.

But Hackett held her down.

"What, honey! Ungrateful and contrary still. There! there! Lie quiet, you banshee,—I have a ship upon the quay, and if you will be gentle and amenable I will squander kindness on you. Ah! if you will come sweetly with me——"

"Never! never!" screamed Margaret, half witless with shame and terror; "if you are who you seem indeed, and not some hideous shadowy nightmare, I spit on and deride and hate you! Help! father! Help!" and the girl screamed until the turret echoed.

Hackett knew there was little time to parley, and swearing with a wicked oath no maid ever yet twice said no to him, he made a sign, whereon his ruffians seized on the girl, dragging her from the bed, and while one hoisted her, all in torn white night-linen, shoulder high, and bore her struggling out, the

other blew his smouldering torch into flame, setting fire first to the bed, then bursting the lattice, fired the summer-dry thatch outside, and retreated just as O'Driscoll, sword in hand, was hurrying from his distant sleeping place.

Down the rocky slope the slaves dragged the hapless girl, and hardly had they got amongst the streets below when sharp and clear in the still morning air came the sound of a shot from a pistol, and at once—it was like listening to the first hungry cry of the wolves in dusky thickets around you—rose from the four quarters of the townlet the fierce wild yell of “Allah! Allah!” and on the breath of the morning came the rushing of slippered feet, the bark of a startled dog or two, and the guttural laughter of the plunderers let loose. Another minute, and a strange hectic flush rose up against the dark sky overhead, as though hell were opening in a dozen places, and Hackett knew the torches were firing thatch and gable to give light for that fierce orgie just beginning.

He saw and knew there was no time to waste. He had some private debts to pay, the very thought of which made him lick his lean lips, and grind his teeth, and draw the keen Moorish blade hidden in

his waistband half from its sheath. So, with a hasty word to the slaves to bear the fainting girl down to the ships, and see her safely secured, he turned into the alleys, and disappeared amid those shadows which a strange new red light was quickly brightening.

And by this time hell indeed had opened, and sleeping Baltimore woke to find itself in flames, and its streets filled with savage hordes of cruel plunderers who cared neither for men nor gods, who knew no syllable of the language in which shame and misery wailed for mercy, and took a keen infernal pleasure in the bloody scenes of torture and ruin they invoked.

There was no hope, no chance of resistance against a visitation so sudden, so deadly, and so unexpected. John Fraenkel, the tanner, heard some one tapping at his door just before the flames burst out, and running down and casting the hatchway open, his head was split to his chin with a single blow from a scimitar. Old Simeons was dragged by his white beard from his bed, and his neck struck in two against the kitchen bench. Maclenner and O'Callish—strong men both of them—were stabbed before they were

half awake, and their screaming wives were dragged naked into the street, and tied hand and heel, and left so, sprawling on the cobbles, until they could be come for presently. O'Driscoll and all his household perished after twenty minutes of fierce fighting. Out on the meadows and down by the harbour, asleep and awake, suppliant or fierce, the people were slain alike.

From street to street the Moslems ran, crying, "Allah! Allah!" and plunging their torches into the low thatch of booth and cottage as they passed, butchering and destroying, bursting doors and windows, casting out of the lattices stuffs and gear, and boxes and bags of hoarded coin and trinkets; plundering, and robbing and shouting, while the scream of the women and the wail of the children, and the hum and rattle of spreading flames soared up to heaven on a great pillar of grey smoke and crimson light. And as the wild din and uproar swelled and spread, and the guttural cries of the pillagers thrilled in the dim vortex of the smoke and darkness, the fury of the sack mounted each moment. The streets were full of women who ran here and there, splashing through pools of kinsmen's blood; of

little children, who sobbed and died on the yata-ghans of dark-faced butchers; of strong men, who fought a moment and then fell; of strange, fitful, momentary scenes of cruelty and rapine that shone for a space, and then gave place to others that in turn rose and vanished between the folds of the dim, gold-streaked curtain of the smoke.

From street to street the Moslems ran like banded furies, slaying the unarmed peasantry, pillaging and killing. Yet even in that dreadful hour—defenceless and surprised—the gallant Irish blood showed bravely here and there. Many a gentle deed was done that night, and many a gallant act of useless valour lay buried under the white ashes of the town when morning dawned. Patrick Bernson held his cottage for an hour of that terrible evening, and safely kept his fair young wife and his babes; for when that dreadful hour was over, the burning roof fell in, and all four died together. Long-legged Andrew Kearn, the poor wastrel of the quay, whose heart was thought to be as empty as his yellow head, had distanced all pursuit, and had near got out upon the safe, free moors beyond the outmost houses, when he heard a little damsel cry in the town,

and back he came—back to his death, picking her from under the very knife of a drunken ruffian, and as the poor fool—who was so mean no man in that place was mean enough to call him friend—staggered off again through the market-square with his little golden-haired prize pressed to his silly heart, the same bullet killed him and her.

Aye, gallantry was of no account, and valour stood for nothing against those hungry wolves. Strong John Ellingham saw his young wife carried down to the ships—he had but fetched her home a month before—and snatching an ancient broadsword from its hooks, went after her through the howling mob, and the smoke, and the flame, and carving a bloody passage into the Moslem pack, he presently came to the fair girl, and lopping down those that held her, she was free. Thereat, in a gust of love, and thoughtlessness, and terror, she leapt to that strong man, and, pressing her lips to his, threw her white arms round him. And so, pinned and hampered by those gentle fetters, brave Ellingham was helpless, and in a trice five knives were in his back, and he died, and his sweet wife was slave and plaything to Abu Said, of Omara, for seventeen years.

Now drew near that wonderful chance which spoiled the completeness of Hackett's plans and, on that night of separations, united two lovers against all likelihood or expectation. For by this time the town was blazing furiously, and loud over the wail of the people, and the confused shout of the victors, the steady, sullen roar of the flames went up into the sky, and the hungry rattle of the red gleams leaping from roof to roof echoed amid the crash and rumble of walls and rafters falling in behind them. The streets were strewn with dead and dying, while wild forms of Arabs rushing here and there—the kennels down the centre ran rippling red with crimson blood—and the burning flakes of golden fire fell like a molten infernal rain, without stop or pause, on everything. Through all that blood and turmoil, the destroyers, true to their robber-instincts, had not ceased to throw out of doors and windows such things as they thought of value, and the better ways were still littered with the out-turn of plundered homes, cups and pots and pans of old Irish craftsmanship, the cherished heirlooms of a frugal race, and golden morsers and bronze bangles and amber beads, and yards of green silk

and furs for holidays, and holy cups and jewelled crucifix from the chapel, and boxes and bales, and misers' chests and housewives' wallets—those greedy thieves had had no time to be discriminate, but had sacked and gutted, and butchered and burned, step by step as they won their way, without pause or chance to do more than toss everything, quaint or rich, that took their fancy into the streets below. And now here was the town burning like Tartarus' self, and the spoil drowning in the gutters or sinking under the glowing rain of embers—oh, it was enough to make an honest pirate weep red tears to see such wastefulness! and that swart villain Al Gakdul, of Melk, the captain of the galleys, beat his hand upon his dusky breast, and shouting to a passing ruffian, bid him run like the red wind itself to the quay, and tell those who stayed by the ships to loose the galley-slaves from their fetters at the benches and send them here to help get down the goodly stuffs and trinkets. Away went the messenger, and Al Gakdul, crying "Allah! Allah!—burn, my children, burn, and plunder!"—plunged into the smoke again.

Five minutes afterwards hammer and file were

at work upon the slaves who sat in foul darkness at the galley oars, the hatches were taken off, and blinking and winking in the ruddy glow, naked to the waist for the most part, of many countries, haggard, savage, half-starved and wretched, their stiff lean fingers still bent like eagle's talon to the shape of the sweeps they plied in eternal misery in the black womb of those pirate ships, by twos and threes and fours the slaves came trooping up from below until they tasted the fresh night air, then stood and leered and stared, rubbing their eyes and grinning to see another sort of hell, brighter and more cheerful than that black purgatory they had just left, open up before them. They eyed the lines of captive women cowering between their guards with the sullen pleasure with which beasts long taken welcome new comers to their shame and misery, they stretched their lean hungry nostrils towards the blazing village whence quaint smells of spilt wine and burning were wafted — then, stumbling and scrambling under their master's lash like lost souls, as indeed they were, herded by furies — over the sides — mean cringing Jews from Iskenderoun, sullen cut-throat rogues from Levant and Kibris, pale sad

Franks, ragged scoundrels from Skutri, and scum from all the wicked places of the Midland Sea—up out of their black steaming holds they streamed, and over the sides and away into the town, screaming and yelling and gibbering in a dozen languages as the fierce joy of momentary freedom reft them of their senses. Up out of the foul black bowels of those wicked ships like a pack of hungry witch-dogs, noisy and sullen, young and old they swarmed until there were but three left—two of them grizzled ruffians unshorn, unwashed, with a pest-house odour in their rags, and the other younger than they, a Frank by skin and stature, though turbaned and slippers and clad in sorry rags like the others.

He, that latter, went to the side, as though in the torpor of pain and weakness he thought they had but come home again to the white hulks of Al Hamisi. He put his hand upon the taffrail, and for the first time looked up. Then with a cry of fear and wonder—a clear heart-cry that thrilled above all the sounds of the sack and pillage—he stepped back a pace, and hid his eyes and stared anew, and gasped, and cried out again, and wept and laughed, and twined his fingers, and turned

away, and would not land. Oh! surely it was some horrible fancy—some hideous dream—some devilish nightmare mixture of love and anguish—some cruel' mirage of a place he once had known that possessed his mind? he thought as tower and roof and gables, market-house and keep of that town shone black and clear against the furious red curtain of the fire behind them, and down he crouched with a sob of misery and bitterness under the shadow of the gunwale, and cowered, and hid his eyes.

He cowered there for a minute, then rose again as though there were some wondrous fascination in the sight before him. "Oh! could it be true!" he gasped; "was it—was it possible that after all those months of anguish, out of all those places to which he might have come, fate had brought him *here*?" He stopped his ears at the wild hubbub of that hideous night, and covered his face in his thin hands a space, then laughing to himself, as though he humoured the madness of some ghastly dream, he took a naked scimitar from the deck, and scrambled out upon the mud and seaweed of the beach.

He staggered past the green-fringed piles of the

old pier, and the rough masonry of the quay, until in a minute he was amongst a knot of slaves in the market-place. He had not stood irresolute by them more than a breathing space when up ran Hackett of Dungarvan on the other side, his gaberdine torn, his elf-locks flying, a red blade in his hand, and his black, silver-buckled shoes full of blood that was not his own.

"Where is the girl?" he cried in Arabic, almost incoherent in his excitement. "Where is Margaret O'Driscoll?"

And at that name the young galley-slave started as though he had been struck in the back.

"Where is the maiden you were told to carry to the ships?" asked Hackett of one of the slaves whom he recognised as the ruffian in whose care he had sent Margaret down. And that rogue scowled and hesitated; then swore behind his grizzled moustache that it was not his fault, but the girl had escaped. He and Abu Om were dragging her screaming through the fight, when a red-headed unbeliever rushed out, and seeing mayhap who it was they struggled with, fell on them naked-handed as he was, and fought so like a tiger, that it was all they could do to kill him in

the end; and while they fought the maid had slipped from their hands and fled into the smoky curtain that shrouded everything.

With a furious imprecation on the Arab and his story, Hackett asked which way the girl had gone, and as he bent eagerly forward to catch the answer amid the roar and rattle of the fire the pale Frankish slave was at his side, all his soul in his fierce flushed face—shoulder by shoulder with Hackett, cheek by cheek with that black schemer with whom his destiny was so linked! Yet neither recked of the other, or thought in the hurry of the moment who stood at his side, whose hot breath it was mixed with his, and whose whole soul was strained in the same eager purpose, to catch the Moslem's words. They heard, and round they both turned on their heels, dashing across the market-place into the reek and vapour, beyond where they were parted, each in his separate way seeking the unhappy Irish girl, who cowered or died somewhere in the red tangles of that glowing charnel-house.

A dreadful search it was. The sack was soon over, the robbers withdrawn, and no one lived then in Baltimore. From house to house the slave

fled, and empty street to street in a torture of hope and fear, and dreadful expectation. And between the blackened strands of creepers swinging in the furnace draught he looked through charred windows into hideous mockeries of what once were homes. The mothers were dead across their kitchen hearths, and the babes were dead at their dead breasts. Mother and son and brother, grey-headed dames and yellow-haired striplings, lay in swathes down in the gutters. There, in one place, at an upper window, a fair young girl was leaning out, as though she played, her long yellow hair swaying against the white cottage wall. Down in the red shadows hamstrung horses screamed and died; and here was a tender maid of six summers prone on the cobbles in her night gear, her doll in one hand and her shoes in the other. Higher up the street again a dead plunderer was sitting by a blackened wall, and at his throat, dead like aught else—ripped by the Syrian's blade, but his long fangs still buried in that dusky throat—hung a shaggy Irish boarhound. Overhead in those dismal thoroughfares the white linen was still drying on cords from house to house, fair household gear, quaint wear of fishermen and maid,

and it lifted and flapped as the heavy black curtain of smoke rolled in choking eddies, and the gusty streams of flames and sparks burst through that murky shroud!

Down through streets already silent and ghostly under a deep powdering of ashes the slave ran, crying perpetually, "Margaret! Margaret!" For an hour he had run from block to block, and alley to alley on that hopeless quest, until at last, sick and giddy and hopeless he was sitting down himself to die, when, as he staggered along through the heat and the dust, the smoke screen parted in front of him, and out of it stepped Black Hackett of Dungarvan, his long cloak flapping, his grey elf-locks lifting in the hot gust, and across his shoulder, senseless and limp, with arms atrail and hair over her face, and thin night linen wrapping her in the pink shine of the fire like the drapery of a marble nymph—lay the prize they both were seeking.

He caught sight of the slave, and, half mad with gratified vengeance and the fierce excitement of the evening, burst out laughing, until it seemed a hundred devils were laughing in the red sockets of the empty homes about them; then beckoning

up the Moor, he slid into his arms the luckless burden that he bore. "There, there! good fellow!" he shouted above the roar, wiping the streaked dust and sweat from his face with the bloody corner of his gaberdine, "you are younger than I am; carry me this bundle of love and obstinacy down to the ships—down to the galleys with her, my bully—and, once ashore again, you shall run riot for a week, with a light heart and a heavy wallet!"

Infinitely gently, with every fibre athrill, and heart beating wildly, the slave took the maiden, and went down upon one knee, then resting that fair form upon the ground, propped her against his bosom, and so—in that position—oblivious to all else, her head on his heart, her long white arms about his neck, the poor thin flutter of her breath fanning his hot pale cheek, he parted her tangled hair, and put it back from her face. Kismet!—it was decreed! the Fates were good—that girl was Margaret O'Driscoll, and he in whose arms she lay so still and white was John O'Hara, the betrayed, the dead—the returned!

He tore his Moslem turban from his head, casting it fiercely into the gutter, and Hackett with a yell recognised him—and he Hackett—and there

they stood, snarling and scowling at each other over the prone girl, while shame, and wrath, and anger burnt in their faces, and filled their hearts with a bitterness too great for words.

O'Hara asked no explanation of the man who, he knew too well, had betrayed him into slavery, and brought this red night's work on Baltimore for his own base purposes; and Hackett knew that the other knew all now, and offered no parley to that pale stern form risen from the dead at his feet, in the very moment of victory, to accuse at once and condemn him—but they glared at one another for a minute like two hungry wolves, and then, with a shout of defiance, O'Hara with his Turkish scimitar, and Hackett with a round target he had snatched up upon his left arm, and in his right hand that long keen fletcher's knife he could use with such deadly cunning, they sprang upon one another. And round and round they stamped, as though it were some pleasant green amphitheatre they fought in, spurning the hot grey dust in clouds about them, stabbing, lunging and striking, reeling and tripping over the bloody bodies of the sack, screaming fierce hate and defiance in the fury of their excitement, fighting for white Margaret

O'Driscoll like two mountain eagles for a dead kid upon the ledges. And all about swirled and twined and eddied the soft brown curtain of the smoke, laced with golden threads of fire. And the flames went up like a crimson forest through the black night air to the bronze dome of the sky overhead, and the thunder of the destruction about them—the fierce lapping of ten thousand tongues of flame was like the sound of the waves in the hollow caves of Dunmanus when the wild west wind blows at nightfall!

Round and round they had fought for twenty minutes with no remembrance of time, or place, or circumstance, and no wish but one, and still they were fighting, circling, and crying, and looking for an opening to each other's throats, when, on a sudden, a roar close beside them louder than any other sound in that place of a thousand echoes made them pause and involuntarily leap apart. All the side of the narrow white street on their right—there higher than elsewhere—was glowing hot, and now as they looked the long line of white walls curved forward like the bellying canvas of a ship in full sail, a hundred golden fissures gleamed for a second all down its front,

then the lower storeys of the houses collapsed, the uppers tilted and overhung the combatants, the roof-pins were unloosened far to right and left, and in a moment an acre of burning thatch was escalading down upon them—an hundred score of tons of molten stuff was let loose, and ribbed with bright light, tasselled with fiery fringes, and plumed with a thousand waving featherets of smoke, was sliding swiftly down.

Quick as thought—with one brave leap O'Hara got to Margaret's side and, seizing her by the white shoulders, dragged her back. He saw the red flush on Hackett's face, he saw him hesitate—then turn and fly, and trip, and lie sprawling in the gutter with a dead woman's long hair twined tight about his ankles, and then the red avalanche came roaring down between them—night was ruddy bright day for one moment, and when darkness fell again Baltimore was a city of the dead.

Two hours afterwards, a fair girl was slowly recovering life and consciousness under a grey rock upon the heathery hillside, and by her side was kneeling one who chafed her hands, and wrapped an Irish shawl closer about her, and

watched the pink colour dawn in her face with consuming tenderness and solicitude. And all about them on the sweet, smiling, contented mid-summer earth another dawn had come. Every bent and grass was gemmed with dewdrops that shone and scintillated and blushed an hundred colours in the warm early sunlight. The lark, under the pale morning dome of the sky, was deluging the world with music; the little brown linnets were piping on the bramble; the sleepy yellow bee was drowsily about the task he left unfinished yesterday; the fresh breeze came off the hills loaded with scent of thyme and heather-bells; the sea was sleeping in unruffled loveliness, and the earth a fair tapestry of tender lights and shadows interwoven.

There was life and hope in the very breath of that morning, and presently Margaret heaved a deep sigh and sat up, and as her eyes looked about the fair country they took a new colour from it, but when they chanced upon the tumbled grey plain of ruins by the harbour that once was Baltimore, she shuddered and hid her face in her lover's shoulder. "Oh, hide me! hide me!" she cried, "they may come again!" But O'Hara

pressed her close and answered, "Fear not, my pearl! We are free—they are gone—and God's malediction go with them! Look: yonder's the last of them," and she looked where he pointed to the very verge of the southernmost sea and saw two white specks of lateen sail, that flushed as she watched tender rose-colour on the sapphire rim of the ocean, and shone and diminished, and now were no bigger than fairy mustard seed, and then but the size of a grain of sea sand, and glittered so for a space like the red flush on the one facet of a gem, and seemed to grow large again for a second, and hung there—the shining points of that lovely tender morning; and then her fair eyelids dropped for a moment, and when they rose again, the rim of the sea was vacant from edge to edge.

A DREADFUL NIGHT

A HUNTER'S TALE RETOLD

ONLY he who has been haunted by a dream, a black horror of the night so real and terrible that many days of repugnance and effort are needed to purge the mind of its ugly details, can understand how a dream that was a fact—a horrible waking fantasy, grotesque and weird, a repetition in hard actuality of the ingenious terrors of sleep,—clings to him who, with his faculties about him, and all his senses on the alert, has experienced it.

Some five years ago I was hunting in the southwest corner of Colorado, where the great mountain-spurs slope down in rocky ravines and gullies from the inland ranges towards the green plains along the course of the Rio San Juan. I had left my camp, late one afternoon, in charge of my trusty comrade, Will Hartland—a braver or more faithful little fellow, by the way, never put foot into a Mexican stirrup—and had wandered off alone into

the scrub. Some five or six miles from the tents I stalked and wounded a prong-buck. He was so hard hit that I already smelt venison in the supper-pot, and followed the broad trail he had left with the utmost eagerness. He crossed a couple of stony ridges with their deep intervening hollows, and came at last into a wild desolate gorge, full of loose rocks and bushes, and ribboned with game tracks, but otherwise a most desolate and God-forsaken place, where no man had been, or might come for fifty years. Here I sighted my venison staggering down the glen, and dashed after him as fast as I could foot it, through the bushy tangled, and the dry, slippery, summer grass. In a few hundred yards the valley became a pass, and in a score more the steep, bare sides had drawn in until they were walls on either hand, and the way trailed along the bottom of what was little better than a knife-cleft in the hills. I was a good runner, and the hunter blood was hot within me; my moccasins flashed through the yellow herbage; my cheeks burnt with excitement; I dropped my gun to be the freer—the quarry was plunging along only ten yards ahead, and seemed a certain victim! In front was the outing of that narrow ravine—long reaches

of the silver San Juan twining in countless threads through interminable leagues of green pasture and forest—I saw it all like a beautiful picture in the narrow black frame of the rocks; the evening wind was blowing softly up the cañon, and the sky was already gorgeous and livid with the streaks of sunset. Another ten yards and we were flying down the narrowest part of the defile, the beast-path under our feet hardly a foot wide, and almost hidden by long, wiry, dead grass. Suddenly the wounded buck, now within my grasp, staggered up on to its hind legs, in a mad fit of terror, just as, with a shout of triumph, I leapt up to it, and in half a breathing space—in less time than it takes to write, but too late to stop my fatal rush—I and the stag were reeling on the very brink of a horrible funnel,—a slippery yellow slope that had opened suddenly before us, leading down to a cavernous mouth gaping dark and dreadful in the heart of the earth. With a scream louder than my shout of triumph, staring at that horrible place, I threw up my hands and tried to stop; it was too late; I felt my feet slip from under me, and the horrible attraction of that cruel trap draw me away, and in a second, shouting and plunging, and clutching at the

rotten herbage, I was flying downwards. I caught a last glimpse of the San Juan twining pearly-pink under the sunset, through leagues of green velvet verdure, and the blaze of the sky overhead crimson and green and sapphire, and then I was spinning into darkness, horrible Egyptian darkness, through which I fell for a giddy, senseless moment or two, and then landed with a thud which ought to have killed me but did not, bruised and nearly senseless, on a soft quaggy mound of something that seemed to sink under me like a feather bed.

So impossible does it seem to give an adequate idea, in honest black and white, of what followed, that I am half inclined to leave the task unattempted. Yet I will try, for my experiences were so strange and terrible, that they deserve telling, however poorly. My first sensation on recovering consciousness was that of an overpowering smell, a sickly, deadly taint in the air that there was no growing accustomed to, and which, after a few gasps, seemed to have run its deadly venom into every corner of my frame, and, turning my blood yellow, to have transformed my constitution into keeping with its own accursed nature. It was a damp, musty, charnel-house smell, sickly and

wicked, with the breath of the slaughter-pit in it—an aroma of blood and corruption infinitely discomposing. I sat up and glared, gasped about in the gloom, and then I carefully felt my limbs up and down. All were safe and sound, and I was unhurt, though as sore and bruised as though my body had stood a long day's pummelling. Then I groped about me in the pitchy dark, and soon touched the still warm body of the dead buck I had shot, and on which indeed I was sitting. Still feeling about, on the other side was something soft and furry too. I touched and patted it, and in a minute recognised with a little start that my fingers were deep in the curly mane of a bull bison. I pulled, and the curly mane came off in stinking tufts, for that bull bison had been lying there six months or more. All about me, wherever I felt, was cold, clammy fur and hair and hoofs and bare ribs and bones mixed in wild confusion, and as that wilderness of death unfolded itself in the darkness to me, and the fetid, close atmosphere mounted to my head, my strong nerves began to tremble like harp-strings in a storm, and my heart, that I had always thought terror-proof, to patter like a girl's.

Plunging and slipping I got upon my feet, and then became conscious of a dim circle of twilight far above, representing the hole through which my luckless self had fallen. It was fading in the twilight outside every moment, and was already so faintly luminous that my hand, held in front of me, looked ghostly and scarcely discernible. With a groan I began to explore slowly round the walls of my prison, and with a heart that grew sicker and sicker, and sensations that you can imagine better than I can describe, I traced the jagged but unbroken circle of a great chamber in the underground, a hundred feet long, perhaps, by fifty across, with cruel, remorseless walls that rose sloping gently inwards from an uneven horrible floor of hides and bones to that narrow neck far overhead, where the stars were already twinkling in a cloudless sky. By this time I was fairly frightened, and, alas that it should be written, the cold perspiration of dread began to stand in beads upon my forehead.

A fancy then seized me that some one might be within hearing above. I shouted again and again, and listening acutely each time as the echoes of my shout died away, I could have sworn some-

thing like the clash of ghostly teeth on teeth, something like the rattle of jaws in an ague fit, fell on the silence behind. With beating heart, and an unfamiliar dread creeping over me, I crouched down in the gloom and listened. There was water dripping out in the dark, monotonous and dismal, and something like the breath from a husky throat away in the distance of the cavern came fitfully to my ears, though so uncertain that at first I thought it might have been only the rustle of the wind in the grass far overhead. It was cowardly to be scared at one's own fancies, and again mastering all my resolution, I shouted until the darkness rang, then listened eagerly with every faculty on stretch; and again from the dim came that tremulous gnashing of teeth, and that wavering, long-drawn breath with something infinitely woeful and pathetic in it. Then my hair fairly stood on end, and in a minute my eyes were fixed with breathless wonder in front of me, for out of the remotest gloom, where the corruption of the floor was already beginning to glow with pale blue wavering phosphorescent light as the night fell, rose glimmering itself with that ghastly lustre, something slim and tall and tremu-

lous, that was full of life and yet was not quite of human form, and reared itself against the dark wall, all agleam, until its top, set with hollow eyes, was nine or ten feet from the ground, and oscillated and wavered, and seemed to feel about, as I had done, for an opening—and then on a sudden collapsed in a writhing heap upon the ground, and I distinctly heard the fall of its heavy body as it disappeared into the blue inferno that burnt below.

Again that spectral thing rose laboriously, this time many paces nearer to me, to twice the height of a man, and wavered and felt about, and then sank down with a fall like the fall of heavy draperies, as though the energy that had lifted it suddenly expired. Nearer and nearer it came, travelling round the circuit of the walls in that strange way, and awed and bewildered I crept out into the open to let that dreadful thing go by. And presently, to my infinite relief, it travelled away, still wavering and writhing, in what looked like discontent, and I breathed again.

As that luminous shadow faded into the remote, I shouted once more, for the pleasure, it must have been, of hearing my own voice,—again there was that gnashing of teeth,—and the instant afterwards

such a hideous chorus of yells from the other side of the cavern, such a commingled howl of lost spirits, such an infernal moan of sorrow and shame and misery, that rose and fell on the stillness of the night, that, for an instant, lost to everything but that dreadful sound, I leapt to my feet, with the stagnant blood cold as ice within me, my body pulseless for the moment, and mingled my mad shouting with the voices of those unseen devils in a hideous chorus. Then my manhood came back with a rush upon me, and judgment and sense, and I recognised in the trembling echoes a cry that I had often listened to in happier circumstances, and knew that uproar came from the throats of wolves that had been trapped like myself. But, "Were they alive?" I asked in fascinated wonder,—how could they be in this horrible pit? and if they were not, picture oneself cornered in such a trap with a pack of wolfish spirits—it would not bear thinking of; already my fancy saw constellations of fierce yellow eyes everywhere, and herds of wicked grey backs racing to and fro in the shadows, and with a tremulous hand I felt in my pocket for a match, and found I had two—and two only!

By this time the moon was up and a great disc of silver light, broad and bright, was creeping down the walls of our prison, but I would not wait for it. I struck the match with feverish eagerness, and held it overhead. It burnt brightly for a moment, and I saw I was in a great natural crypt, with no outlet anywhere but by the narrow neck above, and all chance of reaching that was impossible, as the walls sloped inwards everywhere as they rose to it. All the floor on every hand was piled thigh-deep with a ghastly tangle of animal remains, in every state of return to their native earth, from the bare bones, that would have crumbled at a touch, to the hide, still glossy and sleek, of the stag that had fallen in only a week or two before. Such a carnage place I never saw, —such furs, such trophies, such heads and horns there were all round, as raised the envy of my hunter spirit even in that emergency.

But what held me spell-bound and rooted my eyes into the shadows was—twenty paces off, lying full stretch along the glossy, undulating path which the incessant feet of new victims had worn, month after month, over the hill and valley of dead bodies under the walls—was a splendid

eighteen-foot python,—he whose ghostly rambles and ineffectual attempts to scale the walls had first scared me in that place of horrors. I turned round, for the match was short, and scarcely noticing a score or two of dejected rats, who squeaked and scrambled amongst lesser snakes and strange reptiles, looked hard across the cave. There, on their haunches, in a huddle against the far wall, staring at me with dull cold eyes, were five of the biggest, ugliest wolves ever mortal saw. I had often seen wolves, but never any like those. All the pluck and grace and savage vigour of their kind had gone from them; their bodies, gorged with carrion, were vast, swollen, and hideous; their shaggy fur was hanging in tatters from their red and mangy skins, the saliva streamed from their jaws in yellow ribbons, their bleary eyes were drowsy and dull, their great throats, as they opened them to howl in sad chorus at the handful of purple night above, were dry and yellow, and there was about them such an air of disgusting misery and woebegoneness, that, with a shudder and a cry I could not suppress, I let the last embers of the burning match fall to the ground.

How long I crouched in the darkness against the

wall, with those hideous serenaders grinding their foam-flecked teeth and bemoaning our common fate in hideous unison, I do not know. Nor have I space to tell the wild horrible visions which filled my mind for the next hour or two, but presently the moonlight had come down off the wall, and was spread at my feet in a silver carpet, and as I sullenly watched the completion of that arena of light, I was aware that the wolves were moving. Very slowly they came forward out of the darkness, led by the biggest and ugliest, until they were all in the silver circle, gaunt, spectral, and vile, every mangy tuft of loose hair upon their sore-speckled backs clear as daylight. Then those pot-bellied phosphorescent undertakers began the strangest movements, and after watching them for a moment or two in fascinated wonder, I saw they had come to me in their despair to solicit my companionship and countenance, and I could not have believed it possible dumb brutes could have made their meaning so clear, as those poor shaggy scoundrels did. They halted ten yards off, and with humble heads sagged down, and averted eyes, slowly wagged their mud-locked tails. Then they came a few steps further and whined and fawned,

and then another pace, and lay down upon their stomachs, putting their noses between their paws like dogs who watch and doze, while they regarded me steadfastly with sad, great eyes, forlorn and terrible.

Foot by foot, grey and silver in the moonlight, they advanced with the offer of their dreadful friendship, until at last I was fairly bewitched, and when the big wolf came forward till he was reeking at my knees, a horrible epitome of corruption, and licked my hand with his great burning tongue, I submitted to the caress as readily as though he were my favourite hound, and henceforth the pack seemed to think the compact was sealed, and thrust their odious company upon me, trotting at my heels, howling when I shouted, and muzzling down to me, putting their heavy paws upon my feet, and their great steaming jaws upon my chest whenever in despair and weariness I tried to snatch a moment's sleep.

But it would be impossible to go step by step through the infinitely painful hours of that night. Not only was the place full of spectral forms and strange cries, but presently legions of unclean things of a hundred kinds, that had lived on those

dead beasts when they too were living, swarmed in thousands and assailed us, adding a new terror to the inferno, ravaging us who still kept body and soul together, till our flesh seemed burning on our bones.

There was no rest for man or brute; the light was a mockery and the silence hideous. Round and round we pattered, I and the gaunt wolves, over the dim tracks worn by the feet of disappointment and suffering; wading knee-deep through a wavering sea of steamy blue flame, that rose from the remains and bespattered us from head to heel, stumbling and tripping and groping, and cursing our fates, each in his separate tongue, while the night waned, the dew fell clammy and cold into our prison, and the great yellow stars, who looked down in turn upon us from the free purple sky overhead, made a dim twilight in our cell. I was blundering and staggering round the walls for the hundredth time, feeling about with my hands in a hopeless search for some cleft or opening, when the grimmest thing of the whole evening happened. In a lonely corner of the den, in a little recess not searched before, pattering about in the dark, I suddenly touched with my

hand—think with what an electric shock it thrilled me—the cloth-clad shoulder of a man! With a gasp and a cry I leapt back, and stood trembling and staring into the shadows, scarcely daring to breathe. Much as I had suffered in that hideous place, nothing affected me half so much as, with all my nerves already stretched to their utmost, dropping my hand like that upon that dreadful shoulder. Heaven knows we were all cowards down there, but for a minute I was the biggest coward of us, and felt to the full those strange throes of superstitious terror that I had often wondered before to hear weaker men describe. Then I mustered my wavering spirit, and with the gaunt wolves squatting in a luminous circle around me, went into the recess again, and put my hand once more upon my grim companion. The coat upon him was dry and rough with age, and beneath it—I could tell by the touch—there was nothing but bare, rattling bones! I stood still, grimly waiting for the flutter of my physical cowardice to subside, and then I bethought me of that second match, and in a moment of keen intensity, with such care as you may imagine, struck it against the wall. It lit, and at my feet,

in ragged miner garb, sitting against the wall with his knees drawn up and his chin upon them, was the skeleton of a man so bleached and dry, that it must have been like that for fifty years at least. At his side lay his miner's pick and pannikin, an old dusty pocket-Bible, the fragments of a felt hat, and a pair of heavy boots, still neatly side by side, just as the luckless fellow had placed the well-worn things when, for some reason, he last took them off.

And overhead something scratched upon a flat face of the rock. Hastily I snatched a scrap of paper from my pocket and, lighting it at the expiring match, read on the stone,—

“Monday,”

“Tuesday,”

“Wednesd—”

—there was nothing but that, and even the “Wednesday” was unfinished, dying away in a shaky, uncertain scratch, that spoke infinitely more plainly than many words would have done, of the growing feebleness of the hand that traced it,—and then all was darkness again.

I crept back to my distant corner, and crouched like the dead man against the wall, with my chin

upon my knees, and kept repeating to myself the horrible simplicity of that diary—"Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday!" "Poor nameless Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday! And was this to be my fate?" I laughed bitterly,—I would begin such another record with the first streak of dawn, and in the meantime I would sleep, whatever befell, and sleep I did, with those restless blue wolves cantering round the well-worn paths of the charnel-house, to their own hideous music, the silent unknown away in the distance, and the opal eyes of the great serpent staring at me like baleful planets, cold, sullen, and cruel, from between the dead man's feet.

It was a shout that woke me next morning, a clear ringing shout, that thrilled me down to my innermost fibre, and jerked me from dreadful dreams like a stone from a catapult. I scrambled to my feet and saw from the bright pavement of light about me that it was day above, and while I still staggered and wandered stupidly, again came that shout. I stared up overhead where the sunlight was making the neck of the trap a disc of intolerable brightness and there, when my eyes grew

accustomed to that shine, was a round something that presently resolved itself into the blessed face of my steadfast chum, Will Hartland—"Trusty English Will" they called him on the plains.

There is little need to say more. With the help of his strong cow-rope, at his saddle-bow, and a round point of earth-embedded rock as purchase, he had me out of that accursed hole in an incredibly, ridiculously short space of time. And there I was, leaning on his shoulder, free again, in the first flush of as glorious a morning as you could wish for, with the San Juan away in the distance, winding in a sapphire streak through miles of emerald forests, a sweet blue sky above, and underfoot the earth wet with morning mist, smelling like a wine cooler, and every bent and twig underfoot gemmed with glittering prismatic dewdrops. I sat down on a stone, and after a long pull at Will's flask, told him something like the narrative I have just given. And when the tale was done I paused a minute, and then said somewhat shyly, "And now I am going back, Will, old man! back for those poor devils down yonder, who haven't a chance for their lives unless I do." Will, who had listened to my narrative with horror and wonder flitting across his

honest brown face, started up at this as though he thought the night's adventure had fairly turned my head. But he was a good fellow, chivalrous and tender of heart under his Mexican jacket, and speedily acknowledging that I was right, set to work to help me.

Down I went back into the pit, the very sight and shadow of which now made me sick, and with the noose end of Will's lasso (he holding the other end above) set to work to secure those poor beasts, who whinned and crowded round my legs in hideous glee to have me back again amongst them. 'Twas easy work; they were stupid and heavy, and seemed to have some idea of my intentions, and thus I noosed them one at a time, and when a wolf was fast, shouted to Will, who hauled away with scant ceremony, and up the grey ghoul went into that sunshine he had not seen for many weeks, until he and all his comrades were free once more, spinning, and struggling, and yelping—truly a wonderful sight. But nothing would move the python. I followed him round and round, trying all I knew to get his cruel, cynical head through the noose, and then, when he had refused it a dozen times, I

grew wroth and cursed him in the name of the ancient Mother, and gathering up all the tortoises, lizards, and lesser beasts I could find into my waist-band, ascended into the sweet outer air once more.

A very few hours afterwards a heavy blasting-charge, fetched from a neighbouring mine, was dangling by a string just inside the mouth of the detestable trap, with its fuse burning brightly. A few minutes of suspense, a mighty crash, and a cloud of white smoke hanging over the green hill-top, and one of the most treacherous places that ever marred the face of nature's sweet earth was a harmless heap of dust and tumbled stones.

RUTHERFORD THE TWICE-BORN

AT the twentieth outset of this story, when I have made up my mind many times to tell it, and have as often shrunk back from the paper and pen unwilling, I still hesitate and doubt, weighing with the wretched sensitiveness of my nature your certain ridicule against the hunger of confession that is within me. Yet I must speak, and I will! Here on the twentieth venturing I feel the crowded incidents of that one marvellous evening of my life well up strongly before me; the giddy, fantastic thrall of the strangest hour that ever a mortal man lived through possesses me again; my cold pen slips eagerly forward to the betrayal, and this is the narrative of my shame and my penance, just as it came unasked upon me out of the invisible past.

I was the younger son of an ancient family boasting an untarnished reputation, and one of the best rent-rolls in the northern country. When I was

very young I gloried in the splendid sweep of territory that spread out in purple vistas round Wanleigh Court, weaving golden fancies of the sweet share I would play in the rule of my mimic kingdom, and when I was a little older I quickly learned with a sigh that I had no more part in that fertile realm than the meanest peasant on it. Briefly, I was the younger son of three, and before I was come to manhood, I had had a fiery word or two with those above me, and taken the younger son's portion, and went out into the world, and ate husks with the social swine, and, too proud to ask and too poor to beg, kept that sensitive, self-searching soul my ancestors had bequeathed me, and my frail, fine body together on the scanty wages of two unable hands. Lord! how I suffered during those years, how nicely I measured each black abyss of humiliation, and probed each raw wound that my sensitive nature took in the rough and tumble of that grim, ugly strife for bare maintenance,—and then—even now I cannot write it without a lump of genuine sorrow in my throat—my father died, and Wanleigh passed to my elder brother in the summer, and before the next spring it had gone again from that brother's dead hands

into those of Guy who came between us, and here, in a trice Guy's horse had tripped and tumbled at a fence and Guy was gone in turn!—and I, ragged John Rutherford, who had feasted for years on poor men's leavings, and kennelled with his peers in leaky attics, was Lord of Lutterworth, and Worsborough, of Warkworth and Torsonce, of Thenford House and Sudley Park, with a new world of delights opening at my feet.

It was as sweet a flying sip from the full cup of pleasure as ever a man tasted, and my starving body and my hungry soul, I remember, burst into new young life with the bare conception of it. And that brief glimpse of delight lasted one day. Before I had scarcely ventured from my lair or shaken off those cruel rags which weighed like lead on my proud spirit, some rolls were handed to me as eldest now and heir, the most secret archives of our race, and therefrom I learned in a few numb minutes what had been to me before only a vague, whispered hearsay—that we held our splendid holdings by fraud, and that many generations back, but well within the discovery of research and the possibility of restitution, should a Rutherford arise so minded, was a foul deed of

treachery and usurpation whereby the lawful line had been ousted from their right and ours substituted. That was all!

For six long black hours I—ragged, hungry John Rutherford—lay white and silent and speechless in my garret, my head on my arm on the table, that dreadful thing crushed in my unfeeling fingers, my corporal body inert and lifeless, while the good and the bad within me fought desperate and long for the mastery,—and then, when the sodden dusk of a December evening had fallen across my cheerless window, the fight was finished and won, and I rose to my feet pale and faint and grateful. I went out and ordered that search which I felt would condemn me for ever to my kennel and the blank drudgery of living from which my soul revolted, then, I remember, I came back in the dark and took down my crust and my pitcher, and could not eat or drink, but sat like that all the night, cold and alone, fighting again all the incidents of the fight, and so fell asleep at last in my chair in the twilight strangely, incredibly contented.

And now begins the strangest part of the story! The search begun at my orders prospered so well

that soon the long sequence of the wrong had been followed down until at last it seemed there was only a step or two needed to snatch the splendid pageantry of Lutterworth and Worsborough, Warkworth and gay Torsonce, from me for all time. I bore those endless days of torture in dull resignation, and then, on the very morrow of the final discovery, a fierce yearning took possession of me to see the old house once more, a fierce hunger which overlapped even the physical hunger in which I lived, an insatiable longing to touch even though it were but the humblest thing that friendly hands had touched, to hide my heavy loneliness even for a moment in the kind mother shadows of my home; and so I went.

It was a wet, rough evening, when I turned off the high-road I had been trudging, and picking my way in the stillness of the dark along broad avenues and through lonely fir plantations, every turn and bend of which were redolent to me of bygone memories, presently found myself amongst the tangled, neglected lawns and effaced flower-beds of Wanleigh Hall itself. And as I stood there in the sullen drip of the trees while the white moon shone between the chinks of the

storm upon the desolate face of that splendid sorrow in front, and the black feet of the clouds trod in gloomy procession across the sodden, unkempt lawns, the measure of the price of my victory, the depth of my loneliness was forced upon me, and I wrung my hands and hid my face and prayed to the night-time, prayed to the great unforgiving, inscrutable powers,—prayed as I had never prayed before in shame or in sickness, cursing in my blindness and folly that black debt, and him who had bequeathed me to pay it,—and leant me against a tree and wept like the weak fool that I was,—wept, but did not waver.

Presently the gust was over, and walking out into the light I hardened my heart and approached the house, from whose many windows only one small streak of brightness shone into the dark air, from where an old servitor and her husband lodged. The hall had been left in charge of these, and it was they who gave me admittance and had prepared in some measure for my coming. I will not say what a flood of memories rushed upon me as I stood again in the old wainscotted hall, or later on ascended the broad staircase and passed down a long ranked avenue of my ances-

tors' portraits to my bedroom; those crowding recollections of dead days were infinitely painful, my senses were all on the alert for laughing voices the memory of which filled every echo in these gloomy corridors with ghostly meaning, and my heart hungered for some sign of life or love to break the speechless loneliness of the desolate place. I washed and dressed in moody abstraction, and then made my way down to the great banquet-room, where a solitary stately supper was laid for me in grim parody of my condition.

There I supped under the wide vaulted roof at the table that had sat a hundred, the pale shine of my two tall candles making a bright island of my supper napkin and my plate and tankard in the ocean of the gloom around,—touching the white tips of the antlers my kinsmen had brought home from long-forgotten hunts, and gilding with their faint yellow beams buckler and breastplate of that ranked armour they had worn in long-forgotten fights. On the one hand—far down the hall—the lonely fire burnt away back in the great cavernous grate-place, singing low, sad songs, it seemed, to itself as the grey smoke twined in wreaths up the wide chim-

ney; and on the other hand the long, uncurtained sequence of the mullioned windows and the wet raven night outside,—the plaintive rustle of the dead unseen summer things that for ever drew their withered strands to and fro against the streaked diamond panes, and the sad sob of the evening wind wandering like a restless spirit on the broken terrace outside, lifting with the invisible hem of its sable skirt the rustling dead leaves, and gently trying in turn with wet soft fingers each casement catch and latchet! Not a being in that full-haunted house, not a sound broke the dead stillness; my head dropped upon my hand, and I grieved with a stony, emotionless grief like the grief of the stones around me.

Then—all on a sudden—some one was coming, and upon my empty ear fell the sound of fine small footsteps in the dim corridors at the distant end of the hall! Those steps were like the dripping of water in the silence of a cavern, and somehow every awakening fibre in me thrilled instinctively to the measured approach of my invisible visitor. I held my breath and gripped the carved lions on my chair and stared, and then very gently, inch by inch, and foot

by foot, the heavy tapestries down beyond the bottom of the long table were parted, and from between them came an immaterial something, a smoothly stepping shadow that dropped the draperies behind it and came meditatively forward into the radiance of the low-burning fire ; and there in the glow stood a black-velvet clad Elizabethan gentleman, as like to myself somehow and yet not quite alike, as one bird is to another of kindred feather ! For some minutes that strange figure stood there gazing into the blaze, while I strove to steady my beating heart and wondering fancies, and then it looked up ! My whole nature was fascinated by that glance ; I felt a secret unknown association between my essence and that thin essence in front of me, which was like the eager attraction of the two parted elements of one common whole in a chemist's crucible ; I did not fear or tremble ; but a quick, strong, expressionless apprehension of my visitor — of every turn and motion of him, of every touch and play the fire-light made on his soft velvet garments, the hilt of his silver rapier, or the lines of his strong passionate features enthralled me. And when he spoke my heart was in my throat. " John Ruther-

ford!" he said in a low cadenced way,—and I thought even the wind outside and the raindrops had stopped to listen to him, "I have come to-night to explain, to help you to explain, some things which you find inexplicable. You have been wondering, and fuming, and fretting; cursing the unknown origin of your sorrow, and even blaming with bitter rashness the stable equity of chance! Your grief in this is my grief, and both might end," he said with a gentle courtierly inflexion suiting him strangely, "if you will but lend yourself to me. Now!" he said, gliding gently up until I felt the thrill of the cold smooth presence that hung about him; "now!—think—remember! back son of a hundred fathers—back into the dim,—back up the long path you have come—think! remember, I conjure you!" and he laid a light thin hand upon my wrist, and at the touch of it every fibre in me began fiercely pulsing, my breath came thick and short, my head grew light and giddy, and all the real about became dissolved into a vague immaterial shadow; I, me, the hard, material, passion-aching me and the solid life around was wiped out, and down I went out of my own control, down the plane of the immaterial, into a

fantastic world remembering at that magic touch all, everything I had done; step by step, backwards into the past my wondering wide-eyed consciousness receded, watching that immortal ego which was myself shrink from manhood down to babiness, and then materialise again into another life in another age, and heave and push and struggle, and shout and laugh and cry, and ever acting as though that life it lived upon the minute were the only one, the while it floundered slowly through ambiguous sloughs, towards the pale deathless glimmer of that distant godly Hope which was its life and being,—back reeled my consciousness, back by deathbeds and altars and cradles, and cradles and deathbeds and altars;—at one minute of that compressed understanding I saw myself loathsome for base design and deed, and then the rhythm of that ceaseless struggle for the better which my ego waged, mended as the baseness mended,—at one minute my staggering, startled consciousness saw itself grey and lean and wrinkled stretched in courtly obsequies upon a bed of silk and minever,—and then as a soldier hot and young, waving a broken hilt in the thick red tangles of charging squadrons—at one minute of those lives

that flashed in endless sequence before their liver, that liver sunk in shameful hopelessness scarcely lived, and then anon, at a hair's-breadth interval, it rose to heroic heights. I could not stand the stress of that wild vision, and presently ceased remembering, all on a sudden, the material materialised again, and with a gasp I was myself; the opaque curtain of corporeal living clouded my mind, leaving only a vague consciousness behind that I had forgotten something I had lately remembered!

"Back again, sweet kinsman," cried the shadow, standing right in front of me, "back again, sweet comrade, back into the black sea of the forgotten, for that great pearl of fact you have not found," and he touched me once more upon the wrist.

I struggled, I would not go, I gasped; and in a minute I had gone again and was spinning down the long dim vistas of the by and done-with, until I came at last, by episode of love and fear and hate and redeeming sadness, to where two half-brothers jointly owned our land. This was the kernel of it all. The elder of those two close comrades was learned and gentle, serene in his confidence of the brother whose loyal friendship

made half the sweetness of the wide dominion that they shared. Another breathing space, and I saw mad envy growing in the younger till it ripened into malice and savagery, and pictured against the dark background of my fancy in his every pose and gesture; and lastly, in one minute of shame and sorrow incredible I saw him decoy the other to a pleasant tryst and stab him most foully in the back, stab him twice and thrice, till he lay bloody and dead in the screen of the woods, and all for the sake of a few more acres; then sneaking home, traitor no less than coward, I saw him by lies and forgery brand with infamy the true wife and children of that brother, and as he rose, wicked and flushed and triumphant on their ruin, undivided master of Wanleigh and Worsborough, of Torsonce and Lutterworth, I saw his face,—and it was my own.

With a scream and a start I awoke, all the terror and shame and confusion of that dread discovery working in my features; I threw myself out upon the table in an agony of contrition, and locking my clasped hands above my head, shut out for a minute the long, dim length of the hall half seen in the golden gloom of the candles

and the deathless eyes of that grey inquisitor who stood watching the tempest of emotions that racked my soul. So it was I, was it? I who had done that black, foul deed in another life, and sown the miserable seed of which the harvesting also was mine; it was myself then, on whose head I had heaped an hundred thousand curses; it was I, gentle John Rutherford, that was the best butcher of them all. In my wild incoherent grief and astonishment I lay moaning like that for a minute, thinking over in my living mind each step of the motley pageantry which had carried me back into the past and given me that strange knowledge, that one chance insight, into what seemed the great methods of the inscrutable powers. I forgot the grey shadow by me until in a minute he touched me again and said, more gently this time, "The wrong was great, and great has had to be the repentance, but the methods of the law which governs your life and mine, there where you are, and here where I am, are as just, and as generous, as they are unalterable. You have offended and made restitution, good! this single circle of the hundred thousand which compose your life is completed, now see how nicely

the ways of 'chance' (forsooth!) fit to the needs of justice—think again, kinsman."

But I dared not. I staggered back, back from the glamour of that shrouding presence about him, —back from those inflexible grey eyes standing out keen and bright as two pale planets in the dusky solitudeness of my hall; I wrung my hands in my stress like a woman, and wailed as the fear and the doubt and the wonder played like hot metal in my veins. In a frenzy of terror, with the courage of a rat in a corner, I remember swearing I would not remember again, and for answer, in a thought, he had touched me with that smooth, cold, velvet touch and I was away, nerveless, dreaming anew, right back into that age where my earlier self had done the baseness, and thence, this time descending through the years, I followed on the heels of the outlawed ones I wronged. I saw those dear, flitting phantoms stream across the stage of my comprehension, dropping as they went from their gentle condition down into lesser ranks, son succeeding to father, and brother to brother, a long line of yeomanry living in forgetfulness on the outskirts of the land that was theirs but for my treachery;

marrying and working and dying, writing their names in churches and chapels and Bibles, until so many of them had slipped by that presently all knowledge of the wrong that had been suffered and the right unrestored was gone from amongst them! But could *I* overlook it? Step by step, and life by life I saw the right in the cottage come down step by step and life by life with the wrong in the hall; I saw that right inviolate, slip from name to name and hand to hand; twice it was nearly extinguished, and then, when I somehow knew in my sleep I had followed it down all but to the actual present day, all the right and heirship of our wide acres and many halls was concentrated by true descent and existed only in one fair, unwotting, yeoman girl. I saw her bud in the swift, bright sequence of my involuntary recollection from a tender cottage maid into a comely woman with averted face, I saw one in dress of better kind ride down and woo her by cottage door and hazel copse, and win,—and lead her to the altar,—and all my straining soul and aching heart and stretching nerves were breaking to look upon their faces, for here were they who had bred him who was to-day true Lord of

Lutterworth and Worsborough—he to whom I must give place, and light and life, the embodied heir of that deathless wrong I had done. I half dragged the white linen from the table and the clattering plates and cups in the bitterness of my expectation, I half rose from my chair with starting, straining eyes still body-senseless as I was, and waited for those two to turn. And turn they did in a minute, and with a stagger and a start and a cry out of the lowermost depths of my soul, I tottered out of my vision into the material world again, and tossed my arms aloft, and laughed and wept, and reeled, and then fell fainting right across the floor, right at the feet of the grave, calm, gently smiling shadow who was watching me, for I had seen them,—all in one blinding, dazzling moment of swift comprehension I had perceived that in myself was the focus of wrong and of right, in me was both the debt and the credit,—for those two were my father and mother!

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There is nothing more to say. I was ill after that, and when I was well a bulky blue letter was handed to me saying those who had under-

taken my search had, to their marvel, come to conclusions the same as my own, but it need hardly be added by methods much more prosaic. And Wanleigh and Worsborough, and Torsonce and Lutterworth have a new master, a humble open-handed master who goes about thinking he sees better men than himself in every wastrel that he meets, and purpose in the purposeless, and justice in injustice, and the clear heart of eternal equity beating inviolate, imperturbable, and perpetual under all the noisy pulses of casual life.

A STRANGER WOMAN

CHAPTER I

IT was a bright and cheerful hall that wherein one dark spring night some few score years ago young Andrew Lacy and his brother Hugh sat basking by the red rays of a log fire, sipping their warm and well-spiced wine from the tall silver cups that ten generations of Lacys had drunk from, and taking now and then reflective pulls at their long Georgian pipes with a serenity which comes as the last but happiest state of those who dine wisely and well. And man being one to whom everything is comparative, they had another cause for quiet satisfaction. Their walls were thick and stout, the mullioned windows along one side of the long hall were strongly curtained, the ruddy firelight threw a pleasant glow twenty paces down the wainscoting that was decked with old portraits, a head or two

of Exmoor deer, and here and there trophies of bird and beast, or racks for guns and rods. On the long oak table the soft damask cloth was still spread and white country-bread flanked the shining flagons of red wine; everything within spoke of warmth and comfort,—while without!—it made the ears of those shore-bred boys prick to listen to the wild piping of a fierce autumnal gale sweeping overhead, and stayed their pleasant talk now and then to note how the great rain-drops rattled upon the window panes, and how the dull roar of the waves deepening every minute came up from the sea, a scanty half-mile distant, in one long, sullen, heavy moan.

“Just hark to it,” cried Hugh as he filled his glass again, and paused to listen to a long fierce howl of the blast that ran screaming overhead across the tiled roofs, and whistled down the chimneys, and shook the windows, while close upon its heels came a gusty flow of rain that seemed to creep in a solid sheet of water from window to window, and stifle for the moment even the deep, sullen voice of the sea. “Surely, Andrew,” he gasped, as the fitful madness of the storm died down for a moment, “surely this is the

worst night we have had for many a year. There will be some good timber down to-morrow, I fear."

"For certain," answered the elder; "and though I like to cut my own, I shall not be sorry. We have too much upon the land."

"Now that, Andrew, is just a pet folly of yours," put in his brother somewhat warmly (for the good wine by him was strong and old, and Hugh was choleric, though there was not a more generous fellow living in his better moods. "It's just rank folly, and though I know you are squire here and can do as you like, yet I tell you you will ruin the place if you don't curb that brute Micholls and his infernal axe. Why, only this morning I found him taking down the best oak in the clump by the Watchet spring!")

"Yes. I told him to."

"And by the Lord," cried Hugh Lacy springing to his feet, flushed and angry, "I told him not to!"

"Then, Hugh," said his brother, also rising, but keeping his temper, "then you will have to bid him begin again to-morrow!"

"I would see him and you to perdition first," was the passionate answer, and for a minute the two brothers stood looking at each other from

opposite sides of that great stone fire-place which had heard the sighs and the whispers of the Lacys, their love wooings in long winter evenings, the tales of their men and matrons, the querulous complaints of their grey beards, and the fairy laughter of their little ones for five hundred years.

Both were stalwart young men, broad shouldered and straight limbed, gallant gentlemen both of them in their particoloured Georgian finery; both were good-looking in their own way, but the good looks of the younger were the product of physical health and soundness alone. With his brother it was somewhat different. He was taller than the other, and his strength and healthiness were not so aggressively apparent as they were in the quick and choleric younger one. His face was darker and more serious, though it could brighten wonderfully at times; he was generous too, and pleasant-spoken, and during the few years since his father's death he had managed the ancestral acres with skill and success; he had pared the talons of the money-lenders whose mortgage-scrip had overshadowed many a fertile acre; had dried his mother's tears; had found her in his cousin, brown-haired Jane Amory, a

dear house-daughter; had kept his unruly brother in good rule, and fairly won the hearts of the rugged but appreciative Devonian peasantry over whom he ruled.

And was one of those stunted, wind-swept oaks, which jutted from his green warren banks like a mason's beard from off his chin, to come between him and the dear wayward brother between whom and their mother in secret all his heart was divided? He smiled even to think of it, and sighed again a little to remember how often of late such a question had had to be met and laughed at, and then, casting off the last trace of his anger, went over to his brother and putting, with a graceful touch of that boyish fondness which had never ceased between them, one hand upon his kinsman's and the other about his neck, looking into his face, and as the aggressor glanced up with the last signs of the sullenness dying away, Andrew said — "Hugh, old man, this is ridiculous; why, no one knows better than we do that not all the oaks from here to Hartland could come between us two. Think no more of it! we will go over to-morrow morning the very first thing and have a talk

about the trees upon the spot." Hugh's anger melted on the moment, his hand tightened in his brother's, and as he bent towards him he smiled and laughed. "You are right, dear brother, and I was a fool to be vexed. Neither oak trees nor anything will ever come between us while we are in our right minds,—will they?" and he leant his head for a moment on his brother's shoulder.

For a minute they stood thus in silence, and it was so still in the long wainscotted dining-room of that lonely manor-house by the sea that you could hear the rain-drops hissing on the smouldering fire, and the drip of the water in the court-yard, and the scrape of a bough somewhere on the walls outside; it was so still as they stood there in their love and comradeship, that as they listened, far away in a dark corridor the mechanism of an ancient Dutch clock began to hiss and rattle, and the face opened (they knew the process right well), and out came a man and beat slowly and solemnly eleven strokes upon the brass bell at his side; the face opened again, the spin of the wheels was distinctly audible in the stillness between two gusts of the storm outside, and then, with a click, the mannikin was gone, and the sedate tick of the

clock, to whose serenity life and death were nothing, whose measured pulse never quickened for love or hate, came measured and slow again on the stillness.

As the last chime of the hour struck, Andrew looked down at the handsome face at his shoulder, and then drew in his breath and gasped, while a sharp shudder of pain and dread, keen and fine, shot through him, while for a second a nameless terror passed like a gust across his mind, and his heart stood still with awe, and then fell a-thumping fiercely against his side; for that comely face that a moment before had been so ruddy, with nothing but the honest stain of sun and sea-wind upon it, was now ghastly pale, and drawn, and blue,—and dead! In many a weary month of exile and shame, Andrew Lacy wonderingly recalled that fleeting minute of dreadful prophecy; now, with that dreadful thing upon his shoulder, his whole being seemed in suspense for the moment, every sense and function was lost in vague impalpable terror until with a start that broke the spell and set the young squire's blood running fiercely in his veins, once more the life flowed back into the face that had been so grave like, and as Hugh started up he stared at the window, and then

broke out hastily, "Why Andrew—look! what is this strange shine coming between the curtains? why, God save us, man! 'tis from the sea," and, striding hastily to the recess that looked out over the trim garden and a few hundred yards of sandy warren grass beyond, he pulled back the tapestry, and peered eagerly through the rain-streaked diamond panes. And there, shining weird and ghostly out in the black heart of the night, disembodied, with nothing about it but the dim acres of fierce white water that broke and thundered round the promontory, out in the black howl of the gale and flying scud of spray and spume, was the blue shine of distress, the wavering beam, now rising and now sinking, of a flare from a luckless vessel upon the rocks. "It's a ship! it's a ship!" cried the impetuous Hugh, "and upon the Death-Stone; she will not hold together an hour on such a night as this;—here, Neston and Pritchard!" he shouted, flinging open the door that led back to where the serving-men were basking by the kitchen fire over their evening ale, "a ship's upon the morthoe, and close in; quick, you fellows, my boots and cloak—and ring the turret bell."

It took those shore-bred young men but a short minute or two to thrust their silk-stockinged legs into high leathern boots, and discard their silver rapiers and their claret-coloured velvet coats for rough woollen vest and heavy frieze over-alls, and then they were ready; and as the alarm bell upon the tower sent its keen warning clatter on the dark wet wings of the wind up the valley, and every window and mullion of the old house shone ruddy through the rain, with hastily kindled tapers, young Squire Andrew Lacy and his brother Hugh, close followed by half-a-dozen henchmen carrying cords and ropes, and axes and lanterns, set out on their gallant but hopeless errand for the beach.

But first, just as Andrew's hand was upon the catch of the door, a quick light footfall sounded on the oak staircase behind him, and there was his pretty cousin Jane Amory, a hasty wrap or two thrown round her shoulders, and the heavy coils of her soft hair twisted into a great loose knot upon her shapely head. She went straight up to her cousin, and expressed her fear and grief for the people in the unhappy ship upon the rocks with a simple earnestness which told that a good heart backed those kindly words, and

telling him that all should be ready in the house to succour any that were saved, and then—it was a little action, but it was eloquent—dropping her hand for a moment, light as thistle-down, upon his arm and bidding him be careful of himself—“for his mother’s sake—and hers.” Then the door was opened and they started.

It was as wild and fierce a night as any that had ever blown on that iron rim of the northern Atlantic. Here on the land the darkness was rayless and heavy, while down by the sea, as they staggered towards it, the black night was in chaos and the ghostly shine of the surf, limning the edge of the land with a pale belt of tumult, dimly showed the savage line of the coast, the rugged fields of mighty breakers rushing to destruction, and the cruel, fantastic ledges of rocks upon which they burst incessantly in torrents of white water and shadowy confusion.

And to the stupendous thunder of the surf in the bay was added the wild shrill whistling of the wind smiting the sea and the shore, like the heavy material hand of the storm out of the abyss of the gloom. It beat and buffeted the struggling men, and howled and shrieked, and

wailed like souls new gone to Purgatory, and laid the long warren grass flat to the sands; and tore the gorse and ling, hustling armfuls from the banks, and sent the great swirls of stranded sea foam spinning far up over the meadows; and whistled amongst the branches of the stunted oaks, and piped shrilly amongst the rocks; and all the time the heavy darkness lay on everything, only broken by the dim white boundary of spume and turmoil that separated the worlds of sea and land from each other.

Out on the bare forelands, where the heather and ling and short flower-spangled grass sloped so pleasantly down in the summer by a smooth velt to the naked rocks of the tide line, the wind was keener than ever, and loaded with bitter, stinging sheets of salt rain that bit the bare faces and hands of the squire and his men, stifling the breath in their mouths, and at last bringing them—so fierce were the furious gusts during the lasty fifty yards of their walk—fairly to their knees; gasping, bewildered, and groping they went slowly forward, and in a few yards more saw the gleam of a lantern among the rocks below, and sliding and slipping down to where it lay at

the foot of a sheltering buttress of cliff, they found themselves in the presence of a knot of fishermen crowding under the cover and staring out hard to seaward.

When he had got his breath, Andrew Lacy put his hand upon the edge of the rock and glared like his fellows into the gloom. For many a long day he had cause to remember that night. Lord! what an inferno it was. Here, low down, you got all the spume and litter of the storm in one plane, and the sky was inky black above, while the floor of the sea was dim, ghostly white, with a thousand ever shifting black abysses on it, right away to the vague place where air and water merged into one. Near by, in the spectral shine on either hand was the fringe of rugged rocks in spires, and pinnacles, and ridges all set one way as sharp as knife blades; and just in front crouched a narrow reef swept round in crescent form, enclosing a rugged harbour perhaps two hundred yards across. Outside this, away again in the deeper gloom, were more black fangs of rock and cruel mangling places for luckless mariners, and beyond them all—now a vague white blur against the black shroud of the

night, as mighty cataracts of foam played over her, and then anon shadowy and grim—like a lonely island in an ocean of foam, lay the wreck herself.

The young squire was shoreman enough to know no swimmer or boat could have lived a moment in that seething midnight cauldron. Rank behind rank, in their gloomy pride, out of the endless reserves of the night came the racing phalanxes of water. Tier beyond tier the tossing white spume hung upon their crests. They escalated the reef on which the vessel lay, and hurtled round and over her in mighty avalanches of water. Then on again in a furious living rampart, through the devious channels between the scattered points they pressed, obliterating and bursting into tall fountains of spray; and on yet again, with the strength of the storm behind them and fierce invective of the wind in their ears, to here, where at Lacy's feet they finally fell, with a shock like the shock of the thunder upon the inner barrier-reef; and while the wild curtain of the salt mist leapt in a broad sheet up into the black night sky, and a thousand dripping gullies spurted foam and water, those thousand tons of sea fell

over into the rocky haven, and up—staggering, boiling up out of the shadowy basin of the rocks, its troubled surface rose at each renewal, in a broad mosaic of foam, and so at last came to rest, and lay heaving placidly a space in that dim midnight pool.

It was in these scanty intervals of peace that the sturdy fishermen made dashes down to the edge of the spume, and snatched—it was all they could do—at anything living or dead the sea brought within their reach. They had made two or three such dashes before he came, and now one of them touched the young man on the arm and said, pointing to a deep patch of shadow near by, "There's two of 'em come ashore already, sir. Will you see them?" and though his speech was ambiguous, Lacy knew well enough he was pointing to the bodies of some seamen washed from the wreck, and moved by a spirit of compassion, and an idea that those poor waifs would be about the only fruit of their errand that evening, he nodded, and taking the lantern they went over to the place of shadows, where the night wind was whistling a lullaby through the crevices, and the long wet tassels of the dark

weed upon the rock swayed in the pale lantern light like funeral drapery, and there, side by side, on their backs, pallid and stiff and bloody, with wide open eyes and dark swollen lips, lay two battered corpses. Both were young, both were Spaniards, but even their Andalusian mothers could have said little more than that, for the sea had played horrible havoc with them, and those who while Lacy was filling his second after-dinner glass of red Hermitage an hour or two before were stalwart fellows, olive-skinned and tall, now lay at his feet in the yellow shine, hideously gashed and disfigured. The iron fangs of the reef had been at work on their hapless bodies, and the playful sea out yonder had pounded, and bullied, and crushed those poor carcasses, and the rocks had gnawed and stabbed and lacerated them, until their bodies were all weals and furrows and great gaping wounds, and their limbs were broken, and their ribs were crushed, and their clothes were ripped to ribbons, the red blood was oozing from their battered mouths, and their great frightened eyes were staring so wide on Lacy, that he turned away at last in generous pity, and would watch no more on the

shrill wind playing covetously with their dank locks, and the horrible contortions of their dead faces.

Wayward are the ways of chance!—a frailer thing came presently safe through that cauldron! The young squire turned away in disgust and pity, and as he did so the group above was all excitement, and down came the sturdy cragsmen scrambling over the rocks,—and Lacy joined them,—to the very verge of the rock-encompassed pool of water. There the tessellated floor of the water was heaving and falling as though some great heart beat under it, and out in the dimness amongst the boil and litter of the fight something small and black was floating. To a landsman's eyes it might have been only a Spanish chest, or a broken offal-box, or something foul and wastrel (as would to God it had been!)—but the cliff men knew better; and young John Dunne of Bodrean whipped off his coat and vest and boots, and William Rodd of Porthwidden tied a rope about his middle, and in a minute he was in the boiling midnight pool, striking out gallantly for that vague something that rose and fell and disappeared in the spume and froth. Twenty

minutes it took that strong swimmer to forge through the swirl and spin of the dim arena inside the crescent reef, and ten more brought him slowly back with his prize, gasping and struggling and faint in the churn and spin of the eddies, but still strong and redoubtable.

As he gripped the ledges with one broad wet hand, and the heave of the sea bore him and his burden breast high up for a minute, a dozen willing arms were stretched out, and stout John Dunne of Bodrean was landed, gasping and giddy, upon the rocks,—a couple of kindly fellows led him stumbling up the path,—and now, what had he got?—a woman, by the bright light of day, and a wondrous slim one. They carried her up after her rescuer and put her down in the shelter of a corner, they put her head upon a coat and turned the lantern on, and there, under the kindly stare of that peering circle of weather-beaten men, in the gusty rain and the sea spume, lay as fair a featured girl as any man could hope to look upon. Was it possible she was dead? Lacy asked himself, as he bent over her and felt in that first moment the spell of her beauty. Even the sea, which had crushed her countrymen out of all

shape of humanity, had strangely revered her loveliness. The colour had gone from her face, the wild black hair in splendid coils was all astray upon the wet sea-wrack on which she rested, the bare long arms as white as ivory lay listless just as old William Rodd had put them; the tiny unslipperd feet in their silk stockings pointed to the sky; the eyes were fast shut; the mouth was set,—yet, save for one scratch upon her chin, there was not a mark upon her. Was it possible the light of so much loveliness had gone out into the black water for so little hurt? Lacy could scarce believe it, and let his eye stray for a moment down the sweet unruffled outline of the wet white drapery that clung to her and did not hide or diminish the round grace of a single curve,—then back to where upon her bosom a diamond clasp glittered in the pale lantern light, and there—Jove! was it fancy, or the shiver of the night wind amongst the folds of silk?—no!—as he looked, those shining stones trembled and blushed crimson and gold and sapphire for a moment, and rose a hair's-breadth and sparkled and shone in smiling mockery of the black night about them, and

then with a tremulous glint of colour gently subsided again,—the girl was breathing!

Down upon his knees went Squire Andrew Lacy, down went his brother Hugh, down went many another rough fellow as good as either, each vying with each to husband that sweet spark of life smouldering within. They stripped their coats off and piled them about her, they rubbed and chafed, they worked her fair arms as never the arms of Granadian maid were worked before; they loosened her girdle without her leave, and undid her damp collaret; trying all the rough remedies the place permitted, and soon the shining gems quivered again and fell, and then in a minute or two more her white fingers twitched, a struggling sigh escaped her, and with a gasp and a half cry, as the shock of a new breath beset her, Iris Algeciras opened her eyes.

And now there was little to do but get her up to the house, where she could have softer ministration, and better chance of warmth and peace. When Andrew Lacy called for coverings to wrap her in, enough coats and plaids were proffered to have wrapped all her ship's company; and when he asked for two strong fellows to bear

the fair burden up, enough willing hands were proffered to have carried fifty such.

So they started, and as the flickering lantern and the black knot of bearers disappeared over the cliff grass into the wet gloom of the evening, each of those two young men who stayed to watch the wreck sighed to himself, and somehow felt that life was somewhere changed, and that that new morning which was already shining low down in the south, between the black pall of clouds overhead and the leaden fields of broken sea, would begin a strange new day for him and his.

CHAPTER II

IT was not until the second breakfast had been set in the pleasant, long dining-room of the Manor House, and only the spars of the luckless ship a quarter of a mile off the point, and a thin rim of wreckage along the golden sands of the bay under the windows, remained to tell of the storm which was over, that Jane Amory burst in upon the brothers with the news that the Spanish girl was coming—that she was even then upon the

stairs with their mother. Those two young men rose eagerly, and in a minute the door opened and in came their mother with as sweet a girl leaning upon her arm as ever had played havoc with the hearts of two country boys. As for Hugh, he fairly gasped with surprise, and a flush of wonder and pleasure shone upon his face; while Andrew—oh, poor Jane Amory!—the thought that flashed into Andrew's mind, as he looked at the Spanish girl in that first minute of her recovered beauty, was that she was the most fascinating being that his wildest fancy had ever conceived, and by her his fair cousin's honest English comeliness was scarcely worthy to be a foil; he was spell-bound by a touch of that warm southern beauty, and yet somehow it was not all with pleasure, there was a taste of bitterness in his delight he afterwards thought—a suspicion of the grief to come—even in that moment of fascination. But sweet or bitter the young squire quickly mastered his native hospitality, and with a hand outstretched went up to the girl and welcomed her in his own frank, unstudied way. And the lady left the kindly arm of her companion, and with the prettiest blush imaginable, and a wondrous

depth of eloquent thanks in those lustrous great black eyes of hers, gave a white hand to each of the brothers, and in broken English, that tripped, they thought, most bewitchingly across the rosiest lips that ever fashioned a pretty speech, thanked them for her rescue. Was there ever a man's heart that could have withstood gratitude so flattering and yet effective? Neither of the brothers possessed it certainly, and the Spanish girl, even while she prated of their wet jackets, and shuddered to recall the black night, and dropped a glistening tear or two behind her jewelled fingers, read their admiration in their open country eyes.

At that breakfast, and in the days that followed, Iris completed the victory she had begun. A little time dried her tears most marvellously, and her splendid spirits, fired by new sights and things, and such freedom as she had never tasted hitherto, were not to be damped by any dull remembrances or thoughts of those companions whose weltering bodies still drifted here and there about the sapphire bay, on which she looked and laughed and clapped her hands in childish pleasure.

In twenty ways she contrived to show, before she had been with them a week, a levity that

hurt the tender seriousness of the English girl, and shocked the mother, even if it only amused her boys. Then she was so catholic!—a solemn stillness fell upon that table when the Spanish lady crossed herself and whispered long exorcisms over the home-made bread, the guileless Devon eggs, and honest home-cured bacon. Her crucifix and rosary too,—the stern puritanical simplicity of the Valley could never forgive her those, or the way she plied them; the quaint unseemliness of her piety, to their chapel-going eyes, was nearly heathen, and her heterogeneous devotions and constant intercessions to saintly patrons wounded the susceptibilities of their Arcadian ritual.

Then again her Andalusian propriety embarrassed and awed the simple modesty of that shore on to which chance had thrown her. She knew a hundred diversities of decorum, which had never dawned upon the guileless maidenhood of the place; she would put plain names to things which rustic Devon blushed to think of, and yet where rustic Devon wandered at its sweet will, free as thistle-down through the woods and heather, this fair Iberian girl would not go a step,—Jove! she would not go once round the house, or so much as call upon

the cocks in the farm-yard pens behind, without a well-tryed companion at her side.

This they perceived of the fair waif in the first few days of enforced companionship, and then the shrewd mother instinct in the elder woman noticed the fatal infatuation which was closing round her boys, and saw, or thought she saw, that Iris, out of coquetry and idleness, was fanning that fatal flame. And like the worthy, helpless lady that she was, she wrote with a full heart, "Haste, haste, Post haste," large upon the upper corner of the envelope that they sent to Spain, to bid the lady's kinsmen come to claim her, and then went to her first-born, throwing herself upon his neck and warning him against beguilement. It was too late! He had seen the trap, and, all his sense and caution at war with headstrong love, had been caught, and now he could only sigh and kiss his mother, and promise to be discreet, and as he did so, acknowledge to himself that the sweet Spaniard was already dearer to him than any other girl in broad England.

And hot-headed Hugh made no scruple of his love, and fumed and fretted, and turned sullen and morose, and had such fits of fury between

his days of melancholy, that even while Iris Alge-ciras in the flood-tide of her gamester spirit,—hot in the sweet delight of beguiling both those boys at once,—was sometimes frightened.

Yet it was lovely sport to that bright-eyed daughter of Granada, and once outset upon it she could not stop. Oh, what merry tales she would tell the laughing girls in fair Cordova, of how differently those rough, strange island boors had crept to her footstool. By sweet St. Christopher, she had had sport before, and had broken the heart of a proud Don or two, and had edged with her fatal smile the blade which had set the blue blood of some certain noble gentlemen spinning in distant Castile, but this was merrier sport than any. Oh, it was the strangest, most mirth-provoking thing that a fair maid could watch, thought fair Iris Algeciras, to see pale, brave Andrew Lacy grow long, and lean, and lank, and haunt by-ways and shadowy places, and strive so sternly to find a charm against her spells, and anon turn angry from her, and anon come so humbly, like a spaniel, to hand when she did call. Oh, it was lovely to watch his young face grow white and drawn with the pain of the conflict that he fought

so silently—it was enough to make an Andalusian damsel laugh until she wept, to see him struggle so! And then there was Hugh,—strong, honest, fiery Hugh,—who thought to take her heart by escalade, and was so ridiculously in earnest, and as loud and blustering as the rough winds upon his coast; oh, how the red-lipped gossips would laugh in Medina Sidonia when she told of it! and how she saw their mother fret and fume, and played her game in derision of her! and how the stupid English girl betrothed to one of them had a silly trustfulness that was cozened easier than anything. And lastly,—and even that merry Iberian maid smiled a little more soberly at this,—and lastly—why, if it all bred ill-blood between those brothers and they came together—why, that would be sweetly romantic—a pretty finale to the tale,—and such hot young blood as theirs, she had once heard, would stand a little letting.

So it came about. For a month she played the brothers one against the other out of her wanton spirit, and hoodwinked the women, and then one day—two days before a peak-bearded kinsman, all cloak and courtesy, all soft speech

and sombrero, had come to fetch her—miserable Hugh Lacy's wretched love and jealousy lost bound and check, and over the after-dinner wine and by the ancestral fire-place, with cruel bitter words of hate and malice he outlet his spleen upon his brother, and set a meeting with sharp swords on the sands for those two at daybreak on the morrow; and to make it surer, in the wild fury of his passion, struck Squire Andrew Lacy a red blow on his face that left the mark of bare fingers there for hours.

It was a time when the code of honour was clear and simple, when no degree of kinsmanship and no nice questions of equality were held to excuse absence from the "field of honour." Andrew Lacy was but one of his time, and a young one to boot, and sorely tried, and grossly affronted, with all his long forbearance bearing only this bitter fruit, and he went to bed in a fierce whirl of feelings, and spent a hectic night of fitful dreams and waking fancies no more pleasant.

At daybreak he rose mechanically and put on his clothes with unusual care. It was a superstition that on such an errand as this a gentleman should be scrupulously neat; and though his mind

was in a giddy whirl and his reason numbed for the time by a flood of contending passions, yet the fancy was so strong upon him that he chose a new frilled shirt from the press with the nicest care; all the while bitter doubt and perplexity as to what the morning might bring forth were burning in his head. He discarded one pair of fine black silk stockings because there was a flaw in the stitching, and another because they were a trifle rusty; he donned and dressed himself with the fantastic regard to trivial things, while his mind was in a ferment, and every action was unreal and involuntary; and it was not till he came to the buckling on of his belt and rapier that the touch of the steel woke him to his real self, and with a shudder and a gasp he recognised the full truth of what this careful preparation meant. For a moment his good genius prompted him to leave that deadly toy at least behind, and whispered him that if he must go out to meet his brother, yet might he well go out unarmed, and so make reconciliation doubly possible. It was a plausible idea, and for a moment Andrew handled the weapon listlessly while the grey brightened in the sky and the

shapes he knew so well of cliff, and tree, and warren sands grew out of the purple shadows; and then the fatal infatuation that had held him since the night when Iris first lay wet and panting in his arms, mastered him again, and the rapier was girded on, and trying to salve his conscience by muttering that because he wore it it did not follow he must draw, he gently opened his chamber door and went out.

All the household slept; the old clock ticked solemnly in the dusk of the corridor; the passages were chill and gloomy as he groped guiltily forward. In a minute he came opposite to his mother's bedroom, and here a new spasm of pain shot through him—his mother, Gods! how could she sleep like that?—what would she say presently?—and next to her lay sleeping fatal Iris Algeciras; he could hear the smooth, slow rustle of her untroubled breathing he thought; and next to her, sweet, faithful Jane Amory! Oh, was there not so much compunction in all heaven that one of those women might dream one uneasy dream, though it were only for the beating of a pulse, and start, and hear the gasp of pain and sorrow that young Andrew Lacy gave as he groped by

those closed doors, and turning his face away in grief, went slowly by? But nothing moved; and down into that great hall he passed, where the cloths were still on the tables, and the little mice were frolicking amongst the supper crumbs. He drew back a curtain and filled a glass of wine, and as he drank, glanced guiltily round the room. How wan and strange it looked in that grey light, how dead the ashes were in the dead fire, how black and cavernous the shadows, and how those old fellows on the walls, his squire ancestors, with sallow cheeks and great starched ruffles, did stare at him. He could not meet their cold, stern eyes, and threw the empty wine-cup down, and taking a great cloak from the pegs, slipped out into the open, and closed the door gently behind him.

This at least was fresh air, and better to his throbbing veins than the cursed, heavy night-smell of the house. Up upon the downs behind him the curlews were calling, and away in front he could hear the tide far out across the sands beating with a smooth monotony under the white curtain of the mist. And that same mist was cold and raw as it came inland in wisps from the sea; he wrapped his ample cloak about him closer, and

pulled down his wide hat, and pushed on over the rabbit tracks, through the damp warren grasses, and down the sandy sea lanes, so full of waking dreams wherein love and pride whirled round in giddy mazes, with hideous spectral fancies, that he did not notice other footsteps were before him—angry striding footsteps, that had left white, dusty hollows in the dew-damp surface sand; and so he came out on to the sea-levels, and walking on without a thought, still led by that fatal passion which beset him, went on a quarter of a mile and found himself face to face presently with the solitary pile of lichened rocks that rose lonely and conspicuous out of the sea-wrack and shells under the sloping sand-hills about midway across the bay.

He paused, and drew his hand across his face, thin with pain and sleeplessness. What was he here for, it was all so grey and solitary? was it not some horrible dream? was not that shallow sea out there lipped with whiteness a myth, and those grey hills behind him fancy, and the pale tide pools that shone so ghostly in the white morning light all mirage too? He seemed the only living thing in all that lonely morning world; and he drew his hand across his red, weary eyes,

and took a stride forward, turning a corner of the rock, and there, up before him, from the stone on which he had been sitting, leapt his brother Hugh !

Andrew staggered back and stared as though it were some horrible apparition that had risen before him, and his kinsman also fell back a pace and glowered speechless ; and while they glared on each other like that a raven fell a-croaking on the nearest hill-top, and the light clouds overhead flushed crimson with the coming sun.

One word even yet from the many who loved and honoured them might have stayed that fatal quarrel, one solitary shepherd taking out his sheep along the hill slope, one fisher's cobbler by the point might have shamed them into reconciliation. But it was not to be ; no one moved, not a voice broke the stillness save the hideous chuckling of that unseen bird upon the hill and the distant lap of the tide, and so, in a minute, Hugh broke out, fierce and bitter, and scoffed and stung his brother with the wild cruel flails of his passion, and lashed himself into a fury,—and all the while Andrew still wore his cloak and hat and stood there with bent head in grim, silent agony, extending imploringly his open

hands against the fiery menace of the other, and sick and giddy, overwhelmed by the tumult of those strong feelings all at war within him, which even his strong heart could not control, strove still to speak that saving peace which died still-born upon his dry pale lips.

And then somehow, how soon not even Andrew knew, Hugh Lacy's rapier was uncovered and he was making furious passes against his brother, and churning the sand up as he stamped about him, and heaping bitter invective on him—swearing he would slay him as he stood for a pale, trembling, white-livered coward—oh, it was more than mortal man could bear, and Andrew bore it for two minutes, praying mad, useless prayers there behind the shadow of the hands that hid his face, and then he too succumbed, and dropped his cloak, and cast down his hat, and undid his sword-belt, and unsheathed his Toledo blade, and throwing the scabbard by stood there for a minute in his fine white silk ruffled shirt and black velvet knee-breeches, so tall and comely, so stately and handsome-seeming, and yet withal so deadly sad and pale, that even Hugh lowered his rapier point for a breathing space.

Then they fell on, Hugh with reckless fury and Andrew with dull sullen persistence, and down came the chuckling raven a hundred yards or so the better to get a sight of it, and over the sigh of the wind in the grass and the pleasant ripple of the sunny morning sea away across the sands rose the sharp click of their rapiers. It was *carte* and *tierce*,—high *carte* and *tierce* again,—*parry*, *feint*, and *flanconnade*,—and thrust and lunge, and *demivolt*; then Hugh near got in upon the bosom, and Andrew pricked him on the wrist,—then *tierce* again,—“half-circle,”—*seconde*,—*quinte* and *prime*,—and so these furious, foolish boys went at it out in the fresh morning mist, and back at home sweet Iris Algeciras turned her fair head from one white arm to the other and gently sighed.

But those were deadly toys they trifled with, and the hideous fascination of the game they played grew each minute. Even Andrew Lacy felt it now, and flushed with exertion and anger began to fight eagerly and hot, and down his nervous rapier Hugh felt the infection of his brother's rising spleen lend fiercer incentive than ever to his own, and round he went to right and

left, and Andrew met him here and there, and pressed him hard, and the sand was beaten down into a broad circle as those once-time playfellows stamped round, and the raven flapped his wings delightedly, and you could have seen the glint of their flashing rapiers half way up the hillside.

All that heathery amphitheatre seated with spectators, and an armada in the bay, would not have shamed or stayed them now. It was furious sport, but too hot and fierce to last. In twenty minutes, Hugh Lacy, mad with passion, made a lunge, and missed, and lunged again and missed, and rushed in upon his brother, and in a second Andrew's sword was through him—through him from breast to back—through him and two foot clear out beyond; and poor Hugh's rapier glittered idly in the air for a minute overhead, and Hugh's knees knocked together, and he made a poor futile attempt to drag himself off the shining steel that pricked so cruelly and felt so hot, and was glittering so dim and strange at his bosom—then down he went with a half-smothered cry, dragged the weapon from his wound, and his brother nearly over on top of him, and so, after writhing for a spell, lay white and dying on the sand.

It was so horrible, so sudden, so complete, that for more than a minute Andrew stood there staring, first at the bright red blood that was steaming on his still outstretched rapier, and then at the prone form of his luckless brother, and then with a cry of bitter agony, that drew a guttural laugh of pleasure from the black spirit in that bird upon the rocks, he set his foot upon his blade and broke it in two, casting the hilt fiercely out towards the sea, and then dropping on one knee by his brother, lifted his head gently and lovingly against his shoulder.

And that young squire opened his eyes as he was lifted, and looked at the other. Then he smiled and gasped—

“You were always better with the small sword, Andrew! I was foolish.”

What could Andrew do but press his hand and lift it to his lips? Then Hugh went on—“You are not angry now, old fellow,—and you will forgive,—O God! how dark it gets,—and how this cursed hole does ache! Old fellow, stoop down and let me kiss you,—there, so. Andrew, I love you still—be kind to Iris—she is the most beautiful girl—the most beautiful girl that

ever I saw!" and so his head fell gently back upon his old playmate's shoulder, and with a single long sigh Hugh Lacy died.

For an hour Andrew knelt by him praying, and until he was stiff and his dear hot young soul had gone out of the comely body, and then very softly and sadly he laid him down and put the long cloak all over him, and fresh sand upon the blood-marks, and made all tidy round about, and with a last look of bitter reluctance and pain, turned away to the house.

Not one step of that backward path could he afterwards recall. He found his mother just come down, and in the hall. He stretched two eager hands towards her, and that worthy dame could not see the white shine in his face as he stood against the light, and broke out cheerfully—

"Andrew! I have been looking for you everywhere, my boy. I have good news for you. Farmer Giles' sow farrowed last night, and half the litter's black, and half are white; Giles says you are to have your pick, but—why, Andrew—what is it!"

But that luckless young man could only gasp out "Mother! mother!" and take that gentle,

wondering dame into his arms for a minute, and kiss her twice with passionate grief and love,—and then he was gone; he could not think of pleasant Jane Amory or fatal Iris,—but went straight to the stables and saddled his own grey mare, and silently mounted her and rode out of the gates, and turned inland up the valley,—yet halted for one moment by the white cottage porch where old Risdon the grey-haired gardener was staking his rose-trees—good old John Risdon, he loved “young master Hugh” as though he were his own first-born—and Andrew bent low from his saddle and told the ancient servitor to “take some help and hurry out at once to the rocks where he was sorely wanted,”—and so the young squire jerked his rein and turned his horse’s head again towards the wide world and rode away out of the sight of men.

It was not until ten years had gone by that Andrew Lacy came back, and then one day a thin, sunburnt wanderer of sober mien lifted the latch of the door of the old manor-house and entered unasked,—unasking. He went straight to the long dining-room,—and there was his

mother, white-haired and sedate, and by her, sewing in the sunlight, a sweet and sad-eyed Jane Amory! Three strides took him to his mother, and down he went upon his knee, and possessed himself of her hand, and while he kissed it mutely, he felt the kisses and tears of absolution on his head.

And that lovely waif of the sea that had bewitched him had long ago gone back to her country; the story of his shame was forgotten; and comely Jane Amory was wise and forgiving, ay! she grew dearer and fairer again to him each day, until presently, late in the summer, she was dearest,—dearest of any but his mother,—and so the matter was ended, and time, like the indulgent tide, washed out the footprints of sorrow, and laughing Iris was forgotten,—beautiful, witty, vivacious Iris Algeciras de la Carrasco de Magalona!

Note by the Author.—The main details of this story are actual fact, and part of it was written in the shadow of the rock under which the duel was fought.—E. L. A.

A NARROW ESCAPE

NO one can pretend that the divorce or marriage laws of America are perfect to-day, but there was a time when, though the interests at stake were just as large, yet the laws were chaotic even by comparison with their present condition. It was at such a period, when each of those States which have now crystallised into a gigantic whole was in full enjoyment of the exercise of its native vagaries, and Western society in the first flush of its new radicalism was in that primitive condition of isolated communities so highly commended by those who have had no experience of its working, that a startling matrimonial incident happened in the town of Dashville that was without a parallel in the memory of the oldest inhabitant, and indeed was probably unique of its kind anywhere.

Dashville at that time was young and proportionately frolicsome. It had sprouted into being

in less than a decade, on the strength of a new railway which had come to its fertile plains and pine-covered hills a few years previously, and galvanised the first settlers' huts into a town of stately streets and marble porches even before those same huts could drop into decent decay, abashed by all the splendour around them. Dashville was proud of its newness ; it sat astride of the astonished river which meandered through it, metaphorically, with its thumbs in its waist-coat arm-holes, and its brummagem watch-chain flashing in the eyes of civilisation, while it loudly declared, with the toothpick of prosperity jauntily poised between the lips of native arrogance, that there was no deceit about the place,—none of your antiquated feudal nonsense ; no mildewed castles harbouring rheumatic ghosts ; no sense of hoary antiquity about its shining stucco and rampant freshness.

And the burghers of this brand-new capital, hot from the oven of chance, were not only proud of a city which, like a great mushroom, could be seen from afar, nestling among the shelter of the pine barrens, but they were proud with an incredible pride of themselves and their

belongings. Though it is doubtful if any man among them could boast with certainty of any previous bearers of the name honoured in his person, yet, though the musty jealousies of older ideas may tempt a smile, it is nevertheless a fact that they were proud amongst themselves, and exclusive by a series of exquisite gradations which made the drawing-rooms of Fifth Street Elysium fields into which the dwellers of Fourth Street might only hope to look from the top of their brand-new line of tram-cars, and drew a subtle social difference, though Dashville had no College of Heralds to countenance it and no Debrett to record the fact, between those who had arrived at the primitive settlement in a costermonger's barrow and those who had come in the haughty seclusion of a springless "prairie omnibus."

Every now and then as Dashville became opulent, and began to boast of public halls and brass bands, and Dashville beauty grew more and more attractive in the eyes of Dashville youth, one or other of her leading citizens would give an entertainment, a ceremonial heralded by weeks of expectation, and followed, when the festivities were over, by months of gossip and scandal.

On one of these occasions, the town-hall had been hired by an enterprising burgher whose privilege it was to be known, not only to the town with whose prosperity his own had risen, but also to an outer circle of acquaintances, many of whom had much that the ordinary Dashvillian lacked. Especially this gentleman had had commercial relations with an old and very select colony, some few miles distant, whereof the members held theirs to be some of the bluest blood in the Republic. Their progenitors had, they declared, come over in the *Mayflower*, a ship that has supplied ancestors to countless thousands of Americans, and in truth a certain distinctiveness *did* mark this people, a quaint old-fashioned stateliness of demeanour, a prim puritanical decorum of thought and speech, that contrasted strikingly with the raw splendour of the typical Dashvillian. The young men of this latter town secretly regarded the frigid Arcadian beauties of the neighbouring colony with feelings of awe and admiration, akin to those which a schoolboy is supposed to entertain for the columbine at a Christmas pantomime. But it is doubtful if any columbine was ever less touched by the flames

she inspired in such juvenile bosoms, than the Arcadian beauties aforesaid by the young commercial gentlemen of the mushroom town across the river.

However, chance had brought the colonies together, and the railway had strung them like two beads on a single thread,—it would not do to stand aloof for ever, and consequently, when on this memorable occasion the granddaughters of the *Mayflower* were invited to join the revels of the sons of the budding salt pork and tinned-beef town, they graciously unbent, and came in strength with their prim Puritan mothers and fathers, and their stiff, starched brothers. The function was therefore looked forward to with especial interest, for somehow or other the new town was, like a Scotch domicile, self-contained, and, rubbing shoulders very little with the adjacent social world, lying beyond the golden zone of prairie sand encompassing it on every hand, the arrival of those strangers, of whom the young radicalism of the town stood somewhat in dread, was looked forward to with keen excitement; and then, as a distinguished guest of Irish extraction subsequently told a friend, the great evening dawned.

To say that the thousand lights of the town-hall, rising into the sky from ground which half a score years before was the exclusive freehold of the prairie marmots, "shone brightly on fair women and brave men," would scarcely be doing the event justice. It was the most memorable night, Dashville recognised at once, the town had ever had, and Dashville would have sent all the way to Boston for an historian, giving him twenty dollars and his return fare—minus discount for cash, of course—in order to have had the ceremony suitably described amongst other great historical events of the like nature, had she thought of it in time. But Dashville having neither history nor historians of her own, let this golden opportunity of making a beginning with both slip by, and the duty falls to an unworthy pen. It was the most splendid affair, however, that could be imagined; the hall decorated from marble paving to roof with sumptuous magnificence, the tapers innumerable, the supper overwhelming, the company hilariously jolly, and more than ever convinced their town was the true hub of the universe! To attempt to record all the fun and frolic of that occasion would be

idle. Champagne in the refreshment-rooms flowed in a golden stream down the throats of the thirsty youths, and in the dancing-hall innumerable feet twinkled hour after hour, over the polished floor, to the music of a band whose reverberating strains brought bad dreams to the 'possums in the hollow sycamore trees across the ridge, and put the coyotes on the prairie all out of conceit with their own puny efforts in the same direction.

But those Western feet could not trip for ever, and bandsmen will get thirsty after a time, consequently it happened shortly after midnight that the musicians gave themselves a respite, and dancing came to temporary end. It was during this interval that a knot of indefatigable ones, who could not bear to see the golden moments running to waste, proposed games. Now Dashville youth knew of many games, from pitch-and-toss to the sport of kings. Besides all those European pastimes in which it joined with a zeal not a bit the less creditable because it did not in the least understand them, it possessed to its own solace a score of amusements in which the patient archæologist, hunting backwards, might

have traced the germs of ideas still current amongst the inventive costermongers of Whitechapel, or the light-hearted "boys" of Cork and Limerick. On this particular evening one wild frolic, which it is not for me to excuse but only to record, was unanimously voted for.

The name of this game, in the regrettable absence of the historian previously alluded to, has not been preserved. There was an air of rusticity about it, a suggestiveness of Hampstead Heath on Easter Monday, that must have been full of delicate significance to the first generation of Dashvillians as they sat round the walls and watched the young people at play. It began as a kind of "Oranges and Lemons," and you were instinctively reminded of grubby little girls in the street holding each other's skirts and running round in a circle, then it took a development suggestive of "Kiss in the Ring," such as the frolicsome American emigrant plays on Castle Green, or the Briton in the green shades of classic Rôsherville; and so it went on, by many niceties of change which only an expert could understand, to the grand climax when the rosy and breathless partners to an indefinite number,

who had been left stranded by the game in a long row of ill-assorted pairs, were compelled to go through a ceremony of marriage "as they stood," and were then marched off to recruit their energies for the next dance by more ices and champagne in the supper-room.

On this particular evening the fun was exceptionally uproarious. Dashville was fairly off her head with fun and frolic. The "aloofish" strangers within her gates unbent for once, and joined in the revels of those whom to-morrow they would not know across the road, with a disguise of their true opinions greatly to their credit. No less than thirty couples had joined in the fun; the "Oranges and Lemons," the "Kiss in the Ring"—but without the kissing, for the stranger drew the line at that—and all the rest of the excellent nonsense had been gone through; it even seemed as though the fates themselves were carried away by the spirit of the moment and lent themselves to the fun, for never had a string of more terribly impossible couples—and this incongruous association of those who came up for the final "marriage" was just the point which so tickled the delicate Dashville sense of humour—never had such a

string of odd mixtures, such a ludicrous amalgamation of repellent individualities been developed out of the game since it was invented! Nothing but an intimate knowledge of local society and an acquaintance with the by-ways of rumour and gossip current on the spot could have fully done justice to the sight, or qualified any one to appreciate the exquisite irony of the thirty "*mésalliances*" which fate had decreed in that column of grown-up girls and boys, who had at last stood waiting the final act with every variety of expression on their perspiring faces. But that the "blends" were excruciatingly funny any one could have seen in a moment by glancing along the line of spectators, and noticing how appreciation of the situation showed itself amongst them in every degree, from the mildly sardonic smile of infinite meaning, to the uproarious mirth of ungovernable amusement.

Then came the question of who was to officiate, and after a hunt round the room, the leading spirits pounced on and dragged from his retirement a suitable candidate in the person of a mild, weak-eyed theological student, the last shreds of whose little native wit at once forsook

him at being hauled into this publicity. Expostulation and entreaties were alike of no avail: his captors swathed that unhappy youth in a tablecloth, and cramming a book into his hand, led him to the hastily appointed altar where, prompted and his courage kept up to the necessary mark by an inflexible young gentleman on either side, he proceeded to stammer and blunder through so much of the abbreviated service Dashville was accustomed to, as could be given without offence to the most delicate of susceptibilities in these matters. The couples came up in batches; any amount of rings for the brides' fingers were available, for the young men of Dashville gloried in finger-rings, and in fact the whole ceremony, if it was not the real thing (and four-fifths of the partners in this ridiculous sport thanked Heaven devoutly for the fact), yet was extremely like it.

Then came the adjournment to supper and the climax! While they were laughing and talking, and the "brides" secretly thinking to themselves behind their fans how dreadful it would be if the pretence were fact, and they had really been linked for life to the partners chosen for them by mad chance, a servant came in with a

telegraphic message for the individual who had "officiated."

He opened it between a pause in his conversation with his neighbour, and glancing over the contents, a broad smile of complacency slowly spread over his amiable countenance. For a minute or two, as that fateful message lay under his hand by his plate, he was lost in a rosy mist of satisfaction. It was a brief dream of happiness, and then some one or two of those who watched him over the rims of their wine glasses saw the luckless youth start nervously, and a cloud pass across the vacant satisfaction of his face. The cloud darkened under their wondering eyes, as the slow mind behind it worked, until at last the astonished onlookers witnessed the luckless student's cheeks blanch from dimpling red to deadly white; they saw him clutch the table convulsively and then stare round the company (and by this time every one was watching him) with glazed and foolish eyes, in which horror and bewilderment were comically striving for the mastery.

They thought he was ill, and a score of voices asked him the question. But no, he was well

enough, he said with a ghastly laugh. What was the matter then, they queried,—bad news? No, it was not bad news; he had just had *good* news in fact, gasped the poor wretch, glaring round the circle of faces, while his teeth fairly chattered, and a smile so sickly and wan and thin that it was the very mockery of a smile, played about his mouth. Every one laughed in that light-hearted company, for never before had cheerful news been so quaintly received, and then they pressed him again in boisterous good humour, and insisted upon knowing more of the tidings capable of producing such strange symptoms, and very reluctantly the boy stammered out—

“The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, I was up yesterday in Harvard for my degree of ordination; it was not the first time I have tried, ladies and gentlemen, and I had no hope or thought of doing better on this occasion, but,” he added, nervously eyeing the distance to the door, and horribly torn between his own private satisfaction at what was coming, and a growing perception of the mess he had got them all into—“but this,—this message just brought to me,”—and the words dropped from his mouth more and more slowly,

while his eyes rolled more and more fearfully, "is from a friend to tell me—to say in fact that I have passed successfully."

"Hurrah for the Reverend Arthur Smyth," called out a noisy Dashvillian from amongst the laughing crowd of brides and bridegrooms, and with a resounding cheer the company toasted that reverend gentleman, nodding and bowing to him over their glasses, until he was pink to the roots of his sandy hair with fear and modesty and shame.

Then somehow as the hubbub subsided a hush fell upon the room; it was not that they had nothing to say, but it was as if a sudden instinctive apprehension of mischance had developed in the air, and in the pause that followed, while they were still looking surprised and uneasy in each other's faces, an old Boston lawyer who had not joined in the shouting, but had sat calmly eyeing the newly appointed minister during his brief speech, got up, and, having wiped his gold eyeglasses deliberately upon a great silk bandana, placed them calmly across his nose and looked fixedly at the unhappy Arthur for a minute or two.

Somehow every one's attention immediately became fixed upon those two with a magnetic spell, and none spoke as the lawyer presently said in the blandest of tones—

“My first duty to Mr. Arthur Smyth, if I may assume the rôle of spokesman for this company, in which I am probably the senior, though no doubt one of the least worthy members, is to offer you our sober congratulations on the excellent—and wholly unexpected—news you have just communicated to us. My next duty, and I think you will presently understand and pardon my inquisitiveness, is to ask when exactly this important event, which made you a recognised minister according to the Judicial Code of this State, took place?”

“Yesterday, sir!—yesterday morning,” gasped the unhappy youth, yearning with a dreadful yearning to be out with his emotions in the dark pine barrens, or far away amongst the friendly coyotes, who do not go in for a complicated civilisation, on the sand plains, anywhere but here—the centre of that circle of faces upon which the horrible truth was slowly dawning.

“Humph!” said the man of law, looking grimly

round at the crowded, wondering, ill-assorted couples thronging the table, "and it was you, there can be no question, who recently officiated at that idiotic game upstairs?"

Mr. Arthur Smyth by this time was too far gone to do anything but reply by a tremulous inclination of the head, amply sufficient in itself, however, as every one in the room knew there was no other answer to the question; and so the Bostonian continued after a minute's pause, during which not a sound broke the stillness but the rustle of quick feet overhead, where the enthusiasts were plunging into the second half of the programme, and the spasmodic murmur of the band far away in a forest of azaleas and palms—"Then, sir, all I can say is that this game of yours appears to me a little more serious than I believe most of these ladies and gentlemen suppose, and, as far as I can see, speaking on the strength of twenty years' practice in our matrimonial cause courts here—having regard, moreover, to the idiotic formalities carried out upstairs, and your appointment, the possibility of which you so unconscientiously kept to yourself—these ladies and gentlemen around me must consider them-

selves married, thanks to your duplicity and the misapplied ingenuity of the young gentleman who started this deplorable pastime, not for half an hour as they fondly supposed, but for the term of their natural lives; these mock marriages you have just celebrated are, under the circumstances, perfectly valid and binding at law, and these ladies are the lawful wives, with all that that implies, of these gentlemen to whom you have kindly united them," and the lawyer, wiping his glasses again, calmly replaced them in their red morocco case, and sat down to watch the effect of his announcement.

For a moment or two no one spoke, and then a wild and wrathful clamour, a scene of indescribable confusion took place. The rape of the Sabine women must have been a peaceful and ordinary proceeding compared to this matrimonial holocaust of the ladies who had trusted to the bachelor hospitality of Dashville. It is not given to one feeble pen to depict the kaleidoscopic display of wrath and indignation and horror and despair which marked those charming faces, or to tell how, while some of the stronger-minded ones scornfully laughed at the scurvy trick fate

had played them and metaphorically rolled up their sleeves and dared the delighted bridegrooms to claim their own, the weaker ones succumbed to the shock and added to the general confusion by hysterical tears and wild outbreaks of indignation. It was all very well for the two or three simpering couples whom fate had precipitated into a state which, though ready enough, they had only meant to enter with more circumspection, to blush and simper and bless the Rev. Arthur Smyth in their secret hearts, but the more the female remainder of the company thought over the matter, between the spasmodic outbursts of their tears, the less they liked it.

In fact, to make a long story short, there is no knowing how many heads might have been cracked or how many hearts broken that night when the news had spread amongst the chaperons and male relatives of the victimised maidens, had not the same individual who had pronounced the mock marriage good and valid in equity amended his decision by the discovery of a happy flaw in the proceedings. He had, it appears, questioned the Rev. Mr. Smyth more closely while the hubbub was at its height, and in the

course of their talk it transpired that although Smyth had passed an examination duly creating him a minister according to the stipulations of that lax period, the announcement was not yet publicly formulated—it would not be formulated, in fact, until the early hours of the new day upon the threshold of which the revellers of that famous Dashville party stood.

This, the 'cute Bostonian saw, annulled the whole proceedings. The few and pointed words in which he pronounced a general divorce over the pale and weeping "brides" carried balm of Gilead with them: those redeemed Arcadian spinsters thronged round him as though he had been another Perseus receiving the thanks of the rescued Ethiopian damsels, and as they shook his hands, with enough smiles and tears to make the fortunes of an April day, the dry old lawyer laughed and said, "A good game that of yours, ladies, an excellent game, and not so much unlike the real thing in life perhaps! But it is a game, ladies, at which you ought to load your dice, and leave as a rule much less to Providence, believe me, than you have left this evening."

THAT BABE OF MEG'S

AWAY in the blackest corner of the Black Country, in a region where man's greed blots out nature's free sky with a leaden pall of smoky cloud, and sears every green and tender thing off the face of the fair earth underfoot, stands a prosperous town, clustering round the mouth of a pit whose ramifications undermine two parishes. In the most squalid corner of that dingy city, in the poorest part of a place to which spring never comes, and winter arrives before the summer of happier localities is over, stands in unabashed ugliness a row of tumble-down miners' cottages. The hands which built those abominations are not more dead than the hearts which own them, unashamed, to-day. The whitewash of a past generation peels from their mouldy walls in sickly yellow flakes; the broken slates of their rotten roofs slide down into the choked gutters at every blast; those bleary little windows of theirs are sear

and yellow, and look out upon a foul and pool-worn roadway, where cadaverous ducks follow the ancient instincts of their kind in Stygian puddles, and shock-haired youngsters, each possessed, it is said, of an immortal essence, grovel and play amongst surroundings which would shock a Christian pig. In front of those cottages is the road, and beyond it rise across the horizon mighty ranges of dismal cinder-heaps in ugly terraces, tier on tier, without a scrap of vegetation to break their sombreness until they are crowned by the output mouth of the great mine; the ugly wheelhouse, and the buildings that cluster round about its lip. To rearward, each cottage has, Heaven wot!—a garden,—a sorry little space fenced from its neighbours by a broken paling, and for so long given over to all ignoble uses, that its native soil is hidden under the hideous disjecta of a dozen generations stamped into solidity by endless wear. Nothing grows in those mire-plots; they are stratified epitomes of ugly years of poverty; all the noisome and wastrel things that it is worth no scavenger's time to move find natural burial in them; no spots on the face of the wide world could be more woful and forlorn!

In the ugliest garden of all those ugly leafless plots, a girl was sitting one day, playing with the loose end of the glittering brummagem necklace that hung round her neck, while she watched with sulky pride the feeble contortions of a three months' babe lying on the dusty ground in front of her. Such a splendid ideal of healthy womanhood had surely never graced a cinder wilderness before. Not only redolent of health, the girl was beautiful, with a strong animal beauty which, like the nimbus of a goddess, permeated the very air about her. Those glittering glass gems she played with hung round a neck white and stately as that of the Cyprian goddess herself; in her brown wild hair, heaped on her head in noble disorder, shone a marigold or two from a neighbouring waste-heap, and her sorrel red dress, torn and wide open at the neck and sleeves, dirty and tattered and frayed though it was, clung round her shapely limbs in statuesque simplicity. There she sat in the sunshine, a magnificent hoyden amongst the cabbage stalks and refuse of her predecessors, making that ugly place noble with the shine of her wonderful beauty, biting those green and white bits of

tinsel from about her neck now and again—a pink and white Venus of the slums, with a face as fair as that of Helen herself, and a hand so stained with ash and negligence that no man would willingly grasp in its actual state! Her child crowed and chuckled to her and waved its coral pink arms aloft, and still she frowned in sulky fashion and would not see it, staring at that aimless little being with fierce handsome eyes, in which the quick changing light was not of motherhood, and gnawing her ripe round lips, and dropping her shapely head lower and lower to hide even from that baby the flushes of anger and doubt which kept mantling brow and cheek.

Little more than a year ago she had married young John Summers, one of lower rank than her father, and a worker in that great underground labyrinth whose pulsing life lay far under her feet. The general opinion of the neighbouring gossips was that good-looking John was doing that which he would find plenty of time to repent of in taking to wife the beautiful, idle wastrel, who, with the strength of four such as herself, would only work when it pleased her

queenship, and spent all her life basking in what sunshine she could discover, playing with gaudy bits of stuff and cheap glittering things for neck and hair, with strong fine hands for ever in lap, and not a gossip amongst them could say what fancies in her head.

But Summers stuck to his choice nevertheless; they were married, and after a brief episode of play, during which he spent all his hoarded savings in taking the girl from place to place, and showing her the fatal fringe of new worlds, of that brightness and mirth and music for which he soon saw with secret uneasiness her woman instinct hungered with savage unrest, they came back to the old life and sad mediocrity of existence in a musty sty, hedged in by a cinder Sahara in front, and sloughs of despond behind.

A new young life made little difference to that small household. Meg was still sulking like an offended Juno amongst the potsherds and ashes, when one day a chance shower of rain drove into her modest shelter no less an individual than the owner, not only of the mine across the road, from whose mouth a great fortune had already come forth, but of half the land upon which the

town stood, and no one knew what else besides, or how much more. Count Walter Scheillberg was fifty and florid, with a countenance as ugly as his own nature, and a jauntiness of manner no one but a woman could stand for a moment. This individual, swathed in fur and glittering with gems, was amazed with Meg Summer's beauty, and when he had looked round the little front room with its dilapidated furniture, its discoloured walls, and loud poverty in every direction, and then into the wonderful face of its mistress ashine with shy interest, he came to the conclusion that if this was Mrs. John Summers, and this her house, then Mrs. John Summers was vastly wasted. He looked at her closely on that occasion with those sharp little red eyes of his, stayed through two showers, and was so civil that foolish Meg, with a woman's appreciation of opulence in whatever form it is presented, half forgot her first heaven-sent aversion. When he had gone she put away the tea and the humble plate of bread and butter he had left untasted, —and under the plate was a bank-note, crisp and white and fresh, and representing to Meg's eager eyes untold felicity.

Another time the Count came again when John Summers was away, and this time the gilded villain made Meg sit, and pulled his chair a little nearer to hers, and talked less vaguely and more pointedly, dwelling on his splendour, and how poor poverty was, and how pleasant all those sweet things were of which she scarcely knew the names. And first the girl was shy and frightened, and then she was flattered, and hung her stupid head and her fair red face, while the rogue, who watched every change of colour and droop of eyelid with keen attention, dropped his description like golden raindrops on the thirsty soil of her heart. When he left that time Count Scheillberg smiled to himself, and Meg Summers sighed.

All the week that intervened until he came again she was restless and uneasy, more moody than ever, and wayward. At times, when she thought no one was looking, she would pause in that caged-lioness like walk of hers about the narrow confines of her room, and go over to her child and stare at it hard for many minutes with strange varying expression, now sullen and defiant, and anon tender and remorseful; when John

came back at night, toil-stained and tired, she would mayhap play the sulky virago, huddling for hours at a time into some dusky corner alone with her beauty and temper, her great violet eyes shining in the dim like baleful planets, or perhaps, as uncertain as she was with the babe, she would be rueful and tender, and hold up honest John's face and look at him with such apology and wistfulness in her scrutiny, it was marvellous he could not know the whirl of contending feelings that burned behind her silence.

The third time the German came he misjudged the advance he had made in Meg's regard, and when he left and his bulky figure was retreating up the lane towards that discreetly left brougham which Meg had better cause to remember later on, she crushed the second gift he had left with her into a shapeless twist in her nervous hands, and like a beautiful fury, which at best she was, leapt to the narrow window and glared through the tattered and grimy little curtains and the unhealthy geraniums against the panes at his retreating form, with her eyes blazing and her cheeks burning. Had John Summers come back then all might have been well, but he did not,

and so the wild gust of her passion consumed itself impotently; she burst into a stormy flood of weeping, and when it was over hid in her bosom that wretched square of white paper, which, though she crushed and spent her bitter tongue upon, for the life of her she could not quite destroy.

Again and again the Count pressed the siege, and at last, angry and vexed to be so near and yet no nearer day by day, it occurred to him that new tactics must be tried. Then strange things began to happen to Summers. The worst character in the mines, a Mexican rogue all oaths and top-boots, became effusively affectionate, and strove hard to make him one of the dangerous, drunken gang of which he was the head and ornament. A hundred charming ways to hell opened up at Summers' feet under the tutelage of this southern gentleman, and though Summers was not sufficiently strong in the integrity of Exeter Hall to shun even a step or two down those flowery paths, yet he was too discreet to venture far. When he had drawn back from seduction after seduction, and proved himself invincible at every point, the rascal threw him off, and here, perhaps, plotting a little more knavishly than he

was paid for, went about whispering that Summers had more enemies than was known, and so persistent was this rumour, and so adroitly was it kept alive, that presently even his best friends began to look askance at him, while those who only knew him as the point of muttered gossip shunned his company.

Then came the first black trick on young Summers. It was his duty to go down the shaft one Sunday morning and water the horses in the mine. On that particular occasion it was certain that no one but he would descend, and part of his way down the horrible black funnel must be by a light wooden ladder fixed to the rocky side.

Now, it happened that as Summers was starting down on that job, and was still standing at the pit-mouth in a pleasant gleam of sunshine, with a lark singing somewhere up in the sky over the distant fields, and the yellow dandelions asserting nature's sovereignty on those rude cinder-heaps, a man came up who sometimes bought, for his own purposes, an extra horse or two from the many below. This fellow asked of the other if he might come down with him,

and the boy said "certainly," little knowing the dreadful leave he gave. Five hundred feet below the surface they left the cage, and as they stood upon a bit of staging there, the shaft above a grimy tube, with far aloft the sky a pale faint button of light, and below, black vacuity sinking down a thousand feet into the bowels of the earth, they stood chatting for a minute as to which should go first. And presently they settled the older man should lead. It was all silent about the mine for a space, and then, had you been listening in the sunshine on top, you would have heard come out of the mouth of the black abyss, faint, distant, and small, one thrilling horrible yell, one bitter sharp cry of agony and surprise and terror, and then a dead ghostly silence until up, wildly scrambling up to the light, came young Summers, alone, his eyes starting from his head, his hair on end, and the cold perspiration running down his ghastly face. As for the other man, they brought him to bank later on a shapeless heap of rags, and all they ever knew was that the ladder the ganger went down by had been sawn through overnight until nothing but a skin held it together, and the first

man whom Providence had sent upon it had gone to horrible destruction.

A few weeks later on, Summers, his recent danger forgotten, was laying a heavy blast in a lonely level, and handled the deadly case and the cotton long fuse with the tender discrimination that a man will in such circumstances. All was ready; he had but to light the wick and run, and in a few minutes the dim grey rocks and the iron ribs of the cavern in which he knelt would be rent and torn into a thousand fragments, the solid floor beneath him would be scooped out by that brown Terror over which he bent, and the earth itself quiver up even to the distant ground. He lit a match,—the seam was a safe and gasless one,—and as he put it to the train, a chance draught blew out the flame! Again he lit another, and again in the black bosom of the earth that tender, shivering, compassionate breath came over his shoulder and extinguished it. With an oath he exorcised that viewless thing, and the third match lit the fuse,—it flared up in his face,—Gods!—some foul, cruel hand had charged the slow, harmless cotton with live powder, and

there was the red and orange flame racing away to the great blast in its metal case! That infernal light flashed on the rocky walls about him, and gleamed golden and wicked for a moment on the terror-frozen face of the man—another minute and not two shreds of his body would be together, and he knew it,—there were not three inches of that horrible treachery yet to burn, and it was burning an inch a second! And then the cool head and the strong heart nerved him, he seized the fuse just by the canister, down came the flame, and hissed and spluttered and smoked round the fingers that barred its progress with fibres of steel, for a minute poor Summers' roasting flesh charred and cracked and shrivelled, and turned black in the midst of that gleam,—for a minute the man and the flame were pitted each against each in that grim silent fight, and then the man won, the flame went out,—out to the last red ember, and no sound broke the stillness but a stifled gasp as Summers sank nerveless back into the dark.

Fortunate, well served Count Scheillberg of many friends! While this was happening in the depth of the earth a certain seductive gentle-

woman of middle age and insinuating address had cozened Meg into a friendship, and, under cover of a manner of temporal district-visiting, had wormed herself into that unhappy girl's good graces. Once there, flattering and cajoling as she gained ground day by day, that crafty lady had found the victim ductile enough, and fanning her discontent, had turned the world inside out before her, and, cunningly and slowly at first, had led Meg away, taking her in secret, and during the long spells of her husband's absence, now to one gay scene and then to another, until the flattery and the light and the stolen pleasure had turned that too trustful head, and the hard real of her existence was horrible, abhorrent death, and the gilded transient dream of brightness that she touched under that guidance was life itself. And like a black shadow, not pressing himself upon her notice, but ever present—the vague, irresistible origin of those forces which circled round him and, doing his will in secret, drew the luckless girl down into the maelstrom of his wishes—moved Count Walter Scheillberg. And all the excitement of the game which Meg played with the delight of a despe-

rate gambler had flushed her cheeks and added new lustre to her eyes, and new effect to the unstudied grace of her carriage—everywhere she went men's eyes followed her with a sudden fascination, and women's tongues, they scarcely knew why, were hushed as she passed. So it went on until, all the girl's heart red-hot with vanity and recklessness, she must needs go to a great ball in the west of the city, and Count Scheillberg, judging the game was nearly played, and having nothing to lose, had her dressed like a princess in a queenly white gown of softest stuff, with great pearls upon her neck that was almost whiter, and diamonds in her tumbled brown hair—a lovely, inscrutable vision of beautiful womanhood, with great handsome eyes that burnt with the strong ardour of the rebellious soul within, and a face perfectly wonderful to watch, so hard it was at times, and then again so tender and pathetic.

That evening was not bare existence to Meg, it was an intoxication, a bewilderment in which the luckless girl seemed treading the paths of a material paradise in an atmosphere of brightness and beauty, the centre of throngs of men and

women who lapped unknowingly all her senses of right and wrong to sleep with the incense of their flattery, and acknowledged her by look and voice peerless and incomparable amongst them.

And two hours before midnight—two hours before dusty, trustful John Summers would come up from his night shift in the mine, Count Scheillberg had Meg under the great palms in the conservatory, where the breath of the magnolias and night-stars was loading the air with soft narcotic, and the gleam of the distant lamps was dim, and the swell of the distant music only loud enough to drown a sigh, and there he told her that all this and much more might be hers if she would but take it; the matter was fairly before her—so that golden villain argued—there was not cause or reason for more delay; here and at once she must make up her mind! In ~~twenty~~ minutes, he whispered, his brougham, empty, would be at the gates below. She had but to break the last thread of a silly hesitation, which, free to-morrow, she would be the first to laugh at, to slip from the room unseen and take her place inside it, neither speaking nor being spoken

to—and all the world was at her feet,—and so he stole away, leaving a white image of a woman standing rigid and beautiful and pulseless, a noble marble likeness of queenly womanhood, alone in the shadows with not a breath of life upon it from fair pale forehead down to feet rooted to the ground!

And twenty minutes later Meg was stealing down the deserted corridor! All her finer instincts were strung to the highest pitch by the fascination of what she had just left behind, the soft rhythm of the music seemed vibrating in her very soul, her ears were full of soft speech and accent of courtly flattery, her unaccustomed eyes were dazzled and blinded by a splendour which was to that daughter of the cinder-heaps, to Aphrodite from amongst the cabbage-stalks and the unclean deserts of her home, like the splendour of paradise itself. With a heart fiercely and wildly beating, she slipped down the great stairway unobserved; it was all to be hers, she whispered again and again—hers, all that pomp and splendour, hers to listen to sounds that were delight in themselves, hers to be dazzled and to dazzle—to drink deep of the sweet deep

draught of hearing her peerless beauty adequately praised. Outside was the carriage that would convey her for ever out of the pale of those sights and things from the very thought of which her soul now shrunk with a sullen hatred. It was too easy, she cried to her better nature, too horribly, wholly easy ; she would not go back to the vile places from whence she had come, she had tasted the pleasures of life, the joy and the longing were burning in her innermost spirit, and lead the path where it might, while there was colour on her lips and light wherewith to witch men in her eyes, she would tread that path with the best of them. The sweet delusive fantasy mixed itself up with the madness of her brain as she quenched the last spark of hesitation in her heart, and, wrapping her warm soft mantle still closer round her, stole down the carpeted steps, and with splendid effrontery that did not quail, and eyes that met the few eyes that noted her passage with proud indifference, she reached the gateway and stepped into the ready brougham.

The door shut on its velvet hinges, the impatient horses spun round, and in a minute the lights of the hall and the twinkle of the long

avenue of carriage lamps that waited outside the great hall were lost behind.

Deluded Meg in that luxurious carriage, with one episode of delight behind her and a new world of pleasures such as her hungry soul had scarcely dared to dream of opening, as she fondly thought, in front, was beginning to feel her high-strung nerves relax now that the tension was off them. Quicker and quicker, as the swift wheels beneath spun her away into the darkness, came the revolt of her woman instincts. At first she scowled and frowned in the luxurious gloom of her corner as she felt the touch of that weakness; and then she tried to be rid of those sapping thoughts—to plan and plot, and disentangle the particoloured, chaotic, prismatic skeins of pleasure which to-morrow and the next day and the next were to bring to her—but again and again those pale, perfidious thoughts arose and would not be denied, and already doubting, she winced and turned and bit her lip, and furrowed her great white forehead under them in vain, while bitterer and more bitter every moment grew that struggle which Meg waged alone and unbefriended.

Then while all was still undecided, and the few small moments of consideration were slipping by quicker than the yellow flicker of the street lamps, presently something in those dim illuminations, some slight familiarity in the darkness upon which those street lamps shone, forced itself upon her. She sat up, dry eyed and wretched, with the fierce war of conflicting emotions still raging within her, and wiping the misty glass—it was plate and bevelled edged—with one of Count Scheillberg's fine silk tassels, looked out. Nothing but a dim vista of narrow streets and barrenness beyond, but Meg saw it, and started back, and looked again, and gasped! They were but a street or two from her home, and all on a sudden, across the dazzle and glitter of the ball-room, the vision of a poor hovel rose before her, and an empty fire-place, and an unslept-in bed, and a rickety worm-eaten cradle by it—and in the cradle her little one!

She could see it all as plain as though there was not half an acre of brick and mortar between them, and Meg's head went dizzy and everything was unreal for a minute, and then suddenly that sweet instinct that Nature has given came upon

her. The babe was supperless—she knew it under all her silk and ermine—and wanting her;—a great yearning seized the mother for that poor little scrap of cheap humanity she had planned to leave, a yearning which swallowed up every other consideration—just for one minute, she would, she must see it again, and give that dear small come-between one more kiss, one more press to the place from which henceforth it should be for ever stranger; and the hunger of her instinct was too strong even for the splendid infatuation of that evening, and staying the carriage, and bidding the wondering man to wait a space, she descended and walked at first slowly down an alley into the darkness, and then, under the friendly screen of the night, all in her queenly gear, her diamonds glittering as she glanced like a flitting spectre from lamp to lamp, Meg, with all the mother strong within her, ran like a hunted roe up one narrow street and down another, across a dingy court or two where the cinders crackled under her poor laced shoes, and the damp, dark air was pungent with the quaint, sad odours of ungarnered rubbish, until she came at last, panting and breathless, back to the door

of that poor house which a few hours before she had left for ever!

That morning, when John Summers came off his long night shift in the grey dawning, his mind was more at ease and his heart lighter than they had been for a long time. As he had gone to put away his lantern in the shanty by the engine-house, the overlooker had met him and had offered Summers a great chance in Australia. That good fellow jumped at the offer, and now here he was going home in the twilight thinking he felt the fair Queensland grass soft as velvet upon the cindery path, and the free, warm southern air of a great new land in the murky breath of the morning, and a strong sweet-faced girl for his steadfast helpmate, and a rosy little one to work for in that sweet clean life that here might begin for him. And so he came to his poor door, no longer noticing how poor it was, and very gently let himself in, and, softly as hobnail boots would let, went up the bare wooden stairway. Outside the door that shut in his world he gently put down his basket so that he might not disturb those who slept within,

and listened for a minute. From within came a strange soft purring sound, an almost inarticulate murmur of animal pleasure such as a she-tigress might make, perhaps, as it fondled with fierce satisfaction the cub of which chance had nearly robbed it, and Summers very gently opened the door and entered.

All was dark inside. He took a box of matches from a corner and softly struck one. It was a pale, sulphur thing, and spluttered and wavered for a minute or two, and then as it burned brightly he lifted it on high. In the middle of the room, in her oldest dress, sitting on a stool, was his wife, and at her breast was his baby. And under the shade of her loose brown hair her beautiful face was bent down close to the little one she fondled and kissed—talking to it as only mothers can, and pouring in hot fierce whispers into its philosophical and unmoved ear the tale of the nearness of her destruction.

And all around Meg, in a wide glittering circle, just as she had torn them off in anger and shame, lay the glittering white confusion of the splendid raiment she had worn that evening. John Summers stared at her and his babe, and then at those

splendid silks rent into long fragments, and at those tender furs fit for the neck of a princess; at the bracelets and linked diamonds of the zone that glittered and flashed angrily, green, and golden, and blue, in a distant corner; and then, as the match burnt low and spluttered and went out, and a dim, hazy sense of what those things meant came upon him he staggered back with a gasp of surprise and terror, and hesitated for a moment, and then with an eager cry, like one newly delivered from peril, leapt forward and outstretched his arms and called in the dusk to his wife, and in a minute she was with him again, his for ever, beyond the touch of temptation, her babe in her right arm and her left wound round the neck of her husband as she buried her face in his shoulder, and her hot white tears of love and repentance fell in the quiet of that room in an audible, silver shower on the front of his collier shirt!

A FAIR PURITAN

IT was as strange a troth-place as could well be imagined. A dark wainscoted room, dimly lit by a couple of yellow gleaming candles; at one end a wide four-post bed with sepulchral hangings, and on the bed, very near to his death, a grey old man propped up on pillows, his white hands outstretched upon the coverlet, and his keen restless eyes even now noting everything about him. On one side was a table with the tapers and an open Bible, and on the other were standing a young man and woman, the former a handsome but self-willed looking fellow, while she, his companion, a very sweet and comely girl of eighteen, with a fair white face as honest and truthful as could be, was standing half turned from him watching her father on the bed with great tender eyes of fear and love, and a soft inexperienced heart under her crossed white tippet torn by the strangest conflicts of emotion.

A month before, the dying man, Sir John Sondes, Master of Cromwellian Horse, and Governor of the Western Ports, had discovered that a strong and mutual love was established between his daughter and Andrew Trevanion, the son of a Royalist house whose unswerving faithfulness to the fortunes of the banished line had made the name he bore odious to the opposite faction. But beyond all the political considerations making the discovery detestable to him was another one, namely, that that stern autocrat of camp and hearth had better views for his only daughter. He had long destined her for the son of his friend, old John Makepeace, and it was not to be thought of that a matter so long settled should be unsettled to please a silly maiden fancy, the stern old Puritan argued; and so when this new love showed itself, acting with the same promptness which had carried dismay into the ranks of the Royalists at Winceby and the bloody field of Marston Moor, he had furiously refused to listen alike to the arguments of the gallant but penniless Trevanion or Janet's frightened pleadings, and in such a scene as, alas! will happen when love

and policy run counter, had finally forbid, without explanation of his intentions, the former to come into his house again. There was one more stolen meeting between the lovers, at which the hopeless vows of constancy they exchanged were deep and sincere on both sides, and then Trevanion, who like many another had long ago sunk prejudices in patriotism, went out into the great west with his company to take part in the nameless campaigns which the Puritan colours were waging on their new-won frontier, and Sir John, summoning young Gilbert Makepeace to the seaport town where he commanded, ordered that complacent youth to woo his daughter with no more preface or thought of insubordination than he would have expected had an order been given to the humblest of those psalm-singing pikemen in the barracks yonder who trembled at his very shadow. But death, the great interrupter, interrupted Sir John Sondes and his unaccomplished schemes, and feeling after a sudden sickness his end was near, he had summoned those two recusant lovers into his presence that evening.

For a minute in that great dim room no one

of those three spoke, and then the elder man, fixing his eyes on the younger, said in a husky whisper—

“Gilbert Makepeace, have you done as I bid you, and asked this maiden, my daughter, to be your wife?”

“I have, sir,” said the youth, hanging his head somewhat sullenly; “and she does not love me.”

Again there was perfect silence in that long black chamber, as the dying soldier shifted his grim imperious gaze to the luckless girl who stood with folded hands by the bedside, knowing only too well that all her young life hung on the next few minutes, and looking into her father's eyes with a frenzy of silent imploring love. But he did not and would not see, Heaven wot! he could see nothing now save this his last wish; and after he had gazed at her for a minute until all the girl's resolution had melted, and nothing was left but her consuming affection and a lifelong habit of obedience, he said very slowly, “Janet! do you choose *this* moment to thwart me—and for the first time?”

What could she do? She durst not cry as she was aching to do; she could not argue it—

it was an age when the first duty of the child was absolute obedience; all her soul was melted with pity and love for the strong man who lay before her so weak, and with a great pang of the double sorrow that was tearing the tender heart within, she dropped upon her knees by the bedside, and burying her white face in her hands, gasped out, "God forefend, dear father, that I should thwart thee now or ever. I am in your hands—speak, and I obey!"

With a faint smile of conquest shining on his rugged face, Sondes signed to her to rise, and made the other come near as well. Then looking at them inflexibly for a minute, as though to overawe the last chance of their resistance, he loosened from his shrunk finger a fine small gold ring. It had been Janet's mother's, and hers again before her; and the old knight, mustering the last of his energies, "Take it," he said; "of Makepeace I have no fear, and ask no promise; but you!—put it on his finger, girl, and swear to me here—faithfully—swear that you will wed this man when he asks you, and will think of no other; swear, I say," cried Sondes, raising himself up with dreadful energy upon his elbow, and trembling with vehemence.

mence; "swear that you will take him, and wait for him, and be bound to him until he claims you or sends the signet back; swear, girl, by your dead mother, who never once deceived me; swear, or my bitterest curse be upon you!" But Janet would hear no more. The great dark chamber, the yellow lights, the white bed shining in their radiance, and that strange gaunt figure on it, at once so feeble and so fierce, were all merged in one horrible unreality before her. She took the ring, and turning mechanically to the man whose love for her had been the one bad dream of her life, to the man she hated with all her virgin heart, held out her hand, and, not perceiving in the bitterness of the moment how strangely their places were reversed—only bent, at whatever cost to herself, in gratifying the last wish of her father, and still moved by his imperious will—she held out her hand, and taking the young man's, made a desperate effort, and in a voice to which she seemed to be listening as though it were some one else's rather than directing herself, gasped out—

"Gilbert Makepeace, my father bids me give you my troth; and here I give it to you, putting

this ring upon your finger thus in witness. And I will be your wife when you ask me, and wait for you, and think of no other man until you either come or send me back this signet."

"Swear it!" cried the figure on the bed.

"I swear it!" gasped poor Janet; and then turning faint and weak all of a sudden, hid her face in her hands, and scarcely knowing what she did, suffered young Gilbert to lead her to a chair in the darkness beyond the bed-hangings. And as he led her there, and hung over the poor bride-elect, whispering misjudged words of comfort that did but add to her grief and shame, old John Sondes had watched them into the shadows with glazing eyes, then falling back upon the pillows, looked for a moment at the open Bible, muttering to himself—"Even as Saul gave Michal—'twas for the best, then why not this?" then closed his lids, and sternly crossed his hands, and for a time silence reigned in the room, broken only by the sound of the low whispered love with which Makepeace was striving to stay Janet's stifled sobs.

When she was quieter presently she put that young man gently by, and tucking her handker-

chief into the pocket of her Puritan apron, stroked back her fair hair, and putting a good face on it, all for love of that grim old man yonder against whom at least she could bear no grudge, went to his bedside, stroking down the coverlet as a woman will, and looked at him with long and rueful tenderness. How white he was and thin, she thought, as he lay there resting after the exertion. Her poor little heart sank into her black leathern shoes as she noted how meagre he had grown, and how near the end seemed. Why! he looked thinner than when she had seen him ten minutes before, and altered somehow! She stooped nearer with a nameless dread beginning in her mind, and looked, and touched his hand—then looked, and bent close again, until her strong young heart stood still for a second, and then set off fluttering wildly against her bodice—another look, and with a scream of terror and love that went echoing into every corner of that empty chamber, she had learned the cruel cold knowledge, and had thrown herself upon that dear body, and with streaming tears and passionate lips and reckless pleadings that ought to have called back the spirit, though

it were but for a moment, into any clay that still had one spark of compunction in it, was begging a look, a word, from the sightless eyes and the speechless lips of her dead father!

Well! it was over, and Janet was young. The morning of dull grief followed on the night of wild regret, and other mornings came one after another, and the sharp edge of the girl's misery receded, giving place to a dull abiding sorrow in her heart. Her father's only kinswoman, Dame Ursula Sondes, came to live in the empty house, and took charge of her; a solemn, prim old lady, as exact and straight backed as the black oak furniture in the grey brick Puritan keep where they lived on the outskirts of the city, that the ebb and flow of troops going and coming to war had made into one great camp. Makepeace had gone away with his regiment two days after the old soldier had died, and down by the quay where Janet had duteously followed to see him embark he had lifted his broad felt hat, and, as many another was doing, had pressed that sad-faced Puritan girl once into his heart, and kissed twice cheeks that went as white as those brand new

sails of the corvette in the harbour that were just dropping from their clews against the blue sky overhead, while he whispered into that shrinking ear, not doubting, with the happy conceit of his youth, that she would love him now, "Courage sweetheart! 'tis but a week's sail away across the sea, and a few months merry bout of swords and clatter of drinking cans out yonder, then back I come as fast as love can flit and canvas lift to claim my pretty and take her for my own for ever; courage, Janet, 'tis but a day and I'll be back," and again he put his hand under that dimpled chin and pressed his lips to hers, and her to him! And Janet, tied like a slave to a stake, and hating in her secret heart the man who thus claimed her as his own, submitted by sheer will, dry-eyed and uncomplaining, to it, though her heart was as lead within her; and when at last Makepeace was gone, and the big ship was a tower of white canvas leaning against the southern sky, she stood with a weeping crowd of women staring after it amongst the munition boxes and bales upon the quay with a strange fascination taking hold of her, and feeling as

though the vessel were some living thing, and might at any minute turn back upon and carry her captive into some vague and odious bondage; and when at last it had gone out of sight, and all the other women, more happy, were spending their grief in tears and sobbing, a vacancy settled down upon the much-tried girl, and she went back to the grim primness of her kinswoman's house knowing that blank as to-day was the expectation of to-morrow was even worse.

At that remote period in the development of society the right of a parent to bind a child to absolute unreasoning obedience was still held very sacred—by none more so than the stern sect to which John Sondes had belonged; and poor red-eyed Janet would as soon have thought of questioning the justice of any of those moral edicts which Master Zechariah Jordan fulminated so fiercely every week from the dusky pulpit in the sombre little barrack chapel, as of doubting her dead father's right or wisdom in pledging her to the man she hated. As for that stern kinswoman of hers, she knew the bond Janet had been placed under, and it would have been beyond the limits of her narrow mind to suppose that

a young woman could have a wish of her own in such matters; she would as soon have thought of questioning a dedicated lamb on the orthodoxy of sacrificial rites as the girl on her willingness to redeem the pledge she had given—there was no sympathy or solace to be got from that frigid lady, Janet knew it, and ruefully resigned herself to fate.

Day by day and month by month slipped by monotonously, and the dark shadows of that voiceless home and her helplessness took all the red roses out of Janet's cheeks, and all the joyfulness out of her laugh, yet lent as it did so a new pale sweetness in the stead, that all who saw her passing to marketing or chapel said was infinitely more lovely than the brighter beauty it replaced. And as the fame and the strangeness surrounding that gentle sad-eyed woman, who never laughed and never looked above the cobble-stones, spread, men came from all sides to try their fortunes, waylaying her at church and chapel, stall and market—sighing and glancing as she passed with as much effect as though that white face they strove to bring a tinge of colour into or a shade of emotion had been

carved, as indeed it seemed, of marble. Unnumbered nosegays and sweet-scented billet-doux in nearly as many hands as there were gallants in the town, fell a prey to Mistress Ursula Sondes, and to all the senders who rashly asked it, that grim lady vouchsafed an interview; but sweet as Janet was, and great as the prize they sought, 'twas noted none of those suitors came again.

So things went on, and Makepeace, who had written to Janet some once or twice, presently wrote no more. Then next there came a few rumours of him with more of the "clatter of drinking cans" in them, it must be told, than the more glorious "bout of swords" he had spoken of, and those stories, fragmentary as they were, were so greatly to the truant's discredit, that Dame Ursula pursed her lips and frowned to know Janet must hear them, and stood five inches stiffer in her stiff black silk and high starched ruffles, while Janet flushed a fine soft pink between shame and wonder. And those days in that postless time, which had grown into weeks, presently grew into many long months; the girl was fairer and taller than ever, and at times, as the loneliness, which was all pervading,

became unsupportable, she would go down to the quay, and sit hidden from sight amongst the piled wares, her elbow on her knee, her chin in her hand, staring hard out into the south, with no longing and hope, but wonderingly—trying to read what was behind the blue haze out yonder for her with a vague unrest, a fine broody discontent which pressed and peered behind that curtain of the future which it most dreaded to see lifted.

And then one day, when Makepeace had been silent and signless for more than a year, and his old companions in the town had forgotten him, and only the one white-faced, hating girl, with the love of another man burning, sternly repressed, in her heart, waited sullenly, faithfully unforgetting for him—one day when he had been so long away that any ship might bring him, there *did* suddenly come a ship, as Janet watched, out of the sea, and grew bigger and bigger before her terror-stricken eyes, till it was a great pile of canvas between sky and water, the very image of the ship which had taken Makepeace away, and Janet could no longer stand the thought that he was in it perhaps, and coming to claim

her! but fled incontinently, and in the shelter of her own bedroom waited in an agony of fear and expectation for what that ship had for her.

She could hear presently the singing of the sailors down at the dock as they drew the big transport to her berth, and the cheering of the people, of those glad wives and sweethearts whose joy made her heart quake; then presently the cranes began to creak upon the quay, and the baggage waggons came lumbering by, while noisy groups of homing troopers, carrying their gleeful little ones on their backs, and hand in hand with their bright-eyed women, laughing and talking, marched by her lattice window. All the town was in an uproar—every one seemed glad and happy except poor Janet. As for her, every time a step came nearer than another to the outer door upon the harbour side, she cowered down upon her pillows, and cruel visions of the long wainscoted dining-room below, of that man who owned her come to claim the promise which had sapped her life, and Mistress Sondes standing with crossed hands, approving and merciless, to see that the bitter bond was duly honoured, came

upon the girl as she lay trembling and listening until the dusk fell. Yet nothing happened, no one came!

Thereat she took heart of grace; after all her alarm had perhaps been groundless. So long a time had elapsed, so many ships had come and gone before bringing no news or tidings of Makepeace, why should this one do more? She was a foolish brain-sick girl, she told her sweet red-eyed reflection in the heart-shaped mirror on the window table, as she stroked the loose strands of her soft hair behind its snood, and put over it the white linen cap that framed the fair face below so sweetly, to let her lonely fancies run away with sense and reason so; the careless bridegroom might never come—perhaps, as she had hoped a hundred times, he had forgotten her and the fatal promise, and, blessed thought, she would be free henceforth to live and wither and die and be forgotten as she was without let or hindrance. Then somehow at the tag of such reflections there would always steal in a small voiceless thought of that other man, Andrew Trevanion, who too had made no sign, but the pressure of whose last kiss still burned,

she thought, upon her maiden cheek all that long, long time—pray heaven *he* came not! she was always whispering to herself, for that would be almost worse than the other's coming; and so thinking on this last of many sad occasions, she threw a light shawl about her shoulders, and now that there was little chance of any one being about, slipped out to cool and collect herself upon the terrace walk, for guests were coming that night to supper, and she would not have them see her red-eyed.

Below the terrace there was an ancient garden, part private and part public, a quaint old-fashioned place, with yew-tree arbours and shady walks, and broad beds overgrown with great rampant English flowers, that shone in a splendid patchwork of colour against the leaves beyond all day, and in the evening filled the air with a wealth of faint fine smells. Over shoulder, as she wandered on, the young crescent moon was blinking at her approvingly between the high chimney stalks of the house behind, and a yellow star or two were shining between the black fingers of the yews in front. The hour, and the light, and the breath of the lavender and rue on every side was infinitely

soothing to her troubled spirit. She had been foolish, she decided, and fanciful; she would give way no more to fears that might so well prove idle, and would trust more in the great future; and then, as she thought that, and wandered further and further down the paths, thickly hedged in by the gathering shadows, the lights in the distant windows twinkling smaller and smaller behind her, and none for companion but the rustling bats overhead, a pale sweet maid with white-mitted hands modestly clasped, and white face dimly visible in the starlight, she turned a corner by a bench underneath a cedar, and started, and gave a half articulate cry of surprise, for on it a man was sitting, young and slim, and well dressed with the picturesque artificialness of his time. He saw Janet as soon as she saw him, and jumping up, looked hard at her; then came a step nearer and looked again, as though in extremest hope and wonder; and Janet, who had gathered her soft skirts for headlong flight at first sight of the stranger, somehow did not fly, but stood there staring, feeling the thrill of that moment down to her silver-buckled shoes, and fascinated by a slowly dawning recognition. In

a minute that recognition had developed into a terrible sweet certainty, the skirt was dropped, and two trembling hesitating white hands were stretched out—in spite of their mistress' utmost self-control—to meet the eager hands of the stranger; and poor Janet, with one stifled cry of infinite pathos, Andrew!—Andrew Trevanion! had found love for the moment stronger than duty, had gone to him, and had forgotten for one minute everything but the old inextinguished love.

It was indeed Trevanion. He had come from the ship which had arrived that morning to the garden and the very seat where they used to sit hand in hand before he was banished, knowing nothing of her father's death, and only hoping some happy chance might give him, as it had, a meeting with Janet; and now he could not and would not understand in the first transport of delight her feeble fluttering and half-hearted struggles to escape from the strong arms that held her. He drew her back with him into the screen of leaves, and there, just as they used to sit hand in hand, they were sitting again in a minute, he with his arm, alas! round her small Puritan waist, asking no answer or encourage-

ment but the touch of that lady and the half seen shine of her face in the starlight, while voluble and resistless, in the tones that had haunted her all those years, he told that bewitched and trembling listener of the old love of his, and how it had grown by the keeping—of all the adventures he had had, the privations and the hardships, the weary marches and the hard fought battles in a land where no posts went or came, all lightened and brightened by the thought of finding her free when he returned, and old enough to be her own mistress! That strong flow of deep unchanged love was life to poor Janet's sore and lonely soul; it was like a gracious rain, deep and strong and cool, on a thirsty desert, and she *could* not stay him. Just for to-night, she pleaded with herself, just for this moment, and to-morrow he shall know, and I will send him away from me—for ever; but not now, not to-night, not *here*; and so it was that those little struggles with the strong arm that surrounded her all came futile, and those soft efforts to free her fingers from the grasp that held them were no less abortive. Round about the friendly screen of the branches shut out the world for a time, and the

splash of a fountain somewhere in the labyrinths of the old garden came to them gentle and cool; the scent of the unseen flowers filled the warm air, and the great white night-moths drifted about amongst the beds themselves like flowers adrift. It was a moment of unmixed delight to that lonely girl. Had she long before been asked to imagine how sweet such a time and meeting would be, she could not have conceived even in her innermost mind anything half so sweet as the reality proved, and it was all the better because she knew it must be so fleeting! With ears alert for the least sound, she had sat for one matchless hour, forgetting everything in the intoxication of the moment, and seeing more and more clearly, with a feeling which was half irrepressible joy and half terror, that this first love which she had thought she had killed had only been waiting a word, a touch, to spring into tenfold life. Then before the least of all there was to say was said between them, and while Trevanion, still possessing her hands, was beginning to ask how much difference the time that had made none to him had made to her, and while her whole soul rose in revolt at the answer she had to give, a respite

came for the moment, for her quick hearing had caught the sound of steps upon the distant terrace, and her name called loudly.

"Oh, quick!" cried frightened Janet, springing to her feet; "quick! away! I would not for half the world they found us thus."

"Ay, but," said the lover, still trying to detain the girl by a reluctant hand as he followed her from the harbour, "Janet, dearest Janet! remember I am an outlaw from your house; I cannot come to seek you, as happier men might do, until the ban has been removed——"

"Alas!" cried the girl, now thoroughly alive again to her sorrow, "it were happier if we never met—a hundred times happier if we had never met anew. You do not understand——"

"No, not one bit," laughed Trevanion, too happy to be afraid, "except that you are sweet as the starlight, and that I love you as never maid was loved before. Come here then again to-morrow night, sweetheart, since there is that upon your mind still needing explanation, and make me understand this strange mysterious something that troubles you. Is it a bargain?" he lightly questioned.

But the luckless girl, who knew so much better than he what the something was, could scarcely find voice to speak for a minute, and when she did, her assent was wrung from her in a bitter sigh.

"Then till to-morrow night, dearest lady, good-bye; and yet stay a moment! I never gave you a keepsake, did I? There, take this ring of mine"—pulling as he spoke one from off his other hand—"which is the largest finger of this sweet white set? There!" he added, shutting her hand upon the thing he had given her, "'tis but a little circlet, but betokens my endless love, and may serve, if you will let it, to keep you in mind of the tryst to-morrow!" and little knowing what a strange thing had happened, he took her in his arms once more, and kissed her as she was never kissed by man, and then was gone but a moment or two before Dame Julia, tall and disapproving, came to call her ward back to the house.

Now it happened that that evening the Rev. Zachariah Jordan and his lady, with two other Puritan pillars of the state, all as sombre, as heavy, and as virtuous as egotism and buckram could make them, had come to take supper with

Dame Ursula; and poor Janet, with her heart fluttering, and her simple mind giddy with love and shame and confusion, presently found herself in the frigid splendour of the receiving room, looking through sheer stress of pent-up emotions as white and fair and tongue-tied as every Puritan maid should be. Then the supper began across the bare stone hall in the long wainscoted meal-room, and Janet was sitting at a snow-white table-cloth in a funereal black chamber, with noiseless servitors in sad mouse-coloured livery, stealing prim and silent from chair to chair, and a hundred little tapers twinkling golden up and down the table in the great silver candlesticks that the dead master of Cromwell's Horse had taken from the heathen princelings when Bristol was stormed and sacked, and opposite and about her the guests were sitting in austere silence. It was a grim meal of interminable length; it had lasted for an hour or two already, and Master Zachariah was in the middle of a ponderous discourse whose monotonous flow seemed to emphasise rather than enlighten the black silence around; the cloth had been drawn, the silent servitors had slipped

away; all in a row those solemn men and women were sitting to the end of that solemn feast in that solemn hall; there did not seem one atom of life, or love, or youth, or passion, in all their sallow Puritanic faces; they were listening, like yellow parchment dolls dressed in crape, in dull glum silence to the slow drawl of that soulless chaplain in front; it was all dead hush and heavy decorum, and no one thought of Janet, when all on a sudden from where she sat a clear piercing scream cut through the silence, a wild heart cry so full of human love and passion, so sharp and ringing, so expressive in its singleness of a hundred headlong emotions, that the very tapers seemed to start, and Zachariah Jordan paused dead on the very threshold of the fifteenth subdivision of his argument.

And there was pale Janet Sondes, with staring eyes and colour that came and went, and hands outstretched before her, staring at her fingers like one bewitched and trembling, and crying hysterically. Never had there been such a scene in that quiet hall. The frightened servitors came rushing in. The sombre guests were for the moment shaken by that one wild cry out of

all their prudery, and while they started from their places and stared at that trembling girl in blank amaze, Ursula Sondes, who had a wide knowledge of young women's ways, ran round to Janet with aromatic vinegar and smelling salts, thinking for certain the girl, whom in her cold fashion she loved, was beside herself. But Janet, when in a minute she was calmer, stopped crying out, but still stood trembling there. "Oh! oh!" she gasped, almost incoherent, "look, look what 'tis I wear!"—and at her bidding they looked, and saw only a Puritan maid with an ancient gold circlet on her finger, such as even Puritan maids will come by now and then when young men be about; but Dame Ursula, looking more closely than any of them, gasped, and seized that white hand of Janet's, and pulled it down nearer to the candle-light, looking long and hard at the ring, and then wrinkling her old brows with surprise and wonder, turned to her ward and said, "Thy mother's ring, girl!—then Gilbert Makepeace is back?"

"No," gasped Janet.

"What! has he sent it, and put thee by forsaken——"

"No, no, not even that!"

"Not brought it or sent it! Janet, you rave! How came it on your finger?"

And Janet trembled and looked as amazed at that yellow ring as any of them, and then said, scarcely knowing what she said, "A man gave it me just now—a strange man;" and then with a desperate effort for the truth—"Oh, Cousin Ursula, help me; I am amazed and frightened; I cannot think; my head is all confused. It was the other one, it was Andrew Trevanion who gave me this ring but just now, now in the garden, not a minute before you came out!" and then with a great gulp of sorrow—"gave me this ring, this very same ring with which I plighted my troth to Gilbert Makepeace. Oh, quick, quick, in mercy send for Trevanion. He sleeps to-night in his cabin on the ship. Send for him, and ask him what it means, for I know not whether I be happy or unhappy, or the most cruelly mocked girl that ever lived!" and hiding her face in her hands, poor Janet gave way to a flood of unrestrained tears.

The rest need take but a word or two! Tre-

vanion came eager and wondering to their summons. He was shown the ring and told the story of it, and then it was his turn to start and stare, and afterwards he went up to the girl very tenderly, and putting a generous hand upon her shoulder, "Janet," he said, "this is too wonderful! What! Gilbert Makepeace, my chance comrade by a bivouac fire and companion in a day's march, *thy* betrothed! What! that man out of whose water-bottle I drank, and to whom I talked for an hour, the man for whom your father put me by—'tis almost past belief!"

"And the ring—the ring!" the woman cried. "How came you by it?"

But Trevanion hung his head and would not answer until they pressed him; then taking Janet's hands, although Dame Ursula stood watching by, he very gently asked—

"You can only guess too well?" and Janet could. She knew in her heart at that moment that Makepeace was dead, but she did not speak, only leant heavier and heavier towards Trevanion, and seeing she knew, he went on very gravely, "He died like a good soldier, with his face to the foe, and one who had seen us together, and

thought we were greater friends than we were, took that ring from his finger and gave it to me—when it was too late to replace it—and so, never thinking, I wore it, and struck by a passing fancy, gave it back to you but just now in the garden—here! Dame Ursula! help—Janet has fainted!”

And so she had, and sweet and white and helpless the gentle Puritan girl was lying on the breast of her lover whom fate had so strangely sent back to her.

Never had there been a prettier wedding than that which followed in a month or so; never a taller, gallanter bridegroom, Janet's envious bridesmaids said; never a sweeter, rosier bride, the young men sighed, than the one whom Trevanion led up to the altar that day!

MEG OF THE BRAIDS

IF any one had told handsome Maggie Nichols as she sat dangling two stockingless legs over the stone edge of the harbour quay, and watching the red-winged herring-boats slip out one by one into the open sea beyond, that in a few short hours chance would have made her a heroine, the subject of the wondering admiration of a countryside, she would have laughed the idea to scorn. In truth that vigorous and comely young woman was feeling anything but a heroine just then, as she kicked those bare heels against the green weedy granite, and turned sulkily away from the admiring eyes of the weather-bronzed, yellow-bearded young fishermen who, as their herring-boats filed below, stopped for a minute in their stowing of mahogany-red nets and hauling of dripping ropes to glance and sigh up at that disdainful village beauty, who sat enshrined so inaccessibly amongst lobster-pots and herring-

boxes. Seventeen, and as fresh-looking as an April morning, with a splendid wealth of brown hair piled up on top of her head, and long enough, the envious fisher-girls whispered amongst themselves, to lie upon the ground when its owner stood to the top of her no mean height; strong and supple, with a foot as sure as a mountain sheep's upon the treacherous green slopes of the precipices out yonder; with brown eyes as bright as the sea-bird's overhead, and a laughter as musical to sailor ears as the prattle of the southerly wind in the brown cordage as he turns homeward; the nimblest fingers amongst yarn and hempen sea-gear, the steadiest hand of any of the Thorswick women upon a tiller and the readiest with an oar,—what could any young fisherman hope for better than such a helpmate?

But prosperous John Nichols' daughter was shy and proud. Many an ambitious quay-man had made his proffer to her and had failed,—the last of all of them was young James Gilmour. It was a pity so fine a fellow, the gossips said, should go and break his heart for such a minx; but Maggie's close companion, Janet Scott, knew that Gilmour had a better chance than all the

others put together. Once already that young man had asked her to marry him, and, too much in earnest to take no for an answer, had come once more this very morning as she was sitting on the quay, and the girl, full of conceit and waywardness, though loving him all the time, had played with him and mocked him and sent poor Gilmour bitter and fierce to sea again. Had he but known how thin that mask of anger was, had he but persisted for another minute or two, it might all have been different; but if she could be proud so could he, and so he had flung his great seaboots across his shoulder, and taken his bundle and strode away hating all maids, and—so he thought—Maggie Nichols best of all!

He had gone miserable and crestfallen, and Maggie was still too proud to call him back. She would not even look towards it as his boat passed out of the harbour, but turned to Janet Scott, sulkily biting between her white teeth a rebellious strand of that great hair of hers as she did so, and asked, "Is he gone, Janet?—is he looking back?"

"'Gone!' ay, Meg," said her friend, "and like a man who cares but little whether he comes

back or no; and as for looking back!—he does it now—quick, Meg, wave to him, 'tis thy last chance,—see, he's standing all a-sag by the tiller eyeing you with a face whiter than Monday linen; another minute and he will be round the point——”

“You wave!” said the elder one, gloomily toying with an empty mussel shell, and the younger, whose heart was softer and her offers not so many, did not wait to be bid twice, but waved a scarf for a moment until the boat was round the bend, and then turned and said after a moment's pause, “Well, Maggie Nichols, I suppose you know your own mind best, but you have sent the likeliest man in all the place to sea with a sore heart to-day, and 'tis an 'ill new meeting comes of an ill parting.’ Ay, and what is more, Meg,” said that candid friend, growing a little warm with the other's overweening pride, “if it blows to-night and yon man be in peril, then, were I you, I would not sleep a wink or have a moment's peace in house or out of it till his ship be safely back, and you have spoken civilly at least to him—nay, that I would not!—not for your father's gold, and your good looks, and that

hair that they say makes you so proud." And so saying the girl walked away and left her to her uneasy thoughts.

Maggie went back to her work that day feeling worse than she had done for a long time. She sat and knitted in gloomy silence in the deep-recessed, green-paned window of her father's cottage, taking fugitive glances between the long-stemmed geraniums at the broad expanse of the sea that stretched out from their garden palings to the extreme limit of the sky, and at times she said bitter things to herself about all young men and Jamie Gilmour in particular, half hoping—perhaps for a minute at a time—that he would not come back to trouble her again, and then as the love she was vainly trying to smother and hold down asserted itself, she would suffer ingenious tortures of regret at the thought of her coldness, and watch with keen and guilty anxiety for the first sign of that rising wind which she felt would be but her deserts.

There was not long to wait. Before the afternoon was half done, the sky darkened and turned to purple in the north, and the gulls, white as ivory against that ebony background, came trooping in

from the open sea, the white linen began to flap upon the clothes-lines, and as the day wore out a fierce autumnal storm grew out of the northward, driving the great squadrons of low clouds before it, and ribbing the sea with white under its hurrying feet. By daylight it was blowing a heavy gale, and all the fishing-boats were safely in harbour except three. And two of those three never sent even a whisper of their fate back to the land! The third one was that upon which Gilmour served.

All day long, frightened and repentant, Maggie watched in the wind and the spray upon the quay amongst a crowd of eager women, and when the afternoon came and that grey veil that overhung the steep, black hills and valleys of the sea, shutting out everything but the dull, incessant roar of the storm, had given no sign of a sail behind it, she called her little brother Andrew, and with him went out of the village up to the headland to the northward, hoping from there to learn something of the missing ship before the night fell. The rain and wind made it almost impossible to stand upon that grassy promontory, but those two crept along, and before they had

strained their eyes into the grey sea-fog half-an-hour the long-expected happened, for out of the mist shrouding the sea close below them plunged a brown-sailed boat with the number Maggie knew so well showing large even at that distance upon its close-reefed mainsail, and, cushioned in white foam, its gleaming deck swept by great seas every minute, came staggering in to the land.

For a moment she had no idea but delight to know Nichols was coming back at last, and then that fisherman's daughter saw with a spasm of new terror, in spite of the rain that blinded her and the wind that made it difficult even to breathe, that his ship was being forced by the irresistible power behind, out of the only road to the harbour beyond. Maybe the mist had deceived those on board, or the strong swing of the currents had carried them from their reckoning; but almost as soon as that luckless craft appeared, she was within the great circle of underwater rocks that fringed the cliff, and showed their heads now and again out of the confusion.

As the boat came in Maggie crept forward to the green edge of the cliff, where the spume was lying in thick strands amongst the short hill-

grass and yellow cinque-foil, and clutching a grey fragment of rock in her nervous grasp, she glared over in the white cauldron below with eyes that saw nothing but that ship and its peril as nearer and nearer it came and more and more certain seemed its destruction. There was still just a chance that it might run through the inner channel, and so weather the point, and Maggie watched through the veil of mist half hiding the wild play of the waves below with heart that hardly beat, and pulses that stood still with expectation. Another minute and the ship, a dark shadow in the storm haze, was in the teeth of the danger—another minute and she would be through; and then, quick as the changing sequence of a dream, it seemed to that unhappy girl, something went wrong on board, a rope broke, a tiller slipped, and in an instant the Nichols' boat was end on for the shore; she came hurtling out of the far twilight into the white arena just below, she rose reeling on to the summit of a great black swell right under Maggie's eyes, and then with the force and straightness of a javelin thrown by a giant arm, the cruel sea hurled her straight upon the iron edge of the shore—the girl saw the lugger stagger and

plunge to the shock and strike again and burst like an earthen crock, there was a toss of spar and mast for a minute, a fine thin shriek or two borne up out of the furious cauldron of waters below, and as Gilmour's sweetheart threw herself prone upon the grass and hid her face in her hands, the hungry waves lapped down the last vestige of his ill-fated ship.

But to that apple-cheeked urchin, Maggie's brother, it was the bravest show, the most exciting incident since the spotted horses had come round with the great circus that time two years ago. He lay flat upon the very verge searching the wave-swept ledges far underneath, and in a minute his keen young eyes had caught a sight of something moving near them, and with a cry that startled his sister out of her grief, he shouted out—

“Maggie! Maggie!—old gaffer Giles is cast ashore—and another man's swimming hard in the swirl—” and then before his companion could sweep the tears out of her eyes and rush to his side, he shouted again—“Gaffer Giles has got upon the shelves, and t'other man's grasping at a rock—ay, he's gone for good now!—nay, there he rises again, and clings, and clammers waist-

deep in the wash—there, Meg—there, dost see him through the rift in the spray, down by yonder rock with the hummock of waving grass upon it?” and Maggie saw in truth, and her heart stirred within her, for in a minute her eyes, made keen and quick by love, had recognised James Gilmour in that struggling, water-sodden figure.

Staggering and tottering as they crawled up the rocks out of the jealous clutches of the sea, with white faces, and bleeding hands, and clothes all in rags, Meg and her brother, leaning over the sharp edge of the spray-swept precipice, watched those two with desperate eagerness. And then first the older man gave out, and on a bare flat of rock about twenty feet above the waves, collapsed suddenly, and lay there without sign or motion, an inanimate bundle of brown rags. Then both of those helpless spectators saw Gilmour, bleeding and spent, scramble with a last effort a few yards higher up, and then too give out and fall fainting across the foot of a treacherous shoot of loose shale that led sheer down to a swirling black kit between the rocks, and there he lay in a minute far below them, his white face, streaked with blood, staring straight up through the gloom

at them, and his body only stayed from destruction, it seemed, by a single point of rock scarce six inches high.

Poor Margaret's blood froze in her veins as she stared down at her lover's face, and waited breathless in horrible momentary expectation to see him slip—she knew even so much as a deep sigh would start him—and go rolling down into the yawning mouth of that surging, foam-laced gully below. But he did not slip, and presently as she watched her womanhood came back to her. She looked at old Harry Giles, and she thought no human being could reach those two; she looked at Gilmour, and she thought mayhap it might be done! and in another minute she was on foot, and had shaken the sense back into her urchin brother. “Run, Andrew, run,” she cried, “run for your life and mine!—in yonder shieling is a coil of shepherd's rope with an iron bar for setting hurdles, and in the hollow beyond two men are cutting sedges; bring them quickly here—they will know what's to do—there, don't stand staring like that, but go; and if it should happen that I did not come back—but never mind for that—away, Andrew! run, my lad, for the sake of yonder men

and me;" and giving that awe-struck urchin one great kiss of many emotions, she sent him racing inland, while she herself turned back to the cliffs, and without a waver began her desperate errand.

Active and strong, accustomed all her life to climbing about these heights, yet even so that venture was almost too much for her. Down by jags and crevices Meg of the Braids scrambled, twisting and turning to right and left, following the narrow goat-paths under those dizzy walls, till the goats themselves had turned back dismayed, and then, strong in her love and courage, taking to the ledges where the puffins built in the spring-time, and no human being had ever been before. As she went down that desperate road crawling and clinging, and dropping from point to point, the hill-top grew fainter and fainter, while the thunder of the storm seemed more and more dreadful. Now for a minute she would see the two men, Giles nearest to her, and Gilmour lying a little further off, and then a bend in the rocky wall would shut them from her view for an interval of dreadful suspense. At times, as she slid from point to point of the ragged stone that tore her hands, with nothing but her own

strong arms and cool head between herself and the destruction that waited below, the wind would beat so fiercely that every moment seemed her last, and the spray, heavy and cold, was driven by the storm with cruel force upon her face till she was well nigh breathless.

But still the girl persisted, and presently after ten minutes' desperate effort, was down into reach of the long white lashes of the waves and close to the old fisherman. Then began her misfortunes. She called twice gently to that shivering heap of clothes, and at the second call Giles looked up dazed and stupid, then staggered to his weak legs, smiling feebly to see that friendly face come out of the sea-spray, and extending as he did so a trembling hand. As he put it forth he staggered and missed his footing, and before the rescuer could stir a finger, had plunged backward off the ledge, had struck his head with a dreadful crash against another ledge, and was gone headlong into the sea below.

It was no time for sentiment or vain regrets. Gulping down her horror at that sight, Meg scrambled back a yard or two, and turned to where Gilmour was lying. She saw with tremu-

lous satisfaction he still lay, as he had done all the time, near the bottom of the steep rubble shoot, with a sheer wall of cliff above and underneath him, the sea growing darker and darker every moment as the night came on. She saw also it was impossible to approach that insensible figure from above, but just below a solid jut of rock would give a scanty foothold, and to that she scrambled with infinite peril to herself, cutting her knees and her hands, until, half blinded by the salt spray, and half dazed by the ceaseless thunder of the waves about her, in a moment of silent triumph, the girl came within touch of her lover, a white shoulder staying him up and a white arm round him, and as she whispered his name and laid her cheek against his—there was no one looking—and felt under his torn blue jersey the feeble flutter of his life still beating, for the first time in that day of keen anxiety she cried freely and plenteously.

But he was not yet saved, and very eagerly she waited the coming of the rescuers. Before long, a head—a black dot—showed over the edge of the cliff far above, and then another, and a smaller one between them, and a rope was paid

out, first an almost invisible gossamer up amongst the crags, and then a blessed thickening strand that came swinging and crawling down over the gannets' ledges and the little patches of rock-flower that streaked the cliffs with purple in the far away summer-time; it was close at hand, and then after one or two futile attempts she had hold of it, and had drawn it down just so that it touched James Gilmour's shoulder—and there it stopped! One yard more and she would be able to pass the cord round his chest and send him up to those strong arms above; it only wanted one yard more, and yet those poor three feet were strangely slow in coming! Meg pulled as hard as she dared, then stared above, and signed to them to lower more, and pulled again—why did they keep her waiting so? and looked, and tugged, and then turned faint all over for a moment, for she had read the reluctant signals of the men on top aright, and had guessed the miserable fact that there was not another inch to spare; the very utmost limit of the rope was reached there as it hung, three feet too short, and Meg must tie her lover with what she had or let him go!

Long afterwards she used to say there was no moment in the day so bad as that. All the excitement that had buoyed her up of changing hope and fear and exertion seemed suddenly to have gone, and in its place came a vague despair as she stared at that rope which ought to have meant salvation, but only mocked her as precious minute after minute slipped by. The frightened girl knew well enough those above could give no help. There was not another strand of cord or cable for a mile or more, and the little village itself was out of call or signal. Before a messenger could get there and come back with the means of rescue she and that precious burden that lay so limp and heavy upon her arm would long ago have gone into the black sea behind. And all about the short winter day was dying grey and dark, and under the lift of the hurrying clouds the stinging wind was coming keener and more keen; the chill of the damp rocks against which her breast was pressed seemed numbing all her faculties; the tide was rising, and the angry sea was making every moment closer and closer attempts to wrap its white arms about those two. And there was that half dead man, whom she

dared not try to lift, resting so that if he but moved with a spark of returning life, or only sighed, he might slip and sweep them both from their frail holds into the death below. Maggie was not proud then, but as she wept soft spasmodic woman-tears, and thought of all the episodes of her short seventeen years, it seemed the very end of all things had come at last, and there was nothing left but to die.

She was not a bit proud now, but wondered a little whether it would not be better to wrap young Gilmour in her arms, and so take one step back with him into what was after all only oblivion, sparing herself the long hopeless wait, and him the misery of the awakening. And then she thought of all the rope that lay unvalued on the quays at home; how for an arm's length of that neglected hemp she would give her youth and beauty—her strength, her hair, ay, her very hair itself!

As she thought that last thought, the girl started a little. She said the words over to herself again, and then her face brightened—an inspiration, an idea, a happy flash of invention had come upon her! Why not make use in

this emergency of those splendid strands of brown hair that nature had given to her? She clapped her hand upon her bare tumbled head, and felt there that queenly pile, salt soaked in truth, and frayed out upon the gale, but soft and strong and supple; she looked up through the blinding veil of spray ringing against the streaming cliffs above to where those tiny hopeless dots were waiting aimlessly, and down below to where the churning sea was looming up through the twilight; then, laughing a little, turned back to her lover, and passed a hand across him, till in the folds of his wet jersey she got hold of and drew from its place his strong sheath knife.

With just one sigh, and something that looked like a half blush under the wet glaze of her skin, the girl untied her snood, and shook down to her feet those great broad plaits that surely kind Providence had put there for this very use, and seizing them close up, without giving a moment for thought or remorse, with three strong cuts shore them from her head. Twisting the two lower ends together with swift clever fingers that had served a lifelong apprenticeship at such

work, Meg slipped the sleek brown belt round young Gilmour, and then, holding the loose ends in her teeth, seized the rope again. It was no good trying to tie hemp and hair, Maggie knew that well enough, but they might be woven together as she had woven worse material a hundred times before. And now she unrove a foot or so of the cord, and bound the hair into it, holding Jamie steady meanwhile with a shoulder, and working with desperate zeal, until presently it was done, a coarse rough splice such as any skipper in the fleet would have laughed at, but strong withal.

One fugitive, half reproachful stroke Meg gave to the ragged stubble of her own poor head, and then waved a signal to those above, and they, wondering but obedient, began to pull upon the rope; there was a moment of infinite anxiety while the heroine waited to see if the strange belt would hold, and then that brave girl saw through tears and spinning salt-sea spume that it would!—saw the plaits strain, and stretch, and tighten; saw strong hemp and gentle hair that love and repentant pride had twisted, blend and weld together, and grow stronger for the

union; saw her lover drawn into safety out of the very jaws of death, and crouched down to wait her turn in an hysterical outburst of joy and fear and weariness.

It can hardly be necessary to say much more. The bright morning sun was streaming into her father's room in their cottage the next morning, and Meg sat knitting a winter shawl, a willing watcher by the side of the bed on which James Gilmour lay, feeble and pale still, but recovering. The sunshine was lending a splendid scarlet to the flowers of the geraniums in the window, and a fine ethereal blue to the peat smoke that twined up into the outer air, that was as clear as a mountain burn after the storm. An ancient clock was ticking to itself somewhere outside, but no other sound broke the silence, until Gilmour, who had been awake some hours, turned over, and looking earnestly at the girl, said—

“Meg! what made you come down the cliff for me like that?”

Now that was a question which the lady had asked herself several times during the still hours of the night, and whatever her own conclusions

were, the healthy red upon her cheek only deepened a shade and the bright pins only twinkled in the sunshine a thought the faster through the worsted as she answered slowly and without looking up—

“It was only civil—I could not leave you so—all awash like that, for the tide to sweep away.”

“But, Meg,” said Jamie slowly, for he too had been thinking over it all, and watching her in secret; “folk do not risk their lives and scramble down crags, where no man or woman ever went before, or will hereafter, out of bare civility;” and then in a minute, after an eager pause, he had put out a strong brown hand, and somehow got hold of hers, and “Meg!” he said, “if I asked you that question I asked last time upon the quay; if I asked you, lass, once more to be my wife, should I be rebuffed again?”

“What!” said that heroine in homespun, blushing charmingly, “marry me all shorn and cropped like this! Why, lad, the folk would laugh you sad and sorry in a week.”

“I would not care how much they laughed.”

“Ay, but I think you would.”

“I swear a thousand times I would not.”

“Oh, well then,” said Meg of the Braids, “if you were sure of that then—then I think—perhaps—I would leave the question for you to answer as you wished!” and happy Gilmour knew at that instant that there was no medicine for his hurts like the glance she gave him, and no salve in the world for his bruised and tired body like the magic of her touch as she put her hands again in his.

MARGARET SPENS

FAR away in the north country, where the green Cumberland Hills slope to the long wash of the Irish Sea, and the fertile meadow lands run down to the edge of the salt water wherever time has made a gap in the grey walls of the ragged limestone cliffs, there nestles at the mouth of a great harbour as pleasant a fishing village as could be found anywhere between the yellow Solway Flats to the northward or the wild Welsh Hills in the south. Landward of this sea-hamlet the tide runs up a broad estuary between green downs and sloping cornfields, carrying commerce of which the village knows nothing to a far inland mart, and out at the sea, as that little street of reed-thatched cottages looks upon it from the shelter of its sunny cove, is the broad plane of the water, with, a mile or so away—the bar lies across the harbour mouth—a golden thread of sand in a summer day whereon the opal waves

prattle and frolic about the soft feet of the laughing gulls, and rolls long strands of floating sea-wrack into bands amber, black, and red, out of pure harmlessness; and in the winter all the thunder and fury of the salt waters falls in infernal tumult upon that ridge, the great black mountains of the waves come tearing in upon it from under the cloak of the October evenings, and howl and thunder at it, and cast themselves on its smooth strength and burst into a thousand fragments as though those watery ranges were no more than dusky glass, and split and shatter and toss their white ruin mast high into the low droop of the flying clouds above, and fall one upon another, and beat and rave and paint the black sea white for a league around them, until at such a time you cannot sleep in that little village for the sullen ceaseless roar of that dreadful deep sea playground.

And the salt spray and spume that comes in on the wings of every wind has savoured and impregnated everything in that Cumberland village. It has got down the throats of the cocks who stand upon the broken lobster-pots and hurl defiance at each other in husky pride across the

shingly flats. It has dwarfed the geraniums that summer and winter peep from the tiny white-curtained lattice windows; it lends something of its own fine strong smell to the fuchsias that cover the cottage porches in the summer, and a new whiteness to the linen that tugs and flutters for ever on the drying ropes down by the beach where the yellow sea poppies grow amongst the dead black seaweed; it lends a new crispness to the short stiff hair of the men, and a new redness to the cheeks of the comely women, and tans the bare arms and legs of their little ones before they have been a month from their cradle. In this pleasant, salt-sea hamlet, in the hollow of the cliffs, lived a few years back one John Spens, a grizzled veteran of commerce, who had seen storms and tempests in every part of the globe. After fifty years of adventurous existence, he had come back to a white cottage and an acre of sloping potato garden in that village whence he had long ago set out a callow sea-apprentice with his heart full of hope and his wardrobe in a blue spotted handkerchief. Spens shared his house with his motherless daughter Margaret, as sweet a bit of seventeen-year-old womanhood

as there was in that village of comely, ruddy-faced women. And because Spens had been a captain in his time, and because the gold buttons on his close-reefed pilot-coat were the only gold buttons in the place, and because his front garden was paved with cockle shells, and two fierce little cannon mounted on emerald carriages threatened defiance to the world from behind their ramparts of marigold and musk—for these and many other reasons the old captain was greatly looked up to in his native place, and sweet Margaret Spens was held the mirror of womanhood in that small realm.

It was a sight to see those two go to church on Sundays side by side, and many were the caps that were touched to him, and many the stalwart fisher lads whose hearts beat thick and fast as the fringe of sweet Margaret's cloak touched them in passing. But Margaret was shy as the little grey finches that come to the hawthorn bushes in May, and Spens knew the dignity that hangs about one who has trodden the quarter-deck for many years—he held aloof; and thus it came that only one man in the village hailed him when they met, and dipped into his wide tobacco pouch,

and lay basking with him on the sunny seat under the flagstaff on the cliff on long summer afternoons in terms of perfect equality, and this man was the pilot William Nanson. A fit friend for that stalwart skipper, though twenty years his junior. Nanson's strong heart and faultless honesty shone in every glance of those keen grey eyes of his. There was not a better pilot anywhere along the coast from Solway to Orme, men said, or a steadier hand upon the tiller when the North Sea sky was lead from verge to verge, and the fierce salt foam streaked the sea with whiteness for leagues on every hand; there was not one who could tell a better tale through the blue smoke of the waterside tavern parlour, or who could lead a hymn better in chapel on Sunday mornings; there was no one who was quicker to his place in danger, or more generous and tender-hearted when disaster came, as sometimes it came, upon those humble hearths; and Spens loved that strong man like his son, and to the younger the old captain was the soul of what he hoped to be, the very embodiment of grey-haired manhood. More, it was patent, and had been for so long as any one could remember, that William

Nanson's love for the father was but the reflection of that which he bore for his daughter. What did it matter that he was twice ten years her senior; had they not been closest friends as long as either could recall—who was fitter for her; and so no one wondered, if some there were who sighed, when, on Margaret's twentieth birthday, it was told she was to marry the honest pilot in a month or two; and as the news spread, and the congratulations came in, the old captain's eyes beamed with contentment immeasurable, and Nanson's plain, good face flushed into handsomeness with pride and joy, and blushing Margaret hung her head like a dew-damp poppy in the corn patch on the cliff, and told her gossips "how pleased she was to please her father," and that she thought "there were none she liked the better!"

Then—God knows whence these things come—out of the to-morrow came sorrow and humiliation for William Nanson; and Margaret had seen young Andrew Frossard, a handsome, careless, fickle fellow, with nothing in the world to recommend him but his comeliness and a tongue that ran as seductively as Eden over its shallows in June. And that curly-headed good-for-nothing

lit the true fire of love in Margaret's maiden breast, and she was his henceforth, in a week, heart and soul. She strove bravely against it for a time, and when it grew invincible, all absorbing, and she had read the swift comprehension of her treachery in the grave sad pilot's eyes, she fled to her father and cast herself on her knees before him, and buried her tear-stained face in his hard kind hands, and begged in a wild gust of shame and fear and love that the marriage promise he had put upon her might be removed. It killed stout John Spens! Within a year he died, and before that time Margaret was affianced to handsome Andrew Frossard, and Nanson was away upon the sea.

Then, two months before they were to be married, Frossard went upon a voyage which was to last that time, no more; and while he was away Spens died as was said, and friendless Margaret went to live with a poor kinswoman down by the quay. Nanson came back presently, tender and brave and diffident, and the two months lengthened into four and six, and yet there was no Andrew Frossard. Then out of the six months grew eight and ten, and Margaret

went up night and morning to the barley-field by the flagstaff, and wrung her hands and gazed for hours into the westward. And from the ten months came twelve and fourteen, and Margaret grew white as a lily; and Nanson, out of his big heart and his consuming love of that winsome, sad-eyed girl, moved heaven and earth to find her lover. From the first year grew five, and from five ten others, and Andrew Frossard was forgotten by nearly all in that village, and Margaret's comeliness had ripened into a splendid womanhood; and it was only then and not till then that patient William Nanson asked her of herself once more. Once more Margaret went up to the flagstaff and looked long and hard into the great loneliness of the westward. There was no answer from the sea, and when she came down she put her hand into Nanson's, and told him in her sweet trustful way that such love as she had given to the other man she had not to give again, but all else was Nanson's, "he had well won it;" and Nanson did not cavil, but took her by the hands, kissing her on the forehead, put a new seal on the old compact, and so it was settled.

Once more he was within an ace of felicity. Everything prospered, the day was set, the village on tiptoe, and then the very night before the wedding a fierce autumnal gale came booming out from the west; the sun that was to have risen on Margaret's wedding went down angry and red; the horizon came creeping in to the land as the night fell till it was not a mile away, and before the darkness blended everything, sea and sky were mixed; the bar was lost save for the tremulous thunder that marked its place in the gloom; the rain-drops glittered on the rattling window panes; and the white scud went flying overhead as the fierce wet gusts and the driving rain squalls came in upon each others' heels faster and faster from the great dark wilderness of the lonely Irish Sea. By midnight it was blowing a heavy gale, and at two o'clock in the morning a pale blue rocket went up into the sky from a ship ashore upon the bar! The little village had the only lifeboat for ten miles on either hand, and forthwith at that signal doors and gates were shut and opened, gravel rattled on the windows of the sluggards, and up started those hardy fisher-people from their pleasant

slumbers as though it were a bidding to that marriage feast they had in mind that had roused them, and by the time, it was but a very few minutes, the good boat was on the rollers and ready to be run into that dim chaos of white waters that stretched indefinitely out into the night, all her crew were mustered eager for the fray.

None pulled a stronger oar than Nanson on these occasions, and none was ready sooner. There he stood in the pale shine of those great white lappets of the sea that hissed and smoked upon the beach in the dusk, a modest hero in overalls and sou'wester, and it was sweet Margaret Spens—who fitter—that buckled him into his ponderous harness, and as a last touch threw a scarf about his brawny neck. And as she reached up to tie it, that comely bride-elect, her white arms were about his neck for a minute, the brown wind-blown strands of her hair glistened like gold in the flickering lantern lights athwart his face, the incense of her breath was upon him and fired his blood; her sweet front was front to front with him, he felt the swell of it through all his harness, and could not speak, the pride

and love at full flood within him was too strong for words; he looked into the shy eyes of that lovely girl for whom he had waited a lifetime, and long vistas of happiness opened out into the future; here was the crown of a life, here was a girl to do and die for; he looked out into the wild wrath of the night, and those misty fields of spume and thunder seemed a pleasant playground on which he could venture anything for her sweet love. He took her deep into his arms, and as the magic of her touch thrilled him in every fibre, and he kissed with a lover's kiss for the first time, the pale shine of another rocket from the stranded vessel fell upon them, and the cry was passed from mouth to mouth to man the boat.

Nanson took his place with the others; the good ship was run out, and soon the land behind them was as lost to those strong rowers as the edge of the sea in front. Hour after hour they toiled through interminable wildernesses of angry water, and it was nearly morning before they came alongside the ship as she lay a great black colossus across the reef in a tumbled bed of glistening foam. They crept in under the shadow of that dead giant, and then when they

were so near that they could see the stars, as the boat rose and fell in the surf, making giddy golden evolutions amongst the tangled rigging overhead, the coxswain got upon his knees by the peaked bows with the salt spray and flying rain gushing in torrents from his tarpaulins, and in a minute hailed them, sending his voice bellowing out into the darkness. Then there was a brief pause of expectation, and as the call of that stout old sea-lion was swallowed up by the hungry sea, there came in turn from a huddle on one of the masts an answering wail. It was a pitiful small sound, yet it fired the hopes of those brave fellows in the boat; they shouted with one accord, then set them down again to their oars, and making up the drift their boat had taken in that few moments, brought her once more into the shadow of the great hulk.

And there they lay for twenty minutes on the tremendous heave and fall of that white pool, with the wind howling like a legion of furies in the broken cordage overhead, and in front the wild barrier of the surf on the bar and the ceaseless gush of the water pouring down over the broken waist of the vessel in front of them

in gleaming sheets of dim brightness. Now for a minute the spinning floor of the black water beneath them fell away with a steady, endless, seeming subsidence, while the big ship grew from a sombre wall into a beetling black mountain towering into a black sky right above them, the great rents in her stricken sides looking as they sank like gaping cavernous wounds through which a black tide spirted out into the night, and the grinding of loosened iron plates and rending of timbers as the giant rolled slowly on the sands in his death throes came tremulous and terrible through the howl of the tempest. Then the playful spirit of the storm laughed, and out of the nethermost pit of the waters bore that gallant boat-load up giddily, madly up on the great heave of the surf, up till the stars seemed just above them, up till the dusky foam-streaked decks of the ship were laid bare below, and her grinding spars were almost within their touch, up that playful spirit sent them until they could see, in the ghostly gleam of the waters, the faces of those who huddled upon the masts and watched them with a dumb, speechless fascination !

At last out of that black huddle one man, braver than the rest, came out, and crept hand over hand along the yard, and at the furthest end loosened the slack of a coiled halyard, and waiting his chance, threw it out on the wind. It fell short, and he coiled it in, and tried again, this time as the rescuing boat was spinning up to heaven out of the white yeast at his feet, and the rope lit full amongst them. Willing hands were on it in a second, and none so quickly as strong William Nanson's; then as the cord was tightened between wrecked and rescuers, and the black sea swirled the boat now and again out of the curdled litter below, out the round tops of those shifting salt sea hills the crouching figure at the yard-arm hailed them feebly—

“Where are we?”

“Upon the Owen Sands!” they shouted back from below; and then after a minute there came the question—not even the wild laughter of the wind could drown the tone of startled wonder in it—

“What! is that the Mort lifeboat?”

“Yes.”

"And William Nanson on board?" shouted the midnight voice.

"Ay, ay, lad," cried the little recking pilot himself; "and we'll have thee home in no time if thee will but shut thy clapper and bend a rope to this halyard twine"—then down they went again, and Nanson let the wet cord run quickly through his fingers, then up again as he took it in by great rounds, up until his face was not many yards from that pale wet face, so dim and ghostly on the yard that had come out of the dead past to mock him and his happiness—then down they went once more, and Nanson did not know, and the man upon the yard turned grimly and crawled back; they saw him, numb and cold, crawl safely half-way, then the big ship gave an uneasy quiver, a quick cry came out of the night overhead, and he had missed his footing in the wild uproar and darkness; they saw him drop across the shine of the distant waves, striking a ratlin as he went, and then disappear with a horrible thud into the gloom and litter on the decks below.

And now none of those huddled wretches in the top would move another finger for their

deliverance. They had been five hours in that pitiless wind, and the courage and the life blood had curdled into black indifference in their hearts; there they crouched and cowered and hid their eyes from the great abyss of the sea that thundered and broke about them, and shut their ears against the howling of the wind in the rigging—in vain those brave men riding for their sakes in the throat of hell implored and cursed them by turns; they would not move. When the rescuers saw this, they held a muttered consultation, leaning over the hafts of their strong oars; and when that talk was over, William Nanson was standing alone, without his tarpaulins, at the boat head, a light line round his waist, and every man's lips were tight shut behind him, and every man's heart beat quickly, as slowly and steadily they rowed a length or two closer in, to where against the cliff-like sides of the stricken monster was hanging a dark tangle of her shrouds and cordage. They rowed the boat in, and down she went into a dusky valley, then out again on a tremendous heave of the midnight cauldron upon which they floated, up until it seemed the great ship before them was sinking in turn; and then

in a trice, at the very apex of that rise when the boat was nearest to the ruin of those broken iron walls over which the sea burst in ceaseless clouds of white smoke, Nanson was gone, and every man's heart stood still a space, and every man's eyes were bent in desperate hope upon that spectral sheet of eddying foam into which he had plunged. Another minute or two, and with a fierce spontaneous cheer of encouragement they saw him clinging to the fallen gear upon those streaming sides, and as the watery floor dropped away beneath them in that dreadful game they played, he seemed to be going up and up until he was a dark something spinning in the air above; then the next wave came howling and crushing down, and broke in furious thunder on the far side of the ship, and its sheeted foam flew overhead in bitter stinging sheets, and its swirling ruin came gushing from below, and skywards they went once more at a giddy sickening pace, the hungry grey waters swallowing up the black sides of the ship, until they had caught strong William Nanson as he struggled, and for a minute he was gone again into the cold vortex of the spume and ruck, a fathom down into the bosom

of that cruel playful sea. Then up he would come gasping and faint and indomitable, and down they would go with hearts beating and brave voices crying to him, and so for many times and many anxious moments, until at length they saw him in a gap of the streaming bulwarks, and knew the first half of his desperate venture was done.

Then for the other half—and the end! Nanson was not the man to hang about. He went aloft, getting a new rope between the ship and the boat, and one by one, imploring, taunting, and begging, in the cruel sleet and rain, he unbent the frozen fingers of those half-dead seamen, unwound their stiff dead arms from the shrouds they were twined in, and slung them out and sent them down to where the boat—a tiny smudge, it seemed—was reeling and tossing between hell and heaven in the white smother. Seven of them he sent down, and then he was alone, alone in that horrible mockery of a stately ship, with ruin above and ruin below.

There was nothing to keep him. He had risen to go, when suddenly the remembrance flashed upon him of that brave fellow who had come

along the yard to them and failed so dreadfully in his venture. He might be somewhere in the twilight of the deck, and alive. Nanson clambered down, and began to look about for that helpless wounded body. First he searched forward of the mainmast, and there, in the black wild thickets of the fallen yards and loose sails under which the salt water sluiced to and fro, he stumbled over two men, both dead, the one wound in python coils of rope, with sodden pale face turned up to the sky, and teeth set hard in the last fierce struggle he had made for deliverance; the other, a comely lad, slain at a blow by a falling spar, lying with his head on his arm and a smile on his bloodless lips—but neither was he whom Nanson sought for.

Then aft he turned, and made his way through the white swirl and the litter till he was in the middle of the ship. And there it was like hell above and below. The furious thunder of the giant surges fell with a hideous roar interminable and incessant upon the mighty carcase of that helpless vessel, and at every thundering crash Nanson felt her start and stagger under his feet, and tremble and rock, and as the white

wall of spume and foam and spray flew straight into the air from her echoing side, and fell in blinding sheets athwart her hollow ways, and gushed, thigh deep, across her decks, and blotted out sea and sky, pouring in crashing avalanches over her side into the pool beyond—as every tumbling black mountain of water that came hurtling out from under the cloak of the night hit her, Nanson heard her cry like a wounded beast; he felt the great body quake beneath him, he felt her strong sinews of steel and oak rending and tearing like silk. And out of every dark cabin mouth and hatchment came the wildest sounds of chaos within; 'twas not like what he knew it was that dreadful din, but more as though the great womb of the ship were possessed of spirits, for over and above all the wild tumult of her destruction came from below such an earthly screaming and howling and bellowing, such a wild hubbub of horrible voices from where no voices were, that Nanson stood aghast, and leant against a spar and stuffed his ears a space, that ghostly chorus made him so faint and dizzy.

Then on again, and as he struggled through

the fallen labyrinths that cumbered the sodden decks, scores of squeaking rats came crowding round him, tamed by their desperate straits, and squeaked and jostled to be near him, and wild with terror, blear-eyed and damp, sat shivering on the rigging all about, and clung and chattered to him in their extremity, and followed in his footsteps, and were washed overboard by tens and dozens—but Nanson only shook his head at them, and pushed along slowly and laboriously.

He had nearly ransacked that place of dreadful sights and sounds—he was turning to go; there was only the main hatch cover a little lifted above the deck to be searched. He turned and gained it through a wall of gear, the rats scrambling piteous and noisy after him; he peered over, and there—there in the middle of the ruck of coiled ropes and heaped tarpaulins, flat on his back, helpless and alone, lay he whom he was looking for. And the face of the man was towards William Nanson, a pale handsome face, in spite of the thin threads of red blood that were streaking its white, and Nanson glared and glared at it, while his courage ran out at his finger tips, and his brave knees knocked together, and his

strong hands clutched convulsively at the ruin about them, for there—he knew it in an instant with dreadful certainty—in front of him, was the face of Andrew Frossard.

Nanson, dazed and terror-stricken, stared in dumb terror; and then as the meaning of it dawned upon him, the fierce old instincts of his kind blinded his reason for a minute. With a savage cry of anger and pain he leapt at him, and threw himself upon him, and felt for his sheath knife, as though he would hurl back again into oblivion that life that had risen so cruelly, so horribly in an instant between him and her he loved—and then he recoiled as his fingers closed upon that wet cold neck—it was so clammy and so helpless; and now he edged off, like the mindless beast that he was for the minute, and slunk into the shadow, and stood there scowling and irresolute, with nothing but the gleam of his eyes showing in the darkness, gazing guiltily round while the wonder and the dread and the fear swelled stronger and stronger within him. What! he groaned under his breath; was he to save him, to take him ashore—take him ashore to *her*—and on the eve of *to-morrow*!

God ! he was nearly dead already ; a few minutes more—'twould be no pain to *him*—and all the world to Nanson. No one watched ! Why not ! A word or two to those within the boat that he had found nothing, and he was free for ever. Long before morning light the ship would have slid back with the tide from her bed upon the ridge, and gone down out of sight of Heaven and men, and with all which was upon her. He slunk away to the bulwarks, with the cold perspiration of fear and shame upon him, and looked over, and there rode the lifeboat down below, tugging and straining at her cable in that hell of water. He heard them hail him and ask, "What cheer ?" and at the sound of their human voices in the dismal concert of other sounds, the knowledge of his duty came back to the tempted man, the full enormity of his offence rose before him ; he shut out the sight of the boat and the sea, and turning again laboriously clambered back, amid the delighted chorus of the rats, until he came to his rival again, and bending over, gazed at the nerveless form into which the life was slowly returning.

Somehow the sight of that handsome sunburnt

face set the black blood flying again in Nanson's veins; it was like a page out of the bitter yesterday, so real, so terrible, so fraught with misery, that he leapt to his feet, and wrung his hands, and cried to the night, and the mocking wind laughed aloud, and sent the strands of spray about his rugged face, till he thought it was the fine skeins of Margaret's hair come again. And the white ribbons of the hungry surf ran twining about the black pall of his rival's couch, and the wind, low down, whispered along the gaping decks, "Leave him to me!—leave him to me!" And Nanson *could* not take him to his own certain misery and displacement—though hell came presently, he would not save it by to-morrow's heaven, and once more he crawled away in shame and anguish, with the horrid tumult of the black spirits of the water bellowing and whistling under his feet, and the infernal tumult of the wind above. He crawled away a yard or two, and then came back and scowled, and glared, and trembled, and went off and came on irresolute a dozen times, torn in that fierce struggle by his great love and no lesser honesty, till at last, faint and giddy, he threw himself upon

his knees before the senseless form of the man he hated, and hid his face in his hands, and out of the strong heart of William Nanson came one long bitter cry of pain and love—"Margaret! Margaret!" he gasped in his helplessness, and then, for a space, unseen and alone, he wept under the friendly cover cloak of the storm.

An hour afterwards the eager watchers on shore saw something black ride for a minute far away against the dim gleam of the pale dawning. It came again nearer and clearer, and with a shout that set every heart beating in the village they recognised their boat returning. It came nearer and nearer, and in a few more minutes swept through the tumble of the waves to the beach right by the village hard—fifty willing hands were on the rope, and as she was drawn up safe and victorious on to the ringing gravel, Nanson himself jumped from her glistening prow, and pushing gently through those who tried to stay him with praise and welcome, stalked away over the shingle towards his cottage.

And alone, just where the door of the tavern, kept open to harbour the rescued, sent a golden gleam of light across the gusty rain of the even-

ing, Margaret Spens met that brave and patient man, and knew him in a minute, running to him with a pretty cry of welcome, and said she was so glad to have him back, she had had such dreadful fancies all the while he was away—and Nanson had suffered too much to suffer much more. He put two kind strong hands upon her shoulders, and turned her fair face to the light, and looked at her wistfully for a minute, then said in a voice strangely clear and gentle—"My girl, I have brought a love gift ashore for thee; 'tis fit that I should give thee something, and yonder it lies—see, they lift it out now by the lanterns. Run, my girl, run—and God's blessing for ever on you!"

But Margaret hung back, and "O William," she cried, trying to slip her hands into his; "I am frightened—my heart stands still—oh, what do you mean; what is it?"

And the much-tried man turned away a little; then he said: "Go, my girl, go—alone and quickly"—and then again almost angrily—"The gift's for thee, I say, and *there*—must thee drag my heart from me also by standing questioning like this—away, away, for God's sake, and have

it done!" and as frightened Madge moved off a space, possessed by wonder and a fine unknown terror, he called her back again, and speaking in the old gentle way, he took her hands in his, and "What! Madge!" he said, "William Nanson angered, and with *thee*—why, that were stranger than all that has happened since sundown! There, put thy shawl so about thee, so, and away to the beach; ask Johnny Martin for that which came last out of the wreck—'tis a gift from me to thee, and remember, sweetheart," he said, folding her for the last time in his arms, "Nanson takes back no gifts he once has given, and those fights which Nanson has fought—and won—never need to be fought again"—and as they parted, and the pilot disappeared into the kindly shadows, he heard Margaret Spens run down across the loose shingle, and speak to those by the boat, and then up to him as his guerdon out of the wind and the rain was borne from a woman's throat one clear ringing cry of recognition, and wonder, and love, and joy overwhelming, inexpressible!

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